

Chapter 207

PRINCESS AEKEIRA

She stood in front of the cave, dawn breaking around her. She stared into the yawning black. "Are you sure he's in there?"

Yaz gave a solemn nod. "He's been here for months. It's unlikely he left during my absence."

"You said you have never been inside? Not even once?"

"Yes. He forbade it. Threatened to rip apart anyone who dared," A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Lord Vladya doesn't want to be seen like this. He came here to die, your highness."

Aekeira flushed. "Why do you call me that?"

"That's what you are, is it not?"

"It is." She glanced back at the cave entrance. "But you always called me 'Slave.' Hearing you address me differently now feels... strange. Please, call me Aekeira."

Yaz seemed to consider this as she ventured into the cave. Jagged rocks jutted from the ground and walls, the deeper she went, the narrower the path became.

Aekeira glanced down at her extravagant attire, wishing she had worn something simpler for this. The few clothes she possessed were all equally elaborate.

She lifted the heavy hem of her dress as she climbed over the rocks, her mind already picturing how awkward this was going to get. Perhaps Lord Ottai will supply simpler ones some once she and Emeriel settle in.

The cave stretched on, vast and empty.

The echoes of her footsteps were the only sound accompanying her. Maybe he really did leave.

Then, she heard it. A low growl from the far side of the cave.

Aekeira hastily erected a mental barrier against the spike of fear that shot through her. You didn't come here to cower.

Squaring her shoulders, she followed the sound.

"You should not be here, whoever you are."

His voice...

She stilled, swallowing the sob that rose in her throat. Whipping her head around, she searched for the source, but the echoing walls made it impossible to pinpoint its location.

She squinted into the darkness, but saw no one.

"Go explore another cave... Wait." Sniff, sniff. Pause. A much louder sniff. "Wretched youngling. How dare you smell like... smell like..."

"A certain human who should be halfway across the world right now?" Aekeira offered, still scanning the shadows.

Silence.

Then, a sudden gust of wind stirred at her back. His warmth enveloped her from behind, his heat like a protective blanket. He's right behind me.

She didn't move, staring ahead, resisting the urge to turn. "I do not have a right to smell like her, do I?"

A pause.

And then. "A-Aekeira?"

Ottai's study door burst open with a force that rattled the shelves. "You brought them back here without even thinking to consult me!?"

Ottai paused mid-scribble, his quill hovering above the parchment, and glanced up calmly. The male was livid.

Ottai half-expected to see smoke rising from Zaiper's ears.

"The last time I checked, I am also a grand lord." Ottai said evenly. "I don't need your permission to do anything."

"You should have told me!" Zaiper barked, his fists clenched at his sides.

Ottai folded the scroll with care and set it aside. "How many decisions have you made over the years without consulting me?"

"Those two were set free. They were sent home! They are not needed here again!"

"I disagree." Ottai was unbothered by his anger. "In fact, the people disagree as well. You should have seen the way they were welcomed. Our people are happy for the breath of hope in these miserable times."

"What do you hope to achieve with this?"

Ottai raised an eyebrow. "I thought it was obvious. Daemonikai and Vladya need their females back."

"This is no place for them," Zaiper snapped, advancing a step. "Send them back home. Now."

Ottai snorted. It had been a long time since he'd seen Zaiper this riled up, and it was satisfying. Very satisfying.

"You told me to do what I do while you do yours. This is what I do." He picked up the scroll and returned it to its place on the shelf.

Then turned to face Zaiper again. "And don't even think about taking matters into your own hands, Second Ruler. Yaz and Wegai are now responsible for their protection. They will protect those two with their lives. Any move against them will be met with retaliation."

Ottai hadn't thought it possible for Zaiper to look even more enraged, but the male was full of surprises this morning.

"Maybe, it's time we discussed this in court. How you really feel about the grand king and Vladya. How much you'd prefer they never recover. It would make for an interesting topic when everyone learns how much you delight their struggles. I can already imagine the uproar."

"You have no idea what you're talking about!" Zaiper's voice thundered through the room. "Of course I want them to recover!"

Ottai snorted again. "Could have fooled me."

Zaiper finally seemed to rein himself in. Trying to suppress his anger.

"Perhaps the people will have a thing or two to say about all this. How worked up you are over the return of two humans. Tell me, Zaiper," Ottai settled back into his chair, leaned back, and eyed him intently, "Why does it get to you so much? They are, after all, merely harmless humans."

"Why should they affect me?" Zaiper sneered. "Weak, powerless humans, not worth the sand on my feet!"

"Yet, you seem to fear these two females in particular."

"I FEAR NO HUMAN!" he roared. "I could crush them in my fist and scatter their remains across the desert before I'd ever fear them."

"Except you will do no such thing," Ottai rose and walked closer to him. His voice hardened. "Let me make myself clear. You do not have jurisdiction over them. They are not in Greyrock; they are in Blackstone and Frostfall. Anything you do, under any pretense of exerting the law, will be considered illegal and will be brought up in court."

"Did you just threaten me?" Zaiper growled.

"Our people are hopeful again, and they are out for blood." Ottai stated. "If any harm comes to those two, I will sing like a canary about how much you relish Daemonikai and Vladya's suffering. One single harm."

Ottai strode past Zaiper out of his study, throwing a final command over his shoulder. "Close the door after you when you leave, Lord Zaiper."