

Demon Queened

Chapter 34

Written by Princess Kay

Proofread by FallingLeaf

Chloe

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Abigail asked for the third time.

“I’m sure,” I replied, keeping my voice nice and patient. I mean, I could hardly blame her for the whole disbelief thing! We *were* on one of the nature floors, after all. Great for relaxing outside the city floors, not so great for eating fancy dinners. Especially this one, seeing as how it was forest-based.

“Don’t doubt Chloe’s information network,” Nivera grumbled, glaring at Abigail. “She’s never wrong.”

“*Almost* never,” I corrected her. Because sweetness is sweet, but getting carried away was just going to set false expectations! “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... My intel’s pretty solid this time, though, 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. Also, I just straight up asked Araina what her dinner plans were while you two were busy. She got super flustered. It was the cutest thing!”

Seriously - she’d turned so red! And her adorable little feet started tapping away at the ground as she backed up, then shuffled forward, then went back

again... No need to bring all that up, though! I mean, sure, communication is important, but I wasn't trying to make Nivera jealous! Especially about the feet. She always pouted when I said anything about someone having cute feet. I think she worried I might have a foot fetish, or something.

Anyway, Nivera looked like she had enough things she wanted to say already. Like 'why were you flirting with the enemy,' and 'why would you risk alerting our enemy by flirting with them,' and 'are you sure you didn't just want to flirt with a cute spider girl?' But all she actually said was, "Okay."

Which... No. Communication is too important to let her get away with that taciturn nonsense! Especially since I knew why she was doing it.

"Awww, look at my cutie Niv, acting like she trusts me completely!" I 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," Abigail said. "You asked her out on a date? Isn't she going to be a bit mad when she finds out you were trying to trick her? I mean, the plan is to get her on our side, right?"

"Who said I was tricking her?" I asked, tilting my head a little to the side. Mostly because I knew Nivera found it adorable when I did that, even if she'd never ever admit it in front of anyone. "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."

Oops, looks like it's 'Nivera Doesn't Want to Say the Thing she Wants to Say Take Two!' This time with a dash of suspicion! This time, I was going to take her "Alright" at face value, though. I had my reasons! And she knew I had reasons. And she knew I knew she knew about those reasons! And usually I'd say screw all

that and demand that we actually explain our reasons, but this time... well, I had reasons!

“Come on, you two!” I called out to Bailey and Abigail. “We’re gonna need to scamper like a set of squirrel girls on bitterbean if we want to make it there on time.” Then I grabbed hold of both their wrists, and took off running like a... Well, like a squirrel girl on bitterbean, I guess! Partially because we really were running out of time, but also because Abigail looked like she wanted to ask a few questions in Nivera’s place. Which, again, would normally be welcome, but - again - I had my reasons not to! So I was just going to have to keep them busy dodging tree roots while we ran for a bit.

“Fox up to something,” Bailey grumbled from behind me. Which was maybe a bit of a problem, since it meant that she was good enough at keeping up to grumble, which in turn meant she might have the spare breath to ask questions I couldn’t have her asking... but, thankfully, she wasn’t the sort to talk much.

“I’m always up to something!” I agreed, because there’s no deflection like a truth-based deflection! “I’m a trickster, y’know? I trick, tease, trap, and sometimes even bamboozle! 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,” Abigail pointed out. Which was totally true! And definitely the easier route to take. But...

“You say that like it’s a good thing! 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 Araina through 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?” Abigail asked. I guess she was getting used to root-dodging, too. “How does that even work?”

“Pretty well, actually,” I called back - or more like *threw* back! A little trick I knew, to make it seem like my voice was coming from behind her. It worked extra great when I paired it with an illusion. Of course, then I had to actually take the lead in guiding Abigail past obstacles, to ensure that she wouldn’t stumble when her head snapped back towards my illusion. But that was fine! She’d probably only be looking for a second, anyway, so long as I made the fake image do a dramatic

fade away. “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 - some of which you might see first hand, one day, if you’re lucky - 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?” Abigail asked me, shaking her head. Bailey nodded, meanwhile, which... Okay, I wasn’t going to say that didn’t hurt - the girl was such an innocent sweetheart, I couldn’t help wanting her to like me, but... Well, I had a mission to get back to!

“A very *hot* mess! Now come on, Araina’s waiting right through those trees!”

Trees we passed through just half a second later. The arachne of the hour was standing by the opposite side of the treeline, nervously tapping her fingers together, shifting her legs about and occasionally glancing up at the sky to try and check the time.

“Hey Araina!” I called out, as soon as she was in sight. “How’re you doing?”

“Ch-Chloe?!” she called out, jumping about a foot in the air. “And... aren’t you... Queen Devilla’s maid?”

