

Steel 531

Chapter 531 - Reforming The Royal Guard

Currently, King Berengar von Kufstein stood in his office. The man firmly clasped his hands behind his back as he stared out the window, gazing upon the sun setting over the Austrian Alps. For several moments there was silence, that is until the King finally spoke with a voice filled with authority and intimidation.

"So, you believe that you are ready to act as the Field Marshal over the Royal Guard?"

A young man, even younger than Berengar himself, stood on the opposing side of the desk that stood between them. He gulped the saliva that pooled within his throat as he quickly nodded his head with a severe expression in his eyes. This man was none other than the King's cousin and Brother-in-law.

"Yes, cous- erm, your majesty!"

It had been years since Berengar had last associated with Heimerich, other than in passing. A few years back, Heimerich's elder brother Gerhard assumed the position of Regent over what they then knew as the County of Steiermark.

The reason for this was simply because of Lothar's rebellion. However, rather than prove his competency as the heir to the County; his first act as regent was a poor attempt to dissolve the betrothal between his youngest sister Adela, and his cousin Berengar.

When his father Otto got wind of this notion, he castigated the boy, and replaced him with his younger brother, Heimerich. Years had passed since then, and a fierce conflict between the two brothers had emerged as they fought for the succession of their father's position.

In the eyes of their father, who was now not only a Duke but also the Chancellor of Austria, Gerhard had since redeemed himself. Despite this, Berengar was not fond of the man. After all this time, Heimerich had come groveling to his cousin, the King of Austria, for a position that would allow him to excel in the eyes of his father, and hopefully one day succeed him.

However, despite this plea, Berengar was hesitant. He was not one known for tolerating nepotism. In fact, such an act was a criminal offense in Austria, thus he wanted proof of the young man's capabilities as a military leader. With this in mind, a cruel smile formed on Berengar's lips as he walked over to his desk and sat down. He read over the report on his younger cousin's accomplishments on the battlefield as an officer in the Royal Army.

"It says here that you were awarded with a Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross for your heroism in battle. Having fought in the Iberian Campaign, and the War against the Eastern Coalition, your superiors speak highly of your abilities as not only a soldier, but also as a commander. You served with the Grenadier Guards. Is that correct?"

The young man nodded his head without hesitation before responding to his King's comments.

"That is correct, your Majesty."

Berengar smiled when he heard this enthusiasm. The Grenadier Guards was an infantry regiment renowned for extensive service record. Since the earliest of Berengar's campaigns, the Grenadiers Acted as both his personal guard, and has his shock troops.

Over time, they expanded into a dedicated regiment of the most battle hardened infantry. For a long time, it was considered a great honor to join their ranks.? However, nowadays, this specialized unit was just another form of infantry. With the invention of stick grenades, such weapons had become standard issue to all infantry units, and thus the Grenadiers lost that which made them unique.

Despite this redundancy, Berengar wanted to pay homage to the Grenadier Guard's lineage as his original bodyguard. Thus, he selected an officer from this prestigious regiment's ranks as the Field Marshal in charge of his newly reformed Royal Guard. Interestingly enough, his cousin just so happened to be the man he was looking for.

While Berengar was going over his cousin's file, he was carefully studying the man who was dressed in his full service uniform. After a while, the King placed down the dossier and sighed heavily before revealing the thoughts he had on the biggest issue at hand.

"I have some concerns about appointing you to such a lofty position. For starters, you are young, and though you have fought in two wars, there are plenty of officers more experienced than you. Though you have an outstanding reputation among your peers and superior officers alike, I fear some will see that your appointment to Field Marshal of the Royal Guard will be an act of nepotism on my part.

It is because of this that I want you to prove yourself in a military exercise. I will not lie to you. The task I will appoint to you will be one that few men can succeed in. I will hold this excursion in Northern Lombardy, where you will be tasked with leading a brigade of Royal Guard conscripts against the Kingdom of Lombardy's defense forces.

Your aim is simple: Invade Northern Lombardy with your brigade and seize control over a single county. After you and your men have established control over this county, I will dispatch my Jagdkommandos to act as rebels, where they will engage in guerrilla warfare against your forces. With your army of conscripts, it is your job to identify and eliminate these rebels without a single civilian casualty.

If you can succeed in this endeavor, then you will not only prove to me, but to everyone else in the Kingdom of Austria, including your father that you are fit to lead the Royal Guard into battle against all of my enemies whether they be foreign or domestic. So what do you say? Are you up to the challenge?"

Heimerich struggled to cope with this task. What his cousin was asking of him was beyond most Field Commander's capabilities. Not only was he given a single infantry brigade of fresh recruits to fight a mock battle against the entire Kingdom of Lombardy's Defense Force, which numbered over 10,000 men, but he was also then supposed to fight against a guerrilla force composed of Austrian Jagdkommandos.

The Jagdkommandos were Austria's elite special forces. Not only were they experts at direct action, but they were also masters of covert operations and unconventional warfare. To fight against such elite soldiers with an army of conscripts fresh out of training was not something any sane individual would want to do.

Despite the difficulty in the task set for him, Heimerich knew well why Berengar was imposing such restrictions. If he truly wanted to lead the Royal Guard as its Field Marshal, he would need to be a capable enough leader to overcome conventional armies, and guerilla rebels alike.

After all, the Royal Guard was being reformed into the King's personal militant force, and they would most likely be dealing with rebellions from within the realm at some point in the future. With a heavy sigh, and careful consideration, the King's cousin nodded his head before responding with his answer.

"Very well. I will undertake this task, and after I have achieved total victory, I will expect you to honor your words and grant me with this position."

Berengar merely smiled as he heard his cousin's words. If the young man was truly such an exceptional leader to be successful in this nigh impossible task, then he was indeed worthy of leading his Royal Guard. Of course, if Heimerich failed, then Berengar would find someone more suited for the position. Either way, the crown was victorious in this scheme.

"I like your confidence. Prove to me you are the right man for the job, and I swear it will be yours. As you know, I always fulfill my promises."

Upon hearing the King's commitment to his terms, Heimerich sighed in relief before saluting his monarch.

"For King and Fatherland!"

In response to this action, Berengar raised from his seat and returned the man's salute.

"Hail victory!"

After saying this, the Grenadier Officer was dismissed from the Monarch's office, where he prepared himself for the mock invasion he would have to endure. As for Berengar, he dispatched news to the puppet King of Lombardy to alert him to this military excursion, giving him ample time to prepare for the Austrian Invasion.

While rebellion occurred within the lands of Northern Germany, the South German Confederation was taking time to prepare for their inevitable conquest of the region. Whether the local population would view the Austrian invaders as saviors or ruthless conquerors entirely depended on Berengar's efforts of intrigue.

Thus, much work had to be done, and there was little time to do it. However, Berengar was never one to shy away from a challenge, thus he quickly got to work drafting the necessary documents for the approval of his plans, both internally and abroad. The reach of the Austrian Crown knew no bounds in this feudal world, and he would not rest until those who were responsible for his sister's injury met justice.

Though it may seem like Berengar was being merciful by not outright invading the North German States, his cruelty in response to his sister's injury would forever remain in the minds of monarchs throughout the western world.. A permanent reminder of what happens when one targets the Royal Family of Austria.

Chapter 532 - Berengar You Sly Bastard!

Eckhard sat back on his leather sofa, drinking wine from a gilded chalice. His years of service to the von Kufstein Dynasty had finally paid off. He was now the Grand Duke of Prussia and had a sizeable estate within the boundaries of Marienburg. The former headquarters of the Teutonic Order was now his personal abode, and he very much enjoyed it.

At his side was a young woman no older than eighteen. This woman was blonde-haired and blue eyed, with fair skin and natural curves. She was quite beautiful. So much so that perhaps her appearance could even rival that of Berengar's many brides.

This eighteen-year-old girl was Martha von Hohenzollern, and she was the eldest daughter of the Margrave of Brandenburg. In Berengar's past life, the House of Hohenzollern unified Prussia and later the German Empire, acting as its imperial dynasty until its collapse in 1918.

However, in this life, the family's destiny to become a mighty imperial dynasty was stolen by Berengar, and instead they were now subordinated to Eckhard, who had renamed his surname and dynasty to von Marienburg after the Teutonic Castle, which now acted as his home.

After becoming the Grand Duke of Prussia, Eckhard immediately sought a wife. This was an opportunity he did not have as a vagrant knight, nor was he able to fulfill this desire while in service to Berengar.

Now that he was finally free from a lifetime of war and had established his own royal dynasty, it was time to marry a good young wife. Though Eckhard may be a middle-aged man, he still had a few good years left to sire a proper successor.

Naturally, the Margraves of Brandenburg were more than willing to marry off one of their daughters to the Royal Family of the newfound Prussian State, even if there was a massive age gap between the two.

Thus the young woman sat loyally by her fiance's side as she met the man for the first time. Her father, Johannes von Hohenzollern, had an excited facade as he introduced his daughter to his newfound liege.

"Your Grace, I must say I have long since admired your military record. You truly understand the warrior spirit of the German people. It is the highest honor for me to marry my daughter off to such an esteemed General as yourself!"

Despite saying such pleasantries, Johannes was far from cordial in his heart. In fact, he despised Eckhard. In truth, the Margrave of Brandenburg had been plotting for some time to take advantage of the Teutonic State's collapse and annex their territory.

Unfortunately for him, Berengar acted first, and after being victorious against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, gave the ownership of the region to his greatest General. Because of this, the man was now subordinate to a foreigner of low birth.

