

## Chapter 82

AMIE

Hours ago, when Amie arrived for her shift, a wave of relief washed over her at the sight of Slave Master Gainé alone behind the tavern bar, Master Boris notably absent. The feeling lingered, a comforting warmth against the chill of the night as she finished her work and stepped out into the darkness.

Eager to return to the fortress, she took the shorter route through the barn. But her steps faltered as a bloodcurdling scream pierced the silence. More screams, more pleas. The slave, whoever it was, was begging a master for mercy. She recognized the masculine voice.

Master Boris.

Hell, hell, hell. Amie's pace quickened, panic constricting her throat. She'd managed to avoid him all week – why had she chosen the shortcut tonight?

A brutal yank on her hair sent a jolt of pain through her scalp. "Ah, there you are, my little sneak," Boris's voice rasped in her ear, hot with malice. "Sneaky, sneaky, Amie."

She winced. "M-Master Boris..."

"You've been avoiding me."

"Never, Master," she choked out, the lie tasting bitter on her tongue.

"Oh, really?" He yanked her hair again, harder this time. "Do you think me a fool? How dare you lie to me? Where is the little prince, Amie? You were supposed to bring him to me."

"He doesn't work at the tavern anymore, Master Boris. Surely, you've heard about the court incident? The grand lords have taken an interest in Emeriel. They have their eyes on him. It is dangerous to pursue your desires for him."

"I care not for what happened in court," Master Boris snarled, his fingers left her hair to tighten around her throat. "How dare you lecture me? You do not want to anger me, do you?"

Fear choked her. "No, Master." She gasped, fighting for air.

"Good." His grip loosened. "Two nights from now, the barn, sixth hour past noon. Bring the boy. Do you understand?"

"I don't care how you do it. But if I don't see him there, I'll gut you like a fish and bury your corpse where no one will find it." His voice was low and menacing, promising unimaginable pain. "Understood?"

Despair washed over Amie. She had no choice. "Yes," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "I will bring Emeriel."

COURT OF DUTY, RAVENSHADOW CITADEL.

GRAND LORD ZAIPER

This court was similar to the grand high court in all aspects except its name and location. Its appearance mirrored that of most courts within the fortress. The assembly convened here, with the grand lords settled in their seats and the high lords taking up their respective positions.

The meeting had been in progress for quite some time, with discussions revolving around taxes, crops, and hunts. Following these deliberations, Lord Jakal, the overseer of military affairs, stood to address the issue of the ferals terrorizing the mountainside of Urai.

"I am pleased to announce that my soldiers have finally captured and eliminated two of them. The mountainside is now free from the threat of ferals. It is unfortunate, a family of four was lost before we could apprehend them, but I am relieved that the danger has passed," Lord Jakal announced, his voice ringing with a mix of pride and regret.

Vladya observed Zaiper's sudden interest at the mention of ferals and their elimination. Zaiper had been bored to death by the court proceedings, but now his ears perked up, and he leaned forward. Vladya rolled his eyes.

Ottai shot Vladya a pleading look, and Vladya raised a placating hand in a gesture of surrender. Ottai visibly relaxed.

"Ferals are wild creatures that must be dealt with before they kill us all," Zaiper praised, "I commend you, Lord Jakal, for ensuring the safety of the mountainside."

The overseer of military affairs beamed, bowing low in acknowledgment. "It is my duty, Your Highness."

"Indeed," Zaiper purred, his smile returning. "Speaking of ferals... It is high time we discuss the mightiest among them. As I mentioned during the harvest, it is time to peacefully send the grand king home. I believe most of you agreed with me then that it is the right course of action."

However, this time, none of the heads he expected nodded in approval as they usually did. The silence that followed was discomforting.

His smile vanished. "Surely, it is the right thing to do, is it not?"

Lord Daryl, the overseer of trade, rose to his feet. "With all due respect, Your Highness, I disagree. We all saw what happened in court that day. It was undeniably terrifying, yes, but..." He shook his head, his expression a mix of awe and disbelief. "It was also... extraordinary. Those were not the actions of a mindless creature."

"I beg to differ, Daryl. Those were indeed the actions of a feral beast. You all saw how he lunged at me, did you not?" Zaiper's voice was sharp. "Grand King Daemonikai did not recognize his own rulers. He would never have acted that way if he were in his right mind."

Vladya let out a snort of derision.

Zaiper glared at him.

Vladya met his gaze, unfazed.

"No one here claims his mind is unimpaired, Your Highness," Lord Daryl clarified. "We merely suggest that something is... different. Perhaps we should not rush to eliminate the beast. After all, we have already waited five hundred years. A little more patience would not hurt."

After Lord Daryl resumed his seat, the overseer of financial management stood to address the court. "I concur with Lord Daryl's sentiments, and I also believe that the boy... the human boy taken by the beast should be brought to court for questioning. Why was he chosen? What is the meaning behind it all? Perhaps he holds the answers we seek."

Before Zaiper could retort, Vladya's voice sliced through the air, cool and collected. "The boy holds no answers. I have questioned him thoroughly. He is just as baffled as the rest of us."

"The mystery remains, then," the overseer pressed, his resolve growing. "We must tread carefully —"

"What has gotten into you all?" Zaiper's voice boomed through the hall, his fury barely contained. "What happened during the harvest was sheer luck. We narrowly escaped with our lives! Do you truly wish to gamble with your very existence? With the lives of your loved ones, should that beast break free once more?"

"As Lord Daryl mentioned," Zaiper's voice continued, impatiently. "We have waited five hundred years. We have gambled with our lives and the lives of our people for far too long. The forbidden chambers may be fortified, but they cannot hold King Daemonikai's beast. It could escape and wreak havoc at any moment! Any moment!" His gaze raked across the assembled lords, piercing their composure. "And what if next time, luck isn't on our side?"

An anxious murmur rippled through the court as the high lords exchanged furtive glances, weariness etched into their faces.