

The group rode through the sparse forest, trees farther apart than seemed normal, but was accepted as such in that part of the world. Tall birch trees, with the occasional oak thrown in, were scattered across slowly rolling hills covered, save the the road they were on, with dense undergrowth. Being the middle of summer, the trees fully adorned with bright green leaves that provided a canopy that did not very well shade the riders below. The group numbered around forty; a diplomatic group in wild territory demanded a large escort.

The command was held by a tall, strikingly handsome man with shoulder-length blond hair and a well-tanned face. He wore a fine suede tabard, which somewhat resembled a dress from the way it hung to his knees, split up to the waist for riding. Cut off at the shoulders, the tabard showed the half-sleeves of the mail hauberk the man wore beneath. The tabard was a dark brown with a sigil stitched onto it with gold thread; the face of a wolf in a dark, storm-gray. Buckled over the tabard was a sword belt, though the sword itself was currently strapped onto the side of the saddle, that was made of soft, supple leather with a silver buckle worked with writing. It read *Hed'ün hala haar Min'haam*.

"It's a fine day for being out and about, isn't it, cousin?" The tall man looked over his shoulder, smiling at a young woman who had long black hair and wore a white linen riding dress, embroidered in gold around the cuffs and the collar.

The woman, riding her horse as if she had been born holding reins, smiled back. "It certainly is, if it doesn't get too much hotter. The sun was terrible yesterday."

The blond man chuckled. "Yes, the heat was awful. I often wonder how those poor people who live in Amondë suffer it." His mother was from that city, and he had often visited her kin there as a child.

Shifting in her saddle, the black-haired woman looked at another of their group. "Enarë, how did you enjoy the heat yesterday? I know that you *love* the warm weather."

A man with storm colored eyes and short brown hair snorted. "Mirren, I am from Delcarom. I do not *love* the heat, I *hate* it. I grew up with summers that would have considered this," he gestured to the air with a hand, "exceedingly hot." Delcarom, being not only built part way up a mountain range but also seventy leagues farther north than the capital, experienced what would be called harsh winters and chill summers to the rest of Neldomark. But a harsh winter in Delcarom was a mild one in other places, and Enarë knew it. His mail shirt was rolled into one of his saddlebags along with the tabard that bore his own markings. Currently he wore a white linen shirt, unlaced at the collar and sleeves rolled up over the lean arms of a swordsman. He rode his mount, a massive, tar-black warhorse, even more naturally than Mirren did, the reins held loosely on hands propped on his knees. He could ride better than any other in the group, trained from boyhood to command the elite cavalry unit Hrad'meizhin.

But none of the Stone Horses accompanied him that day. Instead, the other thirty-odd riders were all members of the Maerin, the king's personal guard. Riding down the road in two neat columns, the soldiers were dressed in crisp uniforms that matched all the way down to threads and folds; steel breastplates polished to a mirror shine over high-necked brown coats worked with silver scroll work, gauntlets and greaves armored their hands and legs, flanged maces were tucked into wide black sword belts and lances tipped with two feet of steel were propped in stirrups. At the fore of the columns, two

riders held banners. The first was the banner of Neldomark; a golden tree atop a small hill, backed with light blue and bordered with white. The second was the sign of the Maerin; a silver shield beneath a gold, five-pronged crown all set on a field of dark, blood-red crimson with black bordering.

Mirren was in the middle of another remark when the blond man raised a hand. The double column of riders came to a stop as the Maerin's commander, a grim, scar-faced man in his fifties, clopped to sit astride from the blond man. "What is it, sir?" A thick coastal accent peppered his words, spoken with a deep voice with enough gravel to pave a street.

The blond man's eyes slowly scanned the tree line and the undergrowth. "I'm not sure." He glanced at Enarë, blue eyes meeting gray. "Might want to don your mail. I have a bad feeling about this."

