

Dragon's Domain

Part II

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The next few days were slow and uneventful, the better part of a week passing while Zelina healed. The Queen's wound had already stopped aching, with only faint scars remaining. Zelina's treatment had been going well, as was her time with Markus.

The dirty blonde haired Heofonite was reading about Wynverian history, devouring information on the culture and trying to better acquaint himself with their ways. He noticed Zelina drawing nearer, though, and promptly closed the book, greeting her. "Your Majesty, how are you?"

"I'm fine, just waiting on news. The reconnaissance group should have reported back long ago..."

"Maybe the situation is taking longer than expected. I could go ahead and check, if you want."

"...Perhaps if I don't hear back within two more days." Zelina tapped her fingers against a table, slowly, over and over. Simple attacks against unorganized invaders never took so long. Looking over, she saw that Markus was staring at her intently. "Do not worry about me, just continue to relax."

"That's hard to do when the person I'm supposed to be guarding is uneasy. Maybe something that would set your mind at ease? You could teach me how you use a sword."

Zelina shook her head. "I don't much feel like swordfighting right now, or carving."

"You carve? I didn't take you for the artistic type."

"Yes, but I'm not very good. It is more of a hobby for times when I can't travel or practice anything more involved."

"I see. Still, I'd like to see what you make sometime. I'm sure you've made at least a couple of figures that you're proud of."

"Perhaps one or two. I'll show you another time, for now, I suppose I am just growing impatient." Zelina's concern was soon met with news, though, as Delys came barging in. "Delys? Is something the matter?"

"The scouting party returned with some news, they're coming in now."

"Is it good or bad news?" Markus asked.

"I'm not sure, but they did look pretty grim."

"Then tell them to come here, immediately. I'll find out for myself."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Obeying, Delys went off, fetching the returning force.

It was five minutes later when the leader of the scouting group returned, his expression dour and solemn. "Queen Zelina, I have some troubling news."

"Tell me what it is."

"It seems as if the invading force is more capable than first expected. We did our best to stay from sight and we noticed that they were an army of considerable size. There were roughly fifty men to a group, and they wore red uniforms. Each was armed, and it appeared that majority among them were human, though reports state there were a number of Flor and Ellon under their command."

"That's strange. Saepi's armed forces don't wear red, and Lurion and our nation are allies."

"I doubt they belonged to either country, Your Majesty. They spoke with accents we couldn't quite place. I would say they came from across the ocean."

“From another continent?” Zelina paused. “Then tell me all you’ve learned. The sooner I have that information, the sooner I can deal with them.”

“I would, but we had to engage them. We had found that they had destroyed two more villages since we were dispatched, and they were heading in the direction of Arachon. We tried to stop them, but they had help.”

“From who?”

“The Justar Brood, and the Geol Brood.”

“They had Errant Broods helping them? Why would they ally themselves with someone trying to destroy Wynveria?”

“Could it be self preservation?” Markus asked.

“Maybe, but either way, we can’t afford to waste any more time waiting.” Zelina turned to the soldier before her. “Tell General Havir to get our forces ready, we’re going to face this threat head on.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” With a quick bow, the soldier departed, leaving Zelina to her thoughts and Markus to observe the ruler.

“So, will you be going yourself or sending someone else?”

“Of course I’ll be going.” Zelina rose up, her expression serious and stern. I have to support my people and be there to fight alongside them.

“Queen Zelina, can you not stay? I know some rulers do like to lead their people into battle, but that would put you in the forefront of danger,” Markus reasoned. “This isn’t a duel or formal challenge.”

“You’re right, it isn’t, but it is traditional for my people, and frankly, I would not feel right if I sat here and waited if I knew I could help. Besides which, I won’t thrust myself into the fray without concern!”

Markus paused for a moment. He could see the fierceness and passion in Zelina’s eyes, but he was also worried.

“Your Majesty, I understand, but the situation might be a small uprising. What if a small force and myself were sent out? Merely to engage them? If they prove to be too much, we’ll come back and muster the full force.”

“Very well. I shall send you and a small squadron, but you must act in tandem with them,” Zelina said. “Is that clear?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Good. Then prepare. You will leave first thing tomorrow.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Bowing, Markus departed, too.

Left alone, Zelina began to make plans. She had much to do and much more to set in motion, as the battles ahead would likely be difficult and unforgiving. She only hoped that Markus was strong enough to face them.

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With the rising of the sun, the Wynverian army left Arachon, departing far and away to intercept their foes. The army started by flying off, with Zelina bidding the group farewell. She watched on as many of those who could only march also advanced on the path that was laid out ahead of them.

Markus was in the middle of the force, but after a few hours he had been asked to fly ahead and to act as a lookout, in case something was wrong. As a smaller flier, he would be less conspicuous and more likely to make it back to the group unnoticed.

From behind him, Markus could hear the loud, continuous flapping of their wings, sounding off like it was like thunder, announcing the presence of a storm. For this reason, Markus was sure their enemies would know that they were coming, but that was fine by him. After all, he knew they wanted their foes to know that they were on their way, to instill fear in their opposition. In that noise, no one would notice him zipping by, as their attention was on the obvious threat.

After three continuous hours of uneventful flight, Markus noticed there was a small group travelling. It looked as if they were refugees, but he was unsure.

Markus soon landed, with two Wynverians flying down to join him.

“Are you alright?” Markus asked the strangers.

“As well as we can be,” A Wynverian man said. Behind him was a group of other travelers, including humans and an Ellon. “We came from Folrei Village, which was attacked two days ago.”

“And you are survivors?” One of the soldiers asked. “Are there others?”

“A handful, but we scattered when the invaders came. We’re trying to reach Arachon now.”

“Then you should continue along this trail and you will reach it before long. Tell us, where is Folrei?”

“On foot? Half a day’s travel behind us. Considerably shorter by flight.”

“Thank you. We’ll check back for any survivors.”

“Then best of luck to you.” The lead refugee nodded before motioning for his followers to continue the path with him.

“A moment,” one of the soldiers said. “Talk with our general. Any information you have may be useful, and perhaps we can send a couple of soldiers to escort you.”

“I appreciate the generous offer; we accept graciously.” Walking off with the soldiers, the refugee and his people departed.

“I suppose I will scout ahead, then.” Markus took flight once more, and followed the trail from the sky. Since he could easily move in the air and avoid the treacherous mountain path it was a much shorter trip for him.

After thirty minutes, he managed to make it to the village’s remains, noticing the horrendous sight gave him pause.

All that greeted Markus was charred hovels that were once houses and the foul scent of dead bodies wafting through the air. While the winged man walked around, trying to mask his horror, he was gripped by his thoughts.

In truth, Markus had never expected that the realities of war to be so gruesome. While training and being taught about how to be a proper guardian, he realized that there would be tragedies that he would face, but it did not compare to the bodies around him.

The large, scaled dragon bodies seemed unaffected by the fire, but still they bled and smelled of decomposition, while the normal sized bodies of varying races were burnt, alongside bloodied weapons and scrapped armor.

Still, Markus knew he had work to do, and contained himself, resolving to stop this from happening to others. He was a guardian, and they were those he swore to protect. Solemnly, he closed his eyes and offered a prayer for those who had passed.

It was then Markus heard a noise, which sounded like earth being moved.

“Huh?” Carefully, Markus approached the source of the noise, where he found a strange sight.

