

Steel 161

Chapter 161: The Council of Cordoba I

Enough time had passed since the Proclamation of the German Reformation, to the point where the authorities of the Catholic Church, or at least those who were still loyal to it, had gathered in Cordoba at its famous Cathedral. There they began to squabble about the ongoing events that were of pressing concern. Berengar's Reformation was far more popular than they had initially estimated, especially after the revelation of the Church's infinite corruption and crimes by Ludolf. As such, this was the most important concern in which they discussed at the gathering.

Simeon, as always, had started the meeting by shouting at anyone who opposed him. Though he called this meeting ahead of schedule to address the German Reformation and the Schism between the Papacy in Avignon and the Vatican, he was not a diplomatic man. He was currently engaged in a debate with the Pope of Avignon, Avilius III, over what should be done about the matter.

"If we do not mend our differences, this heresy being called the German Reformation will sweep across Christendom like a plague!"

However, Avilius was in disagreement after all Berengar had labeled it the German reformation. After the last meeting, the French Pope had gathered quite a bit of information on Berengar. As far as he could tell, Berengar's ambitions solely lay within the German-speaking regions. Thus he did not accept the notion that this Reformation was designed for anything more than Germany. Thus he was certain to voice his opinion on the matter.

"Berengar and his pet priest Ludolf have labeled this the German Reformation. Why should I care what those savages to the East believe? The Holy Roman Empire is your puppet, not mine!"

Avilius, as always, was drinking from an entire flagon of wine while making his opinion well heard. Though he was not as abrasive as Simeon, he was equally short-sighted, not realizing that allowing the German Reformation to fester could allow newer branches of Christianity to pop up and further challenge Papal Authority. These two men were both proclaiming themselves

to be the central figure of authority for all of Christendom, and as such, were constantly at one another's throats.

Simeon, as always, was flushed with rage; his face was practically the color of a tomato as he shouted at Avilius once more.

"Not your problem! The souls of every German are at risk to this heresy. Do you not care about their salvation?"

Avilius merely smirked smugly in response to Simeon's accusations. He could not very well admit his utter contempt for the German people; after all, such a declaration would be unbefitting of a man who proclaimed himself Pope. However, he could not reject the claim in good conscience, as doing so would compromise his beliefs. This action, of course, further enraged Simeon, who struggled to contain his growing wrath.

Seeing the direction in which the meeting was heading toward one of the Cardinals present immediately raised a major concern. After all, the voice of reason who normally convinced these two to behave themselves was no longer present, for he had switched sides and joined the German Reformation.

"Cardinal Engelbert is no longer with us, and as such, we should take time to consider the consequences of having a Cardinal join this heresy known as the German Reformation."

Seeing that the discussion was switched in another direction, the two Popes decided to put aside their differences for the time being and address this concern. Avilius' reaction was quite extraordinary.

"We should capture all of the German Cardinals and interrogate them to find out whether or not they have sympathies for this Heresy! It is the only way to ensure that more of them do not flock to this so-called Reformation."

Simeon, on the other hand, was once more outraged over Avilius's ideas. Though the Italian Monarch led the Holy Roman Empire, the Kingdom of Germany had always been an important factor in the Empire's stability; for many centuries, the German monarchs ruled the Empire. With the ongoing civil and religious crisis in Germany, the power and authority of the Holy

Roman Emperor had diminished. In Simeon's view, if they were to discriminate against the German Cardinals who have shown no sign of heresy, then they would be driving more people into the German Reformation, thus weakening the authority of not only the Vatican but also the Holy Roman Empire.

Of course, the only person who would benefit from such an outcome would be Avilius, the Pope of Avignon, whose influence greatly stretched to the Kingdom of France, which had a long-standing rivalry with Germany for many centuries. As such, Simeon quickly responded to this idea with contempt.

"You would like that wouldn't you, Avilius? The only person who could benefit from the resulting chaos that would ensue would be you!"

Avilius, of course, was drinking from his flagon of wine when he denied the accusations against him.

"I am sure I have no idea what you are talking about, Simeon."

The result of this brief exchange caused the entire council to result in chaos as the cardinals and bishops who gathered all began to scream at each other and hurl insults. Eventually, a loud whistling noise appeared across the room, instantly silencing all of the banter. When the cardinals and bishops searched for who was responsible for the noise, they noticed a Cardinal scowling at all of them as if they were a bunch of bratty children. After staring down the crowd of clergymen for some time, the Cardinal finally voiced his opinion on the matter.

"It has become increasingly clear to me that neither Avilius nor Simeon are fit to be Pope; thus, what I propose is simple. Both of you, two imbeciles, step down from your positions and allow us all to elect a single new Pope, one who is actually capable of combatting the crisis in which we find ourselves!"

Avilius and Simeon immediately protested this option. However, they found little support in the room.

"Absolutely not!"

"Who are you calling an imbecile?"

Yet, not a single voice defended them among the crowd; the two men finally realized that their support had dwindled. Last year this council was split into two sides that supported either of the two potential Popes. However, now, after the debacle that had occurred during this timeframe and their petty squabbling, not a single clergyman within the room was in support of either of these prospective Popes. The Cardinal who voiced this option stared menacingly at the two self-proclaimed Popes and chastised them like children.

"Engelbert joined the Reformist movement because he was sick and tired of dealing with you idiots and felt that the Reformist movement provided a better alternative. If neither of you is willing to abdicate, then you leave us with no choice. We will elect a new Pope and declare both of your positions invalid, which will only further increase the volatility of the situation we find ourselves in. For once in your lives, you two should do what is best for the Church and not your own selfish ambitions!"

After such a verbal thrashing, both Simeon and Avillius looked at each other with helpless expressions; ultimately, Avillius was the first to speak.

"I voluntarily abdicate my position as head of the Papacy of Avignon and hereby declare my support to the election of a new unified Pope!"

With Avillius abdication, all that remained was Simeon. As such, the entire Council of Cordoba stared at him with intimidating eyes before finally the man broke from the pressure and bent to their will.

"I, too, abdicate my position."

With that, the two former Popes sat down in their seats and admitted defeat. They may be a pair of incompetent fools. Still, even they could realize when they lacked support if they refused to abdicate, they would be forced by the Ecclesiarchy out of their positions and wander the world as Self-Proclaimed Popes with no real power or authority. It was best to remove themselves and still maintain some degree of authority within a unified Catholic Church.

Thus, the College of Cardinals would hold an election in the upcoming month, where a single Pope would be elected and placed in command of the Catholic Church for years to come. Whether or not this Pope would be more competent than Simeon and Avilius were yet to be known, but it was a good start on the

path to recovery. Though they solved one of the major issues of contention, Two major issues presented themselves, which needed to be thoroughly discussed. The ongoing German Reformation and the Teutonic State's war with the Golden Horde. As such, the Council had only begun to solve the current crisis the Catholic Church was going through.

While the Council of Cordoba was ongoing, Berengar and his allies in the German Reformation had made great plans to secure the regions in which their movement had taken a foothold. Tyrol, of course, was as secure as a region could become in this chaotic age, yet Berengar's neighbors would need some assistance, and the young Count was more than happy to capitalize on such a venture.

Chapter 162: Council of Cordoba II

Many of the Cardinals and Bishops had gathered within the Cathedral of Cordoba to discuss the many problems currently plaguing the Catholic Church. Though they had finally found a solution to mend the old Western Schism that had been ongoing for close to half a century, there were still two major issues that presented themselves. Chief among them was the ongoing German Reformation, which had spread beyond their control. To the Southern regions of Germany. As such, the various Cardinals and Bishops were discussing how to move forward. With Simeon and Avillius removed from power, the conversation was far more cordial between the various factions of the Church.

At the moment, the answer which everyone had agreed to was military force. However, the military orders of the Catholic church were all busy fighting external enemies at the moment, and the last group of Crusaders, which was tasked with eliminating Berengar and purging Tyrol of heretics, was slaughtered in battle by Berengar's forces. As for the Vatican, they were aware that Berengar was using advanced weapons within his army. One man, in particular, acted as a second-hand witness to this information. That was the Prince-Bishop of Trent, whose lands were annexed by Berengar during his winter campaign to seize Tyrol.

The Prince-Bishop spoke with an intense hatred for Berengar about the issues at hand and how it would not be an easy task to route out the Reformists who have mostly formed within the mountainous territory of the Alps.

"The weapons in which Berengar's infantry use have the capacity to kill a man at over 400 yards; they penetrate through plate armor with ease and leave an untreatable hole in the victim's bodies! These are no mere hand cannons but something else entirely! The average soldier is equipped with plate armor that covers their vital areas, and is virtually impenetrable by man's weapons! If we are to march on the Alps, we would need a massive force, one in which is armed with the hand cannon in vast numbers!"

The surrounding clergymen listened to this Prince-Bishop's rant, and many of them did not believe their ears. After all, how could such a weapon possibly exist? Nevertheless, what came next shocked them further.

"He employs cannons, whose cannonballs explode upon impact, killing multiple men within the blast zone! These cannons are highly maneuverable and far more destructive than anything we have seen before! I know not how he obtained these advanced weapons, but we can not win by sheer numbers. After all, the Teutonic Order tried these tactics, and they were trapped in the mountains where the heretics mercilessly slaughtered them!

