

Dragon's Domain

Written by Lorenzo Antonio Hall
Illustrations by Tostantan



Wynveria; a nation of the proud and strong, also known as the land of the dragons. The nation evoked a feeling of quiet, understated dignity. The lowlands were very plain and humble, a stark contrast to the great mountains that surrounded them. For any outsider, it would take weeks to climb the mountain range and reach the larger settlements of Wynveria.

Nearing the clouds and stretching high into the sky was the great mountain of Excelsis; upon its pinnacle, where it had rested for countless centuries, was the castle of Wynveria's ruler. The onyx colored bricks that the castle was composed of seemed to

blend into the mountaintop, creating a unique, breathtaking image of seamless strength and unity.

As the sun rose over Excelsis, rays of light crept through the windows of the castle, basking its insides with radiance. This woke the castle's ruler from her slumber, shifting out of her covers and swinging her legs over the bed's edge as she yawned tiredly. She was used to being tired when she woke up, but she was never pleased with having to rise this early.

Now fully awake, she was soon dressed and prepared for her day ahead. She noted that her servants had prepared her finest clothes; as befitting the occasion, for she was to entertain important company. Soon, there was a knock at the door.

"Who is there?" asked the queen, an air of authority and power clear in her voice.

"Delys, Your Majesty," came back a voice from the other side of the door. "The Heofonite Guardians are scheduled to arrive in four hours."

"I am aware," replied the queen, an undertone of weariness creeping into her voice. "Please wait outside; I will be with you shortly."

"Yes, Queen Zelina."

The ruler of Wynveria, Zelina Hanari, sighed in relief as she strolled to her wardrobe, carefully opening its antique doors. Within its mahogany confines rested a Wynverian relic; the royal crown. Its gold finish gleamed in the morning sun as she donned her symbol of regency. Her outfit completed and her mind prepared, Zelina exited her chambers.

"Delys, I am ready," spoke the queen as she looked at her tan-skinned assistant.

“Oh, good. I’m glad to see you prepared so quickly,” said Delys as she smiled at her queen. Delys had glossy, light red hair that was cut short, and bright yellow eyes. She was shorter than the queen, and had a curvy, somewhat ample frame. Her friendly disposition and disarming smile endeared her to many.

“You say that as if I waste time in the mornings,” Zelina joked, a childish pout quickly flashing across her face.

“You don’t, but you do have a tendency to rest longer than you are supposed to,” prodded Delys, half-attempting to hide her giggle with her hand.

Zelina rolled her eyes. “If you are done making jokes at my expense, please tell the others to prepare brunch and be ready to welcome our guests. We want to be sure a good first impression is made.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. My apologies.” Resuming her role as Zelina’s assistant, Delys bowed before hurrying off to deliver the message.

After seeing Delys off, Zelina walked through her castle, taking her time to admire the morning’s light and watch her servants amble here and there on their business. She eventually came to her castle’s courtyard; she sighed slightly as she sat down on one of the courtyard’s many stone benches. She tried to recall if she had any business to tend to for the day, but nothing came to mind.

Instead, she took her time and enjoyed the few moments she had to herself. These moments were precious to her, for her busy life as queen often kept her on her toes, constantly being busy here or there.

She bathed in the rays of the sun, feeling its warmth upon her fair skin. Closing her eyes in bliss, her mind drifted, thinking of other places and other times. This high in the mountains, the sunlight was particularly warm, and with the cool summer breeze drifting through the castle's halls, Zelina was almost able to forget her many obligations.

Snapping out of her reverie, she frowned slightly, remembering that she would later have to deal with other noble families of Wynveria should they had any issues with how she ruled. The life of a ruler was not as restful as many assumed.

After her moment of rest, Zelina decided to see if Delys had done as instructed, and from there she proceeded to help. Although Zelina indeed did have servants who were meant to take care of such things, she felt things usually went more smoothly if she directly oversaw and helped with any ongoing tasks; for important matters such as the upcoming meeting, everything had to be perfect.

Within a matter of hours, preparations had been made and everything was perfectly set; all that was left was the arrival of their guests. Zelina was approaching the front gates of the castle when Delys spoke up, her hand raised in attention.

"Queen Zelina, you have a slight smudge on your face. I'll clean it," she said as she reached up to her queen.

"No, allow me to," said the queen as she gently brushed Delys's hand away. "I would rather handle it myself." The queen backtracked into the castle until she came across a mirror. It hung in one of the castle's grand halls, and was large enough to accommodate her large figure. Once there, she observed her reflection with a slight smile.

Zelina was a young woman, early into adulthood. As she looked at her face, she noticed the spot of dirt that Delys had mentioned and wiped it away with a cloth

produced by one of her nearby servants. She decided to look over the rest of herself to be sure no similar blemishes remained.

Her outfit consisted of a dark orange dress with yellow embroidery and a rich brown bodice and matching boots, with her gold necklace and crown rounding out the ensemble. Both the necklace and the crown had a single cerulean gem nested into their respective centers, creating something of a complementary pair. As she inspected herself, she found nothing amiss. Her clothing was pristine and her boots, crown, and necklace were all well-polished.

