

## Chapter 104

Emeriel's heart skipped a beat, then began to race.

He quickly finished dressing, his fingers fumbling with the fastenings of his tunic in his haste. With a final deep breath, he stepped out of his quarters and followed the soldier towards the imposing structure that housed Lord Vladya.

Upon arrival, he was ushered to the door of the grand lord's private study. The Urekai maid who had escorted him withdrew, leaving Emeriel alone in front of the ornately carved wooden door. Raising his hand to knock, a knot of anxiety formed in his stomach. After a moment's hesitation, he rapped his knuckles against it.

"Enter," Lord Vladya's deep voice rumbled from within.

Emeriel stepped into the familiar study, the heavy door clicking shut behind him with a soft thud. The air hung heavy with the scent of old parchment and beeswax candles.

Lord Vladya leaned casually against his desk, arms folded across his chest. His piercing gray eyes bore into Emeriel, their intensity sending a shiver down his spine.

"My Lord, I came by the other morning as you summoned, but I was informed you had already left for court." Emeriel began, wetting his lips nervously.

"You are Daemonikai's Soulbond," Lord Vladya stated without preamble.

Emeriel's body jolted in surprise, Lord Vladya's words hit him with the force of a physical blow..

His eyes widened, the pupils dilating into dark pools of shock, mirroring the raw panic seizing his heart.

How did he know?

"My Lord, I d-do not think I understand what—"

"You are his Soulbond," Lord Vladya repeated, his voice unwavering. He paused, as if to allow the weight of his words to sink in before adding calmly. "Choose your next words carefully, Emeriel. I behead those that lie to my face."

Unable to meet the intensity of the grand lord's gaze, Emeriel averted his eyes. his breath caught in his throat as if he'd been plunged into icy water.

"You know," Vladya continued, his voice low and measured, "I have asked myself repeatedly why I did not see it sooner. It was right there, staring me in the face. The way a feral beast—a creature devoid of reason and thought—fixated on you. The inexplicable events that unfolded around you. The beast storming into court to save you. The primal rage that erupted from him at the scent of another male on you, which led to a violent escape and a brutal killing. Its desires to specifically mount you. And then, there's your blood."

Lord Vladya straightened, his voice gaining strength with each word. "I should have pieced it all together long ago. But do you know why the idea simply did not take root, no matter how many times it crossed my mind?"

Emeriel's heart pounded in his chest, threatening to burst.

He fought to control his breathing, his lungs desperately gulping in air as panic surged through him.

"I will answer that. It is because I never imagined a female could live within Ravenshadow Citadel, right under our noses, under my own roof here in Blackstone, disguised as a male. Living as a male. Deceiving us all into believing she were a male when she was simply... not."

"Your h-highness," Emeriel gulped, instinctively retreating as Lord Vladya closed the distance between them.

"Once you grasp the missing piece, everything else falls into place," Vladya added. "You always resisted being undressed. There was always a reason, an excuse. And your physical appearance? Small and delicate, pale with flawless skin. Unnaturally pretty for a boy. I dismissed it as a trait of your royal lineage. But it was all there, wasn't it? Right under our noses, yet we remained blind. I never thought such a level of deception was possible. Not here, not within this fortress."

Emeriel gasped, her back hitting the wall, Lord Vladya's commanding form towering over her. The gray of his eyes vanished, replaced by the fierce, predatory yellow of his beast.

Not his beast, Emeriel thought in terror. Not his nearly feral, unpredictable beast.

Lord Vladya's hand shot out, claws extending with a menacing hiss, poised to strike. With a whimper, Emeriel squeezed her eyes shut awaiting the blow.

But she felt a sharp tug at her shoulder as a claw dug into her tunic, tearing through the fabric. The garment ripped open, hanging in tatters above her chest.

Lord Vladya gripped the remnants, ripping them away with a savage yank.

Emeriel's chest-binds lay blatantly exposed, a secret laid bare.

"Female," Lord Vladya growled, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through Emeriel's bones.

Before Emeriel could react, the grand lord leaned in, his face inches from hers. He pressed his nose to the crook of Emeriel's neck, taking deep lungfuls of breath.

A guttural growl erupted from his chest, followed by a single word that sent a wave of terror through Emeriel's veins, surpassing the fear she already felt.

"Syren."

He knows. Grand Lord Vladya knows.

Emeriel's mind reeled, a dizzying sense of lightheadedness threatening to consume her.

In that moment, she welcomed the darkness that beckoned, yearning to be anywhere but here. If fainting was the only escape from this agonizing reality, she would gladly embrace it.

"Don't you dare."

The sharp command, delivered in a low, menacing growl, shattered her fleeting hope of unconsciousness. Emeriel's throat constricted as she swallowed, her eyes locking with Lord Vladya's in a silent plea for mercy.

The grand lord took a few steps back, granting her a reprieve from his suffocating presence. As he retreated, some of the yellow in his eyes receded, replaced by a hint of his usual gray.

"You know," he began, his voice still laced with a predatory edge, "to actually detect anything from your scent, one must allow their beast really close to surface and channel its senses with a specific intent. I suppose that is how you managed to evade discovery for so long. None of us truly suspected, none of us channeled with that intention in mind."

Emeriel felt like a trapped animal, heart pounding against her ribs as she struggled to maintain her composure.

Lord Vladya pinned her with his hawk-like gaze. "So you are female, Emeriel?" he asked, his voice devoid of any warmth.