The more the Prince-Bishop ranted and raved about the spectacular performance of Berengar's weapons and the armies who wielded them, the more clergymen within the meeting began to disregard his words as pure fiction. At a point, a relatively fat and loathsome Cardinal raised his head and began to insult the Prince-Bishop.

"I suppose you personally witnessed these weapons in use?"

This question immediately made the Prince-Bishop of Trent frown; after all, he had not witnessed the battle that had taken place; instead, he was hiding like a coward in his Cathedral before fleeing the city while his soldiers sacrificed themselves. Ultimately he had to admit to the fact that this was all second-hand information from his garrison commander.

"I am afraid not; however, this information was reported to me by my garrison commander before he and his men distracted the heretics long enough for me to escape to the Vatican to deliver the news!"

Several of the attending members of the council of Cordoba began to scoff at the Prince-Bishop of Trent's words. Clearly, the Prince-Bishop believed the

wild tales of a frightened soldier, or so many of the council members believed. Ultimately few decided to take the Prince-Bishop's warning seriously. After all, they severely lacked the manpower to invade Southern Germany in the first place. That is, of course, until one of the Cardinals proposed an opportunity.

"Why don't we call for a Crusade to wipe out the heretics in Germany? It has worked before. Even if they are as well-armed as the Prince-Bishop claims, what can they possibly do against an army of a hundred thousand men who have taken up the cross? Surely we can sponsor such a vast army, by calling upon the Lords and Knights of Europe to defend Christendom from this vile blasphemy? Do we really need to wait for the existing holy orders to finish their wars when we can create new ones?"

These were all excellent questions, which could easily be answered, after all, it had been quite some time since a Pope had declared a Crusade, and due to the success of the previous Crusades in this world, the idea was quite popular and would undoubtedly draw in a lot of potential troops to invade Southern Germany with. After a bit of discussion, this was how the Council of Cordoba chose to deal with Berengar and the Reformist movement.

Unfortunately for the future Crusaders, by the time they could fully prepare such a massive force for the invasion, years would have passed, and Tyrol would be a self-sustaining stronghold. Berengar would be more than ready for such a force. However, how could these men possibly know the future? As such, after figuring out how to deal with the German Reformation, they moved on to the last topic at hand. One of the participating Cardinals brought up the matter of the Teutonic State and the crisis they were currently facing.

"The Teutonic Order has angered the Golden Horde by waging war against the Grand Duchy of Moscow, which is their protectorate; they are currently facing a crisis the likes we have not seen in decades. If we aid them, we will only be furthering the rift forming with the Eastern Orthodox Church. How shall we proceed?"

Instantly the opinion of the participating clergymen was divided, some supported the Teutonic Order, and others believed they should never have been attacking the Orthodox to begin with. As such, they quickly devolved into an argument about this issue. One of the Bishops attending voiced his support for the Teutonic Order and their conquests of the East.

"The Teutonic Order is the bulwark of Christendom in the East; they must not fall to these heathens! I say we supply them with the funding and equipment necessary to win the war at their doorsteps!"

However, a Cardinal instantly voiced his objection to this matter.

"Preposterous, we should never have been involved with the Teutonic Order's war in the first place. If Simeon had not supported them in their efforts, they never would have had the ability to take over the Muscovites. Now more than ever, we need to rely on our allies to the East. The German Reformation will be causing a lot of troubles in the future, and we will need the support of the Orthodox short if we seek to end it swiftly!"

Without a Pope in the audience, there was no way to move forward with the ideas presented unless all parties agreed; they could easily agree on a Crusade to crush the German Reformation, but supporting the Teutonic Order during their crisis in which they brought upon themselves? That was a point of contention between the various factions of the Church. As such, the men continued to squabble amongst themselves over this one issue for a week before concluding that they would provide material aid to the Teutonic Order, but they would not provide any troops or economic support.

The Teutonic Order was left on its own to fight the enemies in which it had created, at least for the most part. After all, the Church was more concerned with putting down the German Reformation, which posed a far greater threat than the Golden Horde. If this were the army of Genghis Khan from centuries prior, then maybe there would be a need for concern. However, at the moment, Berengar was a far greater threat for the Church, and they needed time and resources to prepare for a great Crusade against him and his followers.

Berengar, of course, anticipated this move by the Church, and he had no qualms building a sufficient force in the meantime to deal with the threat the Crusaders would pose shortly. However, for now, he was fairly relaxed as he focused his efforts on what he had been doing since his return from the campaign in Tyrol. Building his army and defenses while maintaining his trade with the various factions who wanted his arms and armor.

As for the Reformation's place in this world? It was not so easily diminished; word had spread that the German Reformation had begun, and plenty of people saw it as an opportunity to take back power from the Church, something in which most secular rulers had desired for some time. Even if they did not necessarily agree with the teachings of the German Reformation themselves, the idea of getting rid of the Church's influence over secular affairs was attractive enough to join in with the Reformist Movement as such Berengar's allies grew in numbers, which would be useful in the upcoming war with the Catholic Church.

Ultimately the Council of Cordoba ended in what could be considered a monumental success for the Catholic Church, the Western Schism had been mended, and a plan was in place to deal with the German Reformation, as for the Teutonic State, they were left to their own devices for the most part. Thus the Catholic Church had addressed the ongoing crises from which it was currently suffering. However, in the end, this would not be enough to stop the growing tide of the German Reformation and Berengar's rise to power.

Chapter 163: Catfight

The light of the sun shone down upon Adela's room and through her glass window, illuminating her doll-like face as she slept beneath her covers. It was well past dawn, and yet the young girl still slept; after all, she was still growing and, as such, needed her beauty rest. After a short period of struggling to adjust to the light which beamed upon her, she began to pout before opening her deep sapphire eyes and gazing at her window with contempt.

Now that she was awake, she decided to get out from under her covers, where she wore a frilly white nightgown; as per most of her clothing, Berengar designed it with both comfort and aesthetic in mind. The soft silk material dangled loosely from the growing curves of her adolescent body. After stretching for a little bit, she decided to go about her morning basic hygiene rituals such as bathing, brushing her teeth, and flossing before finally dressing in her exquisite attire based on Tudor and Elizabethan clothing patterns from Berengar's past life.

After getting dressed in her daily attire, she progressed to the dining hall where her family was gathering to eat breakfast; ever since her sister Ava had arrived in Graz, Adela had been doing her best to stay away from the woman, after all despite being siblings the two got along about as well as cats and

dogs. For whatever reason, the Count of Salzburg's son and heir was spending his time in Graz with his wife and three children. Though Adela did not understand why this was the case, after all, Salzburg was safe enough, and the excuse of being on vacation visiting Ava's family had long since grown suspicious.

Despite Adela's growing concerns over her eldest sister's stay, she still tried to play nice with the young woman, and as such, the two sat across from one another at the dining table, where the two began to mince words. Ava was, as always, the perpetrator of their little disputes, and as such, decided to bully her cute little sister.

"Adela, I heard your fiance was bold enough to declare his heresy as a reformation! I wonder what will happen to him when the Pope finally declares a crusade to deal with the trouble he has caused; I worry for your safety, after all, you are engaged to the man that the Church refers to as Berengar the Accursed!"

Immediately the women went straight for the heart, knowing that Adela's relationship with Berengar was her most vulnerable point. However, since their first dispute, Adela had grown wiser and noticed that her eldest sister so commonly targetted Berengar with her words in an attempt to rile her up as such, Adela was as calm as a pond's surface as she rebutted Ava's taunt.

"Any force the Vatican sends into Tyrol will end up the same as the last group of fools who entered Berengar's domain in an attempt to remove him from power."

She was quite obviously referring to the slaughter of the Teutonic Order's army, which marched into Berengar's lands; the result of that battle was well known among the Lords and Ladies of the German-speaking regions. However, Ava knew something that most did not know; after all, her husband was the son and heir to the Count of Salzburg, and his father's spy network was extensive. As such, she further taunted Adela with her attacks on Berengar's character.

"Poor sweet little Lambert, I heard Berengar used some vile sorcery to kill that poor boy in battle; what kind of black-hearted man murders his own little brother?"

Though Adela tried to stay calm, hearing her sister compliment Lambert while insulting Berengar's character was enough to invoke ire in her heart.; Ava dared to act like Lambert was a saint, despite knowing of his past deeds. However, this was exactly how the Church was behaving about the issue. Every since Lambert's death, he had become a martyr in the eyes of Catholics and a stain on Berengar's reputation.

Every wicked deed the boy had ever committed was wiped away from his past by the powerful propaganda network of the Church; the Catholic church depicted him as an exceptionally pious man who voluntarily gave up his inheritance to serve the Teutonic Order. Where he was deployed to bring his brother, a condemned heretic, to justice. However, as the two fought on the battlefield, Berengar blinded Lambert with some vile sorcery before stabbing him in the back.

This was the tale in which the Catholic church told the world about Lambert and Berengar's duel within the battlefield of Oberstdorf. Obviously, it was completely fabricated, but unlike Adela, who now thought of herself as a reformist due to Berengar's influence, Ava was a devout Catholic much like the rest of her family and chose to further propagate this story, despite knowing its falsehood in a deliberate attempt to mess with Adela. Hearing such provoking words Adela could not control herself and immediately lashed out at Ava, who had succeeded in her aim.