Zelina was sure to check her hairstyle, as well. Her long, golden blonde hair was tied with wrappings on both sides, while her eyes were a brilliant sapphire color, and her gaze was sharp as she scrutinized herself. After making certain not even a single hair was out of place, she was satisfied; The Wynverian Queen wanted to appear warm and welcoming to her guests.

Heading back out to the front gates, she met with Delys and others. As she arrived, she spotted two, unusually small figures flying nearby as they descended towards the gates.

“They’re so short,” Delys commented as she squinted at the figures.

“Delys, please remember your manners.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, my apologies.” Delys looked down in chastisement. “I’ll try to be more composed.”

“Please see that you are. Your actions reflect upon our people,” scolded the queen as she turned towards the visitors.

“Understood.” As Delys finished speaking, the Heofonite Guardians landed.

The first was none other than the Sovereign, leader of the Heofonite Guardians. The majestic being landed gracefully, his sandaled feet touching the black, stony walkway as he approached. Directly behind the Sovereign was another Heofonite, although this one appeared significantly younger. His landing was a bit less majestic; whereas The Sovereign had gently glided into a soft landing, the young man landed at a more of a jog before he stopped himself.

The two were tanned due to their closeness to the sun, and typical of Heofonites they each possessed a pair of angelic, feathered wings. Compared to The Sovereign, who appeared to be in his early forties and exuded an air of calm serenity, the young man had a far more energetic disposition and was wide-eyed. He looked to be barely over seventeen, though he might have been older; Heofonites tended to look younger than they truly were.

“Lord Sovereign, I am glad you have deigned to grace us with your company,” said the queen as she greeted the ambassador.

“The honor is mine, Queen Zelina.” The silvery-gray eyed man bowed slowly, his companion following suit. “I have not seen you since the Titan’s Trial Tournament in Ahsira.”

“Yes, I remember.” Zelina smiled as the memory fled through her mind. “Your guardians did well in the tournament; their performance honestly influenced my decision to accept your offer.”

“I am glad to hear it. Your own followers were impressive, as well; I believe only one of them actually lost against one who was not of your kind.”

“Yes, Cassera. She was disappointed by her loss, but such things happen,” shrugged the queen. “She will have another chance when Wynveria hosts the next Titan’s Trial Tournament. Then again, I may participate myself.”

“Then I fear for any who has to face you, young Queen,” said The Sovereign, looking at his companion and motioning for him to come forward. “It was rude of me to take so long to introduce him, but this is Markus,” he said with a slight smile of pride. “He is one of our finest guardians. He is young, but holds promise.”

“You’re embarrassing me, sir.” Markus began to blush and look down, his sky blue eyes facing the ground. “I merely speak the truth,” chuckled The Sovereign as he reassuringly patted Markus on the shoulder. “Regardless, I am sure that he will serve you well.”

The queen nodded in affirmation. “This is my hope as well, but I must ask; would you explain the nature of Guardians? I learned precious little of them from our prior exchange. We can converse inside, should you desire a place to rest.”

“Of course, Your Highness. By your leave.” He bowed slightly, motioning for the queen to lead the way.

At Zelina’s motion, the others followed her inside, guiding them to the dining room so that they might eat. Once there, the Heofonites spoke a silent prayer before eating; out of respect, Zelina waited until they had eaten before beginning herself. Delys departed to give the queen privacy in this foreign affair.

“So, then, what do Guardians do?” Zelina asked the Sovereign. She spoke between morsels of food, having already cleared her plate twice while somehow

maintaining her table manners. She noticed that though Markus also ate, his eyes were constantly on her unless she met his gaze.

“We work as liaisons with willing kingdoms and act as allies during any and all conflicts between people.” The Sovereign had completed his plate of food, but had not touched anything after.

“And if you are allies with two nations who decide to war with one another?”

“Then we will try to facilitate peaceful negotiations. If not, then we shall abstain from the conflict itself.”

“What are the general benefits of a Guardian, then? I am sure your followers are powerful, but we of Wynveria are certainly formidable in our own right,” said the queen as she polished through her fourth plate.

“I am very much aware of that, but Guardians have access to certain ancient scriptures, information channels, and a variety of skills that even other Heofonites must train for decades to master.”

“Is that true?” Zelina faced Markus, who nodded at her.

“Yes,” replied the timid Heofonite. “I can seal and cancel magic, among other things. I can control it, so it should not be a hindrance.”

“It would not be, anyway,” said the queen with a quick handwave, attempting to not sound too prideful. “The royal family does not dabble in magic, save for that which is related to our clothing and armor.”

“Why would you need to charm clothing?” Markus curiously inquired. “Is it so you don’t outgrow them?”

“Not quite,” chuckled the queen. The chuckle quickly faded as she turned more serious. “I would also like to ask if I have a choice in who is left with me, or is Markus my only option?” she asked as she turned towards The Sovereign.

“I chose Markus because I believe he can bring your kingdom certain benefits no one else can. Please trust that my intent was merely for the improvement of Wynveria.”

Deadly serious now, Zelina put down her utensils for the first time during the meal before authoritatively addressing the Guardian. “While your gesture seems to come from a good place, I must remind you that I am ruler of Wynveria, not anyone else. Whatever your intentions, it is my decision who will and will not serve with me. Is that understood, Sovereign?”

