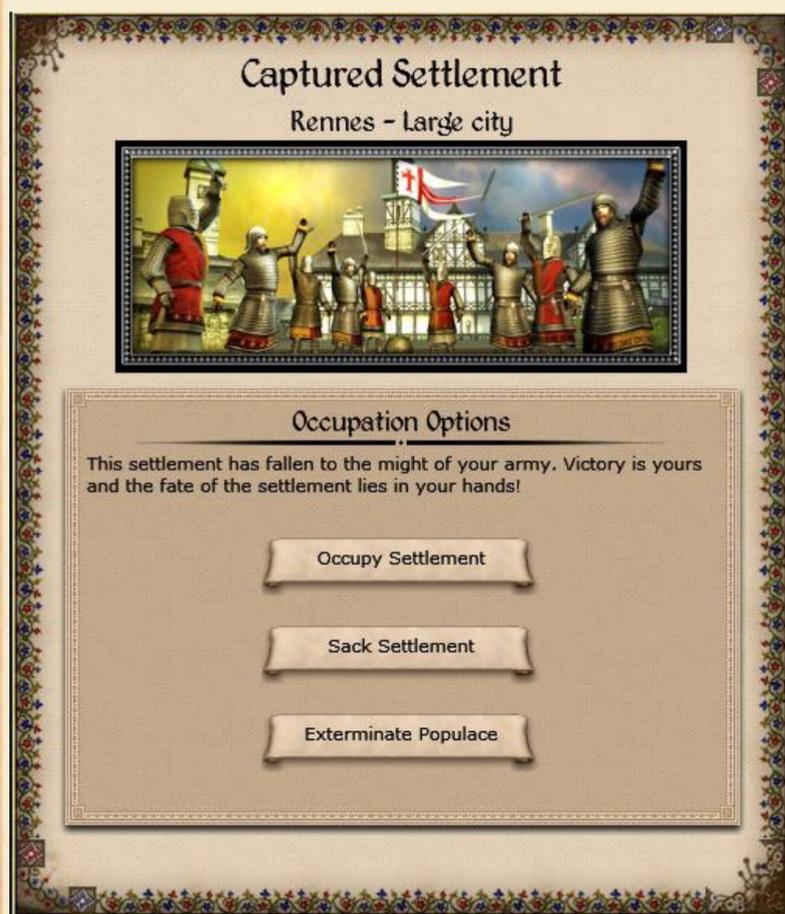


Chapter 27

The messenger walked through the streets of Rennes, smiling at the sight of hanging Scottish banners. The damaged walls were all ready being repaired, and he noted with approval the heads of Captain Vaggio and Marco on pikes on the castle walls.

He passed through the castle walls after being challenged by a guard, and moved into the castle proper to the court-room where all business was heard by the current Governor of Rennes, a city once French, then English, then Scottish, then Milanese.

Now Scottish again.



Adam Canmore's men had successfully recaptured the city where his father, Alexander, had died in glory and honor on the battlefield. The presence of the Milanese in Rennes had been an inexcusable insult to the Scottish Empire and the honor of the Canmore name. Captain Stuart had wiped that insult clear, and Adam Canmore had ordered the messenger to bring to Stuart his appreciation, an offer of adoption into the Canmore family.

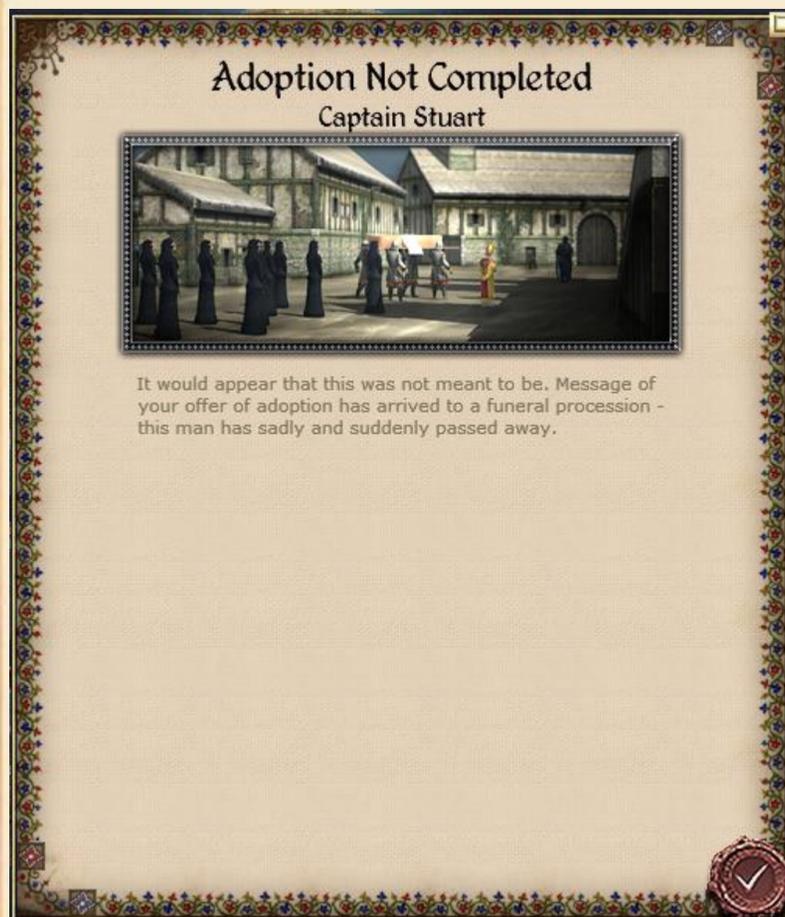
"I have come to see Captain Stuart," the messenger grunted as he stepped into Castle Rennes court, "I bear an important gift from Prince Adam Canmore."

"I'm afraid Captain Stuart is unavailable," replied the harried looking official sitting staring at the long line of petitioners that had been forced to wait on the Royal Messenger, "He'll nae be back."

"Where in heaven is he then?" snapped the messenger, "I must see him."

"Then find yeself a good Priest or a cheap assassin," muttered the official, "Captain Stuart died from a pox a week ago, after enjoying himself a deal too much following the recapture of Rennes."

The messenger closed his eyes and sighed, not at the news but the implications. Now he'd have to return to Adam Canmore to tell him his will had been thwarted, and that was something the harsh (and paranoid) ruler did not take kindly to.



At Bruges, Captain Mac Bethad walked along the walls staring at the sieging Milanese. Milan's armies had been a constant presence on the former French Coast since the death of Prince Alexander, and Scotland had continued to throw them back again and again. Mac Bethad longed to take his men and march on Milan's own cities, to throw the daily lives of their citizens into disarray, but orders from Adam Canmore made it clear that he would not leave the coastal cities undefended and risk giving Milan - or even England - the chance to launch an offensive onto the Scottish mainland. Even the recent news of the breaking of the Milanese/English alliance had not altered his stance. Milan's frustration at their failure to take Bruges and Caen being taken out on England, which in turn blamed them for not working together from Antwerp to concentrate on Bruges. Mac had to admit that if he'd been in their shoes, he would have done just that and guaranteed the sacking of Bruges, but the Milanese and English were both too proud, and now any chance they'd had to overcome Scotland's defenses were gone.

Alliance in Tatters

Milan
England



These two great powers once stood together, ready to die for one another's honour... now their people stand apart, estranged by mutual distrust and varied beliefs. Will they reconcile their differences, or let them lead them to war?



"Enough!" snapped Mac, clapping his hands together, "If we cannae take the fight to Milan in their own cities, we'll take the fight to them outside ours. Assemble the men, let's kill some Milanese!"

Outside the city, Captain Dego watched men swarming onto the distant walls and bit back a curse. The Scottish were preparing to launch an assault on them, well before his own men had a chance to build their siege equipment and await the arrival of reinforcements. The Scottish inside the city far outnumbered them; they'd laid siege more to keep them from reinforcing Caen than anything else. Now the Scottish were coming out to fight, and they'd had to choose a stormy day with rain in the air to do it.

"Pull back men!" he called, "Get into formation and stay out of Crossbow reach, I'll warrant those men on the walls are even now loading up to kill from afar! If they want to fight us, they'll have to come out of their city and meet us on the field like men!"





The Milanese lined up in formation as far from the city walls as they could get while still posing a threat to the Scottish. Deigo smiled, now the Scottish would HAVE to come out onto the field to face them, and he was confident he could put his own Crossbowmen to good use to thin down their superior numbers. He smiled as he saw the gate to the city open, then frowned as he saw what was coming through.... catapults.

"Shit," he grunted, "Get forward and kill the operators before they can fire on us!"

"But sir!" gasped his second, "The crossbowmen on the walls will cut our men down li-"

"That catapult will blow us into Hell if we don't! Now GO!"





Captain Deگو watched the few surviving crossbowmen routing, charging past their countrymen and disappearing into the forest in terror after being slaughtered by a mixture of crossbow bolts and catapult fire.

"Now men!" ordered Captain Mac Bethad, "Teach the bastards that are left they should follow the example of those other craven dogs!"





"This is ridiculous!" hissed Deigo, "We're being slaughtered, RETREAT! RETREAT!"



Mac pulled up short as he watched the surviving Milanese disappear into the forest, feeling grim satisfaction at his victory. But then the old anger returned, what use were these victories if Adam Canmore would not let them off their leash and take war to the Milanese?



Ian Mensies bowed before his King inside the command tent pitched in the harsh desert, ready to present his report. He carried no papers or messages, only Fearghus Campbell ever held physical copies of their intelligence, and even then only rarely. All in the Scottish Spy Network had been taught to present their messages orally and only ever to an authorised figure, usually Fearghus himself.

This was Mensies first meeting with the new King, and he eyed the man up carefully, being sure not to be seen to do so. Domnall looked stern and uncompromising, but his eyes moved too rapidly, he shifted too quickly between camaraderie and paternalism. He was acting the King, but he had not settled into his role yet, and one thing was for sure, he was no Edward Canmore.

"Yerevan holds a garrison of just over 1500 men," Mensies was telling his King, "Led by the Captain of the Archers, Suleymish. They have roughly 400 archers to stand the walls, and a large number of spearmen to stand at any breach of the gate and choke it with the corpses of cavalry. There are some mounted lancers, but not enough to make any great difference and the rest of the numbers are made up in peasants who at best will provide momentary resistance to our men."

"They have more men than us," grunted Domnall, "But the quality of our own far surpasses theirs. The important thing is that we are encroaching close on the diminishing borders of the Turkish Empire, and we must be careful not to draw them into aggression with us. Yet."

Ian nodded, noting that Domnall was talking aloud more to himself than the Spy, but was still talking out loud. Edward Canmore would never have exposed his inner thoughts like this; Domnall still had much to learn.

Domnall noted that the grey-haired spy was still present and dismissed him, returned to his maps and drawn outlines of the city. This was hardly his first battle; he'd ridden with Edward and Edmund enough times and killed many men at their side. But for the first time he was to LEAD a battle, and though he was convinced of the soundness of his battleplan, he still felt nervous butterflies. What if he hadn't thought of something? His Father and Uncle Edward had always been there before to prompt him in the right direction if he forgot something, but now there was only him and advisers that were no more experienced than he.

This would be his first true test.

"Trebuchets, smash in the gate and wipe their archers of the walls!" ordered Domnall as his men lined up before the walls of Yerevan, "I dinnae want any Scotsman to die this day unless the Rebel facing him is close enough to smell the ale on his breath!"

No one laughed at the joke and he silently cursed, remembering how well his Uncle Edward had handled such pre-battle speeches. He himself had always gotten on well enough with the men, but since becoming King his own natural predilection for solitude had seen him spend less time with them, and maybe they'd taken it as an insult? Regardless, the time had come for battle, and he must put all his concentration into that, not whether the men liked him or not.







As Turkopole Archers rode in circles before the wall and let stream their arrows, Domnall only felt his tension grow. So far all was going exactly as he'd planned, but what if he'd missed something? Was there something he hadn't thought of? He pushed the thought back and ordered the infantry forward to wipe out the last surviving archers on the shattered walls.



The Rebels began to retreat, charging deeper into the city followed by the baying Scotsmen, and Domnall's frown deepened. What if they had Ballista in there? Or Catapults? Or a reserve force that could cut his infantry off and wipe them out? He should have thought of these things earlier and prepared his men for the eventuality, dammit! Uncle Edward would have, now he just knew that the cry was about to go up that his men were being slaugh-

"They've routed!" came the cry from within the city, and Domnall shook his head clear of his dark thoughts and spurred his horse forward to observe the final extermination of the rebels holding Yerevan, and his first true victory. He smiled, maybe things were going to be okay after all?



Things were getting bad.

Domnall sat his seat... throne, he corrected himself, sat his throne in Edessa and stared with disbelief at his brother.

"I thought ye'd be pleased!" Aodh whined, "Caesarea is in Scottish hands now!"

"Ye have declared war against the Turks," grunted Domnall in reply, "And opened ANOTHER front in our Empire's war! Nae I am nae pleased, Aodh!"

"But the Turks are a spent force," complained Aodh, "They're all but wiped out all ready, and besides.... they're heathens."

"Sultan Tutush was also a highly respected, formidable leader," spat Domnall, "And when ye ordered 430 Scotsmen to attack Caesarea and Tutush's barely 70 men.... and then lost over 200 men doing it... ye gave the Turks' a martyr to rally around, and made us look like clumsy-footed fools in the process. Now we must look to the North for an attack from the Turks, deal with rebels to the North-east and who knows how many Mongols still licking their wounds to the East. To top it off, on the other edge of the world England and Milan still provide a thorn in our sides.... are ye mad Aodh?"





Aodh's face flared with anger but he held his tongue, he'd always known his place. A loved son, Aodh was nevertheless the youngest of Edmund's children and one that nothing was expected of. His love of the Church had meant all had expected him to become a Priest or Missionary, but Scotland's ex-communication in his youth had made that impossible. Domnall dismissed him angrily and then stared at Captain Kirk, the brash young officer who had captured Caesarea at Aodh's command and probably rightfully expected a commendation for doing so.

"Why did ye follow the order, Kirk," grunted Domnall.

"Prince Aodh made an order, sir, I did nae question it," replied Kirk, his face earnest. He was a man of promise, if a little prone to unconventional tactics, but Domnall had thought he was smarter than this... to declare war on the Turks?

"Nae, ye did nae question it, for such is nae ye place," muttered Domnall, "Please go, and take my thanks for performing ye duty for Scotland."

Kirk hesitated, unsure if he was being complimented or run down, then bowed and made his exit, leaving Domnall brooding on his throne. Domnall knew exactly why Aodh had decided on this course of madness, of course, because he hadn't realized that Domnall's position was so much higher than his now. In his mind, with Edward and Edmund dead, he was in a position of authority *almost* as high as Domnall and Nectan's, much as it had been for all his life. He only recognized Domnall as King of Scotland intellectually, he didn't yet truly understand what that meant. The same went for Kirk, if Domnall had been Edward he never would have followed Aodh's command without first checking with the King, and Aodh would never have come up with the idea in the first place. Now Domnall was left to clean up the mess, because in the eyes of his youngest brother, he was no Edward Canmore.

War!!!
Scotland
The Turks



We have entered open warfare with these people, they are now our mortal enemies. Though reconciliation may be possible, conquering them would be far more glorious!



Adam Canmore read the letter with a bemused grin, how precious of his cousin to presume to order him about.

Adam,

Dear Cousin, I regret that this should be the first correspondence between us, I have been remiss in not remaining in contact with you since you returned to Edinburgh with Uncle Alexander those many years ago.

I write in regards to the current standings of the Scottish Empire in our ancestral lands. Your father did great work for Scotland in throwing back the English and then taking control of their lands, forging a United Kingdom where once were four. My Father and our Uncle, the late King, were both saddened by Alexander's death, but I am saddened further by the lack of progress since Alexander's death. You have recaptured Rennes but done little else to answer the affront of Milanese aggression, and England still exists at Antwerp, castrated as they are.

The time has come to teach Milan the price of challenging Scottish power, Adam, and I am counting on you to spearhead the campaign to wipe them from the face of the Earth.

Your cousin,

King Domnall Canmore.

"Do you think it wise to ignore a direct order from the King, darling?" Cassandra asked as Adam read out his reply to her, a long and boring letter thanking Domnall for his letter but noting that the political situation on this edge of the world was far different from the desert stretches of Egypt where the next closest nation was the sand-dwelling, backwater Moors. He went on to assure Domnall that Milan would be dealt with in his own way at a time when it was most to Scotland's benefit.

"Bah, he never gives a direct order, only makes suggestions," grunted Adam contemptuously, "For all Edward's faults, he always was to the point. I used to beat Domnall Canmore about the ears in play, and I would do the same if he was here as a full grown man!"

Cassandra stared at the warty, pot-bellied, pale-skinned man in front of her and imagined Domnall as some sort of tall, leathery-skinned, taut and muscular warrior astride a horse. She chuckled inwardly, even as she murmured soft appreciation for Adam's bravery and might, and drew her "lover" down into the bed to show him how much he "truly" aroused her.

"Besides," chuckled Adam as he surrendered to his Mistress' charms, "It's nae as if he was Edward Canmore."

Domnall read the reply from Adam Canmore and gritted his teeth furiously. The man had dismissed out of hand what had been all but a direct order.... the temerity of him, the gall!

But he knew why, because Adam didn't see that Domnall had the authority to give him orders. To Adam, Domnall was still the young boy that Adam had beaten up at play in the courtyard at Cairo, not the King of Scotland, and certainly not Edward Canmore.

He wished, not for the last time, that he could go to Antioch and get advice from Nectan, which was surely what Edward had intended when he'd named Domnall his successor and Nectan the new heir to the throne. But Antioch was quarantined due to an outbreak of plague, and their only communication was via messages shouted down from the walls to messengers who then either took the message to its intended destination, or to another city where a bird could be sent on to the recipient. But he knew what Nectan's advice would be, what he himself had all ready decided to do. He'd come to the decision after several weeks of agonized thinking, looking for flaws in his plans, trying to find ways to minimise risk. Finally he'd come to the conclusion that it was a gamble he'd have to take, and laughed, knowing that Nectan would have come to the same conclusion himself almost instantaneously.

So he'd called for the man currently standing before him, a man who had always terrified him as a boy and still made him uneasy today. A man who - to his credit - stood before Domnall and was openly regarding him critically, rather than behind shielded eyes like everyone else. Domnall knew that the man found him wanting compared to Edward Canmore, but at least he was honest about it.... and he also didn't seem to care that Domnall wasn't Edward.

"I can guess why ye've called me here, my King," Fearghus Campbell - Master of Spies - said, a smile on his old face. He was the last of a generation almost gone from the world now, one that remembered a time when Scotland did not rule Egypt, "Ye need my help to gain the respect ye think ye need to rule this Empire."

Domnall nodded, ignoring the suggestion that what he was thinking was wrong, and leaned forward to whisper his reply, despite the fact they were the only ones present in his chambers.

"Aye, I want ye to find me what is left of the Mongols, and I want ye help to send them straight to hell."

Chapter 28

At Caesarea, Captain Hew walked the walls grimly, looking constantly West towards the army he knew was inevitably coming. Word had reached him yesterday of a most unlikely alliance, with England pledging what strength, influence and money it still possessed to help the Turks in their battle with Scotland.

He cursed softly, a familiar trait to the guardsmen also standing the walls. Though not as crude as his cousin Malcolm, Captain Hew had been known to turn the sternest Highlander's face red with embarrassment when he got a good head of steam going. He hated the English, a hatred passed down by his Father and Grandfather who had still remembered a time when England not only stood as a threat to Scotland, but dominated them and threatened to turn them into vassals. Now the thought that the English could play any part - no matter how small - in his own possible death drove him to distraction.

Reinforcements were allegedly on their way from Acre on the coast, but were delayed by being forced to sail past Adana. The Papal States had refused a request for military access to their lands, and that was ANOTHER thing that was irritating Captain Hew, they wanted to pass through Adana to kill heathens, for God's sake, what could be more Christian than that?

So Captain Hew spent another night walking the walls waiting for a Turkish army he knew must eventually come to challenge the less than 250 men that made up the Caesarea Garrison.



Captain Aed blinked with surprise as his scout gave his report. They'd been following the trail of the Turks through the dry hills for several hours, knowing that the Turks must have been aware of their presence for some time. Aed had expected the young Turkish General - Baydara ad-Dawlah - to be leading a large force to lay siege to Caesarea, but now his scout was reporting they numbered less than 300. They must have believed they were a match man for man with the Scottish garrison, and now that arrogance was going to be the end of them.

"They've pushed for the high ground, Captain," the scout was finishing his report, "They must be aware of our superior numbers, and seeking a position to hold us off."

"Aye," nodded Aed, dismissing the scout then stalking up to his second to order the men to prepare for the battle, "High ground or nae, Baydara will nae see the walls of Caesarea again."



At Aed's order, the Scottish archers charged up the hill, a move that would normally spell death for an attacking army. But they were archers, it didn't matter if they were tired when they reached their destination, because they merely had to stand in place and fire their arrows. He watched them moving into place, sending his Spearmen marching at a less intensive pace after them as Baydara's archers opened fire on Aed's men. The Scots returned fire with blazing arrows, designed to force back the Turks and open the space between the two sides, which would give the Spearmen space to move once they arrived.



"Focus on the javelins!" roared Aed as he moved with his men past their archers, knowing that the Turkish Javelin would be able to fight hand to hand far more effectively than the Turkish Archers. His men followed orders and rained flaming arrows down on the Turks as Aed led his men forward towards them at a quick run, and the combination of flaming death and hundreds of roaring Scots was enough to break the Turks and send them running past and through Baydara's bodyguard as the Turkish Royal screamed at them for their cowardice.



"We can still hold them back!" screamed Baydara as they ran, then turned and saw....



"No...." whispered Baydara as he watched the Scots swarm like locusts over his men. For a moment he felt a bitter pang of regret for all the things he knew now he would never experience. He wasn't even 20, and there was no doubt that his life had come to an end. His sword grip slackened and his horse - sensing his mood - grunted and shifted beneath him.... and then he tightened his grip and gritted his teeth. Anger had replaced his depression, how dare these aliens come to his land, kill his Sultan, take his cities and rape his women.

"DEATH AND HONOR!" screamed Baydara, and charged into the Scottish.





As Captain Aed watched his men mop up the last of the Turks he allowed a smile to cross his face. He'd succeeded, and now Caesarea was safe.

Caesarea was doomed.

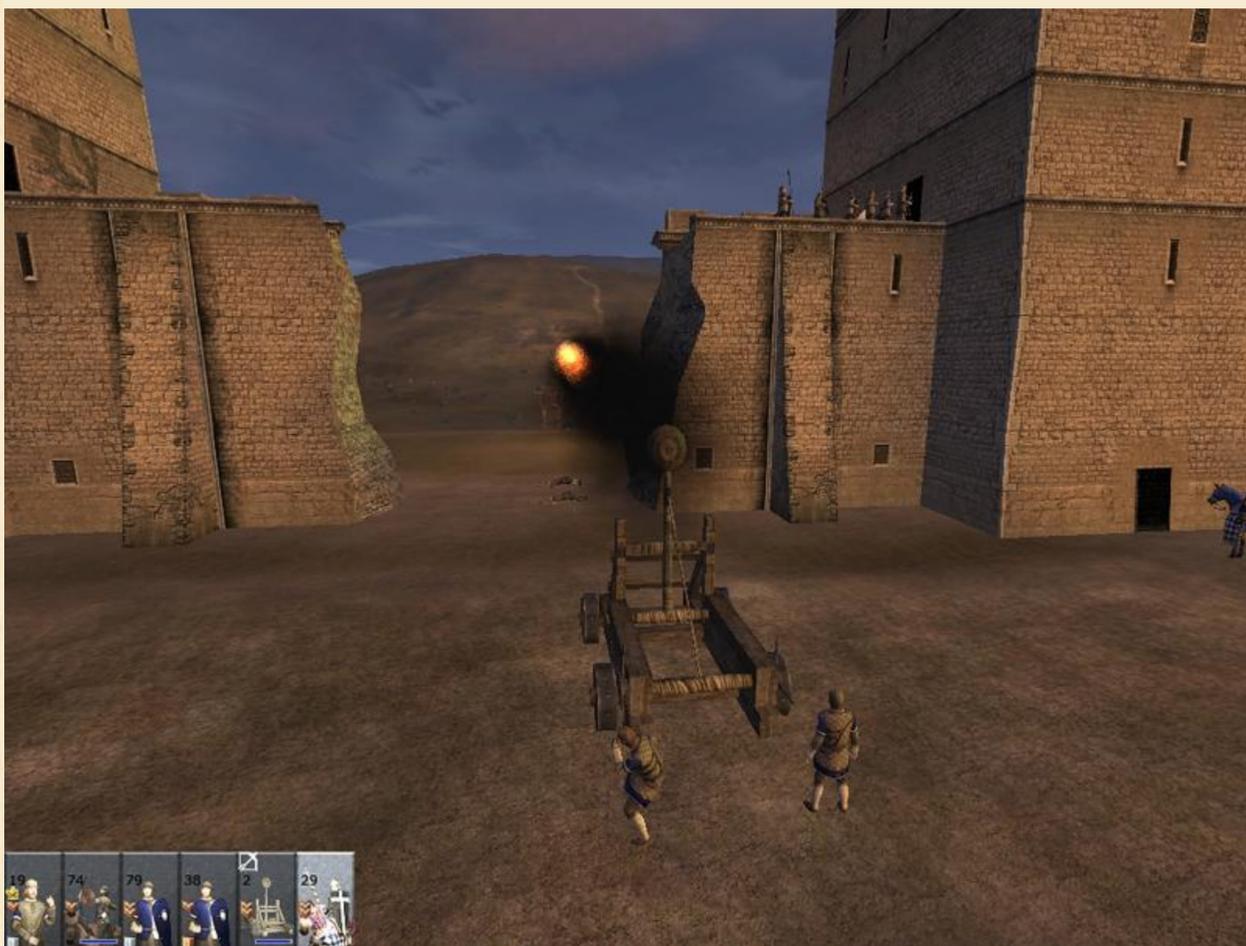
Captain Hew stood on the walls in the deepening gloom, watching the massive force of Turks approaching. They'd arrived earlier in the day, 1500 strong and intent on recapturing Caesarea from the Scottish at any costs. He cursed Captain Aed, where was the fool? Surely he'd landed by now and pushed his men to come to Caesarea's aid.... how could he not have arrived!?!

