

Steel 381

Chapter 381: Reflecting on the Past

The day after Berengar arrived in Constantinople, he arose bright and early. He immediately noticed Honoria was not lying next to his side, which made him curious. As such, he spent some time getting ready for his day. Luckily for him, the Byzantines had a large bathhouse within their palace similar in size and grandeur to his own.

After spending some time cleaning the sweat and grime from his body that had accumulated during his journey across the Mediterranean sea, Berengar decided to take a walk through the palace gardens. After all, the Byzantines, much like their Roman ancestors, were quite well known for their unique garden culture.

While walking through the immaculate gardens of the Byzantine Imperial Palace, Berengar noticed a peculiar sight. Honoria was dressed in a byzantine style gown that matched her Tyrian purple hair as she sat upon the side of the large fountain with Heraclius perched upon her forearm.

The beautiful princess had a broad smile on her face as she gazed upon the gardens that she had grown up within and reminisced of the past. Upon noticing her lover enter the area, she beckoned him to sit with her, which Berengar was more than happy to do. After sitting down next to Honoria on the edge of the magnificent fountain, Berengar began to comment on Honoria's cheery state.

"You seem to be in a rather good mood, and here I thought you would lament the idea of returning to the home you once described as a cage."

Honoria's warm smile immediately turned into a bitter one. It was amazing what nostalgia could do to someone's memories. The moment the young princess heard this, she immediately began to reflect on the truth of the matter. However, in the end, her bitter smile reformed into a gentle and pretty one as she began to reflect upon everything that had happened since she ran away.

"Though I was a prisoner trapped within the palace, I never saw any hardship during my youth. One could say my life was ideal aside from the fact that I was to be married off to a gay prince from a faraway Kingdom."

Berengar instantly felt chills go down his spine as he heard this; that same prince had already expressed his intent to seduce him; however, after thinking about it for a few moments, Berengar got a brilliant idea and decided to tease Honoria a bit.

"Prince Aubry was it? Did you know that he of all people sent me a flirtatious message?"

Honoria's smile instantly vanished when she heard this and was replaced with a look of fury. She could not believe that the little slut not only tried to trap her brother but was now attempting to seduce her fiance. As such, she curled her tiny fists as she cursed the boy out.

"That fucking harlot, I swear to God if I ever see him again, I'll put a bullet in his brain! Please tell me you're not interested in such a thing!?!"

Berengar chuckled as he saw the enraged state Honoria had entered and proceeded to wrap his arm around her before expressing his thoughts on the matter.

"No matter how pretty Prince Aubry maybe, he is still a guy, and I have no interest in anything other than women. You can relax; I was frankly disgusted when I heard his message."

Upon hearing this, Honoria sighed heavily in relief; she could not imagine Berengar falling into the hands of another man; the very idea made her skin crawl. As such, she leaned in close, which caused Heraclius to launch off of her forearm and fly into the sky above the couple. Where he began to circle the ancient city in search of prey.

After a while, Berengar gazed around at the palace gardens and expressed his opinion on them to the young princess he was soon to marry.

"I'm impressed; these gardens are magnificent! I think I will have to have a word with my gardener... Clearly, I need to do some redesigning of my own."

Honorina instantly began to giggle when she heard her lover say this. After visiting her childhood home, Berengar's takeaway was to compete with the Byzantine imperial family in gardening. Berengar had no idea why she was laughing and immediately began to question what had caused such a state.

"What is so funny?"

Honorina calmed herself down upon hearing this before beginning to speak her thoughts on the matter.

"Nothing, I just love that about you. If you see someone who has something better than what you possess, your first instinct isn't to steal or destroy it but to compete with them by making something of your own that is far grander. It is this very attitude that makes me believe one day soon Austria will be a Kingdom that stands above all others."

Berengar was struck with awe as he heard this comment; until now, he had never believed that he had such qualities. But it was true; if he envied someone else for what they possessed, his immediate desire was to create something more significant.

It took a remarkable man to look at magnificence and desire to create something even grander. Most men would have the desire to steal or destroy what they did not possess. After hearing that Honorina had such a high opinion of him, Berengar was curious; he had never really thought about what made his girls love him. Instead, he just accepted it. As such, he instantly began to inquire further about Honorina's opinion of him.

"Really? what else do you love about me?"

Honorina put a warm smile on her face as she began to list the qualities she found attractive in Berengar.

"For starters, you are strong and ambitious. You do what you want and to hell with the consequences, for you have faith in your power that you may be able to overcome any obstacle you may face. Such confidence is a rarity among men."

Berengar smiled when he heard this; he became increasingly interested in Honoria's views of him and thus goaded her on.

"What else?"

Honoria immediately placed a finger on her chin as she began to reflect on the question, which Berengar found to be adorable. After a moment of thinking, she smiled once more as she bridged the distance between her and Berengar while resting her head upon his shoulder.

"You are kind to those who you love and are responsible for. The amount of time and money you spend on making sure your family and your people are happy and well off is something I have never seen before."

Berengar immediately cracked a joke about such an essential part of his character.

"I hope I'm not too kind, or else my enemies will walk all over us..."

Honoria immediately began to pout as she heard Berengar's remark; she knew he was aware of precisely what she meant, but seeing as the man was purposely being obstinate, she began to address the next point of his character that she loved.

"I said you were kind to your loved ones and the people under your protection. If you were kind to everyone, I would think you were a fool and wouldn't even bother to be with you. It is the cruelty you show to your enemies that I have immense respect for.

You have shown time and again that the lives of your people come first. The way you conduct warfare is brutal and vicious, but it achieves a swift victory so that your soldiers and their families suffer to the slightest degree possible.

You genuinely care for the lives of the men beneath your command and do whatever you can to minimize their losses while providing appropriate benefits to them and their families after they have been wounded or killed in battle."

After saying this, a warm and gentle smile appeared on Honoria's face as she stared into Berengar's deep sapphire eyes before adding one final comment to her rant.

"I could spend all day talking about the qualities that make you great, but I think what I have said is more than enough to describe why I and the others love you so much. It is not just us; your people admire you, even if your enemies despise you, never forget that!"

Berengar was shocked when he heard such a long-winded speech about his good qualities. Though he generally did not think or even care about what people thought about him, on more than one occasion, his curiosity had gotten the better of him, forcing him to ask for clarification on why his women loved him, and they repeatedly responded with similar answers. Was this truly how people viewed his character?

He had to admit that he had never imagined himself as the person Honoria and the others described him to be. Generally, he thought of himself as a selfish and vicious bastard who did whatever was necessary to achieve his goals. Most of what he had achieved in this life, if not everything, was due to his own selfish desires. But, that begged the question, is it the intent behind his actions that mattered, or was it the result?

Berengar reflected deeply upon this question as he continued to chat with Honoria in the gardens of the Byzantine Imperial Palace. It would be a matter of days before their wedding took place, and Berengar intended to spend as much time as possible with his young bride before it took place.

Chapter 382: Retaking Cordoba

Gunshots and cannon fire echoed in the air as the Granadan Royal Army pounded the walls of Cordoba. For the first time in centuries, the Moorish armies of Iberia had begun an attempt to reclaim the crown jewel of Al-Andalus. Sultan Hasan Al-Fadl, General Ziyad Ibn Ya'is of the Granadan Royal Army, and General Arnulf von Thiersee of the Austrian Royal Army were standing at the army's rear.

Through a desperate attempt to divert the attention of the Iberian Union's armies from the homeland, Hasan had decided to lay siege to the city of

Cordoba. Surprisingly, the hail mary attempt to sneak an army through Andalusia and into the vicinity of Cordoba went as planned.

While most of his army was equipped with the inferior Arkebuse matchlock firearms and primitive falconet cannons, the Emirate's shock troops, known as the Granadan Royal Guard, were issued surplus weapons from the Royal Austrian Army.

The rifled muskets and 1417 12 lb Field Guns were being employed in a limited capacity. Despite the small numbers of such weapons, they proved to be exceptional in the field. As Arnulf gazed through his binoculars at the ongoing siege, he noticed the massive amount of damage being dealt to the walls by the combined explosive shells of the twelve-pounders and the one-pound solid shot used by the Falconet cannons. Upon seeing the progress being made, Arnulf began to smile as he addressed the Sultan and his top General with a proud smile on his face.

"What did I tell you? These new weapons are vastly superior to what your forces currently are equipped with. Within a matter of hours, these walls will falter, and the city will be returned to Moorish hands at last!"

Hasan had a pleasant grin on his face; he had followed his sister's advice and returned to the battlefield to increase morale. As for whether or not he would lead from the frontlines, that was not something a man of his caliber was willing to risk.

Nevertheless, with the Sultan among their ranks, the Granadan forces had a boosted sense of morale as they recklessly charged past the Iberian missile fire and pelted the defenders with arkebuse balls. After gazing upon the battlefield for some time, Hasan began to speak to Arnulf as if he were an old friend.

"My friend, you must tell your master that I appreciate the continued support, though I fear it is not enough. Though we may be able to retake Cordoba after all of these years, I fear we will not be able to hold on to it! At least not until reinforcements from Austria arrive!"

