

Steel 551

Chapter 551 - The North Bleeds!

Berengar sat in an armored train car designed for military purposes. While not armored to the same standards as those used during the world wars of his past life, this train car was at the very least made from steel and protected against primitive munitions.

The day had finally come for him to march to war against his enemies, three months prior he gave an ultimatum in public, declaring that Hartman von Luxembourg was a criminal and needed to be brought before the Crown of Austria to face his judgement for the sins he had committed.

Since then, he had been supplying rebels to fight against his Northern rival, and though these insurgents had made significant progress in inviting chaos to their realms, ultimately they had failed to achieve their aim.

Because of this, he was now sitting on a train heading towards the Bavarian border with thousands of men on board. The construction crews had completed the railway a week ago, and since then Berengar had ordered his troops to deploy via train cars nonstop. The king himself was on the last train to the border. Once he arrived, war would break out between the South German Confederation and the Northern Alliance.

Despite this reality, Berengar was relatively calm as he sipped on his chalice which contained a light beer. He did not want to be intoxicated for his arrival at the staging point, however, he also needed something to calm his nerves, thus this weak swill was the best suited drink to the task.

He had spent the morning saying his goodbyes to his family, and now it was only a matter of minutes before the train arrived at its destination, thus with a calm facade he read from the morning paper, the headline being a bold statement.

"The North Bleeds!"

The following information summarized the ongoing rebellion within the North German states, and the Northern Alliance's brutality as they attempted to quell it at all costs. It also had an editorial piece, calling the King of Austria's decision to intervene on behalf of the civilians a moral and righteous cause.

Naturally, Berengar had a tight leash over the press, and because of this, they had no choice but to support their King. Still, it brought a smirk on his face to see such a widely distributed paper fulfilling its duties as the Crown's propaganda machine.

As he took another sip from his beer, the train slowed itself down into a halt. Berengar looked up from his paper and gazed out the window to see the car pulling into the last railway station that his construction crews had built within Bavaria. With a grin on his face, he placed his chalice down and neatly folded his paper while waiting for the doors to open.

When the doors to the Train opened, Berengar stood up from his seat, and left his cabin, with the members of his royal guard in tow, they were about to enter the borderlands to an ongoing conflict, and thus protecting their King was paramount.

After exiting the train car, the Royal Guard gathered their equipment. The entire train's purpose was to house its members, as well as their mounts and weapons. Thus, Berengar waited patiently as one of his soldiers fetched his royal steed.

The King smiled when he gazed upon the blood red coat of the horse named Glory, before grabbing ahold of its reins, and placing his foot into its stirrup, lifting himself onto its back. He gazed upon the battalion of soldiers who stood behind him and issued their orders as they finished gathering their supplies.

"We march to the staging grounds. When we have rendezvoused with the rest of the army, we shall begin our invasion of the North. Remember that Today is an important day in the history of mankind, as we all march forth to unite the German-speaking regions into a single Empire beneath our banner! Hail victory!"

The army of Royal Guardsman screamed their battle cry in the air before following their orders and marching forth to the staging grounds where an army of over 100,000 men were gathered waiting for their King to arrive.

Eventually Berengar arrived where he approached the gathered Generals, who were planning their invasion. When they saw that the King of Austria had entered their war tent, they immediately stood at attention and saluted him.

"Your Majesty!"

Berengar merely nodded his head before giving his command.

"At ease. Tell me, what's the situation in the North?"

The various generals immediately did as they were instructed before informing their King what their scouts and intelligence units had reported.

"It's a good thing we arrived when we did. The bastard of Luxembourg has been raiding villages left and right. Of course, this has only hardened the rebels' resolve as more and more people flock to their cause. We have split our army into five divisions. Each will operate independently as we march into the various states that form the Northern Alliance. As our King, it is your right to choose whichever theatre you wish.

We have informed our operatives embedded with the rebels of our impending invasion and have tasked them to begin the next phase of their operations. While we invade from the south, the rebels will rise within the cities and begin causing chaos. The result of this will be a combination of civil strife and foreign invasion at the same time.

As for the guerillas outside of the cities, their aim is to secure strategic locations, and ensure that the enemy does not engage in scorched earth tactics before our invasion. To put it simply, because of internal and external threats that the enemy will face, this will be a rather quick campaign. It will not take long for us to enter the capitals of each State and force them into submission."

Berengar nodded his head in agreement when he heard this analysis before pointing towards the Capital of Luxembourg. With a sadistic grin on his face, he called out his target.

"Very well, I will lead my Royal Guard and the First Division into the Bastard of Luxembourg's heartland. I will have the fiend who dared to harm my beloved sister grovelling before me before the week is over!"

Upon witnessing their King's malevolent expression, a sense of dread filled the air. The Generals silently pitied the fool who had the nerve to harm Berengar's sister. They each knew of the cruelty that their liege would engage in after he had captured Hartman, and did not envy the man. As a response, the gathered generals nodded their heads in agreement.

"As you command, your majesty!"

Berengar smiled before giving the command that would change the fate of Germany forever.

"Very well. Muster the men and begin the invasion. I will not rest until I have brought the perpetrators of my sister's assault to justice. For King and Fatherland!"

The Generals quickly saluted their King and reported the phrase he had said before departing from the tent and issuing the orders they had received to their respective divisions. As for the King of Austria, he rallied with this Royal Guard, and the First division, where they packed up their belongings and gathered their weapons before marching into the borders of the Duchy of Luxembourg.

The war had just begun, and Berengar fully intended to be as ruthless to the enemy as possible. Any man who stood on the side of Hartman was an enemy guilty of the highest of sins, and he would afford them no mercy. As for the people of Germany, Berengar intended to treat them with generosity seldom seen by a conquering warlord.

After all, Berengar's goals in this conflict were not to increase the hatred towards him and his dynasty, but to come as the savior to the German people against their vicious masters, and liberate them from the shackles of feudalism.

As such, the King of Austria rode atop his steed as the horseman of war incarnate. With a graceful smile, and an army of 30,000 men at his back, the man was a symbol of earthly authority. The bastard of Luxembourg and his soldiers were about to be given a rude awakening as they faced off against a semi-modern army.

By Berengar's side rode the Generals in charge of his Royal Guard, and the First Division, these men had equally confident expressions as they gazed upon their King's immaculate image. They had long since served in the Austrian Army and had witnessed its many victories. To them, there was no chance of defeat in this war.

Every soldier in the Army shared this sentiment as they marched forward, with victory in mind, and a vision of forming a new empire to rival the might have ancient Rome. The drums of war resounded in the air as the Austrian soldiers marched to their beats. The enemies of Austria would soon face the fury of King enraged by an unprovoked attack on his family. Blood would be shed, and heroes would emerge as the age of knights and chivalry finally came to an end.

Chapter 552 - Unfair Treaties

Arnulf sat within the confines of a horse-drawn carriage. The crafter who had designed this vehicle embellished it in the style commonly seen in use by Austrian Nobles. By his side was the native translator, Kahwihta.

A company of soldiers accompanied the two of them as they headed towards a nearby Algonquin village, which sat atop a massive coal deposit. The purpose of this visit was simple: negotiate with the natives over the mining rights to such a valuable resource.

The young native woman rested her head on Arnulf's shoulder as she slept through the journey. A hint of drool escaped from her lips as it fell upon the sleeves of the Grand Duke's regal attire. Despite this, he did not mind, and merely shifted the girl's bangs out of the way of her closed eyes. From his perspective, the young woman had been quite busy lately and needed the rest.

After a brief journey, the convoy arrived at the gates of the Algonquin village, where its warriors guarded the entrance. The moment the Austrians approached these native tribesmen, they were suspicious. Though they had received word of the Grand Duke's visit before his arrival, they did not wholly believe that these pale-skinned invaders came with peaceful intentions. Thus, they clutched their iron weapons tightly, as they slowly parted open the gates to allow Arnulf's entrance.

With the trade of resources between Austria and the local tribes, the natives had advanced their technology rapidly. Iron tools had become quite common, and inventions such as the wheel had spread across the tribes of New Vienna. Allowing for easier transport, even if it was in the form of hand-drawn carts.

Despite these new advancements, the natives were still severely lacking compared to their European counterparts, especially in the fields of agriculture and architecture. Thus, the general layout of the village was practically the same as it was before the Austrians landed in the new world.

Arnulf cared not for the small advancements the natives had made and instead focused his sights on the bark covered wigwam sitting atop the hill that the natives founded the village upon. As he and his convoy closed the distance, the Grand Duke noticed the hostile gazes the villagers gave him. The peace that had been founded between Austria and the Algonquin was fragile at best, and suspicion existed on both sides.

Despite marching into the proverbial lion's den, Arnulf seemed at ease with the whole scenario. Rather than quaking in fear of potential conflict, he exuded an aura of confidence as the convoy stopped in front of the wigwam belonging to the village chieftain. In the next moment, he wiped the drool from his translator's mouth before shaking her awake.

"Kahwihta, we have arrived at the Algonquin village..."

