

Chapter 191

AEKERIA

The next morning, Aekeira was beside herself with worry as she stepped into the grand court alongside Emeriel. They had tried to be brave when they received the summons, dressing in their slave uniforms with unsteady hands. But now, standing before the imposing double doors of the court, her heart repeated somersaults.

As the doors creaked open, Em's hand grabbed hers, her anxious eyes reflecting the same fear that gripped Aekeira.

Linking their fingers, Aekeira mouthed. "It's going to be fine."

They stood at the center of the court, surrounded by lords, high-ranking officials, and nobles, their eyes heavy and assessing.

Aekeira's gaze immediately found Grand Lord Vladya, seated at the right of the king. He was as stoic as ever, his attention solely on the parchment he was writing on, never once sparing her a glance.

Contrary to what Emeriel had said, Aekeira knew he had been avoiding her all week. She had felt it—the deliberate absence, the cold distance.

And it hurt.

Aekeira had thought they were making progress. After the day they spent together in his chambers, when he had shared a piece of himself with her, she had dared to hope. Maybe, just maybe, he was letting her in.

But now, it was clear. He wasn't.

In fact, he had withdrawn from her completely.

Was it the feral madness yet again? Or had he decided a mere human wasn't worth it?

Aekeira wished she could say it hadn't bothered her, but the truth was, she had been downright obsessing over the reasons. Trying to justify his silence, his avoidance.

Maybe their paths simply had not crossed?

So why hasn't he spared me a glance here? Not even once?

"We are gathered here today to make a decree." The grand king's voice rang out over the court. "For too long, these two souls have been bound in chains, denied their freedom and dignity. Today, we acknowledge their dedication and service to Urai. By the power vested in me by this court and in the presence of these witnesses, I hereby declare that the bonds of their enslavement are broken."

Aekeira heard the words, but their meaning didn't sink in. Bonds of enslavements are broken. Bonds of enslavement... broken?

A quick glance at Emeriel confirmed her sister was just as confused.

"From this moment forth, you are free women, no longer subject to the will of another," the grand king continued. "May you walk with your heads held high, knowing you are equal in the eyes of this land and its people. Go forth, live your lives as you choose, and may you find peace and happiness in your newfound freedom."

We are free...?

Her throat clogged, tears stinging her eyes. Aekeira blinked frantically, struggling to process what she had just heard. Had she heard it right? Could it be real?

The room, the faces, the grand king—there was no way this was a dream. Emeriel pressed closer, squeezing Aekeira's hand.

We. Are. Free.

"Let this act serve as a reminder that good deeds can be rewarded, and this court stands in support of new beginnings. Once done from here, a troop awaits to safely take them back home." The grand king finally stared at them. "The future is yours to shape. Be free, be strong, and may you find joy in the days ahead."

Happiness surged through Aekeira, so powerful it held no bounds.

She could feel it radiating from Emeriel as well. Her sister's face broke into a wide smile, and before she knew it, Emeriel was in her arms, and they were hugging passionately.

"We're free, Keira!" Emeriel mumbled into her shoulder.

"Yes, we are, Em." Unreal. Ten months of slavery. Was it really over?

No more back-breaking chores, slavemasters with their spiked whips, barely edible food, nights of starvation, mistresses attacking them, being naked before lords on the roundtable. Was it truly over?

"I never thought this day would come," Emeriel choked out, pulling back to glance around the room. "How is this day even possible?"

Aekeira shook her head. "I don't know."

As the grand king scribbled on a scroll, passing it around to the high lords for their signatures, Aekeira watched their freedom become more tangible with each mark.

With every stroke of the quill, their chains unraveled.

Then, the words the grand king said, came back to her. A troop awaits to safely take you back home.

Aekeira stilled. Her breath, her heart, everything inside her froze.

They were going back home. Back to Navia.

Emeriel tensed too. In her eyes, Aekeira saw the realization as clear as water.

Aekeira looked at the podium where Lord Vladya and King Daemonikai were scrutinizing the scrolls, focused solely on the formalities. Same ironclad control, same poker face and eyes that revealed nothing. Both males, so different yet so alike in many ways. She wished desperately that she could see what was going through Lord Vladya's mind.

Why hadn't he looked at her? Not even a glance.

But she knew why. They were being sent away.

These two impossibly stubborn males were getting rid of them the only way they knew how. Millions of miles across the universe, far enough they would never return.

They want us gone so badly they are willing to set us free for it.

"It h-hurts." Emeriel's broken whisper made Aekeira's eyes water.

"I know, Em," Aekeira's hand clenched into the fabric of her skirt. "I know."

Being free was exhilarating, but at what cost?

Freedom, it seemed, came with its own kind of pain.

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Standing at the gates of Ravenshadow with Emeriel, they gazed back at the towering castle that had been their home and doom for nearly a year. Its magnificent pillars stretched high, almost reaching the sky.

Aekeira noticed the glares from the Urekai people passing by, their hatred directed squarely at Emeriel. The strength of their disdain made her stomach churn.

If it weren't for the protective troop of soldiers surrounding them, Em would surely have been attacked.

Moving toward the carriage, she asked Em. "Are you ready to go?"

Em did not respond immediately, her eyes lingering on the stone walls, tracing every corner of the fortress as if to carve it into memory.

Finally, she turned to Aekeira. "Yes, I'm ready."

Just as they were about to step in, a voice called out. "Wait!"