The Turks had a large number of spearmen, far outnumbering Hew's own, but inside the city walls they were safe from Turkish spears. The trouble was, the Turks had brought ballistae, catapults, siege towers and ladders with them.

"Hold ye places here on the walls, lads," called Hew from the tower post rising above the stone wall, "Those pox-ridden horse-fuckers will find we dinnae abandon the walls so eas-"



"Oh shite, abandon the wall, lads!" Hew cried down to his men. They started running, catapult blast after catapult blast smashing into the wall and breaking it apart, several men knocked off of their feet and to their deaths on the ground far below. Hew cursed angrily and then roared down to his own catapult, served by two crotchety old bastards who should have long since retired... but in a siege, you took what you could get, "They've made ye a hole, lads, take a shot back at them yeself!"



The wall on the other side of the gate tower shattered and buckled as the spearmen stationed on it rushed off of it to avoid death, and Hew closed his eyes and sighed in resignation as he saw the greater bulk of the Turkish army begin to move forward against them.

"Ye bastards in the towers, fire! Burn down their goddamned siege weapons! Ye bastards on the ground, move into those holes on the wall and hold ye ground! Keep them from entering the city!"





"Aye, that's the stuff!" laughed Hew as he watched the Turkish siege weapons burn, "Now hold the bastards at the walls, damn ye! Let them die throwing themselves against our front lines! Dinnae let them into open space, take away their numbers advantage! We can do it, lads! We can hold this fucking city!"

The Turks rode directly at the two holes in the walls on either side of the city's main gate, and found Scotsmen waiting to meet them. The two sides clashed, and the Scots fought with ferocity born of the knowledge that they had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. They either held the city, or they all died.





"Hold them! Hold them, God damn ye!" screamed Hew as the Turks kept coming, pressing forward with unrelenting pressure, pushing back the Scotsmen no matter how hard they tried to hold their places.... and then the dam broke, the Turks suddenly flooding through in massive numbers, bodily slamming the Scottish aside.



As the dawn broke over the newly recaptured Turkish city of Caesarea, far from the shattered walls and piled bodies of deadly Scotsmen, nine men stood together on the edge the dry hills that spread out across the landscape as far as the eye could see.

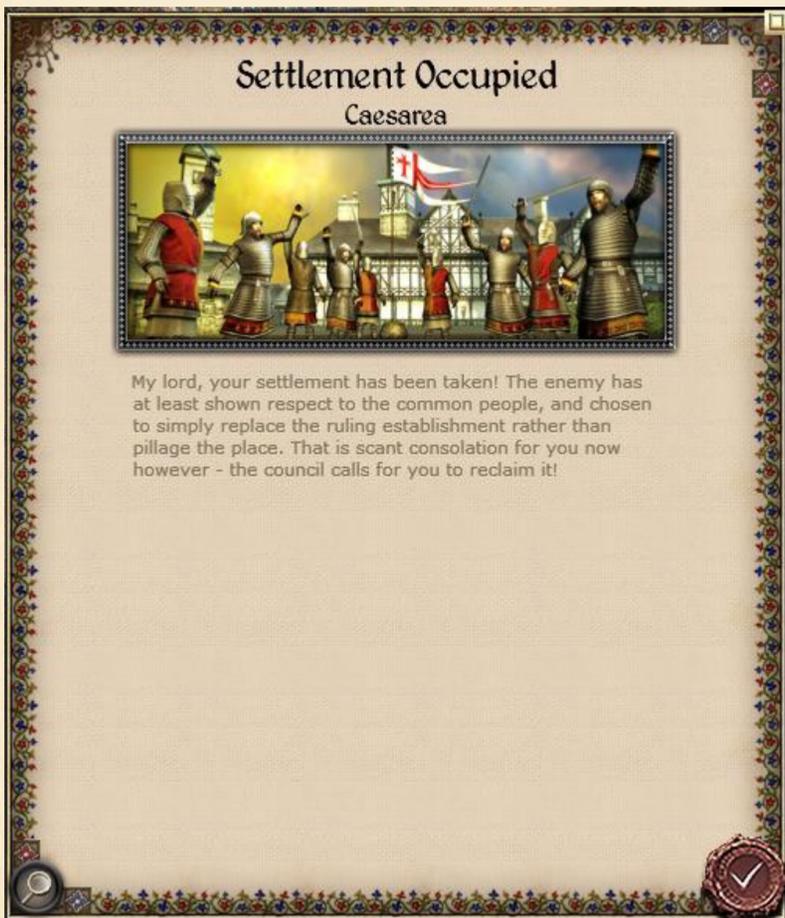
"What now, Captain?" asked one of the battered, bloody nine.

"Now? We're done, that's what," grunted Captain Hew, his armor gone and his sword a useless, notched mess, "We've lost Caesarea and we're trapped in the middle of Turkish territory. How the hell we made it out alive is God's own fucking mystery."

The nine had, in fact, crawled aching and battered from amongst the corpses of their fellow countrymen hours after the battle had ended, stripping out of their armor and moving through the dark away from the city. They'd met along the way and gathered together more out of habit than anything, but now their brief comradeship was over, and Captain Hew was giving them his final command.

"Captain Aed is out there somewhere, if ye want to try to find him and rejoin the army, more power to ye. For myself, I mean to disappear into these hills, live off the land for a time, then find my way back to some semblance of civilization in this Godforsaken land, find a lass, fuck some kids into her and try to forget I was ever a soldier."

The others gasped in surprise at his words, but Hew ignored them. They were too concerned for their own survival to worry about him, and even if they did survive against all odds and make it back to the Scottish, he doubted any one would bother trying to find him. He'd signed on as a soldier under King Edward and served him gladly, but would he risk death or worse for Domnall? Not bloody likely, Domnall was no Edward Canmore.



"I understand this lad is quite the monster," chuckled Duncan Broune as they watched the opposing army approach, "Or at least he was before he discovered the Scottish."

"He's nae to underestimated," warned Dougall Inchmertyn, "leader" of this army, though his two companions would dispute that. Duncan Broune and Rory Randall were his childhood friends, the three of them all of noble blood and distant relatives of the Scottish Royal Family, whether by adoption or by blood. They had insisted on coming with him on this mission, especially when they'd learned who had given him the order.

"Separated from the rest of his ilk he's gelded," Dougall lectured, "But given the chance to reunite with his people he could prove a real danger to Scotland."

"Aye, Duncan," laughed Rory, "Dinnae get too close, that old dog can still bite."

The "monster" in question was Khanzada Aradai the Wrathful, heir to the Mongol Empire, long since separated from the rest of the Horde following the late Prince Gawain's destruction of the Mongols in their first clash with Scotland. Dougall had received explicit instructions on what was expected of him, and put in control of a force of 1800 men. Now the first part of his instructions were complete, he'd ridden deep into the desert and found the brutal warlord Khanzada Aradai and his surviving 200 men.



Aradai sat panting with fury as he watched the approaching Skot-tish army. Since his humiliating defeat he had ridden his men deeper into the deserts so like their own homes in the East, seeking to escape attention and find a chance to rejoin the greater part of the Horde. For a long time, for all he knew Khan Chaghatai was dead and he himself was now the true leader of the Mongols, and when he'd heard that Berkei the Wrathful had laid siege to Baghdad (itself recently captured by Rebels) he'd planned to ride to join him. But now the Skot-tish had returned to plague him, and he felt the same old impotent fury that had been eating into his belly since his exile in the desert.

"Hold them at range," he growled, "Fire on them, keep your distance. We are in open desert, there is no bridge here, they can't force us into a killing corridor. Despite their numbers, we have the advantage."

If his men noted that he'd thought the same thing at their last encounter with the Skot-tish, they gave no sign. Mongol Archers fired into the air as close to 2000 Skot-tish charged down over the sand dunes towards them.



"Our archers have a longer reach than theirs," grinned Aradai fiercely, "We can hold them o-"



The trebuchet blast tore through the left side of his archers and Aradai swore angrily, watching as the others in the line turn and ran, flaming arrows bringing them down as they fled in terror. And then there was no time to concentrate on anything but killing, as the Skot-tish arrived in force.





"COME SEE HOW A TRUE MONGOL DIES!" screamed Aradai as his men found themselves facing a wall of laughing, taunting Scot-tish, "YOU CAN KILL ME! BUT THE HORDE WILL NEVER DIE!"

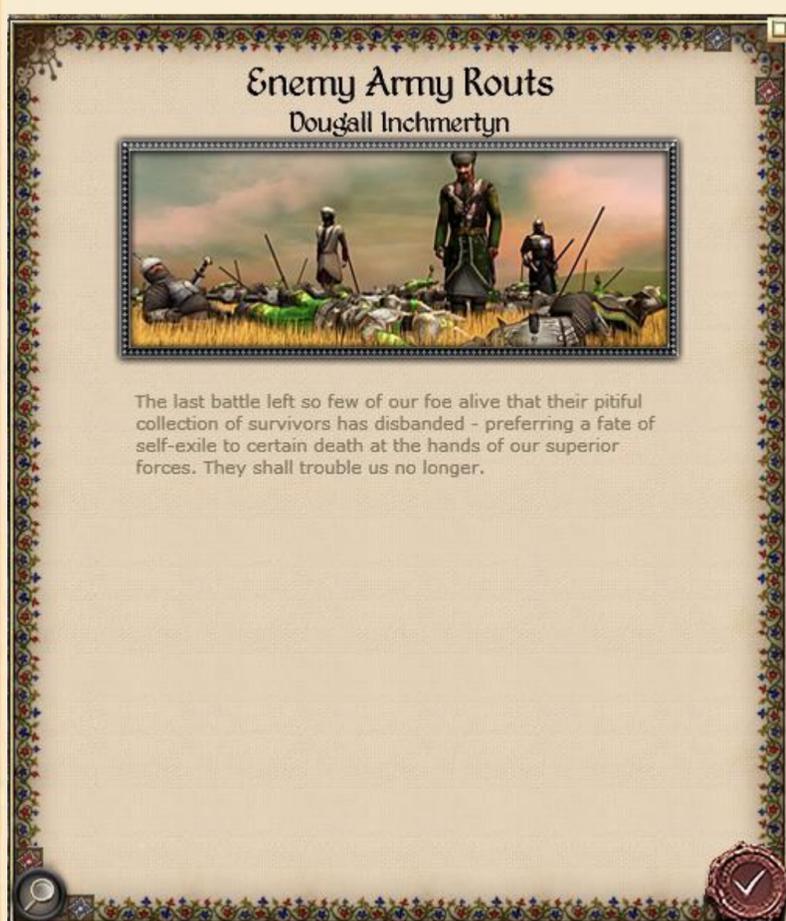
And then he rode crashing into the Skot-tish, lost in a red haze of fury, fury at his inevitable death, fury at Khan Chaghatai for ruining the Horde with his pathetic leadership, fury at the Skot-tish for being what he wanted the Horde to be.... and fury for the grinning, red-haired man he saw on a horse before him now, laughing with delight as he cut down Mongol's left and right. Aradai focused all his hatred and fury on this Skot-tish, and crashed his horse through the Pikemen and into the laughing man, revelling in the shock he saw in the man's face when he realized how close he was, saw him mouth the words, "He bites," before he crashed his sword down into the man's head, even as dozens of pikes plunged into the side of him and his horse, and Aradai the Wrathful was no more.

And neither was Duncan Broune.





An hour later, Dougall stood amongst the dead bodies considering his "victory". Aradai's death and the destruction of his personal Horde had been inevitable, and necessary if all was to go according to plan. But Duncan had never been meant to accompany him, and now one childhood friend was dead and the other changed perhaps forever. Rory had stared aghast at Duncan's dead body after the battle was ended, then emptied his belly and staggered away. He sat his horse now away from the stink of the dead bodies in the desert, staring out at the seemingly endless expanse lost in thought, unusual for the usually bright and cheery noble.



But Dougall had no time to be melancholy, or allow his friend to wallow in sorrow. He had fulfilled the first part of his instructions by locating and killing Aradai, but he still had much work to do. He pulled himself up onto his horse and quietly instructed his commanders to prepare the men to march.

They had to ride North, and quickly.

Domnall Canmore stood in his command tent and sucked in a deep breath, held it and then let it out, trying to relieve himself of his tension.

"Ye're taking a gamble, my King," muttered Fearghus Campbell, and Domnall forced himself not to jump. He would never be used to the way the man could just appear as if at will in his supposedly closely guarded tent, but he could at least mask his reaction... though he doubted he was fooling Fearghus. He turned to the grey-haired old spy, who was again eyeing him critically, the only person in the Kingdom who would do so openly. It was strange, when Domnall had just been one of Prince Edmund's sons, his few encounters with Fearghus had shown that the man perfectly masked his own feelings. Not for the first time, Domnall wondered why Fearghus was allowing him to see what the other man was thinking... on the surface at least.

"A necessary one," he replied, "I must risk disaster now to ensure my reign is not plagued by those who think my power is anything but complete."

"And ye hope to force the men to love ye," noted Fearghus smoothly, "To see ye as another Edward Canmore.... but Domnall, ye are nae Edward Canmore."

Domnall threw back his head and laughed heartily at Fearghus' choice of words, a genuine and happy laugh that caused a reaction in Fearghus Campbell that few had ever seen - surprise. Still chuckling, Domnall turned and exited his command tent, leaving Fearghus to ponder his King's strange behavior... and then smile.

The men watched as Domnall rode his horse past the lines, inspecting the men as they stood prepared for what must come. Their King had instructed them several weeks earlier that they were pulling back from their new holding in Turkey to have a final reckoning with an old enemy. News of Baghdad's fall has recently reached them and most expected that Domnall meant to recapture the city that had once been Scottish and then gifted to the Papacy. Instead, they'd discovered that the surviving Mongol Horde had been located in the central desert between Baghdad and Acre, and that Domnall meant to clash with them.

Such thought was madness, the Mongol Horde was a ranged cavalry-based army that moved in huge numbers and attacked from a distance. Scotland's victories over them had been engineered by Prince Gawain and then King Edward Canmore's use of the land to bring the Mongols to them on a battlefield of their choosing. Now Domnall proposed to take a force of roughly 1400 Scots and meet a force of Mongols that was at best the same size as them in the open desert... in the Mongol's own preferred choice of battlefield. Already this campaign was secretly being called Domnall's folly, and in many of the coastal cities bets were being taken on how many Scottish men would die for Domnall to realize it, would Domnall lose his own life in fact in learning the lesson?

In the distance the Horde could be seen approaching, a rising dust cloud in the far desert horizon. There had been no question that the Mongols would come for them, they would be eager to avenge their previous losses against the Scottish, especially in this open desert setting. The gathered men turned and looked at each other uneasily as Domnall continued to ride up and down the lines, saying nothing. Would he at least not have a word to say for the men who were about to die for his madness?

Khan Chaghatai and Orda the Merciless grinned at each other as they rode together towards the waiting Skot-tish. Finally they had a chance to strike a blow against the hated Skot-tish, and their scouts reported that they were led by their new Warlord, Domnall Khan who was also Kanmor Khan, according to the conflicting reports of their intelligence. The strange way these Skot-tish assigned names was just one of the many infuriating things about them.

"Will you lead the main force, Chaghatai?" asked Orda, casting his intense gaze onto his Khan. The man was a simpering fool and an embarrassment to the Horde, but in the Horde's current state Orda had no desire to challenge the man's leadership or have him killed and risk a crippling battle with Berkei or even Aradai over who would take the mantle of leadership. So perhaps he could embarrass the fool into leading the charge against the Skot-tish and do them all a favor by dying?

"I will indeed," grinned Chaghatai, "I've longed for this day, Orda, a chance to show these Skot-tish how a **true** Mongol fights war, not like those other idiots who threw away their men with foolish vanity."

Orda held his tongue and simply smiled, signalling silently to his own men to pull back their forces and let Chaghatai's take the vanguard.

"Oh this will be wonderful," grinned Chaghatai, "I only hope that this Domnall Khan lives long enough to see Berkei bring his 700 up on their flank and wipe all the Skot-tish out to a man."

Domnall rode his horse to the direct centre of his men and looked them over.



"Lads.... I have a problem!" cried Domnall, and the sudden breaking of his silence after so long riding back and forth before them immediately caught all of their attention. Satisfied that all eyes were on him, Domnall pushed ahead with his planned words, feeling them coming more smoothly and comfortably than he could have possibly hoped, "My problem is that I'm nae Edward Canmore!"

"I was named King after the death of my Uncle, and that night I looked in the mirror and I said to myself, "Ach, Domnall, ye're nae Edward Canmore."

His men listened, perplexed.



"I took Yerevan, my first victory in a battle I personally led! I revelled in my victory, until I heard some soldiers discussing the battle and muttering that there was any number of things I could have done better.... but what could ye expect.... I'm nae Edward Canmore!"

Some of the soldiers exchanged concerned glances.



"Trouble by such thoughts, I returned to Mosul to plan my next campaign and slept in my Uncle's old bedchamber. When I awoke, an elderly servant who once served the late King stood staring at me confused.... do ye ken what he said, lads?"

"Ye're.... nae Edward Canmore?" asked the men hesitantly and out of synch, but still together as Domnall has hoped. He smiled.

"AYE! YE'RE NAE EDWARD CANMORE!" laughed Domnall, "So I did what any good Scotsman would do in such a situation.... I got pissed!"

The men laughed despite themselves, and were relieved to see Domnall seemed to share their humor.



"Oh it was glorious, lads," chuckled Domnall, "I found a group of old veterans that I'd once travelled with as part of my Uncle and Father's aborted Moorish Campaign. We sat and drank together in the castle, and drank and drank and talked of times past and battles fought. And then I stepped outside to relieve myself, and heard one of the veterans tell another that he was impressed with how much I'd drunk. Do ye ken what the other replied, lads?"

"YE'RE NAE EDWARD CANMORE!" laughed the men, and Domnall laughed with them.

"Aye, and that was the final straw! So I said my goodbyes, and I returned to my bedchambers, and ordered a woman be sent up to me to cheer my bad mood. A comely lass answered the call, small but well rounded, and willing and able to please in any number of ways.

There were wolf-whistles and cheers from the men.



"Aye, and I gave as good as I got, and when all was said and done, I asked the lass if she'd enjoyed herself. She said she had, and like all men must, I asked if I was the best she'd had? Do ye ken what she replied, lads?"

"YE'RE NAE EDWARD CANMORE!" roared the men and Domnall together, huge smiles on their faces, their bodies shaking with laughter, tears of mirth running down their faces.

"Aye lads!" he cried as the laughter started to subside, making sure his voice cut over the joking and excited babble coming from his soldiers, their earlier tension now completely gone, "And it was then I realized it was true, I'm nae Edward Canmore. I am Domnall Canmore, son of Edmund, nephew of Edward!"

He turned and pointed at the approaching Horde, growing closer and closer now though still not close enough for the battle to begin, "Those bastards there ken I'm nae Edward Canmore, so they're coming to fight, because they think they can beat me! But I have news for them, lads, and maybe news for ye too. Maybe I'm nae Edward Canmore, and maybe the fact I'm Domnall Canmore does nae mean anything yet.... but I'll tell you what does. I'm a Scotsman, lads! I'm the King of the hardest drinking, toughest fighting, meanest, strongest and most stubborn race of men that ever lived on God's earth! I'm a Scotsman, I'm leading 1400 Scotsmen in battle, and those bow-legged, oily haired bastards coming here have no idea of the hell that awaits them on this battlefield! Let's show the world that it wasn't Edward Canmore that made Scotland great, it was Scotland that made Edward Canmore great!"

Fearghus Campbell watched as the assembled Scottish army roared with approval, completely caught up in the spell that Domnall had weaved.

"Ye'd make ye Father proud," Fearghus smiled, "Good luck to ye, lad, ye're going to need it."

Because Fearghus alone knew the full extent of Domnall's plan, and if it did not work exactly as the King had planned, another Canmore would soon be sitting the Scottish throne.

Chapter 29

Domnall Canmore was no more.

In the aftermath of the bloodbath that had been the open desert battle with the Mongols, Scotland's new King had sent word to Adam Canmore, and this time there had been no denying the order. Milan's constant sieging of Scottish lands was an insult that could be tolerated no longer, and Scottish armies had gone on the march towards the Milanese border.

The reaction from Milan was swift, as they realized the massive juggernaut that was the Scottish Empire was turning its full attention on them. Even as mighty a nation as Milan knew they could not hope to survive that, and so Cicilia Rossi, Princess of Milan was dispatched to Caen to strike a ceasefire with Morgunn the Boroundon, a young inexperienced noble that Adam had placed in charge of the invading force, his last pathetic protest over being forced onto the offensive by his orders.

Cicilia was plump and short, but her regal birth gave her an "inner" beauty that made men lust for her and certainly not her dowry. She entered the court at Caen and made an entirely proper curtsy, noting the placement of Morgunn's advisors, fellow nobles and soldiers in the crowded court. Much could be learned from where men stood or didn't stand, whether their eyes matched their words, even the way they stood.

"This bloodshed between us has become meaningless," Cicilia said with a smile after observing the usual niceties, "Let us end this warring today. I bring a formal offer of ceasefire from Duke Puccio."

"I see," grunted Morgunn, "Of course, Scotland would be happy to accept this offer."

Cicilia let a grateful smile cross her face, while inside she laughed with delight. That had been easier than she expected, an-

"With one condition," added Morgunn, causing Cicilia to frown openly before catching herself.

Morgunn snapped his finger and an advisor came forward holding a sheet of paper, which Morgunn carefully scanned. Cicilia took a quick look about the court and noted the blank faces of all present, all of them hiding any distaste or humor they found in this obvious pantomime.

"We've reviewed the cost of Milan's presence in the last several years in our lands, including the upkeep of our forces; the rebuilding of city walls and smashed buildings; the reconstruction of farms.... and the cost in the lives of our men as well. We'll accept ye offer of a ceasefire, on the condition that Milan repays these costs in full."

Cicilia frowned as the advisor handed her the sheet of paper, and she scanned through the carefully scrawled figures, detailing to the finest details expenses that could not possibly have been quantified. The figure at the bottom was.... it was outrageous!

"We cannot accept this!" she snapped angrily, diplomacy forgotten.

"Very well," muttered Morgunn, sounding bored, "If Milan's vaunted wealth cannot meet its debts, we will accept a compromise. Milan shall make itself vassal to Scotland, ye debt shall be repaid in servitude."

"Forget it!" she hissed vehemently, outraged and insulted beyond belief.... how dare these... these.... sheepfuckers! How dare they make such demands!?! "We're not interested!"

She stormed off, and the Scottish Court watched her go impassively, waiting until word had reached them that she was gone from the castle grounds.

"Now that pantomime is done with," grunted Morgunn, allowing a savage grin to cross his face, "I think it's about time we showed Milan what a real war looks like."



Scotland  At War for 15 turns  Milan

Caen
Fortress

Details & Behaviour

Relations: Abysmal
Reputation: Despicable
Power: Supreme
Wealth: 120
Religion: Catholic

Make offer

Attack faction
Give region
Make single payment
Regular tribute
Map information

Make demand

Attack faction
Give region
Make single payment
Regular tribute
Map information

Perhaps something more balanced this time?

Demeanour: Annoyed

Your offers
Accept or we will attack

Your demands
Become a vassal

Proposal Balance: Very Demanding

Make offer

Cialia Rossi

Details & Behaviour

Priorities: Peace
Reputation: Reliable
Power: Supreme
Wealth: Very Poor
Religion: Catholic

Allies & Enemies

Allies: None
Enemies:  Scotland
 Portugal
 Rebels

Current Treaties:
None

Scotland  At War for 15 turns  Milan

Caen
Fortress

Details & Behaviour

Relations: Abysmal
Reputation: Despicable
Power: Supreme
Wealth: 120
Religion: Catholic

Make offer

Ceasefire
Attack faction
Give region
Make single payment
Regular tribute
Map information

Make demand

Attack faction
Give region
Make single payment
Regular tribute
Map information
Become a vassal

Forget it, we're not interested. This is something we are simply not interested in discussing.

Demeanour: Not Interested

Cialia Rossi

Details & Behaviour

Priorities: Peace
Reputation: Reliable
Power: Supreme
Wealth: Very Poor
Religion: Catholic

Allies & Enemies

Allies: None
Enemies:  Scotland
 Portugal
 Rebels

Current Treaties:
None

Army Details

 **Morgunn the Boroundoun** Age: 20

Family member

Command 

Chivalry 

Loyalty 

Piety 

Retinue
None

Traits

- Aspiring Commander
- Siege Expert
- Drillmaster
- Marks of War
- Loyal
- Dutifully Religious
- Winning First

Maria de Parma loved Paris.