While the generals were conversing in the rear, the Granadan Royal Guard stood back roughly three hundred yards away from the ramparts and opened fire upon the defenders standing behind the merlons for protection.

The moment the Catholic Iberians raised their heads, a lead minie ball projectile would make its way into their skull, splattering blood and gray matter across their vicinity. The Catholic soldiers were terrified of the power and distance that such weapons could achieve.

To penetrate through their iron helmets at three hundred yards was a feat the arkebuse could not possibly achieve. As such, they were incredibly fearful of the new weapons that the Granadans were fielding and quickly began to cower behind the ramparts, too afraid to stick their heads out from behind cover.

Much like Arnulf had predicted, after several hours of bombardment, the walls finally crumbled, and the moment they fell, a grand melee began to break out between the Granadan pikeman and the Iberian defenders.

The flag of Castille flew above the city of Cordoba as the Catholic warriors began to defend their town with all their might. Though the pike was not the most effective weapon for sieges, its length was quickly able to pass through the breach and cause damage to the city's defenders at a relatively safe distance.

However, undoubtedly, the Granadan Royal Guard would lead the charge with their flintlock rifled muskets and bayonets when it came to urban warfare. Both sides struggled to gain ground at the destroyed section of the city's once-mighty walls for the time being.

Hasan borrowed Arnulf's binoculars and gazed at the sight of the battlefield with joy in his eyes. He could not believe that they had brought down the wall so quickly; it had only taken them a few days to achieve this magnificent feat. As such, he had faith in Allah that his forces would prevail on this day. With this in mind, he began to thank Arnulf once more for the weapons and tactics he and King Berengar had provided his forces with.

"I must say, what we have achieved here this day, could not easily be accomplished without the support of our good friends in Austria! After this war

is over, I will be sure to throw a grand feast for you and all the soldiers who have helped us achieve victory!"

Arnulf had a severe expression as he heard this; in his eyes, Hasan was not what he would refer to as a man capable of thinking long term. This entire siege was a mistake from the Austrian General's perspective.

Moving their primary force out of a defensive position to draw the attention of the central Iberian Army was a poor decision. He decided to provide some advice to the Sultan of Granada; he did this by addressing his concerns over the current state of affairs with a friendly tone.

"Though this is indeed a great victory until reinforcements arrive from Austria, we will not be able to hold the city. We have been defending our borders for some time, but our enemies' numbers grow each day while our forces dwindle.

If we stay here, we will be cut off from supplies, and reinforcements, forced to defend the city until our last dying breath. I suggest after taking the town and annihilating the enemy, we abandon Cordoba and begin a guerilla campaign until the Austrian Expeditionary Force arrives."

General Ziyad Ibn Ya'is nodded his head in agreement with Arnulf's words and quickly spoke up in his defense.

"I agree with General Arnulf; we simply cannot defend our borders as our enemies continue to outnumber us. Nor can we hold the city of Cordoba; we must massacre the enemy forces here and make a swift retreat.

I will take most of the army and hold the line within our borders; Arnulf should follow his plan and lead the Granadan Royal Guard on a guerrilla campaign to slow down the enemy's advance. After all, the Royal Guard is well trained in riding and is equipped with the best weapons. It would make the most sense to use them for this operation."

After hearing his general approve of Arnulf's plan, Hasan smiled and nodded his head in agreement. If this were a proposal that both men agreed upon, then he would heed their advice. As such, he clasped both men on the shoulders as he gave his consent to carry out such an operation.

"Very well, I shall leave this war in your capable hands; when this battle is over, I will return to Granada. I look forward to seeing the results of your campaign!"

As the Sultan said these words, the banners of Granada were raised above the city walls, and the bloodcurdling screams of battle came to an end; in its place, loud cheers echoed in the distance, signaling the Moorish victory. For the first time in centuries, Cordoba, the Jewel of Al-Andalus, was returned to the hands of its Moorish masters.

Though the celebration would be brief, as Hasan and the other officers in his attache descended into the city and witnessed the bloodshed that had occurred, corpses of both sides littered the city's streets. Blood formed a small river as it flowed throughout the city.

Eventually, Hasan took an advantageous position within the city and began to speak to his troops about their victory, and the plans settled only a few moments prior.

"Men! Today is a great day for the Emirate of Granada. We have retaken the Jewel of our people! However, we do not have the means to hold it, so we must abandon it! We will bury our dead and return to our borders to defend the heartland of Granada against those who would seek to destroy us.

While this is going on, the Grandan Royal Guard shall be led by our allies from Austria, who will undergo a campaign to slow down our enemies' advance and weaken their resolve! Glory to Granada! Glory to Al-Andalus!"

As Hasan said these words, the crowd of battle-hardened soldiers dressed in mirror pattern armor began to chant back his final words. In doing so, securing their victory. After finishing their gathering, the Granadan soldiers executed all of the Iberian soldiers who had surrendered before burying their own fallen warriors.

After these actions were completed, they ransacked the city for its supplies and headed off in the opposite direction back to their homeland. After making it to the halfway marker, the Granadan Royal Guard followed Arnulf and his attache on a separate path. Henceforth, until a time when the Austrian

Expeditionary Force could arrive, He and his small army of elite soldiers would harass the Iberian Union worse than a colony of fleas living on a dog's back.

Chapter 383: The Byzantine Royal Wedding

While the war for Granada entered a new stage, Berengar and his host were within Constantinople. Finally, the day had come for his wedding to Princess Honoria. As such, Berengar sat on horseback within the courtyard of the Imperial Palace, where he and Honoria would ride through the streets with a convoy until they reached the Hagia Sophia.

A medieval wedding ceremony was different from the modern ones Berengar had implemented within his Kingdom. As such, he waited patiently until Honoria arrived. After a few minutes had passed, the Princess descended from the staircase with her bridesmaids and family in tow.

She was dressed in an elaborate silk dress in Tyrian purple with gold embellishment. The jewelry that crested her dress was in mint green gemstones, which matched her eyes perfectly. For this special occasion, Honoria had washed the dye from her hair and was currently back to her natural brunette state.

Though Berengar generally preferred blondes and redheads to brunettes, he made an exception for Honoria as she looked divine in her natural state. As such, he sat upon horseback with a proud stare where he immediately began to complement his bride as he gazed upon her exceptional figure.

"Honoria, my dear, your beauty is matched only by that of the ancient Goddess Venus."

In response to this, Honoria began to blush as she tried to hide her excited smile, despite complimenting her in a way only a pagan would. She was happy to hear her groom was enticed by her appearance.

Following this, Berengar reached out his hand and pulled the Princess up onto his horse behind him, where she latched her arms around his waist and nuzzled her head into his back. The couple began to stride forth throughout the city's streets as the common people of Byzantium gathered on the sides, tossing flower petals into the air to celebrate the marriage of their Princess.

As the convoy continued to press through the streets, Berengar smiled and waved alongside Honoria to the gathered masses, further imprinting an honorable impression on the people who had gathered. If they knew that their precious Princess was no longer a virgin and the debauchery that she had gotten up to with her fiance, they would probably be cursing her at this moment.

Of course, they had no way of knowing such a thing; as such, they shouted their cheers and celebrations for the monumental occasion. Before long Berengar, and Honoria ended up in front of the Hagia Sophia, where they dismounted from their horses. Emperor Vetranis led Honoria to its gates, whereas Eckhard followed by Berengar's side as he strode forth with authority and dignity.

After approaching the gates of the Grand Cathedral, the Patriarch of Constantinople was there to greet the young couple and lead the procession. As such, he began by speaking in Latin as he blessed the rings provided for the ceremony.

After reciting the blessings, and a few bible passages, the Patriarch held the rings in his hands while pressing Berengar and Honoria's heads against each other three times. After he had finished this aspect of the tradition, he began to place the rings on the bride and groom's right hands before swapping them a total of three times. This tradition supposedly signified that one's weakness would be compensated by the strengths of the other.

After blessing the rings, the Patriarch led Berengar, Honoria, and the guests inside the Hagia Sophia; as Berengar gazed upon the magnificent Cathedral in its original state, he could not help but gasp at the beauty of it. Though he had created his own Grand Cathedral to rival any in the world, the sight of such a majestic and historically significant part of Christendom was indeed an inspiration to behold.

Eventually, Berengar and Honoria were led to the altar, where two candles were lit and handed to the young couple. As such, the bride and groom grasped ahold of the candles with their left hand. As they stood there holding their candles with their left hands, the Patriarch joined their right hands together in unison, where the young couple would continue to hold hands until the wedding was over.

Seeing that the couple had done as instructed, Eckhard brought forth two crowns made of wreaths; these wreaths were joined together by a white ribbon, where they were placed upon Berengar and Honoria's heads by the Patriarch himself. After doing this, he began to swap the crowns thrice, much like he had done the rings a few moments prior.

Having done this, the Patriarch began to quote scripture once more, though Berengar did not pay attention to any of it. Instead, he fondly gazed upon his beautiful bride with a smile on his lips as the ceremony continued. Eventually, after finishing his long-winded sermon, the priest brought forth a single cup filled with grape juice.

Because the Patriarch was made aware of Honoria's condition, he secretly swapped the traditional wine with a non-alcoholic beverage. He then proceeded to feed it to Berengar first and immediately after to Honoria, where they each took three sips from the chalice.

