

## **SPELLBOUND 61**

### Chapter 61 - So Bad

Shock was clearly etched on Evie's face as Gavriel eased away from her and faced Luc. Evie saw how his face had transformed from one that was playful and seductive, into one that was cold and flint-like.

"Take my wife back to the castle." He ordered in a calm voice and the green eyed blond immediately nodded.

Evie reached out and clasped at Gavriel's coat. Her expression was severe.

Seeing the worry in her eyes, Gavriel bent and whispered to her. "Don't make that face, love. Didn't I promise I'd protect you? I will not let a single unwelcomed person get pass this wall so do not worry, okay? Furthermore, we need to continue what we started but was rudely interrupted... right?" Gavriel teased with a grin, trying to ease Evie's worry.

The certainty in his voice made Evie felt secured and that teasing managed to get her to loosen up a little. However, she was not so much worried about herself but more for him. She knew he was strong but... that earlier nightmare... what if her father had allied himself with the crown prince? No, why would her father be with the crown prince? The crown prince was humanity's enemy. And the weather was not bad. She looked up in the sky and it was clear. The first sign that a dragon would arrive sooner or later were thick dark clouds appearing in the sky. If the dragon guardian goes out for war, a gloomy weather would follow him wherever he goes. And when it was time for the dragon keeper to call the creature, a thunderstorm would precede the dragon as it makes its way to the guardian's location, before emerging from the thick clouds along with lightning that accompanies it.

Seeing that there was no sign of her father nor the dragon coming, Evie was utterly relieved. It seemed that her nightmare was not going to happen yet – at least not tonight.

But still, she could not help but feel worried for him. A war was a war – it recognises no friends nor foe and has no boundaries. Anything could happen.

"Evie," Gavriel's voice echoed and then his lips brushed lightly against hers.

When her eyes slightly widened with his unexpected move, he leaned away, flashing her a small smile. "You're not listening," he gently chastised.

"Di-did you say something?" she stammered, flustered. She could not believe he was so calm and could even behave in this manner with her at time like this. Her recollections of people going off to war previously were always cloaked in a heavy, sombre mood. Thus, she was slightly taken aback at his current conduct.

Gavriel did not respond immediately, he stared at her and then leaned in towards her again until his lips were almost touching her ear. "I asked if I can touch you."

Maybe because of the situation, Evie failed to pick up on the mischief in his voice. He was only trying to lighten up her tenseness. But Evie took his words seriously.

"Of course." She answered without hesitation though there was a blush of pink on her cheeks which belied her embarrassment. However, her eyes were incredibly serious. "Didn't I already agreed to

this last night?" she added. That slight pinkish hue turned into a dark red smear across her cheeks, but the situation seemed to have made Evie's tongue-tied problems disappear. She used to get flustered and took way too long to respond when it comes to things like this.

At that moment, Gavriel froze, completely shocked. What did he just hear?

Reaching out, Evie wrapped her arms around his strong and broad torso and embraced him. "You can... you can touch me all you want once you're back... so please come back to me safely." She whispered against his chest, knowing that he could hear her clearly. The feelings inside her chest grew larger and larger until she felt it was getting too much for her to bear. When did her feelings for him grow to this proportion? "I'll be waiting for your return in the castle." She added as her grip on him tightened, not willing to let him go.

Gavriel was still a frozen statue when Evie finally convinced herself to let go of him to look at his face. She knew she had to let him go now. He must leave now. His men needed him.

"Go, your men need you out there." She told him in a calm voice, not letting her worry show on her face anymore. She was trying her hardest to be that supportive and loving wife that would wait patiently at home for her husband to return victorious from war.

A low masculine groan suddenly echoed as Gavriel, the statue, finally moved. He tugged on his hair with one hand while his gaze on Evie glimmered with an intensity she had never seen before. His eyes were so incredibly bright Evie momentarily forgot to breathe.

And then, with an abrupt and greedy move, he lunged and had her in his strong arms. His one hand was clasping her against him in an unbreakable hold while his other hand held her face and kissed her hungrily.

"Gav..." Evie moaned. "Wait..."

"Oh, Evie... damn it..." It took him everything to stop and pull away. "You're so bad. Suddenly telling me all this when we are right smack in the middle of this situation." He growled again. "Do you know how I feel right now? I've been waiting for this for a damned long time and now that I hear these words I've been waiting for...I can't... good lord... why would you tell me this right now?" his whispers were filled with utter frustration and need.

"Be... because I need you to return safely." Evie said caressing his face ever so gently. "If you really want to touch me, hold me... come back to me safe."

He cursed, yanked his hand through his hair and then his hands flew to both sides of her face. "Just you wait, Evie... I'll make you pay for this." His eyes gleamed with a dangerous and savage need that ignited something inside Evie. "Just you wait. I swear... I'll settle this quickly." He promised her, voice heavy with want.

"If I don't die of waiting first..." Evie heard Gavriel mumble under his breath.

Chapter 62 - Quickly

Someone deliberately cleared his throat so Evie could only push Gavriel away.

"Your Highness, it's more than time already. We must depart now." Luc said, his face still managing to remain quite stoic, despite everything that he had seen and heard.

"Go, I'll be fine." Evie urged her husband as well all the while trying to break free from his hold. Elias also emerged from the stairs, already holding Evie's cloak and dagger with him.

"Alright," Gavriel's hold finally loosened rather reluctantly. His struggle to let go of her was apparent to everyone that were present. "But I need you to kiss me first." Gavriel demanded Evie boldly, not caring that his men and butler were there to witness how childish he was behaving at the moment.

Evie, and the other two vampires could literally hear their jaws dropping to the ground. She glanced at Elias and Luc and the two suddenly whirled around, turning their backs to them in a bid to afford the couple their privacy – well, whatever privacy could be afforded in such a place that is.

"Please get it done quickly, My Lady." Luc begged and she could hear the embarrassment from his voice.

"Make it quick Princess, please." Elias similarly voiced out and Evie could only wryly smile as she gave in. She knew this man was sometimes impossible, but to this extent? My god, she could not believe that he is asking for this right now.

Evie quickly slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Knowing that Gavriel wouldn't be satisfied with a peck, especially since he was already opening for her, inviting her in, Evie slipped her tongue inside his mouth and kissed him.

It was very hard for her to keep herself under control especially when he started to respond intensely. She moaned against his mouth, wanting him to stop now or else...

