

Chapter 73

EMERIEL

In the following two days, Emeriel was relocated to Blackstone and Lord VLadya departed on his journey. He was assigned to work in the gardens—a prospect that filled him with unexpected relief.

Emeriel had always envied the slaves who worked in the gardens, drawn to the earthy scents and the quiet rhythm of tending to life. It had been one of his indulgences back in Navia—a haven of peace amid a life of turmoil.

Emeriel couldn't be certain whether it was due to what had happened in court or if the slaves in Blackstone were simply different, but he noticed a change in the way he was treated.

The slave masters no longer bellowed at him, and his fellow slaves no longer sought reasons to harm him. Even the Urekai maids displayed a newfound respect. They observed him with curiosity as he moved about and generally stayed out of his way.

Aekeira began visiting more frequently as well. Once she had finished her tasks, she would hasten to help Emeriel with his work.

Of course, they had to be discreet about it, as the slave masters frowned upon slaves aiding one another.

However, yesterday, while Aekeira balanced a brimming clay jug, helping Emeriel soak the thirsty flowerbeds, the slave master in charge of their duties caught them. Emeriel tensed, the watering can slipping from his numb fingers, and they sprang upright, rigid as the dried stalks bordering the garden.

Like cornered mice, they awaited their punishment. Surprisingly, the slave master ignored them, leaving Emeriel utterly bewildered, and relieved.

Aekeira was overjoyed when Emeriel shared the news of her meeting with Grand Lord Vladya. Tears streamed down her face, hot and unchecked, as she expressed her happiness.

"So we shall remain together now, with you in the neighboring chamber?" she queried, a lingering sniffle betraying her tears. Her wild smile held a flicker of uncertainty beneath its joy.

Emeriel embraced her, nodding in affirmation.

"And the forbidden chambers?" Her smile waned. "Em, I am not pleased with that. I do not want the beast mounting you."

Emeriel held her tighter, his resolve hardening. "Better me than you, Keira. Serving him would bring you far worse harm than anything he could do to me. That beast would never kill me. I am certain of it."

"And how can you be so sure?" she asked, her voice small, worry lacing every word.

"Because he had every chance to kill me, yet he has not. It is not mere luck." Emeriel gently cupped her cheek, his gaze searching hers. "Look into my eyes, Aekeira. You will see the truth. I want to do this, not just to save you, but because...something within me knows the beast will never harm me."

Aekeira's worry lingered, etched in the tightness around her eyes. But a flicker of reluctant acceptance softened her features. She ceased her arguments, her small sigh echoing in the space between them. Her embrace, when it came, was tight, almost desperate. "Very well. I only wish for your safety, Em."

Emeriel noticed a change in Aekeira. She became happier, radiating with joy. Glowing.

Serving the beast had scared Aekeira more than his sister ever acknowledged, and the thought that he'd lifted that burden from her shoulders filled him with quiet satisfaction.

The only time Emeriel left Blackstone was at midnight. To feed his beast. And yes, sometimes, Emeriel could not help but refer to the beast as 'mine', especially in his head. He had stopped fighting that inclination too.

Upon arrival, the guards simply glanced at him before stepping aside. The same guards who had once yelled at him to leave, hurled threats, and shoved, him now cleared his path. Emeriel would never openly acknowledge the trickle of satisfaction it brought him.

He entered through the small gate and door, and the beast uncurled itself from the ground as he approached

. One moment it was behind the barricades, the next, it had Emeriel pinned to the wall. Its swift movement no longer frightened Emeriel as it would have before. Instead, he willingly bared his throat to the beast.

The beast took a deep inhale and, as always, emitted a long, satisfying purr that filled Emeriel with warmth and an odd sense of happiness. Twice it licked his throat, its rough tongue leaving a trail of heat.

For a heart-stopping moment, a jolt of fear prickled Emeriel's spine. Would it bite? Would the beast finally drain him dry as the mistress had said?

But then, he remembered that the beast had bloodfed days ago, so the fear eased, and he relaxed.

As Emeriel arranged the feast—slabs of raw meat and steaming bowls of offal—the beast devoured them with guttural grunts. Its yellow eyes never left him, tracking his every move.

That burning gaze sent shivers down Emeriel's spine. Made him feel like a rabbit trapped before a wolf. As if he was eating the wrong food, Emeriel was the one he wanted to eat. As if he wanted to bend Emeriel over and mount him.

Emeriel was getting wet thinking about it too, and quickly dismissed it.

Yet, when it concerned the beast, not thinking about him was an illusion. Emeriel found himself thinking about the creature more times than he cared to admit.

GRAND LORD ZAIPER

Grand Lord Zaiper grew increasingly frustrated and angry. With Vladya away, this was the perfect opportunity to rid himself of the bothersome little fly that was the little prince and be done with it.

However, Vladya had unexpectedly assigned the boy to Blackstone, and as a result, Zaiper had not caught a glimpse of him the past two days.

Summoning the boy was out of the question. Doing so would attract the attention of the fortress to the fact that the boy was with him. Now that the boy had gained some level of fame among the people, Zaiper did not want his death to be traced back to him.

Then, some might speculate Zaiper killed the boy because he felt threatened, a desire to prevent Daemonikai from regaining his sanity, or a craving for the throne. He needed none of those rumors to spread. So, no, Zaiper did not want the boy's death linked to him.

So how could he bring the boy to Greyrock without summoning him?

It would have been simpler if the boy were still in the southern wings, but Vladya had relocated him. The mere thought infuriated Zaiper.

Footsteps interrupted his thoughts. "My Lord, as you requested, I have sent a message to Lord Gaff. He will respond by morning," Razarr, his head of soldiers, spoke behind him.

Zaiper turned his head towards Razarr. The male was incredibly handsome, and Zaiper was well aware of Razarr's fierce loyalty to him. How could he not, when Razarr had loved him for centuries?

Zaiper simply pretended not to be aware, even as he occasionally took Razarr to his bed. It helped that Razarr remained highly professional, committed to his duties, possessing the same level of resilience as Zaiper himself.

"Razarr?"

He straightened and met Zaiper's gaze. "Yes, my Lord?"

"If I desire to end a human's life without summoning them, as I intend to avoid any connection between their demise and myself, how might I bring this individual into my presence?" Zaiper inquired in a bored tone.