

Demon Queened

Chapter 38

Hashing Things Out

Written by Princess Kay

Proofread by FallingLeaf

Devilla

My room was empty when I arrived back at the tower. Something I found momentarily surprising, though perhaps I shouldn't have - Abigail had no reason to believe I'd be coming back so early, after all. Without even Bailey to look after, she was likely resting at home, or even out enjoying herself.

In the end, I suppose her absence meant little to my plans. I didn't precisely need a guide to reach the kitchens, after all - though I certainly would have appreciated the company, had she been present. Even that was only my own selfishness speaking, though. Surely Abigail had better things to do with her mornings than showing me around my own home.

At least, that was my thought process when I started my journey to the royal kitchens. Fifteen minutes later, I realized I had forgotten something rather important - namely that the individual floors of Dimona Tower were large enough to contain a small city, such as the one Abigail lived in, and I had one to *myself*. I had no idea where I was, and I couldn't ask anyone either. I hadn't seen another living soul since somewhere around the eight minute mark. So far as I could tell, far from finding the kitchens, I'd wandered into a part of the floor that wasn't even in use!

I was about to give up and backtrack my way towards actually occupied space when my eyes finally caught sight of something familiar - a dark wooden door, trimmed by gold. One that looked nearly identical to the one outside my own room. As it should, considering the ornamentation around my door had been painted to mimic it in the days before my coronation...

It was the room the Demon Princess normally moved to after becoming Queen. A room I had not only avoided, but declared off limits, with a penalty for no less than a week in our dungeons for anyone caught near it. A room I rarely thought about, these days - though, once upon a time, I'd come there quite often. Even after all these years, one could list it among the locations I was most intimately familiar with. Perhaps that was why my feet saw fit to lead me there in my directionless wandering.

I stared at the handle for a long moment, considering whether I wished to open it or not. To see the bed, so neatly made since my last time bouncing upon it. The pillow where I'd once placed a stuffed rabbit, so that I would have something to look at as I talked about my day. The closet, full of clothes I'd never wear, and the dresser, filled with items I used to gawk at and wonder about.

Then I turned around and walked away. There was no way I could face my mother's memory, in light of everything that I had done. Everything I had become... There was simply no way.

"Devilla?"

I paused at the sound of a familiar voice, paired with footsteps running down the hallway.

"Devilla!" Abigail repeated, a relieved smile on her face when she spotted me. I wondered how she could possibly look so happy to see me. "I thought I might find you here. Bellasy said she saw you heading towards the restricted area, and this is basically the only thing down here I... know about... Are you okay?"

"Does it matter?" My voice sounded cold, even to my own ears. I wanted to reprimand myself for it - to shake myself awake, and remind myself that Abigail was one of the only people who'd put up with me, who actually *cared*. I should be careful not to drive her off. I should treat her with the warmth she deserved. And yet the apology I wished to utter refused to come from my lips. I just stared at her.

"Of course it matters!" she replied, narrowing her eyes at me. "You're my friend."

"Why?" I heard myself asking. "We both know I don't deserve it."

“Not this again...” she rightfully complained. “I thought you were doing better!”

“So did I. But doing better doesn’t mean that *I’m* better. We both know that. We both know I don’t... I don’t deserve...” Ah. There were tears coming down my cheeks again.

“Devilla,” Abigail whispered before running towards me.

“Don’t,” I whispered. “I don’t-”

Abigail’s hand was on my lips before I could finish, her pitch black eyes drilling into mine. “Don’t you dare say you don’t deserve it. *I’m* the only one who gets to decide who deserves my affection, alright?”

I nodded, faintly, as more tears flowed down my cheeks. They were striking against Abigail’s hand, now, but she didn’t seem to mind them.

“Now tell me what’s wrong,” she said, taking her hand away from my lips so that she could place it, and its pair, upon her hips. “Why the hell are you back to trying to argue down your worth? I thought you were at least starting to accept the whole ‘people care about you’ thing.”

“Because I’m a disappointment,” I replied. “Because it’s all I can be. All I’ve ever been. I disappointed the Generals, who needed my help to keep things running. I disappointed my people, who needed me to make them feel like the

sacrifices they'd made had worth. And I disappointed my mother, who gave up her life to keep our people safe. Or at least, I would have, had she lived long enough to see everything I'd done."

