

Steel 311

Chapter 311: The Italians Strike Back

While Berengar was marching onto his next target, which was the city of Milan, his supply routes were being maintained by the 5,000 soldiers who had transferred the treasure hoard gained from ransacking Verona.

These men were dedicated to ensuring that the main Army was well supplied and that any spoils were transported back to the Royal Treasury in Kufstein. However, due to the nature of their mission, they swiftly became targeted by the Italian forces.

Because the Italians could not contend with Austria in the field, they had begun to resort to skirmishing tactics against their enemy's scouting regiments. Since this was the way that they had chosen to engage in warfare, Berengar had devised a series of search and destroy tactics to hunt down the ambushers in advance of his march.

As for the logistical network, Berengar had increased the number of soldiers among their ranks from 5,000 to 5,500, adding a few scouts with them to ensure that the path ahead was secure. At the moment, this force of soldiers was led by the Colonel, who was Captain Arnwald's superior officer, with Arnwald's grenadier unit acting as the central offensive unit within their ranks.

Currently, this supply Caravan was in the middle of their encampment, within the fields between the Italian Alps and Milan. It was early morning, and the men had just woken up; they were in the process of tearing down the camp so that they could begin their long march to Milan, where Berengar's main Army was sure to be located.

Captain Arnwald was sharing a hemp cigarette between himself and the Colonel as they discussed their plans over a map within the command tent.

"Our supply route should lead us safely to the frontlines where we can resupply King Berengar and his forces. The scouts have spotted ahead, and they have assured us that there are no traps or ambushes laid out within our path. Give it another day or two, and we should have arrived at our destination without incident."

Arnwald, on the other hand, was not convinced; things had been quiet since they had begun their journey back to the frontlines. Over a week had passed since the Siege of Verona, and during this time, they had traveled to Kufstein and back.

Yet not once had they encountered an enemy ambush or any attempt at it. It was mind-boggling; after all, the best tactic the Italians could come up with to slow down the Austrian advance was ambushing smaller units detached from the main Austrian Army.

Despite being separated from the main force and tasked with the essential job of maintaining the supply routes into Italy, the Italians had seemingly ignored their intrusion; it was almost as if they were watching and waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike while the Austrians least expected it.

This made Arnwald quite paranoid, as he was confident the Italians would have targeted the Austrian Logistical Network. Regardless, neither the Scouts nor the Intelligence Agency had informed them of any nearby hostiles.

As Arnwald and the Colonel discussed their plans for the remainder of their journey, an unarmored Italian Knight dressed in simple attire was located in the distance, overlooking the Austrian encampment from the hilltops above.

The Italian Crown had become aware of the infiltration into Northern Italy by Berengar's spy network. In response to this threat, the Italians had adopted a compelling tactic; they had begun to shed their arms and armor and travel under the guise of refugee and merchant caravans; after all, their armor was practically useless in the face of Austria's wonder weapons.

The difference between these caravans and actual refugee groups was that they were comprised of the battle-hardened soldiers of Italy and their hidden arms, which were needed to ambush the Austrian Armies. They had even brought women and children along with them to make things convincing, not fearing what would happen to the poor souls once the battle had erupted.

After carefully observing the Austrian encampment and the soldiers within it for some time, the Italian Knight rode his horse back to his unit, where he informed his commanding officers of what he had discovered. Since the

Austrians were in the middle of tearing down their camp, it was the perfect time to ambush them.

Before long, this so-called Refugee convoy approached the Austrian forces, who were in the middle of preparing to move out; because of this, there were only a few men on guard, and as such, it took some time before the Italian caravan was spotted between the hillsides of the Milanese plains.

When the Austrians finally realized that an unknown caravan was approaching, the guards lowered their weapons towards the approaching strangers. However, before they could utter their commands, the men on horseback within the Italian forces unleashed their blades and charged towards the guards, piercing through their open-face helmets and reaping their lives.

The moment the Cavalry charged into the encampment, a large group of the Italian soldiers split off and began to swarm the Austrian soldiers before they could grab hold of their weapons to retaliate. As the Italian men-at-arms charged towards the Austrian soldiers, arrows and bolts had begun to fly into the encampment.

The camp quickly found itself wholly overrun with the Italian soldiers who began to butcher the Austrian soldiers that struggled to equip themselves in an attempt to counter the well-planned ambush. While chaos erupted in the camp, a soldier rushed into the command tent, informing the Colonel and Captain Arnwald of the enemy ambush.

"Sir, we are under attack!"

Both the Colonel and Captain Arnwald gazed at each other with confusion; just where did the enemy soldiers come from? Despite their questions, both Officers knew now was not the time to ask, but instead, firm action was needed to be taken if they wished to survive the enemy ambush. With this in mind, the Colonel and Captain Arnwald burst from the command tent and began to rally their troops for battle.

"Form ranks! Grab your muskets and form ranks, dammit!"

Hearing the confident voice of their commanding officer pierce through the air was enough to snap the nearby soldiers into their senses, where their reflexes as battle-hardened veterans immediately took over. Now was the time for the extensive training they had been put through to truly reveal itself.

The soldiers rushed into their tents, where they retrieved their 1417/18 Rifled Muskets, along with their web gear that contained their munitions. Before long, the Austrians began to form ranks while firing upon the so-called refugees who had snuck into their encampment.

Thousands of Austrians had now armed themselves with their muskets and began to effectively counter the Italian assault. As they rapidly reloaded their weapons and fired a second volley, the Italian forces were quickly cut to ribbons.

As the battle continued to wage, Arnwald rallied his Grenadiers, who fulfilled their purpose as the shock troops of the Austrian Army. Without fear, they began to load their muskets and fire into the mob of Italian Soldiers; after doing so, they lit their grenades and lobbed them into the fray.

Once the grenades had exploded, killing hundreds of Italians in the process, they fixed their bayonets. Where the fearless Grenadiers charged at the concussed soldiers of the Italian Army, skewering them with the triangular steel blades, causing mortal wounds that were impossible to stitch up—leaving the Italians to bleed out in a pool of their bodily fluids.

While this was going on, a few dozen Italian Knights recovered muskets from the fallen Austrian soldiers. After doing so, they immediately mounted their horses and fled into the distance; the moment they did so, the remaining Italian soldiers took notice and began to retreat, providing cover to the Knights as they escaped from the chaotic battlefield.

The tides of war rapidly shifted in the Austrians favor; as the Austrians regained their footing, the Italian ambushers were quickly slaughtered like a bunch of stray dogs. The battle had ended as soon as it had begun with an overwhelming victory for the Austrian soldiers.

Unfortunately, the Knights had gotten away with a few dozen muskets, which they would undoubtedly bring back to the Empire's engineers. One thing was

sure; such a result would have far-reaching consequences about the leaking of technology and the advancements that Berengar's enemies would soon come to possess.

The days of overwhelming technological dominance would quickly come to an end. If Berengar did not innovate his armies further, he would soon be combating forces with a similar military capacity to his own.

Chapter 312: Fall of Zurich

While the Austrian supply caravan had suffered many losses on their journey to the city of Milan due to the enemy ambush, Adelbrand had been marching towards the rally point of the Swiss forces within the city of Zurich. Until now, the Swiss had not tasted the power of steel and shot, and as such, they were fairly arrogant.

Aside from the Mercenaries who were wiped out during Berengar's rise to power, the Swiss had not become aware of the effectiveness of Berengar's weaponry and refused to believe that the Austrians had become superior to their mighty forces.

As such, there was a degree of arrogance among the Swiss armies gathered in Zurich as they witnessed the Austrian soldiers clad in their black and gold equipment arriving outside their city's borders.

The commander of the Swiss forces gathered in Zurich was the Duke of Zurich; he was the current head of the Swiss Confederation and was a man of renowned power within the alpine state as he gazed upon the gathering Austrian army below his ramparts, a smug smile formed on his face. As he boldly declared the city's impregnability.

"I don't care what wonder weapons these Austrians have allegedly created; they will not be able to penetrate through the mighty walls of my city!-"

However, the moment the man said this, the echo of the 1417 12 lb artillery pieces roared through the air as the shells whistled by and detonated upon the mighty stone walls of the city. In a fit of cosmic irony, the section of the wall that the Duke of Zurich was standing upon was struck by one of these shells; the explosive impact crushed the ramparts and sent him spiraling below to his death.

With each barrage fired, the stone walls were rapidly chipped away as the explosive blasts engulfed the material that they were comprised of. With 140 cannons unleashing hell upon the cities walls, it was only a matter of hours before they were brought to rubble, much to the chagrin of the Swiss Defenders.

