

# Demon Queened

## Chapter 32

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## Devilla

The momentous nature of our first steps aside, there really wasn't anything that impressive immediately outside the town walls. The most noteworthy thing was the ever present line of people waiting to enter the city. Though I did notice a few things that had previously escaped me - namely the fact that almost everyone was clumped together in groups of at least two or more. There was also a tension to the travelers, easily detectable from the way people's eyes darted about with every noise.

A result of the Monster Movement, perhaps? If Lucy and Feyra were to be believed, it made the world outside considerably less safe... if it could even be called safe to begin with. It was likely that only the desperate or the foolhardy would dare to travel alone, in such cond-

“GAH!”

“...Did anyone else hear a scream?” I questioned, glancing first to Lucy, and then to Feyra. The latter merely shrugged her shoulders, while the former shook her head. That shake was quickly followed by a question, however.

“Do you know where it came from? Could you lead us there?”

“Lead us *where*?” Feyra interjected. “I didn't even hear anything!”

“Me neither, but I trust Eena’s sense of hearing at least as much as my own! If she heard someone scream, then we should check it out!”

“It could have been nothing,” I warned her, even as I tugged at her hand. It wasn’t a lie, or a false assurance. While I’d certainly heard a scream, it could easily have been someone reacting to a spider, or - Fallen forbid - a *rat*. There hadn’t been any follow up, after all, nor had the initial scream come with any form of context... But if it *did* signal genuine danger, and we ignored it, the result would doubtlessly haunt Lucy. I wouldn’t be exactly untroubled by it, either.

Besides which, the voice sounded oddly familiar.

“Fuck!” came the cry again, closer this time. It was paired with the noise of metal clashing on... something hard? Not metal, I was fairly certain. It was more akin to when Lucy had blocked the spiked bear’s claws with her sword - though not quite that, either.

It didn’t matter. A few more steps through the woods, and I’d have my answer.

“I think I heard something this time!” Lucy declared, relinquishing my hand in order to grab at the hilt of her sword, while picking up her pace.

I hesitated a moment, eyeing the bumpy forest floor with its carpeting of roots, leaves, and twigs. Tripping hazards for a girl in heels. I could potentially levitate myself? It would certainly be a fast mode of travel. It would also gobble up

far more magic than simply flying with my wings, *and* prevent me from utilizing any other form of magic... Maybe I could bounce between the trees, then? Or...

I fought with myself. Long enough for Feyra to pass me on her horse. Long enough for Lucy to pass through the trees before me, drawing her sword from its sheath. Long enough for me to curse myself for being a fool, who would put vanity before the safety of one she cared about. Then I gathered up my courage, undid the straps of my shoes with a bit of magical manipulation, and stepped barefoot onto the forest floor.

Freed of my footwear, which I'd quickly stowed in my pack, it was trivial to outpace Feyra's horse and catch up with Lucy. I chose not to look in her direction, though, not wanting to see the expression she might make, at seeing my reduced height. I doubted she'd be disappointed by my diminutive appearance, but... it was best to keep my eyes upon the trouble ahead.

Trouble that came in the form of a familiar blonde figure, facing against what looked to be a massive spider made of stone.

"Is that Kalice?" Feyra called from behind me.

"Cute... I mean, who's Kalice?" Lucy asked.

"Someone who caused trouble for Feyra in the recent past," I explained, frowning at the blonde debt collector as she warded off one of the spider's legs by

*punching it* with a steel clad fist. “And I suppose she *is* attractive enough, yes - though it hardly seems the time to mention it?”

To be honest, she seemed more ‘hot’ than cute to me, clad as she was in leather armor that clung closely to her curves. With her blonde hair swept back into a ponytail, and her orange eyes burning with determination as she deflected strike after strike from the spider with her gauntlets, there was a certain fierceness I could see attracting someone. Indeed, it might have drawn *me* if not for her previous behavior rather tainting my opinion of her...

“You’re probably right about the timing,” Lucy confirmed, with a nod as she strode forward. “But I was actually talking about you!”

