

Chapter 246

THE PRESENT

Seated on the bed, Emeriel shook uncontrollably in the stillness of the night. Her uneven loud breaths echoed in the silence of her chambers as she rocked herself back and forth, her arms wrapped tightly around her knees.

None of the grand rulers had returned from the ancestral shrine.

Why do you do this to yourself? Why revisit the most painful memory of your life?

But she knew why this particular memory had broken free from its chains. The intimate conversation with King Daemonikai about children.

“If you can give me a child, Riel, I will lay the entire world at your feet.”

Her trembling worsened, teeth clattering. If only he knew... if only he knew how close they had come.

We agreed to bury it, didn't we? To leave it in the past and live as if it never happened?

That's how she had lived.

Going through each day as if she were whole, as if she weren't splintered inside. As if she hadn't lost the most precious gift the gods could ever give her.

Losing her child had forced her to grow past the pain of their severed bond, beyond the heartbreak that had nearly destroyed her.

It had forced her to become stronger, to bury the old Em, the one who had known innocence and hope.

After all, If I hadn't been so weak, I wouldn't have lost my child.

Who would have imagined it, that she'd conceive from her first full heat? And who would have thought she would lose it the way she did?

“You're alright. You're alright,” she whispered, rocking herself. If only the movement would stoke some warmth in her soul.

But no one knew. Not even Aekeira.

It was a secret Emeriel would carry to her grave.

How could she ever tell him, a male who so desperately desired children, who had suffered the loss of his two children, that she had carried his third, only to lose it due to their incompetence?

He would never forgive himself... just as she had never forgiven herself.

So, this burden was hers alone to bear, even if it was killing her slowly on the inside.

No one knew why she was fighting hard to protect her heart, why she withdrew from everyone, why she was always angry. No one knew the extent of her pain. No one knew why the old Emeriel had died so the new, hardened one could live.

That girl had endured everything, survived enslavement, torment, heartbreak, the severed bond...

But she hadn't survived the loss of her child.

And now, everything she had worked so hard to build was crumbling around her. The armor she'd forged was cracking.

Just weeks in his company, and all the feelings she had buried were clawing their way back to life.

For five long days, he had borne the pain of venom inside him while it destroyed his organs, all in an effort to save her life. Just the thought of it made her dead heart leap with hope.

The bond wasn't even active, yet she was falling for him all over again.

All over again? Her inner voice snorted. Did you ever truly fall out of love with him?

Emeriel was... terrified.

For Aekeira, it was easy to preach, easy to say, "Give your heart a chance."

But Aekeira hadn't stood in that cold lavatory, helplessly watching her child slip away in a pool of blood.

She hadn't spent these last two lonely years, torn apart by the memories of a life that never had the chance to bloom.

No, it wasn't Aekeira who had to live with the misery, the gaping wound that never healed.

Her sister hadn't stayed up countless nights wondering what her child might have looked like, how they might have grown. Who they would have become.

Whether her child would have been a strong, handsome boy or a beautiful, radiant little girl.

Would their eyes have been a piercing green like their father's, or the deep blue of her own?

Emeriel stared ahead blankly, quake after quake, raking her body.

GRAND LORD OTTAI

He entered his study, utterly exhausted. All Ottai wanted was to collapse onto his bed and sleep for a week.

The rain ritual was always long, intricate, and draining. But if it yielded results, as it had the last time, then it was worth every ounce of effort.

He turned—

"Balls of the gods!" Ottai cursed, jumping in surprise. "Emeriel, is that you? You startled me."

The princess stood leaning against the wall, shrouded in shadows, eyes closed.

Ottai exhaled heavily. He was so fatigued that his usually sharp senses had dulled. “How did you get in here?”

“Your bondmate said I could wait here for you,” she replied, eyes still closed.

He nodded, studying her more closely. “How is your body holding up? Are you well?” When she didn't answer, he sighed. “What do you need, then? If you're looking for the grand king, he returned with me. He should be in Frostfall now—”

“You gave me your word.” Her voice was quiet. “You said, 'Whether you could help him or not, if it ever became too much, you only need to ask, and I would take away from Urai.'” Her eyes opened, meeting his. “Those were your words to me, remember?”

“Of course. A true Urekai never forgets a promise,” he stated solemnly.

“Good,” she murmured, her voice barely heard. “It has become too much for me.”

"Wait a minute." Ottai's mind caught up. "Do you mean...?"

“Yes.” She finally straightened, stepping out of the shadows to stand in the dim light of the study. “Take me away from here, Lord Ottai. Tomorrow morning, at first light. Take me home.”

Shock washed over Ottai, leaving him dumbstruck.

“You can't be serious. I thought...” He shook his head, struggling to find the right words. “You two were making progress.”

“I don't want to make progress, I just want to go back to Navia,” she said coolly. “I want to be as far from here as possible. You will keep your word, won't you?”

Ottai had a thousand questions. A thousand arguments against her decision.

But in the end, he simply nodded. “Yes,” he said in a heavy tone. “We leave at dawn.”

“Swear to me you will not tell the grand king about this.”

He'd expected as much. For one so young, Emeriel was incredibly perceptive and intelligent. “I swear it.”