

# Interlude 1.2: Apprehension

## Heir to the Audish Throne

6<sup>th</sup> of Fifth, 3461

Recently, I've learned that this is the proper way to open a journal entry. While I must admit that I'll miss the carefree way I've written in this journal in the past, I also hope that by changing my habits in a small way, I can start acting like the crown prince that the court expects.

I'll stop with the pranks. I'll stop making eyes at every noble lady, but if they tell me *one more time* to stop spending time with my brother, they can kiss my...

The name of the brother I'd been discussing in my dia... no, my journal had me jerking my quill off of its paper.

Through the door in front of me, I heard my mother shriek, "He brings nothing but embarrassment on this family!"

And I frowned. Maybe I should have waited for my father somewhere else. This morning, he'd called me to his study for an unknown purpose, and I'd been waiting for his summons with my journal to keep me company. Or I had been until this disagreement had started.

My mom and dad had been fighting a lot recently, but every time a disagreement had started, I'd been ushered out of the room before I could figure out what the problem was. Today's fight must have come from a *powerful* stressor. I'd never heard my mother yell so loudly before.

My father murmured something soothing at her, but she refused to calm down.

"I don't like the boys associating like this!" she hissed. "I want you to send him away."

There was a bit more murmuring, along with some wheedling, before my mother shouted.

"That's not good enough! Have you ever considered that maybe *he* is the reason our son hasn't summoned a splinter yet? Alouin knows you don't deserve yours. Maybe Ele has placed the curse that should have gone to you onto our son instead!"

And my father's gruff voice rose to meet hers.

"That's not how it works, and you know it!"

The sudden quiet beyond the study's door was loud enough to match my own shock. My father *never* raised his voice, and this anomaly, more than anything else could, had me moving closer to the door.

"The nobility is talking," my mother eventually continued in a stiff voice. "If our son doesn't show some sign of Alouin's favor soon, they'll start to think our family is lost. That could give them a reason to revolt against us."

"Don't worry your head, woman," my father said. "I have a plan to help our son. Just leave it to me, like you always do. Is there some other concern you want to tell me about right now? Because I have more problems than your petty jealousy to tackle."

My mother must have given him a negative because my father's voice continued after only a slight pause.

"Then, our audience is at an end. Send the crown prince in on your way out."

Even as the doorknob turned, though, his voice stopped my mother.

"Will you ever forgive me?" he softly said.

"For your association with that whore?" my mother said. "Yes, I might have forgiven you for that, but I'll *never* forgive you for Nebailie. You put our family in danger with him, and in so doing, you've lost any love and affection I once held for you."

Oh, boy. I needed to get away from this door. Eavesdropping was not only rude, but it was unbecoming of the heir to the throne.

Or so I was told.

But that was fine. I just needed to make sure I wasn't caught.

"May I go, Your Majesty?" my mother rigidly said.

"Of course, Your Majesty," my father just as stiffly replied.

Flinging the door open, my mother stormed through it, although her face reddened when she saw me hovering.

"Your father will see you now," she said before gliding away.

Well. I hadn't been quick enough with getting away. She'd caught me, and now, I'd never live that down. Not with her at least.

“Are you coming in, Your Highness?” my father said from inside.

And I sighed. Were those the roles we were playing today? King and heir to the throne, not father and son?

“I wasn’t sure if you were ready for me, Your Majesty,” I said as I came inside.

As always, my father’s study was intimidating. The sitting area behind the door was innocuous enough, stuffed with a pair of comfy armchairs, a side table, and a sideboard topped with crystal decanters. New-fangled oil lanterns with their self-contained flames lent the area a cozy atmosphere, strengthened by the shoulder-high bookcase opposite the door.

The scene above those books was what made a part of me quake like a child in the middle of a scolding. A pair of short, curved stairs on either side of the sitting area led to the landing above the bookcase. A railing currently blocked my view of the desk sitting in the center of that dais, but I could see the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the city. Considering how far the ceiling rose above us, they made quite an ostentatious display of wealth.

The study was located on the side of the palace that extended over a cliff’s edge, and quite a lengthy drop awaited anyone foolish enough to test those windows’ strength.

My father was sitting in one of the armchairs near the door, which had me breathing a sigh of relief. I hated the unnerving view in here, avoiding it as much as possible.

As I joined my father in the seat beside him, I said, “Your discussion with Her Royal Majesty sounded heated.”

“It was nothing,” my father said, waving away my concern. “The queen is still justifiably irate about Prince Nebailie’s presence at court, but that’s not why I’ve called you here.”

