

Chapter 322

The following month was a whirlwind of highs and lows.

On one hand, the kingdom basked in newfound joy. The news of not one now, but two grand rulers finding their destined mates had spread like wildfire.

Whispers of Grand Lord Vladya’s human princess mistress—as many had once called her—going into heat and emerging as his Soulbond reached even the farthest outskirts of Urai, seeping into the smaller villages.

And with it, something changed.

The two grand rulers, whose minds had long been rumored to be failing, had begun to show remarkable improvement.

According to murmurs within the city, their grand king appeared visibly happier than he had been in centuries. He attended court more frequently, fully engaged in matters of the realm, and presided over official duties and festivities with a vitality unseen in years. The people had never seen their Grand King more alive.

So, they began to wonder... Were the rumors of his return madness false after all?

And then there was Grand Lord Vladya.

Unlike the First Ruler, the Third Ruler had confirmed his own rumors himself.

One fateful day, he gathered the people before the dias, standing tall, his voice clear as he proudly declared his mind was healing. That he was drinking more from his Soulbond, growing closer to her intimately, and with each passing day, he felt the difference. His mind was better. Clearer.

Once, the people of Urai had hoped their grand rulers would one day fully return to them, and everything would be as it used to, before the tragedy. But that hope always felt distant, like an unreachable star.

But now, for the first time, that hope felt within grasp. They believed.

And with that belief came the first steps toward stability. For their monarchy. For their kingdom. For the future of Urai itself.

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PRINCESS AEKEIRA

"You look so beautiful, Princess Aekeira," Amie gushed as they stepped out of the Royal Residence. "It is nice to see you glowing."

Considering how sick she had been over the past few days, Aekeira took the compliment in good faith. "Thank you so much, Amie. Have you seen my sister?"

"She left early. Said she needed to visit an old friend."

Aekeira smiled. So, she finally made the time to visit High Lord Herodis?

Emeriel had barely left her side for days, fussing over her like a mother hen just because she had fallen a little unwell. Stubborn as ever, her sister had insisted on staying, refusing to leave—even for a moment. But now that she was showing signs of recovery, her sister had finally started to ease up.

Some days, it was hard for Aekeira to remember she was the elder one.

Today, she was heading to the market. A small outing with a special purpose.

She planned to embroider a rope belt for Lord Vladya as a gift, which was why she had waited until he left for the hills before dressing up to go fabric sourcing.

"Lord Vladya left really early this morning too," Amie said casually. "He is rarely around the fortress anymore."

Aekeira only nodded. She was well aware.

Lord Vladya had been so preoccupied the past week that, despite her moving into the next bedchamber to his in the Royal Residence, she barely saw him. But it was for the best.

"It pertains to getting his soul back," Aekeira confided. Over the years, she had come to see Amie as a true friend. Despite Aekeira’s status change, that part of their relationship had not. "He is working closely with the Oracle to find a solution."

"Really?" Amie gasped, her eyes going wide. She hurried ahead, spinning around to face Aekeira. "Oh, that is wonderful news! You must be so excited, my princess!"

“I am,” Aekeira admitted with a smile. “So far, only two of the rituals have succeeded, but we are hopeful."

Amie clapped her hands excitedly, nearly bouncing where she stood. "How many rituals are there?"

"Four." Her smile dimmed just slightly. "The third one keeps failing."

The second ritual had gone through after two failed attempts, but the third had been performed seven times.

Still, Aekeira refused to dwell on disappointment. They had been fortunate enough to have two rituals succeed, and she was determined to remain optimistic.

"Oh, I have faith it will go through!" Amie declared, maintaining the conversation while still making sure she faced Aekeira. "You two have been through so much. You have come so far—just like the Grand King and Prince Emeriel!"

Aekeira chuckled. Only Amie still made the "prince, princess" mistake when referring to her sister.

For a twenty-one-year-old who had endured terrible hardships, Amie was a ray of sunshine that never faded, even at dusk. Cute as a button.

"So, after his soul is restored, you two can finally bond and live happily ever after?" Amie bounced on her feet.

Aekeira could not help it—she laughed, shaking her head. "I hope so."

Her being a Soulbond has changed things. They no longer needed to endure the grueling, seven-day bonding ritual for soul compatibility, but there was still the mating ritual.

Usually performed on the last day of the bonding ritual, it was the most important of all. And for it to succeed, Lord Vladya still needed his soul.

Aekeira could not wait for that day to come.

"Unlike the bonding ritual, if the mating ritual fails, it can always be redone, right?" Amie nearly stumbled but quickly caught herself.

“Careful,” Aekeira said with a soft chuckle, nodding. “And once again, you are correct.”

"But what could cause a mating ritual to fail? For a bonding ritual, it fails when the souls do not align, but what about when the souls are already naturally bound by the gods?"

"Well," Aekeira gave it a thought. "I guess if the rites are recited incorrectly, or the female’s heat is not at its peak, or, in our case, if Lord Vladya’s soul is still missing, it might fail."

As they neared the main gates, passing by the lush gardens, the fragrance of roses hit her. Aekeira’s stomach churned unpleasantly.

She quickened her pace.

Amie glanced at her with concern. "Does the smell of flowers still affect you badly?"

"Yes, but I believe it will pass." Aekeira waved it off. "Are you sure you know the best part of the market to get these fabrics?"

"Of course!" Amie’s face lit up with pride. "Some months ago, I was assigned to the head seamstress, and I used to go fabric sourcing with her. You are in the right hands, Princess."

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PRINCESS EMERIEL

Standing before Lord Herod’s manor, Emeriel shot her guards a stern look when they moved to follow her inside.

Heavens, they were like flies on a corpse. Hovering, watching her every move, never giving her so much as a breath of space.

Not that she blamed them. Their grand king had given strict orders regarding her safety. But still...

"I need space." Her tone gave no room for argument. "Go join the other soldiers on the training grounds or something, but none of you are stepping into this home with me."

The guards exchanged uneasy glances.

She sighed. "Look around you, soldiers. We are in a highly fortified territory, inside the estate of a former High Lord of Urai, behind fortified gates, with soldiers patrolling everywhere. What could possibly go wrong?"

One of them, looking particularly uncomfortable, cleared his throat. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, it is just that..." He shifted awkwardly. "The grand king will skin us alive if anything happens to you. Perhaps it is best not to leave it up to chance?"

"What is best is that I get to spend time with my friend without bodyguards hovering over me like a noble youngling in a playground." Her frustration bled through her tone. "Give me some space."

They relented, stepping back to join the other soldiers.

“Oh, thank the Gods,” she muttered under her breath.

With a relieved sigh, she turned back to the door, excitement bubbling inside her, and knocked.

The door swung open.

She beamed. “Look who it is—” But her smile dimmed.

The male standing before her was not Lord Herod.

At first glance, he bore a striking resemblance. Same features, same strong, masculine build. But the longer she stared, the clearer the differences became.