

Steel 541

Chapter 541 - Aiding the German Rebels

While Berengar was making preparations for his armies to invade the Northern German States, should it become necessary, Linde's vast network of spies, assassins, and saboteurs was already behind enemy lines fanning the flames of war. Currently, an agent of the Austrian Crown was undercover in Luxembourg, in a local tavern where a group of disgruntled peasants were gathered.

The spy was clothed in a hooded cloak and stood at the back of the gathering, leaning against the wall listening in silence as he sipped the watered down beer that was served in these feudal realms. After drinking high quality alcohol produced in alcohol for so long, this swill was simply piss water in the agent's eyes.

Nevertheless, he needed to maintain the appearance of a lone traveler, and thus he continued to drink from the poor beverage as he watched a man preach to the local citizens about the need to rise against their sovereign.

A large bald man with callouses on his hands and a blacksmith's apron boldly took the stand in the tavern to declare his beliefs to those who paid patronage to the establishment. With each passing word, he worked up the local peasantry into a state of fury.

"The Bastard of Luxembourg, who proclaims himself to be our rightful sovereign, has without provocation attacked the royal family of Austria. In doing so he has failed to eliminate the target of his ire, and instead gravely wounded the innocent princess of our neighbor's realm.

This is the same Royal Family of Austria that has opened their doors to citizens of our realm, and the other German states when the war for the German Crown was at its fiercest. Many of you have siblings and cousins who have moved to the Southern Kingdom and prosper beyond measure.

Some of you are still alive because those same family members have sent back silver and gold to help support your families. Not only has Austria shown its benevolence towards us, the common people of the German States, but they are also the homeland of the German Reformation.

Most of us here are diehard reformists, and yet our Duke has spilled blood in the holy city of Kufstein! Are we supposed to stand by and allow him to invoke a conflict with our own brothers, sisters, and cousins? Are we supposed to march to our deaths against the most powerful Army in Christendom? For what reason, because the Bastard of Luxembourg seeks to establish himself as King over us all?

Tell me, why should we follow a man who seeks to appease the corruptions of the Catholic Church? A Church which is responsible for expelling all the German Cardinals! Why should we kneel before a man who seeks to oppress the common people, wishes to force us to fight against a Kingdom of honor and nobility whose only goal is to unite the German people, and uplift us commoners to a better state of living?

Do any of you desire to spill the blood of your families who have long since immigrated to Austria, and helped build that Kingdom to its current state of prosperity? Or be killed by your kin as a response to our duke's actions?"

When the man said asked this question, the crowd of surly drunks immediately jeered in response.

"Fuck no!"

"Down with the Duke!"

"To hell with the von Luxembourgs and their bastard!"

The entire room was filled with angry shouts as the men and women gathered, vented their anger in the open. When the Agent standing in the corner heard this, a smile curved upon his lips. Now was the time to present himself to these enraged masses.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I'll have you know that I have a solution to your problems!"

When the agent spoke these words, all eyes shifted onto him. Not a single soul uttered a word as they waited for this man to finish voicing his intent.

"I represent the Crown of Austria, and our benevolent monarch understands your plight, and knows full well that the people aren't his enemy. Rather than send an army into your lands, and risk killing the common people who were drafted into a suicide unit by their sovereign, he has decided to give you all the options to overthrow your wicked Duke.

I come bearing gifts! Weapons and munitions straight from the Austrian arsenals. Enough to make the bastard of Luxembourg tuck tail, and run in fear for his life. It is all free, of course; you need only take your destiny into your own hands and march against the Duke. The only other alternative is an outright Austrian invasion. The choice is up to you, the people of Germany!"

The people listened to every word that the Austrian Agent said with equal parts respect and trepidation. It was one thing to speak of treason in the confines of a tavern while drunk, but to actually be given the opportunity to rise against their sovereign, such a thing required a different breed of drunk. Ultimately, one man rose from the crowd and questioned the Austrian Agent.

"If you will provide arms, does that also mean you will provide the training and tactics to defeat the Duke and his armies?"

The Austrian agent silently nodded his head as he took a swig from his beer mug before responding to the question.

"Of course, we already have operators embedded within the Northern German States training local militias to fight against the lords who oppose the people's will. Swear your allegiance to the Austrian Crown, and I promise you, that you will all be well trained and equipped to eliminate your enemies."

There was a moment of hesitation in the hearts and minds of those gathered. If they truly swore allegiance to Austria and rose against the Duke, then bloodshed could no longer be avoided. However, if what the agent said was true, and Austria was preparing to invade the North, they knew it would be far more bloody to stand in their way. Thus, the man who asked about training was the first to kneel before the Agent and profess his loyalty to the Austrian Crown.

"I will fight for Berengar!"

After saying this, he pulled out a knife and cut his hand, spilling his sanguine liquid onto the floor and declaring a blood oath for all to bear witness. After he had said this; one by one, the people gathered within the tavern kneeled before the agent, and swore their allegiance to the King of Austria.

The Agent merely finished his drink in silence. After doing so, he placed the mug on the bar counter and addressed the crowd once more.

"Come, we have much work to do, and little time to do it. In a matter of weeks, my operators will make you an efficient fighting force capable of contending against your former masters."

After saying this, the agent departed from the tavern, and so too did the men and woman who had sworn loyalty. The man representing the interests of the Austrian Crown led them to a secluded area in the woods where a cabin lay in wait.

Gathered outside the cabin were several men dressed in blumentarn uniforms. These were Austria's Jagdkommandos, who had deployed to the Northern States ahead of the Austrian invasion to train the common people into a guerilla rebel force.

The man in charge of this unit gazed upon the peasant rabble and sneered in disdain before making a speech to the gathered masses.

"Over the next few weeks, my soldiers and I will make you the most efficient fighting force that you can be. After you have completed your training, you will begin conducting guerilla operations throughout this sector. Infiltration, sabotage, assassination, and ambush are your goals.

Our agents will provide intelligence on your objectives. As for the man who brought you all here, you may call him Agent Shadow. He will be your liaison to Austrian Royal Intelligence. You do not need to know any of our identities, and will simply refer to us by code names. Is that understood?"

After saying this, the group of volunteers nodded their heads in unison before the Jagdkommando in charge dispatched their orders.

"Alright, you may refer to me as Sarge, and I will be responsible for your training. Go gather your equipment. We will begin basic firearms training immediately!"

Having received their orders, these rebellious recruits did as instructed, this was just one of many guerilla groups that Austria was supporting behind the scenes across all of Northern Germany. As for Austrian Royal Intelligence, the department of Covert Operations was busy with two primary objectives: aid the rebels in Northern Germany, and recruit the local nobility to their cause.

After all, if Berengar wanted to conquer Northern Germany with the least resistance, then he needed not only the support of the common people, but that of the lower nobility as well. Thus, while Agent Shadow and his Jagdkommandos were busy training a group of Rebels, other agents of the Crown had been dispatched to the Castles of the nobility to gain their support.

Chapter 542 - Recruiting the Nobles of Luxembourg

A mature and beautiful lady was sitting across from a handsome Lord within the Duchy of Luxembourg, this man by the name of Hilmar Von Senheim and was a prominent Count within the Ducal Court of

Luxembourg. The Lady across from him was an agent of Austrian intelligence, and had approached the Count to gain his support for the various Rebels that were being trained in his territory.

Hilmar was a cautious man, and he knew the winds of change were blowing, Berengar von Kufstein had risen through bloody conquest to become King over half of the German States, The armies of Austria were indomitable, and unfortunately for the count, his liege had provoked the tyrant of steel.

He was looking for a way out from the violence that he knew was about to occur, thus when an agent of the Austrian Crown approached him, he was more than happy to entertain her in his home. At the moment they were eaten some rather bland mutton, with a side of watered down ale. Despite his wealth and power, it had become incredibly difficult to get his hands on Austrian ingredients.

After all, Austria held a stranglehold over trade with the East via their byzantine connections, and with the attack on his life, he had moved to isolate Luxembourg from many facets of trade that had once made their lands wealthy. Hilmar was no fool. He could tell by the displeased expression on the Austrian beauty's face that she was rather displeased with the bland food, and thus apologized for the lack of spice.

"My lady, I must apologize for the lack of taste in this food. As you should be aware, Berengar has set up several embargos against us after my Liege's foolish attempt to claim the man's life. With your master shutting down his black market and calling on his allies to sanction us, it has become rather difficult to get my hands on the spices necessary to make a good meal."

Despite the bland mutton, the woman did not stop eating it, a free meal was a free meal, and even if it failed to meet her tastes, it would at the very least fill her stomach, thus she sighed heavily before expressing her thoughts on the matter.

"Your master is a fool for attacking my King. If you think Berengar is being merciful by not invading the North, guess again, I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but since you have taken pity on little old me, I guess I will give you a hint about what is going on behind the scenes..."

