

Chapter 225

She did not want to walk with him. Every part of her that had toiled, survived, and endured screamed against it.

Yet, she took a step forward, not away from him, but towards him. The people erupted in a chorus of approval, some clapping their hands.

In what alternate universe had she fallen into? The grand king calling her Beloved, and Urekai cheering them?

Emeriel had no idea what was real and what wasn't anymore.

"Thank you, beloved," King Daemonikai said, once again pressing a kiss to her hand.

"Please don't call me that," Emeriel snapped.

The endearment carried the sweetness of what could have been and the bitterness of what was lost. And it made her heart lurch.

His smile dimmed, and sadness flashed in his eyes. It was brief, gone as quickly as it came.

"Forgive me, beloved," he said smoothly. "I will take that into account."

She glared.

A broad grin lit up his face.

Emeriel almost swallowed her tongue at the sight. Never had she seen him smile that way.

Hell, she had never seen him genuinely smile. Period.

It tugged at her insides, and she stared dumbfounded as he led her to his waiting steed.

Finally, she caught herself. "There is no extra horse," she noted, her voice dry.

"You will ride with me," he climbed into the saddle, extending his hand towards her. "Worry not, beloved. I will not let you fall."

No, it wasn't that kind of fall she was afraid of.

Emeriel absolutely hated the way "beloved" sounded coming from his lips. She hated the thrill it sent through her, the way it awakened parts of her she had fought to bury.

She hated how much she wanted to hear more of it.

With a reluctant sigh, she placed her hand in his strong, calloused one, and he effortlessly lifted her onto the horse, positioning her close behind him. He gave a subtle command and they set off at a leisurely pace.

The closeness was suffocating.

His scent, the solidness of his back, the warmth of his body. Heavens, this was a terrible idea. A terrible, stupid, reckless idea.

The grand king glanced over his shoulder. "How was your morning, beautiful?"

"The morning is still fresh, Your Grace," she grumbled. Hesitated, then added, "I received the flowers. Thank you."

"You are most welcome," he said warmly. "The day is beautiful, is it not?"

"For a male who crawled out of death's mouth, he's certainly in high spirits this morning," Emeriel muttered under her breath.

King Daemonikai chuckled. "I heard that."

"Damn supernatural ears," she mumbled.

"I heard that too," he added, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

Emeriel clamped her mouth shut, more startled by his laughter than anything else.

"I have prepared something for us," he announced. "Brace yourself." He signaled the horse to increase its speed.

Instinctively, her arms wrapped around his waist, holding tight as the horse surged forward.

As they galloped through the countryside, Emeriel fought to feel nothing.

Not the feel of his strong body under her hands, his hair tickling her face, the solidness of his back against her chest. No, she noticed none of that.

The ride ended sooner than expected, but when she dismounted, she realized just how far they had traveled.

The towering peaks of Asbar Mountain stood ahead, its snow-dusted cliffs plain against the clear sky.

When had the rest of the entourage dispersed? Only Wegai remained, and even he turned his horse around to depart, leaving them alone.

"I need his horse," Emeriel requested.

King Daemonikai nodded, and Wegai obediently left the horse behind before making himself scarce.

Glancing around, her eyes narrowing as she noticed what lay ahead. He had set up... an archery range?

Targets lined the field... wooden frames holding tightly drawn circles of straw, each one marked with a painted bullseye. Bows and quivers filled with arrows rested on a makeshift stand crafted from branches.

"I come here occasionally to unwind," King Daemonikai said, walking ahead with his hands clasped behind his back.

Emeriel took in the scenery. The well maintained fields, the swaying tall grasses, and the majestic peaks of the mountains rising in the distance.

"It's a beautiful place," she admitted.

"It is," he agreed, stopping at the makeshift table and selecting two bows.

He offered one to Emeriel. "Archery is a way for me to center myself, to relax. Focusing on a single point, blocking out the world... it's calming."

Emeriel's eyes traced the elegant bow, noticing the royal markings etched along its length. She ran her fingers over them.

GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

He strode towards the archery stand, positioned a good distance from the target, and with ease, loosed an arrow. It flew straight, striking the bullseye dead center.

"Nice shot," Emeriel commented.

"Thanks. Hey, come over here," he beckoned her closer.

Strapping the quiver of arrows to her back, Emeriel joined him at the stand.

"Each shot is a moment to breathe, to release the burdens that weigh on you," Daemonikai said in a soft tone, setting up her shot.

"Weeks of caring for me must have been difficult. I figured this would be a good way to relax. Archery can be surprisingly therapeutic."

Emeriel focused on the target, her fingers brushing the bowstring.

"It's also a useful skill for safety and defense," he continued. "In the days of old, archers believed that—"

The sudden whizz of an arrow cut him off.

Emeriel had already loosed her arrow, striking the bullseye with pinpoint accuracy.

His jaw dropped.

He stared at the target, then back at Emeriel, then back at the target.

Emeriel shrugged nonchalantly. "I learned a thing or two."

"Wow," he finally said, stunned. "That was impressive. Archery is not an easy skill to master. How did you learn to shoot like that?"

Silence met his question. Emeriel stared blankly at the target, her eyes distant, as if reliving some private memory.

"Emeriel?"

She blinked, snapping out of her reverie. "Let's just say pain can be a killer... and a motivator."

Just like that, Daemonikai's good mood soured.

After he'd sent her away, the Soulbond had been crueler than anything he'd imagined.

He'd known it would be bad, had expected suffering, but the reality was on a whole new level.

It was a hollowing hunger in his very soul.

Days had blurred into a haze of misery, with him barely functional.

Grief was swallowed by something darker—a soul-deep need that clawed at him ruthlessly.

Countless times, he had almost crossed over to the human world to get her. To bring her back right here. But, the guilt always stopped him.

How could he want another woman so desperately, when his lifetime bondmate lay beneath the ground, dead because of his failure to protect her?

How could he desire a human so fiercely?

How could he lie awake at night, not thinking of Evie, but of Emeriel? Thinking about her in his bed, wondering what the future would have felt like with her.

He had felt like the worst kind of traitor. Torn from two angles, and neither was merciful.

And when he finally stood at the great mountains, ready to cross over and bring Emeriel back, the crushing guilt had tripled tenfold, nearly suffocating him. So, he had turned back, returning to face his broken kingdom, and his even more broken self.