

All's Fair in Love and War

Losenis

Chapter 6

Images had been burned into her eyes.

An army in disarray, spread throughout the town.

A desperate defense.

Scattered groups in a panicked retreat.

Picked off, group by group. Knights on horseback crashing into those outside the city, unable to form up in time. Infantry engaging those within the city. Nostrian flags among the thousands of humans who came to reinforce.

The Nostrians had not followed them. In fact, they had predicted their path. It had been an ambush.

A army of Variland, encircled. Condemned. Hopeless. Outnumbered ten to one.

A massacre, quick as it was.

She could do nothing. They were everywhere. They outmanoeuvred, outnumbered, outmatched them at every step. She could not protect him. Holed up, cornered in a street, fighting to their last, and yet, she could not stop the knights from defeating them. She saw him fall, and next to him, a knight standing back up with his dagger all bloodied.

Then, the Nostrians cut them all down with their swords.

"Melanie."

Why was she still alive?

"Melanie!"

Valerian's call snapped her back to reality.

"You must've seen awful things if they have you spacing out like this," he said from the opposite end of the table they sat at, "but I really need you here with me. You said the dullahans couldn't reorganize in time. What happened then?"

Melanie ran her hand down her face, still finding it hard to focus and find the words.

"...He killed Jeremiah." She said.

"He'? Do you know who it was?"

"His voice... It was the same voice as the one that tried to kill Victoria back at the inn."

He had begun to wonder, but there was not much he could think of. He didn't know who the man had been, in the first place. A detail worth keeping, he imagined, writing it down with the rest of the report.

"You were surrounded. What happened then?"

"They cut us all down. Demon realm silver. We were wounded so much by it that they knocked us out. Then... we woke up outside the city, all our weapons taken."

Valerian's brows furrowed.

"All of you?" He asked.

"All of us. We even ran a head count. They let all of us go, no casualties."

Confusion still reigned within him, leaving him to stare aimless at nothing.

"Why would they..." He was about to ask himself. With a quiet sigh from his nose, he figured he'd not get answers any time soon. He kept on writing all he heard on the paper, a report growing lengthy as time passed.

It was going to be a long day for the two of them.

"Caroline!"

Victoria's call echoed through the desolate throne room of Caedisia's castle. For a few seconds nothing occurred, until a few bats began to appear. The number increased, their flight paths grew erratic, until all wildly converged around a spot in front of Victoria. They then dispersed, revealing Caroline standing where they once gathered.

"You make quite the ruckus for someone who just arrived." Greeted Caroline, visage bored and uninterested. "Well? What's gotten you that noisy?"

Answering normally would invite falling into that taunting question. However, she had neither the time nor the patience to care.

"Variland is at war with Nostrum." She answered.

Though Caroline stood still for a moment, soon she grew a faint smile as she lightly laughed to herself.

"Have I not warned you of this possibility long, long ago?"

"I don't have time for lectures." Retorted Victoria. "Many of my cities have been raided. Helmsreach is ashes. Jeremiah is dead."

Caroline's smile faded away, replaced by widening eyes and a frown in aghast surprise.

"I was stupid." She continued. "We were at war since before I even bought that equipment from you, and I hid the fact afraid that everyone would see me as incompetent. I tried to control the situation and it only ended up with Jeremiah dying because of me."

"They... got into a demon realm...?" Caroline could barely muster the focus to say.

"Twenty paladins found their way in. They also have an army in the city closest to my realm. Around ten thousand men, if my dullahans saw right. I honestly don't know how long I have left until they figure out how to march it in."

Silent and in thought, Caroline's expression contorted as she found no ideas to cling to, lowering her head with eyes shifting directions.

"Caedisia doesn't have the armies to fight a war like that..." She muttered. "Nobody does. The demon realms have defended our territories from invasions well enough already. What about the Demon Army?"

"Calling for their help was already in my mind. Problem is, I don't know if them joining the war would escalate it to the point more nations of The Order decide to join against us. It doesn't matter. I'll send word either way. The Demon Lord will know what to do, but I can't rely on her to fix every mistake of mine."

Caroline looked on without focus for a moment, then sighed as she shook her head.

"What a mess this is." She said, to then bring her eyes to Victoria again. "I'll put my realm to work on the war effort. Don't expect it to be all charity, but it'd be best if we handled it after making sure we all don't share Jeremiah's fate."

"Then, can I count on you to help me no matter how bad it gets?"

Caroline let out a light laugh.

"You're the only thing between Nostrum and Caedisia. If you fall, we'll be next."

Manpower.

Her greatest resource.

Hardly anywhere else would one find a realm with so high a percentage of dullahans, outside those where the undead reign. That percentage, along with the great size of Variland itself and its population, led to so high a number that she could muster an army of.

The thousand she had were not even a fraction of the recruitment potential.

Dullahans. The one type of monster most renowned for their inherent alignment to that which is required for military matters.

Discipline. Self-restraint. Patience. Traits many monsters shared, but few had them all at the same time.

She could grow a great army from them. The obstacle, inevitably, would be to recruit them. There she sat at her study desk, pondering the ways to do so. How would she spread the word? What would be the most effective ways to convince them to join? How many could she train? Where would they be housed, how would they be fed, how would she keep morale high to avoid desertion? She wouldn't be able to blame anyone for running away, given what foe they were up against.

Logistics. Such a nightmarish topic.

Someone knocked on the door. Though she had not expected visitors, these hectic days had gotten her used to calls at random hours.

She walked out the doorway and went downstairs, to reach and open the front door. Behind it, she found the kikimora.

