

“Huh? What have we got here?”

A wicked grin drew across Azaren’s delicate face. She brought her armored hand to her chin out of amusement.

The armor was shining with a silverish black. Despite the expensive material and perfect condition, its shape was jagged, rough, spikey, and uneven. Obviously crafted by bending rare metal with magic.

This was traditional for Demon Lords. Being able to procure all of one’s weapons and armor oneself was a sign of rough individualism. Something the Monstrous Armies respected.

But Azaren stuck to tradition to an exceptional degree even for a Demon Lord. Her predecessors were satisfied with a crown and maybe pauldrons to hold their cape. Of course, none of them crafted their weapons on their own.

Azaren crafted her sword, the BlueScar out of her own crystallized mana. Just like the first Demon Lord.

Just like the first Demon Lord, she was embraced head to toe by a metallic blackness of her own making.

The only thing that stood out from the dark metal enveloping her body was the long red hair and pale skin of her unarmored head.

“If it isn’t my old comrade, Roland. I’m surprised you made it through my castle’s defenses...then again, you were always a tough one. Weren’t you?”

Roland tried to reply, but no air came out his lungs. He realized he was out of breath. Or rather, he let himself realize this for the first time since he dealt the first blow at the castle’s entrance. Since then it was a focused dance of blocks, ripostes, slashes, cuts and stabs all the way to the throne room.

He glanced backwards. A carpet of blood and gore stretched behind him, going all the way to the castle gate.

“That must have been around a quarter of my garrison” Azaren commented dispassionately.

“Congratulations. But I assume you didn’t do all of...this just to greet me.”

She stood up from the throne, her hand was resting calmly on top of BlueScar’s hilt at her side.

She began walking towards him with a cautious calm.

But Roland could almost smell the killing instinct underneath her peaceful exterior.

“Indeed, I came to ask a question.”

“Oh?”

Azaren observed him carefully.

His was not the figure of the imposing blonde Paladin hero that inspired respect and reverence across the Human Alliance. Slouched, covered in blood, dusty hair, a six o’ clock shadow on his sharp jawline, a black eye beginning to form on his high-set cheekbones. She perceived him as pitiful rather than a threat, but then there must have been an ace up his sleeve. He always came out on top at the last moment.

“I asked it of your rank soldiers. They didn’t give me an answer that satisfied...so I cut them down.”

Roland's usual pompous heroics.

She had known him long enough to tell when he was faking his bravado. But then, maybe he was equipped with something powerful...

"I asked it of your generals. They didn't give me a satisfying answer either. So I cut them down as well."

What remained of his armor was battered and smashed. But Azaren knew that Roland preferred to fight without it, he claimed that it impeded the swings of his beloved two handed sword. Which itself was in no better condition. After all the fighting, it was barely good enough to cut butter.

He also had a small crossbow tied loosely to his side. Only two iron bolts hung nearby, tied just as loosely.

"The question is a simple one, and I believe you can give me a satisfying answer..."

Challenging a Demon Lord with these was suicidal. Azaren wondered if he had some sort of Explosion scroll tucked away somewhere.

She found it ironic that "the" Roland might attempt to finish her off using one. He was the type to reject using magic because it was too unreliable.

"...why did you do it? Why did you betray humanity?"

Azaren stopped analyzing Roland as a threat, for half a second meeting his intense green-eyes staring into hers. There was exhaustion, frustration, but no killing intent.

Was he merely suicidal? No way, not Roland.

"Allow me to answer your question with another question."

"That's so like you" He smiled nostalgically.

She showed no reaction.

Was he stalling for time? Then let him stall and see who he's waiting for.

"What do you think of the state of the world? What do you see when you look around you?"

"Do you mean after we defeated..."

"Yes, since Nera's Death."

"I see a Mankind free of the Demon Lord's oppression beginning to find its own footing."

The way his face almost turned to a trained smile gave it away.

He was lying. Azaren could tell it so easily. It frustrated her to the point she couldn't keep silent.

"Bullshit. Those are the platitudes you tell the Nobles and Ministers to keep out of their politics. It might get them, but it won't work on me."

"Ah.." Roland sighed.

He was visibly tired and weakened, but he was still acting like a dashing Paladin hero until that point. Something broke, for a couple of seconds.

For a couple of seconds, the charming hero attitude was gone. A tired frustration was staring at Azaren.

Roland regained control. He forced a tired smile while staring into nothing.

"....do you remember? How it was after we slew Nera? I mean the celebrations, back in Rima."

Merely the name of the city caused a warm sense of nostalgia for both of them.

"I still remember all the little details, you know? The smell of the spices and flowers that the crowd was throwing at our creaky parade float. Their smiles brimming with a joy and unity I've never seen before. The clapping of hooves against paved stone..."

