

Chapter 32

Aekeira turned her head sharply. "What is wrong? Has anyone... Have those masters been cruel to you?"

Emeriel hesitated. But it was always hard lying to Aekiera. "Not both. One of them has...has taken an interest in me."

His sister froze, dread pooling in her eyes, worry replacing tiredness. "Oh, dear lord..."

"You need not worry," Emeriel was quick to add. Saddened by those looks, he aimed to make her feel better. "He has not acted on his desires yet. I reminded him that I belong to a grand lord, and it made him cautious."

"Nothing can make them cautious, Em. You do not have to lie to me. I understand that I cannot always protect you, but it breaks my heart to think that after everything you went through with the beast, not long ago, some useless master is onto you again." Aekeira's sorrowful eyes burned with anger. "Perhaps I should poison him."

Emeriel was so startled that for a whole minute, he was unable to form words. "No! Do not do that. Have you forgotten the consequences of killing a master!? You would be whipped, tortured. Burned alive!"

"One has to get caught first." Aekeira squared her shoulder stubbornly.

"Nothing remains hidden under the sun. Aside from their investigations, these people are Urekai, not humans. They possess heightened senses and numerous magical artifacts that could rival even the mages. You would be caught," Emeriel pleaded.

If they began to kill every slave master who mistreated them, how many would they have to kill? It would become an endless cycle of violence. How long would it take before their own humanity faded away, and they turn into monsters?

"We are slaves, Aekeira," Emeriel spoke softly, his voice filled with resignation as he continued to untangle her hair with the brush. "This is our fate."

A heavy silence settled between them.

"That is usually my line, Em. I am usually the one speaking of despair and acceptance," Aekeira's voice cracked. "You were always the one offering encouraging words, saying all that nonsense about faith and hope."

"Yes," Emeriel conceded. But when one has a secret so burdening, when one's body undergoes weird changes, has been brutally mounted by a feral beast, roughly handled, and lashed with a thorned whip, one was bound to feel so exhausted.

"I am just so tired, Keira," he kept his voice steady and light. His sister must not know how much he was breaking inside.

However, Aekeira, always perceptive, rose again, turned, and pulled him into another heartwarming embrace. Emeriel went easily, hugging her tightly as he breathed in her familiar scent.

Aekeira always smelled like their mother. It was soothing.

Until Aekeira's hand pressed against his back, unintentionally applying pressure to his wound, sending a sharp pang of pain through his body. Emeriel jerked, crying out in pain.

His sister pulled away, her brows furrowed, "What is the matter?"

"It's nothing. Do not worry about it."

But Aekeira refused to let it go. She untucked his shirt from his pants and raised it, her eyes scanning his body intently.

"It's not nothing," Emeriel insisted, gently pulling his shirt over his head.

Aekeira proceeded to remove his other two shirts until the chest-binds were exposed. She gasped, taking a step back, horror blanketing her eyes.

"You were wh-whipped?"

"It was not too severe. Besides, it is already healing. Madam Livia said it will be completely gone by next week."

A tear escaped Aekeira's eyes. "You w-were whipped?"

Emeriel closed the distance between them, his arm enveloping Aekeira, speaking in a soothing tone, "Do not let it trouble you, Aekeira. You have endured far worse—"

"Yes, men have forced themselves upon me. Some I had to cooperate with willingly to avoid incurring King Orestus's wrath. Most times, they only take their pleasure without inflicting violent harm upon me. I am either in pain or numb to it. But none of them ever whipped me, Em."

"You downplay it for my sake, sister. I was there too, remember? I know what it feels like. I would not argue with you on it, but I only want you to be strong for me as well. Just as I have always been strong for you," he pleaded, fighting back his own tears. "Especially on a night like this when I'm finding it so hard to keep being strong, Kiera."

"I am deeply sorry, Em. I am here for you," Aekeira's voice trembled as she began to outrightly weep, her arms holding Emeriel tenderly. "I never wanted this fate for you. Perhaps you are right. Maybe we should escape."

"Aekeira—"

"We will never know until we try! I hate this! I hate that we have to go through all of this, and we are so helpless to stop it! I despise it!" Aekeira cried out with fervor, sorrowfully.

"I live in fear every day, uncertain when I will be sent to please the beast again. It has been weeks, so it will happen soon enough." Her tears soaked Emeriel's shoulder. "Moreover, the ceremony for the presentation of new slaves is imminent. We will be passed around to so many males that we will lose count of those who violate our bodies. They will strip you, and your secret will be revealed. What will happen then? What will they do to you? I live in fear every day, Em."

Silent tears streamed down Emeriel's face.

"We have no one here, Em. We cannot rely on miracles. What awaits us? Will we live like this forever? It t-tears me apart to contemplate such a fate." Aekeira wept, sobs choking her throat. "This is all my fault. I should have never prayed to leave Navia. This is not what I meant when I said those prayers, Em. At least in Navia, you were safe. We did not have to live in fear of...everything. This is a fate worse than Navia."

In the embrace of the night's silence, they cried together.

Aekeira's tears flowed unchecked, her face swollen and eyes red. She took hold of Emeriel's hands, her grip firm. "Let us escape. One day. Let us try."