

Chapter 185

EMERIEL

Emeriel wept.

She lost awareness of everything, her problems, her surroundings, even who she was with. Surrendering to the pain once more, Emeriel mourned everything she had wanted and all that would never be hers. She mourned the horrible, horrible life she lived.

"I wish they had never hidden who I was when I was born. I wish I never had to live like this. So what if I lived female? Being sold to the breeding houses would have been better." Emeriel had never been one for regrets, but in that moment, regret was all she felt. "What's so wrong about becoming a harlot? It's an awful life, but then there'd be no deceit, no crushing secrets... no Urai. I wouldn't have to live like this. We would have never met. I wish my parents never tried to protect me."

A hand rested on her shoulder.

She flinched from that touch before her mind registered it as... safe. It took her a moment to come back to herself, to remember where she was and whom she was with. She gazed up at King Daemonikai.

All the anger had drained from him. There was no annoyance in his touch, it was gentle, comforting.

Then, his hands slid under Emeriel's arms, gripping her sides, lifting her effortlessly. Her legs automatically wrapped around his waist as he carried her across the room and settled onto the plush cushion.

"It's alright," the grand king murmured. "Let it all out."

More tears flowed, and she welcomed them, clinging to him. Gripping his robes like an anchor. Her eyes hurt, swollen and red from crying. Her cheeks sore from swiping at tears for days.

"I'm just so tired," she whispered brokenly. "I just want it to stop. I want all of this to stop."

The exhaustion hit her all at once. The nights of constant worry, extreme stress, and little sleep had finally caught up with her.

"Galilea..."

"Emeriel. Please... call me Emeriel."

There was a pause. "I'm sorry for my outburst, Emeriel." He exhaled heavily. "I was waiting to do this, thinking I'd have my feelings under control by now... turns out I was wrong. I didn't think about how all of this would affect you, and for that, I am sorry."

His hand stroked her hair, and she leaned into him, resting her head against his chest. She could hear the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath her ear.

"I'm really sorry for everything. For the lies, for the meltdown." Emeriel forced her eyes open, fighting the pull of sleep. "I have always known this bond would not work. Your people will never accept me... Everything you said, it wasn't anything I didn't already know."

"Still, I shouldn't have said it the way I did," King Daemonikai admitted. "And for that, I'm sorry. I see things from a different now, it helped me understand better. It must have been hard for you, living with all of this."

"It was." She swallowed, her throat tight. "But having a sister like mine made it easier. Aekeira... she bore the burden with me. She—" Emeriel stiffened.

"Do not worry, young princess," King Daemonikai said softly. "Your sister is not in trouble. I already figured she knew everything, after all, she is your sister."

He let out another tired sigh, heavy with weariness. "Making sure the bond does not fester... it's for the best. I feel as empty inside as I ever have. There's nothing left in me to give you, Emeriel. Nothing."

"Can you tell me about them?" she asked, hesitant. "Your family?"

A long silence reigned, and Emeriel wondered if he had heard her. She could feel the tension in his body, the way his muscles tightened at her question.

"I cannot," he uttered at last, so low, she almost missed it. "It hurts too much to talk about."

The amount of pain in those few words shattered the last of Emeriel's fragile hope. Any lingering thoughts she had of them being together, of the bond working out, disappeared like a gust of wind.

This male was too hurt, too broken. He walked through life as if everything was fine, leading his people, masking the truth of how completely shattered he was inside. But Emeriel saw it now, clearer than ever. He has not yet grieved, there is no healing within sight.

"You still have trouble sleeping, don't you?" she murmured.

"It was easier when I could not manage at all. I see them every night in my dreams." His tone was raspy. "Their faces are still so clear, as if it all happened yesterday. I should have told Alvin I forgave him, that I held no grudge against him. I should not have told Myka to protect his mother with his life... that it was okay to save himself. I should have protected them. I failed them all."

Emeriel gave in to the need to comfort him, rubbing his side in slow, soothing circles. "I do not know them, but from everything I've heard, you raised wonderful children, my king. I do not believe they would ever think you failed them. You protected your people."

"Yet the kingdom moves on while my world crumbled around me," he said bitterly. "I do not regret saving over five thousand lives that night. But I regret with every fiber of my being not saving my family. That guilt will be forever etched into my soul."

"Your Grace..."

"Sleep, little one." he cut her off gently, his hand resting in her hair. "If your exhaustion is so great that it seeps through my mental shield, then you need rest."

His words took a moment to register, but when they did, her brow furrowed. "Mental shield?"

"Yes." King Daemonikai resumed stroking her hair. "At a later time, I will teach you how to set up your own mental shield... to suppress the bond when it becomes too much, to control the foreign emotions you can feel from me," he sighed. "I reckon it's harder for you. You have felt the bond longer, even when I was feral. But with a proper shield, you can learn to control it, learn how to manage it."

She nodded slowly, her eyes fluttering closed.

"For now, you sleep."