Thankfully, he pulled himself off her with much difficulty and turned to Luc and Elias while Evie tried to catch her breath and compose herself.

"Take her back to the castle first, Luc." His order much more serious now and the two vampires sighed in relief. Zolan had just appeared as Luc and Elias approached Evie.

Before Elias could help Evie put on her cloak, Gavriel had already grabbed the cloak from him and personally put it on Evie. Elias could only sigh and back off, knowing that the prince was already forced to let someone else carry his wife away.

"Wait for me." Gavriel whispered before finally letting go of Evie and nodding towards Luc, giving him the permission to approach his wife.

"Pardon me, Your Highness." Luc said and he scooped her up carefully into his arms. This was one precious bundle he needed to protect with his life.

Evie's eyes were fixed on Gavriel's as Luc leapt away until she could not see him anymore.

Gavriel let out a deep sigh and finally turned his gaze away from the castle and faced the other side. Cracking his neck, the look in his eyes instantly changed and the almost blinding aura he was emitting just a while ago had gone incredibly chilly and dark as the night.

"Alright," Gavriel declared, "let's go end this as soon as possible."

Zolan raised his brow, unaware of the little drama that happened just before his arrival. "What's with the haste? I thought you're going to toy around with him a little, maybe rough him up some?"

Gavriel tilted his head. "I'm not interested in playing with him or anyone else now." His eyes turned wicked and a smile tugged at his lips. "I'm only interested with my little wife now."

Zolan blinked and then frowned. 'What the hell is he talking about?' he thought to himself, confused at this new side his prince was showing.

"Let's go." Gavriel then leapt from the watchtower with enthusiasm and an almost odd kind of excitement Zolan never seen him exhibiting before.

"It seemed something interesting happened before I arrived." Zolan muttered and followed after him. He reminded himself to dig on what happened from Luc later.

...

The night was already deep when the crown prince and his army reached Dacia's mighty fortress.

Shocked and overwhelmed, the Dacrian soldiers' morale began to drop just by the sight of their enemies. None of them expected that the crown prince would come at them at full force. He did not just bring with him the mighty imperial army but also three out of the five fearsome half-blood vampires.

The numbers of the imperial army were already enough to overwhelm them and in addition to that, they had also brought with them three monsters! How were the normal Dacrian soldiers expected to win, going into such a battle? They were badly outnumbered and underpowered compared to them. Prince Gavriel was strong, but could he win against three half-blood vampires on his own? They had heard that the five men who have been with their prince were also strong, but how strong were they? Is not fighting this battle just pure suicide?

Fear and uncertainty were palpable and could be clearly seen in the eyes of every single Dacrian soldier. No matter how much they tried to rouse themselves, the fact was that their numbers were only a quarter of what the imperial army has. This alone was enough to make their situation hopeless. They would be mercilessly annihilated; their prince killed ruthlessly and Dacia would be destroyed!

"Seems like you'll need to say something to the army, Prince Gavriel." Zolan said.

"The soldiers are already faltering, and the war has not even started yet," mumbled Reed who was shaking his head when Samuel butted in.

"What are you saying? The war has already started you, idiot. And our soldier's intimidated reactions only mean that we are already losing the first wave of the battle right now."

Gavriel who had his eyes fixed on the figure of the crown prince at the far back let out a sigh. "I don't think my words alone could lift their morale. There is only one thing I could do to give them hope and lift their fighting spirit." He said and then he smiled. "You guys know what I mean, right?"

His men straightened, their gazes suddenly sharpening, and eyes narrowed dangerously as they nodded.

"We will show our army that they have nothing to fear. No one can get past this wall." Gavriel declared and he unsheathed his sword. His moon-like eyes painted scarlet and his aura darkened and thickened so heavily that his men had to take a few steps away from him. "All of you aid our soldiers, leave the half-blooded vampires to me."

"Yes, Your Highness." Gavriel's men all smiled, with the promise of death at the end of their grins.

Chapter 63 - Is That So?

Staring uneasily out the windows, towards the direction of the front line that her eyes could not even see, Evie remained tense long after Luc had dropped her off according to Gavriel's orders. She somehow felt that the air was heavier and chillier, even though the temperature was the same as last night.

Unease and worry laid heavy on her as if there were a boulder sitting on her chest. She remembered those times in her younger years, she and her mother used to feel this way every time her father goes out to war. It was an awful feeling. Like she was holding back her breath the whole time and could only breathe again when he finally come back home, alive. And this time, she could obviously feel her anxiety was more intense.

Taking a deep breath, Evie gripped the dagger Gavriel had gifted to her. Tonight, she was not going to do anything but to patiently wait and hope and fervently pray that her husband will be fine and fulfil his promise... that he will be returning to her side. She sighed with the knowledge that it would be a very long night.

...

Meanwhile, at the battlefield, swords flashed and clanged against another, roars echoed, and there was no shortage of blood and dead bodies being scattered everywhere – as far as the eye could see. Such was the sad outcome of an already large army going against another much larger army.

Gavriel's men, Samuel, Luc – who had since then re-joined his team after sending Evie off, Levy, Reed and Zolan were scattered into the areas where the fighting was fiercest, aiding the outnumbered Dacrian soldiers. They were strong, slashing mightily against the imperial armies, tearing them apart like they were nothing but feeble grasses around them. Their vigour and power had revived the fighting spirit of the soldiers and true to what Gavriel had said, it seemed that all their troops needed was to see their power unleashed upon their enemies and they would arise and fight with everything they had.

Even though there were still too many imperial armies swarming around them, the soldiers were now fighting at their full power and potential, and that was enough. Everyone must fight with everything they had to help their prince win the war and protect Dacia.

The battle between Gavriel and two half-blooded vampires were intense. These two half-blooded were beyond strong. They were among the five greatest warriors in the entire vampire empire. Their abilities and powers were simply unrivalled. That was why they were feared and regarded as national treasures of the empire. However, in reality, Gavriel knew that they were simply glorified weapons for their rulers' use.

Gavriel's blade was swift and deadly, and repeatedly crushed against the half-blooded called Gallas. Gallas physically stood much larger than Gavriel and the supernatural powers he had were as expected, nothing short of incredible. One swing from such a huge creature would send a horde of soldiers flying, dead upon impact.

The power of each single strike was too strong that there were a few times Gavriel nearly lost grip of his blade. But the prince had proved himself faster. He dodged each incoming swing and then another until he suddenly appeared behind the huge half-blood and struck him at a critical point from behind.