After drinking from the cup, the Patriarch led Berengar and Honoria around the altar three times on which a bible and cross rested upon. After completing this, the Patriarch first addressed Berengar with a parting blessing.

"Be thou magnified O Bridegroom, as Abraham, and blessed as Isaac and multiply as Jacob. Walk in peace and work in righteousness, as the commandments of God."

Berengar nodded when he turned this, and after doing so, the Patriarch shifted his attention to Honoria, where he spoke a different blessing.

"And thou O Bride, be though magnified as Sarah, glad as Rebecca and multiply like unto Rachel, rejoicing in thine own husband, fulfilling the conditions of the law, for so it is well pleasing unto God."

After saying all of this, a smile broke out on the Patriarch's face where he said the ancient Greek words

"Na zisete."

Upon saying this, the ceremony was over, and Berengar had officially married his third bride, the beautiful Princess of the Byzantine Empire. Having

completed this portion of the wedding, Berengar and Honoria walked out to the greetings of each guest before circling back to the palace, where the reception was to be held.

Having returned to the Byzantine Imperial Palace, Berengar and Honoria sat at the table where the feast was held. While enjoying his time with Honoria, he gazed over towards his other two wives, who had less than excited expressions. Adela was pouting, and Linde was staring daggers at Honoria.

He could not understand the way these women thought, they fought during the day as if they were mortal rivals, but at night they were so quick to gather together to please him. One thing was certain within Berengar's mind, no matter how displeased they were with the wedding, neither of them would act up.

There were two reasons for this conclusion, the first being that they were shown the same degree of respect at their weddings by Honoria. The second was that Berengar would severely discipline them if they so much as began to make a scene. As such, the evening was relatively uneventful in the form of unnecessary drama.

Berengar drank from his wine glass as he gazed over at his new father-in-law. He had many things to discuss with the Byzantine Emperor about the future of their two realms. As such he put on a cheery expression as he addressed Vetransis.

"Emperor Vetransis, I would like to have a word with you."

Upon hearing this, Vetransis, who was already two and a half bottles deep into his wine, shook his head with a smile on his face as he tried to correct Berengar.

"Please, now that you have married my daughter, you are my son by law; call me father!"

Berengar glanced over at his own father, who was present at the ceremony, to see if that was even remotely acceptable. Oddly enough, Sieghard had a massive grin on his face. Never in his life did he believe his firstborn son

would accomplish so much, and in the end, marry the Princess of the greatest power within the Mediterranean.

While Sieghard was happy, Gisela was giving Berengar the same glare she had given him when he married Linde; though she was wearing a pretty smile, there was nothing but malice contained behind it. She could not believe that her son was such a hedonistic playboy.

Berengar ignored his mother's vicious stare, and instead focused upon his father's expression. Upon seeing that his father was okay with Emperor Vetrans's suggestion, Berengar sighed before addressing his father-in-law in such a manner.

"Father, I was going to discuss something important with you, but it would appear that you have had too much to drink. We can continue this conversation tomorrow. I am sure you will be interested in my proposal."

Vetrans merely nodded his head in silence as he listened to Berengar's words; he was indeed far too intoxicated to possibly be able to have a conversation about something as essential as agricultural reform. As such, Berengar returned his attention to Honoria, who had the prettiest smile upon her immaculate lips. It was finally her turn to marry Berengar, and she enjoyed every second of it.

After a while, the ceremony ended, and Berengar returned to Honoria's bed-chambers alongside his wife. Where they proceeded to consummate their marriage; Berengar and Honoria spent much of the night making love. It was not until well past midnight that the couple passed out from exhaustion.

Chapter 384: A Byzantine Breakfast

The day after Berengar's wedding to Honoria, he woke up next to the young Byzantine Princess with a smile. Honoria was still asleep, and Berengar decided to play a little prank on her. He immediately began to spoon with the girl as he groped her sizeable breasts while kissing her neck.

Eventually, she awoke from her slumber and looked over at her husband. His eyepatch was removed, revealing the heavily scarred sapphire blue eye usually concealed beneath it. Seeing the wound he had received in battle, she carefully caressed his handsome face while kissing him passionately.

With this in mind, Berengar began to insert his member inside her tight, slippery hole, which instantly caused the princess to moan in pleasure. Eventually, Berengar sped up his movements, where he pushed Honoria's face down into the pillow while ravaging her from behind. To Berengar, this was where the fun began.

After playing around with his wife for a solid hour, the couple eventually got dressed and entered the dining hall, where everyone was gathered eating breakfast. Berengar and Honoria sat down at the table and immediately noticed their stares.

Evidently, Honoria was quite the squealer because everyone at the table had awkward expressions on their faces as if they were aware of what the couple had been doing for the last hour or so. Though Berengar didn't mind it, his bride indeed began to blush when she came to realize that she was responsible for the tense atmosphere.

Eventually, Berengar broke the silence by pulling out a leatherbound book and sliding it across the table towards the Emperor. Vetransis was immediately curious as he saw Berengar's actions and instantly inquired about the details.

"What is this?"

Berengar scoffed as he drank from the coffee that was presented to him before answering the Emperor's expression with a smug grin on his face.

"That is everything you need to know about how to feed your people properly. The four-field system, how to produce advanced fertilizers, the means to construct irrigation piping from copper, and a few modest improvements to your tools such as the steel plow; you can consider it my wedding gift."

The men and women present at the table stared at Berengar in disbelief, none more so than Quintus, as the Prince most renowned for successful administration, this leatherbound book was worth more to him than any other text in the world.

Yet Berengar just handed it over as if it was an ordinary object. Despite how it appeared, this book contained critical information regarding the technology

and knowledge behind the agricultural revolution. Berengar wasn't simply handing it over as a wedding gift, but as a means to strengthen the Empire.

With the backing of the mysterious tertiary faction, whose aim was to place his and Honoria's future son on the throne. Berengar wanted his child to inherit a wealthy and stable Empire. The construction of the Suez Canal and the advanced agricultural methods Berengar was providing the current Emperor was done so with this potential future in mind.

As for other technology such as superior iron and steel-making techniques, Berengar had no plans to yield those to anyone. After all, his ability to produce vast quantities of high-quality steel gave him a severe military advantage over everyone else in the world.

Vetranis flipped through the book with an astonished expression on his face. Though he didn't understand much of what was stated in the text, he knew people within the Empire who could adequately comprehend it. As such, he was eager to begin implementing such advanced technologies as soon as he possibly could.

With a warm smile on his face, the Emperor began to joke around with Berengar as if they had been friends for a long time.

"I'm glad to see our alliance is bearing fruit already. If I had known that uniting our two households in matrimony would be so beneficial, I never would have betrothed Honoria to that feminine Prince from France."

Upon hearing this, Honoria immediately glared at her father; the last thing she wanted to be reminded of was the fact that she was once engaged to that little twink. However, she was not the only one in a foul mood. Decentius could not stop eyeing Berengar and Honoria with hatred. He blamed Honoria for his treacherous actions, and now that he knew she was alive and safe, he would not allow her to go unpunished.

After dealing with an entire day dedicated to a marriage he deemed a blight upon his bloodline and the sounds of his sister getting railed by a Barbarian King from the west this morning, Decentius was on the verge of exploding.

Noticing the second Prince's foul expression, Berengar could roughly guess what was on his mind, and as such, he decided to provoke the man further. With this in mind, he took a sip from his coffee before bluntly revealing Honoria's little secret to the rest of her family.

"So... Honoria is pregnant..."

This news shocked the entire family, except for Vetransis, who was well aware of this fact. Honoria began to pout as she gazed at her husband with a furious expression; she could not believe that he would reveal this fact the morning after their wedding.

However, none took it worse than Decentius; upon hearing this news, he choked on the coffee he had taken a sip from; Berengar had intentionally timed the moment of his statement for when the Prince was at his most vulnerable.

After struggling to swallow the remnants of the coffee stuck within his throat, the man quickly began to erupt in a fury; no longer capable of containing his growing wrath Decentius pounded his fist upon the table before screaming at the people he deemed responsible for this atrocity.

"Our noble heritage, which dates back to the glory of Rome, has been forever stained by the blood of a filthy German! You should be ashamed of yourself, you filthy slut! Running away from our glorious Palace to go lie with a dog from Germania!"

Vetransis immediately rose from his seat and was about to chastise his son for his remarks when Berengar calmly expressed his thoughts on the matter with a smug grin on his face.

"Oh, I am a dog now? I'd say that is woefully inaccurate; if you compare the German people to any animal, I'd say a Wolf is more accurate. Wild, cunning, and ferocious but fiercely loyal to their own. I have tolerated your insults to my woman once out of respect for your position, but I will not do so a second time!"

The moment Berengar said this, Decentius gazed at him with a haughty expression before speaking the thoughts on his mind.

"Oh yeah? What are you going to do about-"

Before the Prince was capable of finishing his sentence, Berengar threw a shovel punch directly across the table and into Decentius' liver. When taking into account Berengar's physique and his adequate knowledge of hand to hand combat from his army days, the second prince of the Byzantine Empire immediately grimaced in pain as he stumbled backward losing control of his legs and toppling over his chair as he collapsed to the ground.

