

Demon Queened

Chapter 21

Written by Princess Kay
Proofread by FallingLeaf

Devilla

I studied my venison skewers as Lucy and I walked toward our next destination. They were simple in construction, consisting of cubed meat impaled by wood, cooked upon a grill, lightly salted and slightly charred. They smelled good, and - judging by a quick nibble - tasted decent. But were they truly worth the praise Lucy had bestowed upon them?

“Is something wrong?” Lucy asked, already halfway through the first of her meaty treats. “If you don’t like the taste, I can take you somewhere else!”

“The taste is fine,” I assured her, taking a larger bite. The meat was firm and smooth, boasting a surprising depth of flavor, the lack of culinary seasoning supplemented by the creature’s own varied diet. A bit gamey, but not bad at all. “I’m just confused, I suppose. For as good as it tastes, I cannot help but credit that to the ingredients over the chef. And yet you called his stall your favorite? I mean no offense, but surely there are others who could do the job as well?”

“I think you’re underestimating how hard it is to hunt stuff, Eena,” Lucy chided me. “Hunters are basically competing with monsters! Monsters who will want to attack them, too! I mean, Wilhoon’s actually an adventurer, you know? He makes most of his money selling monster material to guild!”

“Why not sell them at his stall, instead?” I questioned, taking another bite of the meat. Though I had a newfound appreciation for its rarity, I still thought it

could have used more seasoning. As wonderful as salt was, even fries couldn't truly shine with that alone. Dipping sauces were essential. Speaking of which... "Could you hold this for me?" I asked, extending my skewers. "There's something I need to retrieve from my pack."

"People don't eat monster meat, Eena," Lucy informed me, lowering her voice to a whisper as she took hold of my meal. "The church teaches that it's fine to use their materials for weapons and stuff - to fight them with their own tools - but that consuming their flesh is to invite darkness into our hearts... Not that I really agree with them..." Lucy trailed off, the frown that had briefly marred her features disappearing. "But we're getting off topic! The food's not really why Wilhoon's stall is my favorite, anyway."

"No?" I questioned, digging into my pack, past the non-perishable goods that filled it, to reach the Empty Bag hiding within. "Then what is?"

"The way he treats me! He's always been way more casual with me than the other vendors!"

I had to bite my tongue to keep from questioning Lucy's words. I didn't wish to disparage her favorite stall further, but if *that* was her idea of a 'casual' interaction, then I had to wonder whether my manner of speaking even registered with her as *formal*. The man hadn't even called her by name! And he'd clearly been nervous the entire time, albeit to varying degrees... But I had no wish to

endanger whatever joy she found in frequenting the place. Especially if the other vendors were, indeed, bad enough to make Wilhoon seem friendly by comparison.

“If it’s more the vendor than the flavor that drew you,” I said instead, “then perhaps you won’t mind me making a minor adjustment to the taste?”

“What do you mean?” Lucy asked, eyeing my pack. Her eyes widened as I drew forth a glass bottle, curiosity written clearly upon her brow as she studied the red liquid within.

“This is called hot sauce,” I apprised her, tugging its cork free from the narrow neck. “A spicy topping that goes well with meat.”

I watched Lucy for her reaction, just as she in turn studied the condiment I held. I was a little concerned that she might question its presence in my possessions, deviating as it did from standard adventurer fare, but thankfully, she seemed more curious about its contents than confused as to why I had such a thing in the first place. I could only hope that she’d be as accepting of the other sauces, spices, and herbs that Lenora had helped to procure. It would be best if I probed her acceptance carefully, so as to avoid breaking my promise with Abigail to be discreet.

“Can I try some?” Lucy asked after a moment of study.

“If you’d like,” I assented, proffering the bottle with one hand as I reached out to retrieve my two remaining skewers from her. She had, I noticed, finished the first of hers. “Though I’d be careful with the quantity. It’s quite potent.”

“Don’t worry,” Lucy replied, confidence puffing up her chest, as she proceeded to pour a generous heaping upon the first chunk of her skewer. “I have a really high tolerance to spicy stuff!”

Or so she said. And yet the very moment her teeth cut through the meat...
“Spicyyyyyyyyyyy!”

“I did try to warn you,” I sighed, trying not to chuckle at the Heroine who’d been brought to tears with a single bite. It was hard to imagine that her presence had ever struck me with terror, seeing her like this.

“I thought you were just underestimating me!” Lucy explained, levitating the bottle over to me via arcane magic, so that her hand would be free to fan at her overheated tongue. A futile gesture, but one I understood all too well - though only via my memories as Jacob. “I mean, I’ve had hot sauce before, and usually I need at *least* that much just to feel it!”

