

All's Fair in Love and War

Losenis

Chapter 2

From the window of her house, Victoria watched unnerved. Even from such a distance, she could see glimpses of the far too alarming number of aspiring recruits.

"I've never seen so many people in one place." She said.

"A thousand dullahans, more or less." Added Jeremiah, sitting on a chair by the coffee table in her living room. A youthful looking guy, elegant in attire and with his hair combed back. Her butler, who couldn't hide traces of a smile at how many of them he had inspired to come here to Variland's service. "Once Valerian and Catherine finish counting them, we'll know."

"There's too many." She said, turning around to look at Jeremiah. "Where are we even going to house them?"

"For now? I'm guessing the city's inns. We should have enough gold to spare while we work something out."

Victoria remained silent, thinking, until after a pause she looked out the window again. The city. 'Lightsreach', the capital of Variland. It wasn't that long a distance, seeing as her villa was an hour's trip on foot at most. One could even see it from the hill it rested on.

His logic seemed solid. They could spare the gold. Their equipment, on the other hand, would be the real issue. They were so complacent that they had not even prepared for a war. They had nothing. The country had little history of martial prowess or culture either, leaving all ill-prepared.

"...I can get them weapons and armor from another country, while we start making our own." She pondered out loud for Jeremiah to hear, but that only left a painful thought to cross her mind:

Should she tell the others about the war? The neighboring countries, even ask the Demon Army to help her?

All sensible logic would point to an immediate affirmation, but soon enough other thoughts crept in. It was a fatal mistake to not prepare. This mistake, this complacency, had been in great part her own fault. Her own flaws. Things that could have been prevented, yet were not. It would be accepting the idea of incompetence and call for others to fix her mistakes.

She worked too hard to accept this as a failure. She saw this nation brought from abandoned ruins and a loose collection of settlements into what it now is. She couldn't just give up like that. She could fix this. She could see herself out of this mess.

She wasn't a failure.

The more to the north one walked from Variland, the more the sky darkened. To the far north was Caedisia, the realm of the vampires where perpetual darkness reigned. For almost too long Victoria had not visited, though the loss of perception of time had reminded her of at least one of the reasons. She had left Variland early in the morning, and here it was already, dark as midnight. Even staring out the windows of the castle's hallways, she no longer saw the sun, but rather a starry sky.

It hardly mattered. She was not here for sight-seeing. In due time she arrived to the throne room of the castle, to find a young woman in an adorned dark cloak and dress talking with a succubus. The two took notice of the lilim's arrival, to which the vampire nodded at the succubus, the latter immediately departing at the gesture.

Caroline. The Lordess of Caedisia.

"I keep forgetting you can get past the guards." Said Caroline, nonchalant and almost bored visage betraying her disinterest. "Need something?"

"Not even a greeting...?" Said Victoria.

"Hello, Victoria. Need something?"

Victoria forced a smile. The same old Caroline, who never changed.

"I want the equipment for a thousand infantry." Said Victoria.

But Caroline did not answer. Instead, she frowned in utter confusion, tilting her head to the side.

"A little too many for a first time purchase, don't you think?" Asked Caroline.

A chill ran down Victoria's spine, nervousness kicking in.

"I... thought that I could get you to charge me less if I bought them in bulk. You know, because you're selling so many to me in one go?"

Caroline crossed her arms, still sporting her confused stare.

"But to buy a thousand out of the blue," she said, "when Variland has barely forged enough for a couple hundred in well over a decade...?"

Too inquisitive. It already seemed to get in Victoria's nerves, that her disinterest had to end right there when it hindered her the most.

"Point being?" Asked Victoria. "Even if many are left to gather dust, they'll eventually find a use. I'm thinking long-term here."

"It doesn't look like you have a pressing need for them, though. Were I you, I'd just make do and produce locally. Cheaper, and helps the economy more than importing. I thought you knew better."

Victoria had to force back a rough, scornful sigh. Caroline was correct, of that there was no doubt, but the situation at hand differed from what was in her mind. The questions had left the lilim cornered.

Then, a thought crossed Victoria's mind. Perhaps she could let out bits of truth out. A twisted version, but still fulfilling its purpose. Smiling as she let out a chuckle, Victoria raised her palms.

"You got me." She said, keeping Caroline just as confused. "Truth is, I figured I should maybe think a bit about the bordering Order country and prepare accordingly, but Variland has been defenseless for so long that I want to get ready as soon as I can. Call me paranoid, but I don't want to risk them coming out of the woodwork while we're not even done making a helmet. I have the gold, and you have the equipment, and I'm putting time over finances on the list of priorities."

Though Caroline stared on, soon she snickered in amusement.

