

Chapter 97

SECOND TO LAST CHAPTER FOR PART I.

"Ukxae," Yaz's voice broke the silence once more, filled with astonishment. "Your Highness, if the grand king continues, he will drain the boy."

It was true. Finally, Vladya managed to overcome his shock, forcing his stiff limbs to move. Yet his steps faltered after a single stride.

He watched, transfixed, as Daemonikai's beast withdrew its fang from the boy's neck, all on its own, sealing the wound with a gentle swipe of its tongue.

"They will kill you," the boy's voice was a fragile whisper against the beast's fur, barely audible even to Vladya's heightened senses. "I don't want you to die."

But Vladya had heard it. Every word, every tremor of despair.

He had heard Emeriel's plea for help, the beast's answering roar, the raw exchange of trust and need, and now, this.

"I wish for you to get better," Emeriel's words were starting to slur now, "Oh... I feel drowsy."

The boy was high as the heavens. Blood-drunk, just like his sister.

The lingering scent of Aekeira still clung to him, intertwined with the warmth of her moisture on his inner robe.

Vladya needed to leave before the beast sensed his presence and considered him a threat. He retreated, his steps quick and silent. Yaz following behind him.

His head spun with a whirlwind of thoughts, his mind racing to make sense of it all.

There were missing pieces, gaps that needed to be filled.

Vladya needed time to think and connect the dots. He was overlooking something. That tiny, elusive detail that would finally make everything come together and make sense.

What in the world just happened back there? What had he just witnessed?

He would find out.

AEKIERA

That night, Aekeira sat beside Emeriel's bed. Her fingers gently combing through her sleeping sister's jet-black hair, her gaze fixed on the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest.

"My brave, brave little sister," she whispered.

To think she'd been blissfully unaware while Em had fought for her life today, not once, but twice, filled her with a shame she couldn't shake.

Guilt gnawed at her. Aekeira should protect her little sister, not the other way around. She was the elder, after all.

Aekeira was the weak one, always hiding behind Em's courage. Em was the one who worked extra hard, not only to keep up with the boys but to shield her sister in the process.

Their lives had always been harsh, yet they had found happiness in each other. Even amidst sorrow, they had shared smiles.

"Once we lose our smiles, we have nothing else," Em used to say.

Once so unflappable, her poor sister had become withdrawn and easily frightened. Em had lost her smile, now she cried almost every day. Even tonight.

Consumed with the pain of the beast's death on the morrow, she had cried herself to sleep.

"Keira?" Em stirred, her voice groggy, eyes puffy. "Are you crying?"

"No, I'm not," Aekeira smiled, tucking a strand of hair back. "Go back to sleep, Em."

Em's breathing steadied again, her features relaxing.

"Sleep, Em. If they kill the beast tomorrow, I will be here for you. We will get through the pain together. You have been strong for so long. From now on, I will be strong for both of us." Aekeira kissed her forehead, a tear rolling down her eyes.

EMERIEL

A raw, suffocating grief twisted in Emeriel's gut as he gazed down upon the crowd of Urekai, from his shadowed perch on the balcony of the southern wing. Heart heavy with sorrow.

The night enveloped the surroundings in darkness, yet the multitude of fire torches held by each Urekai illuminated the scene as if it were daylight. They assembled at the tournament arena, filling every seat, leaving no corner unoccupied—Some were even standing. Soldiers and Urekai maids were granted permission to attend, while humans were strictly forbidden.

"Any human found near the arena shall be burned alive," Lord Zaiper had stated, earlier that morning.

Thus, everyone was confined to quarters. However, Emeriel had slipped away. Not out of a desire for death, but because he simply could not bear to remain within the suffocating walls of his chamber. He had tried to stay put, he truly had.

Yet this pain... it was a living thing, gnawing at him from within. His heart burned, each beat a searing agony.

They will kill him tonight.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the image, swallowing a sob. The weight in his chest threatened to suffocate him.

"Em...?" a soft, gentle voice called.

