

Chapter 170

EMERIEL

Emeriel slipped into the last of her clothes, catching sight of her reflection in the tall, elegant wooden frame mirror.

A sad, almost bittersweet smile tugged at her lips as she stared at the girl looking back at her. It wasn't Princess Galilea in the reflection, but Emeriel.

"Thank you," she murmured, sincerely.

The household slaves bowed deeply before filing silently out of the bedchamber. Emeriel sighed.

The servants had drawn her a bath, helped her dress, and assisted with her ablutions. No matter how she hinted or outrightly stated her ability to take care of herself, Lord Herod either ignored her or deflected easily. They even tied her chest bindings.

Emeriel glanced at her chest. The binds were looser than normal, her breasts still tender and swollen from her recent heat. For that, she wore three layers of shirts.

Taking a breath, Emeriel let the moment sink in. Finally. It's all over.

"Are you ready to go, little one?" Lord Herod's voice broke the quietness. He stood by the open door, waiting patiently.

She nodded, turning to him. "Thank you for everything."

He leaned against the doorframe. "How does it feel to be going back to the real world?"

Emeriel stared at her reflection once more. She felt... different.

It was hard to put into words, but she didn't feel like the girl she was before her heat. Usually, she was burdened by the weight of her secrets, by the deceit and guilt. Her every moment was filled with anxiety and fear of being discovered.

But this Emeriel, the one staring back at her in the mirror, simply looked... resigned. Sad and resigned. Guess the sadness never changes.

Perhaps it was because she had finally experienced a taste of what could have been, what she was missing. What was meant to be hers but would never truly belong to her.

It had felt like touching the clouds, reaching for the heavens, only to be reminded that it would never be hers.

It didn't hurt, not the way she expected. For once, pain wasn't the defining emotion. Maybe because she had been in so much pain these past few days, she had gone numb.

There was this bone-deep sadness. And resignation.

"Emeriel?" Lord Herod's voice softened as he moved closer. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm alright," she forced herself to smile. "Let's go, please. I'm sure they must have noticed my absence by now."

Lord Herod studied her a moment longer, then offered his arm, which she took gratefully. Together, they walked through the halls toward the main entrance of the estate. When they reached the gates, Emeriel turned to him.

"Thank you once again for everything," she said softly.

"There we go again. Considering how many times you've said that, you sound like a broken record."

"I'm sorry, My Lord," she said. "It's just... no one has ever been this kind to me before. In the beginning, I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. It took me a while to realize there was no shoe, and after... everything, it still feels unbelievable. That you would be so kind. I guess it makes me feel better that you see my gratitude."

Lord Herod chuckled. "I see your gratitude, little Em."

"How can I ever repay you?"

He took her by the shoulders and, with a final, amused smile, guided her through the open gates, remaining on the other side. "Repay me when you become the grand queen."

Emeriel's eyes widened. "You know that's not possi—"

The heavy doors swung shut, his laughter, fading into the distance as he walked away.

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AEKERIA

Aekeira sat on the edge of the bed, her fingers entwined in Lord Vladya's hair. He sat on the floor, his head resting on her thighs... close to her core.

A position so crazily intimate it had made her uncomfortable. But as she stroked his black silken strands and he nestled closer, a rush of warmth spread through her chest. She liked.

It seemed now that Aekeira had finally put a name to the nagging feeling inside her, it began to blossom, making a home for itself deep in her heart.

Her love for him shone, forbidden and hidden, but alive nonetheless. Glowing like embers beneath the ashes.

The silence between them was a comfortable one. Lord Vladya still looked like he was struggling with sexlust, but there was no urgency in him now. Eyes closed, but she could tell he wasn't asleep.

"Meryl was one of my oldest friends," his voice low, unexpected. "I watched her struggle with infertility for centuries."

Aekeira's fingers stilled in his hair.

"She tried every herb known to man," Lord Vladya continued. "One time, out of desperation, she snuck out of Urai to visit the mages. It was a foolish thing to do, the journey was risky, and she had just one guard for protection. But she was willing to risk everything for the child she wanted so badly."

He was talking to her. Sharing something personal with her. Opening up to her. Aekeira's heart sang.

"The mages couldn't grant her a real pregnancy, they do not have such powers. But they could give a fake one. They performed a spell that made her feel pregnant." He paused. "That was over a hundred years ago. She returned so happy, even the cost of the magic didn't sway her joy. Henry was terrified, but Merry... she was glowing with happiness. The magic lasted only a few hours, but in that brief time, she was the happiest I'd ever seen her."

"What was the cost?" Aekeira asked, tone soft, her hand resuming its gentle strokes.

"Paralysis." Lord Vladya's eyes remained closed. "Meryl sacrificed the use of her legs for two weeks, just to experience four hours of carrying a child. Basking in the feeling. That was how desperately she wanted what Ukrae finally blessed her with."

No wonder Lady Meryl radiated such joy, even confined to her bed. Aekeira had a sinking feeling she knew where this conversation was leading.

"She's my bloodhost, my dear friend. I should be overjoyed for her. I saw everything she went through, I should be ecstatic. And I am happy for her, but..."

His eyes opened, fixed on the wall. "When I look at that child, all I feel is pain. An ugly jealousy, a sadness so deep it festers in me. I've never had that. I will never have that." He stated calmly, his tone aloof. "I almost hate that child. What sort of person am I that I would hate an innocent newborn? What sort of friend am I? Who have I become?"