

# Interlude 1.1: Apprehension

## Heir to the Audish Throne

Today is a special day. Today, my father spent the morning with me. Today, we've had a party. Today, people tell me that I'm smart and good and nice.

Because today, I turned seven.

Master Kinlith says, "Birthdays are a chance for a prince to show his worth. Let the commoners laud you, Your Highness, but remember to be gracious in return."

I don't like it when he says confusing things, but sometimes, I understand anyway. I was a good prince today. At the party, I tried to be like my father, and my mother noticed.

She said, "You're too young to be so serious, my love. Be a child while you can."

Then, she gave me my present. Inside the box was you! My new diary. I love the way you look and smell. I love that you can keep secrets.

I love that my mother gave you to me because I love her.

But that's all I wanted to say. Today, I turned seven. I was a good prince and made my father proud. Mother gave me a nice gift.

And best of all, I didn't have lessons with Kinlith! I hope my next birthday is this good.

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I am very confused, diary.

My brother was born today. His name is Nebailie, and I think he's wonderful.

Why doesn't everyone else?

The castle was so quiet this morning. Servants and nobles kept hurrying through it. They went out of their way to avoid me, so I thought I was in trouble.

Then, I overheard some people talking about my brother. They weren't saying nice things, and when I went to stop them, they only thought it was funny.

Why? My brother was just born. Why do they already not like him?

It doesn't matter. I think he's perfect. My father let me hold him after I pitched a fit, and I've never seen something so amazing. He was sleeping, and when I saw that, I knew I had to keep him safe.

So, that's what I'll do, diary.

Thank you for letting me write today! I was so confused, but writing it out helped a lot!

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Ok. I have to get this off my chest. So please, forgive me for a moment.

Kinlith. Is such. An *ass*.

I mean... I know I'm growing up, getting into those 'troublesome years' that people always talk about. *I get it*.

But I swear. If that stuffy tutor gets on my case *one more time* about 'proper decorum' and 'lines of succession', I will *punch him in the face*.

All right. I think I got it out. Maybe I should explain now.

I know it's been a while since I last wrote in here. I forgot I had a diary for two solid years, and when I remembered that it existed, I may have been a little too busy with... stuff to do any journaling. Stuff involving girls. Also swords and learning to fight and shit like that.

Prince stuff. I promise it wasn't all fun and games.

Anyway. Now, I'm back because...

Well. Because there are things happening that I don't know how to explain to other people. And I'm not sure who I can talk to about it.

Which leaves me here.

I think something might be going on with my brother. Last time I wrote in this journal, I may have mentioned how much I love Nebailie? Yeah, that's still true. My little brother is probably my favorite person in the world, and he's just... not happy.

Not that I can blame him. People in the castle are *the worst* around him. They act polite and nice to his face, but behind his back, it's all gossip and deriding comments, and I swear to *Alouin*, I'm going to get the next person who makes fun of him banished from the capital.

Sorry. Apparently, I still have some anger to work out.

But getting to the point.

Today, 'bailie and I were in our usual lesson with Kinlith, learning about... something.

I'll be honest. I wasn't paying that much attention.

My brother was. He's always been the better of us with studying, almost like he's trying to prove his worth through our lessons. Which... it makes me furious that he has to do that, but whatever.

Kinlith asked us some questions about our neighboring kingdom, Lyzencroft, and I didn't know the answer. I mean... I know that at some point, their crown princess and I will be getting married. Don't know how I'm already *engaged*.

But beyond that, I don't know much about Auden's neighbor.

Nebailie was happy to jump on the question. He had the correct answer and everything, and Kinlith just *had* to be snarky about that. I don't know why a tutor would make fun of his student's smarts, all while making the insult sound like a compliment, but that *asshole* did it.

I was about to get in his face, but 'bailie grabbed my arm before I could shoot out of my seat. He smiled and said 'thank you', like he hadn't heard the disdain behind Kinlith's words, and the lesson moved on.

How can he put up with that? If someone treated me so horribly, I don't think I could be as calm about it as my brother was.

But he deals with things like that all the time, much as I hate it. Much as I *still* don't know why it happens.

Alouin, I wish someone would explain it to me. I wish the subject of my brother didn't keep getting brushed aside in polite conversation. I wish I could understand so I can help him.

I don't like living in a lie, like there's some obvious truth that no one's telling me.

And I don't like that he's having to live like that too.

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Well. I got myself into a spot of trouble today, but unlike the many other times when this has happened, this one might have been truly worth it.

Nebailie has been having a rough week. He's been quiet and a little sullen, even with me, and that annoying childhood habit of his, where he refuses to meet people's eyes, popped back up.

And this was not ok with me. Don't get me wrong. He should be able to express his feelings in whatever way he wants. That wasn't the problem. I just wanted to cheer him up, if I could.

