

All's Fair in Love and War

Losenis

Chapter 1

"Has this conflict not been occurring since the dawn of this world? Those of The Order on one side and monsters on the other. So many generations. So many lives. Chief Gods and Demon Lords succeeding each other one after the other... Even after the last Demon Lord took over, hardly anything seems to have changed.

For many of you, it is the singular conflict that would decide the fate of this realm. Raging on for millennia, and for millennia it may go... If only you knew how little it all mattered. Like rats fighting for cheese, they're all unaware of the cat who stalks its prey.

Your universe is the interior of a hallway. Many walk through it without knowing, blessed by ignorance, but someone in the wrong place at the wrong time may find that something lurking beyond the walls is knocking.

What if you were that someone?

What would you do...?

The mind of a flatlander is not meant to comprehend such things. It is certainly tragic that I can't share my gifts with you, but my greatest flaw is that I can never say no to those who ask.

Pray that your curiosity does not get the best of you, and beware... for I am the Crawling Chaos."

Dread and terror mixed in with a sensation of unnatural numbness. It was enough to make the lilim gasp, snapping her awake in the dead of the night.

Her racing heartbeat subsided, seeing the almost too soothing darkness around her. Silent, tranquil, it was simply another night. It was not happening again. And yet her hand moved over to her belly, where that unnatural numbness had struck her a night not too long ago. A wound which almost took her life, merciful enough to not leave a scar to remind her for the rest of her days.

There was no way she'd fall back asleep after something like that. She had been left wide awake. With a sigh, she pulled her blanket off and stepped out of her bed.

A quiet walk led to her living room. For one who held the reins of a nation, it did not seem too spacious. The sound of her steps changed as solid ceramic flooring switched to that of a carpet. Other than the coffee table and chairs around it, she could walk at her leisure even with the minimal lighting. There was nothing to hit. Desolate, thought at this time, almost too desolate. Lonely.

She had nobody to truly be with. A curse, as if. Her eyes fell on the silhouette of an object in the darkness, in the corner of the room. A rapier without its sheath.

It wasn't even hers. The heraldry of The Order gave away the allegiance of its previous owner, left forgotten after he had left.

'Do your best, and your love will come true', her mother had told her when she was only a little girl. 'Make your lands the best in this world, and you'll see the man of your dreams come to life.'

That man had arrived.

He had tried to kill her.

Two cups rested over their plates. Into each, Victoria poured tea. With both now full, she put aside the pot to then lift one of the cups by the plate onto a tray. Her lack of dexterity had begun to show. She couldn't balance them properly. She had to slow down, or risk it all spilling onto the floor. Before she could take the remaining one, however, a pair of gauntlets took it for her.

"You don't look used to this, Lady Victoria." Said Catherine. Rather than an armored woman, she was the armor itself. Hollow within, a suit of metal brought to life.

Though surprised at Catherine's sudden presence in the kitchen, Victoria let her shoulders drop in relief. She could almost feel envy for her lack of pulse.

"Yes. It's been another world with Jeremiah gone."

With both cups over the tray, Victoria and Catherine walked off. Out the kitchen, they entered the living room where a man sat by the small table over which lay a map. Next to it, Catherine put the tray.

"Have you figured anything out yet?" Asked Victoria, taking a cup for herself.

Valerian slowly shook his bald head.

"After what they did to Helmsreach, I have no idea what they're capable of, or where they'll go next." He said, taking the cup Catherine extended. "They must have something that lets them go in and out of a demon realm safely, something they can't give to that army they have."

Victoria glanced at the map. On it lay drawn her proud nation.

Variland.

A nation which, as she had come to face, had been plagued with complacency. Just like her. It was one of the various demon realms, locations in which the demonic energy would sooner or later turn women into monsters and men into incubi. Their nature had deterred any incursion by those whose allegiance lay with The Order.

The nation of Nostrum to the south, however, had somehow found a way in. Towns had their crops burned, and Helmsreach itself had been consumed by flames, all owing to her lack of preparation for the worst. A greater threat haunted her as well: that of an amassing army in a city by the border. 'Makillae'. More than a city, it seemed a fortress, as defended as one would imagine from its proximity to those Nostrum would consider enemies.

Someone knocking on the door interrupted her thoughts.

"Don't tell me he's back already." Said Valerian.

Victoria left the cup on its plate and stepped over to the door, opening it to find a kikimora maid behind it.

"Marie?" Asked Victoria. "What is it?"

"My Lady, a dullahan wishes to see you."

Pausing in place, she then turned her eyes to Valerian. The glance alone told him enough. Flurries of thoughts crossed their curious minds, prompting them to stand up and follow. Outside, a stone path flanked by flowers and vines over lattices of every kind led the way through her villa. Past turns and buildings of her villa, they came to see a woman with a scarf keeping her neck covered, along with a great bag slung over her shoulders. With Marie leading them up to her, Victoria knew this was the dullahan she had heard of.

"Can I help you?" Asked Victoria.

"Lady Victoria!" she eagerly answered, though with hints of anxiety that couldn't be hidden. "My name is Melanie and I come from Helmsreach. I'm here to lend my service to Variland in any way I can!"

Recruits, she figured. Those Jeremiah had promised before his departure to spread the word. At least the complacency had not eroded their defiant spirit.

"...Victoria." She heard Valerian's call. Farther than she imagined, in fact, to find that he was no longer beside her, but rather a fair distance ahead with Catherine already on him as armor. "You should see this."

Curious, she walked over to where he was. It was then that Victoria's eyes widened upon the sight.

More and more individuals were making their way towards her villa. Dozens, if not hundreds, of which Melanie had only been the first of.