

Chapter 226

The Soulbond had torn him to pieces.

But if it had been that excruciating for him, Daemonikai shuddered to think how much worse it must have been for Emeriel.

She had carried the bond longer, nurtured it more deeply.

"Are you alright?" Her voice brought him back to the present. She was standing in front of him, her expression cool but her eyes searching.

No. No, I'm not, Emeriel.

She was stronger than he'd ever given her credit for. Far stronger than her delicate frame suggested. Not just physically, but in every other way.

She had walked through fire, and it had changed her. Hardened her. It was evident in every aspect of her being – the way she moved, spoke, and looked. The guarded expression in her eyes.

Will she ever forgive me? Will she ever give us a chance?

Daemonikai let the bow and arrow slip from his grasp, clattering to the ground, and in one fast move, seized her shoulders and spun her around.

Moving with lightning speed, he pressed her against the rough bark of a nearby tree.

"What are you doing!?" Emeriel gasped, startled.

"I need you to listen to me, Emeriel," Daemonikai said quietly.

"No, don't." Fire blazed in her eyes, and her fists clenched against his hold. "Do not!"

"I need to—"

"Let me go! I do not want to hear it." Desperation seeped into her voice, her tone rising...frantic. "I don't want to hear it!"

"But I have to."

She began to struggle, fighting him with a fierceness that surprised him.

Twisting away, pushing him, snarling at him, scratching anywhere she could get her hands on.

Daemonikai hadn't expected that physical strength. Or how angrily she would fight back.

But he easily subdued her, pinning her hands to her sides, his body pressed firmly against hers, caging her in.

"Let me go," she whispered, her head tilted back against the tree trunk, resignation replacing her struggle.

Her eyes were squeezed shut, as if trying to block him out. "Just let me go."

"I'm so sorry, Emeriel," Daemonikai said, words tumbling out with raw emotion. "From the depths of my heart and the bottom of my soul, I am so sorry. I should have never sent you away. I should have handled it all better."

Only the sounds of birdsong and rustling leaves answered him.

"I broke your heart, and it haunts me," he told her, apologetic. "I regret sending you away. Words are feeble, and I'm not good with them. I wish you could look into my heart and see how I truly feel."

"I guess I should have expected that," she whispered. "I told you I never had a choice in anything, and you sought to give me one. I guess I should have seen it coming. After all, we had already agreed there was no future for us, that our bond wouldn't be allowed to flourish."

It was his turn to squeeze his eyes shut. His own words repeated back to him. And there was more where those came from.

"You told me plainly there was nothing left to give me," she said. "That your late bondmate owned your heart and soul as long as you drew breath. So yes, I should have expected it. I should have seen it coming."

Her tightly shut eyes relaxed and slowly opened, staring blankly somewhere beyond Daemonikai's face. "But if you were going to tear my heart out, crush it to pieces, and hand the remains over to me, the least you could have done was tell me."

Heavens. "Emeriel—"

"If you were going to plunge a knife into my chest and drag the blade down to my belly, the least you could have done was give me a warning." Her body began to tremble, each breath a shudder that seemed to shake her to the core.

"Two long years of misery. You would think when the bond went to sleep a years ago, it would end, wouldn't you? But no, the wounds kept spreading until every part of me was raw and scabbed, Your Grace. And they never healed."

Daemonikai groaned. Anguish rolled through him like a dark storm. "I am sorry. I didn't think it through at that moment. I thought setting you free was the best decision. I was hurting, Emeriel. Overwhelmed. I never meant to hurt you this way. Please believe me."

"I do. And that's what hurts the most, you know." Her lips trembled with a bitter, hollow smile. "Because I see the sincere intention of an aggrieved man beneath it all. A male whose world came crashing down and forced to face the world again. I understand that."

Her head hit the tree behind her, the impact making a dull thud. "I only wish it helped with the pain."

When her head made impact again, Daemonikai winced at the sound, knowing it had to hurt.

But she did it again, and again, as if trying to numb the pain inside by inflicting one on herself on the outside.

"Stop," Pinning her wrists above her head with one hand, the other he slipped between the tree and her skull. "Don't do that, please."

"The pain buried me alive and built a house over my grave," she whispered, not missing a beat. "I lost count of how many times I wished for death. I even tried to kill myself one time. To end it all."

Daemonikai felt sick. "Ukrae's soul," he cursed.

"I didn't," she finally blinked, but the blank, faraway look remained. "However, it took losing the best part of me to crawl out of my grave. I had to lose something so precious to claw my way back through those dark tunnels."

There were no tears in her eyes, only resignation. Acceptance. And that twisted his damn heart.

Her dry eyes and detached tone struck him the hardest.

Daemonikai would have preferred tears, even anger...something that suggested there was still hope.

"Please forgive me," His forehead fell on hers as he pressed his body closer to mold into her. "Give us a chance."

"And then what? We have no future, that much is as clear as day. I would never want you to forget your family because of me, but I won't be a replacement for them, either." Her voice was hoarse, weary, yet firm. "Plus, you don't feel anything for me."

"I do," he countered, his ill soul aching. "I—"

"Guilt, maybe. Pity, that too. But nothing more." She conceded flatly. "You didn't know Emeriel enough to feel more, Your Grace."

Taking in a deep breath, she added. "You needn't be burdened by those emotions, I'm a big girl now. I'm not that fragile little girl anymore. I won't cry over you, and I won't ask for more. I don't want more."

She finally looked him in the eyes. "I merely wish for your soul to recover, for you to live a long, happy life, as best you can, despite everything that's happened."

"Hear me out," Daemonikai groaned.

"I can't do that. I don't want to," she said quietly as she straightened. "Now, would you please let me go? I beg of you."

He slowly released her, his hands falling limply to his sides.

Stepping back, she created a physical distance that mirrored the rift between them.

"Thank you, your grace." She stepped away, brushing off her clothes.

"I'm not going to give up, you know," Daemonikai stated. "Not on you, not on us."

She ceased dusting off her garment and gave him that look again—as if he'd sprouted a second head. Turning her back on him, she started to walk away.

"Emeriel..."

She stopped, her back to him. "I don't know what you want from me, but I can't give it." Another deep breath. "I just... can't. Too little, too late, Your Grace. I have nothing left in me to give."

She walked away without a backward glance.