

Chapter 102

"Have you seen their grand king yet?" Erin asked Ham, another slave working beside her. Their voices were hushed, but Emeriel's ears perked up at the mention of the king.

"No," Ham shook her head, her hand deftly unearthing a stubborn weed. "But I am curious to see him. The rumors I've heard about him since I was a youngling kept me far away from his beast form when he was feral. Urekai have a wealth of legends, and for thousands of years, they've been regarded as one of the strongest species. This grand king was nearly in every tale."

"They say his bondmate tamed him," Erin added, her voice tinged with awe. "According to one legend, he was a cold and aloof young grand king before he found his mate. A ruthless warrior who killed without hesitation or remorse. Always eager for battle and the spoils of war. Other kingdoms trembled at his name. But the legend claims he mellowed due to his family. He became less bloodthirsty, more focused on ruling his people with wisdom and compassion."

Ham paused, her expression thoughtful. "I wonder how it must feel to lose your entire family like that," she mused, her hand still in the soil. "To have them by your side for three point five millennia, and then, in the blink of an eye, they are gone. And after enduring five centuries of madness, you must now face the world without them. I can't even begin to imagine such a loss."

Erin released a heavy sigh as she gathered the uprooted weeds into a pile and stood up. "He's relocated the royal residence. He probably couldn't bear the memories of his family there. Which doesn't bode well for us humans. He will undoubtedly take his grief and anger out on us. What if he becomes worse than Lord Zaiper?"

"Then we're as good as dead," Ham mumbled, her lips twisting into a worried frown as she mimicked Erin's actions, gathering her own pile of weeds.

Emeriel's hands froze mid-motion, her heart sinking at their words.

What if they were right? What if the grand king turned out to be worse than Lord Zaiper?

He refused to believe it, but he knew the destructive power of grief and pain. They could twist the purest heart into something dark and monstrous.

It's wiser to keep his distance, right? Emeriel longed to see him, but the grand king probably didn't remember. Though it pained him like a burning blade, the truth must be faced. The grand king does not remember us, therefore it's best to avoid him.

And you know you yearn to catch a glimpse of him. You crave it.

Emeriel ruthlessly silenced his inner voice, returning to his task.

As the sun began its descent, Emeriel headed back to the fortress, the day's labor drawing to a close.

Walking through the big gate, a low murmur caught his attention, accompanied by the clatter of metal. Ahead, a crowd was forming, their faces filled with excitement.

Intrigued, Emeriel leaned toward an elderly human woman. "What's happening?"

"Their grand king has just concluded court," she explained, her eyes twinkling with anticipation. "Many are eager to catch a glimpse of him."

The woman moved on, leaving Emeriel to observe the Urekai gathering from afar. He shouldn't risk venturing into such a gathering, not for a mere glimpse of the king. It was far too dangerous.

Not a risk if you don't get too close, his mind whispered.

No way. Absolutely not.

Your beast. He is your beast. The same one who rescued you from the court, from the slave master, from the assassins. The same one you saved.

Before he could fully comprehend his actions, Emeriel was moving towards the crowd. He sought refuge behind a sturdy tree, his eyes scanning the assembled figures, searching for...

And then, he saw him.

Amidst the grand lords, he stood out like a bonfire.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Emeriel stared. The grand king carried himself with regal authority. His posture, his stance, his attire – every aspect of his being radiated immense power.

The grand lords were clothed in their customary long white robes, but he wore heavy black robes decorated with elaborate white embroideries. While the grand lords had their hair neatly bound at their necks, his long, raven-black mane flowed freely, captivating Emeriel's attention with its bold white streaks on either side of his head.

My beloved.

He was larger than life. The phrase had always seemed like an exaggeration, a cliché. But seeing the grand king now, he understood. He towered over even Lord Vladya, who was quite tall and imposing.

"So that is him," Emeriel murmured aloud.

A sense of tranquility washed over him. A part of him that had been restless since the announcement of Daemonikai's return, since every Urekai had flocked to the arena that night, finally found peace. Daemonikai was easily the most handsome male Emeriel had ever laid eyes on.

Urekai approached the grand king in groups of two or three, each taking the hand he offered. They pressed his hand to their noses—a gesture of respect—inhaling his scent in a ritualistic act of reassurance. It was as if the mere presence of their grand king, the confirmation of his return, was enough to soothe their anxieties and quell their fears.

"What are you doing here?"

Emeriel jumped, startled by the unexpected voice, and whirled around.

Aekeira stood behind her, her eyes following Emeriel's. "You were watching the grand king, weren't you?" A knowing smile played on her lips.

"Nope." Emeriel was flustered. "That's not it. I was just... umm..."

"Watching a gathering of Urekai, I see," Aekeira quipped, raising an eyebrow. "Must be quite a sight. A captivating display of nature, wouldn't you say?"

Emeriel wrinkled her nose. "Are you making fun of me?"

"You bet I am," Aekeira chuckled, taking his hand and leading him away. Her expression sobered as they walked. "You have to be careful, Em. This is a dangerous path you're treading."

Emeriel averted her gaze. Yes, he was aware of that. But his stubborn heart refused to listen to reason.

Aekeira stopped and turned to face him, her eyes searching. "I caught a glimpse of that male up close, and I can assure you it would be best to avoid him. He looks terrifying. Handsome, yes, but really scary. Even more so than Lord Vladya, and that's saying a lot. If I were you, I would do everything possible to stay away from him."

"Are you doing everything possible to stay away from Lord Vladya?" Emeriel asked softly.

It was Aekeira's turn to look away. His sister didn't have an answer for that.