

Demon Queened

Chapter 34

Written by Princess Kay

Abigail

“Are you sure this is the right place?” I asked. Again.

“I’m sure,” Chloe said. For the third time. And she didn’t even sound annoyed about it!

Maybe because she couldn’t blame me for having doubts. I mean, we were on one of the nature floors! You know, the ones with an image of the sky overhead? Make you feel like you’re actually outdoors? This was a forest based one, too, full of trees, and grass, and bushes - though I’m pretty sure the trees wouldn’t be so spread apart in actual woods... sacrifices to realism for convenience sake, I guess? I mean, floors like this were mostly meant as a place to relax and enjoy “nature” outside of the city floors. Though I’d heard some demons preferred living on them, too. And they also helped supply our lumber, since the dryads could help them regrow in a hurry...

Okay, so they served quite a few purposes. But what they *didn’t* serve was *food*.

“Don’t doubt Chloe’s network,” Nivera said, glaring at me from across her fiancée. “She’s never wrong.”

“*Almost* never,” Chloe amended. “There was that one time with the juggler! And yep, I know, you still think that she was up to something - your trust in me is really sweet. We did clear her, though... but also my intel’s pretty solid this time, either way. A friend of a friend overheard another friend talking to her friend about how Araina got invited out to a sunset picnic by this girl in a super expensive dress. And also I just straight up asked Araina what her dinner plans were, while you two were busy. She got super flustered. It was cute.”

Nivera looked like she had *several* things she wanted to say to that. And I kinda did too? But ultimately the only thing that came out of her mouth was, “Okay.”

“Awww, look at my cutie Niv, acting like she trusts me completely!” Chloe cooed. “Not that you don’t, but you also really don’t need to try and put up a ‘united front’ in front of Abigail and Bailey, y’know? We’re allies. And I *know* you’ve got wasps in your stomach, wondering whether Araina’s likely to change her plans, or contact the Aleesendra family. The answer is no, by the way! She has *terrible* social anxiety - really sucky stuff - so there’s pretty much no way she’s going to contact them an hour before the meeting just to tell them that she told some random girl where the meeting’s going to be. Especially since I was all sneaky about it - y’know, went in asking her out on a date, then segued into teasing

her about maybe already having one, and taking an interest in where? Even if she thinks it's suspicious, she'll second guess herself right up until the actual meeting time."

"Wait. You asked her out on a date?" I questioned. "Isn't she going to be a bit mad when she finds out you were trying to trick her? I mean, I'm pretty sure we're trying to get her on our side here, aren't we?"

"Who said I was tricking her?" Chloe asked, tilting her head to the side. "I'm poly, she's cute, and I'm pretty sure she'd actually be into the whole 'bound up interrogation' thing Nivera's already plotting in the back of her brain. Though maybe save the binding for after we've gotten to know her a bit better? And the interrogation for after I've gotten more of a chance to talk to her. Speaking of which, I'd really appreciate it if you could sit this one out, Niv. The poor thing's skittish enough already."

Again, Nivera looked like she wanted to say something. Again, all she did was say, "Alright." Though this time I swear I saw a flicker of suspicion cross her face. It was gone before I could so much as comment on it, though - and then Chloe's hand was around my wrist, and I was being tugged along. As was Bailey.

"Come on, you two!" she called. "We're gonna need to scamper like a set of squirrel girls on bitterbean if we want to make it there before the appointed time."

Nivera might have been satisfied with that, but I had a few things *I* wanted to ask. Like why the hell we didn't leave sooner if we were so pressed for time, and what sort of thoughts went through her head to come up with 'scampering like squirrel girls.' Too bad my brain was preoccupied with putting one foot in front of the other fast enough to keep up, and avoiding the protruding roots that wanted to make that difficult.

"Fox up to something," Bailey grumbled. For her part, she seemed to be doing fine with keeping up. Maybe she had practice with this sort of thing while living in the actual woods? Or maybe it was just instinct. I kinda got the impression she hadn't spent a lot of time in human form, before coming to the tower.

"I'm always up to something," Chloe agreed. "I'm a trickster, y'know? I confuse, bamboozle, mislead, and tease! But I also look out for my friends, so trust me, alright?"

"You know, most people would at least pretend to be trustworthy before telling people to trust them," I pointed out.

"You say that like it's a good thing," Chloe replied. "If I acted like I'm always on the straight and narrow, I'd lose all credibility the moment you found out about my true nature. I'd rather be upfront on what you can and can't trust me with - speaking of which, it might be a good time to mention that I never lie, so if

you want to mislead Arianna through verbal half truths, you're on your own. But if you leave it to me, I'll be sure we get through this with all the sureness of a mouse sniffing her way through a maze! Which is to say that there's probably going to be a lot of backtracking, but we'll make it in the end."

"Wait. So you're a trickster who doesn't lie? How does that even work?"

"Pretty well, actually," came a voice from behind me. I snapped my head around to find Nivera waving at me - except her form was already fading away, even as I looked. "Between the fun things I can do with my voice, the *amazing* things I can get up to with illusions, and absolutely crazy things I can do with my body - which maybe you'll see first hand, one day - it's not actually that hard to get away without lying. And by never lying, I make sure people will take me seriously when it matters most! Communication's pretty important to me, after all."

