

Chapter 328

That night, Grand Lord Vladya stood by the door, gazing at the figure sleeping exhausted upon his bed. He had been standing there for some time now, baring noticing the passage of time.

A part of him still expected this to be ripped from his grasp. Torn away like every other good thing before it.

Even now, it felt surreal. Unbelievable.

He had a Female. His.

And she carried his child.

No one beyond their small circle knew of it. Vladya had not yet shared the news with his people. In time, he would.

But for now, secrecy was its own form of protection. The more concealed she remained, the safer she—and the child—would be.

His family.

Emotion thickened his throat. An ache both familiar and foreign. Those were words he never thought he would speak.

Words he never imagined would be something real, something his own.

Vladya's eyes drifted to the sheets draped over her form, shielding her belly. He knew not what he sought to find, yet in the past few hours, he had looked at that belly more than he had in months.

How could something that once seemed so distant—like a far-off dream—suddenly be within his reach?

His thoughts turned to his conversation with the Oracle earlier.

"Is there anything more I can do? Something different to make these spells work?" Vladya had asked.

"Aekeira has done most of the work," the Oracle had replied. "She is making you feel again, as one might raise dead bones. The more you feel, the greater your chance of regaining your soul. And the more these rituals work, the more you will feel and express."

"So it all centers upon feeling."

"And living. They go hand in hand. For one to truly live, they must feel. And for one to truly feel, they must live."

Vladya's mind returned, and once more he was seeing Aekeira's sleeping form.

He had lived more in the few years than he had in centuries. All because of this small, blessed human girl who had been placed into his cold and barren existence.

Turning, he walked out, closing the door quietly behind him. Yaz fell into step with him as he strode through the hallway, out of the citadel.

That night, he went to his cave. It lay hidden, deep within the woods. A place he claimed for himself alone.

Vladya eye's swept over the uneven walls, taking it in. He had first come here after his fifth bonding ritual had failed—three millennia past.

The memory had long since blurred, but he recalled wandering the woods that night, suffocating under the weight of loss and heartbreak. Then, by chance or fate, he had stumbled upon this cave. He had entered, pressed his hands to the cold stone walls, and let his tears fall.

And so, he had returned to this place, time and time again, whenever life had proven its cruelty.

Until, eventually, he had stopped coming.

For centuries, the tragedies had continued. But he no longer felt them. Numb. Lifeless.

Tonight, he stood once more here, looking at the uneven ground, at the darkness that stretched before him. He took in the silver flow of the waterfall spilling down one side of the cavern. And the feeling he had been suppressing all day broke free. Hot tears spilled from his eyes.

Vladya let them fall.

Here, in this place, he'd never needed to restrain himself. This place alone had borne witness to his pains, his despair. And tonight, he wanted it to bear witness to this as well.

For the first time, he clung to these walls, tears streaming down his face, but they were not tears of anguish. Not of suffering. Not of misery. Not the bitter tears of a life deemed unfair, or the helpless kind shed over a fate slipping through his fingers.

No. Tonight, the cavern shared in his joy. Tears of happiness so overwhelming he could scarcely contain it. Tears of hope that was real and touchable. Tears of excitement for a future worth enduring almost four thousand years of pure torment.

Because every misery had led him to her.

And perhaps—just perhaps—everything would be all right in his world.

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Moments later, when Vladya stepped out into the cool night, he was startled to see Daemonikai leaning casually against a tree like a silent sentinel in the darkness, arms crossed.

"It was a guess, but I figured I might find you here."

Vladya approached, his footsteps quiet. "Why are you so far from the fortress?"

Daemonikai pushed off the tree with a lazy stretch. "I ventured out to share a run with my dear friend, who, in the near future, will cradle in his arms the greatest treasure the world can offer."

Vladya's lips curved into a faint smile. "Indeed." This time, he was the one to step forward and embrace his friend.

Daemonikai tensed for only a heartbeat before his arms came around Vladya's shoulders, his grip firm and strong.

"I am going to be a father, Your Grace," Vladya rasped.

"Congratulations, V.D. I am proud of how far you have come."

Vladya exhaled a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "Who would have thought, hm?"

"I would. I always did." Daemonikai pulled back, giving him a solid pat on the shoulder. "Not once did I give up on you, even when you gave up on yourself. Come, let us take that run."

Daemonikai returned to the royal residence well past midnight, his muscles aching from the night's exertions as he proceeded directly to his bedchamber. Opening the heavy wooden door, he stepped inside and halted.

Emeriel sat at the edge of the bed, head resting against the carved bedpost. She was fast asleep.

Her chest rose and fell, lips slightly parted, soft breaths escaping between them. She had been waiting for him.

His grip on the doorframe tightened. For a moment, Daemonikai allowed himself to imagine her like this, only different. Her belly round with his child, his seed growing within her.

The image struck something deep within his chest. An ache of pure longing.

He felt immense joy for Vladya. Aekeira's last heat had granted him the desire of a lifetime. And deep within Daemonikai, he hoped one day, it would be the same for him and Emeriel. That one day, her full heat would also bless them with such a miracle.

Moving closer, he bent and slid his arms beneath her. She was warm against his chest, body pliant in sleep. As he lifted her, she stirred, a faint hum slipping from her lips. Her lashes fluttered, and drowsy blue eyes found him.

"Your Grace... When did you return?"

"Just now." He brushed his fingers against her cheek, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "You were waiting for me?"

"Mm." She barely managed a nod before resting her head against his shoulder.

A pleased warmth sat in his chest. He had not realized how much he had missed this—missed her. Waking beside her, feeling her presence close. But distance was necessary.

Daemonikai would sooner drive his own sword through his chest than risk a repeat of what had happened that dreadful night.

He had not shared something with her. Since that night, his beast had gone unnervingly quiet. No attempts to force a shift. No desperate need to stake a possessive claim. It had simply retreated into the deepest part of his mind, drowning in its guilt.

Their brief time at the cottage was a cherished memory he held close to his heart. The easy moments, the stolen touches, the intimacy that had come so naturally.

Perhaps one day they would have that again.