

## Chapter 71

A Urekai maid came out and escorted him inside. Emeriel followed without question.

His eyes were immediately drawn to the soaring ceiling, supported by ornate stone columns, giving the space an airy yet imposing ambiance. The floor was a seamless expanse of polished marble, veined with gold. In the center, a large Persian rug in rich colors caught his attention.

An enormous fireplace dominated one wall, its mantel carved from a single block of marble, a fire crackling within. Nearby, floor-to-ceiling windows draped in heavy brocade curtains offered a view of the royal gardens. It was the grandest and most magnificent living room Emeriel had ever seen in a royal residence.

"Come." The maid led him through twists and turns of passageways until they stopped at a closed door. "Go inside. He is expecting you."

After the maid left, Emeriel swallowed tightly then opened the door, entering the grand study. Behind the large wooden desk, Grand Lord Vladya sat, engrossed in writing on his scroll.

Lord Vladya paused, glancing up at him.

Emeriel bowed. "My Lord."

Lord Vladya abandoned his scroll, the chair drawing back with a distinct sound as he rose. With steady and regal movements, the grand lord closed the distance between them.

Emeriel resisted the urge to step back, instead keeping his head lowered. Standing before him, Grand Lord Vladya scrutinized him with a watchful gaze. As if he could see straight through Emeriel.

To make matters worse, Lord Vladya bent at the waist, bringing his face close to Emeriel's, making eye contact.

Emeriel's head jerked back, his eyes widening as he swallowed tightly.

"How can someone so small do something so big?" Lord Vladya muttered to himself.

Emeriel deducing the grand lord was talking to himself, remained silent.

"What did you do to make Daemonikai like that, Emeriel?" This one was directed at him. "What could you have possibly done to a male—beast—like Daemonikai?"

Emeriel's stomach lurched at the accusations. In this kingdom, this is how it usually begins, and ends with the accused head hanging on a spike. "I did nothing, I swear it!" he answered quickly. "I've never done anything."

"You did something." Lord Vladya countered.

"No, I—"

"The beast let you feed him. Burst out of the cage at one point just to mount you. And a few days ago, it broke free to take you away from court and keep you to himself. Why?" Lord Vladya pulled away slightly. "I have asked myself that countless times now—I have even had sleepless nights. But you know what, Emeriel?"

"W-what?" Emeriel was hyperventilating now. The room spun, tilting. Where is this going?

"I do not care how you do it. I do not care what you are doing at all. I simply want you to keep doing it," Lord Vladya stated, looking up at him.

Wait, what? The room snapped back into focus. That certainly wasn't what he expected to hear. "What?"

Grand Lord Vladya looked away. "I will have you know, it is highly improbable for a Urekai to come back from mindlessness. Such a thing has never occurred before. But Daemonikai is also displaying actions that should not be seen in a feral either, and it all began with you. It all seems to be connected to you. I feel foolish even entertaining the thought, but..."

His eyes locked onto Emeriel's, revealing a raw pain in them. "If there is even a chance, no matter how slim, that he could regain his sanity, I would move mountains to make it possible."

Emeriel watched him, stunned.

Grand Lord Vladya, who usually wore an expression of indifference or icy coldness, now bore a look of unmistakable naked pain that shocked Emeriel. A display of vulnerability Emeriel never expected to see—not from him.

"Thus, I need you to remain close to him," Lord Vladya stated. "From this point forward, your duty will be to feed the beast. I will inform the soldiers accordingly, to ensure your safe passage. I want you out of harm's way. Until I see whether or not you can help Daemonikai, you are not allowed to die. Do you understand?"

That was one weird request. Why would Emeriel want to die? "Yes, Your Highness."

"I will grant you a single request. Consider it a reward for hope given. Apart from setting you free, you may make one request of me, and I will grant it."

Emeriel's eyes widened in surprise. "Truly?"

Lord Vladya nodded once. "Yes. What do you desire?"

The answer was surprisingly easy. His greatest wish was to set Aekeira free.

But Emeriel hesitated.

Aekeira would never leave without him. And even if she were forced to, she would never be safe back in Navia. King Orestus would continue exploiting her, pawning her off to his officials, using her as collateral for his bets. And Emeriel wouldn't be there to protect her.

So, he opted for the next best thing. "I do not wish for my sister to be offered to the beast ever again. And..." he hesitated, his voice faltering. "If possible, Your Highness, I would like to request that you cease mounting her as well."

Silence enveloped the room.

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GRAND LORD VLADYA

Lord Vladya's sharp gaze rested on the young prince, his expression unreadable as he contemplated the boy's request. Of all the things Emeriel could have asked for, it surprised him how little he had chosen to demand.

Most would seize the opportunity for wealth, expansive lands, or gold coins. Yet, the boy had asked for something infinitely more personal...to save his sister.

Vladya's lips pressed into a thin line. In truth, granting the first part of Emeriel's request was almost laughably simple. He could declare it done with a single command, and none would challenge him.

But the second part? That was far more complicated.

Taking his seat, he leaned back slightly, his fingers drumming against the arm of his chair. Deep down, Vladya knew the truth that disturbed him greatly. He still wanted Aekeira.

His desire for her still burned unchecked, insatiable. He hadn't sated his appetite for her—not by a long shot.