“M-me?!” I sputtered. “F-for the last time, I’m not... just because I took off my heels, doesn’t mean I’m... For Fall.... By all that is good in this world, can we please focus on the girl in trouble?!”

“I *am* focused on her!” Lucy protested. “But it’s usually considered bad manners to interfere with a monster fight unless you’re asked. Can you step in while I heal her if things go wrong, though?”

“Could you *please shut up and let me concentrate?!* ” Kalice shouted, jumping back as one of the spider’s legs crashed into the ground, where she’d been standing a moment prior. “This thing is hard enough to beat without an audience!”

“Sounds like she’s fine, to me” Feyra remarked, pulling her horse to a stop next to us. “If anything, we’re getting in the way by being here...”

“I guess,” Lucy admitted, frowning, before lowering her voice. “Maybe we could just hide out of sight? That way we can leave if everything goes well, and interfere if it doesn’t. I can heal any injuries that don’t kill her instantly, so long as Eena buys me time!”

“Easy enough,” I confirmed, turning to walk back through the trees. “Though, regardless of the results, I think I’d like to have a word with her when this is done... She made some vague threats, when last we met, and I’d honestly rather tie up such a messy loose end.”

“She threatened you?” Lucy questioned, following after me as we put a few trees between us and the fight. A tingle in the air alerted me to Lucy’s use of magic - likely preparations to distract or block the spider in a hurry, if need be.

“Uh. Am I the only one worried about the *super* fucking ominous thing Eena just said?” Feyra asked, drawing a frown from me.

“Did Lucy put you up to saying that? Because I really don’t see what’s so problematic about wanting to put a preemptive end to any trouble she might cause us in the future.”

“Don’t worry,” Lucy interceded. “Eena’s just bad at phrasing things! I’m sure she isn’t planning to kill her or anything like that!”

“Kill... I know you don't think much of me, Feyra, but I'm hardly going to kill someone for an inconvenience they may or may not be intending to one day inflict upon me! I simply hope to use Lucy's status as the Heroine to make her think twice about future entanglements... assuming you don't mind, that is?”

“I don't!” Lucy confirmed. “Though I also don't think you should get mad at Feyra, when she's only reacting to your phrasing. And I'm still kind of curious about what's going on? It sounds like she caused a lot of trouble for you and Feyra, but Feyra never mentioned any of it to me!”

I bit back my instinctive protest at Lucy's words, choosing to instead think back on what I had previously said. I... still didn't see anything wrong with my initial word choice. Yes, I suppose it could be misconstrued as a threat of sorts, but I was hardly the sort to maim or kill just to 'tie up loose ends' - even at my brattiest, there were always lines I would not cross. Feyra didn't know that, though. In fact, she quite obviously thought the opposite. Something that irritated me... but was that really an excuse to get mad at her, in the here and now? Or was I simply being too sensitive, when it came to her opinion of me? I hadn't gotten mad at Lucy when she reacted that way before, after all. And even if I did have a right to be annoyed at Feyra in general, snapping at her wasn't exactly productive to winning her over.

“I apologize,” I said at last, nodding my head towards Feyra before turning my attention towards Lucy. “Though as for sating your curiosity, I do believe the duty belongs to Feyra. Assuming she’s willing to share?”

“There’s nothing to share,” Feyra grumbled, rolling her eyes - whether at my apology, Lucy’s curiosity, or both, I could not say. “I borrowed money. She came to collect. Eena interfered.”

“Is that why you said you paid your last guide in saints?” Lucy asked, smiling at me. “You were paying off her debt, weren’t you?”

“...It was as much to extricate myself from trouble as anything,” I informed her, not entirely happy with the look Lucy was giving me. One that seemed to promise praise and hugs, if I wasn’t careful. Not that I’d have minded the latter, but... “It was my fault that they caught Feyra to begin with, besides. She was hiding just fine until I gave her away with my gaze.”

“Hiding from problems doesn’t solve them,” Lucy pointed out. “*You* did that. And you did it by paying Feyra for her services, too - which meant she got to keep her pride, *and* got helped! By someone who could have easily left on her own, if she wasn’t a better person than she gives herself credit for!”