As we speak, Austria's special forces are training the common people to rise against your master. They are being equipped with sufficient arms, munitions, and the tactics necessary to bring your transportation and logistics to complete and total halt. Assassinations of nobility, and ambushes on your troops, are about to become a common occurrence. If I were you, I would think well about where your loyalties lie.

I understand you to be a man of refined taste, and I can promise you that so long as your loyalty lies with the bastard of Luxembourg you will not be able to get your hands on the luxuries that you have taken for granted."

Hilmar halted, frozen in his tracks as he heard this comment. He was already having a hard enough time getting by without salt, pepper, and any other number of spices from the east. Now he was being told that all the other luxuries he enjoyed from trade with Austria and its allies such as coffee, fine wine, beer, glass, textiles and any other number of items that made his life more glamorous were all about to be taken away.

On top of this, Austria was raising an army composed of his own people in his backyard, such a thing concerned. If he were any other lord, he would have the woman sitting across from him taken to the

dungeon and interrogated on what she knew. However Hilmar was not so naïve, the detainment of an Austrian Agent was something that would easily provoke Berengar, especially since she had been so open about her position.

In anything, this woman was acting as a delegate rather than a spy, and thus Austria would argue that the rules of diplomacy protected her. Thus, attacking her in any way was an attack on Austria itself, and that could only end badly. The gears turned in the Count's head as he considered his options. When he suddenly realized about the reason for this woman's visit, he placed his fork down, and took a deep breath to calm his nerves before responding.

"I understand... What does the King request of me?"

When the female agent heard this positive response, a sultry smile appeared on her face as she took a sip from her wine chalice before teasing the man.

"Good boy..."

She did not immediately respond to his question with the answer he was looking for. Instead, this beautiful mature woman took her time eating her meal, before relaying the orders Linde had given her.

"The Austrian Crown knows the Duke favors you. Contrary to what you might believe, it is not as easy as you might think for us to infiltrate his inner circle and spy on him. The man is more careful around his servants than other noblemen. It is because of this that we need you to be our eyes and ears within the Ducal Court. I want to know everything that the Bastard of Luxembourg says, and does regarding anything remotely associated with the upcoming war, his allies, and most importantly, the Kingdom of Austria."

Hilmar gulped the saliva that had been pooling in his mouth as he listened to every word the woman spoke. After several seconds of silence, he nodded his head before responding.

"I understand. How will I contact you when I come across such information?"

At this point, the beautiful mature spy's brow raised and her expression shifted to one that feigned confusion.

"What do you mean? I will stay right here with you, in your castle, as your personal liaison with the Austrian crown? I am sure such a thing would please you, would it not?"

A smile formed upon the count's face as he heard this. Such a rare beauty would stay in his castle and be his contact? This was like a dream come true. However, the next statement she said nearly made him pass out from excitement.

"As long as you behave yourself like a good little boy, I am sure I can find some way to reward you for your efforts. So what do you say? Will you do this for me?"

Without hesitation, the Count nodded his head like a trained puppy

"Yes, of course, my lady. I would be more than happy to host you in my home for as long as you need. Anything you desire, so long as it is in my capabilities, you need only ask!"

Upon receiving such a loyal response from her newest pet, the Austrian spy giggled before revealing her thoughts.

"Good boy, now tell your servants to open the gates so that my people can bring in some much needed materials. This mutton is truly horrific..."

Hilmar did not hesitate to do as he was instructed. He immediately ordered the gates to be opened, and when they were several merchants from Austria, brought in spices, wine, beer, and distilled spirits so that the Lady could enjoy a proper meal. The sight of these luxuries practically made the count burst into tears. He was now fully prepared to sell himself to this woman so long as she pampered him.

If there was one thing Austrian Intelligence was good at, it was identifying those who could be made use of, and fulfilling their desires in order to gain their loyalty. This agent was a specialist in dealing with pampered masochists, and had been deliberately sent to this Count because of her skills in that regard.

Everybody had a price for their loyalty, and Wilmar's was to be pampered and abused by a beautiful older woman. True loyalty was a rare quality in humanity, and the agents of the Austrian Crown knew how to make use of human greed better than anyone. While this spy gained the loyalty of one of the favored counts within the Ducal Court of Luxembourg, others were dispatched to secure similar loyalties across the Northern German States.

By the time Austria launched its invasion, Berengar would have compromised his enemies within every facet of their societies. Commoners, nobles, merchants, and the church alike would fall prey to the whims of Austrian Intelligence.

Future generations would learn about the extensive campaign of subterfuge that Austrian Royal Intelligence undertook in coordination with the Royal Military. In doing so, historians would later dub the German unification wars as the first instance of Hybrid Warfare in human history, and attribute it as an act of brilliance on Berengar von Kufstein's behalf.

Chapter 543 - The Shot Heard Around the World

Within the City of Luxembourg, the young Duke of the Duchy stood at a podium in the middle of the streets. By his side was none other than his mentor and advisor Renault De la Roche, who acted as moral support to the Duke. Behind these two men were a retinue of Knights whose purpose was to protect their liege from any potential dangers.

Gathered at the sides of the street were a variety of citizens who bore witness to the young Duke's speech. There was a stark contrast between the Duke and his citizens, which was exemplified by the condition of their appearances. On the one hand, Hartman appeared perfectly healthy with a regal and proud appearance, finely groomed hair, and clean clothes in the renaissance fashion style that had died out in the southern German Kingdoms, yet still prospered in the north.

As for the citizens gathered in the streets, they were visibly famished while dressed in homespun clothing that was tattered and patched after years of abuse. Dirt and grime speckled their attire, as they were likely one of the few sets these peasants possessed. Despite these visual signs of destitution, the common people had no choice but to gather in the streets and listen to their sovereign's speech about unity and prosperity in the face of adversity.

Hartman gazed upon his people with a hint of disdain in his eyes as he boldly responded to Berengar's ultimatum that he had spoken a few weeks prior to his people. Since then, the speech of the Austrian King calling upon the people of the Northern German states to rise in rebellion against the Bastard of Luxembourg had caught on like wildfire.

Though Hartman and his allies were unaware, Austria had already made a play to arm and train those with rebellious thoughts, and by now, these men and women had completed their training. In fact, there were a few of them gathered in the crowd today, as they gazed upon their Sovereign with an equal sense of disdain. However, ultimately, their sights fell upon a different individual.

"I have gathered you all here today to remind you where your loyalties lie. This pretender from the South is a wicked man who has enacted all kinds of heresies in his lands that have put our entire faith in danger. However, I will not speak from a religious perspective on this matter, as I am certain that you are all wary of such propaganda.

Instead, I will comment on the horrible crimes Berengar von Kufstein has committed in pursuit of his ambitions. If you think he is some saint sent by God to liberate you from the Church's corruption, guess again. Though we know little of his early wars of expansion that led to him becoming a prominent figure in European politics, we know that he murdered a small child in cold blood to obtain the position of Duke of Austria.

This vicious cunt, who proclaims himself to be the King of Austria, ruthlessly murdered Conrad von Habsburg, the rightful heir to the late Duke Wilmar von Habsburg, by tossing the boy out a window before he could even become an adult, and for what? To satisfy a madman's ambitions!

Officially, the late Duke Conrad committed suicide after the tragedy against his family, which was caused by my long term rival Duke Dietger von Wittelsbach, a man who now swears his allegiance to the man who murdered the rightful heir of Austria!

After usurping the Ducal Throne of Austria, this man waged an unlawful war against our Sovereign Emperor Balsamo Corsini in an attempt to declare himself King. As a result of this illegal war, the Austrian War machine brought the once proud city of Florence to ruin, killing all of its inhabitants in the process. It is a miracle that the Emperor survived this ordeal.

Our Emperor was given an ultimatum to recognize Austria's independence, or face further bloodshed. How could a human being even think of claiming more innocent lives in pursuit of their goal? When faced with such overwhelming evil, the Emperor caved to this Devil's demands, and recognized Austria's independence. Despite now being free to rule as a Monarch, Berengar von Kufstein has continued to build up his armies, an act of provocation to all of his neighbors!

He claims that I have made an attempt on his life, and in doing so wrongly injured his sister, but he has no proof of these allegations. It is far more likely that Berengar himself is responsible for the attack on his life so that he can justify a war against us all! Now he seeks to undermine my authority, as granted by God, and invoke all of you to act in rebellion on his behalf."

Despite this public condemnation filled with partial truths against Berengar, the people were unphased by their liege's words. They merely stood silent as they waited for the man to finish his speech so they could get back to work.

When Hartman saw this, it filled him with scorn towards his own people. Shouldn't his speech have roused them to act in defiance of Berengar's wishes? Instead, it was as if they were staring at him with pity. Such a thing did nothing but invoke his ire. He was about to give them a command to show him some respect when Renault stepped forward to scold the people.