"You know full well that Lambert was a devious little scoundrel who on multiple occasions tried to murder Berengar! What was his punishment for such actions? He was disowned and sent to the Teutonic Order to redeem himself, where he used the first opportunity he could get to try to get revenge on Berengar for being merciful; if you ask me, Berengar should have cut off his head, to begin with, it would have saved everyone some trouble!"

Ava smiled devilishly as she witnessed Adela fuming with anger, to the point where her cheeks were puffing like a chipmunk and were slightly flushed; in Ava's eyes, it was adorable. After seeing such a sight, of course, Ava could not resist and further poured salt on the wound.

"I suppose that is the excuse he told you after stealing Lambert's fiancée and impregnating her, right?"

Adela continued to fume in anger, but she did not lose control of her emotions. Instead, she forced herself to calm down before addressing Ava's last point. For the past few months, ever since Ava arrived, she had continuously beaten Adela in any argument solely because she would bring up this point after being sorely defeated in the previous rounds of engagement and cause Adela to throw a tantrum. However, not this time, Adela had finally figured out how to beat Ava this time around, and she threw her words right back into her face.

"So what if Berengar has a lover? He is a great man, and plenty of great men have had multiple women by their side throughout history! If your husband was half as accomplished as Berengar, he too could take a lover, and I doubt you would mind!"

These words completely baffled Ava and attacked her weakest point. She knew her husband was not nearly as accomplished as Berengar, nor would he ever achieve half of the things Berengar had in life. Aside from coming from a powerful family and being slightly good looking, her husband was a relatively dull and unambitious man. The fact that her youngest sister managed to get someone like Berengar as a fiance had greatly invoked her ire, and it was her reason for picking on Adela all of the time.

While Ava had an ugly expression on her face, Adela was smirking smugly at her, oh how the tables have turned. As for her husband, who was slightly older than Ava herself and was named Wolfgang von Salzburg, it took him a few moments to realize that Adela had essentially implied he was a loser. During that time, Ava lashed out at Adela as she pounded the table with her fists extremely uncivilly.

"You think you are better than me because your fiance is extremely handsome, has never been defeated in battle, and is absurdly wealthy? How dare you!?!"

Adela was delighted at the moment, ever since Ava had first arrived, she had continued to lose these daily catfights, but now the shoe was on the other foot. Apparently, Ava was a very sore loser. As such, Adela merely scoffed at Ava and told her the words she was told every time she erupted at Ava in the past.

"We will discuss this later when you calm down."

If Ava's expression was ugly before, it was now outright hideous, she wanted to pounce at Adela on the spot, but she knew she could not do so; after all, such behavior was unladylike, and she had an image to maintain. As such, she quickly dug into the food on her plate while grumbling under her breath. Of course, it was at this moment Wolfgang finally realized that maybe there was a slight possibility that Adela had just insulted him, and as such, he whispered in Ava's ear asking about it.

"Did she just call me a loser?"

Ava nearly snapped at her husband's response; not only was he dull enough not to realize that he was insulted, but he had the nerve to ask her about it in front of the perpetrator; she really wishes she was married off to someone more like Berengar. Though she looked down on Berengar for being born into low nobility, the more he accomplished, the more Ava became jealous of Adela. After all, who cares about whether someone is born into low nobility or not when they go from being a baron's son and heir to a Count mighty enough to flip the bird to the Vatican in under a year?

After this little catfight was over, the family's breakfast continued in awkward silence; the only one satisfied with the results of this meal was Adela; she had won a great moral victory today against her sister. Adela believed it was doubtful that Ava would mock Berengar further now that her weakness was exposed. As such, she enjoyed the thick German Pancakes on her plate with delight.

Chapter 164: Death of a Duke

For the past few months, Duke Wilmar of Austria has been in the process of conquering Bavaria. However, despite his initial progress, he currently found himself in a stalemate with the armies of Bavaria, which have returned from their campaign in Northern Germany to reclaim the land in which they had lost to Austria. Despite the advantages the Austrians initially had in this war, they now found themselves struggling to maintain the ground they had conquered.

The Bavarians had made great gains in Northern Germany, pursuing their claim for the vacant throne, however after realizing that the Austrians had stolen their Capital, they were forced to withdraw from their holdings and leave it to reconquest by the House of Luxembourg and their allies. As such, they were in a furious state as they gazed across the battlefield to see the

Dastardly Austrians who had attacked them while they were pursuing their ambitions.

The two Dukes led their respective armies with Duke Wilmar von Habsburg in control of his personal forces and those of his vassals. Duke Dietger von Wittelsbach was in charge of the Bavarian army. Seeing as how nearly all of the two Duke's forces were gathered for this event, this would be the single most important battle of the war in Southern Germany to decide who would reign supreme, Austria or Bavaria. The battle ultimately would take place outside the city of Passau in Eastern Bavaria. Duke Wilmar was currently discussing the plans for the grand battle which was about to take place with his vassals, who were commanders in his army.

"Count Otto, my old friend, I wish for you to command the rear-guard, make sure that our flanks hold the line against any potential attack, especially that of Cavalry."

Seeing that he was not tasked with leading the Vanguard, Otto frowned, however despite his objections, he agreed to the Duke's orders and voiced his support.

"I will do as you command your grace."

Duke Wilmar was, of course, pleased with this result, as for the next comment from the Duke, it surprised nobody.

"Count Walfried von Salzburg, you are tasked with leading the Vanguard!"

Walfried pounded his chest as he saluted his liege while responding to his orders.

"You honor me, your grace!"

With those two positions taken care of, Duke Wilmar moved on to his overall strategy.

"While Walfried advances with the Vanguard, I will lead the cavalry which we will split into two units and circle around the enemy's lines where we shall attack them from the rear of their flanks. Once the flanks are crushed, the

Bavarians will have to fall back and reinforce their lines; as they do so, the Vanguard will rush in and cut them down before they manage to do so."

It was a simple enough strategy and had worked numerous times before; as such, none of the Lords who were present had any complaints about the tactics they would use to defeat the Bavarians. The last remark the Duke made was about his archers.

"The Archers will be placed atop both of these hills on both sides of the battlefield, where they will rain missiles down upon our foes."

After these words were stated, all of the Lords who witnessed this conversation nodded in agreement. Shortly thereafter, they were all set to the task, and the battle had begun. The Archers took their positions on the hilltop and began to rain their arrows down upon the enemy forces, just as planned.

However, unfortunately, it appeared as if the Bavarians were just as well equipped as the Austrians; as such, the arrows were largely deflected off of the heavily armored infantry of the enemy. The fact that the Bavarians were so well equipped was shocking to the Austrians, seeing as how the Austrian Lords had spent a fortune on Berengar's arms and armor preparing for this war. Despite this fact, the Bavarians seemed to be equally well equipped, at least for the most part, which began to fill the Lords of Austria with doubt over Berengar's loyalty.

Nevertheless, now was not the time to worry about such concerns, and though the arrows could not pierce the brigandine or plate, they easily slid into the gaps in the enemy armor when fired in a volley numbering in the thousands. There were still many wounds inflicted on the Bavarian troops before they arrived in combat with the Austrian infantry. Still, it was strange that there was no sign of Bavarian Archers or Crossbowmen deployed to the battlefield, which filled Count Otto with angst as he commanded the rear guard, watching the battle from afar.

The moment the two feudal armies made contact with one another, blood and death began to spray about the fertile grassland that was the battlefield. Corpses littered the field as the steel-clad armies clashed with one another like an enormous metallic tidal wave. As the battle continued to rage, Duke Wilmar finally found an opening for his cavalry, and as such, he began his

charge; just like in the battle plan, the heavily armored knights mounted on horseback broke into units and went around the vanguard of the enemy army where they proceeded to attack their flanks from the rear. With their lances couched, and the force of the horse's charge, even high-quality steel plate armor could be damaged by such a powerful blow.

As such, the heavily armored Knights of Austria led by Duke Wilmar crashed into the enemy flanks, driving their lances through their chests and ending their lives. Quickly the Bavarian flanks began to crumble, and the plan seemed to be working perfectly. However, unlike Duke Wilmar had estimated, the moment the enemy flanks crumbled, the men began to route and fled into the distance. Seeing this as an opportunity for victory, Duke Wilmar charged ahead of his infantry and into the routing forces.

However, this turned out to be a grave mistake, as the enemy forces were pulling a classic feigned retreat. By the time the Knights of Austria arrived in front of their enemies, they were encircled by thousands of crossbowmen and archers who unleashed a massive volley from 360 degrees around the Austrian Knights. Though the bolts of the crossbows could not penetrate the toughness of the steel-plate armor, they could get into the gaps between them, causing injuries to the Knights and Nobleman who were encapsulated, as well as their trusty steeds.

Before long, the entire contingent of Knights who had broken the Bavarian flanks found themselves dismounted as the continuous volley fire had gravely injured their horses; many of them were wounded or had even perished in the attack by the crossbowman. After all, the plate armor of the time was not as advanced as what Bernegar equipped his cavalry with. Many Knights wore mail aventails for throat protection, rather than gorget or great bascinet, which allotted some degree of steel plate throat protection. Thus the crossbow bolts of the heavy steel crossbows were capable of piercing through the mail aventail and into their throats.

