

Chapter 199

PRINCESS EMERIEL

Three days later.

After morning training, Emeriel freshened up quickly before making her way to the breakfast table.

Her muscles still ached, but she welcomed the burn. It was the only thing that felt real these days.

The large wooden doors creaked as she entered the dining hall. Aekeira was the only one seated, sipping from her cup.

"You're here, Em, take a seat," Aekeira said warmly, gesturing to the chair beside her.

Emeriel's jaw clenched, resisting the urge to lash out. It wasn't Aekeira's fault that the name she'd called her all her life now stirred memories of slavery and Urai.

"Where is the king and Daviel?" Emeriel asked in a clipped voice as she sank into the seat.

"The king had an early court session, I think. And the prince?" Aekeira gave a half-hearted shrug, "he's probably still in bed."

They ate in silence. The food tasted like sawdust, but Emeriel forced herself to swallow. Everything tasted like ash these days.

As they were about to leave, the door opened. King Orestus strode in, his guards flanking him.

"Is everything alright, Your Majesty?" Aekeira inquired, her brow furrowed.

The king hesitated. His hand twitched at his side as he looked at Emeriel before shifting his gaze to Aekeira.

The tyrant king ruled with an iron fist, he rarely looked this... anxious. Something was wrong.

"Emeriel, Aekeira," he cleared his throat, "I hope you weren't... uh... upset about, you know, what happened in my study the other day?"

"About the letters?" Aekeira was bewildered.

"No, not the letters." Orestus shifted awkwardly. "The part where I lost my... um... temper. I want to apologize for that. About... saying I would crucify you for the secrets you hide... I didn't mean it."

Emeriel's patience snapped. "Okay, what the hell is going on?"

Years ago, she never would have dared to speak to the king in such a manner. But years ago, she had cared about things like decorum and respect.

These days, she could barely care enough to drag herself out of bed.

"What is happening?" Aekeira asked too.

"They are here." The king looked downright terrified.

"Who is here?" Aekeira's voice dropped to a whisper.

Time stretched and distorted. Emeriel's heartbeat pounded in her ears. Then, she stopped breathing entirely. Surely he doesn't mean...

"The Urekai. Three in number." King Orestus said at last. "They are here to see you two."

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Aekeira gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

But, the sound seemed far away, muffled. The world tilted on its axis.

Emeriel's vision tunneled, her hearing replaced by a rising, high-pitched ringing that drowned out everything else.

No. No. Not them. Not here. Not now.

The dining hall blurred. The table, the walls, even her sister... everything receded into the distance.

Or was she the one falling back? Emeriel wasn't sure anymore. When had she stood up?

"Em?"

Aekeira's voice was faint. She saw her sister's mouth move, her lips forming her name, but it didn't feel real.

Aekeira was pale. Too pale. The color drained entirely from her face, leaving her whiter than a vampire. So, this isn't a dream, then. It is real.

They are here.

Emeriel stumbled backward until she slammed into something solid—a wall, maybe—but she barely registered the pain.

Her breaths came in shallow bursts. No, no, no...!

Thoughts slipped from her grasp. Limbs sluggish, like she was wading through thick mud. She had to run away from here.

"Em!" Aekeira was suddenly in front of her, pulling her into a fierce hug.

Emeriel recoiled.

Too close.

Too crowded.

She didn't want to be touched. Couldn't handle the closeness.

But Aekeira didn't let go. No matter how hard Emeriel pushed, her sister's grip only tightened.

"What is happening to her?" King Orestus's voice was distant. "Do I need to call for the medicine man?"

"You are okay, Em. You are fine," Aekeira soothed. "I'm here. I'm not letting go."

Small, pitiful whimpers. They were hers.

Those fragile noises were coming from her.

Emeriel bit down on her lips and shut everything out. The voices. The world.

All that existed was her fight for breath. The burning in her lungs as her body shuddered in sync with Aekeira's.

Time stretched on.

Endless.

Suffocating.

But slowly, Emeriel felt the ground return beneath her feet. The ringing in her ears faded, the world around her slithering back in a slow return.

"I'm fine now," she croaked, raspy. "You can let go, Keira."

Her sister released her, tears tracing paths down her face. Her eyes searched Emeriel's. Probing. Looking for signs that all was truly alright.

Emeriel averted her face. Don't look at me like that. Don't look too closely.

She hadn't had an attack this intense in years. Way too long.

"Please... send them away." Small, hoarse, barely her own.

"Em..."

"No." Her voice gained strength. "They should go."

"Let's at least hear why they've come."

If Emeriel shook her head any harder, her neck would break, and her head would tumble down her shoulders. "I don't want to."

"You don't mean that—"

"I don't want to see them. I don't want to know why they are here. I want them gone." Her voice rose, high-pitched, and panicked again.

Aekeira wiped her tears, nodding slowly, though her eyes remained filled with sadness. "It's okay, Em. I understand. You don't have to see them if you don't want to."

"You can go see them if you want," Emeriel's tone turned brittle. "But promise not to tell me a thing when you return. If you return. I don't wish to hear it."

"Why wouldn't I return?"

"If you decide you wish to go back to Urai, I don't need to know." She said in a flat tone. "I don't want to know. You could go with them."

Aekeira flinched, hurt flashing in her eyes. "You don't mean that,"

"I do! Leave me alone!" she shouted.

Aekeira reared back like Emeriel had dealt her a physical blow. The pain in Aekeira's eyes burned into Emeriel.

Stop. Stop hurting her. It's not her fault.

You never hurt Keira.

The guilt surged, drowning Emeriel.

But she slammed it down, burying it deep, beneath the cold wall.

Emeriel let those ice seep into her being. Cold was safer. Cold meant survival.

Squaring her shoulders, Emeriel turned and walked away.