The Sovereign smiled thinly for a moment before replying. “Of course, my apologies. All I ask is that you humor me. Keep Markus with you for a month or so, and if he proves unsatisfactory, then please send him back and I will allow you your choice of any Guardian you desire.”

Considering this for a moment, Zelina nodded. “Very well; that is amenable.”

Softly clapping his hands together, The Sovereign smiled widely. “Excellent. I suppose my work here is done, then.” The Sovereign stood and bowed. “Queen of Wynveria, I must depart, with your permission.”

Zelina frowned slightly at this. “Do you plan to go so soon? You could rest for the rest of the day, if you so desired.”

“No, thank you. I have other business to tend to, so it would be best if I left.”

“Very well, then. I wish you safe travels.” Zelina stood and curtsied for a moment, giving her personal respects to The Sovereign.

“Thank you, and good luck to you as well, Markus.”

“Yes, sir,” said the young Guardian as he stood and bowed before his superior.

Exchanging no more words, the Heofonite Sovereign left, leaving Zelina and Markus alone in the grand dining hall. The soft clinking of utensils on plates was the only sound for several minutes as Zelina finished her fourth plate and Markus picked at his first. Seeing his reluctance to finish, Zelina began to look at the young man, noticing that he was still looking at her.

“You have stared at me for some time. Is something amiss?”

“Please, forgive me, but I've never seen someone so...” Markus began, before trailing off nervously.

“So, what?” Zelina asked, a hand on her hip and an eyebrow raised.

Markus seemed to realize his blunder and looked down. “Um...Most Heofonites are slender, as are the select few humans and Ellons I’ve met, but your people seem...big.”

“Well, of course,” Zelina said plainly. It was no secret that she had a wide body type; if Zelina was any other race, she would have been considered tall and overweight. Wynverians were naturally taller than other races and had hefty bodies. Zelina was a full head taller than Markus and at least twice as wide. Her body was curvaceous and ample, but in excellent shape; beneath the layers of fat were muscles that had power beyond what most races possessed.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," spoke the Guardian as he flushed red and gazed towards the floor. "This is new to me, and I will try to be more mindful."

"Please do. I will assume you mean well, but if you let people see your ignorance, they will get the wrong impression."

"Of course, my apologies." Markus bowed his head.

"Apologies accepted," smiled the queen as she finally finished her meal. "Now, when you finish your meal, I will have Delys escort you to your quarters."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you."

Zelina smirked inwardly. She could tell the awkward young man meant well. He was honest, at the least, and she got the sense that he would indeed learn from his shortcomings.

Wynveria, an ancient and storied land, filled with powerful opponents and vast mountains to climb; it was a perfect place for the warlord from a foreign shore to begin a new campaign. As his warship drifted closer to the craggy shores, the immense mountains they had seen from further out were far more imposing, and the monument in front of them was even more impressive.

It was a large statue, constructed of steel that rose just as the mountains did; it was a female figure with long hair and posed in a way that depicted grace and strength. It gleamed in the afternoon sun, its steel construction reflecting light towards the lands around it.

The warlord turned, his dark eyes upon one of his men. "Fetch the bibliognost."

With haste, the man left to obey his master's will. It was a few minutes before he returned with a thin, pale man in tow. He was dressed in a shabby coat and tattered hat, clutching a bag of books while he shook with fear.

"Bibliognost, what is before us?"

"A monument, Lord Raleigh," stuttered the smaller man as he quivered before the muscular warlord.

"I am aware it is a monument," hissed the warlord in annoyance. "Tell me why it was made."

"I believe that is the human guise of Aura, ancestor of the Wynverian dragons, claimed as a goddess..."

The warlord scoffed. "Hmph. Enlighten me, why would a supposed goddess-dragon take human form?"

"The legend states that she did so for the love of a man who she spent many years with prior to taking on that form."

"How sickeningly sweet," Lord Raleigh said with mock sincerity in his voice, then turned to his men. "It is time to send a message. Everyone mobilize! We will let them know that Krieg Raleigh's Army has graced their shores."

"Yes, sir!" The myriad of vagabonds and ravagers readied their weapons and grabbed their few belongings, one preparing the way for their master to disembark.

Before long, all were prepared, with the warlord stepping off first. One of his underlings escorted the bibliognost and the rest followed, marching towards the grand

statue. Raleigh halted his band with an outstretched hand as they arrived at the foot of Aura's monument. He turned to address his men.

“Men, before us stands a legend of the land, one which embodies its old culture so much so that they made it to rival their mountains.” The warlord pulled forth a long great sword from the sheath on his back, letting it slowly swing down to rest in the ground. It was wide, heavier than most blades and far too unwieldy for most, yet he wielded it like it was little more than a twig in his hand; the metal was stained a haunting blood red color and the edges were jagged and chipped, but it was still quite deadly.

“Today, and all days hence, we shall build a new legend; a legend of our glorious might. The ways of these dragons... their land, their gold, their history, their lineage; all of it is worthless. All that will matter is who is strong and who will fight. Spare none save those who shall embrace our message, accept brothers-in-arms, and allow them to have a foretaste of the new world's message; A message of carnage and destruction, of fire-forged bonds, and brothers of blades, and of a world unified by war!”

