

## Captive Slave 349

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Sacred relics gleamed beneath protective glass, set upon altars of blackwood and obsidian. Votive lights shined in iron sconces along the walls. Every detail spoke of reverence, tradition, old magic and power.

Entering the hall, Daemonikai's eyes landed on one object in particular. The Charlice.

Once awakened, it was one of the most powerful relics they ever possessed. Among its many abilities was the power to grant them strength on their night of weakness. Stolen during the last eclipse moon, Vladya had pried it from the human king's dead fingers after he'd slain him.

Forcing that night away from his thoughts, Daemonikai ascended the dais, the gathered assembly rising in deference.

His eyes found her, as they always did. And as ever, something in him relaxed and softened.

Princess Emeriel sat among the highborn ladies and mistresses of Urai. Beside her was her sister. The two women leaned together, heads touching as they slept with a bowl of nuts rested precariously on their laps.

"Look at them," Daemonikai nudged Vladya with his elbow.

Vladya was already watching them, stopping beside Daemonikai instead of moving around to take his seat.

"It is the best feeling, seeing your female carrying your child. There is nothing like it," Vladya said quietly.

"I know." Daemonikai could sit and watch Emeriel all day, and never tire of it. "It doesn't help that they look as sweet as spring bloom with their moods swinging from laughter to tears in the blink of an eye."

Vladya huffed out a laugh. "Aekeira burst into tears yesterday because her broth was too hot. I was helpless what to do. It comes without warning."

They were aware of the hall watching them waiting for their rulers to sit before the rest of the gathering took their places. Following the line of their gaze, many in the crowd glanced toward the princesses.

A few snorted, others exchanged glances and rolled their eyes, but most smiled. The sight of the two women still seated while the others stood, heads pressed together in sleep, was enough to soften even the hardest lords.

"We had best take our seats." Daemonikai forced himself to tear his gaze from Emeriel. He gestured subtly to the crowd before lowering himself onto his throne.

Before him, Vladya sat to the left side, Ottai already seated to his right. In between them, Zaiper's throne stood conspicuously empty.

In the front row of mistresses, another chair remained unoccupied; the seat reserved for his bloodhost.

Daemonikai had heard everything that transpired in his absence after he regained consciousness three days later. Vladya told him Sinai brought her fate upon herself, but he still felt bad about his actions. As usual he remembered nothing of those hours.

But fortunately, the Mistress was alive, healing under care.

The ceremony moved forward, the solemn cadence of the sacred rites beginning. The priests and high elders took their places, beginning the murmured incantations.

The priestess stood over the wide bowl of water set upon the altar, a slender ceremonial blade poised in her hand.

"We give blood to the waning, so the waxing may thrive. Let no shadow devour the whole. Let no darkness steal its soul. Moonrise, moonrise-guard the light until its time."

She drew the blade across her palm, drops of her blood falling into the waiting bowl.

The grand event hall was as still a tomb, the sacred rites demanding absolute silence. No one moved, not a breath stirred louder than a whisper of cloth.*www.NovelWorld.com*

However, a faint disturbance began beyond the hall's great doors.*www.NovelWorld.com*

At first, it was a murmur. A distant scuffle, like the shift of restless feet. But it grew louder.

Voices now. Raised commands. The sharp rings of steel.

Inside the silent hall, the assembled clans glanced at each other with confusion. But none broke the sacred silence.

Daemonikai gestured to Wegai who nodded once and signaled several soldiers. They left their posts, slipping away quietly to investigate.

The chaos outside growing.

The grand entrance doors flew open with a crash, and standing there, behind the great doors, was the last person Daemonikai expected to see.

"Oracle?" He straightened, breaking the silence.

The old woman turned, looking behind her as if she expected something to follow. Then, with a wave of her staff, the grand entrance slammed shut of its own accord.

"Seal this door, barricades in place, now!" the Oracle ordered.*www.NovelWorld.com*

The guards hesitated, glancing at Daemonikai who frowned but gave a curt nod.

They moved immediately, hauling the iron drawbars into place to reinforce the door.

Daemonikai turned back to the tense Oracle. "We are in the middle of the sacred rites for the Moonrise-"

"That can wait, Great Grand King." Gripping her staff tightly, she walked forward, steps heavy, moving towards the center of the hall. "I bring news of great importance. It may be the last news I ever deliver, which is why I ask you to listen carefully. Do not interrupt me. Do not react, no matter how difficult it becomes. I have but little time to speak all that must be said."

Daemonikai frowned deeper. As cryptic and maddening as she had always been, something in her tone rooted him in place. He exchanged a glance with Vladya, then Ottai. Both were tense too, and just as watchful.

"I am hunted," the Oracle went on. "Those who wishes to keep this secret buried, pursue me. They will soon break down that door and try to undo my words. But I am the Oracle. I do not lie, and most of all, always remember... it's not a lie if every bone in my body shatters as I speak truths never meant to pass my lips." "Oracle." Vladya rose. "This seems highly dangerous-"

"Five hundred years ago, under the Eclipse Moon, one of us betrayed our kind." A ripple ran through the hall, but the clans sat frozen. Eyes wide. Breath held. "It was never the humans," she stated in a loud reverberating tone. "One of our own joined forces with a dark mage, using the human king as a pawn. One of us brought disaster upon our land. One of us opened the gates to slaughter."