As expected, Gallas' skin was tough as an armour, but Gavriel still managed to inflict such a huge wound that made the half-blood roar in rage and pain.

Gavriel was still suspended in midair leap when Leon aimed a spear at him. The spear came at him fast and not unlike a huge arrow. Gavriel dodged and the spear missed him but Gallas swung his fist and came at him. The prince managed to react by blocking with his arms as he could not dodge in time and caught the blow. But that hit was so strong he was thrown many strides away and crashed against the wall.

The force of the impact was so great it created a huge depression in the wall where Gavriel landed.

The half-bloods made their way towards the wall where Gavriel had landed, all the while, swinging their deadly fists around and killing the Dacrian soldiers who tried to block their way like they were just tearing apart figures made of rice paper. None of Gavriel's five men came to his rescue even though some of them saw what had happened.

Gallas snorted as he stood there, looking at the debris of crumbled stones. "I was so looking forward to this war, thinking that we would be having some sort of challenge. But it seems that the crown prince had really overestimated this traitor prince way too much." Gallas scorned, spitting uncouthly to the ground. "I could take him down all by myself! Didn't even need to break a sweat. I don't understand why the emperor had to send the three of us."

"The war is not over yet. And the prince is not quite dead too." Leon's voice was flat.

"He might as well be as good as dead. If not for the prince's approval that I can claim prince Gavriel's wife as spoils of war if I take his head and help him win this war, I would've just stayed with prince Caius in the command tent and let Tau fight him with you." Gallas spat out in disgust once again. "This is getting so boring. I thought at least he's going to last a little longer. I'm just going to finish him off and go claim his wife. He's not worth my fucking time –"

Before Gallas could take another step in approaching the pile of debris, he halted. Leon was already on alert as if he had already sensed something off before Gallas could even halt.

"Oh, is that so?" A voice suddenly echoed. They recognised and knew it to be the traitor prince's voice but why was it that they suddenly felt a strange chill just at the sound of his voice? Half-blooded vampires do not feel intimidated! Never! But if that was so, what was this then?

Gallas and Leon found themselves rooted to the ground where they stood as they saw Gavriel rise from the debris. And when the prince who was supposed to be as good as dead opened his eyes, the air around them changed. Those eyes that did not seem to belong to the mere royalty they had just fought was now glowing in fury like they belonged to some god of slaughter who had risen from the depths of hell itself.

## Chapter 64 - Monster

The half-bloods instinctively stepped back. Their expressions had changed, especially Gallas'. His haughty look was now gone, being replaced by incredulity and shock. He had been prepared to expect many things from this traitorous prince, but this was not one of the possibilities that he had imagined ever happening. At all. Leon who rarely shows any emotions was also showing a wary look on his face and very clearly had his guard up.

Their purple eyes had gone bloody red. Time seemed to have come to a standstill and the suffocating air that enveloped them thickened even further. It was as if they were mired in a bog and not only their breathing was being smothered, but the movements of their limbs were also slowed down, like invisible strong chains were weighing them down and pulling them back.

The next moment, a flash of something whisked out from the direction of the rubble and struck at one of them. The half-blood called Leon had speedy reflexes and managed to block the unexpected strike, but he was still flung back many strides away and crashed into the imperial army, killing on impact those who were hit head on.

Gallas's eyes widened in disbelief. That startling flash was like a bolt of black lightning. No, it was not even close to calling it lightning. He knew it was the traitor prince' strike – and it was faster than lightning! And judging by how far it had sent Leon flying, the strike was way stronger than the hit he landed on him a while ago. What in the blue blazes?

Something was strange. Gallas could feel a strength and power from the prince he could not even begin to fathom. Was this an illusion? Whatever it was that he was emitting was something he and the rest of the half-bloods had never seen before. It felt like something that is not supposed to belong to this world. No! This had to be an illusion! There was no one stronger than half-bloods in this whole land!

Roaring, Gallas attacked. In his firm grasp, he slashed his sword at Gavriel but only to slice at air. The huge half-blooded vampire took a bone-shattering blow instead that came from out of nowhere.

Gallas bellowed in outrage and swung around him wildly, not caring the least that he looked as if he was attacking mindlessly. But his sword continued slicing away at nothing. His opponent's movements were beyond what his eyes could follow. How could that be? The half-blood was incensed, unable to accept that someone – a non-half-blood, at that – was faster than him. It was incomprehensible that he, a half-blood, could no longer land a blow on this useless traitor prince.

As time seconds passed, desperation welled in him like an ever-growing wave, threatening to consume his sanity. His breathing became unsteady and there was a hint of what looked like franticness in his originally haughty eyes. But the half-blood refused to admit he was subpar to this traitor prince and he went berserk.

He went after Gavriel with all he had, his swing became faster, more powerful than ever before, offering Gavriel no opportunity to dodge and leap away.

However, it was as though Gavriel had seen and experienced that sort of attack and power a thousand times before, Gallas' attack was rendered useless in front of him. Each and every strike was easily repelled and blocked as if they were playful hits coming from a little child. Gallas was too caught up in his own attacks to notice the mocking and almost bored smirk on Gavriel's face.

Leon who was looking on from the side however, noticed it as his speed and abilities were above Gallas' and wondered how much power this prince is still holding back. Was this not the extent of his full capabilities yet? He could not suppress a slight shudder at that thought and turned his eyes back to the fight. What monster had they accidentally unleashed by going up against Prince Gavriel?

...

Gavriel took a deep breath, focussed his mind, and closed his eyes. That big lug of a half-blood is now just a large red bullseye to him. He felt every single cell engage and activate. That hidden ability and prowess only able to be tapped by the true vampire royalty sparked. The power deep within surged forcefully through him. As his eyes snapped open, a crimson ruby red radiance gleamed forth as he pinned his knifelike gaze on Gallas. The air around his body warped at the overwhelming aura leaking from him.

"You don't know you're already a walking corpse." Gavriel taunted Gallas and smirked, giving a small scoff.

Gallas rocketed himself at Gavriel, sword slashing down at his prey. The crown princes' army roaring at him in encouragement. Gallas felt his blood surging through his veins. He could not help but be stirred up by such a strong opponent.

Gavriel lazily avoided the downward slash. Eyes mocking the half-blood. He swiped his hand out, sending a silvery arc speeding right at Gallas' face. Gallas retreated a few steps, quickly bending backwards. Sweat poured down his face together with a small trickle of blood between his eyes. That silver arc would have sliced his head in half had he reacted a second later!

