

Chapter 43: My Intentions

Eledis

“Laest one fur evening, uld man,” Sigemond told me.

His peculiar accent always made it difficult to understand him when I was in this completely sloshed state, but his meaning got pretty clear when he thumped a tankard of ale in front of me, giving me a pointed look, before returning to his other customers.

“I’m not... old,” I shouted after him. “So rude.”

The guard who’d originally accompanied me here had long since departed, giving some bullshit excuse about his duty to Kaedesa to excuse his abandonment. After he’d left, I’d done the same for a time, meaning to find somewhere I wouldn’t make a fool of myself, but then, I’d run into Raimie in Tiro’s training yard and...

Suffice it to say that our chance meeting hadn’t gone well. With an aching back and a limp, I’d haltingly returned to the comfort of this tavern and its well-known wares.

Folding my body around my mug, I sipped the foam on its lip. What made that Alouin damned barkeep think that he could cut me off? I was descended from royalty. By rights, I should get *all* of the ale I wanted. If I were king...

Well, if I were king, circumstances would be much different. Feeling myself growing maudlin, I tossed back my drink.

“Someone should play a cheerier tune, damnit!” I shouted.

The man in the corner, who’d been contentedly strumming his lute’s strings, jerked toward me, making a jarring note clash with his song.

“His playing’s fine,” an unseen patron shouted back. “Go home if you don’t like it, old man.”

And I shot to my feet, clinging to the table while the tavern spun.

“I am *not* old,” I growled. “Who said that? Come here and say it to my face!”

As if I’d told some joke, the other tavern’s patrons returned to their drinks with indulgent smiles in place. Even Sigemond was smirking, where he was wiping his damn dirty rag over his damn

glasses. Alouin, it was *outrageous*.

“Attend to me, you worthless peasants!” I shouted.

After a pause, the room erupted into laughter, and fire sprang to life in me.

“I could have your heads,” I roared, drawing Shadowsteal. “All of you!”

The tavern fell still with the patron’s panicked titters as loud as screams. Everyone knew that drawing a weapon in a tavern was one of the most anathema of taboos. Put a sharp edge in the hands of a drunkard, and someone was liable to get hurt or dead.

Before anyone could move or decide to be a hero, the tavern’s door banged open.

“There you are!” a familiar voice said.

Whirling toward it, I stumbled, bringing Shadowsteal to bear on the intruder.

Marcuset. Oh, hell...

“Apologies for my friend, Sigemond,” the commander said. “He’s never handled his liquor well.”

As he strode toward me, he locked his eyes on mine, and on stopping outside of my reach, he crossed his arms.

“Put it away,” he said.

So, the commander wanted to play that game, did he? Well, royalty could participate in a staring contest just as well as a soldier. For as long as I must, I could meet those exhausted, pitying, concerned...

Sheathing Shadowsteal, I hung my head, and stepping forward, Marcuset grabbed my arm, dragging me to the door.

“Some coin for your trouble.”

The leftovers of my friend’s voice mingled with the jingle of chits sliding against one another.

“Please, don’t let the king hear about this,” Marcuset said.

Sigemond heaved a sigh while scraping the coins against wood.

“He’s nu longer welcome in bar,” he said.

“Fair enough,” Marcuset said.

Once we were outside, I stumbled down the porch’s stairs, and my friend slung one of my arms over his shoulders, miraculously keeping me from faceplanting in the stone beneath us. We

shuffled down deserted streets until Marcuset found an empty doorway for us to slump in.

“How dare he forbid me from his establishment,” I mumbled to myself. “Such a transgression demands... demands fitting punishment. I should give him a piece... of my mind.”

“Don’t bother. I doubt he cares about what you have to say,” Marcuset said. “Besides, I’ve already given him an appropriate punishment.”

A whisky bottle of excellent quality had appeared in my friend’s hand, but I was too drunk to truly appreciate its value.

“This is why people don’t like the Esela,” I said with my words slurring together. “Magic is cheating, would make thieving like you did so much easier, and you’re full of it tonight.”

“How do you mean?” Marcuset asked.

Uncorking the bottle, he took a swig from it before offering it to me.

“I *mean* that you’re supposed to be at the Birthing Grounds, which is at least a hundred miles away.”

When I tilted my head back, fire scoured my mouth, and I smiled. Now, I could appreciate this whisky’s quality.

