

Keys

“What did you do wrong?” Daddy asked me as I once again picked myself up off the floor. While I really enjoyed learning knife-fighting and unarmed combat techniques from him, the classes could be a little embarrassing. Thankfully, none of the Edotoman court were here to witness this session as I was not turning out one of my better efforts. “Well?”

“I over committed,” I told him, annoyed with myself. “I thrust too far and lost my balance. I then failed to regain my balance quick enough and you gutted me like a fish.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “That’s a fairly accurate description. What are your keys to success?”

“Balance, speed, and accuracy of my strikes,” I told him for the hundredth time.

“Exactly,” he agreed again. “Someday when you’re older, you’ll understand just how important it is that you follow these keys at all times.”

“Yessir,” I told him before launching a leg sweep at him. He jumped, lashing out with a kick simultaneously, and we were going again. Five minutes later, after maneuvering him into making the attack I wanted him to make, I missed my knife strike to his armpit. Instead of a solid, lethal blow, my practice blade merely cut across the back of his shoulder. Desperately, I threw myself into a back flip trying to dodge Daddy’s follow through. But I’d gotten too close and missing had left me just a hair off balance. As my hands touched the ground, his arm hit my elevated legs spilling me over. Even as I scrambled to continue moving, I felt him draw an ‘X’ across my back with his practice blade.

“Clarissa, you’re twelve years old now. This is not a game so please do not treat it as such. Now, what did you do wrong this time?” he asked patiently.

“I missed,” I replied angrily. I was mostly mad at myself. I’d had him and I’d missed. “I should have had you.”

“Indeed, you should have. Missing was your first mistake even though you wounded me. You compounded this mistake by moving away from me, against your own momentum. While close-in, you should have used some of your martial arts training. The back flip was just a bad idea. You exposed too much of yourself and turned your back to me. For an abort maneuver, a leap away from my immediate facing would have been much better.” He was right and I knew it. Most of the mistakes I’d made today had been simple ones. Things I hadn’t done in years.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. Daddy’s always been one of the most perceptive people I knew.

“I don’t know,” I muttered. “I guess I’m just a little out of sorts.”

“You’re nervous about the trip to Regillus and aren’t concentrating,” he replied.

“Maybe a little,” I admitted. Perceptive.

“Alright, I think that’s enough training for the moment,” he said, picking up a towel off the rack and throwing it to me. Snagging one for himself, he began wiping off his brow as we walked out of the training room.

What Daddy hadn’t taught me then was deception. I’d known about feinting and such, but not true deception. A lot of tough lessons in that art now lay behind me. Enough that I liked to think that I’d become something of an artist myself.

“I’ve decided that I’m going to attack Gael,” I told him as we sipped coffee on the patio of Daddy’s favorite country estate. He blinked in surprise and a frown briefly crossed his lips before disappearing. So far as art went, this was more akin to stacking large stones into an interesting shape. Not nearly as much subtlety as I would have preferred but not too obvious either.

“And why would you do that?” he asked, neutrally.

“Reliable word has it their ambassador insulted Grandad. We can’t have a lowlife place like Gael insulting our king. It sets a bad example. A most unfavorable precedent if you will. Therefore, I’ve decided to loot and then raze both their capital and largest southern city. I think that should produce an increase in civility across the worlds.”

“I see. And what are you going to use to accomplish this feat?”

“Oh, I’ve gathered a fleet,” I replied easily, enjoying the coffee. “It’s fairly small. Only three hundred ships. Still, Gael doesn’t have much of a navy and my ships can take out their airfields while we’re still on approach.”

“Three hundred,” Daddy replied quietly with a thoughtful look. “What types of ships?”

“Mostly modern and ultramodern,” I told him. “I’ve got ten battleships and fifteen heavy aircraft carriers. Twenty or thirty light aircraft carriers and more frigates and destroyers than you can shake a stick at.” I’d considered mentioning the amount of money I expected to garner from sacking the two cities. However, I was concerned that Daddy might suddenly become interested in joining the venture rather than reacting as I wanted. Daddy’s eyes grew quite round for a moment. I pretended not to notice as I sipped some more of this excellent coffee.

“Has Dad said anything to you about doing this?” he asked after a long moment.

“Hmm? Oh, no. Grandad’s very busy. No, I decided that if my uncles would hie off and invade some world on a whim, then I could hie off and teach a valuable lesson to a place that insulted our king.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, Clarissa.”

“Really? You don’t think I have enough ships?”

“No, I’m quite certain you have enough ships. I don’t think the attack itself is a good idea,” he answered quietly.

I frowned at him as though irritated. “And why not?”

“Dad has a way of turning an insult against him to his favor. He’ll use the ambassador’s discourtesy and change it into leverage for his negotiations. I’m pretty sure that Dad is planning to have Gael join the RTC soon. If there’s only smoking rubble remaining, that’s not going to do anyone much good.”

“So you’re suggesting that Grandad’s going to do the political equivalent of an Essal Shea maneuver? Turning the opponent’s strength against them?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Maybe,” I said a bit doubtfully. “Still, I’ve already gathered my fleet. Expensive thing to leave sitting around. I’d rather use my ships than pay for them to gather rust. Besides, it would be fun.” Daddy looked thoughtful for a while as we sipped our coffees.

At last he stood. “Come with me,” he said, gesturing for me to follow. Drinking the last of my coffee, I did so. He led me through the house into one of the small parlors. There, a transport mirror sat and he walked right up to it.

“Where are we going?” I asked curiously.

“You’ll see,” he replied mysteriously, punching in a long sequence of runes on the mirror control plate. The mirror soon showed a wasteland. He stepped through and I followed.

“This was once a thriving trade center,” he told me, gesturing towards the broken remains of a very large city.

