

“Well, damn.”

Captain Cheytan’s curse mixed with the dust of his horse troop and filled his mouth with grit. He was riding in King Garrid’s vanguard that had just reached the banks of the Avenflow River. To the northwest, another dust cloud, bigger than the Simarron vanguard, filled the air. Captain Cheytan knew its cause long before the scout returned — the Imperium League army.

In the four weeks since the Simarru army had rode from the Khanhorn, the warriors moved fasted and hard, cycling through fresh horses from the remuda herd and more often than not, eating, drinking and sleeping in the saddle. King Garrid had hoped to beat the Imperium League to the fords, but the short miles from Glittnair to the Loriad border allowed the League to win the race. Now the army was setting up camp on west bank of the Avenflow.

“What do you say captain?” asked a fellow Simarru captain. “Why don’t we ride in there and raise some hell?”

Cheytan laughed and whooped. “I wish we could, but it’s not my call. You know Minghan Temur wouldn’t allow it.”

“You’re right.” At his side, Captain Nakoma grinned, feathers dancing on the breeze amongst her raven hair in war braids. “What fun would it be if we routed the League our first day on the field of battle?”

The vanguard sat on top of a low rise, the only sound the mutter of horses and the animal’s annoyed stamping hooves and tail swishes at the flies just beginning to show in the warm spring weather. In the wide fields in front of them, it would have been impossible for the Simarru scouts to advance undetected in the bright sun of late morning. In some places though, the grass almost as tall as a man — a last scattering of the lush grasslands of the Simarron Plain — and the League army seemed to be concerned with fortifying their camp, not catching scouts. As such, Cheytan could see the Simarru outriders weaving through the tall grass unmolested.

By the time the scouts returned, a long line of haze behind them announced the coming of the main force of Simarron riders. Cheytan waited patiently while one of his scouts took a long swig from a water skin and allowed his mount to be led away by one of the horseboys.

“There are at least five thousand of them captain,” the scout said. “Carls from Gunnheim, footmen from Dunrath and Skaldain, along with those knights of their. They’ve also got a fair amount of drovers and Scyth light cavalry.”

Cheytan smirked. The greatest horsemen to ever ride in Peldrin, the Simarru looked down their noses at other cavalry such as Skaldain knight and and the mounted Scyth raiders. The Simarru captain, and all of King Garrid’s riders were eager to throw their prowess against the League’s horse.

“That’s a lot of horses waiting for us to take,” Cheytan said. “What about archers?”

The scout shook his head. “Not many. The drovers Scythys are middling horse archers and the Dunrath, Gunnheim and Skaldain troops all of bowmen mixed in, but nothing to match our warriors or the Lorish foresters.”

Captain Cheytan nodded. “Well done. Switch out your horse, get all the supplies you need and pick ten more men to accompany you. Keep a close eye on the camp but do not engage the enemy. If they chase you off, return to camp immediately. We’ll be along the river to the east.”

The scout tipped his lance and trotted off. Captain Cheytan watched as the men around him gave the same orders to their outriders as well. When the scouts were mounted on fresh horses, and resupplied with a remount in tow, the vanguard turned east. *Now we’ve got to find a place to cross that cursed river.*

The Simarron army made camp just beyond the site of the League forces, on the eastern bend of the Avenflow. In the distance, Fordstown could be seen to the north. Later in the evening, scouts reported General Innsbruck was still fortifying his position and that the Lorish forces on Fordstown had raised the drawbridge connecting the river island with the Skaldain banks of the Avenflow. At sunset, two ferries of Lorish soldiers crossed the river and were brought before King Garrid.

The foresters pulled back their mottled cloaks, revealing haggard faces and days-old beards. On their backs rode quivers of heavy war arrows, with armor piercing heads and the mighty longbows the Lorish were famous for. Each man also wore a shirt of mail beneath the cloaks and an arming sword at his waist.

“Greetings King Garrid,” said one, saluting. “We bring word from Fordstown’s commander.”

“Please, join us at our council,” King Garrid said. Captain Cheytan waited until the men were inside the giant round tent before he followed behind. Inside, the whole of the king’s command staff was present, from the *arbans*, or captains, to the *minghan*, General Temur as well as the three tribal chiefs. The Lorish messengers took a place in the circle around the fire. Cheytan noticed one of the men, a tall figure with strong features and shoulder-length hair gazing around at the council while their leader spoke.

“We believe the League army will wear down the walls with ballista, onagers and trebuchet,” the Lorish leader said. “Once they’ve dropped a few towers or a section of the wall, we think they’ll ferry troops across on rafts and barges. There are also rumors that they’ve hauled a small fleet of Gunnling longships with the train and will assemble them to blockade the river. As you saw, they’re still fortifying their camp and hadn’t taken any other actions when we sent to meet you.”

“Who is your commander?” King Garrid asked.

“General Kirk Bramstoke, sire,” the Lorish leader said. “His sister is the mayor’s wife. My name is Miles, sire. I am captain of the scouts.”

“Very good,” King Garrid said. “I have heard of this Bramstoke. A sound commander I am told. What are his plans of defense, for the city and your army camped on the eastern bank?”

“We have a number of barges available if we need to ferry men across the river, sire.” Captain Miles said. “If the League does have longships with them, we may be in trouble. All of the barges are owned by river traders, who are being paid by King Aedd for their services, they’re not equipped to fight Gunnling longboats.”

“Therein lies our problem.” General Temur stood with the king’s permission and swept his gaze around the circle. “Our forces are essentially divided into three: the Fordstown garrison, the Lorish camp on the eastern banks and ourselves, here to the southwest, on the same side of the river as the League. General Innsbruck will seek to occupy either our riders or the Lorish camp and then throw the main body of his troops at the city. *And* he has the numbers to do so.”