

192: Get with the program

“Was the dragon truly a demon?”

Scarlett stood at the entrance of Duke Valentino’s opulent office, observing the portly man seated behind an arched wooden desk, his brows furrowed deeply as he looked at Sir Home beside her.

“Yes, Your Grace. It was the largest demon I have ever encountered, and while it bore an uncanny resemblance to a dragon, there was no mistaking it,” Sir Home said. The captain of the Sable knight order wore the same grim expression he had worn all morning as he presented his report. “I understand why you might have mistaken it for one when it attacked you and the young Lord, but no living creature in this world exudes such a malevolent aura. And the breath it unleashed could only have originated from the Blazes with how cursed it was.”

“I received the report, but I never expected such a foul creature to be responsible for my injuries and my son’s current state,” the duke muttered, his expression filled with half-restrained anger, one arm resting on the desk that was filled with neatly arranged papers and documents.

Scarlett and the rest of the group that had returned from their mission to slay the Vilewyrms had arrived in Bridgespell again not long ago. There, she and the knight captain had immediately been led to Duke Valentino to discuss the details of the ‘harrowing’ encounter.

“I had hoped it would not be as dire as it sounded, but this is much worse than I feared. This situation is reminiscent of that incident in Quickmallow.” The duke’s gaze focused on Sir Home, sharp and probing. “And you are certain that the demons which attacked your men after the fight were seen fleeing to Crowcairn?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Do we know why that village in particular?”

“No. But there were no signs of an attack, and my men reported seeing the villagers going about their business. It is likely that the demons are in hiding.”

The duke’s frown deepened as he wore a contemplative expression. “...I’ve gathered those who arrived too late to join your expedition yesterday, as well as several guardsmen. They are ready to depart at a moment’s notice. I am entrusting you with this matter, Captain Home, and granting you the authority to take any necessary action to resolve this issue swiftly and prevent further damage. I trust that you know what to do.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Sir Home responded in a deep voice. “I am fully prepared to execute your orders.”

Scarlett studied the man for a moment before shifting her eyes to the duke. “What do you intend to do?” she asked.

The duke fixed her with a direct gaze. "Is it not obvious? This corruption has been festering within my domain for Ittar knows how long, but we have only just now uncovered it. It is my duty to handle it in whatever way I can, and that includes any individuals responsible for the situation. If there is a network of demon-cooperators and their sympathizers in that village, I will ensure that each one faces justice."

Scarlett's own gaze remained on him for several seconds before she lowered her head slightly in a nod. "I suppose you are right." She fell silent for a moment before continuing. "In that case, I would like to make a request."

"And what might that be?" the duke asked.

"Allow me to join Sir Home and his men on their mission to Crowcairn."

The man's eyebrows shot up as he regarded her. "...Why?"

"I have prior experience dealing with demons and their kind. As a member of the empire's nobility, I cannot simply ignore a matter of this magnitude."

"This matter is far too delicate. I cannot permit outsiders to interfere simply because of that. While I will offer you my thanks for your role in bringing this situation to my attention, this is the extent of your involvement."

"I assure you that I will in no way hinder your people's efforts. In fact, I suspect my expertise and abilities could prove invaluable. And there will be no risk of my sustaining any injuries and the blame falling upon you, if that was one of your concerns. I am more than capable of protecting myself, as Sir Home might be able to attest."

Duke Valentino turned to Sir Home, who offered a single nod.

"Baroness Hartford is a highly skilled mage, Your Grace. She was the one who slew the demon during our battle."

The duke's eyes widened slightly.

"I will clarify that I merely finished it off," Scarlett said. "By then, the demon had already sustained grievous injuries at the hands of Sir Home and his men, so it would only have been a matter of time until it perished. I am proficient at magic, but please do not misconstrue that as me single-handedly neutralizing a threat on the scale of a dragon."

"While that is true, from what I have observed, she is likely more skilled than any of the mages under my command," Sir Home added. "Without her and her companions' assistance at the end, many more of my people would have been seriously injured or killed. If we are to face more demons, I believe her aid could be a great boon, Your Grace."

Scarlett glanced at the aging knight. The man didn't even look at her as he spoke, his gaze aimed straight ahead towards the duke. Still, that was some pretty glowing praise, considering he likely harbored some resentment towards her for not providing more help than she did.

Well, not that what he thought of her mattered that much. As long as he didn't outright protest against her joining them.

She returned her attention to Duke Valentino, who had been studying her for a while. Finally, the man spoke. "Perhaps some of those rumors circulating about you aren't as exaggerated after all, Baroness."

