

Chapter 80

MIXED POV.

Emeriel and Aekeira hurried after him, the guards bowing as they passed, their eyes wide with a mix of awe and fear.

They proceeded in tense silence out of Greyrock, Lord Vladya's shoulders stiff, tension emanating from him in waves. Emeriel suddenly wished he could hide his vulnerable sister away, where neither Lord Vladya nor Lord Zaiper could find her.

Even though Emeriel would readily choose Lord Vladya over the monstrous Lord Zaiper, both men posed a threat to Aekeira. And while Lord Zaiper was openly cruel and sadistic, Lord Vladya possessed a darkness within him that chilled Emeriel to the bone.

Emeriel was truly beginning to grasp the gravity of the grand lord's warning about the potential danger to his life.

Upon reaching the southern wing, Lord Vladya stopped and faced them.

His gaze bore into Emeriel's, fixing him with a stern look. "I expressly forbade you to leave Blackstone."

"For-forgive me, Your Majesty," Emeriel stammered. "My sister was in danger, and I—"

"Did you truly believe you could rescue her from Zaiper, Emeriel? When will you understand the reality of your existence in this land? This is Urai, not some human kingdom. You have no power to make anything possible here. You are nothing more than a slave. The lowest rung of the hierarchy. Less than dirt beneath our feet. Lower than a sewer rat."

Pain lanced Emeriel's heart. Yet he held his ground, refusing to let Lord Vladya witness the extent of his wounded emotions. He would not allow the grand lord to see how deeply his words cut.

"I like that fire in your eyes," Lord Vladya's voice was deceptively calm, the words like honey laced with poison. "Let it burn. Embrace it, for it will serve you well. It will stop you from making foolish decisions."

His gaze hardened. "Had I not finished my business and returned early, you would be dead. Your sister as well. Is that how you protect her? By leading you both to your deaths? When you see your sister engulfed in flames, throwing yourself into the fire won't save her. Nor will it save you."

Tears welled in Emeriel's eyes, cascading down his cheeks. He had not even realized he was crying.

Aekeira stepped forward, shielding her brother protectively from the wrath of the grand Lord. "Please," she whispered, her voice trembling but resolute. "Stop."

The grand lord blinked slowly. "What did you just say to me?"

"No, Aekeira, don't. He is right." Emeriel attempted to step forward, but Aekeira stood her ground. Clearly, she still harbored fear of the grand lord, but her need to protect Emeriel eclipsed that fear.

"He is not right," Aekeira countered, fixing Lord Vladya with a determined look. "Yes, we are powerless in this kingdom. Yes, we are slaves. We have no free will, and our lives could end at any given moment. But we have each other. We may lack the power to defend ourselves against powerful men like you, who treat our lives as worthless, but we have each other. And we protect one another the only way we can. By being there. By doing everything within our power, even when it seems we can do nothing at all. We do everything within our means. Everything."

"Aekeira, please!" Emeriel hissed, his fear for her well-being a tangible thing. No one spoke back to these lords. By the lights, they were doomed.

But Aekeira didn't waver. Her tear-filled eyes remained fixed on the grand lord. "Even when we fight a losing battle, we keep fighting. Because we are each other's strength. What's so wrong with that, Your Highness?" Her voice cracked. "What is so wrong with doing everything you can, even when you can do so little?"

A heavy silence descended.

Grand Lord Vladya stared penetratingly at the human princess. A flicker of something unexpected, admiration perhaps, stirred within him. The girl was undeniably terrified of him, yet she stood her ground and voiced her thoughts.

Normally, he would be enraged that she dared to defy him in such a manner, eager to crush the fragile wings she thought she had, to break her spirit beyond repair for her audacity. To show her that no one spoke to him that way without consequence.

But he wasn't enraged. He was... intrigued.

And though he would never admit it aloud, everything the girl said was true. The boy's actions reminded him of himself. His own relentless fight to save Daemonikai, even when his best friend's situation was beyond hopeless. The way he clung to hope, refusing to let go, even when there was nothing left to hold onto.

Because even if he fought a losing battle, he was not ready to stop fighting. What is so wrong with doing everything you can, even when you can do so little.

"Oh, Aekeira..." Emeriel whispered to his sister's ear, his voice thick with worry. "You should have held it in."

Then, Emeriel remembered that Urekai possessed heightened hearing. The flush of embarrassment crept up his neck as he took a step back.

The rush of adrenaline drained from Aekeira, leaving behind a stark realization of her recklessness. She had talked back to a grand lord, a grave offense. By the skies... Why hadn't she held back?

Emeriel and Aekeira lowered their heads, bracing for Lord Vladya's wrath. Aekeira didn't regret her words, but what if Emeriel got hurt because she had mouthed off to a grand Lord?

Lord Vladya turned away. "Pack your things, Aekeira. You are moving to Blackstone."

The words hung in the air. That... was not what she expected to hear. Far from it.

"Huh?" Aekeira and Emeriel exchanged wide-eyed glances.

Instinctively, they both dropped to their knees. Emeriel began, "We beg your forgiveness, your Majesty. Please reconsider—"

"Rise." Vladya's voice brooked no argument.

They obeyed, their movements hesitant.

"Go to your chambers, gather your belongings, and move to Blackstone," he repeated. "You are clearly your brother's weakness, and since I need him alive, I must ensure your safety as well. The maids will prepare a room next to his. You cannot remain in the southern wing. For now, you reside in my territory, where I can keep a close eye on you. You both will work the gardens until your duties are determined."

She could hardly believe her ears. Disbelief gave way to elation. Was it possible?

"We are deeply grateful, Your Highness," they chorused, relief flooding through them.

"I checked on the beast upon my return. It was my first order of business before I heard about your... situation. The beast is showing signs of restlessness due to Sexlust, but it's manageable for now. I said what I did to appease Zaiper and secure your release. However, in a few days, Emeriel, you will be required to serve him. Prepare yourself." With that, Grand Lord Vladya turned and simply walked away.