

Chapter 173

EMERIEL

Emeriel woke slowly, disoriented.

Her head throbbed with a dull ache, and her mouth felt parched. A dull throbbing ache pulsed through her skull, and her tongue felt like sandpaper against the roof of her parched mouth.

She groaned softly, only to flinch at the sharp discomfort lancing through her shoulders and back. Something rigid pressed against her spine. A pole. A hard pole, rough against her bare skin.

She was standing naked, her chest bindings were gone, her wrists stretched above her head, the coarse bite of rope cutting into her flesh.

As she shifted, her ankles screamed with a similar pain, bound tightly to keep her rooted in place. Tethered in a way that left her in a painful, awkward stance.

Panic rose within her. Where am I? What's happening?

Her eyes darted around. A cave, and it was dark. Only the faint glow of torches casting flickers of shadows on the jagged walls saved her from being completely blind.

"Look who finally decided to join us," a voice sneered behind her.

She twisted her head toward the sound, but her neck protested. In the end, she gave up. "Who are you? What do you want with me?" she asked instead in a hoarse rasp.

A figure stepped in front of her, their face obscured by the hood of a cloak. The person held a flaming torch aloft. "She's awake!"

Emeriel struggled to quell the rising panic, but her body refused to obey. She struggled against her bonds, the rough rope burning her skin.

A brittle, crackling sound reached her ears, drawing her gaze downward.

Firewood. Large bundles of it were heaped around her feet, encircling her legs like a prison.

The torches... they aren't for light. They're going to burn me alive.

Terror seized her. "Please, let me go!" she begged, her voice rising in pitch. "You have the wrong person, let me go! I didn't do anything!"

"Oh, but I don't think we do." Another masked figure entered the cave, his voice colder than the first.

The scuff of boots against stone accompanied the sound as another figure stepped forward, followed by several more. Their bulky silhouettes and deep voices left no doubt, they were men. Urekai men. Five, so far.

"I swear, I've done nothing wrong!" Emeriel's mind was racing. Who are they?

Could this be the work of Mistress Sinai? She'd always threatened to kill Emeriel. Could she be behind this?

"Your existence alone is a problem," one male sneered. "A nuisance. Just the thought of you being our grand queen disgusts me. Your kind is a disease that should be eradicated. We don't need someone like you."

Emeriel's heart slammed against her ribs as his words sank in. They know.

They knew her secret.

They know everything.

Emeriel's breath hitched, and the panic clawed at her like a vise. She yanked at the ropes like a wild animal desperate to escape its cage, ignoring the searing pain as they bit deeper into her wrists.

"What makes you think you're good enough for our grand king?" Another masked men spat. "You actually spent your heat with him, which is why you stink of him, like he pissed all over you. How dare you!? You're not worth a strand of his hair!"

"Enough talk," another said impatiently. "Light the fire and let's be done with this."

"No," a different one growled, his arms crossed over his broad chest. "I think we should have some fun first before killing her. To waste her like that, without a single ounce of pleasure, seems like such a shame. Don't you think?"

"G's right," another chimed in. "She's his Soulbond. Specifically created to belong to the grand king. I mean, aren't you even a little curious to... explore her?"

"Exactly," the one referred to as G agreed, his gaze sweeping over her. "She might be human, but she's far from ugly. Just look at those breasts... still swollen from her heat. There's no rush to kill her; we can take our time."

Emeriel was panting, her frantic heartbeat making her ears ring. They were going to kill her. Strip her from existence as if she had never been.

No one knows where she is. No one can save her. No one—

A small whisper cut through the chaos in her mind. Someone can. Your beloved.

Emeriel stilled, the words echoing in her head repeatedly.

Her first instinct was to reach for the only one who could help her, to call to him through their bond. But then she hesitated.

If I do... my secrets will be exposed.

There would be no hiding she was a female. That Emeriel was Galilea. That she was his Soulbond.

Could she do it? Could she summon the courage to reveal everything—to risk everything?

Wouldn't it be better to just die?

Death would mean silence.

No rejection, no humiliation, no disgraceful execution.

If she died now, no one would ever have to know how she lived, her secrets and lies.

It was tempting, so tempting...

But if she died, she would never see him again. Never feel his arms around her.

If I'm found out, I will lose him anyway. Emeriel squeezed her eyes shut, tears slipping down her cheeks. I can't call him. I can't!

"Our orders were to kill her, you fool," the angriest of the group snapped. "Keep it in your pants. The kingdom is overflowing with female holes you can stick that in. Find one of those!"

"Enough!" a commanding voice boomed from the back, silencing the others stepping closer. "We have wasted enough time. Why are we arguing? No one's touching her. G, control yourself. The orders from R were to kill her, not have fun. Now light the damn fire!"

A sob escaped Emeriel's lips. Resting her head against the rough wood, she closed her eyes, resigned.

Deep within her soul, she reached out, calling with all her heart silently through the bond:

"My Beloved, I need your help. My Beloved... please, help me."