

Chapter 248

That's progress. Daemonikai should be happy. But seeing such despair on her face was agony.

No one he cared for should ever hurt like this, and worst of all, he knew it was his fault.

Closing the distance between them in a single stride, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. His hold was firm, strong, ready to hold her even if she struggled to break free.

But she didn't.

Instead, she trembled, her fragile body tense against his.

"Your Grace..." she said, her voice was a broken whisper.

"I would take all the pain away," he brought his lips near her ear. "If I could, I would draw it out of you like poison and make it my own."

She shook her head faintly. "You already have so much pain. I couldn't let you take mine, too—not if it meant you'd have to bear it within yourself."

Ukrai. His heart twisted painfully. This girl will be the death of me.

She did not hug him back, but she didn't push him away either. She stood pliant in his arms, letting him embrace her.

That much was enough for him.

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PRINCESS EMERIEL

She was tired. Bone-deep, soul-crushingly tired.

Leaving Urai was supposed to lighten her heart. To lift the burden pressing down on her chest, after all, she was going back to her world. There she planned to find a small cabin near the river to settle down and live a quiet, undisturbed life.

The first thing she would do was face the problem of her heat. No more suppressants, no more running from it. If it consumed her, so be it.

Even if it meant arranging five men to help her through the fevered, miserable nights, she would be ready. Anything to make her next heat bearable.

If she survived that, she would live out a small, quiet life, fading into obscurity until the end of her days.

See? I'm making plans. That's living, right?

But the heavy stone pressing on her chest refused to lift... until her grand king pulled her into his arms. And, just like that, Emeriel could breathe again.

The suffocating heaviness eased, and her troubled inner self stilled. His arms were truly the most secure place in the world for me.

Tears pricked at her eyes. How could she ever live without this?

"I'm relieved to see you well again, Riel," he said in a tender voice.

It did things to her... the way he said her name. Soft and intimate, like a whispered promise.

How will you live without all this? her mind whispered.

I did it before. I can do it again. Right...?

"You have been through a great ordeal. I'll allow you to rest." He finally pulled away, kissing her forehead. "Goodnight, Riel."

Emeriel watched him leave, holding back tears.

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She tossed and turned, sleep proving to be her greatest enemy. Her restless mind refused to still, her thoughts shackled to one man.

The heaviness in her heart was back again, the silence of the night too deafening.

At Dawn you will leave this place forever. The thought struck her like a sword.

Away from your Beloved. Never to feel his touch, to taste his kisses again.

Her throat convulsed, and she dragged in uneven breaths, fighting the constriction in her chest.

Never to feel his strong arms around you. Never to touch him again. Never to feel him inside you.

The ache was unbearable. Rising, Emeriel picked up her cloak, leaving her bedchambers.

She walked through the quiet halls, past guards stationed at the royal residence who bowed and stepped aside without question, until she stood before the door to his private chambers.

What are you doing? her rational mind demanded. If you allow yourself to have a taste of him when you are leaving tomorrow, how will you ever survive without it? This is NOT a good idea!

Emeriel's hand trembled on the doorknob. Her breaths came quick and shallow as her internal war continued.

Turn back. Go away, her rational mind scolded. Not a good idea, Emeriel.

But another voice... softer, more desperate, whispered back. Just one last night. I need to feel him one last time.

You know the risks. If you do this, there's a chance your heat will come early. You are NOT ready for it.

"I miss him," she whispered aloud in a quiet plea. "Just this one night with him is all I ask for, is that too much to ask? I miss him so much, it hurts."

A pause followed in her chaotic mind.

You poor, poor thing, the inner voice sighed, resigned.

She gripped the doorknob tighter, and with a soft click, it swung open. Stepping inside, she closed the door behind her.

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GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

His eyes snapped open, his sharp senses registering the presence of an intruder. But a familiar calm settle over him.

His beast purred in his chest, ears perking up in recognition. Her scent reached him, even as his vision quickly adjusted to the darkness. And there she was, standing in the doorway.

She removed the cloak and his eyes greedily drank her in... tracing every inch of her. A vision of sexy beauty.

That almost transparent nightgown hugged her curves like a second skin, showing off every dip and swell of her body.

Emeriel, are you alright?" he rasped, sitting up.

"I need..." She licked her lips, then whispered, "I need you."

Throat going dry, he forced his gaze to meet her face. What he saw there gave his hunger a pause.

It was the first time since her return he had seen the mask of composure completely removed. Too many emotions on her face. Need, fear, vulnerability, hunger, and... resignation.

Something was wrong.

Seeing her so raw, so unguarded, disturbed him greatly.

"Riel... did something happen? You know you can tell me," he prompted, his tone gentler, coaxing.

Her hand moved to the straps of her nightdress, slowly sliding the fabric from her shoulders, until it fell soundlessly to the floor, pooling at her feet.

Emeriel stood before him, completely naked.