

Chapter 157

Sunlight stabbed through the window, striking Emeriel's eyes, the bedsheets were cold, the room silent. She woke to an empty bed. Trying to move, she realized that was the least of her problems.

A sick feeling churned in her stomach, the nausea hitting her hard. Each attempt to move sent tremors of pain through her battered body. Bile surged up her throat, muscles protesting as she doubled over and wretched onto the rumpled bedding.

She heaved until nothing remained, dry sobs wracking her frame. Tears mingled with saliva and bile on her cheeks, her nose running unchecked. The world swam in a nauseating blur.

A gentle knock broke the silence. My beloved?

The door creaked open, revealing Lord Herod's concerned face. "Oh, my poor little one." He stepped inside. "Your heat has ended."

Indeed it had. The feverish arousal that had consumed her for days was gone, leaving behind a bone-deep exhaustion. Her mind was clear, but her body felt as if it had been trampled by a stampede of horses.

"I feel... crushed," she groaned, squeezing her eyes shut against the morning light that stabbed like needles. "Like a war chariot ran me over."

"A common feeling, my dear," Lord Herod soothed. His footsteps drew nearer. "I'll have you moved to the main house. The maids will see to this mess. A bath has already been prepared. You'll feel better afterward."

Emeriel doubted that, but she didn't have the energy to argue. The thought of being clean was a small comfort.

"I'm going to lift you now," Herod announced, his hand reaching for her arm.

Emeriel recoiled with a hiss, her body instinctively shrinking from his touch. "No," she whimpered. "It hurts."

"That, too, is normal, my dear Em," he said softly. "You've been touched constantly for days. Your body craves space to heal. But I'm afraid you'll have to endure it for a moment. Walking will be difficult. This is the only way I can get you out of here."

Emeriel's stomach roiled, making it difficult to focus on Lord Herod's words. She tried to summon the strength to move, but her muscles refused to cooperate.

"Alright," she managed, weakly, bracing herself for the pain.

But nothing prepared her for the abject misery that shot through her when his strong arms lifted her from the bed. Emeriel stifled a cry as she was carried out of the cottage that had been her world for the past three days.

"The grand king has left, hasn't he?" Emeriel tried not to cry.

One would think that after the heat, her emotions would be more stable, but they were still a chaotic mess.

"Yes, at dawn," Lord Herod replied. "Matters of court wait for no man, Emeriel. But he spent your heat with you, staying the entire time, despite his deep-seated hatred for your kind. The gods are truly on your side."

Are they? The grand king had nearly killed her, not once but twice. His pain had often overshadowed their bond, driving him to the brink of murder. Twice, he'd almost strangled her. If the gods truly favored her, they wouldn't have forged this bond in the first place.

Before the manor, shielded from the harsh sunlight, Emeriel finally opened her eyes. The nausea surged again.

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"Just a few more seconds, my dear," Lord Herod urged. "We're almost there."

AEKEIRA

Aekeira missed her sister deeply.

Days apart felt like an eternity.

She'd attempted to speed through her chores and slip out of the fortress before but juggling both her work and Em's proved near impossible to complete everything on time. Today, however, she was determined. Not just to finish early, but to elude Master Tyke's ever-watchful eyes. She hadn't encountered him since that dreadful evening, and she'd hoped she never would again.

Rising before dawn, Aekeira barely snatched an hour of sleep before tirelessly cleaning Blackstone's entire third wing. Then, she tended the gardens, watering, weeding, and planting. By midday, she was exhausted but elated. Everything was going according to plan. She would see Em.

Humming a cheerful tune, Aekeira moved around the toolshed, organizing.

"Well, well. Look who it is. The human witch."

She spun at Slavemaster Tyke's voice. He stood in the doorway, pipe in hand.

Her eyes fell, concealing the fear rising within. She hadn't encountered him since that dreadful evening, and she'd hoped she never would again. "Good day, Master Tyke."

"Spare me the pleasantries." He inhaled deeply from his pipe. "What did you do to his highness?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand—"

"Don't play coy with me!" He advanced menacingly. Aekeira stumbled back until her spine met the rough wall, trapping her. His eyes burned with rage, muscles tensed. "Lord Vladya despises your kind. He finds great joy in eradicating vermin like you. What did you do to earn his favor?"

Panic clawed at Aekeira's throat and she glanced at the door, longing for escape. "I swear, I've done nothing wrong."

"Liar!" he thundered, closing the distance, looming over her. His hand shot out, gripping her jaw tightly, forcing her to meet his stare.

"You're pretty, but so are half the women here. Your looks alone wouldn't fixate Lord Vladya. If it's not witchcraft, then what? Are you that skilled in bed? Is your cunt that enticing?"

Aekeira struggled, her jaw aching under his grip.

"Maybe I should find out myself, eh? See what all the fuss is about."

"Lord Vladya summoned me not long ago," Aekeira blurted. "I was just on my way to see him. If I'm late, he'll want to know why."

Tyke's grip tightened momentarily, before shoving her away in disgust. "Get out of my sight!"

She fled the shed without a second thought.

"You're Aekeira," the high lord of agriculture said, stepping into view.

Aekeira stood from the chair where she had been waiting and bowed respectfully. "Yes, my lord."

"I've heard so much about you," he said with a warm smile. "I am High Lord Herod. I'm glad you could make it."

"Thank you, my lord." Aekeira's gaze swept through her surroundings. "My lord, if it's not too much trouble, I would like to see my sister."

The handsome lord nodded and turned. "Come with me."

Aekeira followed, navigating the luxurious space until they stopped at a door at the end of the hallway. The high lord faced her. "She's in recovery. A delicate state. Be gentle with her."