

Chapter 287

GRAND LORD VLADYA

His arms were folded tightly over his chest as he observed his friend from across the room.

Twenty minutes had passed since Daemonikai entered Vladya's bedchamber and Vladya had told him everything, and in all that time, the grand king had not lifted his head. Remaining seated on the edge of the bed, his hands clasped tightly between his knees.

The thick silence in the room was broken only by the faint crackling of the fire.

"No. I would never do that." Daemonikai whispered at last, his tone low and hoarse. "You just told me a horror story, Vladya. A nightmare. And you know I would never do something like that to my Soulbond. So now I'm still sitting here...waiting." His fist curled even tighter, knuckles going white. "Waiting patiently for you to get to the part where you tell me this was just some cruel, sick joke that went too far."

"I wish it were a joke," Vladya said sincerely. "But it's not."

Daemonikai shook his head. Slow at first, then more forceful.

"This cannot be happening. This cannot—" he sprang to his feet, and began pacing the room like a caged beast. "I need to see her, I need to see her. I must see—"

"Come," Vladya said softly. "I will take you."

The journey wasn't far. Emeriel was resting at the end of the hallway.

But as they approached the door, Daemonikai came to a sudden stop, several feet away.

Vladya paused, turning back to him.

His friend's face had gone ashen... and blank. But Vladya didn't need to read his features to know Daemonikai was not alright.

It was in the tautness of his muscles. The faint shaking of his hands. It was in his rooted feet to the floor.

Daemonikai stood like a male who was terrified to take the rest of the steps and see what lay behind those doors.

"I'm thinking about everything you just told me. About the possibility that I..." His throat worked while he stared off at the distance. "And the implications if I... What if I..."

"I'm sorry."

Daemonikai's jaw clenched.

Then he steeled his spine.

He was moving again, his eyes anguished, his tone resolved. "Let me see her."

Vladya nodded and stepped aside, opening the door. He stayed by the threshold as Daemonikai walked past him and into the room.

In the center of the large bed, Princess Emeriel lay under a soft blanket, small against the vastness of the mattress.

A white towel rested on her forehead, and her eyes were closed, her face pale and bruised.

Her hands, visible by her sides, bore deep discoloration, though the swelling had gone down. Her left hand was bandaged.

Daemonikai was still.

Then exhaled shakily, stepping closer to her.

Reaching out, he pulled the bedding back, exposing more of her battered body.

"The healers have been here constantly these past three days," Vladya said from behind him. "So far, there hasn't been any fatal damage, and her treatments are going well. They said she will heal... with time."

Daemonikai's eyes moved over her slowly. Lingering on every visible wound. Every abrasion. Every bruise.

"She woke yesterday evening but was in a lot of..." Vladya shook his head. "They had to put her back to sleep."

Daemonikai sank onto the edge of the bed, staring at her face.

He didn't speak.

He didn't move.

He just sat there, staring at her as if, by sheer willpower, he could undo the damage.

And that was how minutes stretched into hours.

Even when the healer entered to administer her afternoon medicines, Daemonikai didn't leave her side. Did not move, his eyes never leaving her face as they applied salves and tinctures.

Later, Livia arrived with the young slave girl, both of them moving quietly around. They cleaned Emeriel with care, changing her clothes and the bedding, before slipping out just as quietly.

The afternoon crawled by.

Shadows lengthened on the walls.

Eventually, Vladya had to leave for court. But as he did, his mind stayed behind in that chamber.

Worried for his old friend, and his woman.

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The court was somber. Filled with tension.

While Zaiper presided over the proceedings, Vladya sat stiffly, his thoughts drifting to Emeriel and Daemonikai again and again. He barely registered most of the session.

It was a pattern he'd fallen into over the past three days.

"I will be leading tomorrow's rain ritual," Zaiper announced to the court. "As you all know, the Grand King is... indisposed."

Vladya forced himself to focus on the present.

"Speaking of the grand king, how is he doing?" Lord Gaff asked, his voice measured... probing.

Zaiper's smirk was sharp. "Well, his mind is gone again—"

"We cannot say that for certain right now," Ottai cut in, shooting Zaiper a glare out of the corner of his eye. "We will provide a clearer answer to that later."

Daryl, the High Lord of Trade, cleared his throat uncomfortably. "There are... rumors flying around. Not just about his state of mind, but about... uhm, his woman. Or rather, what he did to his woman. How true is this rumor?"

Lord Gaff leaned forward in his seat, narrowing his eyes. "Did the grand king really brutalize the human princess he claimed to cherish just a week ago in front of all of us?"

"What is so funny?" Ottai snapped at Zaiper.

Only then did Vladya notice the faint, smug smile on Zaiper's lips.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Zaiper drawled, rising to his feet calmly. "The truth is, it's time we stopped deceiving ourselves and face the fact that our Grand Ruler is no longer fit to sit on the Grand Throne."

Hushed voices rippled across the court.

Zaiper raised a hand for silence.

"First, let's not shy away from the obvious. His mind is not well." His voice rang louder, more authoritative. "Why would we continue entrusting the ultimate leadership of our kingdom to a male whose state of mind is clearly unstable? Everyone here knows it."