The young native woman instantly opened her chestnut colored eyes and stared at the man she served in disbelief. She thought for sure she had only closed her eyes moments ago, and yet they had already arrived at their destination.

Despite this, she quickly came to her senses and stepped out of the vehicle alongside Arnulf, who quickly introduced himself to the village's chieftain, who was glaring at the Austrian Grand Duke and his Mohawk translator.

"I am Arnulf von Thiersee, the Grand Duke of New Vienna. Please accept this gift as an offering to your people."

After saying this, Arnulf whistled and one of his soldiers dragged a jug of wine out from the carriage and handed it to the elderly Chieftain in a peaceful gesture. The chief stared at the red liquid for some time before taking a whiff of its fragrant scent. After doing so, he took a quick swig before handing the jug off to his son.

With this gesture, Arnulf and his translator were allowed within the Chieftain's home, however his guards remained outside. This did not cause Arnulf to worry. Instead, he sat down by the fire and accepted the peace pipe, where he took a hefty draft of its tobacco before giving it back to the chief of the village. After the Algonquin chief took a hit of his own, he placed the pipe by side before asking the question that was on his mind.

"Why have you come to our village? I warn you, if you come for war, we will be ready!"

Arnulf had to prevent himself from scoffing as Kahwihta translated the man's words. Rather than lash out at the man for needlessly expecting violence, he instead calmly responded with his true intentions.

"I have come to negotiate for the rights to mine the coal that your village sits upon. I realize that your people have no need of such a substance, but my people would be very much interested in obtaining it for ourselves."

After Kahwihta had conveyed Arnulf's thoughts to the chieftain, he stared at the two of them for some time in silence. He knew nothing about mining, or the value that coal had. In fact, he was not even aware that his village rested on such a vast deposit of the resource.

However, what he knew was that this was not the only village that Arnulf had approached since his arrival with intentions of negotiating for natural resources. It was a common tactic for the Grand Duke to visit the nearby tribes and coerce them into signing peace treaties regarding the natural resources of the land they inhabited. These treaties heavily favored Austria, and the natives seldom knew the value of what they were signing away.

In return, the Austrians gave the Natives some meaningless technology, or resources, that could aid them at the moment. This including things such as iron tools, primitive metallurgy, basic agricultural technology such as early crop rotation, etc. Austria basically provided them with the knowledge and skills they needed to advance beyond a stone-age society, while taking control over the natural resources on the land they inhabited.

Now the Algonquin's turn had finally come, and their leader was far more suspicious of the true intentions that Arnulf had when compared to his neighbors, the reason being the mistrust that existed between the two factions because of the previous conflicts they had engaged in. Thus, the elderly chieftain scratched his chin for several moments as he dwelled on Arnulf's demands.

"What is it you will give us in return for this so called "coal" that you desire?"

A smile formed on Arnulf's face as he reached into a satchel and pulled out something that surprised the Algonquin chieftain. In his hands was a shirt of riveted mail armor that Austrian soldiers had scavenged from some battlefield in Europe. Normally, Berengar's strategy was to recycle the weapons and armor they recovered from the enemies' corpses.

However, with his colonization plans under place, Berengar had called for some examples to be spared, repaired, and used as bargaining chips with the natives. If the value of mail armor was properly demonstrated against the primitive stone weapons the natives wielded, it would surely entice them into giving up their resources.

After all, though, peace had been established between the Austrian settlement and the Algonquin; the Iroquois and the Algonquin were still very much in a heated rivalry. Thus, a confident smirk appeared on Arnulf's face as he spoke his terms.

"We will provide your warriors each with a mail shirt. We formed this armor from interlocking iron rings, and it will protect you against any weapons you may encounter from your enemies."

Obviously, he failed to mention how worthless such armor was in the face of firearms. Such a thing would surely have a negative result during negotiations. Thus, when Kahwihta translated Arnulf's words to the Algonquin chieftain, his eyes grew wide with shock. His suspicion of the Grand Duke instantly vanished when faced with such exceptional protective equipment. As a result, the chieftain quickly ordered for the mail shirt to be tested against the weapons that his warriors wielded.

A nearby soldier grabbed hold of the mail shirt and brought it out for testing. While that was going on, Arnulf, Kahwihta and the Chieftain smoked more tobacco, remaining in total silence until they had made a conclusion. Not long after, the Algonquin warrior returned with the mail shirt that did not have a single scratch on it. He spoke exaggeratedly as he struggled to express the results of his test.

After several moments of conversing with his warrior, the Chieftain took one last hit from the pipe before nodding his head in agreement. With these iron shirts, his warriors would have a significant advantage over their enemies in terms of defense. Thus, he was eager to agree to these terms, especially when he didn't even know the value of coal.

With the agreement made, Arnulf quickly fetched one of his soldiers to draft a treaty, where the two parties signed their signatures and imparted their seals. Considering the Algonquin didn't have a written language, and couldn't comprehend the German language, they had to rely on the word of Kahwihta that the terms presented were fair.

Despite the lengthy process, Arnulf had successfully established a treaty between this Algonquin village and the Austrian Colony. Thus, the former General had avoided a war between the two factions. Luckily, for everyone involved, Arnulf had showed his skills as a diplomat, and once more proven his value as the Colonial Governor.

Had the King of Austria been the one to lead the campaign for resources, he would have just sent in the army to clear the land and take what he wanted. Yet, Arnulf was not Berengar, and he valued peaceful solutions to diplomatic issues when he could achieve it. For the time being, New Vienna was the among the most peaceful places in the world.

Chapter 553 - The Schleswig-Holstein Question

King Alvar of the Kalmar Union sat upon his throne with a stern expression, for the last few years he had maintained a peaceful co-existence with the Austrians, and although he had faced pressure from his more fanatical Catholic subjects to fund the Papacy's crusade against the German Reformation, he had abstained from doing so.

For a long time now, Alvar had maintained an attitude of disregarding southern affairs. After all, they were so far away from Austria and its neighbors that even trade between the two kingdoms was difficult at times. However, things were different now. Austria's territory grew with each year, to the point where a sizeable chunk of the western Baltic was now under their control.

However, this matter wasn't the greatest concern of the Kalmar Union, rather with Berengar's propaganda of uniting the German-speaking regions, there became a prominent question in the minds of the Kalmar Court. What would Berengar do about Schleswig-Holstein, which was currently under their rule?

Schleswig-Holstein was a province under the control of Denmark, however despite being ruled over by the Danish crown, the overwhelming majority of its denizens, including the nobility, were ethnic Germans who spoke the German tongue. Obviously, with Berengar's open attempts to unify Germany, there was a serious worry within the Kalmar Court whether Berengar would break his non-aggression pact with the Kalmar Union.

It was because of this that the Scandinavian King's court now met to discuss the troubles that presented themselves with Austria's expansion into the North. One particular minister, who wore a catholic pendant, was practically spitting as he screamed at his Reformist counterparts.

"King Berengar von Kufstein has declared war on the Northern German Alliance. In doing so, he seeks to unite all the German-speaking regions beneath his banners! He has already expanded into the Baltic, and shows his malicious intent by investing in the construction of several Naval bases, and the expansion of the region's port cities!

Until now, we have acted with indifference towards Austria, and maintained our non-aggression pact with them. However, their monarch's ambitions are too grand. If Berengar successfully lays claim to Northern Germany, then his armies will sit on our southern borders. After all, he has made his desire to unite the German-speaking regions well known. Who is to say he values our treaty, then?"

King Alvar sipped on his wine from his golden chalice as he listened to his ministers debate over what to do with Austria. It was hard enough maintaining the balance between Catholics and Reformists in the Kalmar Union, however, this minister made a valid point. Just when the Scandinavian King was about to speak up, another minister who represented the Scandinavian Reformists scoffed as he interjected on behalf of Berengar.

"You speak out your Arse and you know it! The Kingdom of Austria may appear to be hell bent on conquest, but they have always valued their alliances and treaties. Just look at how they treat the Sultanate of Granada and their Byzantine allies.

King Berengar has even gifted his two greatest allies advanced technology in the fields of agriculture and industry, which has allowed the two realms to expand their military capabilities! Not once has he shown hostility towards us, and we should not be quick to bare our fangs out of fear of an invasion that will never take place!

Provoking the proverbial Lion to the South would be a foolish endeavor that would surely result in our doom. Rather than condemn ourselves to needless destruction, we must maintain our diplomatic ties to

the Kingdom of Austria and seek to further relations. So far all we have done is maintain a non-aggression pact, and allow free trade with Austrian merchants.

However, with their expansion into Northern Germany, the Crown of Austria will surely invest into rebuilding the North German States into industrialized regions similar to that of the Austrian heartland! We should seek to take advantage of this and invite further trade opportunities with Austria before they achieve victory in this conflict!

The territory of Schleswig-Holstein has always been difficult to maintain control over. The Germans who live there are fiercely proud people. I say it is better to offer the region to Berengar in return for technology that will make our lives easier here in the North! Perhaps even a more permanent alliance could be brokered via matrimony? I hear the man has several sons."

