

Demon Queened

Chapter 33

Written by Princess Kay

Devilla

Kalice's enemy did not meet its end swiftly, or quietly. Instead, it ended with a loud *crack*, and a *squelch* as her gauntleted fist broke through its armor and smashed through its flesh, bringing it to an ignoble end.

I barely noticed, however, more preoccupied with the dreadful words that had most recently slipped from Lucy's mouth.

"So why didn't you want me to see you outside of heels, anyway?"

"That's..." I hesitated, not quite able to look Lucy in the eyes, even as she squeezed my arm against her armored chest.

Partially because I hadn't put my heels back on yet, and would have had to look slightly *upward* to do so.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want," she assured me, her voice filled with an odd mixture of innocence and determination - as if she were readying herself to keep me safe from whatever unknown foe might try and drag the answer from my lips.

"It's fine," I assured her, still attempting to figure out how best to phrase things. How to tell her that I simply didn't like the fact that she was taller than me. In the end, there really weren't any clever phrases I could use to work around it.

Not if I wanted to be upfront with her. “I simply... dislike being seen as small... It’s ridiculous, I know, but-”

“It’s not ridiculous!” Lucy protested, squeezing my hand. “I might not get it, but if it bothers you then it bothers you, right? It doesn’t matter if there’s a huge reason, or a tiny one! Just that it’s important to you!”

“Not to interrupt,” Feyra interrupted, “but has anyone noticed the lack of crashing or cursing over the last couple seconds? Because I think the battle’s over, one way or another.”

“We’ll discuss this later, alright?” I promised, honestly rather thankful for an excuse to put things off, if only because I didn't know what to say. It wasn't as if there was some grand reason for my distaste of being short. I suppose if one were to try and analyze me, they might claim it was a physical representation of my inability to measure up to my mother, or ancestors in general... but that was likely assigning too much depth to a simple issue of vanity.

Regardless, it was best to think about that later. For now, I was eager to slip back into the comfortable embrace of my heels, withdrawing them from my pack and utilizing my magic to buckle them without bending down. The restoration of my height was perhaps a little more assuring than I wanted to think about, in the moment - and the warm and caring gaze that Lucy was sending my way certainly

wasn't helping anything, reminding me as it did that I was making her worry over nothing. Just because I couldn't come out and admit to my flaws. I did my best to ignore all of the above, though, as I walked past the limits of Lucy's sound seal and towards the assumedly victorious Kalice.

"Ugh," came her voice. "You interlopers still haven't left yet? If you were hoping to pick off a weakened enemy, you're too late for the spider, and far too early for..." Kalice trailed off, crossing her arms and looking me over. Despite knowing that she couldn't hurt me, the blue ichor leaking from her gauntlets did add a certain element of intimidation to her look. "*You.*"

"You remember me, then," I confirmed, arching an eyebrow at her cold reception. "I do hope you aren't planning to use this as an opportunity to make good on your threat to get back at me?"

She scoffed. "As if I'd waste my time on petty revenge. What money's there to be made in *that*? I just said that in order to save some face in front of the goons. What about you? Here to humiliate me some more? Or did you only do that to impress not-so-little miss potion addict?"

"I'm not an addict!" Feyra protested, emerging from the forest behind me. Sans horse, I noted. "I just... need them. To feel like myself. Alright?"

“...So she’s here, too, hmmm?” Kalice asked, keeping her attention on me.

“Let me guess - you enjoy playing her knight in shining armor? Careful she doesn’t drain your wallet dry - anyone who’d borrow from a loan shark to get something that makes them feel good *is* an addict, no matter what they say.”

“We’re going on a mission together, if you must know,” I informed her, narrowing my eyes. While I didn’t entirely disagree with her words, I got the impression that Feyra was ‘addicted’ in much the same way a person might be ‘addicted’ to their *antidepressants*. Her friends obviously condoned her medicinal use of the potions, after all... Though, by that same token, I did believe Feyra had a problem, of sorts. Namely with her pride, considering she was going to a loan shark when her actual potion supplier was obviously more than willing to help her out. “I imagine she’ll be able to pay for her own potions, without my input, when all is said and done.”