"Alright." She answered. That word alone felt like a weight dropped off Victoria's shoulders. "Took you long enough to change your mind about that Order country. I'll get you that equipment, then."

"Knew I could count on you." Said Victoria, pure bliss and relief making her grow an honest smile.

A mild breeze blew over the cobblestone streets of a city. Blue skies without a cloud to be seen loomed above, a weather few could ask more of. A scenery calm and serene as monsters and incubi walked one way to the other, but all in stark contrast to what goals Indrick needed to accomplish.

To think they'd have to burn it all to the ground. What a waste.

Yet, contrary to Helmsreach time ago, from the bench Indrick sat on he kept on seeing every now and then pairs of dullahans armed with spear, shield, and helmet. They strolled around as if patrolling at their leisure.

Steps approached till a man passed him by, sitting down beside him.

"Found anything?" Asked Indrick.

"Should be similar to Helmsreach." Answered Dirk. "I don't like this place, though. Too many dullahans all of a sudden. They must've figured out our pattern."

"Been seeing them since I got here. Any ideas?"

"Can't risk it. We should go back and try another approach. Your call."

"Right." Answered Indrick, standing up with a sigh. "Tell the others. We're leaving."

They had returned to old grounds. Stone roads led the way, flanked by towers and palisades, tents and fortified buildings of every kind. There was nothing to be described as civilian in the northern part of the city they walked through, all left to the military in idea and purpose. Makillae, a walled fortress-city; it had to be, if it wanted to stand as the one thing closest to a demon realm. Indrick and Dirk walked beside each other, though Dirk aimed for a return to rest at his leisure, he watched from the corner of his eyes at the one beside him not looking as eager.

"You've been grim ever since that day." Said Dirk.

Dirk was balding, stout, with a faint smile ever present on his face. Indrick, on the other hand, looked hardly in his twenties, contrasting with Dirk's advanced age. Blonde and blue-eyed, almost a prince charming in looks, though primarily because of that he had been the one to be sent against the lilim.

They were two paladins, out of a group of twenty. Tragically, that was all that Nostrum could muster to send into the demon realm, as sending the army would invite a fate similar to Lescatie's attempted reclamation. They had neither the resources nor the time to properly protect so many.

"I'm fine." Answered Indrick.

"Boy, you can't lie to me. Something's on your mind."

Indrick let out a quiet sigh out his nose.

"I'm just thinking." He answered. "It's only gonna get tougher from here. They're already arming themselves, and that lilim is only gonna get stronger. It feels like we lost our only chance already."

Dirk didn't immediately respond. Though curious, he still was in equal parts already aware of what ran in Indrick's mind.

"What makes you say that?"

"Our only hope of winning this was getting rid of the lilim on day one, and I couldn't do that." Answered Indrick. "Feels like I just invited her to do to us what Druella did to Lescatie."

"You are asking too much of yourself. That you came back in one piece at all is a miracle on its own."

"She wasn't even aware." He said, halting in place and turning to Dirk, prompting him to do the same. "She thought I was a traveller when I got to her villa. Pretended to be interested in her, and she even believed it. She even invited me to her own home. She turned her back at me and I stabbed her, but just as I was about to finish her off, I... ran away. I ran away and condemned us all."

No words followed, Dirk and Indrick staring at each other in silence over the streets. In Indrick's mind, memories surfaced.

Memories of days ago, when that event happened. When he had the chance, and yet, could not take it.

The theory had been correct. Demon realm silver would sap a monster's strength just as it did to a human. Stabbing her with it had left her numb, on the ground. And yet, when he was about to finish her off with a dagger of mundane steel...

His body had refused to move. His heart had caved in, for reasons he could not understand. The sight of the lilim's face in betrayal still haunted him, pained him, like that very same dagger sinking into his chest, and yet, to run away had condemned Nostrum to a slow but sure defeat. The lilim would adapt, would grow stronger, and what minuscule chances Nostrum had of victory would immediately drop to zero.

It was all over before it had begun.

"Listen to your own words." Said Dirk in a calm, soothing tone.

"What about them?"

"Would anyone believe you managed to do that? Great heroes have fallen to things as low as a slime. Having run away maybe be the only reason you're still here with us."

Though unreactive for a second, Indrick let out a snicker.

"I couldn't even get the teleportation right." Said Indrick. "I got out of there, but my rapier didn't come back with me."

"I know how you feel. Can't say I disagree, honestly." Said Dirk. "Had it been me in your place, I'd probably feel the same, assuming that lilim was even interested in some old balding guy for the trick to work on her in the first place." He chuckled. "The fact that we all returned safe should be something to be happy about."

"...Yeah."

"Let's just go for a drink, alright?"

"Alright."

Popping a smile, Dirk stepped off, to which Indrick followed suit.