

Chapter 94

GRAND LORD VLADYA

Grand Lord Vladya slumped in his study chair, his gaze fixed blankly on the weathered stone wall. He had sent a soldier to summon Merrilyn.

The soldier's report resounded in his skull. Lady Merrilyn has been in labor for hours, and thus unable to make the journey.

The next thing to do was clear. He needed to hurry to his bloodhost before the poison reached his heart, while some strength remained, and get the much-needed blood himself.

Even if it meant a sip from a goblet, just to sustain him until the healer arrived. Any other male in his position would have done it.

Not him.

His eyes fell to the ravaged flesh on his shoulder. The wound throbbed, swollen, black veins pulsing outward, tracing a macabre path toward his heart.

While hunting in the woods with his soldiers, he had spotted an assassin. He'd sent Yaz and the others ahead, then gave chase. He wasn't surprised to learn they were targeting Emeriel.

He had known yesterday's events would put the boy in greater danger. He just hadn't expected it to happen so soon. Was it Zaiper? Or were there others?

The door creaked open, and Yaz entered, his scent thick with concern. "I shall hurry to Lady Merilyn's dwelling and inform them of your poisoning, my Lord. She would bleed herself dry to save you, even amidst labor's agony. She is unaware of the severity of your need."

"There's no need. Send for the healer." Vladya dismissed with a wave of his hand.

Yaz remained rooted in place, his eyes filled with stormy determination. "The poison will reach your heart before the healer arrives."

"Just do as I said, Yaz." Vladya leaned back, his eyelids fluttered close. He was so tired.

"But—" Yaz's protest hung heavy in the silence.

In the end, however, the scrape of wood on stone marked Yaz's reluctant departure.

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AEKEIRA

Aekeira tended her garden, the watering can a gentle weight in her hand. Sunlight dappled her skin as she moved with practiced grace, allowing a delicate stream of water to nourish the plants below.

She tended to the vibrant array of flowers and vegetables. Sound of water meeting the soil brought her a sense of comfort, immersing her in the moment. Then, the sharp crack of a footstep approaching shattered her tranquility.

Startled, Aekeira whirled around.

Lord Vladya's head soldier stood rigid, his familiar face hard.

"Lord Vladya summons you," he stated, his voice clipped.

Aekeira's heart skipped a beat. "He does?" It had been two days since that disastrous night, and she hadn't seen him since.

The soldier clenched his jaw, flicking his gaze away. "Yes," he confirmed, the word edged with a strange finality. Make haste."

"Is everything alright?" she asked tentatively, sensing there was more to the soldier's behavior.

"Everything is fine," he retorted, the words as sharp as a blade. "Now, come."

"Just a moment to—"

"No, come at once," the soldier snapped, a hint of urgency coloring his tone.

Dropping the watering can with a clatter, she removed her apron and hurried after him. Her pulse a frantic drumbeat against her ribs. What was going on?

They strode towards the grand entrance, and inside the vast residence. The soldier halted before an imposing set of doors.

"I will leave you here. He awaits within. Enter," he commanded, his voice devoid of warmth. Then, with a brisk turn, he was gone.

Aekeira watched Yaz retreat, his stiff posture mirroring his master's. Too serious, too rigid. Like master, like soldier.

Her knuckles turned white as she rapped hesitantly on the wood, the sound echoing in the strained silence. With a groan of ancient hinges, the door swung inward, revealing a sliver of shadowed space.

She ventured into the study, her steps hesitant as she crossed the threshold, the scent of old parchment filling her nostrils.

"Your Highness?" Aekeira's voice shook despite her attempt at composure. "You called for me?"

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GRAND LORD VLADYA

Vladya's eyes opened, like twin pools of darkness. Her scent hit him like a wave.

It has always been alluring, but now, mixed with the fragrance of roses, Aekeira smelled unimaginably appealing.

"No," he rasped through clenched teeth, the word a jagged shard of sound.

"No? But your head soldier... he said—"

Yaz? He had brought Aekeira here?

A surge of fury battled the weakness coursing through Vladya's veins. Leaning back, he shut his eyes. "Leave. I did not—"

She gasped. "You're bleeding!" She gasped. "You're hurt!"

The next second, her scent engulfed him. Unbelievably close. The sweet notes of rose mingled with vanilla bean.

"It is nothing," Vladya ground out through clenched teeth. "A mere scratch—" The words died on his lips as the sharp rip of fabric pierced the air.

Eyes snapped open, he stared at her. Aekeira had torn a strip from the hem of her dress. Her movements rushed and determined, she stepped closer, holding the torn cloth like a weapon.

"What madness is this?"

"We must stop the bleeding, Your Highness," she said firmly. The improvised bandage brushed against his fevered skin, sending an unwelcome jolt through his system.

The scent of her blood, sweet and heady, washed over him like a breaking wave. Like a blooming field of wildflowers. His nostrils flared, and a low growl rumbled in his throat.

Every fiber of his being screamed for sustenance; his weakened state, blood loss, and the poison gnawing at his control. His vision blurred, her vibrant life force, a beacon against the encroaching darkness.

"Get away from me, Aekeira," Vladya snarled, the words ragged through his lengthening fangs. "Go, before I—" He couldn't finish the threat, the hunger a burning coal in his gut.

Aekeira met his gaze, her own widening with a flicker of fear. Her face paled, and she swallowed nervously. But something else held her ground – a stubborn defiance laced with compassion.

"I can't. Not until this is bound." She tightened the makeshift bandage, her touch feather-light against his burning skin.

Where did she find such courage? The question gnawed at him as a strange sensation rippled through him. A yearning for much more. A craving for the very thing he must deny himself.

"Your brother was attacked. Poisoned arrows in the woods. I sent him to his chamber to rest."

Aekeira went still, a gasp escaping her.

"Em...!?" her voice cracked, choked with a new fear.

"Do you have another brother?" Vladya pressed sarcastically, a sliver of cruelty slicing through the haze of need.

Her hand fell away from his wound. Aekeira spun away, skirts swirling as she lunged for the door.

Vladya nodded. "I thought so," he muttered under his breath. His eyes slid shut, and his head fell back, a weary sigh escaping him.

But her steps faltered. "Wait. You saved Em? You?" Incredulity laced her voice.