

Demon Queened

Chapter 19

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Devilla

It's funny how some things manage to escape your notice entirely, until after they've disappeared. I, for example, failed to notice the ubiquitous chatter of our fellow guild members until it suddenly fell silent. In fact, I'd more or less blocked out my surroundings altogether, so focused was I upon my surprise reunion with Lucy.

And then, of course, there's the corollary to my initial statement - that you often don't appreciate what you have until it's gone. Like the previously alluded to silence of the guildhall, which I very much wished *would* disappear, right up until the moment it actually did so. It was replaced by the commotion of every single adventurer in the guild hall - and the staff, for that matter - trying to speak at the same time. Each and every one of them commenting on Lucy's words.

Not that I could really make out any specific conversations, mind you. I'm not entirely convinced anyone was calm enough to hold something so structured, in the first place. But the words "highborn" and "Heroine" were being repeated so frequently as to be impossible to misconstrue the topic of interest, even if I were dense enough to misattribute the commotion to begin with.

"Eena?" Lucy whispered, looking a little unnerved. "What's going on?"

I wondered what they were saying about me. What tales were they spinning, to explain how the nasty highborn had managed to snatch the heart of their beloved Heroine?

“Eena?”

Not that it really mattered what a bunch of random humans thought of me. They could say whatever they wished behind my back, and it wouldn't mean a thing to me, so long as Lucy didn't listen to them. So long as I had her by my side. So long as she didn't decide that it wasn't worth the trouble of staying around me. So long as she didn't leave me.

I felt a hand grasp my wrist, and offered no resistance. I felt it tug me forward so I walked towards it. Another hand touched my forehead, but despite my confusion no words of protest escaped my lips. My mind was a jumbled mess, the trials of the last two days slamming into me all at once after the momentary respite that was my reunion with Lucy. The brief moment where everything seemed like it would be okay. Where I didn't have to worry about people misunderstanding me, or misjudging me, or *rejecting me* based only on what they *thought* they knew of me.

I wondered if Lucy would be the next to-

“*Veroon, Belloosa mador!*”

A familiar warmth washed over me, a sheet of holy magic coating my flesh. The noise of the crowd receded. Not that it was any softer, per se - the spell merely added a sense of distance, as if the speakers were somehow very far away, despite being nearly within arm's distance. I knew instinctively that I could shut it out completely if I so desired.

“Eena! Are you okay? Can you hear me? I’ve cast a privacy spell on us - we can talk to each other, so long as we’re touching, and nobody else will be able to hear us.”

“I...” I started, then stopped, noting the way my voice was trembling. First there was my overreaction to her hug, and now this? Was worrying Lucy all I could manage?

“You can say no to me, if you want - I promise that nobody will be able to hear you reject me, if that’s what worrying you - but are you really that opposed to going out with me?”

“No!” I cried out, shaking my head rapidly. “I mean, I’m not...” I hesitated, unsure how to continue. I was fairly certain Lucy hadn’t truly meant to ask me out. Even beyond the obvious questions - such as why she’d even be interested in me, in such a way - there was the fact that she’d opened with how there was something she wished to accomplish. But if I was wrong in that assumption, wouldn’t I be making even more trouble?

“Then what is it?” the Heroine asked me, leaning forward. “Whatever it is, I’m sure I can help you deal with it! Whether it’s your self-image, or the Demon Queen herself, there’s nothing we can’t handle if we put our heads together!”

I stared at Lucy, whose eyes shone so bright with passion and determination. I knew, just by looking into them, that she fully believed what she was saying. That, despite having no clue whatsoever about what might be plaguing me, she truly believed with all her heart that we could conquer it together. That *any* issue could be set right, if we were willing to work for it. It was such a naive view, from my standpoint. A mockery of all the hopelessness I’d ever felt, in both this life and my last. And yet, in the face of that indomitable determination, I couldn’t help but smile.