Eckhard nodded his head in silence as he drank from his cup, carefully eying the Margrave and his beautiful daughter. A single phrase filled with disdain entered his mind.

What a couple of vipers you two are...

After a lifetime of experience, it took the veteran Field Marshal one glance to tell that this dynamic duo inwardly despised him. To think that he had found himself such a beautiful young woman to marry, it was such a shame that she was a two-faced bitch. As if he could read minds, the woman put on a loving facade as she grabbed ahold of his hand and flattered him with needless pleasantries.

"My father is not alone in his thinking. I, too, have greatly admired your meritorious service to the Austrian Crown over the past few years. It is a dream come true to marry a man as strong and capable as yourself."

Despite knowing what these two were up to, Eckhard had no choice but to engage in their little masquerade, thus he placed down his cup and wore a warm smile as he grasped ahold of his fiancée's hand with both of his own.

"I assure you, my lady, war is not as admirable as you think it is. Still, it warms my heart to know that such a young and delicate flower like yourself cares so much for an old man like me."

The young woman smiled gracefully as she accepted Eckhard's compliment.

"You flatter me, your Grace. I know I am not as beautiful as the King of Austria's brides, but I will make up for it in loyalty, I assure you. Besides, though it may not be appropriate to say, I have a thing for older men..."

If Eckhard was a less experienced man, he may have scoffed at that very moment. Such a conniving vixen not only declared her loyalty to him but also claimed she was attracted to him, as well. It was truly laughable.

Luckily for Eckhard, he had spent many years in the Austrian Court by Berengar's side. After all this time, lying was second nature to the man, thus rather than sneering in disdain, his smile lightened to a caring and kind expression.

"You honor me, my lady. I promise to be a good husband to you!"

Johannes gazed upon the "couple" with contempt concealed within his eyes. Truthfully, if he felt he could contend with Berengar's armies, then he wouldn't have bothered wedding his daughter off to this up-jumped Knight.

However, he was wiser than others. After learning about Berengar's many victories and the capabilities of his armies, he knew conflict was not a viable option to get what he wanted. Thus, if he wanted his

dynasty to rule over this newfound Prussian state, he would have to play the long con, no matter how much he despised it.

Of course, that did not mean he would simply sit by and watch his daughter pretend to flirt with this lowly knight, instead he intervened and shifted the subject to a more pertinent conversation.

"Your Grace, I will have you know I am having a bit of a difficult time convincing the local noblemen to surrender their rights and privileges as lords. There are many of them who are too stubborn to accept your political, economic, and military reforms. They assert that they have the right to rule their lands as they see fit."

Once more, Eckhard had to prevent himself from scoffing. He knew full well that the noblemen in Brandenburg were all united behind the will of the Hohenzollern Dynasty. Especially now that Eckhard had come to power in the region. In the eyes of the noblemen of Brandenburg, he was a foreigner of low birth, and was an illegitimate ruler, placed on his seat of power by a foreign occupier.

If the noblemen of Brandenburg were resisting Berengar's reforms, then there was only one man responsible, and that was Johannes von Hohenzollern. Thus, by raising this point, the Margrave hoped to use it as leverage to gain some further benefits from the newly appointed Grand Duke of Prussia, or perhaps he was simply testing Eckhard's resolve.

This was a foolish move on Johannes part. He was messing with a man who had, for the past 30 years, led men into battle. To Eckhard, the solution to this problem was simple, and thus, he finished the wine in his chalice before slamming it down onto the glass table next to him. As the glass shattered, so too did his kind facade.

"You tell those incompetent fools that the age of Knights and chivalry has long since passed. You have all been living on borrowed time in your primitive ways. I am in charge now, and I assure you, I will not tolerate such insubordination. You tell your Bannerman that they have a choice. They can either stay in the ancient world, or live in the modern one. There is no third option!"

After saying this, Martha gazed at Eckhard in genuine shock. Her father had assured her that the old man would be an easy one to manipulate. As for Johannes, he glared at Eckhard with fury in his eyes. He had truly underestimated the Austrian General. He never expected after retiring, Eckhard would so quickly resort to violence as a means to solve his political disputes.

Martha immediately tried to placate her fiance

"Sweetheart, there is no reason to be so brash, I am sure that-"

However, before she could finish her sentence, Eckhard slapped away her hand and stood up before chastising the father and daughter.

"Be gone, both of you. I do not want to see either of you until you have decided whose side you belong to. The future, or the past, because I assure you, whether you like it or not, these reforms are going to happen."

After saying this the Margrave and his daughter left the room in silence, they were completely outraged by the humiliation they had suffered on this day. It was only after they were alone in their carriage did either of them speak up.

"Father, what are we going to do now? It appears he is not as easy to manipulate as you thought..."

Johannes frowned, as he glared out the window of his carriage onto Marienburg Castle, where Eckhard still stood. After several moments of silence, he revealed his plans to his eldest daughter.

"I won't lie to you. This definitely complicates things. His violent response to our ploy was not within my calculations. I genuinely believed he would try to maintain peace in his life now that he had finally achieved it. It would appear that this old dog still has some bite left in him. Apparently, my informant provided me some misinformation about the old Field Marshal's mental state.

I believe he suspects I am responsible for this little insurrection, and rightfully so. We have no choice but to tread lightly from now on if we wish to accomplish our goals. Make no mistake, my baby girl, one day we will rule this land."

Martha remained silent, gazing out the window of the carriage towards her old fiance. She thought he would be a feeble old man on his last limb in life. Yet, despite her father's probing, he so quickly resorted with a show of force. Perhaps marrying this old geezer wouldn't be so boring after all.

As for Eckhard, he stood on his balcony gazing at the departing carriage. A single thought crossed his mind as the Hohenzollerns vanished from his sight.

Berengar, you sly bastard! You promised me a retirement, and instead you threw me into a nest of vipers! Very well, if this is a test of my loyalty, then you shall have a satisfactory result! This I swear to you...

Chapter 533 - Tractors, Potatoes, and Revenge

Honorina sat within the confines of the King's office within the Royal Palace. The byzantine princess rested her chin on her palm, with her legs crossed as she gazed across the desk to see the handsome visage of her husband, the king of Austria.

She was visiting the man as he was hard at work to report some information she had received from her family that she believed to be of dire importance to the national security of her husband's kingdom.

"Palladius says that Decentius has found the book you gifted to my father and copied its contents. Supposedly, he is responsible for its leak to the papacy. I'm curious how you intend to respond to these actions."

Berengar merely smirked as he heard these words. In his hands was a golden letter opener, which he was twirling on the top of his desk. He responded to his third wife with a coy tone in his voice.

"Oh, I am well aware that your brother is responsible for leaking my technology, however any further attack on his being would be considered an act of aggression and I would rather avoid conflict with your family.

There are other ways to deal with his insolence, and trust me, the leaking of agricultural technology is not as big a threat as you might believe it to be. It will still be years before my enemies are able to fully implement such technology, and by then our people will have a serious advantage in agriculture that they won't have."

Honorina was surprised to hear this remark. She thought for sure Berengar would be more concerned. Just what technology had he invented now that was such a huge invention? She could not help but ask.

"What exactly would that be?"

Berengar smiled as he raised two fingers in response to his wife's question.

"Firstly, there are the potatoes you brought back from the New World. You may not know thus, but after some thorough research by our botanists, this wonder food is a hardy vegetable that has excellent nutritional value. Should we grow potatoes en masse, and use it as our staple crop, it will have serious health benefits to our people. As for the second reason, there is another technological innovation that I have drafted."

After saying this, the Austrian King pulled out a diagram of a steam powered tractor and began to explain its use to the Byzantine Princess.

"This device will replace the need for horses in the fields. It can be used for many agricultural purposes, including the pulling of combine harvesters. No longer will we need to raise twenty horses or mules for the purpose of pulling these massive devices.

With our current technological capabilities this steam tractor can be produced relatively cheaply, and sold to farmers across our Kingdom, with the lack of resources going towards caring for the animals who currently act as our primary power source for agriculture, we will be able to lessen the cost of food, making it even more affordable than it currently is.

Naturally, I intend to subsidize these Tractors so they are even more affordable for farmers to get hold of. This will ensure they are able to be rapidly employed in our fields, decreasing the cost of labor substantially."

It shocked Honoria to see how much effort Berengar put into increasing agricultural yields and decreasing the cost of food. After all, as far as Berengar was concerned, food should be plentiful and readily available to his citizens.

Ultimately, Honoria realized Berengar was about to ask a favor of her, and thus she wore a pretty smile as she cut to the chase.

"So I'm guessing that you have a favor to ask of me?"

Berengar chuckled when he heard this before making his request.

"You understand me so well... Yes, I need you to lead an expedition of my marines into the region to secure a foothold in the mountains, and establish trade with the less hostile natives. I want a massive influx of potatoes into the fatherland so we can begin growing them across the realm.

Also, I am certain that potatoes are not the only valuable item in the region, so make sure that you bring back anything else you believe could be of value. It's a bold new world, filled with discoveries and resources we could only imagine, and I want it all to belong to Germany."

The Byzantine princess sighed as she heard this request. However, in the end, she nodded her head in agreement.

"Very well. I will do as you ask. However, after helping your men establish a colony in the region, I want your permission to do something that we should have done a long time ago..."

It surprised Berengar to hear that Honoria was making a demand of him, especially in such a cryptic way. He needed more information before he could agree to her request, thus he had no choice but to inquire further about the subject.

