

Demon Queened

Chapter 36

Written by Princess Kay

Devilla

“Bailey...” I fought the urge to groan or slap my hand across my face, choosing instead to look around me for a moment to ensure there was no sign of Feyra or Lucy in the vicinity. Satisfied with our isolation, I put forth the one-way sound seal I had learned from Lucy, and kneeled down to gently shake Bailey awake.

The horned wolf’s ear flicked up a moment before her head did, her snout narrowly missing my face. Her tongue, on the other hand, hit the mark of my cheek quite expertly.

“Bailey,” I repeated, the word coming out much whiny than I would have liked. I reminded myself, firmly, that this wasn’t the wolf girl’s fault. I was the one who hadn’t bothered to so much as nudge her away from the teleportation circle before activating it. The one who’d failed to notice her tail so close to my feet. “Do you know where we are?”

Bailey looked around, no doubt taking in the trees before turning her head back towards me and shaking her head slightly.

“Silly question,” I sighed, shaking my head. “Let me try again - do you know where we *aren’t*?”

This time I received a nod of confirmation from the wolf, followed by her standing.

“Stay in wolf form, for the moment,” I told her, preferring to be on the safe side. “I... need to take care of something, real quick.”

Namely checking in on Lucy. It was possible that Feyra had noticed my teleportation out of the area, and subsequent absence. Hopefully she hadn't taken advantage of my time away to do anything I would regret - if she had, there was little I could do but face the music, but if she hadn't... Well, I couldn't shake the fear that she might take the gamble on my third disappearance, even if she hadn't done so on my first or second. If I were in her shoes, I might very well convince myself that it was a 'now or never' type of affair. I wanted to at least show my face in front of her and Lucy before that could happen.

Bailey, thankfully, nodded her assent without argument. I granted her a smile in turn, before dispelling my sound seal and turning towards our campsite. It wasn't hard to find - I simply listened for the sound of idle chatter. Though what I heard was more along the lines of 'excited babble,' as Lucy told Feyra about her not-date with me in excruciating detail. With a particular focus upon the faces I had apparently made at several points, and how 'cute' I had looked when the thought of indirect kissing had popped into my head.

Needless to say, I decided to rush my return to the campsite, abandoning all concern for the preservation of my magic and levitating myself over the twigs and stones to reach the two of them as fast as possible.

“Eena!” Lucy called out, once I’d broken through the treeline. “I was just telling Feyra about the hot sauce you have! It’s really spicy, isn’t it?”

“It seems to me that you were telling her far more than that,” I remarked, painfully aware of the blush upon my features. “Did you really need to go into such detail about the shade of my cheeks after our skewer exchange?”

“It was the second best part, though!” Lucy exclaimed, with a grin bright enough to blind.

“I know I’m going to regret asking this,” Feyra said, “but considering you spent the last five minutes talking about the ‘second best’ bit, what the fuck was the *first*?”

“Watching Eena eat,” Lucy answered instantly. “She gets this really blissful look on her face whenever she eats something good! Which is also how I know she didn’t really like the skewer she took from me - not as much as she liked the other one - but she ate it anyway, because she knew I couldn’t handle it as well as her! It was really nice being cared about, like that.”

“B-Be that as it may,” I said, fully aware of - but helpless to fight against - the fire invading my cheeks, “I actually had something else that I wished to talk to you about. Namely, a question as to how long you think this trip will take?”

How long, in other words, would I be keeping Abigail waiting?

“Well...” Lucy began, hesitating a moment. From the look in her eyes, she obviously wished to know the reason behind my inquiry. She held that curiosity in check, though, as she mentally went over the trip in her mind. “We made pretty good time today, so... probably another two days to reach Daroom Woods? And then however long it’ll take to clear the issue? And then we have to come back, so.... Somewhere around a week, maybe?”

“A week...” there was no way I could ask Abigail to wait a week, was there? Especially if there was a chance it might take longer. But there was also no way that I could spend extended periods away from Feyra and Lucy to deal with tower issues... At least not alone. But they didn’t have to be alone, did they? Not if I asked Bailey to keep an eye on them. To stand in for me, as a presence to keep Feyra at bay... Lucy was already acquainted with the horned wolf, so it likely wouldn’t be hard to convince her of Bailey’s friendliness.

That left another issue, though - explaining my absences. Could I really disappear for hours on end, in the middle of our trip, without raising Lucy’s

concern? Without her questioning where I went? ...Maybe. She probably wouldn't ask if I didn't wish to tell. She'd accept it, along with my other secrets, just as she'd accepted my question just a moment prior.

