

Demon Queened

Chapter 17

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Abigail

Devilla wasn't home yet. *Yet* being the keyword, here, because it was barely evening, and I was pretty sure (read: very hopeful) that she wasn't going to stay out two nights in a row without even checking in. That still left her unavailable to chat at the moment, though, and with the bitterbean potion wearing off... Well, like I'd told Bailey, I was going to need a nap if I wanted enough energy for a proper retelling. Which was why I was maybe a bit less than happy when Bailey started growling, right before I could reach my apartment, and pointed out the fact that there was someone leaning against the wall right next to my door.

The only thing that kept me from snapping at them - other than basic decency, and the small chance that they were actually waiting for a neighbor - was the fact that she seemed familiar. Not familiar as in, 'I recognize her,' though - more like... this feeling like I *should* recognize her? Which was weird, because I was pretty damn sure I'd never seen her before.

I was also pretty sure I'd know if I had, because she kinda stood out. I mean, for one thing, she was on the small side - I wouldn't call her tiny (not when I was coming back from a meeting with a goblin) but still small enough to stick in my brain - somewhere in the range of five feet. (Maybe five foot one? I wasn't as

sensitive to this stuff as Devilla.) And then there was her species - not because kitsune were uncommon, or anything, they just tended towards bright colors. In this case, bright orange hair in a cute pixie cut. Add in her bushy tail and ears, with the white and black tips, and you have a pretty distinct look. Which made that sense of familiarity all the stranger, since I recognized none of it.

At least, not until I caught sight of her violet colored eyes.

“You’re-”

“A totally hot, utterly mischievous, and extremely brilliant vixen who also just so happens to be the Queen’s cousin?” She interrupted, flashing me a sharp toothed grin, and holding out her hand. “Name’s Chloe.”

“Nivera’s fiancée.” I ignored the hand. I’d have preferred to avoid the girl, too, but I didn’t really trust her enough to turn my back on her. The smile on her face never faltered, though.

“That too! But I try not to lead with that - it polls *really* low with pretty much anyone who’s met her. Like, *way* lower than being related to Devilla. At least at first? She *really* doesn’t make the best first impression - which is actually why I’m here!”

“To apologize for her?” If so, I wasn’t exactly impressed.

“Nope! I make a point not to fight her battles. Or apologize for her mistakes - kinda gets in the way of her growth, y’know? And believe me, we *all* know she’s in need of that growth. It *is* related, though.”

I frowned, but didn’t say anything. Chloe’s cheer didn’t have the same insincere feel to it as Nivera’s... anything and everything that wasn’t bitchy. But I still wasn’t ready to buy anything that came from her mouth. Bailey on the other hand, didn’t seem to share my concerns.

“What Fox want?”

“Glad you asked!” Chloe said, with another toothy grin. “It’s like this - wait, first off, have you ever had a broken bone?”

“No.” Though I would have probably said the same thing if I did. I didn’t know what this girl was after, and I wasn’t in the mood to find out. Bailey didn’t seem to be in the mood to work against me this time, either, but Chloe didn’t seem to care.

“Well, they’re *bad*. Hurt like hell! Worse? If you don’t set them right, they can heal all gnarly - like, you might even have to break them again, just to fix things. Bad time all around, really...”

“And your point?” I asked, despite myself. This was either the worst lead in to a threat I’d ever heard, or... Actually, I had no clue what else it could be, but some stupidly morbid part of me actually sort of wanted to find out.

“Well, first impressions are the same! You clash, make bad impressions, stomp off to lick your wounds and by the time you get over it your opinion on the matter’s already set and you think you already know everything you need to know about a person! Which sucks, because people are all multi-faceted, and impossible to get from a single meeting? I mean, there were, like, five descriptors in my self-introduction alone, and that barely even scratched the surface of the complexity that is me. Like, I didn’t even get into the fact that I’m terrible at metaphors! I mean, by the logic I’m spinning, I’d have to say I’m here to... I don’t know, poke the broken bone a bunch, and stop it from healing until Nivera can come set it right...? Which sounds needlessly cruel and kinda gross, but there we go, I guess!”

“Ha...” I let out a... Laugh? A sigh? Some cross between the two that I honestly had no clue what to make of. Which was pretty much how I was starting to feel about this girl, too. Was she really Nivera’s partner? *That* angry snake actually listened to *this* on a regular basis, and came out thinking ‘I want to marry her’? It was kind of hard to believe, but...