As the Austrian soldiers came pouring over the rubble that was once the mighty walls of the city, deemed impregnable by the Duke of Zurich, the Swiss could hardly believe the sight. In such a short period, the city walls were brought to ruin, and the enemy had rushed into the fray; with their bayonets affixed, they formed ranks and fired on the stunned Swiss defenders.

Adelbrand gazed upon his army from afar as they advanced into the city and engaged in battle with the Swiss soldiers who had gathered within its gates. Unfortunately, they arrived early and were battling only half of the troops the Swiss Confederation could manage to field.

Without a shadow of a doubt, Zurich would fall on this day, and with it, half of the Swiss Army. With this in mind, Adelbrand approached the front lines of the battle, where he witnessed the Austrian soldiers gunning down the Swiss spearmen who rushed towards the Austrian lines.

They had not been informed that human wave tactics did not affect the Austrian army; as the Swiss stepped every closer to the Austrian lines, smoke filled the air, and thunder echoed in the distance as thousands of guns went off in unison, shredding through the armor of the Swiss soldiers like a knife through butter, and tearing apart their internal organs.

Blood and bone scattered across the battlefield with each volley, creating panic among the Swiss forces; in the height of their hubris, they had not believed for a moment that the Austrian weapons could so easily pierce through their high-quality armor.

The Duke of Zurich was now buried beneath the rubble of the wall he was standing on, his head squashed like a melon as the giant piece of stone debris replaced where his skull once was. He had not survived the initial barrage and therefore could not rally the city's defenders behind him.

With their chain of command broken, it did not take long for the Swiss soldiers to break ranks and flee from the city's rear gates, struggling to break through at the expense of their comrade's lives. Unlike in Italy, the plan was not to raid and plunder the cities of Switzerland for their worth.

Instead, it was a matter of conquest and annexation. Thus while Swiss Soldiers fled the city rapidly, the Austrians secured the critical areas while leaving the civilians to their own devices. After a few hours, the battle had come to a close, and all resistance within the once-mighty city of Zurich had fallen.

The Austrian flag was slowly raised above its walls as Adelbrand gazed upon the setting sun with a stoic expression. While gazing off into the distance, his second in command approached him and relayed the information that he had received.

"Out of the 10,000 soldiers of the swiss army who were stationed in Zurich, over half of them were killed in battle. As for our casualties, less than 1,000 men were wounded or killed in action. What are the plans for the deceased?"

Adelbrand sighed before shifting his attention from the beautiful sunset towards his executive officer.

"Bring the Austrians back to the fatherland and have them buried in the national cemetery. As for the Swiss soldiers, bury them most fittingly. We are here to rule over these people, and thus we should not make a mockery of their dead."

The officer nodded his head in response to these orders; while he did so, he prepared to leave before remembering he had a note in his pocket that had arrived from the Italian front. With this in mind, he retrieved the letter and read its contents to General Adelbrand.

"The supply Caravan tasked with providing logistical support to Berengar's Army has been ambushed; they suffered minimal casualties, and a few dozen muskets were looted. Berengar has advised all forces that the enemy may disguise themselves as refugees or merchants and that we should remain vigilant. It would appear the enemy has realized that they can not contend with us in the field and thus are utilizing some unconventional tactics."

After hearing this, Adelbrand sighed heavily before giving his orders to the officer.

"Double the protection of our logistical network, and relay these orders to the officers in charge. I don't want any mishaps here on our campaign. If the Italians have adopted such tactics, it is only a matter of time before the Swiss do as well."

After hearing this, the officer saluted General Adelbrand before responding in the affirmative.

"Yes, sir!"

General Adelbrand returned the man's salute before giving him one last order for the day.

"Dismissed!"

With that having been said, the officer left the area where Adelbrand was standing, and the General was left by his lonesome, gazing off into the beautiful sunset that filled the sky with a unique blend of orange and purple light.

Only one thought escaped the man's lips as he reflected on this new information he received.

"Looks like things won't be so boring after all..."

With these events, the war for Austrian independence had taken a new turn, the days of significant field battles and human wave tactics would soon come to an end, as the Italian and Swiss forces would engage in unconventional warfare against the numerically and technologically superior forces of the Royal Austrian Army.

The Austrian occupation and annexation of Switzerland would become a long and brutal conflict, as the non-German population was sure to retaliate against the forces who presided over them with an Iron fist.

Berengar had no use of those who did not toe the line, and rebellion could not be tolerated. Despite the Austrian conquest of Zurich, the war for Switzerland had only just begun. Whether General Adelbrand could adapt to the new tactics employed by the enemy had yet to be seen.

Chapter 313: Keelhauled

Among the Crew of Honoria's revenge, one lass, in particular, stood out among the primarily European crew. This woman was named Nazeeha el-Fahmy; she was a woman from the Mamluke Sultanate who had made her way to Austria as a slave sometime earlier in her life.

However, due to Berengar's legal reforms that outlawed slavery within the Kingdom of Austria, Nazeeha soon found herself accessible and incapable of working. After all, she was both a woman and a minority, and she was not afforded the privileges that the normal Austrians received.

With nowhere to go in life, she had ended up selling her body to sustain herself within the city of Kufstein; after all, a foreign beauty was a highly desirable object by many of the patrons who visited the brothel where she had previously worked.

Nazeeha was out purchasing supplies on one fateful day when she came across Princess Honoria, who had introduced herself as Valeria Zonara. The two ended up chatting for some time before the runaway princess gave Nazeeha an offer, one where she could live a life of freedom and fortune.

After carefully considering the offer, Nazeeha had joined Valeria's Crew. She did not mind that Valeria was a Byzantine, despite their two peoples being bitter enemies for centuries; after all, it was not like she was a member of the Byzantine aristocracy who was responsible for the numerous invasions into her people's lands.

Or so she thought, and as such, she had been enjoying her time as a member of Honoria's Crew. However, the more she utilized the weapons provided to her by the Austrian Crown, the more she became convinced that such weapons needed to be smuggled into her homeland so that they could be used to repel the Byzantine invaders.

Due to Austria's military aid, most of Egypt and Lybia had fallen to the Byzantines. With it, the most economic regions of her homeland had fallen to their bitter enemies. As a profoundly patriotic woman, Nazeeha desired to aid her people in whatever way she could.

Thus while the Crew of Honoria's Revenge was docked in the city of Benghazi to sell the loot they had acquired from the vessels they had recently ransacked, Nazeeha was undertaking another mission. Hidden beneath her cloak was one of the 1421 Repeating Flintlocks that Berengar had designed for Honoria's use.

She was secretly heading to a clandestine meeting between herself and a representative of the Mamluke Sultanate. Unbeknownst to her, she had been followed by a mysterious agent in the shadows.

For over a year now, Linde's spy network had expanded to Byzantium and the Mamluke Sultanate; with the opening of trade routes across the Mediterranean largely in part to Berengar's naval expansion, opportunities for embedding agents across the coastal regions of the sea presented themselves.

Never one to miss an opportunity, Linde had taken this chance to expand and strengthen her spy network. As such, a small cell of Austria's intelligence agency was located in Benghazi and had become aware of this meetup. They had quickly identified the target and followed her to the meeting, where she was now standing face to face with a member of the Mamluke military.

The man was a high-ranking official tasked by the Sultan to procure the advanced weaponry that the woman claimed she had come across. As he stood in front of Nazeeha, he asked the question on his mind.

"Do you have what you have promised to bring?"

Nazeeha nodded her head silently before revealing the repeating flintlock. The moment the officer gazed upon the weapon, he knew it was not something remotely similar to the arquebuses in use by the Byzantine Forces.

As such, he reached out and grabbed ahold of the weapon, pointing it into the air and cocking the action back before firing. The shot flew into the air, and after it had done so, he cocked the flintlock back and fired again.

After several uses of the weapon, the officer nodded his head with an excited grin curved upon his lips. He handed the gun off to a subordinate before taking out a small chest filled with gold coins, which he handed over to Nazeeha.

"Your service to the Sultanate is greatly appreciated, a small reward on behalf of the Sultan as proof of his gratitude."

Nazeeha eyes widened as she saw this wealth and quickly grasped ahold of it before stashing it away beneath her cloak; she bowed her head respectfully before departing from the meeting area.

The young Arab woman was utterly unaware that after she had left earshot, the officer and his assistant were assassinated by the Austrian agents. The weapon was recovered, and Honoria had been informed of the woman's betrayal.

