

Chapter 188

"No thanks. I already have my Monah," Gaff said, shaking his head. "I cannot imagine her dead, let alone being replaced by someone else. I would kill the person myself, human or Urekai."

"Well, let's not forget who saved your beloved Monah's life on the eclipse moon night," Belzebob grunted, casting Gaff a pointed look.

Gaff deflated like a festival balloon. "Every morning, I pray to Urai to bless King Daemonikai. I'm sure millions of us offer the same prayers." He downed his drink. "I just wish he could be happy again."

"Their bond must have a very strong pull for him to spend her heat with her," Jakal added thoughtfully, his brow furrowed. "Left to me, I'd say the girl should stay. Maybe she's exactly what he needs to heal. If I found a compatible soul, I don't care if she were human or witch, I wouldn't let her go."

Belzebob chuckled, casting a sidelong glance at Jakal. "Hard to believe you have grown tired of bachelorhood, Jakal. A hundred years ago, you were as determined to stay unattached as our esteemed second ruler here." He cast a fleeting glance at Zaiper. "Who would have thought you would talk about bonding with such wishfulness?"

Jakal smiled, raising his goblet in acknowledgment.

Belzebob turned his attention back to Zaiper. "And what about you, Your Highness? Should we expect you to bond anytime soon?"

Zaiper glanced up, suppressing his anger as he looked at their expectant faces. It sickened him how much they adored Daemonikai. Absolutely disgusting. To them, the male could do no wrong.

With the topic of discussion in court, he had expected allies when he invited them for a drink. Instead, he was surrounded by sycophants.

Plastering on a smile, Zaiper shook his head. "Not from me, no worries. Variety is the spice of life."

"Oh, Your Highness, you don't know what you're missing," Gaff drawled, swirling his nearly empty goblet. "Having a bondmate is everything. Your life feels... complete. I used to say the same as you, but after I got my Monah? It's been, what... three hundred years? And not a single female has ever made my eyes stray. None of them compare to her."

"Same with my Haigel. Eight hundred years together, and she's still my world." Belzebob beamed, his drunken eyes brightening. "I would die if I lost her. Just damn the world and kill myself."

"Sounds like brainwashing and bondage to me," Zaiper deadpanned, raising his goblet to his lips. "I love my freedom, gentlemen. I enjoy it."

Jakal sighed, a long and wistful sound. "I wish I had what you two have. Do you know what my greatest fear is?"

"Get me another flagon!" Gaff shouted, glaring at his empty goblet before glancing at Jakal. "Dying before you get a chance to meet your woman?"

"No, that's not it." Jakal hiccupped. "Becoming like Grand Lord Vladya." He grimaced. "No offense, Highness Zaiper."

For the first time that night, Zaiper's face broke into real amusement. "None taken. No one wants to be Vladya. That's the greatest curse a witch could ever put on anyone."

"You mean his string of failed bondings, right?" Belzebob shook his head, sympathy seeping into his tone. "I not only reject that fate for you, Jakal, but it's impossible to surpass his record. The average failed bonding is what, five? The third ruler has tripled that."

"Or quadrupled it," Zaiper added, chuckling. "It's hard to keep track with Vladya."

The others glanced at him, shifting uncomfortably. Clearly, they didn't find it as amusing as he did. Stuck-up fools.

Belzebob sighed. "It's hard to think the Skyvaktó bloodline will die with him. They are the strongest, right after the grand king's, ugh—"

He flinched as Gaff kicked him under the table. Belzebob's eyes widened in alarm. "And... an-and His Highness Zaiper's, of course!" he added quickly, followed by an awkward laugh.

Zaiper's smile had disappeared. He straightened in his seat. "Are you suggesting the Skyvaktó bloodline is stronger than Dragaxlov?"

"Ignore him. He's drunk," Gaff chuckled nervously.

"Yeah, ignore me," Belzebob said, clearly flustered. "I'm drunk."

"Everyone knows how strong your bloodline is, Your Highness," Jakal stated. "That's why you are the most feared ruler."

"And the most loved," Gaff added smoothly. "Our people whisper your name with reverence, Your Highness. Unlike Vladya, whom everyone pities. You are undoubtedly the best ruler we could ever ask for."

Zaiper's sharp gaze lingered on each of them, searching for any hint of deceit. But they seemed genuine.

Maybe they were right. Maybe he was the most loved. After all, what's not to love?

His anger faded, replaced by a smug grin. "Come on, let's not spoil the mood with such topics."

The tension around the table dissolved, and the others exhaled in relief, bursting into laughter. Jakal raised his glass high. "A toast—to the peace and continuous prosperity of our land. To Urai!"

"To Urai!" they chorused, clinking their glasses together.

The high lords continued conversing and laughing uproariously, but Zaiper remained quieter, nursing his drink. The joviality did little to ease him.

To think I've lost more of my men this year than in decades... all because of a tiny little human.

It was a good thing the others were too caught up in the drama to investigate who had tried to burn Emeriel. Zaiper might not have given the order himself, but Razarr did. If fingers pointed at Razarr, they pointed at him.

Daemonikai had made sure there would be no investigation by tearing them apart limb by limb and crushing their skulls, making them unidentifiable.

Why is it so hard to kill Emeriel? This was the fourth failed attempt.

Zaiper tipped his goblet back and drained what was left of his drink. Maybe it's for the best that she's leaving Urai.

EMERIEL

"Lord Vladya is avoiding me."

Emeriel swiveled her head to look at Aekeira, who was working on her chest-bind. "Are you sure? I think he might be quite busy with everything that's going on."

Aekeira's shoulders slumped. "Perhaps."

Emeriel had never imagined witnessing such a transformation in Aekeira. She had gone from openly despising Lord Vladya to expressing genuine concern for him, checking in on him, willingly bloodfeeding him, and constantly worrying about his well-being. It was as unbelievable as it was surreal.