The city had once been the capital of France, until Milan tore through the once mighty Empire and took their lands, cities and people for their own. Maria had come to the city to govern it as a reward for his assistance in foiling an assassination attempt on Duke Puccio, and fallen immediately in love. The Imperial Palace held luxuries and treasures beyond any he'd ever seen, he enjoyed intellectual discourse with the philosophers who had survived the war between Milan and France and remained in the city despite its fall. Paris was the home of art, the home of music; it was truly the greatest city in the world, at least as far as Maria de Parma was concerned.

Now the Scottish were coming to take it all away from him.

Duke Puccio had initially wanted to capture the coastal cities that Scotland had won from England, and that desire had turned to obsession as Scotland continued to throw back his armies again and again. As a result, the garrisons of Milan's cities were seriously undermanned, and now the Scottish had marched in large numbers to punish Puccio's obsession.



Maria had organized his few men as best he could, arranging the bulk of them onto the thick walls of the great city and the rest stations through the narrow streets of the city itself. He would negate their numbers advantage as best he could, hoping that he could pick off their numbers as they approached the wall, and the men could hold off those scaling the walls long enough to equalize their forces. The walls would inevitable fall, but then the Scottish would be forced up the narrow Parisian streets that they did not know well, and Maria's men could fight them on an equal footing. If all things went well, there was a chance that Milan might still hold the city.

A messenger ran up beside Maria on his horse, hauling in lungfuls of air and wiping his perspiring brow to compose himself so he could deliver his message.

"Catapults, m'lord," gasped the messenger, "The Scottish mean to shatter the walls from a distance!"

Maria threw back his head and laughed. Destroy the massive stone walls of Paris? The Scottish were truly mad!









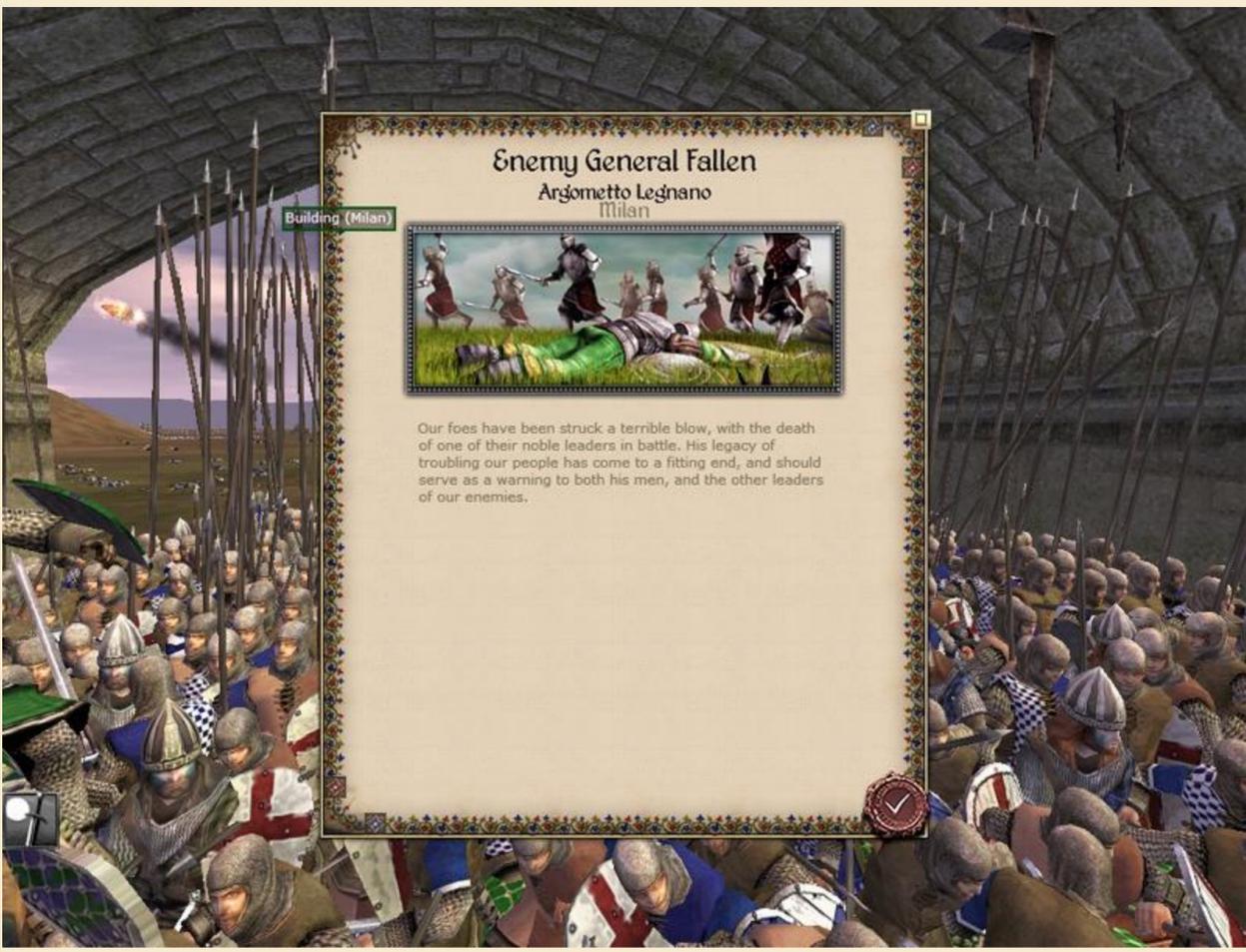
It seemed the Scottish weren't so mad after all.

At Angers, Captain Cormac ran at a quick march with 800 other infantry-men towards the shattered remains of the city gates. Angers was a heavily fortified Milanese fortress built into an easily defended giant hillside, with thick ringed walls on multiple layers acting as buffers against an invading force. To enter the city, the gates needed to be broken down, which the Scottish had done. But Cormac's men still had the Milanese garrison of 500+ men to deal with, and then two more sets of heavy stone walls to pass beyond after that. They were without cavalry, and Cormac had ordered the catapults to hold back now the gate had been smashed open, knowing that they would need them to get through the next line of defense.



But first Cormac's 500 had to deal with Argometto Legnano's 800, mostly infantry themselves but also including Argometto's personal mounted bodyguard. The Milanese had the benefit of massive stone walls to hide behind and a thin entry point that the Scottish would have to bottleneck in, creating a killing corridor for the Milanese. It was madness for the Scottish to think they could push through the Milanese.







It seemed the Scottish weren't so mad after all.

"Paris...." gasped Maria de Parma, falling from his horse. He died face down on the streets of the city he loved, amongst the blood and bodies of his countrymen, trampled underfoot by the unstoppable force that was the Scottish. The Scottish had sent their message to Duke Puccio the Cunning in the form of the black smoke rising over Angers and Paris. Milan had sought to conquer Scotland, and now they had wakened the sleeping giant.





Domnall turned and pointed at the approaching Horde, growing closer and closer now though still not close enough for the battle to begin, "Those bastards there ken I'm nae Edward Canmore, so they're coming to fight, because they think they can beat me! But I have news for them, lads, and maybe news for ye too. Maybe I'm nae Edward Canmore, and maybe the fact I'm Domnall Canmore does nae mean anything yet.... but I'll tell you what does. I'm a Scotsman, lads! I'm the King of the hardest drinking, toughest fighting, meanest, strongest and most stubborn race of men that ever lived on God's earth! I'm a Scotsman, I'm leading 1400 Scotsmen in battle, and those bow-legged, oily haired bastards coming here have no idea of the hell that awaits them on this battlefield! Let's show the world that it wasn't Edward Canmore that made Scotland great, it was Scotland that made Edward Canmore great!"

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Because Fearghus alone knew the full extent of Domnall's plan, and if it did not work exactly as the King had planned, another Canmore would soon be sitting the Scottish throne.

It had been weeks now since Fearghus Campbell has watched Domnall prepare to lead the Scottish against the Mongols, watched him whip them men into a frenzy and make them truly his own. But he remembered it like it was yesterday, he doubted he would ever forget the bloodbath that had turned golden sands red and proved the end of Domnall Canmore. He often found himself turning memories of that day over in his head, as he did now:

The tension has returned to the Scottish, but now it was a nervous excitement as opposed to the earlier rising dread. The Mongols were growing closer, Fearghus recognizing instantly the banner of Khan Chaghatai, the vainglorious, strutting peacock that was "ruler" of the Mongol Horde. It seemed the idiot had been convinced to ride in the vanguard, and if Edward Canmore had been here he would have ordered his archers to open fire on the Mongol Khan.

But Domnall was not Edward Canmore, as he himself had proclaimed to such great effect to the men only a few minutes earlier. He sat his horse and waited, as if happy to let the Mongols charge directly into them. Fearghus' keen eyes watched as Chaghatai pushed his men out directly towards Domnall's banner, his mounted archers obviously eager to get into range of the Scottish General and pepper him with arrows.... and still Domnall sat still and did nothing, merely waiting.... waiting.....

"Now lad!" whispered Fearghus, hoping Domnall's own sense of timing was on.

"NOW LADS!" roared Domnall only a moment later, "FIRE!"



The Khan's eyes raised in surprise at the peculiar booming noise and the flash of light from the Skot-tish flank, and then the world had turned into a blur and the wind was knocked from him as he smashed into the sand and lay dazed amongst screaming men and horses, felled by some dread magic of the Skot-tish from across the length of the battlefield.



"Thank ye, Father," whispered Domnall gratefully, closing his eyes with relief. Edmund Canmore's engineers and alchemists had come to him several months before his death to tell him of their work with a mysterious substance called "gunpowder" and their belief they could turn it into a long range weapon of war like the trebuchet, but as mobile as an infantry unit. Edmund had kept the weapon's creation under wraps while it was developed further, and now it had been revealed for the first time on the battlefield and used to magnificent effect, crashing into the charging bodyguard of the Mongol Khan and decimating it.

"Bu... but I'm the son of Genghis Khan," gasped Chaghatai as he struggled to move his unresponsive limbs, the last words he would ever say.

One could not help but think that if Genghis Khan was still alive, he would have been relieved.

Enemy General Fallen

Khan Chaghatai
The Mongols



Our foes have been struck a terrible blow, with the death of one of their noble leaders in battle. His legacy of troubling our people has come to a fitting end, and should serve as a warning to both his men, and the other leaders of our enemies.



"NOW LADS! CHARGE!" roared Domnall, "SHOW THEM WHAT MAKES SCOTLAND GREAT!"

His men charged forward with a roar into the faltered Mongol vanguard, the archers trying desperately to pull back to open fire on the heavily armored, slower moving Scottish infantry.





Orda - Khan now in all but name - watched as Chaghatai's men were slaughtered by the Scottish, and then surprised his men by roaring with laughter. He turned and cast a challenging look at his men, who lowered their eyes immediately, and that made him laugh more.

"You wonder why I laugh as our men are slaughtered by the Skot-tish?" he asked, "THAT is why!"

He pointed into the South, where a rising dust cloud could be seen rumbling closer. Orda laughed again, ordering his men to move forward so they met between the Skot-tish and the dustcloud. Berkei had arrived just in time, and now he and the other deadly Warlord could mop up after Chaghatai's mess and destroy the Skot-tish.

The charged forward, ignoring Chaghatai's dead and dying Mongols as they moved into position. Already, Orda could see Berkei's trebuchets towering up through the dust, and he relished the idea of sending flaming balls of fire directly into the Skot-tish.

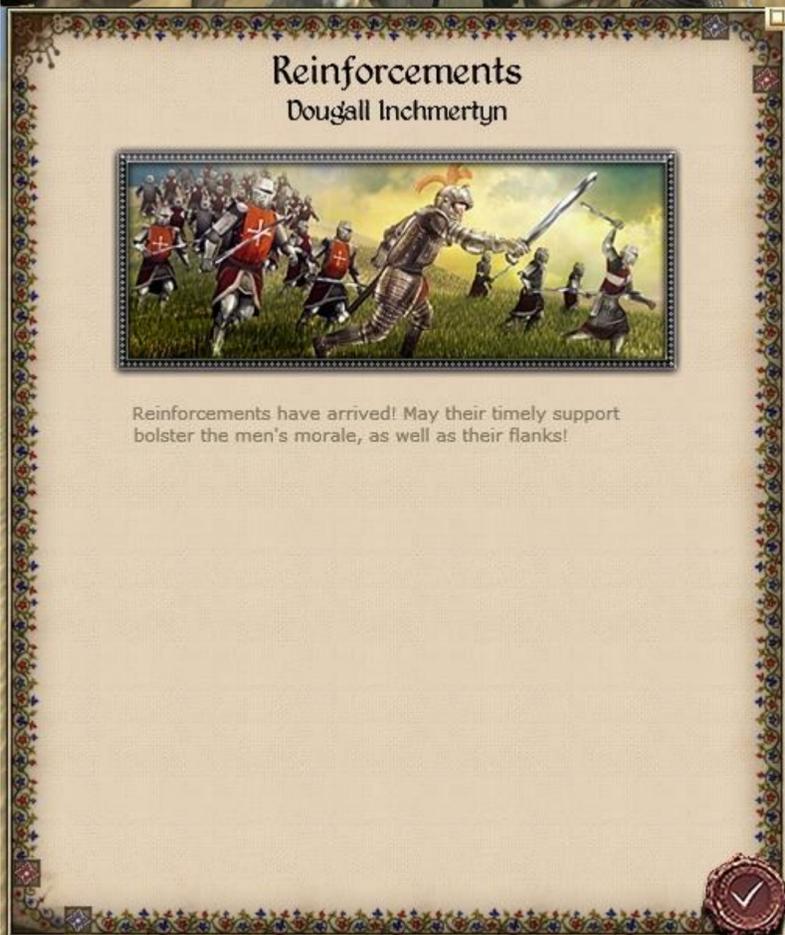


As Chaghatai's Mongols were broken down into small pockets of resistance against Domnall's men, the greater bulk of the Scottish force turned to face Orda's Mongols moving up on their left flank. Domnall had brought surprisingly few archers, who fired flaming arrows at the gathering Horde, and Orda ordered his own considerable archers to rain death down on his enemies.



Behind him, he could hear the thunder of Berkei's forces approaching, and he felt exhilaration coursing through his veins. This novice Domnall was little better than Chaghatai, once the surprise of his strange new weapon had been revealed, he had nothing else to offer to suggest the Skot-tish could defeat the Mongols in a battle of equal forces in open desert warfare. The thunder of Berkei's men was almost overshadowing the clash of Skot-tish and Orda's Mongols now, and he turned with a grin to watch the breathtaking sight of the unstoppable charge of the Mongol Horde.

And his mouth dropped open in horror.



"For Duncan Broune," grunted Rory Randall, his hard eyes unrecognizable from the carefree glint that had been in them before this "adventure" had started.

"Aye," nodded Dougall Inchmertyn, who had ridden his men north to intercept Berkei's army, losing a full third of his army in the decimation of Berkei army, which at 900 strong had been only half the size of Dougall's. The Mongol Warlord had fought ferociously and come close to driving back Dougall's forces multiple times, but in the end the Scottish had prevailed, and then ridden hard north once more to come up on the Mongols. To Dougall's surprise and delight, Orda's forces had been exactly where he'd been told they would be, having remarkably deliberately placed themselves between Dougall's men and Domnall's. Now the Mongols would be unable to use their preferred method of open, ranged desert warfare and would have to close and engage with the Scottish.

And that was a war the Mongols could not win.



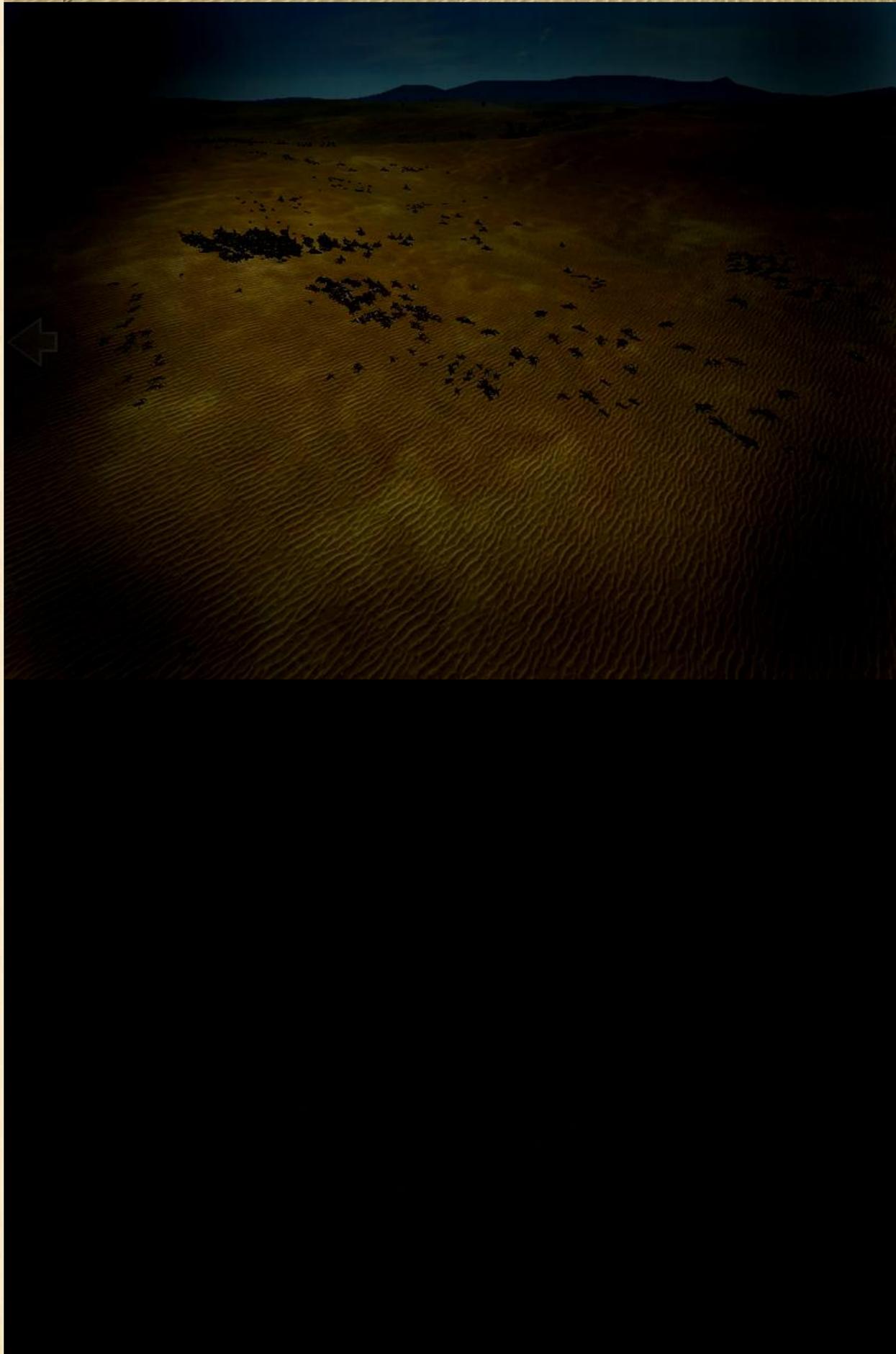
Orda roared with fury as he realized the trap he'd been caught in, and his eyes narrowed as he saw Domnall's banner, the Kanmor Khan riding his men through those Mongol Archers that had managed to keep their distance and fire on the Skot-tish infantry.

"THE KANMOR KHAN! THE DOMNALL KHAN!" screamed Orda, pointing towards the man, "FORGET ALL ELSE BUT HIM! RIDE! RIDE AND KILL HIM IF YOU ARE MEN! I WILL NOT LET HIM ENJOY THE FRUITS OF VICTORY!"

Orda's core group of most loyal men reacted without hesitation, ignoring the grasping, slashing Skot-tish about them and thundering their horses through towards Domnall, who seemed blissfully unaware of their approach. As Orda killed every Skot-tish that came near him, he kept a gleeful eye on his men as they smashed into the flank of Domnall's bodyguard, pushing their way towards the Kanmor Khan himself in the thick of the fighting. Some Skot-tish realized too late what was happened, but they could not break away to defend their Khan, or risk certain death from the frenzied, fighting Mongols.

And Fearghus Campbell had watched also from a safe distance, standing by the King's command tent and watching as the Mongols surrounded his monarch and slashed and struck at him.

He watched the death of Domnall Canmore.



And he watched the birth of King Domnall, true heir of Edward Canmore.



Domnall tore through the knot of Mongols that had surrounded him, screaming in fury and hacking with his sword in a rage. One Mongol fell, then another, then another and another. His armor was coated in blood, his eyes wild with rage, and the Mongols fell before him as if they were made from paper. His men followed, screaming Domnall's name as they cut down those Mongols that Domnall did not get.... and then Domnall was clear, and turning he fixed his gaze on Orda and his men trapped between the two Scottish armies, and he raised his sword and pointed it straight at Orda's heart.

And Orda broke.

The last great Mongol Warlord, Khan in all but name, felt his blood turn to ice and his heart falter in his chest. Dropping his weapon, he charged his horse through the Scottish and spurred his crazed mount as fast as he could away from the monster, the demon, the devil that was the Domnall Khan. His men broke immediately upon seeing their Warlord flee, and Domnall let loose a blood curdling roar and set after them, his own men following as fast as they could as they sought to turn the golden sands red with the blood of the Mongol Horde.







Finally Domnall came to a rest, and came back to himself. The battle had been a red haze for him since he'd torn his way free of the encircling Horde and gone on his rampage, but now he was himself again, and he stared around at the seemingly endless desert, the empty view of the sands broken up by the corpses lying from where he sat his horse all the way back to the Scottish camp. He realized his men were chanting, and it took him a moment to realize it was his name they were chanting, staring at him with adoration in their eyes as they stared at a man who was not Edward Canmore, but WAS their King.

Domnall Canmore was no more, he had entered this battle a nervous man given reign over the mightiest Empire in the world without ever earning it. He had come out of it a worthy, respected and adored King.

His great gamble had paid off.



Khan Orda the Merciless had finally achieved his dream and become Khan of the Mongol Horde.

All 27 of them.

How had it come to this? Under Genghis Khan they'd swarmed unstoppable over the East, and ridden through towards Edessa drawn by the strange green fertile lands. But then Genghis had died, Chaghatai had become their new Khan more by political expediency than by merit, and then everything had fallen apart when they'd encountered the Skot-tish.

Now, 27 men were left and, most frustrating of all, his grip on power was not complete. His men had seen him run in terror from Domnall Khan, and he'd had to beat several challengers to his power into the ground, but not killed them because he couldn't afford to lose even a single man.

They rode through the dry hills to the Northwest of the rebel city of Baghdad. Many Mongols had died trying to break through the walls of that mighty city, and Orda blamed it in part for enabling the Skot-tish to wipe them out. But he would not have his revenge on Baghdad any time soon, at the moment all he wanted to do was travel back East to their ancient lands and slowly work on rebuilding the Horde into a formidable force once more. Then HE would lead them back against the Skot-tish and gain his rev-

Skot-tish.

He stared in horror at the familiar and hated banners of the Skot-tish on the hills before them, the familiar blue "kilts" of the Skot-tish's fiercest warriors, the Hye-Landas.

"No," he whispered in horror, as he finally realized that it was over, "No!"

"Yes," hissed Captain Steaphan from his position on the hill several hundred feet away, "Thank ye, God, for giving me this honor."

Steaphan turned and looked at his men, all of them veterans of the original battles with the Mongols, and the legendary battle under the control of Prince Gawain on Mongol Bridge over Blood River.

"For Gawain!" cried Steaphan.

"FOR GAWAIN!" cried his men, and then they charged on the Mongol "Horde".





Faction Destroyed

The Mongols



The long legacy of these people has at last come to an end by your hand! Celebrations held in honour of your glorious conquest of their dominion erupt throughout the kingdom, with everyone from prince to pauper toasting your righteous reign!



Chapter 30

Captain al Adil sighed as he watched his men rushing into formation, preparing once more to defend the city of Baghdad from invaders. al Adil had led the rebellion that cast out the Papal Army that had been gifted the city by the Scottish, and then to the shock of all - including al Adil himself - they had repelled an effort by the Mongols to take the ancient city. But now the army that had conquered them so many years ago had returned, led by their new King fresh from his utter destruction of the Mongols.

The Scottish had returned to Baghdad.