As such, when Nazeeha finally returned to the vessel after spending her newfound wealth on frivolities, she found Honoria and the Crew gathered before her, armed and ready to restrain her.

Nazeeha knew not what she had done to invoke their ire, but she knew she was in trouble; however, before she could escape, one of the girls hit her on the back of the head with the stock of her firearm, knocking the lass out completely.

When she finally came to, she was tied up with steel wire rope and lined against the ship's edge. Nazeeha had no idea that her treachery had been revealed and attempted to plead with Honoria.

"Captian? What are you doing? Let me go; I have done nothing wrong!"

However, in response, Honoria simply sneered in disgust before retrieving the repeating flintlock that Nazeeha had sold to the Sultanate. The weapon had the same proof mark and the serial number of the musket she had handed

over to the Sultanate, and after observing this, the Arab beauty's eyes widened in disbelief.

Seeing Nazeeha's expression, a sadistic grin curved itself upon Honoria's immaculate lips as she asked the question on her mind.

"Do you deny that you have sold the weapons afforded to you by the Austrian Crown to its enemies?"

After hearing this question, Nazeeha looked away; she knew there was nothing she could say to prove her innocence; evidently, the Agents of the Austrian Crown had found out about her betrayal, and they had the evidence to prove it.

As such, the woman accepted her fate, though she had no way of knowing just how cruel the punishment for her crimes was. With the evidence presented before the crew and a lack of denial for the crimes, Honoria declared Nazeeha's guilt for all of the crew to witness.

"Nazeeha el-Fahmy, for supplying the rivals of the Austrian Crown with the advanced weapons his Majesty's generosity has afforded us, you have not only betrayed this crew but endangered the lives of every one of your sisters who you have fought beside. For the crime of treason and mutiny, there is only one punishment. I sentence you to be keelhauled! May God have mercy on your soul!"

With this decree uttered, the steel wire rope bindings were looped beneath the vessel before Nazeeha was tossed into the Mediterranean; as the ship sailed through the sea, Nazeeha was slowly dragged along the keel of the vessel. Multiple lacerations accumulated on her back as she was violently forced across the sharp steel-plated keel; whether the woman bled out in the water or drowned was uncertain.

However, what was undeniable was that Nazeeha had died a miserable death for her actions against the crew, and more importantly, the Crown of Austria. If Berengar's agents were not already in Benghazi spying on the Sultanate for the Byzantine Empire; then, the likelihood of Berengar's rivals reversing engineering such advanced weaponry within the next ten years was high.

Luckily for Austria, their intelligence network had spread across the Mediterranean and was able to intercept such valuable technology before it fell into the wrong hands. With the increase in trade to the regions of the Mediterranean, Berengar was able to easily infiltrate the societies that shared the sea, to what degree depended entirely on the area his Agents had entered.

With this in mind, Honoria sighed heavily as she returned to her Captain's quarters with a bottle of whiskey in her hands. It was never easy to punish someone you thought of as a friend after they had betrayed you. As such, the runaway princess began to sulk alone in her room; as she drank from the whiskey bottle, she expressed the thoughts on her mind.

"Berengar, I miss you... When will you return home?"

Honoria was utterly unaware that Elfrun had been listening to her complaints from the other side of her door, with an ugly expression on her otherwise cute face. The fact that Honoria thought of Berengar in such times greatly annoyed the adolescent girl. As such, she refused to stand by and listen to Honoria's words; instead, she departed from the corridor in silence. Nobody ever was aware that she had been eavesdropping on the Captain.

Chapter 314: Formation of the National Militia

While Berengar was off at war, Chancellor Otto von Graz was running the state in his absence. While there were a few garrisons located throughout the Kingdom, the fear of invasion from foreign powers had begun to infect the minds of a small portion of the populace.

In response to this, Count Otto devised an idea and presented it before the Reichstag. This idea was loosely based upon some of the drunken ramblings Otto had engaged with between himself and King Berengar in the days before the war.

Otto was an efficient statesman who was entirely capable of being inspired by Berengar's half-brained intoxicated ideas and turning them into a practical reality. At this moment, the Chancellor of Austria was standing within the Reichstag, speaking his mind to the congressman who was gathered within.

As a representative of the people, Gunther was among the crowd of men elected by people of all social standings to represent the people's interests. As such, he was privy to the ideas presented by the Chancellor as he spoke with passion.

"Months ago, I discussed with King Berengar, about a matter of critical importance to the safety and security of the Kingdom of Austria. We spoke about the possibility to form a National Guard. A registered and well-regulated group of civilians who undergo military training on weekends, and act as an extension of the pre-existing Armed Forces.

The purpose of this National Guard is to ensure that the Austrian people are sufficiently armed and trained to defend their life and property in the event that foreigners were to invade our country. Today, I have given every one of you a copy of my proposed plan for the Austrian National Guard.

All able-bodied men between the ages of sixteen to twenty will be required to undergo weekly training based upon military standards, including physical fitness, firearms training, and tactics. Of course, these men will be appropriately compensated for the time spent training in the militia.

With this said, I will leave this proposed bill for all of you to look over and discuss, however now more than ever, I think it is pertinent that we make sure that Austria is well protected from all internal and external threats."

With these words spoken, the Chancellor left the podium and returned to his chateau in Kufstein, where he began to relax until an agreement could be made between the legislature and himself. He had nothing to do while the Reichstag debated among themselves, and as such he enjoyed a nice cup of coffee.

While Otto was enjoying his free time with leisure, Gunther was in the middle of looking over the proposal. It was by no means a poor idea, and he knew that Austria had the capability to supply the militia with the weapons necessary for their objectives. As such, he was in favor of the idea of establishing a National Militia.

After all, the garrisons spread throughout Austria were not enough to protect the fields and the village folk from a potential invasion. With this in mind, he looked over at the other representatives in a fierce debate with one another.

Many of them had sons that were within the age group listed and feared their children being forced to take up arms to defend the Nation should it come under attack. Gunther decided he would do his best to convince the Reichstag to agree to Chancellor Otto's terms.

The man shivered in anxiety as he approached the podium and tried to gain the attention of the arguing representatives.

"Excuse me..."

However, his actions went completely unnoticed; as such, he decided to steal his resolve and speak with some force behind his tone.

"Quiet down!"

When Gunther shouted these words at the top of his lungs, everyone finally noticed that someone was standing at the podium and was intrigued as such; Gunther cleared his throat before speaking in an authoritative voice.

"Some of you may not be aware of who I am, but my name is Gunther; I am a representative selected by the people of Kufstein to represent their interests. I know many of those among you come from noble upbringing, but allow me to tell you who I am.

Until four years ago, I was a common serf; I tended to the fields in the name of my masters, the von Kufstein family. When I first met King Berengar, he was a frail, sickly youth, but he had a dream. A dream of a self-sustaining Kufstein where the people were appropriately compensated for their labor.

It is a dream that any man, regardless of their upbringing, could achieve in life whatever they desired based upon their merit! At first, I thought he was just an idealistic youth, but I have seen the town I grew up in transform into a marvelous city over these last four years.

Berengar von Kufstein conquered Tyrol after Count Lothar betrayed Duke Wilmar through the hard work of better men than me. To my surprise, the man who once toiled a field beside me was now the Count of Tyrol, and with it, he brought the same innovations that had led his Barony to Prosperity to the entirety of the County.

Yet that was not enough; as the Bavarians invaded, Berengar led the men of Tyrol to retake Austria as a whole. Unfortunately, the Duke and his line had passed away in its entirety shortly after, and Berengar was named the new Duke.

We have had a stable peace throughout these past two years, allowing us to grow in wealth and prosperity. King Berengar has done the unthinkable; he has created a world where a lowly farmer like myself can own my land and operate it entirely with my family. The wealth I have gained from this has allowed me to buy more land and expand upon that.

I now have a factory under construction that will be producing paper from the products I grow. Four years ago, I could never imagine such a fate, but this is the reality we all see. Without Berengar, and the brave men who have laid down their lives to pave the way for this future, I would not be where I am today; I likely would have starved to death alongside my family in a particularly harsh winter.

So, I think it is the duty of all men, capable of bearing arms, to at the very least provide a last line of defense for our Homeland. While our soldiers are away at war securing our independence, the responsibility to protect our homes, our family's, our businesses, and most importantly, our Nation should fall to every able-bodied man in Austria!