Standing back up, he saw Gavriel continue advancing with steady steps. Both men narrowed their eyes. A clap sounding like thunder sent a shockwave to the armies around. They saw Gallas counter Gavriel's next slash down. To the onlooker's surprise, Gallas was bent slightly backwards just blocking this deceptively simple move.

The half-blood was then forced to use both hands to push back, sending his opponent flying back. Gavriel smoothly flipped over and landed nimbly on his feet.

"Is that all you've got?" Gavriel sneered. He then casually combed his bangs back, showing obvious contempt and clearly snubbing the half-blood. "So weak..."

Gallas bellowed, livid at his taunts. He whipped out another weapon. Now, one hand clutched a long sword, and the other a sharp curved dagger – both glinting with razor-sharpness. He disappeared from sight and suddenly appeared before Gavriel, both his weapons flashing and slashing with fearsome speed. Both men flashed around the cleared-up area. Only glimpses of them could be seen, appearing from place to place, accompanied by echoes of blades swishing, swords clanging, and slashes of flesh being cut up.

Gallas was then seen toppling over to the right, into the soldiers who were watching on.

## Chapter 65 - Get Up

Blood suddenly sprayed out of the huge man's body without him realizing until Gavriel's powerful fist crashed into his face and he was sent flying away from the troops only to drop to the ground not unlike a chunk of huge stone. Following the tremor of Gallas' collapse, there reigned a few seconds of dumbfounded silence from both armies who were watching this awe-inspiring exchange.

Watching the fight and being able to follow their moves, Gavriel's men smiled. "There he goes," Samuel smirked and then lifted his sword as he shouted out at the Dacrian soldiers. "Our prince is the strongest, so don't falter! Kill them all!" he roared, and the Dacrians' morale soared as they too roared along and attacked with an even higher and renewed vigour. Their roar was so loud that the crown prince at the far back heard them and his darkened face went even darker.

Leon, the half-blood Gavriel sent away in one strike, who stayed back to observe was now back. Jumping in front of Gavriel and blocking him before he could leap over to where Gallas had fallen. He was not done with the man yet.

The look in Leon's eyes were different. Unlike Gallas, Leon had a calm and dangerous look in his eyes. He was the type who does not get easily affected by emotions. One glance and Gavriel found him much more dangerous than his huge haughty fellow friend.

Leon attacked. As expected, he was fast and precise. Gavriel could tell that this half-blood is definitely a class above the big lug he had fought with earlier. It was clear that his moves were well thought out and were executed with intelligence. They clashed fiercely for a long time. Dancing away from each other's jabs and thrusts in a seemingly endless exchange.

Gavriel's crimson eyes were blazing with excitement. It had been a long while since someone could withstand his moves for this long. This Leon was good. He liked the look in his eyes.

As their blades locked and their faces came close, Gavriel spoke. "If you lose," he started, "swear your loyalty to me and serve under me."

Leon blinked in surprise, but he was also quick to respond. "And if I win?"

"That's never going to happen." Gavriel grinned and then they both pushed against their blades and leapt back.

Their gazes locked on each other as Gavriel cocked his head to observe his opponent while Leon furtively took the chance to catch his breath. This so-called traitor prince was better than expected. A split second later, they leaped and crashed against each other. Leon was starting to get overwhelmed by Gavriel's sheer power. They were both fast and powerful but there was just something else that the prince had that was missing in himself. He did not know what it was, but clearly, he was being overpowered by whatever it was that he lacked.

Never in Leon's wildest imaginations had he thought that there could be someone who could make him lose his sword in a fight. Not until this prince. Just who was he? How could he beat a half-blood?

Gavriel smiled at him as if he had just sealed the deal that Leon did not even want to acknowledge yet. As Leon's sword clanged to the ground, his eyes widened, knowing that a powerful strike was coming at his head – when Gallas intervened.

The raging half-blood came at Gavriel like an enraged beast – all bloodied and feral from his last attack – and Leon cunningly took the opportunity to join him. The fight suddenly became even more intense as the two half-bloods came at Gavriel all at once.

As the night waned on closer to dawn and the pinkish light of dawn peeked its way at the horizon, Gavriel's army started to push the enemy back. Gavriel too was holding his own. Because of a mistake mainly caused by Gallas' blind rage, Leon had suffered a lethal blow from Gavriel and fell. Leaving Gavriel and Gallas fighting again.

Gallas, consumed by his pride and rage was then tossed back with one hit from Gavriel's sword, sending him flipping through the air like rag doll. He crashed against the wall creating an even larger depression.

Gavriel approached the pile of debris slowly. The half-blood had crumpled from the impact.

"Get up," Gavriel said. His voice cold and flat. "I remember you saying you'll be taking my head?"

What Gavriel heard from this man a while ago was the last straw that had provoked him to take action. He initially wanted to toy around with them and wear them down slowly and make it look as if he had beaten them by pure luck. He planned it such as he thought it was too early for him to show his real strength, especially when the crown prince was still cowardly hiding at the back of his troops and surely had been watching him.

But hearing this bastard talking about taking his wife broke whatever restraint and whatever plans that had been made earlier. He had originally wanted these half-bloods to be under him because they were meant to serve the true royals not the wannabes. But what this man had spouted was unacceptable. And the price of his punishment cannot be anything else other than death, right here, right now.

Gallas stood on his feet, wobbling. He lunged desperately at Gavriel, hoping to land an attack, but the prince effortlessly dodged and smote him with the hilt of his sword, then kicked him hard.

The half-blood spat out blood and fell to his knees.

"Get up. It's time for me to claim your head." Gavriel said once again, looking down at him with fiery but deadly eyes.

Finally realizing that Gavriel had been toying with him all this while, fear began to fill his insides, coiling intensely like a serpent in his innards. He had never felt such genuine fear in his entire life.

Screaming, the half-blood rose and attacked – a desperate and pitiful last-ditch attempt fuelled by fear. "Monste –"

But Gavriel did not even grace him with the time to finish what he wanted to say before Gallas' head was already dangling in Gavriel's hand which was clenched in his hair while the half-blood's body rolled lifelessly to the ground.

