

Chapter 144

At the fortress, he passed through the familiar intersection and was almost at Blackstone when he heard a familiar voice.

"Lord Vladya?"

Vladya did not turn. "Not now, Ottai."

"Yes, now," his friend insisted, his voice firm. "And if you do not grant me your time, I shall follow you all the way to Blackstone. And mark my words, I shall plague you until you give in."

Vladya stopped with a resigned sigh.

"Figured as much. Everyone, leave," Ottai ordered. Within seconds, the meeting of paths was deserted, except for the two of them.

"It is the madness, is it not? It creeps closer. Tell me what troubles you, Vlad."

Vladya met his gaze. "Nothing."

"You know better than to lie to me," Ottai hissed, stepping closer, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You vanished for days, now you return with bloodshot eyes, as if you haven't slept in weeks."

"Fine. It's the madness. I lost track of time. Zoned out for days." He stated bluntly. "What are you going to do about it?"

Ottai paled, his anger replaced with a wave of pity and sorrow. "Vlad..."

Vladya turned and began to walk away, unable to bear the weight of his friend's concern.

"Tell Daemon about this. Please." Ottai's plea hung in the air.

Vladya stopped, whirling around. "And what difference would it make? He already contends with enough burdens. He does not need the weight of my own struggles."

"Is that what you tell yourself? You think the grand king will not wish to know that his closest companion is battling feral madness? Since when do you lie to yourself?"

Vladya rubbed his throbbing temples. "I have a headache the size of a dragon's egg, I cannot do this right now."

"He sought you. Repeatedly. He even left to hunt for you, before news arrived that he had to attend to some urgent matters for days."

"What urgent matters?"

"I know not. My point is, you must tell him." Ottai pinned him with a stern look. "If you do not tell him, I will."

Anger flashed in Vladya's eyes. "Why is it so important to you?"

"You think I do not know what you are doing?" Ottai shot back, anger mirroring Vladya's own. "Your sanity deteriorates rapidly because you are not fighting this. You are NOT putting up a fight. You think I will let you? You think I would let you run away like a coward?" He closed the distance between them, jabbing a finger into Vladya's chest. "Think again! I. Will. Not. Let. You."

Vladya blinked slowly. For a man who rarely lost his composure, Ottai was truly furious.

"So, you either tell him, or I will. Do you hear me, Vladya?" With those final words, Ottai turned heading towards Mabblewood.

Vladya took a deep breath. His headache worsened.

GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

Leaving was much more difficult than Daemonikai had expected.

He had been in the woods for a while now, their towering pines looming over him, their earthy scent of moss and decaying leaves mingling with the crisp tang of pine resin, filling his nostrils.

Daemonikai would like to tell himself that he was out here hunting his best friend, but he was a male who rarely lied to himself.

You left her in her first heat, all alone.

She is not alone. Her male is right there with her.

His beast snarled. That ugly feeling of jealousy rose again.

He squashed it yet again. The girl had him so distracted, he could barely see straight.

Daemonikai could not remember being so out of control. It had been so long; it felt really strange right now. Strange and uncomfortable.

His chest felt tight, painful, as if he were feeling someone else's agony. Ridiculous.

His family was gone; he had no personal attachment to anyone else. Rubbing his chest absently, he rounded a grove of ancient oaks trailing Vladya's scent.

His rut was getting in the way of his tracking. The girl's scent was all he could think about.

Stopping, he squeezed his eyes closed, filling his lungs with deep fresh air, attempting to think of what could be wrong with Vladya. Daemonikai tried not to worry, but it was becoming hard not to.

Even when breaking the laws he helped create, Vladya would typically confess his wrongs bluntly, leaving Daemonikai to clean up the mess.

Was Herodis around?

His eyes snapped open. He had left in such a hurry, fighting his instincts tooth and nail, that he hadn't even stopped to confirm the Lord of Agriculture's whereabouts.

Of course, he's at home. His female is in heat; where would he go?

But you took her away. What if he is off to his duties? He expects her to be in good hands, after all.

Now, he was also arguing with himself. Great. Very mature.

Daemonikai exhaled, walking and sniffing. The girl had him wound so tight, even the smallest task was difficult. Never before had he experienced such uncertainty leaving a female after her heat.

But this is not after heat, was it? What if the heat waves were back? What if she was suffering right now?

"I can smell you, Wegai," Daemonikai's voice cut through the silence of the woods. "You can stop hiding in the trees now."

The rustle of leaves and the snap of a twig preceded Wegai's appearance from behind an oak tree. His expression stoic and impassive, all professional, as usual. "Your Grace."

Daemonikai resumed his stride, hands clasped behind his back. "You have become rusty. You used to be able to tail me for a few hours before I caught you. I thought I instructed you not to follow?"

"I apologize, Your Grace." Wegai's voice was steady, betraying none of the defiance Daemonikai knew simmered beneath the surface.

"Are you sorry?"

"No, I'm not," Wegai replied, coolly.

His general was a stickler for laws and order, but he tended to disobey direct orders when they involved him staying put while Daemonikai moved around unprotected. It was a familiar dance between them. Daemonikai was used to it.

"You were keeping guard all night at the high lord's estate?" Daemonikai asked.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Is Herodis home at the moment?"

"No, he left early this morning. There was a fire in one of the barns at Brookwood. He has gone to investigate."

Daemonikai's muscles tensed, as he came to a stop. "What? Who is with the girl?"

Wegai hesitated. "I wondered if I should bring it up," he began cautiously. "The girl was in a lot of pain after you left. I think it's the heat waves."

A vice-like grip tightened around Daemonikai's heart. The usually familiar landscape blurred around the edges, and his beast roared. Jumping and banging its head against the walls of his chest, snarling like a rabid dog.

The image of Galilea, alone and suffering a heat contraction, filled his mind, igniting a rage he could barely contain. He hurt.

Daemonikai whirled around, starting back towards the estate before he could think.

His pace quickened with each step.

Then, he was running.