"Marie?" She asked, stepping aside and letting her in. In her arms she held quite a curious number of rolled up papers of great size. "Need something?"

"Yes, my Lady." Answered Marie. "I need to show you a few things."

Marie walked over to the coffee table, Victoria following close in curiosity. She left them over the table, and one by one unrolled them in what little space was available. Victoria watched, seeing them what was drawn on them.

Architectural plans. She had seen the likes of them, presented to her by Jeremiah when the construction of the various military buildings had been proposed. However, it puzzled her to see that they weren't the same she had seen. These were new ones, in fact, sharing the distinct style of the old ones.

"Are these Jeremiah's?" Asked Victoria. "Did he draw more before he had left?"

"No, my Lady. They're all mine."

"You mean..."

"The ones Jeremiah showed you were mine as well. I showed them to him, and he saw them good enough to show you."

It sparked her wonder. She took a design and gave it a thorough look. Sure it was, detailed enough for construction. If the first ones had been approved, then so would these. Taking a second design, it showed just as much meticulous calculation and detail.

Now she remembered well. Jeremiah had never said who drew them. He only brought them to her and presented them, leaving her to assume it his work.

"I... feared being the center of everyone's attention in the construction. I did it to aid my Lady, not out of personal desires." Said Marie, answering the question that Victoria was just about to ask. "I just didn't think things would get... this bad."

"Nobody did, Marie." Lamented Victoria.

"I'm sorry for not being open about this from the start."

Victoria rolled the design up, to then extend it to Marie. "You came to me when it was needed. That's what matters. If you were the one who came up with all of this, then can I trust you to oversee the construction?"

Left spacing out by her words, Marie took a second to snap back to reality and grab the rolled paper.

"Yes!" She answered. "I am willing and able!"

To that answer, Victoria smiled.

"I never took you for an architect." She said, to then grow silent as her gaze fell elsewhere. An idea had crossed her mind, causing a faint grin to grow on her. "...In fact, it's precisely what I'll need soon. Are you with me, Marie?"

"To the very end!"

Early morning. Long gone were the days of comfortable awakenings, of dressing up and having breakfast at her leisure. With rapier in hand, Victoria stood in stance in front of Valerian outside. Catherine was not on him this time, though he still had his longsword at the ready.

Then, Victoria lunged. A thrust forward, holding the rapier with one hand and one foot stepping forward. Valerian quickly stepped back and deflected it, to which Victoria returned to her stance.

"And you're learning all of this from just old manuals?" He asked. "You'll have to lend me a few about longswords, then."

"You'll have to learn quite a lot if you want to help in training my dullahans."

"Wasn't imagining it an easy task anyway."

At that moment, however, Valerian's expression fell to confusion. He stood quiet, lowering his sword as he stared past Victoria.

Curiosity befell her, and so she turned to see what Valerian looked at behind her. She saw nothing, but as she turned back to Valerian she could only see him swinging his longsword down upon her. It struck before she could react, chopping through the union of her neck and shoulder till it reached her chest before he slid it out, all without bloody injury.

"Ch...cheater...!" She gasped as the blow of demon realm silver sapped her of all her strength. She stood petrified for a second before falling to her knees, and then to the ground.

"You'll have to forgive me for that." He said, sheathing his longsword and walking up to her. "I needed to test something. For now, let's see how long it takes for you to get back up."

"You could've... told me beforehand..."

"I'm not going to believe you'd have willingly taken a blow of that magnitude."

A rough sigh escaped her, giving away what fury she held.

"You can talk, though." He remarked as he sat down next to her. "How are you feeling? Is it numbness and lost control that keeps you immobile, or is it exhaustion?"

"B-both..."

A hum in acknowledgement followed, leaving a silence to take over. There he waited, letting time pass as he watched.

Then, he spotted how one of Victoria's hands twitched, trying to clench into a fist. The first signs of movement ever since the blow.

"What's it been?" He asked himself. "One minute?"

A soft noise followed as she dragged her arms on the ground till they rested right in front, as if she was getting ready to stand up, but Valerian saw her not even trying to do so. Saving strength for later, he imagined. With nothing else attempted, he concluded that she wasn't going to do anything for another while.

An uneventful silence set itself again, till he saw movement once more. Victoria attempted to prop herself up by her elbows, little by little gaining height with interrupted grunts, but soon fell to the ground again.

"Two minutes." Said Valerian. "Maybe."

"What are you trying to figure out?"

"Why The Order of all people decided to use demon realm silver."

The words had silenced her. She knew it to be strange that they had chosen such material, but greater things had taken up her attention to question it.

"Did you think of anything?" She asked.

"If someone was trying to kill you right now, do you think you'd be able to defend yourself with any spell?"

Memories surfaced. She had been struck down in her house, the first time. Struck down in that inn, the second time. There was nothing she could do but stare. Had it been Indrick who landed the blow rather than Valerian, she'd have been doomed.

"No."

A sigh escaped his nose.

"They might be using demonic metal to weaken their opponents, and finish them off with those daggers. I've heard of men fight on without an arm, even with a sword in their gut, but never when it involves demonic metal. If that's the case... then it's no wonder a single human could almost kill a lilim."

Grunting in both irritation and effort, Victoria felt that she heard enough. She tried to prop herself up by her elbows once more. In response, Valerian stood back up and helped her up, bringing one of her arms behind his neck and helping her to her feet. Then, a punch flew into his gut, knocking the wind out his lungs as he stepped back with his arms hugging his belly.

"Now we're even." Muttered Victoria.

Valerian could not blame her. Rather than be upset, he laughed to himself inbetween coughs.

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