

**Chapter 264**

Complete silence.

Only the soft rustle of Emeriel's gown and the quiet echo of her last words hung in the air.

A single pair of hands began to clap, Vladya's. His eyes shining with a newfound respect.

Soon, Ottai joined in, his clap enthusiastic and booming.

Then a high lord from the roundtable. And another.

One by one, others around the roundtable joined the applause, the sound swelling and reverberating through the grand hall.

It was not just polite; it was genuine. Carrying with it an undercurrent of approval.

Many high lords nodded, some even wore smiles that were rarely seen in the cold austerity of court.

Daemonikai's chest swelled with pride. It rushed through him, warming him like a draught of fine wine.

He had expected a long, tiring resistance. A slow, uphill battle to win over the court.

But here she was, his woman, making impressive progress. Already she was bridging the gap with her sincerity and strength.

Emeriel raised her head, tears falling from her eyes. She gave them a watery smile, wiping her cheeks. "Thank you, everyone, for hearing me out."

They might be doing more than just hearing you out, Beloved.

As the applause quieted, a few high lords rose from their seats... and tilted their heads to the side.

Emeriel was confused.

Keeping her eyes on them, she inched closer to him. "What are they doing?" she whispered in apprehension.

But Daemonikai could not speak for he was stunned. He hadn't expected this, not so soon.

"Your Grace?" she whispered again, her tone uncertain.

"They are acknowledging your greater position," Henry interjected. Marilyn's bondmate.

He rose to his feet. "Princess, it means that the high lords of Urai are willing to give you the chance and support you asked for."

"Our Grand King was right, we wouldn't have him here today if not for you," Belzebob said, his gruff voice now surprisingly gentle, rising as well. "And you may not realize it, but we do not take our Ultimate Ruler lightly. His well-being is deeply tied to ours."

"Our people are fiercely attached to him," Gaff added, standing beside Belzebob. "And if there's even a sliver of hope that he could find happiness again, we do not wish to stand in the way."

Henry inclined his head. "So, to show that we not only grant you the chance you asked for but also acknowledge you as the female he is courting, we bare our necks to you."

One by one, the standing lords mirrored the gesture, their throats exposed.

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PRINCESS EMERIEL

Rooted to the spot, she could only stare at the lords before her, floored by their gesture. Words evaded her entirely.

"Do not keep them waiting, dearest," Daemonikai murmured, his tone as tender as it was encouraging.

"I-I don't know what to do."

He smiled softly, his eyes gleaming with pride. "Walk to them, one by one, and press your nose to their necks to accept the respect they offer. Take it as they give it."

Having witnessed this sacred gesture before, Emeriel understood the weight of the act.

This was not a mere acknowledging her, they were accepting her. Offering her not only respect but also a tentative trust.

It was more than she'd dared to hope for.

Joy rose within her, a budding warmth spreading to every corner of her being, awakening a hope that shone like a newborn sun deep in her chest.

Sniffling, she steeled herself, forcing her legs to move even as her sore muscles protested.

She reached Lord Gaff, who bent slightly to meet her, sparing her the discomfort of standing on her toes.

Heart pounding, Emeriel leaned in and pressed her nose gently to his neck, the act both humbling and empowering.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Gaff inclined his head, his stoic expression softening.

Emeriel moved to the next lord, then the next, repeating the act with each.

When she reached High Lord Henry and whispered her gratitude, his quiet response caught her breath.

"Take care of him, My Lady. He deserves true happiness."

She gave a nod. "I will, My Lord." A promise she intended to keep with all her heart.

As she completed her rounds, the load that had pressed on her shoulders for so long felt lighter.

She glanced around the roundtable, her gaze lingering on the faces of the lords who had bowed to her in respect.

For the first time, she saw not adversaries but a fair council. Perhaps the court wasn't so terrible after all. Perhaps these nobles weren't as heartless as she had once believed.

A sudden pang struck her chest. Nostalgia, wrapped in melancholy, gripped her as her thoughts turned.

High Lord Herodis.

Tears filled her eyes again, even as she smiled.

Dearest friend, I hope you are fine wherever you are. You were right, after all. Two years ago wasn't the end of the world. The day did come when the world would give me a chance.

Her gaze swept the court once more, at the council who had once sentenced her to death, accepting her now as their grand ruler's woman.

"Look at me now, Lord Herod," she muttered under her breath, tears falling. "Look at your slave friend who, once upon a time, had to dress as a boy to survive. Today she stands before the council of Urai, not as a slave boy in hiding, but as a Soulbond to their Ultimate Ruler."

GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

"Are you alright?" Vladya's voice carried a note of concern as they dismounted from their horses. The guards swiftly took the reins, leading the steeds away.

"I am," Daemonikai lied.

The dizziness that had plagued him earlier was becoming worse, a throbbing ache behind his eyes.

During the hunt, his vision had blurred, the trees swimming together into a green haze, and at one point, he'd nearly lost his balance.

"You are recovering from a poison that eats away at people's organs. I hope to hell you have been drinking blood." Vladya came to his side, sharp eyes scrutinizing him.

"I haven't felt the thirst," Daemonikai replied coolly, forcing himself to walk with a steady gait. "The hunt lasted longer than we expected."

"Why? Are you so eager to go back to your woman, Your Grace?" Ottai's voice rang out teasingly as he joined them.

Daemonikai rolled his eyes, but a smile tugged at his lips. He couldn't deny it.

"You just know he is, the smile says it all," Zaiper added, approaching from behind. "Congratulations, Your Grace. Truly."

"Thank you, Zaiper." With a curt nod, Daemonikai led the small group through the fortress's pathways.

When they reached the intersection marking their separate routes, everyone parted ways.

Daemonikai tried to maintain an even pace, but Ottai was right. He was eager to see Emeriel again.

The royal hunt, usually an enjoyable activity, had felt like an eternity.

The sound of soft footsteps behind him made him pause.

He turned, raising an eyebrow. "Why am I not surprised you are following me?"

"I wish to talk with you." Vladya grunted, catching up to him.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" Daemonikai asked, resuming his walk. "You and I both know you're in a hurry to get back to Aekeira."

Once inside Daemonikai's chambers, Vladya settled lazily into an armchair, the leather creaking faintly under his weight. "What are your plans for your bloodhost?"

Daemonikai shrugged out of his hunting cloak, folding it neatly before answering, his voice flat. "I have none yet."

"Perhaps you should, Daemon. The sooner you do, the faster you will tackle your thirst." Vladya took a deep breath. "I sincerely don't know why you aren't drinking from her. Even if you don't wish to see her, there are many ways to get her blood."

"I know that," Daemonikai bit out, his headache getting worse.

He rubbed his temple before walking over to pour water from a decanter, the steady trickle of liquid briefly filling the room.

He ignored the glass once it was full. "I cannot drink from her. I will not."