

Chapter 323

Perhaps a brother?

The male smiled wide, shaking his head in astonishment. "I had no idea he knew someone this beautiful." His eyes roved over her with open admiration before reaching for her hand and bringing it to his lips with a courtly grace.

"You, my lady, look absolutely mesmerizing," he murmured. "Who is it that graces our door on this blessed morning?"

Her lips curled slightly. "I am Princess Emeriel, and I am looking for Lord Herod."

His grip slackened, dropping her hand so fast as if it had grown spikes. "Our grand king's female? That princess?"

Emeriel laughed softly. "It is I."

Just then, a familiar laughter rang from within the house. "Emeriel...!"

Her heart soared as she spotted Lord Herod. She barely registered the wide grin on his face before she hurried past the stranger, closing the short distance and throwing herself into his arms.

His laughter was deeply rich as he lifted her effortlessly, twirling her once before setting her down.

Tears burned behind Emeriel's eyes from pure joy, and she bent into a graceful curtsy, despite the dizziness. "My lord, it is a pleasure to be in your presence again."

"You look absolutely stunning!"

"And you do not look so bad yourself," she grinned.

And he truly did not. It was as if the past two years had never touched him.

"Oh, you flatter me, Little One. I—"

"Hold on a moment." His look-alike stepped between them, scrutinizing her in a manner that made Emeriel wonder if she had sprouted horns.

Then, he turned to Lord Herod, expression flat. "You really are going to get yourself killed, Father."

Emeriel blinked. "Wait. Father?"

Lord Herod's laughter rumbled once more, warm and amused. "Meet my son, Dale."

Then, turning to the younger male, he gestured toward her. "Dale, meet Princess Emeriel—my dear friend."

His son's eyes lingered on her for a moment before he straightened and bent into a formal, full-bellied bow. "Your Majesty."

Emeriel shifted, awkward. "You need not bow that much."

Lord Herod smacked the back of Dale's head. "Quit it. You are making my friend uncomfortable."

"No, it is alright," Emeriel assured them with a small smile. "It is just... wow," her head shook in disbelief. "I remember you telling me you had a son, but I never expected..."

Her gaze flickered between them before she huffed. "Though I wonder what I was thinking. In a species where people never truly age, sons are bound to look more like their father's brother."

Lord Herod roared with laughter.

Dale, however, looked less than impressed.

"I refuse to believe I look identical to the old male," he muttered. "I'm not even a day over three hundred, while he—with all his loneliness, self-isolation, and brooding—looks seven thousand, to say the least."

Now it was Emeriel's turn to burst into laughter.

Lord Herod shook his head in exasperation. "Firstly, you are three hundred and seventy-seven years old. And secondly, I do not look seven thousand."

Emeriel felt like she had to add, "He really does not."

"You hear that?" Lord Herod said smugly, shooting his son a pointed look.

Dale scoffed and retorted. Only for Herod to fire back, sparking a heated exchange between father and son.

Emeriel watched them, emotions stirring in her chest. They bickered like this so easily. So naturally.

She was glad to know Dale had returned home, that he was keeping Herod company. But... self-isolation?

Her smile weakened. It had to be because of his lost position.

Her eyes drifted over the familiar surroundings, the manor that had barely changed. Blinking rapidly and trying to fight off the sting of tears burning behind her eyes.

Two years ago, she had roamed every inch of this home, clothed in male slave garb, hiding within its walls, spending time with the one friend she had found in a sea of enemies.

This male had made slavery bearable. Had given her an escape. Had fed her, protected her, and cared for her during her brutal, full heat. Lord Herod had saved her life in so many ways.

And it feels nice to stand here again.

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PRINCESS AEKEIRA

"This is the finest wool in the market. Only the best for nobles and the privileged," the market vendor ran her fingers along the soft material. "Not too scratchy, and perfect for winter cloaks."

"I like this one." Amie said.

Aekeira pursed her lips, studying the fabric. "What other materials do you have?"

The vendor nodded and disappeared into her shop to fetch more samples.

As they waited, a passing Urekai female caught sight of Aekeira—and stopped, looking excited as she took a hesitant step closer.

Aekeira, uncertain what to do, inclined her head first, offering a hesitant greeting.

The female's eyes shone as she bent into a bow. "May your days be blessed, Human Princess."

"Oh..." Aekeira fidgeted at such direct reverence. "T-Thank you."

"You have no idea what you have done for my people, do you?" the female reached out to take Aekeira's hands in hers, patting them gently. "I am a Southern Urekai."

Ah. Lord Vladya's clan.

Moments like this had become her new normal, but they still unsettled her.

In the past, Urekai acknowledged her reluctantly at best. Some referred to her only as the Third Ruler's human mistress, while others blatantly ignored her altogether.

Now, they looked at her differently. Some even approached her warmly—like this female.

"So many of us had lost hope," the female's eyes glistened. "We thought his lineage was doomed to end forever. It is one thing to know there is no heir to the southern throne, but after all those failed bondings, is after watching his attempts end badly again and again—it was another thing entirely to realize he might never have a bondmate."

She swallowed hard, sniffing as she wiped her eyes. "And then, the feral symptoms appeared. We all lost hope. Who would have thought we would be here today...?"

Now, Aekeira was tearing up. Her emotions were everywhere lately.

Sniffing, she squeezed the female's hand. "I am the blessed one. I am lucky to have him."

The Urekai female beamed, nodding fervently. "Perhaps the Gods have finally woken... and at last, they are smiling upon our people."

With another graceful bow, she turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Aekeira swiped at her eyes, clearing the moisture before it fully fell. She barely had time to collect herself before the market vendor reappeared, holding up a luxurious roll of silk.

"What about this fabric? Imported from the East. The finest quality."

Aekeira stepped forward to touch it, and the world tilted.

A violent dizziness crashed over her, so strong it sent her swaying. She barely registered Amie's panicked gasp before her legs buckled.

"My Princess!"

Amie caught her before she could hit the ground.

Aekeira leaned into her support, gripping her head to force the world to stop spinning.

"I knew we should have waited before coming to the market!" Amie scolded, panic thick in her voice as she steadied her. "You are not fully recovered yet! Oh, Goddess, Princess Emeriel is going to kill me!"

Aekeira squeezed her eyes shut, focusing on her breathing. "I am fine. It is just a dizzy spell—nothing I have been having for a while now. I will be alright."

Amie was not convinced. "You are shaking."

Aekeira gritted her teeth, gripping her arm tighter. "Please, do not tell Em. If she finds out, she will never let me out of the Fortress again."

That did the trick.

Amie sighed, clearly torn. "Fine," she relented, "but only if you promise to tell me immediately if this happens again. If you fall to the ground, Grand Lord Vladya will have my head!"

Aekeira nodded weakly. She had refused to see a healer, but now she was starting to bother her.

Why am I so sick?