“If you’re going on a mission, then why are you *here*?” Kalice demanded.

“To ensure an ideal ending to your fight,” I answered, honestly. Not that I was entirely sure why I cared, at this point. “And to tie up loose ends, in regards to your ill intentions towards me.”

Kalice flinched at my words, before scowling. “Is that some sort of threat?”

“I believe *you’re* the one who threatened *me*,” I reminded her, rolling my eyes at her dramatics. “I simply wished to see if you’d keep to it. If you’re unwilling to act upon your hostilities, though, then I don’t suppose they matter much, in the end.”

“So, in other words, you’ve got no business with me?”

“...I suppose not,” I confirmed, glancing at Feyra. I considered suggesting that an apology was in order, but feared that it would come across as an attempt to ingratiate myself, or some such. Perhaps rightly - it wasn’t as if I had a reason to care about whether the girl’s honor was insulted. Even if Kalice’s attitude did rub me the wrong way.

“Then maybe shoo?” Kalice proposed, waving me away with one hand. “I need to dismantle this thing for parts before any predators come in.”

“Happily,” Feyra interrupted, glaring at me when I opened my mouth to ask what in the world the parts were even for. I couldn’t imagine anyone willingly eating a spider covered by stone, even if consumption of monster meat wasn’t already frowned upon, so I was rather curious what the materials would be used for.

Still, it was probably better to ask Feyra or Lucy, over a girl who’d literally sworn vengeance upon me.

“Couldn’t you be a bit nicer?” came Lucy’s voice, preempting my agreement. “I know Eena didn’t phrase it very well, but she was really worried about your well being, you know? She’s the one who heard what sounded like trouble - and even though she had a bad time with you before, she wouldn’t have even hesitated to lend a hand if things had gone wrong in your battle!”

“Oh, great,” Kalice muttered, directing her attention past me, and towards Lucy, who was pushing her way through the branches of a tree. “Ano...ther.... Heroine?!”

“That’s me,” Lucy confirmed. “And you’re Kalice, right?”

“Y-yes, Heroine!” Kalice replied, giving Lucy a nervous smile. She looked deathly pale. “I-I’m so sorry, I didn’t know that you were there, or-”

“Or you would have treated my traveling companions nicer?” Lucy interrupted. “You shouldn’t be so mean to people who want to help you, whether I’m there or not!”

“I understand, Heroine,” Kalice said, bowing her head. “I was in the wrong. Would a donation to the church help to make amends for my mistake? I’ll gladly donate all my proceeds from this request, if so. Or even if not so! I’ll do it! I mean, it’s the least I can do to thank the Heroine for watching over me, as I fought. I’m

sure your presence brought the goddess's benevolence down on me, just as your own forbearance has kept her judgment of my errors at bay."

Lucy nodded. Not that anyone but me saw it. Kalice's head was bowed so low I doubted she could see much past the obstacle that was her chest, while Feyra had her head in her hands and seemed to be muttering a prayer for the Goddess's mercy.

It wasn't just Lucy's nod they missed, though. It was the sad look in her eyes, and the forced smile on her face as she said, "I'm sure you'll do better in the future! Just remember that the Goddess is always watching, even when I'm not, okay? And try to do your best!"

"Yes, Heroine! I promise, Heroine! I'll do my best, Heroine!" Kalice declared, her head still lowered.

Lucy nodded, again. To an audience of one, yet again. "Come on Eena, Feyra. We've got a journey to get back to! And a horse, which I probably shouldn't have left alone!"

"...Did you seriously leave our only mount in a forest of deadly monsters?" I asked, exasperation laced through my tone. Not that I really had the heart to be upset with Lucy, in the moment, but I thought I understood now why she so

treasured my willingness to go against her. Far be it from me to deny her that bit of normality.

“I’ll hurry back!”

I let out a sigh, before narrowing my eyes at Kalice and Feyra alike. I had quite a bit I wanted to say to them both. It could wait, though. For now, I needed to talk to Lucy about what just happened - and maybe work at restoring her real smile, while I was at it.

