

Demon Queened

Chapter 43

Petrifying Discoveries

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Devilla

Having never been in a monastery before, I had little beyond Jacob's shallow knowledge to go on when it came to what to expect. Most of that came from TV shows and fantasy books - hardly reliable sources. So while part of me expected to see cavernous halls leading to private rooms with stone beds, I wasn't that surprised to find nothing of the sort. In fact, the building wasn't even large enough to house such things to begin with. It was more like a chapel than a full fledged church, let alone a proper monastery.

What the place *did* have was holes. Holes in the crumbling ceiling, holes in the walls, and even a massive hole in the ground. The latter being the most interesting, as it revealed two more floors - and another hole - further down.

It also had the markings of a stampede. Splintered pews of rotting wood that looked like they'd been burned in some places, shattered in others, and even made to disintegrate in a couple spots. Claw marks had gouged the stone floor in places, some as large as my hand and others as tiny as my pinky finger. There was even one part of the stone that looked as if it had somehow *melted*.

There were also feathers. Quite a lot of them, actually. White ones, piled up in the corners and sprinkled across the ground. As if something had shed them in great quantities, and recently...

“Pretty sure *something* calls this place home,” Feyra remarked, putting words to my suspicion.

“Something small, though,” Lucy declared, picking up a bit of plumage. “Or maybe just something with lots and lots of really tiny feathers? I’m not sure something small would be able to claim this place, during the Monster Movement...”

“Unless it somehow *caused* the Monster Movement,” I speculated, frowning at the large hole in the ground. There was more rubble down below, unsurprisingly, but it was something else that caught my eye. Something I couldn’t quite make out from my current vantage point, as it only barely peeked out from under the rocks.

“Anyone else want to take a peek down below?” I asked, bringing my eyes up to hone in on what remained of the place’s back door. It had been reduced to little more than splinters. Splinters that had been blown *away* from the staircase it once hid.

“Not really,” Feyra grumbled. “But something tells me I’m going down there anyway...”

“Well... I do want to go,” Lucy admitted. “But I’m sure Bailey would be willing to stay by with you, if you Devilla asked!”

“Yeah, because I trust the *monster* to guard me,” Feyra scoffed, shaking her head. “No. No way. I’ll go down into the fucking monster-infested bowels of this place, where it’s *safer*.” She paused, glancing at me. “Or at least as safe as anywhere else is, these days...”

“I really wish you wouldn’t insult Eena like that,” Lucy complained, hands on her hips. “She’s been nothing but nice to you, but you won’t even give her a chance, just because of... whatever you know about her.”

I didn’t miss the hesitation in Lucy’s voice before she spoke those last words. Nor did I miss the glance she’d given me. It was almost as if she knew what Feyra did, but I was willing to bet she only *thought* she did. I’d probably let slip a hint or two about my inhuman nature during our time together, after all, but my royal status? That likely remained hidden. Most likely she thought of me as only a random demon who’d escaped from her dark past in the tower...

Regardless, I'd be telling her the truth soon enough. For now, I needed to focus on putting one step in front of the other, stepping lightly so as to avoid destabilizing the structurally unsound building around us.

"Hold on, I think I left the lantern in the saddle bags with the horse outside," Lucy said, glancing back at the door through which we came. "I'll go get it real quick."

"Be careful," I warned her as she moved towards the door. "We don't know what might be lurking around here." In truth, I was half tempted to join her on her brief journey outside, but I knew she could handle that much by herself. Not that I wouldn't be out the door like a rocket if I heard so much as a disconcerting thump from her direction.

"Be *careful*?" Feyra parroted as soon as Lucy passed out of sight. "Seriously? If you care that much, you could just command the monsters to back off instead of putting on a fucking show all the time."

"You speak as if I can actually control the things," I remarked, frowning. "My ability to scare them off notwithstanding, there's no such connection between us."

“Says the girl with control over a horned wolf,” Feyra pointed out, jutting her chin towards the panting specimen in question.

“Bailey’s a... special case. I assure you, I have no control over monsters in general, no matter what the church teaches on the subject.”

Feyra rolled her eyes, but made no retort, leaving us in an uncomfortable silence broken only by Lucy’s return.

“Got it!” the redhead declared, holding a lantern that shone almost as brightly as her smile. “Now we can actually see where we’re going.”

“Probably for the best, considering all the holes about,” I agreed, glancing once again at the massive pit in the middle of the floor. “Well, let’s see what downstairs has to offer, hmm?” I suggested, moving towards the stairs.

“Uh-hm!” Lucy agreed, hurrying up to stand right beside me, holding the light in front of me. No doubt she wished to make sure I could see, but I had little need for the lantern. As always, darkness posed no obstacle to me, the dark stairway as visible within the light as outside of it as we made our way down. But if the lantern helped the others, then it wasn’t as if it affected me... negatively...

...Wait. *Last* time there'd been a lantern, it *had* affected me, had it not? It had ruined my night vision. So why was I able to see now? What had changed? The world should be blind outside the lantern's light, should it not?