"Is this the respect you show your liege? If I did not know any better, I would assume that you were all influenced by Austria's propaganda, and are traitors to the Duchy of Luxembourg! Have you nothing to say for yourselves?"

It was at this very moment something unexpected occurred. A peasant in the second row pulled out a revolver and pointed it towards Renault's head before screaming the words aloud for all to hear.

"Rule Germania!"

After saying this, he squeezed the trigger, sending the .38 Special cartridge down range and into the veteran knight's skull, leaving a bloody hole in his head. A look of shock appeared on the man's face as he collapsed to the ground, lifeless.

Immediately, the assassin ran through the crowd, who were in a state of panic. Meanwhile, the Knights beneath Renault's command aimed their arquebuses towards the fleeing suspect and fired them, however by the time they could light the matches and take a shot he was at such a distance that they missed him entirely.

While this chaos was occurring, Hartman approached his fallen advisor and grabbed hold of his lifeless corpse, sobbing as his tears streamed down upon the man's lifeless face. In between his cries, the Bastard of Luxembourg spoke the words.

"You can't die... I can't do this without you!"

Despite this, there was no resurrection in this world, and Renault's soul had faded away. As the Knights chased after the man responsible for this attack, grief turned to anger as Hartman gritted his teeth and issued orders to his soldiers.

"Lock down the city. I don't care if you have to butcher everyone in this crowd, bring me the man responsible for this atrocity! He must pay for his sins!"

The assassination of the Duke of Luxembourg's mentor marked the beginning of a brutal civil war in Northern Germany. Shortly after this attack, the local insurgency would publically declare their rebellion, and the hundreds of other cells across the Northern German States would instantly rise alongside them.

The Bastard of Luxembourg had sought to unify his people against Berengar and his goals, and yet the Austrian King was already ten steps ahead of his rival to the North. While the Duke was preparing for war with Austria, his enemy had emboldened his own citizens to strike against him.

With Renault dead, Hartman's greatest form of support had been cut off. After all, the man was not only his mentor but also his greatest general and his closest confidant. As more of his lords and peasants turned against him, the young Duke would grow increasingly isolated and paranoid especially in regards to what Berengar had planned for him.

History would later remember this assassination as the "Shot heard around the world" a single instance of gunfire that sparked the German Unification Wars. How much bloodshed would Northern Germany have to endure before Austrian Intervention? That had yet to be seen.

Chapter 544 - Papal Support

The bastard of Luxembourg sat upon his ducal throne with a pitiful expression on his face. His closest friend and ally lie dead, and he had not had a proper moment to grieve. Days had passed since Renault's assassination, and a group claiming to represent the people of Germany had declared open rebellion.

As far as Hartman was aware, insurgency cells had instantly appeared in every corner of his realm, and that of his allies. It became immediately apparent to the man that Berengar had been secretly training and funding these groups without him being any the wiser.

Unfortunately for Hartman, this meant he could not even attend the funeral of his late mentor. With an ongoing rebellion in full effect, he didn't have the time for such a thing. Because of Renault's untimely demise, the Bastard of Luxembourg was forced to seek council from an old friend and had thus dragged the Count out of isolation and into his court. The young Duke remained entirely unaware that this friend had already sworn his service to Austria. more specifically, its beautiful and mature female spy.

Count Hilmar von Senheim stood at his liege's side as an emissary from the church stood before them. This Cardinal was a man of great prestige within the Catholic world and hailed from the Kingdom of France. Though he did not kneel before Duke Hartman, the crimson clad cleric showed his generosity with gifts, which his servants brought forth.

Hartman responded with a warm smile as he welcomed the representative of the Holy father into his home. Despite the defection of the German Cardinals towards the Reformation, there were still plenty of Catholics in the German World, mostly centralized within the Northern States. After all, the South and Eastern portions of Germany were under direct influence of the Kingdom of Austria, and Berengar would never allow the Catholic Church to thrive within his lands.

Still, in the North, many German noblemen still clung to the old traditions of the Catholic Church and looked towards Rome, and not Kufstein, as the capital of their religion. Hartman was one of these men, and his conflict with Berengar was not simply one of ambition, but religious duty. With a graceful expression, the Bastard of Luxembourg greeted the French Cardinal with all the civility he could muster.

"Cardinal Mahieu, it is a great honor for a man of such piety to visit me in my humble abode, let alone provide me with such generous gifts. Though I am a bit confused about your reasoning for visiting Luxembourg, especially during this time of crisis I am facing, surely the journey to my realm is a perilous one, what with the ongoing rebellion I am currently facing."

The Cardinal wore a sinister smile as he bowed his head gracefully before revealing his true intentions for traveling all the way from Avignon

"But of course, this heretical rebellion is the reason for my visit. The Holy Father would like to extend his generosity towards your realm in the form of some much needed weapons. According to our intelligence, these are no mere peasants that your armies find themselves in conflict with. Rather, they are a Legion of the Damned armed, supplied, and trained by the devil'd minions. Surely you know who I speak of?"

Hilmar, who stood at his master's side, scoffed when he heard this remark. The Catholic Church would stop at nothing in their efforts to paint Berengar as the physical incarnation of Satan himself. In many parts of Christendom, such superstitious propaganda worked wondrously. However, in Germany, the average person viewed the Austrian King in a better light. If that were not the case, then why would so many thousands of rebels appear in Northern Germany at the behest of their Southern Master?

Meanwhile, Hartman was more concerned over the weapons the Catholic church was providing. Surely, whatever they brought forth could not compete with the overwhelming firepower the Austrians had at their disposal. Despite these internal thoughts, the bastard of Luxembourg was far from condescending as he investigated the gifts further.

"The Papacy's support is most welcome, but I am curious. Just what sort of weapons have you brought to me which I can not manufacture on my own?"

Cardinal Mahieu smirked sadistically before whistling to his servants. Once this was done, they pried the crates open to reveal the hidden contents. Inside were several crudely manufactured matchlock muskets. These weapons were the product of the Catholic Church's years of research into reverse engineering those captured muskets that the Italians had scavenged from their battles with Austria during the war for independence.

Unfortunately, despite their best efforts, the Papacy could not figure out how to replicate the rifling, nor did they discover how to manufacture the springs used within the flintlock mechanism. Thus, despite many efforts, the Catholic church had resorted to replacing the superior flintlock system with the earlier matchlock mechanism, which was used by the arkebuse firearm that was now commonly found throughout the Mediterranean as a result of Austria's massive arms trade.

Still, these weapons were better than anything the North German states had at their disposal and could penetrate through Austrian armor at close distances. Of course Hartman had no way of knowing this, thus he had a look of disdain on his lips as he gazed at the primitive firearms.

"Just what am I looking at here? It looks like it is just a longer, heavier arkebuse?"

When the Cardinal heard this, he frowned before lecturing the young Duke on his errors.

"This is no mere arkebuse, it is a musket, or at least that's what the Austrians call it. I am ashamed to admit, these weapons are not as effective as the ones Austria sells to its allies, but its range and penetrative power is superior to the arkebuse. I have little doubt that at close range, your soldiers will punch straight through the average Austrian soldier's armor.

Granted, you may have to rethink your tactics, as we both know the Austrian Army has superior range, and firepower over your armies, but at least with these weapons you will have a fighting chance against your enemy, assuming you can find a way to fire upon them at close range that is.

There was a hint of worry in Hilmar's eyes as he heard these words, though it would be difficult to pull off. If they could succeed in their endeavors, they could fight a war of attrition with Austria, using every soldier and every villager to fire upon the invaders within the streets of the Northern cities.

Such a thing filled the young Count with endless dread. He was well aware of Berengar's reputation. The Austrian King had destroyed more than one city to prevent injury and death among the men beneath his command, and would surely do such a vicious thing once more if put into such a situation.

As for Hartman, he was thinking the best way to utilize such weapons in the field, regardless as to how he made use of these muskets, it was surely better than equipping their soldiers with arkebuses. After a while, the bastard of Luxembourg broke his silence and asked the question in his mind.

"How many of these muskets are there in total?"

When the Cardinal heard this question, his expression sank. Unfortunately, the Papacy's manufacturing capability was not nearly as efficient as Austria's, and they had many Kingdoms to equip with these weapons over the coming years. Thus, he lowered his voice as he responded with a hint of shame.

"roughly fifteen hundred..."

When Hartman heard these words, he curled his fists in rage, so much so that he practically broke the skin on the palm of his hands. He could not help but lash out at the Cardinal at this moment.

"Fifteen hundred! You think that will make a difference when the armies of Austria number in the hundreds of thousands! That's not even enough to wipe out a single contingent of Austria's infantry! You might as well not have visited in the first place!"

