

Chapter 117

She had offered herself for him to feed from. Freely, willingly. Twice. It was only courteous on his part to take her to her bed.

It had nothing to do with her feeling so good in his arms or his reluctance to let go. And it certainly was not because her scent so close like this was... comforting.

The girl was sound asleep by the time they reached the gates of Ravenshadow. Her breathing was slow and even, her body completely relaxed in his hold.

He did not want to give the people something new to gossip about, nor did he want to give Zaiper more ideas. So he forced himself to reluctantly give her to Yaz.

In the girl's chambers, he stood at the foot of her bed, watching her sleep, his men standing guard outside the door. The rhythmic rise and fall of her chest was hypnotic.

She looked even younger. Peaceful. So disgustingly beautiful.

Her hair fanned out on the pillow like a dark halo, and her lips were slightly parted, a portrait of peaceful innocence.

"I am madder at you than the rest of your kind, Aekeira. I was perfectly okay until you came along. I should have never ventured to Navia with Ottai. We should have gone to another human kingdom," he sighed, his voice a low murmur in the quiet room.

Are you sure? His mind asked.

The girl distracted him, made him feel things he never wanted to feel again, got under his skin, and made him so out of control, and he hated all of it.

But the truth was, he wanted the girl here anyway. Here in Urai, in Ravenshadow. Here in Blackstone.

He had no idea why. He was not even sure he liked the girl, and yet, the thought of never seeing her again was simply... unacceptable.

He took a deep breath, her scent lingering in the air, sweet and intoxicating. "What have you done to me, you sexy little witch?"

GRAND LORD VLADYA

That night, Daemonikai and Vladya ventured into the moonlit forest for a hunt, their bodies half-shifted into their beast forms, fur mingling with human flesh, eyes glowing with a predatory light.

Neither of them wanted to complete the transformation, with the balance of beast and man unpredictable at best.

The forest was alive with the sounds of nocturnal creatures, the rustling of leaves, and the distant hoot of an owl. It was exhilarating.

Daemonikai leaped from a tree with feline grace, snatching an antelope mid-stride and tearing its head away with a crunch. Vladya watched from the ancient oak, his heart soothed by the familiar sight.

"Another one for the feast," Daemon announced, hoisting his prize with a grin that gleamed in the moonlight.

Vladya had missed this. The thrill of the hunt, Daemon's sharp reflexes, his excitement over a kill. Even his gloating on their way back after getting more game than Vladya. The forest air was cool against his skin, the scent of pine and fresh earth mingling with the metallic tang of blood.

"Alright, alright, enough bragging," Vladya said, trying to mask the emotion tightening his throat. Thank Ukrae for not taking this male away from me.

Daemon's grin widened, revealing a flash of sharp fangs. "Four to two, my friend. Perhaps if you stopped lurking in the shadows like a skittish doe, you'd even the score." Though his smile seemed strained, tight around the edges.

His smile seemed strained, tight around the edges. Vladya studied him, realizing how rare it had become to see Daemonikai genuinely smile. It made his chest feel heavy.

Daemonikai had never been an easy male, but his smiles had once come easily for those he cared for. Now, they seemed forced, as if he had to drag them from the depths of his being.

"Why are you thinking too hard?" Daemonikai's brows knitted in concern, his green eyes reflecting the starlight. "Are you alright?"

Vladya leaped from the tree, landing gracefully. "I'm good. Race you," he challenged, taking off in a burst of speed, the wind whipping through his hair.

Daemonikai gave chase.

The thrill of the hunt and the race sent a rush of adrenaline through Vladya's veins, momentarily clearing the shadows from his mind.

An hour and several kills later, they settled on a cliff overlooking a serene river, the water shimmering under the moon's glow. The towering spires of Ravenshadow loomed in the distance, a comforting silhouette in the vast wilderness.

"You seem more at ease than yesterday. Another visit to Merilyn, I presume?" Daemonikai observed, staring on the horizon, his tone casual yet probing.

The image of Aekeira moaning, twisting in his arms earlier in the day, flashed in Vladya's mind. He shook his head to clear it. "No, but you are right. I have fed."

"How many? Ten? Twenty?" A hint of concern laced Daemonikai's words. "That must have been... stressful."

If it were anyone else, Vladya would have let the conversation die.

"One. A girl," he confessed, the memory of her taste still vivid on his tongue.

"One?" Daemonikai's eyes sharpened, his surprise palpable. "She sated you?"

Vladya snorted. "You know that is impossible; she is not my bloodhost."

"Surprised me, too. I was hoping maybe you've got a new bloodhost, and Merilyn can finally take a rest from your grumpy self," Daemonikai stated in a light tone.

"My grumpy self? How can an old grump like you call me that?" Vladya smirked. "You rubbed off on me thousands of years ago, Your Grace."

"Brat," Daemonikai muttered, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

"Ancient of days."

Daemonikai's jaw dropped. "Coming from an almost four-thousand-year-old? That is just wrong, and you know it."

A genuine smile finally graced Vladya's lips.

"There is that smile that has Alvin always giving in to you—" A shadow fell over Daemonikai's face. His playful smile vanished, replaced by a deep sadness.

The atmosphere shifted, heavy with unspoken grief.

Alvin had been as stubborn and hardheaded as he was playful and juvenile. Unlike, Daemonikai's eldest Myka, who had more of his father's traits. More reserved.

Most of the time, Vladya knew how to get his way with Alvin. He used to tease Daemonikai that Alvin was the way he was because he and Evielyn had spoiled him rotten.

Vladya offered no words of comfort, knowing none would ease the pain. Instead, he reached out, placing his hand atop Daemonikai's in a silent offering of support.

But his best friend jerked, snatching his hand away. A second later, the hand was back, this time initiating the touch.

Huh.

Daemonikai held his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"I've noticed it for a while now," Vladya said, his voice low and serious. "Your aversion to touch."