

*6th day, Month of Harvest*

*1422 A. F. L. E.*

*The Royal Palace, Donia City, Kingdom of Caeledon*

“Armel! By the Saint, man! Where are you?”

Prince Armel Maior, the youngest son of King Rearden Maior of Caeledon, sighed and rubbed his temples. His brother Conrad, the kingdom’s Crown Prince, was not known for his subtlety. For the thousandth time, he wished Conrad would act more like a king than a soldier. Armel looked up from his book to find his Knight Guardsman and friend, Crispan Bonheur, smirking at him over his own work.

“Crispan, would you?”

“Say no more, Your Highness.” Crispan tossed the book aside. “I shall corral yon shouting brother.” He exited the office with a snarky wave of his fingers.

“Thank you.” Armel muttered dryly. Though respectful enough, Crispan’s easy-going attitude often lent him an air of irreverence. Not that Armel minded. He’d take irreverence over incompetence any day.

After a moment or so, his brother stormed into the office with Crispan following behind. Conrad’s face was stormy, red blotches flaring in his cheeks mirroring the fiery red of his hair. “It’s completely intolerable!” he burst out, collapsing into a chair.

“Guardsman, the wine would likely be useful at the moment.” Armel spoke first to his companion before turning to his brother. “What’s intolerable, Conrad?”

“Father has denied my request to return to my troops. My men need me!”

Armel sighed. His brother, ever the military man, spent much of his time stationed on the contentious border between Caeledon and their aggressive western neighbors, the Tarrtigan Empire. He eschewed the court, despising the factional rivalry that had sprung up over the last fifteen or so years between those who supported the policies of their mother, Queen Rayna, and those who supported, Dulcibelle Shanon, their father’s mistress. King Rearden himself took little interest in court politics or

governance, preferring instead to hunt, take river cruises, and engage himself in other entertainments.

“Explain. What did he say?” Armel marked his place in the ledger on his desk and closed the book, pushing it to the side.

Conrad frowned. “Never knew how you could stand to do all that book-keeping. I go cross-eyed if I so much look at a ledger.” He accepted a goblet of wine from Crispan with a nod of thanks. The bodyguard stepped back to observe.

Armel just stared, waiting.

“I went to his chambers to ask when I might rejoin my men. She was there, sitting on the arm of his chair like a spider.” He shuddered. “I might have been able to convince him if she was not there, I know it!”

“Let me guess. She made some sort of excuse, and Father, being who he is, took the easy route and sided with her?” Armel leaned back in his chair.

“Exactly!” Conrad leapt from his chair to pace the room, gesticulating wildly. Crispan deftly avoided the wine goblet headed for his head. “She actually referred to the Empire as our ‘friends,’ and said that I should not need to return to my men because my men ought to be called back.”

This news sent a jolt of electricity down Armel’s spine. He leaned forward. “She said this explicitly?” Armel glanced at his friend over Conrad’s shoulder. Crispan’s eyes gleamed.

His brother stopped pacing. “I know that look. What are you planning? Does her response mean something?”

Armel considered how much to tell his brother. Conrad had the best of intentions but was known to be careless with information. He gave a mental shrug as he made his decision. “We have long suspected the Dulcibelle might favor decreasing our military footprint on the border. Why is anyone’s guess. But she has never stated this opinion in so many words, until now it seems.”

Conrad shook his head. “No. This is getting too complicated for me. Just see if you can work on Father. We can’t abandon the border and I won’t abandon my men. Thanks for the wine, but I’m

gone.” With that, the crown prince swept out.

Armél sighed. Try as he might, he could never seem to impress upon his brother the need for him to pay attention to the goings-on at court. If Conrad was ever to make an effective king, he could not stick his head in the sand, as their father had done, and ignore the business of ruling.

Crispan shut the door to the office and leaned against it. “He’ll never really concern himself with governance. You’ll have to do for him what your lord uncle Bertram has done for your parents.”

“I know.” Armél leaned back in his chair. “It’s maddening, but it’s as I always knew it would be.”

“Still,” Crispan continued, fiddling with a copper bead on the end of one of the braids framing his face, “he had some interesting information about Dulcibelle. What do you suppose she means by advocating for a reduction of troops at the border?”

“It could be anything. This could be a precursor to a new treaty with the Tarrtigans. She and her faction might covet the wealth profiting off border skirmishes would bring. She could even have said that simply to provoke Conrad. He never shies away from a confrontation with her. We’ll have to wait and watch for her next move.”

“Still, between this and the reports coming out of her estate, we should have decent proof of illegal dealings.”

Armél frowned. “Not so fast, my friend. We must find concrete proof. This certainly adds to the rumors, and we now have some confirmation of her stance on relations with the Tarrtigan Empire. As for the reports, well, slavery is slavery no matter what term she’s using to cover it. But we’ll need to catch her in the act if we’re to bring this atrocity to light.”

“On a lighter note,” Crispan pulled a letter from his jerkin, “I received a message from home. My father will be arriving to report to the king in three days. Marguerite is coming with him. She’ll be attending Prosper’s Academy this year.”

Armél felt his pulse quicken at the mention of Crispan’s younger sister. His friend had not seen

any member of his family in the five years since he joined the ranks of the Knight Guardsmen, but he maintained a steady communication with Marguerite, often reading letters aloud to the prince. Armel had developed a fondness - he refused to acknowledge it as a crush - for the girl via her intelligent and witty writings. In his mind's eye, he pictured the miniature portrait of Marguerite Crispan carried with him. Painted when she was eighteen, it depicted a petite young woman, dark-haired and green-eyed. She was beautiful in an elegant way, just blossoming into womanhood. Now, in three days, he would finally meet her.

“You must be ecstatic to see your family again.” He said, doing his best to mask his eagerness.

“I am. It's been too long since I saw Maggie. When I left she was still a girl. No doubt, Grandmama's turned her into a lady.” Crispan smiled wryly and glanced at the water clock on the wall. “We might want to get a move on. You've that dinner with your uncle Bertram within the hour.”

Armel nodded and began to tidy up his workspace, thinking furiously. Dulcibelle's new stance was disturbing. What could she possibly be up to now, and how could he maneuver a plan in place to stop her machinations? But the news of Marguerite's impending arrival, however exciting, was a distraction he could ill afford. He would have to keep a tight rein on himself if he wanted to avoid any missteps.

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