The Cardinal was about to retort to the bastard of Luxembourg with an equally hostile tone when Hilmar interjected in the conversation.

"Your grace, surely such weapons can at the very least be used to bolster your personal guard. With these so-called muskets, your protection is greatly enhanced. You should be thanking the Cardinal, and the Holy Father for their efforts to aid you."

Upon hearing this advice, Hartman sighed heavily before nodding his head in silence. After a few moments, he apologized for his harsh words.

"I am sorry, Cardinal Mahieu. The death of a close friend and the ongoing rebellion have put me under a lot of stress. I understand your intentions and thank you for the help you have provided. Please stay in Luxembourg and enjoy yourself for the time being. When you finally feel it is time to return to Rome, bring my regards to the Holy Father."

The Cardinal's anger subsided momentarily as he too sighed in exhaustion. He had no choice but to accept the young Duke's apology, thus he forced a smile as he responded to the man.

"Apology accepted. I understand you are going through a difficult time, and I absolve you of your sins. I will relay your kind words to the Pope when I finally return to Rome and thank you for your hospitality."

After saying this, the Cardinal departed from the room, with some of the Duke's servants leading him to his quarters. When Hilmar and Hartman were finally alone, they discussed their options in hushed voices. The bastard of Luxembourg was the first to voice his concerns.

"You think these muskets will help in the slightest?"

Hilmar scoffed when he heard this question before shaking his head.

"Not in the slightest, at most they might be able to protect you from the Austrians at close distance, but judging from the Cardinal's words, these things are practically useless against the enemy's armor at longer ranges, and we all know how capable the Austrian army's rifles are.

My guess is the Pope is merely showing you respect, and doing what little he can to help against his greatest adversary. If things continue as they are, we will lose this war before the Austrians even invade. I think it is time to call your Counts back to Luxembourg. We will need all the help we can get..."

Hartman sighed heavily as he heard these words. However, ultimately, he could not help but agree with Hilmar's sentiment.

"Very well. We will have to make do with the weapons we have. Bolster the border defenses, the last thing we need is Austria's armies intervening while we fight against this rebellion."

Hilmar nodded his head as he responded in affirmation to the Duke's orders.

"Of course, your grace."

After saying this, he left the room. His next task would be to coordinate with the Austrian Spy and see what the best course of action in the future would be.

Chapter 545 - A Madman's Massacre

Hartman stood at the forefront of his soldiers, who had gathered in a small woodland town within the Duchy of Luxembourg. Reports of rebels coming and going from this city had reached the ears of his spies, and though the information could not be confirmed, the Bastard of Luxembourg did not care.

The assassin of his mentor had escaped, and the Catholic Church had given him some much needed firepower. Despite Hilmar's best efforts to console the Duke, the moment his grief disappeared, it was replaced with an insatiable wrath. Thus, in his state of fury, the Duke had given the village an ultimatum: hand over the rebels, or die with them.

Currently, there was a standoff between the Knights of Luxembourg, and the poor peasants who struggled to live their lives in this unforgiving feudal landscape. The chief of the village was an elderly man, who had many years of experience speaking on behalf of his people to the local lordship. He peacefully negotiated with the enraged Duke as the soldiers huddled his people into the center of the village.

"Your Grace, I do not know what you heard, but I can speak on behalf of the people of this town. " There are no rebels here, nor have we aided them. We are simple farming folk who enjoy a peaceful and secluded life. We have no desire to get caught up in this conflict between the nobility. If there were rebels here, we would surely hand them over, but there simply aren't any."

Hilmar stood by Hartman's side. Since Renault's death, he had assumed the position as the Duke's right hand. More importantly, he was working with an Austrian spy in secret to overthrow his liege, and thus he knew well that this village was innocent of the charges laid against them by the Duke. It was because of this that he was more than happy to intervene on their behalf.

"Your Grace, with all due respect, we have searched the village for weapons and supplies, and have found nothing. I believe your spies' reports are inaccurate. There is no evidence to support the claims

that this village is associated with the rebels in any capacity. It is in our best interest to leave them be, and resume our quest to find the men actually responsible for Renault's death."

Despite hearing such a logical argument, Hartman was not in a state of reasoning, instead there was only bitter hatred in his eyes as he unleashed his dagger from its scabbard, and grabbed ahold of a small village girl, placing his blade to her neck before screaming at the local villagers in fury.

"If you do not hand over the rebels this instant, I will cut this girl's throat, and then I will order my men to raise this town to the ground! You have five seconds to comply!"

The parents of the little girl fell to their knees and pleaded with the Duke to see reason.

"My Lord, let our baby girl go. She is innocent! How could such a small child bear the sins of the traitors!?!"

Despite this valid reasoning, the Duke was too outraged to listen to it, and instead began to count down while the villagers protested his ruthless actions.

"Five!"

The village chief tugged at the Duke's bracers as he pleaded with the man to show mercy.

"Your Grace, please, she is but a small child!"

Despite these protests, Hartman did not give in, and instead continued to count down.

"Four!"

More villagers called out to the lord to rethink his actions.

"My Lord! You're being unreasonable!"

Despite this call for a reason, Hartman continued to count down further.

"Three!"

With the girl's death fastly approaching, several villagers began to panic, and attempted to wrest control of the innocent child from the vicious Duke. However, they were met with a firm kick from the surrounding knights and were easily repelled.

"Two!"

With only two seconds remaining, the father of the girl fell to his knees and grasped ahold of Hartman's hand, begging for mercy with tears in his eyes.

"My Lord, let me take my daughter's place. If you must punish someone for the rebels, punish me!"

A sneer of disdain formed on Hartman's lips as he counted the final number.

"One!"

After saying this, he dragged the sharpened steel blade across the girl's throat, severing her arteries and causing a fountain of sanguine liquid to spill forth. The look of panic in the girl's eyes as her life faded

away would forever etch itself upon the mind of Hilmar, who gazed in horror at his liege's actions. When the girl fell to the ground, lifeless Hartman issued a decree to his soldiers.

"Time is up! Kill all of these traitors, and burn this village to the ground. I want their bodies to serve as a permanent reminder to my people what happens to them when they aid the rebels!"

The Knights beneath the Duke's command did not hesitate. They immediately lowered their matchlock muskets and fired upon the villagers. As the thunder spew forth from the weapons, their lead projectiles flew into the bodies of their victims, spilling blood across the field.

Hundreds of villagers lay lifeless from the initial attack, and the survivors began to panic and flee for their lives. Despite this, those mounted horsemen rode them down with their lances, skewering them into the fields they once tended to, leaving behind a ghastly scene of an unnecessary massacre.

The blades of the Knights slashed into the torsos of their victims and severed the heads of the fallen as Hilmar gazed at the crime against humanity with horror in his eyes. In a fit of fury, he latched onto Hilmar's blood stained gauntlet and screamed at him.

"What have you done? These people were innocent!"

However, despite these protests by his most senior advisor, Hartman merely shook off the man's grip and stared at him with hate-filled eyes before issuing a threat.

"You will do as I command, or you can join these filthy peasants in the afterlife!"

Hilmar could hardly believe that the man he once called a friend had turned into such a heartless monster. Witnessing such a ruthless slaughter, and gazing into Hartman's hate-filled eyes had hardened Hilmar's resolve. He swallowed the saliva pooled up in his throat and nodded his head in obedience.

"As you command, your Grace..."

After saying this, he gazed upon the sight of the Knights desecrating the bodies of the slain villagers, and hanging their corpses from the trees while lighting the village, and its fertile fields ablaze. Such a gruesome scene engrained itself within his mind, as he swore he would do whatever it took to avenge these poor, innocent villagers who were so brutally killed for no reason.

Shortly after the massacre took place, the Retinue of Knights and its commanders returned to the Castle of Luxembourg, where Hilmar quickly approached his resident spy, who was struggling to enjoy a bath in the primitive wooden tub that existed in this backwards realm.

When he intruded upon the scene, the woman held a chalice in her hand as she soaked naked in the tub. She frowned upon seeing that her servant had interrupted her before declaring her displeasure.

"This better be important Hilmar, you are interrupting one of few things I can enjoy in this filthy backwater you call a home!"

Hilmar had no time to maintain pleasantries. Instead, he spoke of what he had witnessed only after closing the door and ensuring nobody was listening to their conversation.

"You must get into contact with your superior as quickly as possible, and inform them that Hartman has begun to massacre innocent villages in retaliation for the rebel's activities. If King Berengar and his army do not intervene soon, there won't be a Luxembourg left to conquer!"

When the mature beauty heard these words, she dropped the chalice in her hands into the pool of water she was soaking in. She immediately reacted by stepping out of the bath and displaying her curvy naked body to the Count before wrapping a silk robe around herself.

