

of glee sickened Markus, but he remembered they were merely human, celebrating what they saw as a victory for their people. He tried to tamp down the bile within himself as he was led to a great tent, one that was even more heavily guarded. Twin guards stood in front of the door, grizzled and stern. As Markus approached, they crossed their spears, preventing him from passing.

“Who have you brought?” one of the guards asked, taking a look at Markus’ wings. “A Heofonite?”

Markus nodded. “I am. I’m the Guardian sent to meet you.”

The first guard’s twin looked at the man escorting Markus. “Is this true?”

Markus’ guide nodded. “It is indeed, it seems the clouddwellers sent an errand boy to talk to Lord Raleigh.”

The other guard stared at Markus’ escort. “Show some respect. This is a Guardian, their own warriors; He’s no mere messenger. Otherwise, Lord Raleigh would have no use for him.”

“Peacekeepers,” Markus corrected tersely, saying it to the guard who defended his station.

The guard said nothing, however, instead still staring at the guard with intensity.

Markus’ escort nodded fearfully before looking at Markus. “Ah, beg pardon! Regardless, he is to see Lord Raleigh, if possible.”

The twins looked at each other before one went inside to alert Raleigh. It took a few minutes, but the twin who went inside rejoined the others. "He is to come inside."

The man who guided Markus nodded before gesturing for him to go in.

Markus obliged, but was surprised when the guards blocked their comrade.

"Just the Guardian. You return to your post," one twin said. "Now."

The man grumbled before leaving, while both guards gave Markus a glance before closing the tent behind him.

Gulping, Markus stepped forward, Still he had to stand firm and appear relaxed, the duty he was tasked with and the information he wanted. Going inside, Markus found the tent warm enough, with the sight of several sheathed weapons and chests of spoils being the first thing to greet him. He stared at all the loot, but also saw the path straight ahead led to another, larger room. As he passed through, he noticed there was an area where a small fire had been set, a hole above allowing smoke to escape. Walking within, he found himself at a large dining table made of wood. It seemed to be old and weathered, but was seemed to have been originally of fine make. A single white cloth was draped over the table, unstained and as white as the snow outside. On the table was a bowl of fruit and

a single loaf of what looked to be baked bread, while nearby was a single, leather bound book.

Markus wondered what the book contained, however before he could touch it, a familiar voice rang out.

"I was told Heofonia would be in contact, but I did not expect them so soon..." Raleigh strode into the room, a welcoming, inviting smile on his face. "Much less that of the warrior from before."

"R..." Markus caught himself, struggling to make the words come from his lips. "Lord Raleigh..."

Raleigh stood proudly and offered a hand, looking down at Markus with an avuncular friendliness. "I do not believe I have heard your name, young warrior."

Markus stared, dumbfounded. This was the same man he had opposed on the field of battle not long ago, having crossed paths with him directly. "Guardian Markus Astrann of Heofonia." Markus realized Raleigh's hand was still extended. A couple moments passed before he made himself take it. To Markus' surprise, Raleigh clasped it firmly, but with a familiarity one would give an old friend.

"Ah, now I know who quite literally knocked me off of my feet," Raleigh said before chuckling. "I admit I was tired after the duel with Queen Zelina, but I must give you credit, it was a strong strike. You showed much courage and loyalty."

"I...Merely did what I thought was right," Markus replied honestly, but he was shocked to see that Raleigh seemed earnest; there wasn't even the vaguest hint of malice or a grudge.

Releasing Markus' hand, Raleigh nodded. "Well, I hope I can depend on such strength and valor in the coming days, Guardian Markus. Your Sovereign told me much about your order, and at the same time so little, but when I saw you and experienced that strength, I felt it was truly worth investigating."

"That's...Very high praise," Markus said, stating the fact without pleasure. He watched as Raleigh started to laugh, obviously relaxed around Markus.

Raleigh gave a nod before speaking, his voice showing his curiosity and some excitement. "Ah, the cloudborn. Truly your people are a mystery...For the longest time I believed you were little more than legends made by the old, until your people sent a messenger. Even then, I was unsure what to make of you, but I certainly believe your people's strength very real after you attacked me." Raleigh gave a smile, as if chuckling at his own comment, and then looking Markus over. "I must say, you hit rather hard for someone with so little muscle."

"...Thank you?" Markus replied, unsure whether or not it was appropriate compliment; Raleigh obviously valued one's capability as a warrior, but Markus didn't hold such talents in the same esteem.

“You are very welcome. However, I hope you will forgive my prior ignorance. Warriors, wherever they hail from, always have my respect.” Raleigh then looked to the loaf of bread on the table before taking it in his hand gingerly. “Have you yet eaten?”

Markus shook his head, but watched as Raleigh offered the bread to him.

“An appetizer until our meal is ready. Tonight is the night of a feast. You can also help yourself to the fruit.”

Markus considered refusing, but he knew it would make his task that much harder. Markus reached out and took a piece, while Raleigh kept another part. Biting the broken bread he held, Markus hated to admit that it did taste good, especially after days of the bland rations he had in Zelina’s camp.

“So, I am told you are here to serve me and Heofonia,” Raleigh stated plainly as he inspected his morsel of food before eating it rather quickly.

Markus nodded, trying his best to smile without it looking too forced. “That is correct. Whatever you may need, as the rightful ruler of Wynveria, I am obligated to do for you.”

Raleigh grinned before swallowing the rest of his bread and looking at the rest of the food on the table before facing Markus. “Excellent. Then let’s start with something simple...Does Zelina still live?”

Markus stared, unsure of what to do.