Battle Deployment

Your forces attack an army of Rebels (Seljuk Rebels)

Your Forces

Scotland
★★★★★★★☆☆

 King Domnall
977 men

Reinforcements: 0

None


Balance of power

Enemy Forces

Rebels
○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

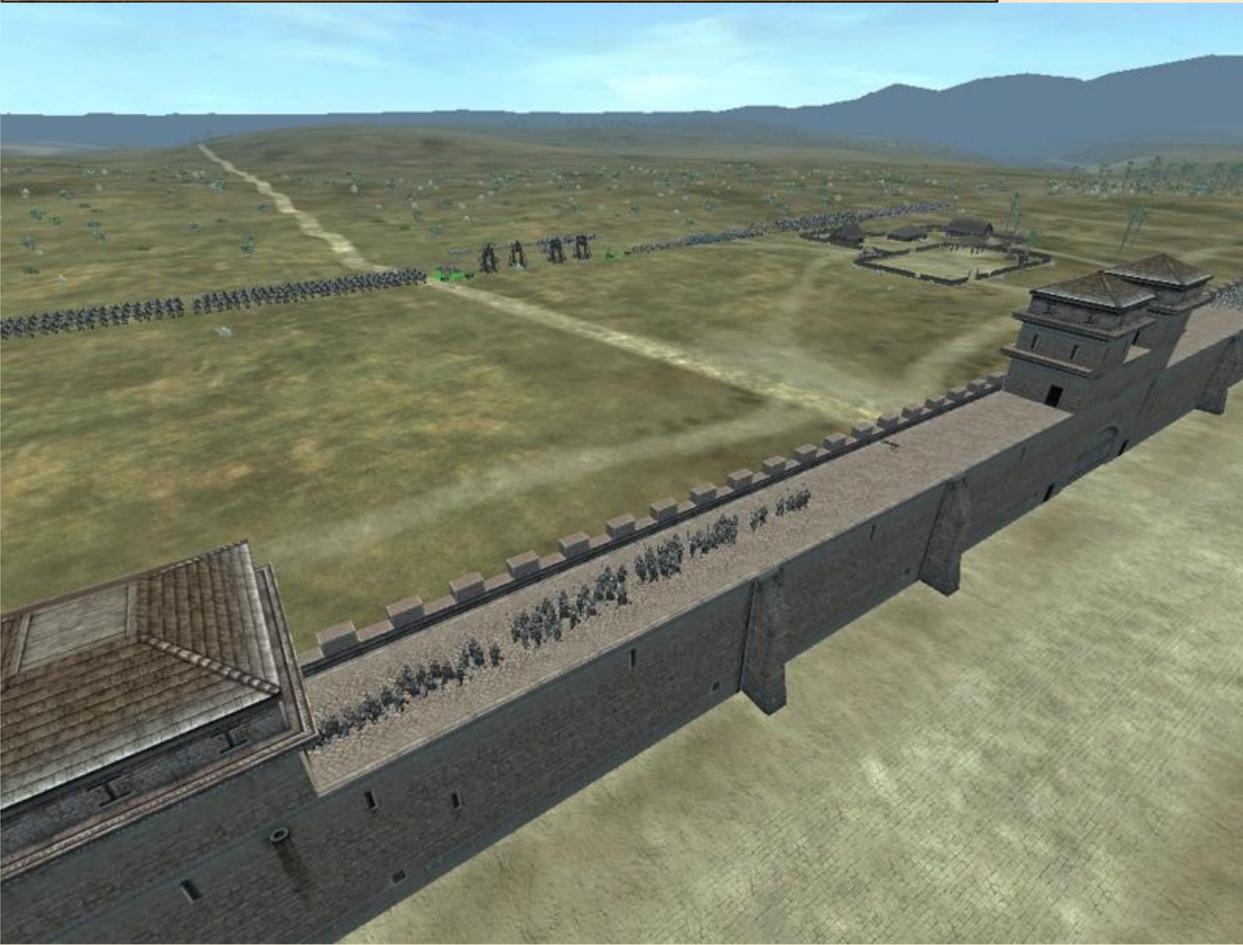
 Captain al Adil
1001 men

Reinforcements: 0

None

Attempt a night attack





On the massive stone walls, one Rebel Archer squinted down at the distant Scottish lines and slapping the man beside him on the shoulder.

"What are those strange black tubes?" he asked.

A moment later, he had his answer.



"GET OFF THE WALLS!" screamed al Adil,"Hold the ground behind!"

The archers charged down the tower stairs as the walls shook under the impact of thundering trebuchet and bombard blasts, hearing the terrible grinding of the seemingly indestructible walls of Baghdad collapsing.

"The Scottish are coming!" warned al Adil,"Stay behind the walls, make them come through the holes and slaughter them as they come!"

The archers positioned themselves behind the city gates where they had a clear view of the approaching Scottish forces but were themselves protected by the remains of the wall, and prepared to open fire as they avoided the blindly fired flaming arrows of the Scottish over the walls. The stomping march of hundreds of Scotsman could be heard from the other side of the wall, but the Rebels had the advantage of knowing exactly where they would be coming from, and they stood prepared to pepper the infantry with hundreds of arrows the moment they appeared in the hole in the city walls.

And then the gates to the city opened.



"THEY'VE OPENED THE GATES!" roared al Adil in disbelief as he watched the Scottish Crusader Knights charge through the doors and smash into the flank of the unprepared Rebels. Captain al Adil turned to a runner and harshly ordered him to send another unit of archers to flank the Knights and open fire on them, hoping that the Scottish would not be finished slaughtering their foes before the archers got into position.

They were.





"Prepare to ride," Captain al Adil grunted as he stared down Baghdad's narrow central street and watched the Scottish riding in force through the main gate, despite having smashed two large holes in the walls on either side of it, "We have to bottleneck them, create a killing corridor where their numbers are meaningless! Ride with me lads, we threw out their Pope! We held off the Mongols! We can defeat the Scottish!

They rode forward, al Adil gasping with relief when he saw the still relatively inexperienced Domnall had made the mistake of sending his trebuchets in on the vanguard. He'd obviously planned to smash and burn through the Rebels from afar, but now the lightly armored and inexperienced fighters that moved the trebuchet could be slaughtered AND create a blockage that would hold back the Scottish.

What al Adil forgot was that in war, death is only a sword strike away, no matter how skilled the hand that wields the blade. As he charged ahead of his men and smashed into the startled trebuchet operators, one Scot flung his arm out wildly slid his sword unknowingly between the joints of al Adil's armor, cutting him open and making the Rebel Captain scream in pain as he grabbed at his side and unbalanced his sword, pitching it over so that it collapsed on top of him, crushing his internal organs.

The Rebels were without a Captain.





Enemy General Fallen

Captain al Adil
Rebels



Our foes have been struck a terrible blow, with the death of one of their noble leaders in battle. His legacy of troubling our people has come to a fitting end, and should serve as a warning to both his men, and the other leaders of our enemies.

"Retreat back to the square!" roared one horseman as the death of their Captain sent them into a panic, "We can hold them off there!"



The Rebels converged in the City Square, uncoordinated and unorganised as they waited for the Scots to come at them from two different entrances to the Square. As peasants stood alongside archers and cavalry fighting for their lives against the Scottish, a single unit of Spearmen organised themselves tightly together, their spears thrust out on all sides and shields raised, ready to make a final stand and die with honor rather than the mad, slap-dash deaths of their brethren.





"We die today, brothers," growled Sayid al Sadr, commander of the Spearmen. Flaming arrows spilled down on his men, but they held their place. Knights and Cavalry approached, but held their place, "But we die free men, slaves to no foreign power!"

Slaves or free men, they died nevertheless.





Winter in Italy.

Duke Puccio the Cunning sat in the great city of Milan, a fire roaring in his study. It was the blackest part of night, when all but thieves and the City Watch were awake.

And Duke Puccio.

Puccio rarely slept more than two hours; he was far too busy to waste time on such a mundane activity. Nights often found him wandering the halls of his Palace, or at work in his study at his great oaken desk, reviewing reports and maps, deciphering the inner intricacies of the diplomatic overtures of other nations both to Milan and its allies and enemies.

Tonight, however, Puccio was playing host to a succession of his closest and most trusted men, as he prepared to shift the focus of his war with Scotland. He was called Cunning for good reason, under his reign he had destroyed the once mighty French Empire and taken their lands for his own. Under his reign he had made Milan one of the most prosperous nations on Earth and given his people a lifestyle the envy of *almost* the entire civilized world. His natural contempt for religion had seen him clash with the Catholic Church and excommunicated by the Pope, but if the religious people of Milan were troubled by this, the wealth that made them fat kept them complacent. But Puccio's cunning had failed against the juggernaut that was Scotland, and his efforts to chip away at the border of the northern empire were now exposed as folly as Scotland turned its full attention too soon on Milan.

"Who would have thought that whelp Domnall would wipe out the Mongols," he grunted to himself after the latest of his appointments had exited his study. His anger was tinged with admiration though. Adam Canmore was a weakling and a fool, and loath to open up war against the power of Milan. But Domnall Canmore was a different matter entirely, an enigma who had shown no potential for leadership until the death of the near mythical Edward Canmore had seen him thrust into the role of King. Since then, Domnall had exterminated the Mongols, pushed the Turks back to the brink of extinction, and overrode Adam's reservations to push back against Milan and take THEIR cities.

He reviewed the latest message from his woefully inadequate spy network in Scotland's desert territories, cursing once again Scotland's mysterious Spymaster. Domnall had retaken the ancient city of Baghdad from Rebels who had taken it from the Pope, who in turn had received it from Scotland as a gift after they'd taken it from Rebels. Puccio had always found Baghdad's history fascinating, or rather its history as a political prize, and he wished not for the last time that he had a diplomat as skilled as Scotland's Gille Calline the Balleol. The man had all ready convinced the Pope that Scotland's decision to hold the city once more under their own control was in fact STRENGTHENING the Church's position in the Holy Land, because Scotland's armies were concentrated there and better able to defend it.

Puccio raised his head as the last of his appointed men entered his study, the man in question giving a silent, appreciative nod that Puccio had detected his entry. Virgilio de Palenza was a plain man, completely non-descript in every respect, which was what made him so dangerous. For the last 20 years he had been Puccio's personal assassin, and over the last decade a number of Scotland's Generals and Captains had fallen victim to his deadly talents.

"Virgilio," grunted Puccio, lifting his hand and allowing the assassin to kiss it, affecting boredom. The truth was that appearances were important, and he allowed the assassin this closeness to show that he did not fear him and held him as a person of trust. Of course Puccio trusted no one, but the appearance of camaraderie was a necessary tool of rule, "I have a new role in mind for you, one you must undertake immediately."

Virgilio nodded silently, and leaned close as Puccio explained his plan. He did not speak or question his orders, and when Puccio had finished speaking he simply nodded and left Puccio alone in his study. Milan's ruler smiled softly, Virgilio had much work to do over the next few cold winter months, while Milan would steadily build up the forces severely depleted in its failed attacks on the Scottish border which in turn had allowed the Scots to push so far forward over Milan's border.

"You caught me unawares, Domnall, bravo," chuckled Puccio, "But while you enjoy the desert heat of Baghdad and your brethren in the North hunker down for the Winter, my men will be working to bring down your ancestral lands.... and I will enjoy seeing Edinburgh burn."

The sky above Rheims was a thick grey, the ground blanketed in a thick layer of snow. A winter storm had left the streets deserted, and Bernardo Carbonetti sat in the banquet hall in the lavish palace where the French aristocracy had once indulged their every whim. 40 of his best men sat in the hall with him, feasting on venison and enjoying the heat of the roaring fire, glad to be in out of the cold. Bernardo meant to get nice and fat this Winter, which looked set to be a long and stormy one, and come the summer the garrison here would be reinforced by men sent by Duke Puccio. The Scottish had taken Paris and Angers but Winter would stop them in their tracks where the Milanese army had failed.

Bernardo frowned as he noted a guardsman enter the hall and move purposefully towards him. The city walls were lightly guarded due to the weather, and he couldn't imagine what would drive a guard out of his relatively snug and warm guard tower to travel the stormy, snow-laden city streets to the Palace. The man knelt beside Bernardo at his table and whispered frantically into his ear, and Bernardo's eyes widened before spraying food from his mouth with laughter. He thumped his mug against the table and his men stopped their laughing and talking to turn to face their Governor.

"Those mad Scottish bastards have marched through the storm on Rheims!" he laughed, "It seems they mean to freeze to death outside our walls!"

His men laughed, shocked at the idiocy of the Scottish. That they had made it as far as Rheims in the first place was astonishing, but city walls could not be successfully taken in a storm as ferocious as that blowing outside.

Outside Rheims, Morgunn the Boroundoun gritted his teeth against the cold, squinting through the wall of white before him looking for the monotony to be broken by the silhouettes of towers, walls and buildings. Scouts lead the Cavalry's horses by the reins, and the infantry followed in the tracks of the cavalry, even the hardy Highlanders struggling to resist the numbing effects of the bitter cold.

"There," grunted Morgunn, as a thick shadow that could only be the walls of the city suddenly loomed up before him, "Ride for the gates!"

He kicked the sides of his horse and it reluctantly pushed forward through the deep snow, his men following as the walls of Rheims loomed up larger and larger. A shout from the city walls could be heard dimly over the roar of the wind, but no arrows were fired down at Morgunn, there was no point. The strong wind would blow the arrows off course regardless, and visibility was too low to gain a good shot.... plus why bother? The Scottish brought no siege weapons and could not penetrate the walls even with them, they would die at the walls.

And it was at that point that the gates to Rheims groaned, shook and then opened inward.



"They what!?!!" roared Bernardo in horror as word reached him.

"They have entered the city, my Lord," replied the Guard, desperation plain in his voice, "The Gates simply opened for them..... like magic!"

"Magic my ass!" screamed Bernardo, "They have a man inside the city who infiltrated the guard tower.... my God.... the Scottish have entered Rheims, how many are they!?!"

"It was difficult to count in the weather, my Lord," replied the Guard, trying to hold back his terror, "But we believe close to 800."

"No," gasped Bernardo in horror, then slammed his fist on the table, "TO ARMS! WE'VE A CITY TO DEFEND!"

The Scottish marched through the city straight down the main street of Rheims, feeling almost warm with buildings on either side of them blocking the harsh winds. In the white gloom ahead of them they heard the familiar sound of horses, armor and weapons and braced themselves for what they knew was coming.

And then Bernardo charged his men - few in number but still warm and well fed - against the all ready exhausted, cold and hungry Scotsmen.



"Drive them back into the night!" roared Bernardo as his fresh men slashed down from their horses at the Scottish standing in deep snow around them, "They'll not take Rheims!"

But the Scottish army's blood was up now, and in the rising battle fervor they felt their bodies move freely, as the Milanese felt the cold sapping the heat from their bodies. Bernardo's full belly now felt like lead, and his arm was striking down on the Scottish slower and slower, his horse staggering amongst the fighting men and horses in the deep snow, and then he was crashing down from his horse as the Scots overwhelmed them.

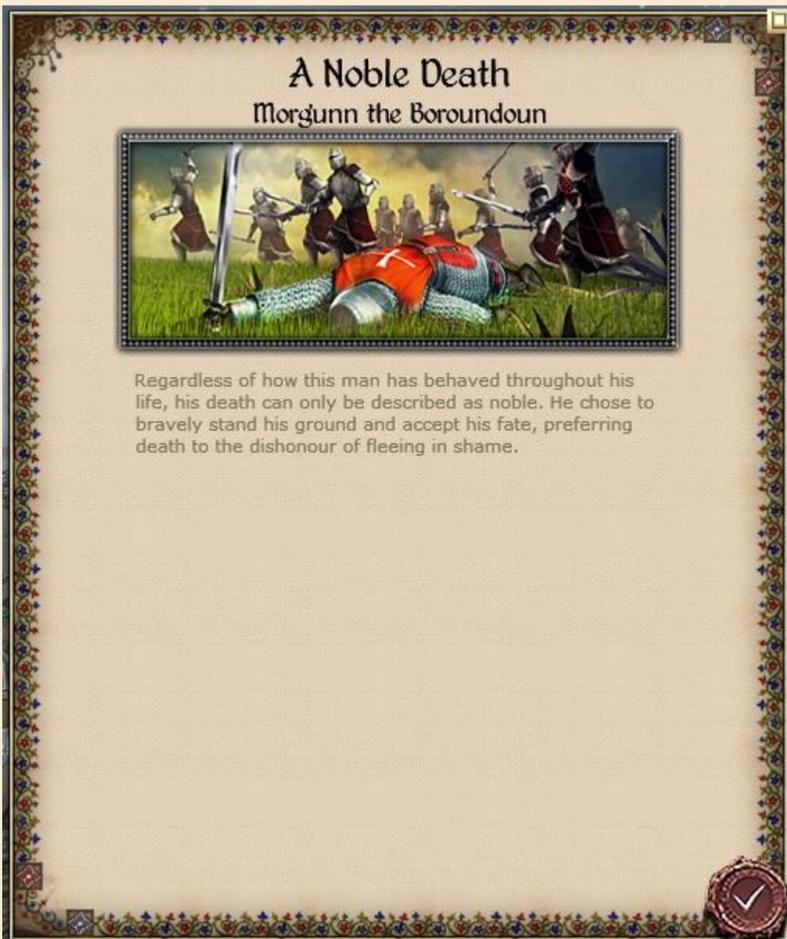


The Scots pushed on, entering the City Square as the Milanese Crossbowmen tossed aside their crossbows - all but useless in the storm - and drew swords to make a final stand. The Scottish crashed into them, seeing the palace beyond their enemies and warmth, food and shelter waiting within.



Morgunn the Boroundoun grunted as he slowly rode his horse over the corpses of the Milanese, holding his gut which pulsed with an unwelcome heat. One of the crossbow bolts that had been fired had hit its target, and by either providence or some dark design, it had been Morgunn who was struck.

"Who will lead the war now?" he grunted as he watched his men celebrating both their victory and gaining shelter from the storm, and then he fell from his horse and knew no more.



The Scottish did not stop with the conquer of Rheims though, the Fortress of Metz was even less defended than Rheims had been. With the storm ended, Captain Malcolm Hew took control of the forces following the death of Morgunn the Boroundoun and, in his usual gruff fashion, cut directly through Banchello Cremosano's token defence





Duke Puccio opened the "gift" from the Scottish and stared blankly at what was contained within. Reaching into the basket, he drew out the contents and placed it on the table before him, eliciting a gasp from the Diplomat before him.

"What is... what is this?" asked the man.

"This is... this **was** Virgilio de Palenza," Duke Puccio said with a sneer, looking at the horrified expression on the decapitated head on his table, "He was my agent, and the Scottish have sent me a message."



He lifted the head, dropped it back into the basket and handed it to a servant who quickly scurried away, and the Duke raised an eyebrow at his Diplomat guest, "What the Scottish have told me is that I **cannot** defeat them alone, I will suffer the same fate as the Egyptians and the Mongols and be wiped out, or worse yet, the fate of the English and become as nothing."

"And you would bring US into this?" asked the Diplomat.

"I would give you a chance to save yourselves now," replied Puccio, "Scotland will not stop with the conquering of Milan, they all ready have a history of war with Sicily.... do you think they will look at your rich lands and not be tempted? Scotland is an Empire of expansion, their armies are commanded by Donnall Canmore now, no matter how far from us he is based.... things are different to when Adam Canmore controlled Scotland's ancestral holdings and Edward Canmore did not give it a second thought."

The Diplomat stared at Puccio for several moments, obviously trying to see through the intricacies and twists of whatever the Milanese Ruler's plans were. He needn't have bothered, Puccio knew he was far smarter than this Diplomat could ever hope to be, and he was offering him the pretence of a mutually beneficial relationship he could not afford to pass up. A friendship with Milan would open up trade potential, and Milan was a rich nation.

"Very well," said the Diplomat at last with a smile, "Venice accepts your offer of Alliance, Duke Puccio, may our two peoples work together for the mutual benefit of both."

"Indeed," smiled Puccio, even as he thought, "And may Venice prove an adequate shield to die in Milan's place."



Chapter 31

Pope Maczeus was dying.

The 55 year old Hungarian Pontiff had proved a popular and competent ruler for the Catholic Church, and his true commitment to his faith had been a welcome relief following the "unfortunate" proclivities of his predecessor. But now word had come from Gille Calline the Balleol - Scotland's Chief Diplomat - that the Pope was in bad health and not expected to live much longer.

Surprisingly, Cardinal James the Unorthodox's public prayers for the Pope's recovery were also matched by his private prayers. Despite being strongly considered a favorite to succeed Maczeus, James himself felt no personal desire to become head of the Church. If God willed it to be so, then it would be so. If not, then he would continue his work as a Cardinal.

Such as the grim work ahead of him today.

On the lakeshore near Jerusalem, Cardinal James strode confidently through the thin grass towards the sandy shore where a group of filthy men stood glowered angrily at the Scottish soldiers standing near them. One in particular caught James' eye, a tall, thin, wild-haired and wild-eyed man, unshaven and defiant... that would be the one he was looking for, he had no doubt.

"Which of ye is Spartacus!" he demanded.

"I'M SPARTACUS!" roared the wildman James had marked, stepping forward.

"I'M SPARTACUS!" yelled one of the other prisoners, also stepping forward.

"NAE! I'M SPARTACUS!" yelled another, then another, all stepping forward. James noted the look of anguished gratitude on the wildman's face, obviously he didn't want them to put themselves at risk but he was gracious for their loyalty.

"Very well!" he cried, "With the power vested in me by God through his agents Pope Maczeus the Righteous and King Domnall Canmore, I accuse Spartacus of heresy against God and the Church! The punishment for this crime is burning at the stake!"

"He's Spartacus!" cried one of the prisoners, pointing at the wildman.

"Aye, that's the one, Spartacus!" yelled another, pointing at the same man. Soon all were yelling and pointing at Spartacus, whose face now betrayed only anguish. Several soldiers chuckled and James shot them a forbidding look, instantly quieting them.

This was no laughing matter; this was God's business he was about.



The English were back.

Captain Malcolm Hew cursed as he watched the remains of the English army disappearing into the forest East of Bruges. He had returned to sign off on a "ceasefire" between Scotland and Denmark, their "war" the result of Denmark's alliance with England, no battle between the two sides had ever taken place. But shortly after the Danish Princess left Bruges, the English had attacked and Hew been forced to fight them off... and he'd had enough.

It had been a mistake to allow the English to lick their wounds at Antwerp after Alexander had cast them out of the Isles. But the proclamation of war by Milan, and Adam Canmore's own reluctance to risk losing the lands his Father had gained meant they'd been allowed to rebuild their strength. For the most part, England had wasted their opportunities, striking a foolish one-sided Alliance with Milan and throwing away their own scarce men in attempts on Bruges. But after England's King Godwine had realized Duke Puccio was using him, the Alliance had been broken and Godwine had thrown his trust in his best remaining General, Thomas Weste. Weste had ridden East into the lands of the Holy Roman Empire which was undergoing internal strife due to long term ex-communication and captured the cities of Hamburg and Frankfurt. Emboldened by an Empire that was technically speaking actually an Empire again, England had ridden against Bruges again. Captain Hew had fought them off and Weste had lead his army away, and Hew could all ready see what would happen next. He would send a letter to Adam Canmore asking for permission to ride against the English, and Adam would refuse, saying it was too dangerous in this time of war with Milan to leave Bruges' garrison under strength. The English would return to Antwerp, rebuild their strength and then come at Bruges again, and the whole cycle would continue endlessly.

"Like buggery it will," grunted Hew, then turned and stormed back through the gates of the Burges and straight to the palace. He gave quick, harsh orders and men rushed to obey as he called a messenger to come to him.

"Take this message," he instructed, "You will travel to York Edinburgh and inform Prince Adam Canmore that we have repelled an attack by the English. You will report that we have received information that the English General, Thomas Weste, is regathering his strength in the forests to the East, and a force of men is riding to find him. You will report that we mean to continue East until we find Weste, and put an end to his threat for good."

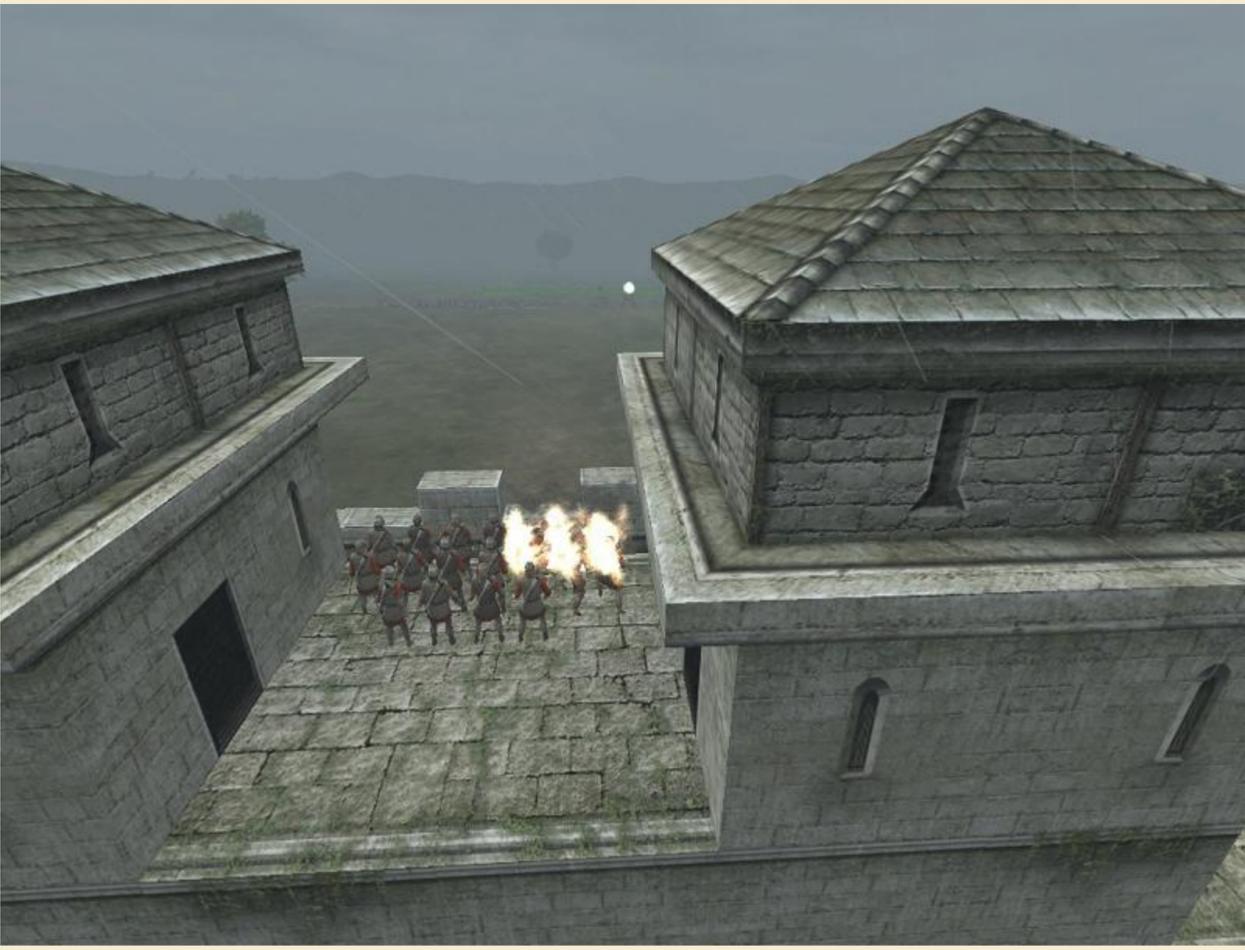
"Aye, Captain," saluted the soldier, then paused and spoke, knowing that he could speak plainly to Hew, "Prince Adam is likely to order ye back to Bruges as soon as he hears this report."

