

Chapter 289

Hours later, Grand Lord Vladya returned to Blackstone. As he approached the royal residence's hallway, he came to an abrupt halt.

She was there.

Aekeira stood leaning against the wall outside her sister's chamber, eyes closed. She didn't notice him.

Vladya allowed himself to look at her. Really look at her.

His chest ached at the sight, and for once, the pain had nothing to do with his bruises or the swollen eye from earlier.

She wasn't talking to him. Hadn't spoken a word to him in three days.

And she avoided him like he carried the plague.

Vladya could not blame her, but still it stung.

Then her eyes fluttered open, and landed on him. Jerking upright, her back straightened, and she looked away immediately.

But just as quickly, her eyes flicked back to his face, her expression shifting into one of shock.

"What happened to you!?" Aekeira hurried toward him. Her brows furrowed deeply as she took him in. "Look at your face. Look at..." Her breath caught.

Even now, she worried about him.

Vladya...missed this.

Her fretting. The easy smiles. The warmth in her voice directed at him.

"Is it the... you know?" Concern was etched into every line of her face. "Did you have an episode?"

"It's not the madness," Vladya hadn't had an episode in over a month now. The longest stretch so far.

"Then what is this..." she lifted her hand, brushing against his busted lip. Touch light, almost hesitant.

Vladya didn't so much as flinch.

She could have pressed her fingers into his swollen left eye, and he wouldn't have reacted... wouldn't have minded at all if it meant she kept touching him.

"I was in a fight," he admitted with a sigh, hoping to ease her worry. "In court."

Her lips parted in shock.

"Don't worry about it, it's nothing. You should see the other guy."

She squared her shoulders. "Who is he?"

"Why? Are you planning to fight him for me?" The faintest smile tugged at his swollen lips.

She caught herself and snatched her hand away from his face as though burned. "I wouldn't. And you shouldn't joke about things like this, my lord."

My lord. They were back at formalities. He hates the the distance formalities created between them.

"Why are you waiting outside her room instead of just going in?" he changed the subject, looking at the closed door of Emeriel's chamber behind her.

"I was waiting for the Grand King to come out," she said in a quieter tone. "He has been in there for hours."

"All day, then," Vladya murmured, more to himself than to her.

"He just...keeps staring at her," Aekeira's expression was tight. "Does not move a muscle. Not even when I accidentally stumbled in earlier, apologized and walked away, he did not spare me a glance."

Vladya's jaw clenched. Daemonikai was drowning in his guilt.

"My lord—"

"I thought we had moved past that," Vladya said.

"So did I," she looked away. "Now, I'm not so sure anymore."

He reached for her. "Aekeira—"

She stepped back, out of his reach. "I must take my leave now, Your Highness." She inclined her head, before turning and walking away.

Vladya stood there, watching her retreating figure until she disappeared around the corner.

Vladya had no idea what to do. For the first time in ages, he felt truly powerless.

PRINCESS EMERIEL

Light shone behind Princess Emeriel's closed eyes, faint but persistent.

She tried to blink it away, but it remained insistent. With an inward sigh of resignation, she opened her eyes.

The ceiling came into focus. A familiar view. Same room. Same bed.

Mentally bracing herself, she moved her hands, expecting the familiar shot of pain through her body.

None came.

Surprised, she flexed her fingers. Still nothing.

Slowly, she moved her legs. There was no pain there either.

A low groan left her lips as she shifted, pulling herself into a slightly upright position. Her body still felt weak, but the sharp aches had dulled to a manageable throb.

In fact, she felt better than she had in... days? Weeks?

The sound of the door creaking open caught her attention. She turned her head to see Aekeira step inside, a basket of herbs balanced on her hip.

At the sight of Emeriel sitting up, Aekeira froze. Her eyes went wide with shock. The basket slipped from her hands, the herbs spilling across the floor.

"Em! You're awake!" she cried, voice breaking as a wild smile split her lips.

Before Emeriel could say a word, Aekeira ran to the bed, hopping onto it and pulling her into a tight hug.

"Oh, thank the gods! Thank the lights! You are awake!" she sobbed, clutching Emeriel tightly as though afraid she might vanish if she let go. "Thank you! Thank you!"

"Keira..." Her voice came out raspy. The sound surprised her, but it was a good thing.

She hadn't regained her voice during the previous brief moments she had woken.

"Yes, it's me!" Aekeira's sobs grew louder, trembling with relief.

Emeriel's heart ached as she hugged her sister back, though her arms felt weak.

"How long has it been?" she asked softly, her throat still raw.

"Nine days," Aekeira pulled back slightly to look at her, tears streaming down her face. "Nine days, Em. For nine days, you were in pain. You were fighting for your life, you were..." A shudder ran through her and she sniffled, wiping at her eyes. "Don't ever do something like that again! Please!"

Guilt caught Emeriel's chest. "I'm sorry."

Neither spoke for a while, only Aekeira's occasional sniffles surrounding them.

Eventually, her sister pulled herself together and climbed off the bed, returning to the basket she had dropped. "These are for you, it helps you get better."

Crouching down, Aekeira gathered the scattered herbs before setting them neatly on the bedside table.

The next few hours passed in a flurry of activity.

The healers came in to administer their routine treatments and examined her progress.

Madam Livia arrived shortly after, with Amie trailing close behind. Both women were overjoyed to see Emeriel sitting up. The head maid had a gentle smile, and Amie openly wept.

Emeriel had to hug the girl in consolation. She always had a soft spot for Amie.

They helped her eat, the warm broth soothing against her sore throat.

Aekeira assisted her with a bath, carefully helping her freshen up and change into clean clothes. The simple act of being clean and groomed made Emeriel feel more alive.

By afternoon, the chamber was busy with visitors. Lord Vladya and Lord Ottai arrived together to visit her. Emeriel could see the relief in their eyes as they looked at her, mingled with the lingering shadow of worry.

"It's good to see you looking better," Lord Ottai said in a sincere, relieved tone.

Emeriel offered him a faint smile. "Thank you,"

While Lord Ottai remained by her bedside, Lord Vladya stood a little farther back, his eyes flickering between Emeriel and Aekeira.

Emeriel noticed how her sister refused to meet his eyes. Her stiff posture.

Whenever they passed too close to one another, Aekeira would shift, subtly moving to avoid him.

Oh yes, there was tension right there.