But was *I* satisfied with that? With leaving her completely out of the loop? Hiding everything from her, without so much as a crumb of information to satisfy her no doubt burning curiosity? How was I meant to be building trust with her if I didn't *tell her anything*?

"Eena?" Lucy asked me, worry writ clearly across her furrowed brow. "Is everything okay?"

"It is," I confirmed, nodding my head. "It's just..." I took a deep breath, allowing myself to wonder for a moment if I was making the right decision, before ruthlessly grinding that concern to dust beneath my mental heel. Lucy deserved my trust. Even if I couldn't tell her *all* my secrets, I wanted to tell her what I could.

"There's someone I need you to meet. Can you follow me?"

"Alright!" Lucy agreed, moving towards me without a moment's hesitation.

Feyra, for her part, opened her mouth to say something - perhaps to protest - only to hesitate a moment as her gaze flicked between the two of us. Then she sighed. "I'll get the campfire going. Some of us actually have to worry about monsters attacking, you know?"

“We won’t be far,” I promised her, gently taking Lucy’s hand and leading her back towards Bailey.

The redhead, for her part, seemed to hesitate a moment at Feyra’s words, but ultimately surrendered herself to me with a faint squeeze of my hand. Still, I could tell that she was worried, from the way she glanced back towards Feyra now and again. As such, I chose to stop part way towards my goal, setting up a sound seal once we were suitably far from Feyra’s sight, and whistling to attract Bailey’s attention.

Or trying to whistle, anyway.

“What are you doing?” Lucy asked, watching curiously as I blew air through my pursed lips, to no avail.

“Calling a friend,” I informed her. “Or at least I’m trying to...” I didn’t understand it. I *knew* how to whistle. I knew I did. I’d done it plenty as Jacob. But somehow, the knowledge wasn’t translating right... perhaps because it had become more a matter of muscle memory than actual knowledge, by the end? In fact, I couldn’t even recall the precise instructions, now that I searched my memories for them. Jacob must have learned it *somewhere*, yet no matter how hard I focused the memories would not surface...

“If she’s close enough to hear you whistle, can’t you just call for her?” Lucy suggested, stifling a giggle behind her gauntleted hand.

“...Bailey!” I called, wishing I could bury *this* memory as well as Jacob had his whistling tutorial. “Can you hear me?”

A short bark was my reply, followed quickly by the presence of the horned wolf herself, much to Lucy’s apparent surprise.

“You kept her?” Lucy asked, her eyes wide.

“More like she insisted on being kept by me,” I replied, bending down a little to scratch the girl behind the ear. It was weird to treat her like a wolf, considering my desire to help her adapt as a demon, but Bailey’s true nature wasn’t something I was willing to get into. At least not directly. It would bring up too many questions about why I, personally, needed to keep my identity a secret despite willingly admitting to consorting with a demon. Still, to leave Lucy entirely in the dark about the nature of her new traveling companion felt wrong. So, once again, I would have to compromise. “She’s different from the average monster. Smarter. I consider her to be on par with a human, at least in terms of raw intellect. Though I’m afraid her social skills are a little lacking...”

“Well, she’s not growling at me, anymore,” Lucy pointed out, pulling her hand from mine so that she could cautiously move it towards Bailey. The wolf girl

allowed it, thankfully, her eyes closing in bliss as Lucy's fingers scratched behind her other ear. "I think that's already a big improvement!"

"Would you like to try communicating with her?" I asked, kneeling down besides her and running my fingers through her fur. "She's capable of using telepathy, of sorts - though you'd have to ingest a bit of her fur."

"You shouldn't suggest that too casually," Lucy warned me, frowning. "Lots of people would get really upset if they heard you saying that..." All the same, though, she reached out for Bailey's back. "Can I?"

Bailey hesitated for a moment, glancing in my direction, before nodding. Lucy thankfully didn't pluck the fur, but instead used a delicate dab of magic to cut a single strand. When I reached out to take a strand for myself, though, Bailey surprised me by pulling away.

"...You want to have a conversation with her alone?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

Bailey nodded, her tongue lolling forth from her mouth in a way that somehow seemed to convey amusement to me.

For my part, I hesitated a moment before nodding my assent. There was no such pause on Lucy's side, however, as she instantly swallowed the hair, summoning a large glob of water to wash it down.

