

Chapter 280

Two Days Later

PRINCESS EMERIEL

She knocked once before opening the door to her sister's bedchamber, only to freeze in her tracks.

They sprang apart—or rather, Aekeira did—leaping out of Grand Lord Vladya's embrace as if his touch had suddenly burned her. They had been kissing.

"Em!" Aekeira's face was bright red. She looked both thrilled and flustered.

"That's me," Emeriel replied with a gentle smile, trying to ease the awkwardness. "Forgive my intrusion. I should have waited for an invitation. I didn't know I'd be interrupting..."

"No, no, it's quite alright!" Aekeira hurried forward, embracing her sister with a quick hug. "It's wonderful to see you. How are you?"

This was the same question Aekeira had asked upon their return to the fortress the previous day. Despite Emeriel's reassurances, her sister's worry remained.

"I'm well, truly," Emeriel insisted, then turned to the third ruler with a respectful curtsy. "Your Highness."

"Princess." Lord Vladya inclined his head in acknowledgment, his usual composure firmly in place. "Has Daemonikai returned from the training grounds?"

"Not yet." Emeriel tried to keep the longing out of her voice.

Her grand king had been absent since dawn, leaving Emeriel to fill the hours tending the gardens and overseeing the planting of new crops.

She had returned to the fortress only to hear he still hadn't come back from training. She missed him terribly.

"He should return soon," Lord Vladya said. "Enjoy your sister's company in the meantime. I shall take my leave." He clasped his hands behind his back, and Emeriel's eyes widened in surprise.

"Lord Vladya, your hand..." she gasped, unable to contain her astonishment.

The hand that had been trapped in its beast form was now whole and fully restored.

"Indeed." Vladya raised his restored hand, examining it with a genuine smile.

The smile was more startling than the healed hand itself. Emeriel could not recall ever seeing a smile on his face that wasn't a sneer or a smirk. It was... pleasant.

"It occurred this morning," Lord Vladya explained. "I intend to surprise Daemonikai with the news."

Beside her, Aekeira was beaming with joy. Emeriel marveled at how joyful her sister had become these days.

"I am truly happy for you, Your Highness," Emeriel said sincerely, curtsying once more. "And like my sister, I pray your mind will heal as completely as the Grand King's has."

She paused. "I also wanted to express my gratitude for your assistance in the past. I never had the opportunity."

"I played a minor role." The grand lord waved his hand. "And I won't pretend my motives were entirely unselfish. Keeping Daemonikai unaware of your identity was my primary concern."

"Nevertheless, thank you for turning a blind eye," Emeriel insisted. "And for visiting me after my secret was revealed, when everyone else left me alone."

Lord Vladya's expression softened. "You have matured considerably these past few years. I once questioned Ukrae's wisdom in choosing you as Daemonikai's Soulbond, but I now realize the gods knew precisely what they were doing. You are well-suited to him, Emeriel."

Emeriel hadn't expected such a compliment, especially from him. It was unexpectedly gratifying. "Thank you, My Lord."

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GRAND LORD OTTAI

"Hold your stance, soldier! A wobbling shield will cost you your life on the battlefield!" Grand King Daemonikai's voice boomed across the training grounds.

A young soldier hastily adjusted his grip, his face flushing under the scrutiny.

Grand Lord Ottai stood a few paces away, observing the grand king with a keen eye. His own soldiers flanked him, mirroring his attentive posture. He watched as Daemonikai moved down the line, correcting a young archer's stance.

In moments like these, Daemonikai was a force to be reckoned with. Over millennia, he had led them into countless battles, securing victory after victory. There was no trace of the playful ruler now... only the ruthless commander.

"Archers! Show me what you've got!"

At his command, the soldiers in formation raised their bows in unison. There was a ripple of movement before a shower of arrows arced through the air.

"Many of you are improving," the grand king's voice resonated across the field. "Your accuracy has increased, but your stamina still lags! On the battlefield, that weakness can be fatal! You need —"

His words cut short.

He stopped moving.

A hush fell over the training grounds. Everyone was focused on him, anticipating his next command, but Daemonikai seemed... frozen. He stared at some distant point in the horizon.

His eyes grew cold, his jaw clenched, fists tight at his sides. Tension radiated from him.

Was he lost in thought?

"Your Grace?" Ottai called out cautiously.

There was no response. Daemonikai's nostrils flared.

Something was deeply wrong.

"King Daemonikai?" Ottai approached, apprehension crawling up his spine.

His instincts screamed at him to proceed with caution, his own beast stirring restlessly inside him.

He placed a hand on Daemonikai's shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Daemonikai whirled around and shoved him with a force that sent Ottai flying backward.

The push was so sudden and violent that Ottai had no time to react. He landed hard on the ground, the impact jarring his bones.

Gasps rose from the surrounding soldiers, their shock tangible.

"By the gods, something's not right!" Ottai roared, scrambling to his feet. "Everyone, take cover! Protect yourselves! Wegai, get reinforcements! Keep them close but off the grounds!"

The soldiers scattered, chaos erupting as they obeyed his frantic commands.

Meanwhile, the grand king stood motionless, muttering words Ottai couldn't make out.

What was he saying? Ottai crept closer, straining to hear.

"My woman. Mine."

What?

He is not himself.

What in the hell is happening?

"Must go to her," Daemonikai muttered. "Must have her."

The vacant look in the grand king's eyes added a dangerous focus that looked... predatory. He started forward in long strides filled with purpose.

Ottai moved to intercept him. "No, wait, Daemon! You cannot go to her like this!"

Daemonikai's fist connected with Ottai's jaw.

The fourth ruler stumbled back, but quickly recovered and shoved the king in return. "No! Snap out of it!"

Daemonikai's claws extended, slashing at Ottai with a speed that made his blood run cold.

The deadly intent behind the strike was unmistakable, forcing Ottai to dodge with lightning reflexes. Narrowly, he managed to avoid three more vicious swipes.

Now more determined than ever to stop the grand king, Ottai roared an order. "Send for Vladya and Zaiper! Tell them it's urgent! Go!"

Not wasting valuable time waiting for them, Ottai shifted into his half-beast form, bracing himself for what was clearly an all-out attack.

Every strike, every blow from Daemonikai was aimed to inflict serious damage.

This wasn't sparring; it was a fight for survival.

"Must get to her. Must have her," Daemonikai growled, angrily. "Out of my way."

His shortened sentences, his words gruff... as if he were driven purely by instinct. Mindless.