

Demonic Byways

By Gabriel's wings and Raphael's healing hand, I was sick to death of demons and half demons. Angels above but they were annoying creatures. Up to their eyeballs in innuendo, schemes, manipulations, and such.

It reminded me a bit too much of a Diamond family reunion.

Riding Juji out of House Daemon lands, I began crossing a vast rolling pastureland. Like most interworld passageways, this one was not openly visible. But I could feel it. This ability was part of the first set of powers I'd received from the Great Machine. Finding just the right spot, I rode forward and the red grassland immediately faded away except what little could be seen behind me. Nudging Juji on, we started down yet another interworld passageway. This one was a bit different though. While the floor of the passage was as grass covered as the lands behind us, I actually seemed to be riding through a giant tube of some kind. The walls were of a slightly fluorescent ivory with red grass-covered earth concealing the bottom third of the tube. I supposed this had been made by a different great apprentice from the one who'd made most of the interworld corridors I was used to traveling through.

Frowning in remembrance, I thought back on my recent travels. In some ways Lord Corin Mannus, the Darkseer, lord of Dul Malice, had indeed sped my way along. And in more ways he'd slowed me down. Three months. It had taken me three long months but I was now beyond those worlds controlled by House Daemon. Matters had started off well enough. The trip from Dul Malice to Coventry had been long and had given me a chance to get a better understanding of half demons.

Riding in the half demon lord's wagon had certainly been interesting. He'd neglected to mention that the wagon was as big as a house. It had been pulled along by ten large, furry rhinoceros-like creatures. Each of the wagon's eight wheels had been larger around than I was tall. Indeed, I believe I could have stood upon the rim of a wheel and not touched the top. On top, the wagon actually had battlements in place. It was an impressive bit of engineering. Inside, the wagon had been lushly appointed as was befitting the ruler of a city as large as Dul Malice. I had been given a small room to myself which I had to work nigh constantly to keep that way.

The rebel's attack had occurred at roughly the halfway point in our travel. I think Corin had expected me to join the fighting. Instead, I followed the archangel Rafael's work and went about sewing up and otherwise aiding the wounded. Lord Mannus gave me speculative looks after winning the skirmish but did not comment on my lack of fighting.

Once we reached the large city of Coventry, he introduced me to the ruler of that place, one Baroness Solla Vizun. Both Solla and Corin looked almost human. Both had reddish skin and dark hair. Both had small horns on their foreheads. Solla even had the cloven hooves to go along with her tail. Corin had bat wings that he usually kept folded beneath his cloak. It also turned out that both of them had a fascination with me as well.

Corin, I had figured out on the trip. He'd been quite forthright in asking me to join him in his bed. I'd been concerned that something along that line might happen. Surprisingly, he took me declining his offer quite well. While he seemed disappointed, he didn't seem overly so. That, I learned, was because he kept trying to find new and inventive ways to get me to change my mind. If persistence was a virtue, then he was a most virtuous man. By the end of our travels, him trying

to get into my bed or get me into his had almost become a game. An annoying game, but a game nevertheless.

Over dinner in Coventry, Solla and I had discussed a variety of topics including men. We came to the conclusion that men were men, regardless of their race. When I mentioned Corin, she'd laughed and suggested that while men were men, not all of them were as horny as others. Corin, she insisted, fit into the far end of the horny spectrum. This was not a turn of topic I really wanted to discuss with a half-demon so I steered the conversation elsewhere.

After dinner, we continued our talk as we carried a couple of wine bottles down in the hot springs beneath her palace. Despite the vastly different decor, this rather reminded me a bit of Edotoma. There the water had been piped into various bathing chambers. Here, there seemed to be natural caves which the hot spring water partially filled. Solla's caves seemed to feature some rather interesting bas reliefs featuring demons going about various demonic activities. Some of them very erotic and all of them quite explicit. Quite the stark contrast to the floral wall murals in Edotoma. Truthfully, I supposed it only superficially reminded me of Edotoma. I missed the place.

"I've had the baths cleared," Solla informed me. "Tonight, we have the use of the baths all to ourselves." With that she removed her clothing and wine goblet in hand, stepped down into the steaming water. Seeing no reason to be impolite at this point, I followed her example wearing only my emerald necklace.

"Do all of House Diamond have perfect bodies and faces?" she asked curiously as she walked further out into the water. When she was just below neck level, she stopped.

"We're all different," told her, easing my way into the hot water. "Perfection is in the eye of the beholder."

