

Chapter 23

LORD VLADYA

"Where is he?" Lord Vladya asked, quickening his pace as he descended the stairs.

"He is at the sixth square, Your Highness," replied Yaz, his head soldier, keeping stride. "The people have gathered there. It is quite a crowd."

Lord Vladya clenched his teeth, striding forward with purpose. Servants and maids scrambled out of his way as soon as they saw him.

Turning a corner, his sharp eyes caught sight of Lord Ottai approaching from the opposite direction with his own group of soldiers. The grim expression on Ottai's face mirrored Vladya's.

Zaiper has gathered the people at the square," Ottai announced as they drew closer, his tone edged with frustration. "He is informing them about the beast's escape last night."

"So I have heard," Vladya stated, his voice clipped. "This must be stopped."

"What is wrong with Zaiper? This is a matter for the court, not the public." Ottai's brow furrowed. "Why would he do such a thing?"

"It is clear he is trying to gain more support."

The two walked together toward the square. Lord Vladya shook his head. "Lately, he has grown desperate for the throne."

When they reached the sixth square, a large crowd had already formed. Their heightened senses allowed them to hear Zaiper's voice as they approached.

"We cannot keep living in fear. The beast will continue to break free, and more innocent people will be harmed," Zaiper's voice boomed, holding the crowd's attention. "We all loved the grand king. For thousands of years, he was our greatest ruler—the finest the Urekai have ever had."

"Yes! Long live the grand king!" someone in the crowd shouted.

A chorus of voices echoed, "Long live the grand king!" three times

Zaiper's jaw tensed, his eyes darkening with anger, but he masked it well, flashing his practiced smile.

"Indeed," he said smoothly. "We all cared for our grand king, without question. That is why this tragedy is so painful. None of us would wish the fate of going feral on anyone, even our enemies. The grand king's mind has been lost for five centuries, replaced by the instincts of a predator. One of the strongest."

"And the rest of us rulers work tirelessly to protect you from the beast. But we cannot always succeed, for the beast is stronger than most of our defenses," Zaiper continued, his voice carrying through the square. "As you all know, lives are lost every time the beast escapes. Can we allow this to go on?"

The crowd murmured softly, their fear clear, but their affection for the grand king even clearer.

For centuries, the people had loved and revered their grand king, who had ruled with kindness and brought peace to their lands. The same Urekai who despised and hunted all ferals preferred their grand king remain alive despite his feral state rather than be completely killed.

And for centuries, they stood united in this belief.

But one day, they would have to face the truth.

The truth that their grand king was gone—and the beast that remained had to be destroyed. Zaiper wanted that day to come sooner.

"We cannot force the people into such decisions, Grand Lord Zaiper," Lord Ottai interjected, drawing all eyes as he stepped onto the podium. "The people have the right to decide for themselves how they wish to handle the beast. The fact that it was once their grand king cannot be ignored."

Many nodded in agreement, murmurs rippling through the crowd.

Zaiper turned his pretentious, sorrowful eyes toward Ottai. "You are correct, Grand Lord Ottai. But how can they decide when they are kept in the dark? Most of them do not know that, just last night during the festival, the beast escaped again."

Gasps spread through the crowd.

Zaiper continued. "We managed to contain the beast, of course. But imagine what might have happened if we had been too late—or made a mistake—and the beast had escaped the fortress?"

Eyes widened in horror, and the murmurs turned to frightened chatter. Amidst the clamor, a few words emerged.

"May Ukrae protect us."

"By the gods...!"

"I was at the festival. I could have been killed..."

"Silence, everyone," Lord Ottai commanded softly, and the square fell as quiet as a tomb. "This is a matter for the court. As Lord Zaiper mentioned, the beast was contained, and no harm came to anyone. He directed a pointed gaze at Zaiper. "Lord Zaiper should not stir fear among the people when the threat has been dealt with."

"The people have a right to know when their lives are at risk," Zaiper countered, his eyes shining with satisfaction.

"The grand king turned feral because of us," a woman suddenly spoke from the crowd. Her voice drew attention. "We would have all died that night if not for him. We are alive because of his sacrifice. So what if he is now mindless? What if his beast cannot recognize anyone, unable to distinguish between friend and foe? He saved us!"

"Yes!" the crowd shouted.

"He protected us!" the woman added fiercely.

"Yes!" they chorused.

"We are not ready to lose him!"

The crowd broke into uproarious cheers of agreement, clapping their hands.

Admiring all of it, Lord Vladya said nothing. Did nothing.

Arms crossed, he simply watched Zaiper spinning his web of influence among the people, who held firmly to their beliefs.

They weren't ready yet.

Just as Vladya.

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AEKEIRA

Throughout the day, Emeriel awoke twice to briefly eat before returning to slumber.

On both occasions, she cried out in pain, prompting Aekeira to be grateful that her sister's awakenings were short-lived. Aekeira pleaded with Madam Livia to administer a stronger pain reliever to Emeriel, but the woman insisted the additional doses would only harm her further.

In the afternoon, Lord Vladya visited while Emeriel was still asleep, leaving only Aekeira in attendance.

"He is not awake yet, my Lord." Aekeira bowed.

Lord Vladya tilted his head to the side. "When he awakes and is well enough, tell him to come to Blackwood. I would like to see him."