

## Chapter 45

EMERIEL

Two days later, Emeriel followed the directions provided by the lord from the High Court. When he arrived at the gate, he introduced himself and the gates opened for him.

The household worker who led him towards the front porch was surprisingly friendly and talkative.

By the time the human male left Emeriel at the door, Emeriel knew the name of the high lord who had summoned him—Lord Herod. The noble lord of agriculture was widowed and over two thousand years.

Emeriel stood hesitantly against the door, his hand raised and suspended in the air. You can turn and head back to the fortress, Emeriel. Pretend you had not made this trip.

However, he could not ignore the summons forever. The lord had only given him four days, and two of them had already passed. What would happen if those four days expired? Emeriel shuddered at the thought.

Before his wandering mind could dissuade him, Emeriel knocked.

The door was opened by a butler and Emeriel stated his reason for being there before a maid emerged to lead him further into the house.

"The master will see you shortly," the maid said before leaving him in a waiting area with a wooden bench, directly across from a large oak door.

Emeriel grew increasingly restless as he waited. He felt anxious, almost hopeful in his thinking that Lord Herod had forgotten about him. But, the door opened, and Lord Herod stepped out.

"Come in," Lord Herod ordered, retreating back into the room. "Emeriel, is it?"

"Yes, my lord."

Lord Herod stopped in the center of the library, turned to Emeriel, and gave a small smile. "I have been expecting you."

"I apologize for answering your summons late, my lord." Why is he smiling when Emeriel was about to jump out of his skin with worry?

Lord Herod nodded. "Do not be so frightened, Emeriel. I did not summon you here today to harm or threaten you. If I wanted Urai to know about an incredibly beautiful girl disguised as a male in the Ravensshadow Citadel Fortress of Great Power, the grand lords would have already taken action against you. But that is not my intention."

"Oh... Thank you, my lord." Emeriel didn't feel relieved. What was the catch? What would this lord do to me?

The lord scrutinized him carefully with his eyes. His lips curled up again, and he spoke, "Come. I want to show you something."

Emeriel followed him out of the study, and together they walked down the hall. The house servants were nowhere to be seen, and the atmosphere was eerily quiet.

As they turned a corner, a large painting of a woman caught Emeriel's attention. When they reached it, Lord Herod stopped.

"This is Rivera, my bondmate. She passed away thirty years ago," he said, a tinge of sadness in his voice.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," Emeriel offered.

"We bonded four hundred years ago." Lord Herod's eyes filled with memories. "I felt like the luckiest Urekai on earth when our bond was established after the seven days of bonding ritual. When our souls connected, I was so elated that I felt like I could move mountains."

Emeriel had no idea why Lord Herod was sharing this with him. But it was clear—

"She was human," he revealed.

—that Lord Herod loved his wife deeply. Wait, what?

"Huh?" Emeriel looked up at him, bewildered.

Another smile graced Lord Herod's handsome face, and he nodded. "Rivera was human. I attended the birth ceremony of Lord Festus's child, and there she was, serving drinks. She was severely malnourished, but incredibly beautiful. I couldn't stop thinking about her for days. When I suggested to Festus that I wanted to purchase his slave, he agreed. So I bought her and brought her here. She worked in this household for years. Then, we fell in love. I loved her even before I discovered she was a syren."

Emeriel's head snapped up and her eyes widened. Did he know she was syren?

However, the lord seemed lost in his memories, his gaze fixed on the painting.

"But when I discovered her secret, I knew it was fate. The centuries we spent together were the happiest of my long life. And when she passed away," he paused, his voice filled with sorrow, "she took all the light and joy with her."

"I offer my deepest condolences, my lord."

Lord Herod seemed to return to the present. "I share all this with you in hopes that your fear would diminish, young one. I still mourn my bondmate deeply, even after all these years. I attended the banquet because I had already missed several festivals, and I would have faced consequences if I missed that one, too. I never expected to meet you there. You know, Vera was just like you. She lived with Lord Festus, disguised as a male."

Emeriel was taken aback. "Really?"

"Mmm. They were unaware of her true identity, but with just one glance, I knew it. When I discovered your secret, memories of Vera came rushing back."

Despite the lord's explanation, Emeriel remained confused. "I don't understand what you want from me, my lord."

Lord Herod's gaze bore into Emeriel's, his eyes filled with intensity. "I want you to feel safe. I want you to know that you can be yourself in my presence."

A door opened, and a human maid—perhaps a slave—hurried forward. "Dinner is ready, master."

So, a slave then. Emeriel noticed that the slaves in the household appeared to be well-dressed and healthy, unlike every other slaves.

Lord Herod turned to Emeriel. "Are you hungry?"

Emeriel nodded quickly, before he could talk himself out of it.

Lord Herod smiled. "Come, let's go eat."

During dinner, Emeriel began to relax. Could it be that this lord hadn't summoned him here for a sordid affair, where his body would be taken in exchange for keeping his secrets? It all seemed too good to be true.

"I can see your mind working," Lord Herod remarked.

Emeriel decided to be honest. "This is not what I expected."

"I get the idea of what you might have expected, but I want you to know that not all lords in Urai are heartless."

Emeriel tried to suppress the skepticism in his gaze, but Lord Herod noticed it nonetheless and nodded firmly. "I know it may appear that way, but not everyone is like that. The people are hurting, and they are projecting their pain onto others."

Emeriel paused, contemplating a question that had always troubled him. "Why should we be punished for the sins of our ancestors? Urekai treat every human as if we were the ones who invaded their land. We shouldn't be held accountable for the actions of others just because we belong to the same species."

Silence fell over the table and Emeriel lowered his head, focusing on his food. Well, now he would find out if Lord Herod was merely pretending to be kind. Knots formed in Emeriel's stomach.