To add insult to injury, Berengar picked up the Prince's plate, which contained his breakfast, and tossed its contents onto Decentius as he laid sprawled out on the ground gasping for air. After doing so, a wicked grin appeared upon Berengar's lips as he uttered the final words to conclude the dispute.

"Clean yourself up; you are a fucking disgrace!"

After saying this, Berengar sat back down in his seat and took another sip from his coffee as if the violent display had never occurred in the first place. The look of contempt on his face for the second Prince did not go unnoticed by the rest of the table.

Even Vetrans was shocked by his actions, but it was not like he could say anything about it. Decentius was woefully out of line, not only as a Prince representing the Empire to its newest and most powerful ally but also as a man. He had to admit if any man had such words to him and his wife, he probably would have reacted violently as well.

Not a single member of the table got up and helped Decentius, the Empress herself, who was the mother to the man, did not lift a single finger and continued to drink from her coffee as if nothing had happened. Meanwhile, Quintus gazed at his brother with a smug expression; it was good to see his rival for power get what he deserved. If anything, this event made the first prince more agreeable to Berengar.

It took a few moments, but ultimately Decentius struggled to his feet, where he immediately barged out of the room, unwilling to say or do anything to further add to the humiliation he had suffered. As for Honoria, she gazed at her brother with a weary expression. She knew he was far too prideful to let this matter go quietly.

As such, she immediately whispered something to Berengar which nobody else had heard. After doing so, Berengar nodded his head before motioning to one of his guards standing nearby. When the soldier approached, Berengar whispered new orders to the man.

"Double the protection around my family; if necessary, use some of the marines on board the Clipper."

Having received his orders, the soldier immediately saluted his King before relaying the message to the appropriate troops. After all, Berengar would take no chances of vengeance upon himself or his family for putting an asshole in his place. With all of this, the breakfast continued in awkward silence; what was supposed to be a happy occasion was thoroughly tarnished by Decentius and his misplaced pride.

Chapter 385: An Unexpected Meeting

After the morning where Berengar had put Decentius in his place, he continued to enjoy his meal, even if it turned to awkward silence. However, after it was over, Berengar was left much to himself. As such, he mainly stayed by Honoria's side, spending a significant degree of time with her. After all, he had done the same thing with his previous marriages.

After a while, Berengar found himself alone in the Byzantine Gardens admiring the scenery. While he was relaxing in this beautiful place, someone he was not expecting approached him. The man was dressed in lavish attire and was evidently very high up within the Byzantine Aristocracy.

Though Berengar noticed the man's approach, he chose to say nothing and instead waited to see what would transpire. While Berengar was standing quietly at ease in front of the fountain, the man stopped thirty paces behind him and immediately began to speak in a calm and friendly manner.

"King Berengar of Austria, it is a pleasure to meet your acquaintance at last; I do believe I was not able to introduce myself at your coronation ceremony properly. I am Strategos Palladius Angelus, ruler over the Balkans and General of its Army. I must admit I have taken great interest in your rise to power."

Berengar smiled before turning around to face the man. The man was practically fifty years old, which would make him an Elder in this day and age; yet, he appeared to be in exceptional health. He had a long grey beard and matching hair.

Though his face was weathered with age, it was also scarred heavily from battle, giving the man the dignified appearance of a soldier. Upon seeing that the man was a Strategos and over the region closest to his Kingdom, Berengar immediately became interested and began to question the man.

"So tell me, Palladius, which faction do you belong to? Who do you wish to see succeed the Emperor?"

As Palladius heard this, he smiled before telling a long tale about how he decided who to support.

"My entire life, I have spent in service to the Empire, ruling my family's dominion and striking fear into the hearts of our enemies. I cared not for the politics of the palace, only in fulfilling my duty. Others have tried countless times to involve me in their conspiracies, yet to no avail.

I humbly admit, though I have achieved much in my tenure as a Strategos, it fails to compare to the mighty Arethas Maniakes. I have always considered myself his greatest rival, even if he never thought of me as such.

Though he was my rival, I never despised him; when I heard of his death in Egypt, I was beside myself; it was as if I had lost all meaning in life. That is until I accidentally discovered a little detail about his death. As you may be aware, I believe Decentius is responsible for the end of my old friend.

After learning the truth of the matter, I instantly became furious and even attempted to persuade Quintus of his brother's betrayal. Yet the boy lacks any sense of fury; when he told me he would not bring this matter to his father's attention until I had received absolute proof of his brother's misdeeds, I knew then and there that the Empire was doomed.

For the first time in my life, I realized why the older men of the court fought and killed behind the scenes to place the candidate of their choice on the throne. Though Quintus is a great administrator and can lead the Empire to

future prosperity, he is a coward and a pacifist. His refusal to engage in violence would be the end of our Empire.

Decentius, on the other hand, is the exact opposite; he has martial prowess and a mind for warfare, yet he has not a single thought within his mind dedicated to anything other than bloodshed. His solution to all problems is to fight someone else. After his betrayal was revealed to me, I knew he, too, was not a viable candidate for the throne.

As for Aurelius, the boy is beyond useless and is too far gone to mold into a proper ruler. He has neither the wit of Quintus nor the strength of Decentius yet comprises all of their worst qualities. Cowardly, treacherous, quick to anger, and stubborn as a mule. Luckily he is more interested in drinking wine and fornicating with women than ruling the Empire.

As for Honoria, she is a woman, and I would never be able to convince the old fools who operate behind the scenes that she is remotely capable of ruling the Empire. When I heard of her disappearance, I initially did not care in the slightest; after all, she was a young, naive girl who had been locked up her entire life, how could such a person preside over our realm?

Yet after concluding that her brothers were all failures, my only hope for the future of this Empire would be in her progeny. Unfortunately, she was declared dead after being missing for two years. Imagine my shock when I uncovered the truth that she was in Kufstein and was the lover of the young Duke of Austria.

A man born to a line of lowly Barons had risen from his minor position through cunning and military prowess to become a Duke. A man who was not afraid to fight on the front lines of war and was winning a war for independence against the second strongest power in the West, the Holy Roman Empire.

I began to think that maybe, just maybe, the son between this King of Austria and the sole Princess of Byzantium might be worthy to rule our Empire. After all, if your future son is half as talented as you are, he is already vastly superior to any other potential heirs to the throne.

With this in mind, I quietly got to work on building a new faction. I made use of the many contacts I had made over the years and acquired the man from the

Empire closest to you, aside from Arethas himself. It was relatively easy; I just had to inform him of the actual reason for his master's death.

After that, he was more than eager to approach your spymaster and convince her to aid our cause. You asked which faction I belong to; the answer is simple, I am the mastermind behind the mysterious section that supports you. So tell me, King Berengar von Kufstein, after spending time with the Imperial Family, what are your opinions on the three princes?"

Berengar listened to the elder's long tale with great interest; in the end, he had come to the same conclusion as the man before him. None of the three Princes were worthy of ruling the mighty Byzantine Empire, and as such, Berengar smiled and nodded before responding to the man's praise.

"I agree with you; all three of them are pathetic and unworthy. You were correct to place your hopes in my bloodline, for I guarantee you that my son with Honoria will be raised as a proper ruler. By the time the Emperor croaks, my son will be the best candidate from the Palaiologos Dynasty to rule your Empire!"

Palladius smiled when he heard this response; after doing so, he asked the second question on his mind, one which he believed was necessary.

"Allow me to ask the question if you don't mind? Have you thought of a name for this child?"

Berengar smiled with a smug expression as he gazed upon the elderly Strategos standing before him; with confidence, he boldly declared the name he had long since come up with for his firstborn son with Honoria.

"There is only one man in Greco-Roman history, fit for my son to be named after. Mark my words, Alexandros Palaiologos will be the greatest Emperor in the history of your realm, a true successor to his namesake."

Upon hearing this, Palladius smiled and nodded his head before revealing his thoughts on the choice of name for a child who was not even born.

"A truly fitting name; I only hope he will live up to your claims."

With this said, the Strategos of the Balkans left the gardens in silence. He had many matters to attend to now that he was certain Berengar was on board with his plans for the Empire. As for Berengar, he was happy about two things in particular. Firstly, the people that were backing him and his plans to place his future son on the Byzantine Throne were not some minor figures.

As for the second reason, he was quite pleased knowing the man in charge of the Balkan Army, who would be the first to come to his aid in the upcoming crusade, was someone who could be considered an ally.

As such, Berengar began to sing in Latin to the lyrics of a famous grunge song from his past life as he walked through the gardens by his lonesome. It was about time for him to return to the loving arms of his newest wife.

Chapter 386: Preparing for War against the Eastern Coalition

Days came and went as Berengar enjoyed his week within the City of Constantinople. He had spent the majority of this time in the loving arms of his newest wife, where the newlywed couple shared practically all of their time together.

After the conflict with Decentius on that fateful morning, the proud prince had not made a move on Berengar or anyone who had traveled with him. Instead, He largely kept his distance from the Austrian host as a whole.

