

Chapter Nineteen: Inner Demons - Part Two

Evan coughed and mastered his breathing. He looked up to see the demon approach the pillar and pull on the sword handle. The blade shifted but remained in the rock. Grunting, he pulled again. The force of the sword releasing pushed him back, but he steadied himself and stepped towards Evan.

The static air buzzed in Evan's ears, the throbbing vibrations shaking his skull. He dropped his head, feeling the urge to vomit. Through his pained mind he thought he could hear screaming. Countless voices crying out in torturous pain.

"I will be glad to rid myself of your pathetic mind," his darker self said, the demonic part of the voice now stronger than his own. "You will be nothing but a prisoner in your own body, witnessing all that I do."

A trembling rage shook Evan. His hands curled into tight fists.

An image flashed in his mind: Reisa's soft, blank expression looking up from her bed, showing no signs of awareness or intelligence that made her who she was. What had happened to her at Moon Bay had taken everything she was, but left her alive. Barely. Evan would not allow this demon to take his mind, like that monster had taken Reisa's.

Hot tears flowed down his face, dripping onto the rocky earth. Evan looked up into his own eyes, seeing them widened with a glaring resolve. The black sword rose.

Memories of Reisa's smile and her hooded eyes flooded Evan's mind. Her deep, hearty laughter echoed in the caves. The echo increased so strong that it shook the pillars. Evan cried out, releasing a bestial, rage-filled shout. He shot to his feet.

Evan grabbed the sword handle as the blade swung down. He wrestled with the hands that held on, and pushed and pulled for possession.

"I will destroy you!" Evan cried, tears streaming his dirtied face.

They grappled and shoved each other, their boots shifting through the soft earth.

"You fight the inevitable," the demon shot back. "Your soul is already mine."

The sword came down to the side and then swung up and down to the other side of them. Pushing back, Evan lifted the sword and swung it back the other way. When the blade struck the ground, the handle jolted and the demon's grip loosened. Evan swung the sword up and back the other side and the motion released the sword, sending it spiralling into the darkness among the pillars.

Evan stepped back and glared at his dark reflection. His hardened, cold features sickened him. Evan lashed out, swinging a fist across the demon's face and knocking him to the ground.

He reached down and straddled his darker self. The throbbing sensation returned to him and the air electrified with an intense static buzz.

Twisted with rage, Evan struck another blow, bloodying the demon's nose. He pounded him again, and again, raining down blows on the face that disgusted him so much. The face of the person who had been too weak to protect his land and his people. Too weak to save his parents. Too weak to save Reisa. A worthless, hollow Prince. Spit flew from Evan as he cried out and threw another punch, his knuckles bloodied and bruised. The throbbing in his head had caused his own nose to bleed.

Not content with the damage he inflicted, Evan grabbed the demon's throat and squeezed. His darker eyes, bruised and swollen, bulged as they looked up at him.

"Die!" Evan shouted as tears filled his eyes.

He squeezed harder and pushed down.

Tendrils of wavy, purple energy began emanating from the demon, curling up and encompassing them both. The dark power ebbed and convulsed over them.

A myriad of chaotic thoughts and images bombarded Evan's mind. Voices and sounds crashed together in a jumbled mess. In the maelstrom of muddled thoughts, he picked out a voice, distinct from the rest.

Remember what you hear, Evan-ol. His mother's voice was stern in her no-nonsense way, but her words soothed his weary mind, washing over him like a cooling balm. *Listen. Hear. Remember. Act. What have I told you, ol-mou?*

Evan wilted under the weight of his mother's words. At once, he was much younger, sniffing back tears as his parents towered over him. Their attempts at condolences had no effect on him. Reisa's mind had been taken, and nothing could change that. His mother knelt and her pale face reached inches from his, her hands cupping his flushed cheeks.

Channel your remorse, use it to empower you. Find strength in your weakness.

King Alden Goodheart stood sternly over Evan, who could not see past his own hatred of himself for not having protected Reisa. *When the source of your weakness is yourself, you must overcome your own doubts.*

The images washed away, and in their wake there was a lingering voice. His mothers. *We will always be with you. You are our son, for always. Never forget that.*

A shiver ran through Evan as a moment of clarity came, and the throbbing sensation suddenly ceased.