#### Chapter 66 - Purpose

With a sickening thud, Gallas' body fell to the ground and rolled a couple rounds lifelessly due to the impact and weight. Seeing their prince standing there leisurely – the ultimate picture of calmness and with an air of assurance surrounding him – with the half-blood's head still dangling in his hand, the Dacrian soldiers seemed unable to believe what their eyes were showing them nor were they able to respond to what had just taken place.

They gulped in astonishment, opened their mouths, then shut it again, very closely resembling the actions of those golden, red or black fishes with rotund bodies and bulging eyes that can be found in the palace gardens. Gavriel's men saw the other soldier's responses and could only smirk and chuckle in the superior knowledge that this is nothing to their prince. The best has yet to come.

Their prince resembled the prince of hell very closely, right about now. They could actually feel goosebumps prickling and rising along their skins just by looking at him. Their prince. They knew he was strong, but they had absolutely no idea he was this powerful. Never in their wildest dreams would they have thought he could be stronger than the greatly feared half-blooded vampires who were supposed to be the strongest of all. How? Why? When did the prince become this powerful? Or... was he already always this formidable?

Suddenly, a roar echoed and when Gavriel turned his face towards the source of that noise, he saw that there were little horizontal clouds of white being kicked up at the edges of the periphery. It seemed that the imperial army was retreating. He creased his brows in obvious displeasure. The war was nowhere near over yet so why was Caius already retreating? It could not be as simple as he had gotten scared, could it? A scornful sneer formed on Gavriel's handsome face as that thought crossed his mind.

With narrowed eyes, Gavriel focused his gaze as he searched for Caius. He found him and their gazes clashed and met. Due to the distance between them that was too wide, communication that usually could be made through their eyes were not possible.

Caius' eyes were emotionless as he glared balefully back at Gavriel, he then abruptly turned and disappeared from Gavriel's sight.

The roar of victory from the Dacrian soldiers that had started as soon as the imperial army retreated continued and got even louder. They were ecstatic at this win against their enemies. Small it may be, but it was a very significant one as a half-blooded vampire was taken down by their very own prince!

Zolan landed lightly in front of Gavriel, giving a small bow as a show of respect to his lord. His long blond hair that was braided behind him now painted with blood.

"What do you think is happening?" Gavriel asked, his gaze still fixed on the retreating lines of Caius's army.

"I'm not certain, My Lord but... it felt suspicious to me. It was as if they just came at us this time for the sole purpose of testing out the waters." Zolan replied honestly with a grave expression.

"And what you're telling me is that this water they're testing should not be that of the capabilities of our Dacrian soldiers ... but mine?" Gavriel's eyes were cold and hard as one side of his lips curled up, making anyone who looked at him frightened at the extremely glacial sensation he was giving out.

"Yes, Your Highness. They are now aware of the kind of power you actually have. You easily killed a half-blood before their very eyes and beat another one up quite nicely, I would say." Zolan's gaze that had a slight hidden amusement, fell to the other half-blood who was now being surrounded by Samuel and the others. "You, taking down two of the empires' most powerful warriors all at once, and on your own, nonetheless, is enough for them to realize the power you've been hiding all this while."

Gavriel smirked but then, he swept his gaze around the battlefield and his smile slowly faded. His gaze settled on Leon who was now crouching, preparing himself to attack the men who were surrounding him.

"You must be right, but I don't think that's the sole reason behind this attack and retreat. There must be something... a bigger reason behind all this act that he's putting up." Gavriel's voice hinted that he was more than certain about his suspicion.

After handing Gallas' head to Zolan, Gavriel made his way towards the other half-blood. The man was still healing from all the wounds Gavriel had inflicted on him. If he were a normal vampire, he would still be unconscious on the ground or rolling around screaming in pain. But fortunately for him, he was not a normal vampire.

Leon had his eyes blazing red. He had lost his sword from the earlier attack, so he was crouching and ready to fight barehanded.

Long ago, when the vampires were still fighting against powerful beasts, they had learned to use weapons like swords as their fangs and nails were nothing compared to the beasts' fangs and claws. Using weapons were far more effective against the massive beasts than fighting them barehanded. Since then, vampires had gotten used to fighting with the sword. They do not need their swords when they are against the weaker humans but if it was fighting against their own kind, the vampires preferred to use weapons if they were to kill each other.

The soldiers parted and opened a path for Gavriel as he approached. Even though most of them had their attention towards the snarling half-blood, and some of them did not know that Gavriel was approaching, Gavriel's presence itself was so strong that it made them look back instinctively and when they saw him, they immediately moved aside.

Even the half-blood felt him approaching while he was still far off and focussed his threatening gaze and elongated claws at Gavriel's direction.

Gavriel halted beside Samuel, his eyes holding onto Leon's eyes. "You know what you need to do. Leave this to me and take Levy and Reed with you." Gavriel commanded and Samuel immediately nodded.

Without wasting a moment, the big man nodded at Levy and Reed and the three leapt away into the darkness, towards where their enemy had retreated.

"Leon," Gavriel called the half-blood's name as he calmly and leisurely strode forward, circling the half-blood just like how a predator would circle its prey. "Have you forgotten about the deal we agreed on earlier?"

#### Chapter 67 - Weapon

Leon's eyes widened a little before narrowing them in suspicion, not sure where Gavriel was going with this. "You didn't even give me a chance to agree." He gritted his teeth.

"Oh, did I not?" Gavriel tilted his head slightly. "Well, that's not important anymore. You've lost the bet. Therefore, you will serve me from now on." The prince declared with a wide smile.

It was not just Leon who was shocked at the words that came out of Gavriel's mouth, but everyone else who had heard him. Gavriel shrugged his shoulders casually.

"Caius left you behind while retreating with the rest of his troops. That means you're not as valuable a weapon to him as you seem to think you are." Gavriel did not hold back in his comments and observations. One of the things he had noticed with Leon was his intelligence. Unlike Gallas, Leon was certainly aware of how the royals truly see the half-bloods. Gavriel could tell just by looking into his eyes.

"Why would you want me to serve you?" The half-blood finally spoke, his voice questioning and with a hint of suspicion. "You are strong... a monster even I never thought could ever have existed. Someone like you don't need a not-so-valuable weapon like me." There was a tinge of self-reproach as he said that last statement.

"That's right, I don't need a weapon. But I do need allies. The stronger they are, the better." Gavriel's eyes were clear and bright, staring straight into Leon's.

