

# Demon Queened

## Chapter 20

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## Devilla

It was an interesting experience, walking down the street hand and hand with the Heroine. Though I suppose it was less about the experience itself, and more about the shocking mundanity of it. Nobody pointed at us, or stared. There were no whispers about the highborn, the Heroine, or even questions about the girls in shiny armor and skimpy clothing. People obviously knew we were present, as they moved in such a way as to avoid collision, but their gazes never seemed to settle on our forms.

Perhaps it was another effect of Lucy's privacy spell? If so, I could only hope that she'd cast it again in my presence. In fact, I'd be holding onto that hope even if it *wasn't*. The basic sound proofing alone would likely be more effective at thwarting spider spies than peppermint oil could ever hope to be. It almost made me wish I had a way to cancel my request for it. *Almost*, because there was still a chance the passive effect of the oil's scent deterring spider-spies might prove worthwhile. Assuming it worked, at least...

"That's the stall I was talking about!" Lucy informed me, drawing my attention back to the present and redirecting it towards a humble little stand. And I do mean *humble*. It consisted of nothing more than a grill and a sign, the latter of

which merely listed a price of 6 copper virtues alongside a picture of what looked to be meat on a skewer.

“I’m surprised it managed to catch your eye,” I remarked, internally comparing the stand to some of the more elaborate food stalls surrounding us. Though that adjective’s use was admittedly rather relative, the other stands at least had things like counters, and colorful pictures to try and draw customers to them.

“My friend Eff told me about it, actually,” Lucy apprised me, a bright smile on her face as she drew forth the memory. “A couple years back, a little after I joined the adventurer’s guild. It’s actually my favorite stall! But today’s the first time he’s set up shop since my arrival... Maybe it’s a sign of the Goddess blessing our reunion!”

I had to bite my tongue to keep from scoffing. The mere idea of that absentee goddess intervening with something like this when she couldn’t even be bothered to referee my aunts in heaven was enough to ruin my appetite.

Thankfully, the scent of charred meat wafting from the stand quickly reignited it.

“Are you going to be okay if I drop the privacy spell?” Lucy asked me, giving my hand a little squeeze. “We’ll get more attention, but it won’t be anything like in the guild.”

“It would be rather awkward to order if you didn’t,” I pointed out, returning her gesture of reassurance in kind. “I’ll be fine, Lucy. If stares and whispers are the price I must pay for your company, then so be it. I’d rather weather them alongside you than walk alone, in any case.”

A tinge of pink appeared upon Lucy’s cheeks. Perhaps my words had embarrassed her? If so, I could only be grateful that I’d said them before her spell came down, for a moment later the warmth of its holy magic disappeared, and the noise of the world at large washed over me.

The surrounding pedestrians did, of course, notice us once the spell had lifted. But, to my surprise, they did not gawk or gossip in quite the same way that the adventurers had. There were whispers, and lingering looks, of course, but their forward movement didn’t cease. In many cases, it barely slowed. In fact, the one who showed the most overt reaction of all came from the stall owner Lucy was steering me towards, who momentarily froze in the act of handing a pair of skewers to his most recent customer.

“Miss Heroine!” he called out, sporting a grin that was just a little bit too wide to pass for sincere. It didn’t seem entirely fake, mind you - at least not to my admittedly amateur eye - but rather a touch strained. Like genuine joy had been tainted by nervous energy. “I was wondering whether I’d see you today. Was starting to think I’d need to put some meat in reserve.”

“Wilhoon!” Lucy whined, her smile transforming into a pout. “Didn’t I ask you not to do that anymore? You’ll have less time to spend with your family if you wait for me, won’t you? And if I don’t come, for whatever reason, you’ll have less money to spend!”

“Aye, miss Heroine,” the man laughed, a smile on his lips as he scratched at a scar on the side of his nose. “But how could I face the Goddess in prayer, knowing that her champion lost a chance at the best meal she’s ever had? It’s venison today, you know? Your favorite - went hunting for it the moment I heard you were in town.”

“I’d rather lose out on a meal than see you losing time with your husband,” Lucy objected, stepping forward as the man’s redheaded customer beat a hasty retreat, not even sparing a glance in Lucy’s direction as she rushed off with a meaty skewer in hand. “Isn’t his number one complaint that you spend too much time away from home? And I bet you spent forever in the woods, trying to find the perfect game for me, too! Even though I would have been happy with anything you cooked...”