The multitude of mercenaries cheered at their master's message, and before long they watched as the warlord used his blade to strike the monument, jumping high as he raised his sword.

Sir Raleigh swung his sword with one arm, cutting through the wide expanse of steel as if it was naught but more air before his weapon; there were sparks as the steel gave way to the foreign metal of Raleigh's sword. Once he had cut the statue across its chest, leaving a deep slash mark, Sir Raleigh signaled his men.

They began to rage against the monument, those wielding hammers pounding their mighty weapons against the statue. Others readied battering rams and struck in

coordinated rhythms. The force of their blows, the strength of their arms, and their own savagery gave them the power needed to topple the great statue.

The once great monument, now battered and broken, teetered as if it was still attempting to stay upright, but the mercenaries' work was thorough; the statue collapsed under its own weight, falling to the earth with a sound like thunder. The shockwave that ensued shook the land as if in empathy to the fallen cenotaph.

With the figure having fallen, Sir Raleigh led his men forward, beyond it and towards their true targets. The campaign had begun, and war was to be waged.

The days since Markus first arrived in the capital of Arachon were more interesting. While Zelina rarely left her castle, she did so more often in order to show Markus his new surroundings and make him more accustomed to life in Wynveria.

The Heofonite Guardian was astounded by much of what he saw, looking around with wide eyes and curiosity. "This country really is impressive. I have never seen so many people out at once before."

"Is it so uncommon?"

Markus nodded. "There aren't very many of us in the Guardians, or Heofonia in general. It's a new experience for me."

"Hopefully one you will grow accustomed to. I will not be able to escort you around the kingdom after today, so if you have anything you would like me to personally explain, now is the time."

Markus pondered the offer. "Do Wynverians still have warring clans?"

“You know about that?”

“Yes. I read some texts about your people. It said that leaders of the Wynverians gain that position by fighting in battles.”

“That is correct, but we have established more order since those days. There are now formal challenges and there are Noble Clans and Errant Broods.”

“What are Noble Clans and Errant Broods?”

“Noble Clans work with the ruling Wynverian family and promote the society we have made and receive aid and support in return from Wynveria and their allies. Errant Broods are not affiliated with the kingdom, but unless they cause trouble, we leave them be.”

“So, are they not your subjects?”

“No, but they can still stay in our nation. Wynveria was founded by our ancestor, Aura’s husband. He just wanted all of his children to have a place to stay, and we have respected this for all but the cruelest of our kind.”

Markus considered what Zelina had told him. He obviously still had much to learn about Wynveria, but he would be as good a student as he could. He noticed the sound of flapping wings was growing louder and more intense .

It appeared as though a number of dragons were flying in the air, far more than usual, and a whole group were on the approach. “Queen Zelina...”

“Hm? Ah, it seems I spoke at just the right time. It appears the Reila Brood is on their way.

Immediately, five white-scaled dragons landed, each of them with four horns and bright, golden eyes. It did not take long before they transformed, shrinking down as their bodies went from dragonic to human, dressed in dark brown clothing.

As far as Markus could tell, the group appeared to be family of some kind. He looked and saw Zelina stepping ahead to greet them.

“The Relia Brood. May I ask why you have chosen to come here as a group? It is rare to see you in Arachon.”

“We wish to challenge you, Queen Hanari. It is time for new rulership in this land.”

Zelina smiled. “Very well. Please, inform me which of you will be challenging me?”

From the group, a man stepped forth, his hair short and black and his brow furrowed. He was very tall and muscular, his expression was serious, contrasting Zelina’s apparent air of levity.

“I shall. I am Hemon Relia, current heir of our clan. I have come seeking a duel with you, Queen Zelina.”

“I suppose I am in the mood for some light exercise. A duel with you would certainly do the trick.” Zelina then directed her attention to Markus. “Come with us, this is your opportunity to see how Wynverians conduct themselves.”

Transforming, Zelina began to grow larger, her hands becoming claws, as did her feet. Slowly, her body expanded and covered in scales as her clothing disappeared.

It took a few moments, but Markus was awed. While it was startling to see the Relia Brood change from dragons into Wynverians, seeing Zelina change was breathtaking.

The ruler of Wynveria was now larger, the size of a house, with large, shining claws that were as sharp as scythes. Brilliant, golden scales covered her body, each one glistening in the light as darker, sharper scales also emerged, running along her tail. Each scale looked similar to plate armor, some even covering her wings, except for where her wing membranes were.

Zelina began roaring, fire erupting from her open maw. After revealing her ivory colored fangs, Zelina then faced Markus who stepped back. If she had a mind to, she could likely snap up the Heofonite in one bite, but she spoke to him instead. “Markus, come with us.” Jumping into the air, Zelina flapped her wings and flew, and soon, the Relia Brood followed suit.

Markus was next, flying after them, finding that staying with them was harder than he had anticipated. He stuck close to Zelina, flying above her and noticing that she was attempting to fly quickly. She was continuing along with them until he saw that they were nearing a plateau where a coliseum was. It was shortly after that the dragons landed within the coliseum, each one returning to their Wynverian shapes and being eyed by several guards.

