

## Chapter 189

But if Aekeira saw something worth loving in Lord Vladya, Emeriel would support her every step of the way.

"Hey, it's going to be alright, Keira."

Aekeira gave a small smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "I think it's okay if you want to dress in female garments now, Em. Your secret is out in the open."

"And everyone wants to kill me for it," Emeriel replied wryly. "I don't think it's wise to flaunt it when they still haven't adjusted. Plus, it just makes me uncomfortable."

"I understand." Aekeira finished securing the chest-bind and stepped back. "There. All done."

"Thanks." Emeriel dressed in her usual breeches and tunic.

"You have a visitor," a soldier's voice announced, making them both glance at the door. Emeriel wondered who it could be. "Are you dressed to receive?"

"Yes, please."

The door opened and—

"Lord Herod!" Emeriel was already moving toward him. He smiled, opening his arms, and she barreled into them.

"It's so good to see you, little one." He patted her hair and pulled back to get a better look at her. "Are you alright?"

"I will be back, Em." Aekeira grabbed her things, moving toward the door. "I have some errands to run."

Emeriel's lower lip wobbled. "You are worried about me? I have been dying to know how you are faring. I'm so sorry for dragging you into my mess. All week I've been worried sick."

"Please, do not let your beloved hear that," he said, amused.

"How can you still jest in a situation like this?" Emeriel studied his amused expression, noting the underlying sadness that hadn't been there before. Her heart sank. "What happened? Please don't brush it off. I want to know."

Lord Herod released a weary sigh. "I was stripped of my title as the lord of agriculture."

"What?" Emeriel stumbled back. "Because... because of me?"

"Do not beat yourself up over it. It was my doing. I knew what I was getting into when I looked the grand king in the eyes, lied, and played such a grand game of deceit. I know the laws of our land." He gave a small, tired smile. "Frankly, I expected to spend a month or two in the Hole, or maybe years in the dungeon. If there had been a public trial, the punishment would have been severe. But as it stands, I only answered to the grand rulers, and instead of facing the humiliation of public punishment, I was allowed to resign. It's a fair punishment."

"How can you say something like that?" Shaking her head miserably, Emeriel slumped onto the bed. "There is nothing fair about losing your title."

He waved a dismissive hand, sitting beside her. "I lost the title, not my wealth. It's fine, I need the rest anyway."

He was downplaying it. Emeriel knew it hurt him more than he let on. He'd once told her that his work had kept him from going off the deep end after Vera's death. Lord Herod loved his work, his passion for it evident in every conversation they'd shared. Now, he had lost it because of her.

"I will plead with the grand king. I will—"

"You will do no such thing. Please, stop worrying about this. Look at me, Emeriel." The high lord turned serious. "I'm a full-grown male, not a youngling. I knew what I was getting into. I knew there was a possibility that something like this might happen, but I still did it anyway. And I don't regret protecting you the best way I knew how. If it happened again tomorrow, I would do it all over again without a second thought. And you will not make an appeal to your beloved on my behalf. Do you understand?"

Emeriel looked away in guilt.

"I'm being honest with you. Are you listening?"

She nodded.

"We are all beasts. Without order and a strict hand, there would be chaos. If our people ever perceive weakness in the enforcement of our laws, there would be a revolution. Some of these rules, set in stone, are essential. And when one breaks them, one must be punished," he said. "The rulers do not jest with rules and punishment. Being the Soulbond of the grand king is what stood between you and punishment, Emeriel. The bond might be difficult for Daemonikai to accept, but it does not change the fact that he's standing before you like a protective cloak. And for that, no punishment will cross your path."

Emeriel took in his words. She had never thought of it that way. The events in the arena that day suddenly made more sense. King Daemonikai had stood before her like a protective shield, he'd sheltered her from the wrath of the crowd.

"It must drive Lord Zaiper crazy," she blurted out.

The seriousness dissolved from Lord Herod's face, and he snorted. "Of course. The second ruler is still fuming, even back in court. But Ottai and Vladya are standing firm with the grand king, and so are most of the high lords. So, do not bring this up with him, not for my sake."

Emeriel's face fell. "I feel really bad, my lord. I really wish I could do something to help."

His smiled. "You might still be of help. Just wait until your male is wrapped around your fingers, then you can put in a request for me, alright?"

She tried to picture the grand king, Daemonikai, being wrapped around her fingers. Too far-fetched. "It's not possible."

"Oh, it's very possible, dear Em," Herod said with a chuckle. "Every bondmate eventually has their male wrapped around their fingers. It might take time, yes, but it will happen. He will be yours. Live for you, protect you, and heal for you. All he needs is time."

"Do you really think time is enough? His scars... they run so deep." Emeriel swallowed hard, her gaze drifting away. "I have seen the threads of it, shards of glass embedded in his shattered heart. It's like an endless abyss, and even I can't see the bottom."