

"Flee Milord. Our foes are as many as the beach has sands. Flee East. We must make haste, wipe your tears, for now is the time to fly."

Colyn, a brave and just man, refused to run. Grabbing his sword in hand, he cried out, ready to face the Emperor in battle.

"Lancelot, I cannot run. And abandon our people to their fate under the Empire? To leave my father....to not even give him a proper burial?"

But the knight grabbed the prince and shook him, pulling him on his mount.

"Our king has given the command for you to flee. For our kingdom lives as long as you draw breath."

--Pg 10. Gallant Colyn and the Tyrant of the East.

THE GRAND BAZAAR, MIDDAY.

Taking the bolt, the baroness collapsed on the ground, thoroughly spent from the fight. Panting, she put her gun and sword on the ground, hot angry tears pouring from her face. She knew when she was beaten. Sighing she looked down, not wanting to look at Albert's smug face.

"Of all the people to lose to! Why was it to you? Gods, I would have taken any of your grunts. Even the delinquent! I...I yield. Your party is the superior one."

Chuckling, Albert put away his tome triumphantly. He smiled as he looked at the scattered members of her caravan, coming to as they got up from the ruined bazaar square.

"Music to my ears. I must say, I am glad that this was an overwhelming-"

"In the square, right there! Surround them, men!"

In an instant, scores of men poured out from the surrounding buildings, holding muskets to both members of Sofia and Albert's parties. Holding up his arms and not wishing to tangle with the law here, Albert's smile turned into a frown as he looked at the force that must have mustered during their little duel.

"Victory. I am sorry, but you are detaining a foreign prince, you know how graven that crime is, yes?"

The captain of the guard walked out, hands behind his back as he looked at the young prince. Tutting his tongue as he looked at the damage he nodded.

"We know who you both are, Prince Albert Cresswell. Lady Sofia Harrison. In Bawaba, all are equal under trade. Under the Five Families' authority, we are arresting both parties for disrupting trade and inflicting property damage on the Grand Bazaar of Ouars. The orders come from the very top, if you both have an issue, take it up with them."

"Who would detain a prince of Colyn? Surely not any of the local constabulary."

"From one of the current heads of the Five Families. Lady Anna al-Mansur. Please. Come quietly and we can resolve this peacefully."

Sighing, Albert looked at his tired crew and gave a nod. Even if he wished to run, it was a bad plan to anger the trade empire that was Bawaba.

"Very well."

OUTSKIRTS OF THE THEOCRACY OF AN'KI. MIDDAY.

It was hot, Richelieu noted as he wiped beads of sweat from his brow. No wonder civilization didn't grow in these lands, after the Empire collapsed. With this heat, it was a wonder that they got anything done. For once, he wished the lead was back in the mountain range he just left and not on the borders of Tharium. An'uki was filled with religious zealots who lived in a backwater, true.

But at least it was cold.

Exiting his tent, he looked out at the dig site and at the scores of men who lifted rubble, sifting through dirt and collapsed rock work. Yes...that old document from the Empire mentioned that it should be here. What it *was* exactly, he couldn't tell. A shrine of some sort. It was built hastily, yet as opulent as possible given the time frame and made in the twilight of the Empire. But still, the remnants took their time to carve it out even as the Eastern Empire rose out of the fragments of the old. But *why*? Why was this so important? Religious purposes? Or perhaps it was-

"Monsieur Richelieu!"

Damn. Interrupted again, by these blasted soldiers. When will they learn to leave him and the other scholars to their work? Good for nothing except for protection and the odd grunt work.

Well at least that was admittedly fairly useful. His thin and slender frame was hardly of use for the heavy lifting that sometimes was necessary for archeology. But still, the military insisted on putting their hands on valuable artifacts, demanding answers that would take years to discover while they manhandled the fragile items and tried to slip away the valuables. Still, they were important, especially as Fleuris' standing with the other countries waned. It seemed the Citizen

wanted to put the army in practically everything these days. Then again, with how horrible the bloodshed was years before Capnet took control, it was understandable to keep order around things. So, he'd bite his tongue and give a handsome smile at the captain who arrived to interfere with his dig site, tailed by a private who held a satchel.

