

Demon Queened

Chapter 56

Written by Princess Kay

Devilla

There wasn't much to say about my aunt's place. It was... nice enough? It had four walls, decorated with a few painted family portraits and the occasional knick knack. To be honest, I was a little too stressed out to truly focus upon the details.

It was only just occurring to me that I didn't even know my aunt's name, after all. I couldn't exactly ask, either - not when I'd just been seated at the dinner table, sitting across from that very same aunt, who was now glaring at me from across the wooden surface.

"You look like a smaller version of your mother," my aunt said, after a long and awkward moment of me desperately wishing for Chloe and Nivera to get back from the kitchen. Abigail's hand on mine, from one seat over, was about the only thing keeping me anywhere close to calm and collected. "Except for your eyes. You took after your dam, there."

"...Thank you?" I proffered, after an awkward moment. "I'm afraid I've only had the occasional portrait to go by, personally, so I'll have to take your word for it."

Rare were my mother's portraits - and even rarer were my dam's. In fact, the only picture I had of her was the singular family portrait I'd seen - my dam's arm around my mother, her hand on her belly, and a soft smile on her face.

Mother's face *used* to grace the currency, as well, but I'd had it replaced with my own image... perhaps in part to avoid feeling her judgemental eyes on me, whenever I saw a coin.

"I didn't say it was a compliment," my aunt replied. "Though I suppose your mother did have good looks, if nothing else..."

"Look, Aunt..." Oh no. Why did I open my mouth? Now she was bound to find out I didn't know her name, and-

"Do you have to be so bitchy, Marlene?" Nivera complained, slithering out of the kitchen with a large platter of food in each hand. One was stuffed to the brim with the stuffed pork chops Chloe had promised, the other with mashed potatoes. Chloe was following not far behind, carrying two bottles of wine, and four glasses, while floating a green bean casserole behind her. Each of us was given one of the glasses, except for Marlene who received the second bottle in its entirety.

"Devilla's her *own* person, not a reflection of her mom."

Aunt *Marlene*'s head swiveled about to face Nivera, and for a moment the two's gazes met - one icy cold, one fiery hot. Then both pairs of eyes seemed to mellow out, as Marlene let out a soft sigh. "Fine. I'll try. For your sake, and Chloes, if no one else's... but I'm going to need a lot to drink, tonight."

"Got you covered!" Chloe promised. "There's half a dozen more wine bottles chilling as we speak!"

Marlene grunted, plunging a claw into the cork to pluck it out, so that she could take a deep drink from the wine bottle. "...Alright. I'm ready to hear it. What do you ladies want from me?"

"Who says we want anything?" Abigail asked, defensively, narrowing her eyes at my aunt.

Marlene snorted. "Please. If this was just about getting to know my niece, Chloe would have come up with a twelve step plan to ease me into things - by the time I actually sat at a table with you, she'd have found some way to get me relaxed and open as a book. This? This is *rushed*. You're after something."

"And I'm pretty sure you know what," Chloe chimed in. "Something to do with the name Alira, perhaps?"

“Though I’m honestly more interested in what you know of my mother, and her plans for me,” I confessed, shifting uncomfortably in my chair. This dinner felt almost brutal in its truth bearing efficiency.

“Yes, well, lucky for you it’s rather hard to talk about the first without the second,” Marlene informed me, before taking another swig of wine. “Seeing as how Alira’s blackmail material can be traced directly back to your mother’s no-good interference in my sister’s life.”

“Alira *blackmailed* you into staying away from me?” I asked, arching an eyebrow. That was certainly unexpected.

Then again, I’m not entirely sure *what* I expected her reason to be.

“I’ve heard that Alira was a big supporter of isolating you,” Nivera apprised me, frowning. “I can’t *prove* she was the one to come up with the idea, but she’s always been my top contender.”

“It was theoretically less about isolating you, and more about keeping people from having undo influence,” Chloe chimed in. “But we all know the end result. I’m guessing Alira didn’t want you interfering, Mom?”

“Something like that,” Marlene confirmed, swishing her wine bottle and staring at the sloshing liquid. “And before you ask what she blackmailed me for, I’ll repeat myself - it all goes back to your bitch of a mom.”

“You *really* don’t like Aunt Grimmilla, do you?” Chloe noted, before I could reply. “Any reason why? Most people - who remember her - talk about her like she was the next coming of Luci, or something.”

“Ha!” Marlene scoffed. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing, young missy. Trying to get more information from me... but whatever. I already promised I’d tell you, didn’t I? About that bitch of a woman who took advantage of my sister’s ideals...”

“Aunt Issa’s ideals?” Chloe pressed. This time, though, I was fairly certain the interest in her eyes was real.

“To start with, get that nonsensical image of Grimmilla out of your head,” Marlene warned, her eyes trailing over everyone at the table before finally coming to rest at mine. “She might have tricked the masses into thinking she cared, but deep down she was almost as selfish as you. I’m pretty damn sure there was only one person in this whole world she cared about - and it wasn’t my sister, or even herself. It was *you*.”

“Me?” I questioned, hardly able to believe my ears. “I wasn’t even born yet.”

“Yeah, well, you meant the world to her, all the same,” Marlene muttered, lifting her bottle of wine up and practically chugging at it for a moment or two. “Ah... Yeah. She... at first, I think she mostly saw you as some sorta tool. She talked about you all distantly, like you weren’t *real* to her. But when she actually got pregnant? She shifted her tune. Started actually getting *excited* when she talked about your future. Always going on about the various possibilities you’d have before you... She said you’d be the first Demon Queen to ever truly be *free*. Free of the war - free of *us*, if you decided to be. Because you were going to be the one to end *everything*.”

