

# Demon Queened

Chapter 39

Reconcilable Differences

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## Devilla

With our food consumed and our belongings packed, travel resumed without issue. Indeed, the only real difference between today and yesterday was the fact that Lucy had found an alternative to holding my hand. Namely, clutching my arm against her armored chest. The better to support me, she said, since I still insisted on wearing heels, no matter how bumpy the road before us became.

It actually did help, to be honest. With her acting as a stabilizing pillar, I could suddenly afford to spare much less attention to the cluttered path ahead of me. A good thing, by all accounts... or at least it should have been. Unfortunately, an idle mind was wont to wander, and in my case it wandered directly over to my fast approaching meeting with Nivera.

I was... scared. Frightened of how she might react to me. Abigail was insistent that Nivera thought fondly of me, but I couldn't understand how that could possibly be. Not when I'd ruined her family dynamic by firing her dam and plunging Nivera herself into despair. All because I was so desperate to keep her as a friend...

I could still remember the hatred in her eyes when she looked at me that day. The vitriol with which she had cut off her relationship to me. How she'd called me

selfish, a brat who only cared for herself... Would she do it again? As ridiculous as it sounded, a part of me feared that this was all just an elaborate set-up for her to take revenge...

Still, I *wanted* to believe she'd forgiven me. I wanted to think that there was a chance of us becoming friends again. That I could reclaim what I had lost. It was an idiotic desire. A selfish wish that flew contrary to everything I knew, yet I still wanted to believe so, so desperately.

She was the only friend I'd ever had, after all, not counting the recent additions of Abigail and Lucy. The only person who'd ever truly cared about me. The only one who played with me as an equal, not letting me win every game we played. Who'd argued with me, not caring about my station. Who'd *fought* for me, growing angry on my behalf when I complained about the trivial issues in my life.

...I suppose there were others, if you counted my life as Jacob, but I wasn't sure if I should. Those friendships felt *different* somehow. Flatter... or perhaps static would be the better word for it. Frozen in time. I had feelings of affection for all those who had befriended me, as Jacob. Alice in particular had been like a sister to me. Those familial feelings for her hadn't changed with my rebirth - I felt exactly the same towards her today as I did the day Jacob died.

Which was exactly the problem. Where was the bittersweet feeling of loss? The sadness over never being able to see her again? Why didn't I *miss* her? And not just her... Everyone. Even the family who'd raised me. I felt more anger and despair about the mother I'd never known than the parents who'd been with me for an entire lifetime. Even thinking about my dam, who I knew literally nothing about, brought me a twinge of 'what if' - but Jacob's parents evoked none of that.

Perhaps it came back to how my memories worked. How my brain differed from a mortal. Jacob remembered loving his family. He remembered spending time with Alice. Playing games with her, and chatting about shared interests. Yet when I reached for the specific memories that made up those feelings, the little moments that allowed for such happiness... there was nothing. Vague recollections, at most. The knowledge that we'd done things, over the events themselves.

It made me wonder - how much of me was really Jacob? How much of him survived? Initially, it felt as if his memories had all but overwhelmed me, but now... I knew some part of him still lived on in me. Even ignoring the changes to my behavior his memories had wrought, my newfound phobia of rats spoke to his influence... but then there was his fear of heights that had fallen by the wayside.

Perhaps his memories were something akin to icing placed upon a cracked cake. Something that seeped deep into certain areas, filling up that which was

missing - like empathy and compassion - but elsewhere laid only shallowly upon the surface. I had plenty of experience with flying in this life, so the icing there had flaked off when put to the test. I had none with rats, so it sank deep there...

...Was it just me, or was that a rather terrible analogy...?

“Eena?” Lucy asked from her place beside me. “Are you okay? Did you hear me?”

“Apologies, Lucy,” I replied, shaking my head to free myself from unnecessary concerns. “I was lost in thought. What were you saying?”

“I wanted to know what your favorite dessert is!” Lucy repeated. “But if something’s bothering you, I’d rather ask about that!”

“...Cake,” I confessed, a small smile touching upon the corner of my lips. “Yours?”

“Pie!” Lucy replied without an ounce of hesitation. “Especially apple! But I like most types - except for lemon. Also, you don’t have to talk about what’s bothering you if you don’t want to, but I hope you know I’m here to listen if you do!”

“Or you can just keep brooding,” Feyra added, inserting herself into the conversation from her place at the rear of our formation. “You know, if you don’t mind seeing the Heroine pout.”

