

Chapter 243

PRINCESS EMERIEL

Emeriel drifted in and out of consciousness.

Each time she surfaced, someone was pressing a bitter herb to her lips, cooling her forehead with damp cloths, or coaxing her to eat. It was exhausting, intrusive.

Why couldn't they just leave her to her dreams?

Beautiful, sweet dreams of her and her Beloved.

Here, in this world of warmth and light, there was no pain, no misery.

Here, their bond was alive and flourishing.

Here, she could feel his presence even when he was far from the fortress.

Here, she felt everything in his heart, not just his pain but also his happiness. His love.

In this world, her belly was full and rounded, carrying their child. A child who brought even more sunshine into their already radiant world.

Her beloved glowed with joy, untouched by the sorrow of grief and loss.

Emeriel did not want to wake from this idyllic dream.

If crossing over to the other side brought dreams like these, perhaps she should have crossed long ago.

It was beautiful. It was—

"Wake up, Princess. Open your mouth." Madam Livia's voice drifted into her dreams.

Not this again.

"Go away..." she tried to shout, but the words came out a garbled mumble.

"She's overdue for her medication," the head maid's voice chimed in, "but lately, she locks her jaw tight, refusing any disturbance."

Blessed silence returned.

Emeriel relaxed, grateful. Thank heavens—

A strong, gentle hand caressed her cheek. "Wake up, dearling."

Her heart stirred at the familiar voice. What was he doing outside her dreams?

Here, in this fuzzy half-world, he sounded closer... more real.

Fine, perhaps she'd open her eyes for just a moment.

Bright light assaulted her vision.

Nope. Emeriel quickly squeezed her eyes shut.

"Draw the curtains closed, Livia," her Beloved ordered.

"But she needs cool air—"

"Do it," he insisted.

The sound of rustling curtains followed. The room dimmed. Then, the wonderful silence.

Cautiously, she opened her eyes again, one at a time.

Her vision was blurry, but as she blinked, her male's face slowly came into focus.

"Hello, Princess," he groaned, his fingers caressing her cheekbones.

Her head felt light and foggy, but this... this was a pleasant dream, too. Emeriel let out a soft, contented sound, nuzzling into his touch.

"That's my good girl," his hand moved to stroke her hair. "Now, you need to drink."

A cup pressed against her lips, and a bitter liquid touched her tongue. She gagged, turning her head away.

"Bitter," she mumbled. "Don't want it."

"I know, but you must," He leaned closer, his face filling her vision, blocking out the rest of the world.

Emeriel found she didn't mind that at all.

"You're so handsome," she slurred. "But... there's a little error here..." Lifting a hand, she flattened the lines of worry on his forehead, smoothing the frown between his brows. "There, much better. Don't frown so hard."

His gaze was filled with a tenderness that made her feel like the center of his universe.

Oh, she liked that. A lot.

"Keep looking at me... like that," she murmured drowsily, lost in those eyes. "Sometimes, it's like you see right into my very soul."

She paused, her eyelids fluttering. "It's unnerving, but... I like it. Don't ever stop."

"You're drugged out of your senses," he said in that deep, sexy voice that made Emeriel tingle inside.

"No, I'm quite clearheaded," she informed him with utmost seriousness.

Blinking hard, she frowned, her brow wrinkling as her eyes tried to focus. "Though you do seem to have... three eyes and two noses."

He let out a deep chuckle. "Clearheaded, are we?"

"Absolutely," Emeriel's hand slipped to his neck, greedily tracing wherever her fingers could reach. "I wish you'd do that more often. Laugh. I want to hear it... to see it."

"You make me want to," he admitted, his tone raspy. "I never thought I would again, but you..."

He picked up the dreaded medicine cup once more. "You do need to drink this."

"Do not."

"Do, too." It pressed against her mouth again. "Drink, Riel."

Riel. The pet name made her insides twist pleasantly.

"Riel..." she savored the way it sounded. "I like it."

"You do?"

Emeriel nodded enthusiastically. "Very much. Call me... Riel, Your Grace."

"I will, darling," he promised softly. "Now, drink."

Reluctantly, she opened her mouth and gulped down the bitter medicine, grimacing.

A smile touched his lips. "Good girl."

Emeriel preened under his praise. "I have the most beautiful dreams..." she confided, groggily.

"Oh?" There was curiosity to his tone.

"Mmm." She reached for him, clinging weakly. "Lie beside me, and I'll tell you all about them."

He sighed. "I'm needed in court, Riel."

"Please... Beloved," she whined, persuasive.

Another sigh, one of surrender. "Leave us, Livia."

She barely heard the soft footsteps, the door opening and closing.

He lay beside her, and Emeriel rested her head on his solid chest, sighing in contentment.

His arms were her favorite place. The safest place in the entire universe.

"I dreamed of us," she fought the pull of sleep. "Of our life together... You were so happy."

"Was I?" His voice was soft.

"Oh yes." She glanced up at him, her eyes heavy. "I was heavy... with your child."

In that instant, Emeriel was grateful she could see his face. Could see the raw hunger that sparked in his eyes.

The longing...

Sick or not, it was a sight that would forever be imprinted on her heart.

Her powerful mate looked... as though he might cry.

"It's not something that will happen for me... for us anytime soon," he said hoarsely, his eyes finally breaking away from hers. "Not for centuries to come."

She ran a soothing hand over his chest, grounding herself in the steady rise and fall of his breathing, trying to keep her drug-addled mind focused.

"My late bondmate and I were together for four millennia and only two sons to show for it. Our youngest was eight hundred years ago... we tried for a third for centuries." His voice faltered, and he drew a shaky breath. "I would give anything to have another child..."

Oh, my beloved. Emeriel's heart ached for him.

An old pain surfaced; she had no idea where it came from, but it was right there in her chest.

"Do you know what it means to try for a child for three hundred years, young one?" His deep voice rumbled through his chest.

Closing her eyes, she soaked in the soothing vibrations.

"It means each day feels endless. Every heat cycle that passes without conception is agony for both of you."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Don't be." His hand stroked her arm. "It's a beautiful dream. I would give anything to have shared it with you, even if only in a dream."

Her eyelids grew heavier, his sweet embrace lulling her into that drifting peace.

A memory stirred at the edge of her consciousness.

Something painful yet precious, but she didn't hold onto it. Here, pain had no place.

"It's a lovely dream," she conceded. "Stay with me, my Beloved. Just a little while longer."

"I'm right here." He held her possessively as his beast once had, but with the male, there was a gentle protectiveness in his touch that stirred her very soul.

She liked that. She liked it a lot.

"I'm terrified of my heats... now even more than before." she told him with one final effort. "But I wish... I wish to grow round with your fruit inside me. With everything in me, I wish I could give you a child."

She was nearly lost to sleep when she heard his whisper.

"If you can, I will be the happiest male in the universe," the softest vow in a hungry tone, "If you can, Riel, I will lay the entire world at your feet."