

# Interlude 2: Arrogance

## Heir to the Audish Throne

25th of First, 3467

I met my betrothed today. She was accompanied by the Eselan ambassador, an arrival that's been delayed by almost six years. Apparently, the Eselan Haven has been dealing with an internal conflict in that time, one that's only recently abated.

The woman I'm to marry isn't of the Eselan race, thank Alouin. Her name is Illasaya, and she's the first-born daughter of Lyzencroft's king. That nation also shares a border with the Eselan Haven. My father hopes that by intermingling our nation's royal bloodlines, Auden can exploit Lyzencroft's bustling trade partnership with the Esela.

But enough about the arrangement's boring details. I'm sure you'd rather hear about my first impressions instead.

She's... stunning. I can see why so many men have supposedly fallen for her before, but... she's a bit odd as well.

When the ambassador's party arrived today, I mistook the princess for one of the group's guards. She was riding her horse like a man, in breeches and everything, and she even had a sword strapped to her belt! When greeting the group, I completely ignored her at first, which made our personal introduction slightly... awkward.

And she most certainly speaks her mind too! The first words out of her mouth were disparaging comments about the state of my home, followed by complaints about the long journey she'd made to reach it. To be fair, she followed that up with a few compliments, directed at me, but that first exchange of words sapped any glow I might have felt from receiving those.

Perhaps that was what she meant to do, though. Maybe she's as skeptical of this marriage as I am.

In these moments, I miss my brother. Nebailie would help me figure out whether this princess is intriguing or intolerable, but he's on the other side of the kingdom, hunting bandits.

I hope he's gained some self-worth while serving in the military. Hopefully, some distance from court will have given him at least a chance at that.

But I so rarely hear from him. In my last letter, I begged him to come home during his next leave. I know he hates coming to court, and for good reason, but I need him now. My duties as the crown prince have overtaken every spare moment of my life. Alouin, I *need* someone I can share my frustrations with, someone other than a blank page that can't talk back.

I should receive his reply soon, and maybe then, I'll know how tolerable the next few months will be.

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4th of Sixth, 3473

Today, I am a married man. Alouin, it felt so good to put that down on paper, so I think I'll do it again. I'm *finally* married!

My wife has lived with us for the last six years, and while I'm grateful that courting and wedding preparations took as long as they did, giving us the chance to get to know and love one another, I'm glad to put the time behind us.

Illasaya is perfect in every way. She's smart and funny. We enjoy so many of the same hobbies, and she's gorgeous.

I don't know what I've done to deserve her. Perhaps she's Alouin's blessing upon me in place of a splinter's presence. If so, I'll take it. I'd trade the powers a splinter bestows if I'm allowed to keep her-

Forgive me for the abrupt pause, but it seems my wife has need of me. Until later.

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14th of Third, 3476

My father is dead.

They tell me he died in his sleep, that I could have done nothing for him, but I still blame myself for what happened.

You see, I've been asking Alouin for his death over the last few months, ever since Nebailie came back home.

He and our father have always gotten along poorly, but since my father ordered Nebailie away from his military life and back to court, their relationship has deteriorated even further. Toward the end, my brother was well-nigh rebellious with father, saying and doing whatever he wanted rather than observing proper decorum. Behavior like that would have gotten an ordinary man thrown into prison, somewhere he could think on his actions for a while, but Nebailie only ever received a withering glare from our father.

My brother accidentally revealed the reason for his flippancy one night, when we snuck a bottle of whiskey out of the cellar, thereafter proceeding to get thoroughly drunk. I don't

remember exactly how it happened, but at some point, his shirt came off. I asked him if he'd earned the scars crisscrossing his back while fighting bandits, and he broke into hiccupping laughter. When I asked what was so funny, he shook his head and said they were wounds from a battle that took place much closer to home, and I remembered nights when my baby brother had come to bed after a 'talk' with father, shaking like a leaf. I remembered times when I heard strange noises coming from the rooms where they'd taken their meetings, and once I put it all together, I vaguely recall that Nebailie had to hold me down to stop me from murdering our father.

