

Chapter 163

A series of emotions flitted across Daemonikai's face—shock, pity, disbelief. He grappled for words, his mouth agape, then snapped shut without a sound.

"But you know how unreliable, dangerous, and dark those spells are!" his friend exploded. "We outlawed them for a reason, you and I. We made that decision, remember? What the hell were you thinking, Vladya Theriozydovkar Skyvaktó?"

"Not the full name," Vladya grumbled, almost amused. He might have smiled if he wasn't certain Daemonikai would throttle him for it. His friend was beyond furious.

"How could you!?" Daemonikai roared, the veins in his neck pulsing. "How could you do something like that, dammit! You should have turned a blind eye! You should have resisted! No matter how tempting it was, you should have held it in!"

"I wanted to save her!" A primal roar of his own filled the room. "I was prepared to save her by any means necessary, soul be damned! I never even gave it a second thought. So what if I lost the most important part of my being? So what if I am severed from my beast? So what if I start to lose my sanity? Tiara would be here, my bondmate would be with me, and I would still be bonded. The loneliness, the darkness, would disappear. So what if I lost my soul if I could get my greatest desire!?"

"I was willing to do it, I was ready to do it, I did it!" Vladya was shouting now, the pent-up bitterness and anger of centuries spilling out uncontrollably. "The gods fucked me over. It's not enough they've been messing me up my whole life, they chose the moments I needed them the most and fucked me over. I should have known. Their favor has never been mine. Nothing, not a single desire, has come to fruition. I should have known they would forsake me. Curse the seven gods! To the abyss with the fates! And may Ukrae be damned for all eternity! I am done."

"Vladya..." His best friend looked utterly devastated.

Chest heaving, Vladya took a moment to regain his shattered control.

"I am done," Vladya repeated, his voice now calmer. "I will give them what they want of me. I am done fighting. I am tired, Daemon."

For a moment, no sound was heard. The weight of his words filled the room.

"Only you can tell me to put up a fight, and I will." He glanced at Daemonikai, and the unshed tears brimming in his eyes. "Only you can tell me to resist the pull of the madness, and I will. But please, Daemon, if you have any love for me at all... if you've ever cared for me, please... I beg of you, just let me go."

GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

"Over. My. Dead. Body." Daemonikai's voice was steel. He gripped Vladya's shoulder. "Look at me, Vladya. You will have to go through me before you get to that feral madness. I will not let you."

"Daemonikai, please."

"I. Will. Not. Let. You," Daemonikai reiterated, his eyes boring into Vladya. "You forget sometimes, you're not the only selfish one around. I need you here with me. Alive."

Vladya's gaze fell to the floor.

Daemonikai cupped his jaw, forcing him to meet his eyes. "What did you tell me the night I returned?"

"Daemon..."

"You said not to escape. Not to hide. You told me living was the only choice we had, that we should live even if it felt like hell. So if you think I'm going to let you die, then think again."

A muscle ticked in Vladya's jaw. "I know that," he admitted, his voice tight. "It's why I've kept it a secret."

"Too bad. You are not running away from this. Promise me."

"Daemon..."

"Promise me you will fight it." Daemonikai hated this feeling in his chest. So raw from pain. Exposed.

But more than that, he hated the thought of losing Vladya to madness. He would get a promise out of this hardheaded mule if it was the last thing he did. Because just like him, Vladya's word was his bond. A vow was all he needed.

After all they'd been through, centuries and millennia, through every challenge and disaster, the very thought of losing Vladya was simply... unacceptable. Not while Daemonikai still drew breath.

If this was how Vladya had felt when he'd gone mad, it was no wonder Vladya couldn't let go. No wonder Vladya had gone to such extremes to bring him back.

"I don't care if you have no soul, you will fight it. I cannot lose you. Promise me. Now, Daemonikai said fiercely. "Because let me tell you, if I have to lose you too, I will go on a killing spree. I will slay every last human in this world, including the ones born today. I will erase the human species and turn their lands to dust. I truly will set this world on fire, V.D."

A flicker of amusement sparked in Vladya's eyes, breaking through the tension.

"Oh, stop. That sounds like the most twisted love confession," Vladya said in a lighter tone. "You sound like a lovesick idiot."

Daemonikai didn't share his amusement. His face remaining grim, deadly serious.

Vladya must have seen something in his eyes, for the lightness in his vanished. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Gee, I wonder what gave me away?" Daemonikai crossed his arms.

Vladya's mouth opened. They closed, words failing him.

"Ukrae's balls. Not that the idea of erasing the entire human population isn't tempting as hell, but you can't do that," Vladya said at last. "You'll become that person again. Evie went through hell to purge the world of Daemonikai the Cruel. The Berserker. Vicious Destroyer. Harbinger of Ruin. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Daemonikai stared him down. "You will fight it. You will not give in, easily. Promise me."

"Daemon..." The fight drained out of Vladya, his shoulders drooping like willows. "Fine, you stubborn ancient wagon. Agreed."

"I need your word."

"You have my word." Vladya massaged his brow, adding in a low tone, "I promise."

"Seal it with an oath."

Vladya's frustration flared. "You... Bloody hell." A deep breath. "Fine, I vow that I will fight the feral madness. I will fight with my last breath. Happy?"

Only then did the rigidity in Daemonikai's posture ease. That would be enough for now.

"No wonder people have misunderstood our friendship over the centuries." Vladya snorted, gesturing between them. "Just so you know, this is unhealthy. You are as toxic as the devil's tits."

"Shut up." Daemonikai glowered at him. "Don't think I did not hear how you chose this." He mirrored Vladya's gesture. "How you chose me, over our people for five centuries. You were all that stood between my feral self, our laws, and Zaiper."

Vladya's cheeks flushed, looking uncomfortable. "Forget that." He cleared his throat. "It seems history is about to repeat itself, only now, I'm on the feral side."

"No, you are not, you brat." Throat tight, Daemonikai pulled Vladya into another bone-crushing hug. "I will stand between you and that dark void, you hear me?" he vowed. "Now you tell me everything. How the symptoms are, what you're feeling right now, what you want. Leave no detail untold. Let's fight this. Together. And if you go down, we go down together. You hear me?"

He felt more than saw Vladya nod against his shoulder.