If it was under any other circumstances Hilmar would have enjoyed the sight, but after witnessing such brutality, he had no stomach for the desires of the flesh. The spy patted Hilmar on the shoulder as she whispered something in his ear.

"You have been a good little soldier. I will report what you have said to my superiors. It is up to them how Austria responds to this news. I will reward you for your efforts later..."

After saying this the woman quickly absconded from the scene, eager to get in contact with her handler who would relay the news to the Department of Intelligence, only after such a thing was confirmed would the news be reported to the Director, who in turn would inform the King of such grave news. One thing was certain, Hartman's crimes against his own people would speed up Berengar's time tables forcing the man to react.

Chapter 546 - The Calm Before the Storm

Berengar stood on the balcony of his Royal Palace, gazing off into the distance towards his enemies who lie in Northern Germany. In his hand was a hemp cigarette, which helped calm his nerves. Though the lands surrounding Kufstein were calm, in the distance, he could see a large storm gathering.

It was rare for him to get a peaceful moment where he could simply enjoy the gentle breeze of the Austrian Alps. After all, he spent most of his time either within his office or in a meeting with people from various branches of government.

As time passed, the cigarette contained between Berengar's lips degraded away into nothing, causing him to flick away its remains onto the ground before stomping out the flame. Despite having just smoked a whole cigarette, he immediately reached into his coat pocket and grabbed ahold of his packet, where he secured another such device and lit it.

Unbeknownst to the Austrian King, his wife, Yasmin, stood within the doorway observing his actions. The Moorish beauty could tell something was troubling her husband, but didn't want to intervene in the quiet tranquility he had surrounded himself with.

After all, she knew well that sometimes a man needed to be alone, thus she kept watch, to prevent any of the other meddlesome little girls that the man surrounded himself from interrupting his brief yet much needed respite. It was only after Berengar had finished his second cigarette did he turn away from the ledge, whose view gazed upon the natural beauty of the Alpine landscape.

When he saw his bride standing there, protecting his serenity like a guardian angel, he could not help himself but to smile. As he gazed lovingly at the woman, who was quickly becoming his favorite wife, he spoke softly.

"How long have you been standing there?"

A beautiful smile curved itself upon Yasmin's full lips as she bashfully tossed her bangs to the side before responding.

"Long enough to know that something is troubling you. Do you want to talk about it?"

Upon hearing such a statement, the young King's smile turned bitter as he gazed off into the direction of his enemies once more before conversing about the conflict within his own mind.

"It is not much. I just know that I will have to march to war soon. Though intelligence has reported the rebels have successfully assassinated the right-hand man of the Bastard of Luxembourg, the man has resorted to unnecessary cruelty in his attempts to root out his enemies. It would appear that I do not have the three months I initially gave myself to prepare for this invasion."

Yasmin frowned when she heard that her man would march into danger so soon after achieving peace. Despite her fervent belief in her deity, she did not preach the words of her faith to her husband.

Unlike Adela, who hijacked every conversation to talk about God's will, Yasmin knew better than to preach about divine plans to Berengar, for such things would only irritate the man she loved. Instead, she offered the comforting words Berengar needed to throw himself into the fray once more.

"You once told me you think of the entire German people as your own, despite ruling over a small portion of them. Right now, those same people need you and your armies to deliver them from the evil of their masters.

If intelligence reports are accurate, then intervention in this civil war is the only way to save the lives of so many people who believe in you and your cause. You must remember that you did not start this conflict. The Bastard of Luxembourg did so the moment he tried to claim your life, and injured your sister."

Upon hearing such words of wisdom, Berengar grabbed hold of his pregnant wife's hand and kissed it intimately. After doing so, he dragged her into his embrace and whispered in her ears the words she longed to hear.

"You always know just what to say to comfort me when I am feeling troubled. Where did you acquire this skill?"

Yasmin merely giggled before kissing her husband on the lips. After doing so, she responded to his question with a vague answer.

"You can consider it one of my many gifts..."

Though such an answer did not wholly satisfy Berengar's curiosity, it was enough for the time being. Berengar sighed heavily as he let go of his bride before walking over the edge of his balcony and gripping its railing firmly.

"It would appear that bloodshed is unavoidable. I had thought that with my support, the rebels could quickly conclude this war, but I never expected the madman to actually massacre his own people in retaliation. There is no choice. I must march to war as swiftly as possible, or else there may be nothing left when I finally march into his lands."

Yasmin approached Berengar's backside and wrapped her arms around the back of his neck before whispering in his ear.

"Try to end the war as quickly as possible. From what your other wives have told me, you have a tendency to be absent when they give birth to your children. I'd hate for our son to be brought into this world without gazing upon his mighty father..."

Berengar chuckled when he heard this. He grasped ahold of Yasmin's loving hands and nuzzled his head into her chest before responding.

"How do you know it is a boy? As far as I am aware, we do not yet have the technology to determine such a thing..."

The Granadan Princess giggled in response to Berengar's question before responding with a confident tone.

"I just know..."

The Austrian King gazed into his wife's amber eyes and nodded his head before responding to her claims.

"Well, I will do my best to return home before our son enters this world, but I give you no promises."

It was now Yasmin's turn to rest her head on her husband's chest. As she did so, Berengar stroked her dark hair before. The Moorish princess enjoyed the moment in silence for some time before responding.

"That is enough, I suppose..."

The couple stayed in this position for some time before the eldest Princess of Austria intruded upon them. Henrietta gazed at the affectionate scene with a bit of jealousy in her cute, azure eyes. She puffed out her cheeks out as she pouted. The look on her face would be adorable if Berengar had seen it, but he was too busy enjoying the comfort that Yasmin provided. Eventually, Henrietta had crossed her arms before calling out to her precious elder brother.

"Big brother... There is something I want to talk to you about!"

When Berengar heard his little sister call out to him, he sighed, before dismissing his bride.

"Thank you for your support, Yasmin, but it would appear duty calls. I want to speak to my sister alone for a bit."

Yasmin nodded her head and bowed respectfully to her husband before giving the two siblings some space.

"Of course, husband, whatever you desire..."

After saying this, she walked past Henrietta and gave her a frightening glare before disappearing back into the Palace. When the two siblings were finally alone, Henrietta rushed into Berengar's arms and planted a passionate kiss on his lips, before hugging him tightly, resting her head on his broad and muscular chest.

"You're going back to war so soon? It seems like you just got back from one... Why must you always put yourself in danger?"

Berengar petted the girl's silky golden hair before wrapping his arms around her and hugging her tightly.

"Henrietta, it is a King's duty to lead his soldiers onto the battlefield. Besides, my role is not as dangerous as it once was. I seldom see actual battle these days. If anything, I have become the physical incarnation of my soldiers' morale as I guide them to victory. I promise you that I will return unharmed as I always do..."

When Henrietta heard this, she frowned at her brother before grabbing ahold of his eyepatch and stretching it out. Upon releasing it, the thick leather snapped against Berengar's eyelids, causing a brief sense of pain.

Tears formed in the Austrian Princess's light azure eyes as she scolded her brother for his inaccurate statement.

"You call this coming home unharmed! I'm not an idiot. I hear stories from the siblings of my friends who have served with you. You are always the first man into the fray, usually leading the Cavalry into battle! When you aren't cutting men down with your sword on horseback, you are in the front lines firing upon the enemies with your rifle. You always put yourself in harm's way for no reason!"

It slightly surprised Berengar to see his sister was so well informed about how he usually conducted warfare. What she said was true to some degree, though he was certain that the soldiers beneath his command may be exaggerating on some details of his heroism. Still, it would appear that he could not easily abate the girl's fears. Thus, all he could do was kiss her forehead gently and wipe the tears from his eyes.

"I promise, nothing bad will happen to me this time. Besides, it has been a while since someone injured me on the battlefield. I swear I have learned from my youthful mistakes, and won't put myself into a position of unnecessary danger."

Henrietta sniffled as she heard her brother's comforting words. The two siblings would stay in each other's arms for some time before the King had to get back to work.

Chapter 547 - Landing in South Vinland

Honoria sat within the confines of her ironclad sloop of war. Flanking its sides were four Ironclad Frigates, which carried the military personnel necessary to begin the construction of Austria's second colony in the new world.

For the past couple of weeks, she and her crew had been at sea sailing towards their objective, and by her count, it would not be long before the steep mountains of the Andes revealed themselves above the South American coastline.

Truthfully, she had not even come up with a name for this territory yet, nor had her husband, the King of Austria. While North America was currently being referred to by the ancient term of Vinland, and the area that was once known as New York in Berengar's previous life was now called New Vienna.

The Austrian government still had not created an official name for the New World, let alone a largely undiscovered region in the south. Thus, for now, the Austrians simply referred to this territory as South Vinland until an official name could be approved by the King.

