

All's Fair in Love and War

Losenis

Chapter 4

A patch of moved earth lay in front of them. Valerian stuck the shovel into the ground, looking at his finished work without much pride for the circumstances. Jeremiah stood beside him as did Catherine, looking in silence like him. There was not much to say. Friend or foe, a burial was still a burial.

"What are we even meant to put on him?" Asked Valerian. "I don't know about a cross, but the Demon Lord's emblem seems... insulting, for someone like him."

"I feel it's insulting enough that he's buried in a demon realm." Lamented Jeremiah.

"Compared to not even having a proper burial, I don't think it's too much of one."

Past a few seconds of silence, Valerian looked at that which hung from his hand. A pendant on a small ornate chain. The cross of Nostrum, their nation's emblem. At the center of the cross was encrusted a gem, glinting a warm orange light. It had belong to the one who had fallen.

"Figured something out?" Asked Jeremiah.

"I feel this has something to do with the demonic energy not turning them." He answered. "If these are rare, then it might explain why their army isn't marching over the border yet."

"One can only hope." He sighed. With none saying a word, silence returned anew, though thoughts echoed in Jeremiah's mind. Thoughts concerning Valerian in particular. "It doesn't look like it hit you as heavily."

"I've grown used to the idea that sooner or later something would happen. If anything, I'm surprised that it was only one instead of hundreds."

Dumbfounded, Jeremiah narrowed his eyes. "...What do you mean?"

In response, Valerian calmly glance at him. For that moment, he only stared, collecting his thoughts before turning his eyes back at the patch.

"Catherine and I used to live in a little town to the far south, bordering Nostrum." He said. "When you're that close to them, you start wondering. You start getting curious as to who they are, and what they could do. The failures of The Order are laughable, but only because they failed. Lescatie was a humiliation, but if its reclamation had succeeded, we'd all be

behaving differently today. When all that is in your mind, and you know that your town will be the very first to fall should they advance... It does things to people. You eventually learn that you're only paranoid when you're wrong."

Jeremiah had to let it sink in. His gaze shifted to Catherine, seeing her looking silent and immobile towards the patch of earth before her. She stood there as a piece of armor anyone would mistake for inanimate, though it only made him wonder what her thoughts were. Most likely, she thought just the same as Valerian. She had to, if they were husband and wife.

At least, it allowed him to understand. He had already found suspicious that Valerian would be able to guess where they'd go each time. No wonder, if he had all the time and caution in the world.

"I wish we had you before the first fires had started." Said Jeremiah, gaze returning up front. In return, however, Valerian silently shook his head.

"I doubt it." He said. "That a human can enter a demon realm without turning sooner or later is unheard of. Add to that all the things that happened, if someone wanted to warn about them. It would've gotten me labelled a madman. We all know how those depressing stories of one guy knowing what will happen, only to not be believed by anyone go. My best bet was training and learning every corner of Variland to imagine what they'd pick as targets. Then, it was just waiting till the opportunity appeared, praying that it never did."

Taking a deep breath, Valerian looked high at the bright, blue sky.

"I guess that's a luxury we won't have anymore." He continued. "They must've realized some of us weren't as surprised as they'd have wanted. I honestly don't know what they'll do, from here on."

Books. Journals. Encyclopaedias. Her desk was a mess, as it had been since the few days that passed. A small candle served to illuminate what she read, turning page after page. Enthusiasm, however, was sorely lacking. Dark circles under her eyes had begun to form. It was way past her bedtime, and the haunting memory of that event had not let her sleep properly the previous night. Even part of what motivated her to stay in her study room a floor above was the sense of pure dread to return downstairs, to pass by the room she had seen the dead man in. Even if cleaned up, the memory lingered.

To think she didn't even want to go parts of her own house.

Her mind wandered off, away from the journals in front of her. What a mess of a situation, if she had ended up where she had never pictured herself being. She had no plans for this. No desires. Nothing. Was she not even saving up her finances to invest in a great plaza, as well?