When he saw his bloodied and bruised face below him, Evan released his hold, jerking back with shock.

His darker self spluttered and coughed blood.

With his mother's words ringing in the air, Evan reached down and placed his trembling hands gently over the demon's face, cupping his cheeks like his mother had done. Cupping his own cheeks. Now he could be a mother to himself, he thought bizarrely.

"I... I am sorry," Evan said, his voice a breathy whisper. "I am sorry."

A warm, soothing sensation tingled through Evan's hands, similar to the feeling of sorcery running through him.

He lowered himself closer to the bloodied demon, embracing the righteous power that flowed over him - through him.

Purple orbs of hot light floated in the air. They multiplied and grew, collecting together until they filled most of the cave, causing Evan to squint. Concussions of sorcery pulsed in the air, shaking the purple light and radiating a power that brightened the area further. All shadows were cast away, revealing the extent of the caves. The rows of pillars marked the vast distance around them, spreading into an endless depth on all sides. The infinite expanse jarred Evan, but it could not diminish the brilliant power welling inside him.

He found that he was standing now, several yards from the demon. But he no longer saw a darker version of himself.

A hulking, jet-black beast, studded with blunt protrusions over its back and limbs, lay hunched over on the ground, its bulbous shoulders heaving. The ebony sword lay by its side.

"You are defeated," Evan said, panting with exhaustion. "We have no further cause for conflict."

The spike-studded head lifted, and white, glowing eyes narrowed when they looked at Evan. The demon was void of any features beyond its eyes, the rest of the head a smooth, ebony mass with distinct jawline.

"And you are a fool." Its deep, rumbling voice no longer contained Evan's own. Despite not having a mouth, its jaw moved with its words. "We are bound, Voarn-Prince. You cannot destroy me without destroying yourself."

"Your words mean nothing to me," Evan said with certainty. "I control my fate. And I say what goes, now."

The demon collected the sword as it rose to its full height. It towered over ten feet. Evan studied the spiked form; the powerful shoulders and broad chest that tapered to a narrow waist, the large hands that contained seven long, clawed digits. The sharp protrusions on its head reminded Evan of a royal crown, though a distorted, monstrous version of one.

"You had said so yourself," Evan said. "You see what I see, and feel what I feel. I know you felt my mother's embrace. You felt her love as much as I did."

"An insignificant power." The demon lifted the black sword, but Evan no longer feared the blade.

This demon may have been his enemy, but it existed inside him. He could have sought to destroy the demon, like he had wanted to destroy himself, and yet what he really had to do was give his love to the demon. To love himself. He could see that now.

His parents had tried to teach Evan to love his enemies, and yet only now could he understand their lessons.

Evan raised his hand towards the demon, and the black sword vanished. Curling his fingers in the air, Evan gripped the sword that appeared in his own hand. A glorious silver-bladed broadsword, black and gold handle gleaming with jewels. His father's sword.

Complete again, Evan no longer feared anything.

"How..." the demon said.

"My mind. My power," Evan said. "Your threats were meaningless. You had no power here. Not unless I gave it to you."

He stepped towards the demon. As he walked he saw that the pillars, along with the ground and cave roof, were beginning to fade. The rock receded with a transparency, and had disappeared completely by the time Evan reached the demon.

They stood, floating in a white expanse, though somehow a ground could still be felt.

The demon looked down at Evan. "Your victory is meaningless. We are still bound. As long as you have a soul, I will be with you. And I will never give you peace."

A smile crept onto Evan's face. "It works the other way too, demon. I will torment you, also. We are bound, correct, I can feel that now. But you are defeated. And you have not considered one option."

The demon's white eyes narrowed. Evan knew that it could read his thoughts, but now he could feel its emotions too, and the confusion the demon conveyed pleased him.

He slid this father's sword into the sheath that returned to his back.

"You are truly powerful," Evan said, regarding the hulking demon. "You will be a great asset."

When he stepped closer, the demon reigned back.

Evan took pleasure in the uncertain fear that emanated from the demon. He knew it would struggle, but they both knew it would be powerless to resist.

After all, they shared the same mind.

A surge of power pulsed from Evan, distorting the world. Their forms rippled and twisted, and swirled in the white expanse like ink in water.

Evan closed his eyes and embraced the demon.