"Aye," nodded Hew, "Which is why ye won't be leaving for Edinburgh until the morrow. Now if ye'll excuse me, I've ordered the garrison to march, and I mean to leave within the hour."

It was a grey and foggy late afternoon in Antwerp when the sound of approaching thunder was surpassed by the thunder of approaching Scotsmen. As lightning lit up the sky, the fields before Antwerp revealed hundreds of the English's greatest enemies, marching in formation and banging swords and spears against their shields in time. Their faces were obscured in the darkness of the coming thunderstorm, but the English standing the walls had no doubt they would be cast in demonic grins.



At Captain Hew's command, catapults fired on the massive wooden gates of Antwerp and the English standing the walls. Men were sent flying off of the walls, screaming and burning as they fell to welcome deaths, and the gates smashed open as Hew gave the order for his men to enter the city, to show the English the correct way to take an enemy city.





As Scotsmen and English clashed inside the City Gates, General Thomas Weste hastily strapped into his armor - still dented from his recent failed siege of Bruges - and pulled himself up onto his horse. His Swordbearer passed him a sword, and he looked about as his men quickly prepared themselves as well, ready to ride to the aid of the men at the gate. Weste's eyes widened in surprise as he saw the King's Banner being lifted high, and then before his eyes rode the man himself. King Godwine, blood of William the Conqueror, rode his horse towards Weste, his armor polished to a high shine, his sword more ceremonial than functional.

"My King, I must insist you remain inside the Castle under guard," warned Weste, "The Scottish are being led by Malcolm Hew, a crude and barbaric man but an able Captain. Should he see your banner, he will direct his forces directly against you."

"I will not let this Scottish insult go unanswered," replied Godwine stiffly, and Weste recognized the man's infamous temper immediately. There would be no reasoning with him; all he could do was his best to ensure the King of England did not die.

"Very well, your Majesty," acquiesced Weste with a slight bow, the best his saddle could accomodate, "Then let us ride together as true sons of England, and finally take the opportunity to show these upstart Scots that there shall always be an England."





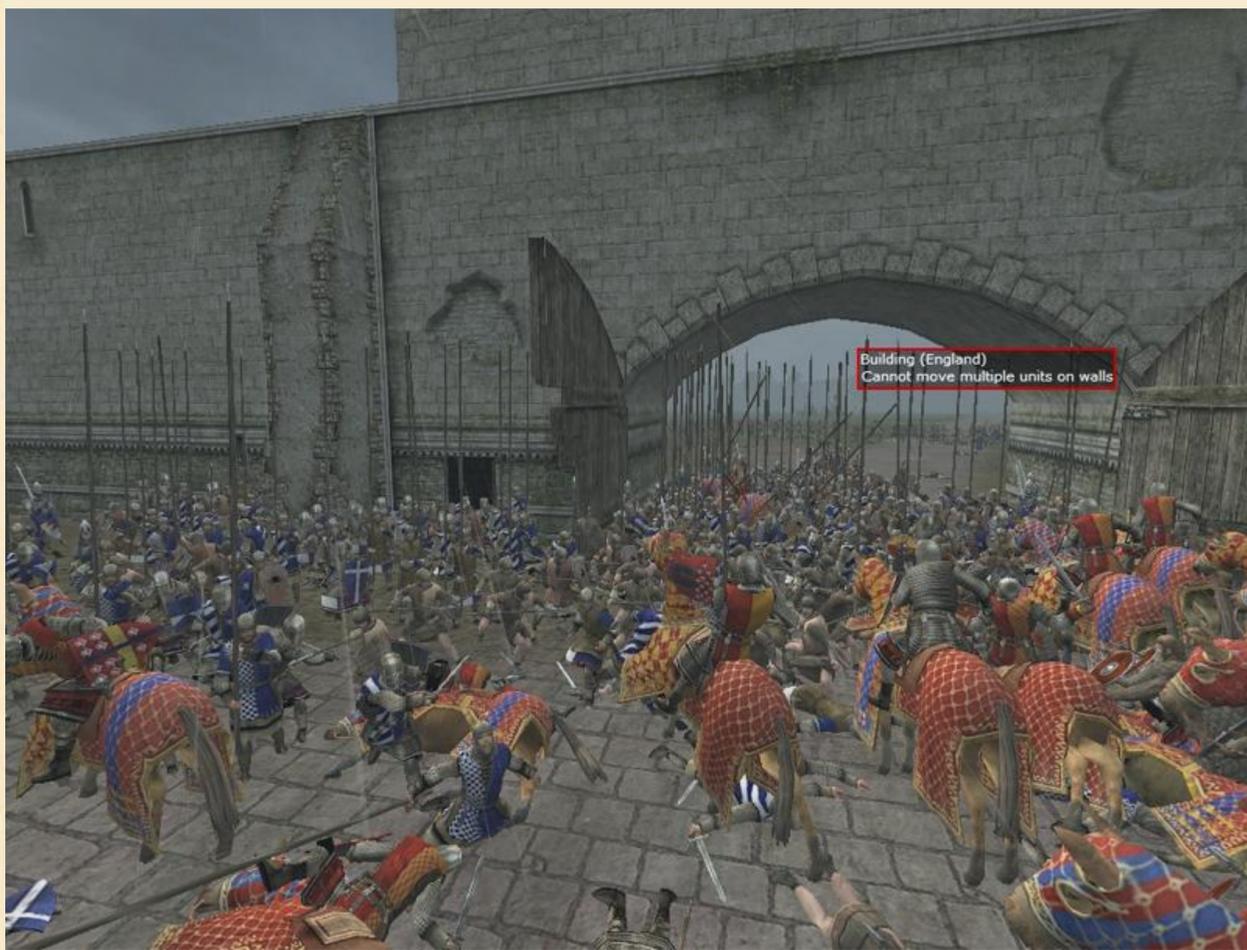
Together King Godwine and Thomas Weste charged their men into the Scottish Highlanders, and as Weste feared the moment the Scottish saw the King's Banner they charged in huge numbers towards him. Weste had hoped the sudden charge of so many horse into the front line of the Scottish would serve to break their formation and separate them from their fellows, but these men had been fighting the English and Milan for years and were well used to cavalry charges. They seemed to part and flow around the charging cavalry, and Weste saw once more the hardiness that had allowed them to break his constant sieges of Bruges. Scotsmen were stabbed, cut, pummelled, rode over and hacked at by the English, but where most men would fall and die, the Scottish stood back up and kept fighting, even when their life's blood was spilling from them or limbs hung limp and useless. They sang as they fought, and they laughed, and they mocked, and those that parted around the charge of the cavalry reformed like water around Godwine and his men, cutting Weste off from his King. Godwine roared and slashed about him, much like his Grandfather William had done before him. But where William had conquered, Godwine was conquered. His sword was torn from his hands, he was torn from his saddle as his fierce warhorse was brought down from under him, and the Scottish were all over him as his torn banner was crushed underfoot.

For King Godwine at least, there was no more England.





The thick pelting rain made the ground underfoot slippery, and Weste cursed as he tried to keep his horse on its feet. He watched his King fall and cursed angrily, both at the Scottish for killing his Monarch and the dead King himself for tossing his life away so carelessly. Raising his horn to his lips, he blew mightily and then roared at the men around him to rally, to ride with him against the Scottish flooding through the gate and push them back.



"YE FUCKING WILL NAE!" screamed Hew, "PUSH BACK YE BASTARDS! THEY'RE TRYING TO KEEP THOSE BONNIE ENGLISH LASSES FOR THEMSELVES!"

His men roared with laughter, Spearmen stabbing into the English Cavalry, knocking some down, pushing others back as they pushed back against the mass of soldiers in the Gateway and took control once more.



"SHIT!" screamed Weste, uncharacteristically coarse as he found himself surrounded. He slashed down at the Scotsmen surrounding him, twisting his head about as he took note of his men and their positions, and prepared to call a retreat so they could reform deeper inside the cit-

And then a rumble louder than the thunder of the clouds far above his head sounded, and a light brighter than the lightning periodically brightening the sky filled his eyes. The walls of Antwerp came crashing down.... directly on top of Thomas Weste.



Enemy General Fallen
Thomas Weste
England



Our foes have been struck a terrible blow, with the death of one of their noble leaders in battle. His legacy of troubling our people has come to a fitting end, and should serve as a warning to both his men, and the other leaders of our enemies.



Scottish Crossbowmen moved up to the breach in the wall and opened fire on the English on the other side, and the sudden bolts plunging into their flank while facing infantry at their front AND seeing their King and General die proved too much. The English broke and ran deeper into the city, pursued by the Scottish who chased whooping and laughing, unleashing the pent up rage of year after year of enduring sieges, assassinations and spying.





To their credit, the English soldiers of Antwerp fought hard and fought well as they made their last stand at Antwerp. The Scottish spoke well of the common soldiers, and even though they had no respect for the late King Godwine, they agreed that Thomas Weste had been a worthy foe. But the respect the Scottish showed the English would probably not have warmed their hearts if they lived, made as it was in a formerly English city, in formerly English taverns and inns, as they drank English beer and caroused with English women.

Antwerp was Scottish now, and all that was left of England was two small cities surrounded on all sides by the hostile Nations of Scotland and the Holy Roman Empire.



King Domnall embraced his twin brother warmly, then his younger brother with more reserve. He'd arrived in Antioch earlier in the day at the head of a large army, having left behind Baghdad in the capable hands of Dougall Inchmertyn, who had all ready had some experience assisting Aed Canmore govern Cairo. With news that the quarantine of Antioch was over, Aodh had received the summons to travel there to see his older brother, and then await the arrival of their King.

"Nectan, it does my heart good to see ye again," laughed Domnall. They were in Nectan's private offices, having had their public reunion in the Court and then attended "old business", and now Domnall could let his guard down and be less reserved.

"It does me good to see **anyone** again, brother," laughed Nectan, "That cursed plague was a nightmare, I felt a prisoner in my own Castle."

Domnall chuckled, then sat behind his Brother's desk and bade his brothers follow suit. They sat before him, and he leaned across the desk, his face serious now.

"We face a dangerous time, brothers," he warned, "In many ways the Mongols were less dangerous than Milan, they did nae use spies or assassins, they did nae hide and came at ye from the shadows. With the Mongols, ye could ken where ye enemy was and what he wanted. Duke Puccio sits his throne like a spider at the centre of a web, pulling strings and waiting to strike."

"And our own spider lies dead at the centre of its web," noted Nectan. Domnall nodded grimly, thinking back to the "old business" they had just completed. Fearghus Campbell - Spymaster of the Scottish Empire and perhaps the most frightening man any of them had ever met - was dead, having come to Antioch as his aging body failed him so he could serve Scotland one more time. He'd held on till Domnall arrived, and then imparted some final wisdom to both he and Nectan, Aodh forced to wait out in the corridor feeling useless and unwanted. The man had died peacefully and in luxury, which was barely the tip of what Domnall felt Scotland owed the man, and left the Spy Network strong and in the capable hands of a series of his trusted lieutenants.... but no one could ever replace the man himself.

"So what is ye plan then, brother?" asked Nectan, "With Adana in the control of the Papacy, we cannae march an army through to Iconium to finish off the Turks, but ye've come to Antioch for more reason than to see ye twin brother."

"It's true, ye ugly bastard," laughed Domnall, punching his brother good naturedly in the upper arm, "Antioch's port is why I'm here.... and Aodh."

"Me?" asked Aodh in surprise, having until now felt his presence here was merely a nicety, "Why me?"

"Because Nectan here showed ye war in the past," smiled Domnall, and Aodh felt a shiver run through his spine. His brother's smile did not reach his eyes, "And so did Father, and I, and Uncle Edward. But ye order to Captain Kirk to engage in war with the Turks showed me that ye did nae learn anything."

Domnall leaned forward on the desk and his smile grew wider, and this time it did touch his eyes... but his smile was full of malice.

"Ye're going to travel with me to Iconium by sea, Aodh," smiled King Domnall, "It's time to put Turkey out of its misery, and this time ye'll be taking an active part in the fighting."

Chapter 32

Deogo di spina was the most dangerous man in the world.



It was a conceit he allowed himself, one of very few. At 58, the Milanese Spymaster had seen and done it all, and taken Milan to a position where only one other nation could possibly challenge it - Scotland. He worked tirelessly to change that, and he was a man given to such modesty and personal sacrifice that one could be forgiven for thinking his motives were purely patriotic. In most cases, they were, but not in his quest to better Scotland, that was a personal obsession, and it was based purely on ego.

Milan was the second mightiest Empire in the world. Milan had the second best spy network in the world. Milan had the second greatest treasury in the world. Milan was second best in almost all respects.... and it was purely due to Fearghus Campbell.

Ever since gaining Duke Puccio's eye and rising to a position of prominence within Milan's Spy Network 30 years earlier, Deogo had been aware that Scotland's Spy Network was controlled by a Spymaster beyond compare, a shadowy figure aware of **everything** that happened in the world, not just within the confines of his own nation. A professional interest in finding out more about the mysterious figure - at the time Milan had not had any dealings with Scotland - had grown into an obsession, as Deogo found every line of inquiry, every intelligence probe or push defied. He had known Fearghus Campbell was a spy, of course, but the man seemed to be no more than any other Scottish spy, competent enough but hardly the legendary figure everyone knew the Scottish Spymaster to be. Deogo had briefly considered Prince Edmund Canmore might be the Spymaster, then Gille Calline the Balleol, but always his theories had found some fatal flaw, some incontrovertible piece of evidence that showed the Prince or the Diplomat could not be the Spymaster.

Then Fearghus had died, and the barriers keeping Deogo's inquires and probes out had relaxed. He still could not fully penetrate the network - Fearghus' protégés had been well trained - but now he had enough knowledge to know that Fearghus HAD been the Spymaster, disguising himself in plain sight. Deogo had to give the man credit, he'd come with Edward and Edmund to Alexandria a nobody and helped the two Brothers create an Empire the likes of which the world had not seen in 1000 years. But now he was dead, and with his death, Deogo di spina now believed himself to be the greatest Spymaster in the world, and by extension the most dangerous man in the world.

So woe be to Scotland then, as Deogo de spina moved quietly, inconspicuously through the streets of Metz - a Milanese city only recently captured by the Scottish - towards his meeting with the traitor who would spell the beginning of the end of the Scottish War on Milan.

Aodh Canmore was miserable. His horse had picked up on his mood and moved restlessly beneath him, and he was painfully aware of all the noise it was making as compared to the silent, still shadows in the darkness around him.

King Domnall's army stood before the walls of Iconium, final refuge of the Turks. Within the walls were Sultan Chaqmaq and Crown Prince Orhan, rulers of the Turkish Empire, and Domnall meant to end their royal line before the dawning of the new day.

And he meant Aodh to take part.

"Ye'll watch and listen closely today, Aodh," Domnall said, riding up beside him. His face was backlit by the torches of the men before him, and it gave him a demonic look that Aodh did not like. He had seen his Uncle in battle and could understand the holy fire and passion that had overtaken him. He had seen his Father in battle and could understand the numbness that had kept him from the horrors of warfare. He had seen his brother Nectan in battle and could understand the disgust and disdain he felt for battle. But he could not understand the bloody-minded pleasure than Domnall seemed to feel in battle, "Ye'll hear my orders and listen as I explain them to ye. Most of all, ye'll take part, and ye'll kill Turks yeself, and I hope ye'll learn the lesson I mean ye to learn."

And so it was that Aodh sat his horse beside Domnall, and endured both witnessing the battle to end the Turkish Empire, and a lecture.

"A man has preceded us to Iconium by many days," Domnall explained, "He has become just another part of the background for those living inside, and thus invisibility. He has assured the gates of the city are open, allowing our men to enter without enduring a long siege and the construction of siege equipment. Note that I send archers and trebuchet forward to pin down the Turks on the walls, while our Spearmen and Pikemen rush the gate to gain a foothold there."





"We have taken the gate, and our men are inside the walls," Domnall continued his lecture, "But we dinnae rest on our laurels, now we must break holes in the walls, so that the Turks will nae be able to concentrate all their men at one point to hold ours off. We outnumber them, and we take advantage of our numbers."





As Domnall delivered his lecture to Aodh, inside the walls another Noble meant to teach a lesson to the Scottish. Sultan Chaqmaq hated the Scottish, they had killed his Father in their unprovoked attack on Caesarea, and now they came to Iconium! They meant to kill him and destroy the proud lineage of the Turks!?! Well not so long as he drew breath! He spurred his horse forward closely followed by his loyal, highly trained bodyguard and his son Orhan. Drawing his scimitar, he let loose a bloodcurdling scream and rode his men directly into the Scottish Pikemen.

"LET US SEE HOW YOU FARE AGAINST TRUE TURKISH HORSEMEN!" he screamed.

The Scottish Pikemen, all veterans of the Mongolian War, held just fine.





The death of their Sultan broke his mounted Bodyguard, who turned and rushed back towards the City Square, Orhan dragged along by his personal bodyguard who screamed at him that as the new Sultan he could not afford to throw his life away in anger. The Scottish gave chase, haranguing the fleeing Turks at every step, fighting ferociously with those who could not get clear while flaming arrows and trebuchet blasts rocked down amongst those running.





"And now, Aodh?" asked Domnall.

"Now?" asked Aodh, confused.

"What do we do now, sitting here on our horses outside the city as our men chase the Turks deeper inside of it?"

"I dinnae understand?" Aodh said, frustration clear on his face.

"Aye, that's the problem," sighed Domnall, "Aodh, of all the lessons Father and Uncle Edward taught ye, ye did nae grasp the most important. The Canmores have always fought on the frontline with their men, it is how we show them we consider them our brothers in arms, our kin, our blood, our people. Do ye think I love battle? That I revel in blood and death? I fight because war is necessary to ensure the protection of my people, and that is why ye do nae start a war for no reason. Edward and Edmund erred when they declared war on Egypt, it was the act of men too stubborn to turn back on a course set when drunk, but that mistake created the greatest Empire this world has seen in 1000 years and turned Scotland into a true world power. Such mistakes rarely end so well, though, and I warred with the Mongols because they threatened Scotland. I war with Milan because they threaten Scotland. There was nae reason to declare war on the Turks, and now ye will see the consequence of that decision. Ye will ride with me into the heart of the battle, and together we will kill alongside men who serve not because of God's divine will or because of who we were born to be - but because they love and honor us, and because we love and honor them."

Aodh sat dumbfounded, mouth agape. Had he really misjudged his brother so poorly?

"RIDE AODH!" laughed Domnall, spurring his own horse forward, "RIDE WITH ME AND FIGHT WITH ME! FIGHT WITH THE MEN OF SCOTLAND!"

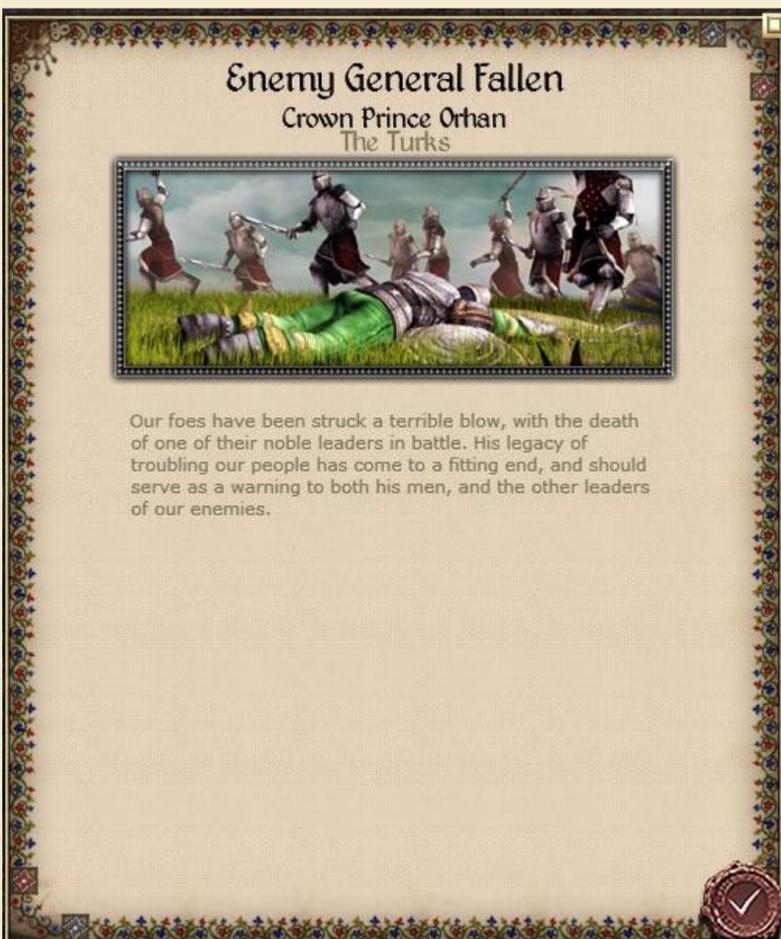
"AYE!" cried Aodh, surprising himself with laughter of his own, "FOR SCOTLAND!"





Aodh felt his stomach drop and his lungs freeze as he charged along with Domnall and their cavalry into the thick of the fighting. But at the same time he felt his heart pumping and exhilaration spilling through his body, and what was more, over the clamor of battle he heard the Infantry cheering. The Canmores had come to fight with their men, and they fought with renewed vigor because of it. Then the time for thought was over, as Aodh crashed into the middle of the fighting and - more from instinct than the training he'd had as a child - began to lay about him with his sword, hacking at anyone not wearing the blue of Scotland. Time seemed to slow, the sound of battle fading to almost nothing, his labored breathing filling his ears. He saw men come at him and swing their own weapons, but they were as nothing, every detail was in perfect clarity, and he saw how to strike, how to parry, how to fight back and kill.... and then a screaming Turkish face was in his own, a man roaring in their barbaric tongue that he killed his father, he killed his Grandfather, he would kill him an-

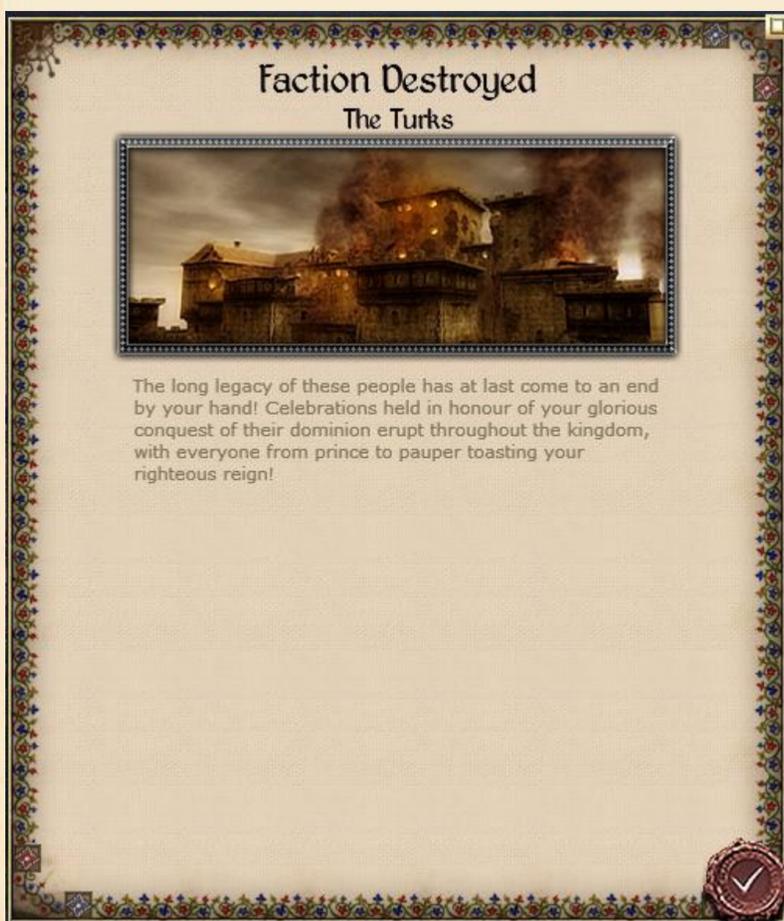
The man's head went flying through the air and his body collapsed, and Aodh stared with wide eyes as Domnall laughed before him, having just cut Crown Prince Orhan's head off.



"Now we pull back, Aodh," smiled Domnall, clapping his brother warmly on the shoulder as they sat their horses during a brief lull in battle, "We have done our duty, and to stay longer is to risk death, which we cannae allow for the good of the Empire.... plus I have a personal attachment to my own head I'd like to keep, I call it my neck!"