I replied with a noncommittal hum, unsure how to justify the differences in strength between Lenora’s concoction and those that Lucy was more familiar with. It made sense to me, now that it had been pointed out. Lucy’s people didn’t have dryads, capable of producing entire fields of peppers almost at will, and as such

were no doubt stingier with their supplies. Not to mention the fact that we demons of the tower had long been forced to compensate for a lack of salt in our cuisine, with other, stronger flavors. And yet, as obvious as it seemed to me, none of it was fit for open discussion, while I was hiding my identity.

And speaking of the inexplicable...

“You can’t seriously be planning to go back for another bite?” I queried, voice weighted with disbelief as I watched the Heroine slowly bringing the skewer back towards her face. Her eyes were *still watering!* Not to mention the emotions contained within them - a combination of determination and terror.

“I don’t want to waste it!” Lucy told me, her resolve blazing ever brighter, as if she were gathering the courage to face her greatest enemy. Which I suppose wasn’t too far off base, considering the snack’s origin, but it was still not an expression befitting the consumption of good food. “Wilhoon put his all into hunting this meat! And I bet you don’t have a ton of that sauce, either, right?”

“Well...” I obviously did - a near unlimited supply, in fact. But there *was* a limit to what I could explain having on me.

“This meal isn’t just meat and sauce! It’s filled with the feelings of those I care about! So there’s no way I’ll ever let that go to waste!”

Saying so, Lucy opened her mouth wide to take another bite. The skewer, however, never entered her maw, as my magic quickly pulled it back.

“Don’t be stupid,” I grumbled, snatching the hot sauce from her magic’s grasp, pouring a singular drop upon the skewer that I had bitten into, so that I might offer it to her. I would have gone for the untouched skewer, but I didn’t want to hear any complaints about taking more than she was giving. “Our feelings are meant to bring you *joy*, not pain.”

“Eena...” Lucy hesitated, her eyes traveling back and forth between the sauce drenched skewer she currently gripped, and the one I’d offered her in trade. “Are you sure? Wouldn’t that just put you in trouble, instead of me?”

“As if such a small amount of sauce could possibly trouble me,” I replied with a derisive snort. A bit excessive, perhaps, but I wanted to ensure she took me seriously. Especially since I was speaking truthfully - while there was some risk of the sauce washing out the meat’s flavor profile, there was no chance of its heat debilitating me. I could drink it straight and be fine. In fact I’d done just that, on multiple occasions, in order to judge Lenora’s foray into sauce making.

“Well... If you’re sure,” Lucy said, overcoming her reluctance and making the trade.

She watched me, nerves obvious, as I raised the oversauced meat to my lips and bit into it. The heat washed over me, and while my fear of losing the venison’s taste proved true, the spice itself did me no ill. Indeed, I’d simply need to finish the chunk of meat she’d drenched, and then move onto the lower ones, which had

merely caught the dripping excess. I could even switch between the two skewers I now held, so as to enjoy the taste in both its classic and altered forms.

The smile that thought brought to my lips must have alleviated Lucy's concern, for she was soon raising the meal for a bite of her own. It was only as I watched her bite consume the marks I myself had left upon the meat that something occurred to me - that this might, perhaps, count as an indirect kiss.

My face turned red. Then redder yet, when I saw that Lucy herself seemed to hold no such concerns, her focus entirely on the consumption of hot sauce and venison. I was being ridiculous, I realized, allowing thoughts of lips on lips to pass through my mind, while Lucy herself blissfully enjoyed her meal. To think about what it would feel, if a more direct variant of the concept came to pass.

Did this even *count*? We were biting the food, not sealing our lips upon it. And even if it did, did Solla even have such a concept to begin with? I wasn't sure how much of Earth did, for that matter, having never really come across it outside of the anime that Jacob used to watch. And Lucy certainly didn't seem to be thinking about such ridiculous things as our mouths... sealing against one another...

“Can I have some more?”

I nodded, rapidly, my cheeks on fire as I pushed the embarrassing notion from my mind.

“Eena?” Lucy queried me, her hand yet to reach for the sauce. “Are you okay? Your face is all red...?”

I shook my head, in lieu of a verbal response, not trusting my voice to remain steady. Similarly, my eyes avoided Lucy’s, taken as I was by the irrational fear that she might give her some clue as to what was going through my mind.

“Oh no... Don’t tell me the sauce got to you after all? I knew I shouldn’t have let you take it!”