Emeriel turned, tears streaming down his face as he met Aekeira's gaze. A helpless plea in his eyes.

"Oh Em, don't do this to yourself," Aekeira whispered, her voice filled with worry.

His sister looked exhausted, she had been frantic with worry since yesterday, stressed for him.

Yesterday, Emeriel had felt intoxicated in a way he never had before. He had floated a kind of soothing euphoria he'd never known, all because his Beloved had drunk from him. A strange lightness. Blissful. Relaxing.

He had woken afterward, in the forbidden chamber, the beast's arm draped protectively over him.

And now, they would execute him.

"Don't, don't," Aekeira pleaded, but it was too late.

Sobs ripped from Emeriel's throat, agonizing cries that echoed his internal torment. Tears streamed down his face, hot and relentless.

"Em..." Aekeira whispered helplessly, pulling him into a tight embrace.

"It hurts," he gasped, his body shaking as he clung to Aekeira, his voice breaking. "Like someone is sawing at my limb."

"It's alright, it's alright. I am here for you," Aekeira soothed, her own voice trembling as she fought back her own tears. "Let it all out."

"No, she should not." Madam Livia stood silhouetted against the torchlight, her expression stern. "What are you two doing here?"

They sprang apart, staring at the older woman guiltily.

"Do you wish to be burned alive?" Livia's voice was sharp, yet a hint of concern softened her words. "Aekeira, why are you encouraging her to cry and attract the soldiers? You two should not be here."

"Madam Livia..." Emeriel cried hoarsely, but she cut him off with a raised hand.

"Enough. Back to your rooms, now."

Emeriel shook his head in protest.

"Go now," There was no room for argument in her tone. "You both are far from Blackstone, and it's not safe. Come, I shall lead you back to your rooms."

With a final, shuddering sob, he allowed Aekeira to guide him away. Together, they followed the head maid back to the safety of their quarters.

GRAND LORD ZAIPER

Zaiper stood tall at the podium, his eyes sweeping over the crowd assembled before him—the vast expanse of faces illuminated by torchlight. He could barely contain the triumphant grin tugging at his lips.

His heart swelled with such joy that he had to fight the urge to whistle a merry tune. With effort, he composed his features into a mask of cool authority. Tonight was a night for celebration.

Finally.

After tonight, he would be one giant step closer to claiming the grand throne.

To his right, Ottai's shoulders slumped in mourning, sadness, and desolation etched on his face. On his left, Vladya remained his usual enigmatic self. But Zaiper could sense the tension radiating from him. The male was a coiled spring, ready to snap.

As they waited for the soldiers to complete their preparations – ensuring everyone was seated and the pathways were clear – Zaiper's eyes settled on three healers seated across from them.

They were the ones responsible for concocting the poisons that had been administered to the beast earlier in the day, weakening its strength. Now, the lead healer carefully coated three ceremonial daggers with a fresh batch of venom.

Zaiper could already envision how this night would end, could almost taste the power that awaited him. It was intoxicating. Exhilarating.

And the anticipation was killing him.

"My dearest people." He rose, addressing the crowd. "We gather here tonight to pay our final respects, and to bid farewell to our grand ruler. Tonight, he will officially join our ancestors in the realm beyond."

Zaiper's heightened senses picked up the soft sounds of weeping from the crowd and resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"Soldiers, bring forth the beast," he commanded.

The sound of doors creaking open, followed by the rattle of chains. Ten soldiers emerged, laboriously carrying a massive cage of reinforced steel, designed to withstand tremendous force. Inside, the colossal beast lay motionless.

Zaiper noted the numerous darts embedded in the beast's hide, the tools used to subdue and weaken it. And it had worked.

Though they lacked the power of the Eclipse Moon, Daemonikai's legendary beast had been reduced to the state of a mere lad, stripped of its power and menace.

Gazing upon the creature, Zaiper could scarcely believe this was the same beast that had overpowered him and his own beast on countless occasions, more times than he cared to admit.

Tonight was his night.

He could almost taste the victory.