Though King Alvar was initially leaning towards the previous minister's argument, after hearing the reformist speak, he was now convinced that peaceful relations were the route to go. With Berengar's current rate of expansion, it was only a matter of time before he turned his sights to Schleswig-Holstein, and defending a region that was constantly on the brink of rebellion, against a united German Army was more trouble than it was worth.

Besides, it was not like the Kalmar Union could win a war with Austria. Alvar knew this well. If losing Schleswig-Holstein was an inevitability, he might as well get something out of it. Thus, he agreed with the Reformist, the Kalmar Union's best course of action was to negotiate a peaceful transfer of the region to Berengar's future Empire, in exchange for technology that would allow them to become far more wealthy, and powerful.

After scratching his thick golden beard in thought for some time, a brilliant idea formed itself in Scandinavian King's mind. Thus, he proclaimed his intentions for all within his court to hear.

"I have decided on a course of action. We will cede Schleswig-Holstein to the Kingdom of Austria in exchange for technology, wealth, and a permanent alliance via marriage. As far as I am aware, Berengar has multiple wives and multiple sons. Surely one of them can marry one of my grand-daughters when they come of age."

The Catholic Minister was about to interrupt his King's statement when Alvar glared menacingly at him, instantly silencing the man before continuing this train of thought.

"Schleswig-Holstein has little value for our great union, anyway. If giving it over to Austria means avoiding a war, while securing the aforementioned benefits, then to me, it seems like the most appropriate decision I, as King, can make.

This settles the matter. I will dispatch an emissary to the Kingdom of Austria immediately, where he will make our intentions known to the Austrian Crown. As for negotiations, I would like to meet with King Berengar face to face after he has seized Northern Germany for himself."

The ministers bowed their heads regarding the King's words, after which they all accepted his decree.

"As you command, your highness..."

After saying this, the various ministers left the confines of the Throne Room, where only the Reformist Minister who had made such a suggestion remained behind.

"Your Highness, you have made a wise decision. A war with Austria would only result in defeat. This way we can get rid of a troublesome region, while securing an alliance with the most powerful realm in the Western World."

King Alvar nodded his head in agreement to these words before addressing his minister.

"Indeed, when I first met Berengar, I thought little of him. He was nothing more than a lowly Duke asking for a non-aggression pact with my great Kingdom. I merely signed the treaty on a whim because I enjoyed his company.

To think that in a few short years he would become not only King, but the most powerful man in Christendom, I must say I truly underestimated him... Erland, my old friend, I can only trust you to send this message of peace to Kufstein. Thus, it is your responsibility to speak with the Royal Family of Austria and convey our intentions."

The Reformist minister named Erland smiled gracefully before bowing to the King.

"You honor me, King Alvar. I assure you, I will not fail you in this vital task. The Austrian Crown will hear of our peaceful intentions, and I will secure an audience between the two of you when Berengar returns from his campaign."

Alvar smiled when he heard such confidence from his minister. After doing so, he sighed heavily before dismissing the man.

"Very well. Prepare for the journey. I want you within the City of Kufstein as soon as possible. Do not return until you have succeeded in your task!"

After hearing his orders, the Minister quickly departed, and gathered his supplies. It was a long journey to Kufstein, and he would have to sail around the coasts of Iberia in order to get there peacefully. Perhaps by the time he arrived in the Austrian Capital, Berengar would have already completed his war. Only time would tell.

As for King Alvar of the Kalmar Union, he sank back into his throne in silence, as he dwelled upon Berengar's rapid rise to power. He shuddered to think of what the world would look like in ten years after Germany was united into a single Empire, and the Papacy's crusade failed miserably. It was looking like the centuries old balance of power that had been maintained in Europe would come crashing down, and in its place German hegemony would rise.

If such a fate was inevitability, then Alvar had no intentions of getting in its way. Rather, he would seek to gain as many benefits as possible for himself, his family, and his realm. This decision to appease Austria was one that would surely invoke the ire of the Catholics within his realm, however, he would deal with such a situation when it came to pass.

Chapter 554 - Troubles in the Heart of the Byzantine Empire

Emperor Vetrans sat on his throne within the city of Constantinople. By his side were the veteran Strategos Palladius and his eldest son Quintus. The three of them were gathered to discuss an important matter which was causing quite the worry among the Byzantine aristocracy.

Their neighbors to the South and East were preparing for a new Jihad, and intelligence reports suggested that the Timur Empire would soon invade of the Kingdom of Georgia, which was Byzantium's oldest ally. Palladius' spy network had gathered this intelligence and thus, the Strategos himself presented the evidence before his King and the eldest Prince of the Empire.

"The Timur Empire has been amassing troops on our Eastern Border. We believe this is in preparation for the Jihad they have planned. However, this is not our greatest concern, rather my informants assure me they will first invade the Kingdom of Georgia and subject them to Muslim rule. In doing so, expand their forces by a great margin.

If we wish to have any chance of defeating the combined onslaught of the Muslim world against our Empire, we will need to ensure the safety and stability of our allies. Austria is currently engaging in a war to unify Germany into a single Empire, and we cannot trust Granada to fight against their own Muslim Brothers.

Georgia must not fall! If she does, then our oldest and closest ally cannot support us in our time of need. Though they have yet to ask for our aid, I fear they are unaware of the threat that amasses on their borders. Your Majesty, we must inform Georgia of the intelligence we have gathered and offer our support!"

Vetrans scratched his chin as he heard Palladius' words. With the maiming of Decentius, the Hawkish faction within the Byzantine Court had lost a tremendous amount of influence over internal politics, and because of this Palladius and his tertiary faction, could assume a much closer role to the Emperor.

Quintus was not fond of this reality. Initially, he had estimated his father would look more favorably upon him, and the doves after his brother's injury. However, this was not the case. Someone leaked the secrets that Berengar had entrusted Quintus to protect and implement within the borders of the Empire. Because of this, his influence had waned substantially. Despite this, he protested Palladius' calls for reinforcing their allies' borders in favor of a more peaceful alternative.

"Father, let us not be rash. War is not inevitable, and though Palladius claims the Timurids intend to invade our lands in pursuit of Jihad, I have yet to see any evidence of these claims. Until the Timur Empire makes their intentions clear, any militant action, whether it is moving our troops to our borders or into our allied lands, could be seen as an act of aggression. I advise we send an emissary to the east, and discuss our difference to see if we can dissuade the Timurids from their hostility towards our allies. "

Palladius merely scoffed when he heard these words. Truly, the boy was too passive. If the Empire was left in his hands, it would be overrun in a matter of years. Sometimes, a pre-emptive strike was necessary, and though they would not be taking overt action against their rivals to the east, securing the Kingdom of Georgia was necessary for the Empire's survival. Thus, he did not spare his tongue as he lashed out at the eldest Prince.

"With all due respect, Quintus, I fear your passivity will be this Empire's undoing. If you are to succeed your father one day, you must understand that military action is often necessary for matters of national security. If Georgia falls, and the Timurids force its populace under the yoke of Muslim rule, our enemies will have more men and wealth at their disposal to aid them in their future conflict with us.

Whether or not you believe it, Jihad is coming. For hundreds of years Muslims have aggressed into christian lands unprovoked, and though the crusades successfully stemmed the tide of their onslaught, all it has done is buy them some time to lick their wounds. Our reconquest of Egypt and Cyrene has enraged our eastern neighbors, and once more they seek to steal the holy land from us!

The movement of troops to the border with the Kingdom of Georgia is a simple proof of this. If we do nothing, we will allow yet another christian kingdom to fall to the Islamic faith. Such a thing harms us all, as that means we have one less ally in this world!"

Quintus snarled as he heard this thorough rebuttal of his pacifistic ways. He simply responded with a casual attack on Palladius' character.

"You sound just like my brother. I am sure you and Decentius have a lot in common..."

This caused a frown to appear on Palladius' face. He could not believe he was being compared to the Hawk's puppet right now, and instead he began to bitterly protest this personal attack.

"Your brother and those fools who support him call for endless war with our neighbors. Such a thing would surely be the death of our empire. Just like your pacifistic tendencies. I represent the balance between the extremes that you two brothers represent. You will never be the Emperor if you continue to cling onto such childish notions."

Quintus curled his fists in rage upon hearing this before lashing out with a venomous retort of his own.

"Oh, so Peace is childish is it? I am truly sorry that I do not wish to send the men of our empire to their untimely deaths, when they can be used to maintain prosperity through labor. There are plenty of peaceful alternatives. War should be the last option of a desperate emperor!"

After hearing both sides bicker like a couple of children, Vetrans pounded his fist upon his armrest, immediately silencing the two men before rebuking them.

"Enough! Both of you! I am Emperor, and I will decide what our policy is in the future. Palladius, you overstep your bounds by commenting on my son's ability to rule!"

When Palladius heard this, he scowled but remained silent. As for Quintus, he had a shit-eating grin on his face until his father lectured him as well.

"Quintus! Palladius is right. Your view of the world is incredibly naïve, and unfit to rule this Empire. For too long now, I have tolerated your pacifistic ideals because I foolishly believed your brother countered your childish beliefs with his own, and the two of you combined could form an effective ruler. Such a thing is no longer a possibility, and it is time for you to grow up!

