

Chapter 222

PRINCESS EMERIEL

"You're awake," Emeriel breathed, unable to believe her eyes.

King Daemonikai gave a slow, weak nod. "I am."

Emeriel shoved down the giddy happiness that rose. "How do you feel?"

"Tired." King Daemonikai rasped. "Dearest."

Dearest.

He had called her dearest.

"It's me, Emeriel, not..." Not Evielyn. She almost said it, but didn't.

The barest hint of a smile touched his lips. "I know."

Okay. That was strange.

She had expected to see confusion, maybe even disappointment at being forced to return to a reality he despise. Instead, he looked serene. Almost...happy?

He was awake, alive, and aware. That's all that matters.

Emeriel pulled away, hating how she immediately missed the feel of his body as she rose from the bed. "I'm so glad you're awake. Your people will be overjoyed when they hear the news."

Gathering her scattered clothes, she quickly dressed, avoiding his gaze. Her hands trembled slightly as she fastened her garments.

Then, she moved toward the window, tugging open the heavy curtains. Cool air rushed in, along with the soft light of dawn.

The crowd was still there. Humans and Urekai.

"They held a vigil for you," Emeriel said softly, her eyes scanning the kneeling figures. "They were here all night, praying for your safe return."

"Good people," he murmured, hoarsely.

"They are. They genuinely love their king."

"Genuine love," the grand king echoed. "I guess that is what every bond is about."

Emeriel glanced over her shoulder to find his intense gaze on her. Her stomach did a series of flips, and butterflies took flight in there.

Okay, time to go.

"I'll inform Lord Ottai you're awake," she kept her voice firmer than she felt. "He's been with you every step in the way. This will make him so happy."

"And you...are you happy?" King Daemonikai asked in a low tone.

Emeriel faltered. She was.

The first genuine happiness she had experienced in a long time, and she was trying all she could not to show it.

He's alive! He's back...!

"I heard every word you said to me," the king confessed.

Emeriel reared back, surprised. "All of it?"

"All of it. The stories, the prayers, the words of encouragement." His eyes gazed at her with a rare soft light in them. "You are one of a kind, Emeriel."

She shifted, uncomfortable under such look. "I'm just... me."

As she replied, her eyes darted to the door with longing. But, her bracelets lay on the table beside him. She had no choice but to move closer to retrieve them.

Sliding the cool metal bands over her wrists, Emeriel tried to ignore his closeness, the quiet clink of the bracelets filling in the silence.

Turning to leave, she took a step away—

His hand shot out, catching hers.

Emeriel gasped. Her first instinct was to pull away, but instead, she stood on frozen feet. His hand was gently holding hers, yet firm, as if he too expected her to resist.

"Thank you for coming back," the grand king said, huskily.

"Are you... are you not angry that I did?" Emeriel stared at their joined hands. "I know you sent me away because you didn't want me here."

He was looking at her like that again. As if seeing her for the first time.

The sparkle in his eyes grew brighter. Then, quietly, "I didn't... at that time."

Emeriel nodded. That much she knew. "Did you hear about the attempt on your life?" she asked, changing the subject.

"That too," he released her hand, his face hardening. "Ottai has already begun the investigation."

"Yes. If the assassin was indeed acting under orders, we all hope the culprit is found." Emeriel tugged at her hand. "If you'll excuse me, Your Highness."

He took his time releasing her. But when he did, Emeriel made her escape.

"Emeriel?"

Those butterflies at the pit of her stomach fluttered again. She paused at the door, but didn't turn.

"Thank you for saving my life...again."

"You saved mine too, two years ago. It's only right I return the favor."

"Come back later," he said in a low plea. "Please."

Emeriel couldn't have walked away fast enough.

GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

She did not return the rest of the day.

Nor the day after.

As Grand King Daemonikai's body slowly mended itself, his strength gradually returned. As the days passed, he began to feel like his old self again.

His soul was still wounded, but further symptoms of progression had mercifully ceased. No sign of full recovery yet, but they all hoped it would come. Eventually.

What Daemonikai hated most about illnesses was the confinement. Ottai and his people were adamant he remain bedridden.

He was not to rise until the last of his herbs and potions had worked their magic.. Until his strength fully returned.

Every day, his people sent him gifts. Bunches of medicinal fragrance plants, cuts of rare meat. A famine ravaged the land, yet they still gave what little they had to their king.

A famine that would not be here if Daemonikai had stepped up as the ultimate ruler he was, and stopped wallowing in his pain.

He pushed the guilt away. Better late than never.

They hadn't given up on him, even when Daemonikai had long given up on himself. He was beyond grateful.

But now, their concern bordered on overbearing. Their insistence on his complete rest meant he was bound to the bed like a prisoner until he finished the last of the strengthening herbs and soul-soothing potions.

So, here he was, as the days dragged by, his world revolving around his bedchambers. And with them came the torture of waiting.

Every passing hour, he stared at the door, waiting for Emeriel to return. She didn't come, and he didn't summon her. He simply... waited.

Hoping that she would walk through the door all on her own.

Three more days crawled by.

The good news was: he felt like his old self again. Perhaps even stronger. More focused.

His strength was fully restored, and tonight, the last of his herb treatment would be delivered. Tonight marked the end of his confinement.

Despite being bedridden, two days ago, he had resumed his royal duties. There were so much to do, and Daemonikai was already going crazy from all the inactivity.

So he conducted meetings in his chambers, devising strategies to combat the famine while waiting for the rain. He had summoned the rainmakers the day before, and the ritual to beseech the skies to open...to draw down the long-needed rain...was already underway.

So far, all news was positive.

Except for one glaring absence. Emeriel.

No sight of her. Not a sign of her...for six long days.

As night fell, Daemonikai lay in bed, awaiting his final dose, while catching up on the news sheets detailing events he'd missed during his absence. Or at least, he tried to.

What he was actually doing was grinding his teeth together in frustration while staring at pamphlets.

She hadn't come.

And Daemonikai ached to see her again.

He wanted—no, needed—to see her again.

"Once I'm free from this godforsaken bed, I would hunt her down," he grunted aloud.

"Your medicine is here, Your Grace," his steward announced.

"Send them in."

Her scent hit him first.

Every cell in his body, every fiber of his being awakened to it. His racing mind, his empty heart, and even his dying soul.

Slowly, Daemonikai lifted his eyes from the news sheets...and there she was.