

Chapter 74

Razarr pondered the question. "May I ask a question, Your Highness?" Zaiper gestured for him to proceed. "Could this human be the human prince?"

Zaiper displayed no surprise at Razarr's knowledge. The male had an uncanny understanding of his thoughts, which Zaiper found appealing. "Indeed, it could be."

"In that case," Razarr proposed, "permit me to eliminate him discreetly and bury him in Blackstone. No one would ever trace it back to you."

"A commendable idea," Zaiper acknowledged. "However, I am intrigued to observe the boy more closely. I wish to uncover what makes him tick. Besides, that charming little backside of his..." Zaiper tilted his head to the side, his words trailing off. "Daemonikai's beast had the boy once, and for some reason, it's fixating. I want to mount him, too. I need to understand what the fuss is all about, before I dispose of him."

Razarr remained stoic, offering no visible reaction, but Zaiper knew the wheels were turning in his mind. Zaiper allowed him the time to think; after all, Razarr had a capable head attached to his shoulders.

Eventually, Razarr broke the silence. "You could summon his sister. It is no secret how close the siblings are. If we bring the sister here, the boy will undoubtedly come running."

Zaiper mulled over the idea, his interest piqued. "Go on."

"We shall go to the southern wings and forcefully bring the girl to Greyrock. Outsiders need only know that you requested the princess's presence. I will dispatch a slave to inform the boy that his sister has been forcibly taken. This news will surely prompt the boy to come rushing to his sister's aid. Once he sets foot in Greyrock, his fate will be sealed." He paused. "With Grand Lord Vladya away and Grand Lord Ottai preoccupied with his ailing bondmate, no one will be able to save him. Once the prince arrives, you may release the princess," Razarr concluded. "What are your thoughts, my Lord?"

"I must admit, Razarr, that you are a genius," Zaiper commended. "Secure the princess, and the prince shall undoubtedly follow. Why had this plan not occurred to me before?"

Drawing closer to Razarr, Zaiper slid his hand behind the male's neck, pulling him in for a passionate kiss born out of sheer happiness.

A soft whine escaped Razarr, his composure crumbling into desire as he melted into Zaiper's embrace. The grand Lord kissed him fervently. Thoroughly. Zaiper explored his mouth with hunger, until the scent of Razarr's arousal filled the air.

Relinquishing the embrace, Zaiper stepped back, satisfaction gleaming in his eyes. "You have served me well, Razarr. Vladya is slated to return in two days' time. Therefore, tomorrow, we shall set our plan in motion. I want that princess brought to me, do you understand?"

"Um, I—I..." Razarr blinked repeatedly, attempting to clear his head.

Zaiper watched, amusement dancing in his gaze. He enjoyed seeing his formidable head soldier, usually so composed, reduced to a flustered and intoxicated state because of him.

"Yes, m-my Lord," Razarr finally managed to stammer.

Zaiper turned to face the window, his voice resonating with determination. "Tomorrow shall mark Emeriel's final day in this world. I shall ensure it, without a doubt."

AEKEIRA

Aekeira heaved a sigh of relief as she finished her tasks for the day. Every muscle ached; the water drums were heavy even when only half-full, and her hands were raw from hauling the rough new well-ropes. As she returned the last chipped bucket to the dusty gloom of the storage shed, a prickle of unease crawled down her spine at the sight of the slave master who often targeted her.

The slave master, a bull of a man whose beady eyes always seemed to find her, stalked toward her, his heavy boots kicking up a cloud of dust.

"What are you doing, idling around and dragging your feet, slave? Have you finished your duties?" His sneer twisted his already cruel mouth, his tone laced with contempt.

"Yes, Master Tyke," Aekeira replied meekly, keeping her gaze lowered. It was safer not to meet his eyes.

"Well, there is still more to be done. I want you to clean the water storage areas and the wells to minimize contamination." His voice held a new, oily note, a threat veiled as a command.

Aekeira thought of the work she had promised to assist Em with, as she was planting new flowers that day. Her hesitation was a heartbeat too long.

The slave master's face mottled an ugly red, rage twisting his features. "How dare you stand there silently? I gave you an order!"

"Y-yes, of course, Master," Aekeira stammered, spinning around to hasten to her designated duty spot.

But the slave master was not willing to let her off so easily. "Stop right there! Five lashes of the whip for your blatant disobedience!"

"But, Master, I did not—"

"Ten lashes! One of you slaves fetch me the whip!" the slave master bellowed, and a nearby slave scuttled off, returning moments later with a sturdy whip, handing it over to the slave master. The leather gleamed darkly in the harsh sunlight.

Aekeira's heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic bird against its cage. Oh stars, what had she done to deserve this?

"Bare your back, slave!" The master's whip hissed through the air.

She closed her eyes, the rough fabric of her tunic suddenly suffocating against her skin. Just as the first blow was about to fall, the crack of the whip was drowned out by approaching footsteps, and a voice that cut through the air like a blade.

"Slave master, I am afraid I must interrupt," a cool female voice interjected.

Hope, fragile as a sparrow's wing, flickered within Aekeira. But as she turned, that hope withered. The woman was undeniably a wealthy lady with her extravagant gown and jewels. She was also heavily pregnant.

A mistress, perhaps? Aekeira's stomach twisted.

Aekeira recalled her encounter with Mistress Sinai and knew well that appearances could be deceiving. Even the seemingly gentlest Urekai mistress could be far crueler than the slave masters.

Was this retribution? Had she come to make her pay for being the cause of Mistress Sinai's punishment?

"I hope you don't mind if I borrow your slave?" the mistress added, her voice as smooth and polished as the gems at her throat.

The slave master, previously puffed with rage, deflated. The whip fell from his numb fingers. "Of course, M-mistress," he stammered, bowing so low his greasy hair nearly brushed the dirt.

The mistress's gaze landed on Aekeira, heavy and appraising. "Come with me," she commanded, her tone brokering no argument. She turned, her swollen belly shifting beneath the elaborate fabric of her dress.

Aekeira straightened her tunic, the harsh material rough against her fear-slicked skin. She fell into step behind the mistress, her every sense strained. The mistress's maidservants trailed behind, their gazes sharp as needles. The silence between her and the mistress stretched, each unasked question tightening the knot in Aekeira's gut.

Who was this woman? What did she want from her?