Ever since then, I've prayed for my father to die each night before I fell asleep.

Alouin, but it feels good to write that down. I've kept this sentiment hidden away from the world since that whiskey-sodden night, unsure who might read this journal when I'm away from it. I'm not stupid. I know someone does. When you're not the king in this place, nothing you say or do is private, especially if you're next in line to the throne, but now that my father is gone, perhaps I can write in here, uncensored. Perhaps I can-

As if honed into what I'd written, a priest from my new retinue stuck his head through the door of the room where I'd been waiting,

"Your Majesty?" he said. "It's time."

"Give me one moment," I said, pushing my journal to the side. "I have a final prayer to say before we bestow Alouin's blessing upon me."

"Of course!"

As the priest left, the door thumped closed behind him, and I hastily stripped off my tunic and the heavy robes they expected me to wear throughout the ceremony. Slipping a box from its hiding place, I grabbed the shirt that helped me maintain the illusion of holding Ele's power, donning it. As my fingers touched the tips of the sleeves' gloves, both they and the parts of it over my torso brightly glowed, making its fabric disappear. Throwing my clothes on once more, I kicked the box into a corner and strode through the door.

As I came into view, several of the gathered priests gasped.

"Your Majesty!" the high priest said over them. "You don't need to use your power until the ceremony!"

Lazily examining my hand, I said, "It doesn't trouble me to do so. Should I not express adoration for Alouin in this manner, even when our circumstances don't call for it?"

When I caught the high priest's eye, I smirked. *Try and refute that, you crotchety old man.*

“Of course not, Your Majesty,” the high priest said. “I’d never think to discourage any such worship of our god.”

*So you say.*

Solemnly nodding, I said, “Then, let us proceed.”

The priests surrounded me, and we quickly crossed the distance to the door that separated the hall of worship from the rest of the palace. Those doors were all that stood between my home and its easiest point of ingress.

As the high priest flung them open, I nearly faltered in my step with my breath stuttering.

Alouin but a lot of people were waiting inside, many of them staring or gasping at my lit-up form. Fortunately, years of practice kept my face serene and my feet moving despite the onset of panic.

Was I ready for this? Sure, I’d been training to assume the throne for my entire life, but did that mean I was actually prepared?

As we passed some of the nobles, I noticed my lips twisting into an unintentional smirk. I might or might not be ready to lead a nation, but I’d thoroughly enjoy making some of their lives difficult. They’d heaped trouble upon my brother throughout our childhood, and I meant to enjoy paying them back, when possible.

Speaking of Nebailie...

I checked, and yes, they’d actually obliged my request. Surprise, surprise.

Given, I’d threatened and cajoled far too many people in power to make sure this happened, but there Nebailie stood, in military dress, at the head of my honor guard. My mother had been furious when she’d learned about this, but honestly? I hadn’t and still didn’t care about that. I loved my mother, but she’d always had an enormous blind spot when it came to my brother.

As tradition dictated, my honor guard stood on the left side of the raised apse, and to the right, my wife was waiting, gorgeous as always. When our eyes met, my unpleasant smirk became something more genuine, a smile that she eagerly returned.

I couldn’t wait until later tonight. We’d have a lot of celebrating to do, and I *knew* she was looking forward to that.

Two little boys were standing beside their mother, and when I wiggled my fingers at them, my sons giggled. I’d long ago resolved that they’d never experience the same distance that I’d had with my own father. I’d make time for my family, no matter how heavy the burdens of monarchy became, damnit.

While the high priest climbed onto the apse, I paused before mounting the single stair myself, well-versed in the ceremony’s proceedings. Turning to face the audience, the priest spread his arms

wide.

“Today is a sorrowful day, for today, we've lost a great man, a great king, and one whom Alouin granted leave to guide our nation into a time of unprecedented peace and prosperity.”

