

Chapter 242

The mix of scents made Daemonikai's investigation a maddening task. Incompetent fools.

If he'd known they'd only muddle the scene, he wouldn't have sent them to investigate in the first place.

Their footprints and scents cluttered every corner, making it harder than ever to sift out what truly mattered. But this wouldn't deter him.

Three hours later, he was still at the crime scene, having retraced every step Emeriel had taken.

He combed through the garden, over and over, with a thoroughness that bordered on obsession.

Yet, still, he found nothing.

Irritation gnawed at him as he prepared to repeat the search yet again.

This time, he shifted partially into his beast form to heighten his senses, focusing his nose to distinguish Emeriel's scent from the web of others clinging to the air. But still... nothing.

Very soon, dawn would break. It was time to return.

His instincts had been on edge all night from being away from Emeriel. She was safe, he knew, protected under Vladya's watch.

But while he trusted Vladya with his life, he didn't trust the voices in Vladya's head.

That risk alone had kept Daemonikai's nerves taut all night.

"Wegai," he called out.

His head soldier appeared instantly, having stayed close all night but wisely kept his distance as ordered.

"Your Grace." Wegai acknowledged with a bow.

"Gather the men. We're heading back."

They were near the garden's entrance when Daemonikai suddenly froze, his senses latching onto something.

A scent so faint it was almost a ghost in the air. But he would know that scent anywhere.

"No one moves," he ordered.

The soldiers stilled as he tracked the scent further into the garden.

There, on the concrete, a tiny drop of blood gleamed faintly in the shadows.

Daemonikai crouched, breathing the scent in deeply, letting it fill his lungs.

No, he hadn't been mistaken. It was Sinai's blood.

If it had been anyone else's, he might have missed it. From a distance, all blood smelled the same, it requires a level of closeness and familiarity to notice subtle differences.

This blood was one he knew intimately.

As familiar to him as his own, for he had lived on it, survived by it, for two thousand years.

What was Sinai's blood doing here?

"Wegai, come."

The soldier stepped up without hesitation.

"Go to the Ladies' Headquarters and issue an official arrest of Mistress Laelsienai," he ordered. "Do it now."

MISTRESS SINAI

"Hm, someone is quite pleased this morning," Daryl murmured, his voice thick with sleep.

Sinai grinned, turning to face her lover. The first light of dawn peeked through the window, casting a soft glow over the room. Satisfaction thrummed in her veins.

Picking up her nightclothes, she slid it on. "Nothing like good sex to celebrate a victory, Daryl."

"I'd have to agree." The high lord leaned in to kiss her. Pulling back, though, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Although you haven't told me exactly what victory we are celebrating."

"Ignorance is bliss, my Lord of Trade," Sinai drawled, stretching luxuriously before she rose, casting a sly glance over her shoulder. "Let's just say I finally caught a very elusive, very feisty mouse after so long setting traps."

"Hm. And was this mouse worth all the trouble?"

"Oh, yes," she purred, recalling Emeriel's pained grunt when the arrow made contact. A smirk curled on her lips. "Very much so."

Daryl shook his head, half-amused, half-wary. "You scare me when you get like this. Is this mouse the reason for that bruise on your cheek?"

Sinai's hand went to her cheek, wincing slightly at the faint sting. "My little mouse was—"

A sudden, loud knock startled them. The door burst open, and Nora rushed in, her face pale with alarm.

"Frostfall's royal guards are on their way!" Nora cried out with panic. "They're coming here, mistress! They—"

Sinai's heart skipped, but before she could process Nora's words, the soldiers stormed into her chamber.

Seven of them. Each clad in official attire, their stern expressions leaving no doubt about the seriousness of their mission.

The lead guard stepped forward, unrolling a scroll with ceremonial gravity.

"By order of the grand king and in accordance with the laws of Urai," he announced with authority, "I hereby declare you, Lady Laelsienai Gurtazivrk, under arrest for the crime of attempted murder and assassination of an esteemed guest of our land, Princess Emeriel Galilea Evenstone. You are commanded to surrender immediately and without resistance. Any failure to comply will be met with force."

All color drained from Sinai's face. What...?

"I have no idea what you're t-talking about!" she sputtered.

Despite her attempt to sound indignant, her voice trembled. "How dare you barge into my residence and make such ridiculous accusations—"

"I suggest you come quietly, mistress," the guard warned, his tone hard. "Or we will apply force."

"This is a mistake!" she cast a hysterical glance over her shoulder. "Daryl, tell them they have the wrong person. Tell them I've been here with you all night."

The high lord scrambled from the bed, hurriedly reaching for his clothes, his eyes wide with alarm. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

Inside, Sinai's panic mounted, though she tried desperately not to let it show.

How had they found out? She'd taken every precaution, left no trace, planned every detail to perfection.

"I did nothing wrong," she spat. "I will not tolerate being wrongly accused by the likes of you!"

Two soldiers stepped forward, seizing her arms, and dragging her towards the door. She struggled against their grip, but she was no match for their strength.

"I'm innocent!" she cried, but her protests fell on deaf ears.

As she was hauled through the hall, much to her horror, the other mistresses in her wing emerged from their chambers. Their eyes wide with curiosity and wicked delight as they witnessed her being dragged away like a common criminal.

Sinai had never felt such humiliation.

"Let me go!" she shouted, thrashing against their hold. "I will walk on my own!"

But her pleas were ignored.

Dread quickly overpowered her shame.

Fear of Daemonikai's anger, of his wrath. One she had faced once before, and vowed, never to provoke again.

The fear settled deeper within her, clawing at her chest.

This wasn't supposed to happen. This was meant to be my victory.

How had everything gone so wrong?