“N-no!” I squeaked out, cursing the quivering of my voice. I was being *ridiculous*. Letting Lucy’s talk of romance and dates put ideas in my mind... But... The idea of kissing, outside of sex, was just so... So... *intimate*. Indirect or not! “I’m just... Embarrassed by... Well...” I hesitated, chancing a look upon her face. The concern I saw in her eyes brought guilt bubbling forth from within me. Was she blaming herself for taking the trade from me? Would she try and take it back? And if so, wouldn’t that lead to *another* indirect kiss through it?

“Ijusthadtheideathatwemighthaveindirectlykissedisall!”

Lucy blinked at the words - or maybe just *word* - that had been birthed from my mortification. I watched her mouthing what I’d said, picking it apart. And then I saw a blush touch her cheeks, as they had mine - but it was lighter, a simple pink compared to my own crimson cheeks. And it was paired with a smile.

“I don’t think that counts as a kiss, Eena. I mean, we were just biting it, weren’t we?”

I nodded, slower this time, feeling even more like a fool than before. Lucy’s words only reinforced my own thoughts on the matter, but, somehow, it felt more convincing coming from her lips than it had going through my mind.

“Besides, there’s no way I’d be satisfied with that as our first kiss! When it comes, I want to enjoy it!”

...I wondered what Lucy would think, if she knew how close she was to becoming the first Heroine to ever kill a Demon Queen through sheer *embarrassment*.

“You’re really sensitive about this, aren’t you?” Lucy asked me, her voice betraying not concern, but curiosity. “I didn’t think you would be, considering how you are with... Other stuff...”

“*Other stuff*, as you put it, is purely physical in nature,” I pointed out to her, turning my head away and tilting it forward a little, in hopes of hiding my reddened cheeks behind a wall of temporarily brunette hair. “Kisses are *romantic*. Particularly so when separated from ‘other stuff.’”

“I guess that makes sense...” Lucy conceded. “But then why didn’t you get embarrassed when Wilhoon called you my girlfriend?”

“Because I knew he meant it platonically...” Little as I might have deserved the term, in either of its forms.

“Platonically? Why would it be platonic? That doesn’t even make sense!”

“And assuming we’re dating does?” I retorted, turning to face Lucy’s frowning form.

“I mean, we *were* holding hands,” Lucy reminded me. “Ordering food together. You even used my name!”

“That’s... I’m not entirely sure why that last one made the list, but... Still! Surely that’s a bit of a stretch?”

“Not as much of a stretch as calling girlfriends platonic,” Lucy countered. “I mean, why would anyone even use it that way? It seems like it would get really confusing!”

“That’s...” Accurate, actually. Of course, it had been misleading on Earth, as well. My friend Alice had complained about it regularly. But girls dating girls seemed to be more widely accepted on Solla, even amidst humans, than it had ever been in that world. Nobody had batted an eye at Lissera’s interest in me, even in such a small village, and Lucy certainly showed no sign of shame for her preferences. Nor had she mentioned the church frowning upon it. “Wait a moment - if you knew he meant it romantically, then why did *you* not protest it? We’re hardly dating, as of yet.”

“Because *you* didn’t, of course! I mean, it made me really happy that we looked like a couple, you know? So I’ll back you up if you ever want to stop it, but I’m not going to go out of my way to end something that makes me so happy!”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Lucy’s infatuation with me was obvious, but the path through it much less so. I could only hope she’d come to realize her mistake in crushing on me as time passed and she grew to know me more.

My silence did nothing to dampen Lucy’s mood, however, as she happily consumed the skewer I had given her, swapping back and forth between using the hot sauce and eating chunks plain. For my part, I ate at a much more sedate pace, savoring the flavor of each bite. The hot sauce made a world of difference, and I daresay I might have enjoyed the meal every bit as much as Lucy - though far less vocally. The sounds that girl made would have been more at home in a bed, than on the street.

“We’re here!” Lucy declared, after a minute or two more, chewing through the last of her skewer and turning the wooden sticks to ash with a quick burst of magic. I followed suit, putting away the bottle of hot sauce as I looked over the building she had brought me to.

It was a small thing. Squat, made of brown bricks, with a garish yellow roof that drew the eye and a sign that I struggled to make sense of. It depicted what looked to be a spyglass, a wheel, a vase, and... a fork? There were words as well,

thankfully, written in a flowing script that circled about the mishmash of items.

“Carrie’s Curiosities.”

