

Chapter 178

"I find that hard to believe." Zaiper sputtered, his voice thick with indignation.

"She went into heat her first night in Ravenshadow, Zaiper." An arrogant smirk played at the corners of Vladya's lips, because he simply couldn't help himself. He was enjoying messing with Zaiper too much. "It's really impossible to hide one's identity when heat is involved, don't you think?"

A noisy inhale swept through the crowd. Then, stunned silence.

"That's right," Daemonikai added. "She is also Syren."

The high lords looked utterly dumbfounded. For some, their anger melted away, replaced by a glimmer of hope. A could-she-be-mine kind of hope.

Even Ottai had his jaw on the ground before Vladya nudged him subtly.

The fourth ruler quickly recovered, adopting the expression of someone who had always been in the know.

Poor, cute Ottai. Vladya hid his amusement.

"That was why we had to conceal her identity," Vladya continued smoothly. "If she remained female and Syren, all of you would have been on her like bees to a carcass. One aspect had to be hidden to protect the other, and since she had lived as a boy her whole life, it was the easier choice."

"But why the secrecy?" High Lord Daryl's voice broke the silence. "Would it not have been better if we knew she was Syren? She might make a good bondmate to one of us. She might belong to one of us."

"She does. She belongs to me." Daemonikai's cold eyes stayed on Zaiper, his voice a possessive growl. "She was made for me. She is mine."

The air stilled around them.

"That's right," Vladya confirmed. "The girl is our grand king's Soulbond."

A catastrophic noise exploded through the courtyard, yet again, myriad expressions of shock displayed on everyone's faces.

But what truly caught his attention was the reaction of Daemonikai's bloodhost.

Mistress Sinai had gone deathly pale. Her grip on her maid's arm tightened until her knuckles turned white. She swayed on her feet, nearly collapsing, but her maid caught her, holding her upright.

Vladya almost felt sympathy for her. He knew Sinai had harbored feelings for Daemonikai for a very long time.

Turning back to the crowd, Vladya's voice cut through the din. "That is why we ordered her to remain a secret. If people discovered there was a Syren slave, she would be abducted and forced to endure countless bonding rituals born from desperation. Am I wrong?"

Several high lords cleared their throats, gazes of guilt averted. No, he was not wrong, and they all knew it.

Daemonikai moved forward, in his commanding presence. "Lord Vladya and Lord Ottai felt obligated to protect what is mine. They authorized her to keep her identity a secret, even when she did not wish to. It is not a crime to protect what belongs to us."

"I was not informed of this," Zaiper protested, bitterly. "It is still identity deception and fraud because I was not aware."

"Oh, come on now, second ruler. Everyone here knows how you cannot keep it in your pants. Almost lawless in that regard, really," Daemonikai insulted him bluntly.

Zaiper flushed a deep red with anger.

"As unmated as you are, you would have tried to claim her for yourself even before I arose." Daemonikai went on, unfazed. Then, he raised his voice. "That girl saved me. I was able to return from feral madness because of my Soulbond."

More shocked noises rippled through the crowd.

Emeriel whimpered, pressing closer to the grand king's back, as if seeking protection from the storm of attention.

"She nourished me through bloodfeeding, satisfied my sexlust, and she did it all willingly. She wished for me to live, worked hard for it, and for that, I am here today."

Vladya searched Daemonikai's face. His friend spoke with such conviction, yet had no memory of being feral. Did he even realize just how true his words were?

"This is too hard to believe," Zaiper spat, livid, and doing a poor job of hiding it.

"Why?" Daemonikai cocked his head to the side. "If I did not know better, I would say you hate that my Soulbond is alive, have always hated it even before today. It almost seems like you are dying to kill her even after all we've said. Why, Zaiper? Why are you so invested? Do you hate me that much to kill my Soulbond for no reason?"

It was a high accusation, one that could get Zaiper in serious troubles. Everyone went dead silent again.

The high lords exchanged shocked glances. All eyes rested on Zaiper, putting him on the spot like a sacrificial lamb.

"What is it that you have against me, Zaiper? It seemed like you weren't too thrilled about my return. With everything that's happening, I can't help but wonder why." Daemonikai paused, eyes blazing. "Do you wish I had never come back? Would you have preferred it if I had died?"

"No! I have no ill will against you! How c-could you say that!?" Zaiper eyes darted around nervously, seeking any sign of support. "Without a crime, I would never try to attack your Soulbond."

"Yet we tell you now why she is without crime, so why do you still persist?" Daemonikai doubled down, taking a menacing step towards the second ruler. "Do not think I haven't heard how you were most inclined to get rid of my feral beast. From all I heard, you were pretty obsessed about it. Tell me, Lord Zaiper, do you truly have no ill will against me?"

Brutal. When he wanted to be, the grand king could be absolutely merciless.

"No!!!" Zaiper's voice was a strangled cry, his eyes wide with panic.

The high lords watched him with growing suspicion, people staring at him with distrust. Disgust, even.

"Fine! The girl has no crime," Zaiper surrendered, words forced out through clenched teeth. "I retract my statements. There will be no executions, no dungeons."

Daemonikai whirled around, addressing the crowd. "My Soulbond just went through her first full heat. She is completely exhausted and should not have to go through this. I will take her inside now. This gathering is dismissed." He turned to a red-faced, frozen Emeriel. "Follow me."