

Chapter 258

The resolve in Vladya's eyes was the kind Daemonikai hadn't seen in him in far too long.

"I gave this a lot of thought, and do you know the conclusion I came to?" Vladya's lips twitched into a sad smile. "I still want to perform the ritual anyway."

Vladya was willing to try, to fight, to hope, even when the road ahead looked impossible.

"You know what? Fuck it. Go for it." Daemonikai smiled softly, pulling Vladya into a hug, gripping his back with both hands. "Congratulations, brat."

"Thanks, ancient one." Vladya's tone was light, but the fierceness with which he returned the hug betrayed his emotions.

The soldiers in the middle of drills glanced their way, curiosity quickly masked behind respectful bows.

"That girl is so good for you," Daemonikai said as they pulled apart. "I only watched your interactions briefly, but it told me everything I needed to know. She's changing you in all the right ways. I wish for you to be genuinely happy, Vladya."

"Right back at you." Vladya cleared his hoarse tone. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed for you and Emeriel. I trust you to wear her down—I want to see you remain this cheerful too. That smile on your face? Everyone in this city wants to see more of it."

Daemonikai huffed a laugh, shaking his head, catching sight of a figure hurrying toward them. Her embroidered green gown swayed with her purposeful strides, the gold threading glinting faintly in the sunlight.

"Isn't that Morina?" Vladya asked, curious. "I rarely see her these days. What's she doing so far from Mabblewood?"

"We're about to find out."

Lady Morina approached, offering a graceful bow. "Your Grace," she greeted Daemonikai before turning to Vladya with equal respect. "Your Highness."

"Is everything all right, Morina?" Daemonikai asked. "Are you looking for Ottai? He came out of court with us but disappeared shortly after."

"No, Your Grace." Morina hesitated, looking sorrowful. "I was looking for you. My bondmate sent me here with a message."

The unease in her posture set off warning bells in his mind. "What is the matter?"

"He said he gave his word not to tell you directly, so he asked me to do it instead." Morina shifted nervously. "It's about your woman. The princess, she..."

"Emeriel? She was still in my bed when I left for court this afternoon." Daemonikai's entire body went rigid. "Is she all right? What's going on?"

"She, uh..." Morina's eyes flickered away, hand twisting in the fabric of her gown. "There really isn't an easy way to say this. She has left for the human lands."

EMERIEL

She stood before the glimmering lake, its calm waters marking the first border leading to the great mountain. But the beauty of her surroundings was lost on her.

Her heart was heavy. As though a stone had been dropped on her chest, pressing her down.

She had slept deeply, like the dead, only to wake at the first light of evening to an empty bed, the grand king having gone to court.

At first, she had felt lightness in her heart, happiness in her soul. Last night was amazing. Magical.

But those memories brought the sobering reality of what today was. And with it came the pain.

Now, she stood before the first border, her feet refusing to cross. I made this decision to leave. It was the right choice.

So why did it hurt so much?

"Cross over, Princess," Lord Ottai urged from the far side of the lake waiting for her. "We need to move quickly if we're to reach the great mountain by nightfall."

Emeriel took a step forward, only to wince, stopping.

She could still feel him. Every aching muscle, every tender bruise, was a reminder of last night.

Madam Livia had sent a concoction to ease the soreness, but Emeriel had only taken half. She wasn't ready to forget. Not yet. Even if walking was uncomfortable, she welcomed the pain, clinging to it. It was all she had left of him now.

Tears prickled her eyes, no longer wanting to be held back.

Last night had opened a dam she couldn't reseal. She had fought to keep her emotions at bay during the journey here, but now, standing on the edge of leaving him forever, they spilled over.

She stepped into the lake, a metaphorical dagger stabbing into her heart.

"Emeriel?"

She forced herself forward another step. The dagger twisted, hurting so bad. She stopped, clutching her chest tightly, tears streaking her cheeks.

"Why am I leaving him?" Emeriel whispered, lifting her tear-filled eyes to meet the grand lord's. "Why am I leaving him, L-Lord Ottai? Because... for th-the life of me, I can't s-seem to remember."

His kind eyes held hers, but he didn't respond.

"I wanted to protect myself. To protect my heart." She tried to breathe through the heaviness in her chest. "But why does it feel like there's no saving it from this? Why does it feel like I'm breaking it even more by leaving?"

She turned her gaze to the tranquil waters of the lake, her reflection rippling in its depths. "With every step I take, it's like my heart is being crushed into pieces. Leaving h-him isn't supposed to h-hurt this much, Lord Ottai."

Lord Ottai stepped into the lake, water lapping around him as he crossed back toward her. She took a step back, giving him space, all the while fighting to keep the dam at bay.

"It hurts this way because you still love him, Emeriel," he said gently. "You never stopped loving him."

A sob broke from Emeriel's throat, and her hand flew to her mouth to muffle the sound.

"It hurts this way because you have already forgiven him," Lord Ottai went on, his voice compassionate. "You forgave him a long time ago, but you have been clinging to the remnants of anger that no longer exists. That anger was your shield, the wall you built to protect yourself from the pain—to block your love for him."

Another sob escaped, then another, each one shaking her body. Tears flooded down her cheeks as she buried her face in her hands.