

Chapter 268

Emeriel's tears flowed freely now, impossible to contain. "Please stop. Seeing you like this is tearing me apart."

A third tear fell, his face contorting in anguish. "I am so sorry—"

"Do not apologize, please."

"I am so, so, so sorry, Emeriel. This was all my fault. It was all my—"

"Stop blaming yourself!" she hissed fiercely. "Every misfortune that happens is not your fault, do you hear me? It was meant to happen! It was unavoidable! We must try to move past it! We mourn what could have been, but we cannot blame ourselves endlessly."

Another tear fell, and she wiped it away, her own tears flowing like a river. "We are living beings, Daemon. We are bound to make mistakes, and sometimes... accidents happen. Some things are simply meant to be. Some things cannot be prevented."

As she spoke, her words resounded deeply within her.

All these years, she had blamed herself. Some nights, in the darkness, she had even blamed him. She had hated them both for what happened.

"Casting blame solves nothing," she continued in a softer tone. "It only makes the pain worse. How can we heal and move forward when we let guilt take the reins?"

"Riel... it hurts."

"I know." She wiped his tears on her sleeve. "It is okay, let it out. I've got you, my dearest Beloved. Let it all out."

She pressed his head to her midriff, her arms encircling him passionately. As his body trembled in her hold, she stroked his hair soothingly, petting him.

"It is okay to release it all. Do not give guilt the power it craves. Guilt peels away the salves on a wound, leaving it raw... scarred... never to heal."

The wind swept through the meadow, tugging at their clothes, whispering through the grass.

"Everything around me dies," he muttered, his tears soaking into her dress. "Everyone meant to belong to me dies,"

"You should run, Emeriel. Run far, far away from me." Yet he held her tighter. "I should not have stopped you from leaving today."

"Please stop saying such ridiculous things, I am done running." She threaded her fingers through his hair. "And you, Your Grace, cannot run from me. Because this time, I will chase you to the ends of the earth if I have to."

His arms on her contracted, pulling her impossibly closer. The raw emotions radiating from him were like waves crashing against a shore.

He shook his head. "If I hadn't rejected you the way I did... if I hadn't sent you away, none of this would have happened."

"You made the right decision. Look at me." Emeriel cupped his cheek, coaxing his tear-streaked face upward. His red, tormented eyes met hers.

"I never thought I'd say this, but you did the right thing sending me away, and I'm so sorry it took so long for me to realize that."

He started to shake his head, but she held on, her thumb tracing circles against his skin. "You needed to find yourself. I needed to find myself. I was a slave, and you had been feral for centuries. You hadn't even had time to grieve, to truly process your loss, and all of a sudden, I was thrown at you. Someone you did not choose. Someone from the very species that took your family, who has the potential to replace what you lost. How could anyone expect you to act differently? You. Did. The. Right. Thing."

His lips trembled, and he didn't meet her eyes, but she knew his whole attention was with her.

"We should have communicated better," she reasoned, brushing her hand against his jaw. "It would have helped greatly. Neither of us was ready for the severed bond or the pain it brought. But that separation was necessary. It forced us to grow. To understand what we truly wanted. We needed that time apart, Daemon. We needed to find ourselves so we could choose each other."

Slowly, his head returned to rest against her middle, and Emeriel resumed stroking his hair.

The pain that had clung to her heart for years began to ebb, taken over by a sense of release she hadn't known she needed.

In consoling him, she found herself comforted too.

The guilt and blame she had carried for so long—the self-recrimination and what ifs—they started to dissolve like smoke in the wind.

Emeriel felt so much lighter. Freer. The burden she carried lifted.

Time slipped away unnoticed. She lost track of how long they stayed like this.

Around them, the night moved on. The stars, the moon, and the wind bore witness to this vulnerable time. This heartbreaking moment where she stood and watched her male break apart before her, piece by slow, agonizing piece.

Yet, she didn't move.

Not even when her legs began to ache from standing too long, and her waist ached from the strength of his grip. Emeriel didn't move a muscle because he needed her.

At last, he stirred, his hold loosening as he pulled back.

"Do you feel better?" she asked in a tender tone.

"Very much," he replied, his eyes soft, a hint of gratitude shining through the pain. "You, Emeriel, are a rare treasure. Thank you for being here."

"You never need to thank me. Not for that."

Daemonikai rose to his full height, stretching, then pulled her into his arms again. His lips pressed a gentle, reverent kiss to her forehead.

She closed her eyes, basking in the warmth of it.

"It's been a long night," he murmured wearily.

"It has."

"What do you say we get out of here? Go away from the fortress for a while, just the two of us," he suggested.

Her brows lifted slightly in surprise, but the idea was instantly appealing. "That sounds heavenly. But... your duties..."

"They can wait. Vladya can manage things for a couple of days. Right now, we need this. Just you and I, leaving the rest of the world behind."

The simplicity of his words, the honesty in his gaze. It stirred something deep within her. She nodded, her heart swelling with anticipation.

Daemonikai turned his back to her. "Get on."

She blinked, momentarily confused, but then understanding dawned.

With a shy smile, she placed her hands on his broad shoulders and jumped onto his back.

"Hang on tight."