

## Chapter 194

"But they are of marriageable age," another one protested. "Well past it, actually. If they will not serve in the traditional ways, then they should at least marry. They could bring happiness to some of our males—"

"I will not condone this discussion in my court again," the king hissed, his patience visibly thinning. "I am the king, and I make these decisions. Until I devise a solution, no one—is to bring up this conversation about the princesses ever again. Do I make myself clear?"

They straightened immediately, bowing deeply. "Yes, Your Highness." Voices rose in unison.

Aekeira released a slow breath. It will be brought up again, she knew. If not tomorrow, then in another six months, yet again. Because the truth was, everyone truly was talking about it.

Since returning to Navia, Aekeira had once again been reminded of the curse that plagued humans. Scarcity of females.

The way these vultures eyed them, hungry for the prospect of more women in their midst, was a constant reminder of how much they wanted her and Emeriel either in the brothels or breeding houses. And yet, she couldn't quite believe how safe they had been since their return, thanks to King Orestus.

The same king who had once pawned them off to the highest bidder now stood as their biggest protector. Ironic, really.

He had provided them with bodyguards who took their roles seriously, making sure no harm came to them. Aekeira's heart alternated between grateful and suspicious.

There had to be a catch. A motive.

Men like King Orestus did not change overnight.

The problem was, she had no idea what his motive could be.

Her greatest worry upon their return had been Emeriel's punishment for her years of deceit. Yet, two years along the path, King Orestus never once brought it up. Not in public, not in private.

He treated them both as if a change of that magnitude hadn't occurred. As though Emeriel hadn't suddenly transformed from a boy into a girl.

The kingdom, however, was a different matter. The court was in tumult, the city in uproar. And for two years, King Orestus turned a blind eye.

Even his son, the crowned prince, had taken notice, developing a strong interest in Emeriel's gender revelation.

Not only had he confessed his feelings for her, but he had also been relentless in his pursuit. Using charm to mask an iron-willed determination to have Emeriel that, at times, unsettled Aekeira.

Was this why King Orestus protected them so fiercely? Aekeira had once asked herself. Did he want Emeriel for his golden prince?

But that theory quickly fell apart when the king discovered his son's courting.

He had not only erupted in a fit of rage, but also forbidden Prince Daviel from getting close not just Emeriel but also Aekeira.

As though they were more precious than his favorite son.

Or, perhaps, they carried some deadly, contagious disease.

Aekeira was more inclined to believe the latter.

King Orestus's protectiveness seemed less like the doting care of a guardian and more like the calculated caution of a man harboring secrets. But what could it be?

What was driving him to shield them so fiercely?

Not that Daviel had taken his father's command to heart. If anything, his chase had tripled since then. Only more discreet, slipping through the shadows and around corners to find moments with Emeriel.

Her mind came back to the present. Just how long before the people went defiant and rebelled because "they were not fulfilling their roles in society?"

It worried Aekeira more than she cared to admit.

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Sliding the needle through the linen, Aekeira pulled carefully until the thread emerged from the other side.

Embroidering had always been her peace. A calming ritual that helped steady her thoughts. After a long day of tending to the gardens, she needed this quiet moment to work on the needlework she'd been piecing together for weeks.

How was he?

Is he doing alright?

Her hand stilled.

A familiar, crash of longing blasted her, threatening to pull her under.

Deep breaths. Take deep breaths. She closed her eyes, fighting to steady herself.

"Are you alright, my princess?"

Aekeira blinked, opening her eyes to clear the blur of unshed tears. Otto stood before her, gazing at her with worry.

"I'm fine," Aekeira forced a smile to the older man.

Otto had cared for them when they were children, having served as their mother's personal servant. After their parents' deaths, he had been dismissed, leaving Aekeira and Emeriel to fend for themselves. King Orestus had never provided them with servants, guards, or much of anything.

It had been...surprising to say the least when, upon their return, the king not only reinstated Otto but also assigned troops of bodyguards to protect them.

"Are you sure?" Otto pressed.

"Yes." Aekeira took a shuddering breath. "Yes, I'm fine. Worry not, Otto. It's nothing."

He still looked skeptical, his eyes searching hers for the truth. His concern was genuine, a kindness that made Aekeira ache for the simpler days of their childhood.

Unlike King Orestus, whose motives were a mystery, Otto's care was real. He had been there the night they were born, tending to their mother in one of the hidden underground rooms. Since their return, he had become their silent protectors, always fretting over them... especially since they refused to speak of Urai.

"Really, I'm fine," Aekeira reassured him once more.

"Your sister hasn't been in her chamber all day." Otto shifted uncomfortably. "The hunting party returned hours ago, but she hasn't been seen since."

Case in point.

Aekeira sighed, placing her needlework carefully on the table before standing. He does have a point though. She hadn't seen Emeriel since her abrupt dismissal from court earlier that day. "I'll go find her."

After searching all the usual places, Aekeira finally found Emeriel in Prince Daviel's garden. She had avoided searching there, making it her last resort. Emeriel usually stayed away from this place.

Hands crossed, her sister stood motionless before the meadows, eyes watching the twinkling stars above. The night was beautiful, glowing softly, but Aekeira knew it was never truly safe.

Stepping up beside Emeriel, Aekeira turned her eyes to the sky as well. "We are not being married off," she said at last, breaking the silence. "Orestus put a stop to it. I'd say we're safe for another six months, Em."

"Don't call me that," Emeriel mumbled, her gaze never leaving the stars.

Aekeira ignored that. Her eyes followed her sister's line of sight, but her thoughts were elsewhere. "Do you think they are alright?"

Emeriel didn't pretend not to understand who she meant. She remained silent.

"I can't help it sometimes," Aekeira admitted. "Has he gone feral? Is he doing better? Has the darkness consumed him yet?" A pause. "Does he think of me?"

The longing rose again. Approaching like a forceful tide, hell-bent on sweeping her away.

She fought to keep it from spilling into her words. "Sometimes, I fight for hours on end not to think of him."

"Why are we worried about them?" Emeriel asked, coolly. "We agreed not to."

"Maybe it's time we did."

"I don't think so," her sister stated firmly, her face devoid of emotions. "It's best not to."

They never did, not anymore.