

## Chapter 166

The grand king's eyebrows shot up. "Vladya? Why would he do—"

A wild growl cut through the air, and the slightly ajar door slammed open with a loud crash. Lord Vladya stormed out. Or rather, what would have been him?

Aekeira gasped, stumbling backward. Her neck straining as she tilted her head up, up, up, to meet his gaze. His face was contorted, his fangs bared into a fierce snarl.

Towering over seven feet tall, he was a blend of man and beast. She kept backing away, moving on reflex until her back collided with the wall. Aekeira had never seen a Urekai in half-shift but it was just as terrifying as their full beast form.

Lord Vladya was upon her in an instant, his massive frame crowding her against the wall, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating off his skin. His face mere inches from hers, he looked fierce and wild. Angry.

But then again, when was he not?

The knot of anxiety in her stomach began to loosen. If only slightly. Ironically, Aekeira realized she was more afraid of the grand king and his interrogation, than of this male before her.

Those claws could rip her apart in seconds, those sharp fangs could shred her to pieces, and those arms—thick as tree trunks—could crush her effortlessly. And yet... the fear kept unfurling.

"Lord Vladya," she whispered.

Hesitantly, she raised her hand toward him, hovering just inches from his abdomen before finally resting her palm against his hardened stomach.

Touching him. Soothing him.

The skin beneath her fingers was hot, almost feverish. "It's me... Aekeira..."

A deep growl began in his chest, vibrating against her palm. His head lowered toward her neck, nostrils flaring. Aekeira bared it further, offering him access.

Sniff, sniff, sniff.

Breath held, she closed her eyes as his nose skimmed along her skin.

He growled, the sound low this time. Less threatening. Almost... soothing.

"It's okay." Aekeira's hand gently trailed up his abdomen to the ridges of his broad back, the corded muscles beneath her fingers impossibly firm. He was terrifyingly powerful, and it was like petting a wild lion. Yet Aekeira couldn't stop touching him. "I am here."

Another rumble. This one softer... almost a purr.

"I am here," she repeated. Her hands, trembling, continuing to stroke his back gently.

He purred.

The sound was so odd, so unexpectedly warm and soothing, that for a moment Aekeira couldn't believe it came from this half-male-half-beast before her.

But then he did it again.

A long, rumbling purr that sent butterfly flutters through her belly, chasing away the last ruins of fear.

"Holy Ukrae," Lord Ottai's shocked words cut through the moment, jolting Aekeira.

She had been so focused on Lord VLadya, so caught up in his presence, she'd completely forgotten their audience. Glancing at the two grand rulers, both looked utterly stunned. They stared at her in open astonishment.

Lord Ottai's surprise was written all over his face, but the grand king's expression was more reserved. He looked thoughtful, analyzing... and a trace of something Aekeira couldn't quite decipher in his eyes.

Lord Vladya continued to nuzzle against her neck, his nose brushing against her skin. Another purr followed.

Then, with a shuddering sigh, he began to shift back to his human form.

His towering height diminished, claws and fangs retracted, fur receded. The wildness in his eyes softened, just a little.

"Aekeira," he rasped, taking a step back. He still looked a bit feral, yellow still lingering in his gray eyes. "I need..."

"What do you need?" She was drawn into those piercing eyes like a moth to a flame.

Lord Vladya swallowed. Wetting his lips, he asked in a rough tone. "Remember those dark thoughts I told you I had?"

Aekeira remembered.

Of course, she remembered.

They had haunted her ever since he'd spoken of them.

"Where you wish to tie me up... and h-hurt me?" she asked, just to confirm.

He gave a brief nod, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "Now would be a good time to make that run for the hills.

I am fighting my instincts not to shove you against this wall, tear your clothes away, and fuck you so hard you won't know your left from your right. I am fighting not to..." His breath came in heavy, uneven bursts. "I am fighting, Aekeira. Now would be a good time to flee."

"Wh-where could I possibly flee?" she asked, pulse quickened, face flushed. "The grand rulers will find me and bring me—"

"You will be left alone. I will order it."

"Uhm, hold on, not so fast," King Daemonikai's voice cut through. "Regrettably, V.D., that might be a promise you can't keep. No matter where she hides, I will find her and ensure she's returned here."

Aekeira felt warmth spread through her cheeks, she burrowed closer into the warmth of the half-feral male she should be fleeing from. Curse their heightened hearing.

"Stay out of this, Daemon," Lord Vladya hissed, his stare never leaving Aekeira's face. "Just say the word, and I will make it so."

Say the word! Say the word, Aekeira!

"What will happen to you? You don't seem... alright."

"It is not for you to worry about," he replied gruffly.

"I wish to stay," as she said it, her resolve strengthened. "I'm not leaving."

Because even though she was terrified of his needs, she longed to ease his suffering. No matter the cost.

The whip, the pain, the scars. If they came from him, she would bear them willingly, if it meant he would find peace. "Take what you need from me."

Lord Vladya stared at her for what seemed like an eternity. "You are insane." Disbelief shone in his wild eyes. "You are truly, utterly insane."

Then, he kissed her. Fiercely.

The kiss was not gentle. There was nothing tender about it. It felt possessive.

His tongue, his lips, devoured hers, taking and taking and taking until Aekeira was visibly shaking again, breathless with desire.

"Mine," he hissed against her lips.

Her eyes widened in shock. He was claiming her right here... in front of them?

Before she could fully process, her grand lord whirled around, shielding her behind his broad back. He snarled at the other two grand rulers. "Mine!"

Aekeira peeked around his shoulder, shock in her gut, butterflies in her stomach.

"Yours," Lord Ottai stated, raising his hands in surrender.