

## Chapter 28

EMERIEL

Emeriel barely listened to Grand Lord Zapier, his eyes searching for Aekeira amidst the large number of slaves in the meeting hall. His sister must be actively avoiding drawing the attention of the grand lord because she was nowhere in sight. She has to be here, Lord Zaiper requested the presence of every slave.

"You are all meant to serve your masters. Do whatever they want from you. Your life is not yours; your masters can take it whenever they so desire. The same goes for your bodies. We own you. If you wish to see more days, you must ensure that you complete your tasks well and to the best of your abilities."

The hall fell into a hushed silence as he continued, explicitly stating how they were mere objects with no feelings or will. No one dared to utter a word. In fact, no one dared to even breathe too hard for fear of drawing his attention.

"Defiance and deception will be met with severe penalties. Especially deception. A slave is not allowed to keep secrets. A slave has no business keeping secrets. Because the day what you hide comes to light will be the day you despise your own existence. Does anyone have a confession to make? Is there anything you are hiding from us?"

Emeriel's heart pounded in his chest. His own secret, forbidden in all the kingdoms of the world, echoed in his ears like warning bells, the weight of it pressing upon him.

"Speak now, and I might consider a more lenient punishment for you. Or hold your tongue. If you choose the latter, your time is already ticking. Tick tock. Tick tock." His handsome but eerie face stretched into an unsettling smile. "The date for the presentation of new slaves will soon be announced. All of you are expected to be in court on that day. You are all dismissed."

As they filed out of the court, Emeriel slipped between two slaves, making his way out. The words of Grand Lord Zaiper lingered in his mind.

A slave has no business keeping secrets. A slave has no business keeping secrets.

Emeriel knew what the presentation of slaves to court meant. They would be stripped bare and used as entertainment for the lords and privileged. He had overheard slaves whisper about it, and the things he had heard...

Bile rose in his throat at the thought of being exposed, naked, and used by several Urekai. And what they would discover.

Chills ran down his body. So many problems and no solutions.

Lost in his thoughts, Emeriel went about his errands for the day.

A large hand grabbed him on his way to the market, jerking him forward, pulling him out of his reverie. He looked up to see Slave Master Boris staring down at him.

"Good day, Master Boris," Emeriel said, bowing his head.

"You have not been to the inn in ages," Master Boris snarled angrily, tightening his grip on Emeriel's arm.

Emeriel winced but held it in, blinking innocently at the slave master while enduring the pain. "I have not been assigned to the cellar, Master."

The Urekai ground his teeth in anger, and finally, Master Boris released his grip and stepped back.

"Although the final decision depends on the assigner, slaves are allowed to make suggestions. When you are next assigned, you must suggest the cellar, slave prince. Am I clear?"

Not a chance in hell.

"Yes, Master." Emeriel bowed his head. He was beginning to recognize that look in Master Boris's eyes. The same look Lord Zaiper had when he stared at Aekeira—pure, unadulterated lust.

I would sooner eat from a trash bin than suggest that.

"Good." Slave Master Boris whirled around and continued on his way.

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Emeriel found himself standing behind the drying ropes, hanging numerous wet garments one by one as murmurs filled the air, followed by the sounds of greetings indicating the approach of an aristocrat.

The long linens obstructed his view, preventing him from seeing who it was. When he emerged from behind the linens, he noticed the other slaves bowing deeply, and followed suit.

The luxurious gown of the aristocrat drew closer and closer until it stood right in front of him. Crack!

His ears rang, pain reverberating through his entire being, from the slap across his face.

"Who do you think you are, that you fail to bow to me upon seeing me?" The venomous voice of the aristocrat was filled with anger.

"Forgive me, mistress. I did not see you in time due to the clothes on the drying ropes—"

Another slap landed on his cheek. "Excuses hold no weight with me. Where is the slave master in charge of this place!?" her voice boomed with anger.

"Yes, mistress!" a distant voice responded. The sound of hurried footsteps grew closer, and the slave master knelt down. "I apologize for the disrespect, Mistress Sinai."

Mistress Sinai? Wasn't she the same woman with Lord Vladya the other day?

"Give him five lashes of the whip. Now!" she ordered.

What?! Emeriel's heart pounded loudly in his chest. He dropped to his knees, his voice trembling, "F-forgive me, mistress. I have committed an offense against you, and I deserve to be punished. But please, show mercy—"

"Silence! Be grateful that I am not having you stripped and paraded!"

Emeriel had witnessed slaves being whipped before, and it was a sight one could never forget. And the whips—sturdy and filled with thorns.

Panic gripped him. His mouth opened to plead further...

But in the end, he closed it soundlessly.

She would not listen to his pleas, would she?

Emeriel was all too familiar with aristocrats like her back in Navia. They thrived on the suffering of others, showing no mercy. He was a prince—a princess? whatever—and his pride was all he had left.

"Position your back, slave," the slave master ordered.

Emeriel complied, raising his head to get a good look at Mistress Sinai. She appeared entirely satisfied, looking down her haughty nose at Emeriel as if he were dirt. Tremors coursed through his body as he positioned his back. He hadn't fully settled into position when the first lash struck.

White-hot pain surged through him as he cried out, his body bending under the unbearable torture. Before he could fully absorb that excruciating pain, another lash followed. And another.

Emeriel screamed, overwhelmed, his back tearing under the thorns of the whip, blood trickling down.

After the third strike, he may have slipped into shock. The sounds around him faded, the impact of each lash jarring him. It was raw agony... as if his entire body had been submerged in boiling water.

When he regained some awareness of his surroundings, he found himself lying alone on the ground. A movement sent waves of pain rippling across his back and throughout his body. Tears streamed down his face as he struggled to get up. Through his blurred vision, he managed to make his way back to the citadel.

He stumbled up the stairs, but a feminine arm wrapped around him.

"What happened to you, Prince Emeriel? Who whipped you?" Amie's figure appeared before him.

"Amie..." he sobbed, his lips parched.

"Say nothing. You do not need to explain. I'll take you to Madam Livia!" she said, supporting him with her arms. Relieved he did not have to find his own way, he allowed Amie to escort him.

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