“Queen Zelina, what brings you here?” The guard approached, sword in hand before he looked at the Relia Brood. “Why are these people following you?”

“I was challenged to a duel by them and decided to have a public showing of their defeat. Please send word to the townspeople. In three hours’ time, there will be a public showing of the duel.”

The guard seemed to smile cheerfully, excited at the thought. “A duel? It will be an event worth attending.”

“Duels I am involved in tend to be. Please, ask the other guards to ready the arms and the announcers to move swiftly.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Quickly, the guard went to his colleagues, spreading word and commanding the others to do the same. Within minutes, many had left, and in half an hour, the stadium was filling with people.

The Relia Brood went to one side of the coliseum grounds, the group talking with Hemon and observing the assembly that came for the competition.

On the opposite side, Zelina stood at ready and smiled slightly while two guards entered carrying a large, weathered looking cabinet. Once it was set down, she approached while Markus sat back and watched.

As Zelina arrived at the cabinet, she opened it to reveal that it was an arsenal. Within was a set of weapons, ranging from swords and spears to axes and daggers, even a bow and a quiver of arrows were stored inside. All of them appeared to have edges that were slightly dulled, yet they all were well maintained and made of intricately-decorated steel.

“We shall begin our duel, with the position of Wynveria’s leader as the stakes!” Zelina shouted, listening as the audience, now crowded and full of eager onlookers, cheered on. She listened to them express joy for a few moments before she raised a hand for them to be silent. Before long, they were and she was able to continue. “The rules are that it shall be one member of the Relia Brood and myself. The victor shall be the first to disarm the opponent, though either of us may yield as well. You may choose your weapon, and I shall choose my own.”

Hemon, walking forward, chose a large, imposing axe. With one hand he gripped it and held it aloft, swinging in order to familiarize himself with its weight. “Then I choose this.”

“And I choose the sword.” Zelina took a sword from the arsenal and walked to the center of the arena. She stood there, the area hushed while they waited for her opponent to ready himself.

Hemon motioned for his kinsmen to step aside before he continued to the center of the stage. Putting his weapon forward, he waited for Zelina to tap hers against his, signaling the beginning of the duel. When she did, the two backed away before they assumed offensive stances, ready to face off against one another.

Zelina gripped the handle of her blade tightly, calming her mind and observing her opponent intently. She could see him clutching his axe with one hand, his eyes upon her figure.

“Whenever you are ready, I am.” Hemon stood perfectly still, his eyes focused on his opponent.

Zelina made the first move, thrusting, the forceful strike was narrowly deflected, though Zelina continued her assault. The queen of Wynveria attacked, rapidly and relentlessly, focusing on light blows to keep Hemon on the defensive. Despite her opponent’s presumed strength, Zelina wagered he lacked finesse when it came to armed battles. She continued to pressure Hemon, pushing him back with her relentless assault until she saw that he was growing tired.

Zelina stepped back, easing her offensive strategy until she saw her foe had brought up his axe and stepped aside when he swung it down, crashing into the earth with

extreme force. Taking the opportunity, she slammed the flat of her blade against his hand, causing him to drop his weapon. As Hemon cried out, Zelina stepped in and pressed the blade to his neck as he recoiled.

“This duel is over!” One of the knights bellowed loudly, causing thunderous applause and shouts of adulation to erupt from the audience. The cries of praise caused the victorious queen to smile while her admirers looked on.

Hemon glared fiercely at Zelina, consumed with both jealousy and humiliation. “I swear, this will not be the last time we cross blades.

“Excellent.” Pulling back her practice blade, Zelina watched as Hemon rubbed his injured hand gingerly. “Perhaps next time it will be a little more interesting.”

From afar, Markus saw Zelina turn her back on Hemon before reaching for the fallen axe. As she did, the other members of the Relia Brood moved in, jumping from the audience seats and running towards Zelina.

The queen of Wynveria saw the Relia Brood drawing closer while the audience and soldiers took notice. Not relaxing her guard for even a moment, she stared them down. The four approaching Wynverians came at once, attempting to attack Zelina. For the first, Zelina hit him in the nose with the butt of her sword before shoving him into another with a single push. For the female member of the Relia Brood, Zelina caught her fist and backhanded her with her sword hand.

Markus was impressed and surprised, listening as the crowd cried out as if it was a display that their queen was putting on for them. Zelina had managed to best three enemies in one strike each, but two remained and Markus noticed none of the guards were making a move to restrain the downed enemies, or even stop them from attacking.

While it was obvious Zelina had been well-trained and that she possessed skill, Markus felt that he had to intervene. He could see Hemon approaching, no longer bothering with the axe.

Hemon transformed, going into his dragon state, while his remaining relative did the same. Now, the two of them were large and roared loudly, approaching Zelina.

The queen of Wynveria held her sword at ready, facing both down fearlessly. She turned her attention to Hemon first and attacked him, though the second was inching closer. She saw both had their mouths open were attempting to snap at her. Zelina moved back, but felt Hemon's teeth sink into her arm, attempting to crunch her bones until they broke.

