

The group rode back in silence behind Rufio's messengers. When they reached the adobe walls, the guards remained motionless as they passed through the iron gates into the citadel. Out of the sand-covered street, the courtyard was covered in cobblestone. Palm trees and hanging flowers lined the avenue between the gate and the citadel doors. Before the gates, a large fountain trickled in the calm of the morning. Between the pillars of the avenue, peacocks flitted in and out of sight. As a whole, the scene was as peaceful and beautiful as one could ask for in Emora. The feeling of serenity made Harlan all the more on edge.

At the end of the approach, stable boys waited to take their horses away. Harlan watched them go and then glanced up at the walls, where Emorans with curved swords, bows and spears patrolled. Before the old forester could hesitate, however, the citadel doors opened and they were ushered inside.

The citadel of Rufio was an oasis within an oasis. Where the outside of the fortress and the other buildings of — were red and brown adobe, the hallway leading to the Emoran warlord's seat was paralleled with marble columns. On the walls, precious paintings and statues scavenged and looted from caravans and other warlords, covered the walls. At the head of the hallway was Rufio himself.

Although the hour was early the warlord looked awake and alert, groomed to perfection. His dark curls were oiled and played around a silver circlet and his beard was trimmed close in an intricate pattern. A tiger on a golden chain sat at his feet, tail swishing back and forth. The host of women in thick silks sitting on the steps around warlord and beast looked uneasy. Harlan wasn't sure if that was from the tiger or Rufio.

The group of foreigners within ten feet of the throne and an urging from the messenger caused them to take a knee. Harlan stared at the marble floor while they were announced, wishing more and more with each passing minute that they were riding north.

"My lord, Harlan of Loriad and Chief Angus O'Cooley of the Nibelungen."

Harlan didn't know how they knew his name — the messenger hadn't asked. He wasn't left any time to wonder when Rufio stood and spoke.

"Welcome, Harlan," he said. Unlike many of the Emoran's who spoke the common Republic language, Rufio carried no hint of his native accent when he spoke. "I hope that your stay in my city has been enjoyable? You must forgive me for the late summons that keeps you from the road. I did not want you to leave without being able to enjoy my hospitality. Let it never be said that Rufio is not generous to visitors."

Harlan thought of the children begging in the streets and the rundown adobe buildings outside the warlord's walls but knew better than to mention them. "The pleasure is ours, my lord."

"Please," Rufio said. "Rise! The least I can do is offer you breakfast. Your men look hungry. Let them eat while we speak more."

The warlord clapped his hands and servants appeared from various side doors with covered plates. Other brought out long tables and chair and set them with fine silverware. The men and leprechauns took their seats. Rufio took his seat at the head and seated Harlan and Angus to his left and right.

The platters were uncovered and revealed corn flatbread, guava, barbecued desert lizard and sage hens. Although the fare was far from what the foresters and leprechauns enjoyed in their native lands, a winter of strange eating had helped them grow accustomed to the dishes and they dug in with relish. Meanwhile, at the head of the table, Harlan picked at his plate while Rufio spoke.

“I hear that the League and the Free Countries will war this spring?” the warlord asked. “I have also heard that there will be no League caravans heading east and none of the eastern countries will be able to pass the Loriad border?”

“We have been gone since early winter,” Harlan said. “You’ve probably got more current information than we do, my lord.”

“I try to stay updated on current events, it is true,” Rufio said. He turned away from Harlan to look at Angus. “I confess, I have never met a leprechaun before, my friend. What brings such a strange companionship to Emora?”

“The hospitality and the warmer clime,” Angus said. “Sure, it’s a grand country you have here milord.”

Harlan watched the exchange while chewing on a mouthful of flatbread. He was satisfied to see a hint of annoyance cross Rufio’s face at Angus’ evasive answer. The warlord took a long drink of wine and then plastered a fake smile on his face before he spoke to Harlan again.

“Come friends,” Rufio said. The hand not gripping his goblet toyed with the tip of his pointed beard. “I mean you no harm. I only ask because it is my business at the lord of —”

“No harm in that then,” Harlan said. “It’s no secret my lord. Last fall, both Loriad and the Simarron were attacked by good-sized Jotun warband. Although they were defeated, we believe they are only the first. We’d like to know why the Jotun, and the Periwaneeth for that matter, are settling in the Redlands.”

Rufio leaned back in his seat and placed his hands on the arms of his chair. “As would I, my friend,” he said. “I am hoping that you will be able to help me answer that question as well.” Harlan looked across the table at Angus. Although both harbored their guesses at Rufio’s summons, neither had expected to be asked for help. “What did you have in mind, my lord?”