

Chapter 150

A blush spread as he spewed more crude, blatant words until her entire face scorched. He really wanted to do all that to her, the truth lay stark in his eyes.

For the first time, real fear prickled Aekeira's skin. Dread bloomed in her chest. The things he spoke of, were...downright terrifying to say the least.

Aekeira had never been one to embrace pain, never sought it out. He was right; she should be running as fast and far as she could. Run, Aekeira. Run and never look back!

"Those instincts are dormant for now, are they not?" she heard herself ask. "When they awaken, I will flee, my Lord. But that day is not today."

His brows furrowed in a manner that clearly questioned her sanity.

"King Daemonikai...His feral madness...it wasn't like this, was it?" Aekeira asked tentatively.

Lord Vladya shook his head. "For Daemonikai, there was no warning, no gradual descent. He had a fulfilling martial bond, a loving mate, children...an heir to his throne. The sudden loss of everything, and the manner in which it was taken, shattered his mind." He sighed.

"He also exhausted himself protecting his people that night, pushing his beast beyond its limits under an eclipse moon. There was no strength left to heal, no energy to resist the encroaching darkness. The cost was his sanity."

There was a flicker of sorrow in his cold eyes. "Mine has been brewing for centuries. A lifetime of anger, unhappiness, bitterness. Rage. Every failed bonding ritual, every new child born to another...Watching the Fates play their cruel game." A muscle twitched in his jaw. "And when they finally granted my wish, they took it all away, three short nights later. This madness has been festering for a damn long time. It's inevitable."

Fight it! Aekeira wanted to scream, but the words died in her throat. What good would it do?

He resumed walking, and Aekeira followed, with a heavy heart. They crossed the meadows, then the sun-dappled trails winding through ancient woods, and finally, the vineyards heavy with ripening grapes. They walked into the courtyard, where Yaz and the other soldiers awaited them beside a carriage.

Lord Vladya stepped inside, leaving Aekeira in a quandary. Slaves did not ride in carriages, especially not alongside their masters.

Would she be expected to trudge behind the carriage on foot? The thought made her shudder.

"Get in." Lord Vladya closed his eyes, his voice carrying a hint of weariness.

"Inside, wi-with you?"

"Get in, Aekeira." There was an uncharacteristic subtle softening in his tone.

Trying to mask her surprise—and the thrill shooting through her—Aekeira climbed into the carriage, settling beside him. The space was intimate, their bodies pressed close together.

"May I ask where we're going?"

"Don't worry. I'm not abducting you to bury your corpse in some unmarked grave."

That startled a laugh from her. And the grand lord's eyes opened, swiveling his head to stare at her face for a moment too long, her smile fading under his intense gaze. "Did you just make a joke?"

A frown creased his brows before he closed his eyes once more. "We're going to Merylyn's. If I want to maintain a semblance of normalcy, I need to feed properly from my bloodhost."

Aekeira's stomach twisted in a knot, and an ugly feeling rose within her that she forcefully pushed aside. If feeding from his bloodhost helped keep the madness at bay, Aekeira would support it.

The carriage rolled to a stop before a magnificent manor house nestled inside a luxurious estate. Servants lined the entrance, bowing deeply as Lord Vladya got out. They ushered him inside, Aekeira trailing behind.

"Master Henry is away, Your Highness," the steward informed him, "but Madame Merylyn is in her chambers. Shall I inform her of your arrival?"

"I know she's indisposed, Bazo. I will go to her."

They followed the steward to a closed door, and she announced their presence, then stepped aside. Lord Vladya opened the door, and Aekeira walked behind him.

Lady Merylyn sat propped up in bed, a warm smile gracing her lips. "My Lord."

"How are you feeling, Merry?"

"Well enough." Lady Merylyn's gaze shifted to Aekeira with a flicker of curiosity. "I see you've brought company."

Aekeira inclined her head.

"How is the little one?" Lord Vladya asked.

The lady's face softened with a radiant joy. "She's perfect." She raised her voice slightly. "Kadiri, bring my child."

The door opened, and an Ureka female, presumably the nursemaid, entered carrying a swaddled bundle. Only the infant's head was visible, a wisp of dark hair peeking out from the folds of linen.

Aekeira's heart swelled with pure love. She had always adored babies. It took every ounce of restraint not to reach out and beg to hold the child, even for a fleeting moment.

She used to fantasize of a child of her own, but that dream was impossible. Especially with her current situation. Aekeira would rather not birth a child than condemn her offspring to a life of slavery.

The nursemaid placed the child in Lord Vladya's outstretched hands, who stared down at the bundle with an intense expression. Then, as if by magic, his eyes softened, and the harsh lines of his face smoothed into a longing so raw and unguarded Aekeira had to stifle a gasp.

"She's beautiful," he murmured, his voice rough with emotion. "She looks like her mother. You've done well, Merry."

Lady Merylyn beamed, a blush rising to her cheeks. "Thank you, Vlad. It means so much that you...that you're holding her. I know you normally avoid newborns."

"She's yours," he said, his voice coated with a sadness so heavy Aekeira could almost taste it. "Of course, I would hold her."

Aekeira reached out to touch his shoulder, but her fingers hovered in the air, before quickly withdrawing her wayward hand.

Lady Merylyn's eyes narrowed, scrutinizing Aekeira as if she were peering into her very soul.

"Such a precious little one," Lord Vladya whispered in utter misery.

The lady swallowed, sadness crossing her features. "Here, let me take her."

Aekeira ached deeply for this ancient male. Over three millennia of life, yet he had never experienced siring his own offspring—a desire that clearly burned in every fiber of his being. It was heart-wrenching to witness his profound longing.