“It’s just like using a potion, right?” she asked, closing her eyes. “Got it~! Let’s see...” Lucy trailed off, her brow furrowing for a moment, and for the first time I got to witness what my conversations with Bailey must have looked like from the outside. And there was, in fact, a surprising amount to see - Lucy’s expression turned from happy, to serious, to sad, to happy again in the span of mere seconds. After which her eyes flicked towards mine.

“...What?” I asked, stepping backwards a little.

“Bailey told me how you met,” Lucy responded, with a small, sad smile. “And what she went through with her pack... But also how you’ve been a way better pack leader to her? Even though you’ll never admit it, since you’re always so hard on yourself. And she also threatened me a bunch, if I hurt you, but she also said that she really hoped I could help you, instead! And that she was rooting for me! But also the other girl?”

“The other...” I frowned. “You mean Abigail? She’s just a friend. And I’m lucky that she’ll even consider me that...”

“Abigail, huh?” Lucy asked. Her voice had a teasing tone to it - but though it matched her smile, and even her eyes, I couldn’t help the nervousness that suddenly pervaded me. “Are you sure she’s really just a friend? Because Bailey seemed to think otherwise.”

“I’m sure,” I promised. “Though, since we’re on the subject, I did wish to broach the topic of monogamy with you... Namely in terms of how you feel about me sleeping with other people, as I highly doubt anyone but you would ever want me for more than my body.”

The smile fell from Lucy’s lips, and for a moment I thought she was about to tell me off for even suggesting the idea.

“I really wish you wouldn’t talk about yourself like that,” she said instead. “I mean, I fell for you, didn’t I? So other people might fall for you too! But even if they don’t, I think the fact that anyone fell for you is proof enough that it can happen... and, also, I don’t mind if you sleep with other people? But if you actually want to get together with someone else, I’d like to meet them! Assuming you’re interested in dating me, anyway?”

“I... I’m not... I mean, I’m not opposed to dating you, I suppose, but you shouldn’t... I mean...” I paused, unsure of what I was even trying to say. “...I’ll introduce you, one day...”

I had a feeling the two would enjoy teaming up to drive me insane.

“So is that everything you wanted to bring me here for?” Lucy asked, grinning as she scratched Bailey behind the ear again. “Because I really don’t want to leave Feyra alone too long!”

“That’s only part one, I’m afraid,” I admitted, with a grimace. “Though ‘leaving Feyra alone’ is, in fact, part of what I wanted to talk about.”

“What do you mean?”

“The truth is...” Once more I hesitated, wondering if I truly wished to share yet more potentially incriminating information with Lucy. Once more, I took a deep breath and plunged ahead. “Feyra figured out who and what I am. She wants to tell you. In fact, the only reason she’s kept silent is because she’s of the mistaken belief that I would hurt you and her alike if the truth came to light. An untenable situation, to say the least... Especially since I might need to leave for brief periods, during the coming nights.”

“Wait, that’s why she’s keeping quiet?” Lucy asked, her brow furrowing. “I thought it was because I told her I didn’t want to know...”

I blinked. “You... knew?”

“I knew that she knows,” Lucy confirmed, nodding. “She said she figured something out with her magic sight. But I told her I only want to hear it from you! And I do. When you’re ready.”

I felt like my heart was going to stop, for a moment. A mixture of emotions were welling up inside me, warring for control. Frustration that I couldn’t trust Feyra to keep silent, despite her fear, sadness that I had to rely on fear, to begin

with, for that matter, happiness and gratitude for Lucy, who was keeping to her promise of trust, and... guilt. Guilt, because even though she'd go so far due to her trust in me, I still wasn't ready to trust her back. Not yet, at least. But if not now, then... when?

"After we're done with this mission," I decided. "I'll tell you everything."

"You don't have to!" Lucy protested me, much to my surprise. "I mean, it's fine if you want to? But you shouldn't tell me just because of a deadline! You should tell me because you want to."

"I do want to," I assured her, reaching out to gently take her arms. "I want to tell you everything. I just... can't. Which is why I need to force myself. Why I *need* a deadline. Without one, I fear I'll push it off for all eternity."

Lucy frowned at me, for a moment, before giving me the most reluctant nod I'd ever seen. "Fine. But I'm not going to be mad if you don't keep to it!"

"You won't have the opportunity," I vowed, sliding one of my hands down her arm, to find her fingers and squeeze them. "But that's for then. For now... Well, for now, I'm surprised you haven't questioned me about needing to disappear for a bit."

