

Chapter 257

GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

“Someone is feeling quite cheerful this evening,” Vladya remarked as he approached.

Grand King Daemonikai turned, a smile tugging at his lips, one he couldn't suppress no matter how hard he tried. “I don't know about you, Vladya, but I am having such a beautiful day.”

Vladya arched a brow as he dipped his head in a polite bow. “Your Grace.”

“Spare me the bullcrap.” Daemonikai waved a dismissive hand resuming his pace, hands clasped behind his back.

“He whistles too,” Vladya noted, his voice carrying a teasing lilt.

Daemonikai stopped, the faint melody in the air ceasing as well. He blinked, surprised. Was that me?

He hadn't even realized he'd been whistling.

“You know, you're fortunate Aekeira doesn't have our hearing,” Vladya said, moving beside him. “She would have come storming in last night, hearing her sister scream like that all through the night.”

“Why are you suddenly all over my business, brat?” Daemonikai smirked, giving Vladya a sidelong glance. “Come to think of it, someone does look even chipper than I am.”

“This isn't about me—it's about you,” Vladya shot back, rolling his eyes. “And with all due respect, could you quit trying to change the subject?”

“Your ears should be cut off,” Daemonikai muttered under his breath.

Vladya smiled. An actual genuine, unguarded smile.

Daemonikai noticed the subtle changes in his friend since his return. Little by little, glimpses of the old Vladya were surfacing. But this—this sincere smile—took the cake.

“You know, I think this is the first time I've seen you so... happy. It's been a long time.” Vladya smiled.

Clearing his tight throat, Daemonikai resumed walking. “Took the words right out of my mouth.”

“And you can't blame my ears for this.” Vladya tsked, grinning. “You were the one who moved from your well-fortified master's chambers to another.”

That much was true. The Memories of Evie had been too much, too painful. And now... he didn't regret it.

He liked his present chambers. But perhaps it was time he considered converting it into his main residence, fortifying it accordingly.

“Are you two finally going to give this thing between you a chance?” Vladya asked, his tone losing some of its lightness. “Has she forgiven you?”

“Not yet. But I like to think we are working toward that. Last night was...” Daemonikai exhaled, searching for the right word. “...incredible.”

Vladya stopped, turning to face him, his eyes scanning Daemonikai with a discerning gaze. “All these changes I see, they look good on you. The smiles, the easy air... even your aversion to touch seems to be fading. I like this for you, Daemon.”

“I like this for me too,” Daemonikai said, softly. “I didn't think it would happen either. Who would have thought there would ever be a reason to smile again?”

“Not me.” Vladya's own smile dimmed, leaving only the warmth in his eyes.

Daemonikai nodded, his voice turning reflective. “We were both too damaged. We were each other's strength and destruction. We had to part ways to fight our demons.”

“We had to,” Vladya agreed, his tone flat but tender. A moment passed between them. “I missed the devil out of you.”

Daemonikai's grin returned. “Huh. And the love-sick puppy is back.”

“Give me a damn break,” Vladya groaned, rolling his eyes again.

Daemonikai only chuckled some more.

They walked in companionable silence, following the path to the training grounds. The fresh breeze hit them as they stepped outside, crisp and refreshing, carrying the faint scent of flowers.

Paths cleared before them as people bowed, greeting them respectfully before hurrying out of their way.

Daemonikai's gaze fell to Vladya's paw-like hand. A reminder that, one day, he might lose his oldest friend to madness. Don't even think about it.

Swallowing the tight lump in his throat, he cleared it with deliberate force. “So, are you going to tell me what's going on with you? This whole cheerful mood of yours is... glaringly obvious, in case you weren't aware.”

“I asked Aekeira to bond with me,” Vladya said, the faintest smile back on his face. “We will perform the bonding rituals.”

The words, so unexpected, hit Daemonikai with the force of a windstorm. He stopped walking, stunned.

For a moment, he said nothing, his thoughts scattering like leaves in a gale, staring at Vladya as though he had grown a second head.

“I know it will be hard,” Vladya continued, looking uncertain. “Almost undoable, but—”

“‘Almost undoable’ is putting it mildly. ‘Impossible’ is the right word,” Daemonikai blurted out before he could stop himself.

Vladya's shoulders dropped, sadness crossing his eyes.

Guilt filled Daemonikai. “I apologize for that, V.D. That was uncalled for—”

“It's alright. You aren't telling me anything I don't already know.”

“I still apologize. I should not have said it. It's just... I'm happy you have taken this step. Truly.” Daemonikai reached out, clasping Vladya's shoulder. “Knowing how you swore off bonding for so long, it's a relief to see you trying again. But if it doesn't work...” he shook his head. “I don't want you to go through that pain again. To watch you go through it all again when it's—” he searched for the right words. “—when it's bound to fail this time, terrifies me immensely just thinking about it.”

“I understand.” Vladya averted his eyes. “It terrifies me, too.”

“You know how the bonding ritual is performed. Your female has to be in heat on the seventh day, the ritual rites recited while you knot her womb. Your chest parallel to hers—soul to soul, body to body, binding you together forever. We are missing two vital elements here.” Daemonikai paused, his voice dropping. “Your soul and her heat.”

“I know all that.” Naked pain flashed in Vladya's features. “Of course I do. But...”

Daemonikai stayed silent, watching him.

Vladya inhaled deeply, his jaw tight. “But I still want to try.”

Daemonikai saw it then. Determination beneath the sadness.

“I've done this before. Taken every step and met every requirement for the ritual, yet it still failed. Every single one of them, except one.” Vladya held his eyes. “This—what I have with Aekeira—it's different. It's not perfect—far from it. It's not all roses like my past connections. It's stronger, more intense, more... real.”