A magnificent wonder that would have turned into the envy of the world. A plaza surrounding her villa like a ring, reaching in extent all the way to the capital. If the capital's growth would've continued along as she had imagined, the urban sprawl would have surrounded the villa as well, growing towards her. Lakes and life of each kind, plants local and exotic as well as birds and critters known and unknown, all from each corner of the world, visible to anyone on their way to visit her. Who knows how it would have looked in a hundred years as it developed more and more?

But those finances were gone. That space around her villa was gone. Now, little by little something else took hold. The foundations for the buildings that would accomodate the dullahans were being prepared. Barracks, training fields, mess halls, all dedicated to a war she never asked for.

Perhaps it was a blessing, if the finances had not yet been used for that plaza. With Nostrum to the south, that naivety may have costed her dearly.

In sorrow, she could do little to conclude it had been but a stupid dream, crashing against the reality of the situation.

Her eyes weighed heavily. For each time she blinked, it felt more and more difficult to keep them open. 'Just one more second', she almost begged herself each time to keep her eyes closed. For how long had she been studying? Almost too long. She deserved a break. Maybe a minute of just dozing off. Yes, that'd do. She licked her finger and snuffed out the flame of the candle, leaving it all in darkness. She closed her eyes and felt blissful that she'd not have to force them open for a while. Making herself comfortable, she crossed her arms over the table and rested her head on it.

Before long, she had fallen into deep sleep.

She did not wake up. Even as the front door creaked open, she remained asleep. Steps walked in, to then calmly go upstairs and then through a hallway, till Jeremiah showed up

with a candle himself. His expression of worry turned into warm-hearted amusement, seeing the lilim asleep with so many's book around her, ones he could already imagine what contained within.

"So that's where you were." He whispered to himself. With the house in darkness, and her bedroom empty, it only stood to reason she'd be somewhere else. He walked in with quiet steps, leaving his candle over a small table on the other end of the room to then take off his jacket. Walking back to Victoria, he left it on her with care not to wake her up. Though no replacement for the comfort of a bed's blankets, a cold night could make the two appear almost the same. "Don't push yourself too hard." He whispered, kissing her head. "I can't lose you too."

He returned to his candle. Once he took it, he turned and departed.

Days had to pass before an urgent call fell on Valerian and Jeremiah. At the early hours, they walked up to Victoria's manor. Jeremiah turned the handle and walked inside.

"Lady Victoria, have you called for us?" He asked, Valerian following inside. There he saw Victoria standing in place with a few too many papers in hand.

"Yes." She said, a tone betraying news that none could assume good. She left the papers on the table, spreading by the slight drop.

Letters, all of them. Valerian and Jeremiah walked over and took one each, glancing at the contents just for their brows to furrow. Then, they took another, and another.

The letters came from all over Variland, though they numbered nineteen. All of them shared a similarity: An attempted fire of either crops or buildings.

"They're going berserk." She lamented, sitting down on the chair to then bring her elbows to her knees and thumbs to her forehead, hands clasped together. "None worked, but they'll only need one lucky day."

The more Valerian read, the more his breathing grew rough. He began to shake his head, not of disbelief, but of irritation and indignation. So much for their earlier victories.

"We can't keep going like this." He scoffed, dropping the letters onto the coffee table.

"What else are we meant to do?" Said Jeremiah, still inspecting the letters. "The thinner we spread our dullahans, the less we'll be able to fight the fires and the paladins. Sending them to all of our towns and cities might as well be not sending them to any."

"Forget about defending, we can't do that anymore." He answered, to gain Jeremiah's baffled yet undivided attention. "We need to raid them in return."

Jeremiah kept silent for a second. "Tell me you're not suggesting leaving us completely exposed during that time."

"Are we not completely exposed already? Our only chance of turning this around might be to keep them too occupied with the ones raiding them to raid us instead."

"...No." He said, leaving the letters on the table. "No, it's not going to work. They have an entire army in Makillae, remember? They can defend and attack at the same time, we can't even do either of those properly."

