

## Chapter 12

Emeriel had seen Grand Lord Vladya and Grand Lord Ottai, but not the one called Grand Lord Zaiper. Whenever his name was mentioned, the Urekai maids and human slaves would all look terrified. Every single one of them.

"He is the worst of all the grand lords," The slave girl, Amie, had whispered to him the day before, her eyes wide as she looked around to make sure no one was listening and the hallway was empty. "Lord Ottai can be sweet when he wants to be, and Lord Vladya is very scary. But like Lord Ottai, he is fair and just in his leadership. But Lord Zaiper?"

Amie had glanced around again. "He is a monster. His slaves die every day. Some starve, others are tortured for fun, and some are even raped to death. His slave masters are the worst, and Lord Zaiper does not care. He does not even see us as human."

Emeriel's eyes had widened to the root of his hair. "This lord is worse than Lord Vladya?"

"Actually, Grand Lord Vladya is not that bad," Amie had stated firmly. "When it comes to ruling and running the kingdom, he is as fair as you could hope for from a Urekai lord. He just hates humans. He never holds back when dealing with humans. Compared to Lord Zaiper, though, he is an angel." The younger girl had paused. "Stay away from Lord Zaiper at all costs."

A knock broke into Emeriel's thoughts as Amie poked her head through the door, her smile bright.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked cheerfully.

Emeriel nodded and followed her outside.

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Later.

Boris, the Urekai slave master, watched Emeriel's every move with the sharp gaze of a hawk stalking its prey in the deepest parts of an ancient forest.

Emeriel felt deeply uneasy as he placed bottles of wine into a wooden barrel. He was so uncomfortable that he almost dropped a bottle in a moment of panic.

Luckily, his reflexes saved him, and he caught it just in time.

A good thing too, because breaking a wine bottle would mean fifteen lashes from the burning whip—and two nights in the dungeon, according to Master Gaine, the second Urekai slave master.

Pull yourself together, Emeriel! Do not look at him. Stop glancing his way!

Picking up another bottle of red wine, Emeriel placed it carefully into the barrel with the others on the lower level.

"Two white wines and a perry for the twins at table four," Amie said as she walked up to him. She was one of the slaves serving drinks to the many customers at the tavern.

"Coming right up," Emeriel said quickly. He prepared the order and handed it to Amie, who took the bottles and rushed off.

Glancing at Master Boris again, Emeriel noticed his creepy eyes were now following Amie instead.

Those watchful eyes were far too unsettling.

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BLACKSTONE DOMAIN, RAVENSHADOW FORTRESS.

GRAND LORD VLADYA

"She is awake, my lord," Livia had informed Vladya on the military grounds.

Now, he was on his way back to his quarters.

Three days had passed, and the girl had not regained consciousness. Grand Lord Vladya had started to doubt if she ever would.

He had considered ordering his soldiers to dispose of her body, but he refrained. Instead, he instructed his healer to care for her and had Livia watch closely.

The girl held answers to questions Vladya desperately needed. Answers to the questions that disturbed his mind.

As he entered his quarters, the maids bowed to him, and the soldiers escorted him to the chamber where the girl was being kept. They opened the door, and Vladya stepped inside.

"Wait outside," he ordered, and the soldiers closed the door behind him.

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AEKEIRA

Aekeira watched the male figure step into the room. This was the second time she had been in his presence, and this time, they were alone.

Grand Lord Vladya terrified her deeply.

Her body still ached, though the pain was not as severe as it had been that dreadful night. The herbs had provided some relief, but they had not completely erased the pain.

Aekeira bowed her head slightly. "My lord."

"You have finally decided to rejoin the living. I was beginning to wonder if you ever would."

"I did not think I would, my lord," she replied truthfully, meeting his eyes. "Where is my brother? Is he well?"

"I ask the questions here, human princess. Not you," Grand Lord Vladya said coldly. "How did you manage to survive being mounted by his beast? Honestly, I did not expect you to live through it."

Aekeira clenched her fists tightly. By the gods of light, she hated this man. She hated all of them.

"I do not understand what you mean, my lord," she retorted. Her tone was sharp, and Aekeira realized she was glaring at him.

Grand Lord Vladya's cold, gray-yellow eyes locked onto hers. "Allow me to rephrase the question. This time, give me a response that satisfies me, or I will summon the nearest slave master to strip you and give you thirty lashes. Do you understand?"

Aekeira believed him. The hint of rebellion in her vanished as her heart raced. "Yes, my lord."

"Good. Now, tell me everything that happened from the moment you entered the forbidden chambers."

Aekeira recounted the events in detail, stumbling over her words a few times as she tried to distance herself from the horrible memory as much as possible.

"I lost consciousness several times. I thought I would die. Truly, I do not know how I survived," she finished.

Grand Lord Vladya studied her intently, and Aekeira made sure to look innocent. To look as if she were not hiding anything.

"Do not celebrate just yet," Lord Vladya said at last. "Rest well and take your medicines, for in five nights, our people will celebrate the moonlight festival. On that night, you will return to the forbidden chambers."

What...? Aekeira's blood ran cold.

Just when she had begun to hope for survival, this man shattered it. Tears sprang in her eyes.

"Surely, you do not mean that," she whispered.

"I assure you, I never say what I do not mean," he replied calmly. "But do not worry; I am not completely heartless. The healer will attend to your needs, providing you with the necessary treatments and herbs."

Those chilling eyes met hers. "But, make no mistake, your duty remain the same. Whether you choose to return to the forbidden chambers or send your dear little brother in your stead is of no concern to me. But one thing is certain, one of you will be there."

To hell with the consequences.

"You have no soul," Aekeira spat, venom dripping from her tone. "A manifestation of the devil himself."

"Compliments, slave princess. Compliments." There was no remorse or anger in his eyes, only indifference.

He stood and turned to leave, glancing over his shoulder. "Until we meet again, human princess. If we meet again."

As the door closed behind him, tears streamed down Aekeira's face.

By the gods of light, she had never cried easily. Not for anything. And she refused to start now—not because of a male like him.

Her body ached as if she had been immersed in boiling water overnight.

The area between her legs was raw and bruised, and the thought of being mounted by the beast again made her feel she might die.

But she would rather go back herself than allow Emeriel to be sent there.

Especially because the king's beast wanted Emeriel.

It may have mounted Aekeira, but it was Emeriel's scent it was hungry for.

Why? Aekeira had no idea.

Nevertheless, she would do everything within her power to keep her sister away from that chamber.

Even if it meant being raped to death by a feral beast.