

A Question of Allegiance

Monday, 30 November 2009

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The King's Council Chamber was dark. A slight breeze stirred through the open windows from the warm summer night. The stars and two large candle fixtures provided the only light as the five members of the king's personal council sat around the table. They sat and spoke idly, as all nobles do. Earl Tasin, the agricultural minister, was speaking with Count Henry de Micovane, the Exchequer, of the mounting burdens on the small farming fiefs. Tasin had long held that a lower tax rate would help relieve much of the suffering of the peasantry. Chancellor Perrin, Duke Vernauer de Lyonesse, and Sir Anthoine were locked in a debate about the legality of searching ships on the high seas. Anthoine, the Royal Judge, argued as usual that the rights of neutrality must be extended to all foreign shipping. He did however, understand the zealous Vernaur's concerns. As Grande Admiral de Bretonnia, he was responsible for protecting Bretonnia's shores from any foreign threats. The doors to the chamber opened without a sound. A woman clad entirely in deep emerald green robes seemed to glide into the midst of the assembled nobles. Ribbons twirled behind her as she proceeded, ghostlike, toward the table. All conversation stopped as the ministers tried not to gawk at the disturbingly white hair and mysterious facial features of the lady now standing motionless before them. Just as Chancellor Perrin was opening his mouth to offer a greeting, the Fey Enchantress began to speak in an eerie, otherworldly speech, "Hello gathered nobles of Bretonnia. I come bearing word from the most holy Lady of the Lake. I fear that it shall not be well-received. She is most displeased at the course your country has assumed. Moreover, she rightfully blames this on your foolish king, Charles. He is the root of the problems now faced by fair Bretonnia. The Lady has asked me to relay to you that for the famines and foreign threats to end, King Charles must no longer sit upon his throne. Only with his blood can the land be cleansed and once again know prosperity under a new ruler. The Lady bids you to act wisely and as the noble leaders of Bretonnia that you are." Her message delivered, the Fey Enchantress vanished from their midst, leaving the utterly stunned knights in silence. The assembled council members continued to sit in their disbelief for a moment, before turning to each other, their faces pale with shock. Tasin broke the uneasy quiet, "Well, do we have a choice? Is there a precedent for such a thing in our great kingdom's history? Must we follow the Lady's will at the cost of so magnificent a ruler?" He paused and looked around to the other leaders. Duke Vernaur was the next to speak. "I have fought for both my king and my goddess for many years, yet I know where my deepest allegiance lies. The king is important, and Charles is most definitely a great ruler. However, the Lady is what keeps our noble kingdom independent and united. Without the Lady we are nothing. Have we forgotten who it was that vested Giles with his kingly powers? Are we so quick to forget all that the Lady has done for us throughout our existence?" Sir Anthoine frowned as he countered, "In all of my readings, never have I once encountered an instance of the Lady dictating our actions so closely. Especially, I have never heard of her calling for the death of a Bretonnian noble, save in the instance of Mervech, the mad Duke of Mousillon. Yet, in this instance, he was marked for death only after butchering the King of Bretonnia in cold blood. I ask all of you, what similar action has our king done to warrant a death order, to reduce him to the same rank as the meanest criminal? Also, never in my long hours of reading have I come across a story of a god or goddess turning against the leader of his or her people. Why then, should this precedent be now established?" Perrin's laugh was full of mirth. "Your station credit, judge. You speak of precedents and damning actions. I would put before the council, who is our true leader? A mere mortal? Or the eternal, all-powerful Lady? Moreover, would we not be damning ourselves by refusing to comply with the Lady's orders? Who are we to understand the Lady's will? She has protected us throughout the ages, so can be provided some small measure of trust!" "Yes, yes," agreed Vernaur and Henry. "Tasin and Anthoine looked at each other, their shock and horror clear. Tasin cleared his throat, "Gentlemen, please tell me that what I hear is wrong. Are you honestly suggesting that we kill our King Charles? Surely you are not proposing high treason against his majesty?" "Treason?" asked Perrin, his eyebrows arching in his surprise. "How can you accuse us of treason? Would you advise forsaking the will of the Lady? Is she not the goddess who has led our people since before our kingdom was founded? Indeed, how much higher a treason to turn against her than a petty king?" Anthoine shook his head in disgust as he rose from his seat. "I will hear no more of this blasphemy. For tonight, I go to my chambers. On the morrow I shall send a messenger to you and hope to hear that you have come to your senses!" With that, he turned and stalked out of the council room with Earl Tasin following just behind. The remaining nobles looked to each other. "So," Vernaur began, "what will it be my brothers? Shall we risk civil war? Shall we kill our king in the name of our goddess? I fear that any other course of action could only bring far worse consequences." Henry nodded, "Aye. My heart is bleeding at the thought of killing our beloved king, but what else can we do? The Lady has left us no alternative, and I owe my first allegiance to her." Chancellor Perrin stood, "Then we are agreed. In the name of the Lady, we shall slay our King and institute a new monarch in preparation for an age of prosperity. We must be quick. Anthoine and Tasin will lose no time once our intentions are clear. We must strike within the next day or our cause and lives are forfeit. Vernaur, go and gather together loyal men. They must be entirely trustworthy and willing to follow orders without question. Do not tell them of our intent. Henry and I shall go and procure arms for our band. We will meet in the West courtyard at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. With the Lady's blessing we will be victorious." Vernaur looked to Perrin and nodded his vacant face in agreement. It had been so easy up until now to plot. But as the plan moved forward, he could not help feeling a deep sense of unease in his gut. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. No, this is what must be done for the Kingdom of Bretonnia. "I shall go to the training grounds and gather together twenty brave men who will do their duty to their country. Make sure that we are well-armed or we shall fail." "Of course. They shall not be the finest armaments in the land, but they shall be more than enough to do the job. Come, we must go. Every second we delay is another second those blasphemers gain." Henry saw the agreement etched on the faces of his companions as he moved toward the door. Their duties given, the three conspirators moved to put their plan into action. Each went his separate way in preparation for the dark deed that would soon be committed. Behind them, the council chamber stood, candles flickering, entirely

