

Demon Queened

Chapter 31

Written by Princess Kay

Devilla

I remembered there being a joke, of sorts, back on Earth. One that declared handholding to be one of the lewdest things imaginable. Depictions of intertwined fingers would be pixelated, and the mere thought of grabbing a crush's hands might lead to reddened cheeks or even scandalized gasps. It was a bit of humor I often laughed at as Jacob.

Walking down the street with Lucy, her fingers intertwined with mine, my ever accelerating heartbeat made it increasingly difficult to remember why I'd ever found that joke so funny.

"Are you sure you're okay, Eena? Your face is really red!"

"I'm fine," I promised her. It wasn't a lie. I *was* fine - even if my heart was beating a mile a minute and my face was on fire. Even if it felt like everyone we passed was staring and whispering. I was *fine*. And I would continue to be fine so long as Lucy continued to sport that goofy smile.

"I don't even want to think about the rumors that are going to spread from this," Feyra complained from astride her mount. "The Heroine traveling with a cursed girl, while grinning and holding hands with a highborn whose face is so red you'd think she was walking down the street naked, or something."

“I’d like to see you keep your calm under the eyes of every passerby,” I retorted. The fact that I’d be significantly less embarrassed to walk around unclothed was likely better left unsaid.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it,” Lucy replied. “I’m sure everyone’s just curious about what I’m up to! Especially since I don’t usually travel with people...”

“At least we’re near the gates,” Feyra remarked, placing a hand above her eyes to shield them from the midday sun. “Not having to deal with too many people on the road is the one good thing about the Monster Movement, so far as I’m concerned.”

“It’s really bad for the smaller villages, though,” Lucy pointed out. “I’ve asked around, while traveling, and apparently merchants just completely stop visiting some places! And their costs go up everywhere they *do* go. It’s one of the reasons I want to find the cause and put a stop to it!”

“Really?” I asked. “I would have expected your reasoning to be more along the lines of wanting people free to explore the world the goddess gifted them, or some such.”

“Well, of course I want that!” Lucy affirmed. “But traveling is always going to be dangerous. So long as there are monsters, there’s danger! Not to mention the harm people can do to one another, when they get desperate or greedy... but that

doesn't mean we can't make things better! If the Monster Movements stop, then the monsters will stick to their territories, and the merchants will be able to figure out the right routes to take. They'll be able to visit the smaller villages, and sell things at reasonable rates! And people will be able to get healberries at the normal prices, too!"

"That's... rather practical of you," I remarked, eyeing Lucy. I'd thought her the sort to tackle the world's problems without a second thought. To fight for a better tomorrow, in any and every way she can. And I still did believe that to be true - we were talking about the same Lucy who'd tried to single-handedly end a two thousand year war in *Tower Conquest* after all. But perhaps there was more than blind optimism guiding her movements. "This wasn't a spur of the moment quest for you, was it?"

"Not at all!" Lucy confirmed. "I've wanted to do it ever since I became an adventurer! But the last monster movement ended right before I joined the guild."

"Did you ever try to take a more proactive approach?" I questioned. "To put an end to the movements before the next had a chance to begin?"

Lucy hesitated a moment, before replying. "Once. But I wasn't allowed to go into the forest... The churches near Daroom Woods double as outposts, and the guards that work there try to keep people from going too deep when there isn't a

Monster Movement. It's to stop people from triggering one early... But if it's already happening, then there shouldn't be an issue!"

"*Shouldn't* be an issue?" Feyra questioned, narrowing her eyes from atop her horse. "Heroine. You *did* run mission by *someone*, didn't you?"

"Don't worry!" Lucy replied with a bright smile. "The outposts empty out for the Monster Movements, so there shouldn't be anyone to stop us!"

...Of course, the whole reason her attempt at ending the war was 'single-handed' was because she'd gone against the church to do it in the first place...

"I am so going to hell," Feyra whispered.

"Come on!" Lucy called out, picking up her pace a little. "We're almost out the gates!"

"Is there something special about that?" I questioned her, arching an eyebrow even as I picked up my pace. A feat made slightly more difficult by my choice in footwear. Still manageable, though, if only because I was using small amounts of magical energy to flatten the ground whenever it grew too bumpy.

The things I did for the sake of Lucy's smile...

"It'll be the first steps of our adventure!" the girl in question replied, the aforementioned smile still firmly affixed upon her face. "I mean, I think some people count it from the time you leave the guild until the time you come back

home? But to me, this whole city is basically my home! That's why the adventure can't truly start until we've walked through the gates!"

"The adventure, hmm?" I questioned her, unable to resist a smile of my own. "I'd have thought such a thing would become rather mundane to you, by this point. You've been an adventurer for quite a while, have you not?"

"Ever since I turned eighteen!" Lucy confirmed. "It's always exciting to go out again, though! To help people! To show everyone that the Goddess is watching, and that she cares... that their Heroine is willing to fight for their happiness! It's always meaningful to me..."

For a moment, as I listened, it felt like I wasn't talking to Lucy anymore. That it was the Heroine who's hand I held, and who was pulling me towards a mission to help her people. But then she turned to me, her eyes sparkling and her smile somehow growing even wider. "But this time's special, even aside from that, because it's our first time going on an adventure *together!*"

I laughed. Mostly at myself, for having forgotten something vital - that Lucy *was* the Heroine. That the girl who wished to save the world was the very same one who took such joy simply from existing within it. To see her as a symbol, while ignoring the girl underneath, was a sin, in my opinion. But by the same token, ignoring the symbol she strove to represent would mean ignoring her passion, and heartfelt desire to lead the world into a better tomorrow.