Aodh smiled, feeling a rush of love for his brother he had not felt in some time, and together they lead their cavalry back through the Scottish infantry and past the archers as their men cleared up the last of the Turks. Iconium was Scotland's, and the Turkish Empire was no more.





Farquar Makfulchiane entered his private quarters and sealed the door, sighing grumpily as he settled down into a chair and began tugging at his boots.

"I have a lotion good for footsores," chuckled Dego di spina, and Farquar squawked in alarm, jumping out of the chair and grabbing at the dagger at his side. Dego stepped forward and plucked the weapon from Farquar before he had a chance to do more than fumble, carelessly tossing it behind him and slapping the Scotsman gently on the face, "Calm yourself, Farquar, it's me."

"God's blood!" snapped Farquar, grabbing at his chest, "Do ye want my heart to explode from fright? Can ye nae knock like everyone else?"

"I'm 'nae' like everyone else," muttered Dego, settling down at the end of Farquar's bed and using the man's dagger to nonchalantly clean his fingernails, "And you knew I was due in Metz today, so you should have prepared yourself for the shock. Now, did you find out the passcode for the watchtower as instructed?"

"Aye," sighed Farquar, settling down in his chair again, "When ye army comes, ye'll have all ready infiltrated the Gate Tower and locked the doors open for them. Milan will walk right through the door and take Metz back.... and when Duke Puccio has his precious city back I mean to be recompensed!"

"Yes yes," grunted Dego, "You'll be paid a fine price for your treachery."

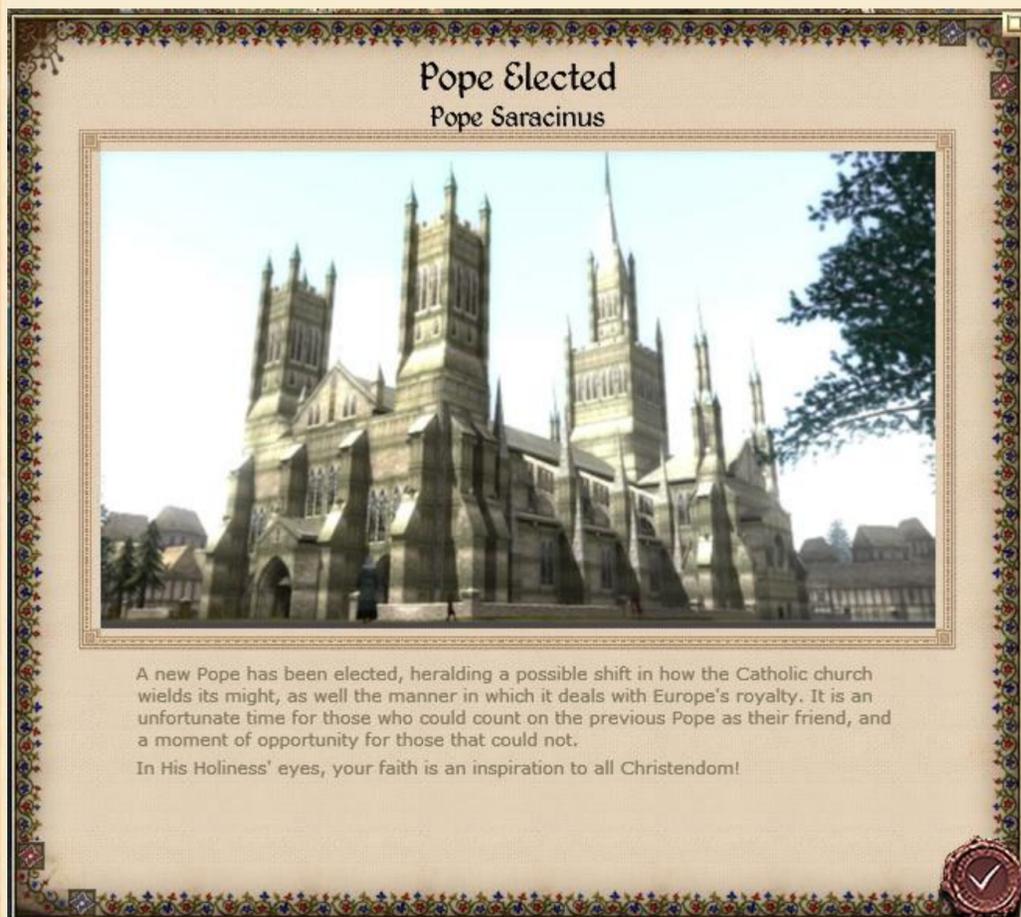
"TREACHERY!" barked Farquar, "Is it treachery when ye own nation turns against ye? When ye own family disowns ye? When ye idiot cousin is accepted into the Royal Family because he studied with the right people in the right places while ye are overlooked because of the indiscretions of ye Father? Is it treachery when ye are only seeking to establish a trading goods company based in Milanese territory and ye own damned "King" disrupts everything ye've built up because he wants to get into a pissing contest with Duke Puccio? Is it...."

Dego let him rant on, long since bored of hearing Farquar's favorite subject - himself and how the whole world was against him. He'd found the man through his Spy Network, an angry Scotsman in dire financial straits who'd he'd turned into his creature. He'd tested the man with a series of small tasks, each one slightly more treacherous than the last, and each time Farquar had done as he'd been told eagerly, his only question being how much money would he get for it. Other times, Dego had let false information fall into his lap to see how Farquar would react, and each time the outcome had been favorable. If it worked against Milan, Farquar kept it quiet, if it worked against Scotland, Farquar was sure to "inform" Dego's Spy Network quickly, with again the only question being how much money was in it for him.

This was the most treacherous thing Dego had ever asked of him, though. He'd used Farquar's connections to get into Metz, and then used him to find out inside information about Metz's defences. Duke Puccio had put Dego in charge of Milan's counter-offensive against Scotland, hoping to regain the rich territories that Scotland had gained in their sudden Winter offensive. Dego planned to use Scotland's own tactics against it, infiltrating occupied cities with spies and attacking in the middle of Winter, taking advantage of the weather to catch the occupiers off guard.

Winter was almost over, but for Scotland, a storm was coming.

"We have a new Pope, Aodh," Domnall noted as they rode towards the docks, "What do ye make of him?"



"I was disappointed that Cardinal James was not chosen," offered Aodh diplomatically, and Domnall laughed. The two brothers previously strained relationship had been much improved since they took Iconium, and now that Aodh had seen war for what it truly was, Domnall almost regretted sending him back to Antioch to study Governing under Nectan. But for what Domnall had planned, he wanted his brothers together and far from him, lest the worst should happen.

"Aye, but still, Maczeus was a good friend to Scotland... thanks in no small part to Gille Calline, and I hope Saracinus will follow in his predecessor's footsteps."

"I thi-" started Aodh, and then stopped as his horse shied, and the howling of dogs started to spread through the city.

"What is this?" grunted Domnall, "Some-"

Suddenly the ground began to shake and groan, the buildings about them shifting alarmingly, dust falling from cracks suddenly appearing in the walls. Domnall cursed and pulled at the reins of his mount, trying to gain control of it, and then the wall to his side collapsed as down the street a building fell apart and crashed down on top of itself. Domnall's vision shook along with the earth, and he saw Aodh fallen from his horse, helped to his feet by other Scots who tried to pull him to safety.

And then it was over, and all stood in the street in preternatural quiet before cries, screams and shouts rose up throughout Iconium.

"Send runners to the Castle and see to it no one was damaged, we'll hold off our departure until we get word. I dinnae think that was too large a quake, but the injured must be seen to."

"That was an ill omen, brother," grunted Aodh, back on his horse and at Domnall's side.

"Pah, that was an earthquake and nothing more," snapped Domnall, "Me and the wife have shaken the bed more than tha-"

He cut off as cries of disgust rose up along the street, and then a strange collective squealing. He turned and watched in astonishment as a black wave rippled along the ground, past the feet of Scottish soldiers, underneath the spooked horses which shifted and whinnied nervously.

"I'll nae hear a thing about any omens," Domnall growled at Aodh as they watched the wave of black rats spill on down the street.



It was time to be rid of Farquar.

Dego di spina didn't like losing assets, but Farquar had seen his face and heard his voice now, and it just made sense to get rid of him. All going to plan, Captain Baldassare would be riding on Metz within the day, which meant Dego could remove Farquar tonight, sleep in his quarters and then make his way at dusk to the Gate Tower and infiltrate it, there to wait Baldassare's arrival. He wasn't an assassin, but one did not last long successfully as a spy without learning a few things about killing covertly, and he had a nice paralytic which would take Farquar out of commission and allow Dego to smother him to death without him fighting back.

"Ale?" he asked, lying on the small couch by the shuttered windows, "I'm parched."

"Aye," nodded Farquar, "I have a barrel or two lying about, all that is left of my poor lost business. I'll draw us a mug each."

He stood up, then slapped his head angrily, "Ach, a fool I am! I received a message from Dijon today, I was supposed to pass it on to the usual contact in Bern, but I thought since ye were here I co-"

"Pass it to me, yes," sighed Deigo, figuring it was nothing more than a standard report written up each month. Farquar reached into his tunic and passed a crumpled envelope to Deigo before moving into the next room and noisily shifting about his junk to find the ale. Deigo sliced it open with Farquar's dagger and opened the note inside, raising an eyebrow when he saw it was a short, handwritten note. He read the contents, and his eyes widened.

"No!" he gasped, and twisted as he leapt to his feet, arm stabbing quickly with Farquar's dagger. Farquar himself stood before him, having moved with terrifying silence behind him, and with a blank face the Scotsman grabbed Deigo's wrist in a vice-like grip and twisted, causing the Spymaster to drop the blade to the couch. He opened his mouth to gasp in pain, and Farquar shot his open hand directly into Deigo's throat, causing him to double over and gasp silently in pain.

"Pathetic," hissed Farquar Makfulchiane - or Farquar the Killer as he was better known, the premier assassin of the Scottish Empire, "If ye are the best Milan has to offer, it's nae wonder ye've always been behind us at every step."

Deigo was twisted around and pulled tight against Farquar, who lifted the dagger from the couch and plunged it into Deigo's stomach as his other hand held in place over the Spymaster's mouth. Farquar grinned harshly, and whispered into his victim's ear, "Dougall Macdonchie was waiting for ye Captain Baldassare... and ye Captain Vaggio... AND ye Captain Alessandro! There is nae army coming for Metz, and no reinforcements for Bern. Dougall will take Bern, and I'm personally going to kill Paolo in Dijon.... ye precious Milan will nae exist this time next year!"





Farquar dropped Deigo's corpse to the ground, right onto the carpet strategically placed to catch any stray drops of blood. He'd wrap the body up and dispose of it later in the night, and these quarters themselves would be stripped bare and unoccupied before the day dawned. He did not fear capture or imprisonment, he was after all working under orders for the King, but he was a professional, and you kept your skills in practise even when you didn't need to use them.

He picked up the message that Deigo had read, the message that had told him trouble was coming. Farquar had held it much longer than a day, it had been sent to him with specific instructions weeks ago, sent by the only man Farquar personally feared. He hadn't opened it out of respect, but now his curiosity got the better of him. Reading it, he laughed long and hard, shaking his head in admiration. A shame he would have to burn the message, he almost wished he could keep it for himself.

My dearest Deigo de spina,

You were never as good as you thought you were.

Yours, Fearghus Campbell.

Domnall woke with a thumping headache, and sighed as it was joined by a thumping at his cabin door. After putting Aodh ashore at Antioch and taking Steaphan Vissman aboard, they'd set sail into the open ocean and Domnall had ordered a celebration of their recent conquest of Turkey. They'd drunk long into the night, and now he was paying for it. He had gained his Father's tolerance for drink it seemed, and wished he could have had some of Edward's famous tolerance for ale.

He pulled the cabin door open after dragging himself from his bunk, demanding, "WHAT!?!"

"My King," gasped the messenger, his face pale not from seasickness or a hangover, but from pure unadulterated terror, "Lord Steaphan! He... he....."

"Out with it man!" snapped Domnall, "What about Steaphan?"

"He... he's dead, my King!" gasped the messenger.

"DEAD!?!!" demanded Domnall, "How the hell can he be dead?"

And the messenger answered with one word, a word that struck fear into the heart of any man, no matter what Nation, what race, what creed, what religion. He said the one word that Domnall would have paid any price not to hear.

"Plague."

Chapter 33

"You know, of course, that Bern has fallen to Scotland," Duke Puccio muttered, sounding bored despite discussing the fall of one of his own cities.

"Of course," replied Philip Grimston, English Diplomat, "We also know that Scotland flooded into your regions when their spies knew your cities were lightly guarded. We know that they came in winter through storms and cold that would have killed any other army. We know they struck hard and fast and caught your own armies by surprise. We also know that Winter is over, that Milan is now prepared and its armies on the march, and that Scotland's only access to your cities is through a thin mountain pass that could be defended by four old men and a goat were it necessary."

"Yes, and England's cities sit flush on the border with Scotland's new territories, with the Holy Roman Empire poised above you to strike," noted Puccio, "And as such, your new King has rethought the Alliance that Godwine so thoughtlessly tossed aside."

Grimston bit his lip, obviously aggravated at the suggestion that it had been England's fault their previous Alliance with Milan had faltered. Puccio was a user, he forged Alliances and then used them all to his own advantage, and England had suffered greatly as a result of its deal. But England NEEDED Milan now, and so it had swallowed its pride and sent Grimston to sign a new deal. Puccio had agreed to see him, but not in Court where Scotland might have spies, but in his private quarters late in the night, where the near insomniac Duke conducted most of his important business.

Puccio eyed the young Diplomat, who stood quietly to allow the Milanese Duke to process his thoughts. Puccio's thoughts were not on the Alliance however, he'd all ready made his decision on that. Rather, he was thinking about the young man, and how he looked in the fine clothing he wore.... and how he would look out of it.

"Harry the Honest, they call your King," grinned Puccio, "I wonder.... how honest is he? Surely he sent YOU, a young, attractive man to me with specific purpose."

"My Lord?" queried Grimston, confused.

"I shall accept your offer of Alliance on one condition," he continued, "That condition being you."

"Me?" asked Grimston, still confused, "I don't understand."

"Oh you will," chuckled Puccio, "I suggest you close your eyes and think of England."

Enemy Character Details



Duke Puccio the Cunning Age: 60
Faction Leader
Command: ★★★★★○○○○○
Dread: ○○○○○○○○○○○○
Authority: ★★★★★★★★★★
Piety: ○○○○○○○○○○○○

Retinue

- Architect
- Foreign Fruitcake
- Military Engineer
- Siege Engineer

Traits

- Holier than Thou
- Corrupt
- Can Tell a Tale
- Well Spoken
- Born Conqueror
- Spycatcher
- Night Fighter
- Religious
- Shameful
- Feels Respected
- Tyrannical Leader
- Expensive Tastes
- Strict Ruler
- Poor Administrator
- Faction Leader
- Master of Espionage
- Mixes with Killers
- Perfect Politician
- Total Deceiver

Spotted By: Micheil Macconel
Subterfuge: ○○○○○○○○○○

Aware that his unholy urges to be with other men could see him in trouble.
-2 Authority

Diplomatic Information



The following factions are now at war with each other:

- Moors - Milan

The following factions have declared that they are allies:

- England - Milan

As the Priest said his final words, the shrouded form of Steaphan Vissman slid from the plank and over the ship's rail, causing a large splash as it hit the water, the weights in the shroud dragging the dead Scotsman to the bottom of the ocean.

Steaphan deserved more, Domnall thought angrily as the men hastily disbanded and moved away, each desperately trying to keep their distance from the other. It was a pointless effort, when you had hundreds of men on a ship - no matter how large it was - distance was impossible, but you couldn't change the human desire for self preservation. Steaphan had been the first to die, but he would not be the last. The man who had faced down the Mongol Hordes and played a vital part in their decimation had died quickly and horribly of a disease that was like unto a curse from God. Now scores of other men across all the ships in Admiral Fearghus' fleet were coming down with the dreaded plague, and efforts to quarantine the sick from the healthy would not be enough... but they also couldn't land and disembark without running the risk of infecting other Scottish towns.

"Tell me of this plague, EVERYTHING" demanded Domnall as he fell in beside the ship's physician, a slight and nervous man who had an annoying habit of running his hands through his hair.

"We ken little about it, to be honest," muttered the Doctor, "It comes in three forms, the deadliest of which killed Lord Vissman, turning his skin purple and destroying his insides. The second form seems at first like a bad case of the flu, with a hacking cough and trouble breathing, until the victim starts coughing up blood. The third and most common form is discomfort, headaches, chills despite a high fever and swelling of the groin, neck and armpits. As far as we can tell it is spread like the flu, so quarantine and isolation may nae have much impact."

"How do we treat it," demanded Domnall, "I ken it kills most, but there must be treatments that have some impact."

"I would recommend going through the ship's hold and finding any fragrant leaves or herbs packed as army supplies, my liege," grunted the Doctor, "Keep pots of them constantly burning on deck to keep the air purified, and keep the boats moving so the air continues to shift and the disease cannae easily be spread from man to man. For those infected, each ship's physician must do the best he can. I can design a plague suit that will mostly protect me from infection while I treat those suffering, and on those with the most common form of the plague, bloodletting will relieve the swelling. After that, all that can be done is to wait. Most will die, some will survive."

Domnall cursed softly under his breath, and rubbed absently at the flea bite on his arm.

"WHERE'S GILLE CALLINE YE STUPID BASTARD MUSLIM!" roared a voice, and the man in question sat up startled in his chair, tipping his cup onto the table. Cursing angrily, he quickly pulled a series of papers away from the spill and stood up as the wine dripped off of the table, careful to avoid any falling on his clothes.

"Stupid bastard Muslim?" Gille Calline asked himself, and then the door to his office burst open and an angry looking man stormed in followed closely by Gille's manservant, a dark skinned Spaniard who was the most devout Catholic Gille had ever met... including all of the Popes.

"AH!" snapped the stranger, as if Gille had been hiding from him, "THERE ye are!"

"And who might I ask are you?" asked Gille, hiding his irritation.

"Gordon of Edinburgh!" exclaimed the man, as if that explained everything. When Gille continued to stare blankly, he sighed and spoke slowly, as if dealing with an imbecile, "Ye're supposed to be mentoring me. Adam Canmore sent me to be ye protégé!"

Even the famously blank-faced Gille Calline could not help but sigh.



The image shows a 'Character Details' window from a game. At the top, it says 'Character Details' with a question mark icon in the top right. Below this is a portrait of a man in a red and white striped turban, identified as 'Gordon of Edinburgh' with 'Age: 40'. Underneath the portrait is a 'Diplomat Influence' bar with 10 segments, 4 of which are filled. To the left of the main portrait is a smaller portrait of a man in a blue tunic, labeled 'Retinue' and 'Translator'. To the right of the main portrait is a 'Traits' section with three items: 'Diplomatic Genius', 'Bilingual', and 'Religiously Intolerant'. Below the traits is a text box that reads: 'Intolerant enough of other religions to the point he uses their names as derogatory terms. -2 Influence'. The window has a decorative border and a checkmark icon in the bottom right corner.

Paolo the Wrathful was dangerous man for an entirely different reason to Duke Puccio. Where Puccio worked politically and shifted spies and assassins about on his map like they were chess pieces, Paolo governed his city - Dijon - firmly but fairly, controlled his armies personally and played no favorites. He was Milan's greatest General, and it was he who would be commanding the counter-offensive against Scotland. Now that the long winter was over, he was looking forward to mounting up and killing some Scotsmen.

Enemy Character Details



Paolo the Wrathful
Governor
Command: ★★★★★
Chivalry: ★★☆☆☆
Loyalty: ★★☆☆☆
Piety: ★☆☆☆☆

Age: 37

Retinue

-  Pagan Magician
-  Treasurer

Traits

- Aspiring Commander
- Dauntless
- Loyal
- Fair Fighter
- Scarred
- Night Fighter
- Feels Appreciated
- Noble in Rule
- Poor with Taxes
- Conscientious Trainer

Spotted By: Donnchadh Makgullane

Subterfuge: ●●●●●●●●●●

Now he stood in what was dubbed his War Room, which featured a giant map - set into the floor - of the entire world. Regions were marked on the map, but not cities, which were instead represented by large moveable blocks set in different colors to represent different nations. Similarly for the armies of nations, in fact the entire thing had the appearance of a giant child's game, and some had joked - never in Paolo's presence of course - that the War Room would be better known as the Toy Room.

Now Paolo stood on the map atop Dijon, a green city-block beside him, and stared to his right towards the now blue city-block of Bern. Dego di spina had been meant to organize the reinforcement of Bern and the recapture of Metz before Winter's end, but instead the spy had disappeared, along with the men in his command. The lack of reinforcements had meant Dougall Macdonchie had easily taken the lightly defended Bern, and now Dijon was the only Milanese city left beyond the mountain walls that protected their holdings in Marseille, Genoa and Milan. But Dijon held thousands of men, the crème of Milan's soldiers, all highly trained and loyal to a fault, and it was they who would help him recapture Bern, then Metz, Rheims and Paris. He expected to have those cities captured by the end of Summer, and to begin hording for Winter during which time the cities would be reinforced against another Scottish winter offensive. The next summer they would be ready to move on Angers, Caen, Rennes, Bruges and Antwerp, and then let the Scottish spend their Winter hiding in terror of the coming Milanese force in their so-called "United Kingdom."

Move to Bern on his map, Paolo lifted the blue markers representing the Scottish armies of Dougall Macdonchie and tipped them on their side. He chuckled to himself, he could see it all so clearly, everything wou-

He crashed to the ground and convulsed wildly, the poison on the Scottish marker quickly travelling through his bloodstream. His arms shook at his sides and his legs flailed as froth erupted from his mouth and his eyes rolled wildly in their sockets.

An hour later when a servant bought him wine, Paolo had all ready been dead for 55 minutes.

Assassination Mission Success

Paolo the Wrathful



This person is no longer a threat, as the assassin that you sent has succeeded in eliminating them without fuss... and more importantly, without drawing any suspicion to the fact it was you who ordered the deed done.

"It was my understanding," noted Gille Calline carefully, "That Pope Maczeus' excommunication of Duke Puccio had more to do with the man's.... predilections.... than his politics."

"He buggers boys, ye mean," grunted Gordon, and Gille sighed heavily.

"Buggers boys?" asked Pope Saracinus, "I was never made aware of this in my former life as a Cardinal."

Gille had noticed that most of the Pope's he'd dealt with over the decades all shared a common conceit. Despite having spent years or even decades dealing at the heart of the dirty and **human** politics of the Papacy, the moment they became Pope they all seemed to firmly believe that theirs was a divine selection and the underlying politics of the Church no longer existed.

"Puccio is a discreet man, but those he chooses to keep in his court speak volumes without saying a word. He has a-

"He keeps "ladies" about who can grow beards, have bad knees and a talent for biting pillows," snapped Gordon, obviously disgusted.

"Come now, Gord-" started Gille, but the brash diplomat from Edinburgh overrode him as the wide-eyed Pope looked on.

"Oh come now my arse!" he snapped, standing up and pacing angrily about the room. The meeting was supposed to be a standard formality, Gille had been having weekly "chats" with whoever the Pope was in Rome for the moment for years now, "Everyone kens, even England's Harry the Honest sent him some stupid young Catamite to spread his arse for an Alliance."

"GORDON!" roared Gille angrily, then turned to the Pope, "Your Holiness, I apologize profusely for my associat-"

"It is nothing," sniffed Saracinus, waving an arm dismissively, "Truth be told, I welcome the directness of your companion, he has given me much to think of. Please leave me now, I would confer with God."

Gille bowed, his familiar blank face returned after his angry outburst. Gordon followed suit, and then the two left, Gille whispering harshly to Gordon as they moved down the marble corridors of the Pope's Palace. Anyone who saw the two would believe the older man was berating his (comparatively) younger companion, which was exactly what Gille was hoping for. What he was actually saying was, "Well done, young man, well done indeed!"



Captain Corsello could not believe that Dijon was in the hands of Scotland.

It was his fault, he had been played completely by the Scottish, who had pulled his strings and run him about like a dog on a leash. The death of Paolo had enraged Corsello, who had suddenly had control of Dijon thrust into his hands until Puccio's austere younger brother Count Catelano could arrive from Genoa to take control. But when news had arrived that Bern's garrison was severely under strength, Corsello had made the decision to divide the forces in Dijon and retake Bern before Catelano's arrival. He had taken 1300 men from Dijon's 2000 strong garrison and ridden to lay siege to Bern, thinking that Scotland's armies were spread thin around their newly captured territories and thus unable to gather enough men to threaten Dijon. The city itself sat in a depression surrounded by high mountains, making it naturally defensible and notoriously hard to lay siege to. Even if access could be blocked from the north, the city's inhabitants could still escape through the mountains to Marseilles, Genoa or Milan.

But Corsello has erred, as he laid siege to Dougall Macdonchie in Bern, the reason for Scotland's lightly defended garrisons was made clear. A force of 1000 men led by a Captain Ranald had marched on Dijon, where spies inside the city had opened the gates and allowed them to march in and massacre the remaining garrison. Thus, the mighty city of Dijon had been captured almost without a fight, leaving Corsello with the largest and best trained army in Milan.... and no city.

He instantly broke off the siege on Bern and force marched his men back to Dijon, enraged and determined to regain some prestige AND a city. He could not allow Dijon to be Scottish, and if he had to kill all of his men he WOULD recapture the city.