“This place has all sorts of interesting things, from all sorts of places!” Lucy excitedly informed me, pulling open the door. “I used to come here all the time, growing up.”

“Growing up?” I questioned, following after the eager girl. “Does that mean this is your hometown?”

A quick glance around the shop showed me two things, one of which demanded far more attention than the other. The first, and less important matter, was a hulking man, with an unruly mop of blonde hair, who stood upright by one of the doors. He was easily over six feet - six foot two, if I were pressed to give a precise measurement - with bulky muscles that seemed more fit for intimidation than lifting. He was likely present as an anti-theft measure, but considering the unlikelihood of us partaking in such activities, combined with the simple fact that either me *or* Lucy could take him with both hands tied behind our back, he wasn’t worth more than a cursory glance.

More noteworthy, to me, were the messy shelves, which rose to just a little below my head. They contained a multitude of items, such as small metal balls, fishing hooks, thick coils of rope, and - of course - the forks I’d noticed upon the sign. All scattered across the wooden racks with no rhyme or reason I could detect.

What's more, the shelves themselves had been arranged to form a spiral labyrinth of sorts. One would have to walk their entire length, passing each and every item on display, just to reach the counter on the other end. An underhanded selling technique if ever there was one. One that likely would have had me turning back around immediately, if not for the bright smile upon Lucy's face.

"Hi Rewdeen!" the redhead called, waving to the guard by the door, before turning back towards me. "And sort of? I mean, it's the first city I ever lived in, anyway. Or even visited! I actually grew up in a small cabin out in the woods! It was near a little village - about the same size as Derrin, actually! - and me and Mom would occasionally go there to stock up on supplies, and talk to people..." The smile slipped from her face. "I only came to the city after she died..."

"Lucy..." I whispered, reaching out to take her hand, as she had so often stolen mine. Much like me, she didn't protest or pull away, but even as my hand gripped hers, it momentarily felt like she was somewhere very far away.

Then her smile returned, as bright and joyful as ever, without even a hint of the fragility I had momentarily glimpsed within her eyes. "I've been here since I was thirteen, though! It's where I learned how to control my strength better, and use my holy magic, and be the best Heroine I can be to the people! And this shop actually helped a lot with that!"

“Is that so?” I asked her, returning her smile with one of my own as she squeezed my hand and pulled me forward, towards the shelves. Whether her smile was as forced as mine, I could not say, but if Lucy wished to put forth a brave face for the sake of the public then I would do my best to help her uphold that facade. I only hoped that she would be able to express herself more fully when we were alone.

“Uh-huh!” She gestured to the shelves with her free hand. “The owner - Carrie - buys her stock from adventurers. Everything on these shelves came from another city. Some of them are even from other countries! Which means even the little things we recognize could end up with big differences! Like...” She scanned the shelves for a moment. “Like these skewers!”

I followed the trajectory of her pointing finger with my eyes, and landed upon a pair of skewers completely unlike the ones that we’d just burnt. Wrought of metal instead of carved from wood, their ends had been twisted and turned to form simplified versions of animals - a chicken and a pig.

“I’ve only ever seen skewers used in street food around here,” Lucy continued, her smile brightening just a touch further. Becoming, in my eyes, just a touch more real. “But in other cities, they’re used in fancy restaurants! And it’s the same with other cooking instruments, too! Not to mention clothes, farming

implements, smithing techniques, and so much more! Wherever you go, things will be different than where you were...”

Lucy’s gaze swept across the various items on the shelf as she led me down the stacks, her focus lingering occasionally - on a sun hat, a hoe, a pair of ornate chopsticks with white flowers painted upon their surface. “My whole world, back before I became an adventurer, was just the forest, that village, and this city... But when I came here, and looked at all the stuff on display, it made me realize that the world is so much bigger than that. That there are places, more different than I could ever imagine, out there... And that they’re filled with *people* who are different, too! People who think differently than me, and do things differently. People I wouldn’t be able to understand if I just stayed in town and trained like Father Tuffel wanted me to. That’s *why* I became an adventurer - so I could go out, and meet those people! So that I could find out what sort of people made this stuff, and work to become the sort of Heroine they needed me to be! And do you want to know what I found out?”

“What?” The question wasn’t a perfunctory one. Curiosity laid laden in the single word, alongside a touch of amusement as the corners of my lips turned upwards. I was being pulled along by Lucy’s enthusiasm. And, much to my own surprise, I didn’t mind it.