"You..." Abigail jammed her finger into my chest. "Big boobed *bimbo*. You're literally trying to end the war here! That's more than any Demon Queen before you has ever done! And you're talking about being a disappointment? Why? Because a bunch of idiots who couldn't even be bothered to raise you right expressed dissatisfaction when you stopped doing everything the way they said? Because people like to grumble about the fact that you haven't already saved them? Because you spent your entire life sitting around waiting to *sacrifice yourself* for everyone else until I kicked you into gear? Who the hell called you a disappointment?! I'll kick their ass! Even if it was you - *especially* if it was you!"

"I..." I laughed, much to my own surprise. "You... How is kicking me the answer to *anything*? And who are you calling a 'big boobed bimbo'? Just because yours are a little on the smaller side-"

"Yours are *huge!*" Abigail interrupted. "And mine are sensitive enough to make up for it, alright? Like I told you *last time*. You should remember that, with your perfect memory, right?"

“I... suppose I do, yes,” I admitted with a shake of my head. “...Thank you. And apologies. I... I think I needed that. Seeing my mother’s room after so long... brought back memories. Memories of a time where I thought I could do better than I did...”

“Well, you’re doing good *now*,” Abigail replied. “And, to be honest, you blew away my expectations the first time you got my *name* right, so you’re about as far away from a disappointment as you can get at this point, at least in my book.”

“I think your book might be a little biased,” I replied, shaking my head. “I *am* your friend, after all, am I not?”

“Yeah,” Abigail agreed. “You are. And don’t you forget it, alright? Because I’ll seriously find a way to kick your ass if that’s what it takes to drill it through your thick skull that you’re worthy.”

“Perhaps you could poke me in the boobs some more?” I teased. “Or pinch them, if you’d prefer. Though you might struggle to build up enough force - it sounds like they’re not as sensitive as what you’re used to, after all.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up,” Abigail replied. I got the feeling that she was rolling her eyes at me, even though I couldn’t technically tell. “What are you doing back in the tower, anyways? I figured you’d be busy with you-know who.”

“I’m pretty sure you’d draw less attention by just using her name,” I pointed out. “And I *am*. I came to get us breakfast, actually.”

“...Breakfast? You teleported to the tower... leaving *Lucy* alone with the woman who knows who you are and the horned wolf that growls at everyone who badmouths you, to get everyone *breakfast*?”

“...Well, anything would sound like a terrible idea if you put it like that,” I muttered, looking away. “It’s not like I’m not going to be putting them in the exact same circumstances later, regardless, you know? Likely for longer periods, too. Consider this a test run.”

“I’d consider it, if I thought you did it on purpose...” Abigail sighed. “Whatever. Come on, let me lead you to the kitchens. Assuming that this isn’t something I can just do on my own?”

“I figured I’d teach Lenora a new dish while I was there,” I informed her. “It’s called ‘hash browns’ - there’s more than one way to make them, actually, but the variety I’m working with involves frying shredded potatoes in oil. It goes great with eggs. And maybe some hot sauce? Though I think I’ll keep that on the side, considering how Lucy reacted to it last time... I might need to get a milder bottle, too, while I’m at it.”

“I’m pretty sure I could tell all that to Lenora *without* you giving her a heart attack with your presence,” Abigail pointed out. “Especially since the kitchens are actually *busy* at this time of day.”

“Busy doing what?” I questioned, tilting my head a little to the side. “I figured they’d empty quickly considering I’m not around to cook for...”

“Us servants need food even when you aren’t here,” Abigail replied, her voice once again implying a rather vigorous rolling of her eyes. “But hey, maybe interacting with Lenora in front of everyone will do her some good... assuming she survives the panic attack, anyway. Did you know they still have her on cleaning duty?”

“She explicitly didn’t want to use her connection with me for her own gain,” I reminded Abigail. “...That said, I suppose I could spare a few words of compliment for her potato work while I’m there...”

The camp was already packed by the time I made it back to Lucy and the others with our breakfast. Unsurprising, considering the amount of time it had

taken me. Thankfully, Lucy greeted me with a smile and a wave rather than a reprimand.

“Is that the food?” she asked, gesturing to the four plates I was carrying - or rather, the one I was carrying, and the three I was levitating.

“It is,” I confirmed, levitating my stack of dishware over to her. She picked the one from the top, allowing me to convey the remaining two to Feyra, and then place the last upon the ground for Bailey. “Eggs and hashbrowns. Well salted on both accounts, with a little pepper on the former. I’ve got hot sauce, too, if you’d like.”