“Then let’s take the first step together,” I declared, slowing to a stop as we neared the threshold. When she gave me a curious glance, I smiled. “On the count of three?”

“One!” Lucy declared by way of response.

“Two,” I replied, a small smile on my lips.

““Three!””

It was sappy, I knew. I could literally hear Feyra groaning about it, too. But so what? When the day inevitably came that Lucy saw me for who I was, I’d be happy for a ‘sappy’ memory or two to cherish.

Abigail

“What do you mean, ‘she gave up on herself?’” That definitely wasn’t the impression *I’d* gotten, back before the Rite of Insight. If anything, she seemed pretty *full* of herself - always talking herself up, and putting everyone else down.

“I meant what I said,” Nivera replied, narrowing her eyes. “Or did you never think it weird that the supposedly selfish brat was planning to fight to the death for all of us? That she never ran away? Or even pass a bunch of selfish laws?”

“She literally made it illegal to say your name around her.”

“...Okay, so she passed *a* selfish law... But she could have done way worse! She could have made it illegal to badmouth her. She could have executed anyone and everyone who looked at her funny. She could have turned into a *tyrant!* But what did she do instead?”

“Yelled at her maids for getting her toast cut wrong, and threw people in the dungeon for saying they were prettier than her?”

“For, like, a day or two at a time!”

“I think what she’s trying to say,” came a voice from up above our heads, “is that Illa only acted that way *because* she’d given up on herself. Y’know, the whole ‘it’s fine if nobody loves me, because I don’t need anyone anyway’ mindset people sometimes get into when they’re super depressed? Or like a kid who gets into an argument with her friend and then pretends they were never really that great a friend anyway, because facing up to her problems would mean dealing with a ton of emotions she isn’t equipped to handle. Except kids usually have parents, or guardians, or at least other friends to help them through it, while Illa had nobody. And I’m pretty sure nobody ever taught her the tools to actually deal with her problems.”

I didn’t reply right away. Mostly because I was too busy gawking at the kitsune sitting on the brothel’s rooftop. “How long have you been up there?”

“Hmmm....” Chloe frowned, tapping her chin and pretending to think.

“Since before Nivera called you over? She was doing pretty good until now, though, so I didn’t really see the need to interfere. Super proud of you for that, by the way!”

“I was still doing fine!” Nivera protested.

“You were getting worked up and shutting conversation down,” Chloe replied, before casually leaping into the rooftop. This time I actually got to see her shift into a fox - though there wasn’t much to see, with an instantaneous transformation. One second she was a girl, the next she was a fox, landing atop Nivera’s head before bouncing off and landing on the ground, back in her demonoid form all over again. “You know you need to keep your temper in check if you want to communicate.”

Nivera didn’t so much respond as *grump*, pulling her lips into a pout and looking away from the two of us.

“And *you* are being too hard on your friend,” Chloe continued, pointing a finger towards me. “Illa might have had a lot of problems, but you of all people know how she’s been struggling to change. Do you think that could have happened if she was really as heartless and selfish as everyone paints her out to be?”

My first instinct was ‘yes.’ I mean, she’d only changed because of the Rite! Because of her past life memories! But there was one thing bothering me about all

that... “I still don’t get what you meant about her being back to the way she used to be.”

“I mean that she’s *always* blamed herself when things go wrong,” Nivera replied, turning back towards me. Her voice was calm, but I couldn’t help but notice the way her tail was curling and uncurling, like when she’d gotten mad at Yara. Thankfully she didn’t seem to be reaching for anything, this time. “Some random bitch didn’t want to be her friend? She must have done something wrong. Someone asked her to get something, but was super vague about it? Her fault for not getting clarification before acting. Maybe that really did change for a bit, when she went all bratty, but I’d be willing to bet she was just trying to protect herself from all the self-recrimination. That she wanted to believe she didn’t have anyone because she didn’t *need* anyone, rather than because she *couldn’t* have them. Because the moment she started caring about people again? She’s already back to viewing herself as the one who fucked everything up, isn’t she?”

“That’s...” I hesitated. Was she right? Had Devilla really been suffering the whole time?

“She’s mostly just speculating,” Chloe added. “I mean, they haven’t talked in forever, y’know? And she’s totally definitely biased in Illa’s favor, too! But... I think it says something that Illa changed the moment she got a friend, don’t you?”

Except it wasn't getting a friend that changed her... but she *had* needed one. *Desperately*. To the point where she'd basically been willing to do pretty much *anything* to keep me around. Even telling me all her secrets... I wasn't going to say that Nivera was right about *everything*. Not when she was missing so many pieces of the puzzle. And I definitely wasn't going to pretend that Devilla being pitiful made up for everything she'd done. But... maybe Devilla's whole self-hatred thing wasn't exactly *new*, after all?

“Oh, but we should probably get to the point about why we brought you out here,” Chloe added, drawing my attention back to the present. “Because you know that whole thing about how someone put the idea of firing Niv's dam into Illa's head? As of about... an hour ago? That just became a whole lot more relevant.”