

Demon Queened

Chapter 30

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Devilla

I wish I could say that my deal with Feyra brought me joy. That I felt pride in the proposal I'd made, in order to give myself more time. In truth, however, it made me feel a little like a coward. Risking everything, because I couldn't trust Lucy with my secrets... Not to mention the fact that I was basically bullying Feyra into keeping quiet. Even if I managed to convince her that I meant no harm to her or Lucy, nothing could change the fact that she was currently being forced to live in terror of me. At the same time, however, her fear - and my inability to work around it - was the very reason that I hesitated to tell Lucy the truth.

The simple fact was that I had been lucky in my travels so far. Lissera had overlooked my identity because I was the savior of her village. Lucy was willing to let me keep it secret because she wanted me to feel comfortable revealing it. And yet the moment I had to actually convince someone that I wasn't so horrible a monster as the church made me out to be, I'd failed to find even the slightest argument in my favor. What's more, I'd literally spent all my time insisting to Lucy that I was a *worse* person than she thought!

On the other hand, one could argue that Feyra was a blessing in disguise. If I could convince *her*, someone completely set against me, that I was actually sincere

in my desire for peace... Well, surely I could convince Lucy of the same? Though how I was going to go about convincing either of them was beyond me...

It was with such dark thoughts weighing me down that I returned, in silence, to the guild. Feyra, besides me, was glowering at nothing, clearly displeased with the arrangement. Something that did nothing for my mood. Though, really, I couldn't imagine *anything* capable of improving-

“Eena!”

“Lucy!” I... smiled? I smiled. Why was I smiling? One minute, I was brooding, and the next... Well, the next moment, I was more concerned with the Heroine throwing herself into my arms. The Heroine, and the *horse* trailing behind her. “...I assume there's a reason for the horse?”

“She's here for Feyra!” Lucy explained, parting from me after a brief squeeze. “So she can keep up with us!”

“Of fucking course she is,” Feyra replied, following the statement up with a tired sigh. “You do know I have no clue *how* to ride a horse, right?”

“I'll teach you!” Lucy promised. “I used to ride all the time, back before I was strong enough to just walk everywhere!”

“I wasn't aware you could outpace a horse,” I remarked, raising an eyebrow. It sounded rather impressive for a human, Heroine or no.

“Well, I wouldn’t say I can go faster,” Lucy corrected me. “But I can keep up with one easily enough! And I’m pretty sure you could, too. But I don’t think Feyra would be able to keep up with either of us, endurance wise.”

“Understandable, I suppose. Though I do have to wonder if there’s a reason you didn’t go for three horses? We’d likely have an easier time keeping in lock step, that way.” And I’d have an easier time of it, in general, for that matter. Not that I couldn’t keep up with a horse - I was fairly certain I could outpace it, and Lucy, both - but walking in heels on the uneven forest floor sounded like a nightmare.

“Well, I was sort of hoping we could walk hand in hand?” Lucy admitted, cheeks red, but eyes trained on me. Unflinching, even as she bared her ulterior motives.

“...I suppose I could manage a walk, if it means keeping you in my grasp,” I conceded, my own cheeks striving to match hers in coloration, even as my gaze slid to the side, failing to equal her straightforward courage.

“Fucking hell,” Feyra grumbled, from behind me. “Why do I have to get stuck with the only two lovebirds I can’t even tell to get a room?”

“Well, I don’t know about a room, but I *did* get one big tent for the two of us!” Lucy admitted. “And a smaller one for you, too, Feyra!”

“Appreciated,” I murmured, with a smile.

A mere hour ago, I would have actually considered that to be an issue. I had plans to visit the tower during the night, after all. Plans to teleport, from the safety of a private tent. Plans that were all but ruined, with Feyra traveling alongside us. She'd be able to tell if I disappeared, in all likelihood, and who knew what she'd do during my away time?

No. Sharing a tent with Lucy was the best arrangement I could hope for, under these circumstances. Both for the sake of keeping Feyra's mouth shut, and growing closer to Lucy herself. Hopefully Abigail would understand and be content with me teleporting written communication in and out for a while.

Just how selfish was I, though, that some part of me actually hoped that she would miss me?

Abigail

"The things I do for Devilla," I grumbled, looking up and down the street outside my house. I'd set up a time to meet Nivera, via Chloe - something that was *shockingly* easy to do, because apparently Chloe knew *everyone*. No less than five of my coworkers had shared drinks with her, and I was *pretty sure* at least two of

them had slept with her at some point. They actually *fought* over who got to pass the message along.

Honestly, I wasn't sure who I was looking forward to meeting less. Chloe, the popular whirlwind of a fox I had *zero* clue what to make of, or-

“Abigail.”

I spun, caught off guard by Nivera as she came slithering out of the alleyway. Also known as the one direction I *hadn't* been looking towards... unlike Bailey, I guess, because her expression was amused.

“Nivera,” I said, silently deciding that I was going to have a talk with that wolf later. What sorta bodyguard let their charge get caught off guard like that?

“Where's Chloe?”

“I asked her to get me something I ‘forgot’ at home, then ran off without her,” Nivera said. “I wanted to talk to you alone.”

“...You ditched your fiancée?”

Nivera snorted. “Like I could trick her with a lie that obvious. No, it was basically code for ‘give me a few minutes.’ She's around somewhere - ready to jump in the moment I make an ass of myself.”

“...Right...” *When*. Not if. At least she was self-aware, I guess?

“Look. Chloe gave me an earful when I told her how things went with you. Said I was even more of a bitch than she expected, and that I needed to apologize.”

“...So you’re here to say you’re sorry?” I asked.

“...Maybe,” she muttered, looking away from me. “*Maybe* I took some of my... issues out on you. But to be honest, I think it was warranted.”

