

Chapter 290

After them, Lord Ottai's bondmate came, breezing into the room with an elegance that belied her concern. She carried a bundle of fresh roses, their scent filling the room as she arranged them in a vase on the bedside table.

"These should brighten your day, dear," she said with a soft smile. "It's so good to see you recovering."

Emeriel's heart warmed by the gesture. "Thank you, my lady,"

As evening fell, the visitors trickled out one by one, leaving the room quiet once more.

Emeriel lay propped up against a mound of pillows, her body sore but her mind finally at ease.

Aekeira sat beside her on the edge of the bed, cradling a small bowl of steaming broth in her hands.

"I told you, I've had enough," Emeriel sighed.

"You have not eaten properly in days," Aekeira dipped the wooden spoon into the chicken broth and brought it to her lips. "Try to eat some more."

"Aekeira..." Emeriel groaned, sinking back into her pillows. "At this rate, I will be fat."

"You should. You have lost weight." She nudged the spoon closer. "Here, just a little more."

Resigned, Emeriel parted her lips.

Her sister tilted the spoon carefully, letting the warm liquid glide into her mouth.

"There."

Aekeira kept feeding her until the bowl was empty. Only then did she set the it aside with a satisfied nod.

"So, what's going on between you and Lord Vladya?" Emeriel asked.

Aekeira's hand hovered over the dishes she had begun gathering.

"Nothing," she said tightly.

"Aekeira..."

She resumed the work, her hands moving jerkily. The dishes clattered loudly as she stacked them.

"He should have never allowed it to happen," Aekeira blurted. "He could have stopped it. He could have ensured none of this happened, but he didn't."

"You know you cannot blame him for this," Emeriel said. "I made the decision on my own and made him promise me. Their word is their bond, you know this."

"As if that wasn't enough, he had Lord Ottai drug me through the night," Aekeira spat, angry and hurt. The dishes clattered again as she packed them furiously.

Emeriel exhaled. "He did it to spare you that pain. You know it was for your own good. If he hadn't done it, you would have done everything possible to try rescuing me... and you could have gotten yourself seriously hurt."

Aekeira pursed her lips, her body rigid as she stood with the stack of dishes in her hands. Without saying anything, she walked to the door, opened it, and called for one of the maids.

Emeriel waited patiently as she handed the dishes over and spoke quietly to the maid.

Finally, the door closed, and Aekeira returned to the room.

"Don't be so mad at him, Keira," Emeriel said in a low tone. "You know you don't really want to be."

Aekeira jaw locked tight.

But then, she let released a slow breath. "I think... I think I'm more mad at me than I am at him."

Emeriel tilted her head, studying her sister with concern.

"I couldn't do anything," Aekeira's voice shook as tears filled her eyes again. "I felt so weak. So helpless. You're my sister and..."

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she tried to hold back the sob building in her throat.

Emeriel patted the empty space on the bed beside her. "Come here."

Aekeira hesitated for a moment before climbing onto the bed. She was careful not to lean into Emeriel or disturb her healing bruises.

Emeriel ignored the dull ache that spread through her body and shifted slightly to lie on her side, turning to face her sister.

"Keira, you need to understand that some things are beyond your control," she said with affection, "It's not every situation you can save, and I would never expect that from you."

Aekeira looked at her, her tears still falling silently.

"I love you so much, and you are the strongest person I know."

A faint, genuine smile touched Aekeira's lips, breaking through the sadness, and the visible tension on her shoulders dissolved.

"I love you too," Aekeira whispered, wiping at her cheeks. "But I'm not half as strong as you are."

"That's debatable. How about we both agree that we're each the strongest person the other has ever known?"

Aekeira chuckled softly, nodding in agreement. "Deal."

Then, she tentatively rested her head on Emeriel's belly. "Is this okay?"

"Oh yes." Emeriel fingers drifted into Aekeira's hair, stroking it gently. My Keira.

For so long, this woman had been the single most important person in Emeriel's life.

Through every trial and tribulation, Aekeira had been her anchor, her protector, her sister. And even now, as Emeriel lay broken and healing, Aekeira's presence was her greatest comfort.

But there was someone else now.

Someone just as important.

Someone who had been on her mind all day, though she had tried not to ask. And Aekeira, perhaps sensing her hesitation, had not spoken of him either.

Emeriel wet her lips, gathering the courage to speak. "How is he?"

Aekeira's soft, even breathing met her question.

And then, "Your Grand King?"

Emeriel's heart clenched. "My Grand King."

Aekeira lifted her head slightly. "Lord Vladya and Lord Ottai put him in the forbidden chambers after... what happened," she told Emeriel. "He woke on the third day, without any memory of it. But Lord Vladya filled him in and brought him to see you."

A knot twisted in Emeriel's stomach. "And?"

"He stayed all day beside you, seated right here." She patted the edge of the bed. "I've never seen him so..."

"Broken?" Emeriel supplied softly.

"Defeated," Aekeira whispered into the quiet room. "He was in a daze the whole day. He didn't move, didn't say a word. Just... stared at you."

The knot in Emeriel's stomach tangled painfully.

Drawing in a shaky breath, Emeriel spoke through her constricting chest. "And after?"

"And after... nothing." Aekeira's tone went flat. "He went back to his bedchamber and hasn't come out since."

Emeriel went still. "What?"

"Lord Ottai calls it a self-imposed exile. No one has seen or heard from the grand king in almost a week, but we know he's still there. He shut down the royal residence and stopped taking visitors."

Aekeira placed her head back on her belly. "Not even Lord Vladya could get in, and apparently, he has tried repeatedly. The Frostfall soldiers guarding the royal wing won't budge. They have strict orders not to let anyone in."