

Demon Queened

Chapter 48

Written by Princess Kay

Devilla

“Is it normal for kitsune to fight like this?” I questioned Nivera, speaking in a whisper so as not to disturb the ongoing spar. They were on match 3, and Lucy was trying to find the real Chloe among not only 3 demonoid figures, but 2 foxes.

Not that the exact numbers meant much when even Chloe’s illusionary selves seemed capable of changing form, and the whole lot of them were constantly mixing up their placement.

“Nobody fights like Chloe,” Nivera replied, pride evident in her voice.

“Though she *is* technically copying your dam’s fighting style,” Sallina chimed in, drawing my attention. She met my gaze with warmth and a smile, which I hesitantly returned. I was admittedly unsure how to feel about her recent display of protectiveness. I wanted to be upset that my girlfriend had been treated so harshly. yet I was grateful that she would go so far for me... It had almost felt as if she were ready to *die* for me, ridiculous as that thought was.

“More like resurrecting it,” Nivera corrected, thankfully giving me an excuse to break eye contact with Sallina. “She built her fighting style off tall tales and rumors, as much as anything - stories about how Issa turned back a human

army by making them think she had an army of her own, and how she made the Heroine herself so dizzy she started throwing up and had to flee the battle... your dam was *popular* back in her day, from what I can tell. About on par with your Mom.”

“*More* popular with some people,” Chloe chimed in, somehow standing right next to us despite the fact that Lucy was *still* battling 3 demonoid Chloes and two foxes. “I’m not actually sure what’s true and what isn’t, so I’ve just focused on recreating everything I can in my own way! I think she’d have approved, though.”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupted, “but are you *actually* talking to us in the middle of a battle? Or is this just another illusion?”

“Why not both?” Chloe shrugged, before suddenly just... disappearing.

I double checked to make sure there was no fox on the ground.

“Ignore her,” Nivera grumbled. “She’s just showing off. Like she doesn’t have *enough* of a handicap with not being able to use illusions directly on herself...”

Sallina laughed, a full hearted sound that had one hand on her stomach and the other on her mouth as she tried to hide her smile.

“I’m sorry, dear,” she said, answering my questioning gaze. “It’s just... it’s hard to believe that I’m watching Chloe lead the Heroine around by the nose... Not to mention the jovial attitude you girls are all taking. It almost makes me feel like I’m the crazy one here...”

“Chloe isn’t exactly a fair metric to judge *anyone* by,” Nivera pointed out, a touch of pride in her voice. “She’s basically a force of nature.”

“But Lucy’s hits still strike sometimes, don’t they?” Sallina challenged. “And when they do, Chloe isn’t being sent hurtling away... if that’s all the power she can manage, then I find myself more worried about what she’ll do to ‘Eena’s’ heart than what she’ll do to Devilla’s body.”

“...You noticed, then?” I asked, unable to prevent the blush that climbed my cheeks. “Our feelings for one another?”

“It was fairly obvious once I was calm enough to look,” Sallina confirmed, drawing a snort from Abigail and a nod from Nivera.

“You’re not exactly great at hiding your weaknesses, sis,” Nivera tacked on.

“I’d hardly list Lucy among my weaknesses,” I protested, unable to help a frown. “If anything, she’ll be of great help with taking my offer of peace to human

lands... not to mention the emotional boon it is simply having her in my life, for however long it'll last.”

“Yeah, yeah, and love’s a strength,” Nivera replied, rolling her eyes. “Look, I get it. I’m in love too, remember? But I’m serious. You’re going to need to wade into the political sphere if you want to get the whole tower behind this nonsense, and you dating the Heroine? Isn’t the best look. There will be people claiming she found some way to charm or seduce you into a trap, or that you’re giving us all up for the sake of sex.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I scoffed. “Anyone who spends five minutes with Lucy can tell she’s sincere.”

“So what?” Abigail asked, her arms crossed and eyes narrowed. She was a bit cross with me - probably because I’d kicked all this off to begin with by sending her on a hunt for peppermint oil, when the room didn’t even need spider protection to begin with... “You just want to just line everyone up and have them meet her?”

“Good luck getting any of them to change their minds.” Nivera snorted. “I doubt most of them will care whether they’re right or wrong about her, anyway. They’ll just see an excuse to argue and a chance to gain concessions.”

“What Nivera isn’t saying,” Sallina interrupted with a frown, “is that she’s already mentally volunteered me and Chloe to help with keeping things calm. Though if you could keep your relationship secret from the rest of the tower, I do believe that would be best.”

“I thought us helping was implied,” Nivera muttered by way of answer, a faint tinge of red upon her cheeks.

“And are you alright with that?” I asked Sallina, arching an eyebrow. She might be laughing now, but I couldn’t forget the hardness in her voice when she addressed Lucy, before. “With *all* of this?”

“If you mean Nivera’s plan, then of course I’m all for helping you,” Sallina began, giving me a warm smile before letting out a tired sigh. “But we both know better. You want my thoughts on your relationship with Lucy, don’t you?”

“I don’t need anything as complicated as your opinion,” I replied, tensing a little. I was vaguely aware of Abigail taking my hand again, to give it a reassuring squeeze, from her place atop the bed. “I simply wish to know if you object to my being with Lucy.”

“Object? No. I know better than to tell a young lady who she can and can’t date. Especially when that young lady has already gone through so much at the hands of adults like me, already.”

“I’m an adult myself,” I pointed out, unable to resist frowning up at the woman. Though I fear it may have come across more as a pout, from the way it caused her frown to turn into a smile.

