

## Chapter 186

GRAND LORD VLADYA

Since Grand Lord Vladya had promised Daemonikai he would fight his madness, he had taken up running to release pent-up energy, to find some semblance of relaxation.

The voices in his head were quieter, as they had been for the past few days. Less distracting, his thoughts remained clearer.

The librarian had even brought every book, every record on feral conditions into his chambers, and Vladya had poured over them, garnering knowledge he might not already possess.

At dawn, after a long run through the woods, his body felt refreshed as he made his way to his chambers, only to pause at the familiar scent lingering in the air. If Yaz hadn't alerted him to Daemonikai's presence, the smell of his friend would have.

Daemonikai was already in his study, sitting at Vladya's desk, his head bowed, fingers drumming rhythmically against the wood.

"Come on in, make yourself at home," Vladya said sarcastically as he stepped inside.

Daemonikai did not respond. Not that Vladya expected him to. He had been worried about his friend these past few days.

"Hey..." Vladya approached, moving to stand in front of him, leaning casually against the table. "How are you holding up? You smell like her, so I take it you finally paid her a visit."

"You knew all about this and hid it from me." It was not a question.

Vladya had known this would come sooner or later. "I wished to hide it for as long as possible. That was why I placed her on suppressants," he confessed. "I know I should not have done that, but I could not think of how else to protect you."

"And her."

"And her," Vladya confirmed, shrugging. "I have a soft spot for the girl."

"I'm going to let her go."

Vladya nodded. "I already figured that—"

"No." His drumming fingers stilled. "I'm going to let her go."

Oh.

Vladya hadn't foreseen that. In fact, he had not even considered it.

"From slavery?" he asked, more carefully this time. "From Urai?"

Daemonikai finally lifted his head, meeting his eyes. They didn't physically age, but in that moment, Daemonikai looked every bit his age. His usually immaculate hair was in disarray, as if he'd run his hands through it countless times. His eyes were tired, sad, but filled with resolve.

"Yes."

Vladya studied him. "Are you sure?"

Despite Vladya's verbal protests in the past, deep down he knew Emeriel had brought something good into Daemonikai's life. She was helping him heal, whether he admitted it or not.

Daemonikai was not doing as well as everyone believed. He had not taken the loss of his family as gracefully as he made others think, and Vladya, for all his hatred toward fate's cruelty, couldn't deny that Emeriel was a balm to some of that pain. And now, Daemonikai wanted to let her go.

"I am sure," Daemonikai stated, staring blankly at the wall behind Vladya. "I will start the process today in court. In a few days, it should be ready to go public."

"Alright. If you are sure."

"I was never the only one thrown into this." Daemonikai's hand dragged through his disheveled hair again. "She's barely twenty-one years old, and she's been through hell. That girl has never had a choice, Vladya. She lived her life as a male, was sold into slavery, forced to become a Syren, and then a Soulbond. She has been trapped her entire life."

He shook his head. "I'm going to set her free and send her home. Not just for me... but for her, too. She deserves to live her own life, finally, to make her own choices. I figured you should know."

"Okay... but why? You do not need my approval to make decisions like that. You know I will always support you in court."

"That's not why," Daemonikai paused, letting the silence stretch between them. "It's about her sister."

Vladya's expression smoothed out instantly, becoming unreadable. Oh.

"From everything I have heard, those two are inseparable. One is never truly happy without the other. I cannot set one free and leave the other behind," the grand king's voice was quieter now. "I know how much you care for her. Don't deny it—I'm not a fool. You are attracted to her. Aekeira belongs to you."

Vladya opened his mouth to speak, but Daemonikai continued before he could get a word in. "Now, it's up to you. If you want her here, she stays. If not... then let's set them both free."

Quietness fell over the room. Vladya averted his eyes, the weight of the decision pressing heavily on his shoulders.

Daemonikai stood. "I will give you time to think about it. Let me know your decision later."

Without another word, the grand king left the room, and Vladya was alone.

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The next evening, Vladya waited, trying to suppress the strain inside him as Daemonikai and the others participated in the clan's monthly hunt. While the Frostfall people celebrated their success with feasting and drinking, their leader had quietly slipped away, retreating into his bedchambers. Vladya followed.

Opening the door, Vladya stepped inside, stopping just past the entrance. Daemonikai was at the center of the room, his eyes already on him, assessing, waiting.

Vladya leaned against the wall, arms crossed, his jaw still aching from clenching it all day.

"Let her go too," Vladya said at last.

Daemonikai said nothing, still observing him with that acute gaze of his.

"Are you sure?"

Vladya nodded. "Yes."

"You must care about this girl more than I thought." Daemonikai's eyes narrowed slightly, curiosity flickering. "You, V.D., a selfish bastard who takes whatever he wants, regardless of the consequences, are making a selfless decision?"

That managed to draw a chuckle from Vladya, but it was dry at best.

"You know you do not have to do this, right?" The grand king's tone softened. "If you wish for her to stay, she remains."

"It was never going to work," Vladya spoke the words aloud for the first time. "She is human."

Daemonikai shook his head. "Vladya, that girl was willing to be mounted by you the other day while you were half-insane—"

"No." Vladya gave another shake of his own head. "That's not what I mean. It's not about me hating their kind. She's not Syren, Daemon. There's no future to this. None at all."