

A man, tall and handsome, strode down a wide hall with tall marble colonnades upholding a roof tiled with scenes from history. Scenes of Maelon the Tall and his brother Thaddeus Ironsides in battle, scenes of peace treaties made and broken, scenes of the First and Second Wars of the North, titanic power struggles with Ossétia for total control of the Haal'iyian Coast, and even a few scenes of the War of Attrition with Bæryvun. The man looked at none of them. His eyes were at the end of the hall. His boots echoed in the quiet of the morning, clacking on the granite floor as his steps brought him ever closer to his destination.

Another man stood at a balcony at the end of the hall. This man was short and stocky with a weaselly face that betrayed his cruelty. At his side was a dagger, uncommon but not unheard of in those times. The dagger was quite ornate, with gold line work in the hilt and a silver pommel. Enhiras Mekam had a reputation for excessive cruelty in the name of order. He often tortured criminals to their deaths, then displayed their mutilated corpses outside the city or town where they had been breaking laws. If not for his love of pain and obsession with death, he would have been one of the most prominent generals in Neldomark, if not the world. For, while ruthless, he was vastly intelligent. He was one of those few who could see and predict patterns. Looking back some seventy years later, long after his death, it would be realized that Mekam had been a Warmaster.

"Enhiras, how go the preparations?" Ceshmir was never one for the frivolity of formalities. His voice was deep and commanding, peppered with the hint of a Wilds accent.

The other man chuckled. Enhiras had a laugh that unsettled most people who heard it; it started as a groaning exhale that turned into something like the sound of rocks grating together. His voice was also unsettling. "Ever one for bluntness, Lord Gerpen." Nasally, his voice constantly bore a condescending tone that, no matter what he said, made it seem as if he were talking down to you.

Ceshmir Gerpen, Lord of Dan'welden, glared at the short man in front of him. Ceshmir could turn his commanding presence into an intimidating one if he so needed.

Enhiras rolled his eyes. "The preparations go quite well, Lord Gerpen. There is nearly an entire centyra currently garrisoned at Daernholm."

"Nearly an entire centyra is less than a thousand men, general." Ceshmir had always been one who lacked in patience, and he was known for his temper.

The condescending tone of Enhiras's voice filled the end of the hall. "It would be *monumentally* unwise to dump troops into Daernholm. The fortress is less than twenty leagues from the Ossétin border; they would be sure to notice if *fifteen thousand* soldiers suddenly arrived at our closest stronghold to their border. The buildup has to happen slowly, and the soldiers have to be covert in their activities." A sneer painted the short man's face the entire time he spoke. "Bar-covern is a large city that will not easily be taken. However, it is also not in a strategically sound location. I—" He clacked his jaw shut as a messenger boy ran up to Ceshmir.

"Letter for you, sir." The youth had a ruddy complexion, with a round face and large brown eyes. He wore fine clothing, so he was probably the nephew of some minor lord or other. He held an envelope out, which Ceshmir took.

“Thank you, boy. I’m sure you have other duties?” He raised an eyebrow at the youth.

“Yes m’lord.” He gave a quick bow and bolted off down the hall.

Lord Gerpen watched until he was out of sight then opened the letter. His eyes slowly scanned the page, and Enhiras waited eagerly. Ceshmir’s jaw tightened as he slowly folded the paper back into the envelope.

“Do we have the support of Dan’bar? I saw the seal and—”

“No!” Ceshmir snapped at him. “No, we do not. Highmarshall Kharne is not with us.”

Enhiras wrung his hands together. “That is not good, not good at all. Are you sure you were not too obvious as to why you wanted the troops?”

Ceshmir stared at the short man, contempt spreading across his face. “Do you really think I don’t know what I’m doing?”

Enhiras stared right back. “Of course you don’t. Otherwise you would not have brought me into your inner circle.” He smiled. An ugly smile, it looked more like a grimace of disgust than a grin of joy. Or sarcasm.

Ceshmir’s face twisted in anger. “You insolent sadist. I ought to have you strung up and—”

“But you won’t do that because I’m too valuable.” He flashed another ugly smile. “Wouldn’t want to waste a good general on an execution, now would you.” Enhiras held the other man’s stare with his hand on the hilt of his dagger, daring him to strike.

“Bah! I don’t have time for your... your frivolousness.” With those words, Ceshmir strode away from the general, muttering to himself in an angry undertone.

Enhiras watched Ceshmir walk away, strides longer and quicker than when he had first arrived to the conversation. *Like prey, running from the predator.* His unsettling chuckle bounced off the marble walls again as he pulled his dagger from its sheath, balancing the point on the tip of his finger.

Killing that one would be fun.