

Chapter 304

What was that about?

When one was uneasy in the presence of the Oracle, it was often for one reason alone. Secrets laid bare. Sins revealed.

Daemonikai was...curious. What had the Vampire of Greyrock done this time?

Zaiper had been unusually quiet all evening, showing none of his usual sharp tongue or stirring of unnecessary arguments, in court. He hadn't met the Oracle's eyes once, which was highly unusual for a man who rarely passed up a chance to assert himself.

"A great deal has happened in the past five hundred years, has it not?" the Oracle broke the silence.

Pushing his intrigue aside, he walked with the Oracle through the citadel. "Yes, it has."

"May I speak casually?"

"Of course."

She paused, her steps slowing as she turned to face him. "I wish to offer my sincere condolences for the loss of your family, Great Grand King."

The old grief rose like a tide. "Thank you. It...wasn't easy."

"It never is," she said gently. "You are strong. Both as a Urekai and as a ruler."

For a moment, he said nothing, his gaze fixed ahead. At last, he murmured, "Sometimes it does not seem like it."

"I know how it may feel. But what seems true is not always the whole truth. You are in your darkest moments now, but it will not always be so."

Daemonikai's lips twitched in the faintest sardonic smile. "Are you telling me about the light at the end of the tunnel?" He tried not to sound sarcastic, though he wasn't sure he succeeded.

The Oracle's lips mirrored his faint smile. "Have some faith, Great Grand King. No one knows what the future holds, but a little faith makes the journey worth enduring."

"There you go with the cryptic words again," Daemonikai muttered, though his tone was lighter. "I can't say I've missed this part of talking to you."

The Oracle's expression turned serious. "Just as the past road has not been easy, the near future holds its own challenges. But you may already know that, judging from your mood today."

Daemonikai stiffened. Of course she knew.

"What do you know?" he asked lowly, his throat tight.

"Perhaps all of it," she said quietly. "You are worried about the upcoming eclipse moon night. Worried you may not be able to protect your people and those you love, just as you could not five hundred years ago. Am I correct?"

Daemonikai swallowed hard, staring at the horizon.

"You have every reason to be worried, Great Grand King."

His voice was hoarse when he spoke. "What do you have to tell me about it?"

"Contrary to what many believe, I do not have all the details. But even if I did, you know I cannot share them."

"The Oracle is all-knowing but none-speaking. The Oracle cannot share knowledge that disrupts the natural order." Daemonikai recited the ancient text, *The Gods and Their Servants*, from memory. "Every youngling by the age of ten knows that."

The Oracle released a soft breath. "I see many things, Great Grand King. The past, the present, and the possibilities of the future. But the future is not a single, fixed path." she paused. "I see multiple potential outcomes for every event. Sometimes three, four, or more distinct possibilities. I perceive these paths, but I cannot know which will ultimately come to pass."

Her grip on her staff tightened. "Intervention is dangerous. Even the most well-intentioned actions can disrupt the delicate balance of these possibilities, potentially leading to consequences unforeseen. Some of which have the power to set in motion events that plunge the world into darkness."

"I understand this," Daemonikai said, and he meant it. "I do."

"About eclipse moon night," the Oracle began again. "Take comfort in knowing that this time, at least, you will be prepared. You will no longer be taken off guard should anything go wrong."

Her words were kind, but Daemonikai still felt uneasy.

"At your age, you have been through at least eight eclipse moon nights," the Oracle said. "Seven of them went well. Just because the last one was bad does not mean the next one will be."

They passed by the garden, its entrance framed by blooming flowers. Daemonikai stopped, looking at the vibrant archway.

The Oracle came up beside him, her staff tapping lightly on the ground. "Your woman and Vladya's are in there, aren't they?"

"How did you—of course, you know." Daemonikai shook his head.

"Amidst the tragedy, the gods have blessed you with something beautiful," she leaned heavily on her cane, looking up at him.

"They did," Daemonikai eyes softened as he stared at the garden entrance. "Soulbonds, rare as they are, are instantly recognizable to our kind. We can always tell because of the connection we feel. How come I never noticed with her?"

"Because you were blinded by grief and suffocating from misery. How could your soul reach out to recognize what is yours when it was bleeding?" She paused, her gaze shifting to the garden entrance. "Just like Vladya, whose soul is... gone completely."

Daemonikai's head snapped toward her. "Vladya? Aekeira is his Soulbond, is she not?"

"I am old, Your Grace. Sometimes I speak nonsense."

He did not believe that for a second.

Her gaze returned to the garden entrance. "Emeriel Galilea Evenstone. Do you think the gods do not know what they were doing when they created that girl for you? When they brought her to you?"

Daemonikai glanced at her.

"In a species with a declining female population, where one parent births six boys yet cannot have a girl child, a woman bore not one, but two daughters. What does that tell you?"

Daemonikai fell silent. He...had not thought about it that way before.

"Their mother, Pandora, was touched by a god. Ukrae: the god of powerful beings."

Daemonikai stared...speechless.

The Oracle nodded. "Pandora bore children who have love so deep, it spills over into everything they touch."

Daemonikai had witnessed that firsthand. He stared back at the garden entrance.

Emeriel and Aekeira came into view just then, both carrying baskets full of plants. They were laughing, holding hands, their smiles radiant as they talked animatedly about something he couldn't hear.

The joy radiating from them was like sunlight breaking through shadows.

"What better pair could Mother Fate have given to two males with more darkness in them than a night can hold?" the Oracle mused, low and reflective. "Two females with hearts so full of love, so willing to sacrifice, it eclipses even their will to live."

Daemonikai's chest arched.

"Don't I know that?" he murmured bitterly. Breathing deeply, he confessed, "Emeriel and I no longer share a bond."

The Oracle remained quiet, listening.

"I do not think it's dormant anymore—If it were, my soul is healed, shouldn't it have returned by now?—I think it was severed. I think Ukrae is angry," he said regretfully. "Taking his sweet time giving it back. It worries me. What if he dissolved the bond completely?"

The Oracle turned to him, her golden-streaked eyes locking onto his. "The gods are not cruel, Daemonikai. They test us, yes, but they do not abandon us. The gods do not take lightly the bonds they create. Have you ever heard of a Soulbond that was dissolved except by death?"

"It is quite rare," he conceded. "Almost an impossibility. But so is a severed bond. So is coming back from feral and fast-healing from a dying soul. So is talking to one's dead bondmate."

"Hmm." The Oracle grew thoughtful.

Daemonikai's gaze drifted back to the garden. "Two weeks ago, all I wanted was to feel our bond again. To better protect her. To hear her call whenever she was in danger. But now..."

"Now you are not so sure anymore?"

He shook his head. "Something happened... I lost control and almost killed her." He did not bother to hide the shame that came with those words. "My mind is not as healed as I thought it was. And because of that, she was in grave danger trying to save me. Again."

"Ah," the Oracle murmured. "Your re-deteriorating mind? I know everything about it."

His head snapped toward her. "You know about it? What happened? What can be done? What can you tell me?"