

Chapter 87

AEKEIRA

What just happened? Aekeira wondered, her body and soul wracked with pain. Everywhere hurts. She had come dangerously close to passing out.

Her chamber door opened once again, and her heart impulsively reached out in desperation, wishing for Lord Vladya's return.

"Keira?" A familiar voice reached her ears.

A breath of relief left her. "Em?" she croaked.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm here for you." Emeriel climbed into bed beside her and hugged her tightly. "He won't hurt you anymore. I saw him leave."

Her younger sister murmured soothingly, gently patting her hair. Emeriel's body trembled, and Aekeira could hear the strain in her voice. "It's okay, I've got you. I'm sorry I can't protect you from this. I wish I could."

How could Aekeira express to her sister that, despite the pain he had caused, she secretly longed for Lord Vladya to return?

How could she explain that, even in the midst of her hurt, she still yearned to feel his touch, to have him inside her again?

Something was seriously wrong with her.

Aekeira buried her face in Emeriel's throat and let her tears flow freely.

AMIE.

The day bled into dusk, casting long shadows that stretched from the looming towers of Ravenshadow fortress like grasping fingers. Amie walked with Emeriel along one of the many winding paths leading away from the sprawling fortress.

"Where did you say we were headed again?" Emeriel asked. Dust rose from the path with each step, swirling around their ankles like a smoky haze.

"To the barn, my lady. Madam Livia said you should assist me in milking the cows," Amie replied.

A flicker of doubt crossed Emeriel's brow, but he followed Amie anyway.

"Did you service Lord Vladya, last night?" Amie asked as they walked. "I overheard two maids from Blackstone conversing by the well. Apparently, Lord Vladya dismissed a Urekai maid to go mount a human royal."

"Is that what they're saying?"

Amie nodded. "He has quite the reputation with the Urekai females in this fortress. They would give anything to capture his attention, no matter how little he was willing to grant them." She glanced at Emeriel. "So, was it you?"

"No, it was Aekeira."

Relief washed over Amie.

Emeriel was looking at her strangely. "Is something troubling you?"

"No, nothing." Amie's conscience was already killing her, knowing she would soon deliver Prince Emeriel to Master Boris. But the added guilt of doing so shortly after Lord Vladya had mounted her was simply too much for Amie to bear. It was a small comfort that it was not she who had been involved.

"We have arrived," Amie announced softly, gesturing towards a weathered building ahead.

The barn house, its roof thatched with golden straw, stood a short distance away. The air hung heavy with the scent of hay and livestock, mingling with the rhythmic stirrings of the animals. Shafts of golden sunlight seeped through the gaps in the aged wood, creating patterns upon the earthen floor below.

Amie led Emeriel towards the doors, their hinges groaning in protest as they creaked open. As they stepped inside, a large hand, shot out from the shadows, clamping around Emeriel's arm.

Emeriel yelped as he was hoisted off the ground. Master Boris loomed over him, a cruel sneer twisting his features.

"Finally," he snarled, his voice dripping with malice. "You've done well, Amie. Bringing him to me like a prized boar to the slaughter."

Amie flinched at the comparison, her eyes widening in terror. Tears welled up, blurring her vision as she stumbled back a step.

Emeriel stared at her in disbelief. "Wh-what is the meaning of this, Amie?" he stammered, his voice barely a whisper.

"Amie has delivered you into my hands, that is what it means." Master Boris shoved Emeriel back onto his feet, keeping a tight grip on his arm. The man's gaze burned into Emeriel, a mix of raw lust and barely contained anger blazing within. "You stopped working at the inn. Amie is merely fulfilling her end of our agreement."

Amie whimpered, the weight of her betrayal crushing down on her. Shame burned in her throat, choking any attempt at explanation. She stole another glance at Emeriel, his expression a mixture of hurt and confusion.

"I'm s-sorry," she stammered, her voice barely audible. Shame spurred her back a step further, putting more distance between herself and Emeriel.

"Please, Amie, don't leave me here. Please, I'm begging you!" Emeriel tried to lunge towards Amie, but Master Boris dug his fingers into his skin.

Master Boris shot Amie a withering glance, "Get out."

Amie flinched, tears finally spilling down her cheeks. "Forgive me," she mumbled with a choked sob, before whirling around and fleeing the barn house.

MADAM LIVIA

Lord Vladya stood like a statue of iron before the imposing metal gates of the forbidden chambers. His arms were crossed impatiently, and his gaze pierced through the open oak door at the beast residing within.

"My Lord," Livia's voice broke the silence. "You sent for me?"

Vladya turned his head slightly. "Bring Emeriel here. The beast needs him tonight," he stated curtly.

Madam Livia hurried away to carry out his command immediately. Lord Vladya was in the darkest mood Livia had ever witnessed, and she had no desire to be the target of his displeasure.

However, she scoured every corner in search of Emeriel; from the southern wings to the western wings, down to the well area and the clotheslines—everywhere. Yet, Livia could not find him.

By the time Livia returned to the fourth wing, her lungs burned from exertion. Her frantic search had left her breathless, her heart hammering a frantic rhythm against her ribs. She stood before Grand Lord Vladya, her composure shaken.

"He is nowhere to be found, Your Highness," she rasped, the words tumbling out in a rush. "I searched the entire fortress, but there is no sign of Emeriel."

Vladya straightened, his scowl deepening into a thundercloud. He swept his gaze over Livia, "Then question every slave master, perhaps one sent him on some errand outside the citadel walls," he ordered. "And alert the entire garrison. Every soldier in Ravenshadow Citadel will be involved in the search. Find Emeriel. I want him brought before me. Now."