

## Captive Slave 359

Chapter 359

Aekeira gravely worried about the toil it was taking on him.

"Here." She patted the space beside her. "Come lie with me. Please."

"I still have work to finish in the study. You need your sleep."

"You can finish tomorrow." Her other hand moved to rest lightly on her stomach, where their unborn child stirred. "Tonight, come lie with me. With us. Our little one is restless, and he needs his father."

Vladya's fierce protectiveness flared in his eyes. She saw his resistance crumble, and without another word, he stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

How attentive he was about their child did things to her, and while Aekeira felt guilt for using it to coax him into bed, her male needed rest.

Since Zaiper had taken her hostage to escape, Vladya had become downright suffocating. There were bodyguards at her side every moment of the day. He denied her leave of the fortress grounds outright. His beast was closer to the surface than ever before, always attuned to her, always scenting her.

The bed dipped under his weight as he climbed in and she shifted, giving him space, but he gathered her into his arms, tucking her against him.

A soft contented sigh slipped from her lips, her body easing into the warmth of his.

"What was your dream about?" Vladya's voice was a low murmur against her ear.

Aekeira hesitated. She didn't know how to explain it.

"I'm not sure," she said quietly.

She could not understand could not even begin to interpret-what she had seen. Yet it had felt too real. Like a distant memory that simply should not have existed.

Her grand lord's hand rested protectively over the curve of her swollen belly. In the quiet, his fingers traced slow, soothing circles over the curve of her womb. The last of the tension holding his body rigid slowly melted away.

"Do you know why I call you a bird?" he asked softly.

"No." She turned her face slightly toward him. "But I've always wondered."

"When a Urekai is well and truly happy, they describe it as gaining wings and soaring the skies. I never understood those words until you came into my life." He nuzzled into the hollow of her neck. "You gave me wings. Because of you, this old male takes his first flight toward everything he ever wished for. There were many great birds in my past... yet it was one small, special bird who helped me soar."

"Oh, Vladya..." she breathed, her heart aching with tenderness as she nestled back against him, closing her eyes.

"She turned out to be the greatest bird. A gentle dove who opened her wings wide and let this staggering, ragged creature find refuge. In her shelter, he held on, grew new wings, and learned to soar."

She had never realized how deep that endearment ran. And now, she longed to hear more of it.

"Say it again," she whispered.

"My bird," his tone was soft. "My special soaring dove, with the strong wings of an albatross."

Aekeira's heart swelled so large it felt too big for her body. "I love you so much." "I love you, too."

Aekeira's eyes snapped open. She tried to turn in his arms, to see his face, but his hand stilled her gently, holding her where she lay.

"Rest, my princess," he murmured.

She stilled, but her eyes stung. Her heart was bursting. It was the first time he had ever returned those words.

"I apologize it took me so long to say it." Vladya pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder. "But I have always felt it. Right here, in the dead shell you brought back to life. I love you, Aekeira Maranthine Evenstone."

She sniffled and smiled. "I love you too."

"Now I have distressed you," he sounded worried.

She gave a choked laugh, shaking her head. "It's a good distress."

He chuckled, tightening his hold around her.

They stayed like that for a long time, Aekeira listening to the rhythm of his breathing, letting the silence wrap around them like a second blanket.

I love you too, echoed in her mind, over and over.

When sleep finally came for her, she was still smiling. "Please, do not leave while I sleep."

She thought she might have already slipped into dreaming when his voice came. "I'm not going anywhere, my little, great bird."

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GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

"I told you to

inform me the moment

she awoke." Grand King

Daemonikai's growl reverberated

down the corridor as he loomed over the two trembling servants waiting for him outside the meeting ball.

"What do you mean she is no longer in the fortress?"

The male servant shuffled uneasily, his hands wringing together. "... I truly do not understand, Your Majesty. I inquired after her myself, and her handmaidens said she left the Citadel."

"Bring them to me, now."

They bolted as though demons hunted their heels.

Daemonikai turned and stalked into the Grand High Court.

The meeting dragged long, his mind elsewhere the entire time. Why would Sinai leave her medications unfinished to embark on a sudden trip no one knew about?

She didn't inform anyone when she'd be back and didn't think to ask for his permission as his bloodhost to arrange alternatives until her return. What was so important she would leave like this while still unwell and not fully healed?

Something about this doesn't feel right.

When he finally emerged, evening shadows stretched long across the floors. Two

females now stood waiting by the door, heads bowed low.

"Your Grace," one of them squeaked. "You su-summoned us."

"What is your name?" he demanded.

"N-Nora, Your Grace."

"Nora." He let the name sit heavily in the air. "Where is your mistress?"

"She left ye-yesterday, Your Grace, packing su-supplies." Nora's hands twisted

her apron. "She said she was go-going on a simple trip and would return soon."

She... she did not take m-much gold."

Her nervousness reeked. Stank of deceit.

Zaiper was the mastermind behind everything. Joined forces with...

The Oracle's final words had troubled him. Who were Zaiper's accomplices?

The question never left his mind. They had slept beside him, eaten at his table. He had recounted

everyone he knew who had been net

close to Zaiper-high lords, mistresses, friends, even

commoners. No one was beyond suspicion now.

Could it be... Sinai?

Could it be his own bloodhost?

"Wegai, seize them," he ordered.

Nora's rounded eyes filled with panic. She and the second handmaiden didn't

have time to scream before the soldiers surged forward, clamping iron grips on their arms.

Daemonikai turned on his heel, their cries following him down the corridor.

"Please, Your Majesty! Have mercy!"

"Your Grace-please!"

He neither spared them a glance nor slowed his steps.

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