

Chapter 75

AEKEIRA

The unknown mistress led Aekeira through the courtyard of the southern Wings, then deep into the western wings. With every step, Aekeira's dread deepened.

Slaves and soldiers alike bowed low as they passed, whispers rustling in their wake. This woman held power, a palpable force that thrummed in the air around her.

Finally, they stopped by the river, its gentle murmur a stark contrast to the tension crackling between them. "I am Lady Marilyn," the woman declared, her voice clear and cool. "Bondmate to High Lord Henry, overseer of domestic affairs. And—" she paused, her lips curving in the barest hint of a smile—"bloodhost to the third ruler of Urai."

Aekeira's eyes widened. "You are Grand Lord Vladya's bloodhost?" Now it all made sense, the deference – this woman was not only the closest to a grand lord but also the wife of a high lord of the court.

The mistress nodded. "And you are the human princess, Aekeira, am I correct?"

"Yes, Mistress," Aekeira confirmed, her voice small.

"I have been eager to meet you. My...condition has made navigating this vast fortress quite difficult." Her gaze swept over Aekeira, lingering in a way that sent a shiver down her spine. "You are remarkably beautiful for a human. Now I understand why Vlad is so... captivated."

The last word hung in the air, heavy and strange. Aekeira blinked, utterly baffled. "Huh?" What did the mistress mean? Captivated?

"I have heard that Grand Lord Vladya has taken a particular interest in you. Is it true that he has claimed you?" The question, while not unexpected, felt like a hand closing around Aekeira's throat.

"Uhm... I don't under—"

"He mounts you, does he not?" The mistress's bluntness sliced through Aekeira's hesitation.

Her cheeks burned, but the truth was unavoidable. She nodded, a single, jerky movement.

"And how was it?" the mistress pressed, her eyes glinting with an unreadable curiosity.

"Painful. He is not... gentle." Understatement of the century. The fact that Lord Vladya hadn't killed her yet was honestly surprising. "He despises me."

"I know he does. Vlad has his reasons for harboring a deep-seated hatred of humankind. That's why I find his desire for you...intriguing. You see, although Vlad may detest humans, he generally refrains from sexually engaging with them. Despite having countless human slaves over the centuries, he has never taken any of them to his bed." Lady Marilyn tilted her head, studying Aekeira like a specimen.

That revelation was unexpected. Confusing. At least now Aekeira understood why Vladya had accused her of witchcraft.

"So, you can understand my fascination." Marilyn's words hovered in the air like smoke. "How does a small human female like you manage to elicit such a loss of control in the mighty Vladya? If you were a syren, I would assume you were his Soulbond." She stepped closer, her closeness stifling. Her nostrils flared as she bent towards Aekeira's neck, a predator scenting prey. "Not a syren, just a human. So what exactly is happening here?"

"I honestly have no idea, Mistress," Aekeira replied sincerely.

Silence stretched between them, the river's murmur suddenly too loud.

"Do you know why he hates your kind so ardently?" Lady Marilyn's question was softer, almost hesitant.

That was an easy one to answer. "It is because of the tragic fate that befell the grand king and his family. And his own people."

"Oh, if only it were that simple." A sigh escaped the mistress, and for a moment, the weight of power seemed to slip from her shoulders. "You see, Vlad has always had bad luck when it comes to forming bonds. Among all the rulers, he desired a family the most. He desperately longed for a bondmate. And out of all of them, fate was most unkind to him." She sighed.

"First, he searched for his Soulbond. Even when everyone laughed at him and dismissed it as a pipedream, as Soulbonds were rare or even extinct, he didn't give up. Vlad traveled through kingdoms, crossed lands and oceans, searching for her. From the Urekai land to other species across the world." A faint smile graced Marilyn's face. "He used to be quite the hopeless romantic, always spinning tales of love."

Aekeira would bet gold coins that her mouth hung open. Dumbfounded.

The image of Lord Vladya painted by Marilyn seemed entirely incongruous. She simply couldn't envision Lord Vlad in that light.

"Unbelievable, I know. But true." Marilyn's eyes glittered with an unnerving intensity. "However, when he eventually gave up on his quest, admitting defeat, he mourned a Soulbond he never had. Centuries later, he experienced his first love. He was deeply in love with her, but after undergoing the bonding ritual, the bond failed to form within the customary seven days. Do you understand what it means for an Urekai bonding ritual to fail?"

Aekeira got the idea, but shook her head nonetheless.

"Very cruel. It is nature's, the moon's, Ukrae's, and fate's way of declaring, 'Your souls do not align, and thus, you two cannot be together.'" Marilyn had a sorrowful expression on her face. "It is an exceedingly cruel fate. We are not granted our Soulbond, yet we cannot be with the ones we love because our souls do not connect. And once a bonding ritual fails, it is impossible to become bondmates. Consequently, one must let go of the person they love."

"Truly heartbreaking," Aekeira murmured, the words barely a whisper.

"It's far more than that," Marilyn replied, her voice tight, the focus on the river a shield against Aekeira's own emotion. "It is soul-shattering. With each failed bonding ritual, Vladya's heart grew colder and more callous. His soul fractured. It seemed as though both heaven and hell conspired against his happiness. He witnessed other lords and grand lords go through the bonding ritual successfully and have a bondmate. He watched as they struggled to bear offspring, a struggle all Urekai knew, yet in the end, they built families. And all the while, his own bonding rituals consistently failed."

"When I became his bloodhost a thousand years ago, love and family were no longer dreams for him." Marilyn's voice cracked, just slightly. "They were the ghosts that haunted him. He'd closed those doors, hardened, and simply brushed off any female advances by giving them the cold shoulder. Our females adored him; they all wanted him, but Vladya had shut himself off. He was done." A shadow fell over Marilyn's eyes. "Then, I fell in love with him."

Aekeira's eyes widened. She hadn't expected that.

Marilyn offered a small, sad smile. "I did. It was incredibly difficult to break through those walls he built around himself. He pushed me away more often than he drew me close. However, as his bloodhost, we already shared a unique bond. Each bloodfeeding intensified my feelings for him and gradually eroded his defenses. It took two hundred years, but I succeeded. He fell for me, and he fell hard."

Oh, Aekeira didn't like where this was going at all. She felt a growing sense of unease. "The bond... it didn't form?" she whispered fearfully.