"Well, I am curious," Lucy admitted, with a shrug. "But I don't want to pry too much? Though I guess I do really want to know if you'll be coming back

during the night! I wanted to hug you while we fell asleep... it was really nice doing that, in the inn.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” I said. “Though I might miss a dinner or two, I can certainly be home by bedtime. Tonight, in particular, I need only leave you alone for a few minutes, to arrange things.”

“A few minutes?” Lucy asked, tilting her head to the side. “Can you really get anywhere that fast? ...Ah. You don’t have to answer that, if you don’t want to!”

“You’re allowed a little curiosity, Lucy,” I said, a wry smile on my lips. “Though I’m afraid all I can tell you is that I have a way of traveling quite quickly.”

“I know I am,” Lucy replied, frowning. “But I keep thinking about that forced smile you gave me, back at the curio shop - when you felt like you had to tell me something, but you couldn’t... and now you’re trying to put a deadline on yourself, too! So I really don’t want to add any more pressure.”

“Would it help if I vowed not to answer more than I’m comfortable with?” I questioned. “Because I already know that you won’t press. It’s part of why I’m telling you so much, to begin with. Because I want to trust you with everything I *can*, to make up for what I can’t.”

“You don’t have to,” Lucy reminded me - but though her words were stern, I didn’t miss the small smile on her lips. “But it does make me really happy, to know that you trust me. As long as you’re doing it because you want to, at least!”

“The trust I give, I give to you freely,” I promised. “Though that isn’t to say there’s nothing I’d like in return... Namely, I’d like you to let Bailey travel with us. I believe she could prove useful - for hunting, if nothing else. But more than that, I must admit that I want to use her as a deterrent. I worry that Feyra will blurt out my identity during my absences. Having Bailey present might make her think twice - she’ll be like an extension of my presence, reminding her why she’s kept quiet so far.”

“Because of fear,” Lucy pointed out, clearly unhappy with the situation.

“Something I’d like to rectify,” I told her. “In fact, I’m trying to convince her that neither I nor Bailey are of threat to her, at all - that we mean neither of you harm. If I can convince her of that, then I believe the threat of her spilling my secrets will naturally disappear as well...”

“...Alright,” Lucy acceded, with a little sigh, before giving Bailey a smile.

“But you have to try and convince her too, Bailey - alright?”

“Thank you,” I said, sighing in relief as Bailey nodded. “Then... if I could trouble you to convince her now, while I take care of something?”

“Right now?” Lucy questioned. “Without even coming back to camp?”

“It’s something I’ve delayed too long already,” I informed her, thinking of how worried Abigail must be about Bailey’s disappearance, before letting out a sigh. “Though, in truth, I might also be avoiding the look Feyra will give me upon my return. There’s only so much terror I can take from that girl.”

Lucy nodded, sympathetically, squeezing my hand, just as I had hers.

“Alright. But there’s something I want to ask, too! Not in turn, though. I’ll agree no matter what! But... when you get back... do you think we could have sex?”

I had to suppress a laugh. To think that after all this serious discussion the first thing on her brain would be sex... just how sex starved was she?

“That’s fine,” I agreed. “I think I could use the opportunity to relax, in any case.”

Perhaps it was just my imagination, but the smile Lucy gave me in return almost seemed to make my heart skip a beat.

“So, let me get this straight,” Abigail said, her palms cradling her face. “You told the Heroine - who you’re keeping your identity secret from - that another person in your party *knows that secret*, and that you’re *intimidating her* into keeping quiet?”

“...Well, it sounds a lot worse when you put it that way,” I remarked, crossing my arms. “And Lucy took it well enough, in any case.”

“Only because she’s insanely tolerant. You do know you wouldn’t get away with that from *anyone else*, right? I mean, I know I’m a little on the extreme end, myself, considering I basically threatened to leave you if you didn’t spill your secrets, but...”

“I’m aware,” I replied, my voice dry. “Though I don’t blame you, for the record. You had no reason to trust me, at the time.” And it did serve to bring us closer, in the end. In fact, I’d go so far as to say it had been a relief, getting to share the burden of my failed rite. Though I feared that it may have put Abigail in an awkward spot...

“Do you regret it?” I found myself asking. “Knowing what you do now? I fear I failed to give much thought to the burden it might place you in, so eager was I to keep your company...”