“Everything?” I asked, my head spinning. The idea that my mother actually *cared* for me was somehow a revelation I had not expected - it felt like someone was squeezing my heart, all of a sudden, except instead of pain I just felt... warmth. Care. Like I suddenly had expectations to live up to, and yet those expectations weren’t harmful to me in the slightest... I felt like crying. Instead, I shoved that confusing mess of emotions to the side, and focused on the woman in front of me. “Not just the war?”

“The war, definitely,” Marlene agreed, eyeing her wine bottle - now with noticeably less wine in it. Chloe got up without a word, hurrying towards the kitchen to grab another. “As for the rest... I don’t know. She always said to interpret that as I wanted... the only thing important to her was that we helped. Or rather that *Issa* helped.”

“Wait,” Abigail called out, holding out a hand. “I get the whole ‘she was secretly a selfish bitch’ complaint, but where does your sister fit into this? I mean, she was just a commoner, right? She couldn’t have been of *that* much help, could she? Mom said she won the heart of the Queen with her jokes and laughter, but-”

“Oh, she won *something* with jokes and laughter,” Marlene snarled, even as Chloe came back to place another bottle in front of her. She tugged off the cork and put the bottle to her lips and taking a big gulp.

“She won your mother’s attention, is what she won - but not her love. The only reason your mother approached my sister was because she wanted her daughter to ‘inherit that smile.’ She figured any child of Issa would have the strength to keep laughing through even the most terrible times... Not that I’m really sure why she thought a *princess*, of all things, would need such a trait. Wasn’t exactly guaranteed you’d get it, either - *obviously*.” Saying so, she made a

broad gesture to me with her wine bottle, before sticking the top of it back into her mouth for another sip.

“...I’m starting to realize just how little I know about my dam,” I confessed. “Especially if her laughter and jokes really were enough to reach my mother’s ears. That said, I’m afraid I fail to understand what my dam got out of this deal... assuming she wasn’t secretly in love with her queen?”

“What she got was an end to the war,” Marlene told me, before slamming her wine bottle down onto the table. “Or at least that’s what your bitch of a mom promised... Issa loved to fight, but she hated to kill. An end to the slaughter was all she’d ever wanted. Which is probably why she got the idea in her head to be a little *proactive* about it.”

“Proactive?” Chloe pressed, before I had the chance to ask. From the enthralled look in her eyes, she was as eager to learn about my dam’s actions as me.

“Aye,” Marlene confirmed, taking another long drink from her bottle. “Proactive. She decided that if her daughter was going to play such a big role in ending the war, the least she could do was play a small one. Or at least that’s how

she explained her insanity to me - how saving a single soldier's life is meant to fix anything, I've got no idea, though..."

"A soldier?" I repeated, my mind flicking to Lucy. She wouldn't happen to have been named Brielle?"

Marlene choked, spilling wine down her front as she slammed the bottle down on the table. "How do you know that name? Don't tell me she came *here*?"

"No... but her daughter did, sort of," I replied, not wanting to admit that I'd personally brought a human into our halls. Let alone the Heroine.

"By the fallen... Just how dumb *is she*? I heard Brielle hoped for her to be a bridge between our people - even talked about naming her after Luci, herself - but this... to come *this far*... No, wait... How did I not hear of this? She hasn't been squirreled away in the dungeon, has she?"

"I... wait.... Lucy was purposefully named after..." I paused, then shook my head. This wasn't the time to get caught on details. "She's not in the dungeon. I've been keeping her under disguise during her time here, ever since I found her."

"Under disguise?" Marlene demanded, narrowing her eyes. "And you're sure nobody found out? Because your dam went to all the trouble of hiding hers in a damn *cave*, and yet she still ended up getting followed..."

“Hence the blackmail material?” Abigail guessed, shifting a little in her seat besides me.

“Aye,” Marlene confirmed. “Hence the blackmail material. And all for nothing - or so I thought... Don’t tell me *she* has something to do with all the rumors swirling around you? The reason you’ve supposedly changed so much? Did my sister’s stupidity actually... *lead* somewhere?”

“Not... quite,” I replied, noncommittally. I still wasn’t sure how much I could afford to tell this woman, aunt or no. I certainly had no intention of blurting out Lucy’s status, or my own recent activities, this early on...

Not that it hadn’t worked out fine for me in the past, but still.

“How about I go get her?” I suggested. “She’d likely appreciate hearing the rest of the story.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Marlene all but snapped at me, waving her bottle wildly in the air. “Go get her! I wanna know what my sister’s damn sacrifice amounted to.”

“Right...” I responded, a nervous smile on my lips. It seemed as if Marlene’s reluctance to speak with me had disappeared entirely, and I wasn’t quite sure what

to make of it... but it didn't seem like she meant any harm, at least? Hopefully, meeting Lucy would even calm her down... and maybe lead to some answers.

I doubted she could answer the questions I really wanted to know, though. Like why the daughter of someone my parents saved ended up the Heroine... did my aunts in heaven do it on purpose? Had they hoped for the events of the game? With me being slaughtered, at the hand of someone who wouldn't exist if not for my parents?

Lucy would probably say otherwise. She'd likely think that the Goddess picked her in hopes of ending the war, instead. So that she could be the bridge her parents wanted her to be... It was possible, but considering I knew for a fact how the timeline would have gone, if the rite had not gone so badly instead...

I sighed and shook my head as I stood up from the table. Worrying about all this would get me nowhere. It was time to bring in Lucy, so that together we could draw out whatever answers we could.