What right did I have to belittle her confidence, considering my own mission? Wasn’t I the one trying to end a two thousand year old war by befriending someone who was meant to be my mortal enemy? An impossible task, by most standards. The very definition of hopeless, when one considered how quickly I’d grown discouraged. How easily I’d allowed my frustrations to demotivate me, and my worries to direct my next steps. And yet the one person I needed most was standing in front of me, happily declaring her determination to move forward alongside me... How could I possibly worry about her abandoning me, when she was so obviously determined to fight by my side?

Even if her choice of example issues *did* leave something to be desired.

“Thank you, Lucy. Truly. But I’m not sure the present issue is one that can be tackled so easily.” I held up a hand to forestall her protests, hoping that the soft smile on my lips would convey that I wasn’t speaking from pessimism, or anger.

“Did you truly mean to ask me on a date? In front of all these people?”

Lucy’s eyes went wide. “No! I would never!”

...A bit blunt, but not unexpected. I nodded, opening my mouth to explain-

“Not in front of everyone! And not while you’re still suffering from such low self-esteem! I mean, that would put all sorts of pressure on you, wouldn’t it?”

I paused for a moment, then shook my head. The qualifiers were unexpected, but it wasn’t as if she’d actually said anything about wishing to date me. She likely just wanted to soften the blow. Still, to be sure...

“Then your request to ask me out was *not* romantic in nature, yes?”

“Of course not!” Lucy confirmed. “It’s just that I’ve realized I can’t convince you how wonderful you are with words alone, so I want to show you with actions! I’m sure that if we go out together as friends, you’ll see for yourself how much enjoyment I can find in your presence, and you’ll realize that there’s nothing about you that could ever drive me away! That you really are deserving of affection, friendship, and love!”

So that's what it was. My poor self-image - realistic as I swore it was - must truly have concerned her, for her to hatch such a plot. Still, it matched my own plans perfectly, so I hardly saw reason to refuse.

“And *then* I'll ask you out! Privately!”

I froze in place, listening to the crowd around me for any hint that the soundproofing might be flawed. That someone might have read her lips. The sound grew closer, as I focused, but the volume stayed more or less the same. I heard no reference to our current words.

“You mean romantically?” I asked, slowly, my face pointed away from the crowd as a precaution.

“Uh-huh! As long as I still feel this way about you!” Lucy casually confirmed, not a hint of caution upon her features. “I think we should get to know each other as friends first, though! That way, maybe our feelings will deepen it on both our ends, so that you'll say yes, *and* I won't have to worry about pressuring you into a relationship!”

“Lucy...” For a moment, I considered pointing out that this confession of hers was applying pressure in and of itself. Or perhaps simply telling her that there was absolutely no way this strange plan of hers could ever work. That she couldn't convince me I was worthy of something when I wasn't. That I wasn't even someone she should consider dating.

Ultimately, however, I knew that this crush of hers was no more than that - a temporary thing that would surely fall alongside her opinion of me as time wore on. For now, I had a much more pressing concern.

“What say you to moving this conversation to a different venue? Preferably one with less of an audience? Even if they can’t hear us, it’s difficult to relax, knowing the current subject of their gossip...”

“Does that mean you’re okay with going out with me?” Lucy asked, her eyes shining bright.

“If you agree to stop referring to it that way, then yes - we can *do things together*.”

“Great!” Lucy exclaimed, loosening her grip upon my wrist so that she could instead snatch up my hand. The holy magic surrounding me fluctuated a little with the movement, but ultimately stayed in place. “Because there’s this food stall that I saw on the way here, and I really want to share some of its food with you! And there’s this shop I really want to show you, too! And... Have you already decided where you’re going to spend the night?”

“I have,” I confirmed, as the overeager Heroine led me through the door. “An inn called the Queen’s Crown.”

“Oh, I’ve heard some of the other adventures talking about that one, before!”

Lucy informed me, with a wide smile upon her lips and a skip to her step as she dragged me out the door. “I hear they have soft beds and thick walls! I can’t wait!”