As if reflecting on the wonders that his god had performed through my father, the priest paused while I internally scoffed. My father had been many things, and an inspiring leader might have been top of the list, but he'd done it without the help of some invisible being.

“But this day is also a joyful one,” the high priest continued, “for today, we'll see a new king ascend, someone who has already shown the mark of Alouin's blessing.”

Again, he paused, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at his melodrama.

“Kneel,” he said.

I might do as I was told, but the entire way, I kept my eyes locked on the high priest. Once this ceremony was over and I held the power I needed to do it, I meant to make some changes within the priests' ranks. I had no intention of showing them my belly, like my father had.

“Do you swear to serve Alouin and thereby, all of his children, from the most common of serfs to the highest of nobles?” the high priest said.

“I so swear,” I said.

“Do you swear to protect Auden from enemies, both within and without, using all available resources up to and including your life?”

“I so swear.”

“Then, rise,” the high priest said.

Once I was on my feet, he continued, “Auden has no crown for its monarch. As a kingdom, we were founded to fight dark primeancy's evil, leaving us no predilections for frivolity or flamboyant displays of wealth. Our origins do not, however, exclude the king of Auden from a mark of office.”

A lesser priest hurried to his superior with a cloth-encased bundle. As the high priest unwrapped it, a hush fell across the hall of worship. Delicately claiming the prize hidden within, the high priest lifted it above his head.

“Shadowsteal!” he roared with spittle flying from his mouth. “Slayer of dark primeancers and the evil aspects that give them power!”

When he offered me the sword's hilt, I hesitantly took it.

At this point, the sword was supposed to light up, activated by the wielder's connection to Ele, but I wasn't a primeancer, no matter how much I pretended to be one. I, however, hadn't spent my

whole life dreading this moment without preparing for it as well.

As soon as I had hold of the blade, I whipped it through the air, as if testing its weight, but while doing so, I release my hold on the strip of cloth I'd torn from my shirt's hem earlier this morning. It unfurled, and I flipped it over the blade's point, catching the other end with my pinky finger at the cross guard. It had taken me *months* of on-and-off practice to perfect this move, but that practice seemed well worth it now. Wrapped in glowing cloth, Shadowsteal looked exactly like it was supposed to.

Unfortunately, the high priest looked a bit taken aback by my small step away from the ceremony's traditional routine.

"What?" I whispered to him. "You said we're a warrior nation. I'm only testing my newest weapon."

Clearing his throat, the high priest said, "Yes, well..."

Shaking his head, he gestured expansively.

"Your new king, nobles of Auden!"

And they whooped and cheered and hollered, the hypocrites. I beamed at them, playing along, before stepping to the side next to Nebailie while Illasaya glided forward to kneel in front of the high priest.

"Did you bring it?" I whispered while my wife took her own vows.

Nebailie silently handed me Shadowsteal's scabbard, and as the nobles cheered for their new queen, I gratefully sheathed the sword.

"Thanks, 'bailie," I said.

"My liege," my brother said.

At that, I frowned. Alouin, I hadn't thought about how much deference would soon be crowding my life. How long would it take for me to get used to that?

"Before you attend the party later, a man has been ridiculously insistent on speaking with you once we're done here," Nebailie continued. "Said it had something to do with our father."

"Great! He haunts us even after his death," I said with a huff.

Nebailie snorted at that.

So, once we'd filed out of the house of worship, I met with a squirrely-looking man instead of joining the revelers at the gala, as I might have wished.

"Forgive me for interrupting your celebration, Your Majesty, but I thought you'd like to hear my news as soon as possible," he said. "I'm the Ring of your Hand, and over the last few days, I've

been investigating your father's death. You may have been told that he died of natural causes, but that's what we always say after a king has died, as long as it remains possible to do so. In your father's case, however, I'm afraid that hasn't been the case. In short, I believe your father was murdered."

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