

## Chapter 325

Females had begun to vanish. Taken during their heat, never to be seen again. What had first seemed an isolated crime had, upon investigation, revealed itself to had been happening for months. Not a single one of the missing had ever returned.

The crisis bothered Daemonikai as he made his way toward the living quarters. Voices reached his ears, filled with lightness, and untroubled. Emeriel and her sister.

Pausing at the threshold, he folded his arms as he observed them.

Emeriel was swaying to the rhythm of music playing only in her mind, while Aekeira reclined in a chair, her fingers working a crochet hook through loops of thread.

"Arms move like this," Emeriel said, lifting her hands in the air and twisting them with a playful flourish. "And the hips—like this." She swayed, her skirt flaring as she spun in a graceful arc.

Ah. She was practicing, or perhaps teaching Aekeira the steps for the upcoming Lantern Festival. Her sister, though silent, watched attentively, never pausing in her work.

"Now, a quick turn left, then a dip. Like this." Emeriel spun, her body flowing gracefully.

Something in Daemonikai eased. Smiling as he watched, the exhaustion of his day, the weight of responsibility, all faded to nothing.

How his life has changed thoroughly, all because of this woman.

Ironic, truly. Daemonikai hated humans. A part of him still did—likely always would. And yet, the brightest color in his world right now was this fearless human woman. His human woman, who painted his life in hues he had never known.

The feral incident should have torn them apart. Shattered whatever fragile thread managed to tether them together. By all logic, she should have fled from him, far from this place. Yet here she was.

Still in his territory. Still leaving traces of her intoxicating scent in every corner of his halls. Twirling in his living room. Smiling, glowing, so fucking radiant, as though she had not endured more horrors and pain in her young life than most would in a thousand years.

A girl who had set his long-dead heart racing. Who now filled the soul he had once thought empty with life.

"Listening is not enough, Keira. You must—" Emeriel's words faltered as her gaze landed on him. "Your Grace!" She gasped, her face coloring with surprise at being caught. "I had no idea you were finished with your work."

Daemonikai straightened, stepping further into the room. Aekeira, flustered as well, rose swiftly and curtsied.

"I have only just finished," he moved to take a seat opposite her. "Now, I await Vladya's return so we may join the others for the run."

"Vlad—I mean, Grand Lord Vladya is returning early?" Interest flickered in Aekeira's voice.

"He is," Daemonikai confirmed. Then, without shifting his gaze from Aekeira, he spoke to Emeriel. "Come here."

A flush deepened the color in Emeriel's cheeks, but she approached him almost timidly.

"Sit."

She made to settle beside him, but he caught her by the waist and pulled her onto his lap. She squealed, startled as she landed against his thighs.

Then, averted her eyes, staring down at her lap. "Oh..."

Daemonikai bit back a smile. He did not know whether it was her sister's presence that made her so shy, but he relished every moment of riling her up.

Her scent washed into his nostrils. Unable to resist, he leaned in, pressing his nose to her neck, and breathed more of it in. Holding the slow, deep, loud inhale, letting her settle deep inside him before he released the breath with a satisfied purr. "You smell heavenly."

"Dae—Daemon..." she whispered, voice hushed, mortified. Her eyes flickered toward Aekeira, who had suddenly taken a great interest in the paintings along the wall.

His prim and proper little princess. Always mindful, always restrained. It was precisely why he enjoyed making her squirm.

But when she looked at him with pleading eyes, he relented, letting her be.

Just then, a voice rang from the hall, announcing Vladya's arrival. A moment later, the doors swung open, and he entered.

At once, Aekeira's entire face lit up as she rose hurriedly to her feet.

Seeing her, Vladya's hard, stoic features visibly softened. He opened his arms.

The girl wasted no time practically flying to him and barreling into his arms.

"Hello, little bird," he drawled.

She beamed up at him, glowing in a way that was impossible to miss. Daemonikai did not fail to notice the resemblance—the way Emeriel had mirrored that very expression when he had first walked in.

At last, Vladya turned his attention to him, inclining his head in acknowledgment. "Ancient One."

"You little shit," Daemonikai remarked dryly, noting the exhaustion on the man's face. "How did the rituals go?"

"As always, we will not know until the next few days," Vladya strode toward him as he spoke.

Aekeira stopped. She gripped Vladya's arm as she swayed.

Vladya's arm tightened around her waist as he looked down at her. "Are you well?"

"Yes, it is just..." She blinked rapidly. "Just a moment. Everything is spinning."

Emeriel's attention focused on her. "You lied. You have not recovered, have you?"

"Of course I have," Aekeira drew in a breath, steadying herself. "There, see? I am fine now." Her pinched expression eased into a smile. "I told you, it is something minor."

But as Vladya led her closer, Daemonikai caught her scent.

And went still.

"Your Grace?" Emeriel had noticed his sudden tension.

He lifted her gently, setting her aside, and rose to his feet. Moving deliberately past her, settling his eyes fully on her sister.

"May I scent her?" Daemonikai asked Vladya, calmly.

Vladya's brow furrowed. "Is everything all right? I—"

"Vladya," he snapped, adding command to his voice. "I, the grand king, am formally requesting permission to scent one of my subject's females. Unless you are prepared to defy me, you will obey."

The room tensed.

Vladya's spine went ramrod straight, the playfulness vanishing from his demeanor.

A breath hitched nearby. "Daemon?" Emeriel's voice was soft with concern.

But he did not look away from Vladya, nor did he waver. "Shall I proceed, or will you deny me?"

A long silence stretched between them.

Vladya gave a slow nod at last. "You may go ahead."

Aekeira, however, pressed herself deeper into him, trying to disappear into his body.

The poor girl. Perhaps she feared Daemonikai had lost his mind again.

Sighing inwardly, he gave the command. "Come to me, Aekeira Maranthine Evenstone."

Wide, uncertain eyes lifted to Vladya, seeking guidance.

Daemonikai saw the tightness in his friend's jaw as he ground his teeth together, but in the end, Vladya gave a curt nod.

Aekeira made a small, despairing sound in her throat.

The girl had always been afraid of him, but now was not the time to dispel that fear. In fact, Daemonikai needed it. The sharper her distress, the stronger her scent would emerge.

She crossed the space between them, walking with heavy hesitant steps.

Beside him, Emeriel was taut as a bowstring, but she did not interfere.

"Bare your neck to me."

A shudder rippled through Aekeira, her fear scent growing stronger, mingling with her natural fragrance. But she obeyed.

Tilting her head to the side, she closed her eyes, breathing quick and shallow.

Daemonikai reached forward, drawing her closer. Lowering his head, he pressed his face to her throat and took a long, deep sniff.

There it was. Osmanthus and lily.

Faint, but undisputable.

"Most times, her male is the last to know, for his senses have long been conditioned to his female's scent and no longer perceive when something has changed." Daemonikai recited from memory. "Book of Fertility and Younglings, page twenty-four."

"What is going on?" Vladya pulled Aekeira back to his chest, still wound with tension. "Why are you reciting random quotes?"

Daemonikai arched a brow. "Fear not, my mind is intact. For now." he said casually, stepping back. "And it is hardly a random passage, given that your female is with child. You may want to summon a healer soon."