Berengar had grown suspicious of his actions but chose not to make a move himself; he decided that he would later dispatch field agents to keep an eye on Decentius and investigate the faction supporting him for the succession of the Byzantine Throne.

Eventually, the day came for Berengar to depart, and he returned to Kufstein with his family in tow. The return trip was far less eventful than the journey to Constantinople as such, Berengar and his family arrived in the capital of their Kingdom without incident.

Oddly enough, Berengar was not given any time of reprieve, for the moment he stepped in the door of his study, there was a massive pile of paperwork sitting upon his desk. Atop this pile of documents was a letter with the seal of the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order.

As Berengar read the contents of the text, a wicked smile curved upon his lips. He had not suspected the Teutonic Order to come crawling to him begging for his protection. He was greatly interested in the prospect, but of course, was wary.

After all, he would be sending the First Division of his Army into Granada soon enough; as such, it would incur a great expense to create a conflict with the massive Coalition who were at the gates of what remained of the Teutonic State.

With this in mind, he immediately requested a nearby servant to fetch his field Marshal for him. Eckhard had recently returned from the Bohemian Front and was even the best man at his wedding to Honoria. As such, Berengar knew he was within a reasonable distance.

After waiting roughly an hour, the veteran field Marshal of Austria stood before his King. Both men were in full-service dress as they began to speak within the personal study of the King of Austria. Berengar handed the letter over to Eckhard and allowed him time to read through its contents.

Eckhard's expression shifted from severe to grave after reading through the text; after doing so, he handed it back to Berengar with a stern expression on his face. Berengar was grinning from ear to ear as he asked for his Field Marshal's opinion.

"So Eckhard, what do you think? Can we annex the Teutonic State and protect it from its enemies to the east?"

Eckhard felt exhausted; he knew exactly where this was heading. He just got back from one war, and now his King was about to ship him off to settle another. Even though he wanted to deny Berengar's wishes, as a man loyal to his King, he gave his honest opinion on the feasibility of the matter.

"Can we? Yes, Though it will require a substantial investment. Should we? I don't think it is worth it. Allow me to ask a question, what exactly are your plans for the Teutonic Order, your majesty?"

Berengar smiled as he heard this question and pointed to one of the stars pinned upon his chest.

"It is simple; I will annex the territory of the Teutonic State and empower the local nobility. I will reform the Teutonic Order from a Catholic Military Order to a Prussian Chivalric Order!"

Eckhard was immediately confused as he heard this and immediately asked for clarification.

"Prussian?"

Berengar nodded in response to this before answering the field Marshal's question.

"I will elevate what remains of the Teutonic State to the Grand Duchy of Prussia for the time being. After we have united Germany underneath my rule, I will combine it with Brandenburg and raise its status to that of a Kingdom."

After hearing this, Eckhard sighed heavily; indeed, Berengar's ambitions were never-ending; from what the King had stated, it became evident that he wanted to create a Federal Monarchy where Austria and, by extension, his Dynasty ruled above all other German States as the Emperors. As such, Eckhard immediately relented and asked for Berengar's plan.

"So what exactly did you have in mind for this annexation? Hennek has appeared to leave the terms deliberately vague. It is clear that he intends to negotiate for as many benefits as possible."

Berengar immediately turned away from Eckhard upon hearing this and stood before the window gazing out upon the gorgeous Tyrolean scenery as he stood at ease. After a while, he began to speak of his plot.

"I don't intend to negotiate with the Teutonic Order, they have expressed interest in annexation, so I will march the Second Division into their lands, where I will personally accept their servitude. Tell me, Eckhard, what is the progress on the Bohemian Royal Army?"

Eckhard sighed heavily once more before speaking his thoughts on the matter.

"They haven't been in training long; it will still be a few months before the first batch of recruits is ready for combat. Why, what do you have in mind for them?"

Berengar's lips curved into a wicked smile as he revealed his intent for the Bohemian Forces beneath his command.

"It is simple; if the Coalition does not halt their advance, then we will smash their Army with our forces. If they relent, then we will use the combined force of the Second Division and the Royal Bohemian Army to reclaim the German-speaking regions currently occupied by the Eastern Coalition. I will not rest until we have retaken Konigsburg!"

Eckhard immediately understood Berengar's intent. He would use the fresh Bohemian recruits as the cannon fodder, while the more veteran and elite Austrians would act as shock troops in this conflict. Upon seeing the level of understanding in Eckhard's eyes, Berengar immediately asked the question on his mind.

"Tell me, Eckhard, have the new field uniforms been properly distributed? Black and gold may make excellent dress uniforms but are less than ideal for combat. It is too.... flashy."

Eckhard nodded his head silently; the field uniforms had been prepared and distributed to every soldier within the ranks of the Royal Austrian Army. Berengar smiled in response to Eckhard's answer; after doing so, he began to issue a new order.

"Very well, when the Second Division has been properly equipped with our newest weapons, I will march them to Marienburg, where I will accept the Teutonic State's request of annexation. Until that time, make sure the men are fully prepared. If you will excuse me, I must have a meeting with the Director of Royal Intelligence about this. I want our agents to be in the field well ahead of our advance."

After saying this, Eckhard saluted his King before departing from the room. Afterward, Berengar had Linde brought to him, who was exceptionally happy to see him. She immediately tried to kiss him. However, Berengar pushed her away with a stern glare in his eyes.

The young beauty immediately began to pout as her husband shoved away her attempt to show her affection. However, Berengar continued to glare at her as he calmly explained his reasoning for doing so.

"Linde, I called you here to discuss important matters of State, not to fool around. The fact that we are standing in my office is proof of this. So let's get down to business. I need you to deploy some of your field agents to the Teutonic State and the Eastern Coalition."

Having heard the severe matter at hand Linde immediately stepped out of her role as a loving wife and into that of the Director of Intelligence; in an instant, the affectionate expression she was giving her husband shifted to that of a quiet professional. She could easily separate business and pleasure, and Berengar admired that most about her. As such, her tone shifted to severity as she immediately asked for clarification on the details.

"Are we going to war again?"

Berengar nodded silently with a stoic expression. The moment he did so, Linde knew that things were about to get serious. As such, she quickly asked for further instructions.

"What do you need my agents to do exactly?"

Having heard this, Berengar leaned in close and began to whisper his plot into his wife's tender ears.

"For now, I want your agents to gather intelligence, assassinate priority targets, and sabotage the Eastern Coalition's efforts to conquer what remains of the Teutonic State. To put it simply, I need you to buy me time in whatever way you deem appropriate. It will be a few months before I can deploy the Second Division to the east, and in that time, I do not want the Teutonic State to fall.

After my forces have arrived and annexed the Teutonic State, I fear that the Coalition may be a bit hesitant to step on our tail. As such, I will need your Agents to provoke a conflict with them in a way that makes them appear to be the aggressors. Once we are in open war with the Coalition, I will do the rest."

After hearing her orders, Linde nodded her head and saluted Berengar as if she were one of his soldiers. She then boldly declared her acceptance of the tasks bequeathed to her.

"It will be done, your majesty!"

After saying this, Linde wasted no time; she immediately departed from Berengar's office and entered the Headquarters of Austrian Royal Intelligence, where she relayed her orders. Berengar now had two wars he would be fighting in the near future. As such, he smiled while pouring himself a glass of wine within his Skull Chalice. After taking a slight sip from the drink, he exhaled deeply before commenting to himself on the situation.

"It looks like the Needle Rifle will see yet another conflict! Good, I wouldn't want it to be replaced without serving its purpose!"

Chapter 387: Halting the Iberian Advance

Arnulf gazed into the distance; what he saw was the glimmer of an army's iron armor. Roughly three hundred yards away, on the fields of Andalusia marched well over 10,000 Iberian Catholics. However, they were dreadfully unaware that within firing range were two hundred and fifty members of the Granadan Royal Guard.

Why were they unaware, you might ask? The reason was quite simple, Arnulf had instructed the men beneath his command to paint their armor and clothing with mud. While the Granadan Royal Guard was equipped with mirror pattern armor protecting their vitals, underneath it was a series of green tunics that represented the colors of Al-Andalus. The tunics and armor worn over it were now stained in the earthy tones of the mud, creating a decent enough camouflage.

This was not the first enemy unit they had ambushed since their guerilla war had begun, but it was most definitely the largest. Due to the overwhelming numbers of the Iberian Union, they had split off into smaller armies, besieging towns, cities, and castles in a rapid conquest of the land.

Arnulf had decided to combat this threat by splitting his own small and elite force into multiple cells, whose objectives were to cause sabotage to the Iberian Armies and assassinate their leaders. Open conflict was strictly

forbidden. These cells acted as mounted infantry which formed a web around Northern Granada.

If one cell was in danger, it could quickly be supported by another nearby via the use of smoke signals. The current plan that Arnulf was engaging in was simple, wait until the Granadan host was in firing range and target the leadership.

Interestingly enough, they had finally caught themselves a big fish. The Army in front of them appeared to belong to none other than Duke Lorenzo de Benavente, the same man who had worked alongside the order of Calatrava to defeat the Granadan Royal Army in battle quite some time ago.

