

## Chapter 196

"Give the order, come on." Emeriel crossed her arms. "It's only been three years, but surely old age hasn't made the tyrant king forget how to string those words together. Go ahead, order it."

The silence was as loud as a trumpet.

At last, King Orestus sighed, and rose from his seat, walking to a shelf laden with scrolls. He withdrew two, each decorated with intricate gold patterns on the rods at their ends. The sigil...

It was unmistakable. Existed only in one place.

Aekeira's heart lurched. Even Emeriel froze still as a statue.

"I received these the night before your return," King Orestus said calmly. He unrolled one of the scrolls, its parchment crackling softly. He began to read aloud:

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From the third ruler of Urai, sovereign of the Urekai, sole monarch of the Western Clans, and protector of the Great Mountain.

Let this be read under the gaze of the gods and the light of the moon.

To King Orestus, ruler of the human kingdom, Navia,

We deliver back into your hands the princesses of Navia—not to be pawns in your games of pleasure and power. They return to your kingdom under our protection, and let it be known that the eyes of the rulers of Urai watch over them, even from afar.

King Orestus, you will shelter them with every ounce of your strength. You will keep their lives safe from the shadow of harm, and you will treat them with the dignity and respect owed to princesses of royal blood and to those beloved by the most powerful sovereigns of Urai.

But heed this, King Orestus, and mark my words as though they were etched in a rock: Should even a whisper of danger fall upon them, should a single drop of their blood be spilled by your hand or by any under your rule, you will learn the true meaning of wrath.

No corner of Navia will be spared my fury. I will kill you and everyone you hold dear. Except your son. There are fates far more agonizing than death, King Orestus.

I am not merciful. I do not forgive.

By the hand of Vladya Theriozydovkar Skyvaktó, the third ruler of Urai.

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The room fell into a hush as King Orestus lowered the scroll, his face pale. He reached for the second one, unrolling it with care.

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From the Grand Ruler of Urai, great sovereign of the Urekai, sole monarch of the Southern Clans, protector of the Boundless Woodlands and the Celestial Mountains, to King Orestus, tyrant king of the human realm.

Let this be read under the gaze of the seven gods, the light of the moon, and Ukrae.

You will shelter and protect the two females whom we return to you on the morrow, with everything you hold dear.

Since I awoke from five hundred years of madness, one brought on by your people, I have had one thought and one thought alone. To descend upon the human lands like a storm of ruin.

I still consider it, to be quite honest. But do not give me another reason to believe it is a good idea, for let me tell you, King Orestus, I am running out of excuses not to declare war on the humans.

Protect the princesses, for they are the treasures of Urai. If so much as a drop of their blood is spilled, your forests will rise against you. Your mountains will crumble under our number. Your rivers will run dry beneath the stomps of our boots. Your cities will burn. Your fields will wither under fire and ash.

The screams of your people will be the chorus that heralds your kingdom's fall. Not a single stone of your citadel will remain unscorched.

This is your one and only warning.

I am not merciful, and I do not forgive.

By the hand of Daemonikai Vipetheriov Naelzharoth, Grand King of Urai.

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King Orestus lowered the scroll, his face drained of color.

Aekeira had sunk into one of the empty chairs during the reading, her shaky legs unable to hold her any longer. Emeriel sat beside her, just as still.

"It has been two years since I received this," King Orestus said in a strained voice as he carefully placed the letters back on the shelf. "Not once have I had a good night's sleep since then."

Turning toward them, his gaze was sharp, searching. "I have asked myself over and over: How on earth did these females, sold as slaves, garner the favor of the two most powerful Urekai that ever existed? How did they become 'treasures of Urai' to the extent that I receive personal letters from their rulers?"

Aekeira glanced at Emeriel. Her sister's face was ashen, paler even than King Orestus's, staring ahead, into nothingness. She didn't blink. She didn't move.

"They signed their full names," King Orestus added. "Do you understand what that means? As a young lad, my father told me, that in Urekai history, their full names are considered sacred. They are not spoken aloud unless under the gravest of circumstances or to convey a serious message. And here," he gestured toward the shelf, "they not only sent separate letters, they signed them with their full names."

They sent letters for us. Sent them, before our return. Why hadn't Aekeira thought of it before?

Of all the reasons she imagined for King Orestus's change, this had never crossed her mind.

"I want to send you both to the breeding houses." His voice hardened. "But there is nothing I want more than to punish you, Emeriel, for your web of deceit in this kingdom."

"Living disguised as a boy when you are, in fact, a girl?" he spat, voice rising, making Aekeira flinch. "I wish I could nail you to that cross outside!"

Aekeira's breath caught, and Emeriel tense beside her, but neither spoke.

King Orestus's chest heaved. "But I cannot. You asked why I treat you as I do? Those letters are why. I may not care about many things these days, but I care about my son. Some might argue that I don't care about my people, but I do. And I know what will happen if I defy those letters."

He turned his full attention to Emeriel. "Anything else you wish to say, Princess Emeriel?"

Emeriel merely rose and walked away.