

Chapter 331

PRINCESS AEKEIRA

"I can fetch my own lantern," Aekeira tried one last time, but her sister ignored her.

She sat patiently in Emeriel's bedchamber, watching as the final touches were made to her sister's attire. Before the mirror, Emeriel stood in a breathtaking ceremonial red gown. The elaborate embroidery caught the light like tiny stars woven into silk.

She looked breathtaking. Poised and elegant as ever.

Tonight was the Lantern Festival. Their second.

The first they had celebrated as slaves in plain clothes, hands raw from endless labor. But today, they attended as princesses.

Dressed in gowns made by the finest seamstresses in Urai, commissioned by their males, they were a world away from that skittish girl and her brave little brother. Outside the chamber, their soldiers and maids stood waiting, ready to escort them to the arena.

Emeriel turned slowly, smoothing the delicate folds of her dress. "There will be plenty of smoke at the festival. It is not good for you or the baby."

Aekeira did not hide her dramatic sigh. "Come now, you know making and releasing a lantern is one of the best parts of the festival! You already took the fun out of the crafting—now you would deny me the release as well?"

"Yes."

Aekeira groaned. "I do not know who is more overbearing, you or Grand Lord Vladya! If it were up to him, he would confine me to the residence and prevent me from any activity at all."

Emeriel snickered. "I see how he is with you, it's almost comical. But you have been sick as a dog for weeks now, can you truly blame him?"

"But Lady Morina said it is normal and to be expected," Aekeira's hand drifted to her belly.

Even now, it was still hard to believe. A week has passed since King Daemonikai sniffed her neck and announced her pregnancy, and still, she could scarcely believe a life was growing inside her.

That nestled just beneath her heart, was child conceived by her and the male she loved most in the world. Who could have imagined that so much could change in a single month?

At this time last month, Aekeira's most unattainable wish had been to become a Syren. To be compatible with Lord Vladya. To see their bonding ritual succeed.

And now... she was a Syren. A Soulbond. Now she was pregnant with his child.

"Hey..."

Aekeira blinked at her sister's voice.

Emeriel sat beside her, looking worried. "Why are you crying, Keira?"

"Am I?" Lifting a hand to her cheek, she touched wetness, which surprised her.

"Is this about the lantern? Very well, you may go—"

"No, no," Aekeira shook her head, looking at her palm resting over her flat stomach. "It's just... I was thinking about everything that has happened. How much has changed for me... for the better."

Emeriel let out a visible sigh of relief. "Thank the gods. Now, you do not wish to ruin your makeup, do you?" She wiped at Aekeira's cheeks with the pad of her thumb. "Stop crying. I know you want to be beautiful for Lord Vladya tonight."

Aekeira sniffled. "I do."

"There you go." Emeriel smiled, brushing away the last traces of tears. "You are so beautiful."

"It's kind of you to say, but I cannot put into words how stunning you look tonight."

Emeriel beamed, her eyes shining with delight. "That is the spirit! Now, let us—"

Her eyes widened and she cupped a hand over her mouth. In the next instant, Emeriel hurried off to the adjoining room.

"Em?" Aekeira pushed to her feet too quickly and dizziness crashed over her, forcing her to pause.

She gripped the table as the world spun around her, squeezing her eyes shut as she waited for it to pass. At least now, the dizzy spells did not last as long as before.

Aekeira hurried after her sister, hearing the harsh retching as she neared the doorway. "Em..."

"I'm fine, it's nothing," Emeriel rasped. Another heave.

Aekeira frowned. "Are you sure? This is your third time today. Twice this morning, and now again."

"That damned porridge Madam Livia served earlier," Emeriel straightened, face pale as she reached for a nearby basin and rinsed her mouth. "I told you it was bitter and did not agree with me."

Aekeira folded her arms. "It did taste bad, but I ate it too, remember?"

"That does not mean it was not the porridge." Emeriel waved her off. "We may be sisters, but we are two different people, Keira."

"Right." She bit the inside of her cheek, unconvinced but not pressing further. "Anyway, I will wait here while you go fetch our lanterns."

Wiping her damp hands on a cloth, Emeriel looked exhausted already when the night hadn't started, but that familiar stubborn light shone in her eyes. "Certainly. I shall return shortly."

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PRINCESS EMERIEL

The sisters stepped out into the cool night, their lanterns glowing softly in their hands.

The sky above them was ablaze with drifting lights, the scent of roasted meats and sweet festival wines very much heavy in the air. Laughter and music came from the distance, weaving through the murmur of gathered crowds. A gentle breeze stirred the silk of their gowns, crisp and refreshing against their skin.

Everywhere, Urai was alive with celebration.

What Emeriel loved most about the Lantern Festival was the joy the air gathered. The thrill of dancing figures, the laughter of younglings. The way humans and Urekai mingled without division. The slaves moved freely, happy as they released their lanterns into the sky.

"It is so nice to be out here for this," Aekeira said aloud, watching the lanterns drift upward. "This festival is one of the things I missed most about Urai."

"Me too," Emeriel tried to keep the queasiness from her voice. Her stomach was rebelling against her. The nausea in her belly would not budge.

She had felt drained all day despite doing nothing too strenuous. She had not trained, had not tended the garden, had not helped the slaves with their work, yet she was exhausted.

And then there was the other thing. The colors.