“Before deserting us at the Birthing Grounds, Kaedesa lent us a few horses, for use in case of emergency,” Marcuset said. “I figured that the two of you meeting up qualified as an emergency, so I followed her as soon as I could. It seems I wasn’t fast enough to prevent a disaster, though.”

Nope. I *wasn’t* thinking about Kaedesa right now. I wouldn’t do it.

“Who’d you leave in charge at the Birthing Grounds?” I asked, hoping to change the subject.

As if the answer had been obvious, Marcuset drawled, “Oswin.”

“Oh. Good choice.”

Taking another swig, I handed the bottle back, and sipping at its amber liquid, Marcuset watched me with glittering eyes, as if assessing me.

“A question’s been eating at me for a while, my friend,” he said.

Rolling my head toward him, I said, “What’s that?”

For a moment, Marcuset shifted in place, but eventually, he answered me.

“I know you have plans in Auden, but I can’t be sure if any of them will end with Raimie left alive.”

Freezing with the bottle halfway to my lips, I forced out a laugh.

“Are you asking if I’m planning to have a family member killed?” I asked.

With a heavy sigh, Marcuset said, “Yes, Eledis.”

Well, fuck. I’d never thought my friend would actually *ask* about this.

“Why, Marcuset,” I said. “I do believe you’re trying to take advantage of my ine-inebriated state.”

Tensing, Marcuset squeezed his hands together, which was his tell-tale sign that he was about to lose his temper.

“Answer the question, please,” he said.

Agh! Sometimes, I wanted to tear my friend’s throat out. Why wouldn’t he leave this be?

“YES! If I need to kill Raimie to reach the end goal, I’ll do it,” I snapped. “But I don’t want to. If Raimie keeps following his role in my script, then he’ll live a long, happy life, probably with Ren. They can have a horde of Eselan brats together. Or maybe it’ll be with Kaedesa. Wouldn’t that be funny?”

Tilting the bottle back, I drained it, coughing as its liquid went down. With his mouth dropped open, Marcuset had pressed his back into the doorframe, pushing against the ground to get as far away from me as possible.

“*That’s* what she wanted?” he said. “*To marry him?*”

I nodded.

“We thought we were so clever, burning her journals when we needed to escape her notice,” I said. “Don’t we look like fools now.”

“I’m... so sorry, Eledis,” Marcuset said. “I know what that first marriage did to you.”

“Don’t.”

I didn’t want to go there, and fortunately, Marcuset dropped it. Resting my head against the doorframe, I’d almost dozed off when my friend spoke again.

“So. As long as Raimie hands the throne over to you at the end, you won’t kill him?” he asked.

“That about sums it up,” I said, lazily waving a hand through the air. “I doubt Raimie will want to keep it anyway, and after all these years, I think I deserve it, don’t you, Emir?”

“Don’t call me that,” my friend said. “I left that name and life behind years ago. You should do the same, Eledis, but... you never will. You cling to your name like it’s your last buoy in a hurricane, but I’m not like you. I’m Marcuset now.”

Yawning, I slowly said, “Fiiine. Since we’re on the subject of names, why’d you choose such a stupid one for these people?”

Marcuset groaned.

“I wanted Marcus, but there’s a silly, social convention about naming in Ada’ir at the moment.”

“Ah, yes,” I said. “Esela get two syllables or less for their names while humans must have more.”

“Exactly. So, I was forced to take a longer name rather than something I’m comfortable with,” my friend said. “Hence, Marcuset.”

As I guffawed, the intensity of my laughter drove sleep to the fringes for a moment.

“Oh, I can just imagine your first meeting in Ada’ir’s court:

“‘Hello, my name’s Marcus,’ you say, introducing yourself.

“She looks at you and your extended hand with distaste. ‘Marcus...?’ she asks.

“Shit, you think, Alouin damned people and their stupid rules. What can I tack on so the name has a third syllable? And the name Marcuset was dragged from your reluctant lips.”

With a smirk, Marcuset said, “That’s remarkably accurate.”

I snorted, barely keeping from laughing again.

“I’m never going to let you live that down,” I said.

“You’ve obviously not had enough to drink,” Marcuset said over my helplessly renewed laughter.

“Let’s fix that.”

He pulled another bottle from seeming thin air, and the two of us eagerly set upon it.

The next morning, this house’s owner would find us passed out in front of her door, and her outraged shouting would wake the block, but we wouldn’t care. We’d continue as we always had, two friends somehow still bonded together in their fight against the world.

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