

Chapter 101

GRAND LORD VLADYA

"This has never happened before in our history. This... coming back from a feral state. How did I return?" Daemonikai pulled back, his gaze sharpened, filled with seriousness.

Vladya was beginning to suspect he might have an inkling as to why. But he still needed confirmation. "I'm not entirely certain myself. How much do you remember?"

"Very little." The grand king pressed a hand to his forehead, a frown creasing his brow. "It's all... hazy. Like an empty space in my mind, filled with a dense fog. All I was aware of was the passage of time."

"Nothing else?" Vladya pressed, his lips thinning. "You have no memory of my visits? Not even a flicker of recognition?"

"Nothing," Daemon admitted, "Perhaps it will all return with time. I still can't fathom it... to think five hundred years have passed since..." His voice trailed off, the pain of his loss evident in his eyes.

A tense silence stretched between them.

"What was it like? Being feral?" Vladya asked.

Daemonikai pondered the question. "Numb." He paused, as if searching for the right words. "Blank. It's difficult to describe."

Considering that Vladya was headed down that path, perhaps numbness wouldn't be such a terrible fate. If they let him live long enough to experience it, that is.

Ferals were killed on sight; they are simply too dangerous. The grand king was an anomaly, no one was ready to let go.

"It's late," Vladya announced, breaking the silence. "You need rest to recover. I'll take my leave."

His friend gave a nod, a weary acceptance in his eyes. "Very well. I will see you at sunrise."

Vladya reached the door, then paused, turning back. "Daemon?"

He looked up.

"I am sorry about your family. I know it would not ease your pain, but..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

Daemonikai swallowed tightly. "I am sorry about Tiara, too."

Vladya nodded, his throat clogged again. "Thank you for not dying on me." With that, he turned and left the chamber.

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GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

Alone, Daemonikai gazed up at the sky, observing the luminous quarter moon casting an ethereal glow upon the land. He lost himself in the endless expanse above, counting the stars in a futile attempt to escape the whispers of the memories.

Yet, try as he might, he could not silence them. Images surfaced with agonizing clarity, their faces etched in his mind.

Though the scent of Evie had long since faded, it made no difference. He was certain her fragrance still clung to the garments hidden away in their closet. Daemonikai would need to change the royal residence. Everywhere he looked, he was reminded of her. Everywhere.

How does one begin to let go of their other half? How does one learn to live without the one who has been their constant companion for over four thousand years?

The weight of his loss pressed down upon him, suffocating him with its unbearable heaviness. Stop thinking. Shut it off.

He had not been entirely truthful with Vladya.

He remembered something, a fragment of memory that lingered. A scent. An intoxicating, alluring scent.

The details were hazy, a fleeting impression he could not quite grasp. He knew he would not recognize it if he smelled it again, but the memory of its uniqueness remained. It was not Vladya's scent either. Whose was it?

Was it merely a figment of his broken mind?

With a heavy sigh, he turned away from the window, footsteps soft as he made his way towards the bed. Yet sleep refused to come.

Hours drifted by in a restless vigil.

Daemonikai did not mind. He would rather remain awake than have nightmares assail him once more.

His people needed him. For their sake, he would find strength.

GRAND LORD ZAIPER

Hours had passed, yet Zaiper remained trapped in a numbing fog of disbelief.

He moved through the motions like a hollow shell. It was as if some invisible puppeteer pulled his strings, leaving him to stumble through the night like a marionette.

He remembered smiling, clapping alongside the others when Daemonikai had risen. He hoped his smile had appeared genuine, that it looked convincing. That no one glimpsed the misery gnawing at his soul.

As they had escorted Daemonikai from the arena to the fortress, Zaiper hoped his trembling knees and bloodshot eyes had gone unnoticed. He could not recall the last time he had felt such profound anguish, such raw pain. He clutched his chest, overwhelmed by the agony.

Daemonikai was supposed to be dead. The finale of months of meticulous plotting. That was the plan. Tonight was meant to be his night of victory.

How had he survived? How had he escaped the clutches of feral madness?

"My Lord," a hesitant voice intruded upon his torment.

"Out, Razart," Zaiper growled, his head still lowered.

The door opened and closed with a soft click, leaving him alone with his despair.

He stared blankly ahead, his mind a maelstrom of confusion and anger. Nothing made sense anymore. Absolutely nothing. He should have struck sooner. Should have eliminated Daemonikai days ago.

Everything had been for nothing. For nothing!

Tears welled in his eyes, hot and bitter.

A strangled sob escaped his throat, the sound echoing in the empty chamber as he began to weep.

EMERIEL

Three days later.

Emeriel and a group of fellow garden slaves were transported to a new land to work. The uncultivated land was filled with a canvas of native grasses, stubborn shrubs, fertile dirt, unruly weeds, vibrant wildflowers, and sporadic trees.

The slave master's command was clear: they were to clear this wilderness and transform it into a magnificent garden.

Some were tasked with the labor of felling trees and clearing away rocks and stones, while the others were assigned other less complex duties.

Emeriel crouched low, diligently uprooting weeds. His thoughts drifted back to the events of the past few days.

He had responded to Lord Vladya's summons, as commanded, only to be informed that the grand lord had left for court. And was instructed to await another summons whenever Lord Vladya was available. Three days had passed, and still, no word had come.

Whispers through the grapevine said the grand lords were preoccupied with matters of the court, particularly in light of King Daemonikai's return. Today, an emergency meeting had been convened in the Grand High Court.

My beast.

But he would have to adjust, would he not? To think of him as King Daemonikai now, even in the privacy of his own thoughts. Calling him "my beast" aloud would be a grave mistake.