"Eena?" Lucy called out to me. "Is everything okay?"

"...I'm fine," I assured her, shaking my head and squeezing my eyes shut. When I opened them again, the world was as bright before me as ever. "Just... lost in my own head."

Being confused about my body and its abilities was nothing new. I just wished there was somebody I could ask... The only person who *might* know anything was General Doll, though. The Artificial Construct General who'd been serving my family for generations, and who had known more Demon Queens than I could count... but we didn't exactly get along. I'd blamed her for failing to ever intercede on my behalf, despite her role as the de facto leader of the Generals. She, meanwhile, saw me as someone who'd undermined the legacy of my family through sheer brattiness. Not to mention the resentment she no doubt held for me, for stripping her role of tower administrator and shoving it upon Sylvanna when I, myself, failed to live up to the task.

“Are you sure?” Lucy asked. “Because you stopped moving, all of a sudden. And now you’ve got this really pensive frown on your face, like you’re thinking really hard about something...”

“Just... dealing with some intrusive thoughts,” I confessed. “Namely about how I estranged myself from all who could help me... nothing to do with what we’re currently facing.”

“But it’s still important to you, isn’t it?” Lucy questioned. “So it’s important to me, too!”

“I truly appreciate it,” I told her, “but there’s nothing to be done about it at the moment. We should focus on the task at hand. There might be dangers ahead...”

“We can if you want,” Lucy agreed. “But I’m here if you want to talk about other stuff, too! It’s not like we can’t keep an eye out at the same time.”

“I’ll... keep that in mind,” I promised her, a soft smile coming to my lips. “Though I fear I already know what your advice would be.”

“To reach out to the people you need help from, because it might not be as bad as you think?”

“And to stop doubting myself so thoroughly,” I confirmed, my smile growing a touch wider. “Things I’ll keep in mind for after we’re done exploring this place.”

“Can we maybe stop talking about personal issues and get a move on?” Feyra called from behind us. “The sooner we’re done exploring this place, the sooner I can stop worrying about a *roof crushing my skull*.”

“As if I’d let the place collapse around us,” I scoffed. “I *am* still saturating the area with my magic, you know?”

“Like I could ever forget it. Feeling your magic gives me *goosebumps*.”

“Really?” Lucy asked. “It just makes me feel really warm, safe, and happy! Like being wrapped up in a magical hug of Eena-ness.”

“That’s because...” Feyra sighed, and I could just imagine her sliding her hand down her face. “You know what? Nevermind. Let’s just keep going.”

I hummed out a noncommittal response, rather than risking the continuation of the argument, before moving my feet once more towards the next floor. Soon, the staircase reached a landing, and with it another splintered door, the shards aiming inwards this time.

I considered continuing down the stairs, for the thing I'd caught a glimpse of through the hole was located at the very bottom, but ultimately turned towards the door and the new floor. I'd likely be able to see what I was after just by peering through the hold, now that we'd come this far.

Here, at last, I found the huge halls I'd been expecting at the start. Here, the ceiling was high, the crumbling archways were grand, and the room was cavernously large. It was also stuffed with the remnants of what looked to be *desks*. Papers laid strewn upon the floor, all writing lost to time and scratch marks. Dark stains splattered the walls in places - blood, perhaps? I don't think anyone but me and maybe Bailey noticed, though, with the lantern light likely failing to stretch so far.

"Something terrible must have happened here," I remarked - an obvious statement, but nobody else was talking and I felt as if *something* needed to be said.

Bailey let loose a low growl in return, looking around the area nervously, ears twitching and head swiveling about as she searched for threats. Lucy, meanwhile, only nodded, staring about with wide eyes. Feyra, meanwhile, failed to even call me out on my unnecessary remark.

“Was this place really a monastery?” Lucy asked eventually, even as I made my way towards the hole in this room’s floor.

“It looks more like a work area,” Feyra remarked, eyeing the remains of desks. She bent down towards one, yanking open its drawer and setting loose a few yellowed papers. She snatched one from the air as the others fell. “Experiment number 180 - sparkling sloth - healberry slurry mixture. No changes in... I can’t make out the last word.”

“Experiment?” Lucy asked.

“Experiment,” I confirmed, having laid myself down next to the hole so that I could better peer past its edges. On the far side of the next floor down was a huge cage, the door of which had been torn free of its hinges. The twisted metal bars of said aperture were what had caught my eye, all the way from the first floor. Though I’d somehow missed the multitude of white bone fragments, which laid amidst tiny bits of stone. “On live subjects, from the looks of it...”

“You mean on monsters?” Lucy asked, glancing between me and Feyra.

“Someone experimented on monsters?”

“And animals,” Feyra said, picking up a second piece of paper from the floor. “Pretty sure this one’s talking about normal sloths - healberry slurry, again,

and no results. Not that I know what the hell they were planning to get from feeding them expensive magical plants... Or maybe not so expensive, since we're standing in the middle of a magical forest."

