

Chapter 176

EMERIEL

Emeriel swallowed tightly, and let the truth go. "My name is Emeriel."

King Daemonikai let go of the lifeless body and it fell to the ground. Dark fury gathered in his eyes, so terrifying Emeriel's heart began the drumming of doom.

"You deceived me?" He sounded calm and enraged all at once.

Emeriel shuddered. "I'm s-sorry."

Sorry. So pathetic, so inadequate. One does not weave webs of lies, and spin the kind of deception she did, and all they could say was "sorry." But Emeriel's mind has gone blank.

She struggled to think, to find a way to explain herself, but the drums of doom drowned out all coherent thoughts.

The grand king said something, but Emeriel couldn't hear it. Her vision tunneled, and all she could see was his murderous face closing the distance between them.

Get up! Run away! Her mind screamed, but her body refused to obey. Rooted to the spot. Paralyzed.

He was going to kill her, Emeriel just knew it.

The world narrowed to a pinprick of light as darkness crept in. I think I'm going to faint.

Relief blanketed her. This, this one she could face.

I wish I never wake.

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Emeriel woke slowly, her senses gradually returning to her. She was draped across the powerful, muscular back of the beast. Dressed once again in her slave garment, but her hair was unbound, cascading loosely over her shoulders.

The feeling of her breasts without the usual tight bindings was hard to ignore, too.

The paralyzing fear was back, but she forced it down. This is her beast. She had spent countless nights in its arms, had handfed and bloodfed it, even been mounted repeatedly by it. This beast had always been her protector. It wouldn't hurt her.

But that beast is still King Daemonikai. A King Daemonikai who just discovered your deceit.

She anxiously scanned their surroundings. They had just passed through the fortress gates where a small crowd had gathered, murmuring, and pointing at the beast. But it was the grand lords standing at the very front, watching and waiting, that terrified her most. All of them were present.

Lord Ottai looked completely perplexed, worry evident in the deep lines on his face. Lord Vladya's expression was a carefully constructed mask, but his eyes were locked on her, penetrating and uncomfortable as usual. Emeriel looked away fast. Lord Zaiper's face was a study in confusion, calculating.

The beast's massive paw shifted behind her, steadying her as he rose to his hind legs and shifted back into his human form. King Daemonikai stood tall, sliding her down his back until she stood, trembling, behind him.

"What is going on, Your Grace?" a high lord's voice cut through the tense silence. "The way you left court..."

"We were worried," another added quickly.

"I've never been so scared!"

"Wait. Is that not Emeriel?" High Lord Gaff's sharp eyes had spotted her. Every head turned in her direction.

"Emeriel is a girl?" another high lord added in confusion.

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd. Murmurs rose from the gathered people, those at the back strained to see, their voices growing louder but the soldiers quickly formed a protective barrier, keeping them at bay.

Grand Lord Zaiper stepped forward, his expression grave. "What is going on here, Your Grace? Emeriel is female?"

Not that grand lord. Emeriel could practically see her life flashing before her eyes. Her breath hitched, and tears welled up as she pressed herself tightly into King Daemonikai's wide back.

"Step away from the grand king and face the council, you foolish human," Lord Zaiper barked, his voice sharp like a whip crack. "You have to answer to us. Hope to your gods that we have misunderstood a chest, perhaps swollen from bruises, for feminine breasts. For if they are truly what they seem, this gathering will be your last!"

Emeriel whimpered, clinging to the grand king's back as if her life depended on it. He still hadn't uttered a word.

The murmurs swelled into angry roars. The high lords, their faces contorted in shock, anger and disgust, muttered amongst themselves, shaking their heads.

"But how could you deceive an entire elite council of Urekai?" a voice demanded, probably another high lord, though Emeriel couldn't see who it was from where she hid.

"Say something, Your Grace," another high lord's voice, this one demanding, echoed through the courtyard.

Why can't I ever catch a break? All Emeriel had wanted was a few moments of respite after a brutal heat and an even more brutal recovery. She had planned to sneak back into the fortress unnoticed, blend in as she always did, and collapse into sleep before the next round of duties began. Was that so wrong? Was that too much to ask?

Why, of all days, did it have to happen today? When she could barely muster the strength to speak, let alone plead, apologize, or explain.

All her energy had been drained from her, and now she felt like a hollow shell, with nothing left to give.

Overwhelmed, she buried her face against the grand king's back, soaking his robes with her tears. She waited for the inevitable. Waited for him to pull away. To hand her over to the vultures that encircled them, eager for her blood.

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GRAND LORD VLADYA

An unexpected emotion crawled up inside Vladya as he watched the girl's fingers tighten around Daemonikai's robes. Pity.

Was she even aware of how desperately she clutched him, as if he were her only lifeline? Did she realize that she was hiding behind a tornado to shield herself from the storm?

The very person she should fear the most was the one she held onto for protection.

Daemonikai had not said a word. To everyone else, his face was expressionless, impassive. But Vladya had known the male for centuries, he saw the fury simmering just beneath the surface.

Daemonikai was pissed as hell at Emeriel.

"Do you not have a mouth, you deceitful human? Start talking!" Zaiper's voice boomed, his anger barely contained.