Leon's eyes widened. He felt that strong and sincere gaze pierce sharp and true through him, making his heart pound in expectation without really knowing the reason why. The colour of his eyes changed into a surprisingly beautiful shade of purple and violet, slowly replacing the red.

"You are strong Leon." Gavriel complimented straightforwardly. "It would be a total waste of resource if I let you remain as just a mindless weapon at the emperor's disposal. Serve me well and be one of my comrades. Or are you the type who would rather die than serve the monster who had just beaten you up?"

"I am no fool, Prince Gavriel. I acknowledge wholeheartedly that you are simply stronger than me."

"Exactly. You're not a fool and that's why you're going to accept my offer and serve me." Gavriel bent and picked Leon's sword up before throwing it at him. "Right?"

Leon caught it and as their gazes met, Leon felt something unfathomable crawled under his skin. There seemed to be an invisible force that made him suddenly feel a certain kind of freedom.

"From now on, you're no longer one of the emperor's weapon and no longer do you have to obey and bow to his demands. You're now Leon, one of Gavriel's men." The prince's loud declaration echoed all around and Leon did not know why but he suddenly fell on one knee and bowed his head in submission to the prince.

This felt really different from the time when he was bowing his head to the emperor. Why did he feel as though this was so right? As if this man was supposed to be "the one" that he and all the other half-bloods were to serve and no other since the very beginning? Why was it that it felt as though he was happy to serve him and would even happily give up his life for this person... this traitor prince?

The soldiers who witnessed the scene remained silent until they watched Leon stood up and followed Gavriel to the entrance of the fortress. It was strange but none of them doubted or complained about what their prince had just done. It should be quite understandable if some of them would feel bothered with the prince's move, taking in someone who was clearly an enemy just moments ago in their midst. But for some reason they all felt like what happened was meant to be.

At the top of the watchtower, Gavriel stood there, looking down at the initially pristine snow-covered meadow that was now regrettably tainted with blood. Soldiers were now lining up the bodies of those who had died, separating the Dacrians from those of the imperial army. Even though the battle stopped midway, there was already so many casualties. The meadow reeked with the stench of blood and death that night even as the moon shone silvery and bright, reflecting nothing of what had happened down below.

Gavriel was still waiting for the men he had sent to spy on Caius's army. He could not declare that this battle was over until he was fully certain that Caius and his army had really left.

Zolan had started to question the still healing Leon, but the half-blood appeared to know very little about the plans of the crown prince and the emperor. All he was able to tell was that the emperor sent them here to kill Gavriel and destroy Dacia.

The half-blood's statement was just as Gavriel had expected. He knew of how the emperor and high officials of the empire treated the half-bloods. They were just tools of war for their use and these tools had no need to know on the more in-depth battle plans.

"Your Highness," Zolan suddenly called out as he approached Gavriel. His eyes narrowed while staring intently at Gavriel's neck.

"What is it Zolan?"

"Pardon me, but... isn't that little wound on your neck taking too long to heal? I've been looking at it for a while now. That wound that small was supposed to have healed a long while ago. Isn't it?" Zolan's voice was serious, feeling as if something is off and gravely wrong.

As though Gavriel was not aware about the wound Zolan was talking about, he lifted his fingers to touch the spot on his neck that Zolan was staring at when he suddenly experienced a wave of dizziness and wavered slightly where he stood. Everyone who was looking at him had their hearts dropping. Had something severe happened to His Highness, Prince Gavriel?

"Your Highness!" Panic coloured Zolan's voice despite his calm expression. Even Leon was alarmed. "What's wrong?"

## Chapter 68 - Nightmist

"Nightmist..." Gavriel said and Zolan's eyes widened in fear. He quickly got the prince to lean against the wall and immediately checked on his wound.

"Fuck. It's indeed nightmist!" Zolan cursed.

Nightmist was the most lethal poison ever created because there was no known antidote for it. This poison could only be obtained by the vampire's royal family and it was said that there was only a very little amount left in the possession of the royals. No one knew who created this poison. All they knew was that this Nightmist had been gifted to a queen long, long ago.

"No need to panic. This poison would kill a vampire in an instant, but you know this poison can't do much to me, much less kill me." Gavriel said calmly. But the prince had started to look a little paler than usual, and his eyes was starting to show a dazed look.

Zolan knew that Gavriel had been poisoned before. Back then, it took him five days to battle and clear off the poison in his body. Since this particular poison does not have any antidote, it was always an instant killer. But Gavriel had managed to survive. Zolan theorized that the prince must be immune to any poison or the blue blood running through his veins was the antidote. But then, why did it take days for the poison to linger in the prince's body before he could fully rid himself of the poison?

"Damn. I can't believe this is happening. Who could have inflicted this wound on you?!" Zolan's voice was deadly. "Was it that Gallas?!"

Gavriel opened his eyes as he leaned his head against the wall and looked at Leon who was standing there, stunned and shocked. Gallas never managed to come close enough to wound him. All his wounds were all from the skilful manoeuvrings of Leon. Leon himself was still shell shocked, standing there stiff and unblinking – trying to understand where or when Prince Gavriel had the opening enough to be introduced to the deadly Nightmist.

Aware of dangerous poisons, Gavriel never let himself get wounded during battles against vampires. But in the fight against the half-bloods, he was confident that the half-bloods would never pull off dirty tricks. They would never resort to using poisons because they were prideful creatures who also

thought of themselves as the strongest and that sole reason was enough for them to strongly decline even if the emperor had ordered it.

"It seemed Caius put poisons on your sword without you knowing." Gavriel scoffed at the still frozen Leon.

The half-blood pulled out his sword and took a closer look at it, carefully sniffing at its blade. When he picked up the faint trace of poison on it, humiliation and quiet rage immediately blazed in his eyes. He could not believe the crown prince had lowered himself and did this. He remembered that he had sparred with the crown prince before they attacked Dacia because of the crown prince's request. It was then that the crown prince asked them to exchange swords for one round.

Leon fell onto his knees, his sword clanging to the ground. He could not believe the crown prince was this shameful and deceitful to his own men. "I deserve to die!"

"Get up, Leon. This is not your fault. Your death will just be a waste. And like I said, this won't kill me."

"Yes, you won't die," Zolan butted in. "But you'll spend days to –"

"Enough, Zolan." Gavriel rose. "This is one of the goals in their attack. Since they doubted my origins, this poison is the easiest way for them to confirm that I am indeed of true royal descent since they all know that this poison kills everyone but the vampire blue blood. It's a genius move I must say. Caius really used his brain this time." Gavriel complimented sarcastically.

