

## Chapter 241

Dizziness washed over Daemonikai, a throbbing headache the size of a warship pounding through his skull.

The poison could stay in his body far longer than in Emeriel's, long enough to secure the antidote. Hopefully.

"Are you truly well?" Worry touched Vladya's voice.

"My head feels as though it's trying to split in two," Daemonikai admitted. "But that's to be expected."

"Who would do this?" Vladya wondered, his brow furrowed. "Do you have any suspicions?"

"I'm going to confront Zaiper," he repeated.

Vladya's eyes sharpened. "You really believe he could be involved?"

"I don't know, but I will start from him." Daemonikai forced himself upright, a boiling rage building inside him. "Afterward, I'm returning to the site of the attack. If these inept fools can't find a trace, I'll track the one responsible myself."

"I'm coming with you."

"No." Daemonikai put on his robes slowly, his insides rolling. "I need you here, with her. I'll be back."

Vladya's concern deepened. "You're unwell, Daemon. I know how these confrontations of yours tend to go. Are you certain you're up to this?"

He walked to the door, stopped, and threw a look over his shoulder. "I can take care of Zaiper. I'm sick, not dead."

\*\*\*\*\*

Crossing the intersection, Daemonikai entered Greyrock, his guards following behind. Every step he took away from Emeriel hammered home how close he had come to losing her tonight.

Since when had his kingdom become so unsafe that assassins dared to strike within the heart of Ravensshadow fortress? First himself, now Emeriel.

Word of his approach must have spread quickly, for soldiers scrambled to clear his path, moving with haste, their expressions tense, and all workers vanished into their posts.

Storming into the royal residence, he saw Zaiper waiting at his door, a guarded expression in his eyes.

"Your Grace. I heard what happened, and I want you to know that my men are also searching for the culprit," he said.

"I require privacy, Zaiper." Daemonikai's tone was icily calm. "See to it."

The grand lord's eyes widened slightly, hesitation crossing his face.

Daemonikai's eyes bored into his, daring him to refuse. But Zaiper nodded, leading him inside, dismissing the remaining guards in the hall.

Once alone, Daemonikai seized him by the collar, slamming him against the nearest wall with enough force to drive the breath from his lungs, holding him suspended.

"What is the meaning of this—" Zaiper choked out, struggling for air.

"How dare you attempt to kill her?" Daemonikai snapped. "How dare you, Zaiper?"

"I would never!" he gasped, clawing at Daemonikai's hand. "Release me, so we can discuss this —"

"There will be no discussion. Just me talking, and you listening." Daemonikai's grip tightened, cutting off Zaiper's airflow. "This is your only warning. If I ever discover you played a role in any of this I will tear you apart with my bare hands."

Zaiper wheezed, glaring. "You cannot threaten me in my own home—"

The grand king slammed him against the wall yet again. "If I find out you had a part in this, I will tear into you like meat in a slaughterhouse, shred you into a hundred tiny pieces, and scatter your remains all over the city," he stated matter-of-factly, leaning closer. "I'll give you a taste of a part of me I suppressed a long time ago."

Fear flashed on Zaiper's enraged face, but he quickly hid it. "Let me go, Daemon, let me go right now!"

A humorless smile stretched across Daemonikai's lips. "Pray to your gods I find no evidence linking you to this crime, Zaiper Thoryk Dragaxlov."

With that, he released Zaiper, who dropped like a rag doll. As he gasped for breath, Daemonikai stepped back with casual indifference.

Zaiper slowly rose to his feet, his fury building, his pride wounded. A flicker of yellow mixed with his gray eyes, and he advanced a threatening step forward.

"You have no right to barge into my home and harass me this way!" he roared. "You have no right —"

Daemonikai stepped into his personal space, standing so close until there was barely an inch between them.

"Bring him forth, I dare you, you fool," he challenged, his voice soft yet merciless. "Let your beast come out to play."

Gripping Zaiper's chin, he stared into those yellow irises. "I will forget every rule of principle and wipe the floor with you both, just as I always have."

Zaiper's defiance wavered, but his glare remained fierce.

"Or better still, maybe I should go all the way." Daemonikai smirked, "If I were to harass you, the least I could do is do it thoroughly."

Then, the grand king released an onslaught of aggressive pheromones. Kneel, he commanded Zaiper with his will.

Zaiper went rigid, trembling as he fought not to give in to the alpha command.

That resistance though, wracked him with torturous pain. "Don't—" he started hoarsely.

Daemonikai flooded him with more, increasing the pressure. But a spike of pain split his skull due to that damned poison.

It wouldn't stop him.

Daemonikai pressed harder. "This is what harassment looks like, Zaiper."

A faint ripple slithered into the grand king. When he realized what it was, he snorted.

"Is that your attempt to challenge me with your own pheromones?" Daemonikai's voice was a low, deadly growl.

He felt the mild ripple again.

"Give it up, little boy." Daemonikai mocked, cracking his neck. "You'll only bring more pain upon yourself. You may be strong, Zaiper, but you are no match for me."

Daemonikai may be laidback, but no one got away with this blatant challenge. No one.

Only Vladya ever dared to dispute him this way, and he'd forgiven him because Vladya was far from sane then. How dare Zaiper challenge him?

Daemonikai pushed more pheromones, not just to assert dominance this time, but to blatantly attack.

"Stop... please..." Zaiper whimpered as he clutched his head in agony, his body shaking.

Daemonikai gave him a bored look. He could do this all night, really. How dare him?

Holding the force a little longer while ignoring the searing pain in his belly, Daemonikai watched with cold satisfaction as Zaiper's resistance melted into more pitiful whimper.

"Please... Your Grace," Zaiper's eyes watered.

Defiance crumbling to dust, he bared his throat for Daemonikai. "Please... Alpha."

Kneel.

His knees hit the ground so fast, so hard, Daemonikai thought he heard a crack.

Bending down, he looked into the second ruler's teary eyes. "How dare you try to raise a challenge against me?"

"I'm... truly... sorry." His voice choked.

Daemonikai punched him hard in the face. The sound echoed around them.

Blood poured from Zaiper's mouth. Daemonikai wiped it up with his fingers and smeared it on Zaiper's forehead.

"Where did you get the nerve?" he growled. "Tell me."

"Please, forgive me," Zaiper begged, barely breathing. Daemonikai's pheromones was making him ill.

Daemonikai gripped his jaw. "I'm sick, and weakened with poison, maybe that's where your audacity came from, but get this clear, Dragaxlov, you are still no match for me."

Zaiper grunted as more blood pooled from his mouth.

"You never will be, not now, not a thousand years past. So keep that wounded pride and arrogance for the crowd." Daemonikai grappled his hair, yanking it hard, forcing his head back. "The next time you defy me, I will drag you into the public square and discipline you before everyone. Do I make myself clear?"

Zaiper's face flushed, humiliated. "Yes, yes, Your Grace..."

"If I uncover any evidence you had a hand in what happened to Emeriel, I will return." Daemonikai said, voice cutting like a blade. "And believe me, that is something you do not want."

To deliver the killing blow to his pride, Daemonikai buried his face in the crook of his neck, scenting him.

Zaiper whined, the sound layered with horror, shame, and self-loathing.

Daemonikai could almost see his beast shrinking back, scurrying into the depths of his mind, covering like a scolded child, its tail tucked between its legs.

Completely satisfied, Daemonikai released him, both physically and from the weight of his alpha command, striding out of Greyrock.

Behind him, Zaiper slumped forward, his head bowed in submission and defeat.