If not for his efforts, then the likelihood of the Iberian Union acquiring arkebuses and falconets would be pretty low.? For all the lives lost in the Battle of the Andalusian Plains, this was now Arnulf's time to get his vengeance. As such, he ordered his men to prepare their weapons.

"Load your weapons if they aren't already, and prepare to fire on my mark. See that bastard with the de Benavente coat of arms? My guess is that's the Duke, so aim your sights on him and the nearby officers!"

As such, the men cocked their rifled muskets and aimed the sights downrange at the targets lying before them. The Iberians were now roughly 200 yards away from the hidden force of Granadan guerillas, and it was at this moment that Arnulf gave his command.

"Open fire!"

With that said, his soldiers pulled the trigger, and with it, the echo of gunfire resounded in the air as the minie ball projectiles were propelled downrange and into the bodies of the enemy. Blood instantly splattered across the plains, and the Iberians soldiers immediately began to react to the ambush.

Though not all of the projectiles had hit their targets, it was enough to take out several officers, and most importantly, the man dressed in the colors of house de Benavente. He had multiple gunshot wounds through his torso; the likelihood of surviving was practically nonexistent.

After firing their first shots, the Granadans ran off from their positions and unhitched their horses hidden in a ditch below, where they rode off into the desert. Though the Iberian Knights immediately pursued, they were ultimately left behind by the unarmored horses in use by the Granadan Royal Guard.

As Arnulf and the Granadans escaped, a man-at-arms dressed in plate armor without a surcoat quickly approached the man assumed to be Duke Lorenzo de Benavente. The man-at-arms quickly unfastened the bascinet of the man who was bleeding out to reveal the face hidden behind the helmet. Unfortunately for Granada and its soldiers, he was not Lorenzo de Benavente, the man most hated by the soldiers of the Granadan Army.

As the men-at-arms saw this, he quickly took off his helmet to reveal that he was none other than Duke Lorenzo de Benavente in the flesh. In doing so, he touched his forehead to that of the dying man and began to speak to him in a comforting tone.

"My dear friend, I thank you for your sacrifice! I promise you that I will not allow these damned Moors to get away with what they have done! I will drive every one of them from these lands, and it is all thanks to you!"

Knowing that the Granadans were targeting high-ranking officers in the Iberian Union's armies with hit and run tactics, Lorenzo had accurately predicted that Arnulf and his men would sooner or later make an attempt on his life. As such, he had dressed as an ordinary man-at-arms and allowed another to take his place as a decoy.

He was on the lookout the entire time for an enemy ambush, but never did he expect that the Granadans would blend themselves in with the terrain. The very idea terrified the Duke to the core of his being. If they had to be on the lookout for potential assassins within every bush, tree, and ditch, it was going to be a long and strenuous campaign.

As such, the man decided he would need to devise a series of tactics to counteract this new style of warfare that the Granadans had begun to engage in. An army on the march could not easily blend in with their surroundings; the very slightest of movements would instantly give away their position to a well-trained eye.

While Duke Lorenzo began to think of new tactics to deal with the Granadan Guerillas, Arnulf led his soldiers out of enemy range and into a small encampment set up in a valley set a fair distance apart from the nearest cells.

There were no tents or any other noticeable print of their presence. Instead, the lodgings were built from the land itself, with primitive lean-to shelters being the standard form of covering. They made sure to make in-ground fires that concealed their presence to cook whatever they managed to hunt throughout the land.

After arriving in the camp and dismounting from their horses, Arnulf gathered the men together as he laid out a map, which had many markings upon it, primarily enemy and allied positions, as well as ongoing areas of conflict.

As he read over the map, he made several markings signaling the movement of the roughly 10,000 men they had encountered and the location they were likely to strike at. After doing so, he rolled up the map. Where he then tied it to the leg of one of the Falcons employed by their unit as a means of communication. This intelligence was sent back to General Ziyad Ibn Ya'is, whose forces comprised the primary defensive army within the borders of the Emirate of Granada.

The mission of the men under Arnulf's command was not just to engage in guerilla warfare but to act as reconnaissance, reporting the movements and numbers of the enemy units. Having fulfilled this duty, Arnulf sighed heavily as he took off his helmet and wiped the sweat from his brow. After doing so, he began to speak his thoughts on the ongoing conflict to one of the Austrian Officers beneath his command.

"I wonder if the First Division will be enough to handle the Iberian advance. Every day fanatical Catholics arrive in Iberia to join the Reconquista. Their numbers grow by the day while ours dwindle. It is only a matter of time before we are defeated. I pray that his majesty's reinforcements arrive swiftly."

The Austrian Officer quickly grasped Arnulf's shoulder and reassured him about their future victory.

"Do not fret; you know as well as I do how a single division is organized. It's established with the intent to wage war independently if necessary. Three

Infantry Brigades will arrive, accompanied by a single Cavalry Brigade and an Artillery Brigade, That's roughly 25,000 men.

I also hear they will be equipped with some mysterious new weapons; supposedly, some of these new rifles were highly effective in the war for independence. I do not doubt that when the First Division arrives, we will eradicate the Iberian Union once and for all and establish a powerful ally in the west!"

Upon hearing this reassurance, Arnulf began to feel much better about his position; if they could continue their actions and hold off the Iberian Advance for just a few more months, then victory was assured. He could not wait to see what magnificent new weapons King Berengar had provided the First Division with.

As such, the two men began to devise new plans for their next offensive. Their web of guerrilla cells was sure to cause a massive headache for the Iberian Commanders and the Crusader Orders who supported them. Whether or not they could hold off the Iberian Advance until Austrian Reinforcements arrived had yet to be seen.

Chapter 388: Locomotives and Weapons

While the war for Granada increased in intensity, Berengar was at home swamped with the business of industrializing the Kingdom of Austria. At the moment, he was viewing the reports on the progress of his railroad, which was being constructed between the capital and the Kingdom's prominent port city.

At roughly 292? miles in total length, the railway was nearing completion after months of strenuous effort by the laborers who opted to build such an important invention. Berengar had made sure to pay anyone remotely associated with constructing the railroad a special bonus. Thus driving the desire for skilled workers to aid in its development.

The first railway would be constructed in Austria by the end of spring, after which Berengar could begin expanding it to all corners of his kingdom. With this in mind, Berengar started designing a proper locomotive to drive his train cars.

Berengar had chosen a specific locomotive from the memories of his past life as the basis for all future steam-powered locomotives. This was the Union Pacific Big Boy, the largest steam-powered locomotive ever built in his past life.

This locomotive was powerful, reliable, and durable. Frankly, Berengar intended for these behemoths of the industry to carry both freight and passengers throughout the confines of his future Empire for decades to come. He also spent time designing various rail cars designed for different purposes.

In his past life, it took six years for the Americans to construct the transcontinental railway; considering he was dealing with a substantially smaller amount of land, he knew that he could build a railway across his current domain within the five years he estimated it would take for the Crusaders to march on his territory.

Berengar was not just limiting his railway map to his current territory. He was designing a rigid structure across all of the lands he desired to conquer in the future, from Konigsburg in the east to Flanders in the west and finally the Adriatic Littoral in the South. Berengar spent hours designing a massive railway system to ensure that what he envisioned would one day become the Fatherland of his future Empire would be thoroughly connected.

After god knows how many hours, Berengar was finally interrupted from his task by the sound of a knock on the door. It was not the standard soft-handed knock usually accompanied by one of his women. Instead, it was the firm knock that only a man could produce.

As such, Berengar's interest was immediately caught, unless it were something urgent, or someone of significance, his guards would rarely allow anyone to gain entry into his Palace, let alone his study. With this, Berengar immediately called out to whoever was behind the door.

"It's open."

When the door creaked open, it revealed none other than the Baronet, and close friend of the King, Ludwig Schmidt. The short older man was carrying a wooden display case in his hands which immediately captured Berengar's

interest. The older man quickly approached his King with a smile plastered on his face before laying the container on his desk.

"Your Majesty, I come bearing gifts. As you know, the 1422 Service Revolver has been undergoing field tests for some time now. Well, I am happy to announce that just now it has been approved for use in combat. As such, I am here to give you the first revolver off of the production line so that you may be able to properly safeguard your body in the field. "

Berengar gazed upon the service revolver within the case with a glimmer of joy in his sapphire eye. Not only was it a functional weapon but it was also a work of beauty in his opinion. This firearm was based upon the Swiss 1929 Ordnance Revolver used by the Swiss Army during Berengar's previous life. Functionally, the design was an improved version of the Swiss 1882 Ordnance revolver, which meant it was a gate-loading, double-action pistol that utilized an Abadie system.

Upon seeing this exceptional weapon, Berengar grasped ahold of the revolver and held it carefully in his hands. In his left hand, he felt the checkered grip swell in the palm of his hands. The grip was solid and sized well enough that even a man with relatively large-sized hands like himself could easily grasp ahold of it.

Berengar then opened the loading gate with his right hand, which disabled the hammer, allowing him to press the trigger, thus cycling the cylinder in a safe state. After confirming that it was completely unloaded, he closed the loading gate, reactivating the hammer. Afterward, he aimed down the weapon's sight in a safe direction before pulling back the hammer with his left thumb. After he had done this he lightly squeezed the trigger with his left index finger, thus dry firing the gun.