"What exactly did you have in mind?"

Honoria's expression turned grim as she stared at her husband in silence. One could tell there was a certain amount of fury in the woman's pupils as her brows narrowed and her fists clenched. Whatever she was about to say was something of significant importance to the Byzantine Princess.

"I want you to allow me to pursue justice for my God-father's murder. It has been years since my brother betrayed Arethas and slayed him in cold blood, and yet despite your promises, his death remains unanswered. Every day that Decentius still breathes is an insult to my Godfather's memory, and I must avenge him!"

Berengar frowned when he heard this, while he had promised to dig up evidence of Decentius' crimes. In truth, Austrian Intelligence, and Palladius' spy network were more concerned with the war for the Byzantine Throne than they were with avenging the fallen general.

However, a promise was a promise, and Berengar was not the type of man to break such a sacred agreement. Thus, after careful consideration, he sighed heavily before nodding his head in approval.

"Very well, after you have ensured the establishment of my colony in the New World, I will permit you to seek justice for your murdered godfather. However, if you are to do so, you must do it in accordance with Byzantine law.

I can not afford to have you disrupt the balance of power in the East out of a thirst for vengeance. Promise me you will reveal Decentius' crimes, and leave his punishment for the crown to decide, and I will allow you to go back to your homeland to pursue your justice."

Honorias bit her lip as she heard her husband's restrictions. She wanted nothing more than to behead her brother herself, however she also knew the consequences such actions would have on international diplomacy. The Byzantine Princess forced herself to calm her inner fury as she sighed in defeat.

"Very well. If those are your conditions, then I will follow them. Just know that if my brother tries to claim my life once more while I investigate his crimes, then I will be forced to act in reprisal..."

Berengar nodded his head with a bitter smile on his face. He could agree to such terms, and thus sighed as he responded to his wife's contention.

"Let us hope it doesn't come to that..."

With this agreement made, Honorias had nothing left to say. Instead, she swiftly departed from the Office and began preparations for her next voyage to the New World. As for Berengar, he collapsed back in his leather office chair and pulled out a gilded chalice. He carefully filled the cup with fortified wine before taking a long swig as he gazed at the map on his desk.

A smile spread itself across his face as he thought about the future. He already had a colony that was stable in North America on the coastline of New York. Now all he needed was one in Venezuela, and he could secure his foothold in both North and South America.

As for his future colonial exploits, he would have to establish strongholds in the Caribbean and central America. However, it would not be so easy to make his way into the latter of the two mighty Empires ruled the regions, and some of them were quite bloodthirsty.

If he were to contact the Aztec Empire, he would like to do so in person, thus he would have to do so at a later date, as he was much too busy preparing for his Unification War at the moment. With the expansion of his first colonies to the new world underway, and the wars to unite Germany on the horizon, it would appear that his plans for his future German Empire were progressing smoothly.

While he was overlooking these details, a knock resounded on his door, and a voice called out from the other side. It was a feminine voice that belonged to his second wife, Linde. She called out to her husband to ensure that he was not otherwise occupied.

"Master, are you busy? There are some things that I wish to discuss with you."

When Berengar heard this, he rolled up his maps before stashing them away within his desk's drawers. After doing so, he called out to the woman with an excited tone in his voice.

"I'm free. You may enter."

Upon hearing this, Linde smiled as she entered the room, shutting the door behind her. She gracefully walked over to the seat across from Berengar before sitting down. After doing this, she voiced her concerns over an important matter.

"Our Agents have contacted the rebellious factions in northern Germany. There are plenty of people willing to fight against their feudal overlords and swear fealty to the Austrian Crown. Though in all honesty, the sentiment is one out of fear, rather than respect for your position. How should we proceed?"

Berengar tapped his desk repeatedly as he sought as he thought deeply about this question. After a few moments, he finally revealed his plan of action.

"Arm the rebels with muskets and cannons, and dispatch our agents to rally loyalists against them. I want this conflict to be fierce, so that when I finally enter Northern Germany with my armies, the people will see me as a savior, rather than a conqueror. The German people will forever know the name Berengar von Kufstein as the father of Germany..."

Upon hearing these orders, Linde simply bowed her head with respect before responding.

"It will be done, your Majesty."

Having given his spymaster her orders, Berengar quickly dismissed the woman and turned his chair around to face the rising sun. A new dawn was rising in the west, and in the coming days, Berengar would lay the foundations for the German Empire.

Chapter 534 - A Crisis of Faith

Adela knelt within the pews of the Grand Cathedral of Kufstein. Though the Church was empty at the moment beside the High Queen herself, the girl did not mind. Currently, the devout young woman was having a severe spiritual crisis, and only meditation in the Cathedral granted her some peace of mind.

Her husband, while the public face of the German Reformation, was in fact an amoral atheist, and she had known this for quite some time. Despite her attempts to save his soul, he seemed to drift further away from God with each passing day.

If it wasn't the copious amounts of alcohol and cannabis, then it was the debauchery that came with polygamy. Worst yet, Berengar had taken up a Muslim wife, not only did he tolerate her religious beliefs, but lately he seemed to spend an unfair degree of time alone with the woman.

Despite Adela's incessant preaching, Berengar only drifted further away from the light of God's will, and into utter darkness. She did not know if she had the heart to see the man she loved damn himself for eternity. Thus, she had turned to the church for reflection.

While the woman was praying in silence, she overheard a familiar voice call out to her from across the Cathedral.

"Your Majesty, I thought that was you. It would appear you are visiting more frequently these days. Tell me, is there something troubling your mind?"

Adela looked over towards the direction of the voice and noticed Ludolf staring at her with a gentle smile. As the head of the German Reformation, this man led the congregation of the Grand Cathedral, and mostly spent his days fulfilling his duties as a priest. As for the governance of the Church, that was left to the many German Cardinals who had flocked to the Reformation after enduring the madness of two separate popes.

When Adela saw the man largely responsible for the creation of the Reformist Movement, a smile appeared across her troubled lips. She sighed heavily as she nodded her head before revealing the core of her troubles.

"Father, I believe that I am experiencing a crisis of faith... I don't know what to do, I feel so lost..."

Ludolf further approached the High Queen before sitting down in the pews in the row behind her. After doing so, he began to further inquire about her difficulties.

"What is troubling you, my child? Perhaps I can be of service?"

Adela remained silent as she bit her lower lip. She did not want to reveal that Berengar was, in fact, an atheist to the man who helped him break away from the Catholic Church, however if she could not talk to the leader of the Reformation about this issue, then who could she?

Thus, with a heavy sigh, Adela began to speak of the difficulties she faced as the only religious member of the King's Harem.

"I fear that my husband is faithless. Though he helped you found the German Reformation, I know in my heart that it was built upon a lie, and is only a weapon for him to use against the Catholic Church.

Berengar continues to act in debauchery. Not only is he an alcoholic, but he abuses certain substances that are quite harmful to the soul frequently. He has taken a Muslim wife, and lies with her more than any of the others. He not only tolerates her heretical views, but even desires to learn more about them.

I have concluded that my husband is a godless heathen, who does not care for the creator. In fact, I am quite certain that he despises the Lord God Almighty. No matter how much I try to save his soul from damnation, he only turns further into depravity, and in doing so distances himself from me..."

Ludolf sighed heavily as he heard these words. He knew all too well that Berengar was not the religious man that he pretended to be in the public eye. In fact, he had a suspicion for quite some time that Berengar was a man using religion as a tool to control the masses. It was one of the reasons that the two men had not spoken to each other in some time.

After hearing Adela's confession, the young priest felt his heart ache for the girl. Unlike any of Berengar's other wives, she was a devout Christian and could not easily accept Berengar's hedonistic lifestyle. Thus, he revealed his thoughts on the matter.

"I have known your husband for many years, and I have also known for quite some time that he has been lying to me about his goals. He is not a moral, or a righteous man. However, I wouldn't outright call him wicked, either. He does what he deems necessary to achieve his goals, and at the very least, his goals are not evil.

If there is one thing I know about Berengar, it's that he is an incredibly stubborn man. When he believes he is correct about something, he will not relent until he is forced to do so. After all, he is a man who respects strength and power above all else.

Currently, your Husband wields more power than any other man in the world, and thus if you preach to him about the power of the Lord God Almighty, he will not believe it, because he does not see it in the world the way you and I do. Instead, he uses his science, and reason to explain the forces of nature, and rather than kneel before these vestiges of God's power, he seeks to tame them for his own will.

Berengar is fundamentally a logical man at heart, and you will never win him over to your side with a spiritual argument. He is not the kind of man to operate on faith alone; he needs empirical evidence to support his beliefs. Unless you can provide him with proof of God's existence, he will not believe it.

My heart bleeds for you. If you truly have made the goal of saving Berengar's soul your quest in life, then you have your work cut out for you. While I may not be able to directly assist you in your efforts, as the last thing Berengar wants is for a priest like me to lecture him about morality and God's divine will. However, I might be able to offer you some useful advice..."

Adela listened to this speech with varying emotions throughout its length. When Ludolf spoke this last part, she was instantly curious. With a pleading expression, she grabbed hold of the priest's hands and begged him for assistance.

"Please, I will appreciate anything you can do to help me save my husband from eternal damnation."

Ludolf sighed heavily as he gathered his thoughts. After several moments of silence, he gave Adela the advice that he believed would aid her in her arduous journey.

