

## Chapter 125

"Do you think he suspects?" the girl asked at last, breaking the silence.

Alviara shook her head slowly. "I doubt it. But then, who can truly know the workings of his mind?" A pause, "What is your name?"

"Emeriel."

"Emeriel." The name was like a caress on Alviara's tongue. "Ah, the human prince? Stolen from court by the beast? The one whom a slave master met his end for daring to defile? It all makes sense now."

The girl, Emeriel, swayed on her feet, her face pale and drawn.

Alviara reached out a hand to steady her. "Are you alright?"

"The feeding. It... uhh..."

"Blood drunk?" Alviara's eyebrows shot up in disbelief. "You feel intoxicated?"

Emeriel let out a sheepish sigh. "A little."

"Huh. Guess what they say is true. Soulbonds really are the whole package," Alviara said in disbelief, "Well, human, I will be on my way. Tonight was... interesting. Let's do it again sometime."

Alviara started to walk away, then paused, turning back. "Do you want my advise?"

Emeriel shrugged, her eyes still closed.

"Hide your identity as long as you can. Nothing good will come from the discovery of your secret. That male loved his bondmate deeply, and he lost her in a way you already know. If you ask me, it is probably best if His Grace never finds out. It would likely be in your best interest."

Alviara cocked her head to the side. "Although fate seems to have a hand here. Well, let fate play its part, but do not force it. Stay away from his bloodhost, she is a vixen who will tear you apart once she finds out what you are." She turned to face the exit, but looked back. "Stay safe, and I wish you luck, human. With a male like the grand king, you will need all the luck in the world."

### AEKERIA

The Lantern Festival was everything Aekeira had imagined it would be. Standing beside Amie in the bustling square, she watched in awe as hundreds of lanterns ascended into the twilight sky.

Each glowing orb carried wishes and dreams, transforming the square into a canvas of light and color. The joyous laughter and excited chatter of the crowd were infectious, a chorus of "oohs" and "ahhs" rippled through the air.

Aekeira's heart was filled with joy, now understanding the allure of Urekai festivals.

Yet, beneath the surface of this euphoria, a grating worry twisted in her gut whenever her thoughts drifted to Em.

This morning, whispers of what happened the previous night had reached her ears. Em's daring act of serving the king's dinner, a maid going into full heat, and the chaos it unleashed upon the unbonded males of the fortress.

Aekeira had found it hard to believe, but not as hard as she had found Em's confession about how intimate she had gotten with the grand king.

"Too dangerous, Emeriel! What were you thinking?" Aekeira hissed reproachfully. She had wanted to grab Em by the shoulders and shake some sense into her. To protect her from her own reckless heart. "What if he found out? Are you that eager to lose your life?"

"I try to fight it, but it's so hard. I wish to be near him, always," Em had said in a soft, broken whisper, her eyes brimming with tears. "My heart aches for him. I yearn for him, like fire in my blood. Crave him... so much. You would not understand, Aekeira."

The fight had drained out of Aekeira. Because she really was beginning to understand.

Who was she to preach caution and self-control when her own thoughts constantly returned to Lord Vladya?

The warmth that bloomed in her belly at the mere thought of him was unavoidable. Undeniable.

Memories of their sexual intimacy and bloodfeeding flickered through her mind, raising goosebumps along her skin.

"Aekeira?" Amie nudge her. "You're lost in your own world again. And why that secret smile?"

"It's nothing." Aekeira quickly composed herself, her cheeks flushing as her gaze returned to the kaleidoscope of lights above. "The festival is simply breathtaking."

"Is it not?" Amie sighed, her eyes sparkling with joy. "I have never seen slaves so happy."

"Uh-huh."

Lord Vladya had carried her. Cradled her in his arms through the woods.

She remembered the feel of those strong arms encircling her, lifting her in the woods. Those piercing gray eyes staring down at her as if she was all that mattered at that moment.

What are you doing, Aekeira? Do NOT read into it. This is Lord Vladya we're talking about, remember? He would sooner kill a human than care for one. Do NOT do that to yourself, you idiot.

The memory of his touch lingered... like a ghost of warmth refusing to fade.

"Look, It's Hansel. He is coming this way," Amie said in a hushed tone.

Hansel approached them with his shy smile and dimpled cheeks. "Hi. Have you not floated your lantern yet?"

Aekeira shook her head, clutching the delicate paper orb protectively. "Not yet. I'm not ready to let it go."

Hansel's smile widened. "Lanterns will float till morning. You can take your time."

Amie shot Aekeira a knowing wink before disappearing into the crowd.

"You look pretty tonight." His gaze lingered on her gown.

"Thanks." Aekeira smoothed down the simple fabric. It was nothing fancy, but it was a far cry from the drab slave uniforms they usually wore.

"Where is your brother?" Hansel asked, glancing around.

"He's... with another group," Aekeira lied.

Em was dressed as a princess, attending the festival with Lord Herod and it warmed Aekeira's heart.

Em might hide it well, but she knew her sister longed for the freedom to express her femininity. To think that Em had to see herself as completely male to the extent she referred to herself as one, even in private, was exceedingly heartbreaking.

Aekeira was just glad Em was finally getting the chance to express the part of herself that had been suppressed for so long.

"That's good, that's good," Hansel stammered, his gaze fixed on his feet. He shifted nervously, a blush creeping up his neck. "Would you like to... maybe take a walk?"

"Uhhh..." Aekeira hesitated, the invitation hanging between them. She knew his intentions, and the last thing she wanted was to lead him on.

"Just to walk and talk, I promise." He looked at her with such earnest hope, his eyes pleading.

Maybe it's better to focus on a friendship with a human your own age rather than a hopeless infatuation with an ancient Urekai lord thousands of years older who would never return your affections.

"Alright," she agreed, a tentative smile gracing her lips.

Hansel's face lit up, his dimples deepening. "Thank you so much!"

Together, they strolled through the festival. The air was alive with the sounds of laughter and music. The sweet scent of blooming flowers mingled with the smoky aroma of grilled delicacies.