

## Chapter 266

Emeriel cleared her throat. "Tell me about you and Lord Vladya. How is his... health?"

Aekeira brushed her hair, the bristles gliding in gentle strokes from root to tip. "It's gotten much better. There are still days when things are hard—when his episodes are really bad. The voices in his head grow stronger, and his beast becomes ruthless. But we have learned to navigate those days together, better than before."

Her strokes faltered, the brush pausing mid-air as the light in her eyes dimmed. "Even so, those days, though rare, remind me of the inevitable... that he won't always be here."

Emeriel balled her hands into fists in her lap.

She wanted to rise, to wrap her sister in the kind of hug that could chase away the pain in her voice. But hesitation rooted her in place.

I haven't hugged her to comfort her in over two years. How do I start now?

Aekeira took a deep breath, her eyes clearing, the heavy misery leaving her. "But we won't let days like that rule our lives—or his."

The sadness ebbed from her voice as she resumed brushing. "He asked me to bond with him, and I said yes."

Emeriel's head snapped up.

She turned sharply, her wide eyes locking onto her sister. "You mean Lord Vladya asked you to be his mate? To perform the bonding ritual and everything?"

Aekeira gave an enthusiastic nod, smiling widely.

Emeriel stared, the weight of the revelation settling over her like a storm breaking on the horizon. She didn't know all the details of the bonding ritual, but Lord Vladya's history with it was infamous.

The idea that he was willing to give this relationship with Aekeira a true chance, to the point of committing to the ritual—was breathtaking. Incomprehensible.

No wonder my sister is so happy.

Emeriel rose slowly and crossed the room. Standing before Aekeira, she took her sister's hand in hers, squeezing gently.

"I am so, so happy for you, Aekeira. It brings me immense joy to see you like this. You deserve it, after everything you have been through."

Reaching out, she tucked a stray strand of Aekeira's hair behind her ear with a tenderness that felt both foreign and familiar. "This was my only dream for so long. That you would find happiness with a male who truly loves and cherishes you. A male who could put this kind of light in your eyes and smile on your face." Her lips curved into a tiny smile. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think that male would be Grand Lord Vladya."

Aekeira nodded too, staring at their intertwined hands.

"Not the day that terrifying lord stood in Navia's court, holding your cheeks and examining you with such disgust. Certainly not in those first months after we arrived in Urai, when he looked at you with hatred so strong it was frightening. And definitely not the day he punished you in court—or later that night in his private chambers."

Tears filled Aekeira's eyes, her voice trembling as she spoke. "We have come a long way, have we not?"

Emeriel nodded, a bittersweet smile on her lips. "Truly, love is found in the most unexpected places. I'm so genuinely happy for you, Keira. If any male can take care of you and protect you, it's him. This has made my night."

"Do you know what made mine?" Aekeira looked up, her eyes glistening as a tear slipped down her cheek. "This. Us, together again. Me and you." Her voice broke in a whisper. "You, Em. Seeing you like this again has made my entire night."

Emeriel's heart grew too heavy.

Aekeira, as always was never hesitant or stingy with her hugs and pulled Emeriel back into her arms. "Thank you for coming back to us. For coming back to me." She leaned closer, her breath soft against Emeriel's ear. "For so long, I was terrified I'd lost you forever."

Emeriel's eyes filled with tears. "I'm so sorry I pushed you away. It's been so hard, staying all these years with that distance between us, but..." I needed to survive.

"What happened?" Aekeira pulled back just enough to look into her sister's eyes. Her voice was small, her gaze searching, imploring. "Tell me what happened. You just woke up one day... changed. No more grieving, crying, or moping. I was relieved—at least one of us was brave enough to deal with it. But deep down, I have always felt there was something more. Something you are not telling me."

Emeriel shook her head slowly. "No, Keira. Let's not go there."

"So there is something." Aekeira suddenly looked determined. "No, I need to know."

"There is nothing." Emeriel took a step back, the warmth fleeing, a chill spreading through her veins.

Her fingers tightened on her garment, her knuckles white. "Nothing happened."

"No more secrets, Em, please." Aekeira sounded desperate and frustrated. "I have thought about it for years. Did the grand king send a rejection letter to you in Navia? Is that it?"

"I truly don't want to talk about it," Emeriel's voice shook. Her body betrayed her as she trembled, the tremors impossible to hide. "Keira, please, let it go."

"Look at yourself!" Aekeira's voice rose, her worry spilling over into anger. "You are shaking—it's still affecting you! What happened, Em?"

"No!" she screamed in anguish. "Let it go. It's all in the past!"

"Tell me, I need to know!" Aekeira shouted right back.

"I lost my child!"

The confession exploded from Emeriel in an agonized scream ripped from the depths of her soul. "I was pregnant, and I lost my baby!"

Emeriel's chest was too full, it hurt too much. And because there was no more room for the pain, it was bursting through her.

"I was cr-crying too much, h-hurting myself too much. I was too weak, and because of that, I lost my p-pregnancy!" The more she screamed, the worse it hurt.

Tears streamed down her face in unending rivers. Now that the dam had burst, the words refused to stop. "I stood there in that lavatory while my child left me in a p-pool of b-blood, and there was n-nothing I could do about it." A bitter, choked laugh left her. "I didn't even know I was pregnant. I was so weak I lost the most pre-precious thing in—"

Aekeira's arms were fierce around her again, and this time, Emeriel collapsed into her body, violent sobs wracking her throat.

"You were pr-pregnant?" Aekeira's stuttered, her own tears falling freely now. "Oh, by the gods, by the gods, by the gods...! How could something like this happen? How did you live with this!? Why didn't you tell me!? You carried something th-this heavy within you?! Light-gods, Emeriel!"

Aekeira held her even tighter, as if her arms alone could shield Emeriel from the agony.

"This is why I n-never talk about it," she sobbed. "After all these years... it shouldn't hurt this much. But it does. I feel like I'm tearing apart inside."

"It was not your fault, do you hear me!?" Aekeira whispered sternly, with conviction. "Stop blaming yourself! Stop—"

Her words froze mid-sentence. She pulled back, her tear-streaked face suddenly tense.

"What is it?" Emeriel asked, her voice shaky and weak.

She wiped at her cheeks, her gaze fixed sharply on something behind Emeriel.

Dread coiled in Emeriel's stomach as she turned slowly.

There, standing in the doorway, pale as death itself, was Grand King Daemonikai.

Oh heavens... no.