“Maybe just a little?” Lucy said, frowning. “It’s a bit too spicy for me...”

“Which is why I brought a milder variant along,” I replied, nodding to the bottle currently tucked under my arm with what I hoped would be a reassuring smile. “You’re free to have some as well, Feyra.”

“No thanks,” she instantly replied, poking at her shredded hash browns with the fork I had provided. “One weird thing at a time is enough for me.”

“Bailey?” I questioned next, despite expecting the head shake that followed. I knew she wasn’t a big fan of spice, but thought it only right to ask considering she couldn’t currently express herself.

“So these are potatoes?” Lucy asked, lifting a forkful to examine them.

“A form of them,” I confirmed, unstopping my newest bottle of hot sauce.

“A preparation known as hash browns, to be precise. I used to eat it with a form of sauce known as ketchup, but... well, I’m not really sure how to obtain that, these days. Hot sauce is a nice substitute, though.”

Lucy acknowledged my words with a happy hum, before scooping a few pieces up and bringing them to her mouth. A tense silence followed, broken only by the sound of her chewing, and the faint noise of Feyra scraping her fork against her plate as she dug into one of the eggs. Then Lucy graced me with a bright smile.

“It tastes good! A little plain, though? I think it might be better if I mix it in with some egg yolks!”

“Another valid option,” I agreed, glancing at the sunny side up eggs on my own plate. “Though not the course I’d personally take... I’m happy so long as you like them.”

Though the review was a little lackluster compared to the response fries had received from Abigail and Lenora, it was well within my expectations. It wasn’t as if she were eating salty food for the very first time in her life, after all. Nor was it the first time she’d had something fried in oil, in all likelihood. In fact, I couldn’t even begin to imagine the variety of dishes she must have tried, as both the

Heroine and a traveling adventurer. To me, it was enough that she appreciated the dish and ate it with gusto.

“I suppose the last step before breaking camp is simply to wash and put away the dishes,” I remarked upon our completion of the meal, gathering our dishes.

“I can handle the washing!” Lucy offered. “Since you got the food, and all.”

“I might have provided it, but I hardly cooked it,” I pointed out. “And besides, you all did the work of putting away our tent and putting out the fire. The least I can do, in my opinion, is clean up my own dishes.”

“Are you sure?” Lucy asked. “I mean, it’s no trouble! Plus, you were gone for a while, so even if you only got the food from someone else it seems like it must have taken a lot of effort...”

“Less than you’d think,” I assured her. “Half the time I spent was honestly just me getting lost... And most of the rest was merely me awaiting the dishes.” Of course, there was also my moderate mental breakdown, but I didn’t particularly feel like getting into it. “Besides, as you said, there’s no trouble.”

Saying so, I quickly pulled a sizable ball of water from the air and began to agitate it. A quick dip of each plate was more than enough to scrub free the contaminants, before Lucy even had a chance to complain about it. Or it should

have been. Before I could grab a second plate, however, Lucy placed a hand upon my own.

“Eena,” she whispered. “Why don’t we wash them together? You can hold the magic, and I’ll put the plates in.”

“It’s hardly a problem doing it myself,” I protested, glancing at the tableware that had been stacked upon the ground. “If anything, it might take more time to do it that way.”

“Maybe,” Lucy agreed. “But it’s not really about saving time! It’s about sharing the burden. And more importantly, it’s about letting you know that you *can* share the burden!”

“...It’s just plates, Lucy,” I replied, shaking my head. “Hardly a burden... and you and Feyra handled everything else...”

“That’s the thing... You keep talking about you haven’t done enough! Like everything is a transaction of some sort, and it needs to be equal. But it doesn’t! These dishes? They’re from something we ate together! This journey? Is something we’re doing together! Every step is part of a greater whole! And the whole is something that we share. So, maybe I’m just overthinking things, but... I really don’t want you comparing what you did to what I did, and thinking you need to do more! I want you to share the burden with me - every step of the way!”

“...You’re overthinking things,” I stated, shaking my head. “Definitively and totally. But if it makes you feel better... I do appreciate the sentiment. And I suppose there’s no harm in splitting the work, regardless...”

“So I can help?” Lucy asked, her eyes practically shining.

“You can,” I confirmed with a chuckle. “Every step of the way.”