I, for one, support the move for a National Guard, and I hope that every one of you will reflect upon what you have gained from the sacrifice of young men who have fought and died to achieve what we have all gained under Berengar's leadership. That is all I have to say..."

With this impassioned speech, Gunther stepped down from the podium and returned to his seat; as he did so, he heard a slow clap, which began to spread; before long, the entire room was filled with applause. After he did so, the House Leader stood up at the podium and began to cast a vote.

"All in favor of the establishment of a National Militia as proposed by Chancellor Otto von Graz?"

After Gunther's speech, those who had reservations about the bill were silenced and even showed their support for the idea. The decision was ultimately unanimous, and after the Reichstag passed it, it would be sent to the Senate, where they would vote upon it. It was only after it was approved in the Senate that it would be sent to the Chancellor's office, wherein Berengar's absence, he had the authority to sign it into law.

The Militia Act of 1421 would become the first significant piece of legislation passed entirely by the fledgling Semi-Constitutional government that Berengar had established. While he was away at war, the capable hands he had left Austria's governance to begin the progress of creating a society where martial training at a young age would one day be considered the norm.

Chapter 315: The Princess of Granada

While the war for Austria's Independence was ongoing within the Kingdom of Italy and the Swiss Confederation, another battle was beginning to intensify as the Granadans fought against the Iberian Union. Due to Austrian military aid, the Granadan forces had multiplied and were relatively well trained, at least compared to their enemies.

While Hasan's soldiers were engaged in a bloody conflict at his borders defending the last vestige of Al-Andalus. He was busy entertaining himself with women and wine.

At the moment, Hasan was back at his palace in Granada. Unlike Berengar, he had no desire to lead from the front lines; the few battles he waged were enough to last him a lifetime. Instead, he left the war effort to his commanders with the aid of the Austrian military advisors.

The young Sultan enjoyed himself on a sofa while his wives attended to his needs, feeding him a bowl of grapes while he sipped on his fortified wine. During Hasan's purge, Berengar's guards had killed one of his wives who attempted to take his life, and he had eliminated another who was loyal to the fundamentalist faction.

As such, the young sultan currently had no more than two wives. Despite this, he was looking to expand his harem. However, he would not accept just any woman, he wanted a harem of beautiful young women to take care of his needs as Berengar had obtained.

While basking in hedonism, a gorgeous young woman approached the young Sultan. This woman was quite tall and had an exceptionally curvy figure, one could say her measurements hit the perfect ratio, and her bust was even more significant than Linde's. Her tan skin glistened with sweat from the heat of the arid climate that surrounded the city of Granada.

This woman was dressed in a traditional silk kaftan style dress dyed purple and had golden embroidery on it; she wore a matching face veil made of sheer silk, giving it a semi-translucent appearance.

Her dark hair was tied up into a ponytail, and her glistening amber eyes were enough to intoxicate any man who gazed upon the vivid gemstones that were her irises.

This woman was not one of Hasan's wives. Instead, it was his older sister Yasmin; when she saw her little brother lazing about with his wives, instead of leading his armies, she crossed her arms beneath her heavy bosom and began to chastise the young Sultan as if he were a mere child.

"My my, What do I see here? If it isn't my sweet little brother, here you are lazing about in Granada while you send your soldiers to die on the frontlines against our enemies. If I didn't know any better, I would say that you are afraid of battle..."

When the princess said this, the wives of the Sultan glared at her viciously; they were aware of the way she pampered her little brother and were also jealous of her natural beauty. Despite their skimpy attire resembling that of a belly dancer, they still could not captivate a man's interest while Yasmin was in the room. Sensing their hostility, Yasmin smiled cruelly beneath her veil before shooing the pesky vixens away.

"If you don't mind, I have some proper business to discuss with my little brother..."

Though Hasan's wives continued to glare at her, Hasan ultimately sighed before dismissing his women.

"Go! As Yasmin has said, we have a business to discuss."

With this said, the two wives begrudgingly left the room; It was only after Yasmin made sure the two women were out of earshot, that she further began to condemn Hasan's actions.

"Honestly, little brother, I know there are no women at the front lines, but as Sultan, it is your job to inspire your troops on the field of battle, even if you do not directly participate! I can hardly think of a Monarch who actually stands toe to toe with his soldiers on the frontlines.

If word gets out that you retreated from the war effort so that you could bask in the arms of your wives, what will your soldiers think of you? Would they consider you a Sultan worth dying for?"

As Hasan heard these harsh words, his expression sank; after doing so, he stretched out his body on the couch and yawned in exhaustion.

"I'm just not fit for warfare; I nearly died in the last battle I fought, I almost had my head taken off by one of my cannons! I've decided to leave war to the men best suited for it. Besides, with the Austrian's support, there's no way we can lose this war!"

Seeing Hasan's relaxed composure, Yasmin sighed before sitting down next to him, stroking his dark hair, which matched her own as she pampered the young Sultan like he were a mere child. As she did so, she offered words of wisdom.

"I only criticize you because I care about you. You rely on your allies too much and not enough on your own power. What if the Austrians have ill intentions towards our Emirate? After all, they are Christian, and though they may be Reformists, that does not mean the centuries of hatred between our people can be eroded so easily..."

Despite her warning, Hasan did not seem concerned. Instead, he shifted his attention and gazed into his sister's gorgeous amber eyes with a look of affection on his face.

"That won't happen, I know that Berengar intends to use us as a means to stall the Catholic Church, but we need him if we wish to survive this turbulent era. So I have decided, the next time I see him, I will do my best to convince him to take your hand in marriage and cement this fragile alliance of ours for the foreseeable future."

The moment Yasmin heard her brother's plans for her, she withdrew her hand and in shock and looked the other way as she struggled to come up with the words to convince him otherwise.

"Hasan..."

However, before she could finish those words, Hasan raised his hand to silence her before speaking over her thoughts.

"Yas, you just turned twenty-six in June; you are well past the age of marriage; if you do not get married soon, you will never have a husband or a family. The only reason you aren't married already is because our father doted on you too much and was never able to find a man he approved of for his precious little daughter."

The Granadan princess continued to stare away as she lightly murmured the words.

"What... what if he says no?"

In response to this, Hasan grabbed ahold of Yasmin's veiled face and dragged it over into his sightline as he responded with a severe expression.

"I will not allow him to say no; he's already discussed the desire to have multiple wives, and if he doesn't respect our alliance enough to take my beautiful sister as his bride, then he can consider it over."

Obviously, I won't pressure him so seriously at first. The next time I see him, I will float the idea and judge his general reaction. Then I'll continue to pester him until he says yes."

Yasmin began to sigh heavily upon hearing this before shaking her head, which was still grasped by Hasan's firm hand.

"Dearest brother, you have actually thought something through for once in your life..."

Hasan feigned offense as he pulled his hand back and began to criticize his elder sister's choice of words.

"What do you mean for once in my life? I think things through all the time!"

With that said, Yasmin began to giggle before she grabbed ahold of Hasan's head and stuffed it into her bosom while stroking his hair while speaking to him in a condescending tone.

"Of course you do!"

being treated like a child once more, Hasan began to pout. No matter how old he grew, his sister would continue to treat him in such a manner. Thus he sighed heavily as he enjoyed the embrace. After a while, Yasmin released him before approaching the exit.

As she did so, the gorgeous princess called out to her little brother once more with a stern gaze hidden beneath her veil.

"You would do well to remember that you are the Sultan of Granada and that your soldiers need you..."

With those words spoken, the beautiful Granadan Princess departed from the room, leaving the young Sultan to himself as he grinned with a smug expression on his face. Afterward, he picked up the bottle of wine that he had obtained from trade with Austria and began to pour its contents into a crystal glass, where he swirled the red liquid around before taking a sip from it.

After doing so, he exhaled deeply before he thought aloud.

"I wonder how Berengar will react when he sees my beautiful sister for the first time..."

Chapter 316: Battle of the Andalusian Plains

Since the victory and seizure of the province known as Murcia, the Granadans have been busy defending their borders from the Iberian Union's attacks. They were not as well prepared for a full-scale invasion of Iberia as they thought they were.

The first few battles they fought showed a severe lack of discipline in their ranks compared to Berengar's troops. The reason for this was simple, the Austrian military attache had not drilled the Granadans as hard as they would their own troops, nor did they put them through specialized training.

As such, after Hasan had returned to Granada to engage in hedonistic activity, the Royal Granadan Army was left in the hands of General Ziyad Ibn Ya'is, who was far more competent on military matters than the young Sultan.

