

## Chapter 105

"Y-yes, your highness," Emeriel confessed, her voice barely a whisper.

"You have been deceiving us all this while. Making fools of us."

Emeriel's legs gave way beneath her, and she sank to the floor, covering her chest. "It was never my intention, your Majesty, I swear it!"

"You understand the consequences for a slave harboring secrets, don't you?" Vladya asked, his voice measured. "Zaiper would have reminded you at every turn, I'm sure. Do you know the punishment for deception, Emeriel?"

A tear escaped Emeriel's eye, tracing a path down her cheek. "Yes, Your Highness."

"And yet, you did it anyway. You knew the penalty for those who lie to us, human or Urekai alike, yet you dared to deceive."

"I know, but it was not a deliberate deception." Emeriel's shoulders slumped, a defeated sigh escaping her lips. "I... I was raised this way. My parents hid my gender to protect me the moment I was born. I have lived this lie for so long that it feels more like a part of me than a secret."

"When you and Lord Ottai purchased my sister, I didn't hesitate to follow her. I didn't consider the consequences, the dangers. All I wanted was to be with Aekeira... we've always looked out for each other."

She paused. "But then, the first day I arrived here, I went into heat."

Lord Vladya's expression remained impassive, but his eyebrows arched slightly.

"It was the first time I acutely became aware of my feminine side," she confessed, looking away. "My menstrual flow was something normal. A mundane task I'd gotten used to. But the heat? It was something entirely different. And when the beast took an interest in me, I knew I was in trouble. Even more so because my heats are irregular and unpredictable."

But I couldn't bring myself to reveal my true gender. I was terrified. I know the consequences, and the hatred the rulers hold for my kind. How could I confess to any of them. I was already facing a death sentence when the truth came out. So, I thought... why not just live one day at a time?"

With a final, resigned shrug, Emeriel wiped away a stray tear. "Punish me as you see fit, Your Highness. I accept my fate."

A heavy silence descended.

"Your sister was well aware of your true gender, was she not?" Lord Vladya asked at last.

Emeriel's eyes went wide.

Light-gods, no. Not Keira.

Emeriel began to shake her head, "No, she doesn't—"

"Careful, Emeriel." The third ruler gave a warning growl. "Remember what I said about lying to me?"

A sob escaped Emeriel's lips. "Please, my Lord. Not Aekeira, please. Do whatever you wish to me but spare my sister. She was only trying to protect me. Everything she does is to protect me."

"Hmm. Everything she does is to protect you," he repeated, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Y-yes, my Lord. Please, don't hurt her, it was all my fault. Punish me."

"During the introduction of slaves when Lord Zaiper ordered you to undress, your sister took your place. Was it also to protect you or because she wants him?"

Emeriel's eyes snapped up to meet Lord Vladya's. "Want him? Lord Zaiper? Aekeira hates him! He repulses her! She once said she'd rather lay with a seventy-year-old corpse than willingly lay with Lord Zaiper—" she gasped, hand flying to her mouth in horror.

Lord Vladya's eyebrow shot up, nearly vanishing into his hair.

Did she really just say that? To a fellow grand lord? A blush stained Emeriel's cheeks.

She cleared her throat. "What I meant to say was, that Aekeira harbors no affection for Lord Zaiper whatsoever. I apologize for my outburst, Your Highness."

Moments passed. A shadow flickered across Lord Vladya's face, a subtle shift in his expression that Emeriel couldn't quite decipher.

"No attraction towards him?" the grand lord pressed. "None at all? Are you saying your sister feels no lust for him?"

Emeriel hesitated.

He waved a dismissive hand. "You may speak freely. Tell me the truth as you know it."

"Never," Emeriel stated vehemently. "Aekeira avoids Lord Zaiper like the plague. She goes to great lengths to ensure their paths never cross. The day he forced her to undress and... touched her in her chambers, she was nauseated. Lust? Aekeira feels no sexual attraction towards anyone. Certainly NOT for Lord Zaiper."

Lord Vladya turned away. He appeared as though he had swallowed a particularly bitter pill.

Emeriel sighed. "Back in Navia, King Orestus treated Aekeira badly. He used her as a pawn, wagering her in bets and duels. He would even offer her to the victor as a prize." The familiar anger simmered within her, but with effort, she tamped it down.

"All my sister has ever known from men is pain and humiliation, Your Highness. She would never attempt to seduce or entice a male unless it was to protect me. That is the only reason she acted as she did in court."

Lord Vladya strode to the window, and stared out into the night, a flicker of... something passing across his features. Sadness? Guilt? Emeriel wasn't sure.

"Please, spare Aekeira. Her only crime was being born my sister. And loving me fiercely. Please, Lord Vladya, I beg you."

"Your sister is exempt from punishment."

A wave of relief washed over Emeriel. "Thank you, Your Highness," she murmured, her voice thick with gratitude.

"Deception is not something I forgive."

She knelt straighter, head bowed. "I accept whatever punishment you deem fit."

With a sigh that seemed to stir the heavy drapes of his study, Lord Vladya sank back into his plush armchair. "You did me a favor. Now, I will give your life back to you."

"Huh?" Emeriel's head shot up. Confusion clouded her features as she glanced at him. She couldn't comprehend his words.

"For all your deception, Daemonikai is here today because of you. You saved his life. I saw you both that day when you bloodfed him, and it got me thinking. It was either the constant mounting of you—his Soulbond, or the drinking of your blood. Or perhaps both. But I know you are a major factor in his awakening."

Lord Vladya turned to face her fully, his mask of inscrutability back in place. "You gave him back to me. And in return, I will not take your life for what you did."