

Chapter 181

Emeriel couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze. She stared at her hands as though they held all the answers to making the violent windstorm around her calm again. Picking up the spoon, she forced herself to take a small bite of food.

The moment the warm food hit her tongue, her stomach growled hungrily, reminding her just how long it had been since she last ate. So eat, she did. Slowly at first, but then hunger took over.

Emeriel devoured the meal as if it was her last. She barely noticed Lord Vladya watching her until the last crumb was gone. Then, reality came crashing back in.

"Are you here to punish me too?" she asked, defeated.

Lord Vladya's look remained steady. "Why?"

She shrugged, her hands dropping to her lap as she looked away. "You gave me instructions to avoid him, to never be found out."

"I also told you that fate was a fucking bitch who knows how to mess with people just to get a good laugh. You were never going to win against that bond." Lord Vladya tilted his head slightly. "Frankly, I'm surprised you managed to keep the secret for this long."

"It matters not, anymore." Emeriel glanced at her trembling hands, struggling to hold back tears. "Can I ask... is Aekeira alright? I have not seen her in days."

"She's fine." Lord Vladya's tone softened.

Silence settled between them, thick and heavy.

"Are you not going to ask how things are out there?" Lord Vladya said, his eyes narrowing. "Do you not have questions?"

"I do. I have a lot, but..." She cast a fleeting glance at him. "I wasn't sure you would answer them."

Lord Vladya leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs. "Ask."

"How is... everything out there?"

He remained quiet for so long, Emeriel began to wonder if he would answer at all.

"It could have been worse," he said at last. "For someone so small, you caused quite the stir."

Emeriel looked away.

"We have been doing damage control, but it has been a series of long, exhausting deliberations. The council is in uproar, but more concerning are the people. They are the most delicate problem we face."

Her heart sank. "The people?"

"They are demanding Daemonikai hand over your head on a silver platter," Lord Vladya's stated matter-of-factly.

The word sank in, and settled, like a dead body tied to a heavy rock and thrown into the river. The plate in front of her blurred.

"Some have threatened to go on a killing rampage if Daemonikai takes a human bondmate. The petitions are relentless. We are trying to manage the chaos as best we can, but it's been... challenging."

"And... Lord Herod?" Emeriel's voice was barely a whisper.

"You mean your betrothed?"

Now, the deafening silence was thick enough to feel. Emeriel had no energy left to defend herself, no strength to explain or plead her case. Exhaustion weighed down on her like a heavy cloak. She was beyond the point of caring about misunderstandings. In the past, she would have begged for reason, but now she was simply too tired to fight. So, so tired.

"What you did with him is none of my business," Lord Vladya finally said with a sigh. "However, I have a feeling Daemonikai would like to know. If you slept with him, don't bring it up unless asked. But if you didn't, tell him, even if he doesn't ask."

Emeriel nodded absently. She hadn't slept with Lord Herod. That much she could say without guilt. But the idea of facing King Daemonikai, of explaining anything to him, filled her with dread.

It went quiet again, awkward and uncomfortable. Emeriel could feel the grand lord's powerful presence. She didn't know how to act, what to say. She felt so small, so lost.

Finally, Lord Vladya rose from his seat.

"Eat well and sleep well. That too is a command."

Emeriel stood and bowed her head. "As you wish, Your Highness."

Why was it so hard to keep her composure? Why were her eyes swimming with unshed tears yet again?

It took everything in her not to break down in front of Lord Vladya. Stay strong, Emeriel, just a little longer.

As the grand lord walked halfway across the room, he paused. He turned fully to face her.

A light shone in his hard eyes. Kind and unexpected.

"Come here." His tone gentler than she had ever heard it. Then, his arms opened, awkwardly.

The last bit of her restraint shattered.

Emeriel didn't walk. She ran.

In a heartbeat, the distance between them closed and she threw herself into Lord Vladya's arms so hard, she heard him grunt.

The floodgates burst open once again, and tears poured, soaking his robes as she buried her face against him.

And Grand Lord Vladya let her.

He did not push her away. He let her cry, standing there like a solid pillar.

Emeriel wailed into his chest, her emotions pouring out in waves—fear, sadness, exhaustion, worry, pain, relief. A part of her couldn't believe this was happening, that Lord Vladya was letting her do this, but she didn't care anymore. She needed this. Needed to feel something other than the crushing weight of loneliness.

"Daemonikai needs... time," Lord Vladya said in a low tone. "Lots and lots of time. Fate is cruel to you both—forcing a Soulbond on a grieving male and making you go through all of this."

"What w-will happen to me, Lord Vladya?"

A long pause. So long.

"That is not for me to decide," Lord Vladya said at last. "But we are trying to keep you alive. You may be lonely now, but it is for the best. It may seem like you are being punished—and maybe there's some truth to that—but mostly, you are being protected. Our people want a piece of you, at all costs. For now, you are safer within these walls than out there."

She gave a nod and sniffled. "Thank you, Lord Vladya."

His hand rested on her head then patted her hair softly. "Give him time, young Emeriel. He will be here soon. Daemonikai... he cannot resist for long."