He spoke as if he was describing something that happened a week, rather than a decade ago.
“Priscilla was busy reuniting with her husband, and Heinrich had to get off because he got sick.”
“He was never one for carriages, that warlock.”

Azaren commented accidentally.

“Right? Him, and Sophia both...” He stopped.

Sophia had been killed by Nera during that last fight.

“...either way. It was just you and me, you motioned to the crowd and said ‘this is just the beginning. Mankind will accomplish even greater things’”

Azaren nodded, something stuck in her throat at the realization that Roland treasured those words.

“I really did believe you back then, you know? I had hope...”

He sighed, his nostalgic smile waned away.

“The Southern Satrapies declared their independence from the Human Alliance the next day. In a month, they themselves broke out into a dozen different local rulers fighting each other. By that time, the Alliance was no more, and hundreds of nations were fighting each other again. Same wars, with better weapons.”

“I’m one of the Heroes that defeated Nera, and a Paladin Of The Justice Gods, this means front row theatre tickets to every petty political conflict across the former Alliance. I was called for every important war, and irrelevant border skirmish. I had to oversee the ‘fairness’ of every minor conflict. Do you know what kept me going through all of that?”

Azaren readied herself, as if for a physical blow.

“Your words. Knowing that you were somewhere out there, fighting to achieve a united mankind kept me sane enough to keep dealing with these pieces of...but then I find out that you decided to turn Demon Lord!”

Anybody but you.

He shouted at her with anger, confusion, sadness, but not a hint of hatred. It was this lack that caused Azaren to reel back in guilt, she stammered her words as if a child forced to apologize for breaking something.

“I-I...I was doing my best! I bore through all the humiliation, the disgusting intrigues of court politics, it got me nowhere!”

“So court politics turned you into this.” Roland smiled with sadness, and a hint of pity.

She couldn’t bear to be pitied, not by him. Her guilty shouting turned to anger.

“Oh, what was I supposed to do? Keep going to dances, keep plotting, marry some sleazebag from a good house...all for what? So that my descendants would be slightly more prestigious? And maybe in a few generations they might have a chance at ruling Razia...one kingdom out of how many? How many more until unification?”

“You decided to take revenge on humanity.” Roland commented with acidity.

“You know I’m not vengeful.” Azaren shot back, her tone had turned cold and she regained her composure.

But she did reveal her thoughts to somebody, for the first time after three years of only talking with demons and spirits. It felt refreshing, she kept going.

“I merely seized by force what was out of reach without it.”

“I don’t understand...” Roland muttered. But just that hint was enough for him to guess where

she was going.

“There are diplomatic moves towards restoring the Southern Satrapies as a federation. The Northern Merchant Republic has stopped the crusades against its pagan tribal neighbors. Razia has finally signed a truce and given away that damn province....and this after just four months since I declared my conquest, Roland! Four months!”

He turned more pale she kept listing examples. It felt satisfying to see him shocked.

“I never gave up on...I never stopped loving, this revolting species. I am saving mankind from itself.”

Roland laughed. The laughter wasn't mocking or amused. There was just confusion and exhaustion. A mad laughter.

He forced himself to stop.

“Haha....ha....they really broke you, didn't they, Aza?”

“But not your dream, you were always too strong to give up on your dreams.”

He stared into her black eyes with pity and understanding. An understanding she craved ever since the first plate she forged for the cursed armor, ever since she started her political career. The pity caused shivers of disgust to wash over her skin.

“what are you...?”

Roland threw his sword on the ground with a loud clang. What remained of his armor followed. Then the crossbow, the bolts, a knife hidden in his boot.

“I surrender.” He spread his arms and let them fall at his sides.

“imprison me, torture me, kill me, but don't marry me.” he quoted a famous Roman novel with a hint of bitter sarcasm.

Azaren was taken aback for a moment.

She smiled nervously.

“You couldn't have rushed all the way here just to ask me why I did it. You're not this selfless, not this noble.”

She knew him too well.

“you got me there” Roland gave her a parody of his signature white-toothed hero grin.

“I'm strong enough to break through the Demon Lord Castle's garrison, kill a quarter of his troops, reach the throne, but hold my own in a duel on top of that? That's something only Azaren...”

He stopped himself, as if he would lose by revealing admiration for her old self.

“It was a suicidal plan from the start”

Azaren commented with bitterness. Admitting it felt devastating. Roland was someone that would rather surrender with humiliation, than accept a fight to the death.

She mocked it several times, but his cowardly will to live was inspiring. To lose even that...

“Don't call it a suicidal plan. Call it 'leaving an unblemished biography’”

He had picked up on the disappointment in her voice, and was faking a sarcastic attitude. But of course Azaren was right, he came to die.

