

## Chapter 85

Putting the shift on hold allowed him to refocus on his immediate surroundings.

It took a while, longer than ever before, to curb those instincts. By the time he regained control, they were both slumped against the wall, exhausted and spent.

"You've fought so hard, Vladya," Ottai had said, his voice thick with emotion, blood gushing from his wounds. "Not just tonight, but with Daemonikai as well. Part of the reason I did not oppose Zaiper in court, as I usually do, is because I think it's time to let him go. This is not healthy. Look at what it's doing to you."

Vladya had offered no response. His head rested against the cool stone wall, eyes closed.

"Part of me wishes Daemon had died that night instead of what happened." Ottai's voice had cracked, the weight of five centuries of grief pressing down on him. "We would have mourned him properly, given him the farewell he deserved. Just as we mourned all the others. Your bondmate, Tiara. Daemon's sons, Alvin and Myka, and his bondmate, Evielyn. My son, Uriel. Even Zaiper's brother, Kristoff." His sigh was a ragged exhalation of pain. "Maybe, if we had mourned him then, things would be different now."

"Perhaps," Vladya had conceded, reluctantly.

"This is better. Better for him, at least. He would not have to face the reality of all he has lost, Vlad. He lost so much. So much."

Vladya's eyes followed the expanse of the blackened sky, coming out of the memory. The faint stars were barely visible. Maybe Ottai was right. It would be unfair for Daemonikai to return to a life of misery. How could any male survive the loss of his bondmate and offsprings?

Vladya had only lost his bondmate, and yet he was shattered. He and Tiara had not even sealed the bond in finality or shared a life together. He could not begin to fathom the depths of Daemon's anguish, a bond severed after almost four thousand years.

A sharp rap on the door broke the silence, and Marilyn entered with a respectful bow. "My Lord."

"What brings you here, Merry? I do not need to bloodfeed." Vladya's voice was a low rumble, his gaze fixed on the flickering lamplight.

Marilyn settled onto a plush cushion, her eyes searching his face. "I know. But you needed a friend, dear Vlad. Henry told me everything." Her voice was soft, filled with a warmth that Vladya rarely allowed himself to feel. "Whatever you are planning, do not do it."

"I am not planning anything."

"I know you, master. You may deceive the world, but not me. I am certain that you are thinking of ways to prevent them from killing the beast."

Vladya rubbed his temples. A headache pounded his skull relentlessly like a locksmith. "I am not. Like everyone else, I too believe it is time for Daemon to find peace."

Marilyn snorted, but did not press the issue. She proceeded to share the details of her day, her household, and the upcoming arrival of her baby. Her face lit up as she spoke about the baby, and truthfully, Vladya felt a glimmer of comfort hearing her talk about the baby. Not much, but it was something.

It was Merry's way of trying to distract and cheer him up. And because he liked Merry, for a fleeting moment, it worked. He engaged with her, listening to her tales of mundane joys and worries.

As she prepared to leave, she turned back to him, her eyes filled with concern. "Please, do not do it. Whatever it is you are thinking. My Beloved saw what happened in court today—and that was only because he knows about your mental state, so he recognized the signs when others did not. He said you had a beastflare. One that you struggled to control."

"I did not struggle to control it; I simply chose not to. There is a difference."

"Oh, Vlad. Please take care of yourself. I am greatly concerned for you. If there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to ask," she pleaded.

"I do need something. Send a maid to me when you leave. It does not matter which one."

"A maid, you say?" Marilyn scrutinized him. "With the headache you are nursing, do you truly believe a random female will meet your needs tonight?"

"A random female has always met my needs, Marilyn. It is not as if I have anyone I am emotionally connected with, right?" His gaze bore into hers.

Marilyn's face paled, guilt and pain warring in her eyes. "Forgive me, Vlad. I did not mean it that way. I would be the last person on earth to speak so carelessly about your deceased bondmate."

Vladya sighed. "I know. Go home to Henry, Marilyn."

"What about Aekeira? Surely, she would—"

"No," he snapped, his voice sharp. Through gritted teeth, he added, "Do. Not. Even. Suggest. It." The darkness returned to his eyes.

Marilyn recoiled, fear momentarily drowning out concern. "I-I'm sorry."

Vladya took a deep breath to calm himself, then blinked hard, the darkness fading as quickly as it had come.

"Just send a maid, Marilyn." He stepped back, closing the door with a finality that left no room for argument.

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Vladya glanced at the naked maid before him. She had undressed and presented to him.

In that position, Vladya should have been rock-hard, tearing off his clothes and mounting her within seconds. However, his body barely responded.

After he undressed, Vladya stroked himself to a half-hard state and positioned himself behind the willing body. But when he grabbed hold of her hips, it felt...wrong. Despite her willingness, she was not the one his body wanted.

Aekeira is close. You know it, a voice whispered in his mind. Take what you want from her. Take what you need.

He straightened. "Get out."

The woman looked confused, but quickly obeyed.

Vladya slipped into his robe and made his way out, arriving at the girl's chambers. Her door was closed, but it opened silently when he turned the handle. It was fortunate too, for a flimsy door handle would not have stopped him—it would only provoke his beast further.

The sight that greeted him was a vision of ethereal beauty. Aekeira lay sprawled across the bed, her white nightgown a stark contrast to her sun-kissed skin and the cascade of golden hair spilling across the pillows. Her eyes were closed, her breath a gentle rhythm in the quiet room.

Vladya entered, locking the door behind him with a decisive click. It had been a mistake, bringing her to Blackstone. She was too close. Too tempting. Too easily accessible.

But for one night, just this one night, he wanted to forget. To think of nothing else. To indulge in the one he truly desired.

Tomorrow, he would resume the battle against himself. Tomorrow, he would face the chaos.

Marilyn knew him well. For as much as Vladya would love to take the righteous path, to let go of Daemonikai, to end his friend's tortured existence, he could not. He had always been selfish, and he had no intentions of changing now.

So what if Daemonikai was broken? So what if the weight of his loss proved unbearable? They would decide if they would have to muddle through it or revert to being feral. Together.

There were two options he was looking at. The first, he would fight them off, even if it meant killing Zaiper in the process. The death of a grand lord was no trivial matter, but Vladya cared little for the consequences.

Should this approach fail—possibly due to obstacles like iron shards, dragon blood, and poisoned bullets—he would turn to his second option. He would chant the Xaa'l Tbeh Zeek.

A dangerous and forbidden dark magic used for mind exchange. His mind for the return of Daemonikai's. There really was not much left of his mind anyway, so it was a fair trade.

Regardless of the outcome, Vladya was prepared to transform into his beast form and spill any amount of blood necessary to safeguard Daemonikai, even if it meant he could not shift back to his male form again.

Ultimately, both paths led to the same destination, Daemonikai's protection. Even at the cost of Vladya's own sanity. Whatever was left of it, anyway.

So yes, tonight, he would indulge.

With that thought, he extinguished the lamp, plunging the room into darkness, and climbed into bed beside her.