

Chapter 143

Then, there was Evie's persuasive insistence.

"A female's first heat is a delicate situation," she would remind him. "Scared, panicked, the girl is unsure of what to expect. They need to be with someone they not only trust but feel safe with. That young one chose you, my dearest. Trying to find them a compatible male is not only needless but futile and time-wasting. Every moment you are not there, that girl is not only terrified, but in severe pain."

His bondmate had been right, of course. And so, Daemonikai had always been there to help.

He made sure not to take their heats for granted, treating them with respect, making their first heat a memorable one. He had seen many first heats in his long life, he couldn't put a face to most of them anymore.

But this one was different. This one felt different.

Daemonikai reached out, unable to resist the urge to touch. Gently, he combed his fingers through her silken hair. Cool and fine as moon-spun silk, they slid through his fingers like water.

Galilea was his first Syren. And, more importantly, the first female to trigger his rut before he'd even touched her.

Usually, Daemonikai needed to mount them before his primal instincts kicked in as if to assess, 'Do we care about her? Alright then.' But this...this had never happened before, not even with Evie.

"Oh, you are so defective, my dear mate," Evie used to tease him early in their bonding. He could still remember her soft laughter as she shook her head, patting his cheek. "Do not worry, I love you like that."

It used to bother him that his rut didn't trigger for his own bondmate unless he mounted her first, but thankfully, that changed two millennia later. Yet, this young Syren...

Daemonikai's eyes traced the delicate lines of her face, the long lashes resting on flushed cheeks, the bow-shaped lips slightly parted in sleep. She was so young, a mere fledgling compared to his ancient self. He felt a pang of guilt for having touched her at all.

An Urekai youngling would have been fifty to eighty years old before experiencing their first heat, remaining a youngling until at least two hundred. But Galilea...the girl didn't look to be a day over nineteen.

What the hell was Mother Nature doing to burden such a young creature with the tumultuous changes of Syrenhood and then thrust her into the fiery furnace of a full heat?

Herodis must have triggered her Syren traits. A knot of jealousy in his gut, an emotion he quickly buried. He liked Galilea, probably more than he liked any other female at the moment, but she was not his. Nor did he want her to be.

The nightmares had awakened him, and he had almost killed her. Each day, the shadows in his heart grew darker. More menacing. It was...troubling.

Where was it leading to? What would happen when he could no longer contain this darkness?

And he still needed to track Vladya.

With a sigh, Daemonikai rose from his seat and dressed quietly.

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AEKERIA

Aekeira was fraught with worry. Em was late. Worryingly late.

She was supposed to have returned yesterday, but there was no sign of her.

With Amie's help, they covered Emeriel's chores to avoid drawing attention to her absence, but with each passing hour, Aekeira's restlessness increased. She had slept horribly, like a restless spirit, tossing and turning throughout the night.

Where was Em? Was she safe?

"I can't just stay here and do nothing." Aekeira paced. "What if it's her full heat? What if she's scared? What if she needs me?"

"You needn't worry so much," Amie said. "I'm sure she is with the kind high lord. She is safe with him."

"I can't help but worry, especially if she's in heat." Aekeira shook her head, filled with so much concern. Em's upcoming heat had been a source of fear for Aekeira for so long, though she tried to hide it. To be strong for Em. "She's going to be so scared. I need to be sure she's okay."

Amie's brow furrowed. "How exactly do you plan to do that? You cannot sneak out of the fortress. Slave master Tyke will find out."

Right. That cruel Urekai hated her. Ever since Lady Marilyn had saved her from his whip, his animosity towards her had worsened. Today, he'd piled on a mountain of chores for her. Leaving the fortress would undoubtedly invite his wrath.

"And, you can't go to Lord Vladya," Amie added. "Word is, he's not yet back to the fortress."

Aekeira's gaze fell, trying to hide the conflicting emotions spreading through them. She had tried not to think of him these past few days. But, deep down, she worried. Was he in the woods again? Was it voluntary, or was it the feral madness?

With a heavy sigh, Aekeira forced herself to sit on her bed, the worry twisting her insides into knots. It wasn't just Em she feared for. She also feared for the male who had insinuated himself into her life and thoughts, refusing to leave.

Is Em safe?

Is Lord Vladya safe?

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GRAND LORD VLADYA

Grand Lord Vladya stirred, disoriented. The air hung heavy with the damp scent of moss and earth. The rhythmic drip... drip... drip... of water off the cavern walls. He blinked, his eyes adjusting to the dim light filtering through a crack in the rock ceiling.

This time, it was the cave.

Not just in any cave, but one on the outskirts of Urai. Vladya had no memory of how he ended up here, miles from the border. His last recollection was sparring with his soldiers in the training yard. And...nothing.

His head throbbed with a familiar, agonizing pain. Rising unsteadily, he stumbled towards the cave's entrance. His clothes were caked in dirt, as if he had run through every forest in the kingdom before finding refuge in this cavern.

Outside, the sky was ablaze with the golden hues of dawn, the bright sunlight piercing his eyes painfully. Had he been unconscious for a day? Weeks?

He reached for a messenger bird perched on a nearby branch, murmuring a few hushed words before sending it off. Returning to the cave, he sank down onto a moss-covered boulder, clutching his aching head in his hands. And, waited.

"Your Highness?" Yaz's voice broke through the haze of pain. How much time had passed?

"In here," he rasped, his throat dry and scratchy.

Yaz appeared at the cave entrance, flanked by two soldiers loaded with supplies. Vladya accepted the offered waterskin, splashing the cool liquid over his face and neck.

"How long was I gone?" he asked Yaz as they made their way out of the cave, his voice still rough.

"Two days, my Lord," Yaz said, concern coating his tone.

Damn it. Daemonikai would have noticed his absence by now.

"My Lord?"

"What is it, Yaz?"

"Permission to ask—"

"Denied."

"Your Highness..."

"I do not want to hear it." Vladya knew Yaz was very worried about him, but he did not want to deal with Yaz's worry right now.

If he were lucky, he would not have to deal with anybody's worry.

He simply wanted to get back to his abode, have the healer prescribe something new for his headaches.

Because, apparently, the current so-called medicinal concoctions he'd been taking were nonsensically ineffective.