"If what you say is true, and Berengar is not only faithless but actively despises our creator, perhaps you should look into his past, and find out what traumatic event caused him to behave in such a way towards God. One does not simply hate the Lord without having a reason to do so. Surely there is something that happened in his past that caused him to so vehemently detest the Lord God almighty.

If you want to change his mind about religion, you must first find out how he came to have such views in the first place. Once you understand the man, only then can you reason with him. I won't lie to you. It will be a difficult thing to do, as the King hides his secrets well. However, if you truly wish to redeem him in the eyes of the creator, then that should be your starting point.

Or you could give up on Berengar entirely, and focus your efforts on raising your children correctly, so that they may be an inspiration for the people to follow. A Pious King would be much welcome departure from the current King's cruelty. Just know that with the system Berengar has in place, you will have to fight with Linde over securing your son's position as Berengar's successor, and such conflict could prove to be quite overwhelming."

Adela heard these two options in life and questioned what she truly desired. Did she wish to save her husband's soul, or focus her efforts on raising her son to be a righteous and pious king? That was a question she could only answer after thorough mediation, and enlightenment. Whatever she chose would surely have major consequences for the future.

Thus, she decided she would wait until she had properly reflected on herself and her desires before she pursued either of the two routes. As for the moment, the High Queen collected her thoughts before raising from her seat. She gazed down upon the Priest with a warm smile as she thanked him for his help.

"Thank you, father. You have given me much to think about, and I believe I will need to take some time to meditate on this before I come to a proper conclusion."

Ludolf smiled in response to his Queen's gratitude before giving her one last bit of aid.

"Whatever you decide to do, you have my unconditional support. If you need anything at all, you know where to find me..."

With that said Adela departed from the Cathedral and returned to the Palace. She had much to think about, and plenty of time to do it.

Chapter 535 - Mock Battle Part I

On a hill overlooking the City of Milan and its boundaries were two men of rather striking appearance. Both men dressed in regal fashion in the colors of their houses. On the left was none other than the King of Austria, Berengar von Kufstein.

As per usual, he had slicked back golden hair in an elegant style befitting of his handsome appearance. The only detraction from his otherwise stunning figure was the scar across his right eye, which was concealed by a rich black leather eyepatch, which had a golden iron cross embedded in its center.

His standard black and gold kingly attire displayed the wealth and power of his Royal Dynasty as he rested his hand upon his Damascus steel cavalry sabre, whose gilded sword knot hung gracefully from its hilt.

Standing next to this imposing figure was none other than the King of Lombardy. This was a man slightly older than Berengar, at roughly thirty years of age. Surprisingly, he was nearly as handsome as his Austrian Counterpart. With flaxen blonde hair and baby blue eyes, his Germanic heritage shown itself on his regal features.

The man gazed upon the King of Austria, who was his suzerain, and pouted slightly, inwardly he could not help but admit defeat in terms of glamor when compared to Berengar. He now understood why, despite the Austrian King's brutal reputation, people still adored the man, and women from all over desired to be with him.

When Berengar noticed this expression, he chuckled slightly before placing a hand on the man's shoulder to console him in his defeat.

"Do not pout Bruno. Few men can compare to me in terms of handsomeness. I am quite certain that your wife has no complaints about your appearance."

The man named Bruno simply scoffed when he heard such a shameless comment from his Austrian Counterpart. Instead, he shifted his attention to the soldiers gathered below before switching the topic.

"You have invested quite a bit of coin and effort into training and supplying this defense force. Are they up to your standards?"

Berengar gazed upon the Lombardic Soldiers who had taken up defensive positions while waiting for the Austrian Infantry Brigade to descend from the Alps. Their attire appeared to be reminiscent of the Italian Bersaglieri from the Unification Wars of his past life. For this exercise, they were issued Needle rifles, and equipped with special paper cartridges that used wax bullets intending to be non-lethal in combat.

When compared with the Austrian Royal Army, these men were severely lacking in defensive equipment, but that was not a concern of Berengar's. After all, the entire purpose of this Defense Force was to deter the Kingdom of Naples, and buy enough time for Austrian Reinforcements to arrive in the event that they were invaded. All in all, Berengar had no complaints and thus made his thoughts known to the Puppet King by his side.

"They appear to be sufficiently armed and trained for their task. In the end, that is all I can ask for."

Upon hearing his suzerain's approval, the Lombardic King nodded his head in silence. After a few moments of observing the Soldiers prepare their defenses, he began to ask the question on his mind.

"I must ask, your Majesty... Though my soldiers are not the most efficient fighting force in this world, there are 10,000 of them, and they have received ample training from your advisors. Do you honestly believe that this Infantry Brigade of recruits you are dispatching to my lands has the capabilities to defeat my forces?"

Berengar shook his head before responding to this question. There was a slight smirk on his face as he gave his answer.

"Not at all, only a truly capable General could rally such an inexperienced unit to victory against such overwhelming odds. This is an impossible task that I have given my Field Marshal Candidate. If he manages to defeat your forces with his limited means, then I will already consider this exercise a success.

As for fighting the rebels afterwards, I merely intend to give him a brutal experience that he can learn from, and hopefully improve upon, in the future. There is only man in this world who I think could truly succeed in this test that I have designed, and sadly, he is retired."

Bruno understood very well who Berengar was talking about, Eckhard's prowess as a General was well known across the western world, the fact that Berengar would speak so highly of the man, proved further in the Lombardic King's mind that perhaps some of the more exaggerated stories he had heard about Eckhard were in fact true.

The Austrian King was about to further comment on the situation at hand when he gazed into the distance and saw the field of Black and Gold gathering. A smug smirk appeared on his face as he saw this before confidently responding to the event.

"Let the games begin!"

Heimerich loaded his wax bullet into the chamber of his G22 rifle. He and his soldiers hard marched from Tyrol into Lombardy, and were now expected to engage in fierce combat against an enemy that held a fortified position.

Despite this, he did not plan to attack such an overwhelming force head on, such a thing would be suicide. Unfortunately for him, he was severely lacking in artillery and could not batter their defenses before charging. After all, he had a single Infantry Brigade of new recruits beneath his command.

Even the officers were fresh out of the academy. The only veterans among his ranks were the Non-Commissioned Officers selected for this exercise. He could hardly believe he was given such an impossible task by his cousin. Could he not show him a bit of favoritism? Apparently not, because this was the barrier between him and the esteemed position of Field Marshal of the Royal Guard.

Between him and the enemy was about three hundred yards of open ground, without a shred of cover to protect themselves from the enemy fire. To march into such an area would only result in disastrous casualties. However, if he wished to flank the enemy's position, he would need to draw their fire. Thus, the man had no choice but to send a unit to their "deaths". Luckily, this was an exercise, or else such a thing would weigh heavily on his conscience.

After gazing upon the soldiers in his army, he randomly selected one of his units to act as the Forlorn Hope and gave their commands.

"First Battalion, Third Battalion, your orders are simple. Draw the enemy's fire while Second and Fourth Battalions flank their positions. Remember, anyone shot by the wax projectiles is considered dead, and will no longer be able to participate in this exercise. So I expect you to treat this as if it were a real battle, and do your best to survive!"

The soldiers beneath his command threw up their salutes and yelled their battle cries as they prepared to charge into the line of fire.

"Hail Victory!"

After saying this, roughly 2,000 men split off from the main army and charged towards the enemy's fortified positions, unleashing a storm of wax bullets as they ran into the enemy's fire. When Berengar gazed upon this act from the hill above, he sighed heavily before placing his head into the palm of his hand.

"It would appear my officers have become used to fighting technologically inferior foes. I will have to reprimand my cousin for such a pointless sacrifice when this is over."

As Berengar said this, Bruno continued to watch the battle unfold. The sound of gunfire echoed in the air as wax bullets flew out from both sides and into each other's ranks. Those who were hit collapsed to the ground faking their deaths. It quickly became apparent that the Lombardic Defenders had the advantage.

With weapons capable of a similar rate of fire as the G-22 rifles, hundreds of Austrian Soldiers were pelted by the wax bullets and fell to the ground in defeat. If this was a real battle, it would be the most casualties that the Austrians had suffered since 2,500 men were wiped out defending the Granadan Borders.

Luckily, this was merely an exercise. However, as the Lombardic defenders paid attention to the 2,000 men charging down their lines, they completely neglected their flanks, where Heimerich and his men had used the cover of hills to get within striking distance.

While the Lombardic defense forces rapidly cut down the ranks of the charging Austrians, Heimerich prepared his counter-attack. This mock battle was far from finished. Whether the Austrian Field Marshal Candidate would prove successful relied entirely on the next phase of his attack. Thus, in the fields outside Milan, the forces of the Kingdom of Austria, and the Kingdom of Lombardy, faced off against each other in order to determine whether a single man was fit to lead the Austrian Royal Guard.

Chapter 536 - Mock Battle Part II

The echo of gunfire resounded in the air of Northern Italy as the Lombardic defenders protected their lines against the charging Austrian Soldiers. Despite being entrenched in the earth, they could not fully prevent casualties. Whenever an Austrian soldier had hit their target with a wax bullet, the defeated soldiers would fall to the ground and act as if they were dead.

Though the Casualties were high, the Austrians continued to press forward through the gunfire and into the trenches that lie in front of them. As for Heimerich, he was in command of one of the flanking battalions, which under his orders had revealed their position as they poured into the relatively undefended sides of the trench line.