Duke Wilmar and his surviving Knights quickly recovered from the attack. However, they soon found themselves surrounded by the enemy infantry, and they were a long way off from their own army. As such, a vicious struggle appeared as the Knights of Austria battled to the death with the men at arms of Bavaria, where the Bavarian Knights were located Wilmar did not know. Though the Austrian Knights were afforded greater protection and had better

skill than the Bavarian men at arms, they were severely outnumbered. They quickly found their ranks dwindling as they were surrounded on all sides and ruthlessly battered by the Bavarian forces.

Duke Wilmar stood side by side with his Knights and Vassals, who had followed him into death as he parried an oncoming spear thrust and lunged towards the soldier's face with his longsword, piercing through the man's skull and ending his life. However, he shortly thereafter received a crossbow bolt in the crook of his elbow, which pierced through the gap beneath his plate armor and through the mail and gambeson which protected it. With a massive bolt piercing through his elbow, he no longer had the ability to wield his longsword with his dominant arm and thus resorted to using the weapon one-handed with his off-hand.

Count Otto gazed in horror at the sight of the Austrian Knights being rapidly cut down by the enemy forces, yet there was nothing he could do. He was tasked with protecting the rear guard, and he was far too distant from his Lieges position to provide any aid. All he could do was watch as the ranks of the Austrian Knights slowly dwindled in a desperate struggle to wait for the Austrian Infantry to arrive at their aid.

However, right when the Austrian infantry was about to intervene, the Bavarian Cavalry rushed upon their loose and disorganized ranks, which was the result of panic, and began to halt their advance. Duke Dieter was at the head of the ranks of his Cavalry as they lanced through the Austrian Vanguard as if they were cutting through cream cheese. The last thing Duke Wilmar saw before he was viciously struck upon the back of his helm with a mighty Warhammer was the devastation wrought upon his forces by the Bavarian Army. He quickly collapsed to his knees from the impact, where he was once more struck by the Warhammer, ending his life.

As for the fate of Count Walfried von Salzburg, he had either perished in the Conflict or been captured alive; to Count Otto, such a thing did not matter at the moment. Despite being his daughter's father-in-law, Otto had no plans to stay behind and rescue the man. As such, he quickly ordered his troops to withdraw from the battlefield, for the Austrian army had already lost.

With this one battle, the Fate of Austria had seemingly been sealed, the Duke was dead, and his armies were routed. Those few who survived and remained

free from bondage were the members of the rear guard who watched their armies cut to pieces. When all appeared to be lost, they fled the battle scene and headed back to their homes in Austria. After all, someone had to defend the homeland from the massive Bavarian invasion of Austria that would soon follow.

Chapter 165: Preparing for an Enemy Invasion

Nearly a week had passed from the fateful battle in which the Austrian Army under the command of Duke Wilmar was horrendously defeated by the Bavarians. Count Otto had maintained his army's march back to Graz, where he intended to defend his home and family until death. As for the result of the battle, Count Otto had dispatched messengers and carrier pigeons to all corners of Austria, informing the realm of their Liege's death and the results of the catastrophic battle.

When Berengar finally received the news, he was sitting on his seat of power, with Linde on his lap, where he was in the process of teasing her. He indeed had no shame as he continued to grope her exquisitely proportioned figure through her velvet dress, which caused her to flush with arousal. Truthfully this entire public display of intimacy was her idea, and Berengar was her Lord, and Master would not decline an opportunity to show off his dominance; as such, The young Count entertained himself with the voluptuous body of his lover. That is until a messenger came rushing into the Great Hall and witnessed the erotic scene.

Upon witnessing the intruder, Linde quickly became overwhelmed with embarrassment and hid her charming face with her hands. Nevertheless, Berengar continued to play with her ample bosom despite the new arrival. While behaving so shamelessly in public, Berengar shouted at the messenger who had just arrived.

"Do you have something important to tell me? If not, get out! as you can see, I am currently preoccupied."

Not knowing how to react to the bold scene in front of him, the messenger stammered as he tried to discuss the letter which had arrived, containing the seal of House von Graz.

"Y.. your excellency, Count Otto von Graz sends an urgent message, I am here to deliver it!"

Berengar's hand, which was latched to one of Linde's large breasts, immediately stopped what it was doing and released its grip. Shortly thereafter, a sigh escaped from his lips as he demanded the messenger pass the letter to him.

"Hand it over!"

The messenger quickly bowed before walking up to Berengar and Linde, where he handed it to the young Count whose arm was still wrapped firmly around his lover's waist, preventing her from fleeing the scene. After the man handed Berengar the letter, he quickly absconded from the spot; after all, watching Berengar openly play with Linde on his seat of power was not something to which one would normally stick around to see.

It was only after the man had left that Linde released her hands from blocking her gorgeous face, where she began to pout. She truly only had herself to blame, as she was the one who suggested such an open display of intimacy. Nevertheless, she still felt Berengar had gone too far by not immediately stopping his actions with the arrival of a third party.

Ignoring Linde's cute reactions, Berengar opened up the letter and read its contents, which caused his eyes to spread open with shock before settling into a grave expression. Seeing his reaction, Linde could not help but pry into his business; after all, she was his spymaster, and as such, she quickly voiced her concerns.

"I know that look... Something serious has happened, has it not?"

Berengar nodded his head before announcing the results of the Battle outside Passau.

"The Duke is dead, his army was crushed in Passau, only Count Otto and his forces have returned from the battlefield. The Lords of Austria are either dead or captured. I'm sorry, love, but I have more important things to attend to at the moment; I will have to play with you again some other time..."

Linde once more began to pout as Berengar forced her up from his lap and began to head to his study. They had only just begun their fun, and yet already he was leaving. She began to believe that such news always presented itself at the worst timing. She sighed to herself as she watched Berengar leave the scene. However, it could not be helped; he had to make preparations for the likelihood of a Bavarian invasion into Tyrol; as such, she decided she would spend her free time feeding her child.

Berengar, on the other hand, quickly got to work; though star forts had begun construction across Tyrol, he had always made a priority on the construction of forts in the border regions and within Kufstein. As such, the borders were adequately defended, at least in terms of fortifications. However, he now needed to transfer more forces to their garrisons after all the Bavarians were likely to invade through Tyrol with at least one army.

By now, Eckhard had already returned to Berengar's court, as his Field Marshal, Berengar liked to have him nearby to advise on strategies and tactics. As such, Berengar quickly called for Eckhard to meet him in his study, where the man arrived in a timely manner. Initially, Eckhard thought Berengar wanted to have a mid-day drink; after all, the two men had become close friends throughout the vast amount of time they spent together; however, after noticing the grave expression on Berengar's face, Eckhard's professionalism immediately took over.

"Your excellency, what has happened?"

Berengar immediately relayed the news he had become privy to.

"The Duke is dead, and the Austrian host was shattered, only a few thousand troops made it out of the battle, and they returned to Graz with Count Otto. Vienna is left poorly defended after Lothar's rebellion, and it will not stand for long if the Bavarians decide to invade!"

Hearing such disastrous news, Eckhard frowned; by now, he knew where Berengar was headed with this train of thought; as such, he asked Berengar the question on his mind.

"Yet you do not plan to provide relief to the new Duke?"

Berengar grinned as he heard Eckhard's response; the man knew him too well.

"Of course not, though the Bavarians may send an army into Vienna, they will undoubtedly also send one into our lands as well; after all, Tyrol exists along the southern border of Bavaria, and I doubt they plan to leave us out of their conquests. We must properly defend ourselves!"

Eckhard nodded; the situation of the Duchy of Austria did not bode too well. However, as the Count of Tyrol, Berengar's first and foremost responsibility was to protect his own lands, which was the wisest course of action in such uncertain times. However, an idea popped into Eckhard's head as he thought about what would happen to Austria.

"What if the armies march on Steiermark? Will you leave your little fiancée to her fate?"

Berengar scoffed at Eckhard's suggestion and immediately retorted

"If those Bavarian bastards dare to think about laying a hand on Adela, I will bring the might of steel and shot upon their feudal armies! I will never allow harm to come to a single strand upon either of my women's heads!"

Eckhard stared at the conviction in Berengar's eyes and knew the young Count was serious. Despite Steiermark being a rather distant County of Austria, at least relative to Tyrol. The grizzled veteran did not doubt for a second that Berengar would break any siege that took place in Graz and forcefully take his fiancée with him back to Kufstein, where she would be safe. With that in mind, the man had decided on the best course of actions in which Berengar's army would take and pointed to the map of Tyrol.

"We will split the field army into two forces; as you know, we have mostly replenished our losses from the battle with the Teutonic Order, and as such, our numbers are back to their peak. 7,500 men will march up to Reutte with Arnolf as their commander, where they will be stationed as a rapid-response force to any invasion through our Northwest Borders. As for the other 7,500 men they will be stationed in Kitzbühel, where I will lead them. If the Bavarians even dare to attack our North-Eastern border, I will crush them! As for any

attacks on our allies in Steiermark, we will be able to more swiftly get to their aid by having our troops stationed in Kitzbühel."

It was a good plan, and Berengar immediately agreed with it. As such, he complimented Eckhard before ordering him to put it into action as soon as possible.

"Excellent work Marshal Eckhard! With this strategy, we should be able to defend our borders from any incursion adequately! Relay this information to the army and have it enacted as quickly as you can!"

Eckhard nodded with a smile on his face before saluting Berengar

"Of course, your excellency! I will dispatch the army at once!"