As Emperor, I will dispatch an emissary to the King of Georgia, informing him we are prepared, and willing to send troops to defend his borders against a potential invasion by the Timur Empire. Palladius, gather what evidence you can on the likelihood of this event, and bring it before me so that I may send it to our allies.

The both of you should reflect on your actions and come to a proper understanding. I swear, all three of my sons are a major disappointment. If I had a fourth option to succeed me, I would gladly take it!"

When Quintus heard these words, he felt enraged at his father. Even the Emperor thought he was a fool for trying to maintain the peace of the world. This immediately caused him to storm out of the room, no longer wanting to hear his father's words of wisdom.

Of course, Palladius was no longer outraged at the scolding he had received. Rather, he saw this as an opportunity to place the idea in the Emperor's head for Alexandros to one day become Emperor. Thus, he made sure all others were out of earshot before putting on a confused facade.

"But, your Majesty, you do have a fourth option. If I recall correctly, your daughter's marriage to the King of Austria is matrilineal. Does that not mean that your grandson has a claim to the Throne? If you are so disappointed with your sons, then perhaps you should focus your efforts on ensuring that the infant Alexandros grows up to be a responsible leader. After all, with a father like Berengar, and the academic prowess of his Kingdom at the boy's disposal, surely he will grow up to be a wise and capable leader."

Vetranis thought about this option for a few seconds as he dwelled upon the candidates that would one day succeed him. Decentius was out of the running, and his youngest son was a hopeless alcoholic womanizer.

Until now, he had only thought of Quintus as an option, but Palladius was right. If he truly wanted the most capable successor, then perhaps grooming his grandson to be the Emperor was the greatest hope he had. After a few moments of silence, the Emperor sighed before giving a vague answer.

"You have given me much to think about, and I will reflect on it with intense introspection. I will let you know my answer when I have thoroughly thought this through. Until then, float the idea to Honoria, and see how she responds."

After hearing this, Palladius smiled gracefully before bowing his head and cupping his hands.

"Of course, your majesty, I will dispatch an agent to Kufstein right away."

With that said, the veteran Strategos was dismissed, and Vetranis was left alone with his thoughts.

Chapter 555 - Preventing Scorched Earth Tactics

A Knight of Luxembourg rode on the back of his steed as he gazed towards the bridge in front of him. This valuable piece of infrastructure acted as the only means to cross the nearby river. It was because of this strategic importance that his liege ordered him to destroy it before the Austrian invaders could use it to cross.

By now, news had spread to the Capital of the Duchy of Luxembourg of Berengar's invasion of the Northern German States. Rather than face the enemy in the fields which would surely result in his army's destruction, the Bastard of Luxembourg had ordered a full retreat. In doing so, he gave additional commands to destroy all valuable infrastructure to slow down the Austrian advance.

His intention was obvious, buy enough time for all of his men to make it back to the Capital which they would defend to the last man. If he was from any other Kingdom, this would be a foolish act, as the King of Austria had showed repeatedly his willingness to obliterate cities to spare the lives of his soldiers.

However, Luxembourg was a German Duchy, and thus Hartman knew his rival would not be so willing to waste the lives of a people he believed to be his own. Truthfully, it was the best plan he could come up with, as his enemy had overwhelming advantages in all aspects of warfare.

Only by forcing them into the Capital City, and fighting them in brutal urban warfare, did his army have a chance of defeating the Austrian host. Thus, this Knight began issuing orders to the men at arms beneath his command, so that they would fulfill their obligations in these scorched earth tactics.

"Quickly, fetch the casks, and light them up. I want this bridge brought to ruin before the Austrians arrive!"

The soldiers beneath his command struggled to bring forth the casks filled with gunpowder. Such a substance was a rare commodity in Europe, especially in the hands of Berengar's enemies. After all, the Austrian King's Triple Alliance had a stranglehold over the trade of saltpeter within Europe, and saltpeter was a critical component in the development of gunpowder.

To waste such a vast quantity of the explosive compound on scorched earth tactics would severely limit Luxembourg's ability to combat the enemy when they finally arrived at the capital. Still, it was a calculated risk that Hartman had thought through, and ultimately was a necessary expense.

Unbeknownst to the Knight and his retinue of soldiers, various men clad in camouflaged clothing hid within the treeline nearby. Among these men were a few Jagdkommandos, but mostly, these were the rebels that Hartman had attempted to root out and destroy over the past three months.

While the Knights of Luxembourg had their orders to engage in scorched earth tactics to buy time for their retreat, the rebels had their own objectives, which were to prevent such actions from being carried out at any cost.

Thus, at the moment Andreas Jaeger, who was garbed in his Jagdkommando uniform, pressed the stock of the g22 rifle firmly against his shoulder as he aimed down his sights towards the enemy force. Without needing to issue orders, he squeezed the trigger, which ignited the .45-70 cartridge, propelling its Spitzer shaped copper-jacketed bullet down range and into the skull of the Knight Commander.

Before the enemy commander could even react, his skull blasted apart, and his body fell off its horse, lifelessly landing on the ground. Yet Andreas was not the only one to shoot. A thunderous roar accompanied by plumes of smoke surrounded the treeline as dozens of rebels opened fire on the enemy forces.

They were careful not to hit the black powder casks, as doing so could easily cause a chain reaction, destroying their objective in the process. The rebel's bullets riddled through the torsos of the enemy man at arms. Still, the rebels were few, and a single volley from their rifles was not nearly enough to eliminate the enemy units. Thus, they rapidly reloaded their weapons, while the hostile men at arms formed a firing line, and aimed their primitive firearms towards the treeline where the volley of fire had come from.

The men at arms fired off a volley of their own towards the treeline. In doing so, it hit several rebels. At such a range, the arkebuses would be entirely ineffective against the armor that Austrian regulars wore, however these guerillas were not wearing any protective gear, and thus, those unfortunate enough to be struck by the arkebuse balls quickly entered the afterlife.

As Andreas was reloading his weapon with a spare cartridge, a lead ball struck his sloped steel helmet. Luckily for him, his helmet protected against shrapnel, and even modern pistol rounds. Thus the primitive projectile deflected upward, leaving the Jagdkommando with a minor case of whiplash and nothing more.

As the man struggled to get his thoughts in order, he quickly realized that he had instinctively loaded his weapon, thus as he came back to reality, he aimed down his sights once more and fired his cartridge towards the enemy forces.

Like his previous targets, the projectile found its way into the enemy's body, and burst through his armor and out the other side, followed by a stream of blood and bone fragments. The man quickly collapsed to the floor as he rapidly bled out. By the time the soldier had passed away, Andreas had already loaded another round and fired towards the enemy once more.

Despite having an overwhelming numerical advantage, the sheer rate of fire that the rebels possessed with their needle rifles quickly caused the Luxembourg numbers to dwindle. In the end, a single man at arms took command as he issued the following orders.

"Retreat! Abandon the mission!"

With this said, the Luxembourg unit rapidly broke ranks and routed, allowing the Rebels to reveal themselves as they secured the bridge. Andreas, despite having suffered a mild concussion, quickly gave out his orders to his troops.

"I want those casks removed. The last thing we need is for an accident to occur, and this bridge to be brought to ruin. After you have removed the explosives, secure the area and wait for our main host to arrive!"

Not a single guerilla beneath the Jagdkommando's command disobeyed. Instead, they quickly did as they were instructed. By now, these men were well accustomed to following orders without questions, and thus they acted with the same discipline that the regular army would have.

Before long, the explosives casks were removed, and the bridge was secured. The rebel guerillas maintained operational security until they witnessed the Austrian host in the distance. Only then did they sigh in relief. Eventually, Captain Andreas Jaeger stood before his King, who had a smile on his face as he witnessed the remains of the battlefield.

"Captain! I am glad to see that you and your band of rebels have secured the bridge. This makes my life easier as we advance forward towards the Capital city! At this rate, the war will be over before the leaves fall from the trees!"

This was not the first time Berengar had used this quote, and unlike the origins of the quote which ended up being a colossal blunder, every time the Austrian King had said these words, it became reality. In response to Berengar's claim, Andreas merely smiled as he uttered the thoughts in his mind.

"I hope you are right, your majesty... Tell me, what are my orders now?"

Berengar quickly began informing the Special Forces Captain as to the current reality of the war effort.

"By now, we have secured the southernmost region of the Duchy with limited conflict. Intelligence supports the idea that Hartman is withdrawing his forces to the Capital to force our army into a bloody struggle for the city. He intends for every man, woman, and child to fight us to the bitter end, like Carthage in its last days.

I won't stand for such needless bloodshed. It is with this in mind that I have a special task for you and your insurgents. I want you and your troops to infiltrate the city and ensure that you prepare the people to rise against their masters when we finally arrive. With your men on the inside, I believe it is possible to take the city without senseless slaughter."

Andreas did not hesitate in his response. He simply saluted his King before speaking the words that had become quite common as Austria's battle cry.

