

Chapter 169

MISTRESS SINAI

Mistress Sinai strolled through the garden just beyond the fortress gates, enjoying the soft caress of the evening air. The sweet scent of blooming flowers drifted around her, calming her nerves.

"Ha-have you heard the rumors, mistress?" Nora asked hesitantly from behind.

Sinai glanced over her shoulder, an eyebrow raised. "Whatever makes you think I am interested in rumors, Nora? It is beneath a lady to involve herself in gossip."

"Of course, mistress. I apologize." Nora's eyes dropped to the cobblestones.

But Sinai's curiosity was piqued. She cleared her throat. "What's the rumor about?"

"They say Emeriel has been away from the fortress for days." Nora's voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Really?" Sinai's heart quickened its pace.

Just the boy's name was enough to stir several emotions in her. She took a deep, calming breath, feigning nonchalance.

"Did he escape? Run away?" A thrill of excitement shot through her at the thought. Good riddance.

"Oh no, mistress. The rumors say he is... having intimate relations with a high lord. He's been spending an awful lot of time at the high lord's estate."

Sinai's steps faltered. Intimate relations? Not what she had expected to hear.

What was it about that boy that made these powerful men take notice? It baffled her to no end. He was handsome, sure—pretty, even—but so were many others.

Well, if it keeps him busy enough to stay away from my Daemon, I'm all for it. Sinai's lips twisted into a wry smile.

Emerging from the garden, Sinai spotted a group of Greyrock soldiers in formation ahead of her. At their center, she caught sight of Grand Lord Zaiper.

She approached him, a demure smile gracing her features.

"Ah, our lovely mistress, Sinai." Zaiper greeted, his own smile slow and deliberate. "A pleasure to see you."

She curtsied gracefully. "Welcome back, My Lord. How was your trip?"

"It went well enough. Refreshing, even. But I'm glad to be home. I have missed the fortress."

She fell into step beside him as they walked. "The fortress has missed you as well, My Lord."

"What have I missed in my absence?" Zaiper chuckled, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Though why do I ask? It's not as if you know much about court matters."

Sinai gave a small snort. "No, they do not interest me much, Your Highness." She lowered her voice, leaning closer. "Although, I did hear that your immediate is... battling the feral madness."

Zaiper waved a dismissive hand. "That rumor has been circulating for months. It's nothing more than idle talk."

"Not this time," Sinai said. "These past few days, he's locked himself away in his domain. No one has seen him. And there are whispers that just before this isolation, he was roaming the woods... even disappearing into caves."

Zaiper stopped walking, a new glint of interest lighting his eyes.

"I think it's more than just rumors this time, My Lord. It seems your immediate truly is going feral."

Slave Master Tyke bristled. "B-but, my lord, it's not something I can control, it—"

Lord Vladya's brows ascended to his hairline. "Did you just question my orders?"

He shook his head so hard it was a wonder how it remained attached to his shoulder. "I will guard her with my life! Your command is my duty, My Lord."

Lord Vladya straightened. "Get out."

The slavemaster scrambled to his feet, and scurried out, leaving them alone once more.

As Lord Vladya turned to face her, some of the wildness that burned in his eyes dimmed. He must have read something in her expression because his face went blank.

Without a word, he moved around the bed, untying the knots that bound her wrists and ankles. Aekeira barely noticed the immediate relief from the pressure, all her attention focused on him.

Once he freed her, he turned away, throwing a command over his shoulder. "Go."

She sat up, watching him disappear into an adjoining room. Part of her was relieved by his order.

On one hand, Aekeira truly did want to run after witnessing, a show of that lurking violence in his gray eyes. He had told her before, she had known this would happen, but there was a difference between knowing and knowing.

On the other hand, a larger part of her wanted to hold him. To hug him close to her chest.

Aekeira didn't believe he had punished Slavemaster Tyke simply as an outlet for his violence. There were countless prisoners in the fortress he could have chosen, yet he had singled out the one who had hurt her.

He had done it for her.

To protect her.

Heavens, I love this male.

Fear, deeper than any Aekeira had known before, overwhelmed her. Her vision blurred, her world spinning. She sat back on her heels, shaken to the core.

It had been easier when she hadn't put a name to the emotion. She had felt something for him for so long, but had stubbornly tried not to identify it.

It was simpler to ignore, easier to fight, when it was just that feeling.

"You should save your tears, Aekeira," Lord Vladya stated, his blurred figure now standing at the foot of the bed. "I am a monster, and there are more paths like this one to walk in the future. I do not need to deal with... this. Leave and have your breakdown elsewhere. I do not have the patience for petty little humans who—"

Aekeira moved to her knees on the bed, closing the distance between them, and threw her arms around his waist.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice still hoarse from taking him deep in her throat. She blinked hard, tears flowing freely, her vision clearing. "I am grateful, Your Majesty."

Lord Vladya stood rigid against her, stiff as a board.

Aekeira only tightened her hold, allowing the tears to flow without restraint. She loved him. She. Loved. Him.

She had feelings for this male who had hurt her more times than she could count, who teetered on the edge of madness. Who scowled at the world and had no smiles to share, who had known so much pain and found comfort in his darkness. And yet, she loved him with a fierceness that frightened her.

He was no fairytale prince. No shining knight she'd dreamed of as a young girl. He was far from perfect.

He was scarred, wounded, and dangerous.

But he was hers.

This love was not gentle or kind. It was raw and painful, like a fresh wound that would never heal.

Was love supposed to hurt this much? Aekeira wondered. Because hers did.

She buried her face against his chest, letting the tears fall unchecked. The warmth of his tensed body against hers, the strength of his presence, was both a comfort and a reminder of the danger he was.

But Aekeira didn't care.

She loved him—flaws, darkness, and all.