"Captain Vallon. What a surprise! I thought you were with the Citizen's expedition."

Vallion gave a nod as he looked over the digsite, stepping on an exposed stele. The archeologist cringed and gave a look at the captain who quickly stepped back. Sheepishly smiling, he was careful where he stepped a second time.

"Apologies. Hopefully, that wasn't important eh?"

Finding no reaction to his joke, he cleared his throat as he nodded, the private giving a set of papers to Richelieu.

"We split off from the Citizen's caravan some time ago, after his ship made it safely across the strait. Most of our protection detail was to deter pirates. Especially the Wild Hunt Pirates."

"Ah yes. The beastmen pirates. They have been quite a thorn in our side for years. I can only assume that the Citizen has arrived safely?"

"You would be correct. We had a skirmish where we sunk most of their ships and now, our main purpose being fulfilled, we are transferred over to your caravan in search of the Fire Emblem while the Citizen meets with the Pharaoh of Ma'at."

Richelieu gave a nod as he leafed through the documents. Durand, Moreau, Roche, all names he was familiar with. Well, they were all men he knew from before. At least he was familiar with how they acted. Wait, one more was....

"Am I to work with the former noblewoman? Monsieur, surely you jest."

"Hold your tongue Monsieur Richelieu! It was that sort of thinking that led to the Time of Blades. She has proven time and time again, through personal hardship to be loyal to the Citizen and our great republic. If you have a complaint, perhaps I could take it up with the Citizen in my report? I hardly think he would be pleased considering we were *hand-picked* to aid your wild goose chase. Speaking of which, how is progress? The Citizen wants results."

How dare he think he was in charge? This was *his* dig site, damn it. However, he simply turned the other cheek. Richelieu may have gone from a bright peasant with a scholarship to a renowned scholar but still, when working under the military he had to at least let them think they were in charge.

"Ah. Forgive me. We found this temple complex from the lead we bought in Bawaba, it seems to

have been built during the empire's collapse but it is still mainly intact. We've found religious iconography, mostly of the Noble Four. But we have yet to find the entrance, the main one was sealed up for reasons we can't comprehend. But these sort of buildings always had a side entrance the priests would-

His explanation was cut off by an excited shout from one of the workers.

"Monsieur Richelieu! Monsieur Richelieu! We found it!"

Giving a smile to the soldiers, he took a lantern and made his way to the temple.

"Well then, let's hope your report is a fruitful one, hmm?"

Richelieu, Vallon, and the private entered the temple complex, the lantern illuminating carvings and statues unseen until this day. In awe, Richelieu interpreted the massive amount of art, trying to make sense of it.

"It appears to be a mausoleum of sorts. Whoever this person was, they seemed to favor Alexandros, The Emperor's Shadow. You can tell by the art of the man wearing armor on the charger. Alexandros was arguably the strongest member of the Noble Four and held his position as the Emperor's personal vanguard. He was never far from the Emperor, Hence the name, The Shadow. if he did not die to an assassin, some historians believe that Colyn's rebellion would have-

Looking over, he saw the private lifting the elaborate lid of the coffin, inlaid with rubies and gold. Holding out a hand, he tried to stop him.

"Hey! Don't *touch* anything, these are priceless-

His words were interrupted by a hiss of an unknown gas. The hapless private started to choke as Vallion and Richelieu covered their faces with cloth. The door, led by some magic, shut all three inside the room.

"Toxic gas! Don't breathe it in!"

The private choked, the strange gas covering his body in a shimmering mist. His body seemed to be drained of all vitality as he shriveled up into a husk. That damned hissing continued to sound from the coffin's lid and the two froze in horror. Then, a hand reached out from the coffin. Two red lights lit up the dimly lit room as the body rose out of the crypt. Richelieu could only watch in horror, trembling in fear as the dreadful silence was punctuated by the hissing of gas.

AL-MANSUR MANSION, SUNDOWN

Gods, how dreadful was the sound of the kettle hissing. More dreadful was the anticipation as Prince Albert sat down in the office of the al-Mansur mansion. Although the awkward silence was somewhat unbearable, it was better than him and his caravan being hauled into the local jail. Even if they (technically) broke the law, she couldn't very well put a prince and his entourage into the nearest cell and call it a day. No, otherwise there would be an international incident. But at the same time, she couldn't show weakness by just letting him go. Instead there would be a compromise. Both would need to come to an agreement before it boiled over into something worse.

