

Chapter 195

Aekeira swallowed the lump in her throat. It was a double-edged sword really, because forgetting helped her move on...but at the same time, she yearned to reminisce.

It was the only way she could feel alive again. To remember what it had once felt like to truly live.

For Emeriel, it was easier to block it all out.

In the beginning, Aekeira had almost lost her. The Soulbond had been so terrifying, that she had watched helplessly as it tore Emeriel apart. The pain of being separated from her beloved had pushed Emeriel to the brink of madness.

She didn't eat for days, barely slept, and spent most of her time in tears.

When she wasn't crying, she would fall into a hollow, distant state, staring into nothing for hours—sometimes days—on end, barely leaving her bed.

Those were dark times. Dark, dark times.

Aekeira shuddered at the memory of the worst of it. The time Emeriel disappeared.

King Orestus had turned the entire kingdom upside down looking for her. They found her two days later at the Great Mountains, the natural border that separated their lands from the Urekai territories.

That place had almost swallowed her whole. By the time they reached her, she was dehydrated, unconscious, and almost dead.

That had been two years ago. Since then, Emeriel had gone... numb.

As time passed, she stopped crying over him, stopped asking for him, stopped letting the memories claw at her. The more she ate and ventured outside, the more she buried the grand king and everything Urekai.

Now, Emeriel was a ball of icy anger. A force no one could break through.

And, she had become reckless. Throwing herself into dangerous pursuits without a second thought. Hunting games, fight arenas, anything that could provide a thrill or a challenge.

Emeriel had always been someone who felt everything too much, but to survive now, she had learned to feel almost nothing at all. She was stronger. Harder.

Aekeira couldn't say she regretted how things had turned out. Emeriel had to survive. It was that or let the soulbond's agony swallow her whole and spit out her carcass.

But still, there were moments...quiet, heart-wrenching moments, where she missed her sister. The one who used to laugh. To care. To live.

She missed her Em, the one who didn't shield herself behind a wall of ice and anger.

This Emeriel didn't even like to be called Em anymore.

Aekeira glanced at her sister now, standing cold and distant in the moonlit garden. It wasn't the same woman she had grown up with, and Aekeira wondered if she would ever see that side of Emeriel again.

But at least she was alive.

That had to be enough.

Leaves rustled behind them. Two soldiers appeared. "Your Highnesses," one intoned, "forgive my intrusion, but the King requests your presence in his study."

"Come on," Emeriel turned and followed them. Aekeira pushed her saddening thoughts away, and trailed behind.

King Orestus sat alone in his study, reading glasses perched at the bridge of his nose. His desk was cluttered with scrolls, while he scribbled on a parchment. At their arrival, he raised his head, his gaze settling on Emeriel first.

"You're here," he set the quill aside. "I heard about the hunt. You caught the biggest kill again, Emeriel. Good job."

Emeriel bowed stiffly. "Your Majesty."

"Word has reached me that you were trying to join the tournaments for tomorrow."

"Yes, Your Majesty. But the spaces were filled. I should have asked earlier."

Aekeira bit the inside of her cheek hard until she tasted the metallic tang of blood. She remembered the last tournament. Emeriel had taken second place but had returned with countless bruises and a fever so severe it took days to break.

At its peak, Emeriel had cried out for the grand king, her delirious sobs echoing through the halls. The fever had broken leaving in its trails, only the bitter memories. That was a year ago.

"The scholars will be here tomorrow," King Orestus addressed Aekeira. "Is your noon free? If it's not, I can arrange for a postponement—"

"Why do you treat us so?" Emeriel's voice cut through, asking the very question that had plagued Aekeira immensely.

"Which way, dear?"

"This way," Emeriel gestured between them. "Like we are actual humans instead of some toys to be passed around to every minister with the fattest coin."

The king's eyes went cold.

"I can't count how many times you whipped me for interrupting court proceedings growing up," Emeriel stated, calmly. "Or how many times you forced Aekeira to teach the scholars, even when she had no food in her belly."

Even as a male, you never let me join the tournaments. 'You're too feminine,' you'd say. 'You're a laughingstock.'" She mimicked. "'You will be worth more on your back than in the fields.' Do you remember, Your Highness?"

King Orestus stared down at her. "Can a man not change?"

Emeriel scoffed. "Snakes like you do not change their stripes."

"Em!" Aekeira hissed, hotly.

"Don't 'Em' me, he sold us to them!" Emeriel shot back. "Without a second thought, in the blink of an eye, he sold us! He sits here on his high throne pretending, but he doesn't care about us. Not One. Bit."

"I know that. But making him angry is not the way forward."

"Listen to your sister, Emeriel."

"With all due respect, go and fuck yourself." Emeriel shot back at the king.

"Emeriel!" King Orestus roared.

At the same time, Aekeira blanched. "Em!!!"

Emeriel lifted her chin, her eyes piercing daggers at the king. She had always hated King Orestus, but never before had she openly antagonized and insulted him like this.

"Stop, Em," Aekeira pleaded. "I don't want you locked up for days without food or water."

Emeriel rolled her eyes. "What do you think, King Orestus? Will you lock me up for days on end? After all, I just blatantly insulted the tyrant king."

King Orestus looked ready to breathe fire.