It was a tall, muscular man, with cinnamon brown skin and dark hair. He was dressed for more arid regions, with loose fitting and light robes. On his head was a turban of sorts, while his gray eyes was focused on the earth below him as he shoveled a grave, next to a dozen other freshly dug ones.

“Excuse me!” Markus said.

The tall figure turned, surprised to see Markus. “Oh, hello, friend. I am sorry we met at such a grisly place.” The person returned to digging, placing dirt aside.

“What are you doing?” Markus asked.

“Giving the fallen proper burial. It is the least we can do for the dead, no?”

Markus nodded. “Who are you?”

“I am Ihsan vas Getael vas Orman, an outcast.”

Markus had no time to ponder what the man meant by outcast. He only knew the man wasn't Wynverian; Despite being taller than Markus, his build was too slight and he was shorter than most adult Wynverians. “How did you come by this place?”

“During my travels I came to Wynveria, and just this past night I found my way here, just as battle ended.”

“I'm sorry you had to come here at such a time.”

“I feel the same, but I feel I can at least do them honor by laying them to rest.”

“My allies and I will help, but can you tell me about what you witnessed?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Ihsan.” Reassured, Markus helped the stranger, the two of them doing what they could to lay the bodies to rest. Markus could feel himself growing somewhat uneasy as he looked at them all, both young and old, enemy and ally.

The bodies of all of the enemy soldiers were placed aside, and were the first thing noticed by the Wynverian soldiers who drew near. Markus quickly informed them of who Ihsan was and of what had occurred. While he had expected the Wynverian soldiers to be apprehensive about a stranger, he hadn't expected what happened next.

Approaching Markus was the General of their force, Geoffrey.

Geoffrey was a war hardened and aged Wynverian, having short, steel gray hair and bright, jade green eyes. His attention was on the number of graves that had been dug, as well as the charred and lacerated remains of the enemy soldiers. “Heavy losses on both sides. Are you alright, young man?”

“I'm okay. I just wanted to give these people proper rest.” Markus tried to put up a brave smile, but still, he felt uneasy in the pit of his stomach.

“Don't worry, my men will join you shortly.”

“Thank you, G-“ Markus stopped mid sentence as he felt himself begin to heave. He faltered and stumbled for a moment before he expelled the contents of his stomach, splattering all over the burned earth beneath him before he began to pant. “Ugh...Pardon me...”

Geoffrey paused a moment before he kneeled down and looked Markus in the eye. “Perhaps it is best if you take time to rest; you have been hard at work, and my men are setting up encampment nearby.”

“Of course, General...” Tired and feeling ill, Markus needed a moment before he was guided to the nearby camp and an empty tent. Going within, Markus began to remove his armor before lying in bed, trying his best to rest peacefully.

Hours passed in a deep, dark sleep, one that Markus was slow to rise from. Rubbing his eyes, he stumbled out of the bed and walked outside. He was startled, though, when he saw the entire camp around him was gone, save for one other tent.

“Hello?”

“Oh, my new friend!” Ihsan came from the other tent, a faint smile on his face. “Good to see you are awake, and feeling better, I hope?”

“Ihsan?”

“Yes. I was asked to wait here until you awoke. The others left hours ago, while you slept.”

“They did? Why didn’t I wake up, why didn’t I hear them as they flew?”

“You slept rather hard. I assume you were quite overwhelmed. The bodies were buried respectfully and I told them what I knew. The general also personally entrusted me with a letter for you.” Ihsan reached into his pocket and produced a piece of paper. “At first I wondered who Markus was, as you did not give me your name.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I should have introduced myself sooner.”

“In trying times mistakes are made. Don’t feel bad for it.”

“Thank you.” Taking the letter, Markus began to read over it, growing slightly disheartened as he did.

‘Markus,

Your dedication to your post as a Guardian and desire to help us Wynverians and all who live in our nation is commendable, however, it is plain to me that you are still very gentle-hearted. I believe a battlefield is no place for you, and it would be best for you to focus on rebuilding efforts. My men and I spoke to Ihsan and he insisted he do something to help, so I have asked him to stay at your side. IF he

does well, I will speak on his behalf to Queen Zelina. Regardless, do your best to defend this nation in a way only you can, and we shall greet you as a brother when the conflict is ended.

Sincerely,

General Geoffrey Nersel'

Ihsan looked at Markus, somewhat perplexed. "What is bothering you?"

"The general left me behind on purpose."

"Oh. Perhaps it was out of concern?"

"It was." Markus dropped the paper to the ground, somewhat bitterly. Turning, he walked off.

"Hold on a moment!" Reaching down to pick up the paper, Ihsan walked up to Markus again. "You really shouldn't leave this laying around. He took the time to make sure you knew what was happening."

"You mean he took the time to make sure I was kept out of his hair." Markus continued to look to the ground, unable to look at Ihsan.

"Markus, you know you can still try to help these people. I am not in the army, but I am doing my part."

"I know, but it's my duty...If I'm not able to stand alongside the people of this nation and show them I am with them, how can I do it well?"

“By doing your duty, no matter the opposition.” Ihsan folded his arms and smiled. “It might be difficult and you may not get recognition, but isn’t it better to toil silently in favor of the people, than to spend time pitying yourself.”

Markus was silent for a long time. His gaze was fixed on the soil beneath him, but he could feel Ihsan’s eyes on him, waiting patiently. There was a moment before Markus looked up, wiping a pair of burgeoning tears from his face. “Thank you, Ihsan.”

“Do not mention it!” Ihsan laughed before clapping a hand on Markus’s shoulder. “Now, the village is clean and the dead are at rest, but we must concern ourselves with those who still live.”

“Right. Our best bet is to look for another village. At best we can warn them and help some get to safety, at worst we have another lead on the enemy.”

“Agreed. However, my inability to fly might make this trip somewhat difficult, though I can try to devise some suitable magic.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll fly you to our next destination. Aerial navigation is the one advantage we have, so we can’t give it up.” Markus then began to flap his wings, taking to the air and offering a hand. “Grab hold and I’ll fly us onwards.”

“Very well, but I shall help first.” Touching Markus’s chestplate, Ihsan muttered a quick chant, before green etchings appeared on it, around the blue stone in the center of it. “There, a spell to make sure a strong wind is always at your back. Perhaps that will make the burden easier.”

“Hm...I can’t say I’m a fan of magic, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

“It is no problem, now, let us fly!”

Taking flight, Markus went up in the air, taking his new ally with him. With the wind charm bolstering him, he was able to easily cover distance, zipping around the skyline quickly, despite the fact that he had to carry Ihsan with him. The two looked around, until they noticed a village off in the distance, with several dozens of Wynverians flying away from it.

Quickly getting out of their way, Markus watched as the dragons flew off and out of sight. After some time, Markus and Ihsan reached the village.

Flying down, Markus and Ihsan landed, thankful to see that the village was in peace. Observing the area, he saw that there weren't any signs of danger, but there were many people, packing up their things.

"Seems someone already got the news." Ihsan began to look around, waving down a few citizens in the area. "Excuse me, are you folks leaving the village?"

One Wynverian youth approached. While he could have been no older than fifteen, he was already taller than Markus. "Yes, we heard word from some refugees that came to us from Galaren that soldiers attacked them and were spotted on the way here."

"So your people are leaving for safer territories?" Ihsan asked.