Afterward, the man exited from Berengar's office and began to enact the plans promptly. Berengar's defenses were rather solid, and though most of the star forts were still under construction and would be for years to come, the border defenses were at least partially completed. As such, he did not fear the Bavarians seizing his land.

Chapter 166: The Way is Blocked

Rain poured down upon the mountainous borders of Tyrol and Bavaria. At the moment, an army of Bavarians was on the march. At the head of the military was a Count who was quite upset about his current task. For the most part, he and the men of his army were proud members of the German Reformation, and Duke Dietger had tasked them to invade the heartland of their movement. Not only was Tyrol an important place in the hearts of German Reformists, but it also housed two of their leaders; that being Berengar and Ludolf. As such, very few men in the army were eager to fulfill this task.

On more than one occasion, this Count by the name of Siegmund had considered outright insubordination. Yet, here he was at the borders between his homeland, and the capital of the reformation, debating whether or not he should go through with his orders. However, the closer his troops approached Tyrol, the more they were able to notice that a fortress was constructed in the area, one whose design was unlike anything Siegmund had ever seen before. It was in the shape of a star and flew the coat of arms of House von Kufstein. It was a fortress constructed by Berengar to protect the routes into his lands.

Siegmund decided to halt his advance when faced with such a mighty fortress, which was visibly defended by relatively massive cannons and hundreds of men armed with what he perceived to be hand cannons. He was no fool, and he could tell by the design of the fortress that if he were to attempt to take it over, it would be a long and bloody battle. Not only were his men vulnerable to fire from all directions, but there were no blind spots to take advantage of. If rumors were to be believed, the hand cannons in which the defenders were equipped were devastating weapons.

When faced with such a challenge, Siegmund only had three options; first and foremost, he could withdraw from the region and find another route into Tyrol, one he hoped would not be as heavily defended. The second option was for him to disregard his losses and attack the fortress in an attempt to force his way into Tyrol. His third and final option was to give up on the idea of attacking the region, and set up camp on the edge of the border, and act like he was doing something, hoping that his liege would not realize he had sat still and done nothing. After all, neither he nor his men were too keen on the idea of attacking Tyrol.

Count Siegmund von Augsburg took a few moments to contemplate his options when one of his commanders approached him.

"Your excellency, the path forward is blocked by the strange fortress; I fear as if it will be a difficult task to invade Tyrol."

Count Siegmund immediately felt a headache looking at the situation before him. If he did not advance into Tyrol, he would be labeled an oath breaker, and after the war was over, Duke Dietger would surely come for him and potentially his family. As such, he mustered his courage and ordered the Army to advance on the fortress.

"Prepare to lay siege to the fortress! We have our orders!"

While giving out the command to his army, Siegmund told himself in the back of his mind.

'May God have mercy on my soul.'

As such, a siege camp was prepared, and within a few hours of preparations, the Bavarian army began to attack the Star Fortress. Men at arms rushed towards the fortress curtains, hoping that the solid portion of the wall would provide a steady platform to raise their ladders. However, the moment they came within engagement distance, the several hundred soldiers of Berengar's army who were garrisoned at the fort unleashed the 24 lb siege cannons onto the invaders. The explosive shells tore the besiegers asunder long before they made it to the wall section, which was their goal.

Limbs were hewn from the victims of the blast, and blood splattered across the grassy mountain pass. Yet this did not stop the dozens of cannons mounted on the fortress walls from firing in the direction of the invaders. The thundering echoes of the guns filled the air alongside the blood-curdling screams of the invaders. Though the defenders only numbered in the hundreds, the fortress was so well designed that even with their 1417 Land Pattern Smoothbore muskets, they were capable of causing massive devastation to the enemy forces.

By the time the third volley of cannon fire went off, the besiegers had fled back to their siege camp, which was unbeknownst to them well within the range of the mighty 24 lb cannons. However, the defenders did not attack the encampment. Instead, they halted their fire and allowed the enemy to retreat. The goal was not to annihilate the enemy force as quickly as possible; if they did such a thing, Duke Dietger would take one of two actions, he would either abandon Tyrol altogether until he had successfully taken all of Austria excluding Tyrol, or he would send a massive invasion far more significant than the current force in retaliation. Neither of which was appealing to Berengar; as such, the young Count of Tyrol had tasked his defenders to wage a war of attrition.

If Berengar's forces could keep these tens of thousands of men bogged down outside their borders indefinitely, Duke Dietger would surely continue to send reinforcements and supplies to ensure the offensive against Tyrol continued. This would significantly weaken their attack on the remainder of Austria and divide his armies, allowing the Austrian lords a decent chance to fight back. However, Count Siegmund had no way of knowing Berengar's plans and was simply in awe of the weapons that his opponents fielded. Thus he stood with his mouth agape after watching his army collapse so quickly against the mighty star fortress. The man was so shocked by the disastrous result of the

brief engagement that he accidentally voiced his thoughts aloud for all the nearby men to hear.

"God is on their side, for how can man build such destructive weapons without divine intervention?"

These words weakened the already low morale of the troops, many of which were Reformists, and had no desire to attack the heartland of their religion. After saying these words, one of the commanders under Siegmund voiced his concerns.

"If God is on their side, then how do we fulfill our orders?"

It was only at this moment that Siegmund realized he had spoken his thoughts aloud, and as such, quickly came up with a scheme to avoid further conflict while making it seem like he was actively participating in an attempt to seize Tyrol.

"Write to Duke Dietgar, tell him the Northwest passages into Tyrol are blocked by mighty fortresses, and we need reinforcements if we are to achieve our objective. He will either send us aid, which will give us a period of reprieve, or he will ignore our pleas, and we will have our justification to sit back and do nothing."

Hearing their liege's orders, the commanders all agreed that it was the best course of action and immediately set to task. As for the defenders in the fortress, not a single man was wounded in the conflict, and as such, they were sitting back and relaxing; after all, they had access to plenty of supplies and relieving forces. Theoretically, they could stay and guard the Northwest borders of Tyrol indefinitely. While the besiegers lived in an exposed and muddy siege camp, the defenders stayed in fine barracks to shelter them from the elements, which allowed them a sense of comfort as they guarded the borders of Tyrol.

The stalemate at the Tyrolean border had just begun, and this star fortress was not the only one facing a similar situation, to the Northeast near the edges of Kitzbühel, the defenders were also facing a similar problem, after all the attempted invasion into Tyrol was a two-prong offensive designed to encapsulate the region swiftly. However, in its initial advancement, it had been

completely halted. When Duke Dietger finally found out that his troops could not penetrate Tyrolean territory, he would be shocked that his strategy had failed so miserably. However, the sunk cost fallacy was a severe issue of the human psyche, and the old Duke would surely continue to send aid towards the besiegers of Tyrol at his own army's expense.

As for the rest of the invasion of Austria, aside from Vorarlberg, the remainder of the Austrian counties were not as lucky as Tyrol to have its natural defensive Barriers, and as such, would fare far worse in the ongoing invasion. As the war progressed, Tyrol would become the symbol of Austrian resistance against Bavarian occupation, and Berengar would gain recognition as the leader of said resistance. As for now, the Bavarian invasion had just begun, and as such, no County had yet fallen to the enemy. While the attempts to invade Tyrol had been halted in their initial advance, Berengar was sleeping peacefully in the arms of his lover.

Chapter 167: Henrietta's Concerns

The light of dawn shone into Berengar's room, exposing the scene of the young Count and his lover entangled in each other's arms. As per usual, this was the signal for Berengar to awaken; as for Linde, she would continue to sleep for some time. The days of her waking up early to sneak back to her temporary quarters were long passed. These days, Everyone knew of her relationship with Berengar, and she openly slept in his room; as such, she could sleep in as long as she wanted, and Berengar never complained.

Thus Berengar skillfully climbed out of bed, without awakening Linde, and got dressed in his athletic attire. As per usual, his morning was filled with a five-mile run, followed by lifting weights and sword practice. When he was finally done with all of those things, hours had passed, and he had entered the bath to get rid of all the sweat on his body. When he opened the door to the tub and entered the pool of water, he found Linde already enjoying herself within. A large smile appeared on her face as Berengar sat down alongside her and enjoyed the steaming water. After a prolonged workout, soaking in a hot tub was something that Berengar had come to enjoy immensely.

After fooling around in the tub with Linde for some time, the couple left the bath and tidied up their appearance while fulfilling daily hygiene like brushing their teeth and flossing. Afterward, they got dressed and headed to the dining room, where they shared a meal. As per usual, the only other person present

at the table was Henrietta, who had long since grown accustomed to Linde being present, and though their relationship had improved, she still supported Adela in her little rivalry with Linde. Adela of course had not been back to Kufstein since she left so many months ago.

Berengar had yet to inform Henrietta of Lambert's death at his hands in the Battle of Oberstdorf; of course, when he did finally tell her of such an important matter, it would be an entirely fabricated story about the boy dying in the glorious crusade against the Golden Horde. After all, Henrietta had always cared for both of her brothers, and she was still not fully aware of the evil in which Lambert had done in his life. Being a young child, it seemed unfair to Berengar to reveal to the girl the truth behind Lambert's misdeeds and the cause of his death. Thus he chose to allow his little sister to remember Lambert in a good light, at least until she was old enough to properly understand the depth of his actions and his wicked character. As such, Berengar drank out of the skull chalice, which was fashioned from his little brother's skull, while talking to Henrietta about how she spent her time recently.

