

## Captive Slave 355

Chapter 355*wɔr.n.vɛlWɔrm.coɪm*

Many of you already know why we have gathered here today."

Grand King Daemonikai stood at the center of the Court of Duty, hands clasped behind his back, face as hard as steel. "A week ago, we uncovered a truth that has shaken the very foundation of our kingdom, of our species. A betrayal, buried beneath centuries of ignorance and complacency, has come to light. One of our own—a grand ruler-committed the ultimate treachery. A sin so grave it has stained the legacy of our kind."

The court was packed to its edges. Every tier of the vast amphitheater occupied. High Lords, lesser lords, clan chiefs, the eldest of their noble lines. None had dared to be absent. All eyes were on their grand king.*WŴw.n©vɛɫwo(r)m.c(o)M*

"Zaiper Thoryk Dragaxlov has disgraced this kingdom," Daemonikai said, his voice unflinching, "He has tainted the Grand Throne and shamed the Dragaxlov name. His betrayal has cast dishonor upon his clan, upon the North, upon his people. And for his crimes, there shall be no refuge."

His eyes met all corners of the assembly like a hammer striking stone. "The Oracle fell into a critical state before she could name all his accomplices. Even now, she fights for her life. But hear me and hear me well. Those who aided him in his heinous crimes-whether in the past or in the present-shall share his fate. They will be punished, and it will not be swift. It will not be merciful."

Silence reigned like shadows at midnight.

His eyes burned with wrath, pressing into every soul in the room. "Any who dare keep silent should they see him, look away, feign ignorance, or let him slip through their fingers are no better than him, and they, too, will know a suffering worse than death. Zaiper Thoryk Dragaxlov is now a wanted male. As of this moment, a kingdom-wide manhunt has been declared. Wherever he is seen, he must be reported immediately."

Many nodded their heads earnestly. Some murmured in agreement to one another.

"This decree will alter the course of our order," Daemonikai went on. "But as it is written in our constitution, as it is decreed in the laws governing treason and crimes against the throne and our people, the Northern Clans will no longer hold the position of Rae'nille."

Daemonikai glared at the Northern Clan chiefs and elders, daring opposition. "No clan that has birthed the greatest traitor of our kind shall stand as Second. The Northern Clans, ruled by the Dragaxlov bloodline, are hereby stripped of their former rank. From this day forward, they are no longer Rae'nille, but Foart'hile. The Western Clans, ruled by the Skyvaktō bloodline, shall now rise to Second, and the Eastern Clans, under the Nocthrax family, shall ascend to Third."

The northern delegation bowed their heads in sorrow and shame. Not a word was spoken.

Across the chamber, the Western and Eastern clans made no attempt to hide their satisfaction. They watched the fallen Northerners with open smugness-those who had long regarded all others as superior, prideful, and egoistic. On the dais, Grand Lord Vladya and Grand Lord Ottai watched their people in silence, without expression.

Daemonikai lifted his chin. "Are there any objections?"

"None, Your Majesty," came the united reply. Voices from every tier answered, resolute.

Then, a throat cleared.

High Chief Yazaro, leader of the Northern Clans, rose. "Your Grace, we understand your decree and we accept your judgment."

Daemonikai said nothing, waiting.

"But what will become of Zaiper Dragaxlov's throne? He is the last of his bloodline. It cannot remain empty for long."*wʊw.n©vɛɫwoR.M.co(m)*

"Perhaps this time, another family should take the throne," the chief's second added, rising too.

"What Zaiper did was despicable. His name does not deserve to remain upon our throne any longer. I cast my vote that a new family ascend."

There were nods. Murmured agreement.

"That might have been the case if Zaiper were truly the last of his line. But he is not," the Grand King stated.

Shock swept through the court, murmurs rising like a growing wind, disbelief plain on every face.

"What do you mean, Your Grace?" High Chief Yazaro asked slowly.

"Many of you will remember Zaiper's elder brother, Kristoff Kaelros Dragaxlov, the late General Commander of all our armies."

Heads nodded, faintly at first, then with certainty. Kristoff's legacy was well known and still honored.*WŴw.m©vɛɫw©rm.co©*

"Over two millennia ago, Kristoff's bondmate severed their bond, fleeing from the family without word or reason, while he was away at war. It was during one of our long battles against the vamp-the war that lasted ten years. When Kristoff returned, enraged and grief-stricken, he never sought her out. No one did." Daemonikai paused, letting the memory settle. "The Oracle told me, eight hundred years ago, before she entered the last deep sleep, something that has remained hidden until now. Kristoff had a son."

Voices clashed, surprise and suspicion sparking into outright chaos. The Northern Clans erupted, many of their members clearly pleased by the revelation. But not all. The clan leaders' faces were irritated, eyes wary.

It was no secret many among them coveted the Northern Throne, believing the Dragaxlov line had run its course. Seeing it revived now was an unexpected blow. While many, including Daemonikai himself, harbored deep animosities toward the Dragaxlov name, there was no denying their legacy. They were a legend-a lineage best suited to rule, far superior to any other clan.

"Neither Kristoff nor anyone in his bloodline knew of the child." Daemonikai continued. "The Oracle confided in me, making me the second to know, in case she slept for a thousand years, and this knowledge was needed. Otherwise, I was sworn to silence. It was not my story to tell."

The court finally went quiet again.

"Now, the Northern Throne is vacant, and a new Dragaxlov is needed. I will bring him to this court. I will introduce him to all of you after I have paid him a visit to make sure he accepts the Northern Crown." He looked toward the Northern Clan leaders. Some faces were pale; others glowed with grudging hope. "Until then, the throne remains empty."

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"You're not fully recovered enough to be going on a trip, my lady," Nora, said again, concerned.

"I told you, I'll be fine." Sinai packed the bag with everything she would need. At least my voice had returned.

"Fine," her maid relented. "But perhaps I should inform one of the Grand Rulers that you are awake-"

"Don't you dare," Sinai hissed, whirling on her. "No one must know I am fully awake. No one must know anything until I'm out of this Citadel." She pinned the girl in place with a hard look.

"Oh. Al-alright, Mistress."

"Good. Now stop standing there like a statue and help me pack. After what I've been through, don't you think I deserve some rest? A little time away from the kingdom for peace and relaxation?"

Nora nodded as she hurried to obey. "True, it's a good idea. I only worry because you're still undergoing treatment, and I wish for you to recover fully."

Sinai rolled her eyes. Nora could be dramatic, but she had been a loyal personal maid for centuries. Still, no treatment was worth staying in this kingdom-not when discovery loomed over her like a sword at her throat.