“Funny,” I said, looking around. “I thought Chloe was going to come out when you started making an ass of yourself?”

“Look...” Nivera ran a hand through her hair. “I... I gave up on Devilla getting better, you know?”

“Huh?” I asked, glancing at Bailey. She... didn’t look at me. Her eyes were solely trained on Nivera.

“I wrote her off, thinking she was a lost cause. A casualty of the fucked up system we bloodliners are raised in. And it wasn’t like I was alright with it, but... Then you came along, and suddenly she’s not acting like a brat anymore! She’s getting salt for the tower. Pulling back on her spying. Acting *nice*... All because of you.”

“And that’s why you think it was alright for you to bitch?” I asked, incredulously. The fact that I *wasn’t* the reason for all that aside... “This has to be the worst apology I’ve ever heard.”

“No! I mean, yeah, maybe some part of me hated you for doing what I couldn’t. For making me own up to the fact that maybe I could have done more. But I could get over that. Until you went and got the bloodliners involved.

Accidentally, I know - but I didn't know that when we met. I figured you were either the biggest fucking idiot I'd ever met, or you were using Devilla for your own ends. And I honestly didn't care which. All I could think about was the fact that you were going to break her all over again."

I wanted to say 'fuck you.' I wanted to tell her that a nice story didn't excuse her for treating me like shit. That she could have given me the benefit of the doubt. I probably would have, too, if it wasn't for how *lost* she looked.

Which wasn't to say that I was going to *forgive* her or anything. I mean, sure, maybe I felt a *little* sorry for her, but mostly I just wanted to know something. "Why do you care so much? Devilla figured you'd hate her. Didn't she ruin your life, or something?"

"Is that how she put it?" For a moment, Nivera's face was blank. Then she let out a bitter little *laugh*, and wiped a tear from her eye. "She really is back to how she used to be, isn't she?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I asked, glancing at Bailey. Who, again, kept her eyes trained on Nivera. I guess she wanted to absorb as much of this as she could.

"Do you know why Devilla befriended me?" she asked, instead of answering.

I hesitated a moment, wavering between telling her to fuck off with the whole ‘telling a story instead of answering a damn question’ thing, or playing along. You’d think it would be an easy decision, considering I literally came there to hear more about Devilla, but it was honestly a close one. “No.”

“Because she was told to.” Nivera laughed again. “She was such a perfect little puppet back then. So fucking desperate for approval. For *affection*. So when the generals introduced her to a bunch of their children, and told her to get along, of course she tried her best. And of course all the children were more than willing to play along.”

“Okay?”

“But then there was me,” Nivera continued. “The only brat who wasn’t willing to play nice just because her parents told her to. I don’t even remember why. Maybe I was just being a spoiled brat. Or maybe I didn’t like the look in her eyes. But Devilla... she saw me as the only obstacle between her and a job well done. So you know what she did?”

“I don’t know... tried to kick you out of the group or something?” I could imagine Devilla doing that. Or at least Devilla as she used to be.

Nivera shook her head though. “I wish... No. She took it on herself to make me happy. To make me her friend. Even to the point where she ignored the others - I mean, they were all pretending to be her friend, no matter what, anyway... But

me? I made her work for it... I made her get me stuff. Do stuff. Even had her issue orders to my parents, once or twice, to make them pay me more attention, or buy me stuff... Next thing I knew, she'd gone from wanting to please the generals to trying to appease her one and only 'friend.'"

"You used her." There wasn't any accusation in my voice. Not over something she did when she was *six*. I was just stating a fact.

That didn't keep Nivera from flinching, though. "Yeah. I did. And the worst thing is? I started feeling good about it. I mean, the generals were making her do boring shit. She was having fun with me, at least. We'd play games together - and sometimes I'd even let her win. We'd talk. Or I'd talk, anyway, she mostly listened... She treated me like a sister... and then my parents forbid me from spending time with her."

"Which is when everything went wrong."

"She somehow got it in her head that firing my dam would solve something... or more like someone put the idea in her head, but that's a story for later. The important bit is that my parents got mad at me, which got me mad at her, and caused our friendship to split. My parents, meanwhile, all but disowned me - I went from being their precious daughter to the disappointment they wanted nothing to do with. They made sure my basic needs were met, but... well, they only ever talked to me to tell me what a disappointment I was to the family."

“And the point of this whole story?” I asked. “Because as nice as it is to hear about Devilla’s past, I don’t really get what it has to do with you caring about her.”

“The point is what happened to us after. On my side? I hated Devilla. For a *long* time. Eventually though, Aunt Sallina helped me realize something - namely, parents who’d disown their kid like that? Over losing a fucking job? *Shouldn’t be parents*. I mean, we both know how fucked up I am. Imagine how much worse it would be if they’d kept raising me. If Devilla hadn’t exposed them for what they were? If Sallina never took me in? I don’t even want to imagine what would happen.”

“And Queen?” Bailey asked, leaning in a little closer.

I didn’t say anything, but I was curious too. Almost *despite* myself, but still.

“Devilla had it worse. She’d been used by the generals, and abandoned by me. She tried running things... She tried making decisions for herself, and passing laws, but she was a kid, so of course it ended in disaster. She tried reshuffling the tower hierarchy - which *sorta* worked, with Sylvanna taking charge, but it mostly just made her more enemies. I’m pretty sure she almost caused a civil war at one point...”

“So what?” I asked. “You blame yourself for her turning into a bad ruler?”

“I don’t blame myself for shit,” Nivera replied, crossing her arms. “It was the generals that fucked us both up, but I was able to get out thanks to her, even if it *was* unintentional. Devilla, on the other hand... gave up.”

“On ruling? Or on you and the generals?”

Nivera shook her head. “On herself.”