

## Chapter 70

EMERIEL.

Emeriel dressed, his fingers working the fabric of his tunic. Across the room, Aekeira paced anxiously, her restless steps loud in the room.

Each spoke of her deep worry and unease. Emeriel glanced at her, a faint smile tugging at his lips despite the knot of tension in his own chest.

"Keira, I've told you not to dwell on it so much." Emeriel tried to reassure her, smiling despite the knot of tension in his own chest. "Worrying won't make things better."

She paused mid-step, turning to face him with troubled eyes. "But why would he want to see you, Em? What if he blames you for what happened in court? What if he accuses you of..." She hesitated, biting her lip. "What if he accuses you of witchcraft?"

Emeriel gave her a delusional look. "Witchcraft? Seriously?"

Aekeira fidgeted. "Look, Grand Lord Vladya is so strange, Em." she resumed pacing, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. "He's unpredictable. That's why I'm so worried. You never know what he's thinking."

Emeriel let out a quiet sigh. "I believe if he intended to punish me, he wouldn't have waited to bring me to his chambers. He would have punished me alongside Mistress Sinai." Pulling his tunic over his head and smoothing the fabric as he spoke. "Besides, he followed you to rescue me from that place, did he not? I don't think he went through all that trouble just to punish me."

"Well, when you put it like that, you might have a point," Aekeira admitted reluctantly.

"How are you feeling, Emeriel?" Madam Livia asked. "I did not attend court, but I heard what happened. Everyone did."

"Is it bad?" Aekeira asked.

"It's been the talk of every gathering and the subject of countless discussions. People can't help but speculate and develop their own theories about what had happened." Madam Livia sighed. "Some are worried because it means the beast can escape its golden cage at any moment, and go on a rampage, wreaking havoc on the kingdom. On the other hand, there are those who, despite their fear, find a glimmer of hope. That behavior was not the action of a feral beast. Perhaps it means their king can be healed."

Emeriel shook her head. What if she is what brings the beast back? What would that mean?

"I'm fine, Madam Livia," Emeriel answered. "King Daemonikai didn't hurt me." If anything, he protected her. But he kept that part to himself.

The beast did protect him. Emeriel would no longer deceive himself when all the signs were in front of him. He had a connection with Grand King Daemonikai. A special connection—one strong enough to make a mindless beast take such an interest in him.

One that made Emeriel notice and think about the beast all the time. Dream about him. Get wet for him. One that made him feel all kinds of strange urges and say all kinds of weird things.

Like what he had said in court, right before the beast broke free.

The beast had come to court to rescue him. There was no denying it now, he was indeed the beast's Soulbond.

Admitting it to himself for the first time felt like a heavy burden lifted from his shoulders, but at the same time, a knot formed in his stomach. What did all this mean for him?

Fate is such a cruel thing. Matching him with a species that harbored an intense hatred for his own kind. With a male who lost his wife and two sons at the hands of Emeriel's people, and as if that wasn't enough, he lost his sanity and remained in his beast form for five hundred years.

It felt like a sick joke played by the heavens.

Emeriel had always sensed the gods were not on his side, given the hardships he and Aekeira had endured growing up and being sold into this place. But to subject him to this kind of cruelty was unimaginable.

And to his dismay, he was beginning to...care for the beast.

"Hear what I said?" Madam Livia's voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Huh?"

"I said we're done here, and you're ready to meet with the third ruler. What were you thinking about?" Madam Livia pressed.

"Nothing," he answered, but when they gazed at him skeptically, he added, "Just how good it feels to be back. After being, you know...in the dark for days."

Madam Livia and Amie nodded in understanding before walking away to pack up the bathing equipment.

Aekeira moved closer, her gaze more scrutinizing. "Are you sure you're alright?"

Emeriel wanted nothing more than to confide in his sister, but he knew it would only distress her. Aekeira was too fearful of that possibility, and truth be told, so was he.

He gave her a soft smile. "I'm fine."

"You look beautiful, Em. Even in male attire." Aekeira returned his smile.

"I'm just so glad that evil mistress didn't succeed with her wicked plans. Although I never want to be in her position, I loved the punishment Grand Lord Vladya gave her. I feel guilty about loving it." Emeriel added sheepishly.

"I do too. But she deserved it." Aekeira giggled. "Grand Lord Vladya can be so cruel. Remember the look on her face?"

Emeriel chuckled. "She looked like a dragon ready to breathe fire."

"An ugly dragon, for that matter," Aekeira added.

They burst out laughing.

"Just like children, you two." Madam Livia shook her head. "Alright, Emeriel, come on, let us go. You do not want to keep the grand lord waiting. Aekeira, go back to your duties before your slave master notices your absence and punishes you."

Aekeira nodded as Madam Livia led Emeriel away.

Although he had assured Aekeira not to worry, all his courage and optimism evaporated as he entered the western wing. Livia bid him farewell, taking Amie with her, leaving him to continue on his own.

One of the guards at the intersection had directed him away from the side door he was planning to enter, leading him towards the grand entrance of Lord Vladya's abode.

By the time Emeriel stood on the stoop, his heart was pounding in his chest. He knocked once and raised his voice. "Your Highness, it is I, Emeriel."