The King of Lombardy stood atop a hill overlooking the chaotic battlefield, witnessing his defenses being overrun on three fronts by the Austrian soldiers. Despite having overwhelming numbers, his forces could not repel the suicide charge completely, resulting in several hundred men pouring into the trenches and stabbing at the Italian soldiers with their wooden training bayonets.

Bruno frowned as he saw his soldiers' defenses collapse under the weight of the Austrian onslaught. He knew that even if this were an actual battle, the Austrian soldiers would gladly charge into gunfire with the same sense of fervor. Such resolve in the face of death was something his inexperienced soldiers were lacking. Thus, he could not help but sigh before commenting on the situation.

"It would appear that I have gravely underestimated the resolve of your recruits. Tell me, Berengar, how do you install such loyalty in the hearts of your men?"

The Austrian King had a smug smile on his face as he gazed through his binoculars to witness the mock battle in all its glory. After seeing victory was at hand, he put his device aside before answering his puppet's questions.

"The Answer to that is quite simple. Through serious efforts by my propaganda machine, the men in my army believe that giving your life in pursuit of the fatherland's victory is the most noble endeavor. Nationalism is a powerful tool, and I have conditioned the people of Austria to believe the three most important things in this world are family, folk, and the fatherland."

Berengar reflected on his past life as he said these words, in many ways the reverence the Austrian people had for their King and fatherland was reminiscent of that which the Japanese people held towards their emperor and homeland during the Imperial era.

Such reverence displayed itself on the battlefield in acts of valor. So much so that it was not uncommon in the last days of the Pacific theatre to see Japanese soldiers charge at machine gun fire with swords and bayonets. Entire divisions died in battle rather than surrender to the enemy. Such unwavering loyalty was a rarity throughout the entirety of human history, and it was a goal that Berengar sought to make a reality for his Empire in this world.

Bruno reflected on Berengar's words as the two men stood in silence, watching the last vestige of the Lombardic Armies surrender to their Austrian counterparts. Only after the mock battle was over, and victory was achieved, did Berengar declare his side victorious.

"It would appear that, although Heimerich's tactics were flawed, in he was willing to dispose of so many valuable lives in the pursuit of victory, he still achieved a favorable result. I will consider this a pass. However, what awaits him next will be far more troublesome. You have informed the villagers in the mountains about the military exercise. Is that correct?"

Bruno nodded his head in silence as he gazed at the mock battlefield. Though his soldiers were well equipped and were decently trained in the use of their weapons, they lacked one major component which was required to be an effective armed force. The resolve to kill and die for their homeland. After all, when faced with actual combat, who would want to risk their life for a puppet state?

The Lombardic King gazed over at his suzerain with a complicated expression. On the one hand, his current life of luxury and power had resulted from Berengar's war against the Holy Roman Emperor. However, despite the benefits that came with being a puppet king, there was a complete and total lack of honor and prestige that plagued his conscience.

Still, the amount of wealth and resources that Austria had invested in rebuilding Lombardy after its destruction was no small amount. Berengar did not create this protectorate just so it could become a failed state. Rather, he sought to make Lombardy prosperous. After all, the greater their wealth, the more they could pay in tribute to their Suzerain.

This newfound prosperity that resulted from Austria's investment had caused Bruno to obediently follow Berengar's will, rather than foolishly attempt to undermine his authority. Lombardy may never become a great power, but under Austria's protection, they would at the very least be very wealthy, and perhaps free from the chaos of warfare.

Berengar did not notice the glance that Bruno was giving him. He was far more interested in the state of the Lombardic Defense Force. After gazing upon the equipment in use by the army, he came up with a simple plan to expand their capabilities.

"If I'm not mistaken, your Defense Force comprises 10,000 men, all of which are infantry. Correct?"

Upon hearing this question, the Lombardic King awoke from his daze and quickly nodded his head in response.

"Yes, your majesty..."

The Austrian King scratched his chin as he thought about the upcoming crusade against his lands. Without a doubt, Naples would invade Lombardy with a large army. 10,000 riflemen were not enough to halt the enemies' advance for long.

Perhaps Milan would fall before Berengar could deploy his forces in its defense. After all, he would have to focus on securing his own borders during the initial invasion. It was with this in mind that the Austrian Monarch expanded his Protectorates capabilities.

"Very well... I permit you to raise your forces to a full division of 25,000 men. I expect you to model it after a standard Austrian Field Division. Three Infantry Brigades, One Cavalry Brigade, and one Artillery Brigade, as well as a few supports battalions.

You can purchase any equipment you may require from Austria. As for the horses necessary to establish the Cavalry, do not worry about that. Soon I will have more horses available than I know what to do with."

When Bruno heard this statement, he frowned. If Berengar was permitting him to raise an entire division, it meant that the upcoming crusade was going to be more fierce than he had initially estimated. Thus, he could not help but inquire about what is valuable intelligence Berengar may have that could help him secure his borders.

"Is there something I should be aware of?"

Berengar shook his head before placing a hand on the man's shoulder. With a calm gaze in his eyes, he assured the man that everything was under control.

"You don't need to be so worried. As part of our pact, I will respond to any aggression into your lands with sufficient military force. However, recent events have caused me to act on my ambitions earlier than I expected.

I do not know what my borders will be like four years from now, nor my army's capabilities. I am simply preparing for an unlikely possibility that I may not be able to deploy my troops to your borders quick enough to halt the enemy's advance."

After hearing his Suzerain's reasoning for the expansion of the Lombardic Defence Forces, Bruno sighed in relief. For a moment there, he feared that Berengar was going to abandon his oath. However, if what the man said was true, then it did not hurt to prepare for the upcoming conflict well in advance.

With that out of the way Berengar gazed upon the army in the field once more, the thousands of Austrian soldiers were preparing to march into the mountains for the next phase of their military exercise. With a wide grin on his handsome face, Berengar made a friendly wager with his puppet King.

"So tell me, Bruno, how long do you think Heimerich's forces will endure against the Jagdkommandos onslaught? Care to make a bet?"

Bruno thought about this question for several moments in silence before giving his answer.

"I'll place 1,000 guildens on them lasting a grand total of three months in these mountains. How about you?"

The Austrian King did not hesitate to give his answer to this question.

"A fortnight is all my Jagdkommandos need to completely annihilate this Infantry Brigade composed entirely of recruits.."

When Bruno heard this, he was quite shocked. Did Berengar really have so little faith in his own soldiers? He knew little about the Jagdkommandos, but he knew Berengar had only chosen two dozen of them to participate in this exercise. No matter how elite they may be, he could not believe such a small number of soldiers could defeat an entire infantry brigade so quickly.

Of course, Bruno did not know what training the Jagdkommandos went through, or where their specialties lied. Though there were only twenty-four of them dispatched on this mission, there were thousands of villagers in these mountains who could be trained to use a rifle against the "Austrian Invaders". If Berengar had chosen correctly for the commander of his special forces, then the man would most likely make use of these locals to expand their forces, and quickly defeat the Austrian Brigade.

Thus, Berengar was quite confident about his wager. Luckily for him, Bruno was ignorant of this strategy and easily fell into the trap that Berengar had laid for him. With a smug expression on his lips, the Lombardic King agreed to Berengar's terms.

"Very well. If your Jagdkommandos can actually repel the Infantry Brigade in two weeks, I will pay you double!"

Berengar chuckled when he heard this before shaking the man's hand, sealing the bet in a gentleman's agreement.

"I look forward to taking your coin, Bruno..."

after this was said, the two Monarchs prepared to ride off into the mountains to witness the rest of the military exercise take place.

Chapter 537 - Mountain Insurgency

Captain Andreas Jaeger stood within the mountains of Lombardy. By his side were roughly a dozen "rebels" that he had recruited since the beginning of the military exercise two weeks prior. Currently, he was dressed in the newest equipment that had been produced because of the Kufstein chemistry departments' efforts with synthetic materials.

He wore a gorka style uniform made from a blend of nylon and polyester that was colored in the camouflaged pattern known as blumentarn. Over his uniform was an olive drab green plate carrier loosely based upon the design of the Defender 2, equipped with Russian forces from Berengar's past life. Inside this armored vest were ceramic plates capable of protecting its user from arrows, bolts, and bullets alike.

Atop this vest was a design of web gear based upon the smersh vest that Russian soldiers had used in the Austrian King's past life. Rather than wear a helmet, the Captain had painted his face in a woodland pattern, and wore a blumentarn pattern headband.

In his hands was a g-22 bolt-action rifle, which, when contrasted with his otherwise modern load-out, would give the viewer an anachronistic feeling. As for the rebels themselves, they had been outfitted in surplus splinter pattern camouflaged smocks, and uniforms that were previously issued to the Jaeger Corps before the introduction of the new uniforms.

Much like their surplus uniforms, these men also wielded a variety of weapons, ranging from the more modern needle rifles to the older muskets. For the sake of the operation, they had been equipped with non-lethal munitions, such as wax projectiles.

Currently, Andreas and his rebels were gathered outside of a local village, which was occupied by the Austrian Army for the sake of this military exercise. Though the people within were alerted by their King as to the nature of this occupation, tensions were far from low.

On the contrary, the proud people of Lombardy remembered quite well what the Austrian Army had done during its brutal campaign just a few years prior. Seeking to take advantage of this conflict between the occupying forces and the local villagers, Andreas had recruited several hot-headed youths from the village and dragged them out into the mountains to undergo combat training.

