

## Chapter 201

The fourth ruler shook his head. "It's not dead, but there's no such hope. Only dark magic can bring it back, and even then, the cost is too great. To make such an exchange, one would have to give up something of immense value. Like a life."

He turned back to the window, his gaze distant. "Then, there's the part where Hav'zie de Baah might 'take' but never 'give.'"

Aekeira's shoulders slumped. Her hope disappeared. She'd forgotten that crucial part.

"So, the grand king... might die?" she asked.

"He will die, when the symptoms complete. Which is why we are here." The grand Lord released a deep breath. "We need Emeriel close to him. We need her to save his life."

"Em saved it once before. She did, and all she got in return was pain." Aekeira shot back. "More pain than anyone should bear. Hate from everyone around her. A heartbreak that almost killed her."

The three men averted their eyes, guilt written all over their faces.

"I'm sorry for—" Lord Ottai began.

"Save the apology, Your Majesty. It's not for me, but for Em." Aekeira cut him off. "The problem is, she will not be taking it. She does not wish to meet either of you, and she made me promise not to tell her anything discussed here."

Lord Ottai turned away from the window, his hand raking through his hair.

"When Emeriel needed him, he was not there," Aekeira continued, years of suppressed anger rising. "My sister needed to be saved countless times, and the grand king was nowhere to be found."

She cried for him, day and night. She almost went mad from illusions and daydreams. Was almost swallowed by the great mountains, and nearly died of starvation. Where was the grand king!?" Aekeira screamed.

"Emeriel had to muddle through it all alone. Forced to survive being severed from her own soulbond. Em had to do it all alone, and it changed her. She is not the girl she used to be. The person you're looking for, Lord Ottai? You can't find her, because she no longer exists." Aekeira's voice cracked. "Emeriel will not be saving your grand king this time, because Emeriel is the one who needs saving."

After that outburst came exhaustion. Aekeira struggled to calm herself. Tension hung around them.

At last, Lord Ottai broke the silence. "What about you, Aekeira? Do you also wish not to help Vladya?"

Aekeira remained quiet.

Lord Ottai closed the distance between them. "I know we have no right to ask this of you, of either of you. No right at all, after everything. You have no obligation towards us, you have no obligations to him."

You are no longer a slave, subject to no one's will. You are a princess in your own kingdom now, free to live your life however you choose." He took her hand, giving it a soft squeeze. "But I beg of you, Aekeira."

It would be so easy to stay.

They might not be wanted or loved here, but they were treated fairly, with respect. It would be so easy to turn away.

But...

Tears filled Aekeira's eyes. "There's this giant hole in my chest, filled with so much longing that some days... it's hard to function." She whispered. "Over the years, I thought it would close, I thought it would heal. That maybe the pain would fade."

But the ache grew worse. The hole only wider...and wider. I miss him so much it hurts. I worry about him constantly. So much that I can barely live my own life." Her eyes met Lord Ottai's, vulnerable and raw. "I want it to stop. This pain, this longing, I wish it would all end."

The fourth ruler had the gentlest expression on his face. "What are you saying, Princess?"

"I will go back with you," she breathed, defeated.

Relief washed over Lord Ottai's face. He gave her a soft smile. "Thank you, Your Highness."

Aekeira blushed. "It's weird when you call me that."

"You better get used to it. To me, to all of us, you're a princess now, not a slave. When we get back to Urai, that does not change." His smile faltered slightly, turning sad. "You really think Emeriel will not come around?"

Aekeira remembered the clear agony in Emeriel's eyes when she'd heard the news. The fear, the pain, the anger, and beneath it all... the yearning.

Em might hide it well, but Aekeira knew she had never truly forgotten the grand king. Emeriel had pretended to live, going through the motions of life, but the truth was there.

Em wasn't living. She was merely existing.

Aekeira knew, because that was exactly how she lived too.

Their lives had ended back in Urai, two years later, they still hadn't moved on, still hadn't found their place in this new world.

Navia was their home, yet it didn't feel like home. Not like Urai did.

With a heavy sigh, Aekeira made a decision. "I will try talking to her again tonight, but I cannot promise anything."

Lord Ottai nodded gratefully. "Thank you, princess. We will get a guesthouse in town to spend the night, but we must live tomorrow. Zaiper has no idea we are here, and the people are left under his care. We have already been away for three days, and there's still a two-day journey ahead of us. We really can't stay longer than tonight. I really hope this works."

Aekeira hoped so too.

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MISTRESS SINAI

Mistress Sinai limped back to her chambers, her mood blacker than the stormy sky outside. Every step sent a sharp jolt of pain through her.

She paused, casting a furious glare over her shoulder toward Greyrock. Heartless, sadistic, vile Zaiper.

She was Daemonikai's mistress, not his. Zaiper didn't get to lay with her, to treat her body like it was his to take, whenever or however, he pleased.

Sinai liked to think herself no stranger to the rougher sides of sex, she even preferred it. But there was rough, and then there was Zaiper's kind of rough.

The male was a monster who reveled in blood. He played with blades as though they were toys, slicing into flesh with a happy grin. And he liked to go dry.

A shudder of revulsion coursed through her, making her limp more pronounced.