"Obviously. I'd recommend you do the same."

"If only our lot in life was so simple!" Ihsan's sunny disposition did not falter. "Markus here has a mission, and I am to help him with it."

"Then good luck to you both!" Sparing no more words or time, the young Wynverian left.

"I suppose it's time for us to head to Galaren," Markus said. "Hopefully we'll find something there."

"A hope I share with you, my friend."

Nodding, Markus set off, flying with Ihsan once more. Their journey to Galaren wasn't long, however both did notice that there was an odd, disconcerting silence. Markus didn't know why, but it made him slightly nervous. When he landed, he looked around and saw that Galaren was destroyed, with all of the buildings in sight little more than rubble and burnt buildings, now still and long cooled.

“Looks like we’re too late.”

“I would say so, but why didn’t we see any soldiers leaving from here?” Ihsan questioned.

“Maybe they never left.” Markus began to look around, noticing that there were some boot imprints on the ground. “Ihsan, be casual.”

“I will, no worries.” Ihsan gave a slight grin before walking ahead with Markus a few steps. “However, a preemptive strike would be advised, yes?”

Markus nodded. “If you can do something along those lines.”

Ihsan merely winked before raising a hand and snapping a finger. Suddenly, a small gale began to swell, focusing around the two, before it grew bigger and more intense. The Heofonite and Qalairn both watched as the wind picked up, becoming a fierce tornado that blew away the stones and wood, causing cries of pain to be heard.

“That must be them.”

“Very possibly. Let’s see.” Ihsan intensified the focus of the wind, causing the howling whirlwind to focus on the area around the men, with dust and ash from the ground being swept up, pelting the confused soldiers. “Got them!”

“Not quite yet!” Markus pointed to a small group from the soldiers who managed to rise up, while the others were still confused.

“Attack!” one of the men roared as he and his allies charged, their weapons raised and their courage high.

Markus was the first to be engaged in combat, as one tried to stab him from afar with a spear. The winged guardian deftly avoided being skewered before grabbing the shaft of the spear and pulling it away from his attacker. Breaking off the spearhead, Markus began to strike back, swinging his weapon.

While Markus engaged a few members of the group, others began to target Ihsan, drawing near to him and trying their best to attack. One man swung a large club, hoping to catch Ihsan unaware.

The Qalairn was quick to activate his magic, however, using a spell to generate an orange burst of energy, which obliterated the weapon on contact before Ihsan kicked his assailant away.

Markus noticed that the men he was facing against were very well trained, and more than capable of holding their own. Regardless, Markus was skilled, confident in his abilities, and he was stronger than any of them.

As he avoided being stabbed by a broadsword, Markus could tell that they were somewhat daunted by him and Ihsan, but their numbers could prove to be a problem.

“Allow me to fix this problem!” Ihsan bellowed before using his magic. There was suddenly a bright flash, blinding the attackers and stunning them, before Ihsan pointed to their weapons. The armaments were changed into rope, which bound itself around their wrists. “There, not a problem!”

“That’s some advanced magic,” Markus marveled.

“It is nothing for a Qalairn, though I admit that the space they gave us made it easy.” Ihsan looked at their captives, counting them. “It seems we have eight captives.”

“Yes, we do.” Markus looked at them as they struggled against their restraints. “You may as well stop, it’s over.”

“We can’t quit! Our mission is too important.”

“To take over Wynveria?” Markus asked, curiously. “Tell me about it.”

The men grew silent and stone faced. They all looked ahead, but none of them gave even the slightest response.

“You don’t want to talk?” Markus asked.

The men were silent once more.

“It seems their silence speaks volumes,” Ihsan stated. “Perhaps we should take them elsewhere?”

“Yes, they need to be detained. I’ll t-”

“Hold on a moment...” said a raspy, somewhat rough voice.

Markus thought one of the men were speaking up, until he saw that the voice belonged to an approaching man with a gaunt frame. He had long, gray hair with a shock of white running through it, his face partially covered by tattered rags he wore.

The most striking thing about the stranger was how the long shock of white hair hung from his head. While the mostly gray hairs were neat and had a sheen to them, his white hairs hung limply and fell to the side of his head, remaining unkempt.

Despite his thin body, Markus noticed there was some muscle to his frame, although it was lean and mostly covered by the black and violet rags he wore.

The strange walked around barefoot, with wrappings to his ankles and wrists, on his waist was a large bag, which made noise as it was moved.

Somehow, Markus felt a chill as the man walked up, his black eyes were focused, though, despite the bags from tiredness beneath them.

“Who are you?” Markus asked. He noticed the men seemed unnerved by the stranger, and somehow he couldn’t quite blame them.

“Dante.” The man walked nearer. “I’m familiar with these men, I can tell you about them.”

“Pardon me, stranger, but how do you know about them?” Ihsan asked.

“I was approached by their master, a man called Raleigh. He asked if I would aid his side and I refused.”

“You! Not another word!” One of the men shouted angrily, when suddenly he began to convulse. “Agh!”

“What’s wrong with him?” Ihsan asked, before rushing to the captive’s side. He touched the man’s forehead and noticed a fever. “He’s ill...Must be magic.”

“I assume so.” Markus touched the man’s forehead next, and suddenly the fever subsided and the man recovered almost instantly. “There. I’ve blocked the magic bothering him.”

“Ah, you wanted your captives kept in good health?” Dante asked. ‘My apologies.’

“You cursed him?” Markus asked.

“Not lethally.”

“Not at all” would be better,” Markus walked up to Dante and looked him in the eyes. “Listen, we’ll do this my way. If you have information or anything helpful, we’re more than willing to hear you out, so long as you don’t do anything else that is...Unsavory.”

“Hm. I heard the winged people were gentle hearted...It is nice to see for myself that doesn’t mean weak willed.” Dante nodded. “I’ll do as you ask.”

“Thank you. Now, then, what can you tell us?”

“The men come from the Elustria continent, so far as I am aware. They came here with Raleigh in his attempts to take over this kingdom.”

“Which countries on Elustria?”

“At least three. Of those three, Raleigh ravaged them all, and in each he was victorious.”

“Really?” Ihsan asked.

“The man told me as much himself. He made it clear he was a figure to be feared, though it was already quite apparent. With each country he visits, he adds to his army, leaving the countries he defeated with rulers who are loyal to him and his cause, all of them funding his campaign and sending their strongest with him.”

“Why?” Markus asked. “What could he possibly gain from killing so many people? Taking over one country is already a lot of power, so why take so many and not even rule them personally?”

“You’ll have to ask him, but if this keeps up, I feel pity for the ruler of Wynveria.”

Markus glared at Dante. “If Raleigh thinks he can take over Wynveria, he better think again! Do you have any idea where he is?”

“Yes, provided I can come with you. I want to see how this man fights.”

“Hmm. He could be a useful ally, no, Markus?”

“He could be, but I’m not sure I trust him,” Markus muttered to Ihsan.

“My friend, we don’t have much choice. We can at least keep an eye on him, should all else fail.”

“Alright, but let me know if you see him do anything suspicious.”

“Of course, my friend!” Ihsan nodded to his ally, confirming. “For now, we have captives to take in.”

“Right. Let’s get to it.” Markus turned to Dante. “Hey, are you gonna come with us?”

“I thought I made that clear.”

