

Chapter 238

Daemonikai had tried not to push him into talking over the years, but seeing all this pain in Ottai's eyes tugged at his heartstrings.

"I have no idea what I would have done if I'd lost Morina too," Ottai shook his head. "The thought alone tears me apart. I can't pretend to understand what you've gone through, but I selfishly wish... I wish you wouldn't leave us." He took a shaky breath, steadying himself. "Don't leave us, Daemon."

"I won't," Daemonikai vowed, surprising even himself.

It was the first time he had said it aloud, and for once, he truly meant it.

Pushing the shadows of grief aside, he spoke clearly, each word a promise. "Not anymore. I'm here to stay."

"Good, that's good," Ottai said, nodding in relief.

Daemonikai expected to be released then, but instead, he was squeezed tighter.

"Now, suffer through this one last hug."

Daemonikai let out a dramatic, insufferable sigh but didn't resist. "You do realize you're a full-grown male now? No longer that little slip of a lad who followed me everywhere three millennia ago?"

Ottai shrugged, unfazed. "Yeah, well, I still need a good hug every now and then."

"No, what you need is to grow up," Daemonikai retorted with amusement.

Ottai had always been the 'baby' of their group. Not only was he the youngest, but Daemonikai and Vladya had been present at his birth.

He had attached himself to Daemonikai's side, following him everywhere as a youngling. It was safe to say Daemonikai had helped raise him.

And some things never changed. Ottai was, and always had been, a notorious cuddle-slut.

Three and a half millennia hadn't lessened that one bit.

With a defeated sigh, Daemonikai relaxed against the cushions, allowing Ottai to cling to him. "Fine, you may continue molesting me."

"Oh, stop complaining, Ancient One." Ottai chuckled. "You know you like this."

He did, though Daemonikai never admit it. The closeness, the ease, felt like old times.

Before the pain, before the deaths. Before life had dealt them all a hard blow.

Just like old times.

At long last, Ottai pulled back, straightening his robes and making a half-hearted attempt to tame his mussed hair. A sly, wolfish grin spread across his face. "Thanks, Papa Daemon. I needed that."

"You really are still Bratty Little Tee, aren't you?" Daemonikai pursed his lips, shaking his head. "Beneath all those heavy robes and titles, you're still the same young lad who used to run away from his nurses, butt naked, from Mabblewood all the way to Frostfall, clutching his clothes for me to help him put them on."

"You know it." Ottai replied with a shrug, his grin widening.

"Brat." Daemonikai muttered, though a fond smile tugged at his lips.

Then, a thought crossed his mind, and his expression shifted slightly. "Have you heard from Vladya? He returns tonight, doesn't he?"

"Oh yes, we expect them any minute," Ottai was excited. "I'm thrilled he's returning to the fortress. Everything is finally falling back into place, and—"

A sudden commotion from outside pulled both their attention.

Daemonikai rose, striding to the window. He peered down, scanning the lands below. "What's happening out there?"

Ottai moved to join him. "Perhaps our people are holding one of their celebrations—"

The door burst open, slamming against the stone wall with a loud crack. Wegai strode in, his face even more grim than usual.

"The princess," he said, his voice tight.

Daemonikai turned sharply. "Emeriel?" His brows knitted together. "What's happened?"

"The princess..." Wegai hesitated for a second. "she has been shot."

The room fell into a stunned silence.

Daemonikai's entire body went rigid, and a high-pitched ringing filled his ears, drowning out the world for a moment.

Wegai's voice broke through, unsteady but pressing on. "Arrows. Poisoned arrows."

"What did you just say to me?" The grand king's growl was dangerously low.

Wegai's throat bobbed, and he stepped closer. "A patrolling soldier found her collapsed in the southern garden. She's been brought—"

"WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY TO ME!?" Daemonikai roared, in a thunderous shout that echoed off the walls.

Without waiting to hear more, he took off in a dead run.

GRAND LORD OTTAI

Three hours later.

Ottai waited, practically bouncing on his heels, as Vladya and Aekeira finally made their way through the fortress gates.

A small crowd had gathered to welcome the Third Ruler back, their faces alight with genuine affection.

They reached out to touch him, their hands brushing against his arms, his shoulders, even his paw-like hand.

From where Ottai stood, he saw the rare tenderness on Vladya's face as he exchanged smiles and words with the people, welcoming their warmth in a way Ottai hadn't seen in years.

Someone handed a newly birthed child to Vladya.

Ottai winced, he's going to recoil.

Vladya surprised him by accepting the infant, holding it gently, gazing down at the baby with a look Ottai could only describe as sad longing.

After a few moments, Vladya managed a small smile and returned the infant to its mother before continuing forward.

Ottai didn't miss the possessive arm Vladya kept wrapped around Aekeira's waist as they wove through the crowd.

"Look who finally decided to rejoin civilization," Ottai remarked as they approached.

Vladya raised a brow. "Even a recluse needs a break every now and then."

Crossing his arm, Ottai smirked as he warned. "Better brace yourself. I'm going to throw that no-touch rule out the window, for I'm about to pounce."

Then, he pulled Vladya into a hug, half-expecting the grumpy ruler to push him away. But, to his surprise, Vladya returned the embrace, albeit one-armed.

Huh. Perhaps there's hope for this one yet.

Pulling back, his eyes shifted to Aekeira. "You look better than the last time I saw you." One brow arched. "Happier, even."

"My lord," Aekeira lowered her head in a graceful curtsy.

Voice thick, eyes red-rimmed. It was clear she'd been crying.

"We heard what happened." Vladya's face grew somber. "How is he?"

"Well," Ottai glanced back to the fortress entrance. "It's safe to say he's not in the best of moods. Someone tried to assassinate his Soulbond."

Aekeira choked back a sob. "I need to see her. I need to see my sister."