

Chapter 327

Even something as simple as breathing sounded thunderous in the silence.

Vladya stared at Daemonikai as if he had lost his mind. Aekiera mirrored the exact same expression, while Emeriel inhaled gaspily.

Saying it aloud had made it real—even to Daemonikai.

"I cannot believe this," Daemonikai shook his head in wonder, looking directly at Vladya, he repeated, "You are going to have a child."

His friend was as stiff as a board.

"If this is some kind of jest, it's not a particularly amusing one, Your Grace," voice tight with anger, Vladya glared. "I know you have been struggling, Daemon. I have seen it, and I do not fault you for it. But not every dark thought that enters your mind should be spoken aloud."

Daemonikai rolled his eyes. "Are you finished?"

Vladya's jaw clenched tighter. "Yes. We are done here. Aekiera, let us go."

Now, Daemonikai was furious. In a flash, he seized Vladya by the collar and shoved him back, making him staggered a step.

Daemonikai was on him again, gripping his tunic and slamming him against the nearest wall. He pressed into Vladya's space until there was no room left between them.

"Look me in the eyes," Daemonikai growled. "Take a hard look at me and tell me if, even at the depths of madness, and the voices banged around in my skull, making my damn nose bleed, do you honestly believe I would ever jest about something like this?"

Vladya's fury only burned hotter. His eyes flashed yellow.

That arrogant, powerful brute—his beast—who would rather fight than believe, was trying to force a shift.

"Daemon, wait..." Emeriel's voice came soft and uncertain. Confused.

"Get a hold of your control, tell your fucking beast to stand down." Daemonikai snarled, not looking away. "Look beyond your rage, think—and tell me, do you truly believe me so heartless that I would lie about this? Your woman is pregnant. There is the faintest scent of osmanthus and lily on her. You will smell it in a few days, but for now, as early as it is, only I can."

Vladya's breath left him in a shudder. His anger remained—flaring, crackling in the storm-gray and yellow of his eyes—but beneath it, Daemonikai saw hope.

Painful, desperate hope.

"B-but we only had one full heat," Vladya's disbelieving was barely audible. "No one conceives without a mating bond. And certainly no one conceives after only one heat." A stark pain, which his friend now allowed him to see, was evident in Vladya's eyes. "Why would you say something like this—"

"I was..."

The soft interruption made them both stop.

They turned as one, their gazes landing on the women.

Emeriel stood pale, looking at Vladya hesitantly. "You asked who becomes with child outside of a mating bond, after only one full heat... I have."

Daemonikai nodded once, firm. "Yes. My female has. Who is to say it is impossible for her sister?"

Silence.

Aekiera's lips parted, but no sound came at first. Her eyes dropped to her belly, trembling fingers hovering just above the flat surface, as if touching it would make it too real.

"I am... pregnant?"

"You are. Congratulations, little one." Daemonikai said. "Now we just need to get your male to believe it, so we can congratulate him as well."

Vladya stood frozen, breathing shallow. "But it's not possible." Looking between Daemonikai, Aekiera, and the floor, he appeared utterly gutted. "I mean... it is me. Things like this do not happen to me."

"They just did. Your soulbond carries your fruit." Daemonikai gripped Vladya's face in both hands, forcing those wandering eyes to meet his eyes. "You, Vladya Theriozydovkar Skyvaktó, are going to be a father. Now let that sink in."

Daemonikai saw the exact moment it did. The exact moment when it finally settled on him that none of this was a jest. That Aekiera truly was pregnant. That he was going to be a father.

Releasing him, Daemonikai stepped back, giving him space.

Vladya did not move, but those wild eyes locked onto Aekiera. The girl stood still, clearly overwhelmed, alternating between looking at him and at her belly.

Finally, the third ruler pushed off the wall and staggered forward.

"I-I do not understand," Aekiera stammered. "I cannot be... I cannot be—"

"It would explain the sickness," Emeriel breathed, eyes gleaming with tears. "Your new aversion to flower scents... It would explain everything."

"But... but..." Aekiera's mouth opened, closed, opened again. Her hands twitched at her sides as if unsure what to do, where to hold, what to feel.

"Aekiera, you are carrying... you are carrying my child?" Vladya looked stunned. Lost. Awed.

"I do not know, I—"

Both Vladya's knees struck the floor with a thud. Grabbing her by the waist, he pulled her closer jerkily and buried his face against her stomach. Sniff. Sniff. Sniff.

He looked up at Aekiera. "I cannot smell anything... I," Sniffsniffsniiiiiff.

"In a few days, you will, V.D.," Daemonikai said.

Perhaps it was the girl, or the rituals, or both, but for the first time in so freaking long, Daemonikai saw Vladya... like this.

The whirlwind of emotions on his face was enough to give Daemonikai a whiplash. And it made him ache for his friend. Vladya had wanted this for so long.

"My little bird," Vladya whispered. He lowered his head and brushed a soft kiss against her stomach. "My sexy little witch... Perhaps you are a witch after all."

Aekiera shook above him. A single tear slipped free, falling onto his dark hair. "My lord..."

"Blessed is the day I first set my eyes on you in Navia." Another kiss, this time lingering, reverent. "Blessed is that day in the Abyss land when I first felt the slightest attraction for you." A tear fell from Vladya's eyes. "You are everything good. Everything fucking beautiful."

Daemonikai felt his own chest tighten. He pulled Emeriel into his arms, and she wiped the tears that fell from her own eyes.

"Blessed is the day you looked upon this cruel, mad ruler and chose to devote your love to him," Vladya whispered to Aekiera. "And blessed is the belly that bore you and your sister."

"Truly blessed," Daemonikai pressed a kiss on Emeriel's nose.

Vladya reached up, cupping Aekiera's face in his hands.

"I love you," she breathed, caressing his cheek, "I love you with all my heart. And I will love you until the day I die."

"Those are big promises," he murmured, slowly rising to his full height, towering over her. Tipping her chin up with his fingers to meet his gaze. "But they are best made, because now, you are fully mine."

"Yours."

"Look at me, Aekiera, and remember how serious these eyes were when I said this: Do not ever leave me. I will chase you to the ends of the world to bring you back. I will lock you in my bedchamber if that's what it takes to keep you by my side forever."

Then, he swept her into his arms, lifting her off her feet in a fiercely possessive hug. "Thank you for bringing this faraway dream of mine close enough to touch."