

## Chapter 245

Aekeira pursed her lips.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice the pain you endured, how deeply he wounded you. I was the one who listened to you cry, night after night, because of him. When you thought everyone was asleep, you’d sob into your pillow until dawn.”

Aekeira lowered her eyes. “It wasn’t easy to let go,” she admitted, her voice quiet. “But when faced with the choice between giving us a chance or living every day half-dead inside, I chose to take that chance.”

“Even though he’s half-mad and soulless?” Emeriel’s voice held an edge.

Aekeira’s lips lifted in a soft smile. “Even then.” She looked up at Emeriel, her eyes bright. “And you know what, Em?”

Don’t call me—Sigh. “What?”

“These past few weeks with him have been the happiest of my life.” Aekeira’s eyes sparkled, a dreamy look on her face. “I’ve never felt more alive. More fulfilled.”

Utterly disgusting. Utterly adorable.

“Give the grand king a chance,” Aekeira urged her. “Listen to him. Then decide what you want to do. Running away is not really the answer. The Emeriel I once knew understood that.”

“I’m not sure I want to be that Emeriel anymore. That girl let her heart lead... and look at the bottomless pit she fell into. Now, I only follow my head.”

Aekeira went silent.

Finally, she said, “And there’s nothing wrong with that.” Rising to her feet, she added, “I’ll go fetch Madam Livia—she needs to know you’re awake.”

Emeriel nodded, watching as her sister walked toward the door.

But Aekeira paused, turning back, her hand resting on the doorknob.

“Maybe you don’t have to be that girl anymore,” she said quietly, “but you can’t lose her completely, Em. Because that girl survived hell. She endured slavery, the hell of sleeping with a beast. Faced the agony of heat and its recovery, of shouldering a crushing secret, and still lived through being severed from her soulmate. She went through all of that, and she... survived.”

Emeriel’s chest tightened hard. She looked away, her sister’s words hanging in the air.

“That girl was the best part of you,” Aekeira added. “She was the strongest part. The bravest. She’s everything that made you, you. Maybe you don’t have to be her entirely anymore, but you can still carry her with you. Because she balanced you out. It’s alright to let your head lead... just give your heart a chance to follow, too.”

Stop, please. Emeriel stared down at her hands. They were shaking.

“I love you, Em.” Her sister opened the door, offering a small, sad smile. “I will always love you, no matter who you are.”

Long after she left, Emeriel whispered into the quiet, “I love you too, Keira.”

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TWO YEARS AGO

Three months after returning from Urai.

Emeriel woke to a splitting headache and an even sharper ache in her stomach.

Sunlight streamed through the window, assaulting her sensitive eyes, but she had neither the strength nor the will to rise and close the curtains. Instead, she threw a pillow over her face, shutting out the world.

Another day dawned.

Another day to hope for her Beloved’s return, to pray he would come and take her back.

She didn’t care if she had to return as his slave; Emeriel was ready to serve him for the rest of her life. She would accept any crumb of affection he could give her, if only he would come for her.

"I'll be a good girl, I promise," she mumbled hoarsely, her eyes too dry, too exhausted to summon tears.

Another day to wish for death.

Outside her door, voices filtered through.

“She was half-dead, severely dehydrated,” Prince Daviel snapped. “If our men hadn’t found her when they did, she would be gone by now.”

“And I ask again, for the thousandth time, what is going on here, Aekeira?” King Orestus’s voice boomed, laced with irritation. “Why on earth would your sister even attempt to journey back to that savage kingdom that enslaved her?”

Only Aekeira’s muffled sobs answered him.

“Motherfucker!” the king cursed. “When will either of you speak to me!? What the hell is wrong with both of you? It’s as if those beasts sent two strangers back to me! You’re both either crying, locked away in your rooms, moping, not eating, or crying even more.”

Emeriel groaned. Her head was pounding too hard for this.

Go away. Just leave me alone! She wanted to scream, but she was too tired to muster the strength to shout.

And her stomach... it was on fire.

Blessedly, she drifted back into sleep.

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A sudden, piercing pain ripped through her, jolting her awake. What the...

Another one followed, sharper and more excruciating, Emeriel doubled over, a strangled cry tearing from her throat.

Struggling to her feet, she clutched her belly as she staggered to the lavatory, desperate to relieve herself.

But when she pulled down her drawers, there was... blood. So much blood.

It soaked the fabric, trailing down her legs.

She stared, horrified. Bewildered.

Crying through another vicious cramp, she wondered what the hell was going on. She hadn’t had her menstrual cycle in over a year!

Gripping her garment so hard, her knuckles turned white, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Gods, my stomach really, really hurts.

Could it be...?

“No, no, it cannot be,” she choked, shaking out of her body, “I can’t be... I can’t be p-pregnant.”

Blood trailed like a painter’s careless brushstroke, staining everywhere it touched.

“I ca-an’t be pregnant!” Covering her face with her hands, Emeriel screamed in denial. “They said it wasn’t possible! They said it t-took time!! I can’t... I can’t,” she sobbed. “I can’t be losing my ch-child.”

Her knees gave way, and she fell like a rag to the ground, bawling like never before.

Right there, in the lavatory, Emeriel’s heart broke all over again.

With every trail of blood down her thighs, every stab of searing pain in her belly, Emeriel knew, with a growing, soul-shattering certainty, that a soul was leaving her body. Her child was leaving.

And there was nothing she could do to stop it.

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