

Chapter 160

MADAM LIVIA

Madam Livia stood at the edge of the garden, her eyes scanning the slaves under the pale glow of the moon as they worked diligently around her. "Elsie, start watering over there."

"Yes, madam." The young girl hefted her watering can to the designated area.

Under the moonlight, a dozen figures moved like shadows, tending to the garden's needs.

A woman, hunched over flowering vines, expertly pruning each branch with quiet, rhythmic snips. A young boy carefully nurtured a row of delicate herbs, his touch gentle to avoid damaging the tender stems. Further down the path, a group of figures worked together, harvesting ripe vegetables, their baskets gradually filling.

Madam Livia oversaw them, her gaze vigilant for any sign of soldiers. They were not supposed to be out here this late, but Livia had to ensure nothing drew attention to Emeriel's absence.

That girl would be the death of her yet. It had been six days, and although Livia knew it wasn't her fault, six days was a long time for a slave to disappear.

Whispers and questions were already circulating amongst the others. Their secrecy's fabric was thin. Excuses could only cover so much.

"Risa, be careful," Livia cautioned as the girl struggled with a heavy bucket of water, her small frame straining under the weight.

When had her life become this? Covering for slaves instead of maintaining her usual stern and unforgiving demeanor?

But then, she remembered Emeriel's wide, agonized eyes as merciless heat cramps wracked her body.

How was the girl faring now? How was she recovering?

Livia tried to push aside her worry, but sometimes, like now, it was impossible. Poor child.

Was Emeriel truly the female the grand king had left the fortress to aid during her heat?

When Livia had first heard the rumor, her relief had been crippling. She had been so terrified of how Emeriel's first heat would manifest without the sanctuary of the beast's forbidden chambers.

Fate truly worked in mysterious ways. Yet somehow, even amidst the cruelty of their world, things had a way of working out. Fate truly worked in mysterious ways.

"Careful with those sacks," she whispered to the two men in the distance, their shoulders burdened with heavy bags of compost.

"Everyone, hurry now."

They needed to finish quickly.

EMERIEL

Emeriel snapped awake as a biting pain ripped through her lower abdomen. It felt as though a cannibal was ruthlessly devouring her insides.

"Oww..." a helpless moan escaped her lips as she drew her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them.

The pain grew, like vitriol being poured into her organs.

Emeriel let out a high-pitched scream, her thin nightrobe riding up her thighs as she squeezed her knees so tightly that her fingers dug into her skin, drawing blood.

The door burst open, and Lord Herod rushed in, his hair sleep-tousled and nightshirt rumpled. "Are you alright, young one?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but a fresh dose of agony bombarded her, cutting off her words. A pained wail was all she could manage.

"Come here." He lifted her gently into his arms.

Emeriel braced for the pain of his touch, but relief came when only mild discomfort accompanied it. "Worry not, it won't be as bad as the first day."

He sat on the chair beside the bed, cradling her in his lap like a child. A sensation like something being squeezed within her made her cry out again, barely aware of his soothing hand stroking her back.

"This one feels different," Emeriel sobbed.

"Yes, it's the final discharge from your womb as it closes and ascends." Sadness flashed through Lord Herod's expression. "It feels this way because you did not conceive."

Emeriel's head snapped up. "What?"

"Our women have a theory. If the last discharge is particularly painful, it's because your body wanted to hold onto that last release, and the discharge ends up fighting to be released. Like a prisoner struggling to escape a soldier's grasp."

"I didn't c-conceive?"

He shook his head, his expression sympathetic.

"It's okay. I never r-really thought about it until now." Emeriel laid her head back on his chest, hiding the tears streaming down her cheeks.

It was true, she had never given pregnancy any thought.

But why did the news that she wasn't carrying the grand king's child hurt more than the physical pain in her abdomen? Like a crushing weight pressed on her chest, making it hard to breathe.

"Em..." Lord Herod sighed, his all-too-seeing eyes staring at her. "Do not torture yourself. Do not do that to yourself, little princess."

A sob tore from her throat, then another. Soon, Emeriel was weeping uncontrollably.

Lord Herod held her, offering comfort, murmuring soothing words as she cried and trembled in his arms.

When the pain surged again, Emeriel squeezed her eyes shut. Maybe if she fought alongside her body, the final discharge wouldn't happen, right?

Bracing herself, Emeriel squeezed her thighs together, clenching her muscles, so hard, her body shook violently, teeth chattering.

"Ukrai, stop that. Emeriel, let it out," Lord Herod scolded, giving her a gentle shake. "Emeriel, let it out, damn it."

But she held firm, her fingers digging into his skin, drawing blood. When the pain finally receded, she collapsed against him, utterly drained.

"How can someone so small, so young, be so stubborn?" he asked, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

"I-I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"Don't apologize. I understand. Vera used to do it too. But your willpower alone cannot force a conception, young one. Our kind simply doesn't bear offspring as easily as other species. You have to accept that now; it will make things easier for you in the future."

I wish I carried his child.

Emeriel sniffled, keeping her face buried in his chest. "Thank you for being here, my lord. I know I've inconvenienced you—"

The hand stroking her back paused. "Don't even start with that. Friends don't inconvenience each other."

"How can I ever repay you for all this?" she asked, her voice small.

Lord Herod sighed, as if she were a lost cause, and he was tired of the conversation. He resumed gently running his hand along her back.

When the suffocating pain returned, Emeriel whimpered and stiffened.

He pulled her back slightly, locking eyes with her. "Bear down, little princess."

With a trembling, aching heart, she did as he instructed, pushing with all her might. A gush of fluid left her body soaking his thighs, bringing immediate relief. "Oh..."

"Feel better now?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she breathed, feeling better than she had in days. But with the relief came exhaustion and dizziness.

"Time to sleep, princess." He lifted her with care, and gently laid her on the bed, then sat beside her, stroking her hair. "You're a very strong girl, Emeriel. No wonder fate chose you to be a grand queen. You fought this battle and won. I am proud of you."

Wouldn't it be easier if this male were her Soulbond?

Wouldn't her life be less complicated if he were the one her heart longed for, the one her soul was tied to?

Emeriel drifted off to sleep. Life was so unfair.