

Chapter 26

GRAND LORD VLADYA

After two full days on the road, Grand Lord Vladya desired nothing more than to recline upon his comfortable bed and doze for the remainder of the day.

It was precisely why he detested venturing to the outskirts of Urai. But the Elder had summoned him, giving him no choice but to answer.

Weary to his very core, he trudged along the path leading to his quarters. The sight of Sinai standing by his door caused him to halt.

By Ukrae, how had she known he was back?

Mistress Sinai greeted him with a smile. "You have returned?"

"How did you come to know of my imminent arrival?" he asked cautiously.

"I encountered your butler downstairs, my Lord," she replied, walking toward him. "How was your journey?"

He took a deep breath. "Exhausting. I need to rest."

"I have heard about the boy. Emerald, is that his name?"

"Emeriel," he corrected curtly. "Not that his name holds any significance to me. What is this about?"

A deep frown marred her otherwise lovely face as she approached him, stopping directly in front of him. "I have heard rumors that Daemon's beast had taken a keen interest in him. News of him has spread throughout the fortress. Is it true? Did the beast truly seek him out?"

Lord Vladya pondered for a moment, opting for honesty. "Yes."

"But how is that even possible?" she hissed, her eyes darkening. "I have visited the beast for centuries, and never once has it shown any signs of recognition, let alone fixation. What in the world is happening?"

Lord Vladya contemplated reminding her that even prior to going feral, Daemonikai had never fixated on her—he had barely tolerated her. However, it would be unfair.

Despite Sinai's often insufferable nature, as the bloodhost to the grand king, she was one of the most powerful and respected females in Urai. In this case, her concerns were valid.

"I have no idea what is going on, Sinai. Perhaps it may be the boy's smell. Maybe he emits a scent that entices the beast. A scent that makes him seek it out. Our primal instincts can be unpredictable at times, as you well know."

"I do. Of course, I do. But this? It is simply too strange. I do not like the sound of it. Not one bit!"

"Why?" Lord Vladya relinquished his grip on the door handle and turned to face her, his brows knitted and nearly reaching his hairline. "You, above all others, should be elated if, by some miraculous occurrence, his beast has fixated. It could signify something positive. Perhaps his mind is not entirely lost? Or maybe his sanity is resurfacing. He might become the first Urekai to emerge from madness."

Sinai's mouth opened, closed, then opened again. "You, of all people, know it does not work that way. There is no return. Once the mind is gone, it is lost forever, and in its stead remains a mere husk. A shell. A ghost of who he once was."

"I did add 'miraculously,' did I not?" Grand Lord Vladya exhaled. "All the more reason for you to know that it is implausible for the beast to desire the boy as an individual. It was likely a one-time incident." He massaged his throbbing temples. "Leave me be, Sinai. I have just returned from a long journey, and I am in dire need of rest."

"You are right, you are right. It was probably a one-off. Unrepeatable." The lines of anger faded from her face, and she formed a slippery smile. "I shall leave you to rest now."

Leaning in, she planted a kiss upon his cheek, bowed, and gracefully walked away, her smile widening as her gown elegantly swept behind her.

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"Are you certain?" Yaz asked gently, his eyes brimming with barely concealed concern.

"I am certain," Lord Vladya replied, and Yaz nodded. He exited through the sturdy metal gates, securing the locks behind him, leaving Lord Vladya alone in the forbidden chambers with the beast.

He sought solace in this place on days when exhaustion overwhelmed him. When he felt far too drained.

Today was one of those days.

Daemonikai's beast emerged from its favored spot, prowling closer to him. Vladya remained motionless as the beast circled him, growling and hissing. Suppressing his own beast, he bowed his head and tilted it to the side.

At his willing submission, the feral's growling ceased. It dug its claws into Vladya's side, drawing blood and waiting for retaliation.

Yet, Vladya remained still, even as the beast pressed its claws deeper, pain coursing through his body.

Finally, the feral withdrew, turned around, and retreated behind the floor-to-ceiling barricade. Only then did Vladya allow his own beast to rise to the surface, enveloping him like a second skin.

In the blink of an eye, his clothes tore apart, revealing a magnificent beast. Nearly identical to the beast behind the barricade, it stood tall, flexing its tail.

Taking position before the barricade, it settled down, mirroring the feral's posture.

Like every Urekai, Vladya found solace and ease in his beast form. In the past, when he assumed this form, he and Daemonikai would venture into the woods, running, hunting, and battling together.

But now, the beast behind those bars stared at him without any trace of recognition.

His chest tightened, making it difficult to breathe.

Vladya lost track of time as he kept his best friend company. This place inflicted immense pain upon him, yet it also provided some measure of peace. It scarred him, yet offered healing. It was his doom and his sanctuary.

Time dissolved into nothing. He could have spent minutes, or hours here—simply existing in beast form. Shutting the world out.

When he finally reverted to his human form, he felt better than he had in days. Even as his heart ached.

Vladya gazed at Daemonikai, tears welling in his eyes, but he refused to let them fall. He would not shed tears. He has not done so for centuries.

"How do you fare, my friend?" he spoke, his gaze fixed on empty space. "Sometimes, I envy you. There is no pain for you. No memories. No recollections. Just blissful nothingness. No dreams to haunt you. Keep you awake at night, tearing your heart out of your chest."

He sighed. "Just simple, blissful silence, even if it manifests as madness."

Vladya recounted everything that had transpired since his last visit to the feral, speaking into the void, aware that the wild one could neither hear nor comprehend, yet it was a ritual he performed nonetheless.

"Nothing remains the same, you see. Our land is no longer what it once was. That night scarred us all irreparably. Without you here to anchor the people, they have all become lost." Vladya's eyes were tired, gazing through the bars. "And the truth is, I do not know how to help them."

He palmed his throbbing head. "Centuries have passed, and I have yet to find myself again. I do not believe I ever will, nor do I wish to. That is how lost we all are, Daemonikai.