In Dijon itself, Captain Ranald had been expecting just this to happen. The Milanese were proud, and even if they weren't, no one could stand being played the fool so openly and publicly. Corsello was bringing 1300 angry and determined Milanese with him, almost twice the number of Ranald's own 741. But his Scots were just as determined to hold Dijon as the Milanese were to regain it. If Milan held Dijon, it left open their mountain passes and would allow more troops to enter Scotland's newly captured territories. If Scotland held Dijon, then Milan's armies would be restricted to behind the mountains and forced to defend rather than attack.

Ranald placed bombards behind the main gate and Spearmen and Pikemen all about them. On the walls themselves, Pikemen stood ready to defend the walls from any number of attacking Milanese, and Ranald was convinced that if they could hold Milan outside of the city, they could successfully hold Dijon despite the numbers disadvantage.

What he hadn't counted on was Corsello's trebuchet.





"Ahhhh SHIT!" yelled Ranald, then screamed down from the wall, "BOMBARDS! MOVE TO THE BREACH AND FIRE ON THAT TREBUCHET! DINNAE LET THEM SMAS-"



"Ahhh **SHIT!**" screamed Ranald, "BOMBARDS BLOW THAT GODDAMNED TREBUCHET UP! SOLDIERS INTO THE BREACH! DINNAE LET THE BASTARDS THROUGH!"

The bombards fired, and cannon shot smashed directly into the first trebuchet, shattering it into pieces. The second trebuchet fired a blast that arched over the wall and deep in the city, hitting the roof of a building and tearing through it. A second bombard blast ripped through it, and the Milanese were no longer able to attack from a distance.... but now there were two huge breaches in the wall, and well over a thousand armored Milanese soldiers charging through the grass towards "their" city.





"HOLD THEM AT THE BREACH!" Ranald screamed down from the wall as he watched the Scottish desperately bracing and trying to hold back the wave of screaming Milanese pouring into the breaches, swords swinging as the pikes of the Scottish.

"WARE THE TOWER!" cried a man to his right, and Ranald turned and cursed as he saw one the siege tower lumbering forward towards the wall.

"BRACE!" he roared at his men, "First Milanese bastard to come over this wall goes back without a head!"

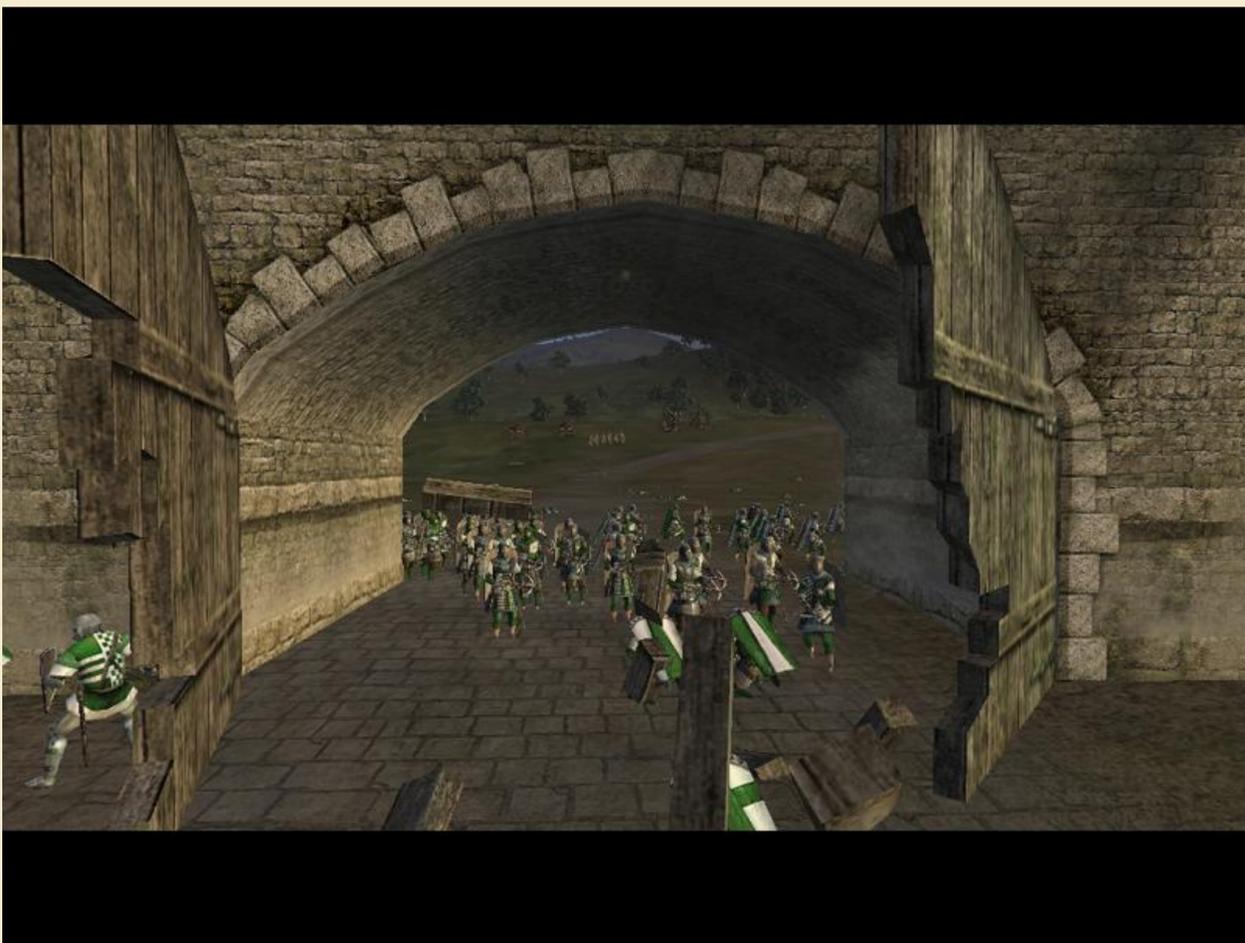


Several hundred Scots stood firm at the breaches, slashing back at the hundreds of Milanese who flooded in against them. Bodies fell between the two sides, Milanese and Scots lying in piles, blood on the stones of the city. Screams and taunting had dropped to nothing now, both sides grunting with effort and concentrating solely on staying alive. As hard as the Milanese pushed, the Scottish held, but as many Milanese that the Scottish killed, more kept coming. The same could not be said for the Scots, there were only so many of them, and for each that died, there was one less to defend.

Suddenly a roaring challenge rang up from behind the Scottish, the voices of fresh men eager to fight. But it was not Scottish, the Milanese had scaled the walls with ladders on the Western breach and now ran into the backs of the Scottish and smashed against them, striking down surprised and undefended men who now found themselves fighting for their lives from in front and behind.



The gates to the city between the two wall breaches pushed open against the weight of the Milanese on the other side, seeking to cut between the two groups of Scottish fighting. They found to their detriment, however, that this move had been anticipated, as the bombards open fired from only a few feet back and send flaming death smashing through the gate and into the men beyond.



On the wall, the Milanese had successfully fought their way over from the siege tower, creating a small gap where they could stand and fight against the Scottish.



Ranald cursed as he watched the Milanese charging up the siege tower onto the wall. If he could just get a bombard outside of the walls to destroy the blasted thing....

"ABANDON THE WALLS!" he cried, inspiration striking him, "LET THEM HAVE IT, LADS! FOLLOW ME! I HAVE A PLAN!"

He charged down the narrow winding stair of the tower (no easy feat, especially in full armor) with his men thumping behind him, and felt a momentary burst of affection for his men for not questioning his order to abandon their walls to the Milanese. Charging out onto ground level, they were to the side of the mass of fighting Scottish and Milanese, who had passed through the breach and were spreading out along the interior wall of the city.

"INTO IT, LADS!" cried Ranald, "Surround the Milanese bastards and wipe them out!"

The men from the walls - still relatively fresh - smashed into the exhausted and bloody Milanese, giving cheer to the equally exhausted and bloody Scotsmen who had been desperately defending the breach. Moving to join with his other men, Ranald saw the Milanese surrounded and attacked from all sides, preventing them from being able to focus on one particular front. As a result, Milanese started falling in greater numbers, and everywhere they turned, they found more Scottish waiting for them.

Ranald had achieved the unthinkable, he was outnumbering a bigger army.



"ENOUGH!" cried one Milanese, and pushed desperately past his fellow countrymen and back out the breach, charging across the grass away from a city he had called his own for many years. No more, the Scottish could have Dijon, the price in blood and death was not worth it.

As if this was the cue, the other Milanese instantly broke and followed, and the Scottish who had been fighting them at the breach for close to an hour now stood bewildered watching them go before letting out a ragged, relieved cheer.



"We're nae done yet, lads!" called Ranald, pointing to the Scottish still fighting at the western breach, "Into them, lets have those Milanese follow their craven countrymen!"

It did not take long.



Ranald sighed with relief as he watched the Milanese running, then turned and stared back up at the wall where he could see several hundred remaining Milanese - those that had taken the walls he had abandoned.

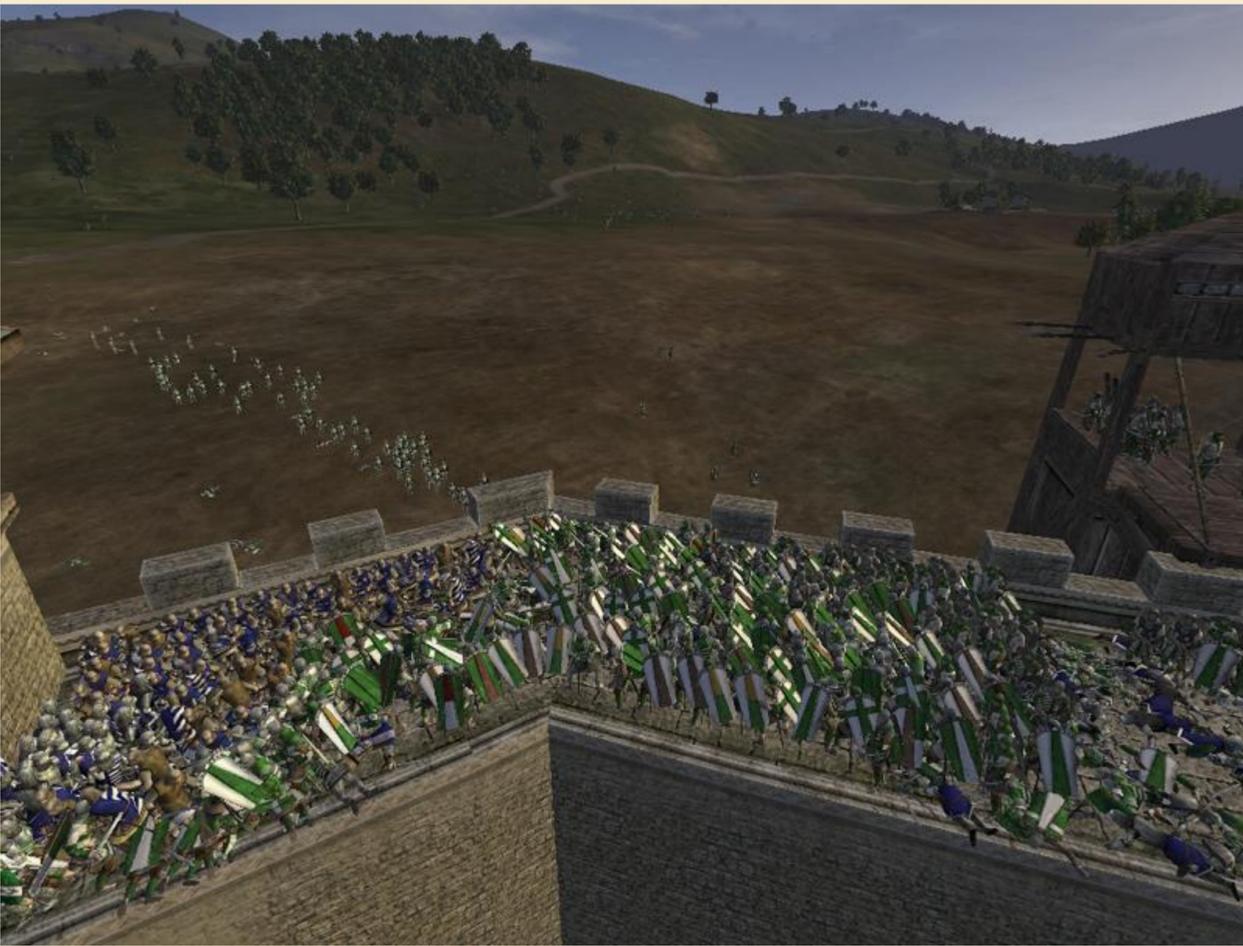
"Bombards!" he snapped, and the bombard commander rushed to his side, "If ye get ye cannon over that pile of dead Milanese bastards by the gate, I want ye to blow that siege tower into pieces. Those bastards are nae going to have an easy way out when we kill them."

"Aye sir!" snapped the commander with a salute, and then turned and screamed at his men to get into gear and get the bombard outside of the city.

"Well then," sighed Ranaldo, turning to stare at his panting, bloody and exhausted men... all of them grinning widely, "Shall we go explain to yon bastards on **our** wall why Dijon belongs to Scotland now?"

His men roared in approval, and then they marched towards the wall where Captain Corsello and his men waited. Despite seeing hundreds of his men break and run like cowards, Corsello remained confident. He held the high ground yeah, the Scots would have to come at him a handful at a time, and even with half his army dead or deserted, he still had more men than the Scots.

They could not possibly defeat him.







Ranald stood knee-deep in the dead, bloody remains of hundreds of Milanese, Captain Corsello's body sliding off of his sword. The Milanese Captain had stood brave to the end as his men broke and ran around him, but he'd died nonetheless, and now the Milanese were running, still numbering in their hundreds but broken and scattered now. The siege tower lay broken before the wall, destroyed by the bombards, and those few units of the Scottish not too exhausted were chasing down the running Milanese still within reach, while the others disappeared into the mountains.

Ranald sighed with relief, it had finally happened, what they'd been waiting for since this war truly began. The most powerful, well trained and effective army of the Milanese had met head to head with the Scottish.... and been found wanting.



Strange dreams. Colors that didn't exist. Noises faded in and out. Thirsty. Burning. Nauseous. Confused. A bird man? Words spoken he didn't understand.

He was dying.

King Domnall blinked his eyes slowly, looking about him. He lay on his bunk, his room was shrouded in darkness, and leaning over him was a.... a thing.... a bird-man reaching with leering eyes and black hands.

"GET AWAY!" he coughed hoarsely, and the bird-man pulled back, surprised.

"Ye're awake?" asked the bird-man, and his voice was strange, muffled and... he smelt like vinegar?

"What are ye?" gasped Domnall, and clutched at his throat, wincing at the pain. He was so thirsty, but his throat burned and felt swollen.

"It is I, Doctor Kinsey," replied the bird-man calmly, "Remember, my liege? This is my plague-suit, it protects me."

"Plague," gasped Domnall, remembering. They were at sea, an army infected by the dreaded plague. Scores of soldiers, possibly hundreds, dead or dying. And he was one of them? Yes, he'd felt the first swelling only two days after Steaphan Vissman had been buried at sea, felt the fever and other symptoms the Doctor had told him of, "I am... dying?"

"Possibly," grunted the Doctor, who Domnall now recognized as wearing the bizarre protective costume of a "Plague Doctor", which included a bird-like face mask containing vinegar and various herbs and fragrant leaves, designed to purify the air through which the plague apparently spread, "Ye show all the signs, my liege, and unless there is something to the old superstition of the divine blood of the royalty, ye chances are no better than any other man."

Domnall lay back on his bunk, and found himself staring directly up into his father's face.

"...." started Domnall in shock, mouth opening wide.

"Ach, Domnall, ye disappoint me, lad," sighed Edmund, standing over Domnall's bunk, "I thought I taught ye better than this."

"I... I..." gasped Domnall.

"Yes, my liege?" asked the Doctor, raising an eyebrow behind his mask.

"What have I told ye about accepting established knowledge, hmmm?" lectured Edmund, in that tone of voice that Domnall knew so well, the one he used when he was trying to teach his son a lesson, "Now ye're just going to lie here and die because someone tells ye that is just the way things are? And ye showed such promise with the way ye dealt to the Mongols too."

"My liege?" asked the Doctor again, concerned as he watched Domnall focusing on a point above him where there was nothing to focus on but the roof of the cabin.

"Ask yeself, Domnall, ask yeself where ye have just been and who ye have with ye. Dinnae disappoint me lad, ye're better than this."

"My liege, I want ye to look at me," cried the Doctor, and sighed with relief when Domnall did, turning his eyes towards the Doctor... but then his relief faded as he saw the intense look of concentration on Domnall's face. The plague-ridden King of Scotland hauled himself into a sitting position, sweat breaking out on his all ready dangerously dehydrated body, and he fixed his gaze on the Doctor.

"When we left Iconium, we took a unit of Turkish mercenaries onboard with us," he growled, "Go to them and find their Doctor, or whatever the closest to one they have is, and bring him to me."

"My Liege?" asked the Doctor, confused, "What do ye...."

"NOW!" roared Domnall, and the Doctor exited the cabin at a run, as Domnall lay back and panted with exhaustion. Had that been the shade of his father? Or just a fever-sparked hallucination telling him what he all ready secretly knew deep inside of him. Whatever the case, it did not matter. If he was wrong about his sudden intuition, the worst that could happen was that he would die, which would happen if he didn't follow it.

At least he would not die lying on his back and waiting for fate to come for him.

"A good day's work today, Gordon," complimented Gille Calline the Balleol, sitting at his tidy desk across from Gordon's cluttered one, "We have secured some stability for our Nation's expansion plans today."



"Aye," noted Gordon, "That Danish Princess had a good set of tits, too."

Gille sighed, which was becoming a more common occurrence nowadays. Gordon was - when actively trying - a brilliant diplomat who had a deft touch for seeing what was hidden, reading between the lines and in turn hiding his own thoughts and feelings. But once outside of what he believed to be a diplomatic setting, he became a foul-mouthed, intolerant religious bigot.

"Gordon, I have told you many times," sighed Gille, "To be a successful diplomat, especially in a city as political as Rome, you must ALWAYS be a diplomat. Whether in private audience with the Pope; meeting with traders from Florence; drinking in a pub with dock workers; or, yes, sitting in our private chambers... you MUST act diplomatically. You must assume someone is ALWAYS watching, and act accordingly."

"Bah, I bet if ye dream about nude women, ye keep ye eyes averted and tell them ye appreciate their singing talent," grunted Gordon, "A man cannae be acting diplomatically all the time or he forgets what kind of a man he is, and just becomes a hollow shell spouting meaningless babble."

"There is a danger of losing your individuality, true," conceded Gille, "But there is a secret to it, a way to stay true to yourself without horribly offending someone and causing a war with Sicily in the process."

"Well ye're the one supposed to be mentoring me," chuckled Gordon, "Let's hear it then!"

"I suppose I'm not getting any younger," sighed Gille, "Very well, listen carefully."

Gordon leaned forward eagerly as Gill closed his eyes and sat up straight, apparently gathering his thoughts. But he continued to sit, and sit.... and sit.

"Calline?" grunted Gordon, "Balleol! OI! You have nae fallen asleep have ye, ye old fart?"

He stood up and pushed Gille's shoulder, and the man fell forward face-first against the table, then slid off of his chair and onto the ground.

His face remained blank and unreadable.

"Gille?" asked Gordon in horror, and dropped and grabbed the man's arm, feeling the rapidly cooling skin.

"Ahhhhh shit!"



Puccio stared with distaste at the Venetian Diplomat, who had just had the temerity to scald him in front of his court.

"Would you care to repeat that?" he asked with a dangerous smile, but the Venetian was not cowed.

"Your disastrous war with Scotland appears to have affected your hearing as well as your mind," he snapped, "You offered Venice an Alliance to present a united front against Scotland to DISSUADE them from expanding. But then you continued to send armies against them, and when you push Scotland, Scotland pushes back a hell of a lot harder. They've taken Dijon, they've taken almost all of your most profitable cities and made them into their own. They'll push through and wipe you out, and then they'll be sitting directly on Venice's border! You've not only doomed yourself, but you've put Venice at risk too!"

"I have created Alliances with Venice AND England, and made peace with the Moors," retorted Puccio softly, "If Scotland presses forward now, it will find itself surrounded by three Nations who consider it a risk to their sovereignty. Now is a time to be united, if our Alliance is broken, then Scotland will consider us all easy pickings.... if we remain united, they will be happy with their new territories. They will NOT come south through the mountains against us here in Milan, the pass is too easily defended and leaves them exposed against England in the north. The fall of Dijon was an unfortunate result of the unexpected death of its Governor, and his replacement - Corsello - overreacted to his new position of authority and lost the city. I will conduct diplomatic overtures to Adam Canmore in the Fall. He is a sensible man who does not seek War, he will return Dijon to me at the cost of some insignificant tribute that Milan can easily afford, and the war will end without either side feeling like they backed down."

The Venetian looked momentarily at a loss for words, while the Nobles in the Court all looked approvingly at their Duke... and then the spell was broken.

"SCOTTISH SAILS! SCOTTISH SAILS!" came the cry, "THE SCOTTISH ARE SAILING INTO PORT!"

"Scottish!?!!" snapped Puccio in agitation, "How could the Scottish be sailing into our port?"

Standing, he marched (along with most of his court and the Venetian Diplomat) down the corridors of his palace to the magnificent balcony overlooking the port of Genoa, where Puccio preferred to spend the hottest part of Summer. There it was, large as life and completely inconceivable.... a fleet of large Scottish ships sailing directly towards them.

"You..... idiot, Puccio," gasped the Venetian, "You've been completely out of your league this entire time and your damned arrogance may have cost us all."

Puccio ignored him, ignored the murmurs and whimpers of the Milanese Nobles behind him, ignored the cries of the townspeople and thudding of soldiers rushing for their barracks to suit up in armor and grab weapons. He ignored the Scottish ships themselves, focusing instead on the lead vessel, and the banner lifted high above even the Scottish flag.

The Canmore Coat of Arms, banner of the King of Scotland.



And on the bow of the lead vessel, King Domnall stood staring through narrowed eyes at Genoa. He was thinner than he would have liked, and still unsteady on his feet after a few hours of ordinary exertion... but he was alive and free of the plague, and though many of his men had died of the Black Death, many more had lived.

The Black Death had passed on from the Scottish, but now it was their turn to bring death to Milan.

Chapter 34

Aodh Canmore sat in his tent reviewing notes carefully, squinting his eyes as he read of alliances, troop movements and diplomatic overtures. It hurt his brain to try and make sense of it all, he had never been tutored in the intricacies of diplomacy and politics, and it had been accepted since he was a child that he would join the Church, but events had transpired to prevent that from happening. Now he found himself in a position where he **MUST** make himself useful to his brother, King Domnall, but it was so hard.

For example, why had Portugal offered Alliance with Scotland but then insulted them by demanding an unreasonably high annual tribute? Then in turn acted offended when Scotland refused the demand? What purpose did it serve Portugal? Why gain Scotland's attention AND ire? It made no sense.

"Portugal's Spy Network has found itself hindered by Scotland's Milanese campaign," spoke a rasping voice, and Aodh jerked to his feet in shock, twisting around to find a hooded figure standing inside his tent, unannounced by the guards, "It seeks to aggravate Scotland into revealing its long term plans, as well as how that may affect Portugal both directly and indirectly."

"Who the hell are ye!?" demanded Aodh angrily, hand on his sword hilt.

"Scotland's greatest friend and servant," replied the man, and Aodh's eyes widened and his hand loosened on the hilt. He knew that phrase! But that was impossible, the only man outside he, Domnall and Nectan who knew it was dead!

"Be seated," smiled the hooded man, "I have a story to tell ye."

Duke Puccio had a young man in his private quarters in the middle of the night, but for once his reasons for doing so were not scandalous.

Count Maria was only 17 years old, still more boy than man, but Puccio had chosen him from the now relatively small Royal Family as heir to the rule of Milan. Puccio's reasons had been the same as the reasons that had seen others in the family look down on Maria. He was a careful young man who questioned everything and never committed himself to a course of action until he had satisfied himself he knew all the variables. He was thin and pale, and had been known to faint at the sight of blood as a boy, which caused many to whisper that he was unmanly, but Puccio saw that as an asset. A man who feared his own death would do all he could to avert it.

Enemy Character Details

Count Maria Age: 17

Faction Heir
Command ★★
Chivalry ●●●●
Loyalty ●●●●
Piety ●

Retinue
Tutor

Traits
Un-Manly
Talent for Command
Heir Apparent
Mindful of Risks

Spotted By: Mac Bethad Bunnok
Subterfuge: ●●●●●●●●

"See here, Maria," Puccio muttered, pointing to the map on the desk between them, "Scotland has taken Genoa, what does that tell you?"

"That they have split our forces at Marseilles from our forces here in Milan," mused Maria, "Preventing either from reinforcing the other. It also serves as a message, Scotland is telling us they can attack from any point at any time, and it is designed to make us scared."

"Not bad, but you give Scotland utterly too much credit," smirked Puccio, who had fled quickly from Genoa when he had spied the Scottish Fleet, leaving it to be captured easily by King Domnall, "You must make advantage from disadvantage to successfully rule, let me tell you what I see."

"**WE** hold Marseilles and Milan, and Genoa is trapped between us," he grunted, poking Genoa on the map with his finger, "Domnall Canmore knows we can ride against him from two sides while his reinforcements must come through the mountains from Dijon. I will admit he caught me by surprise, sailing up on Genoa as he did, but all he has done had strengthened his bargaining position. Let him celebrate in Genoa, and then I will send emissaries to broker a ceasefire with him. Now that the actual King of Scotland is on our lands, we can address someone both in authority AND competent enough to make the best decision for both our Empires."

