

Chapter 235

The quiet concern in his tone startled her, and when she looked at him, his eyes were studying her with the same attentiveness that had begun to undo her.

She forced a smile, her worry fading like mist under the warmth of the sun. Because she knew, deep down, that it didn't matter.

No matter what side of him re-emerged when they returned to Blackstone, Aekaeira would still love him anyway. "I'm fine, Your Highness."

His expression tightened slightly, and for a moment, she thought she had said something wrong. Then, his tone grew firm, resolute. "Vladya."

"Huh?"

"Call me by my name, Aekaeira," he asserted. "Not Lord Vladya. Not my lord. Not Your Highness. Just my name."

Her eyes reached her hairline. A blush crept up her cheeks. "B-but...it's not proper."

He leaned closer, his voice soft, but no less commanding. "We're alone here. Go ahead."

"Vladya..." she breathed, tasting the word. It felt strange on her tongue, foreign and intimate, but there was something right about it, too. Her voice softened further. "Vlad."

Lust and possessiveness flared in his eyes. "My name sounds beautiful coming from your mouth," he murmured, his voice husky. "When we are alone, I want you to address me that way, Aekaeira. I want to hear more of it."

"Alright...Vlad," she agreed, her heart fluttering.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose. "Did you know my symptoms have gone down since your return?"

Aekaeira's eyes widened in shock. "They have?"

"Mmm," he confirmed with a small nod. "I have lived with this affliction for over three years, and I can assure you—they have. It surprises even me."

He leaned back slightly, thoughtful. "Is it the joy of your return? These... new feelings I'm experiencing? Or simply your presence? I don't know the reason," he admitted, his voice dropping to a rare softness. "But I can feel it, Aekaeira. The madness is still there... but it's not progressing. I feel better than I have in years." A pause. "I haven't heard the voices in weeks."

Her breath hitched, and her eyes stung. Oh, Aekaeira, you're such a crybaby, aren't you?

But what else could she do? Every time he shared a piece of himself with her, every raw, vulnerable word, it undid her.

How she had lived without this, without him, for two long years, she would never know.

"So, yes, Aekaeira," her grand lord added with resolve. "Let's go back home."

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GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

By the time Grand King Daemonikai finished with the market and guild records, the last light of day had faded, and the cool cloak of night spilled through the open window. Glancing over at his helper, he paused.

She was fast asleep.

Her head lay on the desk, arms tucked beneath like makeshift pillows.

A rush of tenderness washed over him. When had she drifted off? He had been so engrossed in his work that he hadn't noticed.

She was a wonderful coworker, asking insightful questions when needed, yet comfortable with companionable silence. Daemonikai enjoyed working with her. A lot.

Picking up the ledger she'd been handling, he thumbed through it.

Every figure was well tallied, and recorded in a clear and organized manner that would make even the most experienced scribes envious.

He looked back at her, his chest swelling with pride. Good with arrows, tending gardens, caring for the sick, hunting, and taking records. His woman was a female of many skills. A treasure trove of fine abilities.

What other hidden skills did he not know about?

Rising, he moved quietly around the desk and crouched beside her. His eyes roamed over her relaxed face. Truly a vision, even in sleep.

"I can't believe I once thought you were a cruel joke from Ukrae. A mocking laughter at my expense," he brushed a strand of hair from her face. "Because why do I look at you now and all I see is...a gift? A rare, astounding gift."

The gentle rise and fall of her back lulled him, her breathing was deep and steady as he watched her.

"I was dead inside. Empty." His fingers traced a line along her delicate cheek. "Who would have thought I'd feel my own heart race again? That I could ever look at you without guilt? Who would have thought I could see you, and not someone sent to replace Evie?"

A gentle sigh escaped her.

His hand stilled. But she didn't wake.

"I suppose it took nearly dying to realize these things. It took journeying to the spirit world to find myself." He leaned closer, brushing a ghost kiss on her nose. "I'm sorry it took losing you to find you."

A soft knock sounded at the door.

Wegai entered, his expression apologetic. "Your Grace, about the—"

Daemonikai pressed a finger to his lips.

His head guard snapped his mouth shut instantly.

"She rests. Let's not wake her."

Wegai inclined his head, his voice no more than a murmur. "My apologies, Your Grace."

Daemonikai waved him off.

Pausing at the door, his head guard turned, hesitant. "Would you like me to take her to her room? I won't wake her."

"No need." Daemonikai lifted his woman into his arms and straightened. "You may bring the report later."

Carrying her out of his study, he didn't turn left toward her chambers but right—toward his. He crossed the room in silence and lowered her onto his bed. She looked perfect there.

She stirred slightly, shifting, nestling deeper into his covers. Like she belonged there.

Mine. Possessiveness surged inside him.

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Much later, after he had bathed and changed into his nightclothes, he took his place at the desk across the room, quietly resuming his work.

There she lay, sprawled in his bed, as he worked through the night, his gaze flickering up to her every so often.

A sense of peace filled his being. He could get used to this.

Time moved by as he lost himself in his duties, the comfort of her presence making the long night easier.

But then he heard a soft sound. A moan.

His head snapped up.

Emeriel moved slowly in her sleep, rolling from side to side, making soft sounds.

She was having a dream.

Leaning back, he observed the way her body responded to whatever played out in her mind.

Her fingers curled, her lips parted with a delicate sigh.

"Beloved," she moaned, arching up the bed.

His brows arched, even as heat pooled low in his stomach. She's dreaming...of me?

Arousal flared, dick going hard as stone in record time.

Daemonikai forced himself to breathe evenly. Not now, fella. Now's not the time.

Rising from the desk, he walked to her side and settled beside her on the bed. Her sleep was fitful, her body restless.

"Hey," he brushed a hand over her arm. "Wake up, dearling. You're dreaming."

She calmed.

Blue eyes opened slowly, glazed and unfocused as they settled on him. "My beloved."

He stifled a sigh. If only he could get her to call him that while fully awake.

"I like this dream," Emeriel said in a low tone. "Touch me, beloved."