This General was a middle-aged man and was currently engaged in a conversation with General Arnulf of the Royal Austrian Army. It had been roughly a year since he last saw his home in Kufstein, and despite this, he was not weary in the slightest.

At the moment, the two Generals were conversing with each other as they rode their horses next to each other in the middle of the formation, under the protection of thousands of Granadan troops.

"So Hasan abandons his army so that he can go engorge himself in women and wine? Leaving us to look after his army, that has got to sting a little, does it not? My dear friend."

In response to this, General Ziyad merely laughed before responding to Arnulf's jest.

"Certainly not; I am actually glad that the Sultan has left the war effort in my hands. Don't get me wrong, he is a decent administrator, but a wet blanket would make a better commander in terms of strategy and warfare.

The Sultan is liable to get himself killed out here; it is better for him to be the face of the recruitment efforts back home than to be the man leading the charge."

Before Arnulf could respond to this statement, he noticed a rider in the distance; this man wore the standard mirror pattern and mail armor that most of the Granadan troops were equipped with. As such, he was allowed to pass into the army, where he immediately strode up to the command.

"Permission to speak, sir!"

Judging by the frantic expression on the soldier's face, Ziyad knew the news must be urgent; as such, he nodded his head in silence, bracing himself for the information he suspected would ruin his mood.

"There's an enemy army numbering roughly 20,000 heading in this direction. They are approximately ten miles out!"

As soon as he heard this, Ziyad began to give his orders to the troops in his army.

"Get in formation, and prepare for battle. Load your weapons; I do not want you firing your weapons until you see the whites in their eyes!"

This phrase was how the Austrians had drilled the Granadan troops to utilize their primitive arkebuse firearms in the most efficient manner. Whether or not they were capable of maintaining such a high degree of discipline was another story entirely.

As such, the Granadan troops, whether they were infantry, artillery, or cavalry quickly began to load their weapons with the means available to them; after doing so, they began to form ranks and wait for the enemy to arrive.

After a few hours, the enemy forces arrived, and when they did, they were shocked to see the Granadan Army waiting for them. The Iberian Army was comprised mostly of the Crusader Order known as the Order of Calatrava, but there were also a few Iberian Union units among their ranks from Castille.

These soldiers had become increasingly aware of the advantages and limitations of the Granadan weapons. As such, they instantly began to charge the arkebusiers suicidally, hoping to clash with them before they could reload their guns.

While the Iberian troops began to recklessly charge at the Granadan forces, the Granadan artillery began to fire their grapeshot at the enemy lines via their Falconet cannons. Numerous projectiles filled the air and blasted into the enemy ranks causing massive casualties on the Iberian forces.

Whether it was faith in God or fearlessness in death, the Iberians were not deterred. Instead, they madly charged into the line of fire without any regard for their safety. When Arnulf saw this, he became quite concerned, the Iberians vastly outnumbered the Granadan troops, and the Granadan weapons required a far longer duration of time to reload than the weapons of the Royal Austrian Army.

As the enemy line began closing in, several Grenadan arkebusiers started to fire their weapons in trepidation, which caused a chain reaction from the soldiers as others instantly opened fire despite not hearing an order to do so.

Though some of these shots found their marks, piercing through the enemy's armor and into their flesh, most of them utterly failed to do so. This action forced Ziyad to shout his orders at his troops which were relayed across the army by the other officers and NCOs.

"Hold your fire! Hold your fucking fire!"

Despite these orders, more rounds fired off until a point where roughly half of the soldiers still had loaded weapons, forcing them into a dangerous position. While the other half began reloading their guns as fast as they could, the Iberian troops had finally reached the front lines of the army.

In doing so, they rushed straight into a volley unleashed by the half of the soldiers who had contained their shot. While this volley was effective in devastating the enemy lines, it did not have nearly as significant an effect as possible.

As such, the Pikemen took their place and began to battle with the enemy. However, as the battle waged on the Granadan army started to suffer losses. There were too many Iberians for their army to handle effectively.

It would be another story if the soldiers had maintained the proper discipline and fired when they were commanded. However, the reality was a different story, and roughly 5,000 arkebusiers had missed their targets during the initial chaos of the battle. Before long, the pikemen could no longer contain the Iberian infantry, and they began to break ranks, and flee the battlefield.

Cutting down the Moorish soldiers with fatical hatred, the Catholic forces began screaming in their native tongue a series of battle cries that sent chills down the Granadan armies spines.

"Death to all Moors! God wills it!" "Granada must burn!"

Before long, the Granadan lines began to crumble, and the soldiers started to route. Though General Ziyad attempted to rally his forces behind him, the effort was in vain; Arnulf grabbed the man by the soldier and gazed into his dark eyes with a stern expression.

"The battle is lost; give the order to retreat, or we will die here!"

Ziyad clenched his teeth and fists in fury as he witnessed his army break ranks and flee the battlefield. However, there was nothing to do about it now; as such, he followed Arnulf's advice.

"Retreat! All units fall back!"

As the few remaining Granadan soldiers heard this, they slung their Arkebuses over their shoulders and began to retreat from the advancing army. On the other side of the battlefield, the Calatrava Commander was eager to pursue the enemy and give them no quarter. As he was just about to give the command to annihilate the enemy, he felt a firm hand grip the armor on his shoulder.

As such, the man turned around to see the true mastermind behind this attack; it was a Duke under the employ of the King of Castille; the man glared at the Crusader Commander before shaking his head.

"Let them go..."

When the Crusader heard these words, he was outraged and immediately protested.

"But your Grace! If we do not pursue them, they will regroup and become an even greater threat to our existence!"

However, the Duke remained unconvinced and simply gazed toward the direction that all of the Granadan soldiers were fleeing.

"If we pursue them, we may be walking into a trap. I would rather have them regroup and crush them again than march my men to a meaningless death. You should be thankful; without my advice, this victory would not have been possible..."

After saying this, the Duke released his grip over the Crusader and strode his horse forward, commanding all Iberian soldiers to stop.

"Halt! We shall go no further! Scavenge the enemy's weapons! We shall bring some of these back to Castille so that we may figure out how they function. As for the rest, arm yourselves with them, and become acquainted in their use. The Granadans no longer have an authority on advanced armaments!"

With these words said, the Catholic Iberian soldiers began to cheer. They had accomplished a great victory here on this day, and with it, acquired the means to reverse engineer the Arkebuse; perhaps such a thing would turn the tides of war in their favor. After all, the resurrection of Al Andalus was something the Catholics could not allow to take place.

Chapter 317: Arming Brigands

Months had passed since Operation Thunder proved to be an initial success; the Hussites had advanced well into loyalist territory during this time. So much so that the Catholic armies were now on the backfoot.

As a result of this civil disobedience began to break out all over the realm, which quickly turned to riots. The result of this was a spike in crime; bands of brigands had begun to appear all over Bohemia, acting as a scourge upon the local populace.

While Eckhard was busy acting as the chief military advisor to the various Hussite sects, Agents of the Austrian Crown had begun to supply various brigand groups with the weapons they needed to cause even greater chaos.

The shipment of arms had come straight from Vienna and passed through Eckhard's area of operations; as such, he tasked one of the Field Agents embedded with his unit to take charge of the delivery. At the moment, this Agent was standing in front of the leader of one of the most fearsome Brigand gangs within the borders of Prague.

The Hussites would soon be marching on this territory; with this in mind, Eckhard devised a plan that involved the Brigands' armament, with the intent to distract the loyalist forces. The Agent dispatched to supply these criminals was currently standing in a forest outside of a village that lies within the boundaries of the city of Prague.

The man in front of the Agent went by the name Radovan Dohnal; he was a particularly rowdy individual who was a convicted criminal willing to use violence to achieve his goals. As such, he and his gang of brigands were ideal candidates to arm with hand cannons.

With this in mind, the Agent and his fellow operatives dressed like lowly Bohemian peasants entered into the back of their wagon before pulling out a few wooden crates. After using a crowbar to pry them open, the primitive hand cannons revealed themselves. The Agent, whose identity was shrouded by a hood, pulled the firearms out from the container and handed them over to Radovan and his men. As he did so, he spoke in a perfect Bohemian accent.

"These are the standard hand cannons that have been retrieved from defeated Hussites; you load the gun powder through the barrel, followed by the projectile, where you then pack it down with a stick. After doing so, you put a bit of powder in the pan, where you ignite it with a slow-burning match. "

As the Agent was saying this, he was demonstrating the use of the weapon. After reaching the end of the loading process that took roughly a minute, a loud echo resounded in the forest as the gun discharged its projectile, which embedded itself into a large tree approximately three meters away.

