

Interlude 3.1: Caution

King of Auden

2nd of Fourth, 3476

Since my father's death involved much more frothing at the mouth, convulsing, and other symptoms associated with arsenic ingestion than I'd originally thought, whoever is in charge of my safety has decided that I need a special bodyguard. Apparently, the guards stationed throughout the palace aren't good enough.

I haven't had time to learn as much as I'd like about who will hold the unenviable position of keeping me alive. My life has become a whirlwind of introductions, and although I was initially wary of a suggestion made by a man who let someone poison my father, I've decided that he must not be totally incompetent after meeting the Eselan summoned to take charge of my protection.

Yes, you read that right, whoever you are that's spying on this journal. An *Eselan* bodyguard. One of their infamous Zrelnach, in fact.

The thing is, unlike with the other Esela I've met, I rather like this one. He doesn't look down his nose at me or otherwise make me feel like a bug. He has a sense of humor, which is a quality that the Esela generally seem to lack, and when I asked, he was more than happy to teach me some of his order's famous fighting style. He was also close friends with Illasaya when she was princess of Lyzencroft, *and* he makes my boys laugh, something that always put the comedian into my good graces.

Most importantly, he's already saved my life once. Soon after his arrival, I was attacked by a raving lunatic with Daevetch swarming under her skin. I have no idea how the woman got into the palace and past so many guards, but while I was still in the process of comprehending the fact that she was rushing at me with a knife, my new bodyguard lunged between us. He quickly beheaded her, sheathed his blade, and bowed to me, apologizing for allowing her to come so close.

I'm still not sure why he felt the need to apologize. He did his job, which is all that matters to me.

I suppose I should mention who he is, besides a Zrelnach. His name is Emir, and he's the son of the Eselan emissary, who I've always despised. Ironic, right?

8th of Thirteenth, 3476

This will be my last entry.

Ring has come to a conclusion about who killed my father, and the perpetrator wasn't an assassin from a foreign nation, as we suspected. It wasn't a member of the heretical Matvai to the north. No, the killer was someone much closer to home.

Ever since Nebailie returned to the palace a few years ago, my mother has been getting increasingly erratic. While my brother was serving in the army, I thought that maybe, just maybe, she and my father would mend fences, allowing past mistakes to stay in the past, but then, my father summoned 'bailie home.

The day he returned to the palace, my parents broke into a screaming match, the likes of which I'd never heard from them before. People on the far side of the palace could have heard them! Or so I thought at the time. In the end, my father won that argument, as he always did, but his victory didn't last.

Months passed with no further family drama. My father, 'bailie, and I assumed that my mother had accepted the situation, learning to deal with my bastard brother living in the palace once more.

We were very wrong.

My mother had spent those months quietly scheming and plotting, acquiring and preparing her poison of choice. Essentially, she was planning how to kill my father.

And that's why this will be my last entry. Since my eighth birthday, my mother has given me these journals every year, but she's broken from that tradition, giving me something different for my thirtieth birthday.

For you see, she's ensured that my first official act as king will be to decide whether to put my mother, the woman who murdered my father, to death.

10th of Thirteenth, 3476

It's done. My mother is dead. I did what I had to.

23rd of Thirteenth, 3477

I know that I said I'd never write in you again, but time has passed, wounds have healed, and I've changed. And I need this place of respite more than ever.

I met the Eselan diplomat again today. When he last visited Elisk, he returned home after weeks of delayed meetings, leaving Emir, his son, to serve as my bodyguard.

Have I mentioned how different those two are? How one is intolerable, and the other is—dare I say it—my friend?

In any case, the insufferable bastard returned today, and I couldn't fabricate an excuse to keep from seeing him. During our meeting, he was—how do I put this politely?—haggard. His eyes were so wild and that frazzled hair!

And his desperation! In the two years since I took the throne, no one has ever come to me in such distress.

He told me about the terror that's plaguing his people's Haven: the Eselan, touched by madness, who's leading a band of near deathless monsters. They've pillaged even the most well defended of settlements, leaving no one alive once they're through. Several months ago, Lyzencroft sent aid to the Haven at the bequest of its leaders, and now, months later, the great, decidedly human nation might just crumble before this scourge.

I knew the contents of the diplomat's woeful tale before he spun it. Auden isn't without its scouts and spies. So, when rumors about the Haven's gradual destruction first trickled into my court, I considered sending soldiers to help. In the end, I decided I wouldn't interfere in foreign politics, and if the diplomat's claims about Lyzencroft are true, it seems I've made the right choice. I didn't know my wife's former homeland was in such dire straits.

What also came as news to me are three facts about the terror who's already decimated half the continent. One is that apparently, he's a powerful, Daevetch primeancer.

I don't know how likely I find that. Since my father, no primeancers have surfaced in our world, none that we know of at least, but the diplomat vehemently insisted that his people's opponent is in fact a Daevetch primeancer.

Second, he plans to march on Auden. I suppose two conquered kingdoms aren't enough for him. If this is true, I wish him luck with his designs on my kingdom, even if he can access Daevetch. Auden has stood for centuries, despite numerous threats against it. I doubt our current one will blemish that record.

Lastly, I have a name for the threat. Since my father died and my mother was executed, I've been unconsciously looking for an adversary to take their place. Ministers and diplomats have proven to be poor substitutes, not when they aren't a real threat. Maybe this one will be. So, his name.

My enemy's name is Doldimar.

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