The second member of the Relia Brood would have bitten Zelina's sword arm, but Markus intercepted, flying into the dragon and crushing its neck with a crushing bear hug.

Markus wrestled with the scaled menace, his strength and sudden action causing it to struggle as Markus deprived it of air while the audience went from cheering to talking in hushed tones.

Meanwhile, Zelina was still grappling with Hemon, trying to free her arm as his teeth sunk deeper into her flesh. The pain from his fangs sinking into her arms was great, but Zelina had learned to block out suffering. With a mighty thrust, she plunged her sword into Hemon's eye, making him reel back and release his hold on her. Acting as quickly as she could, Zelina took the blood soaked blade and started slashing downwards, hitting a weak spot on Hemon's neck. "Enough! Change back or I will kill you now."

Without any further coercion, Hemon obeyed, slowly shrinking back down to normal, grunting in pain while he did. Blood flowed down from his wounded eye and neck, while he struggled to remain conscious.

Turning to the guards, Zelina spoke. “Go fetch shackles for these dishonorable scoundrels. I want them imprisoned for attempted regicide.”

Obedying, the guards did as commanded, while others picked up the defeated members of the Relia Brood, escorting them away. Once all of the members of the Relia Brood were taken away, Markus approached Zelina.

“Queen Zelina, please let me see your arm. I need to make sure nothing is broken.”

“You will go to the castle immediately and await me in the courtyard. You will speak with no one, you will be silent, and you shall listen when I speak to you.”

“Why? I helped save your life!”

“You intervened in combat! Perhaps the finer points of why what you did is wrong escape you, but rest assured that you will learn. Now leave while I finish here!

“But, Queen Zelina, I-“

“Shall do as I command, not anything less!” Zelina glared at Markus. “You are here to serve me, so do so!”

For a moment Markus froze, startled by the ferocity in her eyes and the harshness in her tone. He would have argued, but he could tell she was in no mood, and her wounds needed treatment. “Yes, Queen Zelina.”

The bodies of defeated warriors and slain Wynverians were strewn across the ground, the red trails of blood dyeing the earth, while fire consumed every building in sight. The village had fallen under the onslaught of Lord Raleigh's men.

As the warlord watched his men defeat the last members of burning settlement, he tightened his grip on his great sword. "Are there no more Wynverians here who can challenge us?"

"Sir, we may need to retreat," one of the soldiers said. "Another squadron of our men were slaughtered. We've lost upwards of fifty men and they've only lost a dozen of theirs."

"I know how to count, soldier." Lord Raleigh stood and gave a menacing glare at his subordinate, the darkness within his eyes unnerving the messenger. "Stand aside."

Obedying meekly, the mercenary watched his master pass him by, dragging his sword before lifting it up and approaching the front lines.

Lord Raleigh watched, seeing his men still facing off against fully transformed Wynverians, being pushed back. The sight made the Lord wonder if the Wynverians had accidentally set fire to more buildings than the advance force of his army had.

After a moment, though, Lord Raleigh spotted his first target. As a large, yellow scaled dragon flew through the smoke and near him, Lord Raleigh beamed with satisfaction before he swung his blade. The edge of his sword sank into the neck of the incoming enemy. Once his weapon had sliced the dragon's neck, a spray of blood came out before the Wynverian fell to the ground with a mighty crash. Unfazed in the least, Lord Raleigh continued on, more Wynverians flying towards him, roaring, and in a single blade stroke, each met their end.

The ease of his victories displeased the warlord. Each Wynverian faced him singularly, but they were merely large targets for him to pick off. “Come on!” He roared, the loudness of his voice heard even above the cries of battle and the clash of steel. “Can none of you harm me? I thought Wynveria was a land of warriors and dragons! Will my warriors not face one worthy of standing before me?!” For a few moments, Lord Raleigh’s challenge went unanswered, before one of the Wynverians he struck down spoke.

“If your army is composed of warriors...then why seek out simple villagers?” The fallen dragon’s eyes were upon the enemy lord.

“So, you use your last words to tell me that not a single warrior lives in this pathetic burg?”

“No, not a one...Though it must be frustrating to know that your men died to farmers and craftsmen...Given their pathetic display, they would not last a moment against our actual soldiers.”

“I would be frustrated if these men were my best, but they are merely my newest recruits.”

“Recruits? Each of them battles like five men. How could they possibly be new?”

“I only accept the best of the best, and these men who have fallen merely show that I must choose more wisely.” Lord Raleigh then lifted his blade and swung it down, ending the life of the maimed Wynverian. Then, looking at the remains of his victim, he continued. “Perhaps I will find some of your kinsmen here in this fine country to replace them. If pawns of the kingdom are so powerful, I would love to add more substantial pieces to my army.”

The day after Zelina's duel against the Relia Brood was tense, especially for Markus.

The Heofonite Guardian had been in his room since Zelina had dismissed him; the queen was too tired from her wounds to reprimand him.

Sitting on the expansive, firm bed, Markus had already done all he could within the room. There was little to read, save the Saga of Aura, and Markus was already familiar with the love story of the ancestral dragoness

As the better part of the morning passed, Markus decided to exit his room. Although he had been ordered to wait, he also worried about Zelina's health, so he left his room in order to check on her.