“Then you might want to hurry up. We’ve got a long trip ahead.”

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After asking around, they had found out that General Nersel had stationed himself and his men at Joyeuce Keep. It took them two days of travel, but eventually they managed to make their way there, along with their captives. Nersel was happy to take in the enemy’s men, and soon gave rest to Markus’s group until they were all called back.

The keep was heavily fortified, as Markus noticed. The soldiers who had been combatting the invaders were constantly moving about. Surprisingly to Markus, the keep had large halls and curiously some of the ceilings were made of wood, resembling drawbridges. The curious architecture only held Markus’s attention for a short time before Nersel spoke with him.

“I have to admit, taking those soldiers alive is quite the feat.”

“I was merely fulfilling my duties,” Markus said humbly. “It was really my companions are the ones who went beyond their callings.”

“Regardless, all of you helped greatly. Because of your actions and the intelligence that Dante and the captives gave us, we know much about our enemy.”

“Such as what?” Ihsan asked.

“Such as that their leader is a man called Raleigh, the general of the Tyre Empire and its many provinces.”

“They’re that massive?” Markus asked.

“Yes.” Dante turned to the others. “Tyre is a nation from Elustria, said to have been a poor, starving plot of land. It eventually managed to rally its people and overtook another country, and so on and so forth...Gradually growing into a large nation and calling its conquests provinces. The three nations I mentioned before were all ones of note that increased its power vastly.”

“You know from being there?” Markus asked.

“I had...consultations with some of Raleigh’s men. They’re very loyal to him, and vice versa...He could storm this place to free his followers.”

“...Perhaps we could use that to our advantage.”

“What do you mean?”

“If he would be foolhardy enough to try to storm this place, it means we can make a trap for him and his men. According to our intelligence, he won’t be here for another five days, so that gives us more than enough time to prepare.”

“Excellent.” Markus smiled, glad to see things were coming together. “Please, let me know how I can help!”

“The way only you can. Please, return to Queen Zelina and let her know that we will soon defeat our enemies. I’ll also send a letter with you detailing all of our intelligence so far.”

“Ah.” Markus was slightly crestfallen. While he saw the wisdom in what General Nersel wanted, but he also desired to help defeat Raleigh after seeing the havoc he and his men had created.

“Markus, do not mistake this task as trivial. The message you will carry is important and filled with the information you and your allies worked hard to gather. Besides, your allies may not wish to endanger themselves further.”

“I’m sorry, General Nersel, you’re right.” Markus decided to put his own feelings out of his mind. The lives of many were at stake, so that took precedence over all else. He then looked at his two companions. “What about you, Ihsan? Dante?”

“I will likely continue my own journey. I was looking for my friend, Noaveme and I need to be sure she is well.”

“Then I wish you luck,” Markus said with a smile, before looking to the gaunt man. “What about you, Dante?”

“What I do is my business alone. I do wish you luck, however.”

“Thanks,” Markus replied flatly. While the Heofonite would miss Ihsan, Dante couldn’t leave fast enough for him. “Well, I’ll be ready to leave before too long. Know I wish you both well when the time to depart comes.”

“Of course. Until then, please rest as needed. That will be all.” Nersel bade each of them farewell before departing.

Ihsan was the next to stand, but he extended a hand to Markus. “It seems our road together stops here.”

“Sadly. Still, however short it was, I enjoyed your company. It means a lot to me that you stayed with me when I needed support the most. I won’t forget you.” Markus took Ihsan’s hand.

“I know you won’t, just like I’ll never forget you. Promise me you’ll put that wind charm I put on your armor to good use. It should be helpful on your trip back.”

“I have no doubt it will be. I just hope we can meet again, soon.”

“Some day, but tonight let’s have drinks. It’ll be a way to enjoy the rest of our time.”

Dante scoffed, but for the first time that Markus or Ihsan had seen, the man smiled. “Such bonds. I do hope they last. Lives may end, but friendships can last an eternity.” Without another word, Dante departed.

“Well, that was jarring for several reasons. Still, care for a drink?”

“Of course.”

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It was early in the morning when Markus prepared for his flight. The sun’s first rays of light were still making their way along the horizon. As he walked up the keep’s stairs to the top of a tower, he felt a blast of the cold mountain air greet him as gusts of wind sailed by.

The wind reminded Markus to check on his letter, making sure it was tucked away safely. Even with Ihsan’s tailwind, it would be a long trip and Markus needed to keep the letter secure.

Before too long, he took flight, flapping his wings and soaring towards Arachon.

Markus's trip would be long, though the true danger would soon arrive where he left.

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The approach of Raleigh's men was seen from miles away. The army of invaders did not try to be stealthy or secretive. Rather, they sought to garner the attention of the Wynverian forces that would soon face them.

As the fighting force approached in great number, all of them marching in unison as well as wearing bright red armor. The color was more polished than that of the armor Raleigh's other men wore, the hue evoking freshly spilled blood on the battlefield.

From afar, the warriors within the keep were organizing themselves. Battle would be upon them soon and they needed to be proactive, or else they would be defeated. Gathering their weapons and falling into order, this was all lost to Ihsan, who was startled by the chaos.

"What is happening now?" Ihsan asked as he managed to make his way into the hall, standing aside from the rushing soldiers. Eventually, a Wynverian sentry came to him, speaking quickly.

"The enemy forces are approaching. Find the boy who came with you and the Heofonite and stay out of the fray."

“I give my word to stay out of your way.” Ihsan stared at the sentry who nodded before joining his fellow soldiers. Once he was gone, Ihsan decided to look for Dante, fearing for the young mage’s safety.

Soon, all of Joyeuce’s inhabitants were making preparations for the upcoming battle, as Raleigh and his men loomed on the horizon.

General Nersel stood at the top of one of the castle’s towers, overlooking the scene of battle. He watched grimly as his men faced Raleigh’s forces, the number of combatants in the enemy number truly staggering him.

His men had flown in at first in dragon form, spewing fire down on the field, hoping to at least overheat the enemies in their armor, however it had seemed that several of Raleigh’s men were talented marksmen, carefully shooting the Wynverians in their wings to hamper flight and send them crashing to the cruel ground below.

Even so, Nersel had watched two dozen of his men go out and battle, nearly none of them coming out, while not even one hundred of Raleigh’s men had been slain.

“The Tyrean army is fierce, to be sure,” one of Nersel’s own bowmen said, a twinge of fear in his voice.

At first Nersel thought to reprimand his subordinate, but he merely nodded. “That they are, but ferocity dies in the face of a superior force, one way or another.”

Nersel then signaled his bowmen, knowing the arrows would at least distract the Tyrean army while the next wave of Wynverians flew above the loosed volley. “On my command, shoot!”

Soon, Nersel signaled for his men to shoot. A hail of arrows darkened the sky for a moment as hundreds of projectiles flew through the air. The enemy forces, however, were prepared.

The Tyrean army ducked down as quickly as they could in order to avoid the storm of arrows, while the taller and more burly among them carried great shields. They acted as fast as they could, some holding the shields above them as if they were umbrellas to block the rain of arrows, while others on the outskirts held their shields to the front, ensuring the Tyreans were as covered as possible.

The arrows managed to make their way through some openings in the enemy's defense, but ultimately it did little to lessen the number of enemies. However, the next moves made by the Wynverians would prove critical.

