

Chapter 36

"Yaz," he finally managed to utter when he found his voice.

His trusted soldier emerged from the corner. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"Did all the guards on duty leave when you gave the command for them to vacate the premises?"

"Yes, my lord. I was the last to leave."

Vladya's gaze wandered, taking in other details. The surroundings appeared cleaner. The paintings seemed freshly acquired. The walls gleamed as if they were new, and even the sculpted lion head sparkled. "They assigned a slave to work here."

"Seems like it," Yaz confirmed. "This place looks astonishing. Almost like the old days..." He trailed off abruptly, no doubt realizing the inadvisability of his words. No one with wisdom would dare speak of the old days, especially not to Grand Lord Vladya. "I beg your forgiveness for my wayward tongue, my lord."

Lord Vladya waved him off, his mind preoccupied. He had personally dismissed all the slaves who used to tend to the Abyss land, not because he enjoyed the accumulation of dust, but because, for some inexplicable reason, Daemonikai's beast would grow highly agitated in their presence.

The feral creature had broken free on numerous occasions, tearing several slaves apart. Since then, he had decided it was best to cease any work in this area. Though it had been several years—three or four, he had lost track.

He was utterly baffled. Someone had labored here for hours, thoroughly cleaning, and had managed to avoid being torn apart by the beast. And the creature had accepted food from this person.

"I want to know the identity of the slave who worked here. Gather all the necessary information on this slave and bring it to me. I desire the details upon my return from the hunting trip."

"Yes, my Lord."

With a mix of astonishment and relief, Vladya departed, his mood somewhat improved.

EMERIEL

The night prior to the introduction, Emeriel having finished his work in the minefield waited in the shadows concealed from sight in the woods, his back pressed against a tree, casting his gaze upon the river. He longed to take a bath, but he needed everyone to depart first.

Given that the fortress housed numerous slaves with only one river allocated for their ablutions, there was always a slave or two present at any given time of the day. Leading most slaves to pay little heed to privacy, joining others in the river, attending to their own needs.

Usually, Emeriel waited until nighttime or even midnight to secure the river for himself. Yet, tonight proved particularly challenging, for news of the impending introduction of slaves had reached everyone.

His heart skipped a beat at the reminder. Emeriel had yet to recover from hearing the announcement the day before. Observing the excited commotion of the bathing slaves, he found, unlike him, most seemed elated about the introduction.

Emeriel thought back on what Martha, one of the slaves he worked alongside in the minefield, had said earlier in the day as they worked.

"If you capture the attention of a lord, he may issue a decree to purchase you, do you not know? He could make you his personal slave. No more arduous labor, no more harsh beatings. You would be elegantly dressed like a mistress and solely serve a lord! Oh, how I yearn for a lord to choose me!"

Emeriel pondered the idea, his eyes fixed upon the night sky. The stars clustered above as the half-moon radiated its beauty. Would it truly be so terrible if a lord selected him?

He scoffed at the thought. If the lord happened to be interested in men—which Emeriel was not—he would be so disappointed afterward that he might order Emeriel's execution, would he not?

Even assuming that did not transpire, Emeriel could not bear the notion of his life revolving around spreading his legs, being used for carnal pleasure by a random Urekai day after day. His entire existence narrowed to that. The mere thought of it sent shivers down his spine.

The rustle of leaves on the ground alerted him to someone's presence nearby. Looking up, he relaxed upon seeing Aekeira walking towards him.

His sister offered a gentle smile, which he reciprocated, concealing his worries behind the smile so as not to burden Aekeira.

"The river is gradually emptying," Aekeira remarked, closing the distance between them.

"What are you doing here?" Emeriel scanned their surroundings, momentarily apprehensive that a Urekai soldier might chance upon them and reprimand Aekeira for straying too far from the southern wing.

"Do not fret, Madam Livia granted me permission. I wish to bathe with you tonight." Aekeira settled beside him.

"You have a splendid bathing setup in your chambers, Keira," Emeriel sighed. "That room is the sole luxury afforded to you as the beast's service slave, and you should revel in it to the fullest. You should not be here."

"Oh, hush. I desire to bathe together, just like old times when we engaged in countless mischievous exploits." Aekeira's smile widened. "Do you recall when we used to go scavenger hunting in King Orestus's garden?"

Unbidden, a smile spread across Emeriel's face. How could he forget? "He would grow so furious his face turned red. It was always entertaining to witness his changing complexion."

"Those were the good old days."

"Then, we would venture into the woods and engage in pretend battles all day long," Emeriel added.

"Mama worried herself sick searching for us on one occasion. I was never proud of that."

"Likewise. But we were children." Emeriel glanced at his sister. "I miss Mom."

Aekeira's smile turned sorrowful. "As do I. I am certain she resides in the heavens, watching over us and keeping us safe."

No, Emeriel was not certain of that, so he remained silent.

The uncertainty reflected on his sister's face as well.

All those teachings under the moonlight about departed loved ones watching over and safeguarding the living—Emeriel was beginning to perceive the falsehood in those claims.

Surely, if their parents truly watched over them, they would have encountered at least a modicum of luck in this cruel fate they shared, right?