

Chapter 337

"I have existed since nearly the dawn of time, have witnessed countless atrocities and unspeakable horrors—I have seen kingdoms rise and fall. Many have required my intervention, but I did not meddle."

"Exactly how we like you," Zaiper snapped. Do not interfere with the natural order, return to sleep in the coffin-bed and leave the world to ordinary mortals. Why do you persist?"

"Let us just say... this time, I choose to," she said. "This conversation has sealed your fate, Zaiper Thoryk Dragaxlov. The next time we meet will be in the public eye, with me standing in my physical form while the world listens to tales of your crimes. And that day is near, I have nearly completed my tasks here."

She paused, slanting her head to look at him. "Oh, and I see you are searching for ways to kill me. One dark mage and three shamans? Daring, but pitiful, really. Incompetent rat."

Zaiper bristled, turning away, ears flushing pink. Why did she always have to know?

"I could wish you better luck in your pathetic quest," she went on neutrally. "But it would be wasted. You will not silence me, not your way, not any way. Our ends are drawing near, you and I. Mark my words and carve them with blood; the next time we meet will be your downfall. Prepare for it." She vanished.

Zaiper sat there, staring at the empty space where she had stood.

A laugh bubbled up in his throat, and he laughed until it hurt to breathe, and still he laughed.

But when he stopped and the silence came, her words repeated in his ears.

His reality was like a cold bucket of water dumped on him.

That bitch.

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GRAND KING DAEMONIKAI

A good mood feeds the soul, and Daemonikai had been in the best of them for days.

Until the message from Mysticaria arrived.

Seated at his desk, he held the parchment.

I received your message, King Daemonikai, and have since initiated my own investigation. However, I have found nothing to suggest the condition of your mind may indeed involve mage magic.

That said, I performed a spell using the hair you sent, and something did appear... strange. There may indeed be magic involved.

I do not say this with certainty, but the possibility must not be ignored.

If mage magic was indeed used, then it was likely performed by a dark mage. Our kind hunts them like sport animals, for dark magic is forbidden. If such a mage exists, he must be in hiding within Urai—probably close to the heart of the city.

I offer my sincere apologies that there is little more I can do. However, should you find those responsible, I hope you see to it they are nailed to the cross.

From the hands of Malghoxivus, King of Mysticaria.

Folding the letter, Daemonikai stared blankly ahead. So, it was possible. Magic. Someone had dared to meddle with his mind.

He had conquered kingdoms, brought empires to the ground, shaped the rise and fall of dynasties. Suffice it to say, he had made his fair share of enemies. And some enemies never go away.

But what if it was not some vengeful king of a forgotten empire? What if the perpetrator was close?

Zaiper.

His gut told him so, his instincts screamed it.

Like all Dragaxlov, Zaiper hungered for the First Throne. That much was common knowledge. There was nothing new in that—especially not with how pathetic the male appeared at court.

But maybe they'd all dismissed him too easily.

Maybe Zaiper was desperate enough to stoop to treachery to get Daemonikai out of the way. Like tampering with his mind.

The thought made his blood sizzle.

Yet, on what grounds could he act? There was no proof. Only suspicion and assumption that would not fly in court should he pursue this case.

"Wegai."

The door opened immediately as he entered. "Your Grace."

"Assemble the soldiers and deploy them throughout the city. I want every mage in Urai rounded up. Bondmates and non-bondmates, traders, privileged visitors, formally welcomed and unwelcome, gather every single one of them to the Citadel. Now."

Wegai gave a curt nod and departed to execute the command.

"And Wegai?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Launch a discreet investigation into Grand Lord Zaiper. I require answers, not speculation. Seek out those with whom he has interacted in recent months. Find the ones who watch from the shadows, those who know but dare not tell."

Wegai gave a curt nod. "As you command, Your Grace."

“Be cautious. Zaiper knows how to cover his tracks. If he catches wind of this, he may bury the truth even deeper, or worse, ensure those who seek it do not return. Do not allow word of this inquiry to reach the wrong ears," he instructed. "Select only the most loyal males for this task. Hunters, informants, even the desperate—anyone who can dig through the past month and uncover anything that might qualify as valuable information. I wish to know his whereabouts, his activities. Am I clear?"

"Crystal." Wegai turned and left.

Daemonikai couldn't get any work done after that.

Queries went unanswered. Reports were only partially read.

Dark magic? Mind tempering?

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. His beast was raging, banging inside him. His dark thoughts everywhere.

Shift. Shift and hunt. Tear the world apart until we find the one who dared.

Set the kingdom to flame. Burn it. Burn them all.

Drag every mage into the square. Execute them. Slowly. Watch them scream. Watch them beg!

There are good mages, he tried to reason. Some are bondmates, some are just farmers.

Blast them all, this one came from his beast. Treacherous! Kill. Kill. Kill!

Slamming the ledgers closed, he sprang to his feet.

The Citadel buzzed with evening energy, as soldiers shifted rotations and servants scurried to their tasks while he searched for the one being in the entire universe who could hush the voices.

He found her in her bathing chamber, humans tending to her. Emeriel had always been more at ease with humans than with the Urekai maids and servants, and for her sake, Daemonikai had reluctantly allowed them into his residence. His disdain for humans had not lessened—not by a long shot. But for her... he supposed he could tolerate them.

His radiant star lay half-submerged in the bathing pool, eyes closed, head slanted back against the rim. She looked completely exhausted.

It was no wonder. She had eaten little in recent days, unable to keep food down. Not to mention the nausea and frequent dizzy spells.

Daemonikai waited by the door until the bath ended.

When she stood, her body gleamed in the lantern light. Droplets of water slid down her smooth skin, and his mouth went fucking dry.

They were drying her when those eyes, blue as the summer sky, found him.

She smiled. “My king.”

“Beloved.”

She looked down at her nakedness and went the slightest ruby.

The way she fretted over her modesty was endlessly amusing. He had seen and feasted on every inch of that addictive body, yet she blushed as if they'd only just met.

Already, his lousy mood was lifting.