Moving after Lucy, I copied Lucy’s sound seal as soon as I was out of Kalice’s sight - a wall of magic, which saturated the air and refuted the progression of sound waves from our side of it. My understanding of the physics involved was sub-par, so it was surely taking more energy to maintain than if I could properly dictate my wants, but the cost was ultimately negligible regardless. Saturating the air itself took more out of me than any active effect thereafter, and I could easily afford that a thousand times over.

More important than the details of my magic was the expression on Lucy’s face when I found her, holding the horse’s reins. Her sad smile had fallen by the wayside, the mask of joy discarded in favor of downcast eyes and furrowed brow.

“Is it always like that?” I asked, before I could stop myself. “So blinded by your title that they can’t see the girl who simply wishes to help?”

“Except with you,” Lucy confirmed. “And Feyra, I guess? But it’s different with her...”

“She treats you as the Heroine,” I remarked, even as I felt Feyra stepping through my magical field.

“That’s because she *is* the Heroine. Chosen of the Goddess? Heroine of humanity? The most important human on the face of the planet!”

“But still just a person,” I pointed out. “One who grows lonely. One who wishes for companionship - *friendship*. And who doesn’t deserve to be treated like she’s *other*.”

“It’s fine, Eena,” Lucy tried to assure me, with a smile. But it was the same downcast smile that I had seen before.

“Aren’t you the one who told me not to lie?” I protested. “How can it be fine when you’re alienated?”

“I have you,” she pointed out.

“And you’ll continue to have me, for as long as you wish,” I promised. “But that does not change the fact that you deserve more. You deserve to be acknowledged as an individual.”

“It’s... I won’t say it’s fine,” Lucy replied, shaking her head. “Or that I don’t hate it. But you’re more than I ever had before? And that makes me really happy!”

It gives me hope that I'll find even more people who will accept me, one day! And that's good enough for now... Though..." She glanced at Feyra.

"Like I don't have enough trouble without being the Heroine's cursed friend," Feyra groaned. "I don't need everyone looking my way whenever you make a blasphemous comment in public, alright? I have enough problems surviving already, without people thinking I'm corrupting their precious Heroine."

"And yet you're here," I pointed out. "Being seen on a mission with her. Because you care about her wellbeing."

"Only because it'll be even worse if she goes off and dies in some hairbrain scheme, and people find out that I didn't do anything to prevent it!"

"I don't think anyone knows we spend time together, though," Lucy pointed out. "I mean, I even avoid defending you, just because I know you don't like it."

"Is that why you never mentioned her name during the confrontation with Kalice?" I questioned. "I didn't have much time to think of it at the time, but it was rather odd that you didn't protest Feyra being called an addict..."

"Well, Feyra would have gotten annoyed at me..."

"And I suppose you take it as a win that Feyra's even willing to express that annoyance at you?" I questioned, before sighing when Lucy gave a nod. "Well, I suppose I can't blame you for taking victories where you can get them... but do

note that I refuse to be satisfied with such. You deserve to be seen, Lucy, not just as the Heroine, but as the charming, kind, generous and pure soul that you are.”

“I’m not sure that’s really possible...” Lucy confessed. “But I’d be happy to work towards it, besides you! Especially since it goes well with my own goal!”

“Your own goal?” I questioned. Feyra, too, looked curious, arching an eyebrow.

“Uh-huh!” Lucy gave me a grin - an honest, happy one that lifted my spirits - before stepping forward to take my hand. “To help my friend Eena see herself as the beautiful, charming, sweet, and generous soul that *she* is!”

“...I think you’re going to have your work cut out for you with that one,” I remarked.

“Seriously...” Feyra agreed.

“That’s alright,” Lucy responded. “I mean, I’m already expected to fight an impossible fight. But I’m sure I can do it! I’ll conquer the hatred in your heart, team up with you, and end the threat that faces this world, all in one go!”

