

Chapter 198

MISTRESS SINAI

Mistress Sinai stood in Grand Lord Zaiper's study, her fingers trailing lightly over the large desk covered with maps and scrolls as she waited.

The soft ticking of a grand clock in the corner caught her wandering eyes, then the bold paintings on the wall and the collection of ancient artifacts displayed in glass cases.

"If it isn't our beautiful mistress," Lord Zaiper's voice behind her shattered the quietude.

Plastering a practiced smile on her face, Sinai turned to face him. "Your highness."

"To what do I owe this pleasant visit?" Zaiper stood before her, amused.

She batted her eyelashes. "Can't a female decide to visit her favorite ruler every once in a while?"

His chuckle vibrated through the room. "I thought Daemonikai held that title?"

"He did," she shrugged, reaching for the wrapped offering she'd dropped on his desk. Lifting it, she presented it to him with a flourish. "I had my servants prepare your favorite meal. I hope you like it."

Zaiper's brows shot up in surprise. "A meal too?" He took the package, sniffed it appreciatively, then placed it back on his desk. "I hope all this is not about that land beyond Crystal Waters?"

"Does everyone already know about this?" Sinai huffed, sullen. "Yet, no one wants to let me have it."

Zaiper shook his head, moving to lean against his desk. "That's because it's between you and Daemonikai. He promised it to you; when the time is right, he will let you have it."

"It's been six centuries!" Sinai's voice rose in frustration. She wanted to scream, to throw something. Anything.

That land was her key to untold wealth and power. Why wouldn't Daemonikai release it to her?

By now, she would have built an empire. Perhaps even become the wealthiest mistress in the kingdom. "Surely you could release it to me?"

"I could. But it wouldn't come easy." Zaiper crossed his arms lazily. "Tell me, shouldn't you be more worried about Daemonikai's well-being now, instead of a mere piece of land?"

"He is a handful, losing himself to grief. He is not the only one who lost loved ones that night."

"Mmm." Zaiper stroked his imaginary beards. "He is the only one that lost all at once, though."

"Look at you, living your best life." Sinai said bitterly. "What was supposed to be a 'little collateral damage' turned out to be the biggest problem of mine."

Zaiper's amusement vanished, and his face turned cold.

"We swore never to bring that night up to life again." His gray eyes were pools of black rage. "We vowed never to discuss it."

"I apologize, your highness," Sinai backtracked. "Please, forgive me. I spoke carelessly, without thought."

"It's never too late to start thinking. You do not wish to do it beyond the grave, do you?"

Her blood froze. Did he just threaten me?

"You know what happens if what happened that night comes to light, do you not?"

"I do." Sinai could not even bare to think about it. "Please, forgive me."

"Be careful next time, Sinai." His words dripped with menace. "There are things that should remain buried. Things that should never be spoken of.."

Fear chewed at her from the inside. "Fine, fine, I s-said I was sorry."

Zaiper stepped very close to her until only a breath separated them, and caressed her neck. Then, his hand closed around it. He didn't squeeze, but the pressure was unmistakable.

"Vladya is gone. Daemonikai will soon be gone too. Ottai is merely a wind I could blow over, then I become the sole ruler. A place where even the truth cannot hurt us, for I could easily make it disappear. We are almost at the end, Sinai. Let's keep it that way."

"I will, I will," she croaked, nodding.

"Good." He released her, his smile returning. "Now, let's talk about the price for that land."

YAZ

Yaz said nothing. He couldn't feign surprise. The thought had tormented him for years.

But thinking it was one thing. Acting on it was another.

"We cannot do that, and you know it. Lord Zaiper would never allow it."

"Lord Zaiper does not need to know."

"That in itself is preposterous," Yaz scoffed. "We cannot consider something of that magnitude without authorization. The consequences would be—"

"Lord Ottai," Wegai cut in. "He is still a ruler. He can help."

Yaz had considered this too. "And if he does not?"

"We do it anyway."

"Such a move is delicate." Yaz said. "One wrong move, and we're playing right into Lord Zaiper's hands. He's been waiting for a reason to get rid of us."

Wegai stared at the distant mountains, their peaks covered in mist. "I cannot let this continue. We lose them more every day. Who am I kidding? We have already lost them. Now we grasp at straws."

Yaz didn't argue. Wegai was right.

His master had fought valiantly, clinging to the promise he'd made to the grand king. Yaz had witnessed it all: the suffering, the resistance.

But it hadn't been enough. When the will to live flickers and dies, life itself becomes a fragile, elusive thing. His master, though not yet fully feral, was...not himself either.

"They were better when the ladies were here," Wegai continued. "They might not have shown it, but our masters cared for the slave princesses. They are an essential part of all of this. We should have never let them send them away."

Yaz cast a sideways glance at him. "You say that as if we could have done anything about it. You are forgetting something vital. Those ladies were freed. They are no longer slaves. The first time they were brought here, they had no choice in the matter. No human returns to Urai of their own free will, especially not ones who suffered as much as the slave princesses did."

Wegai fell silent.

"Your master's female had it worse," Yaz finally muttered. "During her last days here, our people tried to kill her. Everyone hated her. She had to be surrounded by troops to leave the city safely."

"That was two years ago. Things are different now. Our people have more to worry about, like their daily bread." Wegai turned to face him. "We have to do this, Yaz. We have to try. Yes, all may not go well, there may challenges, but we do not run from fights."

He extended a hand. "What do you say, head soldier of Blackstone? Are you in?"

Yaz met his gaze, resolve in his eyes. He clasped Wegai's hand in a firm grip. "I am."