Unlike the last time the byzantine princess visited this place, Honoria now had a proper understanding of the layout of the land, as well as the hostility of the locals, it was because of this that a sizeable force of marines were tasked to follow the privateers to this region, and act as guardians of the settlers who were chosen by the crown to construct the Port Colony.

Currently, Arnulf acted as the Grand Duke of New Vienna, and status reports between the Colony and the Fatherland were a regular occurrence. The land was thriving with the support of Austrian technology, and the labor of the local tribes who surrendered to the strangers from the East.

It was because of this success that Berengar had asked Honoria to return to what was once called Venezuela in his past life, and establish the first Southern Colony. The young woman had a frown on her face as she closely observed the charts they had made from their initial contact with this foreign land.

While Honoria was studying this, a knock resounded on her door before a familiar voice resounded from the other side.

"Captain, we've reached our destination. We are awaiting your orders..."

When Honoria heard this, she hopped out of her seat and opened the door, which revealed the petite figure of her explosives expert Elfrun. The first thing that Honoria noticed was that the cute girl had a grand total of twelve grenades strapped across her torso. Despite this, Honoria was not the slightest bit concerned, as Elfrun had shown repeatedly that she could fully wield such destructive weapons safely.

A single phrase escaped Honoria's lips as she climbed the stairs out of her Captain's Quarters and onto the deck above.

"Very well..."

After standing on the deck of her ship, the Privateer Captain found that her small fleet was in the bay outside the area where they had landed previously. With the Andes in the background, it truly made her feel tiny and insignificant. However, she quickly snapped back to reality as she issued orders to her troops.

"Prepare the landing craft. I want proper fortifications and shelter built by nightfall. Remember, we are in hostile territory, with limited supplies. Make every shot count!"

Soon enough her orders were relayed across the fleet, and the crew lowered the rowboats where Honoria was the first to step aboard. Perhaps she had been around Berengar for too long, but she, too, liked to be the first one into the fray.

After a while, the rowboats which contained the marines, and engineers landed on the shores, where they quickly got to task. As for Honoria and her privateers, they worked alongside the marines to secure the area. Eventually Honoria pulled out her binoculars, where she gazed off into the mountains above.

Though she did not see any of the locals, she suspected they were already aware of her return, and were preparing for conflict. She did not know that the limited contact she had made with the locals had

already spread disease throughout the land, and in the last few months since she had journeyed back to the fatherland, pestilence had claimed the lives of thousands of people.

Much like in New Vienna, the crew spent their first Night under primitive lean-to structures. The second day was rather peaceful, as the Marines secured the area and the construction crews worked on establishing a proper camp. Trouble only reared its ugly head when night fell upon the land.

Currently Honoria was standing side by side with her close friends Elfrun and Malissa. In her right hand was her revolver, and in the left was an oil lantern. The three of them acted as sentries around the northern portion of the camp, directly beneath the mountains.

On this particular night, a dense fog filled the air, and seeing five meters in front was a challenge, even with the lantern. It was because of this fog that the Marines had not detected the native war band approaching in silence.

In the minds of these warriors, these pale foreigners from across the great sea were directly responsible for the plague that had struck the land, and they wanted to get their payback for the losses they had suffered these past few months.

No matter how much they prayed to their gods, the sickness would not abate, and claimed the lives of the young and old with each passing day. There was only one way to end it, or so they thought, and that was to spill the blood of those responsible.

Thus, they quietly approached the glowing lights, as they hid in the darkness. Each light represented a squad of Austrians, and though they could not discern this, they recognized them as targets. These warriors raised their bows as they pointed towards the lights and fired blindly, hoping they would hit something.

While this was happening, Honoria and her squad were completely unaware that they had been surrounded, and it wasn't until an arrow pierced through the fog and hit the ground in front of her did she realize they were under attack. She quickly took action and screamed to the other patrols as to what she had encountered.

"We are under attack!"

With this said, she raised her revolver towards the area where the arrow had been fired and pulled the trigger, causing a loud bang to resound in the air as the .38 special projectile tumbled downrange and towards its target. After firing this shot, Honoria and her girls ran to a different location, fearing the retaliation that would surely take place.

However, just like the native warrior, she had utterly missed her target, as she, too, fired blindly into the fog. In response to this gunshot, a rain of arrows fell upon their previous position. If it were not for the fact that Honoria had wisely shifted her unit's location, perhaps she would have been skewered then and there.

Elfrun frowned as she realized there was no reasonable way to hit their targets without expending a pointless amount of ammo. Instead, she slung her rifle over her shoulder and grabbed one of the grenades pinned to her web gear. The girl held the stick grenade in her hand and pulled the pin before

tossing it in the general direction of where the arrows had been fired from. The little girl screamed as she did so.

"Frag out!"

Shortly after saying that, an explosive blast tore away the fog, and a giant flame engulfed the area of attack. Evidently, the girl was accurate with her throw, because various screams resounded in the air, and a few chunks of flesh flew in her direction. Although the girl was splashed with blood and bile, she did not frown, instead a vicious smirk filled her face as she pulled out another grenade and tossed it wildly into the night.

Another thunderous explosion rocked the area, as the seemingly innocent girl claimed the lives of the native warriors with her grenades. Despite the fun she was having, Honoria quickly grabbed ahold of the girl and halted her from tossing another. With a stern look in the Princess's mint green eyes, she scolded the girl.

"Don't waste your grenades. Quickly fall back to the camp. We must hold our ground!"

As a response, Elfrun merely pouted as she nodded her head in agreement. Thus Honoria and her squad fell back to the small camp her troops had made, in order to properly defend it from the natives ambush.

Despite the initial shock after witnessing the grenades, the warriors were still determined to make these invaders bleed for their sins, and thus they pursued the privateers and the marines who fought their way back to the camp. Thus, on the second night of Austria's second attempt to colonize the New World, a blood battle had begun. One thing was certain, this conflict was far from over.

Chapter 548 - Stumbling Upon an Important Discovery

Honoria stood side by side with her crew of privateers and the Austrian Marines who had secured the beachhead, as well as the campsite. Behind the makeshift defenses, a group of rifles, with bayonets attached, pointed in the fog's direction, where they knew the enemy waited.

The Byzantine Princess gazed over at the crew, who handled one of the few Schmidt guns they had brought with them on this journey and nodded her head silently. This was the signal to open fire. While she had initially wanted to conserve ammo as much as possible, Honoria did not expect for her crew to be attacked so soon after landing, and under such debilitating circumstances.

This was quite the different scenario from when she and Berengar had landed in New Vienna. Upon seeing the commander of this operation give the signal, the man in charge of operating the Schmidt gun rotated its crank. After a few seconds, thunder echoed in the air repeatedly. With each rotation of the weapon's crank, lead flew out of its ten barrels, piercing through the thick fog.

Though the operators of the mechanical firearm could not see what they were aiming at, the wailing and wheezing that resounded in the shadows was enough to signal that they were in fact hitting something living. As the marines gazed in awe at the massive volume of fire spit out of the crew manned weapon, Honoria caught their attention by lifting her revolver into the air and firing blindly into the fog.

As she did this, the marines and privateers snapped back to reality and followed her actions. With each shot, a flash of light filled the foggy night sky, and thunder echoed. The sailors stationed on board the

fleet's vessels could not see the situation on the beaches below, but they could hear the sounds of conflict.

If only this dense fog did not exist, they could provide support in the form of a coastal bombardment onto whatever hostile forces the landing party had encountered. Thus, they could only gaze on in silence as they waited for the battle to subside, and prayed that their comrades were alright.

By Honoria's side Elfrun pulled out yet another one of her stick grenades and tossed it into the fog, though she did not know whether it would kill or maim a native warrior, she truly did not care, the young woman only cared about the explosive blast that would occur.

Eventually, the wailing of the enemy and the fire of their arrows ceased. When Honoria noticed this, she quickly issued orders to the landing party.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!"

As these orders were reported throughout the Austrian soldiers' ranks, they quickly halted their defensive actions and gazed into the fog, shuddering at the thought that perhaps the enemy was lying in wait for them.

Honoria holstered her revolver before unleashing her naval cutlass. After doing so, she motioned for a squad of her girls and two squads of marines to follow her into the thick fog to investigate the situation.

There was no hesitation in the eyes of the Marines and Privateers alike as they followed their commander into the thick fog. If not for the light provided by the oil lanterns, these brave souls were liable to get lost. However, they could see a few feet in front of them, and when they finally approached the area where the enemy ranks had formed, they witnessed a ghastly scene.

Dozens of native warriors lie dead on the ground with their torsos and skulls blown apart. Others were missing limbs or outright turned into mincemeat from the explosive blasts of the grenades. There was not a single living soul, nor was there an intact corpse. More often than not, one could see fractured rib cages protruding through the shredded chests.