"Let's look for more intact papers," I suggested, looking around at the various desks strewn about. "There might be more information to gather."

The others nodded, turning towards the drawers, and we began to search for any intact compartments and the knowledge they might hold. We found a few papers similar to what Feyra had shown - each listing an animal or monster, what I assumed to be their diet - sometimes a magical plant, sometimes another monster, and in one disturbing case the *same* monster - and what results they'd received, if any. No successes in the documents I'd found. It was Bailey, however, who found something worth reading, half buried under something she disintegrated with her horn.

"Is that a *journal*?" Feyra asked, staring with wide eyes at the booklet Bailey had uncovered.

"So it would seem," I confirmed, studying the cover. 'Goddess Forgive Us' was written on its front in shaky handwriting - as ominous a starter as I had ever seen. By contrast, the first writings within it were rather well written, the

handwriting a neat scrawl. I wondered how long it would stay that way. A glance at the inside cover revealed the name Timortus, written in the corner.

“We’re not supposed to keep journals,” I read aloud, “but I’m keeping one anyway. It keeps me sane in this isolated place. I hope the Goddess can forgive my indiscretion, but it’s not as if I’ll be sharing any of this.”

“If they didn’t want to share it, why the hell did they stick it in a work area?” Feyra questioned.

“Maybe they changed their minds?” Lucy suggested. “Maybe they hoped people would find it after... whatever did this.”

“The only way to find out is through reading,” I declared, holding up the book. “Shall I continue?”

“Please do!” Lucy agreed, smiling at me.

Feyra, meanwhile, rolled her eyes before backing up a few steps. “I’ll listen from... elsewhere,” she said, before muttering under her breath, “I can’t believe those two can be so fucking lovey dovey in the middle of a spooky abandoned monster lab.”

I chose to ignore her words, opening the book up again and reading through the pages. The first few were banal enough - talk of what he’d eaten, how hard

work had been. It only obliquely referenced the work itself, the writing clearly meant as a way to vent, rather than sharing information.

He wrote of his commitment to the goddess. He wrote of how their work would make a difference. Slowly, the form of it took shape - research to learn how better to control monsters. To ‘tame the sins that face us.’ But there were also researchers whose focus was elsewhere - Timortus didn’t like them. Their work ran close to blasphemy. They wanted to know if they could make new monsters - monsters with helpful abilities. Some even wanted to make *current* monsters stronger. All for the Goddess, though. Always for the Goddess.

Then the handwriting began to get shakier. One of his fellow researchers had produced something new. A monster under their care had given birth to a stillborn baby girl- one that looked almost *human*, but for the nub of a tail.

“A monster girl?” I whispered aloud, even as Lucy exclaimed, “A demon?!”

I couldn’t resist throwing a glance towards Bailey, who tilted her head at me in turn. Then I shifted my attention back to the journal before me.

““This is wrong,”” I continued reading aloud. ““This is not the Goddess’s will. This *cannot* be the Goddess’s will. The higher ups were happy, though. Thrilled, even. They wanted to push harder, to try and get a live specimen, for

Goddess knows what reason. They have to be stopped. *I* must stop them! I must bring this place to an end!”

“Goddess forgive me.”

“...What do you think he did?” Lucy asked, worry laced through her voice.

“Freed the monsters?” I suggested. “Or something to that effect, at least...”

“Hey!” Feyra called, from a corner. “I found a bunch of, like, stone... paws? And talons, and other feet-bits, I guess. Some weird shit. Do you think they kept statues in here?”

“Statues?” I questioned.

Suddenly Bailey’s head snapped upwards. At the same time, I heard something *flapping*. I looked up, surprised to see a... chicken? Except with a snake for a tail. A snake with indents where its eyes should be.

“Bwak!”

It’s cry was... not particularly threatening. The purple gas that emanated from its maw, on the other hand, was absolutely terrifying. It quickly filled the room, even as the chicken-creature - basilisk? Cockatrice? Whatever it was - descended towards our floor.

Feyra was the first to cough, letting out a low groan. Lucy followed a second later, but she at least managed to stay on her feet, even as Feyra collapsed to the ground. I, meanwhile, felt nothing at all. I didn't even need to breathe to begin with.

Was it alright to share that, though? Should I pretend to be affected, if only for the sake of show? Would it be counted as a lie? A betrayal of Lucy's trust?

The thought shook me for only a moment. It only caused me a split second of delay. Yet it was in that brief period that the chicken found its way to the floor and lunged towards Feyra. In that singular moment Lucy cried out in warning, and jumped forward to cover Feyra's body with her own. An instant of hesitation was all it took for the snake head to snap forward, catch Lucy on her unarmored wrist, and sink its fangs into her.

Another second later I was by her side, the cockatrice disappearing in an explosion of flesh and feathers as its remains splattered against the wall.

Lucy was smiling at me, a thanks on her lips, even as she turned to stone.