“Fox popular,” Bailey said. She sounded a bit impressed with me, which was nice, but... Well, I think she was impressed with the wrong thing. Araina knowing my name wasn’t anything special!

“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 and backed up a step, moving towards the trees. That wasn’t good. She was definitely feeling skittish, but it could have been worse. She wasn’t running away *yet*, at least. “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,” I interrupted, holding up my hands with my palm out. I needed to keep her from making any mistakes here, or Nivera might end up assuming the worst and doing something we couldn’t take back. “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 *very* familiar voice from behind me. I didn’t even need to turn around to know that it was Nivera coming out of the woods behind me, with her arms crossed and her lips pulled down into an adorable 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,” I replied, following through on the ‘not needing to turn around’ thing by... well, not turning around. “And I’ll get to you as soon as I’m done reassuring our skittish General, alright?”

There was a moment of silence - shocked silence, if I had to guess, where everyone wondered what the heck was going through my brilliant mind as I completely ignored my fiancée. I ignored that, too!

“Araina,” I continued, instead. “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...” I spun towards ‘Nivera.’ “Mellany! I stole your date. How about we make it up with that totally private chat you wanted?”

“Mellany?”

“Mellany?!”

“...Enemy?”

Abigail, Araina, and Bailey asked, pretty much in tandem, but not at all synced! Weird how that worked out.

‘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 my wonderful fiancée’s throat. It was actually kinda creepy. “What gave me away?”

“Let’s see...” I started, tapping my 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 claimed. “Meeting you was a surprise. Are you sure you aren’t spending too much time with Nivera? It’s warping your thought processes.”

“Uh-huh.” I rolled my 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?”

Mellany let out another one of those creepy (from Nivera) laughs, and shook her head a little. At the same time, though, her body started to shift. Her tail curled up on itself, the scales melding together to form a solid lump beneath her demonoid half, which then stretched up and out in order to form a chest shape, one

that came complete with hinges and a curved lid. The colors shifted from green to brown, and the scales became wooden grain.

The rest of her changes were a little less dramatic, but just as impressive. Her demonoid half, which was now protruding from the chest, became a touch less toned - though she kept the abs - while her arms grew just a little 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 with a shark-like grin. Her hair, meanwhile, shifted from long wavy brown locks to a bright blonde bob that fanned out on either side of her head before coming to pointed ends. Her face became a bit more angular, meanwhile, while her green eyes shifted to two different tones - silver on the right, gold on the left. Finally, the black band that had surrounded 'Nivera's' chest sank into her flesh, revealing a perky pair of melons.

"Satisfied?" Mellany asked, baring her teeth in what might have maybe been a grin? If I was feeling charitable. Which I wasn't.

"Mostly!" I replied, with an *actual* 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 *shivered*. Which would normally make me feel bad, but for once I was pretty sure a heavy hand was warranted! Even if seeing her sharp toothed smile all strained was a bit of a downer. 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...?" Abigail prompted. I think she mostly just wanted to feel included in the conversation, which was fair! She'd been sort of sidelined for all this.

"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-” Abigail started

“Th-that’s not-” Araina protested.

I 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 all cards on the table,” Mellany said, with a shrug. “So let’s do this. With Araina around, mind you, since you were going to tell her everything that happened anyway, right?”

I could tell from her smirk that she thought she was pulling one over on me with that. Most likely she didn’t believe that I really wanted everything out in the open. I knew from dealing with my lovely - but uncommunicative - Nivera that it was a difficult thing for most bloodliners to wrap their heads around... but I actually *did* want everything out in the open, so, “Okay!”

Mellany blinked, which I kinda expected. Then she scowled, which I’d also more or less expected, and glared at Araina which... I wish I could say I hadn’t expected. But, hey, in the end she went, “Ugh, fine!” Soooo... win?

“Let me make this simple for you,” she continued. “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 hag 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 with me, 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..." I gave her a nod, all serious like, hummed like I was actually giving it some thought, and then frowned like something had just occurred to me. "And what do you want for yourself?"

"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." Fallen from grace or not, it seemed like bloodliners were still bloodliners. The more someone accomplished, in a family like that, the more respect she'd be given and the more free reign she'd have to follow her own interests. It was a meritocracy, through and through - which sounded great, if you didn't know that they were all raised to be cutthroat bitches out to undo one another. Anything was fine, as long as their infighting never

actually hurt the family's bottom line. Something for me to keep in mind, if I was going to be working with Mellany. She'd be a great ally, so long as it was in her best interest, but she'd as soon stab me in the back as pat me on it if it led her to a better deal.

“Um...” Arachne raised her 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?”

I nodded, hummed, and fought the urge to run up to Araina and give her a big hug. Instead, I turned to Abigail.

“I think we're going to need Devilla.”