Honestly, he'd almost prefer jail time. While it sounded good on paper, his terms were written down by one of the leaders of a country that specialized in deals. Most likely, he wasn't going to like the terms regardless, even if it expedited his travel from detainment.

"Some tea, Prince Albert?"

Said his captor, the head of the al-Mansur family, lady Anna. A quick nod and a butler poured some of the hot liquid in a tea cup. The al-Mansur family was quite odd in many ways. The obvious being skin tone and hair color, the combination of ivory skin and scarlet hair was one uncommon among the people native to these lands. In addition, it was a matriarchy compared to the heavily patriarchal families that normally ruled. Finally and most strangely, all women of the house shared the same name, and looked nearly identical, regardless of parentage. Quite odd indeed.

But, among all the five heads, Albert had the most respect for Lady Anna. He was glad that if any of them detained the caravan it would be her. Although greedy and ruthless, she had some semblance of care for the people of her lands which not all five members shared. Unfortunately, he couldn't appeal to her vices as strongly but at least she was reasonable. Eventually she was handed a document by a servant. Groaning, she rubbed her temples as she shot the royal a glare.

"If you were not a foreign prince, I would have the guards of this city slash you down further than my Liberation Day sale prices! Ugh...I have no clue why you both decided to tear up the Grand Bazaar, but this is a *big* mess."

Taking a sip of coffee, the woman took a moment to collect herself. The prince, as diplomatic as ever, decided to take this moment to deflect and hopefully downplay his involvement.

"It was a bit of a dispute between both of our caravans that the *Harrison side* started. Keep in mind that we tried to keep the damage to a minimum, but her ruffians-"

"Ah! I don't want to hear it. Talk is cheap you know. In these lands, money talks louder than people sometimes and you are *very much* being drowned out."

Handing Cheyenne the bill, the head retainer looked over the set of documents while giving a surprised cough. Albert tried to wrestle control back once again and gave a diplomatic smile.

“Lady al-Mansur.”

“Please...call me Anna.”

“Very well...Lady Anna. As you know, I am of a royal house, on a mission for the Queen herself. Surely our budget can account for- Dumare save us. That is a hefty price.”

Albert said, looking at the amount of zeroes that were written on the paper Anna slid over. The merchant gave a nod as she tapped the number on the invoice.

“This pays for the city guard, the property damages, the estimated sales for that day, and the accountant’s fee all in one neat little package and then split in half for your caravan to pay. Surely a prince can pay for all of this?”

Albert looked over the summary once again, trying to find a misplaced zero there. A nervous laugh escaped the prince who was quite glad he wouldn’t set foot in the capital for quite some time.

“You would be correct. It is...no small fee. But I can more than cover for it. However, it is not within our expedition budget. I can send a courier to the capital and the gold can be sent to you by royal decree.”

A smile came from the merchant as she gave a wry smile. Giving a bit of a wink she chuckled as her mood lightened.

“Well! I’m glad we can both come to an agreement. Now then. I will arrange for your caravan to be set free and we both can be on our merry way once the gold is safely in my coffers. Sound good?”

Albert’s mood soured yet again as he mentally calculated the amount of time it would take for a letter to arrive to Colyn, then for his mother to battle bureaucracy to muster up even *more gold* and then the travel time and...oh dear.

“Could we perhaps be on our merry way and *then* you get the gold? Surely you must know that as a prince, I am obligated to solve this diplomatic hiccup. I do not intend on swindling you, especially when I need to make my way over here after the expedition ends.”

“Oh, no can do, handsome. Sorry, but if I don’t take the gold before you head out, the other houses will leap on that weakness. My family’s standing might go poof! And it would take another Anna to rebuild from the ground up, and you know how it goes. Sorry. But if you’re in a hurry...”

She tapped a finger to her lips, looking at the map of her country, her eyes lit up. Albert felt a pit of dread as she smiled yet again.

“Where were you planning on leaving? By sea? Or by the mountain route?”

