

Chapter 261

"Come, let's go home," he said, his voice regaining its usual strength. "Hydra Lake has seen enough of us for one day."

Raising his voice slightly, he added, "And Ottai has heard enough for today."

Lord Ottai was listening? Emeriel pulled back, her eyes widening in surprise. She glanced around, searching for the grand lord.

From behind a distant tree, the grand lord stepped out, a sheepish look on his face. He waved at them, awkwardly.

"How dare you listen in to my conversation, Ottai?" the king growled, his eyes still on Emeriel.

"I tried not to, Your Grace," he shouted from where he stood, his voice defensive. "But no matter how hard I turned my ears off, they managed to catch a word or two." He paused, looking even more guilty. "Or ten."

"Ottai," Daemonikai drawled in warning.

"I apologize, Your Grace," Ottai said, his tone far too earnest for it to be genuine.

The Grand King snorted, shaking his head before turning to Emeriel. "Let's go home."

She nodded, taking a few steps forward, but faltered when a sharp ache shot through her body. Emeriel winced, trying to mask it, but his watchful gaze caught her discomfort.

"Are you alright?" he asked, concerned.

"Yes, it's... uhhh... that is..." This was difficult. How could she explain that her body ached, and she could barely walk right, from their passionate night together?

"I-I'm fine," she managed to say.

He arched a brow. "Are you really?"

Before she could answer, his arms slid beneath her knees and back, lifting her with ease.

"It seems someone isn't fully recovered from her... strenuous activity last night?" he teased, his voice dipping just enough to send her cheeks aflame.

"Stop," she hissed, burying her face against his neck. "Lord Ottai can hear."

Daemonikai let out a rich, low laugh. "I know Ottai looks all innocent and noble, but one of these days, you should listen in on Morina during heat. His look is deceiving."

"Hey! That's not something you say to a lady," Ottai called indignantly from behind them, his tone somewhere between affronted and amused.

Daemonikai stopped, glaring over his shoulder. "Are you implying I lack tact, Ottai?"

"Not at all, Your Grace. Only a fool would do that."

Emeriel couldn't help it—her lips curved into a smile despite herself. She leaned into her Beloved's shoulder, hiding her face, her soft laughter muffled against his neck.

The king's gaze softened as he looked down at her, smiling too.

And for the first time in years, Emeriel felt lighthearted. Happy.

Home.

.....

"Put me down, please," Emeriel mumbled into his shoulder as they passed through the imposing gates of the fortress. "The people will see."

"Let them." His arms clutched her tighter as he moved forward, carrying her as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Oh gods, is he going to carry me all the way inside? The thought both flustered and warmed her.

King Daemonikai—Daemon—didn't stop, nor did his pace falter. He walked steadily with unhurried steps, holding her with pride.

She couldn't bring herself to look at the faces of the people, but she could hear the murmurs.

Whispers filled the air like a low hum, their words indistinct yet charged with curiosity and surprise.

Emeriel tightened her arms around his neck, hiding her face against his shoulder. She felt like she was floating, the comfort of being this way with him replacing the emptiness she had lived with for so long.

For the first time in what felt like forever, she felt truly warm and alive. Like she had finally thawed out after a long, harsh winter.

"Your Grace, the evening court session has started," a soldier's voice announced as they reached the intercession.

Emeriel peeked through one eye to see where they were. She caught a glimpse of the soldier bowing before quickly shutting her eyes again. She wasn't ready to leave the bubble of safety her Beloved's arms provided.

A few moments passed as Daemonikai carried her forward. Then came a resounding call.

"All hail His Majesty the First, the mighty and supreme sovereign ruler of Urai, His Grace, Grand King Daemonikai."

Her head snapped up at the proclamation, her eyes darting around. Wait, what?

Emeriel stiffened in his arms, realizing they were now at the entrance to the Court of Duty. Her stomach flipped as unease settled in.

"You are still carrying me," she reminded him.

"I know." He looked down at her, his face unreadable. All traces of his earlier playfulness gone.

Her unease deepened. What is going on?

But she didn't dare ask. Something about the way he carried himself, the way he held her, told her not to.

The great doors opened, revealing the vast chamber of the court. The murmuring stopped instantly.

All eyes turned toward them as Daemonikai entered, carrying her. The high lords, the grand lords, every noble present rose from their seats, bowing in acknowledgment.

Emeriel's heart beat faster as he strode further, stopping only when they reached the center of court. Then, he lowered her to her feet and stepped back.

The silence was thunderous.

Emeriel drew in a deep breath, summoning every ounce of courage to meet the gazes directed at her.

Some were curious, others cold, a few openly hostile.

She forced herself to hold her head high, unwilling to show weakness despite the storm of emotions swirling inside her.

Though the people had grown more welcoming toward her recently, she knew better than to believe she had their undisputed approval.

Especially here, in this hall, among these high lords.

The memories were still as clear as yesterday. Her first official appearance before them, where they demanded her stripped naked. The second, when they sentenced her to death in the courtyard and cast her into the dungeons without food or water. The third, when they came together to send her away from their lands.

Why did he bring me here?

"I, Grand King Daemonikai," his voice cut through the silence, clear and commanding, echoing with absolute authority. "The first and the only, stand here on this day to officially introduce my woman to my people."