"Now, we rain fire upon them!" Nersel commanded. Next, a dozen of the Wynverians gathered began to change, taking their dragon forms as they stood at the top of the keep's walls. Once they were fully transformed, they flew, going lower than anticipated, all while Raleigh's forces tried their best to lower their shields. Some, however, noticed that the arrows that had been shot at them were covered in pitch.

Soon, the flying Wynverians spewed their hot, burning breath upon their enemies. The arrows that had been dipped in pitch caught fire, the flames razing the ground before them, as well as burning their shields.

The lumps of burning metal soon grew too hot to bear, some of the shields even melting from intense heat. Scores of Raleigh's men perished from the extreme temperatures, while many more struggled to flee, their armor almost burning them from being heated by the hot air.

For a time, Nersel gave a satisfied grin. The fire would at least slow down Raleigh's forces and make them think twice, however, that was when he noticed something else, further off into the distance. What he saw made him blanch, the color draining from his face rapidly as dread took hold of him. "It can't be..."

Off in the distance, one could see a number of catapults, the war machines rolling closer to Fort Joyeuce. It had been inconceivable to Nersel that they could construct one, much less move them up the mountains. As the stones flew through the air, his heart sank. The tide had certainly turned, but for the worse.

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Ihsan and a handful of soldiers were on the run as the Tyrean army overran the fort. Nersel was nowhere in sight, but the Wynverians were fighting hard.

Despite their strength and size, the Tyreans had the advantage of numbers and often surrounded an enemy before slaying them. There was no interest in capture, surrender was ignored. There was only slaughter and chaos, even outside as a few Wynverians who had taken to the roof fought in dragon form. Most of them joined their brethren and the droves of enemies on the ground as corpses, however, as they were swarmed by Tyreans who crawled over them like relentless ants.

Ihsan breathed heavily. He had never found Dante and suspected they boy was long dead by now. His only leverage was the group of prisoners they held, which hopefully a commander in Raleigh's forces would trade for.

"It utterly astounds me," Ihsan said as he stood outside the cells.

"That your scaled friends fell before General Raleigh?" One of Raleigh's men taunted from behind the bars.

"No, that they'd sacrifice more of their men to get back a small handful. It's tactically unsound, almost suicidal."

"Perhaps, but then again we all knew death would come for us the moment we donned our armor and joined the war," the same soldier said. "Even if our brothers die, we'll fight and die so they can continue to promote the glory of-"

"Yes, yes. You are fanatics. Lovely." Ihsan suddenly heard a sound, he raised a hand and summoned magic forth, only to see that it was Nersel, bleeding heavily from his side. "General!"

"Ah...Ihsan, was it?" The general coughed, holding his wound before rushing in, holding a bloodied saber, his armor deeply scratched and his face smeared with lingering dust. "Are you alright?"

"Fine enough. Where are your men?"

"Most are dead, some deserted....We only have a few, but I posted some men outside this room. I would say we can count less than thirty among us...These prisoners are our last hope to escape alive."

“Trading them was the plan...I hope we can manage it.” Ihsan still continued to summon forth magic, a symbol on his right shoulder glowing. “Otherwise, this won’t be fun.”

“I’m sorry, was I missing when this was fun?” Nersel chuckled darkly.

“I guess we both were.” Ihsan smiled back, knowing it very well could be his last smile. That was when there were noises, grunts, cries of pain, and at last the approach of footsteps. At last, a whole horde of Raleigh’s men were present, at least a dozen stormed the room, before at last Ihsan loosed his magic. “BEGONE!”

Suddenly, the glow on Ihsan’s mark disappeared, and there was a blinding flash from his palm. There was an explosion of force and energy, something indescribable came forth, blasting the very wall and obliterating the men, Ihsan’s breathing heavily again.

Nersel looked at the broken wall and saw no trace of their enemies, before turning back to Ihsan. “Could you always do that?”

“Yes, but it’s lacking in control. I had to focus the blast, or else I could have killed us with them. It’s just as harmful as it is good.

“Which is why our army does not employ mages,” a confident male voice said, still obscured by the dust cloud. “They’re powerful, but such a liability when riled. For example, they could blast open an entire doorway, possibly disturbing a building’s integrity.”

“Enough babble,” a young, female voice said. Then, suddenly, there were several arrows zooming towards Nersel and Ihsan.

Ihsan felt the harsh, sharp pain as an arrow entered his arm and another his abdomen. He couldn’t focus, much less stand. He looked over to see Nersel was already on the ground, bleeding out, the arrows piercing his arm and part of his chest.

From the dust walked out a man with rust colored hair, the reddish-brown follicles cut short and kept trim. He had an oddly warm smile, but it came with an air of smug self-assurance. His eyes were

focused, like a tiger eyeing its prey hungrily. With a single dagger in hand, he pointed to Nersel's body. "It seems you finished off this one, I wonder what spoils he left for us..."

"Don't be a vulture, Tiernan. It really does not suit you."

"Shary, if you insist on not claiming spoils, someone else will. For example, I think I spy something now..." Tiernan drew closer to Nersel's corpse before picking up his blade. "Ah! A weapon of fine make, fresh from a battle. Perhaps I can find the sheathe for it?"

"Leave his body alone!" Ihsan managed to roar, despite his pain. He was panting, but there the was suddenly a crossbow aimed at his face. Looking up, he saw that it was a woman with long, braided black hair and jade green eyes. Her clothing had some chainmail for protection, covering her chest beneath a coat she wore, but her arms and legs were covered by light, flexible armor. Her outfit was deep red, with bright silver trim. Ihsan couldn't help but notice how defined her muscles on her arm were, while her eyes were focused.

"Quiet, unless you want to join him." She then directed her attention to a soldier who drew near. "You, help break down the cells and free the men."

"Yes, Commander Auchmere." A soldier rushed to the cell, looking for a way around, when he heard a whistle.

"The departed general has keys on hand. Perhaps one of these will help." Tiernan tossed the keys to the underling.

"Thank you, Captain Raye."

"No problem...Aha!" Tiernan found the scabbard and turned his attention to Shary. "So, then, we should make sure the survivors are rounded up and given to our great leader."

Shary rolled her eyes before focusing them back on Ihsan. "And this one? He's half dead."

"Then send him the rest of the way. It may take him out of his misery."

Ihsan could only grimace as the woman stared him down, crossbow still leveled at him. "That it may..."

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Queen Zelina sat upon her throne, her fingers interlocked as she rested her head against them, feeling pensive. Her gaze was cast downward as she thought about the battle. News had spread that Wynveria was in a full-blown invasion, and what was worse was that their foes were still making progress towards their capital city.

Battle plans had been discussed, troops had been mobilized, and now Zelina was even dispensing spies, yet there were rumors that Raleigh was also trying to recruit Errant Broods to his side, decimating those who refused.

In the back of Zelina's mind, it struck her as ironic; Wynverians spent so much time trying to prove themselves as strong warriors, yet now another strong force came in and was causing them plenty of trouble. Her people's pride was on the line, but more importantly as their country and their lives. Every inch of the Queen wanted nothing more than to go find the warlord and put a stop to his warmongering ways, but she couldn't. Too much was at stake for her to go out at the moment, and she was waiting on news.

As Zelina continued to think, though, there was the sound of someone opening the door. As she looked, she saw that it was Delys. "Delys, is there any news?"

