

## Chapter 234

"Frustrated about my Daemon's return?"

Zaiper's expression darkened. "I don't know why he refuses to stay dead." His thrusts became sharper, angrier. "Twice now, he's wrestled with the impossible and won. Who walks through the valleys of death and comes out alive?"

"Perhaps a righteous male," Sinai teased, her lips quirking.

Zaiper shot her a glare. "You're not funny."

"Apologies, Your Highness," she replied smoothly, arching a brow. "It was only a joke."

"As I said, there's"—thrust—"nothing"—aggressive thrust—"funny"—thrust—"about it." he punctuated with more brutal thrusts.

The girl screamed, then passed out beneath him.

"Finally, some peace and quiet," he grunted, stepping back to survey her unconscious form with a look of annoyance. "Every time things start going my way, something switches, and I'm back at square one. It's infuriating."

Pausing, Sinai glared at her nails. "It's all Emeriel's fault," she said resentfully. "That little human is a thorn in the flesh. She even saved my Daemon from your assassin, remember?"

"Oh, I remember," he sneered, venomously.

"Maybe you should take her out. She will be a far easier target."

"I'd do that, but Ottai's out for my blood. He'd sing like a canary to the court if harm came to the brat." Zaiper mimicked, his tone dripping with disdain.

"That doesn't mean you can't do it, Sinai." He stared at her. "Enough with the childish back-and-forth with her. Strike head-on—poisoned food, poisoned arrows. You won an archery game a millennia ago, didn't you? You are good with arrows."

Sinai's lips curved slightly. Good was an understatement.

Though she hadn't taken aim in a long time, one of the perks of a long life was time for endless hobbies. Archery had been one of hers, once. "I might actually do it."

Zaiper came with a blissed-out groan. Sinai could imagine his knot extending, locking him to the unconscious girl.

"You should," he urged with a satisfied gruff, falling atop the girl. "Use poisoned arrows. Do it from afar and leave no trace. Make sure the poison is rare enough that the antidote might as well be in another universe. Fire as many arrows as you can—ensure she dies on the spot. Her death first, consequences later."

"Mmm." Her gaze drifted thoughtfully.

Then, a slow smile spread across her face, her lips curving so wide they almost touched her ears.

A poison came to mind. One so rare its antidote was practically a myth.

"Her death will solve everything." Lying on his side, Zaiper pulled the girl to him. "It might even throw Daemonikai off balance again. It better, because something has to give! Right now, my anger could boil an entire river."

"Stay calm, my lord."

"Nothing ever goes my way." He glared daggers at the wall ahead. "Next thing you know, Vladya would return to the fortress."

Sinai's mouth twitched. "Now you're just torturing yourself. The third ruler was in the worst state imaginable when he vanished. I'm sure by now he's raving mad somewhere."

Surveying her neat nails, her smile grew wide. "Calm yourself, Lord Zaiper. Vladya is gone, and he's not coming back."

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PRINCESS AEKEIRA

"Let's go back to the fortress," Lord Vladya announced suddenly, his voice breaking the silence between them.

Aekeira turned to face him, her brows furrowing in surprise as she took in the serious set of his features. They were lying side by side, his face as composed as ever, yet the weight of his words hung in the air.

"Are you sure?"

He nodded once. "Yes."

The simple word left her momentarily stunned.

She had spent so long trying to convince him to return, to go back to the fortress and face what he'd been avoiding. He had always been so stubborn, so adamant in his refusal. And now, just like that, he was ready?

"What made you change your mind?" she asked curiously.

"A few reasons," he was staring into her eyes. "I realized I had placed my life on hold, waiting for this, when I should be living it to the fullest."

He paused, and Aekeira kept silent, waiting patiently.

"You are here," he said, his voice dropping slightly, "and suddenly, I don't want to simply wait anymore."

Aekeira's heart skipped a beat. Was he aware how words like this, from him, affected her?

"I want to go back to my world. I miss my people." His tone remained as monotone as ever, but his eyes turned thoughtful. "And..."

"And...?"

For the longest time, he didn't answer. Those sharp, storm-gray eyes watched her in silence, as if he were searching for something in her expression.

"And, I want to bring you into my world, Aekeira," he said at last. "To show it to you, properly this time."

It warmed her heart.

To think he had that blank stare, speaking in a flat, dead tone of a soulless male right now. And yet, somehow, the detached delivery made his words feel all the more heartwarming.

An involuntary smile tugged at her lips as she stared at him in wonder. Who is this person before me? she marveled silently.

He was still Lord Vladya, and yet he seemed like someone entirely new.

In these past few weeks, he had revealed so many sides of himself she hadn't known existed. Layers she had never imagined were there. And as much as Aekeira had wished for him to return to Blackstone, dread filled her all of a sudden.

What if, when they went back, this version of him—the male before her now—vanished?

What if he was replaced by the cold, distant Grand Lord Vladya she had known before? The one who kept his emotions buried so deep they were unreachable?

What if the real world reminded him of all the bridges between them and everything that had once kept them apart?

Aekeira closed her eyes briefly, trying to steady her racing thoughts. She had loved him before, hadn't she?

The darkness, the madness, the ugliness...all of him. She had embraced all of it, even when it had almost consumed her. But now...now she wasn't ready to let go of this new side of him.

This side that looked at her as if she truly mattered. This side that listened to her, that let down his guard, showing her glimpses of vulnerability. This Lord Vladya, who was so attentive to her needs, who spoke words that warmed her heart.

Aekeira wanted more of him. Her heart was greedy for it—yearning, aching to hold on to the male he was becoming.

"Are you alright?" he asked suddenly, sensing her hesitations.