

Chapter 179

EMERIEL

Emeriel walked in a daze, her legs heavy and her mind numb. The grand king led her through the corridors, stopping before a door in the southern wing.

"Stay here." He turned to leave.

"Your Grace..." Emeriel reached out for him, fingers hovered in the air, trembling.

King Daemonikai glanced at her outstretched hand as if it were a venomous serpent. Without a word, he walked out, the heavy door closing behind him.

Emeriel stumbled towards the bed, collapsing onto the cold mattress. Exhaling a shaky breath, she stared ahead blankly.

He had saved her. Her secret was out. Everyone knew.

It still felt... surreal. Like a nightmare she couldn't wake from.

He hates me now.

But he had protected her. She had almost died. Lord Zaiper had been so eager to see her dead. If not for... if not for the other grand rulers, she would be in a cold, hard cell. Or lying lifeless in the courtyard.

Looking at her unsteady hands, her eyes grew wet again. This was not how she had envisioned her return.

He hates me now.

"Em?"

Keira? She sat up to see Aekeira standing by the door. Emeriel had been so lost in her despair, she hadn't heard the door open.

"Keira..." her voice wobbled, and the tears she had fought so hard to hold back surged forward, spilling over.

Aekeira's eyes shimmered with her own tears. Silently, she opened her arms wide.

Emeriel sprang up and ran into those waiting arms. And sobbed.

Aekeira held her tight. "I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you. I went to the gathering as soon as I heard, but the crowd and soldiers wouldn't let me through. I heard everything, Em." Aekeira's breath hitched. "They sa-saved you, all of them."

"I know," Emeriel cried into Aekeira's shoulder. "It feels unreal."

"Yes. I'm trying to process it. Everything we were so afraid of has c-come to pass, yet... you are still here with us. Safe. The worst did not happen." Aekeira shook her head, crying. "The worst did not happen."

Emeriel pulled back, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. "I don't think it's over yet, Keira. I'm not sure the Urekai will let it go just like that." She sniffled. "They know I'm his Soulbond. I saw their disgust, their rejection. They won't let this go."

"Hey, look at me, Em. Look at me." Aekeira cupped her face, and Emeriel met her sister's eyes, finding a surprising strength in their depths. "We always knew this would happen. Always. Don't cry about it. There's so much to cry about, but not this."

"True, but..." Emeriel looked at Aekeira with utter misery. "He ha-hates me now."

"Oh, Em..."

The dam broke again, tears flowing freely, her sobs shaking her small body. Emeriel's chest hurt too much. Too much. "He hates me now, Keira."

Aekeira hugged her tighter, and Emeriel clung to her, Kiera's arms around her were the only thing keeping her from drowning. So, Emeriel held on and bawled her eyes out.

Aekeira guided her to the bed, sitting down and cradling Emeriel's head against her shoulder.

"I should have told him sooner," Emeriel choked out between sobs. "I should have st-stopped being so terrified and told him sooner, so he wou-wouldn't have found out this way. The look he g-gave me in that cave, Aekeira..." her cries grew louder. "It hurts."

"Cave? What cave?"

Between sobs and broken sentences, Emeriel recounted what happened in the cave.

Aekeira's arms shook, tears falling, staining Emeriel's cheek. "I'm so glad he saved you. I shudder to think what would have happened if not for him."

"Yes, but—"

"There are no buts. Stop blaming yourself." Aekeira pulled back, looking in her red-rimmed eyes. "There was no way you could have told him sooner and still gotten away with it. In the worst-case scenario, you would be dead. In the best case, he would have rejected and avoided you. It's still a lose-lose situation."

Emeriel wiped a tear-stained cheek. "You're not helping."

"Sorry, I just wish you would stop hurting, Em." Aekeira gently wiped away another tear. "I'm so worried right now, thinking of what's going on out there."

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GRAND LORD VLADYA

"Now, can someone explain to me how the Armageddon is Emeriel is a girl? And WE didn't find out about it!?" Ottai's voice reverberated through the hall as they moved from the grand high court to the court of duty.

Vladya took a heavy breath, casting a sidelong glance at the distraught fourth ruler. Since Emeriel's secrets had come to light, Ottai had gone into varying stages of shock, stumbling through his duties, even stammering during official court matters. Yet, as time passed, he seemed to absorb the information a little better.

Though, at times like this, Vladya doubted if Ottai had processed any of it at all.

"Ottai," Vladya sighed, rubbing his temples. "I have lost count of how many times you have asked this question."

"Do you think losing count is the problem here? I'm losing my mind!" Ottai glared at Vladya as if it were his fault. "You dragged me into this mess without a single thought of what it would do to my sanity! Which, by the way, is completely shattered."

They rounded a corner, the sound of their boots loud in the empty corridor.

"Are you seriously going to keep being such a youngling about this?" Vladya rolled his eyes. "Get a handle on it already."

"Oh, let me see if I have got this straight. A boy we purchased alongside a girl, suddenly sprouts breasts, lets down his hair, and turns from looking handsomely beautiful to breathtakingly, femininely beautiful." Ottai's voice rose in pitch. "And if that was not enough to melt my brain, the boy is a Syren. Oh, and just for kicks, he is also the grand king's Soulbond. A SOULBOND!"

"I know, it's mind-blowing, right?" Vladya deadpanned, his lips curling into a sarcastic smirk.

Ottai raised his hands. "It's mind-obliterating!"