Weeks had passed since the beginning of this operation and by now, the "Rebel Forces" had grown from two dozen Jagdkommandos to a small army of two hundred men. Meanwhile, Heimerich was completely unaware of this reality, and instead focused his efforts on controlling the region. While the Austrians were maintaining peacekeeping operations, there was a growing insurgent force in their occupied territory, preparing to strike at this very moment.

On this fateful day, the rain was pouring, and the villagers huddled within their homes, seeking the warmth of the open fire within. The only people outside their homes were the Austrian soldiers, who maintained the peace. Dressed in their signature greatcoats, the black and gold clad Austrian Army proudly strode through the streets, ensuring that no rebels were present.

These men did not know that an armed force had gathered in the fields outside the village and were preparing to sabotage their food supply. With a silent wave of his hand, Andreas communicated his orders to his guerillas to sneak through the fertile fields and enter the vicinity of their target.

As for the special forces captain, he was the first to rush through the fields towards his target. Entirely aware that while his unit closed in on the objective, another Jagdkommando was leading his personal war band to distract the enemy.

Private Gercke Bÿderman exhaled a plume of smoke from his lungs as he finished his drag on his last cigarette. The rain poured down upon him and his unit as they stood in a small mountain village within Lombardy. He, like everyone else in this ragtag brigade, had only recently graduated from infantry school, and despite this, was thrust into a joint military exercise within the neighboring Kingdom of Lombardy.

While initially, he was excited to get some experience in the field, as the days passed, he only grew more tiresome with his appointment. Not a single instance of mock combat had occurred since this operation began, and he was not the only one who felt this way. The soldier next to him chuckled as he gazed upon the pouring rain, getting his face soaked in the process.

"God kill me now... If this is what our four years in the army are going to be like, then I'd rather get struck by lightning..."

Gercke chuckled when he heard this, however in the next moment, thunder crackled in the air, and a wax bullet slammed into the side of the soldier's steel helmet, knocking him to the ground. The man who was just complaining about the lack of action was the first to fall under the attack of the rebels.

Immediately, the youth cursed at his cruel fate. Just when things were about to get interesting, he had to be KIA. He could not believe the cruelty of the world. All he could do now was sit back and smoke as his comrades defended their position against the rebel attack.

The sound of combat echoed from the northern position. In doing so, it successfully drew the attention of the sentries gathered around the village. When Andreas saw this, he quickly gave the command to his soldiers to rush towards the objective.

"Go, now! The coast is clear!"

Without hesitation, the young rebels rushed towards the position of the storehouse, where they pulled out a few bottles of distilled spirit from their rucksacks. These bottles had camouflaged bandanas embedded in their openings, which were quickly lit by the guerillas who then chucked them into the storehouse.

The moment these Molotov cocktails hit their target, they lit it aflame. Quickly, the fire spread to the food stored within. By the time the Austrians were able to put out the fire, their food supply would be ashes. After succeeding in their mission, Andreas whistled, signalling his troops to withdraw.

The rebels quickly began to run away from the scene of their crime. As they did so, a squad of Austrian soldiers spotted them in their escape and charged after them. The Austrians quickly formed a firing line where they shot at the Lombardic Rebels. A few young men were struck in the back with the wax bullets, and fell down to the ground in agony. Though they weren't lethal, such bullets were still incredibly painful.

As far as this operation was concerned, these Rebels were KIA, and thus Andreas and the other guerillas did not spare them a second glance as they dashed through the fields, and attempted to escape the conflict. As for the group of guerillas who acted as a diversion, they had long since been overrun by most of the occupying forces, and, as a result, retreated from their position.

When the Austrian Officer who was tasked with leading the company in charge of this village saw his food stores lit aflame, he immediately threw his helmet onto the ground in a fit of fury and stomped on it before cursing out the nearest soldier.

"Just why wasn't this building protected? Our food is gone! What are we supposed to eat now?"

The soldier who was rebuked bowed his head in silence. He had nothing to say. After all, he was not responsible for monitoring the food supplies. Despite his internal complaints, ultimately this fool was still an officer, and though this was a military exercise, the chain of command was still in full effect. The officer in command continued to rant and rave for some time before he was finally able to come up with a coherent thought.

"Inform the other companies in our battalion, the enemy has finally showed themselves, and they are engaging in sabotage. We need to be prepared for their next attack!"

Having finally received a reasonable order, the soldier immediately saluted his officer and responded in the affirmative.

"Yes, sir!"

Meanwhile, this entire sabotage mission was witnessed by Berengar and Bruno, who gazed upon the inflamed storehouse with varying expressions. A smug smile was on the King of Austria's lips as he made a snide remark towards his Lombardic counterpart.

"So, have you prepared those guldens yet?"

Bruno felt as if he had eaten an entire plate filled with human waste. He gazed over at his Austrian counterpart as he bit his bottom lip in consternation.

"You knew the Jagdkommandos would recruit and train my villagers all along, didn't you? Was this part of your plan the whole time?"

Berengar scoffed at this suggestion before denying the allegations.

"I did not order them to do such a thing. I simply suspected it was what they would do. After all, I trained my Jagdkommandos with the skills necessary to topple other governments. Forming a small insurgency is well within their capabilities.

Now we will see how Heimerich takes to the challenge presented to him. Only time will tell who is the winner of our little wager, but I have a feeling this is just the first of many attacks that will occur in the coming days..."

Chapter 538 - A Necessary Evil

Nearly a week had passed since the start of the conflict between the Lombardic Rebels and the Austrian Occupiers. Several hundred attacks had been committed during this brief insurgency. Austrian supplies were dwindling quickly, and many of the officers within the brigade were "assassinated" during this time frame.

Currently, Heimerich stood within the confines of his stronghold, which existed in the form of a small castle in the largest of the Mountainous settlements. The young man gazed at the map with a bitter expression as he tossed it to the side in rage. These rebels had wiped half of his unit out, either via "attrition" caused by their sabotage efforts or outright "deaths" in combat. Just how did Berengar expect him to defeat the Jagdkommandos and their band of rebels when they blended into the local population seamlessly?

With the villagers protecting the rebels, and their identities, it was almost impossible to locate and eliminate these guerillas. It was at this moment that the Austrian Field Marshal Candidate suddenly realized something of significant importance. Austrian rules of engagement dictated that harming unarmed civilians was a criminal offense, but there were exemptions to this rule.

For example, under certain circumstances, such as attacking an enemy position built around civilians, it was permissible to shell the target even if it resulted in civilian casualties. The rules were deliberately vague regarding exemptions, but the guiding principle was whether the excessive use of force was necessary to prevent needless casualties of allied soldiers.

Under such a rule, a new opportunity for putting down this rebellion within his occupied territory came to mind. Luckily for him, this was a mock battle, or else the blood of thousands of innocents would be on his hands. However, for the glory of Austria, and absolute victory, such a bloody price was well worth it.

With a new plan of action in mind, Heimerich summoned his remaining officers. After all of them were present, he updated them on the current situation.

"Gentlemen, things are looking bleak... I won't lie to you with our current supplies. It is only a matter of time before our entire brigade will succumb to attrition. The insurgents have bested us in every encounter and remain hidden from our scouts. Now, I don't know about all of you, but I refuse to concede defeat to the Jagdkommandos and their band of rebels."

One officer scoffed at this last remark, in the eyes of all the men gathered in this room, this conflict was unwinnable, they were simply counting down the days until they were defeated and could return from this military exercise and get some much needed rest.

When Heimerich heard this, he glared at the man before scolding him.

"Oh? Do you have a thought on this matter? Well, go ahead, enlighten us!"

The officer looked from his commander to his comrades with a pleading expression. However, he had dug a hole for himself, and nobody else was willing to jump into it with him. Thus, he was forced to speak his thoughts on the matter.

"Sir... There is no way to win this. I believe that the King has designed this operation so you would fail. Just how are we supposed to identify and eliminate the rebels when they have the support of the people?"

Now it was Heimerich's turn to scoff. He gazed at the officer with contempt as a cruel smile etched itself upon his lips.

"It is simple. If there is nobody left to fight against us, then we have achieved victory, have we not?"

All the officers gazed up at their commander with a look of horror as they realized what they were about to be ordered to do. This may be a military exercise, but they would still have to act out a slaughter if the command was given.

However, before they could protest this decision, Heimerich made his orders clear to everyone within the room.

"Gather your remaining soldiers, I want you to go from village to village, and drag every last man, woman, and child out of their homes, and "execute them" as far as I am concerned they are all guilty of treason at this point. By harboring the rebels, they have shown who they support, and thus they shall share the same fate."

The various officers looked around at each other, expecting someone else to refuse this command, yet not a single one of them voiced their discontent. Silence prevailed for a while before Heimerich screamed at them all.

"Now!"

Having received their commander's fury, the young men who had just graduated from the academy rushed towards their units and relayed their commands. Meanwhile, Heimerich pulled out his flask and drank from its contents as he gazed up at the hill above where he knew Berengar was located.

"You think you are smart, cousin? Giving me an impossible task to fulfill? Well, let me show you how I handle this little task of yours!"

Within the hour, the Austrian Soldiers were kicking down doors and dragging the villagers out into the streets against their will. While they had refrained from burning down the homes, after all, this was only an exercise, the soldiers fulfilled their duty to the letter.

In one village, Andreas Jaeger was hiding inside a small hovel when he heard a commotion from the other room. The family that had taken kindness on him, and hidden him from the "authorities" were screaming as they fought against the Austrian Soldiers. The special forces Captain grabbed hold of his revolver and burst through the door into the room where the conflict was ongoing.