“That people are just people! Which... is sort of obvious, I guess, but... There’s more to it than that?” Lucy’s brow furrowed in thought, as for the first time I watched her actually pick her words before speaking them. “I mean, different people do need different things. The individual jobs I do change, from place to place, but the end results are usually the same? No matter how different people are, they all need to eat and sleep. They need places to stay, and they want safety for themselves and those they care about. They all have needs that need to be met, to get those things, and there’s so many differences everywhere I go, but there’s just as many similarities binding us all together! And it’s not just that way with humans, either, but *all* living creatures! You know?”

I nodded, slowly, as her eyes met mine. It felt, in that moment, as if she were trying to say that she knew I was different, and that it was okay... That no matter what I told her about myself, *it would be okay*.

Or perhaps that was simply wishful thinking. A desire, on my part, to come clean. A desire that could cost my people everything, if I was mistaken about the limits of her understanding. She could just as easily be reminding me about our talk on animals and monsters. Perhaps it was Bailey she was truly asking after.

“There’s another reason I wanted to bring you here, though!” Lucy added, offering a welcome distraction from my thoughts. “I was hoping you could pick an item to buy!”

“An item?” I queried, arching an eyebrow as my gaze swept across the shelves. There were many things, even in this small section we had walked through. A second sun hat, a pair of sandals, and a candle to name a few. But honestly, of them all, my mind turned back towards the skewers we had seen towards the entrance. Turning back around, without letting go of Lucy’s hands, I spied them still perched upon their shelf. A brief flaring of my arcane magic, reaching out towards and enveloping them with the energy under my command, and I had them floating towards my hand. “Would two work?”

“That’s fine!” Lucy confirmed. “They’re a set, after all! And I know where they’re from, too, which makes it even better!”

“Where they’re from...” I murmured, glancing between the items, and her. “Were you hoping to tell me about the place, then? To ignite my imagination?”

“Close!” Lucy’s smile shifted a little, taking on a nervous edge. “I was actually hoping we could go there, one day? So that I could show you how things differ! And help you see the world how I see it - full of people who are different, but also still the same! Still just people, living under the goddess’s loving care!”

Loving care? I wondered how Lucy would take it, if she knew our goddess had abandoned this world long ago... What would it do to her, when she found out that everything she’d been taught was a lie? That the goddess she believed in was

gone, and that her religion was nothing but cruelty and lies... Would she be able to believe it? Coming from me? Her supposed greatest enemy?

She claimed to have feelings for me. No - *did* have feelings for me. I could believe that much. But could mere infatuation possibly stand against everything she'd been taught? Just because she'd been willing to work alongside demons in the game, didn't mean she'd be able to accept their queen in reality. Not when she knew so little of me.

"Um. We don't have to stick to the skewers, if you don't want to?" Lucy offered. "You could pick something else? Or we could just not do it... Though I really hope you'll at least consider it!"

"No..." I shook my head, forcing another smile to come to my own lips. I reminded myself that I was here to grow closer to Lucy so that when the time came, my words would at least have a fighting chance of reaching her. So that the truth could, one day, be revealed.

Even if it meant hiding things in the present.

"I quite like these," I continued. "And there'd be a certain symmetry in it, besides. Assuming, that is, that you intend to ask me there on a *proper* date one day?"

My teasing tone and smile were ill matched to the painful feeling in my heart. I knew that there would be no date. That there was no way I could allow her

to take me on one, even if I wanted to. She deserved better in romance than a girl who didn't even dare to share her real name.

Suddenly, I felt Lucy's hand tightening around my own, as - without so much as a word of justification - she began to pull me down the aisles at top speed. Before I could even think to question her, she'd tossed a gold coin upon the counter and was dragging me back out of the store again, all but sprinting out the door.

"Lucy?" I queried, once we'd left the building, the cool night air helping to shake me from my shock, as Lucy herself began to slow.

"I'm sorry, Eena! We'll talk at the inn!"

The telltale prickling of arcane magic upon my skin was the only warning I received, before a strong tug upon my shirt's collar sent me tumbling backwards. I realized, then, that Lucy's hand was no longer holding mine. Instead, her arms were circling about my legs and waist, as she picked me up in a princess carry and began to run in the direction of the Queen's Crown. Upon arrival, a scene similar to that in the shop occurred, with her slamming a coin down and hurriedly renting a room from an extremely flustered innkeeper. Then she was carrying me up the stairs, magically maneuvering a key into a lock, and bringing me across the threshold of the room we had been given.

“Lucy,” I began, as soon as she had put me down, the door closed behind us.

“What on Solla was *that* about!?”

“We need to talk!” Lucy declared, her eyes once more aflame with resolve.

