

Chapter 221

GRAND LORD VLADYA

"This place is beautiful," Aekeira exclaimed, her sunny smile beaming as she plucked a delicate cherry blossom from a nearby branch. "So peaceful, too."

Grand Lord Vladya couldn't tear his eyes away from her. Every movement she made, every step she took, his eyes followed.

He had brought her to his favorite sanctuary within the woods, a place he had discovered a millennium ago.

Now, standing there watching Aekeira, he realized that the most beautiful sight here wasn't the blossoms or the tranquil scenery—it was her.

Aekeira had visited him every day, never failing to arrive with a bag filled with nourishing food, ripe fruits, and an assortment of herbs she claimed would be good for him.

He hadn't asked for it, yet she visited daily, taking care of him. Not only did she want him to fight, and she wanted to fight alongside him.

Judging by her constant variety of herbs, she had clearly paid a visit to the royal healer. Faiwick must have been all too willing to help.

Aekeira never came empty-handed, and she hovered like a mother hen to make sure he took every concoction. Of course, she attempted to disguise her fuss, and Vladya played along.

He knew if he acknowledged her attentiveness, those cute fierce blushes would spread across her cheeks, and she would flee.

As much as he enjoyed watching her go shy and flustered, he had grown to like her constant hovering even better.

When was the last time any female had fussed over him like this? With such genuine care and devotion?

Way too long.

Vladya hadn't thought he'd enjoy it, but now he did. More than that—he looked forward to it everyday.

"Is that not gardenia!?" Aekeira skipped over to the patch of white flowers. "So pretty! Em and I have tried growing them for years, but they always die on us. Notoriously difficult to grow."

Aekeira's enthusiasm was infectious. She could talk endlessly when comfortable, and when the conversation turned to things she was passionate about, like plants or her life with Emeriel, she became even more animated.

Vladya enjoyed listening to her.

It was almost unbelievable how much he enjoyed everything about Aekeira.

He used to think things wouldn't feel the same, with his sexual urges dulled. After all, if there was one thing he had always been certain of, it was his great lust for her.

She had always sparked his desire. Always made him hungry.

Just the sight of her was enough to set Vladya off, to make him want to mount her. He thought with those senses muted, something vital would be lost.

But it wasn't.

Different, yes, but somehow...better.

In the past week, Vladya had come to know Aekeira in ways he never had before.

He now knew that she loved to knit, even though she wasn't particularly good at it. Unlike her sister Emeriel, she wasn't skilled in combat. Aekeira has a hearty appetite when excited, and a sullen eating habits when moody.

He learned that when something made her truly happy, she laughed so hard she giggled. A sound that embarrassed her to no end.

"It's so unladylike," she'd said once, her cheeks warm. "My governess would have been furious if she'd ever heard it."

But Vladya loved that laugh.

It was open, free, and it carried with it a joy that lit up everything around her.

He had only heard her laugh like that once, when she'd recounted a story about the mischief she and Emeriel had gotten into as children. The sound of that unrestrained laughter, followed by a sweet giggle, had imprinted. Vladya hoped to hear more of it in the future.

He didn't need the sexlust to feel drawn to her. In many ways, this bond they were building was more meaningful. He was learning who she was, piece by piece, and every new discovery made him feel...more.

"Are you alright?" Aekeira's voice broke through his reverie, concern bringing her close to his side. "Do we need to go?"

Her subtle way of asking: Is it the madness? Is your beast about to flare? Or worse?

"No, I am fine." And surprisingly, Vladya was.

For a male who had more bad days than good over the years, he had only experienced one such day since Aekeira's return.

The madness, the dark whispers that urged him to hurt, to kill, to rampage, had quieted.

Even his beast, ever restless and ready to strike, had fallen silent.

A relieved smile appeared on Aekeira's lips. "When we get back, I'll give you the herbal drink I made. I heard it helps calm the mind."

'Heard,' Vladya's lips twitched. Most likely, Faiwick had drilled it into her. "Alright."

"Come, let's go up the hill." She took his hand—the paw one—her excitement infectious. "I want to see what's beyond it."

Vladya knew what was beyond it. A serene lake.

But he kept his silence, allowing her to lead him. He was beginning to realize how much he enjoyed living in Aekeira's world, experiencing the wonder and excitement anew.

This was the most alive he had felt in centuries. She made him feel alive.

"Heavens! Look! A beautiful lake!" she squealed, the sound definitely unladylike.

And there it was—the blush of shame creeping up her neck.

Vladya felt a rare urge to laugh.

A genuine, heartfelt laughter that came on so strong, he had to force it back down, trapping it in his throat.

"Sorry about that, Lord Vladya." Aekeira cleared her throat, trying to contain her happiness. "It's quite a beautiful lake."

Aekeira was a lady through and through. Even as a slave, she had carried herself with grace and dignity of her noble birth. Vladya had noticed it long ago.

But now, every aspect of her, from her attire to her impeccable manners, spoke volumes about her status and character.

Vladya wished he could tell her that he didn't care how unladylike her laughter or excited squeals were. In fact, he'd like to hear more of them. But he enjoyed watching her little discomforts too much to say it.

"It is quite," he replied, simply.

The flush deepened. She was utterly adorable.

She watched the swans gliding gracefully across the lake, creating soft ripples in their wake. She even waved at them.

Vladya watched her, as always. Absorbing her excitement, her every reaction, as though they were his own.

When he had sent her away all those years ago, it had been out of fear. Fear of nurturing expectations, only for them to crumble into futility. Fear of hoping again.

Yet, despite it all, hope had taken root, hadn't it?

Was it when his beast rejected every female and craved only for her? Or when losing her had caused him more pain than losing his soul—had hurt worse than actually losing a part of himself? Or was it when his sexlust went dormant, waiting for her return?

Vladya wasn't sure. It could have been any of those moments, or all of them. But hope had begun inside him.

A glimmer at first, sparking to life with every passing day until it had grown into something real...something alive within him.

I hope Aekeira is my compatible bondmate. I hope her soul aligns with mine.

Then, as always, the mocking laughter followed. What soul? He had no soul to connect with hers.

But unlike before, that smirk didn't shut him down. It didn't make him slam the door on those thoughts as he had always done in the past.

This girl was making him into someone else entirely. Someone, even he, could hardly recognize.

Someone who dared to hope again.

And, Vladya found out...he liked it.