"So Henrietta, how have you been lately? I have been so preoccupied with work that I have been unable to check up on you."

Henrietta had been attending classes at one of the public institutions which had been set up in the City of Kufstein to educate the young generations; after all, if she stayed cooped up in the Castle of Kufstein with no contact with children her age, she was bound to have some issues properly socializing later in life. Thus Henrietta had a giant smile on her face as she devoured the delectable omelet on her plate. The omelet itself was filled with spinach and cheese and had become one of the girl's favorite breakfast dishes. However, the moment she heard this, her expression soured slightly which did not go unnoticed by Berengar and Linde.

"I am fine..."

Henrietta was a rather shy girl, and as such, she did not like revealing too much about her personal life. However, Berengar was persistent and made sure to pry into the girl's life; as such, he asked another question.

"Are you enjoying school? Does everyone treat you well?"

Henrietta nodded as she snacked more on her breakfast; she did not say much other than

"mhmm"

Despite her answer, Berengar did not believe that to be the case; after all, he knew his little sister reasonably well and, as such, became deeply concerned. It was not simply a matter of being shy; ever since Berengar got his eyepatch and began drinking from a skull chalice, he had an aura of intimidation around him, which made Henrietta subconsciously afraid of him. As such, she acted as an obedient little lamb and merely nodded her head and answered Berengar's questions.

Noticing such behavior, Linde put a gentle smile on her face and questioned the girl on Berengar's behalf. She was a far less frightening character in Henrietta's eyes, and as such, the girl was more open to talking to her.

"It is okay; why don't you tell me if you have any concerns?"

Henrietta's gaze switched between Berengar and Linde for a few moments before she finally opened up about her problems with her school life. Due to being cooped up in the castle most of her life, Henrietta was, as previously mentioned, a timid girl, and as such, she did not know how to interact well with others. Berengar's worst fears about her upbringing had already become realized, and as such, Henrietta revealed her difficulties at school.

"I don't have any friends..."

With this information revealed, Berengar was not entirely surprised; he had deliberately put her in his public education program so she could socialize and become accustomed to the common populace, but she was still the Count's little sister, there was a natural air of intimidation that surrounded her, at least as far as the ordinary people were concerned. The parents probably instructed their kids not to do anything to upset her; when combined with her naturally shy and docile personality, she most likely sat alone in a class all day and simply went over her school work.

It seemed Berengar's guesses were correct as Linde further questioned the young girl.

"Well, have you tried talking to anyone in your class?"

Henrietta merely shook her head in response to this question, causing Linde to put on a warm smile once more.

"Well, maybe you should try it out?"

Henrietta's response was quick and filled with dejection.

"It won't matter..."

Linde tried to dig to the root of the problem, and as such, further questioned Henrietta's response.

"Why not?"

Henrietta's expression turned gloomy, which was rather adorable on her cute little face, at least as far as Berengar was concerned; however, she muttered in a hushed voice

"Because I am the Count's little sister..."

Though she was quiet, the large dining room was virtually silent aside from her voice, and Berengar and Linde both heard her complaint. Now it was Berengar's turn to cheer her up, and he finally voiced his opinion on the matter.

"It sounds to me like the other kids might be a little bit intimidated by your position, I'm willing to bet you don't voluntarily interact with any of them, and you simply sit there in class with an indifferent expression on your face. Am I right?"

Berengar knew his sister all too well, and he had guessed correctly; Henrietta squeezed her favorite doll that she carried with her everywhere into her arms and pouted, Berengar was right on the money, and she felt like she was being scolded. However, what he said next gave her some hope.

"Why don't you try introducing yourself to your classmates? I know you are shy, but if you make a sincere effort, they might stop thinking of you as a little ice princess who should not be offended and instead treat you as part of the

class. I am sure the girls in your class would love to talk about your cute dresses!"

Hearing this, Henrietta continued to pout until finally, she uttered a single phrase.

"I doubt that..."

Berengar laughed at the little loli's cute expression and decided to counter her words.

"Is that so? Then what are the girls in your class interested in talking about?"

Henrietta's face slightly flushed as she recalled the subject the girls in her class were constantly talking about and immediately looked away from Berengar, which deeply confused him. As for Linde, she had a general idea of what the popular topic was among the little girls of Kufstein and merely smiled as Berengar tried to wrap his head around it. After a few seconds of contemplation, Berengar could not figure it out and promptly asked again.

"Henrietta, what are the girls in your class interested in?"

Hearing the authoritative voice of the Count speaking to her in such a forceful manner, Henrietta nearly jumped out of her seat from fright. However, she merely turned her head to look back between Berengar and Linde before muttering a single word.

"You..."

Berengar did not believe he heard correctly, and as such, he asked her one more time.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

Henrietta was already thoroughly embarrassed by the conversation and shouted out what she had said in a fit.

"You! The girls in my class always talk about you!"

Now it was Berengar's turn to be embarrassed; this was not exactly a demographic he wanted to be popular with; as such, he turned to Linde looking for advice, who was merely smirking at his misfortune before teasing him.

"My oh my, to believe my man is so popular with little girls!"

Hearing that phrase, Berengar immediately wished he was a turtle so that he could hide in his shell. It was indeed something he had never expected in life. Though he was popular among the women of Kufstein, for many reasons, chiefly among them were his good looks, his charismatic personality, and the fact that he had achieved so much in life despite being only twenty-one years old. He never thought the girls Henrietta's age would be talking about him as if he was some form of prince charming. As such, Berengar merely cleared his throat before putting on a professional act and began giving Henrietta some advice.

"Well, you should fit right in then! I mean, after all, who knows more about me than my precious little sister? Surely you must know some juicy details that the girls of your class will be interested in? Use that as an icebreaker, and then try to find some common interests."

Linde laughed faintly at Berengar's reaction; despite being embarrassed by the situation, he still managed to turn it around in Henrietta's favor. After pondering about it for a moment, Henrietta realized Berengar was right; if the girls in her class all treated her brother like he was a dashing prince, then she could talk about him to gather their interest, and from there, they could talk about other things. As such, she no longer felt embarrassed and smiled gratefully at Berengar.

"Thanks, big brother!"

Despite his more intimidating appearance nowadays, he was still the kind and caring big brother she had grown up with, which made Henrietta happy. Now that she had a way to make friends at school, Henrietta and the others enjoyed the rest of their meal in peace. As for Berengar, he was cursing his luck for being so popular with girls of all ages. The last thing he needed was another reason for Linde to tease him, and she would indeed never allow him to live this down...

Chapter 168: Constructing the Grand Cathedral

While Berengar was enjoying a peaceful life in Tyrol, the Bavarian invasion had spread to the other corners of Austria. Luckily for Berengar, his position was secure for the moment; as such, he spent his time overseeing the usual activities. After finishing his breakfast with Linde and Henrietta, which had taken an unusual turn, Berengar had moved onto the main highlight of his day, which was presenting the architectural designs of his newest project to his favorite architect. With the German Reformation in full effect, Berengar wanted a symbol of his movement. As such He decided to make a Grand Cathedral in Kufstein to represent the new era of Christianity.

While Berengar was far from an artist, he still could draw some rudimentary architectural blueprints. The style he had in mind was that of the German Renaissance. Berengar had already begun implementing such designs across Kufstein for all of his major architectural projects, for example, his grand palace, which was primarily based upon the designs of the Schloss Johannisburg from his previous life. As such, he was currently in a meeting with his favorite Architect who had been overseeing a lot of his projects within Kufstein, the man's name was Burkhard, and he was a refugee who had fled to Kufstein during the early days of the war in Germany, where Berengar immediately noticed his talents and put him to work. At the moment the two men discussing the details of the Grand Cathedral with each other as they went over the designs. Burkhard being the first to voice his opinion.

"As usual, your excellency, you know how to build a basic blueprint, but are completely lacking in creativity. I am afraid to say you are without any form of artistic talent."

Burkhard was a man in his early fifties. He was an unusually blunt man; even to someone of Berengar's position, he was not afraid of voicing his true thoughts, which Berengar honestly enjoyed. Berengar was constantly surrounded by too many sycophants who told him exactly what he wanted to hear and not the reality he needed to hear. As such, Berengar merely laughed at the older man's comment and expressed his concerns.

"Yeah yeah... I know I am not meant to be an artist; the question is, can you make something magnificent with the designs I have presented you?"

The older man with long overflowing grey hair and steel blue eyes began to contemplate for a few moments while rubbing his bare chin before sighing.

"It will take a lot of work to fix your mistakes, but I promise you, by the time I am done with this Grand Cathedral of yours, it will put anything the Vatican has to shame!"

Berengar chuckled upon hearing the man's confidence and patted him on the back as he brought the topic to interior design.

"For the interior, I was thinking stained glass windows; I have a soft spot for such things."

Burkhard snorted when he heard those words before interjecting his opinion on the matter.

"Of course you want stained glass windows; everyone wants stained glass windows in their Cathedrals! Far be it from me to question your excellency's brilliant mind!"

Burkhard was bitter about the topic, though Berengar did not know why, and frankly, he did not care so long as his vision was brought to life. Thus Berengar switched the topic to the time frame it would take to complete it.

"How long will it take to be finished?"

Burkhard immediately scoffed at Berengar's remarks; the young count was always rushing him on his projects; despite the vast wealth and resources at his disposal, it was not like the man could pull a miracle and complete such a large project overnight, despite his inner monologue Burkhard gave his best estimate.

