

## Chapter 126

EMERIEL

Emeriel and Lord Herod strolled beneath the moonlit sky, their lanterns casting soft lights on the cobblestone path.

As they passed, heads bowed, and curious eyes followed.

"They are surprised," Lord Herod remarked with a gentle laugh. "I have not been seen with a female since Vera's passing. Most often, it's Ezra, my bloodhost, by my side."

Emeriel glanced around, a soft smile gracing her lips. "Everyone adores you, My Lord. And why wouldn't they? You're the kindest Urekai I know."

He chuckled. "You flatter me."

They reached a crowded square, its air filled with music and laughter. Urekai commoners gathered under a canopy of glowing lanterns, the women swaying and singing in unison as the men watched with adoration.

"Many find love on nights like these," Lord Herod mused. "Some will return home with a bond after the seven-day bonding ritual, while others will carry a broken heart."

Emeriel only half-heard his words, her thoughts drifting to the grand king.

Lately, he had dominated her thoughts so much that any moment he wasn't in her mind felt strangely empty.

Last night had been terrifying. Yet the memory of his touch... the passion in his eyes... they had been in her mind all day. His kisses had left her weak in the knees.

"Emeriel?"

Lord Herod's voice pulled her back to reality. He had stopped walking, his brow furrowed with concern. "You have been lost in thought all day. It's not healthy to dwell on things, little one. What troubles you?"

"I'm fine, My Lord," she gave a forced smile to mask her inner turmoil.

"No, you're not—" Before he could press further, a graceful Urekai woman approached them, her eyes sparkling with admiration.

"Blessed night, My Lord," she greeted, bowing. "I saw you from afar and could not resist saying hello."

Lord Herod smiled warmly. "Orin, it's good to see you. How are you faring?"

"Well, thanks to your family's generosity, My Lord." Orin's gaze shifted to Emeriel.

"Orin," Lord Herod began, "allow me to introduce Princess Galilea. And Leah—" he turned to Emeriel—"this is Orin, our family's esteemed healer."

Both females exchanged a respectful bow—Orin's gesture acknowledging Emeriel's royal status, and Emeriel's a simple acknowledgment of the introduction. Orin's eyes sparkled with curiosity.

"This reminds me," Lord Herod began, addressing Orin, "I intended to send for you tomorrow, but since we've crossed paths, perhaps you could assist me with something?"

Orin nodded eagerly. "Of course, My Lord. My daughter carries my medicine bag just across the street. I rarely venture out without it, in case of emergencies. How may I be of service?"

"I need you to assess Galilea for her full heat. It will be her first, and we must know the day to prepare accordingly."

Orin's breath caught. "A Syren?"

She turned to Emeriel, her gaze filled with newfound respect and a genuine smile. "I am so happy for you, Lord Herod. I have been worried that you would not be able to move on from Lady Vera. It warms my heart to see you making an effort."

Amusement danced in Lord Herod's eyes. "Indeed, I am making an effort, so worry not, dear Orin. Where would be a suitable place for this assessment? Must we return to my home?"

Orin practically bounced with excitement. "No, no, that's too far. My home is much closer, My Lord, as you well know."

"That I do," he nodded.

"I shall fetch my bag at once. I'll be back in a moment," Orin said, her voice filled with anticipation as she hurried away.

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AEKERIA

As Aekeira and Hansel ventured further into the woods, the crowds thinned, replaced by the rustling of leaves and the chirping of crickets.

Hansel opened up, sharing stories of his life in Urai—he was born here—his deceased mother and his father, who toiled in the minefields.

In turn, Aekeira spoke of her life with Emeriel before their arrival in this land.

The conversation flowed easily, and Aekeira found herself enjoying Hansel's company. He was kind, gentle, and genuinely interested in her words.

Suddenly, Hansel stopped short. "We have to go back," he said, his voice tinged with worry. "We're too deep into the woods."

Aekeira nodded in agreement, her gaze sweeping the dense underbrush and towering trees. The absence of other festival goers was a clear indication that they had strayed off the beaten path.

"Urekai hunt in these parts," Hansel whispered, his eyes scanning the shadows. "It wouldn't be safe to encounter them in their beast forms."

They turned to retrace their steps, their lanterns bobbing in the darkness. The silence of the woods was shattered by the sound of coarse laughter.

"Well, well, well," a gruff voice sneered. "Look what we have here, boys. A pretty little bird."

Aekeira whirled around, alarmed as a group of men emerged from the trees.

Humans. Slaves, like them, but older. Harder.

"Look, man, we don't want any trouble," Hansel said cautiously, squeezing her hand.

"Oh, but we do," the apparent leader stepped forward. He was a burly man with a menacing grin, eyes glinting with malice even through the darkness.

He gestured to a hulking figure behind him, who lunged at Hansel, shoving him violently to the ground.

Hansel sprawled on the ground, his face contorted in pain.

The leader's gaze raked over Aekeira, lingering on her curves with a hunger that made her skin crawl. "We'll take the girl. Haven't had a pretty one like her in ages."

Aekeira's heart hammered in her chest. Without a second thought, she turned and fled, her legs pumping as she dodged between trees and fallen logs.

"Someone's eager," the leader taunted, his laughter echoing through the woods. "Come on, boys, let's have some fun!"

The men gave chase, their heavy footsteps pounding behind her. Aekeira pushed herself harder.

But she was no match for their speed and stamina. Within moments, they were upon her, their hands grabbing at her clothes, their breath hot on her skin.

She struggled fiercely, kicking and scratching, but they were too strong. One of them lifted her off her feet and slammed her against a tree, the rough bark biting into her back.

"Feisty," the leader purred, his fingers tracing a path along her jawline. "I like that."

Their hands roamed her body, invasive and violating.

Aekeira's breath came in ragged gasps, her eyes darting frantically for any sign of escape.

"Wait," one of the men hissed, alarmed. "Who's that?"

Several hands paused, their attention drawn to a figure lurking in the shadows.

A tall, slender silhouette, partially obscured by the darkness, yet unmistakably there.

Aekeira's gaze followed theirs and her heart leaped to her throat.

Even cloaked in darkness, that stature, that regal bearing, the flowing robe, and the cascade of long hair were unmistakable.

Grand Lord Vladya.