

Chapter 118

"It began two months ago. I nearly attacked Sinai for touching me."

"Everyone's touch?"

A curt nod.

Vladya did not like that. He did not like that at all. "You are aware of what this means, don't you? You are building boundaries. Isolating yourself from all of us. That severe misery state where people begin to build walls around themselves, keeping their loved ones and the rest of the world away. You know how ugly it can get. Fight it, Daemonikai."

But Daemonikai remained silent, his gaze fixed on the silhouette of the fortress.

Vladya did not push. He felt like a hypocrite, urging his friend to battle demons he himself had long surrendered to.

"The scar on your face. Did you get it that night of the Eclipse Moon?" Daemonikai asked, changing the subject.

"Nope. Your beast did that," Vladya said in a casual, light tone. "Turns out it is true what they say, a feral knows no friend from foe, and a feral fights to kill."

Daemon was not amused. "I apologize." His lips turned down in displeasure, a shadow of regret passing over his features.

Vladya waved off the apology. "Are you sleeping better now?"

"I am truly sorry, Vlad," Daemon repeated, the guilt plain in his voice.

"Take a hint, old man. I am trying to change the subject here," Vladya said, dryly. "Are those nightmares still plaguing you?"

Daemonikai sighed, nodding reluctantly. "I do not mind. Better to stay awake than to relive those moments. So, who is she? The female you fed from? The one who quenched your thirst?"

"She did not quench my thirst,"

"Fine, the one who nearly quenched your thirst," Daemonikai amended with a wry grin.

Vladya rolled his eyes. "She is okay, I guess. She got a bit... high, so I had Yaz take her to her room to sleep it off."

Daemonikai paused, his interest piqued. "How high?"

High as a belfry, Vladya thought, remembering the intoxicating scent of her blood, the way her body responded to his touch. If I had not stopped, I could have brought her to multiple orgasms with just my fangs.

"Really high." was all he said aloud.

"Hmm. Interesting," the grand king mused. "I haven't seen that in a while. Sleepy, aroused, but not fully intoxicated."

I have. Emeriel got high when you drank from her the night before your return.

"Daemon?" Vladya called.

"Mmm?"

"Hypothetically speaking, if your Soulbond were to suddenly appear, how would you feel?"

Few seconds passed.

Daemonikai scoffed. "Soulbonds are practically extinct. It is pointless to ponder the impossible."

"Humor me," Vladya persisted. "If she were to appear before you right now, what would your reaction be?"

Daemonikai's eyes lifted towards the stars glittering above.

"I hope it never happens," he finally said. "I do not have the capacity for another bond right now, not even with my Soulbond. I am grateful such a female does not exist because then I would not have to choose to let the person go."

Vladya nodded, a flicker of sadness crossing his face.

He had suspected as much, but hearing it voiced aloud was a stark reminder of how deep Daemonikai's grief ran. How raw his pain was.

Daemonikai looked at the sky as if the vastness mirrored the emptiness inside him. Then he stood to leave.

When they reached the fortress, Vladya paused at the intersection where their paths diverged.

"Feed, Daemon," he urged. "Two months is a long time not to feed during recovery. It is better to nourish yourself with your bloodhost than to drain countless others and remain unfulfilled. Even if her touch is unbearable, do it anyway. For your own well-being. Pretend she is Evielyn, if you must. Just call your bloodhost and feed."

Daemonikai stared into the distance, his silence hung in the air, stretching taut. Finally, he gave a single, sharp nod.

Relief softened Vladya's features. "Thank you, Your Grace," he murmured, smiling a little.

"Cheeky bastard," Daemonikai said with a good-natured snort, before he turned and strode away towards the Southern Wing.

EMERIEL

Emeriel hurried towards the kitchen, a knot of anxiety tightening in her stomach.

Madam Livia had summoned her, and it was her first time venturing to this part of the fortress. If not for the helpful kitchen hand guiding her, she would still be lost in the maze-like corridors.

Her mind dwelled on Lord Herod's words about the impending full heat. She had tried to distract herself all day, but the worry gnawed at her. Aekeira would have offered comfort, but her elder sister was asleep when Emeriel checked and she couldn't bring herself to disturb her.

The kitchen doors swung open, revealing a whirlwind of controlled chaos. Urekai maids rushed about with buckets of water, male servants lugged piles of firewood, all dodging the stern-faced kitchen mistress who barked orders like a seasoned general.

A sweating cook labored over a roaring fire, turning a spit-roasted boar. Another pounded herbs in a worn stone mortar, the fragrant scent of rosemary and thyme cutting through the smoky air. Pots bubbled on the hearth, their contents a mystery.

A wave of nerves washed over Emeriel as she navigated the bustling kitchen. But then she spotted Madam Livia, meticulously arranging silver platters on a long wooden table, and a sigh of relief escaped her lips.

"Emeriel," Madam Livia called, her voice cutting through the din.

Emeriel bowed. "You sent for me, madam?"

"Indeed. You will be assisting with dinner service. We are running short of Urekai servants due to the Lantern Festival preparations."

"Yes, madam," Emeriel replied, "Where will I be assigned?"

"The Southern Wing," Madam Livia answered without hesitation. "The Grand King's royal residence."

Emeriel's heart skipped a beat, a sliver of unease creeping up her spine. Surely, the head maid did not mean...

"You mean his territory, right? I will be serving the soldiers stationed around Frostfall?" Emeriel asked, just to clarify. Please, say yes.

Madam Livia paused, her gaze piercing Emeriel's. "In case you haven't noticed, this is a private kitchen. Exclusively for the rulers. Only Urekai are permitted here. You and I are present because I willed it so."

Emeriel noticed. She swallowed tightly. "I will be serving in the r-royal residence? You mean, the g-grand king?" Please, say no.

"Unless another ruler has taken up residence in the Southern Wing, yes," Madam Livia replied dryly. "Now stop dawdling and get to work."

Emeriel stood rooted to the spot. "But, but, I cannot! You know what Lord Vladya—"

"Lord Vladya is not here now, and Lord Vladya is not the head of maids. I am," Madam Livia insisted, her tone brooking no argument. "Besides, you are wearing scent suppressants. It should not be a problem."

Emeriel shuffled from one foot to another, her heart pounding. Holy Doly! She wants me to serve the grand king.

The older woman's face softened. "It is time you met the male whose life you saved, Emeriel, do you not think?"

I met him this morning. We walked together. He scented me, and I yearned for his touch...

She could have said all that. She knew that if she did, Madam Livia might withdraw her help.

And she was indeed trying to 'help', however unconventional.

But Emeriel did not.

"As you wish, Madam Livia."

Moments later, as Emeriel joined in the line of Urekai maids, a mix of excitement and fear pulsed through her.

She was going to see her Beloved again. Tonight.