Really now? I never would have guessed.

“You want to discuss my lack of a splinter,” I said.

“Indeed.”

Leaning toward the sideboard, my father grabbed a decanter and a pair of glasses, pouring each of us a drink.

“As you know, every monarch in Auden’s long history has been cursed with the presence of an Ele splinter. Our tolerated shame is made bearable by how the populace refuses to call us ‘primeancer’, as is their right. Or they don’t call us that to our face,” my father said, sourly smiling. “Rather, the priests insist that they call us ‘Alouin’s blessed’ instead. This distinction, along with the power granted by Ele, is why the Audish monarch is acknowledged as Alouin’s direct representative throughout the world. It’s also why I’m constantly forced to participate in inane religious rituals instead of useful statecraft.”

Pausing, my father took a sip of his drink before grimacing.

“The queen and I, as well as several noble houses, are concerned that at fifteen, the current heir to the throne has yet to exhibit any powers or tendencies associated with attracting a splinter.”

Hell, I wanted to disappear through the floor. I knew all of what my father had said, having had it repeated to me far too many times, and it never ceased to remind me of my biggest failure in life. It took everything I had to maintain a perfect posture.

“I don’t know what to tell His Majesty,” I said. “I’ve done everything I can to attract one. My apologies that my compliance with the priests’ suggestions has yet to draw Ele’s attention.”

Pausing in a sip, my father frowned at me.

“Oh no, Your Highness. You mistake me,” he said. “I didn’t summon you here to berate you for what others might perceive as a failure. Today, I mean to give you a solution for your predicament.”

The confidence in his voice grabbed my attention. My father might understand Kinlith and the priests’ frustrations with grooming me for this final task in taking the throne, but he couldn’t know mine. I kept my disappointment and self-loathing private, something that I didn’t even share in my journal.

No matter how much I might try to be better—whether as a son, student, brother, or prince—my efforts didn’t seem to matter. My destined splinter had refused to join me here, on the physical plane. If my father could fix this problem for me, I’d be more grateful than he could know.

He handed me a drink, which I happily accepted.

“You know that Auden has been blessed with many minor tears, from which our economy grows and our society advances,” my father said.

Nodding, I said, “Of course. Kinlith has been thorough when covering the subject of economics.”

To my utter and complete delight. That subject was the only one that had ever captured my attention during my lessons.

“Something recently came through one of our tears,” my father said. “I believe it may bridge the gap between now and the time when your Ele splinter appears before you.”

Reaching over the arm of his chair, he retrieved a box, one that the shadows had hidden.

“What is it?” I asked as he pulled it into his lap.

Lifting the lid, my father offered the box’s contents to me.

“See for yourself.”

On taking the box, I found a pile of fine, gauzy fabric, filling it to the brim. Almost ethereal in nature, it looked as if even the slightest of touches would dissolve it into thin air, but still, when I hesitantly lifted it out of the box, I almost immediately dropped it again.

At my touch, a white light had glowed around this fabric, lingering for a few heartbeats before fading.

Fascinated, I poked at it, watching as illumination rippled away from my finger. When I folded it around my forearm, that same phenomenon repeated everywhere it touched my flesh. It was cold against my skin, metallic like chainmail but also breezy. Best of all, it blended against my skin wherever the glow appeared.

“It looks like I’m holding Ele,” I whispered.

Smiling at my reaction, my father said, “That’s the idea.”

When he gestured for the box, I carefully folded that precious fabric into it before giving it back with my vision blurring. I listened with half of my attention as my father said.

“We’ll have this tailored into suitable attire. Once it’s finished, you can reveal it at a prominent public gathering, perhaps when our Eselan diplomat returns in a few weeks. Such a display will surely quash any rumors about your lack of a splinter for a time.”

He couldn’t know how much relief this had brought me. Without the pressure of everyone’s expectations hovering over my head—for this at least—maybe I could focus on other, more concerning problems in my life.

Rising to my feet, I deeply bowed to my father.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” I said. “I don’t have words to convey my appreciation.”

“There’s no need for gratitude,” my father said.

I noted his grimace as I got back into my chair, but any apprehension that might have raised in me was soon erased by his next words.

“Kinlith has kept me apprised of your progress in his lessons. You’ve worked hard, and that’s prepared you for the role you’ll inherit from me someday. I won’t have the best candidate for the throne passed over because of a silly superstition, especially when your brother continues to shirk his duties.”

Making a face, my father looked away from me.

“I’ll need to discipline him again soon.”