"Considering you have me running around the clock building your Palace, and now I have this damn Cathedral on top of it, it will take at least two years! You are lucky you pay me so well and allow me the freedom to express my creativity with these designs, or else I would have quit long ago!"

Berengar was not the slightest bit upset by the level of informality in which the Architect spoke to him; in fact, it was pretty refreshing listening to someone

who did not bow and express meaningless flattery in every comment they made. As such Berengar let the man's seemingly foul attitude slide. In reality, Burkhard was very passionate about his work and was glad to have the near-unlimited resources at his disposal which Berengar provided him to design and construct so many grand projects. Not to mention the freedom in which he was allowed to tinker with the rudimentary designs Berengar had provided him thus giving him the opportunity to turn them into true masterpieces.

Burkhard was right about one thing, though it might take two years at the earliest to complete, it would be far grander than anything the Vatican had at the moment, and as such, the man was immensely proud to stick it to those old fools who had denied him his dreams when he was a young man. The Vatican once hired Burkhard to construct a project for them. However, the Cardinals in charge of the project micromanaged every step of his creative process, and in his opinion, ruined the final result. As such, he was glad to see those old bastards get a taste of their own medicine. Berengar, on the other hand, was a much more convenient employer; as long as the result was fantastic, the young Count could care less if it stuck faithfully to his original design.

This was how Berengar outsourced all of his creative ideas, especially in the textile industry. Those with more artistic talent than himself were allowed to be creative with the basic concept he presented, resulting in styles based upon the clothing of the renaissance from his previous life. However, maybe not 100% historically correct, nevertheless, they still ended up looking fantastic and selling well, and those two things were all that mattered in the end.

After hearing that it would take at least two years to finish construction, Berengar was pleased; it usually would take years, maybe even decades, to construct such an extensive project. However, Berengar had introduced essential materials that significantly reduced construction speed and increased structural integrity over the traditional form of masonry. That was of course structural steel and concrete. With these two materials, his construction crews could create grand projects such as this Cathedral in a far shorter time frame, with greatly enhanced sturdiness, especially when compared to the traditional methods. If one knew what they were doing, they could make a steel-reinforced concrete building look as attractive as any other building. As such, Berengar made use of these advanced construction materials to build his city rapidly as well as his defenses.

Despite being pleased with the estimated time frame, Berengar liked to mess with the older man; considering Burkhard's naturally crotchety attitude, Berengar put on an authoritative facade and said in a stern voice.

"That is too long; it needs to be constructed in half that time!"

Upon hearing such an impossible task, Burkhard nearly had an aneurysm as a large vein protruded from his forehead while he was seething with anger. However, before long, Berengar broke out into laughter after seeing the older man's twisted expression, and Burkhard instantly realized that Berengar was screwing with his head. As such, he forced himself to calm down and responded to Berengar's jest.

"You know you are not half as funny as you think you are, right?"

Berengar, however, had a great smile across his lips; the look on Burkhard's face just now was priceless. After all, Burkhard was one of the few people he knew who he could joke around with like this. With others, Berengar had to maintain his prestigious appearance, yet Burkhard was different, he did not care in the slightest for the face of the nobility, and as such, Berengar could be himself around the older man.

Of course, Burkhard also found Berengar to be one of the more tolerable members of the Nobility he had met. While the man was a member of the lower nobility, he was always looked down on for his lowly status, and as such, never cared for the noblemen and women who commissioned his work. However, he respected Berengar to a degree, Berengar was born to a lower noble house, a mere Baron's son, and yet in under a year, he made himself a Count. This was not an easy feat in this medieval world. After playing his prank on Burkhard, Berengar noticed what time it was and realized he had to be at a strategy meeting in a few moments, and as such, he let Burkhard get back to work.

"Well, Burkhard, as always, it has been a pleasure, but I am afraid I am needed elsewhere; I will let you get back to your work!"

Burkhard snorted when he heard this and responded in a cold manner

"Just make sure I am paid properly!"

Berengar chuckled when he heard this response and walked away, leaving a rhetorical question in his wake.

"Have I ever failed in that regard?"

With that, Burkhard was left with a basic outline for Berengar's Grand Cathedral, and he had a lot of work to do on revising the design into a proper blueprint before he could begin construction. Of course, this Cathedral was not the only project he had to work on, after all the Palace was still under construction, thus the man had his work cut out for him. However, he was pretty happy with his place in Kufstein and had no plans to leave; as such, he rolled up his sleeves and got to work on the new project presented to him. In the distant future, Kufstein would be considered not only the seat of Imperial Power of Germany but also the religious center of the German Reformation, mainly in part to the efforts of Burkhard.

Chapter 169: Catfight II

While the Bavarians were halted at the Tyrolean border, the same could not be said for the rest of the Duchy of Austria, at the moment the Duke of Bavaria's forces were laying siege to Salzburg, the Count of the region was missing in action, nobody knew if he was alive or dead after the battle in Passau, and his eldest son was currently staying within Graz with his wife and three children. The defense of the County of Salzburg was left to the second son of Count, who was slightly more intelligent than Wolfgang but was by no means a genius, let alone a master of military strategy. As such, the region was in dire straits while it faced the Bavarian forces.

Wolfgang's younger brother Adelbrand opted to give his troops the orders to stay within their castles, and fortresses challenging the Bavarians to fight them where they had the advantage. On paper, this might seem like a good idea; however, in reality, this left the towns and villages that provided the food to the Castles, Cities, and Fortresses completely defenseless, resulting in the raiding, raping, and burning of Salzburg's common population by the invasive Bavarians. Of course, Wolfgang had no way of knowing what was going on in his family's territory, nor did he really care. After Otto arrived with his armies and secured Steiermark, the fearful man opted to stay with his in-laws, allowing the lands that should be under his protection to burn in the fires of war.

This, of course, infuriated Ava as she had yet another dispute with her little sister. Since their last catfight, Adela had been increasingly winning the little battles she had with Ava to the point where Ava would rather stay in the Castle in Salzburg than continue to be insulted in this manner. However, once more, Ava decided to provoke a fight with Adela now that she had nowhere else to return to. At the moment, the two women were standing in the Grand Hall fighting over, well frankly, nothing of importance.

"I am just saying, where is Berengar when we need him the most? He supposedly has an army capable of wiping out 30,000 men of the Teutonic Order, and yet he hides in his mountainous territory like a coward! If he is as great as a man as you claim, he should be leading the charge against the Bavarians, and yet Salzburg bleeds while he sits back and does nothing!"

Adela pouted after hearing her eldest sister slander Berengar once more and quickly countered her remark.

"Berengar is the Count of Tyrol, and as such he is currently protecting his lands from the invasion of the Bavarians; according to our father, he has completely halted the enemy's advance into Tyrol and is currently maintaining his field armies in the event that the Bavarians break past his fortifications! He is doing far more for his family's lands and the people within it than your cowardly husband!"

Now that Adela knew her sister's weakness, she made every remark a stake to the heart, which greatly wounded Ava's pride, and in all reality, she was correct. Rather than deal with his own enemies, Wolfgang hid in Graz under the protection of Otto's armies while his lands were torched and his people massacred by the Bavarians. Of course, even if he did show up to counter the enemy, there was not much an inbred dullard like Wolfgang could do about the situation. Still, Ava was greatly dissatisfied with her husband's behavior, and of course, Adela took advantage of that.

Ava was scowling at Adela's remark, yet she quickly offered a retort; after all, much like Adela, she was privy to Otto's intelligence about the situation in Austria. However, Berengar had taken borderline paranoid lengths to remove spies and scouts of other powers from his territory; with his vast intelligent network, a part of it was dedicated solely to counterintelligence, and as such,

gaining information on the events in Tyrol was quite difficult. Mostly they had to go with the intercepted messages they took from the Bavarians.

"According to father's reports, Berengar is sitting back in Kufstein enjoying himself with his lover and bastard child while his armies defend his borders, just how exactly are those the actions of a Great Man as you proclaim him to be?"

Ava had a point, Berengar was not currently at the frontlines as he had always been in the past, but the reason for this was simple. His army was a well-oiled machine, and the garrisons were explicitly trained to defend their star fortresses in the most effective means possible; their commanding officers were battle-hardened veterans from Berengar's campaign in Tyrol and knew full well how to siege a fortress and how to defend one.

There would be no purpose other than morale for Berengar to stay at one of his defending forts. The men were already in high spirits due to the exceptional conditions they found themselves in and the minimal losses they suffered. No matter how many times the enemy rushed at the star fortresses, the combination of rifled and smoothbore muskets alongside the 24 lb cannons was enough to quickly repel any attempted invasion. When one could repel an invasion in under an hour and spend the rest of the day playing cards and drinking tea while munching on biscuits and cookies, there was not a lot of anxiety to be had.

If Berengar was going to enjoy luxuries while his soldiers were defending the borders, then he sure as hell was going to make sure his troops maintained some degree of luxury as well. Thus cookies, biscuits, tea, and other luxury items were shipped to his troops at the border to enjoy themselves with while they weren't in battle. There was no army in the world aside from Berengar's who could so thoroughly enjoy a siege in such a manner. Of course, due to the constant letters, Berengar had written to Adela, she was thoroughly informed of such matters, and as such, she was well prepared for such an attack by Ava.