"Hail Victory!"

Berengar naturally returned the man's salute and responded with the same shout.

"Hail Victory!"

After saying this, the Austrian Jagdkommando and his rebel forces crossed the bridge, and headed towards the city. They would first make a stop at the nearest allied village and assume the identity of peasants fleeing the war before infiltrating the enemy's capital.

While the Rebels rode off into the distance, Berengar gazed towards the direction of the enemy's capital with a stoic expression. He feared that Hartman's reluctance to surrender and face judgement for his crimes would ultimately result in the mad man taking his city hostage.

According to intelligence provided by his spies embedded within his rival's court, the Bastard of Luxembourg had become increasingly unstable after Renault's assassination, and Berengar feared the lengths of terror the man would go to in order to avoid his fate. With a heavy sigh, the King of Austria spoke to himself in a tone so low only he could hear.

"I will do what I must..."

Chapter 556 - One Day Soon you will be a King

While Berengar was off at war, his newest wife Yasmin was in the later stages of her pregnancy, though Berengar had claimed he would finish the war as fast as possible so that he may return home and witness his child's birth, it would appear that it was not his destiny to fulfill this desire of the Granadan Princess.

Currently, Yasmin was in labor, and while that was occurring, two of the Austrian king's other wives had gathered in another room of the Palace where, for the first time in a long time, the two of them had united in a cause, as they discussed their differences in great length.

It was no secret that Berengar had been paying an extra amount of attention to Yasmin since their marriage. This was in part because of the mature, and supportive personality that the Princess of Granada exhibited, especially when in comparison with his other younger brides who were quite the opposite.

Because of this, both Adela and Linde felt a sense of fear of losing their husband to the Moorish Princess, who had only recently entered their lives. This was especially true for the High Queen, who had seen her husband becoming increasingly distant as of late. Thus, with a heavy sigh, the young woman drank from her coffee before expressing her innermost feelings to her oldest rival.

"I am feeling like I am losing Berengar's love. He has been emotionally distant to me lately, as if he simply does not want to be near me. Since Yasmin first arrived, I have had barely any time with him. I fear she is stealing my husband away from me!"

When Linde heard this, she simply scoffed before responding to Adela's claims with an enticing bit of gossip.

"Sure, Yasmin has been pulling Berengar's heartstrings as of late, but she is not the one you need to worry about. If you knew what I know about what Berengar and Henrietta have been getting up to since she recovered from her injury, then you would realize that cunning little brat is your greatest rival."

Adela gazed over at her rival in shock. She could hardly believe her ears.

"You don't mean?"

Linde remained silent as she merely nodded her head while sipping her coffee. She did not wish to speak openly about what exactly went on between the two siblings, and though she learned the truth of Henrietta's lineage, the relationship that her husband had with his sister-aunt was rather taboo in her eyes. After hearing such news, Adela could hardly believe her ears and immediately questioned the validity of this information.

"How did you come by this? I refuse to believe it!"

In response, Linde merely sighed before revealing the extent of the information she knew.

"It is my job to uncover secrets, and despite what Berengar might think, he is rather poor at keeping things from me. However, if you must know, I have been especially attentive to the affairs of the Royal Family ever since that fateful night where Henrietta was harmed under my watch. Unfortunately, things haven't been the same for me and Berengar since, and I believe he has partially blamed me for the incident.

Because of this, I have kept a close eye on the two of them, and have discovered some rather shocking details. For starters, you may not be aware, but Henrietta is not Berengar's blood related sister. She is actually his aunt, and a bastard at that. However, they grew up like siblings, and Lord Knows that my family has its own problems with such a taboo; even then, it still makes my skin crawl just thinking about it.

So if you think Yasmin is the greatest of your worries, guess again. That close relationship between Berengar and Henrietta is something we all need to be worried about. However, I must inform you that even though Berengar has surrounded himself with multiple beautiful women, the reasoning for his distance from you is entirely your fault..."

Adela practically shattered the porcelain cup in her hand from the sheer rage she felt when she heard Linde's last remark. Did this woman seriously just say she was at fault for her husband's distance? Just when Adela was about to scold her rival, Linde smirked and thoroughly rebuked her.

"See, that right there, the way you are acting as if you are better than me, and everyone else around you, is exactly what is turning Berengar away from you. I get it, you're the high queen, but you know the only reason you still have that position is because he desires to honor his family's wishes, right?"

At one point, you were a sweet, kind, innocent young girl who pledged her heart to the man she loved. Hell, you were willing to do anything to make him happy. However, over the years, you have let your faith get to your head, and now you act as if you are a living saint with everyone else, including your husband, being beneath you.

You walk around as if you are incapable of sin and condemn everyone around you for not being a monk. Such religious superiority is something that our husband despises. Yet, despite all evidence, you dig yourself deeper into your faith, with your attempts to convert Berengar into your views. Your excuse is laughable. You say you wish to save Berengar's soul from damnation, but all you really care about is forcing your beliefs on him.

He knows this to be true; I know it, Honoria knows it. Hell, even Yasmin knows it. Your self righteous attitude is your undoing. If you truly care about Berengar and want to rekindle your love with him, then I suggest you stop being such a prudish bitch and tolerate his actions. After all, he is the most powerful man in the world, and plenty of young women would be more than willing to take your place."

The High Queen was stunned after hearing Linde's analysis of her relationship with her husband. Had she really been so rude to everyone? Was it really her overzealous nature that was driving a wedge between herself and the man she loved? Just when she was about to retort to her rival's cruel words, the Court Physician walked into the room, and made a declaration to the two Queens of Austria.

"The Queen Yasmin has successfully given birth to a healthy baby boy, she is resting as we speak, and is expected to make a full recovery. I figured since the father is currently at war, that perhaps the two of you would like to comfort her in his stead."

With this said, Linde stood up, and followed Ewald towards Yasmin's corridors, leaving Adela sitting by her lonesome to reflect on the words that her oldest rival had given her. When Linde finally arrived in the bedroom, she witnessed the Princess of Granada lying naked in the bed with her newborn child clutched to her breast. By a single glance, Linde could tell that the woman was exhausted. Yet she still cared for the child as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Upon witnessing this scene, Linde smirked before gazing at the newborn son of her husband. Interestingly enough, the boy appeared to be a blend of his two parents having the tanned skin, and amber eyes of his mother, but a full head of golden blonde hair like his father. He was truly a unique existence within the Kingdom of Austria.

"Congratulations, it is good to see that you survived the ordeal. I know Berengar would be heartbroken if he returned from the carnage of war, only to find his wife had died in childbirth."

Yasmin merely sighed as she gazed into the eyes of her baby boy. She was well aware of the plans her husband had for their son, and simply smiled as she said the words.

"The Prince of Granada is born. One day, I hope to see him rule my homeland the same way his father rules over the Kingdom of Austria."

This statement shocked Linde, who gazed at the woman and the child with suspicion. Though she knew about Berengar's plans to unite the Triple Alliance through blood ties via his children, she was unaware that Yasmin knew of such plans, let alone supported them. Thus, the redheaded beauty voiced her curiosity with a hint of concern in her tone.

"What about Hasan? You realize that if you go through with Berengar's plans, you will remove your brother's offspring from a position of power."

In response to this obvious statement, Yasmin merely scoffed before retorting.

"I love my brother, but he has always been, and always will be, a fool. When he finally gets himself killed, Granada will need a powerful ruler, and it most certainly won't be his sons to take that position. No, only a child raised here in Austria, under the tutelage of his mighty father, is worthy of such a position, and I will do everything in my power to make it so."

After saying this to Linde, Yasmin shifted her gaze to her first-born son and made him a solemn vow.

"Mark my words, my precious baby boy, one day soon, you will be a King!"

With this said, Linde left the room and returned to the waiting room to find that Adela was absent. The High Queen had many thoughts to reflect upon after receiving such a verbal lashing from her oldest rival. For a while, Adela would seclude herself with some much needed introspection. By the time her husband returned from the war, she would have the answers she needed for her path in life.

Chapter 557 - Discovering a Monumental Secret

Deep within the heart of Catalonia, there was a young woman of Visigothic descent who dressed from head to toe in dark attire. The night had fallen over the sky of Collbato, and with it, the woman could finally get close to her target.

As the War for German Unification was underway, King Felipe of Spain took it as an opportunity to infiltrate Austria's suspicious mine deep within his Kingdom's territory. As part of the Treaty of Aquitaine that he had signed with Berengar and Hasan, the man had given over the mining rights of the area to the Austrian Crown.

As far as Felipe was aware, nothing of importance lied within the region, and despite that, Austria's mining companies seemed to move a suspicious amount of mysterious product from the area of Collbato to the shores of Gibraltar, where an Austrian Naval base currently existed.

Despite Felipe's best attempts, he could not discover just what was being mined in the area known as Collbato. Now that his enemy focused his attention elsewhere, the Spanish king could finally infiltrate the area. With this in mind, the King of Spain dispatched his greatest spy to the mines to uncover what secrets Austria was hiding from him.