She met his gaze, wondering exactly which rumors he was referring to. Lately, it felt like her name was gaining more and more attention in noble circles, but she never knew the specifics of what was said. Maybe she could check with Evelyne when she returned to Freybrook to see if the younger woman knew. Or perhaps she could send a letter to Lady Withersworth, who would undoubtedly be well-informed about such matters and might appreciate Scarlett's continued correspondence.

"I will allow you to accompany Captain Home and his men," the duke continued after a while. "...If you are indeed experienced in dealing with demons, then I welcome your assistance. However, I must ask, where have you encountered demons before?"

"The specifics of my experience on the matter are a topic for another time," Scarlett replied. "Suffice it to say, one encounters a multitude of challenges and useful information when immersed in the type of research and activities that have occupied my recent months. You are already aware of some of it related to the Zuver."

The duke let out a soft huff, as if he had expected a more in-depth answer than that, but he then turned to Sir Home, seeming to realize something as he scrutinized the knight captain. "...It's unfortunate that I must burden you with this responsibility immediately after the ordeal you just returned from, Captain. For that, you have my apologies. But you understand the severity of the situation just as well as I do, so ensure that you handle it swiftly and return to enjoy your rest after that."

Scarlett also glanced over to eye Sir Home. He did appear slightly worn out after the night's events, but honestly, she was impressed with how well he seemed to have recovered compared to his state immediately after the battle. If she had been in his condition, she wouldn't have been surprised if she had needed a week and a half of bed rest, even with access to healing magic.

"That I will," the knight declared firmly.

"Then is there anything more we need to discuss before you leave?" the duke asked.

Sir Home's forehead creased together as something seemed to cross his mind. "While I fully intend to carry out your orders as given, Your Grace, I feel I must ask: shouldn't we also seek assistance from the Followers of Ittar? Considering the circumstances, the Dawnbringers would be an invaluable asset if the situation escalated beyond our control."

"I will forward a request to them," the duke said. "But I am reluctant to risk the demons evading capture or escaping while we wait for the Followers to act. Gathering a substantial force would take too long. That is why I want you to deal with it to the best of your abilities. If it becomes insurmountable, however, we will have to rely on them as reinforcements. In

such a scenario, you should at least assess the situation so that we know what we are dealing with.”

“Very well,” Sir Home replied.

The duke returned his attention to Scarlett, studying her once more. “...We shall discuss the details regarding the compensation for your assistance in vanquishing the demon and addressing this other issue once all of this is resolved. I heard that the demons made off with the heart of our alleged ‘dragon’, after all, so I suppose you’ll have other requests in exchange.”

A slight smile graced Scarlett’s lips. “I eagerly await that discussion, Your Grace.”

The man simply grumbled, offering no further response.

After that, Scarlett and Sir Home left the duke’s office, with the knight captain mentioning that he would find and assemble the men prepared by the duke before their departure. Meanwhile, Scarlett went in search of her own party.

Allyssa and the others were waiting in a reception room within the duke’s manor when she found them. It was a chamber with minimal decorations, but it seemed suitable for hosting less important guests for shorter durations. Her party members were seated on a couch with a small table before them, adorned with modest refreshments and drinks, prepared in advance by the duke’s servants.

Scarlett sat down on an armchair across from them and began explaining the situation.

“So we’re leaving immediately?” Allyssa asked once she had finished.

“As soon as Sir Home and his men are ready, yes,” Scarlett answered, taking a moment to pour herself a cup of tea. It seemed she wouldn’t have time for a proper meal until this situation was resolved.

“Where is Crowcairn?”

Scarlett tested the tea’s temperature, adjusting it to her liking with her pyrokinesis. “It is located near the swamp where we fought the demon.”

Allyssa fiddled with a strand of her golden hair, her other hand holding her brown leather goggles. Her expression carried a hint of concern. “And they’re really certain that those smaller demons are hiding there?”

“Certain? No.” Scarlett sipped her tea. “However, it is the only lead they have to follow. I do agree with them that it does seem like a plausible scenario. I trust that I do not have to explain to you the potential consequences if demons are allowed to roam freely in the countryside.”

Allyssa shook her head. “No, I get it. It’s not like we can ignore something like this. In fact, I’m surprised the duke isn’t involving the Shields Guild, given how serious all of this is. I get that all the branches are super busy right now, but this is an emergency.”

Scarlett glanced over at the girl over her teacup. "I believe I understand his reasoning well enough."

Allyssa just looked puzzled at that, while Shin regarded Scarlett with a severe expression.