The single-action trigger pull was crisp and smooth, bringing a wide grin to Bernengar's lips; he then lowered the weapon and opened its loading gate before placing it within its fine black leather holster, which was provided alongside the firearm. After doing all of this, he returned his gaze to Ludwig as he complimented the man and his workers for their efforts.

"Wonderful! Simply wonderful! My friend, you never fail to amaze me with your abilities! You and your workers should be proud of yourselves; I look forward

to how quickly you can outfit the First Division with such exceptional sidearms."

Ludwig smiled as he heard the King compliment his work. Truth be told, he had some difficulty working with the designs Berengar had presented, but in the end, he was able to create the weapon that Berengar had desired. As such, he shook his head before humbling himself in front of the King.

"It was nothing, your majesty; I merely used the blueprints you designed and made adjustments where necessary. Truly, you are the one who deserves the credit for coming up with the design of such a beautiful weapon."

Berengar chuckled in response to this before placing his hand on the older man's shoulder; as he did so, he gazed over at another exciting piece presented within the case. After noticing the sword lying next to the revolver, Berengar was astonished. As such, he quickly grabbed ahold of the handle and swung the sword in a safe direction.

After a few twirls, he gazed upon the Damascus steel blade with a wide grin on his face. The blade was in a shape reminiscent of the 1889 Prussian Infantry Officer's sword. As for the hilt, its design was based upon the 1869 Austrian Cavalry Officer's Sword but with what he presumed to be a white gold plating over the steel material; there were also some minor adjustments to display the Crest of Austria from this world. It had a white gold silk sword knot attached to the bottom, representing his status as an Officer in the Austrian Royal Army.

Overall the sword was a functional piece of art, and Berengar greatly admired Ludwig's talent in creating weapons of all kinds. After playing around with it for a bit, Berengar sheathed the sword in a black leather sheath with white gold fittings attached to a Sam Browne pattern belt. This greatly pleased Berengar, and as such, he complicated the craftsman once more.

"Ludwig, my friend, you have truly mastered your art!"

The older man smiled in response to this while bowing his head in humility. As he had stated earlier, if not for Berengar providing the designs, it would have taken him a long time to develop such weapons. He would likely die before his work could be completed. However, he was glad that the King thought so

highly of him. As such, he decided to take the opportunity to ask for Berengar's aid on a particular project of his son's.

"Your majesty, if you don't mind me asking, my son has been busy with a certain project, and I think he could use your help when you get the opportunity to do so. I am much too busy overseeing the arms factory here in Kufstein, so I have delegated Research and Development to my son and a team of talented engineers, mostly comprised of those from the younger generation. If you can find the time, they would appreciate your input on this new weapon."

Berengar thought about it for a moment before sighing heavily as he responded to the request.

"If I can find the time, I will certainly aid in whatever way I can. After all, I look forward to working with your son for many years. However, I am dreadfully busy, and my schedule is full for some time. If I can manage to escape the mountains of paperwork you see before you, I'll swing by and see if I can assist."

Ludwig smiled and bowed with respect before thanking the King for his benevolence.

"Thank you, your majesty! That is the most I can ask for. If there is nothing else I can help you with, then I will be on my way."

After saying this, Berengar nodded his head, dismissing his Chief Engineer; after doing so, he sat back down at his desk and gazed at his newest weapons. He looked forward to testing out their effectiveness personally whenever he got the chance.

Chapter 389: Designing the Electric Telegraph

Over the past few years, since Berengar first began to introduce modern chemistry to the alchemists who had gathered in Kufstein, they had managed to produce a significant degree of a great variety of chemicals. So much so that a portion of the industrial district was dedicated to chemical engineering.

The chemistry Labs had grown in size and staff as more alchemists fled from the German regions to Austria in search of a better life. When these

alchemists arrived in Kufstein, they were properly instructed in the field of chemistry and inspired to give up on their primitive notions of gold conversion and immortality.

For the most part, Berengar allowed the chemists the freedom to make their own discoveries; due to this academic liberation, these brilliant minds could rapidly advance the field of chemistry. In doing so, they managed to discover and create many of the chemicals necessary for advancing into the Industrial Age.

At the moment, Berengar was talking to Aldo von Passau, the lead chemist in the Kingdom of Austria, who was proud of his newest research. As Berengar stared at this latest invention, he was in a state of complete and utter shock; the only word he could use to describe Aldo and his team of chemists was "genius."

Sitting in front of him was a very primitive form of the Alkaline battery. This battery was something akin to the early Edison-Lalande Cell. It utilized a negative zinc electrode and a copper-oxide positive electrode with a potassium hydroxide electrolyte.

At this point, Berengar was seriously considering creating some form of award to give to his scientists who achieved terrific feats like this. After having observed the battery, Berengar sighed heavily before revealing the thoughts on his mind.

"Aldo, my friend... You have just cured one of the major causes of my incessant headache!"

Aldo's brow began to twitch as he heard this, he honestly did not know how to react to such a statement, nevertheless, he was glad he could help. As such, he bowed respectfully before showing his thanks for Berengar's so-called praise.

"You honor me, your majesty."

Berengar may have been exaggerating, rather than enduring literal headache he had long since suffered in a figurative sense as he worried about the large probability of train collisions that would inevitably result without some form of

long-distance communication. With this battery, he could now invent the electrical telegraph, and begin construction of telegraph stations, and wires across his railway.

With this in mind, he was incredibly pleased with the results of the Chemists within the Kufstein Chemistry Department. It took some time but he managed to reorganize his thoughts to congratulate the man and his team on their efforts in a suitable manner.

"Aldo von Passau, for your exemplary service to the Kingdom of Austria and its Royal Family, I promise that I will devise an award for your contributions to the field of chemistry. I have long since ignored the effort of the scientific community, and it is time to rectify that!"

As Aldo heard these words he began to smile gracefully, as a vain man, this was a far more appropriate response to all the hard work he and his team had put forth throughout the past few years. Though Berengar may have given them the basic knowledge behind the science of chemistry, it was ultimately their efforts that lead to the discovery of the chemicals that had become the backbone of the Austrian Industry. Thus, he bowed respectfully and properly thanked the King for his remarks.

"Your Majesty, words can not express my gratitude for your kind words!"

Berengar gazed at Aldo with exhaustion; this guy had never given up an opportunity to kiss his ass; if Aldo had not excelled in his career, then Berengar would probably never speak to the man as he had a disdain for yesmen. Nevertheless, he could not deny Aldo's contributions, and because of this, he chose to converse with him a bit longer. Eventually, the chief chemist left the Palace and returned to his department.

It would take a good while before enough of these batteries could be produced to ensure a constant supply of power to his future telegraph network, but when that happened Berengar and his Army would be able to rapidly communicate across his realm, which was helpful beyond measure.

If his Borders were to be attacked at any point, he could have a telegraph sent asking for reinforcements, and immediately men could be shipped onto train cars with their supplies where they would be rapidly sent to the frontlines.

When compared to his enemies, who were still using messengers and carrier pigeons as a means of communication, Berengar would have a massive advantage during defensive operations. After reflecting upon this for a few minutes, Berengar got to work making plans for the first telegraph, which would use this new Proto-Alkaline battery as its power source.

An electrical telegraph was a relatively simple design when compared to more modern advancements in long-distance communication. Fundamentally it was operated by using morse code, which utilized a series of dots and lines for each letter of the alphabet.

It achieved this using an electromagnet, a battery, the morse key, and a long wire referred to as a cable. The morse key was attached to the battery's positive node via a cable, while the negative terminal was connected to the ground. From the morse key, the cable attached itself to the electromagnet and the base. An Armature was joined on the same platform as the electromagnet and was operated by a large spring.

When assembled, one just needed to use the morse key to send messages through the cable to another destination. Hence the need for telegraph wires to be built over long distances, much like telephone wires were done in the 20th century. As for the wireless telegraph, that would require radio waves, and Berengar did not yet have the means to produce them, for now, the electric telegraph would suit his needs.

Now that Berengar had the means to create a battery, all he needed was to make some rudimentary electromagnets, which he had all of the materials necessary to build. A primitive electromagnet consisted of little more than an iron core, with a copper wire coiled around it and connected to a battery. Thus he did not have to worry about procuring the supplies necessary to build such things.

With the blueprints for the first telegraph completed, Berengar decided to begin the construction of telegraph wires and stations alongside his railways and within the rail stations. As for the telegraphs themselves, they would have to be slowly implemented over time. After all, it would take a while to set up a new battery factory.

Ultimately it was likely to take years for this project to be completed. Still, Berengar was confident that by the time his enemies invaded his country, he would have railways and telegraph stations connecting his Kingdom, thus allowing him a severe technological advantage over the crusaders in terms of long-range communication.

Having finished his work for the day, Berengar immediately departed from his study, where he soon found his son Hans searching through the hallways in a suspicious manner. Curious as to what the boy was looking for, Berengar walked over to his son and immediately inquired about his actions.

"Hans, what are you up to?"

The young boy immediately smiled upon seeing his father; he did not hesitate to announce what exactly he was doing that made him look so suspicious.

"I'm looking for Veronika; we are playing hide and seek!"

