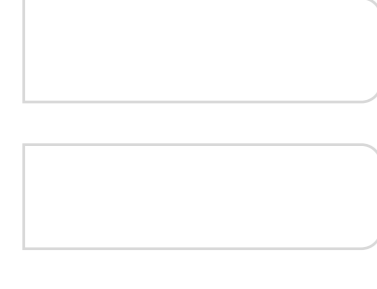


Chapter 162



Daemonikai's insides turned cold, like a dash of ice water had been forced down his throat. Dread filled his gut. "It's me, V.D."

"How dare you invade my space? I should rip your throat out." Vladya was looking at him but not seeing him. His eyes were wild with an intent to kill.

"Scent my neck." The words tasted like acid on his tongue, but it was necessary. Alphas do not bare their necks. He, a grand king, should not be in such a humiliating position, with another alpha breathing at his throat. "You know you want to, big guy. Come on, do it."

Vladya lunged, burying his face in the crook of Daemonikai's neck, breathing deeply. His beast whined in betrayal, feeling so let down by their male side, its head hung low.

But this was Vladya. His V.D.

The grand king closed his eyes and held still, Vladya's breath hot against his skin. "Hey, it's okay. I'm here," he said, keeping his voice calm, his stance non-threatening.

Vladya released another burst of pheromones, meant to provoke. To assault.

"I mean no harm," Daemonikai grunted, raising his hands in surrender, his muscles tense with the effort to remain passive.

Vladya took another deep breath... and stiffened. He shoved away, taking three steps back, eyes widening. "Daemon?"

"Vlad, are you there?" Daemonikai's voice was gentle, coaxing.

The yellow in Vladya's eyes receded, the wild look vanished. "When did you get here? What's going on? Why did you bare your throat?"

Daemonikai closed the distance between them in one step and punched him hard on the nose.

Vladya hissed, clutching his face, and shot Daemonikai a shocked glare. "What the hell?"

Daemonikai landed another punch. On the third attempt, Vladya moved with lightning speed, dodging the blow. "Wait, let's talk about this."

The grand king advanced again, his fury mounting, and this time, a flicker of wariness crossed Vladya's face only fueling Daemonikai's rage.

A guilt-free Vladya would be throwing punches by now. Instead of trying to restrain his beast, his friend would be all over him, engaging him in a fight that would leave this chamber in ruins.

"You bastard. You selfish little—" Daemonikai grabbed his shoulders and squeezed hard, the fabric of Vladya's tunic crumpling under his iron grip. "You selfish bastard."

Vladya slumped against him, as if all energy had been drained from him, his breaths coming out in white puffs against the chill. "You know."

"I know!? I know?" Daemonikai punched him again, watching with grim satisfaction as Vladya's nose broke and his cheek turned purple. But still, Vladya did not fight back, his eyes hollow.

"You dare ask if I know!?" Daemonikai's roared.

"Fine," Vladya sighed. "More. Hit me some more."

"Don't. You. Dare." Daemonikai's hand clamped around Vladya's throat, his knuckles white. "You utter fool."

Daemonikai had dreaded it would be a failed bonding. But this was not about a failed bonding, it was worse. Unimaginably worse.

"Daemon..."

"You were going to leave me? Just like that!?" Daemonikai thundered, the betrayal burning hotter than the blacksmith's forge. "You dragged me back here, to this gods forsaken place, to watch you go mad?"

Vladya stepped back, resignation written across his face. That look—one of weary acceptance—only made Daemonikai's vision go red with fury. It took every ounce of self-control not to take another swing at Vladya. "Selfish piece of work. You were never going to tell me, were you?"

Dead silence hung heavy in the air.

"Say something, you bastard, or I swear to Ukrae, I will tear you apart with my bare hands and hang your remains at the entrance gate—"

"I am sorry." Vladya's whisper was barely audible, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I am just so tired, Daemon."

Daemonikai tried to see past his own anger, he did. But it was a difficult feat. Vladya was going feral.

And he wasn't fighting it.

The resolve, the surrender in his slumped shoulders. Vladya had given up. It was all there, plain as day.

Daemonikai was too appalled to speak. Vladya would allow himself to go feral.

"You're right," Vladya's voice cracked. "I was selfish. I needed you here, even knowing... even knowing I was losing myself. Because though I'm leaving you behind, I can't stand the thought of you being killed. I needed you alive, Daemon."

"You were truly going to leave me in the dark? You were truly going to leave me here all alone?" It had been a damn long time since Daemonikai felt this level of betrayal.

"And if I had to do it all over again, I'd make the same choice." Vladya shrugged, letting out a bitter laugh. "You know me—I've always been selfish, especially when it comes to you."

"You will fight this. You hear me?" Daemonikai stepped closer, invading Vladya's personal space. "You will fight with every drop of blood in you. You will fight with every ounce of strength you have left, and when that's gone, you will find more. You know why?" He leaned in, their foreheads nearly touching. "Because you have no right to give in, Vladya. Absolutely no right to go feral. Not while I still draw breath."

His rage began to fade, leaving a gaping wound of pain. Daemonikai felt raw. "Everyone's gone. You're the only one left... and you were going to leave too? How could you?"

GRAND LORD VLADYA

The betrayal in his voice made Vladya waver, made him hurt. But it was the pain in those eyes that was his undoing.

Closing the gap between them, Vladya embraced Daemonikai, arms wrapping around his broad frame without heed to the slight flinch at the unexpected contact. He held on tight, feeling Daemonikai's body tremble beneath his grip.

"I'm so sorry," Vladya croaked. "Those are the only words I have. I am so, so sorry."

"You stupid, selfish piece of shit." Daemonikai struggled to break free, but Vladya's grip only tightened. "Let go of me, now. I'll knock some sense into you if I have to."

"I'm just so exhausted," Vladya whispered, his voice quivering as he laid his dead heart bare. "Look at me, Daemon. I've walked this earth for four millennia, yet I've never truly known what a bond feels like. The joy of having my own mate, of watching her swell with our child, of sharing the innocent cry of my own blood, never been called 'papa,' never watched my offspring grow. That joy... I can never have that."

Daemonikai's body remained stiff like a board.

"Some nights, I lay awake, and I can barely breathe from the pain," Vladya's voice broke. "I envy Zaiper at times. He never craved any of this, and thus, he lives his best life. He's older, yet his mind is as clear as day, his life fulfilling."

"Zaiper is a vile, twisted little asshat—"

"The longing within me... it has existed for over three thousand years," Vladya said, tears cascading down his cheeks dampening Daemonikai's shoulder. "I live an empty life, Daemon. My beast and I are separated. It's like losing a limb. It's gone rogue, filling my mind with darkness, lashing out when ignored. I've lost myself, Daemonikai. I lost who I was long ago. Now, I just want to rest."

"What about me?" Daemonikai's voice was ragged. "You have me. I'm here. Broken and all, I'm still here. Why would you rest when I'm still fighting? And who told you mating is impossible? So what if millennia have passed? It can still happen."

"It cannot."

"What the hell does that even mean?" Daemonikai demanded, frustrated.

"My soul... it's gone."

The silence that followed was a living entity, thick and oppressive.

Daemonikai went so rigid Vladya feared he might snap. "If this is a joke, it's not a very funny one."

Vladya took a deep, steadying breath.

When Daemonikai made another move to pull away, he finally released him. His friend stepped back, green eyes ablaze with the fires of dread, and a flicker of panic.

"Attempt another joke, V.D.," Daemonikai said, in a desperate plea. "This one really lost its humor."

"When Tiara was dying, I tried to make an exchange." He paused. "Hav'zie de Baah."