“Ah.... You remember that, do you?” Wilhoon’s laugh was more of a nervous chuckle, this time. “Really, I don’t know what I was thinking, sharing my worries with the Heroine... As if you don’t have enough on your plate already... Asteen chewed me out big time for that when I got home, y’know? And I’m sure

he'd do it all over again if I didn't make sure you were well fed, and motivated and for your journey! So what'll it be? Three skewers? Four? I know you usually get two, but what about your lady friend over there?"

The hunter turned his attention from Lucy to me, the unabashed curiosity in his eyes standing in sharp contrast to the red tinge of his cheeks. As he looked me over, I took the opportunity to do the same to him.

He was tall, at around five foot ten, with mossy green hair and the start of a beard that looked almost like lichen had begun to sprout against his skin. There was a small notch on the side of his nose, where the flesh had obviously been gouged at one point - perhaps by a wild animal? - and he might have looked intimidating, with his blood red eyes, if it weren't for his jovial smile. It had grown more natural over the course of his conversation with Lucy, though I still saw a bit of tension in how he held himself. More interesting to me was his hands, though, which were dicing up chunks of meat with practiced ease, even as he examined me.

"Six virtues a skewer, yes?" I asked, waiting for his nod of confirmation. Unnecessary, considering his prominent sign, but it felt like the polite thing to do.

"I'll take two."

"Two silver crosses for all four, then," the man said, eliciting an arched eyebrow from me. That was four virtues too few, if Feyra's lessons on currency were to be believed. "Heroine discount."

“I don’t need a discount, though!” Lucy protested. “You worked really hard to hunt this, didn’t you? And I bet you passed up easier prey so that you could try and get my favorite, too! You deserve to be paid for your work!”

“Aye... And it’s by the grace of the heavens that I succeeded in catching anything at all, hard work be...” He froze, from a moment, his smile growing just a touch more forced as the movements of his knife ceased. “Well, let’s just call this my way of thanking the goddess for my good fortune.”

“Perhaps I could offer a compromise?” I suggested, before Lucy could object further. “If I were to pay for our meals, then there’d hardly be a reason for a ‘Heroine discount.’”

“But then I’m not contributing at all,” Lucy pointed out. “I don’t want to be getting free things just because I’m the Heroine! What’s the point of having money if people keep giving me things for free?”

“Who says you’re not contributing?” I countered, with a teasing smile upon my lips. “Did you know that I paid my last tour guide in saints? And yet the Heroine herself is now offering to show me around, for free. I’d hardly be able to live with myself if I couldn’t at least cover her meal.”

“...Fine,” Lucy conceded, looking between me and the vendor, whose smile seemed to be growing stiffer by the second. “But only if you promise not to call me ‘the Heroine’ again! I like it way more when you just call me Lucy!”

“An easy enough concession,” I confirmed, nodding in agreement.

“Assuming, of course, that the arrangement is acceptable to all parties?”

“Ah, well...” Wilhoon nervously, rubbing at the back of his head. “A man needs to know when he’s beat, doesn’t he?”

“Then it would seem that an accord has been reached,” I declared, reaching into my pocket and pulling out the proper assortment of coins. “Four skewers, please.”

“Right... Four skewers for the Heroine and her girlfriend, then,” he agreed, returning to the cubing of his meat. “Coming right up.”

I opened my mouth to protest the appellation, only to close it again at the sight of Lucy’s smile. I knew the term to be inaccurate, even if Wilhoon meant it in its more platonic form. Considering how little Lucy knew of me, I hardly even had the qualifications to be called ‘friend,’ let alone something so intimate as this. But faced with her pure joy at our connection being recognized... Well, at the end of the day, it was just a word. And considering the fact that she’d already asked me out in front of a guild full of strangers... What harm could one more misunderstanding do to me?

Thinking such, I turned my attention back to the meat in front of me. While the future might hold many mysteries, there was one question in particular that I knew would soon be answered. One that had me salivating, in anticipation.

What in the world would Lucy's favorite meal taste like?