

Chapter 224

Daisies.

A profusion of cheerful white daisies with sunny yellow centers.

Emeriel's heart skipped a beat as she accepted the basket. Despite herself, her lips curled into a smile.

What are you doing?

But her hands refused to let go of the gift.

Burying her face in the fragrant blooms, Emeriel inhaled deeply. The scent filled her lungs, warm and sweet.

If the lilies from his people had calmed her, these daisies from the king warmed her entire being.

Dangerous, dangerous path.

The sensible thing would be to return the flowers, thanking the king for his hospitality but politely declining the gesture. Or, better yet, give the daisies away to someone else, and keep her distance.

But her feet carried her across the room. Setting the basket down, she rummaged for an empty vase, filling it with water and gently arranging the daisies within it. She had no business placing the vase by the side of her bed.

It's okay, I'm not staying anyway, she reasoned as she stepped back, surveying her work.

Once King Daemonikai fully recovered, whether the bond rekindled or not, Emeriel would return to Navia.

This was temporary. Fleeting.

The flowers didn't mean anything.

"Thank you so much for your help, Princess." The soldier said with gratitude.

"It's alright. Your daughter is my friend." "It's alright. Your daughter is my friend." Emeriel glanced at little Dabekka, who sat beside her, gazing up with wide, appreciative eyes. She ruffled the youngling's hair. "I'm glad I could help."

"Bekka told me you've been visiting daily," the soldier said, his voice filled with emotions. "You saved my beloved's life." He looked close to tears again, and Emeriel shifted uncomfortably. "I had no idea she was ill. Bekka can't use a messenger bird yet."

Shame entered the girl's doe-like eyes. Emeriel smiled at her, saying to her father, "She could learn, you know. Start early. Bekka is smart."

"That she is," he agreed, his gaze soft as he looked at his sleeping bondmate. Leaning down, he pressed a tender kiss on her cheek. "My dearest beloved," he whispered. "I'm here now. I'll take good care of you, I promise."

So much love in those eyes.

Emeriel's heart clenched, and the walls of the room closed in. "I have to take my leave now," she said abruptly, turning toward the door.

"Wait!"

Emeriel paused, glancing back over her shoulder.

The soldier stood awkwardly, guilt written all over his face. He couldn't meet her eyes. "I've been meaning to apologize," he began, his voice heavy. "That day, in the courtyard... I was among those who wanted you imprisoned without food or water. When his Highness, Zaiper, commanded it, I was glad. And when the king overruled him, I was disappointed. I even wished for you to die."

He swallowed hard, shame evident in his every word. "The guilt has plagued me since then. You didn't hurt anyone. It's not your fault you were born human. Seeing how you've been helping—how you saved my Dabekka and my beloved—I can hardly live with myself." He finally looked up, his eyes pleading. "Please, forgive me."

Silence settled between them.

"It's all in the past," Emeriel said at last, her voice raspy.

She couldn't believe how emotional his words made her. How fulfilling it was to hear this. "I hold nothing against you. Just... treat your family right."

"Always," he vowed. "I would die for them."

"That's all I ask," she said softly. "I will take my leave now."

The soldier straightened, then bent into a deep bow. "Your Majesty."

Stepping out into the corridor, Emeriel was finally able to breathe freely again. The cool air kissed her face, but a bittersweet ache lingered in her.

How nice would it be to be looked at like that, with such love and devotion? she thought wistfully.

Pushing those unwelcome feelings aside, Emeriel continued on her way, the soldiers trailing behind her.

As she entered Ravenshadow, the fortress buzzed with energy, the atmosphere lighter than she had seen it since her return. The people were lively, conversations animated.

"Did you hear?" she overheard one Urekai excitedly telling another. "The king will appear in court today!"

"For the first time in fifteen months!" one Urekai exclaimed. "I bet the Vampire of Greyrock isn't pleased."

"When is he ever?" another scoffed. "I'm just glad the grand king is back. I hate Lord Zaiper with a passion."

"Oh! It's the grand king!" a voice cried out.

Emeriel whirled around. The crowd was already gathering, joyous exclamations rippling through them.

Hoofbeats sounded in the distance, and soon, a procession of soldiers and high lords appeared, the banners of the Urekai fluttering in the breeze.

And then she saw him.

The grand king rode in the middle. As always, he stood out, commanding and regal. Emeriel had grown used to seeing him in simple undershirts during his illness, but now, his powerful bearing was fully restored.

Clad in his full grand king attire—a richly decorated white robe that glistened in the sunlight—he looked larger than life.

He smiled at his people, waving in response to their cheers. Some he leaned down to ruffle their hair, others he greeted with a gentle kiss to their offered hands.

As he moved forward, the crowd parted willingly, creating a path that led directly toward...

You are in his way. Step aside.

As the thought struck her, Emeriel moved to the side, creating space for him to pass. Dipping her head slightly, she hoped to blend into the crowd.

But instead of passing by, his entourage came to a halt before her. The troops stopped, and Grand King Daemonikai dismounted.

In the midst of the bustling crowd, with all eyes on him, he strode to her.

Stopping in front of her, his eyes locked onto hers. Time slowed.

The murmur of the crowd faded into a distant hum.

Taking her hand, his touch both familiar and foreign, he pressed his lips against her knuckles. "My elusive beloved," he said, his voice a warm caress. "Please, will you walk with me?"

No.

It was right there, at the tip of Emeriel's tongue. All she had to do was open her mouth breathe the word out.

But her lips refused to move, the protest stuck somewhere between her heart and her throat.

Why was it so hard?