Raleigh smiled genially. "Come now, you can trust me." The man's smile merely made Markus more uneasy, especially as Raleigh began to eat the bread, still smirking.

"She is alive," Markus said, the vaguest hints of smugness in his voice and a faint, but noticeable smile.

"Good," Raleigh replied earnestly as he continued eating. "I was hoping that might be the case."

"You were?" Markus asked.

"Yes. She truly was an impressive warrior and she had a lot of spirit...Not necessarily a rare find, but something about her was captivating." Raleigh cast his gaze to Markus. "I'm sure you know what I am speaking of. That presence of hers...Royal or no, she is something special."

Markus nodded, genuinely agreeing. "She is."

"To rob the world of that, and a talented combatant of her caliber, would be sad...I can think of other purposes for her."

Markus took a moment to take in Raleigh's words, his skin crawling as he considered what Raleigh might be implying. He stared at the man as he ate an apple next, without a moment's hesitation; crumbs of bread scattered on the table as Raleigh continued to feed himself voraciously. "What are you saying?"

"I'm considering a solution that would make everyone happy. I am the new King of Wynveria, but

who is to say she has to leave the royal court?" Callously, after eating quite quickly, Raleigh threw his cored apple aside before going on to a bushel of grapes, eating them with gusto too before discarding the bared stem. He consumed ravenously, not even for flavor or hunger, but as if to test his great appetite. "If she survives, she would serve a vital purpose as my betrothed. Those she and her people deemed as errant have joined us, but the greater masses still refuse me, even after word has spread of my rightful conquest. Marriage to Wynverian royalty, or former royalty, may quiet their complaints."

"And then what? You add Wynveria to your conquests?" Markus asked, his eyes flickering to the food remains for a moment before going back to Raleigh, as he noticed him reach for more still.

"Truthfully, it IS conquered; the people just don't wish to accept it. I want to make Wynveria more, though. An equal in these lands to the greatest nations in Elustria, as well as benefit my purposes and Heofonia."

Markus looked at Raleigh closely, the man going on to grab a bushel of grapes and eating them one by one. "How?"

"My bibliognost and other researchers have studied your people, and told me of principalities Heofonia has made on the surface. Ones that refugees go to and further Heofonia's own influence. I would be willing to

lend a few squadrons under my power to assist in those efforts as well as provide the principalities with new refugees...From non-guarded lands, of course.” Raleigh chuckled as he greedily consumed more grapes, stripping the bushel bare of its fruit. “My power grows, your power grows, Wynveria remains intact, and all are happy.”

“It sounds too simple.”

“It needn’t be complex, it merely needs to work.” Raleigh grinned before casting the stripped stem aside. “Think on it, Markus, you could retain your position and become a part of this world’s greatest empire. You could be pivotal in Hefonia’s efforts to make a better world.”

Markus thought on it. Raleigh’s offer sounded reasonable; it saved Wynveria, strengthened Heofonia, and kept Zelina alive, but...somehow it felt wrong. Markus knew he had a decision to make, and only one answer would help him fulfill his true purpose. “I...Accept.”

“Glad you see it my way, young warrior.”

Peacekeeper,” Markus insisted, though unlike his men, Raleigh laughed.

“A more polite word for the same position. Who keeps the peace but those with power? Who extends a hand of peace except he who can ball it into a fist of war? Your nation may not be nearly so...Proactive as



ours, but you have spilled blood, you are a warrior, and there is certainly no shame in it.”

Markus wanted to object, but he held his tongue. He was unsure what bothered him more, that Raleigh spoke with such confidence and conviction in his opinion or that Markus found himself begrudgingly seeing the logic in such a mindset. “Again, you give such exceeding praise.”

“Because I am proud to have a man of valor fighting alongside me.” Raleigh smiled as he stood from the table. “I know Heofonia will be pleased too.” Raleigh looked at Markus, waiting to see his reaction, when a soldier entered the room. Casting his glance to the new arrival, Raleigh spoke with warmth, still in a pleasant mood. “Is it time for our surprise?”

“Yes sir, the feast is ready. The men are eager to hear your speech and meet our new compatriot,” the soldier said with genuine enthusiasm, which only grew when he saw Raleigh’s expression.

“Thank you for letting us know and inform the others that I will be by shortly,” Raleigh said, his tone gentle and welcoming before he turned to Markus.

Markus looked up to the warlord, who stood with a self-assured grin. The way Raleigh stared at Markus had a strange manner. Markus could see approval in the man’s eyes as he looked, as well as a small bit of pride. Markus couldn’t help but appreciate it, given how sincere the man’s thanks seemed to be.

“Markus, the information you’ve given me will help save lives for not just us, but Wynveria. I know you’ve come to be fond of the Wynverians, just as I have. Together, along with the others, we’ll be able to prevent needless bloodshed.”

The guardian wanted to reprimand the man for his words, no, for his hypocrisy about needless blood being spilled, but he also felt Raleigh meant what he said. “Those words are too kind.”

“No, they are earned. Still, I hope you have learned something valuable from our talk. I feel we, Elustria, Heofonia, and Wynveria, will have much to benefit in the coming days, but for now, we feast. My men will be by shortly to guide you to the feast, but for now, I must go.”

“Yes, of course.” Markus waited until Raleigh left the room to begin to look around more. Rising from his chair and going around the room, Markus searched for maps, documents, anything he thought might be useful; He discovered, unfortunately, that there was next to nothing helpful at the table. Realizing it was a little much to hope for and that being caught rummaging around would look suspicious, Markus stopped and sat back down. Telling himself to be patient, he made note to try to search again later if an opportunity arose.

After a brief tour to acquaint himself with the common areas of the camp, Markus was taken to the