

## Chapter 200

PRINCESS AEKEIRA

When Aekeira stepped into the grand hall and didn't see Lord Vladya, it stung.

Disappointment flared, then relief. At least, she does not need to face him yet.

She quickly schooled her features, walking further into the room.

Yaz, and the grand king's head soldier—what was his name again?—straightened at her arrival, stiff and formal. Lord Ottai, who had been gazing out the window, turned to face her.

Those familiar, beautifully crafted black robes filled her with such nostalgia it was all she could do to maintain her composure. Because now she remembered them on a certain someone as well.

"Princess Aekeira." Lord Ottai inclined his head with a respect that was foreign.

It was unsettling to see three of them bow to her. Strangely comforting.

"Grand Lord Ottai," she curtsied. "To what do we owe this visit?"

"It's a matter of great importance. Is your sister on her way?"

"She will not be joining us."

Lord Ottai's face turned sad, but he didn't seem surprised. "Thank you for seeing us. I know it mustn't have been easy for you either."

Aekeira could no longer hold back the question that had plagued her for years. "How is... is he alright?" She had to ask, had to know.

"No." The grand looks shook his head "He is not."

Her breath stuttered, and she stumbled back. Blinking furiously against the sting of tears, Aekeira choked out. "Is he f-feral?"

The hush that followed was unbearable. The look of misery that passed between the two head soldiers was Aekeira's breaking point.

Her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a sob.

Tears streamed down her face, blurring her sight. "Oh my heavens..." The words were a ragged cry torn from the deepest part of her soul.

"May I, Your Majesty?" Yaz asked.

"Go ahead, Yaz."

Yaz stepped forward cautiously. "My master is not feral yet. Not completely."

"What does 'not completely' mean?" Aekeira snapped desperately. "He is either feral or he's not."

"It means he's turning. Your Highness. His hand is that of the beast's. There's no changing back." Yaz explained carefully. "I staked out his cave for days, and managed to catch a glimpse of him when he came out for food. I'm not sure if it's just his hand or if there are other parts."

Aekeira's legs wobbled with staggering relief.

"Usually, the change occurs all at once," Yaz continued. "One takes their beast form and is unable to revert back. But there are rare cases where this happens. When one turns gradually, losing body parts at a time until the change is complete."

"So... he is still... male?" Aekeira couldn't hide the hope in her voice.

"Not exactly," Lord Ottai answered this time.

Aekeira stared at him, her heart sinking.

"When one reaches the turning point, there is nothing quite male left about him. His mind will be completely lost. He wouldn't recognize anything or anyone." The grand Lord paused. "Vladya entered that cave one morning and has not emerged in half a year."

Aekeira deflated like a balloon. Cold sweat broke out on her skin.

Half a year?

This is bad. Very bad.

"And the grand king?" she managed to ask.

"May I, Your Highness?" the other head soldier spoke this time.

"Go ahead, Wegai."

Wegai stepped forward. "My master's soul is dying."

Aekeira blinked. "Come again."

"Over the years after the eclipse moon night, many who lost their bondmates were so aggrieved they either turned feral...or their soul became so hungry, it started dying." Wegai said, his voice grave. "A bond feeds the soul, Your Highness. We had no idea how badly he was barely keeping it together until Princess Emeriel was removed from his life."

"You mean Em's love has been sustaining his soul, and when she was taken away, it started to wither?"

"His love, young princess," Lord Ottai corrected gently.

Aekeira flinched.

That longing rose, so fierce it whipped through her like a storm at sea. Squeezing her heart so tight Aekeira cried out in anguish.

"Are you alright, young princess?" Lord Ottai's concern was evident as he took a step towards her.

"I'm fine, please don't call me that." she strangled out, one hand pressing against her aching heart, the other raised in a plea for distance. "Please... don't."

"What?" Lord Ottai was confused. "The young princess?"

Memories flooded her.

They dragged her back to all the times her grand lord had called her that.

"No one has the right to be this beautiful, young princess."

"Kiss me, young princess."

Too vivid, too painful.

I miss him so much it feels like a part of me was ripped off and handed to him.

"Yes, please!" she panted, squeezing her eyes shut. "P-please."

"Alright. I apologize, Princess Aekeira."

Desperate to distract her mind from the aching void in her heart, Aekeira forced herself to focus on the conversation.

"Your theory doesn't make sense, Lord Ottai," she said, her voice strained. "The grand king doesn't love my sister. We all know that. He was incapable of it."

"He cared for her," Lord Ottai stated. "He might not have been capable of loving, but he cared for her. When everything else dear to him was taken, she was the only thing he came close to caring about again, and that sustained him."

He paused, his gaze heavy with sorrow. "But when she was removed, the gaping wound that never healed took over and spread. Like Vladya with his feral madness, the grand king hid this from us. But unlike Vladya, he actually fought it from the beginning. But now, he can no longer."

Aekeira swallowed, her throat dry. "What happens when one can no longer fight it? What happened to the others who lost their souls?"

Lord Ottai looked away. "They died. Roughly a month after the symptoms are complete, they either go feral or kill themselves. Every last one of them."

What? "But Lord Vladya doesn't have a soul."

"His was different. Vladya's soul is not dead, it was lost to dark magic. It's alive in the realm of the spirit, where no one knows. Alive, but unattainable."

Hope ignited in her eyes. "So it's not dead? That means... there's a chance he can still get it back?"