However, before he could fire a shot, he was wrestled to the ground by an Austrian soldier, who pinned his gun to the floor, as for the other members of the squad, they bound up Andreas, and the family before dragging them into the center of the city. To his shock, Andreas witnessed the entire town, including the rebellious youths, and his jagdkommandos all gathered before a battalion of soldiers who brandished their weapons towards them.

The officer in charge of this battalion spoke towards the villagers as he sentenced them to their "deaths".

"By the authority of the crown's personal representative, Field Marshal Candidate Heimerich von Graz, you are all found guilty of harboring rebels, and are hereby sentenced to death for the crimes of treason."

Andreas gazed in horror as the Austrian soldiers loaded their weapons with wax bullets, and aimed down their bores at the gathered villagers. He could not believe that such a senseless slaughter, even if it was all an act, was about to occur under the orders of the man who would lead the Royal Guard.

He immediately stood up to protest this injustice, but was quickly gunned down by one of the rifleman, a wax bullet splattered against his chest, and caused a significant welt to form, Andreas fell to the ground as he watched the rest of the battalion unleash their volley of non-lethal bullets onto the unarmed villagers.

Though this was all an act, the fact that the Austrian soldiers were willing to engage in such a wicked act to ensure that the insurgents were eliminated proved to all the villagers who had been so ruthlessly pelted with non-lethal bullets just what lengths Austria would go to, in order to ensure their victory. Until now, this entire exercise had been a minor inconvenience, but now it was a horrific reminder of the brutality of King Berengar von Kufstein towards those he deemed to be his enemies.

Across all the other villages in the mountains of Lombardy, a similar scene unfolded. In the end, the villagers were released, and allowed to return to their homes, though a deep-seated fear and hatred towards the Austrians formed in their minds. As for Berengar, he and Bruno witnessed at least one of the massacres unfold, and were stunned into silence.

After several moments of gawking at the scene, the Lombardic King finally collected his thoughts before voicing them.

"Can he do that?" If those were real bullets, thousands of my people would be dead right now! Surely they all suffer some form of emotional turmoil after being ripped from their homes and pelted with wax bullets? You never told me this was permitted!"

Berengar shook his head in disbelief as he gazed at the scene. Perhaps even he wouldn't be willing to engage in such cruelty. Even for a military exercise with non-lethal weapons, this was going a bit too far. However, he could not deny the fact of the matter was, Heimerich and his Brigade of Recruits had just achieved victory.

As he reflected on this brief insurgency, and how in the end only a massacre could ensure the victory of the Austrian Army, a demonic smirk etched itself upon Berengar's lips as he unknowingly said the words on his mind.

"Well played, Heimerich..."

When Bruno heard this, he could no longer hold back his fury, and scolded Berengar for his choice of words.

"Well played? Had this been an actual battle, your General would have committed an act of pure evil! You realize that, right?"

Berengar simply smirked in response to this statement before correcting the Puppet King by his side.

"A necessary evil... In the end, Heimerich's orders allowed his soldiers to achieve victory against overwhelming odds. Besides, it is not as if the villagers are blameless. Throughout the entire campaign, your people aided and abetted the rebels. By doing this, they are just as guilty of treason.

Honestly, it is difficult to fight an insurgency of the people, few men have ever achieved success against such an enemy. Though this may be simply an exercise, Heimerich can hold his head high as one of the proud few to have successfully defeated a guerilla force.

I must say that my cousin's actions have given me much to think about, and he has proven himself capable enough to lead my Royal Guard. After all, he has many years to improve upon his flaws as a military commander. Since neither of us won the wager, I suppose you should use the coin to compensate your people for the difficulties they have suffered throughout these past few weeks."

After saying this, Berengar departed from the scene. Now that Heimerich had proven himself befitting of the position, there were plenty of other things to prepare for. As for Bruno, he gazed in awe at Berengar's lack of concern about his officer's sense of morality. Was victory really the only thing that mattered? In the end, Heimerich's orders acted as a permanent reminder of loyalty to the Lombardic King.

Chapter 539 - An Awkward Confession

With the military exercise completed, Berengar now found himself back in the city of Kufstein, within his royal palace. He was currently within his study approving expense reports and signing bills into laws. While he was going through these documents, a knock resounded on his door, and a meek voice could be heard on the other side.

This young, feminine voice was one he was all too familiar with, as it belonged to his ward Veronika. As per usual, she spoke with a hint of fear in her voice as she tried to gain the Austrian King's permission to enter.

"Your Majesty? It is me, Veronika, if you aren't busy, I would like you to listen to a request of mine..."

Truthfully, Berengar had been so dreadfully busy that he rarely found the time to speak to the girl. He left the parenting of his children mostly up to their mothers, and the wards were no exception. Despite this, the young Princess of Bohemia had deliberately sought him out rather than Linde, which meant she had a request that only the king could grant.

Thus, the young Monarch rose from his leather-bound seat and walked over to the entrance to his study, where he opened the door to reveal the doll-like appearance of the young Princess of Bohemia. Her mismatched eyes were always a stunning sight to behold and immediately stole Berengar's glance.

As he awkwardly looked into the girl's eyes, she felt uncomfortable and lowered her sight towards the ground. After realizing that Berengar had gawked at her condition like an idiot, he scratched the back of his head before moving to the side and allowing the girl to enter his office.

"Please, come in... I have little time to spare, but I can move some things around to speak with you, princess."

When Veronika heard these words, she nodded her head in silence before following Berengar over towards his desk, where she sat across from him. The Austrian King poured two chalices of wine and handed one over to the girl before taking a sip from his own.

The girl stared at the red substance for some time before drinking delicately from the gilded chalice. After several large gulps, she sighed heavily before revealing the thoughts on her mind.

"I wanted to ask you about your plans... for my future..."

Berengar looked up from his chalice and nodded his head before inquiring further about the specific item of interest the girl sought an answer to.

"What about it, in particular, are you interested in?"

The young princess of bohemia fiddled with her long blonde hair for a few moments, struggling to find the words to speak her mind. After several seconds of silence, she finally found the courage to ask for the answer to the question that had plagued her mind for some time now.

"Do you plan to marry me off to Hans?"

Berengar did not answer this question right away, instead he took a sip from his chalice before swiveling his chair around to gaze out the window for a few moments. As he saw the sun set behind the alps, he closed his eyes and entered a state of mental clarity.

"That was my intent. Why do you ask? Perhaps you are displeased with this arrangement?"

When Veronika heard that Berengar truly intended to engage her with his eldest son, she felt rather conflicted. Though the boy was intelligent beyond his years and was the prodigal son of the King of Austria; he was still substantially younger than herself.

The young Princess of Bohemia became quite restless as she thought about the consequences such a distant age gap would have, which caused her to shift in her seat. This did not escape Berengar's sight, and he immediately moved to defend his position.

"The boy may be a bit of a brat. I can resolve such personality issues in time. As the Princess of Bohemia, you have to think about your position. There is no better match for you than my son. Hans has a bright future ahead of him.

If, for whatever reason, he proves incapable of succeeding me, he still has the intelligence to become quite the influential figure in both economic and political affairs. You will live a life of wealth and power that few other women in this world will be capable of.

If instead I were to wed you off to some foreign Prince, I can assure you that your life will be far less luxurious. Which begs the question, is there something in particular that bothers you about the prospect of marrying my son? Perhaps I can remedy such a thing."

Veronika knew that Berengar's reasoning was valid, and there was one thing in particular that was bothering her about marrying Hans, especially when there was a much better prospective candidate for that position sitting in front of her. Thus, she could not help but speak her mind.

"I like Hans. Despite being so young, he is unbelievably intelligent, and I am certain that his future will be one of great success, and whoever ends up marrying him will definitely be a lucky lady. However, I feel that perhaps he is a bit too young for me.

By the time he is of age, I will be in my twenties, which means I will have to wait eleven more years to fulfill my obligations. What if he thinks I am too old by then, and chooses not to go through with the betrothal you have set for him? After all, he is only allowed up to five wives, and I'm certain he would prefer them to be younger than me.

Where, in contrast, I would only have to wait four more years if I were to marry someone else, perhaps someone old enough to be Hans' father, a man has proven himself to be the most capable military leader in all of Christendom..."

Berengar listened to Veronika's words carefully and completely misunderstood her intent. A scowl formed on his face as he questioned if he was hearing her words properly.

"You want to marry Eckhard? How did you even get into communication with that old bastard? I give him the title of Grand Duke, and now he seeks to undermine my efforts?!?"

Veronika immediately felt embarrassed when she remembered the haggard appearance of the retired Field Marshal. She could hardly believe Berengar could be so dense at times. Thus, she ended up blurting out her true intentions to the father of her unofficial fiance.

"I'm talking about you!"

Just when Berengar was about to curse Eckhard's dynasty, she heard the girl's confession, and immediately felt awkward. He remained silent for a few moments as the young Princess flushed red with embarrassment. She could hardly believe she had said such a thing to Berengar.

Unbeknownst to the girl, Hans was on the other side of the door, listening to the entire conversation. When she came out and asked Berengar to marry her, the young Prince gritted his teeth in rage. He may be young, but he had already understood his father's intent to marry the girl to him, thus he had in a way already considered Veronika to be his woman.

