

## Captive Slave 345

Chapter 345

PRINCESS EMERIEL

Emeriel woke with a load in her chest that had nothing to do with the heaviness of her pregnancy. She stretched to relieve the aching pull in her lower back, sighing. At five months, her body was beginning to feel the strain in earnest. Yet it was not her body that troubled her this morning.

She had a bad feeling.

The morning passed, the servants arriving to help her bathe and dress, but the feeling did not fade. She told herself it was nothing. It was not uncommon for Daemonikai to be delayed. His duties often took him longer than was expected.

But the feeling would not leave her.

She tried to distract herself. Reading in the library, tending the garden, wandering through the plantations. Even time spent with Aekeira brought little relief. Eventually, she gave up entirely and made her way to Blackstone to confront Grand Lord Vladya.

She hesitated briefly before knocking on the door to his study. *ww.n0vℓ(w)o(r)M.č(o)©*

"Come in," came the deep, familiar voice.

Emeriel entered, finding the grand lord behind his desk, eyes narrowed over the scroll in his hand. The furrow in his brow eased slightly when he saw her.

"Emeriel." He set the parchment aside, rising smoothly to his feet. "Please, come in."

He crossed to her, steadying her as she lowered herself into one of the cushions. She flushed faintly. "Thank you, my lord."

"Is everything well?"

"Yes, yes, all is fine. It's just..." She cleared her throat, smoothing her hand over the fabric stretched taut across her belly. "I have not heard from Daemon in days. I am... worried."

"You need not be," he said after a pause. "You know how his duties are. It wouldn't be the first time they've kept him away from the Citadel for long, there's nothing to be concerned about."

"I know, I keep telling myself that." She fidgeted. "It's just... he told me this would be a short journey. A day, perhaps two. And when there are delays, he usually sends word. Not always, but often enough." Her voice lowered. "I have a bad feeling." She looked up at him. "I'm sure he is fine. I just... I need to hear from him."

Lord Vladya's eyes dropped, shoulders drawing subtly taut.

It was the tiniest reaction, but Emeriel had long learned that with him, even the smallest movements spoke volumes.

She sat up a little straighter. "You know something, don't you?"

He crouched before her until they were eye to eye. "Only that he is delayed. You will hear from him soon. Don't let this worry you. He is fine."

Before she could press him further, the door burst open. "I'm really worried this feral episode still persists. Daemon is-" Lord Ottai stopped short, seeing her. Alarm flashed in his eyes.

Emeriel stared at him, her mind grasping the words she had just heard. "Feral episode?" Her brow furrowing in confusion. "What feral episode?"

The Fourth Ruler went pale, his eyes darting to Lord Vladya in a desperate plea for help.

Lord Vladya's glare was sharp enough to kill.

Lord Ottai flushed like a youngling caught pilfering coin from his mother's purse.

"What I meant," he fumbled, "was the feral male Daemonikai paid a visit is still... well, he is taking longer to come out of his episode than expected, which is why the Grand King has been delayed."

Emeriel's frown deepened. "The Grand King went to Crystal Waters to oversee the new lands we acquired."

"Of course, of course." Lord Ottai nodded too fast. "What I meant was... on his way back, he stopped by to check on-uh-a male who was feral. And... and... that's why he hasn't returned yet."

The silence was awkward.

Which the uncomfortable fourth ruler felt obligated to fill. "What I meant was, he, um-Vladya," he hissed out of the corner of his mouth. "Help me out here!"

"Help you...?" Emeriel rose to her feet, heart starting to race. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. Do not listen to Ottai," Vladya said through clenched teeth, rising. He shot Lord Ottai another lethal glare. "You know how he is-some days he behaves as though Morina overfeeds him, other days he's too overwhelmed by his duties to make sense."

"Vladya is right," Lord Ottai agreed. "I did not get enough sleep last night."

"No." Emeriel shook her head, though it felt far too light on her neck. "Something is wrong. I feel it." *Www.n(o)ve1w(o)rm.C©M*

She tried to keep her panic at bay. Pressed a hand to her chest to ease the wild thudding of her heart, but it wasn't working. "Our bond may be dormant, but I know! Tell me what's going on. Now." *swnovel*

Ottai was already shaking his head, hands lifted to ward off her words. "Nothing. Nothing at all is—"

"You are hiding something!" she cried, turning, she backed away, still rubbing her chest. She struggled to breathe. "Tell me... tell me!"

The study swam as her legs weakened.

Strong arms caught her before she could fall.

"Emeriel. Emeriel!" Lord Vladya's voice was behind her and alarmed. "Can you hear me!?"

There was movement, weight shifting. She was vaguely aware of him holding her upright. *Ww.N0vℓ(w)o(r)M.č(o)©*

"Look what you did. How many times have I told you not to speak from the door? You enter a place and make sure the damn coast is clear!"

"I am truly sorry! How was I to know she would be here?!" Lord Ottai's voice was strained and defensive.

Another pair of hands steadied her from the opposite side. Emeriel sagged into them, grateful for the support. Her ears still rang faintly, her vision still fuzzy.

A sharp smack sounded, and Ottai yelped.

"Leave her. I will take her," Lord Vladya scolded.

She was lifted. Cradled firmly against Lord Vladya's chest, head lolling back, catching glimpses of the ceiling before she was lowered onto the cushions. The world steadied a bit. *Ww.N0vℓ(w)o(r)M.č(o)©M*

The third ruler's face hovered over hers. "Hey. Look at me."

She forced her heavy eyes to his. The loud, rasping breaths in the room... were those hers?

"Good girl," his voice softened. "You can hear me?"

She managed a faint nod.

"Good. I have no idea what I am dealing with here. You will help me, yes? Daemonikai will kill us if something goes wrong" Vladya sighed.

"I can feel his pheromones from here," Lord Ottai added nearby, sounding

panicked. "Please, huh? Help us."

"Need... to... breathe..." Emeriel gasped.

"Breathe?" Lord Ottai echoed in confusion.

Lord Vladya shoved him aside. "Here. Breathe with me," he said to her. "In. Out.

Come on. Long breaths. Deep. Come on, young one. You can do this."

Emeriel tried. She followed the

cadence of his breathing. Slow, deep inhalations, holding the air in her lungs, then releasing it in steady

streams. His voice was calm, so she

clung to it.

*swnovel*

"Oh! That kind of breathing!" Lord Ottai exclaimed, scrambling forward. "Sure! I

can do that."

He joined in. His breaths were far too fast and shallow, his rhythm completely off.

It was so ridiculous, so Lord Ottai, that Emeriel let out a hoarse laugh. "You are doing it wrong."

The grand lord blinked. "I am?"

"You are." She was still smiling as she drew in another breath, and this one came easier. Her chest loosened, her lungs opening, releasing the crushing weight.

"Better?" Lord Vladya asked, concerned.

"Yes, thank you."

He gave a terse nod, but relief

softened the lines around his mouth.

Together, they helped her sit up.. Lord Ottai hovered awkwardly on one side, his hands ready in case she needed catching. *swnovel*

For a moment, Emeriel allowed herself to feel light. It was a strange thing, surrounded by two of the kingdom's most powerful males, both fussing over her. Often, the constant attention grated on her nerves-being crowded, coddled, treated like she might shatter. But in moments like this... She felt cared for. Protected.

Until she remembered why she had panicked in the first place. The lightness vanished.

"Please, tell me what's going on," she begged Lord Vladya. "Do not lie to me. I need to know."