

Imperator Barrett stroked his short beard and watched the procession of troops on parade in the ground in front of Skaldain's capital. Soldiers from all across the League stood at attention, marched and maneuvered. There were Gunnlings carls, fierce heavy infantry with scale mail, round shields and long, bearded axes, spearmen from Dunrath and armored swordsmen and halberdiers from Skaldain. Beyond the foot soldiers, far enough away that they could barely be seen were ranks of squat, bowlegged, sallow-skinned light horsemen from Scythea, the drovers of the Cattle Barons with long, light lances and Skaldean knights clad in plate armor.

"All told, we'll field about seven thousand soldiers in addition to another three thousand for the siege machines and the baggage train your excellency." The man who spoke stood with perfect posture next to the Imperator, his hands clasped behind his back and his eyes scanning the army below. General Linus Innsbruck was a military man through and through — neatly groomed, armor and weapons polished until they glowed and a born strategist and perfectionist. From his days as Steward, under Isaac, Reynard knew the general's loyalty was unwavering and his tactics unsurpassed by any in the League, even Harald the Cruel.

"When will you be able to march?" Reynard asked

General Innsbruck looked down and frowned at a spot on his breastplate. He rubbed at it with a gloved hand and continued. "The Skaldain and Dunrath troops have drilled all winter and the Gunnling carls are as disciplined and unwavering. Its the Scyths I'm not fully confident in. They're little more than raiders with no sense of for tactics or strategy. We've whipped them in to shape the last month though. The baggage train will be prepared in the next two days and we'll march at the end of the week my Imperator. I expect to reach Fordstown in three week's time."

"Excellent general," Reynard said. "As always, you surpass my expectations. When can we expect to hold Fordstown?"

The general's mustache lifted in the smallest of smirks and his eyes twinkled. "You know I don't make promises like that Reynard," Innsbruck said, dropping the formality between them. The closest guard was posted several yards away and would not have overheard the remark.

Reynard returned the smirk. "Just making sure you're paying attention Linus," he said. "What type of resistance are you expecting?"

"My latest reports indicate that King Aedd is fighting against our forces in the north," General Innsbruck said. "But he's heavily garrisoned the southwestern border of Loriad as well, especially Fordstown. My sources estimate the city has a garrison of one thousand men with another fifteen-hundred camped on the Loriad side of the Avenflow. King Garrid's war council has ended and he is riding north with the majority of his chiefs, nearly three thousand horse."

"We have the numbers then!" Reynard said.

General Innsbruck nodded. “Yes, but Fordstown is a highly defensible position. In addition to taking the walls, we’ll have to ferry our troops across the river and lower the western bridge. Fortunately, King Garrid will have the same problem moving his horsemen.”

Imperator Barrett smiled and slapped his general on the back. “I’m not worried Linus! A year from now, I’m confident we’ll be putting our cattle to pasture on the Sube Lowlands and have control all of the land trade east.”

General Innsbruck had his doubts but instead of voicing them, he gave a stiff bow. “As you say Imperator.”

After surveying the League’s army, Imperator Barrett left the walls of the citadel and made his way to his tower. War, if nothing else, brought with it a mountain of letters and reports to be read and Reynard was eager to get through the drudgery as fast as could be managed without interruption. With two guards in tow, he made his way across the citadel grounds, and through the gardens.

“Imperator! A word please.” Reynard cringed at the voice carrying through the pink and white tree blossoms. He had hoped taking the long route to his solace through the gardens at midmorning would have allowed him a moment’s peace. The interruption was only compounded by the person hailing him.

Clad in a magnificent blue robe, the Head Skald, Rhyman the Edda strolled toward the Imperator, an aide at his side. He had a thick tome tucked under one arm and pair of reading spectacles in the other. Reynard sighed inwardly *The last cursed man I wanted to bandy words with today*. Nevertheless, the Imperator forced a smile upon his face and inclined his head in greeting.

“My lord skald!” Reynard said in fake excitement. “What a joy it is to see you this morning. Decided to leave your dusty chambers and get a little fresh air I see.”

The head skald handed the book to his attendant and gave a sweeping bow. When he stood, he tucked a strand of loose gray hair behind his ear where the rest was pulled back. Deep blue eyes and a hawkish face met Reynard and seemed to bore into his mind.

“I do enjoy a stroll through the gardens in spring,” Rhyman said. “Aside from that, I find it...enlightening to clear the cobwebs from my ears and eyes and see the goings on in our city. I see General Innsbruck has assembled your forces?”

*I’m sure the eyes and ears you’ve placed throughout the citadel have told you much more than that, old man*, Reynard thought. It was publicly known that the skalds, and especially the head of their order, were against warring with the Free Countries. Throughout the winter, Reynard had fought tooth and nail to bypass Rhyman and his fellow Eddas — the highest ranking skalds who sat on the Assembly. In addition to wandering musicians and lore masters, the skalds were the lawmakers of Skaldain and, in twenty years, Reynard had been able to do little to curb their

power, nor was he able to overcome their rigid sense of right with bribery. *Were it not for cursed tradition, I would disband them for good.* As it was, unless he was prepared to risk civil war across Skaldain, Reynard knew he would have to continue his tug of war with the old men and women of the Eddas.