

Chapter 15

"You should not be here, Em. Please, go away."

"And what are you doing here?" Emeriel countered, casting an apprehensive glance toward the imposing metal gates. "Come on, let's leave this place," he urged, taking hold of Aekeira's hand.

"No!" Aekeira jerked her hand away. "I need to be here. But you, Emeriel, you should not. Leave."

"What? No! You do not need to be here. No sane person should be here!" Emeriel seized her hand once more, this time his grip tightened. "Come on, Keira, please, let us go!"

"I can't, okay!?" Aekeira's voice cracked, tears falling, smearing her makeup.

She looked completely tired, as if burdened by the weight of the world. The sight pierced Emeriel's heart like a dagger.

His sister no longer tried to withdraw her hand; simply too weary to fight.

"I cannot leave, Em," she whispered tearfully. "If I do, it will be you who goes behind those closed doors."

Emeriel recoiled at the thought.

But he quickly recovered. "Fine, I will go to the forbidden chambers—"

"No, you cannot!" Aekeira stated vehemently, her eyes wide. "Not you, Em. Never you, do you hear me. I will do it."

Emeriel did not want to enter that chamber, barricaded with metal rods, and face the most terrifying beast that lurked within, either. The mere idea frightened him to the core.

But he would do anything to protect Aekeira. Seeing her so defeated, he couldn't bear to witness her suffering.

"Please, Kiera, let me go. I want to protect you," Emeriel pleaded, tears welling in his eyes. His lower lip quivered with emotion.

Aekeira shook her head, and this time, she drew Emeriel into her embrace. Emeriel clung to her, burying his face to her neck as tears streamed down his face.

"For once in our lives, allow me to protect you, Keira," Emeriel pleaded.

Aekeira stepped back, cupping his cheeks. She offered a watery smile. "I am the elder one here. It is my duty to protect you."

Emeriel wanted desperately to continue arguing, but determination returned to Aekeira's eyes. His sister would never back down.

"Okay," Emeriel nodded at last, conceding.

Aekeira nodded as well, her smile growing wider. "Very well. That's my brave sister," she said, planting a kiss on Emeriel's forehead. "Now, please leave before Madam Livia returns. She stepped away briefly to use the chamber pot in the closest restroom."

"Allow me to escort you to the door," Emeriel insisted.

Aekeira appeared on the verge of protest, but Emeriel gently took her hand and guided her forward. Eventually, Aekeira gave in, letting him to lead the way.

Although Aekeira tried to appear composed, her hand trembled in Emeriel's grasp, and her shoulders tense. She's terrified.

New tears welled in Emeriel's eyes, but he quickly blinked them away. If Aekeira had to bear this horrific torment once again, the least he could do was be strong for her.

They stopped at the metal gates. Emeriel turned to Aekeira. "I will remain here waiting for you, dear sister—"

A low rumble emanated from behind the door.

Emeriel's eyes widened. The growl was so scary he felt an overwhelming urge to flee. To run and never look back.

Even Aekeira's eyes bulged. Yet, instead of running, she clutched his hands tightly. "Run, Em. Escape from this place. Leave the southern wings altogether! Go!"

"Let's go together!" Emeriel tried again, desperately.

"What in Tartarus are you two doing!?" Madam Livia barked at them, coming into view. "Come here this instant, Emeriel!"

Emeriel desperately wanted to protest. He opened his mouth...

"Right. This. Instant." Madam Livia punctuated her words with anger.

Another growl pierced the air, even more thunderous than the first.

Swallowing hard, Emeriel reluctantly released Aekeira's hand. He walked away toward the head maid.

"Enter, Aekeira. Emeriel, come with me." Madam Livia marched off, leaving him to follow.

Emeriel complied and followed.

But a part of him—the same instinctual part that urged him to run and never look back—screamed at him to stay.

With every step he took away, his skin prickled, and a sensation akin to needles spread through his body.

Stay, stay, stay!

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AEKIERA

Aekeira entered the forbidden chambers through the narrow gate at the side of the even larger gate. It was small and slim, the Urekai probably made it that way so they could enter in their human forms without opening the main gate.

She stood frozen like a mouse ensnared in a trap, her heart pounding as the towering beast loomed above her. Its menacing growls reverberated through the air, filling the room with an ominous presence.

Tonight, the feral king seemed even more restless than it had been the other night.

Drawing nearer, the beast sniffed her cautiously, its predatory instincts on high alert. Aekeira held her breath, afraid the slightest movement would provoke its wrath.

The beast's massive hand reached out, its claws pressing against her arms as it effortlessly lifted her off the ground. With a wave of its hand, she was dropped to another corner of the dark room, deliberately away from the door.

Then, the beast turned its attention to the door. Taking two steps forward, it halted and raised both hands...

Aekeira watched in awe as the creature exerted an astonishing force, pushing against the sturdy oak door. With a resounding crash, the door yielded to its strength, splintering into fragments.

Behind the shattered remnants stood the imposing metal gates. The king beast pulled, gathering momentum before hurtling itself at the gates.

Oh, the stars!

Aekeira remained motionless, seated where the beast had left her, paralyzed with fear. Could the beast truly breach the metal gates and escape?

Finally, it became clear why Grand Lord Vladya had been so certain the king beast would kill her that other night. The sheer strength possessed by this creature was beyond comprehension. Immeasurable. Unfathomable.

The beast was on the verge of escape. Yet, Aekeira found herself incapable of making the faintest sound. Her terror so much she came dangerously close to losing control of her bladder.

Again and again, the beast repeatedly threw itself at the door, each impact echoing with a deafening boom. Locks and keys succumbed to its power, crumbling at its feet as the metal gates swung open wide.

The feral king cast one final glance at Aekeira.

She recoiled from its gaze, pressing herself against the wall. He's going to kill me.

The beast approached her, each step exuding a threatening aura of power. Strength.

Aekeira would have wet her undergarments if Madam Livia hadn't insisted she empty her bladder before coming here.

It drew near, bent down, and brought its face closer to Aekeira. Due to the darkness of the room, she couldn't see its features clearly, except for its glowing yellow eyes.

Pressing its nose against her neck, it inhaled deeply. The very spot where Em had nestled her face during their embrace.

The creature growled, licking Aekeira's neck. Twice.

Finally, it straightened up and exited the forbidden chambers with heavy steps.