The woman known by the name of Cecilia de Penafiel lied in wait for the precise moment that the Austrian guards would change their shift. Over the past week, she had examined the patrols from afar, and was now intimately familiar with their schedule. At exactly midnight, the guards on watch for the night packed up their things and brought in the newest patrol.

Thus, the woman took the chance to dash through the fields and into the entrance of the mine, where she ensured she remained unseen. Having successfully infiltrated the mine's entrance, the spy quickly descended its shafts, desperately searching for any sign of what treasure Austria had uncovered within the caverns.

Luckily, her dark attire blended in with the shadows. As the closer she reached the belly of the beast, the more internal patrols she came across. Seeing a light up ahead that was encroaching on her position, the woman quickly hid behind a stalagmite as the patrol slowly passed her by, completely unaware that a hostile agent had successfully infiltrated into the depths of the mine.

It was only after she was certain that they had rounded the corner did Cecilia sigh heavily before continuing on her journey. If she were spotted, then surely she would be a dead woman. Thus she kept this sentiment in mind as she burrowed deeper into the mine. The further she got, the more enamored she became with the Austrian mining equipment.

The interior of the mine shaft held a long rail track, where during the day miners used handcars to transport goods from the depths of the mine towards the surface. The rail track eventually led to an area where the Austrians had set up several steam powered conveyer belts for transferring the product towards the mining carts. This was not the only technological marvel which the woman witnessed. There were also steam pumps in place to prevent water inflow and even mechanized drills.

The woman gazed upon the marvels of the industrial era with shock. Such technology was well beyond her understanding. After all, as far as she was aware, her people operated mines via manual labor. They were dug by hand with iron picks, which proved to be a lengthy and dangerous process. It was almost as if she had walked into a subterranean civilization straight out of a fantasy.

She realized at this moment that no matter how she described what she had witnessed here on this day, it could never fully encapsulate the marvel of what she saw. Thus, she tore herself from her internal shock and continued deeper until she found what she was looking for.

Deep within the mine were several large deposits of saltpeter, a crucial substance in the manufacture of gunpowder. Currently, the Spanish were limited in their capacity to field firearms. This was because of the small amount of gunpowder they could get their hands on. Unfortunately, it was quite difficult to obtain such a valuable resource.

After all, as far as the Kingdom of Spain was aware, there were no natural deposits of saltpeter within Europe. This would be fine if they could purchase it from the east. However, the Byzantine Empire, through its alliance with Austria, dominated the trade with the eastern world, who had an abundant supply of saltpeter.

Because of this stranglehold over saltpeter, it had become incredibly difficult for Austria's enemies to get their hands on gunpowder, and thus, despite their ability to manufacture firearms, they could not field such weapons in large numbers.

However, it turned out there was a vast deposit of this strategic resource lying within her Kingdom's borders the entire time, and Austria had not only noticed its existence, but skillfully usurped the region's mining rights from its rightful owners. This enraged the woman to the core of her being.

It took her a few moments to calm her inner fury and collect her thoughts. What she needed to do now was escape the confines of this mine, and report what information she had collected to her King. If the King of Spain knew that such a vast quantity of saltpeter existed in his backyard, he would do whatever it took to gain control over it.

Thus, the woman instantly realized what she needed to do and climbed her way back to the surface. However, she did not get far, as the moment she turned around to make a strategic withdrawal, a patrol spotted her. The leader of the squad aimed down his rifle at the woman and shouted at her with her native tongue.

"Halt! You are not supposed to be here! Get on the ground and place your hands behind your back!"

After coming so far, the woman was not about to surrender without a fight. Thus, she covertly pulled out a small dagger and threw it towards the squad leader's neck. Before the man could react, the blade pierced his skin and severed his carotid artery, causing his blood to spew forth like a fountain.

The woman took advantage of the shock, to rush her opponents, grabbing hold of one of their rifles, and disarming them, before raising it towards the third sentry and pulling the trigger, sending a projectile straight into his heart, ending his life on the spot.

She quickly used the butt of her rifle to knock out the third opponent before tossing it on the ground. The echo of the gunshot would surely alert the entire facility to her presence, thus she quickly made a run for it towards the surface.

As she suspected, it did not take long for another unit to arrive at the scene of her crime, where they witnessed the deaths of their comrades. The squad leader quickly pulled out smelling salts and awoke the unconscious soldier where he interrogated him about what had transpired.

"What happened here!?!"

The soldier looked around in confusion before gathering his thoughts. After doing so, he quickly responded to the question.

"There was a woman. I did not see her face, as it was covered. However, she was down here in the mine and witnessed our operations! She has probably fled to the surface, quickly get to her before news of the saltpeter reaches Spain!"

A hint of worry flashed across the soldier's face as he heard these words. If a spy had infiltrated the mine and discovered its secrets, then they were all in grave danger. For the moment King Berengar heard about this incompetence, heads would surely roll. Thus, with a grave tone in his voice, the squad leader quickly issued his orders.

"Find her quickly! We cannot waste any more time!"

However, by the time the sentries could prepare a proper search party, the woman was already gone in the wind. They found not a single trace of her existence. Instead, she was already on her way to the Capital of the Kingdom of Spain.

When King Felipe finally found out that Berengar had cheated him out of a vast stockpile of saltpeter and had already mined a fair portion of it, he would become infuriated. For some time, the Catholic world had lagged behind the Kingdom of Austria and its technologically advanced military.

Now that they were finally taking a step forward in military advancements, the lack of gunpowder limited them in their ability to fight against Austria's growing dominance. To have such a substantial deposit of saltpeter stolen from beneath their grasp was a massive insult to not only the Kingdom of Spain but the Catholic World.

The consequences of this revelation had yet to be seen, but one thing was certain: there would be a great pressure on the Kingdom of Granada, and their Austrian allies into handing over the mine, and all that had been retrieved from it back to its Spanish masters. Whether Berengar and Hasan would listen to such an unreasonable request was another matter entirely.

Chapter 558 - A Quest for Gold

Black smoke exuded from the bore of a 1422 service revolver as the thunder of its gunfire faded into the distance. A single dainty hand raised the barrel of the weapon to a set of luscious pink lips, which blew away the vapor of the shot.

Lying on the ground in front of the killer was a corpse which belonged to a young native girl. This adolescent youth had her hands tied behind her back, with a look of shock on her face as her brains decorated the dirt beneath her carcass.

The victim's family knelt by the girl's dead body while bound in chains and filled with unimaginable despair. A pair of brown eyes gazed up with hatred at the foreign woman who had snuffed the life of his innocent young daughter so mercilessly.

When Honoria saw this man's detestable state, a fiendish smirk appeared on her immaculate face as she pulled back the hammer on her revolver and pressed its barrel against the man's forehead. While staring into the depths of the father's resentment, the Byzantine Princess pulled out a chunk of golden jewelry from her coat pocket and shoved it in the man's face. Though neither of the two individuals shared a common language, the intent was as clear as day.

"Lead me to the gold, or die like your daughter..."

When presented with such an overbearing threat, the man did not falter, instead he spat upon the indigo haired woman's face, causing her brows to twitch in fury. The moment Honoria's crew saw this expression, they knew their captain would shed blood.

Thus it came as no surprise when the privateer queen pointed the barrel of her revolver towards the man's young son, and fired a shot into his small chest, in doing so ruthlessly claiming the child's life. The father of the two slain children stared in disbelief at the woman, only to see the gold jewelry pressed in his face once more, and the barrel of the strange weapon she wielded pointed towards yet another of his children. There was utter contempt in Honoria's mint-green eyes as she mouthed the words which the natives could not possibly understand.

"You have two more children, and I have four more bullets. Tell me where the gold is, and I will spare their miserable lives."

Though the native tribesman did not speak German, he could understand the vicious woman's intent, and thus with tears streaming down his eyes, gritted his teeth and bit the proverbial bullet. With a slight nod of his head, the man struggled to rise to his feet, where he marched off into the distance, leading Honoria and her crew towards that which they sought to claim. Upon seeing that the man was now being cooperative, a sinister smile curved itself upon Honoria's lips as she gave the orders to her crew.

"Secure the family. If he tries to screw us over, we can use them as a bargaining chip!"

Having received her orders, Elfrun pointed the barrel of her g-22 rifle towards the mother and her remaining two children as she and her sisters stood watch over the burning village. Having spent the last few weeks building their outpost in this foreign land, the privateers were now on a quest for gold, and they were more than willing to kill anyone who got in their way.

Elfrun gazed into the distance as she watched her captain so bravely marched into the wilderness with only a tortured soul to guide her to the location of the gold mines. As for Honoria, she and her squad stalked their prisoner into the mountains of the Venezuelan Andes, constantly alert to the dangers that surrounded them.

Eventually, they found themselves at the entrance to a cave, which acted as the primitive mine for the local tribe that they had obliterated hours ago. Honoria had an ecstatic grin on her pretty face as she broke out into maniacal laughter.

"Haha hahaha! Daddy will definitely reward me for this!"