Despite such ungodly carnage, Honoria was unphased. Instead, she spit on the ground in disgust at the native warriors who had so boldly attacked her crew, and the men beneath her command. She silently followed the trail of bodies. Each corpse she passed by was in worse condition than the last. If there was one thing she was certain of, the power of these .45-70 Spitzer cartridges were truly overkill.

Eventually the Byzantine Princess had seen enough of the blood that was shed under her orders and returned to the encampment, where she issued further orders to the men and women who lie in wait, prepared for an enemy attack at any moment.

"Tonight, we shall stay on guard. When the sun rises and the fog disperses, we will clean up the battlefield. From what I have seen, not a single body of the enemy remains intact. However, we are a far away from home, and surrounded by hostile natives with plenty of unknown variables. It is best to act with caution."

After saying this, the soldiers quickly switched their safeties on their rifles, and stayed at their positions behind the makeshift palisades. It would be a long and dreadful watch on this night. Luckily, they had enough adrenaline and endorphins pumping in their blood to keep their minds active.

After several hours, the sun rose in the air, and like Honoria had claimed, the fog dispersed to reveal the brutal carnage of the previous night's skirmish to all the soldiers who dwelled within the encampment. They could hardly believe how effective the Schmidt guns were. After all, these improved models had seldom seen service outside of New Vienna and Egypt.

It was a massacre the likes that few men had ever witnessed, and unfortunately, these men and women had to clean it up. While Honoria issued orders to several units to begin "sanitation operations," she gathered the builders and issued orders to begin construction on the settlement.

It was only the third day since they had landed, and she wanted to establish a permanent colony in as little time as possible. After all, there were matters at hand that needed her attention. While Honoria was working with the engineers to ensure that they could establish a port colony in the region. Elfrun approached her captain with a shocking discovery.

"Captain, look what I have found!"

The young woman held onto a few pieces of intricately carved gold scraps that the Austrian marines had scavenged from the native warriors they slew the night before. When Honoria gazed upon the gold, she suddenly expressed her thoughts.

"Are you telling me there is gold here?"

Elfrun nodded her head with a radiant smile as she tossed the golden scraps over to her captain so that she could more inspect them.

"It appears so. In my opinion, we should capture some of these natives and interrogate them about the origins of this jewelry!"

Honoria sighed when she heard this. Though it would be a good idea to find out just how much gold was in this foreign land, and where such deposits were located, the girl's suggestion was simply not feasible at the moment.

Not only were the natives inherently hostile to their arrival, but they didn't even speak the same language. It had taken months for Berengar to train a translator in New Vienna, and that was a woman who was gifted with languages. Honoria simply did not have such time to waste.

Still, the investigation of the origins of this golden jewelry had now become a priority for the byzantine princess. If this land was actually rich with gold, then she was certain that her husband would reward her for stumbling upon such an important discovery. Thus, Honoria issued her orders to Elfrun.

"For now, we will secure this area and establish our defenses. After we have done this, I will dispatch scouts to search for the gold deposits. It is simply unfeasible at the moment to communicate effectively with these savages."

Elfrun pouted when she heard her ideas dismissed so quickly, but nonetheless she obeyed her orders and nodded her head in agreement.

"As you command, Captain"

After saying this, the girl departed from the area, leaving Honoria by her lonesome to ponder upon this discovery in silence.

If there really was a massive gold deposit in this territory, then Austria could stimulate its stagnating economy with it. In truth, there simply was not enough gold in Europe to sustain the rapid growth of the Kingdom's economy.

When Honoria reflected on this, she immediately became suspicious of Berengar. For quite some time now, the woman had the feeling that her husband knew more than he was letting on, especially about the existence, size, and value of the lands within this New World.

In fact, he had even explicitly dispatched her to this region, giving her the proper sailing routes to arrive. Was he aware that there were gold deposits here? If so, how could he possibly know such a thing? Before Berengar had insisted that Vinland was real, and manned an expedition to find it, Honoria had not heard a single person speak of it.

Not only did the Austrian King prove that his madness was reality, but he seemed to know about important information regarding valuable resources and where to find them. Just what sorcery had he conjured to know about such things? Perhaps the Catholics were right, and he had struck a bargain with the devil to gain unlimited knowledge about the world and its many mysteries?

After entertaining this thought for a mere second, Honoria giggled before a fierce look of determination formed in her eyes. She doubted such a scenario was reality, but she was now determined to learn the secrets that her husband was hiding from her.

Chapter 549 - Preparing to Invade the North

Nearly three months had passed since the civil war in Luxembourg began, and news of Hartman's brutality in hunting down the insurgents had spread across all of Europe. Berengar, while sympathizing with the plight of the rebels, refused to directly involve himself in the war until his rival's reputation was at such a level that the world at large would consider military intervention into this conflict a humanitarian necessity.

However, this did not mean he sat idly by and watched during this time. Quite the contrary, he expanded the South German-Confederations military capabilities by arming and training entire divisions of its member states with the best weapons available. He also spent considerable effort replacing his personal army's needle rifles with the new G22 Bolt Action Rifles.

However, most importantly, the Austrian King had spent a small fortune ensuring that a railway stretched from the city of Kufstein to the northern borders of Bavaria. After all, this was critical to the rapid invasion of Luxembourg that he had planned, as well as crucial to the success of his logistics network. Now Berengar was merely counting down the days until this network was complete and he could deploy forces and equipment to Bavaria's northern borders.

At the moment, the Grand Duke of Bavaria, Dietger von Wittelsbach, stood within Berengar's office. Along his side were the other leaders of the South German Confederation, including Eckhard von Marienburg, who wore his various military honors with pride. Though the middle-aged man was no longer a military official, he was still an important political figure in the union of the South and Eastern German States.

For some time, Eckhard had been dealing with the nobles of his realm, attempting to coerce them into obeying the laws he had implemented under Berengar's authority. However, resistance was inevitable

and thus he had taken Austria's military aid with much enthusiasm, rising an army from the peasants in his personal territory. Currently, he was outlining the delicate balance that existed in the newly formed Grand Duchy of Prussia.

"I understand your need for troops, your Majesty; however, as you may be aware, Prussia is currently amid its own internal conflict, and moving my forces from Marienburg to Luxembourg will surely embolden my vassals to rise against me. They are not exactly happy with losing their power. I simply can not afford to spare the troops without risking civil war within my domain. You will simply have to do without my forces...."

Berengar sighed heavily when he heard this troublesome news. He desperately wanted Eckhard's support in this campaign of German unification, but the man was adamant in refusing to partake in warfare. Hell, if he really wanted to, he could have crushed this rebellion of the nobles ages ago.

After retiring from the Austrian Army, Eckhard was more determined than ever to resolve things peacefully; unfortunately negotiations had reached a stalemate. The Austrian King was well aware of the difficulties his vassal faced, thus he placed the palm of his hand on his forehead as he responded to Eckhard's worries with sympathy.

"Very well. Prussia will be exempt from this campaign. You need not send your forces to the battlefield. However, I will require you to contribute to the war effort via additional material aid. After all, we are all unified together against the Northern Alliance, and I do not plan to let a single one of my vassals escape from their duties."

Eckhard had a stoic expression as he nodded his head in response to his liege's demands.

"Very well. I am sure I can satisfy your request. Send a report to me on everything you will need to ensure our Confederation's victory, and I will do my best to supply it."

With the matter of Prussia's participation settled, Berengar gazed upon the map sprawled out across the table in his war room, and pointed towards the railway that now stretched to the northern Borders of Bavaria.

It will be at most a fortnight before the railway through Bavaria is complete, when it is, I will send the first three divisions of my Royal Army and the First Division of Bohemia's Army through the vast network that we have established to the northern Border. I expect Bavaria's troops to already be gathered within the region, and provide support for my army, who will act as the spearhead towards the Northern Alliance.

As for the rest of you, it is unfortunate, but we simply did not have the time to connect your lands via the rail network, so I would advise you to march your forces as soon as possible towards the enemy's borders. Hopefully, within the next few weeks, we can all be gathered and ready to strike at our enemies, who so boldly massacre their civilians in retaliation for the rebels' actions.

I want to make this clear to everyone gathered here. We will conduct this invasion in the most civil manner possible. That means outright bombarding civilian targets, even if there are hostiles stationed within, is a criminal act.

We are not fighting foreigners, but our own German brothers, and unnecessary bloodshed is not only explicitly forbidden, but also a tragedy of the highest order! Remember, we are here to liberate the German people from their corrupt masters, and are most certainly not going to add to their suffering."

The various Grand Dukes who surrounded Berengar nodded their heads in silence as they agreed to these terms. After all, none of them wanted to get on their liege's bad side. Thus, they kept quiet, all except for one. Dietger was rather concerned that his realm would act as the staging ground for the invasion, and thus he spoke up on his views.