"Some. Our friend, Markus, is back. He wants to give you some information when you have time, milady."

Zelina was surprised, but pleased. She had not expected him to return until the conflict was over, though she was very worried that he might meet his end on the battlefield. "Send him in immediately." Zelina could already feel herself begin to anticipate the worst. If Markus was back, what news could he possibly bring?

After a short time, the Heofonite approached, his expression was one of relief. "Queen Zelina, I have news from the front lines!"

"What information do you have?"

“Intelligence regarding the invaders. They're from a continent called Elustria, with a general named Raleigh leading them. He's been conquering countries around his home land and has come here to do the same.” Markus then produced the letter he carried with him, handing it to Zelina quickly. “All of the information and more is here.”

“I see.” Zelina scowled. It was good to finally put a name to the threats that had been plaguing her and her land, but she still needed to know more. “What other news do you have?”

“From what I read, other battles have been against him and his forces on different fronts. So far we've managed to repel them more often than not, but a certain group of his is making steady progress toward Arachon. If it keeps up they will reach us here.”

Zelina's eyes practically burned with the will to win and anger. “Our forces should be more than ready. If this Raleigh seeks a challenge, he's a fool to challenge the Wynverians in their own domain.”

“Do you suppose the advancing force is the group Raleigh is traveling with?” Markus asked with concern.

Zelina was silent, she gripped the armrest of her throne and began to ponder the situation bleakly. “It could very well be. If we can best him, though, then perhaps we can end this bloody conflict.”

“I'd like nothing better,” Markus agreed, his eyes focused and his will strengthening. “What should we do?”

“You should rest for the moment. I am going to make a plan to end this at once.”

Markus bowed. “As you command, Queen Zelina.”

“Also, Markus.”

“Yes?”

“I am pleased that you made it. I ask that in the coming conflicts you serve at my side, however. It is your assignment, correct?”

“It is and it would truly be an honor,” Markus said sincerely. He was just thankful to be back, though he could see that Zelina had things on her mind. Internally, he resolved to shoulder some of her burden and hoped to help her finish this growing war.

“Good...Please get some rest.”

Obediently, Markus bowed once more to the monarch before exiting. Once he closed the door, he went directly to his quarters.

Meanwhile, Zelina was still inside the throne room, wondering if facing the foe directly was the way to go about this. Despite their best efforts, Raleigh was still winning more battles than she felt comfortable with, and she could only face him on so many fronts for so long.

Running a hand through her blonde hair and sighing, she started to read the letter. She hoped that whatever knowledge it contained would be enough to help her against the invading threat.

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Zelina and Markus's journey was much easier than expected. While there were guards around them, the two flew with plenty of free space.

Zelina in particular was trying her best to remain vigilant. While her men and the guardian with her were all wary of Raleigh and his men, that did not mean that the Elustrian Army could not mount a sneak attack.

“Queen Zelina?” Markus shouted to her as she flew.

The gold scaled dragon turned to Markus.

“There's something I've been meaning to ask, but I really never took the time to ask until now.” He looked at her closely, though his glance seemed somewhat shy.

Zelina nodded, as if beckoning him to continue.

“Can you, actually...Speak in dragon form?”

Zelina responded in a language that was hard for Markus to decipher. She could tell that he was having difficulty based on how he cocked his head to the side and strained to catch her every word. Eventually, she had to put conscious effort into her response, speaking in a deeper, booming voice. “Very little.”

“Wh...what was that you just spoke?” Markus asked.

Zelina narrowed her eyes at him before he was silent; she would tell him later, but speaking her usual language was a strain in dragon form.

For a few more hours they flew, passing over mountains and towns, with other Wynverians flying off towards Arachon, or those without the ability to fly journeying in groups. Her people were scurrying like mice away from cats, but she would be damned if she wouldn't protect them.

After some time, the group made camp on a mountain top. It was cold there, snow blanketing the ground, though the Wynverians were used to rocky ground, and from so high it was unlikely that their enemies would come for them.

Zelina was back to her human form, sitting within her tent. She had finished a war council earlier, and their plan of attack was set. The only issue was that with Fort Joyuce captured, it meant that many of her own soldiers had fallen. She began to feel guilty that Nersel and so many others had died, but she knew she had to bury that guilt and protect all they had died for.

As she began to go over the intelligence that Nersel had gathered one more time, there was a knock on the post that had been set outside of Zelina's tent. “Yes?”

“Queen Zelina?” Markus's voice was calling to her. “May I enter?”

Zelina sighed before carefully putting away the notes and walking towards the exit. Once she was outside she stared down to Markus. "What is it you need?"

"Oh, sorry, Your Majesty. I was just coming by to see how you are."

"As well as I can be." Zelina noticed Markus was shivering, the cold bothering him as the outside winds blew. "And yourself?"

"The same. Still, I hope it isn't a bother, but what was that first language you spoke?"

"Dragon."

"Wait...Dragon is a language?"

"Yes. All Wynverians can speak it when we change shape, but speaking it in our human forms is more difficult, and the same for the language we all speak when we are dragons." Zelina opened the tent flap. "You may come inside, it is a bit too chilly to speak out here."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"It is no problem, Markus." Zelina let him in, expecting the conversation might take some time.

Once they were both inside, Zelina saw Markus breathe a sigh of relief. It made her chuckle a little before she sat down on a stool she had brought with her. "Sit anywhere you would like."

Obliging, Markus found a cushion that looked comfortable enough. Once he had gained permission, he sat down on it and looked to Zelina. "I'm surprised it's so warm in here. The outside is freezing cold. You'd think at least a little chill would make its way inside."

“Thankfully, we use charmed tents. It actually traps heat much more easily than a normal tent, so the cold remains outside. Even so, everyone else has long gotten used to the cold, we just don’t prefer it.”

“Neither do I,” Markus chuckled, before he saw Zelina was offering him a drink. “What’s this?”

“Ale. Just a little something to lift the spirits,” Zelina took a drink from the cup.

“I don’t know if I should; In Heofonia we’re taught not to drink anything alcoholic, save in moderation on special days.”

“Well, whether you drink or not is up to you. Still, why not?” Zelina asked curiously.

“Because it can lead to dependence,” Markus stated plainly.

“Some people are like that, yes, but to assume that of everyone shows very little faith.”

“Maybe, but it is all I have known,” Markus admitted. “Since I came to Wynveria, I’m starting to realize things are different here.”

“Things are different no matter what part of the globe you go to.” Zelina took another, deep drink of her cup. “The world is a wide place, and what’s normal for one person is different for another. You have to learn not to box everything as bad or good without context.”

“Maybe...” Markus took his cup and drank at last, expecting it to feel the drink burn, but...instead he just tasted the savory beverage. “Wait...this isn’t alcoholic.”

“I never said it was.” Zelina smirked impishly. “Just playing on your expectations.”

Markus was embarrassed he had been tricked, but knew that he would have found it humorous if anyone else had fallen victim to Zelina’s joke. “Well played, then.” Markus took another drink himself. “Perhaps you really will become an actress when this is all over.”

“True, though I doubt I’ll be able to put on any productions any time soon. After all, there will be a lot to rebuild once we oust Raleigh and his followers.”

“Well, when we do I know you’ll make Wynveria everyone can enjoy.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence, Markus.” Zelina smiled, glad to know that her new ally believed in her as much as her people did.

