

Exiled

Act 1: Exile

Emilia stood above the assembled crowd, observing them all. After a moment, she silenced their low murmur with an effortless flick of her fingers. The Heiress took a deep breath and prepared to execute her first order.

“The dark arts are forbidden. One of you has committed this unforgivable sin, and must be exiled from the kingdom,” her voice rang out.

“Queen killer! Send him to the gallows!” the crowd jeered at the boy at the gate. Emilia struggled to retain her composure amid the reminders of her mother’s fate.

It had been one week since the Queen was found slaughtered in the market. Emilia hadn’t been allowed near the scene, but it had been impossible to avoid the gruesome chatter of the citizens. The Queen’s heart had been ripped out.

The city-wide search for the assailant had only lasted a few hours before he was caught. The culprit was a young teenage boy, the same age as Emilia. He had no family and scoured the rubbish for food.

Upon his detention, his fate was left up to Emilia. The decision came quickly: he would be exiled. Her advisors ridiculed her verdict, but she muzzled them all. Her mercy was widely perceived as foolhardy.

“Quiet!” Emilia silenced her people with a bold tongue. It would be no use killing the boy. He had consorted with demons—if a gateway had been opened, his death would only please the vengeful hearts.

Her hands rose toward the sky as she muttered an ancient phrase, causing the boy's legs to unwillingly carry him from the kingdom. Before the city gates closed behind him, he looked over his shoulder and smiled.

Act 2: The World Crumbles

Emilia lay in bed, her mind refusing to rest. Though many years had passed, her mother and the exiled boy never strayed far from her thoughts.

As she had adjusted to her new position as queen, the ridicule for her decision to spare the boy had never completely faded.

In order to come to terms with her mother's untimely end, she had convinced herself that for someone so young to resort to such gruesome actions meant he had some type of steadfast justification.

She breathed deeply, trying to empty her mind. Suddenly she sat up, startled by an unsettling sound from her window. She stood. Noise from the kingdom never usually reached her castle bedroom.

"Guards!" she screamed. An army was amassed outside the walls, with a towering demonic beast destroying the stonework that had protected her people for centuries.

A guard burst into her room and swept her off her feet. As he raced through the castle, sounds of destruction and terror assaulted her ears. She was carried through the underground passages, ferried safely outside the walls.

They emerged into the edge of the forest. From a distant rise, Emilia watched her kingdom burn with demonic fire.

The guard tugged Emilia's arm, guiding her deeper into the forest, but a flame-tipped arrow found his heart. He fell to the ground writhing.

"The Queen!" A gruff voice shouted. The demonic raiders raced towards Emilia on horseback, giving her no option but to flee into the forest.

Act 3: No Other Option

There was no way to tell if mere minutes or hours had passed in the thick forest. Emilia's chest heaved, but she refused to stop, always spurred forward by the pounding hooves behind her.

Her foot caught a root, sending her tumbling to the ground. Exhaustion had finally caught up with her, along with the demonic raiders.

She couldn't find the strength to pull herself to her feet, and instead scrambled backward into the underbrush. She emerged on the other side in a grassy knoll ringed with twisted trees. Above her, the sky shimmered red. Slowly, the sound of hooves faded.

"Welcome home, Heiress. Oh, wait..." a sly voice hummed. Leaning against a tree was a boy, same cocky smile on his face and fingers pointed towards the sky. The red shimmer was emanating from him.

"What have you done?!" Emilia raised her hands, ready to counter any demonic magic he could throw at her. The boy only laughed, and one flick of his fingers caused her arms to lower. She stood paralyzed, no match for his abilities.

He strolled towards her, each of his footsteps leaving flames that fizzled out into a dark abyss. "Would you believe me if I said I was sorry?" he whispered in her ear.

Emilia seethed. He backed away, releasing her from his spell. "I didn't know it would invite them in."

Emilia's hands shook as she regained control. "What you did to my mother..."

"It was all necessary, I promise. I made sure it was quick," the boy smiled sadly. "She didn't suffer."

"Necessary?! Ripping her heart out and summoning demons was necessary?" Emilia struggled to keep her composure.

"You were royalty, *princess*. You never had rocks thrown at you or dirt kicked in your face by the upper class. 'Rinho the Dumpster Boy!' the rich kids would chant."

"Killing your mother and summoning that demon was a chance to give everyone what they wanted: I needed their power to help the other beggars, and the people needed a queen who wasn't a selfish pri—"

"That's enough!" Emilia's fingers twitched as the magic surged in her veins. "I spared you once. Give me one reason I shouldn't strike you down where you stand."

"Because you need me," Rinho said with a nonchalant shrug. He snapped his fingers and the red shimmer dissipated, allowing the sounds of the forest to pour in. The sound of hooves resounded throughout the clearing, dangerously close.

"The gate has opened, and I'm one of them now. I can counter their magic, whereas you don't stand a chance," Rinho nodded, bringing the red shimmer back into existence.

He turned, stepping into the warped doorway of the twisted tree in the center of the clearing.

"Think about it, princess."

Left alone, Emilia lowered her head. She studied her hands. Would she be strong enough?

Song here, of the death of her mother, the enslavement of her people, and overcoming impossible odds. Will she have to side with the villain to free her people?

Emilia balled her fists and looked at the empty doorway. The red glow of Rinho's demonic fire flickered inside. She knew what she had to do.