“Multiple facets, huh?” I sighed. “So you’re saying Nivera *isn’t* just a bitch?”

Chloe nodded. “Honestly, her bitchiness has gone way down since we first met! I mean, sure, she’s got anger issues. And trust issues. And yeah, she basically

needs a translator because she's so terrible at communicating her actual wants and fears. Which is why her aunt called in, like, half a dozen favors so that General Yara would be an active participant in the conversation, by the way - which I'm guessing went terribly? Seeing how that's basically like tossing a dog in a bag with a cat and telling her to guard the mice that'll be wandering in later - like, sure, the cat and dog will be too busy fighting to focus on the bite sized snacks, but it's not going to make them feel any safer, now is it?"

"You... really do suck at metaphors, don't you?" Honestly, I wasn't sure what confused me more - her analogy, or the fact that I actually *understood it*. Hell, it even cleared up a couple things - like why Yara kept interjecting, despite clearly not wanting to, even though Nivera spent more time arguing with her about that than actually explaining anything.

"Technically, that was a simile. And I think I actually did pretty well with it, all considering! I mean, I totally see that 'so that's what was going on' look on your face! It probably went exactly like I'm imagining, didn't it?"

"Lots of angry bickering that barely seemed to involve me?"

"Yup! Though, honestly, it could have been worse... Honestly, this whole thing with Devilla maybe getting dragged back into politics thanks to the actions of her friend? Really stomped on her trauma. I mean, it's basically the same scenario that derailed both their lives in the first place. And after she spent a whole week

arguing with herself on whether she should get involved and vet you, or just trust that you were actually good for Illa, too...”

“Illa..?” I frowned. “As in *Devilla*?”

“Uh-huh! You’re probably thinking the obvious nickname would be Dev, right? But apparently it started because Devilla called her Niv, which Vera of course thought was *terrible*, so she tried to retaliate with an equally bad nickname, and it became a whole *thing*. Something about how it made ‘Nivilla’ when they put it together? And it coming first made it sound like Nivera was the big sister, or something. Which only made Nivera complain more, seeing as how she’s the younger one, but I think that was mostly just her being too embarrassed to admit she liked it. She’s always been protective of Devilla, after all... Or at least that’s what I gathered from her childhood diary entries.”

“...You read her diary?” I asked, arching an eyebrow. And her childhood diary? Wasn’t that from fifteen years ago? How’d Chloe even *get it*?

“I mean, she basically asked me to? Left it on the nightstand, and everything!” She held up a hand before I could comment. “And no, I don’t mean that in a creepy invasion of privacy sort of way - this is *literally* how Nivera communicates. Or *doesn't* communicate, I guess. The girl sucks at actually asking for help, so she just sort of leaves information where she knows I’ll find it, and trusts I’ll know what to do with it.”

“Right...” I frowned. “Aren’t you supposed to be convincing me to give her another shot? Because so far, all I’m hearing is that she’s an even bigger pain than I thought she was...”

“No, I’m trying to give you a whole bunch of information you didn’t ask for so that I can convince you that there’s more to Nivera than you realize. Being a pain is a big part of it, of course, and I have zero intention of hiding that! But so is caring about Devilla. As is scheming, and maneuvering around greedy bloodliners, for the sake of those she cares about. Which is why she’d be a really big help with all the political idiocy that’s going on.... With me present, of course - I promise she’s better when I’m around. And *worse* when there’s a bloodliner in the room. Especially since she’s always trying to keep me away from them... But you’ll see that for yourself. If you’re willing to meet with her again, in a less stressful setting?”

“...I already told her I’d talk to Devilla about all this,” I said. “That *includes* whether we should take Nivera up on her offer. And no, you’re not going to convince me to put in a good word for her.”

“But you’re not going to put in a *bad* word for her, either, are you?” Chloe asked with another grin. One that got wider when I failed to answer. “Alright! Here’s my address! Let me know if you want to meet up with me - with or without Nivera - and I’ll work to get everything set up! Or just start a rumor about how the

Queen's personal maid is planning to go hang out with the hottest vixen in town - I basically run Nivera's information network, so it'll get to me one way or another!"

I blinked, too caught off guard by that last bit to say anything as Chloe reached into her blouse and pulled a folded piece of paper out from between her tits and shoved it into my hand.

"See you!" And with that she was gone. As in *literally* gone - like she'd teleported away. Or so I thought, until I followed Bailey's gaze to see a fox scampering its way towards the exit, tail wagging all the way.