I couldn’t move. Above, I might have heard words like that from other people, but they’d never come from my father.

“May I speak plainly?” I asked.

Smiling, my father said, “Of course, son.”

Which allowed me to transition from the role of crown prince to that of a son.

“bailie only skips his lessons because Kinlith treats him with nothing but scorn, like the rest of court,” I said. “My brother is smart, fast on his feet, and has fantastic instincts. You should see some of the ways he’s avoided a fight in the past. They can be ingenious at times. If you want him to succeed, though, something needs to change. The hostility he always faces here isn’t helping him grow.”

“Hmm.”

Resting his elbows on his knees, my father steepled his fingers in front of his face.

“Is this true?” he said. “Kinlith isn’t tutoring your brother properly.”

At that, I nodded emphatically. Our tutor might have a few good qualities, but how he treated Nebailie wasn’t one of them.

Leaning back in his chair, my father said, “Perhaps your mother’s right, then. Maybe it’s time for Prince Nebailie to find his place outside of my court.”

That idea chilled me to the bone. If my brother left, I’d lose my only true friend but- but-

I couldn’t deny him a chance at happiness, a chance to leave a place where whispers followed him wherever he went.

“May I ask an... awkward question, father?” I hesitantly said.

I honestly wasn’t sure if I could. My father and I rarely spent time together, not when he was always busy with keeping Auden running. My mother had been the one to raise me.

At the same time, I knew my father might be the only person who could answer this question. Everyone else I’d asked it of liked to dance around the truth, and it frustrated me to no end.

“Son. You can ask me anything,” my father said. “You should know that by now.”

Maybe I would have if-

No. I should take the chance he’d offered me.

“Why does everyone treat ‘bailie like trash?” I said. “It makes me so angry. I swear. The next time I see another group of nobles whispering about him behind his back, I’ll- I’ll-”

“You’ll pretend you didn’t see it.”

At the snap in my father's voice, I lowered the hands I'd raised, pushing myself back in my seat, if only slightly. A good crown prince would never abandon proper posture, even in the face of his father's displeasure.

Fortunately, he quickly winced and waved for me to relax.

"All I meant is that you have inherited the burden of the throne, a burden that will be more than enough for you to carry," he said. "Prince Nebailie's burden will be his to carry, not yours. Even if that burden is because of my own failings."

Looking away, he continued in a soft voice, "Nothing I do will ever make that up to him."

"Your... failings?" I said. "What are you talking about? You're... the king of Auden, the representative of Alouin in this world."

He was my father!

"You can do no wrong."

My father burst into laughter, doubling over from the force of it. It lasted for what felt like forever, but when it eventually faded away, he wiped his eyes.

"Thank you, son," he gasped. "I needed that."

"You're... welcome? I think," I said. "Why was what I said so funny?"

"Because..."

Scooting to the edge of his seat, my father took my hands.

"Because I'm not perfect. Not in the least. I fail in multiple ways almost every day."

Looking at where our hands were joined, he released a slow breath.

"But what you're asking about is quite possibly my biggest mistake. You see, several years ago, I was unfaithful to your mother, and your brother came from that mistake."

He watched me through his eyelashes as realization swept over me, as my mother's recent temper tantrums and the conversation I'd overheard earlier fell into place. The nobles' behavior, the snide comments, every single thing I'd ever found confusing about my seemingly double life clicked into place.

Releasing my hands, my father said, "I had my reasons for the transgression, and some of them were very good. But they don't excuse-"

"Nebailie's my half-brother?" I dazedly said, only half-aware that I'd interrupted my father.

After a pause, he said, "Yes."

“Then... who’s his mother?” I said.

Wincing, my father said, “A noble lady. Someone I sent away from court, for the queen’s sake.”

Alouin, everything made so much sense now. I looked at Nebailie from everyone else’s perspective, and I saw a stain on my family, a reminder of my father’s misdeeds, and a source of stress for my mother. Maybe they’d been right to...

No.

Nebailie was my little brother. Why should I care about the rest? Our relationship with each other was all I’d ever cared about.

Shrugging, I said, “It doesn’t matter. Thank you for sharing the truth with me, Your Majesty, and for the gift, but I have several more tasks to complete today. Is there anything else you need from me?”

My father seemed disappointed for some reason. What had he been expecting from me after revealing this? Absolution?

He wouldn’t find that here. He was, in essence, the source of my mother and brother’s suffering, and I would *never* forgive him for that.

With a wave, my father said, “You’re free to return to your duties.”

Hastily collecting my journal, I left without a word. I had so many new secrets to record in it.

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