

Chapter 259

“But that wall has long since crumbled.” Lord Ottai took her trembling hand away from her face, holding it. “It’s gone, Emeriel. It hasn’t been there for a long time. Your feelings for him returned, no matter how hard you tried to fight them. And while you were with him again, those feelings only grew stronger. You’re hurting now because you’re trying to run from what you already know to be true.”

“I haven’t even crossed the m-mountain yet, and I al-already miss him so much.” She turned, tracing the path they had walked. “It hasn’t even been a full day s-since I saw him, and all I want is to go to him. To b-be in his presence for the rest of the day.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “How do I live without him, Lord Ottai?”

“No one can answer that question but you, dear child,” He gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

“I don’t want to live without him. I don’t want to go back to the hell of living without him again.” A choked, shaky laugh broke from her lips as she swiped at her eyes. “I thought leaving was the answer—that I wouldn’t survive if he broke my heart again. But now that I’ve thought about it... the truth is, I cannot survive a future without him in it.”

Lord Ottai’s gaze softened, and he tilted his head. “Have you ever told him that?”

“I’m too afraid...” Emeriel looked down at her hand in his, her voice barely above a whisper. “Terrified it’ll be thrown back in my face.”

“Sometimes, the best solution is to step beyond that fear. To take a single step of courage. Because what truly hurts is not trying, but giving up.” Lord Ottai said.

“Riel.”

Emeriel’s head shot up at that deep, unmistakable voice, her breath catching painfully in her chest. Had she heard that right?

“He’s behind me, isn’t he?” she whispered shakily.

“Yes, he is.”

“Lord Ottai...”

“This time, tell him everything. No running. No holding back. Face him and pour out your heart.”

Hope unfurled in her chest. Just hearing King Daemonikai’s voice had taken some of the crushing weight off her heart. His presence alone made it easier to breathe.

I’ve been fighting a lost cause all this time, haven’t I?

“Riel, look at me.”

Her heart stuttered and she looked up at Lord Ottai.

“I’ll leave you two to talk.” Ottai released her hand, stepping back.

With her tear-streaked face, and breaths that trembled, Emeriel turned to face him.

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Weak-kneed, she turned, her gaze meeting King Daemonikai. “I c-can’t do it,” she choked out. “I can’t l-leave.”

He stood there, looking tense. His expression tight, an underlying pain to it.

He didn’t move, didn’t close the distance between them.

So Emeriel took that step. And then another. Closing the space until only the faintest breath separated them.

She tilted her head up to him, tears rolling down unchecked. “I don’t want to leave.” Letting out a heart-wrenching sob, she shook her head vigorously. “I don’t w-want to lose you. Not again.”

His hard eyes softened for a fleeting moment before they flickered away.

He’s angry with me, isn’t he? she thought bitterly. Why wouldn’t he be?

She had shared the most beautiful, passionate night with him, only to leave him a few hours later. I would be furious, too.

So, Emeriel laid her heart bare. “I l-love you.”

King Daemonikai’s eyes snapped back to hers, naked emotions swirling in her eyes. He stared.

“I love you, Daemonikai Vipetheriov Naelzharoth. I love you so much it hurts.”

Grand King Daemonikai moved so sudden, cursing harshly as he closed the distance between them, pulling her roughly into his arms. The force of his embrace stole her breath away.

“How could you leave?” His voice was low and pained. “After the night we had, after everything... how could you leave?”

Emeriel shook her head frantically. Sobs wracked her body, making it difficult to speak.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I don't know what I was thinking." Her words tumbled out incoherently between gasps and cries. "I know I haven't made things easy for you. I was so lost in my own pain... I didn't see yours. I didn't give you a chance—"

“Stop. Don’t say that.”

"No, please listen. I truly am sorry." She clung to him. "Forgive me, Your Grace. Don't ever let me go. I will be good, I promise. I will do anything you say—"

“Ukrae, Riel,” he groaned, his hands gripping her back. “Wait a minute.”

“I w-will be her replacement if that’s what you want,” Desperation edged into Emeriel’s voice. “Just let me s-stay by your side. Please—”

“Emeriel!” he snapped in a sharp, commanding tone, one she had never heard before.

It struck through her like a lightning bolt, silencing her instantly.

He released her abruptly, a look of regret flashing across his face. "Shit, I just used the Alpha Will on you. I'm sorry, I never use it that way. it's just—"

Running a hand through his hair, he gripped her shoulders, his fingers digging into her skin as he forced her to meet his gaze. "Listen to me, will you? Are you ready to really hear me?"

"Yes," she whispered, her chest heaving.

Even if she could get hurt, Emeriel needed to hear what he had to say. "Tell me everything, please."

"First of all, I don't see you as a replacement for Evie. Erase that thought from your mind. You are your own person, Emeriel, with your own unique qualities and abilities. Your own unique spirit and fire. You are two separate beings, and you can never be mistaken for each other. Not in my mind, not to anyone else." He punctuated each word firmly, leaving no room for doubt. "When I look at you, all I see is Emeriel."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he raised a finger to her lips. “Shh. Let me finish.”

Emeriel nodded, her hands clutching his cloak.