“It would appear that someone’s been most thorough in their destruction of the place,” I noted.

“Quite,” Daddy replied drolly. “A lot of people died here. Many of them good people.”

“Did they have a really stupid ambassador who insulted the king of Regillus?” I asked in a faux innocent tone.

“No,” he sighed. “They had a princess who was dumb enough to insult Viktor when she turned down his request for a dinner date. Viktor razed the place,” Daddy walked around a still standing building corner where he pointed off into the distance. Following, I found him pointing to a high, grey stone tower. It seemed to be the only intact structure in the area. “He then built that tower and imprisoned her within it. The tower’s enchanted. No one can go in. The princess can’t come out. Nor can she die. All she can do is look out over the destruction she caused by a moment of foolish hubris.”

“Remind me not to upset Viktor more than necessary,” I muttered, looking around the devastation thoughtfully.

“Indeed. Viktor earned his nasty reputation. And I’d just as soon not have my daughter earn a similar reputation.”

For a while, I stood there alternating between looking around at the rubble, the tower, and Daddy. Eventually, I slowly suggested, “I might be willing to put my fleet up as a wager. Without a fleet, attacking Gael would be rather pointless.”

He looked surprised a moment but recovered quickly. “I see. And what might I have that I could put up against this wager?”

With a wry grin, I said, “You tell me.”

“Well, I have that estate in Bersin you’ve always liked,” he suggested.

“Three... hundred... ships,” I countered, allowing my look and tone of voice to darken a bit.

“Ah, yes,” he agreed quickly. “Perhaps we could play a game of cards? Instead of chips, you can use ships and I’ll use various bits and pieces of property I’ve gathered that I might be willing to part with.” I stood quietly mulling this proposition over for a few minutes.

“Provided your pieces of property add up, I’m willing to give it a try. At the very least, winning your property will help pay for fleet maintenance.”

He gave a delighted laugh. “Well now, I suppose we’ll see about that.”

We sat down in a parlor within the Castellum Regillia. Grandad would be our dealer and Daddy and I would be playing head-to-head ripper’s luck. Before each of us was a stack of enchanted betting tokens. Each of mine showed a ship and had the name of the vessel as well as its class upon it. Daddy’s tokens each pictured some property or commodity with an approximate size or market appraisal. Grandad had looked them over earlier and declared the two stacks to be very close in value. Of course we hadn’t told Grandad why we were playing ripper’s luck for such high stakes. We’d simply showed up and asked him to deal for us. He’d been delighted. As king, I had the impression he didn’t get invited to a lot of card games.

Grandad dealt our first hand of seven cards. Four face up on the table before us and three to our hands. There were a hundred and seventeen cards in a standard deck. I had two numbered cards

showing as well as the dragon and the lord. Daddy had one numbered card as well as the queen, the wizard, and the fool.

The game was on.

Three hours later, I had a nicely mixed stack of chips before me. I had about a third of my ship tokens left and about half of Daddy's properties. Some of them were real estate but not all of them by any means. One was an emerald necklace that looked exquisite. Regardless of who 'won', I was keeping that token. Just as I was keeping the token for the little alchemical company.

While I wasn't sure, I thought my father might have been surprised that I was doing so well. Daddy had a wicked reputation as a card shark. I'd done a lot of training in preparation for this evening.

Across from me, Daddy sat fingering one of the tokens himself. "Does General Hoshimuri know that you've named an aircraft carrier after him?"

Frowning a moment in thought, I replied, "You know, I don't think he does. I haven't bumped into him in quite a while."

"In that case, I'll have to take him on a tour. As soon as I've whipped the crew into shape and made sure it's not a floating wreck."

"Grandad, could you kick Daddy under the table for me?" I asked with a grin.

"Sorry, sweetie. Tempting though it may be, I'm just dealing cards tonight," Grandad laughed.

We played on.

After another three hours, Grandad called a stop. I was down to ten percent of my original fleet and had maybe a few more of Daddy's tokens than I'd had three hours earlier.

"It's late," Grandad declared, kissing my forehead. "I'm going to bed. If you want to trade tokens back and forth, be my guest. However, the card playing is at an end."

"Good night Dad," Daddy told him with a smile.

"Night son, granddaughter... sleep well." And with that he left the room.

"Well," Daddy began, "What do you have there?"

With a sweep of my hand I spread out my remaining ship tokens. Daddy did the same on his side of the table with his non-ship tokens.

"Hmm," Daddy mused. "How about we trade my Eagle's Overlook for the battleship, Final Silence?"

"Eagle's Overlook?" I asked. "Isn't that your griffin ranch?"

"It certainly is," he agreed.

"How many griffons does it have now?"

And so the bartering began.

Two hours later I was left with a handful of frigates and destroyers. All that remained of my once mighty fleet. However, I'd gotten what I really wanted early on. The Dyle Alchemical Company. Everything else was hot fudge on the cookie. And it certainly appeared to be quite a lot of hot fudge at that.

Evidently pleased with the fleet of ships he now owned, Daddy conjured up the emerald necklace I'd noticed earlier. He displayed it for me and then walked around and put it on me while I held my hair to the side. Pulling out my transport mirror, I was very pleased with what I saw in it. The necklace looked good on me. Granted, the stones were in Daddy's colors, but that was nothing that a little magic couldn't fix.

With a smile, I hugged Daddy tightly. "Thanks, now that I've had time to think about it, I

don't think I really and truly wanted to sack Gael.”

“Well,” he laughed, “Now that I've thought about it, I've decided that necklace looks better on you than it did in my safe.”

Looking down, I smiled at the Dyle Alchemical token. Deception had definitely become one of the keys of my success.

I just didn't realize at the time that it was one of Daddy's keys as well... or Grandad's.