Making his way to the infirmary, Markus found Delys there, speaking with one of the physicians before noticing him.

"Markus, hey there. What're you doing around here?"

"I came to check on Queen Zelina, how is her arm?"

"Oh? Yeah, that wound was bothering her for awhile, probably will bother her for the next week or two, but she's up and about now."

"She is?" Markus asked, surprised.

"The queen is definitely hurt, but she's not bedridden."

"That's a relief," Markus sighed. "I was worried."

"You shouldn't be. That sort of thing is par for the course, especially for a Wynverian ruler."

"That sounds dangerous. Isn't there a chance she'll die in a duel?"

“There’s a chance of death in any duel,” Delys replied matter-of-factly before sitting on a nearby cot. “It’s part of one’s duties as a king or queen of Wynveria.”

“It honestly sounds rough. Why would anyone choose to lead like that?”

“Because it is our way and because we need to have the strongest leader possible to unite us. I thought you knew about our people.”

“I read books about your ancestor, Aura, the alliance your kingdom made with the nation of Lurion, and a couple of old legends, but nothing else.”

“Well, if there’s anything our people respect, it’s a strong ruler. I’d give you the whole history lesson, but I have duties and so do you. You should probably check on Her Majesty.”

“But isn’t Queen Zelina angry with me?”

“No, more agitated with what you did. I’d just apologize and listen to her, if I was you. Afterwards, I’m sure you’ll be fine.” Delys stood up and smiled at Markus before picking up her things and walking away. “Good luck, Guardian.”

“Thank you, Delys.” Markus replied gratefully before walking to Zelina’s throne room, hoping the handmaid’s words were true. It didn’t take long for him to reach the throne room. Once he was there, he opened the door quietly and entered. “Queen Zelina?”

The Queen was seated upon her throne, though Markus saw that her arm was swathed in bandage wrappings where she had been bitten. She looked at Markus with a cross expression on her face. “I thought I said I would call for you.”

“I’m sorry, but that was yesterday. I thought I would come to speak with you today. I apologize for interfering with your match the other day, I was just trying to perform my duty.”

Zelina stared at him a few more moments before nodding and speaking. “I accept your apology. I hope you will refrain from acting during any official duels.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. May I ask why what I did was wrong?”

Zelina sighed. “You interfered in an official duel before a whole crowd. While I understand your intent and that I was beset by the whole Relia Brood at once, Wynverians are expected to succeed, even in the face of underhanded opposition. We are to rise above and show our ability to overcome anything that challenges us with fairness and honor.” Zelina then raised her injured arm and looked at Markus. “When you aided me, it showed others that I would need help to overcome enemies, and that was unacceptable.”

“But no one succeeds at anything alone, not all the time. Anyone who insists on being alone and willingly faces bad odds isn’t a hero; it’s just risky and dangerous.”

“I am not a hero, Markus, nor am I trying to be. I am a symbol of my kingdom, of Wynverian Pride and all we stand for. As I wear this crown, I cease to simply be myself, but I am also an envoy of my land and culture, all we represent and stand for. For that reason, Wynveria cannot fall to deceit or unfavorable odds, no matter how great.”

“I understand, Queen Zelina, but I am here as a representative of Guardians. What I do reflects my organization and Heofonia’s own defenders and protectors. My assistance symbolizes that we will always be there for our allies.”

“It also denotes that you all have a habit of butting in,” Zelina snorted. “While the gesture is appreciated, limit it to non-personal duels, will you?”

“But as you said, your conflicts cease to be personal as you wear the crown.”

Zelina smiled. “True, but it is my personal body doing the battle. You do not see the whole of Wynveria literally fighting in these duels, do you?”

“I suppose not.” Markus folded his wings inward and bowed, placing his hand over his heart. “I shall respect your desires, Queen Zelina.”

“Good, then you may rise. Consider our previous issue resolved.”

“I am relieved to hear it,” Markus said earnestly. “Is there any way I may serve you?”

“I suppose you could converse with me for awhile longer, if you don’t have any more pressing matters. It grows boring waiting here with none to keep me company.”

“It would be an honor.” Markus smiled and stood to her right.

The two spoke for a short time, with Markus asking Zelina about her time while ruling, while Markus told her stories about his time in Heofonia and some of his missions as a guardian.

After a few hours, the time for audience neared its end, when a knight entered the room. “Your Majesty, I apologize, but I have urgent news.”

“Regarding?” Zelina asked, facing the knight.

“We have reports that there was an attack on a small village close to the coast. Reports say that the village was burned down, and bodies of both our people and an unknown force were found.”

“I see. Has anyone inquired as to who these assailants are, or why they attacked?”

“Yes, ma’am; there some who say they saw more of them heading inland, possibly towards Arachon.”

“Then we must act. Deploy one squadron for reconnaissance purposes. We need to know as much as we can about these invaders and oust them before they cause any more damage.”

“Yes, my queen. It will be done.” The knight bowed and left quickly, leaving Markus and Zelina alone again.

“Queen Zelina, would you like me to check it out as well?”

