

Chapter 41

"What!?" Emeriel's eyes widened, as he suddenly halted his steps.

Aekeira nodded, visibly shuddering. "The look in his eyes whenever he gazes at me terrifies me, Em. I know he dislikes all humans, but I do not understand why he hates me the most."

Emeriel's eyes welled with tears, and he angrily wiped his cheek. He had never felt so helpless in his entire life. "I do not wish this for you, Keira. I hate that this is happening."

A watery smile graced Aekeira's lips. "Well, the alternative is Grand Lord Zaiper, so I suppose I got lucky, right?"

"They are both wrong choices. When you chose to undress for Grand Lord Zaiper, I noticed an ugly emotion flash on Grand Lord Vladya's face. I couldn't quite interpret what it was, but it was...unsettling."

"Yes, that..." Aekeira bit her lip.

"There were so many slaves there tonight, why you?" Emeriel wondered aloud. "Why did the grand lords single you out? Our luck is ill-fated and filled with misfortune."

Aekeira, always being Aekeira, shook her head. "Don't say that, Em. We will get through this." Though uncertainty filled her eyes. "At least you escaped them tonight."

Emeriel looked away, his voice filled with resignation. "What good does it do when, three days from now, the slaves who were not introduced tonight will have to serve the court for their Treaty Party? Other slaves whisper that there will be another presentation that night, and I fear they are right."

Aekeira anxiously bit her lip. "Let us not worry about the future just yet. The present is already burdensome enough. At least your secret was not discovered tonight, and no harm befell you. That makes whatever will happen tonight worth enduring."

Emeriel remained silent as they arrived at the door of the high court. Something on his face caught Aekeira's attention, causing her to stop. "What happened? Something happened, didn't it?" Panic filled her eyes.

Emeriel hesitated, "A lord inspected me."

"Wha—"

"But do not worry, sister. He did not expose me, instead, he let me go," Emeriel concluded, managing a smile. "I was fortunate."

"Truly?" Aekeira's eyes widened. "He simply let you go?"

Emeriel nodded, relieved to see the worry dissipate from Aekeira's eyes. "Thank the heavens! I was worried--"

"What are you two doing here? Get back inside!" one of the slave masters barked, glaring at them, and they hurried back inside.

The remainder of the banquet proceeded smoothly. Emeriel couldn't believe the envious looks Aekeira received from their fellow slaves as the celebration continued.

How could they envy something so cruel? So deplorable?

He wished those slaves had garnered the grand lords's attention instead of his poor sister as fresh tears welled up in his eyes.

Night had descended upon the land, casting its dark shroud upon Urai.

Emeriel witnessed Madam Livia and Amie prepare Aekeira, bathing her and dressing her up in preparation for her visit to Grand Lord Vladya's domain.

Then, Madam Livia dismissed him, commanding him to return to his quarters and rest for the night.

"But I could remain here and..."

"No, Emeriel." Madam Livia shook her head. "Return to your quarters and get some sleep. Trying to stay awake and beating yourself to the point of exhaustion will not help your sister. You are only making matters more difficult for her," Madam Livia admonished.

Her voice then took on a sterner tone. One she employed to ensure the maids fulfilled their duties throughout the palace. "To your quarters, Emeriel. And don't let me catch you anywhere else tonight."

And so, he had complied.

Emeriel was restless within his quarters, unable to find comfort in that secluded part of the fortress. He felt utterly cut off from his sister, particularly on a night such as this.

However, being commanded to sleep was a far cry from actually being able to fall asleep. Emeriel did not even try too hard; he was too worried, too restless, and his heart felt burdened.

An hour later, Emeriel rose from bed, gingerly opened the door, and ventured out of his quarters. He longed for solitude and companionship.

He wanted quietness, not to be disturbed, but at the same time he did not want to be alone.

Before he knew it, his feet guided him to the only place in the entire fortress he could be alone without being disturbed.

Emeriel could not fathom where he had summoned the courage from or when he had acquired such a willingness to court danger, but he found himself journeying alone towards the forbidden chambers.

Upon arriving, Emeriel was relieved to see that the soldiers were not stationed at their posts. The hallway was deserted, but unlike a few days ago, the oak door was now firmly locked.

Emeriel sank to the ground against the metal gates and began to weep.

No sound emerged from inside, but Emeriel knew in his heart that the beast was there. Listening without comprehending.

Yet in that moment, he didn't care, Emeriel just needed to unburden himself.

"Now, thinking of it further, I begin to believe that it might not be so terrible if you were to end my life," Emeriel whispered softly, his voice trembling. "Perhaps death would be more bearable?"

He sighed, tears flowing down his face. "They hurt my sister in that court, and it was not enough. And now, he wants to hurt her again, all through the night."

"And it does not end there. Before the fourth night is over, I have to meet with a lord, otherwise, he won't keep my secrets. As if that is not enough, soon today will repeat itself all over again. Another introduction of slaves." Emeriel laid his cheek on the cold ground, sobbing.

"I do not think I've had a peaceful night's sleep since we were brought here, your highness. For I live in constant fear. Fear of discovery. Fear of being beaten. Subjugated. Fear of being treated like an animal. I know not what else to do, grand king." His breath quivered upon the frigid ground, as he strive to suppress his sobs.
