

Of Noble Heart  
A Twelve Dancing Princesses Short Story  
By: K. M. Shea

Emerys rubbed his chin as he watched Angelique—Evariste’s student—through slightly narrowed eyes.

The enchantress-in-training listened with rapt attention as Alastryr went into painful detail about one of the fussy old tea ceremonies the elves held when the moon was at its zenith and the dawn and evening star crossed paths. Whatever that meant. *How can she look so interested in a topic that’s as appealing as snail slime?*

Emerys had met Angelique at least three times now, and yet he hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that she wasn’t being fully honest...

Evariste seated himself on the ground next to Emerys, his white cloak billowing around him like a cloud. “What has you so interested in your cousin and my cute student?” He reached past Emerys to snag a golden goblet.

“Just puzzling over something.” Emerys shifted his gaze to his friend and switched to studying *him* with narrowed eyes. “What do you think of your...student?”

Evariste laughed. “Is it so difficult to believe I have a pupil?”

Emerys grimaced. “It *is* an odd arrangement. You’re barely older than she is.”

“Yes, that’s why I didn’t take on a student previously.” Evariste swirled his wine goblet. “Could you imagine a mage student trailing after me when I was small enough to ride a pony?”

“The pains of being a child prodigy,” Emerys said dryly. “But you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Angelique is the best student a teacher could ask for,” Evariste said. “She’s respectful, quiet, competent, undemanding, and will suffer through nearly anything without a complaint.”

“She’s also acting,” Emerys said with certainty. “That dainty-and-tranquil front of hers is a lie.”

The Lord Enchanter tapped his cup. “It’s not a lie...not really.”

Emerys snorted. “Oh, please—you can’t be that blinded by your pride in her! She has war magic—that means she’s got to have hidden fire *somewhere*.”

“It’s not a lie,” Evariste repeated. “It’s more that she’s putting her best foot forward and is on her best behavior. At all times.”

Emerys snorted.

“She does have a temper,” Evariste continued. “I’ve seen snatches of it when she thinks she’s alone or that I can’t hear her. But she has excellent control over it and bridles herself more than she has to. Not that I blame her—she had a difficult time of it at the academy. With the way she’s been treated, it’s a miracle that she’s as good-hearted as she is.”

Emerys raised an eyebrow and watched Angelique nod enthusiastically as Alastryr made a sweeping gesture to a bunch of clay teapots that always seemed to—in Emerys’ opinion—

make every drink they brewed taste like dirt. “I guess. She’s got you completely under her thumb, that’s for certain.”

Evariste laughed.

“She doesn’t know, does she?” Emerys tapped his fingers on his knee.

The Lord Enchanter kept his expression benign. “Doesn’t know what?”

“That she has you bridled, saddled, and following after her like a good pony,” Emerys said dryly. “As soon as you look into those big eyes of hers, you transform from a powerful prodigy into a doting master who is more likely to give out candy and pat heads than crack some skulls.”

Evariste laughed and sipped his wine. “One day you’ll understand.”

“I doubt that,” Emerys snorted.

“You’ll find someone who is special to you.”

“Have you *met* my people? If I were to talk to them as I am to you, most of them would be struck speechless.”

Evariste patted his shoulder. “You get along well with your generals and soldiers.”

“Yes. And all of them look at me as an object that must be kept *safe*.” Emerys sighed. “Think of it, Evar. Who would want me—the *real* me, not the king or my pretty face.”

“Your ‘pretty’ face isn’t that remarkable,” Evariste said dryly. “And when I said you would find someone special to you, I didn’t mean it *had* to be a romantic attachment.”

“Isn’t that how it is for you and your ‘cute student’?” Emerys asked.

“No,” Evariste said firmly. “More than anything, Angelique needs someone who will support her and teach her. For now.”

Emerys rolled his eyes. “*For now*,” he repeated back to him. “Meaning you’ve got designs on her in the future—”

“Perhaps you are right. I *am* having a rather difficult time picturing the sort of creature who would come to love you.” Evariste tapped the rim of his goblet. “A silly, beautiful-but-hen-witted girl wouldn’t do for you, after all. And any girl with some intelligence to her would be able to judge that you are more trouble than you’re worth.”

“What did you say?”

Evariste grinned as he continued. “Which in the end means you ought to end up with someone honorable and of noble heart. She would be smart enough to see how you will complicate her life but too compassionate to turn you away.”

“I am not some pity case,” Emerys interjected.

Evariste toasted him with his goblet. “Worry not, my friend. I will always be there to console you.”

Emerys scowled at his long-time comrade. “I bet. You’ll be right there with me—*master!*”

Evariste shook his head and sipped his wine. “We’ll see.”

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Emerys watched Quinn adjust the packs strapped to Fluffy. “You won’t be gone long?”

“I don’t know. It will depend on what we find in Mullberg.” Quinn fussed with a saddle pack buckle, then turned to face Emerys. “You’ll be careful while you search for the wanderers and your generals?”

“I can feel more of my magic returning every day,” he said.

Quinn did not fall for the distraction. “You’ll be careful?” she repeated.

Emerys grumbled under his breath. “Yes. I’ll be careful.”

Quinn smiled, which made his heart twist strangely in his chest. She leaned into him, and Emerys gratefully pulled her closer. He kissed her forehead and relaxed into the warmth she radiated.

“I have to check my weapons, and then it will be time for us to go.” Quinn gently pulled away from Emerys. “You’ll watch Fluffy?”

“He’s not going to run,” Emerys said.

“No. But Guy keeps trying to slip used handkerchiefs into my saddle bag.”

Emerys awkwardly scratched the back of his neck. “Ah. Yes, I’ll stand with Fluffy.”

He was rewarded with another smile before Quinn strode away.

“You picked a noble one, cousin of mine,” Alastryn announced as she joined him in watching Quinn. “You’d be hard-pressed to find a human more honorable than her.”

Unbidden, Evariste’s prediction strolled through his mind. Smiling, Emerys leaned back into Fluffy. “I think Evariste will like her...if he gets to meet her.”

“They’ll find him, Your Majesty.” Alastryn patted his hand. “Angelique will not rest until he is freed.”

“Yes.” Emerys stared at the swirling patterns in Fluffy’s fur and spoke, even though Alastryn wasn’t paying attention anymore. “It will be interesting if she is still in need of a master when she finally does reach him....”

The End