The blonde royal shook her head. “No, we need to know what we are dealing with before anyone goes rushing in. My men can handle this and gain whatever information necessary before too much time passes. In the meantime, I will focus on healing properly so I can participate, if I must.”

“Very well, know that I will be at your side as you heal and when you decide to approach the battlefield.”

“I should hope so.” Zelina began to think over the recent news of conflict. She hoped that it was merely a small matter that her men could tend to without it growing, but she had a feeling that it was not the case.

Markus, noticing the faraway look in Zelina’s eye, spoke up. “Your Majesty, what do you try to do for fun?”

“Flying is enjoyable, when I have time to myself, then there are other habits of mine.”

“Such as?” Markus asked, curious.

“I’ll share them tomorrow. I will have some free time then and I can show you at least one of my interests first hand.”

“I look forward to it, then.”

“I am glad. In the meantime, I must go. I will meet with you later.”

“By your leave.”

Departing from each other, both Markus and Zelina left, hoping that the coming days would be peaceful, though their time of peace was already slowly ending.

By late morning the next day, both Markus and Zelina were both in Komah, a mountain village not far from Arachon

Markus was startled by how Komah looked. It was a smaller village with curving roads cut into the mountain path and a large number of houses carved from the mountain’s sides. There were people walking around and several stalls with food and drinks for sale. There were mostly Wynverians, but a few humans and some Ellons were present as well.

“It’s not as big as Arachon, but it feels...Calm, more restful.”

“It is part of Komah’s charm. It isn’t the largest settlement, but there is a good deal of nature here and life is simple.” Zelina pointed ahead, in a direction where other people were going. “If we follow the crowd, we will see the Stage of Devotion.”

“What’s that?”

“Where those who act perform.”

“Acting? I’ve heard about that, but I’ve never actually seen it. What is it like?”

“Absolutely beautiful. Words can’t do it justice. If you want to see for yourself, follow me.” With an eagerness in her walk, Zelina went ahead, with Markus following behind her as they blended into the crowd.

Before long, they found themselves in a small clearing, the area had a large stage with polished stones, and behind them was a craggy wall leading further up the mountain. The flat area before the stage was laden with organized stone benches, with each arranged in a semi circle around the stage. Like the others around them, Zelina and Markus took a seat and waited for the play to begin.

Towards the central area, just offstage, musicians carrying stringed instruments, flutes, and drums gathered, playing a gentle prelude while the audience waited. The music enticed Zelina, who closed her eyes and listened, humming along with the tune.

Markus stared at her, a little surprised at her humming, but he was more surprised by how lyrical her voice sounded. It was different from the more reverent way of singing in Heofonia, but it was still pleasant.

Eventually, the actors made it on stage and the play began, the duo watching it with vested interest. Watching the story of tragic love unfold, they could feel the passion of the actors and followed the plot, hanging onto every action and word. The whole audience laughed at every comedic moment and murmured at the end of drama, with the two lovers separated by the ocean bringing the play to a close.

By the end, the Stage of Devotion resounded with the sound of applause and cheers. While Zelina clapped steadily and with a smile on her face, Markus was just utterly awed.

“That was amazing...”

“You enjoyed it as well?” Zelina asked him.

“I did, but I didn’t expect them to get so into character. I almost believed the play was real.”

Zelina smiled softly. “That is the great thing about being an actor. Even for a few moments, you can be someone else, or even live another life. When I was younger, I came here often to watch their performances. I entertained the notion of maybe becoming an actress myself.”

“Really? As much passion as you have for it, maybe you could.”

“Perhaps someday, though I can always dream.” Zelina noticed the audience was dispersing. “We should probably leave now before the path gets too crowded.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Exiting the audience area, the two followed a path that would lead back to Arachon, while most others stayed in Komah. They walked and discussed the play for a short time later, discussing favorite characters and the plot itself, until at last they said all they could on the matter. It was halfway through the walk that Markus made a realization.

“Wait, why didn’t we just fly back to Arachon instead?”

“Sometimes a walk is good for clearing the mind and casual conversation. I figured you and I would have time to discuss, and there is still plenty of time left in the day.”

“True. Some time to oneself is nice, but I’ve never had so much.”

“Training to be a guardian must have been busy.”

“Heofonia is always busy, but it’s an orderly kind of business,” Markus explained. “If someone isn’t a Guardian or a scribe, they’re a researcher, chorister, or a messenger. There is always something to do and we don’t have much time to ourselves.”

“Why is that?”

“It is just our culture’s way. Besides, the Sovereign teaches that idleness leads to time lost. We usually only have a day and a half to ourselves every week.”

“Even I have more time to relax than that. Is the Sovereign a lifestyle leader as well as the leader of the Guardian force?”

“He’s one of the Heofonite authorities. There are four others, but each of them is equivalent in power. Together they lead our people.”

“Well, maybe you should take time to relax every so often. It might be helpful.”

“I don’t know, you seem to keep yourself busy and you aren’t bothered.”

“Yes, but I take time to relax, too.” Zelina smiled. “There is more to living than one’s station, you know.”

“I do know.” Markus seemed slightly contemplative while he and Zelina continued to travel, his thoughts weighing on his mind as he travelled with the queen back to the castle.