

Chapter 81

MISTRESS SINAI

Mistress Sinai paced her gilded cage, a whirlwind of fury barely contained within the lavish confines of her chambers. Two days of forced solitude felt like an eternity, each moment a fresh torment in her soul's descent into madness. At this rate, she was truly going to go insane!

Home confinement was a living hell, a cruel mockery of her former freedoms. She abhorred it with every fiber of her being.

To be denied her whims was unbearable enough, but to become the butt of every whispered joke, every pitying glance from the other mistresses in Ravensshadow's royal estate... it was the ultimate humiliation.

Yesterday, Mistress Gaille had come to "check on her," her syrupy concern a thinly veiled insult. Sinai could practically see the woman's barely suppressed laughter behind her false smiles.

All this because of a human. A mere boy.

Vladya had moved heaven and earth to protect the worthless creature from her wrath, even threatening to cast her into the Hole. The Hole! The mere thought sent a fresh wave of betrayal and anger through her veins, hot and acidic.

Had Emeriel been a girl, Sinai might have entertained the possibility that he was Daemon's Soulbound. But fate was not that cruel, was it? It had played a different hand; the little thing was a boy. Thank Urai for small mercies.

All day, she had been forced to languish here, pacing the extravagant prison of her chamber, staring at her own reflection until it blurred with rage. Her once-spacious room felt suffocating, the air thick with her frustration. Boredom gnawed at her, a relentless beast clawing at the edges of her sanity.

"Emeriel will pay," she hissed, her words like venom dripping onto the pristine mirror. "He. Will. Pay."

Desperate for a distraction, she sank into a plush armchair. "Nora?" she called, her voice sharp as a whip.

The maid scurried forward, her head bowed. "Yes, Mistress?"

"What's the gossip out there? Are people still buzzing about Emeriel and his little miracle?"

Nora's eyes lit up with a morbid glee. "Yes, Madam! King Daemonikai must hold the boy in great favor. Why else would one be in the territory of a feral for three days without being torn apart? Oh, the boy must be truly special."

Sinai's lips twisted in disgust, and she shot the girl a disapproving glare.

The girl, oblivious to her mistress's displeasure, continued, "I crave more wonders like that. Half the town is still talking about it. Even Grand Lord Vladya was so impressed that he—"

"Spare me the details. I already know what he did," Sinai interrupted, her voice laced with acid.

"—moved the human prince to Blackstone," Nora finished.

Sinai's eyes widened, disbelief warring with fury. "Wait, what!?"

Nora's face paled and she clamped her mouth shut, clearly regretting her loose tongue.

Sinai surged to her feet, her eyes blazing. "Tell me," she demanded, her voice dangerously low. "Now."

Nora fumbled nervously. "Grand Lord Vladya moved Emeriel to B-Blackstone," she stammered. "He's been tending the estate's gardens for days now. Has his own chamber and everything."

Sinai's vision swam, red with rage and the sting of betrayal.

"And, um... last night, his sister was also relocated to Blackstone. She has her own chamber there too."

"That conniving little—" Sinai grabbed a crystal lamp from the dressing table and hurled it at the mirror, the shattering sound a symphony of her fury. "How dare he! How dare he, how dare he!"

.....

EMERIEL

Emeriel thrashed restlessly through the night, sleep refusing to take hold. Finally, he gave up, sitting upright with a weary sigh. His nightclothes hung loose, his normally bound chest free, his hair unbound.

But freedom was fleeting. With a resigned sigh, Emeriel re-bound his chest and secured his hair before slipping from his chamber.

He padded silently to the next room, the door creaking softly as he opened it. Aekeira slept soundly beneath the covers, her face relaxed and peaceful.

A small smile touched Emeriel's lips as he leaned against the doorframe, watching her breathe. It had been a long day. But for now, Aekeira was safe, and that was all that mattered.

He wouldn't dwell on the future, wouldn't torment himself with what tomorrow might bring. The present moment was all that mattered—him and Aekeira, finally with chambers close to each other, and that was enough.

Closing the door gently, Emeriel turned away from the room. A different destination called to him. He wouldn't pretend this was just a midnight stroll. A yearning he couldn't ignore drew him to the forbidden chambers. Tugging him towards King Daemonikai. To be near him. To feel his presence.

The fortress was sprawling, the largest he'd ever known, yet the familiar path felt short. Guards stepped aside without a word, allowing him passage.

He pushed open the small gate and door, entering the dimly lit chamber. Moonlight spilled in through the corner window, the one Emeriel had opened during his last visit, casting long shadows across the floor.

Outside the barricade, the beast lay sound asleep, its massive form a dark silhouette against the pale moonlight. Emeriel approached, sinking down beside the creature. Its eyes snapped open, a flash of piercing yellow in the darkness.

Emeriel held perfectly still, quelling the instinctive fear that rose within him. He knew, deep in his soul, the beast wouldn't harm him.

Its nostrils flared, drinking in his scent. Followed by a low, rumbling purr of contentment. Gradually, its eyelids drooped shut in relaxed bliss.

A flutter of warmth bloomed in Emeriel's chest, butterflies dancing in his belly. He couldn't help but smile. "Hello," he murmured, his voice barely a whisper.

The beast rumbled softly in response, a massive paw lifting to gently graze Emeriel's cheek. The touch was featherlight, as if the creature understood that pressing any harder would break the skin.

"I never properly thanked you, did I?" Emeriel's voice was soft, laced with a touch of wonder. "I'm sorry for that, your majesty. Thank you for saving me from the court. I'd likely be dead if not for you. Your court is... formidable. All those grand lords, each a force to be reckoned with."

A low groan rumbled from the beast, its eyes slowly opening and closing. It seemed to savor the sound of Emeriel's voice, the melodic cadence soothing its restless spirit.

"I've lived my whole life as a boy," Emeriel continued, his words a quiet confession. "But the longing to be a girl... it burns inside me. It's impossible, though. Never was, never will be. I don't even know if I'd know how to be one anymore." He sighed, a wistful sound.

Propping his head on his hand, he continued, "It started with my parents, trying to protect me in a way they couldn't protect my older sister. It was easier to stay safe in the human kingdom. As a prince, some lords looked at me strangely, but none dared act on it. But here..." His voice trailed off, lost in the depths of the beast's golden eyes.

"It's harder here. I suppose, in a way, serving you has made it easier. Slave masters are careful not to cross me, for fear of Lord Vladya's wrath. And after what happened in court... they do not look at me the same way anymore."

Exhaustion crept over Emeriel and he shifted closer, tucking himself into the crook of the beast's arm. Massive limbs curled around him, drawing him close, as the beast rumbled with pleasure.

The tension seeped from his body, and sleep claimed him.