Enarë nodded, undoing the buckles on a saddlebag and removing a long mail hauberk that, when he slid it over his head, fell nearly to his knees. Buckling his sword over it, he flashed Striker hand-talk to the scarred man. *Do you know what's happening?*

The scarred man gave a small shake of his head and replied, *No. But I am thinking something was seen that is not favorable.*

*Maybe. Keep an eye out.*

The grim-faced commander nodded. *It will be as you say.* He turned his head to the blond man. "What is your wishing of the Maerin, Marstýs Gerpen?"

Marstýs sat for a moment, wishing not for the first time he knew more of Striker hand-talk. "Have them watch for movement in the forest, something is moving alongside us and I don't know what."

"The ordering will be followed." The scar-faced captain trotted his horse, a gelding bred for charges, down the column and shouted Marstýs's orders to the rest of the Maerin.

Marstýs eyed Enarë for a moment, then waved to continue riding along.

The three people at the fore of the envoy held silent as they rode, the two men looking pointedly wherever the other was not. A nervousness hovered over the soldiers behind them; they had heard that Gerpen say an unknown something alongside, and they had not seen anything. Yet, they did not doubt the eyes of their commander. The sun hung molten gold in the sky as the day continued to pass and the iron-shod horses continued to clop down the cobblestone road. Marstýs thought of the results of their visits to Bæryvun, the small nation bordered the southern half of the Dawnwalker mountains. The only nation smaller than distant Thalaan, Bæryvun was very nearly a vassal-state to Neldomark; the War of Attrition, some three hundred-fifty years ago, had ended with a treaty that, while granting Bæryvun the right to exist as an independent kingdom, stripped the southerly nation's ability to wage war by limiting the size of its military, banned imports of metal products to the country, and required an oath, the breaking of which was punishable by execution of the ruler and his family, to never, in confidence or in the open, display hostility of any sort to the Neldoan monarch, noble, diplomat, soldier, or even citizen.

*Why so strict?* Marstýs thought. *All we needed to do was limit their military, that would have taken care of the problem. Lords and Ladies know, they're going to be a problem sometime in the future. Bæryvun will want full independence again someday, and the fact that we so intensely dominate them means they think we consider them a threat. They're not afraid to violate the treaty, they've done so once bef—*

Arrows flew from the underbrush, men shouted, and horses screamed.

Marstýs yanked his sword from its place and shouted “Maerin, hedge the princess! Lances forwards and shields up, ready to dismount!”

Metal clattered as the thirty riders form a circle around Mirren and the other diplomats as hand-talk flashed between the Maerin.

The arrows stopped, and some fifty figures arose from the dense forest growth. Dressed in browns and grays and greens that blended into the underbrush and the trees, they carried a mixed collection of weapons from hand axes to bows, spears to swords, and maces to even flails. They wore also black masks like skulls, knife blades protruding from where the tongues should be and black orbs of obsidian in place of eyes.

And they chanted.

Harsh, guttural voices rumbled through the forests. “Shan’hazh mo’on, si’in haar Met’ron. Hadar’san mo’on, nan waar San’hadar.” The chant repeated over and over again.

But the Maerin and the lords of Neldomark had a chant of their own. The voices of Marstýs and Enarë rang out as one, loud and clear against the harsh voices surrounding them. “For the beaten and broken! For the fate awaiting! For the glory and the fall!”

The Maerin shouted the reply, also as one: “For the beaten and broken! For the lost and forsaken! Let us never surrender, may we rise unto the call!”

“For the beaten and broken! For the fate awaiting! For the glory and the fall!” Marstýs stood in his stirrups and pointed his sword up, towards the blazing sun. And in that moment, he had a certain presence; as if a hero of old leading his soldiers against the dark, as if he were not in a leather tabard, but instead resplendent in mirror polished armor and shield, glorious with a rippling banner and plume. He seemed then, truly noble. Glancing at Enarë, Marstýs jerked his head in a curt nod which the other man returned.

With that, they began their battle.