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The next day, the flight continued, with the Wynverian forces finally catching sight of Raleigh’s men. Markus had been sent ahead to act as a scout high above, using his smaller figure to keep the wary enemies from noticing him, as they expected dragons.

When Markus returned, he was quick to detail the situation. “The enemies are going through a mountain pass. There aren’t many paths in the direction they’ve gone and there’s only one way out. IF we can block it, maybe we can trap them there.”

“Perhaps, but what if it is a trap?” a captain in the Wynverian army asked. She turned to face Zelina. “We heard from a few who had managed to escape Fort Joyeuce that catapults and ballistae were being employed by our enemies.”

“Then we’ll have to make sure that either way we’re ready for them,” Zelina commented. “Our best bet is to separate them from their larger weapons and then pick off the remaining ones from afar. In the chaos, I doubt they’ll be able to counter and we can thin out their numbers.”

“How, Your Majesty?” the captain asked.

“We’ll need a few boulders to start with. Captain Grey, have your men gather some. After that I will explain further. Markus, I want you and ten others to go block the end of that pass where it is narrowest. Everyone else, prepare for battle. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Queen Zelina,” all said obediently.

The queen's expression was grim, but she was hopeful. If they acted quickly, the advantage would be on their side.

After a few hours, Zelina's forces were ready, with the Wynverians having flown around to the pass's start. They flew low to the ground in a roundabout way, so as to avoid being spotted by their foes. They had gathered several boulders they could carry while flying and when they had enough,

Eventually, the group was ready and the plan was set into motion. From far above, where they could not be sighted by Raleigh's men. She made sure that they had everyone in position to attack, as well as clarity on the plan that was to be set in motion.

"Remember, our primary focus is to block their path backwards as well as to destroy their ranged weapons. After that, attack as many as you can safely."

After affirming Zelina's plan, the others got ready for their part. Most transformed, while others who had bows and arrows of their own notched them.

"On my signal, then..." Zelina stared down, waiting until she was sure the enemy's guard was down before she motioned for everyone to attack.

It started with dozens of dragons taking flight, their wing flaps great and echoing through the air, bewildering the Elustrians below. As they made themselves visible, the Wynverians gathered around each other before releasing the boulders. They fell like meteors from the heavens, their shadows growing much like the fear of their enemies below.

There were many crashes heard, the boulders causing cries of pain and death as enemies were crushed beneath them. What was more was that the great weapons were utterly splintered and fractured as the ballistae and catapults lay decimated with their operators.

In moments, the Elustrians realized that the path behind them was blocked off, and that was when, ahead of them, many Wynverians rained down fire, while the archers fired down from the opposite end.

Zelina looked down, seeing her foes start to panic, the acrid scent of burnt flesh filling the air as the storm of fire warmed the cold air. She saw a handful had even tried to jump down from the path to the

craggs below, hoping to survive somehow rather than be burnt or skewered by arrows. As tragic as the sight could be, Zelina felt no pity for the invaders. Instead she watched carefully, until she saw that a few were firing arrows back. "Finish them!" she roared.

And with a few final, precise shots and a great blaze of fire, the Elustrians were decimated. Her forces regrouped and looked down at the defeated and the dead. She turned from the sight to see her people before her, many of them in dragon form still. "We continue our search. Let's ensure no others are on their way."

Afterwards, the others started to take flight high into the air once more, keeping a watch on the mountain scape below. Before the queen of the Wynverians changed too, she saw Markus draw near. "What is the matter?"

"Do you think Raleigh was in that group?"

"I sincerely doubt it. Such fortune would be too much to expect, and even then we have many more Elustrians to deal with," Zelina said firmly. "We'll have to take this slowly, one by one, until all fall."

"Yes...Queen Zelina," Markus replied.

Zelina could see he was wavering for but a moment, but she knew he would follow her regardless. "Check for any survivors, after, we will regroup afterwards and learn where they seek to strike next."

The time after the battle was quite tense. Even though there were few survivors and the group had destroyed many of their war machines, the reality was the Elustrian invaders were still numerous, and the Wynverians would have much harder battles ahead in order to fully oust their enemies.

Zelina was looking over the reports from the day, as well as messages that had been sent to her as well. There was news that the Elustrians had been repelled on several fronts, but there was also news that there was an uprising in the errant broods. Zelina could only assume that that they wanted to use the confusion in order to raise themselves up and upend the current rule. The queen of the dragons could only hope that they would also try to defeat Raleigh's forces as well.

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After many weeks, Zelina and her army had coordinated and defeated most of the enemies before them. It took time and there were more than a few casualties, but there were many successes and finally the Elustrians were becoming overrun.

“Queen Zelina, it looks like we’ve caught sight of Raleigh at last.” Captain Grey stood at ready, waiting for the queen’s response.

“Have we?” Zelina asked, the news sounding too good to be true. “How do you know it is him?”

“Based upon reports from scouts and refugees who claimed to have seen him in person,” Captain Grey went on. “Your Majesty, the intelligence we have makes it reasonable to identify the man we have located as Raleigh.”

“I see. What can you tell me?”

“Only that it seems as if he is moving as covertly as possible. It seems it is only him as well as a few other soldiers traveling in a small group away from the mountains,” Captain Grey reported. “Without his long range weapons, he seems to be at a disadvantage.”

“And if we crush him here and now, that will be that.” Zelina thought on it. After so many struggles, Raleigh was there now, without a large force to battle alongside him. It felt almost too good to be true, but if there was a chance to end the suffering of her people and secure peace in her land, she would not think twice about taking it, or the bloody general’s life. “Then the sooner we are rid of him the better. Tell everyone they are to prepare for battle.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Bowing, Captain Grey took her leave before leaving Zelina alone once more.

The queen of the dragons was slow to move at first. She could not believe that after all the time she had invested in the war that Raleigh would be foolish enough to travel alone. From all that she had heard of his reputation he was a seasoned warrior and tactician, so endangering himself would be ill-advised. Then again, Zelina considered that it was his pride as a warrior pushing him to do something foolish and outlandish. The possibility was there, but she still planned to proceed with caution.

Picking up her sword and carrying it with her, Zelina made sure that her armor was secure as well. Now ready, she went to her army, leading them to their great confrontation with Raleigh. When all were assembled and ready, they each took flight, the Wynverians and sole Heofonite now high in the sky.

Much later, the Wynverian army were all in hiding near the path that Raleigh was spotted on. A few scouts were busy combing the area looking for Raleigh's men, ensuring that he had no support or back up for a counter attack. Once they had returned and given Zelina their report, she was satisfied enough to approve their attack. "Six of us will head off Raleigh while the rest move into position to surround him. Given the location, he has very little choice save to surrender or be executed."

"Queen Zelina, can we not simply all strike at once?" Markus asked. "If you all used your flames or struck in dragon form, he would be defeated, even if he had his army to back him up."

"That is true," Captain Grey replied, "however our enemy deserves a chance to surrender or challenge our leader. It is simply the Wynverian way."

"Captain Grey is correct. Raleigh shall be faced our way, and he will fall like he felled so many of our people." Zelina stared intently at the two. "Markus, Captain, you both will join my group. We leave now."

Obediently, both followed Zelina when she transformed, along with three others as they flew high in the sky. Once they were all above Raleigh, the dragons and the sky native all descended around the imposing warrior.