"And who are their eyes here in Variland? The paladins raiding us." Said Valerian. His voice had begun to grow louder, enough for Victoria to see that this would hardly develop into any kind discussion as she turned her eyes from one to the other. "How many are there? Twenty? They'll be too busy watching our army's movements to be raiding us like this."

"And what if it doesn't work?" Said Jeremiah in equal rising tone. "What if the paladins don't watch us? What if our raid fails? What if we return with even less numbers than we have?! We can't afford to lose even a single dullahan, and you want us to march into Nostrum?!"

"Enough!!" Shouted Victoria, slamming her hand onto the table. In an instant, the room fell into complete dead silence. She stared at the two, shifting glances as they looked back yet kept their words. "Valerian, you brought this idea up. Can you assure me that it will work?"

"No."

"What can you assure me of, then?"

"That it's the best choice we have. The alternative is waiting to see if their third attempt on you works. If not, then the fourth, or the fifth, or the sixth."

Sixth. The numbers had left her heartbeat to hasten as she imagined more and more attempts like those. She could not deny it. They had no way to stop them, after all.

At that moment, Jeremiah sighed as he sat down.

"I had hoped things would not get this bad." He said.

"So have I," said Valerian, "but we have to take risks that might only end us faster."

"I hope you understand how big of a threat a competent Order nation is, in their own turf."

"How big?" Asked Victoria.

In thought, Jeremiah looked at her momentarily. Taking a deep breath, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, hands one over the other.

"I used to be the Lord General of the Demon Lord's thirty-third army, before I was sent to be your butler." He said, to gain unchanging stares.

Petrified, as if. Victoria and Valerian could only watch, his words needing to sink in.

"That's how you caught the paladin?" Asked Valerian, low voice hinting his surprise. "You already knew how to handle troops?"

"Somewhat. We were still something of a reserve army, in any case. Before the army was disbanded, there was a time we had to move as a field exercise. Doesn't matter where from, doesn't matter where to, but by a mistake of mine, we ended up walking into an Order country. They thought we were invading. They intercepted us. We managed to fight them back as we retreated, but..."

Jeremiah fell into silence, eyes losing focus as thought after thought crossed his mind. Though Victoria and Valerian wished to hear what else he had to say, none had the willingness to pressure the words out of him.

"There were casualties." He continued. "My wife was the one in charge of the army's cavalry. They were encircled in an ambush. They escaped... She did not."

Valerian's eyes lowered, and Victoria raised her hand to her mouth.

"I didn't want to be a Lord General anymore. I was allowed to retire, and the army was later on disbanded. That's why I'm warning you all. Marching into Nostrum will be the most important decision we'll make in our lives. I can only pray that it'll not be our last, but even prayer can only go so far."

Nothing.

Valerian and Victoria could say nothing. Valerian pursed his lips in silence as Jeremiah's words echoed in his mind, while Victoria pondered them over and over.

"I still have to insist." Said Valerian. "I don't take them lightly, but the situation is just that desperate. I'll even go myself if I must."

"Then I'll go." Said Jeremiah. "I'm the one with the most experience here. I might have the best chances, as little as they may be."

"But do you really want to be a Lord General again?" Asked Victoria.

Though he turned his eyes to her, he found it difficult to respond.

"I don't want someone to be forced to replace me just because I don't want to use what I learned." He answered. "If that means being a Lord General again..."

At the answer, Victoria calmly stood up. Then, she took her rapier and unsheathed it, gaining the surprised looks of both Jeremiah and Valerian.

"By the power granted to me over these lands by the Demon Lord herself..." She said, lowering the blade to one of Jeremiah's shoulders. She then lifted it to place it on the other. "I return to you, Jeremiah, the title of Lord General under the service of Variland. You'll lead the first army to be mustered in our lands to protect us against Nostrum and those that align with The Order."

With her words finished, she sheathed back her rapier. Jeremiah stood up, though without knowing how to react, he had been left to only look at Victoria.

"I feel the only thing I can hope for is that we build better memories of that title here in Variland, than those you already have." She said.

His hints of sorrow soon turned into a warm smile, to then turn to a chuckle.

"I'll take this as a second chance." He answered.

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