“I’m not the hero you think I am, Lucy,” I protested. “If not for the guilt I felt, I might not have interceded at all.”



“But you did help!” Lucy insisted. “Maybe you felt like you had to, but you still did it! Plus, you could have just beaten up the people chasing her, but you helped her deal with the root problem instead!”

A faint flush touched my cheeks. Partially because of Lucy’s compliments, but mostly... “I did fight them, actually...”

“If you could call that a fight,” Feyra scoffed. “She basically played with them - blocked their punches, pushed them into each other, made them sprawl in the mud... I don’t think she even threw a single punch.”

“I did throw one of them into the other,” I reminded her. “But no. I didn’t trust myself to calculate the right force - too much and they might have been permanently injured, too little and they’d have thought me weak.”

“So... You saved Feyra without hurting anyone too badly *and* paid off her debt?” Lucy asked, eyes sparkling.

“I threw about a couple ruffians too weak to harm me, and then paid someone for her services so that we could all move on with our lives. And even so, I apparently embarrassed the blonde - Kalice? - enough to swear vengeance upon me. Hardly the story of a hero.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what I would have done, though? Including the part where they’re weaker than me! I mean, assuming they would even be

willing to try and fight me, anyway - people don't really like doing that, for the most part..."

"That's because even if they *won*, anyone who found out would beat their fucking asses for you," Feyra interjected. "I mean, you're the fucking *Heroine*! The savior of humanity? Doing anything that even has a *chance* of putting your life at risk would basically make them a traitor to our whole species."

The loud *crack* interrupted our conversation, and drew our attention back to the fight happening a scant few feet away from us. Kalice had apparently managed to land herself upon the stone spider's back at some point, and was now engaged in viciously punching it.

"...You know, it occurs to me that we're talking rather loudly, considering our proximity."

"Don't worry!" Lucy reassured me. "I'm doing something to the air around us, to keep her from hearing us! It's sort of like my privacy spell, but it uses arcane magic instead of holy magic."

"I see..." Something to do with sound waves, perhaps? I was fairly sure simply stilling the air immediately between us and her would be enough to keep our voices from reaching. "Well, I suppose there's little for us to do but wait until she's finished pounding it into submission."

“Or we could talk about how you’re totally a better person than you give yourself credit for, while we wait?” Lucy suggested.

“Or how the public is going to react to the Heroine going all lovey dovey around some unknown highborn,” Feyra muttered.

... Was it too much to hope that Kalice ended her adversary quickly?

## Abigail

“What are you talking about?” Nivera demanded, narrowing her eyes at Chloe. “How did it ‘become relevant’?”

“Well, I’ve been looking over some reports while looking at you,” Chloe declared, holding up a piece of paper which... I was *pretty sure* she hadn’t been holding a moment before. “I’ll circle the relevant bit.”

“Where that come from?” Bailey asked, eyes locked on a pen that Chloe *definitely* hadn’t been holding a second ago. “Wild magic?”

“Sorta. It’s a partial activation,” Chloe explained, with a grin. “You know how my clothes disappear and reappear when I transform? It’s basically that, but harder.”

“Harder is an understatement... Isn’t that supposed to be insanely difficult?” Partial activation of wild magic basically meant complete mastery over it! It took a

*ton* of training. From what I'd been told, anyway. I hadn't exactly ever tried to learn, since it was kinda useless for succubi - I mean, what was I going to do with it? Learn to fly without using my wings? Maybe try to taste lust without eating it?

"It's like needing to sneeze, starting to sneeze, and then just... stopping your sneeze?" Chloe explained. "Without using your hands. Except to do stuff like this!" Her fingers morphed into claws - claws which probably looked pretty small and cute when she was a fox, but which looked pretty damn *vicious* when sized up. "Oh, and not to brag, but it's *way* harder with storage spaces. I mean, it's meant to store all my stuff when I transform, and stop storing it when I turn back, so when I want to put something in or take something out I basically have to keep track of everything I *don't* want it to suck in or spit out."

