

Chapter 93

Emeriel pushed himself harder. The woods, so familiar from a life spent hunting and scavenging to feed himself and Aekeira, were now his sanctuary and his weapon.

The snap of branches and the dry rustle of leaves beneath his feet marked his passage. Every step was a frantic blur, leaving behind only the echo of his rapid heartbeat as he vanished into the depths of the woods.

"Bloody hell! Where is he!?" The fading cry marked his progress – for now. But the ceaseless chase was taking its toll.

Unlike the tireless Urekai, Emeriel was only human. He knew, with a chilling certainty, that he wouldn't outrun them all the way back to the fortress.

Emeriel's ragged breaths echoed in the sudden quiet as his heart pounded a staccato rhythm against his ribs. Desperate eyes scanned the underbrush, seeking refuge.

There – a fallen log covered in thick ferns, a sliver of darkness promising concealment. He scrambled towards it, wedging himself into the tight space.

This was it. He could hide, at least for a moment.

A strong hand clamped onto his shoulder, yanking him out of his hiding place.

"Leave me alone!" Emeriel shrieked, flailing, panic lending his blows surprising strength.

"Quiet. It's me," a familiar, deep voice spoke.

Grand Lord Vladya? Emeriel froze, the surprise of seeing the grand lord almost outweighing his fear. Almost. How had the grand lord found him?

"Save your questions for later. We don't have time. Come on, let's go." Vladya scooped Emeriel into his arms, and ran.

Emeriel held himself still, barely able to breathe. Lord Vladya's speed left him thunderstruck. He moved with the blinding flash of lightning, as quick as the wind.

If the grand lord chased him, Emeriel knew he wouldn't stand a chance.

A storm of arrows erupted, buzzing like angry wasps as they came hurtling toward them. Vladya became a whirlwind, deflecting and dodging with sophisticated grace.

But the relentless onslaught was too much; Emeriel braced himself for the searing pain of an arrowhead.

Then, Lord Vladya's big form enveloped him. His larger body folded over his smaller frame like a shield, protecting Emeriel completely.

Finally, they sought cover behind a massive tree. Only then did Emeriel see it – two arrows jutted from Lord Vladya's left shoulder.

"You've been hit, Your Highness!" Emeriel choked.

Vladya studied the arrows with detached annoyance, as though they were mere nuisances.

With casual ease, he snapped them free, blood oozing from the wounds, then paused to sniff their broken shafts.

"Dragonblood," he murmured, calmly.

"What does that mean?" Emeriel asked, his worry for the grand lord unexpectedly outweighing his own terror.

"Poison," Vladya's response was curt, almost bored. He tossed the arrows aside, then glanced at Emeriel. "Wait here."

And in a flash, he was gone.

The forest erupted in a sound of horror. Screams rose into the air, followed by the snap of bones breaking.

The wetness of flesh tearing, desperate cries of agony cut short, and something crunching beneath a devastating force.

When Lord Vladya returned, Emeriel noticed his white robe was splattered crimson, the blood vivid against the stark white.

More spattered his scarred face, and his eyes... there was a gleam in them that made Emeriel's stomach twist with fear.

He looked as unbothered as ever, as if killing all those assassins was a mere inconvenience. He lifted Emeriel and began to sprint again.

"We have to be fast before the poison takes effect. It is lethal to our kind," Lord Vladya spoke in the same casual tone one might use in discussing the weather.

But, by the time they arrived at Ravenshadow, Emeriel could see how true his words were.

Lord Vladya's inhuman speed had slowed, his once-effortless strides now strained, his breathing harsh.

Emeriel, placed back on his feet, instinctively took a step back to put some distance between them.

He was fortunate Lord Vladya maintained a professional demeanor, keeping his arms firmly wrapped around Emeriel's abdomen without any wandering.

His gaze stayed on the grand lord who had saved his life, and a lot of troubling emotions battled within him. Blood from his wound flowed in endless streams. A sheen of sweat beaded Lord Vladya's brow.

"I thought Urekai had self-healing abilities for physical wounds," the question slipped before he could stop it.

Then, he bit his lips, wondering if he had overstepped his bounds.

"We do, and we don't. It's a complicated matter," Vladya's reply was clipped. "One has to blood-feed first for natural healing to commence. And for injuries such as this, a healer is also needed."

As they neared Blackstone, its impressive outline loomed against the last rays of the dying sun, a group of soldiers stood waiting.

Their eyes widened with alarm as they saw their ruler, but a sharp shake of the grand lord's head cut off any offers of assistance Yaz was about to make.

"I am fine," he insisted, and they reluctantly respected his wishes.

They followed behind the grand Lord, all the way to the grand entrance of his home.

With a deep bow, Emeriel offered his heartfelt gratitude. "My Lord Vladya, I am forever in your debt for saving my life."

"Stay out of trouble," Grand Lord Vladya's tone was cool and dismissive. "Return to your quarters. Your duties are concluded for today."

Emeriel obeyed, but worry gnawed at him as he left. Lord Vladya's injuries had looked severe, even if he'd treated them as mere nuisances.

"I still can't believe he saved my life," Emeriel whispered, a mix of gratitude and confusion swirling within him.

Emeriel flung open the door of his quarters, took one step inside – and went very still.

A shadowy figure lurked against the far wall, hand darting for a weapon sheathed at its hip. Another assassin.

Fear jolted through him. They were inside.

How many more were hiding in there?

He slammed the door shut with a frantic bang, instantly pivoting into a run. The crash of wood splintering echoed behind him, followed by the thundering footsteps of his pursuers.

He could barely force his exhausted legs to keep up the desperate pace.

The good news is, this group didn't seem to have the poisonous arrows. But, the bad news?

They were closing in on him. Fast.

Emeriel had a single destination in mind.

Grand Lord Vladya's quarters would have been a shorter journey, but his instincts drove him in one direction. His beast.