

## Chapter 203

No suitor had dared before. Emeriel would have deflected with a well-placed shove, a swift punch or a biting retort. But tonight, she felt raw, her defenses frayed.

The kiss was agony.

It was like a thousand tiny needles pricking her skin from every angle, her stomach churning with nausea.

Memories of another's lips, another's touch, flooded her. King Daemonikai's deep kisses, the feel of his tongue against hers. The recall assaulted Emeriel's whole being.

Longing rose, clawing its way up from the pit of her stomach...

No, no, no.

She tore her lips from his, stumbling back so fast she lost her footing, and fell hard onto the ground.

"Are you alright?" Daviel reached for her, but she scrambled to her feet, moving backward to put as much distance between them as she could.

"I'm fine," she gasped, dusting off her garments with trembling hands, trying to keep the despair rising inside her at bay. "Let's call it a night, Prince Daviel."

"But, Emeriel—"

"Good night."

She turned and walked away. With each step, the despair crawled closer until it caught up with her, and washed over her entirely.

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MISTRESS SINAI

Mistress Sinai stormed into her quarters, seething. A night spent in the dungeon, all because of that malnourished whore. She needed to kill something.

"Run me a bath this minute!" she barked, and her maidservants flinched.

"Y-your bath is ready, mistress," one of them stammered, barely able to meet Sinai's eyes.

Showing the maidservants aside, Sinai stripped out of her garments and slipped into the warm bath. But even the soothing heat did nothing to calm her nerves.

That bitch had been lucky. If they'd been placed in the same cell, only one of them would have walked out alive.

"You are the only mistress of your master, yet unwanted by him. Two millennia together, and he never chose you. He was Queen Evielyn's from the start. Even after her death, he does not look at you. And now? Now, he belongs solely to Emeriel."

Sinai clenched her fists. Stupid bitch, what did she know?

Her Daemon wanted her.

Her Daemon was hers.

Even Emeriel had admitted as much when she fled Urai, tail tucked between her legs, never to return.

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PRINCESS AEKEIRA

Aekeira pushed open Emeriel's door, the hinges creaking in the silence.

The room was cloaked in shadows, the only light filtering in from the window. Emeriel lay beneath the covers, motionless in the darkness.

"Are you asleep?" Aekeira's voice was tentative.

There was no response, but Aekeira walked deeper into the room anyway. "I know you are not, Em," she sat on the edge of the bed. "You have avoided me all day."

Still, no response.

"The Urekai are in Merabis. Three of them: Lord Ottai, Yaz, and Wegai."

Still, no response.

"I know you do not want to know why they're here, Em. I understand." Aekeira's gaze fixed on the wall ahead. "But I also know you. And I know, deep down, you will regret this in the near future if they leave without an audience from you."

Nothing.

Not even a shift in the bedclothes.

"If I was not sure, I would have let this go," Aekeira's tone lowered, taking on a pleading edge. "But I know you, Emeriel. Beneath all this resolve created by pain, is an Em who still cares. An Em whose world still revolves around her grand king. He is not alright, Em."

Was she really asleep?

"Do you know Lord Vladya managed to fight his feral for two long years? A male who would have succumbed three years ago?" A wistful smile touched Aekeira's lips. "It warms my heart, knowing he held on that long. Now, they need me to help him continue the fight. And King Daemonikai—"

"I do not wish to hear it," Emeriel's voice finally came, barely audible. Pleading.

"—his soul is dying," Aekeira said anyway. "He hasn't been to court in over a year. He spends every waking moment lost in his mind. If this continues, you will lose him forever."

Emeriel's body tensed beneath the covers, and Aekeira saw her fingers dig into her thigh.

Aekeira gently pulled back the covers, revealing Emeriel's white-knuckled grip. Blood prickled where her sister's nails had pierced her skin.

Carefully, Aekeira pried her fingers loose, holding her hand in hers. "I know it's not what you want. I know, under all that, is an Em who feels better knowing her male is doing well at the other end of the world, even if they're not together." She squeezed Emeriel's hand. "Can you tell that Em, her male is not okay?"

"I can't go back there," Emeriel whispered. "I can't see him again. I can't... I can't do it." A shaky breath. "I don't want to."

Aekeira wanted to see her face, but Emeriel remained turned away, her back rigid.

"The Emeriel I know is not a coward," Aekeira said. "The Emeriel I know faces her challenges, no matter how impossible they seem, instead of running from them. What happened to that Em?"

"She was defeated." In an even smaller, shuddering voice.

Oh, Em... "No, she wasn't. She's still there, that much I know." Aekeira stated firmly, tears pooling in her eyes. "Come to Urai with us, Em. He saved your life too. He not only forgave your deceit, but he also saved you, both in Urai and here in Navia. Now, he needs you."

Rising to her feet, Aekeira released Emeriel's hand. "Deep down, you know where you wish to be. You know what your heart bleeds for. If you had truly given up, truly moved on like you think, you would have stopped taking those godforsaken heat suppressants years ago, like you said you would."

Emeriel's breath hitched.

"But you didn't." Aekeira lingered by the door. Her voice dropped. "Because no matter what you tell yourself, a part of you... the part that loves her grand king above all else, still longs for her male. Think about it, Em."

Aekeira closed the door softly behind her, leaving Emeriel alone in the darkness.