

Chapter 180



Ottai stopped mid-step, his hand reaching out to grip Vladya's arm, and he leaned in closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Wait... Was she the 'business' he had to take care of for a few days? The female in heat who imprinted on him?"

"Uh-huh." Vladya's eyes shifted toward Daemonikai, who walked ahead, his face stony and unflappable. Ever since the gathering, Daemonikai had said little beyond what was necessary in court.

"Shit. How did that happen?" Ottai hissed, stealing glances at the grand king. "If he did not know she was a girl, how did they... how did they manage to spend her heat together?"

Because no one meddles with those crazy bitches called fate. Vladya did not know all the details, but it seemed Daemonikai had met Emeriel under a different identity, not realizing who—or what—she truly was.

"Even if Daemonikai's side of the bond was dormant, it would be fully awake now," Ottai murmured, more to himself than to Vladya. "Not only did they nurture it through the heat, but now he knows the truth. Does this mean... he's going to be mated again?"

Vladya's stare flicked toward Daemonikai again. His old friend's eyes darkened, but he gave no other reaction, remaining silent.

"That's enough, Ottai," Vladya muttered under his breath. "You can keep processing all of this, but keep it in your head, alright?"

They had reached the entrance to the Court of Duty. The grand doors swung open, revealing a hall packed with lords. Vladya swore.

He had not seen this many lords gathered in one place in a long, long time. Had every lord in Urai—and beyond—made the journey to witness the proceedings?

As they stepped inside, all eyes turned toward them. The lords rose in greeting, the atmosphere tense and crackling. Zaiper was already seated, his face cold and calculating. Vladya and Ottai moved forward, taking their respective seats.

As Vladya scanned the room, he sighed inwardly.

This was going to be a very, very long night.

EMERIEL

In the days that followed, Emeriel's world became smaller and smaller. Her once spacious bedchamber now felt like a prison.

On the second day, soldiers had come to escort her back to her own room. She hadn't been sure whether she was being protected or punished with house arrest like Mistress Sinai had been, but it didn't take long to figure it out.

The locked door and the ever-watchful soldiers stationed outside her door confirmed her suspicions. It was punishment, plain and simple.

She hadn't been thrown into The Hole or the dungeon, and that was supposed to offer her some comfort. But the absence of chains around her wrists did nothing to ease the worry pressing down on her chest.

She had asked herself too many questions.

Was she being kept here to shield her from the wrath of the council, or was she a caged person awaiting judgment to decide her fate?

The next day passed, much like the one before. She paced the length of her chamber until the soles of her feet ached, read from dusty books she barely understood, and watched as the hours stretched without end. Her anxiety grew, slowly swallowing her calm and logic.

By the fourth day, the isolation had worn her thin, and she felt sick to her core. If tear ducts could dry up, Emeriel's surely would have. If crying could kill, she was sure she would have been six feet under, her grave cold as the air in this accursed room.

She had resolved to stop crying, to hold it all in. But every time she gave in to overthinking, the floodgates burst anew.

The worst part was the silence.

Not a word from King Daemonikai. No visits, no decrees, not even a passing message.

Each night, she lay awake, staring at the door. Hoping he would come, praying for the sound of his footsteps. Emeriel didn't care what his reaction would be anymore. He could scold her, scream at her, even hurt her physically. Anything was better than this suffocating quietness.

By the fifth day, Emeriel was stretched too thin, utterly exhausted and heartbroken. Even Aekeira hadn't come. Which meant she was ordered not to.

The isolation was truly her punishment, and if it was one given to break her spirit, it was working. They might as well have thrown her into The Hole.

With only her spiraling thoughts and aggravating worries for company, Emeriel was slowly slipping further into insanity. She had no idea what was happening beyond the walls of her imprisonment, and the not knowing was its own kind of torture.

Was the council still calling for her head?

Was there another punishment waiting for her?

Was Aekeira safe, or was she suffering now because of Emeriel's actions?

What of Lord Herod? Had he been implicated as well, punished because of her mistakes?

And how long would she be kept here? Another day? A week? A month? Two?

Just the thought made her world spin, making her lightheaded. It hurt.

Seated at the small table in the corner of the room, Emeriel stared blankly at the plate of food before her. The meal had been untouched since it arrived, as had the ones before it. Her appetite had long since abandoned her.

Even the humans who brought her food wouldn't look at her, let alone speak.

The door creaked open.

She looked up, and there stood Grand Lord Vladya, staring at her. Her breath caught in her throat as she scrambled to her feet.

"Your Highness," her voice small. Drained.

The door clicked shut behind him, as he walked into quiet room. His eyes swept over her, his expression grim.

"You have lost weight," he stated flatly.

Emeriel blinked, unsure of how to respond. She fumbled for words. "I—I'm sorry."

Lord Vladya waved off her apology. "Sit down. Eat."

She hesitated, but seeing the hard look, made her sink back into her chair.

"I'm not hungry—"

"I didn't ask if you were hungry." Lord Vladya's tone was sharp as he took a seat across her. "I gave you an order. Now, eat."