"That sounds like wisdom. Outside the temples, that can be a rare commodity around here. Corin says that you helped him fight off the army that attacked him. What did you think of fighting demons and half demons?"

"Corin lied," I told her with a faint smile as I continued easing my way into the steaming water. "I'll not speculate on his reasons for doing so, but I most certainly did not fight against those desperate bandits or rebels or whatever they were that attacked his caravan. I helped the wounded, but I shed no blood. Mmm. This is an excellent wine. Where does it come from?" Finally arriving at neck level, I decided that the water was hot enough that had I been a regular person, I'd have been in trouble from the heat.

Baroness Solla Vizun frowned for a moment. "I wonder why he lied. I suppose I need to find out," she muttered to herself. More loudly, she said, "Oh, it's just a little wine I picked up in Dul Salaciou. Within House Daemon we don't label our wines by vineyard. Instead, they're labeled by the guild that made them. This is a Blue Cauldron 1238. I've always liked the wines from the Blue Cauldron. They typically act as a subtle aphrodisiac while at the same time relaxing away the stress of the day. A most pleasant combination." Well, now. Wasn't that interesting?

"Do you know what they use to achieve the effects?" The alchemist in me was never satisfied and always wanted to know more. Something of a recurring theme with me.

"Hmm? Oh, no. I've no clue. It could be an additive or perhaps a property of the grapes and fruit they use. I have no idea. Hold this a moment, please?" she asked, handing me her goblet. Without asking, she moved around and began massaging my shoulders. "It's so nice to relax with someone who has no eye to supplanting me. Someone who's not interested in tearing down my power-base or requesting favors. I don't remember when I last had an opportunity to just kick back and enjoy someone's company."

“Sounds like you need a vacation,” I replied. I felt vaguely uncomfortable but kept all traces of it out of my voice.

“Vacation. Oh, yes,” she said seriously. “I remember the word. Unfortunately, there’s not an equivalent to it in any of the demonic languages. Were I to go somewhere on a ‘vacation’, the person I left in charge would likely either take everything over for themselves or would fall to someone who would. It would be the quickest and probably the bloodiest way for me to lose everything I’ve fought to gain over the last five hundred years. No. I don’t think I’ll be going on any vacations.”

“Here,” I said, handing her the goblets. Swimming around behind her, I began returning the shoulder massage favor. “I don’t mean to sound critical,” I explained. “But it doesn’t sound like you’re really happy here. And if that’s true, why not leave?”

“Ahh. That feels good. Leave? Oh, no. I couldn’t do that. Not after all the time and effort I’ve spent building up my city. And where would I go? Half demons are not welcome in most parts of the Maze. Therefore, I’d have to go in disguise. And that would be living a lie. Or in power and that would be inviting battle. No. Here I have pretty much everything I’ve ever wanted. In addition, when my demonic traits start becoming too prevalent, someone will suggest that perhaps it’s time for me to visit one of the temples. Out in the wider world, I might not realize my demonic blood was acting up until I’d done great harm. No, I think I’ll remain here. Here. Your turn to hold the goblets.”

“As you wish,” I replied accepting the mostly empty goblets. “However, I think you underestimate yourself.”

“Perhaps,” she mused. However, instead of walking around for another round of shoulder massaging, she wrapped her legs around me, caught me in a hug which pinned my upper arms to my body, and kissed me. To say the least, this took me by surprise.

“You are so incredible,” she declared as she began writhing against me and continued kissing my face as I dropped the goblets and tried gain the leverage to pull her off me. “You try to help me even though you don’t really know me. With your grace and beauty, I feel almost as though Rafael herself had paid me a visit. I’m going to make this a visit you’ll not soon forget.”

“Solla, stop. I can assure you that I’m not going to forget this visit anytime soon. And while I appreciate the gesture, I’m not into other women.”

“You’re not?” she asked leaning back as her hug loosened. Just as my arms came free, she began playing with my breasts.

“No,” I stated with a growl, pulling her hands away from my person and holding onto them just in case she suddenly felt the need to grope me some more. “While I appreciate the compliment, I am not.” I was tempted to rather violently throw her off of me. Or perhaps batter her about a bit. This sort of behavior could not be countenanced. Well, not from me. One of my uncles would probably have been quite happy with this sort of attention. However, despite my feelings on the matter, this was Solla’s city and upsetting or injuring rulers in their places of power tended to cause bad luck. Frequently, that bad luck was of the immediate variety. And flat out killing her would cause a huge incident between our houses.

