

## Chapter 208

PRINCESS AEKEIRA

He recognized me.

Relief crashed into Aekeira. Tears burned her eyes. "Who e-else would it be?" she choked out.

She felt the brush of his nose against her neck, and tilted her head to the side, giving him better access.

A long, slow inhale.

"This feels like a dream," he growled.

"It's not. I'm here, in Urai." Unable to hold back any longer, she spun around, and threw her arms around his neck, pulling him close. "I'm here."

He stilled.

Then, he was hugging her back. His arms encircling her waist, crushing her to him. One was a hand, the other a large, furred paw with sharp, elongated claws.

Aekeira didn't flinch. She didn't care. All that mattered was that he was here...and he remembered her.

"Aekeira..." He breathed.

She had never heard so many emotions wrapped into a single word.

"My Aekeira."

That sob tore from her throat.

She clung to him tighter, burying her face in his neck. His scent, clean and familiar, filled her senses.

And for the first time in years, she felt relaxed. Grounded.

Finally, after what felt like eternity, she pulled back, sniffing. "How did you recognize me?"

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Grand Lord Vladya gently wiped the tears from Aekeira's face with his good hand, drinking her in.

Greedily devouring the sight of her.

Every emotion, both familiar, long-buried, and unfamiliar, swamped him.

He had been dead these past few years. Or at least, he felt that way.

When Aekeira left Urai, she had taken every atom of life in his body.

If losing his soul had made him feel empty before, it was nothing compared to the void her absence had left.

Vladya had thought he could endure it. He had been so sure.

But he hadn't counted on the suffering. The constant, grueling pain that came with glancing around and never seeing her.

He hadn't expected the endless searching. Always looking for her in a room she no longer occupied.

As the days bled into weeks and months, it felt as if his own heart had been ripped out and handed back to him.

Broken, mangled, and bleeding.

Coupled with the madness creeping in, Vladya was so lost.

He had not counted on missing her as much as he did.

He hadn't counted on so many things.

His gaze continued to rake over her. This wasn't the slave he had known. This was the princess he hadn't.

Now, she looked every bit the part. From her elegantly styled hair and simple yet exquisite jewelry, to the fine fabric of her gown.

She was breathtakingly beautiful.

And, she was real.

Vladya hated that part of him whispering that this might be just another one of his numerous illusions and dreams. Those torturous ones he'd had wishing for her return.

"Lord Vladya?"

Yes, this is real.

She sounded far better than she had in any of his countless, countless illusions.

"Do you wish..." he cleared his throat, the sound rusty from disuse, "Do you wish to go further, to my dwelling?"

Her eyes, still wet with unshed tears, searched his face. Vladya wondered what she saw.

Did she see a half-mad male?

A washed up grand lord hiding away in a cave?

Or the one who broke her heart?

Probably all three.

"Okay," she whispered.

He led her deeper into the cave, to the heart of his self-imposed exile.

Here, time had no meaning. The outside world was distant, exactly as Vladya had intended.

"Sit here," he gestured to a small cushion. "Do you want tea?"

Aekeira looked around the space, clearly surprised as she scanned the room. "This is not what I expected."

"I know," A small smile touched his lips. She expected to see an empty place, perhaps littered with skulls and dried blood of his victims, not this warm, cozy, home. "As one waits for the inevitable, let's just say, one has a lot of time on their hands. I go scavenging sometimes. Something to do while... waiting."

"To go mad," she finished for him, quietly.

Vladya turned towards the rickety table and busied himself with brewing the tea. "Madness is not something to fear. It can be fought, the symptoms slowed down, but in the end, it cannot be avoided."

His gaze drifted to his hand. The one that had been a paw for months now, unchanged.

"In human terms, it's more like managing an incurable disease for as long as possible before it claims you." He handed Aekeira the steaming cup of tea.

Aekeira brought it to her lips for a sip.

As usual, Vladya's eyes followed her every move. Vladya couldn't tear his gaze away.

It was as though the years had never passed. She looked the same as she had the day she left.

He clenched his hands together, fighting the urge to reach for her. The desire to touch her, to feel her skin against his, was almost unbearable.

"How have you been, Aekeira?"

Both hands wrapped around the warm cup. "I've been... fine,"

He noticed the slight tremble in them as she took another sip.

Her eyes lifted to meet his. "How are you so...aware?"

Vladya shrugged. "I have my good days and bad days," he settled into the seat opposite her. "Good days are like this. When I'm aware of the world and all it entails. But the bad days..." All that is left is the destruction.

"That's why you left the fortress," she set the cup on the nearby table.

"I became a real danger to them. I had to leave."

Aekeira's eyes darted anywhere but on him. Her fingers fidgeted with the edge of her sleeve.

She was avoiding him. Putting distance between them.

Seated right in front of him, yet far away.

"Aekeira," his voice dropped an octave.

"Mmm?"

"Look at me."

A shaky breath. "I am."

"You are a terrible liar, my little bird."

Her eyes snapped up to meet his. "Don't call me that." Tears brimmed in her eyes once more. But unlike before, when they had been tears of joy, this time, they were filled with stark pain. And anger.

She abruptly sprang up from her seat. "I c-can't do this. I need to leave."