

The Best Defense...

I had long since abandoned any hope of sleep as I tossed and turned in my bed on the third floor of the Flaming Bear Inn. Recent events made sleep difficult and all the different thoughts and scenarios coursing through my mind certainly didn't help either. I'd have gotten up and left the inn, but the innkeeper had already locked up for the night, and something told me he wouldn't take kindly to me departing via the window. So I lay in my bed, worrying about what might become of Aves if I was unsuccessful, much less what might happen to me. The nobility tend to not appreciate being put flat on their backs and insulted, and they are not quick to forget past insults. Even if I was successful in confirming my victory over Lord – now Master – Lenier, the other nobles, would most likely never accept me as nobility, which of course I wasn't. Even Aves, with all his crimes he was accused of, would have an easier time being in a group of the nobility than I would. Granted, not all of them were as completely rotted through as Lenier, but the decent ones would be pressured into not showing any kindness by the awful ones. All that aside, there still wasn't even any guarantee that I would be recognized as having won a lordship, though I'd be damned if I let Lenier have it back. Bribes would do a great deal to change a magistrates mind, though I supposed I could always challenge Lenier again. That fight would most certainly not be easier the second time around, and though it would still not be much of a challenge, I'd have rather avoided spilling blood. I was fairly confident, however, that it would not need to come to that, what with my sums of money I could put to use. It's said that money can't buy happiness, and while that may be true, it can buy damn near everything else. I was counting on that to insure a positive ruling for me.

I strode into the magistrate's courtroom the following afternoon, having received a summons that morning. I entered without my blades, though not by my own choice. The guardsmen at the door were apparently taking everyone's weapons to insure safety, but not ten seconds after I walked in I saw knives on the belts of all the present nobility. It was rather obvious that some of the nobles were flaunting this fact, making a fool of the accused party, or at least attempting to, for I had two stilettos concealed in my boots. With my blades in such plain view, the guards had neglected to check the rest of my person for weapons, which was good for me. I took my place at the accused's podium and waited for the rest of the audience to file in. After a short wait all those who were present for the trial were seated and the magistrate entered the room, after which I had to hold back a grin. He was a rather short wolf with bloodshot eyes and an air of smoke about him. That wasn't what made me happy, though. I knew this wolf. He may have been a magistrate, but I had set him up with a dealer to satisfy his sourgrass addiction. It was obvious from one glance that he recognized me as well, and while I wasn't planning on basing my defense around blackmail, it was something to fall back on should all else fail.

He sat down at the bench and tapped his gavel nervously, gave me a quick sideways glance, as if trying to make sure he wasn't imagining me, then cleared his throat and said, "Okay, can we begin with the case now?" He looked to me and I nodded, then to Lenier and his group, who nodded as well.

"Excellent," he half muttered, "So, this case is on the matter of..." He looked down at the paper in front him to read the complaint. I watched as the color slowly drained out of his face as he saw what was on stake for him to judge and couldn't hold back a small grin this time.

In a suddenly small voice he said, "The matter of lordship over the Cold Isles. Right then, let's begin. Prosecution, if you would make your case first?"

Lenier nodded and stepped out in front of the magistrate and the audience, more confident than he had any right to be, then began, "This hearing, as we have already been told, is about who possesses the rights to the lordship over the Cold Isles, a title that is mine by birth. This *civilian* who we see before us today seeks to steal that title from me and mine, claiming to have won it in trial by combat. To be perfectly honest, such a weak claim practically warrants any of our time, including yours, magistrate, however, I will further remove any legitimacy his feeble claim has to it with as few words as possible, so as to not waste your time. How could such a sorry specimen as himself even claim to have skills at arms to match mine-"

"Overcome yours," I interrupted, "Just to make that clear. If I had only matched your skill, we would hardly be here, would we?"

He stared at me for a few seconds before continuing, "Yes, as I was saying, to claim to be able to overcome me is either an impressive feat of strength or a foolish bluff. I may not be the best judge, but this defendant hardly looks capable of any feat of strength, much less besting me."

I shrugged, "Looks can be deceiving. I know yours were. I thought I saw some intelligence there for a second."

I gave him a few seconds to puzzle that out, then watched as he bristled, but not before I heard a few of the attending nobles chuckle. That was good. If I could impress them now, I would have a much easier time of being accepted after all this was over. Lenier then picked back up where he left off, "In any event, I have witnesses confirming my victory over this civilian." He bowed his head and stepped back as an officer stood up behind me. I glanced back and nodded; this was one of the guards I had already bought to "testify" for Lenier. He walked up and sat down in front of the magistrates pedestal and waited to be questioned.

