

Chapter 204

MISTRESS SINAI

Sinai had always wanted two things in life. To be rich and to be Grand Queen. The first would come, sooner or later, but the second... the second was always slipping just out of her reach. Some obstacle, always in her way.

It infuriated her beyond reason.

Daemonikai was as stubborn as a mule, but as long as he was alive, he belonged to her.

Still, it wouldn't hurt to spread her wings a little. To secure her future elsewhere.

Zaipen. He was ambitious and dangerous.

No one outlived the repercussions of a dead soul, and if Daemonikai died, Sinai would ensure her place at the side of the next grand king.

She let the thought simmer, a slow smile curling her lips as she imagined Gaille's reaction. Oh, how delicious it would be.

But no. She couldn't act on it yet.

Daemonikai had beaten her once before, what if he fought through being soulless, too?

He was unpredictable, and Sinai wasn't foolish enough to gamble her future before she knew which way the wind would blow.

She would wait. Whether Daemonikai lived or died, Sinai would be ready.

One way or another, she would claim what was rightfully hers.

She would be Grand Queen.

PRINCESS AEKEIRA

"Are you sure the princess will come?" Yaz asked as they stood ready, bags packed and horses saddled for the journey ahead.

Aekeira glanced at the door for what felt like the hundredth time and admitted honestly. "I'm not."

Lord Ottai had been unusually quiet, lost in thought.

Beside him, Wegai looked at her. "And you? How are you holding up?"

Aekeira shook her head. "Not well. I do not want to do this without Em. I can't bear the thought of leaving her here, separated from her again—"

Her words faltered as she caught sight of Lord Ottai, his gaze pointed on the doorway behind her. Aekeira turned to see Emeriel step through the open door.

The two head soldiers straightened while Lord Ottai moved forward to meet her. They stopped in the middle of the room, a respectful distance between them.

"Your people hate me," Emeriel spoke in a low, resigned tone. "I won't last two days back there."

"We will protect you," Wegai vowed, bowing deeply. Yaz nodded in agreement. "From now on, we will protect you both, as we do our masters."

"You do not have to do this," Lord Ottai said, surprising them all. "I realize now that we have no right to ask this of you. When Daemonikai set you both free, he wanted you to have the freedom of choice. We can't force you, nor would we."

Emeriel squared her shoulders. "I want to do this, Lord Ottai. I wouldn't be here otherwise." Her eyes were steady as they met the grand lord. "But I have conditions."

"What are they?"

"I will not live in the shadows anymore. I will not hide. I dress as a woman, as a princess, as I am."

"As you should," Lord Ottai agreed. "You are not slaves of Urai anymore, Emeriel. You are guests. I already made arrangements to assign maidservants to both you and Aekeira."

"And when all this is over, I want you to bring me back here." she didn't miss a beat. "When the grand king has recovered fully, I return to Navia."

The grand lord studied her, searching her eyes.

At last, he gave a solemn nod. "You have my word. Whether you can help him or not, if it becomes too much, you need only say the word, and I will take you away from Urai."

Emeriel held his gaze. "I will go prepare."

And then she was gone.

Their carriage rolled through the Ravensshadow gates early, the first to arrive. The second carriage, carrying Lord Ottai, Yaz, and Wegai, was nowhere in sight yet, but Aekeira knew they weren't far behind.

As the horses came to a stop, she stepped out into the cool evening air, taking in the sight of the fortress before them.

Ravensshadow hadn't changed much in the past two years.

Memories came flooding back. The endless errands, the constant toil to avoid the slavemasters' whips, the ceaseless fear and pressure, the sleepless nights. For a moment, it was as though no time had passed.

But it had.

Aekeira stood there now, not as a slave in uniform but as a princess. Beside her, Emeriel, dressed in even more extravagant royal attire, stood rigid, her gaze on the fortress. Her eyes...

"Are you alright, Em?" Aekeira asked.

Emeriel blinked, the naked pain in her eyes replaced by aloofness. "I'm good."

Their presence had drawn attention. The Urekai people had abandoned their tasks, turning their eyes toward them.

Murmurs rose like a tide. Whispers spread through the crowd as more and more Urekai gathered.

Aekeira straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin, meeting their stares head-on. We had done nothing wrong.

"What are you staring at?" Emeriel snapped, fearless, as she glared at the onlookers.

"Em," Aekeira tugged at her sister's sleeve. "Do not openly antagonize them."

Emeriel shot her an incredulous, are-you-out-of-your-mind look. "Why not? I'm not afraid of them anymore."

She raised her voice, clear and strong. "I'm not afraid of any of you anymore."

An Urekai female stepped forward. Emeriel stiffened, preparing for their hostility.

But the female teared up. "Please give him back to us, I beg of you."

Another followed, taking Emeriel's stiff hand in hers. "Forgive us, human princess. Please... help our grand king."

More and more Urekai came, surrounding them in a growing circle.

Aekeira blinked in shock, her heart racing as they pressed closer.

Many were crying, faces filled with hope and sorrow, and it took her a moment to realize...they were happy to see Emeriel. Not angry, not hateful.

What in the world was happening?

Aekeira felt a hand grasp hers, and she jerked in surprise.

An Urekai girl stood before her. "Please, help our grand lord. I implore you."

More hands reached out, taking hers, holding on as if their lives depended on it.

Around them, the crowd pressed in.

But there was no violence. No shouts of hatred.

Instead, there were only tears, begging them for help.