"Hmmp, you really are lacking in intelligence. Berengar may be in Kufstein, but his armies are well supplied and even have luxuries such as properly constructed tenements for shelter, cookies, biscuits, tea, as well as meat and eggs for meals. The only reason Berengar himself is not present on the front

lines of defense is that it would serve no purpose. His armies are fully capable of defending his borders without him, and he makes sure they enjoy a similar level of luxury as himself while they are doing so!"

Being thoroughly defeated in the current war for words, Ava was once more showing an ugly expression; she could not confirm nor deny whether or not Adela was telling the truth, and as such, she was quite perturbed by this. Just how exactly did Adela know so much more about the situation in Tyrol than she did? Ava honestly did not believe that Berengar cared so much for Adela that he would constantly write to her informing her of his progress and daily life. I mean, after all the man had taken a lover to enjoy his time with while Adela was stuck in Graz, just how much could he care for the girl? Nevertheless, Ava recovered from her poor attitude and once more began to sling mud in Berengar's direction.

"If he has such an easy time defending his borders, then why does he not send his field armies into Salzburg to liberate the region and end the people's suffering?"

Ava had a smug smile on her face as she asked this question, believing she had caught Adela in a corner. Nevertheless, she did not expect Adela to respond in the manner in which she did. The young adolescent girl smiled with a look of pity on her face for Ava. Clearly, the woman had nothing but boobs for brains; the answer to this question was so obvious Adela felt embarrassed to point it out to her older sister. Nevertheless, Adela masterfully executed her retort by looking at Ava as if she were a simpleton before stating the reason.

"Because Salzburg is not Berengar's responsibility; it is your husband's..."

The moment Ava heard those words, she felt as if her mind had imploded. Despite just a few moments ago believing she had cornered her little sister in this little argument they were having, Adela had so masterfully evaded her vicious strike and dealt a deathly verbal blow of her own. Realizing that she had been defeated, Ava had a hard time controlling her emotions; with every fiber of her being, she wanted to claw Adela's cute doll-like face off. Yet, she resisted the temptation to do so and instead snorted before walking away from her little sister. Ava absolutely refused to engage in this little debate any further.

Adela, on the other hand, was entirely satisfied with the result of this entirely meaningless debate, she had once more beaten her eldest sister in a war for words, and though this may seem pointless to logical and rational individuals such as men, to a young woman such as herself, this was a great moral victory.

Chapter 170: The Progress of Civilization

Weeks had passed since the Bavarians first invaded Austria, and though their advance into Tyrol was halted at its borders, the war continued to spread to the rest of Austria. From Salzburg to Karnten, and even into Upper and Lower Austria, the fires of war consumed the Duchy of Austria. At the moment, only Tyrol and its western neighbor Vorarlberg were primarily left untouched by the conflict. The only reason Vorarlberg had not fallen yet, was because Berengar had sent troops to their aid; he could not allow himself to be cut off from the rest of the world, and as such, had spent some effort repelling Bavarian troops from Vorarlberg.

Tyrol was utterly cut off from the eastern half of Austria. If Berengar wanted to aid the Count of Steiermark, his uncle, and ally, his army would need to advance through Bavarian-occupied territory. It would indeed be a difficult task, but Berengar would have no choice but to do so if the city of Graz were indeed in danger. After all, he would never allow harm to come to Adela. There was an even more significant concern that had reached Berengar's attention. The Bavarians had largely isolated Tyrol. Because of that, Berengar could only trade with his partners in Italy, and by extension, the trade routes from the Italian Peninsula into the near east. As far as his German trade routes were concerned, they were utterly blocked by the Bavarian invasion of Austria.

While Berengar was still making a significant profit from his trade with Italy, and the Byzantine Empire, many of his customers no longer had access to his products. As such, he saw his earnings decrease significantly. At the moment, the young Count was thinking of establishing trade with the remainder of Germany. Spread out in front of him was a large map of Europe; if Berengar wished to continue supplying the other German regions with steel and textiles, then he needed to maintain security in Tyrol and the county of Vorarlberg, which sat on his western border.

After observing the map for some time, Berengar realized the only way to re-establish trade with Northern Germany was to bring his supplies westward through Vorarlberg and the Swiss Confederacy, where they would travel north into Wurttemberg. From there, his products could once more spread across Germany. Due to the ongoing conflict within the German-speaking regions, Berengar would need to safeguard his trade caravans with armed forces.

After coming up with this new trade route, Berengar set the task into motion and dispatched his orders to the necessary units who would conduct the trade operation. Now that he had concluded that job, he sat back in his soft leather chair within his study and sighed heavily before taking a sip from the wine contained in his skull chalice. Shortly after that, Berengar heard a knock on his door, and he immediately responded.

"Come in"

with that, the large wooden door creaked open to reveal Linde's beautiful figure, who was holding the baby Hans in her arms. The tiny red-gold-haired infant had a curious expression on his face as he peered at his father with his deep sapphire eyes. Linde had been spending time with Hans whenever she had the opportunity; she was quite the doting mother. After Linde approached Berengar with their son in her arms, she began to speak to Berengar with a severe expression. She was here for business, and for whatever reason, had brought their infant child with her. The heavenly beauty quickly got to the point as she relayed the information she had received from Berengar's spy network.

"The Bavarians will be assaulting Vienna soon. The city will not be able to hold out for long. Judging by Duke Dietger's fearsome reputation, he will eliminate any potential rivals to his authority over Austria, which means that the late Duke Wilmar's children will most likely be executed after the Bavarians have taken the city."

Berengar contemplated Linde's words as he stared at her with his one good eye. Obviously, Linde did not just come here to inform him of this matter, and knowing his lover well enough, Berengar assumed she had come up with a plan to benefit the two of them; as such, he asked about it.

"So, what is your plan?"

A pretty smile spread across Linde's immaculate visage as she heard Berengar's words; the man honestly did know her too well. As such, she quickly got to the point.

"We have agents in the Castle of Vienna who are currently on standby; when the Castle falls, we will take advantage of the chaos to smuggle Duke Wilmar's youngest son, Conrad out, and into Kufstein. Where we will then coerce him into naming you Regent and creating a Government in exile where you can begin a reconquest of Austria after your forces are fully prepared."

Berengar was shocked by the plan Linde had presented him; it was unexpected and brilliant. Berengar had initially planned to sit back and gain Tyrol's independence through the conflict before invading Austria at a later date to claim the title of Duke for himself, but this was an even better plan for his ascension to power. Of course, there was only one question on his mind about the whole situation, which he was quick to inquire about.

"After we have retaken Austria, and I am declared Regent, what do we do with Conrad?"

A wicked grin spread across Linde's lips as she had already thought about this plan and had prepared accordingly.

"We let the boy act as a puppet for a few years while we solidify our gains, and then we begin poisoning him in small doses until he becomes gravely ill and passes from this world, leaving you the Regent of Austria with full authority to assume the mantle of Duke!"

Hearing Linde's devious plot brought tingles to Berengar's spine as an equally sinister smile spreads across his face. This was a vastly superior plan than the one he had come up with and was far more likely to quell any potential rebellion against his rule. After all, with this, he gained some form of legitimacy to his claim of the title Duke of Austria when he finally succeeded. Indeed Linde's mind was far better at scheming than Berengar's, which was one of the reasons she was such an effective spymaster. After hearing her devious plot, Berengar got up from his seat and embraced his lover and child before whispering in Linde's ear.

"You are a devious little vixen, did you know that?"

After hearing Berengar's words, Linde began to blush; those words were not intended as an insult but a compliment, and she was well aware of that fact. Having said those words, Berengar let go of Linde and walked away with his hands clasped behind his back.

"I approve of your plan. Make sure preparations are in place to evacuate Conrad the moment the opportunity presents itself!"

Linde obediently nodded before departing with Hans in hand.

"Of course, master, I will not fail you!"

Berengar smiled and sat down after Linde had left his study. He proceeded to pull out a flagon of wine and top off his skull chalice before taking a sip from it and staring out his window. Opportunities presented themselves when one least expected them. With Linde's plot, he would be able to secure the position of Duke of Austria more efficiently and though it might be a few years before he had the title; in practicality, it would only be a few months before he held the power of the position.

Despite the ruthless plan to seize power, Berengar did feel pity for Conrad, soon the boy would be the last living member of a powerful Dynasty from his previous life, and he would not live long enough to continue said Dynasty, it could be said that Berengar's interference in this world's timeline had brought the end of the Habsburg Dynasty before it even reached the zenith of its power. However, he was not deeply concerned about such a thing; after all, the Habsburgs in this world would become nothing more than a stepping stone on his own Dynasty's rise to power.

With Linde busy preparing for this grand scheme of hers, Berengar himself realized that he could no longer sit idly by; as such, he quickly began drafting orders for further conscription. By the time the Bavarians had conquered most of Austria, Berengar would need a much larger force to deal with them. Luckily it would take months before Austria finally yielded to Bavarian occupation, and that gave Berengar enough time to train another division.

Luckily for him, the population to provide such a large number of troops was not much of an issue; with the increase in refugees coming to Tyrol and the size of the native population, Berengar had more than enough men to draft

into service, something which could only be achieved because of his agricultural reforms. Without such reforms, most men would have to be in the fields to produce food, yet now they could be drafted and trained to be soldiers. Such was the progress of civilization.