"Can we *please* focus on the report?" Nivera interrupted.

"Right..." The absolutely *ridiculous* level of control Chloe had over her wild magic had thrown me for a bit of a loop, but... "What the hell's all this about someone putting the idea of firing your dam into Devilla's head? And how's it relevant now?"

"Alira Aleesendra," Nivera told me, all but *growling* the name. Even Bailey was looking at her weird for that one!

"She *used* to be the general of the ninetieth floor," Chloe told me, lowering her voice to a whisper as she handed over the report. "She was in charge of internal

affairs and royal prestige. Which basically meant keeping an eye on how people are doing in the tower - y'know, making sure they're all distracted by their day to day lives, and not panicking about the inevitable demise of our species, or plotting a rebellion. Which... she's still sorta doing? Even though Illa kicked her out of office, and stripped her entire bloodline of any and all right to hold government positions. Revenge for the whole 'you should totally fire Niv's dam' thing - which, to be fair, Alira suggested purely because the two of them had a serious rivalry going on? So it wasn't like Illa wasn't right to be mad. She *might* have gone a little bit too far by physically throwing Alira out of her office, though. And down a bunch of stairs. She uh... kinda broke a couple bones on the way down..."

"Don't feel bad for her," Nivera snarled, through gritted teeth. "She was also in charge of maintaining Devilla's public image. Another thing she's still doing, by the way - unless you think it's a coincidence that every single mistake Devilla makes somehow ends up being common knowledge? That everyone in the tower knows how she treats her maids, for example. Or that she skips supposedly 'important' meetings where absolutely nothing gets done, because nothing *can* get done, because we're all fucking trapped in a tower - but obviously the real reason nothing gets done is because the queen who was never actually taught how to rule wasn't there! And everyone thinks she should just go out there and reclaim our lands, nevermind all the issues with doing so! You know, like the fact that there's a

giant wasteland stretching in every direction, all around us? But why not just pile all the blame on Devilla? The generals get a fucking lightning rod for the public's hatred, Alira gets her fucking revenge on a child who threw a tantrum, and the only one who has to suffer is the girl who's going to die for everyone's sake, anyway, because she cares too much to abandon us all to our fates! And now her own fucking spymaster is meeting with Alira, for some Fallen forsaken reason, and we're probably going to see a whole new round of terrible rumors, right when Devilla's getting back on her feet!"

"Niv has....*feelings* on the matter," Chloe added.

Yeah... That was kinda *obvious*. Not that I could blame her. I'd kinda always taken it for granted that Devilla was an incompetent brat who wouldn't know how to lead someone down a one-way hallway, but... Now? I was starting to question where *exactly* that idea had come from. Not because it wasn't true - Devilla *still* didn't strike me as a leader, even with all her other improvements - but... well, it wasn't really her fault, from the sound of it? She'd been raised as a puppet, not a queen, but she was still the one getting all the blame. For *everything*.

There was something a bit more *immediately* concerning, though.

"Spymaster?" Bailey questioned, tilting her head to the side. Trust her to cut right to the heart of things.

“General Araina,” Nivera grumbled. “From floor twenty. Though she’s really more like Devilla’s gossip hound. The girl has an unhealthy obsession with what people think of her...”

“*Had*,” I said. “She told Araina to stop with that a couple days ago.” Which was probably for the best, considering *what* people tended to say. I’d heard the rumors about Devilla spying on her populace, long before I’d even become her maid. People were actually pretty split on whether they believed it, mostly because there weren’t heads flying in every direction, despite all the crap people said. Personally? Knowing it *was* true? And taking into account everything Nivera had told me... Well, I was starting to realize that maybe I hadn’t put enough thought into what that actually *meant*. What listening to everyone must have done to her, all these years... “These self esteem issues really aren’t new, are they?”

“No,” Nivera confirmed. “They’re not. And if we don’t stop Araina from doing... whatever the fuck she’s trying to do? They’re going to get a whole lot worse.”

“Well, then...” Chloe grinned. “It’s a good thing I know Araina’s dinner plans, isn’t it?”