

## Chapter 165

Daemonikai's head snapped up. "What do you know?"

"She works here in Blackstone. I know where to find her," the stoic soldier said quietly.

"A maid?"

Yaz shook his head, hesitating. "A slave. Human."

The air between them stilled. They were standing out in the open, but the silence was so thick that a pin drop would have echoed through the halls. "Say what now?"

"Yes, Your Grace. She's a newly acquired slave," Yaz explained. "Barely a year ago. Lord Vladya and Lord Ottai traveled to the human kingdom to acquire her and her brother to serve your beast."

That wasn't news to him, Ottai had told him of this journey. What was completely unexpected was the surrounding implications.

The idea that Vladya, emotionally detached, always-in-control Vladya, was drawn to a human girl, enough for his severed beast to fixate on her, was... staggering.

He glanced at Yaz. "Bring this girl to me."

Yaz bowed and turned on his heel. Just as he vanished down the corridor, Ottai rounded the corner.

"Your Grace. I was at Frostfall, only to be informed you were here. There are matters I wish to discuss—" Ottai cut off abruptly, his attention snapping to the low, rumbling growl coming from inside the chamber. A trace of worry crossed his face as he moved closer, his eyes finding Daemonikai's. "How is he?"

"You knew." Daemonikai's voice was flat, accusatory.

Guilt flashed across Ottai's face and he stopped just in front of Daemonikai, his broad shoulders drooping slightly. "It's been happening for a while now, I try my best to help, but..." He shook his head. "You know how stubborn Vlad can be."

"Still, you should have said something, Ottai," he said, the weight of his disappointment lacing his words.

"I know." Ottai hung his head. "I apologize, Your Grace."

They stood at the door, watching Vladya through the crack. He'd taken a half-shift again, prowling the room restlessly, snarling and snapping at nothing.

Ottai turned pale. "Do you think he is stuck in a half shift?"

Daemonikai observed Vladya's figure, his keen eyes studying every tremor, every twitch of muscle. "I think he is too agitated to revert."

Daemonikai wasn't entirely certain, but it had to be. The alternative was unthinkable.

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AEKERIA

All day, the air in Blackstone was thick with fear, rumors darting through the corridors like arrows. Whispers of their ruler's descent into madness stirred a collective dread.

Tales of his abrupt disappearances, unpredictable actions, and today's isolation had the people terrified. Murmurs that had once been mere shadows of suspicion had solidified into a clear truth. Their ruler was going feral.

The fortress buzzed with melancholy all day.

Aekeira freshened up, staring at her reflection in the mirror, trying to shake the dread and anxiety that clung to her. How is he? Is he alright?

She sighed, running a quick comb through the tangled strands of her hair. Her mind wandered to Em.

Perhaps she could go check on her. Bring her back from Lord Herod's estate if the pain of heat recovery had eased. At least that, was within her control.

"Aekeira, are you in there?" a soldier's voice shattered the quiet.

She stilled. Was it Yaz? "Yes, soldier."

"The grand king summons you to Blackstone's royal residence."

Her heart lurched in her chest. The Grand King? Why? King Daemonikai had never summoned her before, and she much preferred it that way.

Was it about Em?

The thought sent a fresh wave of panic through her.

Following Yaz, Aekeira's heart thudded wildly with every step. The closer they got, her nerves went into overdrive. At their destination, she barely registered Yaz's announcement or his departure.

Her eyes were fixed on the floor, but she noticed the heavy black robes signifying the presence of not one, but two grand rulers.

"Look at me, human."

The command wasn't harsh, but the deep voice held an undeniable authority that forced Aekeira's head up.

"Y-Your Grace." So close to him, Aekeira was struck by his sheer size and presence. He was more imposing than she'd thought. Tall, broad, and intimidating. How did Em do it?

"So, you are Aekeira." His emerald eyes scrutinized her, sharp and assessing.

Aekeira's fingers dug into her knuckles. "Yes, your Grace."

"You look incredibly familiar." A frown creased his brow. "We have not met before, but you look like a girl I know."

Heavens, please, no. Aekeira's stomach twisted in knots, fear shooting through her like thunderstorm. Don't mention Em... don't mention her...

"Her name is Galilea," King Daemonikai continued in a contemplative tone. "Betrothed to one of my high lords. A princess, just like you."

"I-I..." Aekeira was tongue-tied.

Lord Ottai tilted his head slightly. "I don't know Lord Herod's betrothed personally," he said, observing her curiously. "But I'm surprised. She bears quite the resemblance to her brother, Emeriel."

"Mmm, that too." The grand king cocked his head, his gaze sharp. "Is the boy with no scent your brother?"

"Y-yes, your Grace." Oh god, oh god, oh god.

"With no scent?" Lord Ottai scoffed, shaking his head. "Emeriel has a scent, alright. One your beast greatly favored, if I recall."

Aekeira was shaking now. Her throat constricted, words trapped behind a wall of terror. She gripped her garment so tightly her knuckles whitened.

King Daemonikai blinked slowly. "What?"

"The boy's scent used to get to you in beast form. We had him serving you specifically because of that." Lord Ottai frowned, a puzzled crease forming between his brows. "Maybe he is on suppressants."

"Why would that be?" The Grand King's frown deepened as he turned toward Ottai. "How would a human slave get their hands on scent suppressants?"

"Maybe—" Lord Ottai began.

"Let the girl answer, Ottai." King Daemonikai's penetrating gaze shifted back to Aekeira. "Tell me, Aekeira, how did your brother get his hands on suppressants?"

Aekeira feared her ribs would crack at how hard her heart was hammering. Was this the way Em felt confronted by Lord Vladya? How had she survived such an encounter? Had her bladder threatened to betray her, just as mine is now?

"Speak." King Daemonikai's voice cut through her spiraling thoughts like a blade. "Do not dare to deceive me, or you shall face the executioner's blade."

"You seem on the verge of collapse," Lord Ottai said with gentleness. "Fear not. Simply speak the truth, and all shall be well."

"Lord V-Vladya. He... uhm... he placed Em on s-suppressants." The words tumbled out of Aekeira's mouth.