“I wasn’t pouting!” Lucy protested. “I was just worried. I still am, actually, but if Eena doesn’t want to talk about it then I’ll move on!”

“It’s nothing, really,” I assured her, eyeing Bailey curiously. I’d half expected her to growl at Feyra’s rudeness, but she was padding along without a care in the world, leading the way forward. I suppose she didn’t want to anger me by frightening any of my compatriots. As things were, Feyra had given plenty of objections to her presence on the road, and not entirely without reason. Bailey would have to hide herself in the woods if we heard anyone else coming. “I was mostly just lost in introspection...”

“Mostly?” Lucy pressed, curious.

“Introspection and... dread,” I confessed. “I’m meeting with someone later. A childhood friend - one who’s time with me ended badly.”

“Child Eena... I bet you were adorable as a kid!”

The smile I gave Lucy was a little strained, not helped in the slightest by the fact that I could hear Feyra suddenly starting a coughing fit. “I was a brat. And a lonely one at that. I sought to avoid my responsibilities, to spend time with my only friend, and when it got us both into trouble I tried to weasel my way out of it with brute force... It went about as badly as you’d think. Perhaps worse.”

“How young were you?” Lucy asked, sending a concerned glance Feyra’s way. Once she was sure the green haired girl wasn’t going to fall off her horse, though, her earnest eyes quickly bore their way into mine.

“Six when we met,” I informed her, “seven when we parted ways. But before you claim my age as an excuse for anything, you should know that my actions all but ruined her life...”

“I won’t try to excuse it,” Lucy said to my surprise. “I mean, I don’t really know anything about it, so I can’t comment on it, but it was a really long time ago, wasn’t it?”

“A long time ago indeed,” I agreed, frowning. “And yet I never once sought to make amends. Our friendship was shattered, and all I could do was wallow in self pity...”

“But you’re meeting her soon, right?” Lucy asked. “Maybe you could do something to make up for it now!”

“I’m not sure there’s anything I can do to make things right...” I admitted. “But I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to try. Even if she never forgives me, I at least owe her that much...”

“You shouldn’t assume she won’t forgive you!” Lucy protested. “Especially not if she agreed to meet with you.”

“She *requested* to meet with me, actually,” I confessed. “In truth, if her claims are to be believed, she’s already forgiven me. She even wants to *help me*. But... I struggle to understand why. As I said, I’ve done nothing to deserve it. Some part of me even fears it’s a trick of some sort, meant to hurt me or those I care about.”

“You also shouldn’t just assume the worst!” Lucy chided me. “Or at least that’s what I want to say, but I know that logic doesn’t always help with fear! And just speaking with good intentions won’t sway your heart... but I promise, whatever happens, I’ll be here for you! If you want to talk about it, I’ll listen! And if you just want to cry, I’ll give you my shoulder! But if it goes well, I’ll be here for that, too. To hug you and celebrate with you!”

“You’re sweet,” I murmured, a soft smile on my lips. “Much more so than I deserve...”

“I don’t think ‘deserving’ has anything to do with it! I’m sweet because I like you. And because it’s in my nature, I guess? Anyways, the point is, it isn’t based on a metric anyone else gets to decide! Not even you. And forgiveness works the same way!”

“I suppose...” I conceded. “I suppose I’ll just have to find out what metric Nivera is using, then...”

“Uh-huh!” Lucy agreed. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to go check on Feyra! She looks like she’s about to explode.”

I glanced at the girl in question, who indeed looked ready to pop from the effort of biting back her curses and questions. She was probably wondering how I could possibly have a childhood friend, considering what the church taught of me... Regardless, she didn’t seem inclined to say anything to Lucy when asked. She just insisted that she was alright.

Bailey, meanwhile, made her way over to me as soon as Lucy released my arm, and nuzzled her snout against my palm. The look in her eyes spoke of concern, which I met with a soft smile.

“It’s fine, Bailey. Or, at least it will be.”

Strangely enough, I almost believed it.

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## Nivera

“It’s going to go fine,” Chloe told me, patting me on the back. “Just take a deep breath.”

“*Fine?!?*” I hissed. “I haven’t seen her in fourteen years! How could it be *fine?!?* How is *any* of this ‘*fine?!?*’ What if she hates me?”

“Why would she hate you?” my beautiful, somewhat logical, usually rational, and maybe-a-touch-too-naive fiancée asked.

