

Chapter 10

GRAND LORD VLADYA

Vladya stayed silent. He felt nothing about the girl's death either.

Maybe he would have felt guilt or something like it if he still had a soul. Sadly, his heart was now an empty space where his soul used to be, and his conscience had died five centuries ago.

Along with his former bondmate. And best friend.

Lord Vladya rose from his chair. "I must remove her dead body from the forbidden chambers. The young prince will go next." His lips tightened in disapproval. "This means Lord Ottai and I must make another trip to the human lands. This time, we will travel across the twelve kingdoms and take all the princesses, even the daughters of the wealthy. We made a mistake bringing back only two. We should have taken at least fifty."

"That course of action could potentially trigger another war," Ottai protested.

"I would not mind one," Vladya deadpanned without emotion. "In fact, I welcome any fight that comes my way."

As always, Ottai tried to keep the peace and gave him a pleading look. "Let us be careful. I believe we can reach our goals without starting a war. I must leave now. I promised Morina I would hunt with her this morning."

A familiar sting of jealousy struck Vladya's chest.

Ottai had been bonded to Morina for a thousand years and would gladly give his life for her. He may have lost his only son that tragic night, but at least his bondmate was still alive.

Ottai left first, and Vladya followed, heading toward the grand entrance.

"Lord Vladya?" Zaiper called out.

Vladya stopped and turned to face him.

"Our grand throne cannot stay empty any longer."

"I have no plans to challenge or fight Daemonikai," Vladya stated firmly.

Zaiper's anger rose, and his eyes burned with fury. "I know he was your best friend, but that is not Daemonikai anymore! He is now a wild beast that must be killed!"

Vladya looked at him with a calm, uncaring gaze. "Let me make it clear. I will not challenge or fight the beast."

With that, he turned to leave.

"I will speak to the Elders then. It has been five centuries. I am sure I can convince them to see reason," Zaiper said with determination.

Vladya stiffened, anger burning inside him. But he kept his face calm as he turned back.

Zaiper grinned wolfishly. "It's a shame that princess died. I haven't heard a girl scream like that in a long time. She would have been fun to mount, wouldn't you agree?"

"I will not dignify that with a response," Vladya said shortly. Turning away, he walked out of the grand entrance without looking back.

EMERIEL

Emeriel returned to his chambers after being thrown out of the southern wing, only to find Amie waiting for him, saying Madam Livia wanted to see him.

He was panicking. His secret was out. Had the head maid reported him? Was she calling him to blackmail him?

With his heart in his throat, he knocked on Madam Livia's door and was allowed in.

"Sit down," the older woman said, walking to the table where she mixed herbs.

Emeriel obeyed. He was so nervous that his legs bounced.

The head maid came back with a wooden cup. "Drink this."

Emeriel fought the urge to ask what was in it. Taking what was offered, he drank it all in one gulp. The bitter taste was so bad it took all his willpower not to spit it out.

The older woman walked away and began cutting another set of dry leaves while Emeriel watched her.

"Chew on this," Madam Livia instructed, giving him some seeds, and Emeriel did as told. "I know you must be sore all over after the night you had. These will help with the pain, bruises, and soreness."

"Thank you, madam." Emeriel's blue eyes showed his gratitude.

His body hurt badly, and the soreness in his private areas made it hard to walk without discomfort. It was hard not to walk with his legs apart.

A hush settled in the air.

But the waiting was too much for him.

"Why are you not asking me questions?" Emeriel asked, at last, looking at her.

She stood by the fireplace, her eyes thoughtful but unreadable.

"I thought about it all night—haven't thought of much else. You are taking a great risk, Prince Emeriel."

"I do not have a choice."

"Mm," Madam Livia hummed. "I have been thinking about what to do. Should I report this to Grand Lord Vladya? Should I—"

"No!" Emeriel dropped to his knees immediately. "Please, you cannot tell anyone!"

Madam Livia pressed her lips together and looked away. "I wish I did not know. If this comes out, I would be punished with you."

"Please, do not! I will do anything!" he begged, his voice filled with desperation.

The madam sighed, rubbing her forehead as if she had developed a headache. "It does not matter what you do. Nothing matters if you are caught. Everyone who knows about this will be punished just as harshly."

"I will swear no one knew!" Emeriel promised. "Not you, not Amie, not my sister. I will keep denying it until I die. I swear on my parents' graves."

On his knees, Emeriel moved closer, taking the older woman's hand in his. "I would never do anything to put you in danger for helping me, Madam Livia."

The older woman said nothing, her eyes carefully studying him.

At last, her eyes softened. "How have you stayed hidden? How have you managed to hide your secret for this long?"

Emeriel looked away, unsure how to answer. "It has not been easy," he answered truthfully.

He had been male all his life, but all he wanted was to be who he truly was—a female.

Emeriel wanted to wear gowns and petticoats instead of surcoats and tunics. He longed to let his hair down and wear jewelry. It was his greatest wish. All kept buried deep inside.

But it was impossible.

His parents had risked everything to make him male. To protect him, they suffered a lot to make sure he lived like that. Emeriel would not let all they worked for be wasted.

If the heavens answered wishes and prayers, his sister would find a good match one day. A man who would protect her with his life and keep her safe from the dangers of being female.

And Emeriel would live as a male for the rest of his life. No hope for a match, no hope for love, no hope for children.

Alone.

He had known this since he was old enough to understand that his life was not his own. But he had accepted it long ago.

"If it was bad before, it will be worse in the future," Livia said, breaking his thoughts. "You are a Syren."