

Chapter 308

GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

Daemonikai's gaze lingered long after Emeriel was gone. She was just so precious.

Her gesture warmed him inside. Waking up so early to prepare everything, to help him get ready for the day was really kind and thoughtful of her...just as everything else.

Daemonikai had known love before. He had built a family, lost one, and endured the weight of time, but somehow, with her, it all felt new again. As if he were rediscovering something long buried beneath the centuries. He had never felt so wholly seen, so deeply cared for.

She made him feel again.

Times like these, when his heart raced at the mere thought of her, he felt young again. Not the ancient Grand King who had walked the world for five thousand, two hundred years, but a youngling experiencing the first flush of love.

If it felt like this now, he could hardly imagine what it would be like when their bond was fully restored.

And it would be restored.

Daemonikai refused to believe otherwise.

Straightening his cuffs, he heard footsteps approaching and glanced up, expecting Emeriel. Instead, Vladya entered, clad in his ceremonial robes.

"I'm going with you to the Celestial Offering," Vladya announced.

Daemonikai arched a brow. "Are you going for the Offering, or do you simply wish to see the Oracle?"

"Does it matter?" Vladya shrugged. "Your clan is traveling to the mountains, and I wish to pray as well. We go together."

Daemonikai crossed his arms. "The Oracle specifically told you through the messenger bird she sent, to wait for a sign."

Vladya completed the first step of the ritual, three days ago. The Oracle had been clear: he was to wait for a sign that would determine whether he could proceed with the second rite. But if none came, he was to pay her a visit next week.

"I'm tired of waiting," Vladya grunted. "At this point, I cannot tell if I have already received the sign or not. When one wants something so badly, everything looks like a sign."

Daemonikai sighed. "You know our return is tomorrow, don't you? That means we'll be leaving the kingdom in Ottai's hands."

"His capable hands. It wouldn't be the first time."

"True," Daemonikai conceded. "Fine. Get your ride ready. We have a long journey ahead of us."

Vladya gave a curt nod before turning on his heel and striding out of the room.

PRINCESS EMERIEL

"Why do you keep looking behind you, as if you expect Lord Vladya to appear out of thin air?" Emeriel's lips curled into a playful smile as she watched Aekeira glance over her shoulder for what felt like the hundredth time.

Aekeira caught herself, blushing.

"It's not like that..." she muttered, avoiding her sister's gaze.

Emeriel pursed her lips. "At least have the decency to admit you miss him. Honestly, you're pathetic—it hasn't even been four hours since they left."

"As if you don't miss the Grand King," she retorted, shooting her a glare.

"I do," Emeriel's chin lifted proudly. "If I had the capacity, I might have tied him to the bed so he'd never have to leave again this morning."

Her sister giggled. "You're shameless, Em."

"I know," she laughed too.

But after that, Aekeira fell silent again, her gaze distant as they continued their walk to the market to shop for curtains.

Emeriel tried to engage her in conversation, but the more she spoke, the more she realized how distracted Aekeira seemed. In fact, now that Emeriel thought about it, her sister had been unusually quiet and pale since they'd set out.

Frowning, Emeriel nudged her. "Are you alright?"

Aekeira stopped walking, placing a hand on her forehead. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure? If you're not feeling well, we can go another time." Emeriel insisted, her worry growing.

Aekeira hesitated before sighing. "It's just... I think I have a fever. I haven't been feeling well since this morning."

Emeriel was in her space in an instant, pressing the back of her hand to Aekeira's forehead. "Why didn't you say something?!"

"It's not a big deal," Aekeira protested weakly. "I can ask Madam Livia for some herbs when we get back."

"No way," Emeriel took her hand. "We're going back now."

Striding quick and purposeful, she guided Aekeira back toward Ravenshadow. By the time they reached the gates, Aekeira's breathing had grown uneven, and sweat glistened on her forehead, matting her hair to her skin.

Emeriel helped her into her chambers, laying her gently on the bed and tucking the sheets around her.

"I'll get Madam Livia," she said hurriedly.

Aekeira didn't respond, her eyes fluttering shut as she swallowed hard.

Emeriel fought to keep the fear away, but it was so hard. Gathering the heavy fabric of her gown, lifting it high to free her steps, she ran from the room, searching the halls for the headmaid.

She scratched her itching arms all the way. Stopping the maids and slaves along the way, asking if they had seen Madam Livia.

Finally, one of them pointed her toward the royal kitchen.

Emeriel rushed in, her breath coming in short gasps, and found the older woman bent over a table, rummaging through bundles of dried herbs.

"Madam Livia! Madam Livia!" she called, breathless.

At the urgency in her voice, the head maid straightened at once, alert. "Is something the matter, Princess?"

"You have to come. My sister... I don't know what's wrong," Emeriel's words tumbled out in a rush.

"Let's go," she hurried after Emeriel.

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When they reached Aekeira's chambers and pushed the door open, Emeriel stopped short, her heart lurching in her chest. The bed was empty.

"Kiera!?" Panic sharpened her voice as her eyes darted wildly around the room. "Kei—"

A pained moan echoed from across the room.

Rushing toward the sound, Emeriel found Aekeira crumpled on the ground, curled tightly into herself, her body wracked with tremors. "I'm here now, I'm right here."

Scratching her arm again to alleviate the prickling itch, Emeriel knelt beside her, grasping her sister's clammy hand in hers. "I brought Madam Livia—Keira, you're burning up! What's happening?"

Aekeira's eyes fluttered open and—

Emeriel. Stopped. Breathing.

A furious, bloodshot red. It stained the center of Aekeira's iris.

Full heat.

"I don't... feel so... good at all," Aekeira rasped, sweat pouring off her in streams, soaking through her clothes. "I feel like... I'm burning up... from the inside."

"We have to get Grand Lord Vladya right now!" Emeriel shouted, turning to Madam Livia, unable to hide the terror in her own eyes. "Aekeira is going into full heat!"