

Chapter 16

EMERIEL

"What in the sky were you thinking, Emeriel!?" Madam Livia scolded yet again. They had returned to Aekeira's chambers.

"Shouldn't you be in the festival grounds, serving drinks? What were you doing here? Do you always wish to be whipped!? Why do you disobey direct orders?" The older woman's voice brimmed with anger.

Emeriel ignored the prickling sensation in his arm and lowered his head respectfully. "I apologize, Madam Livia. I am aware you specifically instructed me not to see Aekeira, but I could not resist. I needed to see her, to ensure she was safe."

"Do you think it was my idea? Grand Lord Vladya issued that order himself. You do not want to test that male, Emeriel. He would devour you for breakfast and cast you into a lion's den if he so wished. That is the kind of male he is." The older woman huffed. "What were you thinking?"

That was the point. Emeriel was not thinking.

The truth is, he did not regret searching for his sister. Even if Lord Vladya punished him, he still would not regret it.

Absentmindedly, Emeriel scratched his arms, saying nothing.

Madam Livia took a deep breath. "Now go and dress up in your festival uniform. We must proceed to the festival grounds. That is the only favor I can grant you. But if anyone notices you were not there on time and reports it to Lord Vladya, I will not help you evade punishment."

It was more than Emeriel could ask for. "I understand. Thank you, Madam Livia."

As he turned to leave, he scratched his arms again, trying to alleviate the itching. The room felt stiflingly hot. Perhaps he could find some fresh air—

Then, it dawned on him.

No.

The hotness, the itching. The familiar burn in his lower body.

Heat. He was about to go into heat again.

"No, no, no," Emeriel cried out in horror, eyes widening like saucers. He took two steps back, away from Madam Livia.

The older woman appeared bewildered. "What is it, Emeriel?"

"No, by the lights, no. Not again." It seemed like just as he had identified the problem, the heat intensified.

His intimate areas flared hot, wet, and swollen. The prickling sensation focused on his lower belly, causing it to ache intensely. Emeriel was consumed by maddening arousal, his body trembling uncontrollably.

Then, the first wave hit him.

Collapsing to his knees, Emeriel cried out as spasms wracked his body relentlessly. His lower belly contracted so violently he feared something would tear inside him. Clutching his abdomen, he sobbed in agony as the spasms continued.

"By the gods..." Madam Livia's voice reached his ears distinctly. "You're in heat."

Tears streamed down his cheeks. One hand gripped the floor tightly as he rode out the wave. Spasms after spasms racked his body. His private area licked slick.

The wave was never-ending. It wanted to rend Emeriel apart. Oh, Light, I don't know if I can bear this again!

"I'm here with you. I'm here," Madam Livia's hand rubbed soothingly against his sides. The pain was simply unbearable.

When the wave finally passed, Emeriel felt lightheaded.

GRAND LORD VLADYA

Grand Lord Vladya stood fully attired, prepared to venture to the festival grounds. He had been so engrossed in his duties, it was no surprise that he was running late.

As he stepped outside his abode, a deafening sound reverberated through the air—twice.

The beast had broken free once again.

By the Gods, not tonight. The fortress was filled with festival-goers, and if the beast were to roam free, it would slaughter every last soul within its reach.

Vladya quickened his steps, hastening from the western quarters toward the southern wings. His soldiers intercepted him halfway, clearly having heard the clamor as well.

"The king's beast has broken free, your majesty." Yaz, his head soldier announced.

"I heard. We must act fast," he declared. "Two of you, locate the maids and instruct them to evacuate everyone from the southern wing. They must guide them outside the fortress and toward the festival grounds. Our foremost priority now is to vacate everyone from the fortress and prevent the beast from reaching the festival grounds."

"Did you hear it too?" Ottai's voice rang out as he emerged from the eastern wing.

"Yes. Where is Morina?" Vladya asked as they met at the intersection. Together, they set off along the path leading to Frostfall—the southern wing.

"She is already at the festival grounds," Ottai said, relief all over his face. "We must ensure the beast remains within the building."

"That is my plan as well," Vladya affirmed. Silence enveloped them as they pressed on, exchanging no further words.

"Do you think Zaiper was right?" Ottai asked, at last.

"Zaiper is never right, but about what specifically?" Vladya queried.

"Killing the beast." Ottai drew a deep breath, his tone tinged with sorrow. "We gamble with our people's lives each day, Vladya. If the three of us unite...join forces, employ the ritual of the Eclipse Moon and the Chalice, we can kill the beast."

Vladya remained silent as they veered into the corridor that led to the Abyss land.

"He was your friend, your best friend, so it is a difficult decision to make," Ottai continued. "And Ukrae forbid we listen to Zaiper, but I believe he has a point in this case. It's high time we consider it."

"I will not kill Daemonikai. The Eclipse Moon night is fast approaching, and when that night arrives, Zaiper can do as he pleases—kill the beast or whatever the hades he desires. But until then, I will take no action," Vladya asserted vehemently.

Ottai sighed, regarding him with a sympathetic gaze.

"You should not be surprised by my response, I have stood firm on this stance the past five hundred years."

"And I do not blame, neither do I judge you for it," Ottai said.

Upon arriving at the forbidden chambers, they were not surprised to find the barricades in ruins and no sign of the beast. The girl, Aekeira, huddled against the wall, trembling.

"What happened?" Ottai asked the girl.

"I-I am not entirely sure. It did not l-lay a hand on me. Instead, i-it moved me aside, s-shattered the gates, and escaped," the girl stuttered. The gravity of the situation seemed to dawn upon her, prompting her to rise abruptly. "I must protect Em!"

Vladya furrowed his brow. The beast's instincts would drive it outside to hunt for prey—either toward the festival or into the woods. It was highly unlikely that it would target the girl's brother.

He pivoted and departed, with Ottai following suit. Soon, realizing the girl was trailing behind them.

"You mustn't follow us. It is dangerous," Ottai said.

"Please, my lord. I just need to find Emeriel," the girl pleaded.

Vladya said nothing. This is not the time to cuddle scared humans.

They continued tracking the beast's scent, pursuing it carefully.

It remains within the confines of the southern wing?