So, Kinlith has this lady friend who's been dropping by the classroom during lessons. It's pretty obvious that he likes her. Like... *likes*, likes her. And I decided to take advantage of that today.

When she came by our classroom this afternoon, Nebailie was sprawled across his desktop, hiding his face in his arms, and as usual, the... noble lady—see here how ridiculously sarcastic I'm being—ignored the prince in her midst. Or one of them, I guess.

She certainly seemed charmed by me, not that I was surprised by that. Most women seem to enjoy my presence, although... that's started to become tiresome. I know they don't like *me*, merely my place in the kingdom.

But this diary entry isn't about me. It's about cheering my brother up.

As our dear guest plied me for information on Kinlith, I was happy to tell her about all of his many... virtues, and after the first example of these, I caught Nebailie peering at me from over his arm before he ducked back into hiding again, which... yes! I knew that would work. As much as he might insist on being polite with our asshole tutor, I know my brother hates him.

Soon enough, I was able to drag Nebailie into the conversation.

How did it go?

"Hey 'bailie, remember that time when Kinlith made you stand in front of the classroom for hours, even though no one was there and you'd only missed that one answer to his questions?"

Oo... if that didn't get a response.

By the time I was finished with the lady, she had *such* a look of distaste scrawled across her face. Alouin but it was beautiful to see.

The best part? Kinlith showed up toward the tail end of our last story, and he made such a fuss, trying to explain himself. The lady wasn't having any of it, trying to get around him without touching him, and because of how close we'd gotten to her, Nebailie and I were able to slip a spider down the back of her gown.

Hell, how she howled! It was *so funny*.

Look, I know what we did wasn't right. And I know I'll have to apologize to both Kinlith and the lady in the morning. Our father was perfectly within his rights to confine me to my room for the rest of the day.

But seeing Nebailie's face glow like it did...

I'd do it all again. A thousand times more.

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Something strange happened again today, and once more, I find myself in a place where I don't know who I can turn to. Who am I supposed to talk about these things when I don't even understand what those 'things' are?

Last time, I told you about how Nebailie and I pulled a prank on our tutor and how I was sent to my room as punishment for that. Well, I... may have... snuck out after writing that entry.

Yeah, I know I did something wrong, and sure, I absolutely deserved the punishment my father gave me, but I was *bored*. Sitting around, doing nothing, has never been my style.

So, I left, and wandering around the palace, avoiding people, was... interesting. I've never seen how the nobles and servants act when I'm not around. From what I saw, they seem more carefree. Less stressed. I don't know how to put that or why that is.

I mean... sure, I'm a prince, and that may come with certain privileges. But I've never used those privileges, not for anything that wasn't underserved at least. So, why are people afraid of me?

Or am I wrong about what I saw that day?

Whatever. That part doesn't matter.

The thing that confused me came after I'd been bumbling about the palace for a bit, already getting bored again. I couldn't engage in any of my typical hobbies, as those are a teensy bit... well. High-profile, I guess?

But anyway, I rounded onto the hallway that leads to my father's study, and as I did, I heard something. Raised voices and... sounds. Not one-hundred-percent sure what those sounds were, but I didn't like them much.

I thought maybe my father was in trouble? I don't know why I thought that. Unlike me, he has Ele to help him if he ever gets into a fight, but still, I was worried.

I was about to grab a guard, but before I could, my mother came around a corner. You know. The one who gave me you. My diary.

She stopped outside of the door to my father's study, and the look on her face! I never thought I'd see something like that from her.

She was staring at the door like it was the most disgusting, reprehensible thing she'd ever seen, but then, one of the voices behind that door raised into a pained shout, and my mother... she- she *smiled*.

Why would she do that? I don't know who was behind that door, but still, I've never seen my mother take pleasure from another person's pain. She's always been so compassionate, toward nobles and peasants alike. For Alouin's sake, she goes out into the pauper's districts so she can help them every month or so!

So, what was this?

I don't know. It scared me. It was another of those pieces in my life that doesn't fit, you know? The ones that scream, "Hey, something's wrong with this picture! There's something going on behind

the scenes. Something you don't know about."

Which bothers me. I'm the godsdamned prince of Auden! I should know what's going on in my own bloody palace!

But I don't. And this concerns me.

It's why I'm writing in you, though. Who else am I supposed to share these things with? No one else can know how afraid I'm starting to become of my own damned home.

I have to get it together. Nebailie needs me to be a good brother. My father needs me to be the perfect prince. And my mother... well, she's never needed anything from me, but I still want to make her happy.

I can't let these fears stop me from being who they need me to be. I've got to keep going.

So, yeah, I may write about these things here, but hell, if I'll let them out anywhere else.

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