“Don’t you dare guilt yourself for that,” Abigail warned me, narrowing her eyes. “*I’m* the one who pushed. And considering I actually *enjoy* your company these days, no, I don’t regret it.”

“Even though it’s gotten you involved with so much? With Nivera, and Yara and now this Mellany character, as well?”

“I mean, yeah, it’s a bit of a pain,” she admitted, with a shrug. “But it’s a small price to pay for ensuring our species survival. Honestly, I don’t even wanna think about what route you might have taken if you *didn’t* tell me.”

“...Fair,” I conceded, my cheeks tinged red as I recalled my early plans. To abandon the tower to its fate, and hope for the best with Lucy at the helm. “But still... if it wasn’t for me, you’d be living in blissful ignorance.”

“Yeah, except for the whole ‘what the hell is going on with our Queen’ thing that would be running through my brain,” Abigail pointed out. “And don’t ask me if I regret having met you, because I *don’t*. You may have made my life more complicated, but I actually *like* having you in it. Besides, you’re not the only one who’s struggled to build meaningful connections, alright? I don’t exactly have a ton of friends outside of you.”

“Really?” I asked, arching my brow. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Well, you shouldn’t.” Abigail huffed. “Most people would have just told me to go fuck myself, if I gave them an ultimatum like the one I did you, you know? Not that I really make a habit of doing that, but... I’m prickly. And not exactly outgoing. Add in the fact that my last job was working for my mom - you don’t wanna know how many accusations of nepotism I got just for having good clients - and I haven’t exactly had a lot of opportunities to make lifelong friends. I hate to say it, but you’re probably the person I’m closest to right now...”

“As honored as I am to hold that position, I must say I think you sell yourself short. You are a caring friend who has stubbornly stood up for my self-worth - regardless of whether I think I deserve it. You’ve taken on my burdens as your own, and by your own account you don’t regret it. And most of all, you’ve held my secrets close, and stood by my side when I’ve needed you most.”

“Yeah, well...” Abigail trailed off for a moment, a faint blush visible on her cheeks. “Speaking of friends... What do you want me to tell Nivera?”

“I’d like you to set up a meeting between me and her, for starters,” I said, deciding not to comment on the decidedly forced subject change. No matter if Nivera had positive feelings for me or negative, I didn’t think we could call each other friends after everything that had transpired between us. “If I’m to be working with her - in any capacity - than I need to get that out of the way.”

“Do you want me there?” Abigail asked, her pitch black eyes somehow radiating a sense of concern.

“Nearby, perhaps, but not present. Not at first. Maybe when I’m ready to meet Chloe...”

“Are you sure?”

“Not at all,” I confessed, shaking my head. “But I think I owe it to Nivera to let her vent any feelings she might have towards me in privacy... though, to be honest, I’m not sure how well I’ll weather it. I’m not looking forward to the emotions our meeting might dredge up.”

“How much do you remember about all that, anyway?” Abigail asked. “I mean, it seems like a lot of it’s pretty much stamped in Nivera’s mind, but what about you?”

“Not much...” I grimaced. “The basics, of course. Our friendship, and the course it took. But as for the details... I suppose I should make an effort to retrieve the memories before we meet.”

“...Retrieve them?” Abigail asked, her brow furrowed in apparent confusion.

“Well, yes,” I confirmed. “I mean, it has been fourteen years, and they haven’t exactly been at the forefront of my mind...”

“No, I mean... how do you *retrieve* a fourteen year old memory?”

“You just.... do? It’s not exactly difficult, is it? The hardest part is making sure you don’t pull it too far into clarity, and end up reliving it entirely.”

“That’s... not how memory works, Devilla,” Abigail remarked, frowning. “At least not for most people... I guess it might be different for Demon Queens? I mean, you are all angels, or something, right?”

“I...” I trailed off, my brows knitting as the corners of my lips drooped. Abigail was right. That *wasn’t* how memory worked - or at least, that wasn’t how it worked for *humans*. Or demons, it would seem... Was that why I couldn’t recall how to whistle? Because Jacob’s brain simply hadn’t had that information in storage, when my last life ended? And more importantly... “Is that why you all kept getting my meal orders wrong?”

“If by ‘meal orders’ you mean all the super specific requests you put in, for cutting your toast the right way and ordering the layers of your sandwiches just right, or serving certain foods at *exactly* the right temperature, then... kinda? I mean, I don’t know about the other maids, but I always thought it was a pretty big pain to keep track of.”