At that moment, Samuel was back. The big man was surprised at the sight of Gavriel leaning against the wall, but the prince did not let him question.

"Report now," Gavriel demanded, and Samuel told him that Caius and his army had indeed left Dacia and were now headed towards the imperial capital. "It seemed Caius is also aware of what will happen to a royalty under the influence of Nightmist." Gavriel chuckled.

"That's right. So, this was why he retreated. What a scaredy cat." Zolan scoffed.

"Alright, you have to bring me to my confinement now before I start to do something regrettable." Gavriel said, still in a playful voice. But what he said sent violent shivers down Zolan and Samuel's spine.

Samuel did not waste a single moment and immediately took hold of Gavriel's arm and draped it over his shoulders. They then leapt towards the castle.

"Wait here and heal up, Leon." Zolan told the half-blood before he followed after Samuel and Gavriel.

The three secretly landed on one of the castle's veranda. They headed directly to the library and Zolan immediately moved to one of the shelves that looked identical to the rest in the room and fiddled with something there. A hidden wall suddenly swung open, and Samuel supported Gavriel as they went through the secret door. Another path opened on the floor revealing a stairway heading to the darkness beneath.

Gavriel pulled away from Samuel and descended the dark stairway alone, using the walls to support himself. He turned before his head disappeared into the darkness. "If Caius returns with his army, just free me from here... however, I doubt he'd return though."

"Yes, Your Highness." Samuel nodded solemnly. "What about the princess? What should we tell her if she starts looking for you and ask questions?" Samuel was thorough and covered all bases. He knew that Lady Evie would definitely be asking after her husband if she did not see him while the rest of them were there.

Gavriel froze in shock. It had slipped his mind for a short moment due to the influence of the poison on his mind. He opened his mouth to reply but instead of an answer to give to Samuel, a groan escaped his mouth. His eyes began to change their colour in the dark and as it blazed with unholy light and locked unto them with mind-numbing bloodlust, Zolan quickly grabbed Samuel and dragged him out of the secret pathway as the floor closed.

As soon as they stepped out of the secret door, the thick walls silently closed and all traces of it vanished from view, as if there was nothing there in the first place.

## Chapter 69 - Report

Last night, while the sounds of battle raging from afar was intense, Evie could do nothing else but just stand by the window, fingers with knuckles bone white, desperately gripping the window frame as if she were hanging on for dear life. The images and thoughts swirling in her brain had been driving her near to madness and terror. No, she was not at all afraid of the possibility that the enemy might be reaching her. However, she was scared and worried to death about Gavriel. She wished she could go down to the frontlines right this moment just to have a quick peek on him, just to reassure herself that he was fine. She could even accept that he would have had sustained some form of injuries as this was a war. All she needed to know was that he was alive and well.

When the realization finally sank into her consciousness that the clashing sounds of battle had stopped before daylight, Evie found herself dashing out of her room and in a few short moments, she was out on the veranda, leaning out as far as she can to catch a hint of something – of anything. To her dismay, she could hear nothing but silence even after standing still for a long while and that silence was almost as frightening as her receiving some kind of bad news. What could have happened since the moment she was taken away from the battlefield? Was it already over that quickly? She had asked herself over and over again when suddenly, a roar echoed. It was a roar of victory. The battle was over! But who won?

Her innards shook intensely at this feeling of not knowing the outcome of the battle. Only now she could truly appreciate and know how this feeling was extremely unbearable. Gavriel... she wanted to see her husband. She wanted to see him victorious. He promised her he would come back to her, safe.

Earlier, Elias had come running excitedly to her while she was in the garden with a big smile plastered all over his face and joyously told her that Dacia had won the war and that the imperial army had already left.

Upon hearing that news, Evie could hardly contain the relief and gladness that she felt overflowing in her heart that her knees almost gave way and causing her to fall over. She did not know how but she managed to steady herself and grabbed onto something to prevent such embarrassing thing from happening. After hearing the news, Elias brought her to her chambers and told her she needed to rest now. Evie had insisted she had wanted to wait up for Gavriel but Elias said the prince could not return to the castle yet as he still had things to settle and deal with. Evie understood this. She knew that as their leader, Gavriel must remain there at the battlefield to oversee the logistics and also the

soldiers and their welfare as well. So, she forced herself to calm down and sleep, hoping that by the time she woke up, he would be back with her and she could... hug him tight and welcome him home – to her.

But even after waking up and night came, she waited with bated breath and on tenterhooks, Gavriel never did come back to the fortress nor did he come to see her. She was a little worried as she knew he was fine. But if he was truly fine, then what was holding him back from coming back? She also had that feeling that the butler kept on dodging her every time she was trying to question him and due to that, Evie started to become a little suspicious. It was a very telling sign that she was being left out of something, as if there was a big secret that could not be told to her. From her previous interactions with him and their past experience together, she now knew for certain that even if Gavriel was busy and held up with something he could not avoid, he would often suddenly appear just to check on her and then leave again – but only when he could no longer tarry around with her.

"Elias, I want to go the frontlines to see him." Evie caught the butler that dawn and laid her demands firmly. "Since you reported that the war is now over, so there's no harm if I were to go there, right?" she reasoned it out and Elias immediately panicked.

"Uhm... err... My Lady... that is..."

"I just want to see him. I won't approach him if he's busy. All I need is just to get a glimpse of him. One glance... just to see that he's safe, and I'll return here immediately." She pleaded with shimmery watery eyes.

The butler looked extremely troubled as he struggled to respond, making Evie's suspicion skyrocket.

"Princess, you wouldn't want to go there. The battlefield is still –"

"I'll be fine. It wouldn't be my first time seeing dead bodies anyway."

"But princess, the thing is –"

"Elias, are you hiding something from me?" Evie narrowed her eyes. She could not hold it in anymore. The more they object to her going to the battlefield, the more she felt that her hunch that something was wrong got even stronger. "Is there really something wrong? We have already won the war so why I can't see him? Tell me, where is my husband? You're not hiding something from me, right?"

The Lady Evie when she was intent on digging matters up was really hard to deal with. While Elias the ever-cool butler even began to sweat and even felt cornered by this seemingly gentle and weak human lady, Zolan swiftly came to his rescue and landed beside her like a cat.