unaware of the great evil to which it had just born

witness.Â Â

***** It was half-past twelve the next day when a messenger arrived at Judge Anthoine's door bearing a small, seemingly insignificant scrap of paper. Yet on that slip were scrawled the most significant words the Kingdom of Bretonnia would ever know: "We stand committed to the cause." None would comprehend the weight of this simple sentence unless he had been in that accursed council room the night before. Sadly for Anthoine and Tasin, they understood all of what the missive entailed. As they read it, their countenances turned grim. "What now Anthoine? How do we proceed?" "We have only one course of action: we must notify the king of this treachery and pray that the news does not come too late. Come, we go to the royal chambers. His excellency should still be finishing his noon-time meal." Anthoine led the way as the two brave men raced through the castle to warn their lord of his peril. The castle's inhabitants were going about their daily routines, cooking, cleaning, and smithing, all entirely unaware of the crisis which was then unfolding. As the two nobles sped past, people would look up for a brief moment before returning to their work, mumbling about frivolous blue-bloods. Anthoine and Tasin sprinted up the final flight of stairs and stood gasping before the king's guard. "An audience with his majesty good sir. It is most urgent!" panted Tasin as his companion began to cough violently from the recent exertion. The guard nodded and opened the door to the king's chamber, "Lords Anthoine and Tasin to see you my liege." The two men stepped into the large, brightly lit room. It boasted large, open windows and its walls were covered in ornate tapestries. In the center was a finely carved wooden table, upon which sat the remains of a formidable meal. King Charles leaned back in his chair on the far side of the table. "Ah, my good friends. It is wonderful to see you. I trust that all goes well with the farming?" King Charles asked as he smiled his large, friendly grin at his guests. Anthoine stepped forward, took a deep breath to steady himself, and began, "My lord, I am sorry to say that I come bearing a dreadful tale. Last night, the Fay Enchantress appeared to us as we sat at council and instructed us that you must be killed. As much as it pains me, I must inform you that Chancellor Perrin, Exchequer Henry, and Duke Vernaur all have the opinion that her word should be followed out to the letter. My king, you must move quickly to stop them or they shall surely take your life and throw this kingdom into turmoil." King Charles maintained his grave expression for a moment before bursting into laughter. "Hahaha, thought you could fool me eh? No, such a thing would never happen. Let me tell you, next time you should pick a more reasonable lie. Now off with you, and many thanks for a good joke." Tasin began, "But Sir..." "Enough, I shall hear no more of this ridiculous story. Fay Enchantress and murder indeed. Leave me be, I must review some of these accounts before my hunt tomorrow." King Charles waved the stunned and crestfallen nobles through the door before standing and moving to a small writing desk sitting in front of a window. He eased himself into the chair, opened the books, and gave one last chuckle at the absurdity of the claim brought before him. Tasin and Anthoine stood paralyzed outside of the king's door. What were they to do? How could they stop this atrocity from taking place when the victim considered the plot to be a joke? Anthoine cleared his throat, "Well Tasin, there are two options before us now. We can either stand by and watch as those zealots butcher our ruler in cold blood, or we can fight to defend our lord from those who would assail him. I know which I would choose, but tell me, what are your thoughts?" The Earl looked mournfully at his compatriot, "I would like to see the king honestly a decision to be made here? I will not stand idly by as my king is brought low by a band of radical assassins. No, I will stand and fight alongside him in those final moments of his life." Anthoine nodded, "Then we are in agreement. Should we die, it is for more noble a cause than any I have yet fought." He is safe, I think, in his rooms for now. Methinks they shall strike this evening after he has dined and is taking his daily stroll through the royal gardens. That gives us six hours until we must be waiting here to accompany him. We will insist that he allow us to follow him. In the mean time, we shall go and prepare for battle. We must do our best to conceal armor beneath our tunics. Metal will not do, as it would create too loud a racket. I suggest we try leather. Ha, how ironic that we should fight so great a battle in dressed in the gear of a peasant. No matter, if it saves our lives, then it is worth it. Now, to the armory shall we go and procure such arms as we shall require." ***** The dark corridor was quiet as Anthoine and Tasin stood patiently outside King Charles's door. They wore cloaks rather larger than necessary, yet hidden beneath them, each wore a hardened leather breastplate and concealed a sharpened sword. Suddenly, the door opened and light flooded the hall as King Charles emerged from his chambers. He jumped slightly seeing the two, solitary figures before him, but soon recovered. "Ah, my lords Anthoine and Tasin you gave me quite a fright. If this is another part of your joke, I must say it is well-played, although I sense by your expressions that it is not. What can I do for the two of you this fine summer night?" he asked, looking first to one, then the other, all the while smiling his big, friendly grin. It was Tasin who stepped forward to speak, "My liege, we would accompany you tonight on your evening stroll with your approval." He bowed and looked to his king for a reply. "But of course my friends, you have always but to ask. Come now, we shall not delay any longer. The sunsets are always so beautiful this time of year." Charles began to walk down toward his gardens, and the two ministers fell into step behind him. The trees and bushes cast long, gloomy shadows as they entered the king's private retreat. On any other night, it would have been the most serene place in the kingdom, but tonight Tasin and Anthoine cast wary glances about them and jumped at the slightest sign of movement. Then, up ahead, they were met by a group of men with torches. The two men followed King Charles as he merrily approached the visitors. The king had just raised his hand in greeting and opened his mouth when a voice came from beneath a dark hood. "We are glad to see you your highness, most glad indeed. We had worried that perhaps others," he looked to Tasin and Anthoine before continuing, "might have scared you away. I see by the look on your face that you comprehend why we are here. Before we begin, I would say that we act for the Lady and do her bidding. Anything different is blasphemy." Charles did his best to compose himself, "A continuance of your little prank my fellow lords? I assure you, it has gone far enough..." but at that moment, he was stopped by the sound of a half-dozen swords being unsheathed. Then came the command, "Now." Tasin and Anthoine sprang into action before the King could react. They threw off their cloaks and drew their swords. Attacking in unison, they quickly killed two of the men already rushing toward their king. Adapting to the situation, Charles stooped and picked up the sword from one of the fallen men and