“...Oh,” I whispered, surprised to find a wetness in the corner of my eyes. I blinked it away, rubbing at it with my arms.

“...Devilla?” Abigail asked, concern evident in her tone. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I assured her, even as my voice cracked. “It’s nothing... really. It’s just... I always thought you were all doing it on purpose... or that you simply couldn’t be bothered to listen or care... Stupid, isn’t it? Even if it had been a purposeful slight, it’s not as if I ever did anything worthy of the effort, to begin with. I don’t know what’s wrong with me...”

Suddenly there were arms around me, as Abigail squeezed me tight. My head was pressed against her shoulder before I could blink, as I received her embrace. My eyes widened in surprise at the tender care she gave - but they also dried, as a smile came to my lips.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice low. “I know I wasn’t really worth caring about before, but-”

“You were,” Abigail interrupted. “Worth caring about, I mean. Even when you were at your worst.”

“...You give me too much credit,” I whispered, cautiously wrapping my arms around her. Some part of me expected her to flinch, to pull away, and tell me that she wanted no such thing from me. Instead, she merely tightened her grip around my form. “But thank you. Abby.”

I don't know how long I stood in Abigail's embrace. I only know that I felt refreshed when I finally left it - which was probably for the best, considering I knew what was coming next. A promise had been made to Lucy, and a promise would be kept. Even if I knew for a fact that she would let me off if I asked.

"I should get back to Lucy, and the others..."

"Yeah..." Abigail agreed, slowly nodding her head. "You'll be back tomorrow, right?"

"I will," I promised her. "To meet with you, and Nivera. And perhaps Chloe, if I'm feeling up for it... I hope you won't think less of me if I end up in your arms, again?"

"I don't think that's usually how that phrase is used," Abigail remarked, with obvious exasperation. "But no. I won't."

"Then it's a date," I confirmed, striding over to the circle.

"A date..." Abigail confirmed. For some reason, I thought I saw a tinge of red upon her cheeks in the moment before the teleportation circle took me - but perhaps it was only my imagination. I couldn't be sure - as good as my memory might be, it was still *subjective*. If I hadn't gotten a good look the first time, then no amount of replaying it in my head would give me an answer.

I shook off such thoughts, making my way to camp, where I found a fire merrily crackling between two tents. Bailey laid in front of it, her tail wagging as she panted. I knelt to give her a scratch behind the ear. “Are the others in their camps?”

Bailey nodded, before nudging me with her nose towards the larger of the two domiciles.

“Alright,” I agreed, getting up and walking towards it. “I suppose I’ve left her waiting long enough...”

“It’s fine!” Lucy called out, even as I pulled the flap apart to enter. “I don’t mind waiting.”

“Perhaps I do, though,” I teased, taking in her form. She was dressed in only a loose shift - one that only hinted to the curves beneath. One that would be quite easy to remove. Yet when I reached out for her clothing, she grabbed my hand in both her own and squeezed.

“Not tonight,” she said, to my surprise. “Tonight, I want to take the lead.”

“You?” I questioned, caught by surprise. She had mentioned that she wished to learn how, during our previous sessions, but while I could testify to her studious nature I never expected her to try and take charge so fast.

“Me!” she confirmed, her eyes shining with a determination that would brook no argument. “And I want to start by removing your clothes! If you’re okay with that?”

“...I suppose,” I conceded, with a nod. Though I had my doubts as to whether Lucy was ready, I thought I owed her a chance to prove herself. It wasn’t as if I stood to lose anything, regardless.

Except for my shirt, that is, which Lucy swiftly took hold of, and pulled above my head. Her hands were perhaps a little too eager, pushing me to lift my arms in a hurry so that she could pull off the maneuver, but despite the hunger in her eyes as she took in my topless form, her movements were still somewhat gentle. She didn’t so much as pop a stitch in my blouse, or my skirt when she tugged it down. When she reached my panties, meanwhile, she hesitated, eyeing me with a silent request for permission. Only when I nodded did she slip her fingers into the waistband, gently tugging the article down, before going down to her knees and guiding my still-heeled foot through the clothes.

Lucy remained on her knees for a moment afterward, taking in my naked form with eyes filled with a raw hunger. “Can you lie down for me?” she asked after a moment. “I’ve got a bedroll already set.”

