

## Chapter 42

GRAND LORD VLADYA

Grand Lord Vladya strode through the labyrinthine corridors that led toward his domain.

Following the Retaliation War, he had acquired many human slave, but, he never took any of them to his bed. His loathing was so intense that he feared if he did, he might unleash on the female—killing her faster than a feral beast killed its prey.

But, tonight, he would take his first human female to his bed.

"Lord Vladya," a familiar voice called out.

Vladya turned to face Lord Ottai. "What is it?" A touch of impatience tinged his voice.

A semblance of pity colored Ottai's expression as he shook his head. "Do not proceed with it."

Vladya did not feign ignorance, he knew precisely what Ottai referred to. Nevertheless, he remained silent, crossing his arms, staring Ottai down.

"Do not do it, Vlad," his friend pleaded. "Forcing yourself upon unwilling slaves is a line you have never crossed before. That is Zaiper's move, not yours. You have never cared enough to even punish a slave before, but what I saw in court..."

Ottai shook his head. "If you say the word, all the unbonded females of our land would run over themselves just to get to you, you need not mount this girl to seek sexual release."

"I might as well satisfy my desires with that girl and be done with it, Lord Ottai." Vladya's eyes darkened, a cynical smile tugging at his hardened features. "I am done fighting my urges, as well as my inner beast."

"Your inner beast?" Ottai raised an eyebrow. "I was unaware that it was involved."

"It was not meant to be," Vladya snapped, before he turned away and resumed his purposeful stride.

Ottai quickly followed. "If your beast is indeed interested in her, it is all the more reason why you must resist, Vlad. You might unleash on her."

"Good riddance then," Vladya stated without hesitation, continuing to walk. In his opinion, her death would be a relief, as it would rid him of these strange and disturbing thoughts about the slave princess. It would be a victory for him.

"Do not succumb to this darkness within you. The time has come for you to fight against it, lest you lose what remains of your humanity."

Vladya halted in his tracks. "Have you forgotten? I lost everything that fateful night. Everything." He did not turn to face Ottai as he spoke. "When life ceases to matter, mere concepts such as conscience, morals, and values fade away. When one's soul is lost, Ottai, there is nothing else left to lose."

"Vlad... I know this isn't about Daemonikai, but about—"

"Do not even say her name. Don't you dare," came his low, dangerous whisper.

Ottai's sighed, defeated.

Vladya resumed his determined stride, his footsteps echoing through the corridor. As he neared a turn, Lord Ottai called out once again.

"At the very least, make a conscious effort not to kill her. Remember, she serves the grand king. For the first time, we have a female such as her for him—someone he does not kill after mounting."

Vladya almost retorted that the girl's brother seemed to excel in that regard too. Yet, he refrained. What was the point?

It wasn't as though he had plans to deliberately end the human girl's life. He simply had no intention of holding back.

AEKEIRA

Aekeira knelt within the heart of Grand Lord Vladya's bedchambers, hands clasped before her, head lowered in submission.

As she awaited her fate, the initial nervousness had long abated, now she felt tired. Resigned. Numb.

The door opened, and the grand lord stepped inside. The click of the lock that followed sealed her fate.

He crossed to the other side of the room and stood against the window, his arms crossed as he gazed out into the night.

For what felt like an eternity, he did not speak to her, not a glance in her direction to acknowledge her presence.

What was going through his mind?

Aekeira wet her lips. "My Lord, please have mercy on me. I know you are mad at me—"

"Do. Not. Speak," he stated coolly, his back to her. "You are not worth the sand I step on. Why would I, Vladya, be mad at you?"

Aekeira lowered her eyes. His words didn't hurt her, even though his tone suggested otherwise, his posture conveyed something else. THAT was what scared her.

The silence gnawed at her, awakening her nerves once again. He crossed to his dresser, and began to shed his ceremonial attire.

Aekeira tried her best not to look, her eyes darting everywhere but at him. It was like fighting a losing battle against curiosity.

The rustle of fabric filled the air, accompanied by the soft scrape of movements.

Before she knew it, her eyes were fixed on him. He had his back to her, but the view was...

Aekeira swallowed hard.

His body was the sculpted perfection of a god. Muscled, chiseled, powerfully built – he was a vision both mesmerizing and unsettling, and she found herself unable to tear her gaze away.

Never before had she found cause to admire a man's physique. Why would she, when every man she had encountered had only brought her suffering and filled her with revulsion?

She was all too aware of the pain they were capable of inflicting.

As she continued to gaze, a sliver of numbness gave way, replaced by an uneasy prickle of awareness. The sensation felt unfamiliar. Disturbing.

The strangeness horrified her. This was Grand Lord Vladya, the same male she abhorred. The same lord who held the power to harm her, or even end her life if he chose.

"Rise."

The command startled her, forcefully pulling her from her reverie. It required a moment for her to comprehend, and upon realization, it felt as though she had been doused with icy water.

Aekeira rose to her feet, her stance unsteady, her gaze respectfully lowered.

"Undress. I want you naked," his tone was cold and clipped.