Despite this, the girl was pining after his father so shamelessly. He refused to sit by and listen to such betrayal any longer, and returned to his room before he could hear his father's response. No matter what Berengar said, the Prince knew his father wasn't likely to accept such a proposition. After all, he had one slot open for marriage, and it would be best to use it to build a lasting alliance with a powerful Kingdom.

Berengar remained silent for several moments before revealing his thoughts to the girl. During this period of silence, the atmosphere became ever more awkward until finally the King's voice resounded throughout the study.

"Veronika, I am afraid that I am going to have to decline your request. Such a thing would put me in an awkward situation, as I already consider you akin to one of my daughters. I know you are impatient. It has already been some time since you have come to my Kingdom, and things are changing so rapidly.

However, you must remain patient. In the long run, my son is a better fit for your affections. Besides, by the time he is my age, I am sure he will be better looking and more accomplished than me. After all, he is his mother's son, and has inherited both her looks and her cunning mind."

The young Princess of Bohemia had a downcast expression on her doll-like face, as she was so thoroughly rejected. When she first conceived of this plan, she did not expect Berengar to deny her request. Now she just felt awkward and embarrassed for even suggesting such a thing.

With a heavy heart, she sighed before rising from her seat and bowing to the Austrian King.

"I thank you for sparing the time to listen to my foolish request. I will return to my quarters for the time being..."

After saying this, the girl fled the scene, and Berengar sighed in relief, however when he saw the tears on the ground, he felt as if he was an asshole as he gazed towards the entrance of his study to witness the sight of his stunning bride Linde standing with her arms crossed and a smirk on her face.

"You always were popular with the ladies.... This isn't the first time a twelve-year-old girl has fallen head over heels for you, is it my king?"

Berengar felt wounded when he heard this snide remark. He poured himself something stronger than wine into his chalice as he hurriedly drank its contents. After doing so, he wiped his mouth with his sleeve before responding to his second wife's taunts.

"Just how did you come to know of this so quickly?"

Linde sat down at the seat from across from her husband before revealing how she had come to know of this private conversation so soon.

"I saw Hans crying as he ran back to his room earlier. While you were speaking with Veronika, I had words for him. Evidently he heard what the girl said about him, and her awkward confession to you. Do you think this little incident will complicate their relationship?"

Berengar took another swig from his chalice before responding to his wife's question.

"Undoubtedly, but they are still young. I am sure they will sulk for a time before becoming closer than ever. Besides, I can use this as fuel to light a fire in the boy's heart so that he strives to surpass me in life. So I would say that even though things might be difficult for a while, ultimately it will be a good thing."

Linde merely nodded her head in response while murmuring. After all, she could not argue with Berengar's logic.

"mhmm"

With this said, Berengar had much work to get to, and Linde had plenty of children to babysit. Thus, they parted ways for the time being.

Chapter 540 - Physical Therapy

Berengar stood by Henrietta's side, as he helped her walk on her own two feet since she had first taken a bullet to her abdomen on that fateful night. Though there was no serious harm done to either the girl's spine, or her major internal organs, some muscle was damaged, and required time and effort to heal.

The two siblings grasped onto each other's hands tightly, as the girl struggled to make her steps. With each movement, her abdomen felt sore, causing her to wince in pain. However, as time passed, the pain left her body, and she strode forward with confidence. Towards the end of the session, she relied only a bit on her brother for support.

After helping Henrietta take her first steps since her injury, Berengar carried her to her room like a princess, where he laid her back down on her bed. Just when he was about to walk away and get to the work that needed to be done, he felt the girl grasp onto his hand, and refuse to let go.

"Big brother, stay with me for a bit..."

A satisfied grin appeared on Berengar's face. He never could deny one of his darling little sister's request. Thus, he sat down on the mattress next to her and stroked the girl's silky golden hair. As he gazed into her light azure eyes while holding her ivory cheek with his palm, he could not help but comment on the princess's beauty.

"My sweet sister, you have grown so beautiful over the years. I must admit I am ashamed to have not noticed it until now..."

Henrietta blushed when she heard this word, and attempting to conceal her embarrassment with the covers that she lay underneath. Such a meek action brought a smile to Berengar's face as he kissed the girl on the forehead. However, such a gentle action was not satisfying enough for the young princess, and thus she revealed her luscious pink lips as she pressed them against her brother's mouth, entangling her tongue with his as she dragged him on top of her.

For some time now, ever since Henrietta first awoke, Berengar had wanted to be intimate with Henrietta. However, she had been too wounded to attempt anything. However, by enticing him in such a manner, he could no longer restrain himself. He quickly slipped his fingers beneath the covers and into the girl's soaked panties, revealing just how much she wanted this.

Berengar kissed his sister passionately as he played with the entrance to her cave of wonders, causing her to pant between gasps of air. After she was well prepared, he disrobed, where she followed suit. For the first time in a long time, the two stared at each other's naked bodies with differing expressions.

Henrietta gazed upon her brother's bountiful muscle, and massive shaft with shock, covering her mouth as she could hardly believe how much he had grown since he was the sickly boy she had grown up with. She could not help herself but to reach out and grab hold of the large stick that was standing erect as its owner stared at her naked body with a famished expression.

It equally surprised Berengar to see how much Henrietta had grown in the last six years. She was taller and thicker than both Adela and Honoria, but smaller than Linde and Yasmin. It was almost as if she was the perfect middle between his four brides.

Seeing such an unspoiled meal before him, Berengar could not help but partake. He pushed Henrietta down on to the bed as she stroked his cock, and suckled at her pastel pink nipples, as if he was trying to

drink from them. Unfortunately for him, the girl could not yet produce milk, still that did not stop his relentless attack on her twin peaks.

After several moments, a brilliant idea formed in Berengar's mind as she shifted their positions, dragging his sister on top of him as he hovered her rear over his head. He instantly licking at her lower lips, which caused the girl to cry out in shock.

"Big brother!"

Despite her protests, he did not relent, and before long Henrietta responded in kind, licking at Berengar's mighty shaft as if it were the tastiest lollipop before trying to insert its length into her mouth. As someone who had no experience with such amorous activity, the princess failed to achieve her aim. Despite this, Berengar did not care. He was a simple man to please.

Seeing that she could not deep throat the entire length of her brother's rod, Henrietta elected to wrap her sizeable breasts around its girth, and please her man with a titty fuck. It became a race between the two adopted siblings to see who could make the other climax first. In the end, Berengar, with his enormous experience, forced Henrietta to squirt all over his face before she could even come close to making her brother cum.

The Princess breathed heavily as she collapsed on top of her brother; she had never felt such pleasure before, and mistakingly believe it was over, that is until Berengar got up from under her, and positioned himself on top of her with his cock lined up towards the entrance of her pussy.

Before Henrietta could react, Berengar had pressed his lips against her own before thrusting his length inside of her, claiming her virtue, and causing her to bleed onto the sheets. She did not have the time to expect the pain such a thing would cause. However, she did not yelp in agony, instead she focused on the sensation of her brother's tongue twirling against her own.

Before long, the pain was replaced with pleasure, and Berengar moved his hips with much greater force, causing the girl to repeatedly cry out in pleasure.

"Big brother! Big brother! Don't stop, big brother!"

Berengar felt a multitude of emotions as he ravaged away at his sister's insides, though they were not siblings by blood, the fact remained that they had grown up together in such a manner, and because of this there was a hint of guilt in his mind about doing such a thing with his own sister.

However, as a true hedonist, this guilt only enhanced his pleasure, causing him to climax much faster than he would have with any of his other wives. Without warning, he released a large load of his thick white substance inside Henrietta's womb, causing her to squirt all over him. After doing so, he collapsed on top of her, with his shaft still inside of the girl.

Normally such an intense workout would cause his wives to quit, but Berengar had awoken something inside of Henrietta that did not exist in his other wives. Perhaps it was because they were related, but she had a libido to match her brothers. Thus, she quickly ground her hips against Berengar's, causing him to do the same.

With a smug expression on her face, Henrietta began to whisper in her brother's ear something that invoked the competitive spirit in his heart.

"Don't tell me you're finished so soon. Your wives told me you had great stamina. I guess they were wrong."

Berengar would not take such an insult to his manhood lying down. Instead, he nibbled on the girl's ear in response, before whispering to her his own words of enticement.

"Challenge excepted, my sweet little sister, I am not letting you go until you are once more unable to walk!"

Henrietta moaned in pleasure as Berengar once more thrust into her with fervor. She joked at her brother as she accepted his length with excitement in her eyes.

"Then it looks like we're going to have to continue our little physical therapy sessions for some time..."

In response to this, Berengar flipped the girl around and took her from behind as he pushed her head into the pillow while yelling his commands to her.

"Arch your back more, there you go, that's a good girl..."

As if the duo could not be satisfied, they kept at their "physical therapy" for some time. When it was finally, they were both so exhausted that they fell asleep in each other's arms. Berengar had finally taken the first step of making his sister his mistress. It would not take long for his wives to become aware of this reality, and when they did, there would be hell to pay.

As for Henrietta, she had finally gotten what she always wanted, for her precious big brother to spoil her like nobody else, and all it took was getting shot. She supposed she had the assassin to thank for this. If such a thing had never happened, she likely never would have confessed her feelings to Berengar, and he never would have realized he shared them.

Still, she hoped deep within the depths of her heart that everyone who was responsible for her injury would get a cruel and unusual death sentence for their crimes against the Royal Family of Austria. After all, nobody loved or supported her big brother more than the princess, and she would do everything in her power to ensure that anyone who made the man she loved most cry would be thoroughly punished.