“Well,” she said, tilting her head slightly to the side. “In that case, it’s a good thing I can change genders at will.” And she did just that in the span of two seconds. I don’t particularly care for surprises in the first place. And I certainly did not like being surprised like this twice in one evening. The suddenly Baron Solla returned to writhing his lower body against me while his hands started groping my breasts again.

“Solla, stop,” I told him and tried to push him off of me. My third surprise of the evening was that he was stronger than I was.

“Doesn’t this feel good?” he asked.

“Solla, stop,” I repeated firmly. “I believe it’s time for you to go to one of the temples.”

“Oh, alright,” he sighed. “I’ll stop.”

“Release me, please.” With obvious reluctance, he let me go and climbed off me. “Do all half demons try this sort of thing?” I asked, walking back towards shore. Dammit, I felt like I needed a bath now.

“If they think their potential partner’s willing,” he said. “Isn’t that the way it is everywhere though?” he asked, following me out. It was clear that Solla remained quite ready to resume his previous activities.

“Where I come from,” I said as I started getting dressed. “There’s a courtship period during which the couple get to know each other. This is accomplished by a series of dates. Sometime after that, if the couple seems compatible, then they might progress on to situations like this.” I indicated the pool in general with a nod of my head. “Doing so beforehand, is considered disrespectful.”

“Oh. You don’t think...”

“I don’t really think you intended any insult,” I finished for him, my voice sounding perhaps a little doubtful. My Aunt Winter would have almost certainly killed him on the spot, consequences be damned. Of course, then again, she might have been happy with Solla’s initial flirtation. Winter seemed to like bold women.

“That’s good,” Solla replied. “Let me assure you that no insult was intended. Quite the contrary. Still, what would you have done if I had insisted? You’re not a warrior. What would your response have been?”

After slipping my dress back on, I turned a raised eyebrow at him. “You apparently spend most of your time as a woman. Do you honestly think I’d have needed force of arms to make you pay and pay dearly for any transgressions against me?” I loved being underestimated. It turns almost all the advantages in my favor. Being this badly underestimated almost made up for the initial aggravation. Almost.

“Hmm? Oh. Well no. I suppose not.” He changed back into her. “Sorry about that last query. I’m not used to so much testosterone. Does that require further explanation or do you know what that is?”

“Yes, I understand exactly what it is. And so far as excuses go, it’s not a good one. I don’t accept it from men and I won’t accept it from you.”

She very clearly started getting angry. “No excuses,” I told her as some of my own annoyance bled through. “You did what you did. Don’t pretend it was the wine or hormones or me or anything else. You were the one who arranged everything. Therefore, you are fully responsible for the actions that resulted from those preparations. You got what you were looking for up until my rejection. Take that as a near success and learn from it. And be glad you didn’t carry matters further after I said ‘no’.”

“And just what would you have done?” she demanded angrily.

I started walking away before stopping and turning to face her again. With a cold smile that came nowhere close to my eyes, I whispered, “Be glad that you’ll never know.” Unlike my previous statements, this seemed to actually make an impression. And with that, I walked out. Without further ado, I gathered my gear, saddled my horse, and rode out of the city.

Eventually, I'd arrived at Rancor. It was another good-sized city. I'd taken to riding with most of my face covered and wearing excessively baggy clothing. I was trying to cut down on the physical attraction factor that seemed to have slowed me so much already. It seemed to help despite the fact I was being followed.

I never caught more than a glimpse of the person but I knew they kept pace behind me. From Rancor, I'd caught a dragon ride to the border fortress of Dul Antipathy. Whoever was following me would have to catch the next dragon which wasn't for several hours. Assuming they didn't have some other means of getting here. Getting through customs took awhile, which gave Juji some needed time to recover from being sedated. Horses do not like dragon rides. However, other than time, the border crossing cost me nothing. Then finally, I was across the border and out of House Daemon territory.

These lands were uncontrolled. House Daemon could have claimed them, but then they'd have had to regulate and supervise them. Easier, they'd decided, to just guard their borders and let what happened across the line be other people's concern.

Which get's back to me traversing worlds via strange new interworld passageways. A little inside the first one, I cast a series of spells that closed and sealed the entry into the interworld path. I was quite tired of demons chasing after me for a while. And in my earlier statement, I definitely meant passageways. I used the plural because after the first one, they all turned out to be the strange, tubular passages.

Turned out, that was just the beginning of the strangeness. I had a long way to go through some most peculiar worlds and carried some very specific equipment to get me through to my goal.