"...Has anyone ever told you that you're a bit of a mess?" I asked, shaking my head in disbelief as I turned my focus back to the forest around us. I'd say I was amazed I didn't trip during that distraction, but I'm pretty sure she only pulled that trick because we were crossing a relatively bare stretch of dirt.

"A very *hot* mess! Now come on, Araina's waiting right through those trees!"

I traded a look with Bailey, hoping that she'd be on my side for once, but she only shrugged her shoulders with an expression that basically screamed "don't look at me." Which I was going to take as a relative win, since I'm pretty sure she didn't have any better of a read on Chloe than I did.

"Hey Araina!" Chloe called, as we broke through the trees and into a clearing. "How're you doing?"

The arachne in question was standing by the opposite side of the treeline, nervously tapping her hands together and glancing up at the sky, as if trying to gauge the time. Which might have been exactly what she was doing, I guess. Either way, Chloe's showing up clearly startled her because she literally *jumped* a foot off the ground.

"Ch-Chloe?!" she called out. "And... aren't you... Queen Devilla's maid?"

"Fox popular," Bailey remarked. She sounded a bit impressed. Chloe just shrugged her shoulders, though.

"I mean, it would have been impolite to ask her out on a date without at least introducing myself, right? Also, hi Araina! Good to see you again so soon.

Seriously. But also, I might have left out a couple tiny details about my entirely sincere interest in asking you out? Like the fact that I'm engaged to a fiancée who doesn't exactly mind me dating but does sorta have trust issues that can be difficult

to work around? And also the fact that I'm Devilla's cousin. And she's Devilla's childhood friend. And that me, Devilla's friendly maid, and Devilla's... Bailey? All really really need to talk to you about your upcoming dinner with a member of the Aleesendra family."

"I-I'm not..." Araina swallowed, backing up a step, towards the trees. "I'm not in trouble, am I? It's just... I-I mean, Mellany reached out to me. S-she said she could help me with m-my image problem. I don't even... I wasn't going to give her a-any... I mean, I don't even have anything on Q-queen Devilla, other than maybe a few rumors anyone could hear, s-so-"

"Relax," Chloe interrupted, holding up her hands, palm out. "I'm not here to make any accusations, alright? I just want to make sure nobody makes any mistakes they'll regret."

"Speaking of regrets," came a familiar voice from behind me. I spun, surprised to see Nivera emerging from the woods, with her arms crossed and her lips pulled into a frown. "I think we need to have a talk, Chloe. I have some new information that might change how you handle this."

"I'm sure you do," Chloe replied, not even turning to look at the girl. "And I'll get to you as soon as I'm done reassuring our skittish General, alright?"

I blinked, looking between Nivera - who now had her mouth open in shock - and Chloe, who was wearing a warm smile for Araina, but not even glancing back at her fiancée. Had I missed something? A quick glance to Bailey got me a shrug in return, from a wolf girl who looked just about as confused as I felt.

“Araina,” Chloe continued. “I’m going to have a talk with Mellany, and get this all sorted out, alright? And I promise, whatever happens, I’ll be speaking up for you. I know you don’t mean harm. You’re probably just scared because everything’s changing, right? And you don’t know where that leaves you?”

“I...” Araina hesitated a moment, before nodding. “Yes?”

“Well, we’ll figure it out together,” Chloe promised. “In a second. First...” She spun towards Nivera. “Mellany! I stole your date. How about we make it up with that totally private chat you wanted?”

“Mellany?”

“Mellany?!”

“...Enemy?”

Me, Araina and Bailey asked, pretty much in tandem.

‘Nivera’ meanwhile, blinked once, opened her mouth, closed it, and then let out a sharp laugh that sounded way too raspy to be coming out of Nivera’s throat.

“What gave me away?”

“Let’s see...” Chloe started, tapping her foot on the grass. “Excluding the fact that I recognized your name, and knew you were a mimic girl - you really should have tried to interrupt before Araina said it, by the way - there’s your hair and scales, which are both a few shades off. Also the fact that Nivera would *never* come in unannounced without using at *least* three hidden code words in the first sentence. And maybe some tail or hand signals, to be safe. *Especially* after I asked her to stay out of this. But also I asked her to stay out explicitly to bait you, since, y’know, Araina told me who she was meeting with earlier? Something I know you know, because there’s no way you would have invited Araina to such an accessible place, *in public*, if you weren’t trying to bait me out in turn. Right?”

“Actually, I was planning to ask for Araina’s help getting in touch with Devilla,” she replied. “Meeting you was a surprise. Are you sure you aren’t spending too much time with Nivera? It’s convoluting your thought processes.”

“Uh-huh,” Chloe replied, rolling her eyes. “Because she totally got that way out of nowhere, and not, y’know, thanks to the same kind of upbringing you had? Now can we stop with the misleads and just get to the point? After you change, I mean. Kinda awkward interrogating my fiancée, y’know?”