"Such a gathering for one man...I am insulted you did not bring more."

"You say as the Queen of Dragons stands before you," Zelina replied, her voice booming as she remained in dragon form.

Raleigh merely smiled and stepped closer to her. "The God of Dragons and perhaps a thousand more would please me."

Zelina, not rising to the taunt, merely changed back to her human form. The Wynverian queen then walked towards the man. Even though Zelina herself was not short, the man was still a fair deal taller

than her. The muscles beneath his scarlet armor large enough to make any Wynverian or strongman envious. She smiled back. "And why would we aim so hard to please a deadman?"

"Ah, I see your people banter almost as well as they fight. I am glad you Wynverians have not betrayed my expectations. Worthy opponents are so rare in my home continent and I desired to see what the world had to offer me."

"We may have offered you a friendly challenge had you merely arrived and asked to do battle with us, but you came for war. Now we offer you the chance to surrender or perish."

"Such kind words, but I do not desire kindness from those who are not my allies. To counter your offer, I make one of my own."

"And what is that?"

"The opportunity to swear fealty to me." Raleigh stood tall, staring Zelina directly in her eyes. "Your people have been as strong and resilient as the land in which they were born. I offer you an opportunity to ally with Elustria, to become a follower of my banner. Should you and your people accept, no more blood will be shed from Wynverian veins. We shall join and split the spoils and glory of battles and wars in this land, building a stronger world in the wake of the defeated."

Zelina was taken aback when she saw the great warlord actually offered her his hand. As far as she could tell, he was serious. She could only stare in shock at him and his grandiose offer. "I decline. I have no respect for your people or your goals. Now, we shall end this war."

"My war has only begun, queen. This skirmish is nothing compared to the contests to come." Raleigh drew his blade, pointing it at Zelina.

"We shall see." Zelina drew her own sword and stared down her opponent. "Are you ready to face a dragon's full might?"

"Yes, so long as you are prepared for the fight of your life." Wasting no more time, Raleigh struck, slashing downwards at Zelina.

The queen of dragons countered by blocking, holding back the powerful onslaught and trying to force her opponent back. The might of the two warriors was very nearly even, however Raleigh's weapon was bigger, his intent was fiercer, and he had gravity on his side. Zelina could only hold him back for so long before she moved aside and pulled her weapon back, readying herself for the next strike. Rushing in, Zelina attacked with a volley of quick stabs.

Zelina watched closely and was impressed by how fast her foe fended off her strikes. Even with such a large blade, Raleigh was able to maneuver it so quickly and so deftly compared to what she expected. Striking with great might, Zelina managed to upset Raleigh's footing before attempting to punch him while he was unbalanced.

The veteran warrior's head snapped to the side as Zelina's fist smashed into it. The queen's face lit up with surprise; she had not anticipated her enemy rolling with her punch. What she expected even less was for him to grab her wrist with an arm before roaring, ramming his forehead into her face.

The blonde ruler grunted as she was hit, but refused to recoil. Instead, she kicked Raleigh in the chest once, then once more until he released her. Wrestling her arm back, she roared before advancing. There was no doubt that Raleigh was an experienced and fierce warrior, but Zelina held her own, defending and countering even his strongest attacks before going on the offensive.

The warrior clad in scarlet smirked, his own blood further staining his crimson clothing. "You fight well! For one so young you have become powerful."

"I would appreciate such praise if it wasn't coming from a bloodsoaked bastard." Zelina pressed again, putting immense force into her strike before knocking Raleigh flat. Raising her blade, she stabbed downwards. She growled when her strike was avoided as Raleigh rolled.

Moving quickly, she took the handle of Raleigh's greatsword and tossed it aside, out of the warlord's reach. "You're disarmed. Surrender is your only option."

"Were I lesser man, I would. However, no weapon defines my might!" Raleigh roared as he rushed Zelina.

The queen was surprised by the foolhardy action that her enemy was taking. Still, she rushed for a stab, only for Raleigh to grab her wrist and twist, disarming her too. She watched as it fell and Raleigh held her still.

“This time we’re both unarmed.”

“Are we?” Zelina glared as she began to change, growing much taller and expanding outwards as her body shifted and changed. She grew in size, becoming too massive to hold as she took on her dragon form, roaring loudly and releasing a plume of flame.

“Damn!” Raleigh cursed in shock as Zelina’s arm nearly crushed him. He was only able to back away for a moment before she turned, using her tail to knock him away, sending the warrior sprawling through the dirt.

Now with a full advantage, Zelina smirked. The battle was hers and she could finish Raleigh off there and then. Opening her maw, she breathed out another great stream of fire, watching as Raleigh ran frantically from it. When she saw he was rushing towards his sword, she leapt in front of him, cutting off his path before ramming him with her head.

There was a loud crack as Raleigh was hit, knocked several feet away with the chestplate of his armor fractured. He rose wearily, but his hand was on Zelina’s sword. Picking it up, he stood and watched, his eyes dark and challenging Zelina to come near him.

Begrudgingly, the dragon found herself respecting the warrior’s resolve. Even when he was at a disadvantage, he had no fear, just desire for victory. It was a spirit Wynverians themselves nurtured, but few embraced it as Raleigh had. Part of her wished that he had arrived in her land under more auspicious circumstances, but knowing the man’s atrocities, she hated the thought. Lunging, Zelina intended to end their struggle with a single bite, however instead there was a sharp pain in her chest.

Moments passed before it was fully evident that Raleigh had plunged Zelina’s blade into her chest, aiming for the softer scales near her belly. He removed the blade and stabbed twice more, roaring viciously as he did, steaming hot dragon blood spraying him and the field of battle. Leaving the blade plunged inside Zelina on his final strike, he ducked under the stumbling dragon.

Part of Zelina felt unsteady, but she knew she could not falter, lest she push the sword even deeper into her body. If she changed back, she had no idea how much damage the blade could do, but she would have a hard time using her arms to grasp the blade as a dragon. From the corner of her eyes, she saw the fearful expressions of her allies. Captain Grey's face was flushed with anger and disbelief, but Zelina's gaze lingered on the gaping, shocked expression on Markus's face. What startled her most, though, was the group approaching from behind her own forces. Eyes widening, she realized what was going on. "Trap! It's a trap!"

By then, however, roars of the Elustrians deafened the others to her cries. Arrows flew, axes were thrown, and bodies hit the cruel, hard ground. Zelina saw at least three of her people fall before the others realized what was happening.

In a rage, Zelina turned, looking for Raleigh. Her pain was forgotten as she felt her fury erupt, the flames in her mouth going from bright red to light blue, verging on a blinding white as she gave in to her deep, destructive instincts. Her search and anger, however, were shortlived when she saw Raleigh had his greatsword back. Part of her tried to take flight and shake him off, but by then he was already attacking. There was a sudden, deep, overwhelming pain as her scales were rended and the blade hacked into her back. Her very muscles were split, and she could have sworn the blades reached her bone near her left shoulder, right near her wing. There was another, severe cut that made her nearly black out from pain, emitting a deep, echoing cry.

"Your life is over, queen of the dragons....Your kingdom is mine!" Raleigh cheered, raising his bloody sword high as he was overwhelmed with the rush of victory, the surge of satisfaction almost blinding him to the conflict around him.

In that moment, all Zelina knew was pain. She had been defeated, and her spirit broken as her life began to ebb away.