"What will happen when the Bastard of Luxembourg realizes I am amassing an army on my Northern Border? Do you think he will simply allow us to prepare for an invasion without incident? Surely, he will strike the moment he becomes concerned with the possibility of our intervention into his civil war."

Berengar scoffed at this concern before lecturing his vassal on the power that his troops possessed.

"If Hartman is foolish enough to attack you, then you have my permission to annihilate his forces. I equipped your men with needle rifles, breechloading cannons, and even a few Schmidt guns. They possess firepower that is more than capable of annihilating any hostile force in this world.

It is my honest belief that the Bastard of Luxembourg will be hesitant to march on your borders should he discover our plot. After all, he simply does not have the men to spare. However, should he rear his ugly head, do whatever is necessary to repel his army."

Dietger nodded his head in response to this answer, though he did not want to provoke a conflict with his neighbors before the Austrian Army arrived to support him, with Berengar's confirmation of Bavaria's current military capabilities he was far less fearful of such a prospect than he was moments ago. With these concerns addressed, Berengar gazed up from his map, and towards the men who had gathered before him, before asking the question that was on his mind.

"Does anyone have any other concerns they wish to discuss before we enact our plans?"

Despite saying this, nobody raised their voice, rather they shook their heads silently confirming that all was understood. Thus, the King of Austria sighed heavily before dismissing his vassals.

"Very well, then this meeting is adjourned. I look forward to seeing you all, or your representatives on the battlefield, soon enough. Remember, this war will determine the future of not only our realms, but the entirety of Germany. We have the opportunity to unite our people into a single Empire, so do not fail me!"

With this said, the various Grand Dukes of the South German Confederation fled the scene, leaving Berengar by his lonesome as he sighed and took a sip from his wine chalice. Soon enough, he would be back in the fields of battle, engaging in the carnage of war.

His hands trembled with fury as he dwelled on such a thought, only the savory taste of his fortified wine could calm his nerves. After settling down by drinking the entirety of his chalice's contents, he sighed heavily once more before speaking to himself, in doing so affirming his resolve towards this upcoming conflict.

"Hartman von Luxembourg, I will make you pay dearly for what you have done to my precious little sister!"

Thus, the Kingdom of Austria and its subordinate states had enacted a plot to invade their Northern Neighbors. A war for the future of Germany was about to take place, whether it would be united under the rule of Austria, or forever remained fractured had yet to be seen. However, Berengar von Kufstein was confident that he and his dynasty would rule over this German Empire for years to come.

Perhaps his actions in this second life of his could prevent the fate that Germany and its people had suffered in his past life. As he reflected on recent events that had occurred in this timeline, another thought escaped his lips.

"Never again..."

What exactly he was referring to when he said these words, only the young King of Austria himself knew the answer.

Chapter 550 - Discovery of a Major Resource Deposi

Arnulf von Thiersee had spent the last few months overseeing the Colony of New Vienna as its Grand Duke. A reward the King of Austria had given him for his years of loyal service. During this time, the small military stronghold on the coast of the New World had flourished greatly.

With the advanced agricultural techniques that Austria had available to it, the fields outside of the fortresses' walls had grown vast and fertile, with mechanized agriculture at their disposal. The Austrians needed very little in terms of labor to operate their farms. Because of this, they used native workers, who had come to the settlement of New Vienna after plague and warfare decimated their tribes.

Unlike Honoria, who currently was struggling to establish a colony in a hostile region of the world, things were relatively peaceful in New Vienna, and though the Austrian Jaegers had engaged in small skirmishes on the frontier against hostile tribes, the settlement itself had not been attacked since the initial Algonquin siege months ago.

In fact, most tribes they encountered had been open to trade, and it was because of this, that several cash crops, such as tobacco, was grown in the fields outside the colony, before being processed and shipped back to the Fatherland for consumption. This had created quite a profitable trade, as the natives lacked a fundamental knowledge of currency, and thus the Austrians traded with them for their resources with scrap iron.

After counting the prospective profits that would the colony would incur from this year's harvests, Arnulf had a wide smile on his face as he jotted down his reports. The King would be pleased to hear that the colony was already turning a profit.

After all, expenses had been minimal thus far. Which resulted from mechanized agriculture and the labor being conducted by natives who did not understand the value of currency. Since this was the case, Arnulf could pay the laborers with housing and meals.

When compared to the primitive longhouses these natives were used to, the half-timber houses that Austria provided them were a quality of living that far surpassed what they had previously endured. Thus, despite not being paid a proper wage like laborers were in the fatherland, all their needs were met, and they considered this payment enough.

While looking over these reports, a knock resounded on the Grand Duke's thick oak door, and a familiar voice responded from the other side.

"Your Grace, our scouts have something important to report. Do you have a minute?"

Arnulf immediately rose from his seat and opened the door to reveal the young, and beautiful Mohawk translator Kahwihta, who had stayed behind and acted as a major influence on diplomatic affairs within the colony. Despite being a native, she held a prestigious position within New Vienna and acted in many ways as Arnulf's secretary.

When the Grand Duke witnessed the woman's appearance, a smile formed on his face as he led her into his personal office. After sitting down at his desk, he pulled out a wood pipe which had been filled with some tobacco. He immediately lit up and took a large draft from. After doing so, he handed it over to Kahwihta, who followed his actions. The woman exhaled the smoke before speaking about the reason for her visit.

"As you have commanded, the scouts have been searching for mineral deposits of industrial resources. I believe we have found a substantial reserve of what you refer to as coal. The only problem is, an Algonquin village currently lives nearby, and if you wish to gain access to the area, then we will need to either convince them to give us access to the land, or we must repel them from the area."

Unlike Berengar, who wielded war as a tool of diplomacy, Arnulf was far more interested in peaceful solutions, and though the Algonquin had been hostile in the past, after suffering several brutal losses, they had established a peaceful agreement with the Austrian settlement.

Arnulf did not wish to see any more senseless slaughter, in fact he quite enjoyed the peaceful position he had been given, thus he tapped the ash contained within his pipe out of its bowl before lighting up another smoke as he thought about a peaceful solution to this diplomatic question. After several moments of silence, he nodded his head before giving the girl her orders.

"Very well, I will personally meet with the village's chieftain, and broker an agreement that benefits us both. Obviously, this means you will have to act as my translator, so you should prepare for the journey when you are first able."

When the Mohawk translator heard this, she smiled before nodding her head in agreement. Since she had first witnessed these golden-haired gods step foot on her land, she had been astonished by how quickly they built such a grand settlement.

Everything from the stone walls, the indoor plumbing, the water powered industry, and the horse-drawn agricultural machines. It was all shocking to the young woman. Despite having such overwhelming technological advantage, these men conducted themselves fairly peacefully, only engaging in violence as a last resort. She had much respect for the Austrian settlers, especially that of the Grand Duke Arnulf.

Of course, had Berengar been managing the colony personally, bloodshed would be a common occurrence, as that was how he opted to solve most diplomatic disputes. After all, in the Austrian King's mind, with such a superior military, it was only natural that he took that which he desired.

Luckily for everyone in New Vienna and the surrounding areas, a far less warlike man led the Austrian settlement. Because of this, an era of peace prevailed in New Vienna, while the old world found itself engaged in brutal conflict on a daily basis.

Of course, Kahwihta had no idea about Berengar's violent, and manipulative tendencies that had earned him the nickname the "Tyrant of Steel, nor that he was planning to march to war against his Northern Neighbors at this very moment, instead she reflected upon what little memories she had of the man fondly.

She had no idea if she would meet the one-eyed god again, but after becoming close to Arnulf, she truly did not care. Thus, with a smile on her lips, she nodded her head before responding to the Grand Duke obediently.

"As you command, your Grace."

After saying this, she left his office and prepared for the journey to the Algonquin Village. Meanwhile, Arnulf dispatched orders for his personal bodyguard to prepare themselves for the diplomatic visit, and the conflict that may result. Though things were peaceful between the Algonquin and New Vienna, it was far from a calm peace.

Arnulf knew that if he wanted this colony to become self-sufficient, then he would need this coal for his burgeoning industry, and he would do whatever was necessary to get it. However, he would not resort to violence unless he exhausted all other options first. Hopefully, the Algonquin village's chieftain would see reason, and agree to giving the Austrians mining rights over the region.

Because of this potential war, Arnulf had ordered his troops to be on standby, and had devised a letter to Berengar, requesting more troops and supplies. If he wished to conquer a single Algonquin village, then he was likely to face the might of the entire confederation, something that he would feel more secure about if he had the troops and resources to achieve it.

Thus, while the fatherland prepared for war with its Northern Neighbors, the Colony of New Vienna steeled itself for a potential conflict with the Algonquin. Whether the long maintained peace would maintain its integrity, or crumble like a decrepit building, would be entirely the result of Arnulf's diplomatic efforts.