

Chapter 107

Two Months Later.

"What about this?" Aekeira asked, her knees bouncing with infectious excitement.

Emeriel smiled warmly at her sister. "I think it'll look stunning on you."

Aekeira clutched the dress to her chest, a delighted squeal escaping her lips. "Yessss! This is the one!"

Amie giggled, clutching her own chosen garment with equal enthusiasm.

They were gathered in Emeriel's chamber, abuzz with anticipation for the upcoming Lantern Festival. The entire fortress was brimming with an unusual air of merriment, a profound joy that had reached everyone—even the slaves.

For the first time in living memory, there was a festival where slaves were not merely servants, but participants.

Instead of serving drinks, enduring humiliating introductions, and being mounted or whipped for fun, they were permitted to dress up and partake in the festivities alongside the Urekai.

"I think I finally understand why these people were so lost without their grand king," Amie said, her eyes sparkling with admiration. "He truly is a remarkable male. Rumors say Grand Lord Zaiper and several others objected to allowing slaves to attend, but Grand King Daemonikai put his foot down. He said, and I quote."

Amie's hands went to her hips, her chin lifted as she deepened her voice in imitation. "'They will attend the Lantern Festival, Zaiper. According to all I've heard, they have not had a day to themselves in over five hundred years. I have more reasons to hate them than you do, and I do, but they will still have this day.'" Amie's voice returned to its normal pitch, brimming with excitement. "Then, he marched out of court, leaving the lords speechless."

Emeriel chuckled and shook her head. "Amie, you're quite the gossip and storyteller."

"Of course." Amie smiled. "The slaves who served in court during that meeting said Lord Zaiper was fuming, but he didn't dare utter a word in protest. To make matters worse, Lord Vladya even made snide remarks at Lord Zaiper's expense."

The three of them burst into laughter, unable to contain their amusement.

"I wish I could have seen the look on Lord Zaiper's face," Amie added with a mischievous grin.

"I'm just thrilled that we get to have tomorrow to ourselves," Aekeira said, her gaze returning to the dress in her hands. "Oh, I need to start making my lantern!"

Emeriel watched her sister, a warmth spreading through her chest. She had never seen Aekeira so genuinely happy before, and it filled her with contentment.

"I know a place in the woods where some slaves are making lanterns," Amie chimed in. "They could teach us. Who knows, Hansel might even muster the courage to speak to you if you have a beautiful lantern." She nudged Aekeira, wiggling her brows meaningfully.

The slave boy of Aekeira's age, was known for his awkward stumbles and stutters whenever he crossed paths with her. Amie was convinced it was due to a secret crush he harbored for Aekeira but was too shy to express.

Aekeira rolled her eyes. "You're full of jokes, Amie." Then, turning to Emeriel, she asked, "You're going to Lord Herod's again, aren't you?"

"Yes." Emeriel nodded as she brushed her hair. "He mentioned he already has a lantern prepared for me. I could ask him to provide some for you both if you'd like."

Aekeira waved her off. "Where's the fun in that? We'll make our own lanterns." She paused, then asked with a hint of curiosity, "So, does this mean you two are... you know? Is there something going on?"

Emeriel scoffed. "Nothing at all. He doesn't see me that way, and I don't see him that way either. We are simply friends." Unfortunately, the one I do see that way does not even know I exist.

"The light in your eyes just dimmed, Prince Emeriel," Amie observed softly, her words pulling Emeriel from her thoughts.

"What? Don't be ridiculous, there's no such thing. Today is a happy day, and tomorrow will be even happier." Emeriel forced a smile.

But some of Aekeira's happiness slipped too. "Are you alright, Em?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

"It's for the best," Aekeira said, her voice filled with conviction. "Keeping a low profile, staying out of sight with your head down, no one will ever discover your secret, and you will be safe. That's all I want, Em. For you to be safe."

Emeriel understood the unspoken message behind her sister's words. Avoid the grand king, avoid any connection with him, and you'll remain hidden, your true gender a secret. Emeriel knew all that. Lord Vladya had told her so in many words.

She had dutifully used scent suppressors every day for the past few months, except for the occasional mornings when she ventured out of the fortress to meet Lord Herod. Like today.

"Em?" Aekeira's voice was suddenly closer. Gentle fingers brushed away the tears that had silently slipped down her cheeks.

Emeriel had not even realized she was crying. What was wrong with her?

With another forced smile, she quickly wiped away the remaining tears. "I'm fine," she insisted, her voice a bit too bright. "Really. Please, let's not ruin the excitement. Please."

"Okay, okay." Aekeira nodded, her own smile faltering slightly. "Go and meet Lord Herod. Just so you know, I'm rooting for you two."

Emeriel chuckled weakly. "Just as I'm rooting for you and Hansel?"

"It's not like that," Aekeira insisted.

Why, Emeriel wondered. Does it have anything to do with Grand Lord Vladya?

But Emeriel did not ask. Her sister got weird whenever Lord Vladya was brought up. Aekeira insisted she hated the male, and yet... Yet...

Emeriel could not even put to words, the way Aekeira got whenever she caught a glimpse of him.

For over a month, Lord Vladya had kept his distance. He had not visited Aekeira's chambers, neither spared her a glance, nor utter a word to her. They had all been consumed by court matters since the grand king's return.

As for the grand king, Emeriel only caught fleeting glimpses of him from afar. She always maintained a safe distance. And she had made peace with that arrangement.

Well, she had.

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