...I knew, intellectually, that she was essentially promising to work towards my murder. I *knew that*. What I didn’t - *couldn’t* - understand was how in the world she managed to make it sound so *endearing*.

Abigail

I closed the door to my apartment with a sigh, grateful for what little alone time I could get my hands on while Chloe went out to ‘case’ the restaurant, and Nivera did... something or another? The girl wasn’t exactly great at communicating.

“Something on Maid’s mind.”

...Well, *relatively* alone time. Bailey still had it in her head that she needed to guard me. “Lots. And I *really* need to sort it out, so if you could maybe be quiet for-”

“Honey?” a voice called. “Is that you?”

“...Yeah Mom. It’s me.”

“Back from work already?” Mom asked, walking into the main living space of our apartment, to greet me. “I thought Queen Devilla was running you ragged, of late?”

“I never said that!” I protested, crossing my arms.

“I have eyes, Abigail,” Mom replied. She probably rolled them at me, too. Not that I could prove it. “You’ve been exhausted, lately, for reasons you won’t even speak of. She isn’t pressuring you to do anything untoward, is she?”

“She wouldn’t,” I replied, quickly, glancing at Bailey. I half expected the wolf girl to start growling at mom for the accusation, but she just stood there, back ramrod straight. Even her tail was still!

Then again, she didn’t seem to really like going against Mom, anyway. Something about it being her territory... Which.... Crap. Meant *I* had to be the one to growl at her, huh? Metaphorically, anyway. “Devilla wouldn’t make me do anything I’m not comfortable with. Hell, I’m pretty sure she’d be happier I *stopped* pushing myself for her sake.”

“Really?” Mom asked, raising a brow at me. “That doesn’t sound like the queen I know.”

“Well, maybe that’s because you don’t know her like I do,” I... snapped. Shit. That wasn’t good. Mom was totally going to do the whole hands on her hips, ‘now you listen to me, young lady’ thing, wasn’t she? That’s what she’d normally do. Except... for some reason, she was only raising one of her eyebrows?

“It seems like you have pretty strong feelings on the matter,” she remarked, instead of giving me the lecture I expected. “You know, I have noticed that you’re always talking about her, of late. Even if it is mostly complaints...”

“I guess?” I agreed, not really sure what her point was. It was probably better not to look a gift horse in the mouth, though. Mom had a way of making me

feel like a little kid again when she got mad at me. “I just think she’s trying harder than anyone gives her credit for. And maybe... maybe there’s a reason she wasn’t trying, before, I guess? Maybe it’s just because nobody ever gave her a *chance*.”

“Before you?”

“That’s not what I... I mean, she’s just... I’ve just been learning a lot about her, alright? And I don’t think things are as simple as everyone makes them out to be.”

“Very little in the world ever is,” Mom agreed. Or at least I thought she agreed? The look she was giving me seemed to imply there was something more to it. Something I was missing. “I’ll try to keep an open mind about Devilla, dear. She *was* different than I expected when we met, after all. But make sure you keep your eyes open, alright? Just because she treats you differently doesn’t mean she’s actually changed.”

“She *has* changed,” I insisted, stomping my foot. Which... wow, childish much? But Mom always brought that out in me.

...I probably needed to see about getting my own room, didn’t I?

“Of course, dear,” Mom said, in that tone of voice that said she was humoring me as much as anything.

“Wait. You didn’t use her title? Why didn’t you use her title? You always use her title.”

“Just... getting used to it, I suppose,” Mom replied. “Just in case...”

“In case of what?” I asked. But Mom just laughed, and turned towards the kitchen.

“How about I make us breakfast for dinner, hmm? Maybe some of the same dishes you taught Devilla to make? And you can tell me all the ways she’s different than I think while we eat.”

“...Okay?” I replied, staring at her back in confusion as she walked away from me. “What was *that* about?”

Bailey met my question with a blank stare. I thought that was all I was going to get out of her. I kinda *wish* that I was all I got out of her, because when she finally did speak it only confused me more. “Said nobody knows what Maid thinks of Queen. Starting to think Maid doesn’t know, either...”

What the hell?