

Chapter 69

Aekeira quickly reached into her garment and retrieved the book that Emeriel had read yesterday, but Aekeira had forgotten to return to the library. "Here." she handed it to him.

Lord Vladya accepted it, brought it to his nose and inhaled deeply. "His scent is there, but it's faint. It will take more time to track him since his scent is barely detectable."

"What about my hand?" Aekeira asked, desperate. "Em loves touching my hand. He does it all the time. That means his scent would be much stronger, right?"

Lord Vladya stared at her outstretched hand. He didn't make a move to take it. "I don't need to scent you right now, Aekeira."

Goosebumps spread through her body as her name rolled off his tongue. She would never admit it, but her name had never sounded better.

That mistress might already be torturing Em. The thought jolted her, bringing her wandering mind back.

"Please, just do it. I beg of you," she implored.

Finally, he stepped forward and enveloped her small hand in his larger ones, raising it to his nose and taking a deep breath.

Aekeira was taken aback as a low growl rumbled from his chest. For a moment, his eyes flickered with a yellow hue. He inhaled once more before releasing her hand.

"Let's go," he ordered, and strode forward.

Aekeira trailed behind him, praying all the while that Em was unharmed.

Grand Lord Vladya descended the stairs, leading Aekeira through the labyrinthine underground chambers. The multitude of rooms and winding corridors would have surely left her disoriented if she had ventured alone. However, Vladya strode confidently, navigating the intricate path without hesitation.

As they drew nearer, Aekeira heard a voice—a woman's voice.

"I shall subject you to thirty lashes from the spiked whip. Whether you count or not matters not to me," the mistress declared, growing louder as they approached.

Grand Lord Vladya swept into the chamber, his black robes swirling, his presence commanding. "You shall do no such thing, Sinai," he proclaimed, his voice echoing with cold authority.

The mistress's head jerked around, and went as still as a statue. She released the whip as though it burned her hand, and it clattered to the ground.

"M-my Lord, what brings you here?" she stammered, breathlessly.

"I could ask you the same thing, Sinai," Vladya's tone was deceptively calm. His gaze swept across the room, taking in the array of torture tools and the figure of Emeriel, who was suspended like a sacrificial offering. Then, his eyes returned to the mistress.

The mistress averted her gaze.

He took a step forward, and she quickly retreated a step. "I told you to leave the boy alone. How dare you disobey my command?"

Leave the boy alone? Aekeira was confused. She observed as the imposing Urekai guard he'd called Yaz went to Emeriel and began untying the restraints that bound him.

Aekeira hastened forward to assist. "Em, are you hurt?" Her lips trembled with concern.

The profound relief that washed over Emeriel's face nearly moved Aekeira to tears. She had truly lost all hope of being rescued, hadn't she? "I'm so sorry, Em."

"Please, do not apologize, Keira." Emeriel mustered a faint smile. "Thank you, sister. For a moment there, I feared she would scourge my back and sear my skin with her branding iron."

Both directed their gaze toward the mistress.

EMERIEL

Emeriel never imagined anything could instill fear in the Urekai female, but her cowering in the presence of Grand Lord Vladya proved him wrong. Emeriel couldn't help but feel a small sense of satisfaction at the sight.

"What do you think you were doing? Did you really believe I wouldn't find out that you went against my orders and killed the boy?" Lord Vladya snapped.

Emeriel couldn't tell what was worse. His controlled fury, or an outburst? The quiet anger he exuded was truly terrifying.

"Why do you intervene on his behalf? He is but a filthy human! He angered me, and I desired to punish him! What is wrong with that?" Mistress Sinai screamed in anger, her cheeks flushed. "Their lives are worthless! You know it, and I know it."

"I care not for your opinion, nor do I concern myself with your reasons. You have disobeyed a direct order, Sinai, and for that, I must punish you," Vladya declared, his gaze piercing hers. "You shall be confined to your chambers for a week. You are forbidden from venturing outside for any reason whatsoever. Your meals shall be delivered to you, and should you require anything urgent from beyond your chambers, your maidservants shall attend to it. Under no circumstances should you set foot outside your bedroom, for if you do, I shall personally throw you into the Hole."

Emeriel winced. She'd heard Urekai mention the Hole a time or two—a place of punishment, a nightmare made real. A dark enclosed small space where time itself became the torturer, the endless dark a suffocating weight. Their beasts, unable to bear the disorientation, would lash out in a frenzy, bringing unbearable pain to their Urekai form.

Mistress Sinai paled. "You would subject me to chamber arrest for the sake of a filthy human? You would throw me in-into the Hole?" She appeared utterly betrayed. Devastated.

Closing the remaining distance between them, Vladya grasped Mistress Sinai's jaw. "Consider yourself fortunate that the torture you planned had not yet begun, Sinai. Otherwise, I would have thrown you straight into the Hole." He tilted her face upward, forcing her eyes to meet his. "This has nothing to do with the humans, and everything to do with your disobedience. Next time you go against my command, I will punish you severely." He sneered, "Guards."

Two soldiers stepped forward from where the mistress had stationed them. "Yes, your Majesty," they chorused, their voices rough and obedient.

"Escort the mistress back to her quarters," he ordered, his tone as sharp and unforgiving as a honed blade. They moved with mechanical efficiency, their hands gripping Mistress Sinai's arms despite her struggles.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, leaving glistening tracks on her pale skin. Her sobs echoed in the stone chamber as they led her away.

Turning abruptly, Lord Vladya directed his gaze toward Emeriel and Aekeira, his eyes like chips of ice.

They quickly lowered their heads, hearts pounding against their ribs. Emeriel was stunned by the manner in which Lord Vladya had dealt with the mistress. It was entirely unexpected. Judging by the subtle stiffening of Aekeira's shoulders, she too was taken aback.

"Tell Livia to have the boy bathed and freshened up. Emeriel and I need to have a discussion," Lord Vladya instructed Yaz, "I want him brought to my chambers as soon as possible."

Then, Lord Vladya turned on his heel, his gaze already fixed on the door. With determined steps, his cloak swirling in his wake, he exited the chamber without a backward glance.