After successfully testing the weapon, the other agents went back into the wagon and pulled out several more crates filled with hand cannons, as well as a few casks; some were filled with gunpowder, others were filled with projectiles such as iron balls.

Having witnessed the destructive nature of the weapon, and the relatively simple loading process, a wide grin appeared on Radovan's face. The man was missing several of his teeth, which resulted from the number of bar fights he had been in during his lifetime. The man pulled out a pouch filled with coins minted by the local lord; he prepared to pay a hefty price.

"How much do I owe you?"

In response to this, the Agent merely shook his head before responding.

"Consider it a gift from the Bohemian Crown, just promise me that when the Hussite forces move onto Prague, you and your band of thieves will provide one hell of a distraction to those damned heretics..."

Radovan chuckled slightly as he heard this before reaching out his hand in agreement.

"Aye, it will be one hell of an occasion!"

After saying this, the Agent and the brigand captain shook hands. The deal was sealed with this, and the Austrian agents departed from the town; this was just one of the many gangs of criminals and thieves they intended to arm in the upcoming days.

As such, they departed from the borders of Prague and journeyed to the next town on their list of objectives. After the Austrians had left, one of the members of Radovan's gang approached him with a worried expression on his face as he asked the question on his mind.

"Are we really going to aid the Crown? We are all wanted men! Who is to say if they use this as an excuse to round us all up and execute us?"

In response to this, Radovan spat on the ground before handing the hand cannon over to the minion who asked such a stupid question.

"I promised them I would simply make a distraction against the Hussites; I don't plan to do anything more than that. With these weapons, we will intimidate merchants and townsfolk into giving us whatever we want! I say that's a reasonable price to pay for such destructive power."

After hearing this, the brigands who followed Radovan felt a sense of ease, they did not desire to see the Hussites win the war, but they also did not wish for this chaotic era to end so soon. There was profit to be made for cutthroats like themselves during times of war, and the best way to do so was to rob towns, caravans, and refugees. Luckily for them, the Austrians had provided them the means to do so more effectively.

Unfortunately for them, they were utterly unaware that agents of the Austrian Crown had supplied them. Instead, they believed it was Bohemia who had given them the weapons. Thus when Bohemia's armies finally captured them, they would be completely and utterly confused as to why they were being executed for acting on behalf of the Bohemian Crown.

Meanwhile, in the supply wagon that had begun to depart, another agent pulled down her hood to reveal her pretty face; as she did so, she began to question her team leader for the actions they had taken on this day.

"Why are we providing these weapons to a bunch of thieves and murderers? Has the Marshal gone mad? Such actions will surely cause significant harm to the Bohemian people!"

When the lead field agent heard these questions, he merely snorted in response; there was silence for some time before he revealed his thoughts on the matter.

"It is no secret that our hand cannons have begun to find their ways into the hands of the Bohemian Crown's forces and that of their crusader allies. After all, they have been captured in battle from the corpses of the fallen Hussite soldiers.

I don't speak for Marshal Eckhard, but he is likely thinking that by leaking these weapons to criminals, such actions can be blamed on the corruption of the Bohemian Crown, which is why we introduced ourselves as their agents.

This can be used in propaganda efforts to rally the people against Bohemia and her allies.

Such a result would be disastrous; people have already begun to riot in response to the food shortages and the excessive demands of the loyalist factions. When the people hear that corrupt agents of the Crown have distributed weapons to brigands for pay, they will take up whatever means they can to outright resist Bohemia and her allies.

When this occurs it will split our enemy's attention from our allies' attacks and force them to fight a two-war front against the Hussites and the Bohemian populace. By the time the war comes to an end, the Bohemian people will welcome Berengar's troops as a means to provide stability to their lives."

Upon hearing this, the female Agent began to pout; Marshal Eckhard was willing to cause such harm to the people of Bohemia in order to inspire greater chaos within the realm than was already present; it was simply madness in her eyes.

However, she was an agent of the Bohemian Crown, lifted from the status of a lowly orphan to serve the state, thus despite her reservations, she would fulfill her duty to the fullest of her ability. After all, without Berengar, and his reforms, she likely would have died long ago.

She owed her life to the Austrian Crown and would never even think of disobeying Marshal Eckhard because she found his actions immoral. Austria was at war and surrounded by enemies; they did not have the luxury to fight a war in a fair and just manner.

The actions of the Austrian agents within Bohemia would ignite a fire in the heart of the Bohemian populace against their King and his allies. Before long resistance from groups of all different ideologies would spread across the realm, causing an even greater degree of conflict than already seen. This would create the perfect storm for Berengar to usurp power when he finally managed to secure his victory over the Empire.

Chapter 318: East-West Schism

Deep within the center of Constantinople, the Byzantine Emperor sat on his throne with a downcast expression. The man was on the verge of tears, but

he could not allow himself to be seen crying as Emperor. As such, he steeled his resolve and continued to read the letter in his hands written by his son Decentius.

Arethas was dead, according to his second son; the man had died in combat against the Mamluke forces early on in the campaign. Since then, Decentius had been leading the Byzantine troops to victory in North Africa.

The news of the death of a man who was more of a brother to Emperor Vetranis than his siblings was a great shock to the man. With the Strategos' death, many things became uncertain. Especially in regards to their relations to the West.

News had spread to Constantinople about Austria's war for independence, which appeared to favor the self-proclaimed King Berengar von Kufstein. The Byzantines had not taken a stance on the conflict. Instead, they stayed utterly neutral.

After all, Berengar was the largest supplier of arms and armor to the Byzantine Empire. Though they had begun to have success in replicating the Arkebuse, most of their weapons still came from Austria. Meanwhile, relations with the Holy Roman Empire were tenable at best.

This was not the only reason for staying neutral in Austria's war for Independence.? There was a matter of significant debt that the Byzantine Crown had towards Austria due to the agreement made about unlimited arms support.

Arethas was the mastermind of all dealings with the upstart King in the West.? Without him, it would be challenging to maintain the friendly relationship that the Byzantines had with their debtor. If he sent the wrong diplomat to negotiate further, it could spell ruin to the Empire's finances.

Losing his closest aid and confidant, who was the godfather to his children, was one thing. Yet, the ramifications such an occurrence had was enough to cripple the Emperor with anxiety. On top of this, such a tragedy occurred shortly after his daughter's disappearance and presumed death.

The only good news that Vetrans had heard within the last year or so was that his son had salvaged the situation and had rapidly begun to reconquer Egypt and Lybia. Before long, the entirety of those two regions would fall into the Byzantine Empire's hands, and they would be able to repay the massive debt that had accumulated with Austria.

With this in mind, the aging Byzantine Emperor sighed heavily; now that his alliance with France had crumbled, his next best option was an Independent Austria; if Arethas was still around, Vetrans was sure the man would advise him to establish friendly ties to the young King.

If only Honoria was still alive, Emperor Vetrans might consider betrothing her to the upstart King from Austria to cement an alliance between their two realms. Of course, that was assuming Berengar was willing to break his betrothal to his cousin. Honoria was an Imperial Princess, and he would not tolerate her being a concubine.

Austria had proven itself a military and economic power like no other, even now the staple currency of international trade had begun to shift to the Austrian Thaler, so much so that some Merchants who visited the Empire had started to accept the Austrian currency as the sole means of coinage for their products.

If the Austrians were indeed to become independent and annex the Swiss Confederation as they have proclaimed, the future was bright for the fledgling Kingdom; as such, the Emperor was at a crossroads.

For some time now, there had been significant pressure from the Vatican on the Orthodox Church to support them in their efforts to combat Berengar's alleged heresy. To the point that the Patriarch had been visiting Vetrans daily, insisting on cutting off trade with the self-proclaimed Kingdom to the West.

As Vetrans was thinking of such matters, the Patriarch of Constantinople appeared before him in his great hall. When Vetrans saw this, he sighed heavily before speaking his thoughts allowed.

"Speak of the devil, and he shall appear. Tell me, Petrus, just what have you come to ask of me this time? If it is about cutting ties with Austria, my answer remains the same."

When Petrus heard this response, he frowned; the relations between the Vatican and Constantinople were beginning to deteriorate rapidly; the more the Emperor stalled on giving him a reply, the worse the situation became. If he did not provide the Vatican with what they wanted soon, a full-scale schism was bound to occur over the issue of the Berengar Heresy.

With this in mind, the old Patriarch of Constantinople began to address the Emperor in a dignified fashion.

