

Captive Slave 357

Chapter 357 "Huh?"

High Lord Herodis was still smiling. How could he not? He had not heard that name in so long, he was not even certain he'd heard it correctly now.

"Process it," the Grand King said mildly, folding his arms across his chest. "I will wait."

"Process what? I do not understa—"

And then it struck him. He called me Gustazlion. Dragaxlov.

Herodis went pale. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you're speaking of Your Grace."

"Oh, you do." King Daemonikai's voice was quiet, but implacable. "The Oracle told me of a youngling who buried his heritage beneath another name. Who wore a new life simply to survive."*www.noVellwör©.Com*

Herod's back went ramrod straight. "I do not go by that name. In fact, I have not been addressed by it in over two millennia. It does not exist to me."

"Perhaps it's time it starts meaning something to you again." The Grand King walked to the nearest couch, lowering himself onto it. Crossing his legs, he added, "The Northern Throne needs its ruler."

"With all due respect, my Grace, I must decline," Herod said flatly.

He felt no anger in him as he said it. No pain, no bitterness.*www.noVellwör©.Com*

The old resentments had faded long ago-lost somewhere a thousand years past, when he had stopped caring about his ancestors' crimes or their legacy*www.noVellwör©.Com*

Time did, in the end, heal certain things.

"I expected as much," King Daemonikai said, nodding slowly. "You buried that part of your life so deep you never once tried to resurrect it. Not even when the Dragaxlov elders died."

"Never once did it cross my mind," Herod answered truthfully. "Were it not for the Oracle, it would have remained a faded past. One that feels as if it never belonged to me at all."

He crossed to the couch opposite the King, lowering himself onto the cushions with a sigh. "The name Duonavaar is a worthy one. I strove for millennia to ensure it stood on its own merit and all that effort was not wasted. After my mother died, after the long years and harder work, I finally found the courage to return to the heart of Urai. I built a life here. A home."

Without pride, merely stating facts, he continued. "I started as a reputable farmer, then became a crop overseer, then the village agriculturist, and finally the High Steward of Harvest. I rose, rank by rank, until I single-handedly became High Lord of Agriculture. I did this without the Dragaxlov name and power, and I have no intention of claiming either."

King Daemonikai regarded him for a long moment in silence. Then he inclined his head. "All I ask is that you consider it. That is the reason for my visit. If, in the end, you refuse, I will understand. We will follow the sacred traditions and select another bloodline worthy of the Northern Throne." With that, the Grand King rose. "I have other engagements to attend."

Herod stood and gave a respectful bow. "Thank you for your visit."

King Daemonikai had nearly reached the door when he paused, glancing back over his shoulder.

"There is one question I have long wished to ask," he said. "Why did your mother leave the Citadel? Why would a good female like Naila abandon her bondmate— who fought on the frontlines for the good of the kingdom-over gold?"

"Contrary to the rumors, my mother did not steal the family wealth. Those were lies, begun and spread by our own clan," Herod stated in a cool voice. "She was pregnant with me when she fled in the middle of the night because her life was in danger. She was poisoned repeatedly, and had she not been skilled with herbs and plants, recognizing the scent of those poisons in her food, she would have died long before she had the chance to run."

The grand king remained attentive.

"But one time, she mistakenly ate one of those poisons that had no scent," Herod's voice was quieter. "Only realizing it only after the first swallow, she was quick in finding an antidote. But after that narrow escape, she made the choice and ran to protect me." He inhaled deeply. "With father away at war, he could not shield us-so she did it herself, for her life and for mine."

Herod blinked, clearing the cloud of memory. "But their bond... it severed. She never meant for that to happen. At first, it only went dormant, but through grief- and the way she fled, making certain never to be found it eventually broke." Sadness was clear in his voice. "I suppose my father must have been heartbroken. Felt betrayed. That's likely why he never came for her, not even after he returned from the war."

There was only the hush.

King Daemonikai nodded slowly. "Thank you for sharing that." He turned to the door but then paused. Again.

"I will say this now-not as a Grand King, but as someone who holds your best interests at heart. As one whose female has told him the kind of male you are. How deserving."*www.noVellwör©.Com*

Herod looked up, meeting the king's softened gaze.

"I understand your hesitation, but I ask that you truly consider this," he said. "I imagine you feel as though your life is behind you. Your bondmate is gone. Your son is grown, accomplished, living a life of his own. And so you ask yourself— what is left? Why take on the weight of the Northern Throne? Why endure the politics, the endless teachings, the burden of leaving behind everything you have known to reclaim an old name?" the grand king's eyes bored into him. "Why move into the fortress, re-learn the ways of governance, train again in the arts of war two thousand years too late, memorize the sacred texts that guide our rulers, and submit to the rituals required before you are crowned?"

Herod swallowed hard. How did the male know exactly what was in his mind?