Her crew mates grimaced when they heard the nickname that Honoria shamelessly used to refer to her husband, before inspecting the cave of their own volition. It was immediately apparent that a vast vein of gold existed on the outer portions of the cave's walls, and the villagers had mined only a small amount.

With the resources available to Honoria, and the future settlement that was currently being established, the actual worth of this mine was completely unknown. But to come across such a valuable deposit so early in her quest was a blessing from the heavens.

The native man glared at the foreign females as they scoured the cave, inspecting it for its worth. Unbeknownst to him, Honoria had raised her weapon to towards the back of his head and set the hammer back. A single phrase escaped her lips before she pulled the trigger.

"Thank you for your cooperation."

After Honoria had uttered the words, gunfire resounded in the air, instantly scaring off the nearby wildlife. The native man's body collapsed lifelessly to the floor with an audible thud as the other members of Honoria's crew came rushing over to witness the scene of the execution.

Malissa had a concerned expression on her face, which Honoria immediately noted, causing the Byzantine princess to shrug her shoulders and make a snide comment about her brutal actions.

"What? He served his usefulness. There was no reason to keep him around any longer..."

The first mate of Honoria's crew could hardly believe how callous the Byzantine Princess had become over the years. When she first met Honoria, she was an innocent and naive girl trying to escape a terrible marriage.

Now the Byzantine Princess was the dread of the Mediterranean, and a ruthless killer. Obviously, the change in her personality was because of Berengar's influence. Sometimes Malissa thought it was better if she hadn't helped the girl escape her family. She internally despised the King of Austria for how he had warped such a nice girl into such a monstrous pirate.

However, there was nothing she could do about that. Honoria had become set in her ways, and Malissa knew the Princess would never leave Berengar. To speak of such an option was a good way to get herself keelhauled. In the end, all the first-mate could manage was to sigh in defeat before pulling out a map and marking the gold mine's location.

Now that she had mapped the area, the privateers would have to make a long trek back to the settlement. Thus, she quickly offered her advice to her captain, who was enjoying the sight of her gruesome work.

"Captain, I advise we regroup with the others and eliminate the natives we hold captive. As you have said, they no longer have a use now that we have got what we need. After doing so, we should march back to the settlement and dispatch a unit of marines to secure the resource deposit."

Honoria quickly nodded her head before turning her back on her crew and towards the direction where the other members lie in wait.

"Very well. Let us make haste. The sooner we secure the gold mine, the sooner we can bring back some spoils from our settlement. I can't wait to see how happy my man is when he finds out how much gold I have found!"

Upon hearing this, Malissa sighed heavily once more before stashing away the map in her satchel and following her captain in to the mountains. After a quick climb, they returned to the ruins of the village they had assaulted, to find that Elfrun had gotten bored, and forced the captives to play hot potato with a live grenade.

When Honoria saw the corpses of the villagers which were now mincemeat, she grabbed ahold of her explosives expert and rustled her hair while scolding her in a friendly manner.

"Elfrun, you little bitch, what did I say? I thought I had explicitly ordered you to keep these savages as bargaining chips. You're just lucky that dumbass didn't try anything, or else I would be shoving a candlestick up your arse right now!"

The girl known as Elfrun's eyes widened in shock as she heard this vulgar threat. Shortly thereafter, her cheeks blushed, and she pouted as Honoria stuffed her head in her mighty bosom. As the princess did so, she whispered something in the girl's ears that frightened her.

"Do something like this again, and I promise that won't be a veiled threat..."

Elfrun immediately nodded her head thrice in silence. After seeing that the girl had become obedient once more, Honoria called out to her girls with a voice filled with excitement.

"We found the gold mine. All we need to do is go back to the settlement and get wasted! As for the management of the resources, I'll leave that up to the commander in charge of the marines. Let's go have some fun!"

With that said, Honoria and her crew descended from the mountain, down into the fledgling settlement below. News of the discovery of gold within the region would only reach Berengar's ears after he had finished his campaign to unify Germany.

When the King of Austria finally realized this discovery, he would begin focusing his efforts on colonizing the lands that were once known as South America in his past life with great interest in obtaining the silver, gold, and oil in the region.

Chapter 559 - Prussian Authority

Eckhard stood at the front of a formation of soldiers which belonged to the recently formed state of Prussia. These men were mere peasants a few months ago, and yet now they were armed and trained to the same standards as the Kingdom of Austria's Armed Forces.

Even though Berengar had granted an exemption to the Grand Duchy of Poland from participating in the ongoing unification wars, that did not mean that the fledgling state was lacking in military matters. Quite the contrary, as the greatest of Berengar's generals, Eckhard had ensured that a proper Army was established.

Especially when one needed to consider the conspiracies that surrounded him by the local lords who clung to an ancient past. Feudalism was dead, and Berengar had killed it. Yet these pompous fools continued to defy the new order, and thus, Eckhard was forced to act ruthlessly in his attempts to squash dissent.

Though he had an engagement to the daughter of the Margrave of Brandenburg, it was becoming clear to the aging General that his fiancée and her father were a couple of scheming devils. Thus, he had resorted to force to show an example of what happens to those who defy the crown of Austria.

With a grim expression, Eckhard addressed the Brigade of soldiers beneath his command. Currently, he only had 5,000 men, but with his wits and overwhelming advantage in military technology, it would be enough to bring the Margrave of Brandenburg to heel..

"A few months ago, you were mere serfs, tending to the lands of your masters. However, with Austria's conquests of these lands, you were liberated from your servitude to your ungrateful masters. Despite the age of feudalism ending, these nobles refuse to surrender the absurd privileges they have enjoyed for the past few generations.

Thus, as men of the new era, it has come to us to force these privileged fools into the submission of the Austrian Crown! Many of you may be in fear for your lives. After all, we are outnumbered. However, you have been trained for this! You wield weapons that the enemy has never even seen before! Go forth, men of Prussia, and conquer your former masters!"

The soldiers in the field immediately roared their battle-cry in unison.

"For King, and fatherland!"

With this said, the soldiers of the Prussian Army loaded their weapons and waited for the hostile field army to arrive.

On the other side of the field was the army, which belonged to the Margrave of Brandenburg. The proud noble led his knights and men at arms from the rear. Though many realms had adapted to the weapons and tactics employed by the Kingdom of Austria and its South German Confederation, there were still those stuck in the old ways, refusing to believe the authority that the Knights once wielded on the field of battle had ended.

Johannes von Hohenzollern was one of these men. He was so confident in his victory over the Austrian Knight, who had been granted the position of Grand Duke from his upstart master, that the Margrave had even brought his daughter to watch the battle unfold.

A cruel smirk was on the face of Martha as she shooed away the heat with a hand fan while sitting on horseback.

"Has he gone senile? The so-called Great Field Marshal of Austria has only brought 5,000 men to combat our forces? We easily outnumber him by five times as many soldiers! I can't believe you agreed to wed me off to such a fool!"

Johannes merely chuckled at his daughter's analysis. With a confident expression on his face, he boldly declared victory before the battle had even begun.

"I suppose once he is defeated, the old man will finally realize that he and his King have no control over our lands. Stay here, and watch as your father defeats the pitiful army of levies that your fiancée has mustered."

After saying these words, the man snapped the reins of his horse and rode off to the front of the formation. Once the Margrave was in front of his knights, he gave a rousing speech to the men who followed him into battle.

"Knights of Brandenburg! These fools think that because they have annexed the Teutonic State that they have a right to our lands. This is nonsense. Our ancestors have built this mighty realm, and it is our birthright to carry on their legacy and rule over its people! Ride out and achieve your victory over these foreigners from the South!"

Upon saying this the Margrave lowered the visor to his great bascinet before charging off on his horse with a sword in hand. Immediately the army of knights, and men at arms, followed in pursuit, believing by sheer volume of numbers they would overwhelm the enemy.

When Eckhard gazed into the distance through his binoculars and witnessed this mindless charge, he merely shook his head before raising his hand and ordering the artillery battalion to let loose a barrage upon the enemy army.

"Open fire!"

The moment these words were spoken, the Artillery crews nodded their heads, before loading the shells into their guns. Once the shells were loaded into the guns, and the horizontal sliding blocks were closed, the gunner in charge of firing the weapon pulled the lanyard, immediately detonating the projectile and sending it down range onto the charging knights.

Before the Knights could even get close, explosions detonated among their ranks, killing men, and beat alike. The Margrave looked back at his ranks to witness from a single barrage, hundreds of his men lie dead.

Before he could return his focus, another barrage of 18 shells landed upon their ranks and blasted more of his knights to bits. He could hardly believe his eyes. Though he had heard rumors of the effectiveness of Austrian weapons, he had never believed the stories to be true until now.

Despite this, he was undeterred. After all, he still had an overwhelming numerical advantage, thus he raised his sword in the air and compelled his forces to charge through the fire and into the fray.

"Charge!"

Though the Knights and Men at arms that composed the Margrave's ranks were fearful, they ultimately mustered their courage and charged forth towards the Prussian Army. When Eckhard witness this, he sighed heavily in defeat, before motioning for his secret weapons to be unleashed.