“Or more like, we don’t need to talk! Or we need to talk about how we don’t need to talk? And it’s a talk that we need to have with absolute privacy, so... *Veroon, Belloosa mador!*”

“Lucy?” I repeated, my tone a bit more cautious this time. I couldn’t imagine much that would demand this level of secrecy from her. Excluding my identity, of course, but... Surely she didn’t know that much?

“Eena,” Lucy began, taking a deep breath. “I know you have secrets!”

I froze.

“And I don’t want you to tell them to me!”

And unfroze. Or perhaps it would be better to say I ‘twitched,’ for that was about all the movement I managed before shock sealed my movements again.

“I’m really sorry, Eena! All that talk about acceptance and differences... It probably sounded like I was trying to pressure you into telling me something... Because I wanted you to know that I would accept you no matter what, you felt like you had to tell me what that ‘what’ was, didn’t you? And then you started talking about dating me, with that pained smile on your face...”

“That’s... was it really that obvious?” I questioned.

“Yes!” The firm response, lacking even an ounce of hesitation, made me grimace. Perhaps I wasn’t cut out for faking my emotions, any more than I was for hiding them... “I knew I messed up, instantly! But I also knew you wouldn’t want to talk about it in public, so I brought you here as quickly as I could!”

“And yet you’re saying that you *don’t* want me to tell you anything about what caused that pain? Because I find that rather hard to believe, coming from someone who so clearly wishes to get closer to me.”

My words came out a touch harsher than I’d intended them to. Lucy didn’t seem to mind, though, shaking her head with a smile that actually felt sincere.

“Of course I want to know! I want to know everything about you! But I want to know it when you *want* to tell me! If you tell me your secrets because you feel like you *have* to, then we aren’t really getting closer, right? You’re going to worry the entire time that I’ll reject you. And you’ll probably still worry afterward, no matter how much I try to reassure you! That’s why I’d rather you not tell me anything just yet. Not until you can truly believe, with all your heart, that I’ll accept whatever you have to say!”

“Lucy... That’s...” Ridiculous? Incredibly optimistic and naive? She had no idea what I was keeping from her! No clue as to the world shattering secrets I was holding back from her. And yet the look in her eyes was the same I had seen after she’d accidentally asked me out in front of everyone. A look that said whatever

secrets I held *didn't* matter. Because whatever my secrets were, she would accept them anyway.

And yet...

"I... Can't tell you yet..." I whispered, shame burning in my chest. "But someday... I promise."

"'Someday' is good enough for me!" Lucy declared, with a grin so wide you'd never believe that I'd just rejected her trust.

"...Then... For now. I will at least trust you with this much." I took a deep breath. "Eena isn't my real name. It's nothing but an alias." I tensed, waiting for the reprimand. Waiting for her to demand that I go further, to say that she deserved at least that much.

What I received, instead, was a tight embrace.

"Thank you for telling me that. I look forward to hearing your real name, someday," Lucy squeezed tighter. "But I'm happy to call you Eena for now, okay? You can keep it a secret for as long as you need! But there is one rule I want to set! And a request I want to make, but you can say no to that one, if you don't feel up to it."

"A rule?" I questioned. She nodded, the movement felt rather than seen due to her head's position upon my shoulders.

“Don’t lie to me!” She parted from me, her eyes meeting mine in a display of seriousness. “That’s really important, okay? If there’s something you can’t tell me, just say so! I’ll trust you, so trust *me* not to ask too many questions!”

I nodded, slowly, fighting down the urge to protest. The desire to say this made *no sense*. That she put too much faith in someone she barely knew. Someone she was merely infatuated with... And yet, the trust she showed me... I knew, in that moment, that I never *ever* wanted to betray it.

“And the request?”

“To have sex with me!”

“To...” I stared at Lucy, who grinned back at me without a hint of shame. “After all that? The bridal carry, the dramatic speech, the ups and downs of our... Not date... You want to have *sex*?!”

“Why not?” Lucy asked, meeting my gaze without flinching. “It’s a great way to relax, isn’t it? It feels really good, and it’s sort of exhausting - but that just means you can go to sleep afterwards, right? Since there won’t be any bear attacks this time! And I can put what I said into practice, too - show you what I feel! Show you that I trust you, by putting myself completely in your hands!”

“The last time we had sex, you came out of it with a crush,” I pointed out. “One I’m not looking to intensify...”