“I don’t know! Maybe because I barely ever let her win at board games? Or because I’m a terrible friend who sent her into a depression spiral and ruined her fucking life?”

“That wasn’t your fault,” Chloe pointed out.

“I know that! It was the stupid system we were born into! But what if she doesn’t? What if she hates me? What if she pisses me off? What if she says the wrong thing, and I go off the deep end like a fucking lunatic who doesn’t know how to keep her damn mouth shut?”

Breathe. Deep breaths. Deep breaths! Don’t want Illa to think you’re some sort of freak who can’t even keep her cool for two seconds! Even if it’s true - *especially* if it’s true.

“You know, usually getting anything from you is like pulling teeth,” Chloe remarked. “It’s kinda refreshing to see you be all open like this! Like a clam willingly expelling all its sand and grit before you eat it.”

“Not the time for bad metaphors, Chloe!” I reprimanded, crossing my arms and glaring at the kitsune.

“That was a simile,” she pointed out, before poking me on the nose. “And *you* need to calm down, before our guide comes back to fetch us. Also, are you sure you don’t want me around for the meeting?”

“Not for the opening,” I told her. “I don’t want Devilla to feel like we’re ambushing her...” Would she care? The Illa of my memories would have. Not that she’d have shown it. No, she’d have greeted everyone with all the decorum that was expected of her, but deep down she’d be overwhelmed by all the new faces and all the potential expectations they might have for her...

Ugh, no more time to think. I could hear the maid coming down the hall, which meant there was a good chance she’d heard *us*. Which in turn meant that my little freakout was going to be common knowledge among the bloodliner gossip lovers by morning... Or maybe not. Most of Illa’s maids were actually redbloods, after all. Mostly because she’d fired every bloodliner who came to work with her - and not even on purpose, so far as I could tell! She just went on firing sprees, occasionally... Also, considering her habit of making insufferable demands and throwing dishes, you couldn’t pay anyone with self-respect enough to work for her for long.

Point was, I wasn't being careful enough. It wasn't like me. I *usually* knew to keep my damn mouth shut. Information was a weapon, after all. It could be used against me. Against those I cared about.

Against *Illa*.

“Niveraaaaaaa~!” A teasing voice came from next to me. “Are you listening?” A finger poked my cheek. “Maari said she'd take us to the Queen, now~!”

“Bwuh? Huh? Maari?”

“The nice maid,” Chloe explained, gesturing to the kitsune in front of us. She was a bit taller than Chloe, dressed in a traditional maid outfit - all black and white, with lots of ruffles. Kinda made me wanna see Chloe in a maid's outfit. Not that I let any of that show on my face as I nodded to the girl. Maybe I'd write it in my diary, though. The secret one, not the public one, in code of course... Maybe with one of the harder ciphers? Chloe would take it as a challenge that way, and she'd probably Ma kick out of it when she finished deciphering it...

“Lead the way,” is all I said aloud, trying my best not to glower at the maid. Just because she got to see Illa regularly... and probably didn't even appreciate her.

Ugh, why did I have to *miss her* so badly? It was easier when I could just tell myself there was nothing I could do, and repress all those feelings! But now I was

back to, like, wanting to see her... to yell at her. And glare at her. And hug her. And tell her that I didn't blame her. That none of what had happened was really her fault. That I was here for her...

Not that I actually would. That would be dangerous. What if someone overheard? Even though I knew that Illa's floor was spyproof, and no magic for listening would even *work on it*, let alone stuff like invisibility or shapeshifting... Well, there was always a chance of somebody hiding through more mundane means, right? Someone who could use the information of how I felt against us. To hurt her. It wasn't worth the risk.

A knock pulled me out of my thoughts. Rewinding my brain a bit, I realized we'd already finished our journey down the hallway, to Illa's room... and that I'd gotten distracted again. Not good. The idea of meeting Illa again after so long was fucking with my normal sense of caution. Whatever, we were already here. The maid had already knocked. The doorknob was already rattling. My breath caught... but it was only Abigail on the other side.

"She's waiting for you," the maid told me, looking me up and down with a frown. "Be nice to her, alright? She's kind of fragile."

"Yeah, yeah..." Of course I would be nice to her. I loved her. Even if I also hated her. Even if I previously wanted to strangle her and shake some sense into

her... and still did, because apparently she was back to blaming herself for everything instead of everyone else... “Don’t worry. I know how to deal with her.”