Upon hearing this, Berengar smiled; Although there was an age difference of roughly five or six years between the two kids, it seemed like they were getting along quite well. There was no doubt that Veronika had minimal options for playmates within the Royal Palace. As such, she had begun hanging out with Hans, and the even younger Helga, acting almost like a big sister to the two.

Berengar immediately noticed a nearby table covered by a tablecloth; while he talked to Hans, the tablecloth moved ever so slightly. Considering the windows were sealed, and there was no breeze within the Palace, Berengar knew that was most likely where the young girl was hiding. With this in mind, he knelt next to his young son and whispered in his ear.

"She's hiding under the table in the hallway..."

A smug grin appeared on Hans's face as he heard this information and silently nodded his head as a form of acknowledgment. After doing so, he calmly walked over to the table before lifting the cloth, revealing the young girl hidden beneath. She immediately began to pout and protest her discovery!

"How did you know!?!"

Hans did not give up the fact that his old man had revealed her location to him. Instead, he crossed his arms with a conceited expression on his face. As he did so, he spoke proudly, in an arrogant manner that only a young prince like himself could pull off.

"Are you questioning my superior German intellect? It was quite obvious that a Bohemian like yourself would hide under the table like a common rat!"

Berengar's smile immediately sank into an awkward expression; he did not know where the boy learned such racial-based taunts. Still, such haughty words caused Veronika to pout even further. Upon seeing this, Berengar attempted to mediate the conflict and thus pressed his hand upon his son's shoulder before scolding him.

"Hans, it is inappropriate to say such things. Veronika is your friend; you should save such remarks for your enemies. There is no reason to humiliate the poor girl. Besides, it is now her turn to hunt you down, and when she inevitably finds you, perhaps she will taunt you in a similar manner."

The young boy immediately knew what his father was saying and nodded his head in agreement. Though he did not apologize to the former Bohemian Princess for his remarks, he had made up his mind that he would no longer verbally abuse the girl in the future. After all, his father was right; he should treat his allies with dignity while humiliating his enemies.

Upon seeing that the two kids were getting along once more, Berengar departed from the scene leaving the children to their games. He had much to prepare for; After all, things would undoubtedly be more lively within the Palace in a few months.

Chapter 390: Stick Grenades and Guncotton

The sun shone through the glass windows of a large conference room within the Industrial District of the city of Kufstein. Various men dressed in work clothes were gathered around the table, stained with the various fluids that an engineer would commonly encounter. At the head of this table was a familiar young man, the eldest son of the legendary engineer Ludwig Schmidt.

Jakob was designing a new weapon, and the men surrounding him were the Research and Development team assigned to the Austrian National Armory.

Usually, Ludwig would be at this meeting, but the man was getting on in years and had many other tasks to work on. With this in mind, he placed his eldest son as the head of the Research and Development department.

At the moment, Jakob and his engineers were working together to design a replacement for the old cast iron grenades that were essentially nothing more than a hollow iron ball filled with black powder and utilized a slow-burning match to detonate.

While the mighty King of Austria, Berengar von Kufstein, had laid the groundwork for the development of arms and munitions, a certain amount of responsibility had fallen to these men, and it was with this in mind that they fervently worked to live up to the standards of their respective positions.

The rudimentary design on the table was akin to a Stielhandgranate or stick grenade from Berengar's past life. Much like the Chinese variant of the stick grenade from the 20th century, they had opted to use TNT as the explosive compound contained within. However, where they were struggling to finalize the design was in regards to the ignition system; for the time being, they could not think of a way to ignite the grenade safely.

Right when they were about to give up on the design altogether, a knock resounded throughout the room, which originated from the doors of the conference room. Shortly after this, the doors crept open to reveal the elegant figure of the young King of Austria.

Upon seeing their Monarch enter the room, the engineers all became dead silent, as they were not expecting his arrival and did not know how to react appropriately. Berengar had a dignified expression on his face as he explained his reasoning for stopping by.

"Apologies if I am interrupting your little meeting, but Ludwig informed me that you guys might need some assistance on whatever it is you are designing. I have an hour or two to spare, and as such, I decided to drop by."

After hearing this, Jakob swallowed the saliva pooled in his mouth before responding to his King's remarks.

"It would be an honor for his majesty to aid us with our newest design."

Having said this, the young engineer sprawled out the paper, which contained the details of the prototype grenade on it. Berengar glanced at it for a few moments with an amused expression. He found it interesting how these engineers had begun to put together something he was already planning to introduce in the near future.

After looking over the device, he instantly realized what they were struggling with and quickly grabbed ahold of a nearby fountain pen, where he began to make alterations to the ignition system. The stick grenade was not an exceptionally complicated device, and truth be told, these men were completely overthinking this particular component.

The actual method from his previous life was relatively crude; unlike other designs, it did not use something akin to a percussion cap to ignite the explosive compound. Instead, it had a sheet steel cylinder embedded within the top of the handle, which was connected to the detonator. A pull cord ran throughout the entire length of the hollow wooden handle and protruded from below.

With this method, one only needed to pull the drawstring; this would drag a rough steel rod through the igniter within, where the abrasion from contact with the steel rod would cause the fuse to ignite; after this was achieved, it would take roughly four and a half seconds for the burning fuse to reach the explosive filling where it would then detonate.

After making this minor adjustment to the grenade, Berengar made a few other minor additions to the design, such as a clip so that the grenades could easily be attached to a soldier's belt. When it was complete, he showed it off to the engineers with a smug expression on his face.

"I believe this has resolved the difficulties you were having, has it not?"

After seeing the completed design, the Engineers stared in awe at their King. In a matter of minutes, he had resolved the issues that they had spent weeks wrapping their minds around. Just what kind of intellect did this man have? Having completed the basic Stick Grenade Design, Berengar stood up from his seat and walked towards the doors, leaving behind one final phrase before he departed.

"You should be proud of yourselves; you have designed an effective grenade to replace the dreadfully outdated devices currently in use by our grenadiers. With this, you have increased the degree of firepower that an average Landwehr can be equipped with. Your only problem was that you were overthinking the ignition system; sometimes, a crude method like this is exactly what is needed."

After saying this, he left the Engineers to themselves; the manufacture and initial testing of these weapons would be left up to the men in this room. After the grenades had proven safe for handling, they would be sent to the Department of Defense for extensive testing under field conditions. After being approved for use in combat, they would be sent to the army.

Berengar, on the other hand, had done his part and was quite pleased with the results. He saw this as a huge step forward on the path to self-sufficiency; after all, he was not immortal, and the day he died, his Empire would have to maintain and expand upon everything he had built.

With this thought, Berengar had another matter of importance enter his mind. While the implementation of the Stick Grenade was essential to the efficiency of his soldiers, there was another and arguably more critical invention that Berengar had to consider implementing as soon as possible.

Having realized this, Berengar immediately began to stride towards the Chemistry Department, after arriving at his destination, all of the men within its halls immediately halted what they were doing and paid their respects to the young Monarch. Berengar was not in the mood for flattery and immediately inquired about the whereabouts of a specific chemist.

"Can any of you tell me where Aldo is?"

The moment he said those words, he heard a voice he was all too familiar with call out to him. As usual, the man behind the voice began to speak with endless praise.

"Do my ears deceive me? Is that the King of Austria here to visit me personally? What have I done to deserve such an honor?"

Berengar's brow began to twitch as he heard Aldo's usual adulation; this man truly never gave up an opportunity to kiss ass. However, Berengar quickly recovered from his impatience and regained the dignity of a monarch as he played along.

"My dear friend Aldo, I had a sudden epiphany and thought to myself, who better to confirm the results of my speculation than the chief chemist of my Kingdom?"

Aldo immediately began to flatter Berengar further while simultaneously getting to the point.

"Oh, King Berengar, I am truly unworthy of your attention. However, I would be more than happy to entertain another one of your brilliant ideas, show me what exactly you had in mind!"

Having heard this, Berengar wasted no time; he immediately grabbed ahold of the nearby blackboard and began writing out the general formula for nitrocellulose, the critical component in smokeless powder.

Nitrocellulose was essentially little more than cellulose treated with a mixture of nitric and sulfuric acid. In fact, For some time now, the Kufstein Chemistry department has been experimenting with cellulose developed from the fiber of hemp. As such, they had a small stockpile of the material lying around.

In Berengar's past life, cotton was the primary material used to create cellulose, hence the nickname "guncotton" after all, as much as 90% of the plant could be converted into the material. However, cotton could not grow within Austria's borders; thus, hemp was a decent alternative. While hemp may only generate up to 70% of the material known as cellulose, one could grow three times as much hemp as cotton on a single acre.

After looking over the formula for a few moments, Aldo and his Chemists immediately gazed in shock at Berengar; However, they could not confirm the results at the moment; such a formula could theoretically prove to be valid. Having provided the chemists with the recipe for Nitrocellulose, Berengar then began to depart from the Kufstein Chemistry Department, leaving behind a single phrase as he did so.

"I'll leave you to your work..."

It was only after his figure had vanished from sight that the chemists immediately began to work on the creation of smokeless powder. There would be a fully detailed report on their findings placed upon Berengar's desk within two weeks.