

## Chapter 292

PRINCESS AEKEIRA

At midnight, long after Emeriel had fallen asleep, Aekeira lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

Her thoughts were restless, circling back to him.

The bruises she had noticed days ago. The tension in his posture. The pain in his eyes.

Sleep was impossible.

Giving up, she rose quietly from the bed and slipped into the dark hallway. Taking the long, silent walk through the corridors, she made her way to the other side of the royal residence.

She hesitated for a moment before knocking. Her nerves were suddenly all over the place.

"Go away," a growly voice barked from within.

She knocked again.

"Yaz, I swear I will have you beheaded if you don't send whoever's out there on their way!" He snapped dangerously.

"It's me, Your Highness," she faltered, her voice quieter than she'd intended. "Aekeira—"

The door swung open so fast she stumbled back.

Grand Lord Vladya filled the doorway. His usually well-styled black hair was disheveled. The wild, unfocused look in his gray eyes told her everything she needed to know. A feral episode.

"Now is a bad time," he warned her. Asking for space.

I'm not leaving him like this. Aekeira stepped inside. "How long has it been? When did it start?"

"Aekeira..."

"Please don't push me away," she moved closer. "I wish to be here. Let me be here."

"It might get bad. Very bad."

Aekeira's heart sank. And it had gotten bad a week ago, hadn't it? Things had spiraled out of control, and she had blamed him. Taken her hurt out on him, pushing him away, even when it was not his fault.

"I wish to apologize for—wait, these bruises..." she took in the deep discoloration around his jaw and on his forearms. "They are fresh. Did you fight again in court?"

"Just a few rough tumbles during the royal hunt," he muttered. "It's nothing."

"They don't look like nothing." But, changing the subject, she looked up at him. "I am deeply sorry for what happened. I was mad at myself. Mad at how helpless I felt. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"There's no reason to apologize," he said, shaking his head. "Seeing the condition Emeriel was in... I understand—" His eyes flashed yellow, and his hand shot out, gripping her neck.

"Human scum," he growled in an angry, deadly tone.

Aekeira's breath seized as his grip held tight, cutting off her air. Her hands went to his wrist, but she didn't fight him.

She had learned long ago that panicking only made things worse.

As quickly as it began, he released her as though she had bitten him. Stepping back so fast he nearly lost his balance.

"I... I apologize, I apologize, Aekeira. Just leave. Tonight's... tonight's bad. I do not want you to get hurt."

Aekeira inhaled deeply, steadying her breath and her pounding heart. "I'm not going anywhere," she informed him. "So you may as well stop trying to push me away."

He shook his head again, hands balled into fists. "It's too dangerous—"

"Please, let me help you, my lord," she whispered now...pleading.

Before he could protest, she pressed on. "It only gets this bad when you suppress your instincts for too long, and when you haven't been sleeping well. When was the last time you fed?"

"I'm not touching Merilyn in this state. And sleep..." He barked a bitter laugh. "Sleep is hard to come by when there are so many voices in your head giving you pointers on how to commit a mass massacre and bathe in their damn blood."

Aekeira wanted to embrace him. To pull him into her arms and take some of that pain away.

But if there was one thing his past episodes had taught her, it was to be cautious in moments like this.

"May I hug you, my lord?" she asked gently, opening her arms to him.

For a moment, he was rigid, his gray eyes wild. But slowly, the tension began to drain from him.

Without another word, he stepped stiffly into her embrace, lowering his head to rest against her shoulder.

Relief washed over Aekeira. She held him close, her arms tightening around him. Light-gods, how she had missed this male.

The stiffness in her own body melted away.

Suddenly, everything felt alright in Aekeira's world again.

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GRAND LORD VLADYA

Kill, kill, kill!

Kill them all...!

Closing his eyes, Vladya forced himself to focus on her touch, grounding himself in her soft arms.

His beast prowled restlessly within him like a confined wild animal, clawing at his insides, desperate to be let out.

Craving to cause destruction.

Hungry for havoc.

"I will run you a bath," Aekeira's soft voice penetrated his chaotic mind. "Also I will send Yaz to fetch some ointment for the bruises and a potion to help reduce the headache—it may help you relax enough to get some sleep, is that okay?"

How did she always know of the headache pounding behind his eyes like his skull was being split in two?

But of course she did. She was Aekeira.

Always attentive. Watching him with those perceptive brown eyes that saw straight through him.

"Alright," he said, his voice rough.

She pulled back slightly, taking his much larger hand in her smaller one, and leading him toward the bed. "Please, lie down."

She steadied him as he sank onto the mattress. His vision swam, fading in and out, but he could still make out her movements.

Walking to the door, she opened it briefly to speak to someone—likely Yaz—before closing it again. Then she moved to the large tub that was brought in earlier, one he had been too busy holding on to his clanging head to use.

Vladya's unfocused gaze tracked her every move. Rolling up her sleeves, she uncorked a bottle of fragrant oil, pouring it carefully into the steaming water. Stirring the bath with her hand, she spread the soothing scent through the air.

A calm came over him. The kind he hadn't felt in a while.

The pounding voices in his head began to lower their volume.

Fading from deafening screams to murmurs. They were still there but quieter now. Easier to ignore.

It was the most peace he'd had in over a week.

Between Daemonikai's downward spiral, the court tensions, and his strained relationship with Aekeira, it was safe to say his mind had been in chaos.

But now, as he watched her again, right here in his space, the scent of her in his territory, the storm inside him began to settle.

"Your bath is ready, my lord," she said, standing in front of him now.

His eyes snapped open, startled. He had actually drifted off?

But just to be clear, he asked, "I slept?"

"You did." A hint of a smile touched her lips. "But only for a few moments."

He exhaled a slow breath. "I haven't had a decent sleep in a long while."

Eyes soft, she leaned in closer, her voice tender. "Well, let's get you ready for one now."

Taking his hand again, she guided him to the edge of the tub. Vladya followed without protest, allowing her to help him undress.

The heat of the water enveloped him as he sank into it, his shoulders dipping beneath the surface.

He let out a low, relieved sigh.

Kneeling beside the tub, Aekeira reached for a clean cloth, dipping it into the water before wringing it out.

She pressed the damp cloth to his neck, wiping gently. Soothing.

Vladya relaxed further with every touch.