"Bring out the Schmidt guns!"

When this order was given, the machine gun crews scrambled to set up their weapons into position, in his entire Brigade, Eckhard only had a single battery of these devastating weapons, and though he had never witnessed their use in battle, he was far from eager to see them employed. Still, despite his hesitation, it was completely necessary to unleash this mighty weapon upon his foes.

The moment the enemy entered within firing range, the men who operated the Schmidt guns cranked their weapons and, in doing so, fired off hundreds of rounds a minute. The repeated echo of gunfire was something that had never been witnessed before in these lands.

The first round of bullets struck the margrave in the chest, with at least seven projectiles piercing through his thick steel breastplate as if it were made of butter, and splashing his blood out the other side. The mount beneath him immediately became frightened and bucked its dying rider off its back before attempting to flee the rapid gunfire.

When Martha witnessed her father's situation from afar, she gasped in horror and covered her mouth in shock. However, the dread that she felt in that moment was only exemplified when the six Schmidt guns continued to fire thousands of rounds downrange towards the Army of Brandenburg in a chorus of thunder.

It was not only the Machine guns that were being fired at the oncoming forces, every soldier within Eckhard's ranks who wielded a rifle stood firm and fired their shots into the mass of iron and steel that was charging towards them as quickly as they could manage.

The Margrave of Brandenburg lied on his back, bleeding out, gazing upon his army of 25,000 men which he had spent his whole life training, cut down in a matter of minutes by the overwhelming firepower of

the Austrian weapons in use by the Prussian soldiers. With a bitter smile on his face, he mouthed a single phrase before his life was snuffed from existence.

"So.... it is truly the end of an era..."

The life faded from the Margraves' eyes as the Prussian army continued to fire upon the hostile soldiers as if their very lives depended on the volume of fire they could unleash upon their enemies. What was supposed to be a quick victory via overwhelming numbers ended up in a disproportionate massacre.

Word of the new and improved Schmidt guns would quickly travel around Christendom, adding a new sense of dread in the hearts and minds of Austria's rivals. The result of this battle would forever serve as a reminder of Austria's advanced military technology to those who sought to refuse their rule.

Chapter 560 - Ending a Rebellion

Eckhard gazed upon the bloody scene of his battle and sighed heavily. All he wanted in this world was a peaceful retirement. For the briefest of moments, he had achieved this aim. Unfortunately, the land that Berengar gave him was filled with mutinous nobles, and thus, he was forced to take up the blade once more.

The echo of gunfire had long since ceased, and the smoke vanished, to reveal the scene of 25,000 corpses riddled with bullet holes. Those that were less lucky had been blasted to bits by artillery fire, leaving piles of mincemeat in their place.

The scent of blood and bile filled the air, but this was something the retired General was all too used to. As he lamented the wasteful loss of life, his eyes glanced upon the horrified visage of his fiancée who lay petrified from fright across the battlefield. With the death of her father, and his army, she was now without protection in this cruel world.

Eckhard sneered in disgust as he walked through the mountains of bodies and rivers of blood to reach the other side of the battlefield, where Martha was trembling. When he finally approached the woman, he stared at her beautiful figure with a gaze filled with contempt.

The young woman struggled to speak, and just when she was about to say her first word since witnessing her father's death at the hands of the Prussian Army, she felt a sting on her cheek, as her fiancée fiercely backhanded her across the face. She gazed in horror as she realized she had just been struck and merely whimpered as Eckhard chastised her.

"If I didn't need your bloodline to cement my legacy as the Grand Duke of Prussia, I would end your miserable existence here and now! Thank the Lord that I am a merciful man. In exchange for your life, I expect you and your family to come to heel. You will marry me, and bear my children, and you will do so with complete and utter loyalty to me and my house. Failure to do so will result in your immediate termination. Do I make myself understood?"

The girl gazed in disbelief at the retired General who she had just moments ago mocked alongside her father. The grand army of Brandenburg was no match for the overwhelming firepower that Austria and its puppets wielded. All she could do was lower her head in disgrace and accept these terms that were presented to her.

Upon seeing that his fiancée had become docile in defeat, Eckhard smiled viciously before presenting his hand to the woman, lifting her from the dirt and up to his level. He chose not to comfort the woman, for she was undeserving of such kindness. Instead, he merely brought her back to the army which were digging the graves of the fallen nobles who had dared to resist the rule of Grand Duke of Prussia, and by extension the Crown of Austria.

Martha remained in complete and utter silence as she reflected on her lot in life. Her father lie dead, her brother would succeed him and he was just a 14-year-old boy. Eckhard had won, and he would force Brandenburg to submit. While she was coming to terms with her fate, Eckhard ordered the horses to be brought forth.

It was a long journey to Marienburg, and he wanted to waste no further time here on the field of battle. Thus he climbed atop his horse, and dragged his fiancée behind him, before riding off with a contingent of household guards. There was still much to be done, and the war for German Unification meant that he would be dreadfully busy supporting his master.

While Eckhard achieved a minor victory in Brandenburg, the same could be said for Berengar far to the west. Luxembourg had attempted to pull back its armies to its capital to fight a brutal urban campaign against their invaders. In doing so, they had given orders to destroy any infrastructure of value, and to burn the fields in their retreat.

Despite this, the Blitzkrieg of Austria's armies quickly overran the units who were to engage in such scorched earth tactics. Resulting in massive losses to the Luxembourg war machine. Currently, Berengar and his host were twenty-five miles from the capital of the Duchy. Victory was near, and he had fought no battle larger than a minor skirmish.

As the Austrian Army enclosed around the capital of his enemy, Hartman stood within the confines of his palace, fervently biting his nails in panic. By his side was his advisor Hilmar, who read from a pamphlet which had been widely distributed across the Duchy of Luxembourg.

"King Berengar von Kufstein has declared that he shall grant a pardon to any soldier who lays down his arms and surrenders to the South German Confederation. However, this only applies to those who refuse to follow the orders given by Hartman von Luxembourg. Any man caught engaging in acts of sabotage, slaughter, or scorched earth tactics will be sentenced to death and immediately executed by firing squad upon capture. Austrian victory is inevitable. Do not waste your lives in defense of a bastard!"

When Hartman heard these words, he could hardly contain the wrath in his heart, however somehow he endured. In doing so, he calmed himself with some heavy breathing before asking in his mind.

"How many of my soldiers have defected to the enemy?"

Hilmar sighed heavily before responding to this question.

"There is no way to no for certain, but from what little intelligence I have gathered, it is likely that thousands of our soldiers have surrendered without a fight. If we take the whole Norther Alliance into

account, it is highly probable that the numbers are in the tens of thousands... To put it simply, our soldiers are well aware of firepower that Austria wields, and are unwilling to walk into a slaughter."

Hilmar failed to inform the man that these numbers were reported to him via his contact with Austrian Royal Intelligence. After all, to do so was to reveal that he was a spy, and thus he kept his mouth shut rather than expose himself.

Hartman did not want to hear these words, and struggled to remain calm. Knowing that the Austrian Army was nearly on the borders of his capital, Hartman made a decision that he never thought would be necessary.

"Very well, Berengar is about to arrive here in Luxembourg, when he does, we will fight him until the bitter end. However, I know how vengeful the man can be. Because of what I have done to his sister, he will surely inflict greater suffering on my blood relatives. Tell my sisters to pack only what is necessary and immediately depart to the Duchy of Burgundy. They will be safe there while I make my last stand!"

Hilmar immediately bowed in respect before responding to these orders.

"Very well. If there is nothing else, I will get to that immediately."

Hartman remained silent and merely waved the man off, where he quickly proceeded down the halls and into the Duke's eldest sister's room. Hartman was a bastard, and because his father had sired no trueborn sons, he was legitimized in life, and made his successor. However, this did not mean that the old man did not have any progeny with his wife. In fact, all of Hartman's sisters were half-sisters that were a product of his father's legitimate marriage.

Thus, they were all elder sisters, and when Hilmar knocked upon the door, all three of them answered with anxious expressions. When the Duke's advisor spotted the three beautiful young women gathered in one place, he bowed his head to them before relaying their brother's orders.

"Your Brother, the Duke of Luxembourg, had ordered for you to pack up only what is necessary and depart within the hour to the Duchy of Burgundy. He has brokered an agreement with the Duke of Burgundy for you to remain safe there while he oversees the defense of the city."

The three women glanced at each other for a few moments in silence before nodding their heads in agreement. They knew it was no longer safe within the city of Luxembourg, and thus quickly got to task preparing for their departure.

As for Hilmar, immediately after informing these three girls of their task, he departed from the Palace and headed into the city intending to visit a local tavern. Despite the imminent siege, this tavern continued to serve drinks to anyone who will drink them. His reason for visiting this location was because there was an important contact for him to meet with, and he figured that woman would be interested in the Bastard of Luxembourg's attempt to get his sisters to safety.

Thus, Hilmar sat down at his table, and ordered two drinks, while he waited for his contact to arrive. He would remain sitting in the tavern, drinking for several hours before the mature beauty that was his contact arrived.