“I think it’s a bit late for that, Eena! I mean, the sex isn’t even the biggest part of it - you’re the one who said that’s just physical, right? Even though I’d argue that it’s a great way to convey emotions, too... But the main reason I fell for you is that you treat me like a normal person! You use my name, and you’re not afraid to tease me... And yeah, you have sex with me, but it’s not the sex itself that was important! Even if it does feel really, *really* good!”

“You...” I buried my face in my free hand. “I can’t believe I’m actually considering this...” But her words made sense to me. Sex was a thing that friends could partake in, easily. It wasn’t like kissing - there was no inherent romance. Only pleasure. And it *would* feel good...

“We don’t have to,” Lucy reminded me, looking down at the ground. “Not if you don’t want to. But I’d like to, if you’re up for it...”

“...Thick walls and soft beds.”

“Huh?” Lucy’s head snapped up.

“That’s what you said this place boasted, did you not? Meaning that nobody should hear your screaming and moaning as I ravish you, even without your spell.” A spell I’d thankfully had the wherewithal to listen to, this time. And one which I very much doubted she’d be able to keep up during sex.

“You mean...?”

“I’ll be sure to repay you for everything you’ve done to me, today, Lucy.” I reached down to grab the hem of my shirt as I spoke. “For the warmth that filled my heart, and the heat that colored my cheeks.”

Lucy let out a little squeak, a noise I assumed to be of joy as her hands immediately moved to undo her armor, her magic tugging at any straps that were placed too awkwardly for her to easily reach. Soon her breast plate was on the floor, her greaves and skirt following quickly after, alongside her bracers and gauntlet. A journey my own clothes had already completed.

All articles except for one, that is.

“Aren’t you going to take off your shoes?” Lucy asked, the innocence in her voice ill fit to the cutting nature of her question.

I couldn’t believe that I was being set such a trial, so soon after my vow of honesty! But I couldn’t lie, so... “I... Dislike being seen without them. Especially by...” People who are taller than me. Six simple, shameful words that I just couldn’t bring myself to speak.

“In that case...!” Lucy’s grin was the only warning I received before she was once more scooping me up in her arms, and carrying me like a princess. “If you’re laying down, we can take them off without me seeing how short you are, right?”

“I am not short!” I protested, my cheeks aflame. “I’m just... On the small side, amongst my family members.” My mother had been six foot one, my

grandmother six foot even, and my great grandmother six foot three! And yet here I was, at a measly five foot four... It was enough to make anyone self conscious!

“It’s alright, Eena,” Lucy reassured me, laying me upon the bed and reaching for my shoes. I watched her remove them without complaint, allowing her to reveal the black nail tipped toes beneath. “I think you’re cute, no matter how tall or small you are!”

“C-cute?” I exclaimed. “Surely you jest?” Sexy, hot, beautiful or even simply ‘pretty’ were all descriptors I would take. But *cute*?

“Uh-huh,” Lucy affirmed, without thought to my pride as she laid a kiss upon the inside of my thigh. “Especially when you get all flustered and squirmy!”

My thighs twitched at the sensation - a movement that most definitely *wasn't* squirming - even as I set a baleful glare upon her. “I do not wish to hear of cuteness from *you*, of all people. Is it not obvious who would receive the title, if someone were to judge between us?”

“We can both be cute,” Lucy countered, her lips traveling up my thigh, leaving a trail of tiny kisses until she was barely an inch from my slit - and then she nipped the flesh, before parting, leaving my needy sex behind as she moved to climb atop me. “You know, I’ve been putting a lot of thought into what I’d do if I got you into bed again? The places I’d kiss. And the noises I’d try to get you to make...” She bent down to place her lips upon the swell of my breast, sucking

upon the flesh right below the hardened nipple, and then kissing the space above.

“I don’t think my imagination was really up to the task, though. I mean, I really don’t know enough about sex! So I hope you’ll help me learn!”

This time her luscious lips landed squarely upon the nipple proper, her tongue darting out to wet the tip, right before her teeth clamped down upon the sensitive flesh. She began to suck, gently at first, but then fiercer, pulling a soft cry from my own lips as my body arched.

I grasped at Lucy’s hair, holding her down against my chest, demanding more of her delightful attention. She obliged my selfish request, sucking and nipping at both the pink peak and the paler flesh beneath. My fingers became entangled in her red hair, as my other hand reached out to wrap around her waist and tug her against my form. This, too, she allowed. Yet when I tried to roll us over, to put myself on top of her so that I could move to return the favor, her hands slammed into the mattress to hold us into place.

“Not yet!” she said, pushing up and away from my breast.