“You *used* to know how to deal with her,” Abigail corrected me. “You haven’t met her in fourteen years.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I glared. She glared back. We glared at each other. For no real reason, since I actually agreed with her... but I couldn’t *say that*. Information - *all* information - was potentially dangerous. In the wrong hands, it could hurt you and everybody you cared about.

“It’s fine, Abigail,” came a new, yet oh so achingly familiar, voice. “I can handle myself.”

“Sure you can,” Abigail said, keeping her glare on me a moment longer before stepping through the door. “Go on in. And be gentle.”

I pushed my way past her. Not too roughly, mind you. I didn’t even make her stumble, but it definitely conveyed that I was annoyed with her... even though I actually appreciated what she was doing for Illa. How she was looking out for her. But it was better if people thought we were at odds. It might tempt them into trying to exploit an enmity that didn’t actually exist. Keep them from exploiting weaknesses that were real.

“Nivera,” came that familiar-but-unfamiliar voice again as I entered the room. *Illa’s* room. With its big bed, and its plush carpet, and.... other things I couldn’t really bring myself to focus on. Because *she* was right in front of me. Staring at me with her arms crossed. Her toes tapping, badly disguised nervousness written across her entire form. “I was told you wished to work with me on fixing a few issues.”

I didn’t respond. Couldn’t respond. My mouth was frozen, my throat was dry, my body was tense, like a coiled spring. Like a snake ready to strike.

“...Something wrong?” *Illa* asked.

Again, I said nothing. My tongue was caught in my throat. My eyes were locked on her, though. On her frown. Not displeased, not really. More worried.

“If you wish to air any grievances with me, now’s the time,” she continued. “So long as you keep it between us, I promise not to retaliate.”

“You’re stupid.” Wait, what? Why did I say that? The words just tumbled out before I could stop them - and they kept coming. “Dumb. An idiot who thinks far too highly of herself.”

“I-” she started, but I wasn’t done yet. Even though I’d never planned to say any of this to begin with. Didn’t *want* to say any of this. Though it was bad to say all of this, I just couldn’t stop.

“You think everything’s your fault. Like the world revolves around you! Like you’re so great, that you should be expected to solve problems that nobody else has managed to solve! You put all the blame on yourself when things go wrong! You let people turn you into a scapegoat! You act like a lightning rod for everyone’s disapproval, and think you deserve it all and worse! That you’re the worst! But you aren’t! You’re sweet. You’re kind. You’re an idiot. Such a massive idiot! You don’t understand how familial relationships work. You think you can fix things that are beyond your control! You think you should be blamed for things you did fourteen years ago, and you probably think I hate you. You’re so dumb, and I hate that. But I don’t hate you.”

“Nivera, I...” She hesitated. Maybe waiting for me to interrupt again? I didn’t. I just stared at her. Unblinking. “I’m not sure what to say... I thought I ruined your life?”

“You made my life better. I’d be twice as fucking broken if you’d left me with the assholes who brought me into this world.”

“I... But...”

“You’re an idiot.” I jabbed my finger against her collar bone. I didn’t remember getting close enough to do so, but I must have, because I did.

“You’re an idiot,” I repeated. I wanted to wrap my arms around her. To wrap my tail around her, and hug her against my shoulders, like I did when we were kids. But I didn’t. I’d regained too much of my self control for that.

“You’re an idiot,” I repeated. “But you’re *my* idiot. My little sister, who’s somehow older than me. And also my cousin-in-law-to-be, I guess. So... shut up, take my hand, and remember we’re family.”

“Nivera-” Illa began.

“Niv.”

“We can’t just... go back to how things used to be. It’s been *fourteen years*. I’m different. *You’re* different. We don’t even know each other anymore...” She looked confused. Like she hadn’t expected the conversation to go this way.

Not that I had, either.

“Then I guess it’s time we got to know each other again, isn’t it?” I replied, holding my hand out for her to take. “And it’s going to be hard. I don’t let *anyone* in, you know! Even my fiancée has to work for it on a daily basis! I’m a troublesome snake who nobody in their right mind would spend time around!”

“Do you really not blame me?” Illa asked, staring at my hand.

“I don’t.”

“You really think of me as family?”

“I do.”

“...You’re going to have to tell me how you ended up dating my cousin,” she told me. “And about my cousin. I didn’t even know I had a cousin...”

She took my hand, looking dazed.

I stared at it for a moment.

Then I yanked her into a hug.