continued forward as the struggle began in earnest. The fighting was hard, and lasted for several minutes. Men on both sides sustained untold numbers of cuts and scratches as swords nicked their arms and legs. The clang of metal resounded through the otherwise deserted garden. "Do it!" cried one of the assassins. At first, the king and his two guardians did not understand the command. They soon realized that it had been given to a line of archers who had been creeping into position on a ledge to their right. Tasin saw them as they drew back their bows and aimed at the king. "No!" he cried as he flung himself to meet them. He fell to the ground accompanied by the snapping of eight arrows which had met their mark in his chest. Heaving, he tried to stand, only to receive a blow to the head from Chancellor Perrin's mailed fist. Again and again the archers shot, five volleys in all. The ground was strewn with bodies as Anthoine lifted his head. To his dismay, he could see King Charles lying motionless on the ground, several arrows protruding from his noble body. "It is finished. Bretonnia as we knew it is no more," he whispered as he sagged to the ground and the world faded into blackness. A long, cruel peal of laughter came from the shadows as a tall, slender, beautiful elf emerged from her hiding place. Her flowing green dress fluttered in the slight breeze, and she appeared to be adorned by a wide assortment of leaves. "You have done well my knights. Now King Charles is dead. His offensive reign has met its appropriate end." Exchequer Henry stammered, "Excuse me fair elf, but I do not understand..." The elf turned to him, her eyes full of fury. Then she smiled a mysterious, knowing smile, "Not understand? Oh, but I think you do. I am Ariel, Queen of Athel Loren. It is me you have worshipped all these many years. Yes, I am the Lady of the Lake. Ever since that fool, Giles accepted the sword from me you have worshipped me as a goddess. Ever since then, you have been my pawns. You see, with Bretonnia following the will of the Lady, they were all too-easily persuaded to protect my forest home from any and all invaders. Ah, now I see in your eyes the full comprehension of what has been done. This beast, King Charles, had ordered the destruction of part of my beloved forest. At first I was afraid that all of my plans would soon unravel. Then, I came upon a stroke of genius. It was but two nights ago when I dispatched my messenger to you, ordering you to kill this fiend in the name of the Lady. Now it is done, and Athel Loren shall be safe. That leaves only you to be dealt with. I will allow you to decide your course of action. By all means, go forth and tell the world how I am the Lady and you killed your king. Shatter their faith and let their entire society crumble into dust. Or you could pretend. Pretend that this encounter never occurred, that the Lady does exist. You would step forward and rule Bretonnia in all its glory, yet know that it is all a facade. It is your decision my knights, and I thank you for your service." Ariel turned and glided off along one of the narrow paths singing a lilting tune to herself, leaving the remaining men standing, defeated, as the sun set in the Western sky.