I eyed her curiously, as she got onto her knees. One of which, I noticed, had slid between my own thighs, close enough to my groin that I could touch it with a single movement.

“I know I’m not that practiced, yet,” Lucy said. “So there’s lots I can learn from letting you do things to me...” Now it was *her* cheeks that bore a blush.

“But... I want to do things to you, too! I don't want to get so overwhelmed that I can't show you how I feel! So please, go easy on me today, okay? So I can learn lots and lots!”

“And you called *me* cute,” I replied, shaking my head with a tired sigh. “If you wish to keep your wits about you, then feel free to try. I'll certainly my best, as well - though I'll warn you now, I'm not exactly well practiced in holding back.” Saying so, I grasped her waist within my hands, and once more attempted to move her. This time, however, I didn't immediately attempt to roll us over. Instead, I shifted her form upwards until my violet eyes could meet her orange head on. Her lips above my own.

Red took hold of my cheeks once more, but I didn't let thoughts of kisses distract me from my goal. A quick tug had us rolling over, me atop of her, the swell of her breasts pressing against mine. I lowered myself down her body, to kiss her nipple, to roll the hardened tip upon my tongue, only to be caught off guard when her knee came up between my thighs to press against my flesh.

Any noises I may or may not have made were thankfully muffled as I pressed my mouth against her breast, kissing and sucking and nipping at her even as her own fingers traversed the distance to my own bosom. Soft hands groped my chest, slender fingers finding and pinching at my nipples for a moment. Then one

left, finding its way instead to my back, sliding down to the small of it, before finding the curve of my rear and clamping down upon it.

I didn't bother to stifle my moan this time, allowing the sound to vibrate against Lucy's tit for a moment before I lifted my head from it and turned my attention towards its twin. One of my hands, meanwhile, crept between our bodies, reaching down between her thighs, pushing my way through the fleshy constrictions to tease my finger against her wet opening.

It was easy to slip a finger inside of her. Easy, to slide it in and out. *Almost* as easy to slip a second finger in alongside it, stretching her opening a touch as I began to seek her G-spot out, my thumb similarly searching for her clit.

Lucy squirmed beneath my ministrations, her thighs tightening around my hand, but no amount of unconscious effort would ever be enough to keep me from my goal. My fingers continued to search and play, index and middle fingers pumping away as my thumb felt out the presence of her button.

Teasing her more sensitive areas, I sucked hard upon her nipple as my thumbnail flicked against her clit. My fingers plunged deep, finding that special spot within her, and I felt her tense, her entire body stiffening for a moment, before it began to move all at once - her channel tightening around my fingers just as her thighs squeezed down upon my hands, her back arching as she moaned.

I expected her to slump against me, after that. As such, I was caught off guard when she grasped my waist, as I had once grabbed hers, and twisted so that she was on top of me. She was breathing heavily, her energy obviously lagging, her body at its limit - and yet there was a hunger in her eyes, a fiery passion blazing behind those orange irises that kept me from speaking a word against her plans, or urging her to sleep.

“I won’t go down without making you feel good,” she whispered, iron in her tone despite the softness of her voice. Her movements were slow, and far from steady, as she pushed against the mattress to move downward. Still, the determination I was coming to associate with her served her well, fueling the movement of her muscles as she slowly lowered her head down between my thighs. Her tongue darted out to touch my legs, and I saw the flicker of surprise as she discovered what I knew she would - that I was sopping wet. Needy. That bringing her such pleasure, combined with her teasing of my flesh, had already pushed me close to her own state.

Perhaps that discovery was energizing, for the swiftness with which she attacked me with her tongue belayed the tired, awkward movements that had characterized her initial descent. Where before two arms had barely kept her up, now one arm was all that kept her from falling flat upon the bed. The other hand

moved to join her mouth, her finger teasing my clit from its hood even as her tongue went to work upon my slit.

Heat rose within me, as warm liquid all but gushed out of me, and her finger swiftly found its place inside me, pumping in and out between swipes of her tongue. What had already been a raging fire was quickly turned into an irresistible inferno, heat and pressure building to a crescendo inside of me before, at last, gushing out in *release*.

Lucy sealed her lips upon my sex, sucking, and licking, and drinking from me, sustaining the waves of pleasure for as long as she could. Then, once the pleasure had become nothing but a pleasant memory, she forced herself onto her hands and knees again. Crawling up the bed, she used the last of her energy to position herself before collapsing, her head upon my chest, one arm curling about my waist, and a leg crossed against my thighs.

That was the night I learned that Lucy snored. *Cutely*.