“That you are,” Sallina assured me. Despite my fears, her tone wasn’t patronizing, but the warm look in her eyes somehow still managed to make me feel like a child before her. “But you’re also a young lady, who’s got many mistakes to make, and lessons to learn, still ahead of her. I only hope this isn’t one of them...”

“It isn’t,” I declared, crossing my arms and turning my attention back to the fight. Lucy had just punched her way directly through the chest of one illusion, who replied with a cheeky grin before fading out of existence and reappearing elsewhere. “You’ve seen what Lucy is like. She’s different than the others.”

“So it would seem...” Sallina let out another sigh. “But you know, it’s not like every Heroine is cut from the same cloth...”

“What do you mean?” I questioned her, arching an eyebrow as I reluctantly turned my attention away from the fight. “You can’t mean to tell me we’ve had anyone like *her* before.”

“No,” Sallina admitted. “Not like her. But I’ve read a lot of firsthand accounts, from those who’ve survived interactions Heroines. Soldiers who were lucky enough to avoid being targeted directly... The early reports vary quite a bit, from Heroine to Heroine. Some seem terrified during their first battles. Others are filled with righteous fury. One person reported that the Heroine seemed almost regretful to cut them down - they speculated that she might have even let them escape...”

“What happened to them?” I asked, unable to help myself. Nivera’s gaze, too, was on Sallina, as was Abigail’s. I suppose this was news to them as well.

“The one who seemed regretful?”

“She went on to turn an entire species to stone.”

“You can’t mean Jodeyne?” I whispered, my mind flashing to the Heroine who had killed my mother. “There’s no way. The soldier must have been mistaken.”

“That soldier was your dam, you know?” Sallina replied, her voice almost a whisper. “And she wasn’t the only one who saw it, either. Other soldiers were willing to back her up when questioned. The statistics back her up, too - many more demons survived their first encounters with her than normal... At least up until a point.”

“A point?” I asked, nervousness threaded through my voice.

“A point,” Sallina repeated, nodding. “I’m not entirely sure when, but the reports about her started to change. She became less nervous. Less and less of our people survived - and those who did claimed she let them go, much like the early survivors... but this time, they were let go so that they could report what she’d done. She wanted us to know that she was the one wiping up our forces...”

“So she changed,” I said, trying to act nonchalant. “War does that. I don’t see what it has to do with Lucy.”

“She didn’t just change,” Sallina warned me. “She went *insane*. She started torching innocent villages. Slaughtering civilians. And yet every time, she’d let at least one person go, to let us know exactly what she was up to... And before you say anything, dear, you should know that she wasn’t the first. Every Heroine has

gone that route - no matter where they started out. At some, indeterminate point, they all seem to just... go crazy.”

She turned her gaze away from me, and towards the fight, shaking her head before slithering forward to put her hand on Chloe’s shoulder. The *real* Chloe’s shoulder, judging by the way the illusions disappeared - including the one who’d spent the last half a minute or so dodging all of Lucy’s attacks.

“I won’t speak against your relationship,” Sallina declared, staring at Lucy. “I won’t interfere from the shadows, or do any of the other political nonsense people get up to in this tower. I just want to know - what makes you different from the other Heroines? What makes you think you’ll be the first and only to stay sane?”

Sallina

I stared down at the Heroine, trying my best not to tremble as I met her orange eyes. She didn’t look angry or even irritated, but to me it still felt as if I

were staring into the eyes of a hungry monster. One who wanted nothing more than to devour me and everyone I cared about...

I couldn't let that show, though. Not in front of Devilla. Not when she clearly cared *so much* about this girl. Not when she'd only just begun to heal from the last time someone interfered with one of her relationships.

"Um... To be honest..." Lucy hesitated, and for a moment I thought I must have misread the situation. That she hadn't been paying attention to my conversation with Devilla, and that I'd just embarrassed myself in front of my two pseudo-children and their loved ones... but then she spoke. "I've um. Never really heard of Heroines going insane before? Not that I'm doubting you! I... get the feeling there's a lot of things the church hasn't told me, actually... I can definitely say I'm different from the other Heroines, though!"

"Because you haven't killed any of us?" I asked, dryly. "It's true you won't grow in strength until you do... but are you sure that's the key to maintaining your sanity?"

"Not at all!" Lucy admitted. Though she sounded... surprisingly chipper about it. "I mean, like I said, I really don't know anything about it in the first place! But as long as I'm weak, Eena can just step in and help, right?"

“So you’ll put it on *her* to keep you from doing anything wrong?” I questioned. “To keep you from killing us all?”

“Well, part of being in a relationship is depending on each other during times of trouble, right? But don’t worry, I’m not planning to put it all on her! I’ve actually been thinking I should take a trip to the holy capital to get answers, so I guess I’ll just add this to my list of things to ask about! If Heroines really do go insane, maybe they’ll have a way to stop it?”

“And if they don’t?” I persisted, even as I felt Devilla’s glare burning into my back. This was important! Even if it broke my heart to think that Devilla might come to treat me as an enemy for it... “What will you do then?”

“Then me and Eena will figure it out, along with any other friends who want to join in!”

“That...” I wanted to call her out on her naivety, but... she was young, and in love, and willing to do what was right... Maybe that was just what we needed to make progress. Besides which, I’d repeatedly promised that I wouldn’t object to their union, and I was already pushing the boundaries of that. “Very well...”

“Don’t worry!” the Heroine declared, still smiling. “Even in the worst case, I know Eena will keep me from killing anyone - demon *or* human!”

“...I’m sure she will,” I agreed, trying not to think of what that might entail. What that might require from Devilla... I only hoped they’d find a solution, before any drastic measurements were needed.

A knock at the door saved me from my thoughts, drawing my attention to Devilla, who frowned as she moved towards the door.

It would seem we had an uninvited guest.