

Chapter 244

PRINCESS EMERIEL

Opening her eyes, and for the first time in days, Emeriel felt... well. More than well, actually.

The persistent headache was gone, the fever and chills vanished, and the swelling faded as if it had never been.

"How do you feel?"

Her eyes found Aekeira seated beside her, exhaustion mingled with relief in her eyes.

"Aekeira..." Emeriel's voice was a rasp.

"You had everyone worried sick," Aekeira said. "For a moment there, we were starting to fear the worst."

"For a moment there, I thought the worst." Emeriel tried to push herself up with a grunt of effort. A sharp pain shooting through her abdomen, and she winced.

Aekeira quickly leaned forward, helping her into a more comfortable position, adjusting the pillows behind her back.

"How long has it been?"

"Five days."

Emeriel let out a slow breath. "Five days... That long, huh."

"I'm so relieved to see you alright." Aekeira's smile was strained. "You really scared me."

Emeriel noticed her sister's hands twitching, knuckles flexing. Aekeira wanted to reach out, to hold her, to be sure she was real, but it was clear she was holding back.

These past few years hadn't been easy on them. Emeriel, in her own pain, had distanced herself from everyone—even the one person whose touch had always brought her the greatest comfort.

So, she reached out first, placing a hand on Aekeira's arm. "I'm sorry I scared you, Keira."

Aekeira was on her in an instant, wrapping her in a tight hug.

Home, home, home. The feeling hit Emeriel so hard, stealing her breath.

Longing surged through her, raw and powerful, so much so that she bit her lip to keep from breaking down. Clenched her fists by her sides to keep from returning the hug, taking shallow breaths to rein in the avalanche of emotion, willing it to stay buried.

"Don't ever do that again." Aekeira scolded, her body trembling. "How could you let yourself be hit by an arrow? You're usually so quick to deflect them! How could you let this one strike you?"

"Oh, yes, I saw it coming and thought I'd stand there with my arms wide open, rejoicing as it tore through my belly," Emeriel said in a dry tone.

Her sister huffed. Pulling back, she gave Emeriel a reproachful look. "So you still have a sense of humor. That's good to know."

Emeriel grunted in response.

"How did I survive that?" she wondered aloud. "I smelled that poison. It was one of those rare, deadly ones. I think it was shezie. Smelled like it." She looked down at their intertwined hands, her brow furrowed. "For a moment there, I was sure I saw the white lights and the train to the otherworld."

"Not even remotely amusing." Aekeira settled back into her seat, taking Emeriel's hand once more. "Your man saved you."

Emeriel had suspected as much. But... how?

No one has a shezie antidote readily at hand, not unless they're a mage.

"He sucked the poison out of you, pulled it into his own body. Lord Vladya said he recited spells that made it possible," Aekeira revealed softly.

Emeriel went still. What?

Pulling her hand free from Aekeira's, she lifted her garment and looked down at the spot where the wound had been.

Nearly healed, there was no swelling, no darkened veins, no lingering trace of the poison.

Emeriel glanced at her sister, mouth opening and closing, but no words came out.

But why... why would he do this?

"Every single moment, he was here, watching over you, caring for you." Aekeira's voice was touched with wonder. "Even while he suffered, while the poison ate through his organs..."

Emeriel's hands spasmed, gripping her garments tighter. He took my poison...?

"He's only away now because of a critical meeting regarding the new project to draw water for the crops. He missed countless duties because he refused to leave your side, Em."

"But why...?" Emeriel's voice was barely a whisper. "Our bond is gone. There's nothing forcing him to do this."

"I don't think this is about the bond anymore," Aekeira said, looking certain and equally amazed. "I think he genuinely cares about you. He took the poison into himself, bore the pain for days. The antidote only arrived yesterday." Shaking her head, she added. "You would have died."

Emeriel's mind was spinning. She couldn't comprehend the depth of his sacrifice. Or why he would do it for her.

And he wasn't fully recovered from his illness.

Emeriel swallowed the tight knot in her throat. "Do they know who was responsible?"

"His bloodhost." Aekeira's eyes turned fierce. "That damned mistress, I don't know why she hates you so much."

Of course. Why am I not surprised?

Emeriel's eyes narrowed. "That foolish woman."

"The grand king investigated it himself." Her sister's expression softened. "When no one else could find a clue, somehow, he did. He nearly lost his mind that night... all because of you."

Emeriel's heart fluttered. An erratic, vulnerable beat.

"Did you patch things up with him?" Aekeira's voice was gentle, but Emeriel stared blankly ahead, saying nothing.

"Em..."

"I'm terrified to," she finally admitted.

Her sister looked at her, pity visible in her eyes.

"I want to hear him, to know what he has to say," Emeriel confessed aloud for the first time. "But I'm terrified out of my mind, Aekeira." Her eyes traced the uneven, faded lines of dirt marring the wall. "What if he says the wrong thing? What if it's pity, or he's only trying to ease his guilt? What if he's just being friendly, with no plans of a future for us?" Another tight swallow. "What if he's doing all this because he feels he owes me something for coming back here to save him? What if he's being nice and sweet simply to return a favor, nothing more?"

"Too many 'what ifs,' my darling sister," Aekeira reprimanded quietly.

Emeriel exhaled, her gaze dropping to the nearly healed wound. "What if he does say the right things?" Her voice was filled with trepidation. "I'm terrified to walk the path of love again, Aekeira. I've been there, and it's heart-wrenching. I feel too much for him. If I let those feelings out again, and he decides we have no future again, I'll never recover a second time."

"Oh, Em..."

"Don't call me that," she grumbled.

"Living this way isn't truly living, Em," Aekeira said, ignoring her disapproval. "Yes, those protective walls shield you from pain, from all the harshness of the world, but they keep you from happiness, from truly living. From taking a chance."

Emeriel folded her arms. "And is that what you're doing? Taking a chance again, after everything Lord Vladya put you through?"