

## Chapter 228

It barreled through her defenses, flooding her with pleasure after pleasure.

Lord Vladya's furry hand held her writhing body still as he continued thrusting his fingers into her starved body.

His grip possessive, as if Aekeira's private place were his right. His to invade, his to open up, his to claim.

Fangs withdrawing, he took the thoughts right out of her head. "This is mine," he snarled, plunging his thick fingers deep and scissoring. "Every part of you is mine, my sweet, pretty little Aekeira."

Her body convulsed in his grasp. Aekeira was submerged in ecstasy. Drowning.

At last, she slumped against him, boneless and utterly spent.

Only then, did he withdraw his fingers. Giving her a raw, heated look, he brought them to his lips, licking them clean. Then, let out a guttural groan of absolute, undisguised hunger.

"Hearths, it almost feels like my sex drive isn't asleep." He growled, staring pointed between her open legs, to her exposed core, a savage look in his eyes. "The things I want to do to you..."

She felt completely exposed. Open to his eyes. But she forced herself to keep her quivering thighs parted for him. To let him see.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled away. Rising, he lifted her from the basin, and carried her back to his makeshift bed. Lying her on the soft surface, he began towelng her body.

His manhood was still hard and proudly erect, tenting up his pants. That must be uncomfortable.

"Are you alright?" Aekeira voiced in a small tone. "Do you want me to—"

Her grand lord shook his head. "I'm fine. I told you tonight was for you."

Looking up at him dreamily, she reddened.

"If I had my soul," Lord Vladya's voice was low and gruff. "I would attempt a bonding ritual."

Aekeira's drowsy eyes flew open. Had she heard him right?

He nodded, his expression solemn. "I would."

"Really?" she couldn't help how small, how hopeful, her voice sounded.

Another firm nod.

Aekeira's heart thudded in her chest. He was terrified of the bonding ritual. Despised the very idea of going through that hell again. Yet, he wanted to do it...for her?

"I vowed never to have the ritual again. After Tiara, I swore off it. But if it weren't so impossible, I would risk it all again. I would want you to be my bondmate."

He toweled her hair gently. "I'm not a prize, Aekeira." His voice was flat, but his eyes rested on her with a tenderness that felt almost surreal. "I'm a disaster. A burden. A nearly-feral one, at that."

"You are none of those things," she said fiercely, aching inside. "Don't speak of yourself that way."

He closed his eyes, his jaw clenching as he fought against his inner demons. "If you were Syren, and I had my soul, I would have fallen at your feet and begged you to bond with me. To be my bondmate."

And I would have said 'yes!'.

"Yes, I want more than anything else in the world to be your bondmate."

I would have screamed for joy, so loud that all the animals in the woods would hear.

Tears brimmed in her eyes as she sat up and threw her arms around his neck.

His arms went around her, and he held her tight...almost crushing her. Aekeira buried her face into his neck, inhaling his familiar scent as her shoulders shook with silent sobs.

Aekeira didn't know which she wanted more. To be a Syren, or for him to regain his soul.

Both.

She wanted them both so desperately, it hurt.

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GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI.

"Kneel before she sees us," he snapped.

Ottai cast him a look as though he'd lost his mind, then crossed his arms with a sullen sigh. "And why must I hide with you? I've done nothing wrong."

Daemonikai leveled him with a superior look, one brow arched.

With a resigned sigh, Ottai finally crouched beside him behind the sheltering rock, muttering under his breath.

Together, they watched Emeriel in silence.

"Are you going to her?" Ottai huffed quietly.

"Yes."

"When?" Ottai pressed, glancing at the king.

Daemonikai didn't respond. For now, he was content to watch her from a distance. Watching her move gracefully as she tended to the gardens.

Just like that, the tension from the day's court proceedings dissipated.

She was a vision in her elaborate gown, its golden patterns shimmering in the sunlight. Simply breathtaking.

Even his people admired her, which surprised Daemonikai. They were... kinder with her.

At first, he was suspicious, surprised even. But after seeing how some interacted with her—the way the younglings flocked to her, their mothers watching with trusting smiles—he began to believe.

He was awed at the way she handled the children. Emeriel would make a wonderful mother.

A pang of longing rose in him, but he quickly squashed it.

Since their encounter two days ago, he had watched her from a distance, following her quietly whenever he had the chance.

Now, she tended to flowers, assisting the slave workers. The contentment on her face as she moved among the blossoms was... mesmerizing. Daemonikai could watch her all day.

"Perhaps you should actually talk to her instead of stalking her, Your Grace," Ottai remarked dryly.

Daemonikai shot him a reprimanding look. "That's an undignified thing to say. I do not stalk."

Ottai raised an eyebrow. "Let's see: you followed her from the sick female's house, to the woods where she gathered herbs with Livia, then to the training field where she practiced swordplay, and now, to the garden."

Well, now that Ottai laid it out like that, it did sound like stalking. Not that Daemonikai would ever admit it.

"I merely follow discreetly," he corrected firmly. "I do not stalk."

The fourth ruler smirked. "If you say so."

"Quit it," Daemonikai growled.

"Have you tried apologizing?"

"I have," Daemonikai sighed. Her heartbreak ran deep. He could still recall vividly the raw pain he'd seen. The misery, the resolve.

"She wants nothing to do with me anymore," he conveyed, not bothering to hide the bitterness in his voice. "It's a wonder she even agreed to return in the first place."

"Oh, that took quite a bit of convincing," Ottai took him. Then, he shrugged. "She's harder now."

"And stronger," Daemonikai remembered her impressive archery skills, and swordplays. Pride swelled in him.

His Soulbond was a woman of many talents.

"Pain has a way of changing people," Ottai said quietly. "It starts from the roots, twisting everything until one becomes numb to all that matters."

A sentiment they both understood all too well. "Only I caused this pain," Daemonikai's jaw locked tight. "It was all my fault."

"You did what you thought was best," Ottai offered. "But maybe the separation was necessary. It forced you and Vladya to truly understand what these women mean to your lives. Sometimes, one does not know the value of what they have until it's gone."

I only hope I haven't lost mine forever.

It was fascinating what coming to terms with oneself can achieve. Now he had made peace with his conflicting emotions, understanding that going after Emeriel didn't betray Evie's memory, he felt most comfortable.

Reaching for this new star that's Emeriel, was not a transgression. It was a chance at life, at healing.

And for the first time in a long while, the will to live was stirring in him.

He still had nightmares about that night he lost it all, and he still thought of them, but instead of wanting to die with them, Daemonikai wished to heal.

Not just to honor their memory but to honor his. He wished to live for them...but also for himself. For Emeriel.

"I refuse to believe I've lost her forever. I will win her back," he stated with resolve. "I have no intention of giving up."