"The duke is considering the possibility that the entire village may be dealing with the demons," the young man said after a while. "...And like Scarlett said, it's his duty to 'deal' with the situation, regardless of the circumstances. The Guild might not agree with what that might mean."

Allyssa froze, one finger curled around her hair. She stared at Shin, then turned to Scarlett. "That can't be true, can it?"

Scarlett simply met her gaze, not saying anything.

The girls' eyes widened. "We're talking about an entire village of people. Surely he can't seriously be considering *killing* them all? There's no way that's legal!"

"If all of them are involved in summoning and making pacts with demons, it would be viewed as the lawful execution of dangerous criminals," Scarlett said, maintaining a dispassionate tone. "I do not know what else you would expect."

For a moment, Allyssa seemed genuinely shocked by her words. "...Anything else but *that*. That's only something a tyrant would do."

"Perhaps. But in such a scenario, the duke would be well within his rights to do so. Of course, there is no guarantee that all the villagers are involved, so this is all mere conjecture."

Scarlett knew for a fact that the village itself wasn't really 'involved' with Malachi's demons, but she supposed that distinction didn't really matter much. The truth wasn't much better, at least from the perspective of an imperial noble.

Allyssa looked at her with narrowed eyes. "But you're talking as if it *isn't*."

Scarlett remained silent for a few seconds, sipping her tea and indifferently. "If you prefer to stay in Bridgespell for this expedition, you are more than welcome to do so. With Sir Home and his men present, it is unlikely that I will require your specific services this time. The same goes for you, Shin."

While she wouldn't stop them from going if they really wanted to, it might be best for both of them if they didn't. Scarlett herself might not be affected by such things, but the same couldn't be said for everyone.

Both Shielders looked at her. Allyssa wore her emotions openly on her face, while Shin appeared to be trying to gauge Scarlett's intentions.

"Can I also decide not to go?" Fynn suddenly said.

Scarlett blinked, turning her to the white-haired young man. "You wish to remain behind?"

He shook his head. “No, but clearly you don’t want to go.”

She frowned. “I do not understand what you mean by that. As I have already informed you, I have every intention of accompanying the duke’s men when they depart.”

“But you’re angry.”

“Angry?” She set her teacup on the table before her, leveling a sharp gaze at Fynn. “I am not angry.”

Surprisingly, she found herself slightly *annoyed* by his claim.

“You are,” Fynn said. “You’ve been angry ever since this morning, when we first heard about the demons near Crowcairn.”

“I have not—” Scarlett paused, staring at him. Her brows furrowed even deeper as she actually considered his words. He wasn’t entirely wrong. She wasn’t *angry*, but...there had been something gnawing at her ever since she realized that Malachi had deliberately framed the villagers. She initially thought it was irritation at the woman doing exactly what Scarlett herself had chosen *not to*, rendering her restraint futile, but now that she truly thought about it, that wasn’t the case. This was something else.

If she were to put it into words, it was *distaste*.

Strange, considering things. Even stranger that she hadn’t even realized what it was until now.

And here she was, thinking she had finally started getting a hang of her own emotions as Scarlett.

She shook her head slowly, returning her focus to Fynn. “You are not entirely mistaken, but no, I am not angry. As for whether I wish to go or not, that matter is not up for debate. I *must* go, and that is that.”

Fynn studied her silently for several seconds before nodding. “Alright. Then I’m going as well.”

“Good.” Scarlett turned to Allyssa and Shin. “And you two?”

“...*If* the duke’s men decide that all the villagers are guilty, will they really try to kill them?” Allyssa asked.

“That is not a question I can provide a definitive answer to, but it would not surprise me.”

“Couldn’t you stop them?”

“I...” Scarlett pressed her lips together. Her intention had been to answer with a simple ‘no’, but for some reason, the word hadn’t left her mouth. Instead, that strange distaste reared its head, clamoring for her attention like a persistent bug. “...I do not see how I could,” she eventually said.

“I see.” Allyssa wore a complicated expression as her gaze dropped downwards. “I’ll...I’ll think about it. Just until we leave. Sorry, is that okay?”

“That is perfectly fine,” Scarlett said. She then looked at Shin.

“I’ll go if she goes,” he stated.

Scarlett nodded. “I suspected as much. Simply ensure that you make your decisions soon, and that you understand the gravity of the situation before doing so. I trust that you will be able to choose what is best for you.”

Meanwhile, Scarlett would make the choice that was best for *her*. And in this context, that meant what was best for Rosa.

That said, she might have to reconsider a bit exactly what that meant.