"Your majesty, a representative of the Vatican, has arrived, and given us a request if we do not publically denounce Duke Berengar von Kufstein and his heresy, as well as provide monetary aid to the Vatican for their upcoming crusade against him, then the results will be an outright schism.

The Vatican will denounce your majesty and me as Heretics and condemn us to Hell for eternity; we will be forced to do the same in response. There will be no mending this bridge. You must choose a path as Emperor of the Romans! Do we stand with the Vatican as we have for centuries, or do we embrace the German Reformation as a legitimate branch of Christianity?"

In response to this, Vetrans tapped his armrest repeatedly as he thought about how best to handle this situation that had presented itself. Ultimately, he could not afford to denounce Berengar; the man held too much debt against him.

With his licensing of privateers, Austria could easily cripple the trade of the Empire if they reneged on that deal. Just like they had done to the Holy Roman Empire, the might of the Austrian Navy was not to be underestimated.

Though the combined might of the catholic world might be enough to bring down Berengar's Grand Army, it would be years before they could fully mobilize their forces, and by then, Berengar's army may have grown triple in size, it would be capable of holding its own.

After careful consideration, Vetrans stood up from his golden throne before responding with a firm tone.

"Inform Pope Lucius that the Empire stands with King Berengar and the Kingdom of Austria. Tell that fool that under the declaration of the Emperor of

Byzantium and the Patriarch of Constantinople, the German Reformation is at this moment considered a legitimate branch of Christianity!"

When Petrus heard this, he sighed heavily as he rubbed his temples in an attempt to cure his growing headache. While he knew that Austria's wealth and power were multiplying at a rapid rate, openly supporting them, and their so-called German Reformation would undoubtedly mean war with the western world. Such a thing could prove disastrous. Nevertheless, he was willing to follow Emperor Vetrans's decision on the matter and, as such, bowed before the Emperor respectfully.

"Yes, your majesty, I will relay your words to the Vatican. Hopefully, they won't react too harshly to our decision, but I fear this will create a rift between us that will never be mended."

In response to this, Vetrans simply sat down upon his throne once more and rested his face in his hands; as he did so, he made one more comment about how he perceived the future.

"With the rise of the German Reformation and others like it throughout Europe, the days of Papal dominance have come to an end. They are too foolish to realize that their crusade will be the end of Catholic authority as we know it. I do not care for Berengar or his religious beliefs; I am merely choosing the winning side..."

With that said, the Patriarch of Constantinople was dismissed, and Vetrans was left by his lonesome once more as he began to sulk in depression over the loss of his comrade.

"Oh, Arethas... Surely if you were still alive, you would council me on such a course of action, would you not?"

With Arethas gone, the Emperor's confidence in ruling his Empire effectively had crumbled; without the support of the mighty Strategos and his charisma, Vetrans would begin to second guess his every decision.

With the choices made by the Byzantine Emperor, and his subservient Patriarch on this day, the East-West schism had finally occurred. The year

1421 AD in this world, would forever mark the divide between the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Churches.

The reasons surrounding this schism were entirely the result of Berengar's effects on the timeline; had he never risen to power, and challenged Papal authority, the likelihood of such a divide occurring would be slim. Thus proving once more that Berengar's existence in this world had forever changed its course of destiny.

What effect this schism would have on Byzantine growth and prosperity had yet to be seen. However, one thing was sure. Such actions were bound to breed conflict between the Rus and their neighbors in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Even Berengar could not predict the rapid changes that would occur in Eastern Europe because of his actions.

Chapter 319: Dietger's Intentions

While Berengar invaded Italy and the Swiss Confederation, the ongoing war in Germany had never ceased its activities. Duke Dietger was currently in a dilemma. Over the years, he had compensated for his losses in Austria by fielding peasant levies to make up for the numbers of troops slain during his botched occupation of his southern neighbor.

For over two years now, the Bavarian Duke had been at war with his northern Neighbors and relying on his levies and allied troops to keep the Luxembourgs at bay. To refrain from paying Berengar the reparations he owed the Austrian people, the Duke had sent an envoy saying he would not be able to meet his payments and instead would pay in one lump sum at the end agreed time frame.

Dietger had no intentions to pay Berengar, or the Austrian people such an unreasonable amount of money, reparations for actions taken during warfare? Just what kind of stipulation was that? It was simply being unreasonable.

Nevertheless, his General had agreed to the terms and entirely withdrew Bavarian troops from Austrian soil in the designated timeframe. By doing this, he had bought Bavaria five years of peace with their rapidly expanding southern neighbor.

At the moment the Bavarian Duke was sitting in his castle within Munich, surrounded by his ministers, one topic of contention seemed to invoke the ire of everyone present. One of his ministers was practically spitting as he shouted his views on the issue at hand.

"Berengar can not be allowed to achieve Independence. By claiming himself King of Austria, he declares himself independent of the rightful King of Germany, our liege Duke Dietger! Austria is a vassal of Germany first and foremost, and every Duke of the German realm should oppose this. Upon hearing this another man spoke up in an equally furious state.

"The Austrians have gotten too full of themselves, what gives them the right to declare themselves as an independent Kingdom?" I say we establish a temporary truce with the Luxembourgs and march on Austria, showing this upstart King his place in this world! The fact that a lowly Baron's son could rise to such a prestigious position is an insult to every prominent nobleman within the German Speaking regions!"

Having heard this asinine statement Duke Dietger slammed his fist on his armrest in a fit of fury, as he did so he gathered the attention of all of his Councilors who were present in his Great Hall. Dietger gazed furiously at those around him as if he were looking at a bunch of idiots, after doing so he spoke abruptly and loudly as he chastised the minister for his stupidity.

"Nobody gives Berengar the right to declare himself King, he takes it by force! While we have weakened our armies with years of conflict over a meaningless title with no genuine authority, Berengar has centralized power over his State while expanding his military and economic might.

For Christ's sake! Our merchants have begun utilizing Austrian currency because it is so pure! In comparison, the money of our realm is given to the individual lords to mint and is debased to such a point that it would take tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of our pfennigs to account for one of their thalers!

If we were to win this war, and Austria was still subservient to our rule, what kind of joke would I be as the alleged "King of Germany? Might is right! Berengar has the power to declare himself King; hell, the man is winning a

war with the Empire to establish his ability to do so! Which one of you has the confidence to declare ourselves independent of the Emperor in Florence?

If any of you think we should align ourselves with the Luxembourgs and march on Austria, you should remove yourselves from this council and put forth your resignation; I do not need the counsel of such fools!"

This statement was undoubtedly a harsh one. However, it made a valid point, and that was the idea of marching on Austria being absurd; if one wanted to know how well that would turn out, they just needed to turn back the clock two years to their last attempt at such a thing.

The minister who had proposed such an idea a few minutes before had an ugly expression on his face, however, he remained silent as he stormed out of the room. After his departure, Dietger gazed upon his council with an equally vicious stare as he expressed his following thoughts.

"Does anyone else have any other bright ideas?"

For some time, there was an awkward silence in the room as the councilors struggled to come up with a suggestion on how to deal with the growing power of Austria as well as the stalemate that had been playing itself out on the frontlines of war with the Luxembourgs.

After a while, one of the men present began to speak up; he was the Marshal of the realm and knew how to resolve the situation with their enemies to the North.

"What if we used the money we are supposed to pay Berengar to hire mercenaries to fight the Luxembourgs and their allies? At the moment, we are not even pulling our weight in the war effort; if we don't find a solution to our troop problems soon, then our allies will begin to feel pressured and withdraw their support."

After saying this, the councilors present began to debate over the credibility of such an idea. First, the initial minister to speak up voiced his concerns over the issue.

"If Berengar were to find out about the wealth, we have been hiding away, and that we spent it on mercenaries, he could see this as a provocation and march his troops into our lands. We would not be able to last the winter if he managed to do such a thing!"

While he made a valid point, neither Duke Dietger nor the Marshal was alarmed about such a possibility. Before they could explain why that was the case; another minister dismissed the man's concerns for them.

"Berengar is in the middle of a war with His Majesty Balsamo Corsini and his Swiss allies. It will take some time before he is able to march troops into our lands; even then, his armies will surely be battle-worn from their efforts in those two theaters. We don't have to worry about such a possibility; what we do have to worry about is the fact that if we don't find a way to field more troops, our allies will abandon us."

Though the minister who had his concerns about angering the Austrians was not entirely convinced, he also could not argue against this point. As such, he kept silent about any further objections he might have. After a bit more discussion, the plan of action was accepted by Duke Dietger, and thus he made a bold declaration.