Lenier began with his first question, "Were you present at the duel?" "I was." "Did you swear to bear witness upon who emerged victorious from that duel?" "I did?" "Then tell me this, officer, who won the duel?" "On my honor with the gods as my witness, the victor of the duel was Lord Saranthos

Inesius, Master of the Cold Isles”

Under his fur Lenier's skin turned red as fire, and I could almost hear him trying not to snort in rage. “That will be all, officer. Thank you.” The officer then got up and returned to his seat.

The rest of the prosecution went fairly similarly. Lenier called up three more witnesses, one of which swore to my victory. I hadn't gotten to the other two, and while they did say that Lenier had won, they certainly didn't swear on it, though not by any part of Lenier's. His former lordship then closed with, “Even with such traitorous witnesses, the truth should be clear. That title is mine by rights and no upjumped peasant can claim to have earned it from me, not with my skill at arms, which you all have witnessed.” He then went back to his seat and nodded angrily to me.

I stood up, walked to the front of the courtroom, and began, “I will not mince words, I do not want to be here any more than most of you do, including Master Lenier, apparently, though he was the one to call this hearing in the first place. I am here to confirm my victory over a frankly bad-tempered former lord who is upset because, for the first time in his life, things haven't gone precisely how he wanted. I wouldn't deign to assume for all of us present, but that is not the type of person I would want running any lordship, much less the Cold Isles. He suggests that my claim to have bested him at arms is so ridiculous that it brooks no argument. If this claim is so ridiculous, even an “upjumped peasant” such as myself should be able to see its invalidity. If this is the case, why would I even make such a preposterous claim, unless it was true? Certainly it wouldn't be to anger the gentry, for everyone knows how foolish an idea that would be, and though I may be many things, I am definitely not a fool. I would have called up witnesses to support my side, but it seems that Master Lenier has already done that for me. Therefore, I will rest my case with this; if nothing else, I would be happy to duel Lenier again, to remove all doubt of my mastery of arms – at least over him – though for the sake of Lenier's honor, I hope you do not choose that alternative. I thank you for your due consideration.” I then took my seat again.”

The magistrate nodded, looking significantly more confident with himself that he had an hour previously, and said, “Very well. The court is in recess while I deliberate.” He tapped his gavel and then exited the room.

I got up and headed towards the main lobby of the courthouse. Along the way I was stopped in a hallway by a group of three nobles. They were a strapping young group, a bear, a hawk, and a lion, all in the prime of their youth and no doubt friends of Lenier. I attempted to move around them, but they blocked my path and leered at me as one of them said, “We don't appreciate being made fools of *my lord*.”

I nodded and attempted to step past them once again as I responded, “Thank you for that tidbit

of information. I will keep that in mind if any of you ever give me cause to make fools of you.”

They moved into my path once again and one of them pulled out a knife, to which the others followed suit. “I don't think you understood us. Nobody makes fools of us and gets away with it.”

I looked at the knives for a few seconds, then said, “You should put those knives away, before someone gets hurt.”

The hawk scoffed at me, “Who? You?”

I shook my head, “I was thinking somewhere towards the other end of the spectrum, but if you'd like to try and injure me with those knives, you are more than welcome.”

All three of them charged at me at that point, but I was more than ready for them. I ducked under the swipes of the first two, which let me reach my knives and disarm the third lordling when he struck at me. I then wrapped my arms in the arms of the other two, the lion and the bear, and dragged them to the ground as I tackled the hawk and knelt on his arms. The hawk was now in no position to move, and the bear and the lion had knives at their throats. I then told them in a calm voice, “You should have listened to my defense. I would have to be completely stupid to make up my victory against Lenier, and I am most definitely not stupid. Now get up, and don't any of you dare to threaten me again.”

I got up and put my knives back in my boots as the three got up, looked at me for a second, then quickly walked in the other direction. The lobby was an excellent place, more practice for me to be a social pariah, as if I hadn't already had enough already. The recess was mercifully short, however, and I soon found myself back in the courtroom with considerably more eyes and ears on me than before. Word can travel fast in a courthouse, it would seem. The magistrate soon entered the room and sat down at the bench, eying me a little more than he had before. He tapped his gavel a few times for silence, then took a deep breath and said, “In this matter I find that Saranthos Inesius, by the laws of the land, correctly and rightfully won lordship over the Cold Isles, to be inherited at the same time as Master Alfonse Lenier would have otherwise inherited the title. Let it so be written down as law.”

Lenier looked visibly deflated after this ruling, which was to be expected, as his entire future was taken from him in the blink of an eye. Not that he didn't deserve it, but it almost made you feel pity for him. Almost. I stood up and quickly left the courtroom, happy that I could return to more important matters, like finding out what sort of trouble a lord could get into.