“The Hero's Party defeats the Demon Lord, after a decade their Warrior-Mage is corrupted and Roland The Great Paladin, Hero Of The Justice Gods, Supernatural Judge eccetera eccetera breaks into her castle, they have an exchange where he realizes that his friend is beyond saving, attempts to kill her in a duel and dies.”

Roland grinned like a mischievous kid.

“A novel-like way to go out. Pretty, right?”

Azaren didn't appreciate the levity in his tone.

“Why surrender? You could have gotten what you wanted. If you didn't throw down your weapons, you would have gotten the duel with the corrupted friend that you-”

“But you're not corrupted.”

His interjection stopped Azaren. She faked a laugh to hide her bewilderment.

“ha-ha-ha...d-do you even know what I...”

“ordered your imps to loot a couple of podunk villages, kings demand worse during wartime.”

“...you started from a looted 'podunk village' like that, Roland. The entire reason you fought the Demon Lord was to take revenge on your family being murdered by Nera's servants.”

Roland gritted his teeth. He didn't have a dismissive answer for that. The death of his family was a wound that never closed.

Azaren picked up on it and pressed her advantage.

“I am evil, Roland. Maybe not absolute evil...not yet. What do the scriptures say? 'One sin invites another like friends gathering for a celebration'? Well, I am planning a party that will make the whole world dance!”

“Stop!”

He shouted, staring into the ground. He didn't want to look at her face while she was saying that. Fear of what she could say next forced Roland to keep staring down.

He repeated himself, with a softer tone.

“Stop...even if you...even if you become absolute evil, if you're still yourself, then I can't...”

Azaren walked closer and placed a hand on his cheek, this forced Roland to raise his head. She made a mistake.

The action happened out of instinct, she didn't mean to make it this intimate, but it accomplished the goal of forcing him to meet her gaze.

“Give up on me.”

She attempted to retrieve her hand. But he grabbed at it, his trembling palm forced her cold metallic glove to push against his cheek.

“h-hey, that's almost as if you're confessing” she joked with an unnatural cheer, the persona of the tomboyish Warrior-Mage resurfaced for one last moment, to automatically blow off one last fake romantic advance joke from her unreliable Paladin friend.

“If I confessed during that noble ball, would you have accepted?”

He didn't need to specify a place or date. Both of them remembered rushing away to the garden behind an expensive mansion, away from the suffocation of gossip and luxurious meals. They danced alone under the moonlight, he was about to say it, then some noblewomen came to discuss politics with Azaren and she left.

“I called you a coward under my breath, did you catch that?” She tried to make the question sound like a joke, but her voice came out broken.

“I hoped I imagined hearing it.”

For a few moments they grasped at the fragile silence, fearing its end.

“if I...if I married you back then, do you think you wouldn't end up like...” Roland stammered out, he didn't dare finish the sentence. As if admitting her Demon Lord state would make it more

real somehow.

Azaren moved closer until their foreheads almost touched. They both stared at the ground, childishly afraid of looking up at each other.

She spoke in a half-whisper.

“I would be too happy being occupied with you, with the kids...hey, you want kids right?”

She looked up at him with expectation, he nodded without meeting her gaze.

“a bunch, red haired and energetic, like their mother.”

she smiled at the shared fantasy. Just being able to hear him imagine it was enough.

“hey...” Roland raised his head. Don’t say it, please.

“...Is now too late?”

Azaren pushed him down into the ground without resistance. She leaned in for a kiss, but stopped herself before their lips met.

“that’s as far as your romance with a Demon Lord goes.”

She tried to get up, but found herself dragged downward into a tight hug.

“h-hey, I’m...”

“...it doesn’t matter.”

Azaren could have pushed him away easily. But she couldn’t find the motivation to mount even a fake protest.

“...I’m covered in curses from top to bottom.”

“doesn’t matter, I’ll find a priest.”

“uncursing a Demon Lord will cost you a fortune.”

“doesn’t matter, I saved a bit.”

“my subjects will go on a rampage if I disappear.”

“....doesn’t matter, let them.”

“but humanity...”

“Let’s give up on it.” He moved her head closer to his for a kiss.

Their lips met with a soft, awkward, virginal brush. They began getting used to each other’s mouths, the kisses that followed became lewder and more intense.

Suddenly Azaren pushed herself upright until she was sitting on top of Roland. She brushed the tips of her fingers against his chest.

Both were still in an aroused daze caused by the kissing, but she forced herself to speak.

“ha...ha...you’re a coward, so you won’t be the one confessing.”

She spoke through a childish triumphant grin.

“While I’m still Demon Lord, I will punish you for that...how did that line go...not by imprisonment, not by torture, not by killing, but by marriage...please”

She couldn’t help but stammer out a request towards the end. Roland laughed at her fumbling the cool confession last moment.

“marrying you, now that’s a horrifying punishment.”

“hey now...” she tried to sound angry, but couldn’t stop smiling through the tears. Both of their faces were wet.