I nodded, deciding to forgo mentioning my own for the moment, as I laid upon the soft surface Lucy had provided. Only once I was prone did the redhead reach for the straps of my heels, gently prying them from my form and placing them down besides my clothes. Then she crawled forward, placing her slender hands upon my thighs and gently - but firmly - pressing them apart.

“Aren’t you going to undress yourself?” I questioned, as she placed her lips upon my inner thigh.

She didn’t respond at first, choosing instead to kiss my flesh, once, then twice, then thrice, each one taking her slightly closer to my center - before parting, just when she would have reached my folds.

“I don’t want to,” she informed me, carefully moving her legs between mine, so that her knees pressed against the inside of my thighs. “I mean, if I do, you’ll try to make me feel good, won’t you?”

“That is rather the point,” I confirmed, arching an eyebrow. “Though I assume there’s some reason you wish otherwise?”

Lucy nodded. “You’re always making me feel good. Every moment with you makes me so happy! And I guess part of it’s just that you treat me like a normal person? But I also just really enjoy your company!”

“As I do yours,” I replied. “But I hardly see what that has to do with not taking off your clothes?”

“Because it’s not really the same,” Lucy told me. “I mean, I know you enjoy my company, but... you also think it’s temporary, right? You don’t think it’ll last.”

I didn’t reply. I suppose that my silence was answer enough, though, for after a moment Lucy went on.

“The first time we had sex, I told you I wanted to try and get my feelings across to you... but I didn’t really know anything about sex, at the time. And I didn’t really know *you!*”

“You still don’t,” I pointed out. “The aggregate of our time together wouldn’t even eclipse three days, as of yet.”

“I know... I know there’s still a long way for me to go! A lot for me to learn! But I still want to share my feelings with you...” She placed her hand on the ground beside me, lowering her head towards my breasts, coming close enough that I could feel her breath across one nipple. “I want to show you how I feel, right now. Even if it might change in the future! I want you to know that, right now, I really love being around you...”

She kissed the tip of my nipple, her soft lips caressing the hard peak. “I really love talking to you.”

Another kiss, deeper this time, with her lips wrapping about tip of my breast, her tongue teasing at its edge as she gently sucked, then nipped, drawing forth a soft gasp from my own lips even as she parted. “I love learning about you.”

Her free hand moved to grope my unattended tit, her fingers curling around the slope and squeezing, as her thumb brushed across the tip.”I love the trust you’ve given me... The fact that you feel safe telling me all sorts of things...”

She kissed her way down the swell of my breast, occasionally nipping with her teeth as she slowly worked her way down into the valley between them. Then she placed a kiss there, as well, before planting both her hands against the ground and pushing herself backwards, until her head was once again poised over my sex. “I love how you help people! How you saved Derrin Village, and showed kindness to Bailey, and helped Feyra - even though I know you probably have excuses for all of it.” She kissed my thighs, first on one side, then the other.

“And I know it’s too early to say I love you... Especially when there’s still so much I have to learn... But I’m going to do my best to learn as much about you as I can! And I want you to give me a chance, so...”

Her head lifted, her determined gaze catching my own eyes as a thrill of... something... went through me. Excitement? Fear? I didn’t know what to call it. I only knew that it kept me captive to her gaze.

“Eventually, when you trust me enough to tell me everything... If I still feel this way... If I still want to ask you on a date... Do you think you can give me a chance?”

I wanted to say yes, but the words caught in my throat. For the second time that night, I realized I had tears in my eyes - though, this time, I couldn't say why.

So I gave her the only answer I could muster - an almost imperceptible nod. I wasn't even sure she'd be able to see it, in the relative darkness of our tent. But she must have, for an instant later her smile was brightening the world around us.

“Then tonight... just for tonight... at least for now... please accept my feelings for you!” Then her head was lowered towards my center. Her tongue slid against my folds, even as her fingers found my clit. She teased it with her thumb, bringing forth a needy whimper with the barest of touches, even as her tongue slid its way into my sex. It wasn't long before she had me crying out in pleasure.

The next thing I knew, I was laying against her chest, my own bedroll forgotten entirely as we squeezed together onto the short strip of cloth. My head against her chest, and her arms wrapped protectively against me. Our legs tangled together.

I felt loved - loved, as I had never been before. It didn't matter if it was only temporary. It didn't matter if Lucy's feelings had the depth of true affection, or were simply the result of a crush. Not in that moment.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder, as I drifted off towards sleep in her arms - after everything I'd done, with everything I still kept secret... Was it truly alright for me to feel like this?