

Chapter 197

GRAND LORD ZAIPER

"That will be all for today," Grand Lord Zaiper declared, rising from his throne.

The high lords scrambled to their feet, bowing deeply as he swept past. Razarr fell into step beside him. "Your Majesty seems to be in a great mood today."

"Oh, Razarr. Every new day comes with its own brand of happiness, is what it is."

As they walked through the corridors of Greyrock, slaves scurried out of his path, eyes cast down, avoiding even the air around him. They do not deserve to share the same space as him.

"Grand Lord Zaiper." A voice he knows all too well stopped him.

Turning with an exaggerated whirl of his robes, a full smile plastered on his face. "If it isn't Lord Ottai. Tell me, how are you, my dear friend?"

The fourth ruler's glare was coated with disgust.

"I know what this is about," Zaiper crossed his arms smugly. "Go on, ask me."

"I heard you ordered the execution of those men. Is that true?" Ottai asked, furious.

"Of course, it is. They stole grain. They deserved to die."

"We do not kill over the crime of stealing. What the hell is wrong with you?" Ottai hissed, stepping closer, his face inches from Zaiper's. "We have punishments, atonement. Death is not how we handle this!"

"Perhaps, before." Zaiper conceded with a shrug. "But I'm thinking of changing things around here. It's come to my attention that we've been far too kind."

"You cannot execute four of our people because they were hungry enough to steal grain for their families!" Ottai's rage flared hotter. "One of them has a pregnant bondmate! She needed food!"

"All excuses, Ottai," Zaiper barely suppresses a yawn. "We must send a message that famine is no excuse for theft. Why face public humiliation in death when you could simply die from hunger?"

The fourth ruler gave him a look of pure hatred and revulsion. If they weren't in such a public space, Zaiper had no doubt that grand lord would have thrown a punch. All of this over four worthless nobodies? Ottai is so boring.

"The grand king would never have allowed this!" He spat.

"The grand king hasn't been to court in over a year. The grand king can barely pull himself out of his own head long enough to recognize reality. He doesn't even know there's a critical famine in his kingdom." Zaiper hated referring to his kingdom as Daemonikai's, but he needed to make a point. "So do not stand there lecturing me on what 'the grand king' would or wouldn't allow. The male is half-dead. The living have to move on."

"You speak with such callousness, words unbecoming of a ruler. You have ruled beside Daemonikai for three thousand five hundred years. You should be better than this."

Zaiper sucked teeth, waving Ottai off. "Oh, stop being so prim and proper, Ottai. It's not a good look on you. How does sweet Morina even tolerate this self-righteous attitude? You are just as responsible for what happens in court as I am."

The male reared back. "Never! I—"

"If you'd bothered to show up in court, you could have been part of the decision-making. All of this—no, some of this—could have been said in court. Instead, you waste your time out here, lecturing me like a young lad." His voice dropped an octave. "Maybe if you spent less time caring for two lost causes, you might actually make a difference."

Ottai's face twisted in fury. "You think I don't know what you are doing? You think I don't see through your games? You want the throne, Zaiper. You want to be grand king."

Zaiper didn't bother correcting him. He no longer aspired to be Grand King, his ambitions had grown, evolving into something far greater.

He now wanted it all. To be the sole ruler.

The one to reshape Urai under his reign.

"You think terrorizing our people, executing them over minor crimes like stealing grain or having a beastflare in public gatherings—something beyond anyone's control—you think that is going to get you what you want? These people fear you, Zaiper. They will never support you. They will never vote you in."

"Ah, but that's the beauty of it, Lord Ottai," Zaiper smirked as he draped an arm around Ottai's stiff shoulders, pulling him along.

Ottai's entire body tensed at the contact, but he had little choice but to walk with him. "I do not need their votes. Daemonikai is gone. Don't get me started on Vladya. And you? You care more about them than you do your own people. I'm the only one left."

Ottai looked away, guilty. The male looked more exhausted than Zaiper had ever seen him, beaten down by the weight of the past year.

"So, tell me, Ottai," Zaiper pulled him a little closer. "Why would I need their vote, when I am all they have left?"

"You disgust me."

Grinning, Zaiper released Ottai. "And you, dear Ottai, amuse me. We both know this isn't where you want to be. You should be off—taking food to Vladya, perhaps? Tending to your fallen friends like the dutiful little servant. Go on, then. Return to your duties and leave the running of the kingdom to me. After all, there is no hand more capable than mine."

As Zaiper strode off, his laughter echoed behind him.

The fourth ruler had already lost the battle. He had no cards to play, no weapons in his arsenal.

The kingdom was already Zaiper's for the taking.

Nothing stood in his way. Absolutely nothing.

YAZ

Yaz laid out the feast before the cave mouth, as he usually did.

"How is he? Did you catch a glimpse of him?"

The voice startled Yaz, and he whirled around, hand instinctively moving to his sword hilt.

Wegai stood on a rock several feet away, watching him. Had his thoughts been so consuming that he'd failed to notice being followed?

"Lower your guard, Yaiz'vlion. I am not the enemy," the grand king's head soldier said, making no move to step closer.

"Do not call me that," Yaz growled, casting one last towards the cave. Then, he stalked towards Wegai, every sense alert. "What are you doing here? It was reckless to follow me. If I'd sensed you in the woods, I would have nailed you."

"I'm well aware. Which is why I was careful."

From a distance, they might seem like brothers. Same height, same breadth, same warrior's bearing.

Wegai's scars were worn on his face from countless battles, while Yaz bore his, hidden beneath layers of armor and cloth.

Their masters shared a bond deeper than most, and while they had fought side by side in many wars, it did not make them friends—just two head soldiers bound by duty.

Yaz relaxed his stance first. "What brings you here, Wegai? I doubt you trailed me to make small talk."

"No, I did not," Wegai began to walk, and Yaz fell into step beside him. "I spent all morning beside my master." Wegai's jaw clenched. "I lose him more with each passing day."

Yaz's eyes flicked back to the cave. His own master nestled in there.

Wegai stopped, abruptly. "We need to get the females back."