"My Lady," the long-haired man pulled her attention. "His Highness had left after settling the issues on the battlefield and went on an important secret mission. So even if you do go to the wall, you won't be able to see him. I am here to report to you about it." Zolan's report was as usual, soldier-like and without inflection to his voice.

Evie stared hard at the man. Unlike the obvious butler, she knew with one glance at Zolan that it would be impossible for her to figure out whether or not he was telling the truth or giving her the excuse they had perhaps already agreed upon earlier.

"Secret mission?" Evie could only ask with an eyebrow arched at him, but she made sure to show Zolan that she was not convinced with his so-called "report".

The long-haired man smiled. "Yes, My Lady. I do apologise for reporting on this a little late and causing you to worry. Please be ensured that Prince Gavriel will be returning soon. So please wait here a little longer. We can't let you go to the wall because His Highness had instructed us to keep you safe here until he's back. I hope you understand why we're not letting you go."

Biting the inside of her lips, Evie stared hard at Zolan for a long while before she willingly turned away and headed back to her chambers.

Watching her retreating back, Zolan released the breath he was secretly holding back and lightly scratched the back of his neck, giving a sheepish look sideways at Elias.

## Chapter 70 - Aim

"Oh my... she was totally not fooled one bit by my explanation. And I thought I had given her the most believable reason there is." Zolan murmured. In his eyes, there reflected a look of respect due to how unexpectedly sharp this human princess was. He did not think she had it in her.

"The lady is very perceptive. I honestly think that she could tell if someone's lying or not!" Elias complained. "I had been trying to avoid being caught by her questioning me, but it's nerve-wrecking!"

"Oh, really? So, her intuition is that good, huh?" Zolan grinned and chuckled at Elias' complaints, earning him a dirty look from the butler.

"Saying it is good is putting it lightly." Elias commented with a roll of his eyes. "It's very hard to convince her. I'm certain she'd –" Elias could not continue on with his statement because the princess who was almost about to enter her room suddenly came striding back towards them.

Her eyes were fierce and firm as she stared down at them. She did not look like the little fragile human girl they knew anymore. That moment, there was no trace of the fear she had towards them before. Zolan was silently impressed at how much this princess had grown in such a short time. Was she not afraid of vampires anymore? She could even look at them straight in the eyes now. Back then, she used to only cling onto and hide behind the prince and only look at him.

When she halted before them, Zolan waited in anticipation as to the reason why she came back with such drive and even looking very serious.

"I'll be needing a bow and arrow." She said in a serious tone and Zolan blinked, totally taken aback. Elias almost fainted from shock. What? Bow and arrows? How did it suddenly come to that? What is she planning to do?

"Of course, My Lady. I'll bring them to you immediately." Elias said respectfully and then he was gone.

Curious, Zolan tilted his head slightly and asked Evie with a polite tone. "My Lady, are you intending to go practice archery?"

"Yes. Since you won't let me leave the castle." Her tone held a tinge of assertiveness that just made her sound adorable coming from that small and petite frame.

Zolan forced a laugh as he strengthened his will and scratched the back of his neck again. His Lady might be the death of him yet. "I'm just obeying His Highness' order, Princess. Since I am here, would you like me to join you during your practices? I am quite good at archery."

And thus, Zolan, followed Evie and Elias to the courtyard. The practice zone was already prepared.

Evie did not waste a moment and focused herself on her target. She was upset. She had absolutely no idea why, but she was quite convinced that Gavriel's men were lying to her and she was dying to know why. Why would they need to lie to her? What are they hiding from her? Why? Gavriel told her he would never want another misunderstanding between them again, so why would he send his men to lie to her?

As her emotions intensified, her shots were also becoming increasingly accurate until all her shots ended up hitting the bullseye. Zolan had an impressed look in his eyes. He did not know that the princess was this good.

The prince had boasted to them about her archery skills once but Zolan thought the prince was just exaggerating out of his fondness for her. To be fair, he was talking about his beloved wife after all. But now that he was witnessing it first-hand, Zolan could not help but clap for the princess.

"That was terrific, Princess! Truly eye opening." Zolan praised as Evie paused to take short water break. He walked towards her and stood beside her. "I never thought you're this skilled. In fact, you're amazing. How about we do something much more interesting this time around?"

Zolan walked towards the target and stood there. "Aim at me, Princess." He said, smiling encouragingly.

He saw her swallow her mouthful of water in shock. Hesitation immediately filled her eyes, and he could see uncertainty and hint of fear in them. It seems she was really skilled, but these skills would be utterly useless if all she could do was aim her unerringly accurate arrows at non-living things.

For some reason, Zolan had the urge to help this princess overcome this obstacle. Since he saw the fierce look in her eyes and the way she shot her arrows, Zolan did not know why but he was seeing something in her. He was not certain what it was yet, but he was deeply intrigued. There seemed to be something beyond fascinating about this human princess. Whatever it was... he was going to find out. For now, he would like her to be able to shoot her arrows with ease towards a living creature. Because Zolan had long realized that this human girl would be their empire's future empress. He knew it sounded impossible that a human would be the future empress of a vampire empire. Many would go against it, many would never accept it, and it could cause another chaos but knowing Prince Gavriel and the way things were going on right now, if things stay the way they are, Zolan could bet that this Princess would be the one who will be standing next to their prince.

"Don't be nervous Your Highness. Think of me as your enemy and release your arrow. Do not worry, I can catch your arrow." Zolan said. "Aim at my forehead princess!"

Evie looked at the man with a frown on her face. Was he trying to train her? She had heard that this Zolan was the master tactician among Gavriel's men. Why was he suddenly doing this?

"It's fine, My Lady. You can shoot at him all you want. He can dodge and catch anything you will throw at him." Elias encouraged her with a laugh and Evie looked at the long-haired man again. His loosely braided hair, that one golden earring and that nonchalant smile made him look harmless yet somehow mischievously annoying.

Maybe it was because she was still upset from the earlier snub from wanting to find out about Gavriel, Evie's hesitation quickly dissolved, and she aimed at the smiling man. Because her hands shook minutely, that first shot strayed a little. But to her surprise, Zolan still caught it effortlessly without moving from his spot.

The man grinned at her. Feeling like he was deliberately trying to rile her, Evie took a deep breath and aimed again. Zolan was still talking, encouraging her to keep calm and to focus when Evie suddenly released her second arrow.

It flew straight without warning that even Zolan looked a little surprised as he caught the arrow right before it planted itself in his face. It was a bullseye!