

Chapter 217

"Would you like some fruits?" Emeriel asked.

"Yes, please," the girl replied, her voice small, her little smile hopeful.

"What's your name?"

"Dabekka."

"Now, Dabekka, hold out your clothes," Emeriel instructed, helping the child raise her garment to form a makeshift pouch. She then emptied the fruits from her basket into Dabekka's cocooned dress, ensuring the fruits stayed secure.

The youngling's eyes widened with delight. "Thank you, please!" She darted forward and planted a quick, unexpected kiss on Emeriel's cheek before sprinting off.

Stunned, Emeriel slowly rose, her hand touching the spot where the kiss lingered like a warm breath. She scanned the area again, and sure enough, several Urekai were watching her from a distance.

Her first instinct was to shout, "I did not harm her!" But she swallowed the impulse.

Instead, she squared her shoulders and continued toward the fortress. Let them think what they like.

"Welcome back, Princess. The herbalist is inside," the soldier stationed at the entrance informed her.

"The herbalist?" Emeriel frowned. She had already visited the herbalist's dwelling, collecting the herbs he was supposed to deliver, before going to the garden.

Her footsteps were soundless as she entered the chambers.

A man stood over the grand king, his dagger raised above the king's head.

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Reacting on pure instinct, Emeriel leaped onto the bed and collided with the intruder, her hands closing around the dagger's hilt.

They struggled for control of the weapon, muscles straining as the blade wavered between them. With a fierce cry, she rammed her fist into the assassin's stomach.

The blow landed hard, forcing a grunt from him as he staggered backward, his grip on the dagger slipping. Emeriel wrenched the weapon free from his hand.

"Who are you?" she demanded, advancing on the intruder.

The assassin recovered quickly and lunged at her, his hands clawing for the dagger.

Emeriel twisted, keeping him from reaching it. Each time he made a grab for the weapon, she pulled it just beyond his grasp.

His frustration mounted, and with a rough growl, he swung a fist aimed at her face. Emeriel deflected it with quick reflexes, and seizing her chance, she drove the dagger deep into the assassin's chest.

He let out a long, ragged breath as his body tensed. Then, with a slow heave, he collapsed at her feet. Lifeless.

Emeriel straightened, dusting off her hands, when a faint groan reached her ears.

But it didn't come from the dead man.

Her eyes shot to the grand king just in time to see his eyelids flutter...more flutters... Then, his eyes opened.

He was awake.

King Daemonikai was awake?

Emeriel rushed to him. But before she could reach his side, the chamber door swung open with a loud crash, and Lord Ottai hurried in. "I heard noises—he's awake!"

"Shhh," Emeriel hushed in a low tone. "Too loud, Lord Ottai."

"Right, right," he whispered, though his eyes sparkled with unbridled joy. "We mustn't overwhelm him. True, true."

Lord Ottai looked like he wanted to shout the news from the rooftops to the entire fortress.

That is, until his gaze dropped to the floor, where the dead assassin lay. All traces of elation vanished. "What is this?"

"He posed as the herbalist, gained entrance, and tried to kill King Daemonikai."

Lord Ottai bent down to inspect the body. Picking up the bloodied dagger, he sniffed it, and his face paled.

"Poison," he looked at Emeriel. "Deadly poison. Aimed at the heart, it would have been fatal."

Emeriel gripped her clothes so tightly her hands turned white.

"Guards!" Lord Ottai bellowed.

Two soldiers entered. "Fetch Wegai. Now!"

They returned later with the head soldier in tow. Wegai's eyes darted to the dead assassin, flared sharply, before landing on the grand lord. "Your Highness."

"An attempt was made on your master's life tonight. He would have died under your watch." The grand lord flung the dagger toward Wegai, and he caught it mid-air.

Wegai brought the blade to his nose, and his face drained of color.

"What were you doing neglecting your duty? You were supposed to protect him!" Lord Ottai shouted.

Jaw locked taut, the head soldier held the dagger in a dead grip. "I was at the training fields with the new recruits, my lord. I left Zan and Ham in charge, they are competent, and have been reliable for months."

"Yet an assassin slipped past them. Disguised as a healer, no less, and came to murder the king under your watch." Lord Ottai barked. "Investigate this matter thoroughly. I want to know who this man was—his family, his friends, everyone he's come into contact with in the last forty-eight hours. No one is to be spared from questioning."

Wegai gave a solemn nod. "As you command, Your Highness."

"Leave no stone unturned. Take your men and raid his dwelling. We must find evidence of who sent him," Lord Ottai ordered, dismissing him with a curt nod.

After Wegai departed, Emeriel stepped closer to Lord Ottai. "Do you truly believe the assassin wasn't acting alone? The humans here aren't exactly known for their fondness and loyalty to the monarchy."

"If there's a mastermind behind this, they want us to think it was a lone act. We'll rule it as such only when there's no evidence to the contrary. And we'll make it clear to the court—the investigation will be thorough, and no one is above suspicion."

They both turned their attention back to the grand king. His eyes remained open but...distant. Unseeing.

He hadn't moved, nor had he blinked.

"What's going on?" Emeriel asked.

"Those eyes are vacant. He is not awake, Emeriel."

Her hope waned. "But—"

"But it's progress, perhaps." Lord Ottai glanced at her. "You saved his life. Thank you."

Emeriel shook her head. "You don't need to thank me."

"How did you manage to disarm an assassin on your own?" he asked, his curiosity piqued.

Fairly easy. "It wasn't easy. But I'm glad I was able to help."

Unable to hold back any longer, she leaned down and touched King Daemonikai's shoulder. "Your Grace, can you hear me?"