

## Chapter 296

The thought of him losing himself that way again was completely terrifying. For one tiny moment, a small, uncertain voice—the voice of the girl whose body was put through the unimaginable—whispered... Run.

Take his offer, and run far away.

"I see the fear in your eyes," his agonized voice was rough. "Oh, Emeriel... where do we go from here, when I've put you right back in a place where you have to fear me again?"

Her throat worked tightly. Do not waver. Do not falter.

"We will get through this," she said firmly. Spoken as much for herself as for him. "I am not running like a coward."

"Running does not make you a coward. It makes you a survivor." With self-loath, he added. "Run, Emeriel. Run far away, beyond where these cursed hands can ever touch you again. If I have to resort to binding myself in chains laced with dragonblood and scented leaves from the Forest of Abadin, then you'll know things have truly spiraled beyond my control."

Emeriel took his hands in hers, bringing them to her lips, pressing a kiss to every finger. "Why would you use chains laced with the deadliest toxins to restrain yourself?"

"You're missing the point," he looked, exasperated. "I may truly be going feral again—or perhaps I never fully healed from it in the first place. There will be episodes of mindlessness in my future. Times when I won't be aware of what I'm doing. Driven only to satisfy the base instincts of my kind, even if it means hurting the ones dearest to me. Not recognizing friend from foe."

"You said you started to feel strange?" Emeriel's mind was working. "That means you can recognize the signs. That's good. It means it won't always be like last time."

"Emeriel—"

She stepped closer again. "How about this? The next time you feel it coming on, you tell me. Or you tell Lord Vladya, Ottai, Wegai—anyone who cares about you. We'll find a way to help you, Daemon."

Her Beloved was clearly frustrated. "Do you not understand what I'm saying?"

"I do, my king," she replied calmly, folding her arms. "I simply choose not to listen to your perspective."

"Emeriel... I have the power and strength to protect you from everything. But who will protect you from me?" he turned away, squaring his shoulder. "Take the carriage and leave. I beg of you."

The look on King Daemonikai's face as he turned away from her...the pain, the great raw pain, made Emeriel's bravado falter.

I may truly lose him.

"I'm not going back, and I'm not letting go," she stated firmly.

"Listen to me—"

"You waste your time if you really think I will." Emeriel moved to his front, letting her misery show. Her voice small. "Instead of thinking it to death, why not hold me?"

His eyes squeezed close, as though he were mentally restraining himself.

"Hold me, please?" Emeriel sounded needy even to her own ears, but she didn't care.

After over a week without him, after the horrors, all she wanted was to feel his arms around her again. "Please?"

"Hell's balls." Then, King Daemonikai lifted her off her feet with one arm around her knees and the other on her back. Holding her so close as if she were a lifeline he needed.

A needy moan slipped from her as she melted into him. Yes, yes.

He carried her across the study, lowering them onto the plush cushions, keeping her cradled in his lap. His hands were trembling. "You never need to ask. It's just..."

"I waited for you to come, but you didn't." Emeriel's voice shook.

"How could I, after what I did to you?" He groaned. "I wanted to bury myself in my chambers and never step to the light again. I have so many regrets..."

His heart beat unsteadily against her palm.

"I should have ended the hunger strike long ago." Daemonikai continued, his voice cracking. "If I had fed from my Bloodhost... I wouldn't have almost drained you."

She pulled back slightly to look up at him. "Don't do that. Please, I beg of you."

"If you decide to leave, I want you to know that I will always protect you as long as I live. I will ensure your safety from harm, and making sure the human king keeps you safe. You will have the freedom to live your life as you choose, without the fear of being preyed upon. I swear to you."

"While that is reassuring to hear, it is unnecessary. I'm not leaving.

Daemonikai's eyes searched hers, a storm of guilt and disbelief swirling in his green eyes. "How are you still here, Emeriel? How are you real?"

In answer, Emeriel kissed his smooth cheek. "I am exactly where I wish to be."

"How could you wish to be in this hell, with this devil?"

Her eyes bored into his. "Hell may be here, but this devil is my angel."

His strong body shuddered, as his eyes drifted to her lips.

Staring at his smooth cheeks, she asked question that came to mind. "Now that I think about it, I hardly ever see a Urekai with big beards."

Deamonikai stopped. His mouth opened...closed...opened again.

"You know those wild, unruly forests, thick enough to lose a dagger in."

"How could you think about that at a time like this?" he asked incredulously.

"Sorry," she said with a slight smile. "My mind tends to wander when the topic no longer interest me."

He inhaled deeply. "You really aren't going to get into that carriage I prepared, are you?"

She grinned. "I wonder what gave me away."

King Daemonikai swore. "You are a very stubborn and unusual female, you know that?"

Even with the exasperation, she heard it...hope. A frail hope.

He was terrified she would leave.

Oh, Daemon. You truly don't understand the depth of what I feel for you, do you?

Every moment apart from you creates a hole in my heart, stuffed full with chilly pepper. I can't breathe, I can't function. How do you expect me to leave?

His throat worked tightly. "You are truly going to stay?"

"Yes, my grand king." She brushed her fingers along the line of his jaw. "Yes, I will stay."

"Thank you, Emeriel." He buried his face against her throat, inhaling deeply. "I am deeply sorry. I will spend the rest of my existence making it up to you."

Emeriel closed her eyes, biting back a soft sound, her body relaxing into him.

For the first time in days, she felt at peace.

Home, again.