‘Nivera’ - or Mellany, I guess? - let out another of those raspy laughs, shaking her head a little. At the same time, though, her body started to shift. Her

tail curled up on itself, the scales melding together, forming into a solid lump beneath her demonoid half, that then stretched out and up in order to form a boxy shape. Or more like a *chest*, I realized, as hinges and a curved lid began to form from the flesh, the coloration shifting from green to brown, and the scales becoming wooden grain.

The rest of her changes were a little less dramatic, but still pretty damn impressive. Her demonoid half, which was now protruding from the chest, became a *little* less toned - though she did keep the abs - while her arms grew just a tiny bit longer, and her nails extended, turning black alongside her fingertips. Her teeth, too, became long and pointed, meshing with one another to fill her mouth. Her hair, meanwhile, became shorter, going from long wavy brown locks to a bright blonde bob that fanned out on either side of her head before coming to a straight edged end. Her face became a bit more angular, meanwhile, while her green eyes shifted to two different tones - silver on the right, and gold on the left. Finally, the black band that had surrounded 'Nivera's' chest sank into her flesh, revealing a perky pair of tits.

“Satisfied?” Mellany asked, baring her teeth in what *might* have maybe been a grin? It was sorta hard to tell, what with them looking sharp enough to *rip your face off*.

“Mostly!” Chloe replied, with a grin. “I mean, there’s still the whole underlying threat that comes with using Nivera’s form - y’know, the bit that I know you can fuck up our lives, and you know that I know that, but neither of us are supposed to say it because unspoken threats are totally the best threats? Which is why I’m not even going to bother spelling out what I’ll do to you if you ever actually follow through on that threat you totally didn’t make. Instead, I’m going to invite you to come sit down and eat! I brought chamomile tea. And ham sandwiches!”

Mellany didn’t so much flinch as *shiver*. Even her sharp toothed smile looked a bit strained, somehow. But she still tried to do the whole nonchalant thing, waving her pointy nailed hand in the air and going, “Yeah, yeah, I get it. No need for dramatics, alright? Copying her form was just the best way to separate you from Araina for a bit.”

“Which you wanted to do, because...?” I prompted. Mostly to feel included, to be honest, because I was getting pretty damn tired of being left by the wayside whenever bloodline politics came into play. It was as annoying as it was confusing.

“Because I wanted to work out a better deal for myself, of course,” Mellany replied. “I mean, come on, that’s why we’re all here, isn’t it? You want to make sure your new sugar mama stays safe. Chloe wants to keep her fiancée from having

a mental breakdown when Queen Devilla inevitably returns to her old ways.

Araina wants to... well, currently I'm pretty sure she wants to run away like a scared little bitch, but she's not doing that because she's *also* hoping to get everyone to stop hating on her, right?"

"Devilla is not my-" I started

"Th-that's not-" Araina protested.

Chloe clapped. "Yay! Communication! I like it. I mean, your views are totally tainted and twisted, and I kinda hate your guts already, but first impressions can be worked on! What's important is that you're actually saying what you mean out loud."

"I mean, you made it pretty clear that you want cards on the table," Mellany said, shrugging her shoulders. "So let's do this. With Araina around, mind you - since you were going to tell her everything that happened anyway, right?"

The way she smirked, I don't think she expected Chloe to actually agree to that. She *definitely* wasn't expecting an enthusiastic, "Okay!" considering how quickly said smirk dropped. In fact, she was downright *scowling* after that.

"Let me make this simple for you," she eventually said. "I don't care about Araina. I don't care about her troubles, her woes, *or* whatever juicy rumors she might be able to share about Devilla. As far as I'm concerned, Granny Alira's an

old who's *obsession* is just a waste of family resources that could be better spent on pursuing actual business opportunities. I asked Araina to meet me with, and put out false info about Granny taking an interest in her, explicitly so that I could try and lure you out - because I know you and your fiancée are two of the only people in this entire goddess forsaken tower with both a hatred of bloodline politics and a willingness to actually *do something about it*."

"Uh-huh..." Chloe nodded, letting out a little hum like she was thinking about it. Then she frowned. "And what do you want for yourself, out of all this?"

"A cushy government job," she answered, immediately. "Paired with the rescinding of Devilla's ban on my family from entering political jobs. Excluding Granny, that is."

"You want your stock in the family to rise," Chloe said. Which... was probably something to do with the whole bloodliner meritocracy thing I'd been told about? The way they were raised to try and compete with one another. I didn't know a ton about it, but if it raised people like Nivera and Mellany then I could guess that it must be pretty brutal.

"Um..." Arachne raised a hand. "I just... want to keep my job? It's all I have left. Since everyone just sees me as Devilla's spy, anyway... And it's um. It sounds like Mellany doesn't really have any interest in helping me?"

Chloe nodded, and hummed again. Then she turned to me and said, “I think we’re going to need Devilla.”

I wanted to say that wasn’t going to be a problem. I wanted to say that Devilla would be back. That she wouldn’t leave me waiting even a single day, after all the times she’d made me worry... but all I could do was give her a terse smile.

Maybe it was just past experience making me worry, but I had a bad feeling about this.