

Demon Queened

Chapter 56 - Wine Aunt

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Devilla

There wasn't much to say about my aunt's place. It was... nice, I suppose? It had four walls, decorated with a few painted family portraits and the occasional knick knack. To be honest, I was a little too stressed out to focus on the details.

It was only just occurring to me that I didn't even know my aunt's name. I couldn't exactly ask, either - not when I'd just been seated at the dinner table, sitting across from that very same aunt, who was now glaring at me from across the wooden surface.

"You look like a smaller version of your mother," my aunt said after a long and awkward moment of me desperately wishing for Chloe and Nivera to get back from the kitchen. Abigail's presence besides me, with her hand on mine, was just about the only thing keeping me from having a panic attack. "Except for your eyes, I guess. You took after my sister, there."

"...Thank you?" I proffered after an awkward pause. "I'm afraid I've only had the occasional portrait to go by, personally, so I'll have to take your word for it."

Rare were my mother's portraits, and even rarer were my dam's. In fact, the only picture I had of *her* was the singular family portrait I'd seen - my dam's arm

around my mother, each of them placing a hand upon the latter's belly, with soft smiles on their faces.

Mother's face *used* to grace the currency, as well, but I'd had it replaced with my own image... perhaps in part to avoid feeling her judgmental eyes on me whenever I saw a coin.

"I didn't say it was a compliment," my aunt replied, "though I suppose your mother wasn't hideous."

"Look, Aunt..." Oh no. Why did I open my mouth? Now she was bound to find out I didn't know her name, and-

"Do you have to be so bitchy, Marlene?" Nivera complained, slithering out of the kitchen with a large platter of food in each hand. One was stuffed to the brim with the stuffed pork chops Chloe had promised, the other with thrice baked potatoes. Chloe was following not far behind, carrying two bottles of wine and four glasses while floating a green bean casserole behind her. Each of us was given one of the glasses, except for Marlene who received the second bottle in its entirety.

"Devilla's her *own* person, not a derivative of her mom."

Aunt *Marlene's* head swiveled about to face Nivera, and for a moment the two's gazes met - one icy cold, one fiery hot. Then both pairs of eyes seemed to

mellow out as Marlene let out a soft sigh. “Fine. I’ll try. For your sake and Chloe’s, if no one else’s... but I’m going to need a *lot* to booze tonight.”

“Got you covered!” Chloe said cheerfully. “There’s half a dozen more wine bottles chilling as we speak!”

Marlene grunted, plunging a claw into the cork to pluck it out so that she could take a deep swig from the bottle. “...Alright, out with it. What do you want?”

“Who says we want anything?” Abigail asked defensively, narrowing her eyes at my aunt.

Marlene snorted. “Please. If this was just about getting to know my niece, Chloe would have come up with a twelve step plan to ease me into things - by the time I actually sat at a table with you, she’d have found some way to get me relaxed and open to you. This? This is *rushed*. You’re after something.”

“I’m pretty sure you already know what we want,” Chloe chimed in. “Something to do with the name Alira, perhaps?”

“Personally I’m more interested in what you know of my mother and any plans for me,” I confessed, shifting uncomfortably in my chair. This dinner felt like a crucible for scouring out the truth.

“Yes, well, lucky for you it’s almost impossible to talk about the first without the second,” Marlene informed me before taking another swig of wine. “Seeing as

how Alira's blackmail material can be traced directly back to your mother's Fallen forsaken interference in my sister's life."

"Alira *blackmailed* you into staying away from me?" I asked, arching an eyebrow. That was certainly unexpected.

Then again, I wasn't entirely sure *what* I expected her reason to be.

"I've heard that Alira was a big proponent of isolating you," Nivera said with a frown. "I can't *prove* she was the one to come up with the idea, but she's always been my top contender."

"It was theoretically less about isolating you, and more about keeping people from having 'undue influence' over you," Chloe reminded us. "But we all know the end result. I'm guessing Alira didn't want you interfering, Mom?"

"Something like that," Marlene confirmed, swirling her wine bottle around and staring at the sloshing liquid. "And before you ask what she blackmailed me for, I'll repeat myself - it all goes back to that bitch who birthed you."

"You *really* don't like Aunt Grimmilla, do you?" Chloe noted before I could say anything. "Any reason why? Most people who remember her talk about her like she was the next coming of Luci, or something."

"Ha!" Marlene scoffed. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing, young missy! Trying to get more information from me... Whatever, I already promised

I'd tell you, didn't I? All about that conniving, lying bitch who took advantage of my sister's idealism..."

"Aunt Issa's ideals?" Chloe pressed. This time, though, I was fairly certain the interest in her eyes was real.

"To start with, get that stupid image of Grimmilla out of your head," Marlene warned, her eyes trailing over everyone at the table before finally coming to rest at mine. "She might have tricked the masses into thinking she cared, but deep down she was just as selfish as you. I'm pretty damn sure there was only one person in this whole world she cared about, and it wasn't my sister, or even herself. It was *you*."

"Me?" I questioned, hardly able to believe my ears. "But I hadn't even been born at that point?"

"Yeah, well, you already meant the world to her, all the same," Marlene muttered, lifting her bottle of wine up and practically chugging at it for a moment or two. "Ah... Yeah. She... at first I think she mostly saw you as some sorta tool to use in her scheming. She talked about you all distantly, like you weren't *real* to her. When she actually got pregnant, though, she shifted her tune. Started actually getting *excited* when she talked about your future. She was always going on about the various possibilities you'd have before you... She said you'd be the first

Demon Queen to ever truly be *free*. Free of the war, free of *us*, if you wanted to be. Because you were going to be the one to end *everything*.”