“The mountains, yes.”

“So your path would go through here....”

She said, tracing a path down the map. She leafed through a few official-looking documents on her desk before finding one and sliding it across to him.

“Well, you’re in luck. I have a job for you that might benefit both of us. In the long run, this will save me a *lot* of time. And time is money! Normally hiring an exterminator takes months. I should hire out troublesome bands of archeologists more often!”

Cheyenne took the parchment and scanned through it. Albert’s eyes raised as he tried to coax information out of the woman.

“Exterminator?”

“Yes. That’s what we call bandit-killing jobs around here. There’s a city called Janna, you may have heard of it.”

“Yes, it is the last stop before merchants travel to Tharium by the mountain pass. Its importance in international trade cannot be overstated.”

“Ah! So, smart *and* good-looking! After your actions today, I didn’t think you had much in that department. But yes, it’s one of our most valued supply chains...and it’s overrun by refugees. A few bandit clans have gotten together and been taking entire villages instead of caravans. Your expedition seems like they can handle themselves in a fight. So, let’s make a deal! You scratch my back, I scratch yours. And you know what? To show the amount of good faith I have in this, I’ll even throw in looting rights. Keep whatever you guys find there. Just wipe them out, and we’ll call it even. What do you say?”

Albert turned to his right-hand woman who put the bounty down on Albert’s side of the desk.

“The terms seem as fair as we can expect. The village they are holding captive is only a day’s ride from Janna. Assuming nothing else takes us off-guard there, the detour should be brief. No loopholes potentially keeping us in a cycle of endless work either. As long as we eliminate their holdings, we can consider it a job well done.”

“Very well Lady Anna. You have yourself a deal. Shall we shake on it?”

Extending a hand, the woman gave a wink as she shook his hand. She whispered something to her butler who then left the room.

"I sent word that we came across an agreement. Your employees should be free to go. Now go and make a killing out there!"

Albert and Cheyenne turned to leave the room, making their way to the banquet hall where Cyrus and the rest of the caravan who were being escorted out of the mansion were being held. Cyrus gave a smile as he stood up and greeted the duo.

"Hey! Welcome back. We came to a deal yeah? You owe your soul to the al-Mansur family now?"

"No. Just a bit of a job we had no choice to accept, but all things considered it could have been *much* worse. How are you faring my friend? Did the guards treat you well?"

"Yeah boss, as promised. They held us in the banquet hall and gave us what we wanted to eat. Would be nice if it wasn't for the constant reminder that they'd slit our necks if we tried to escape it. Overall, not the worst jail I've stayed in. Hell, they even let the dragon smoke."

"Ah, that's Bawaba for you. Veiled threats under the cover of hospitality. Well, we should rest up at the Caravan's Palace for now, and then make our leave in the morning. Cheyenne, tell the caravan when we arrive at the Palace."

"Yes Milord. I wish you all the best of luck."

"Hm? Cheyenne? If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were planning on staying behind."

Cheyenne gave a tired smile as she nodded. It looked like another night with just her and a cup of coffee again...

"Yes. I am sorry Milord, but in order for us to leave Bawaba with no strings attached there is a bevy of paperwork I need to work through. I'm used to it however, being head retainer there is no shortage of documents I work through usually. It won't take me longer than a day, by the time you finish your job, I should return."

"I...see."

Albert frowned as the three of them walked through the streets of Ouars. He felt a pit of guilt hit his stomach as her words went through his head.

"I did not mean to give you more work. Why, it is almost like you are the one being punished here. I...did not mean for this to happen."

Cheyenne sighed as she opened the door of the palace for the prince. She shook her head as she waved his concerns away.

“Milord, I am used to this. You have been doing stunts of this sort all your life, whether you realized it or not. Just...*please*. Stop and think about how your actions affect others. I believe you are a good person, but you must take a moment to not move on impulse alone.”

“Ah...I apologize if I have hurt either of you without thinking. I will try and take your advice to heart.”

“That is all we ask of you, Milord. Now, rest up. You all have a long journey ahead of you.”

Nodding, Albert went up the stairs to his suite. The slow steps of his cane clacked on the wood until he made his way to the room and then to sleep.