"Send forth the word to all of the free companies that I will pay a handsome amount of gold to whoever fights for Bavaria! I want this stalemate to be broken by Spring so that we may advance upon Northern Germany!"

After that was said, Duke Dietger dismissed his councilors with only his Marshal remaining behind; the two men had one severe issue to talk about that Dietger did not want the other councilors to hear. After everyone else was out of each shot, the Duke of Bavaria closed the door behind them, sighing heavily before speaking.

"If we do not do something about Berengar's rise to power, in less than three years, we will be facing an army that we can not contend with. These Mercenaries of yours better win this conflict for the Crown of Germany before then, or else we will have neither the troops nor the wealth to contend against Austria!"

In response to this the Marshal grinned confidently as he assured the Duke of their future success.

"Not to worry, your Grace, with the addition of these mercenaries to our armies, I have complete confidence in being able to break this stalemate by Spring and marching upon the enemy's capital within two years. By then, you can take all of Germany for yourself, and in doing so, raise an army that can contend with Austria! Berengar von Kufstein will pay for humiliating Bavaria!"

After hearing this, a wicked grin formed on Duke Dietger's face; he could not forgive the young upstart from the south for crushing his armies so thoroughly. There was only one response for such audacity, and that was war.

While Berengar fought with the Emperor and his forces for Independence, the other German Duchies began to conspire against him, after all by declaring Austria to be an Independent Kingdom; Berengar had essentially slapped the rest of the German nobility in the face. For such a thing, war was the only outcome; little did they know that is exactly what Berengar desired.

Chapter 320: Cultural Reforms

Within the heart of the City of Kufstein lies a grand castle which was the home to the von Kufstein family. Inside its cold stone halls, there was a small stage set up, where over a hundred patrons had gathered to watch the display. Adela gazed upon the audience from behind the curtains with an overwhelming sense of excitement and anxiety within her beating heart.

For years now, Adela had been surprised with every visit to Kufstein; the first time she had entered the region, it was nothing more than a small agricultural town. Yet now, it had grown into a massive city and was expanding with each day.

However, despite the city's massive growth, it was lacking in several areas, at least in Adela's honest opinion. Though Berengar had long since begun sponsoring artists, actors, and musicians for the sake of funding some culture within Austria, the capital city of the Kingdom was severely lacking in venues for these creative types to display their talent.

With this in mind, the fifteen-year-old girl sat down at the seat, in the center of the stage that had been set up within Castle Kufstein. She had decided that

while her fiancé was away fighting a war for her Nation's independence, that she would begin the process of advancing culture within the City of Kufstein, hoping for it to spread to Austria as a whole.

The crowd gathered before her was filled with over a hundred men and women, primarily from among the ranks of the local nobility. They gazed in silence at the beautiful young girl as she began to play a song she had created to express the difficulties surrounding her relationship with the man she loved.

In particular, this song revolved around the sorrow she felt while he was away at war, leaving her behind to wait for his safe return. The sad song echoed in the venue's air, filling the noblemen and women with complicated emotions as they listened to the young girl pluck away at the strings of her instrument like an angel who wept from the heavens.

While Adela was playing the harp with masterful talent, a pretty young woman stood beside her and sang the lyrics that Adela had written. This woman was a talented singer from the common populace who was among the many musicians Berengar had sponsored during these past few years; her exquisite alto voice flowed perfectly with Adela's instrumentals as she pronounced each word without fault.

Her tone of voice perfectly expressed the lonesome lyrics that Adela had written, filling the audience with the same sense of abandonment that the girl felt every time she thought of Berengar and how far away he was from her embrace.

Before long, the song came to an end, and silence prevailed amongst the audience before they broke out in thunderous applause. Several more eager crowd members cheered for the artists who had performed such a beautiful and touching song.

After the small concert was over, Adela and the singer began to speak to the gathered crowd. They entertained their guests for some time with graceful smiles before they had all departed, leaving Adela and the singer by themselves gazing upon the stage reluctantly.

One could say that this small concert was a resounding success, and neither Adela nor the singer desired to let it go so quickly. Despite this, the two women eventually looked each other in the eyes with a similar sense of excitement. The singer soon approached Adela and hugged her tightly before thanking her.

"Thank you for this opportunity! You have no idea how much it means to me! With this, I might finally be able to make a living off of my music and no longer mooch off of your fiance's generosity!"

Adela put on a pretty smile as she nodded her head before responding to the woman's praise.

"With your talent, that won't be an issue; the problem is that there simply isn't much in terms of venues for musicians such as yourself; I will speak to my father about this and see if we can construct a grand concert hall so that all musicians within Kufstein can make an appropriate living, and share their work with the people!"

After hearing this, the young woman nodded her head and smiled before responding to Adela's claim.

"That would be wonderful; if your father doesn't want to approve of it, we can only wait until King Berengar returns; I am certain he will listen to your advice on the matter! Thank you for doing this for us; though the King has provided living expenses for all of the artists, actors, and musicians within the city, it would be great if we could survive on our own..."

When Adela heard this, she nodded in silence; she too was a talented musician; however, unlike the ones who Berengar's supported, she was a noblewoman of the highest caliber and was destined to marry the King of Austria. As such, she could not make a professional career out of playing her harp.

Eventually, the singer noticed the time on the clock and realized that she had to return home; as such, she hugged Adela and expressed her thanks one more time before departing from the venue.

"Thanks again! I appreciate the opportunity!"

After saying this, the young woman left Adela by her lonesome, where the adolescent girl stared once more at the stage with a bitter smile; she hoped one day all major cities in Austria would have a venue for artists to display their talent.

With this in mind, the young beauty left the venue and departed towards Berengar's study, where her father was surely hard at work. It would be best to discuss her ideas with the Chancellor of Austria as soon as possible.

As such, when she arrived at the door, Adela steeled her resolve before knocking on the door thrice. Immediately after she did so, Adela heard the familiar voice of her father from behind the door, calling out to her.

"You may enter."

Upon hearing this, Adela opened the door where her father Otto gazed upon her fondly. His little girl had grown up so fast, just a few years ago, she was merely a small child, but now she was a beautiful young woman. Soon enough, she would be married to Berengar and become the Queen of Austria. With this in mind, he asked Adela for the reason she had intruded upon his work.

"What can I help you with, baby girl?"

Adela took a deep breath before exhaling, calming the nerves in her heart as she expressed her desire to begin a cultural shift within the Kingdom of Austria to her father, the Chancellor.

"I have come to you to make a request, not just on my behalf, but for all of the people of Kufstein. I think it would be best if we began construction on some locations for the artists, actors, and musicians that Berengar has sponsored over the years to display their talent in exchange for compensation.

I was considering constructing a series of grand venues, such as a concert hall, a theater, and an art gallery. I think it would be suitable for the people of Kufstein to spend some of their hard-earned money on entertainment and culture. We could even aid the local chefs by having them provide some form of food and drink for the guests, for a small fee, of course."

When Otto heard this, he was pretty shocked. He had not even thought of this as a possibility, nor had Berengar expressed his long-term plans for financially supporting the artists, actors, and musicians within Austria. After all, a fair degree of expense was going towards paying these creative types a living wage so that they can continue to develop their skills.

Otto thought about it for a few moments before a warm smile broke out on his face; the benefits of such venues were numerous. Not only could it act as a means of entertainment to appease the masses, but it could also be used as a way to spread Austrian propaganda to the people of the Nation.

On top of these two things, it would create another form of revenue to stimulate the economy. Thus the Chancellor was entirely on board with his daughter's ideas. As such, Otto nodded his head and agreed to Adela's terms.

"That is a splendid idea! I will begin drafting the plans immediately; tomorrow, I will meet with the architects to discuss the feasibility of building such structures. When Berengar returns from the war, he will be extremely pleased with the results, and more importantly, he will be grateful for your contributions."

Adela smiled when she heard this; for too long now, she had done very little to support her man, after all this time she finally discovered a way to do so. Adela desired to become the face of Austria's cultural reforms and become the architect behind them. With this in mind, she bowed gracefully to her father before departing.

"Thank you, father; if there is nothing else to discuss, I will return to my quarters for now."

After hearing this, Otto appropriately dismissed his youngest daughter. Afterward, he immediately began to draft up the necessary paperwork to fund the aforementioned cultural exhibits. With the influx of Italian silver and gold transported to the Royal Austrian Treasury, there was no need to worry about the expenses for such things.