“Everything?” I asked, my head spinning. The idea that my mother actually *cared* for me was somehow a revelation I had not expected - it felt like someone was squeezing my heart, all of a sudden, except instead of pain I just felt... warmth. Care. Like I suddenly had expectations to live up to, and yet those expectations weren't harmful to me in the slightest... I felt like crying. Instead, I pushed that potential meltdown aside for later, and focused on the woman in front of me. “Not just the war?”

“Definitely the war,” Marlene agreed, eyeing her wine bottle - now with noticeably less wine in it. Chloe grabbed the second bottle from our side of the table, handing it over to her Mom without a word. “As for the rest... I don't know. She always said to interpret that however I wanted to. The only thing she cared about was that we helped. Or rather that *Issa* helped.”

“Wait,” Abigail called out, holding out a hand. “I get the whole ‘she was secretly a selfish bitch’ complaint, but where does your sister fit into this? I mean, she was just a commoner, right? She couldn't have been of *that* much help, could she? Mom said she won the heart of the Queen with her jokes and laughter, but-”

“Oh, she won *something* with jokes and laughter,” Marlene snarled, violently ripping off the cork and putting the bottle to her lips for another big gulp.

“She won your mother’s attention, but not her love. The only reason your mother approached my sister was because she wanted her daughter to ‘inherit that smile.’ She figured any child of Issa’s would have the strength to keep laughing through even the most terrible times... Not that I was ever really sure why she thought a *princess*, of all things, would need such a trait. Wasn’t exactly guaranteed you’d get it, either - *obviously*.” She gestured at me with her wine bottle before taking another big sip.

“...I’m starting to realize just how little I know about my dam,” I confessed. “Especially if her humor and smile really were enough to reach my mother’s ears. That said, I’m afraid I fail to understand what my dam got out of this deal... assuming she wasn’t already secretly in love with her queen?”

“What she got was an end to the war,” Marlene told me, slamming her wine bottle down on the table. “Or at least that’s what the bitch promised... Issa loved to fight, but hated killing. An end to all the death was all she’d ever wanted. That might be why she got the idea in her head to be a little *proactive* about it.”

“Proactive?” Chloe pressed, before I had the chance to ask. From the enthralled look in her eyes, she was as eager to learn about my dam’s actions as I was.

“Aye,” Marlene confirmed, taking another long drink from her bottle.

“Proactive. She decided that if her daughter was going to play such a big role in ending the war, the least she could do was play a small one. Or at least that’s how she explained her insanity to me. How saving a single soldier’s life was supposed to change anything, though, I have no idea...”

“A soldier?” I repeated, my mind flicking to Lucy. “Her name wouldn’t happen to have been Brielle, would it?”

Marlene sputtered, spilling wine down her front as she slammed the bottle down on the table. “How do you know that name?! Don’t tell me she came *back?!*”

“No... but her daughter did... sort of,” I replied, not wanting to admit that I’d personally brought a human into our halls. Let alone the Heroine.

“By the fallen -just how dumb *is she?! I heard Brielle hoped for her to be a bridge between our people - even talked about naming her after Luci herself - but this... to come *this far...* No, wait... How did I not hear about this before? A*

human coming to the tower should have spread like wildfire... She hasn't been squirreled away in the dungeon, has she?"

"I... wait.... Lucy was purposefully named after...?" I paused before shaking my head. This wasn't the time to get hung up on details. "She isn't in the dungeon. I've been keeping her disguised during her time here ever since I found her."

"Disguised?" Marlene demanded, narrowing her eyes. "And you're sure nobody found out? Because my sister went to all the trouble of hiding *her* human in a remote *cave*, yet she still ended up getting trailed..."

"Hence the blackmail material?" Abigail guessed, shifting a little in her seat besides me.

"Aye," Marlene confirmed. "Hence the blackmail material. All for nothing - or so I'd thought... Don't tell me *she* has something to do with all the rumors swirling around you? The reason you've supposedly changed so much? Did my sister's insanity actually... *lead* somewhere?"

"Not... quite," I replied noncommittally. I still wasn't sure how much I could afford to tell this woman, aunt or no. I'd certainly had no intention of blurting out Lucy's status, or my own recent activities, this early on...

Not that it hadn't worked out fine for me in the past, but still.

“How about I go get her?” I suggested. “She’d likely appreciate hearing the rest of the story.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?!” Marlene snapped at me, waving her bottle wildly in the air. “Go get her! I want to know what my sister’s sacrifice amounted to.”

“Right...” I responded with a nervous smile on my lips. It seemed as if Marlene’s initial reluctance to speak with me had disappeared entirely, and I wasn’t quite sure what to make of it... It didn’t seem like she meant any harm, at least? Hopefully, meeting Lucy would even calm her down... and maybe lead to some answers for all of us.

I doubted she could answer the questions I really wanted to know, though. Like why the daughter of someone my dam had saved ended up as the Heroine... did my aunts in heaven do it on purpose? Had they hoped for the events of the game? For me to be slaughtered at the hand of someone who wouldn’t exist if not for my parents’ actions?

Lucy would probably say otherwise. She’d definitely think that the Goddess picked her in hopes of ending the war instead. That she could be the bridge her parents wanted her to be... It was possible, but considering I knew for a fact how the timeline would have gone if the rite had gone correctly...

I sighed and shook my head as I stood up from the table. Worrying about all this would get me nowhere. It was time to collect Lucy so that together we could extract whatever answers we could from Marlene.