Maria frowned, considering this take on things. It made sense... but then everything Puccio said made sense, and always seemed designed to greatly benefit Milan... but these last two years had shown that Puccio was **not** always right, and sometimes to the great detriment of Milan. But it was not his place to question the Duke, besides which Milan was a city that seemed siege-proof, its massive outer and inner-wall system and forbidding ballista towers could hold off a massive army for years successfully. But that left Marseille, whic-

A knock at the door disturbed his thoughts, and Puccio sighed before calling for the messenger to enter.

"My Lord, dire news," whispered the pale looking messenger, bowing respectfully, "Marseilles has fallen!"

"WHAT!?" roared Puccio, striding over to the panting messenger and tearing his scroll from him. He unrolled it and read quickly, eyes narrowing dangerously, "That fool Agostino has lost Marseilles! Dougall Macdonchie rode west around the mountains and came on him unawares..... Milan is naught but Milan now!"



"Father?" gasped Maria, dismay in his eyes. His father Agostino the Chivalrous had been left in command of Marseilles, and the idea that the invincible old man could be dead.... "Surely he is not dead?"

"No, he grew wings on his arse and flew to the moon.... of course he's dead you buffoon!" snapped Puccio angrily, "This changes everything! We mus-"

"FATHER!" wailed Maria, and stumbled out of the room past the startled messenger.

"Bah!" grunted Puccio, the glared at the messenger, "You are to instruct my advisors to meet with me in the morning to discuss plans for the defence of the city, while I try to find a diplomatic solution to this nightmare."

The messenger left, and Puccio worked on for several more hours reviewing his plans, before finally, reluctantly, retiring to bed to get the bare minimum of sleep he needed. An hour later he was awoken by a new messenger, this one reporting even worse news than before.

Count Maria - the fool - had mistaken his grief for valor, and gathered an army to march on and meet King Domnall's forces head on.

"There was a boy once, who grew up in a place far from here called Shetland," spoke the hooded man, "He had nae Father, and his Mother died when he was young, so he learned to live on the streets. He had nimble feet and fingers, but a nimble mind too, and there were people who took note of the boy, and took him in, and tutored and mentored him, and gave him a family. He grew into a man, and he left Shetland, and he did things for his family, and it was explained to him that his family had an even bigger family, an Empire in fact, an Empire they served and protected. So the man travelled in service and protection of the Empire, and he saw things that no boy or man in Shetland would ever expect to see. He travelled the gutters and the slums, the homes of commoners and nobles, the most glorious palaces and forbidding castles in the world. He learnt to be more nimble, with his feet, his fingers, and most importantly his mind, and he began to study under a man... a great man, who sent him on missions for the Empire, and told him how the family worked, and told him the family would one day need a new father.... and then the man from Shetland was sent on one final mission."

Aodh stared in wonder at the hooded man, whose words had a hypnotic effect. Realizing that he was in an almost trance like state, he sat up straight and shook his head, and was rewarded with a wide grin from within the shadows of the hood. Standing, Aodh walked around the tent, noting that the hooded man never moved from his chair, even when Aodh was behind him. The young Prince stopped by the small "package" that was the reason for his current trip towards Cairo and felt the familiar pain, and winced angrily, fighting it back. Turning around, he motioned to the hooded man to continue.

"He was sent to Caesarea to spy on the Turks, war was coming between them and the Empire. He did his duty there, and sent his reports back to the Family, and then something happened... the man from Shetland finally found something that his nimble feet, his nimble fingers and his nimble mind could nae escape.

The man from Shetland found the plague."

The hooded man stepped up and bowed to Aodh.

"That is enough for today, tomorrow ye will continue towards Cairo, and in the evening, I will continue our story."

Turning, the hooded men left the tent silently, and Aodh's eyes returned to the "package". Once again, he felt the familiar pain, but this time he let it wash over him.

Domnall flexed his arms and legs carefully, noting that they felt relaxed, they felt strong.

The sack of Genoa had been taxing for him despite the ease with which they'd taken the city. His recovery from the plague was still fresh in his mind, though every day faded the intensity of the pain and desperation he'd felt.

His vision of his Father had served to remind him that Turkish mercenaries had travelled with the Scottish Fleet, and that Turkey had been dealing with the plague for far longer than Scotland. Thus it stood to reason they knew more than Domnall's own physician about treatment, and so it had proved. The Turkish soldier dragged to Domnall's side had been no Doctor, but he served to keep his own unit healthy and had been able to offer advice to Dr Kinsey.

The Doctor had been taken aback at the Turk's insistence that the plague was not transferred through the air but by blood, and blanched at the idea of lancing the boils on Domnall's body. The Turk - al-Antaki - had insisted it was necessary to remove the "bad" blood from Domnall's body, but warned that this could also spread the infection if not drained correctly. Believing he was near dead regardless, Domnall had insisted they follow al-Antaki's suggestion, and endured hours of pain as the Turk and the Scottish Doctor lanced the boils on his body and drained the thick, black blood that oozed forth. Passing out through a combination of pain, fever, thirst and hunger, Domnall had spent the next few days in a bizarre "waking death" during which he sometimes babbled loudly, sometimes whispered harshly, and sometimes lay so still that he appeared dead at a casual glance. Then, several days after he had first called for al-Antaki, Domnall woke feeling tired, sore, hungry, thirsty..... but not sick.

Now, here he sat on his horse feeling as fit as ever, even if he had still not regained the weight loss during his sickness. Before him stretched a vast army of Scotsmen, and the sun shone, the grass was green, the sky was blue and there was an army of Milanese waiting to die at his hands.

"Life is good," grinned Domnall, "ALL RIGHT LADS! WHO'S UP FOR A BRAWL!?!"



Count Maria watched as the vast Scottish army marched towards them, and not for the last time found himself regretting his uncharacteristically brash decision to meet Domnall on the field. But it was too late now for second thoughts, and more in keeping with his character was his decision to use the land and the units available to him to his best advantage. The slope they stood on was slight, but still gave them the upper ground, and he had assembled handgunners on the frontline to open fire on the Scottish as soon as they were in range. The armor of the Scottish soldiers would be no match for their guns, and they would die in their scores, perhaps their hundreds before they reached the frontline. At that point, the handgunners would have pulled back to allow infantry to engage the Scottish, and they could then reform and open fire from a distance again. Everything depended on range, if you could attack your enemy before they could attack you, you could win the battle no matter how insurmountable.



Maria's mounted bodyguard stared in horror at the flaming corpse besides them that had been their General. The Scottish had fired their cursed bombards and scored a direct hit, the blast smashing directly into Maria and making him the first casualty of the battle.

"OPEN FIRE!" roared a Milanese Captain desperately at the handgunners.

"WE CAN'T SEE THEM!" cried the Handgunner Captain, watching in horror as the front row of Scottish Infantry walked into range - and immediately into a dip in the ground that obscured them from view! Maria had been looking at the landscape for ways Milan could use it for offence and defence, he had never considered how the land could in turn be used to Scotland's advantage. As the Scottish Infantry reached the dip and held their ground - forming a long line across the width of the battlefield - the Scottish Archers moved up behind them just out of range of the Handgunners and fired high into the air with flaming arrows. Their arrows arced high, not constrained by a direct line-of-sight requirement, and then plunged down amongst the Milanese.



"Shit... shit.... SHIT!" screamed the Captain of the Milanese Knights,"This is all going to shit.... shit.... CHARGE! CHARGE!"

With no thought of tactics, flanks or strategy, the Milanese charged into the waiting Scottish, who roared with delight and egged them on, eager to kill.



Without strategy, it was simply a few hundred Milanese against over a thousand Scottish, and the difference in quantity told as much as the difference in quality. The Scottish tore through the Milanese, who held desperately and then broke, running wildly in different directions, losing all coherence and becoming nothing more than a series of small groups of running men, all completely exposed to the Scottish to pick off at their will. A small core of the Milanese tried to hold their formation at the top of the slope, but their resistance was short-lived as the Scottish swept up the slope and over them, Domnall sweeping his cavalry over the ground and smashing into fleeing Milanese, wiping them out where they stood.





Looking over the battlefield from a safe distance, Duke Puccio sighed as he watched the massacre.

"My Lord, shall we ride to the aide of our countrymen?" asked the Commander of his Bodyguard. Puccio and his men were suited up, and he had 600 men who could ride with him.

"I hardly see why we should bother," grunted Puccio, "The battle is lost, the Scottish have decimated them."

"But Count Mar-" started the Commander.

"Will riding in there bring him back to life, hmm?" asked Puccio testily, "No? Then what is the point, we return to Milan and we make ready for King Domnall to come lay siege, and maybe I can finally make a diplomatic solution to this entire stupid mess."



"The man from Shetland stumbled feverishly through the forests South of Caesarea," whispered the hooded man. Aodh had travelled through the day towards Cairo along with his "package", and then at night as he retired to his tent he had found the hooded man waiting, unseen the entire day, "He knew he was sick, and he knew what his sickness was, and his only thought was to get clear of Turkish land so that when his body was found, it did nae give away the plans of his Empire."

"The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak, and the man from Shetland collapsed in the forest, his last conscious act to be to destroy or bury any items on his person that marked him as an agent of his Empire. When he awoke, he found himself a small hut, being cared for a Turkish woman who had nae fear of the plague. She treated him, and soothed him in the dark days that followed as he felt fever and pain wash over him.... I would describe it as best I could, but only a man who has suffered the horror can ever truly understand."

Aodh's eyes strayed to the "package", then returned to the hooded man. He nodded, and the man continued.

"She nursed him to health, and finally the fever broke, and he began to recover his strength, and take note of his surroundings. She was a widow, her husband died in the war with the Mongols, and she had two children, a boy named Deniz and a girl named Ceren. Her name was Aylin, and she explained she lived in forest clearing because she and her children had suffered the plague and been cast out. She buried another son there, but the others survived, and together they turned their hut into a new home, and rebuilt their lives."

"Finally the man from Shetland felt strong enough to make his way back to his Empire, but first he felt it only just that he remain to help Aylin and her children. He did repairs on their home, and gave Deniz lessons in fighting, and taught Ceren how to dance. He hunted for them, and helped Aylin tend her garden, and when he had done all he could, he told Aylin he would be leaving. She understood, and thanked him for remaining as long as he had, and then she made a terrible mistake.... she told the man from Shetland she would nae tell anyone the strange things he said in his fever-dreams, and he learnt that in his sickness he had spoken words meant only for his Family. Words in code true, words that any other would nae understand... but words that should nae have been spoken."

"And what did y... what did the man from Shetland do then?" asked Aodh.

"He made it quick," replied the hooded man, his voice calm and emotionless, "And as he left the burning remains of the hut, he looked up and saw a man watching him. He approached the man, and bowed his head, and the man spoke to him."

"Wha... what did he say?" asked Aodh.

"Fearghus Campbell told me then," said Nevin of Shetland, pulling back his hood and staring directly into Aodh's eyes with his own terrible, cold ones, "That when he died, I would serve the Scottish Empire."



"I knew it when ye said that phrase about being Scotland's protector," smiled Aodh, "Ye are Scotland's new Spymaster."

"Nae, my lord," smiled Nevin, his eyes remaining dead and emotionless, "I am the Spy that serves as conduit between the Spy Network and the Spymaster. Fearghus and ye Father decided long ago that the next to be in charge of the Spy Network they created must be intimately associated with the Royal Family, to prevent any possibility of betrayal."

"Then... who is the Spymaster?" asked Aodh, perplexed.

Nevin walked to the table where Aodh's "package" sat and stroked one finger down its side. Lifting it almost reverently, he turned and held Nectan Canmore's urn - containing the ashes of Domnall's twin and Aodh's elder brother, dead of a plague bought to Antioch by Aodh. This was the pain that Aodh felt whenever he looked at the "package" he was carrying to Cairo to bury alongside his Father and Uncle. The pain of guilt, the pain of mourning, the pain of survival. He had suffered the plague as well, but he had lived where Nectan had died.

"Nectan Canmore was Spymaster of the Scottish Empire," Nevin explained, "And now that he is dead, Aodh Canmore, it is my job to make ye his replacement."

The city of Milan was not as huge and daunting as Rome, London or Paris, but it was an impressive city nonetheless. Huge walls were merely the first of many defences, which included massive ballista towers and an inner courtyard past the city gates with a second interior wall behind it. The streets of the city were built narrow and forked, with no central street leading up towards the palace. Any invading force that broke through would be forced to ride a few at a time, and could easily be isolated from the main force and whittled down.

Puccio was convinced that this would not be necessary, however. The Scottish army would not be able to get close to the walls without scores of men being killed by crossbowmen, handgunners and the giant ballista towers. Even if they then broke through the gate, they would have to fight in the interior courtyard, and Puccio was convinced that no one would be mad enough to lose potentially a thousand men when a simple diplomatic overture could end this.

Oh it was true that Scotland had "won" the war, Puccio didn't doubt that. But there were different degrees of victory, and as long as there was breath in his body, Milan would continue on. He would probably have to agree to make Milan vassal to Scotland, and maybe offer up his new heir - Borgognion Florioli - as a "hostage", but in the end the Scottish would depart Milan and he would be left in control as he always had been. He was in his sixties now, but those of his family who died of natural causes tended to live a good long time, and he had potentially another thirty years worth of life to rebuild Milan into the force it had once been.

Enemy Character Details



Borgognion Florioli

Age: 21

Family member

Command



Chivalry



Loyalty



Piety



Retinue

None

Traits

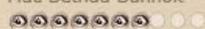
Aspiring Commander

Fair Fighter

Spotted By:

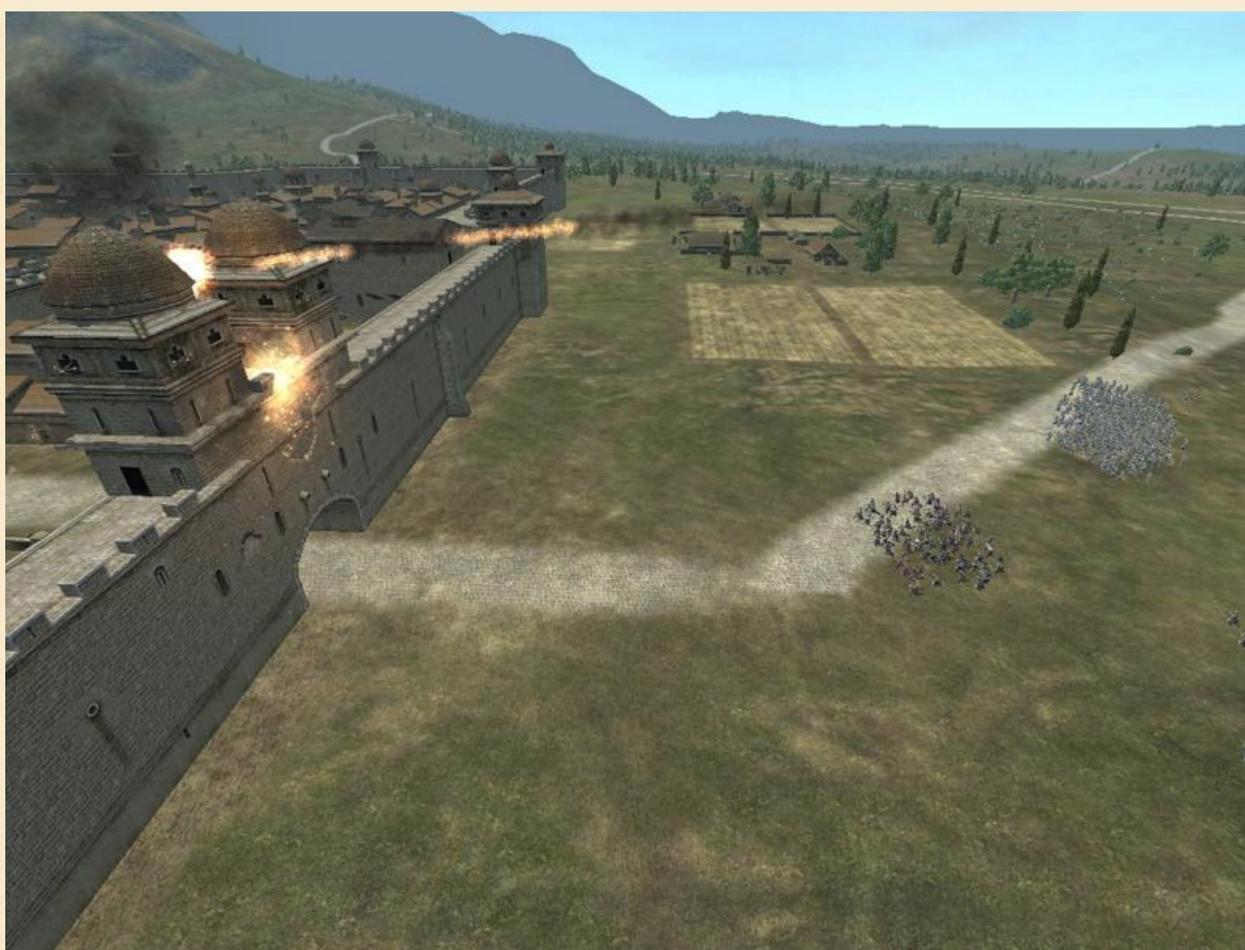
Subterfuge:

Mac Bethad Bunnok



"Mark my words, Borgognion," he chuckled, sitting his horse in the courtyard at the centre of the city, "The Scottish will ride up just outside of the ballista towers range and make a great show of their numbers, their valor, their might. Then our diplomats will ride forth and put an end to this "siege" without a single drop of blood being spilt.

It was not the first time Puccio was wrong about Scotland, but as they watched the flaming bombard fire arc through the air and come smashing against the ballista towers, Borgognion could not help but wonder if this was Puccio's last.



Word spread back quickly to Puccio from the walls as bombard fire pounded the ballista towers. The Scottish infantry was charging up towards the gates, which was surely a suicide charge except... the gates had opened!

"How is this possible!?" despaired Borgognion.

"They have a spy inside the walls, you idiot," sighed Puccio, "Do you think they just asked nicely and our guards opened the doors for them?"



"Let's get this farce over with then, shall we?" sighed Puccio, "Borgognion, send some men forward to meet the Scottish and kill a few of them, I guess Canmore wants to spill some blood first."

Borgognion stared at his frustratingly calm Duke, then saluted and gave the order, sending a small group of men to their certain death. As they marched off, word reached Puccio that several smaller Scottish units were breaking off to move through the narrow side streets of Milan and prevent ambushes.

"Let's accommodate and lay some ambushes, hmmm?" chuckled Puccio, seemingly bemused, "Send some men in Borgognion, give the Scottish their blasted battle."





The Scottish tore through the Milanese easily, as Puccio had known they would, and continued their relentless march onwards towards the City Square.

"They're coming at us from two sides!" gasped Borgognion.

"Oh no!" Puccio mock-gasped, sarcastically flailing his arms about, "Who would have thought it!?! Of course they are, you idiot, wait here to be captured, that's when the real battle begins, to see what concessions I can wring from Domnall before he leaves me in charge of my city and claims his "victory".

"Are you mad!?! " snapped Borgognion, "Domnall Canmore isn't coming to negotiate, he's coming to KILL US!"

"Are you dense, boy, hmmm?" grunted Puccio, "Do you really think Domnall Canmore wants to be forced to leave one of his Generals and a huge army to make sure Milan is kept in check, so far as it is from their centres of control? Hidden as it is behind mountains, creating such potential for rioting, rebellion and overthrow? You are the mad one, boy, if you think Domnall Canmore will kill the one man who can keep it in control."

"ARRRGHHH!" snapped Borgognion in frustration, and turned his horse and spurred it forward towards the road leading into the square, up which the Scottish were even now marching. As he rode, more Scottish pushed up into the square from the South road, and Milanese charged forward to meet them, fighting furiously for their survival.

"Fine, die then," sighed Puccio, "Idiots."







"Duke Puccio," snapped the commander of his mounted Bodyguard as the Duke watched his men being slaughtered by the Scottish, "It seems grim, the Scottish look set to win this battle."

"Nooooo!" gasped Puccio, rolling his eyes, "You don't say."

"Duke, it has been an honor to serve under you, you made Milan great," said the Commander with a salute, then turned his horse.

"What?" snapped Puccio, "What are you doing? NO! NO YOU IDIOTS!"

It was too late, the commander led the men forward and they crashed against the Scottish front, smashing their way through before becoming surrounded and dragged from their horses and put to the sword.

"What was the point of that," sighed Puccio, "Fools, now I will have to break in a new bodyguard."

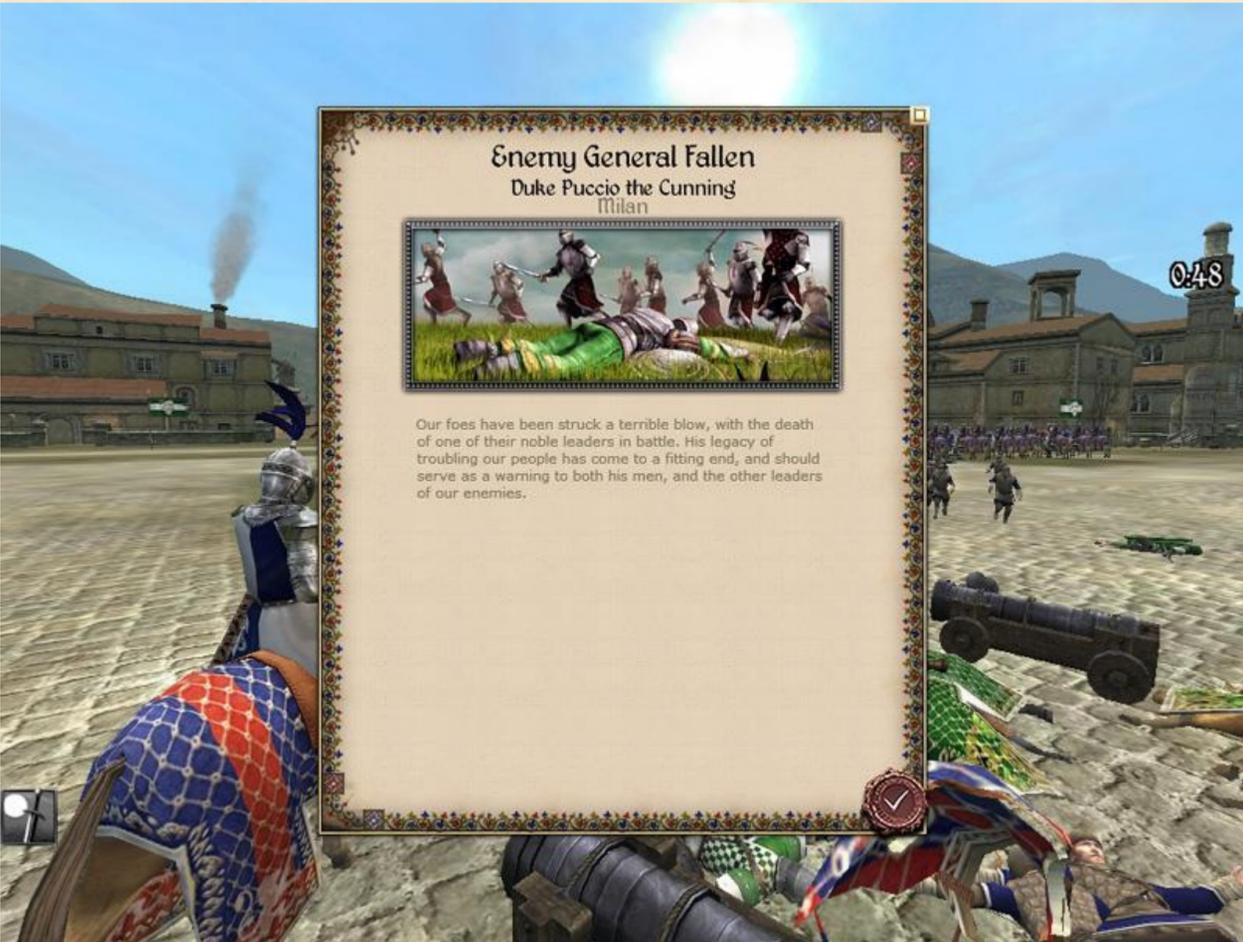
He sat and watched impassively on his horse as the last remaining Milanese were wiped out, and all that was left were the Scottish. They filed into the square from the Southern and Eastern roads, a seemingly endless swarm of them, and then they parted down the middle and Puccio grinned cruelly as he saw the banner and watched Domnall Canmore ride slowly into the city square of Milan, a city the fool now probably believed was his.

"Time to get this over with, then," sighed Puccio, and kicked his horse into a slow march. It paced slowly down the square towards Domnall, who lifted an arm to restrain his men, and then slowly rode forward to meet his fellow ruler.

"King Domnall Canmore, Ruler of the Scottish Empire," smiled Puccio with a winning grin as their horses stopped beside each other, "Milan surrenders."

In one fluid motion, Domnall pulled his sword clear off its scabbard and parted Puccio's head from his shoulders. It rose high in the air and then crashed to the ground, Puccio's body following moments later as it dropped from his horse, which remained still. In the silence that followed, Domnall wiped his sword clean and spat on the corpse of the man lying on the ground before him, before answering Puccio's surrender.

"Scotland accepts."



Enemy General Fallen

Duke Puccio the Cunning
Milan

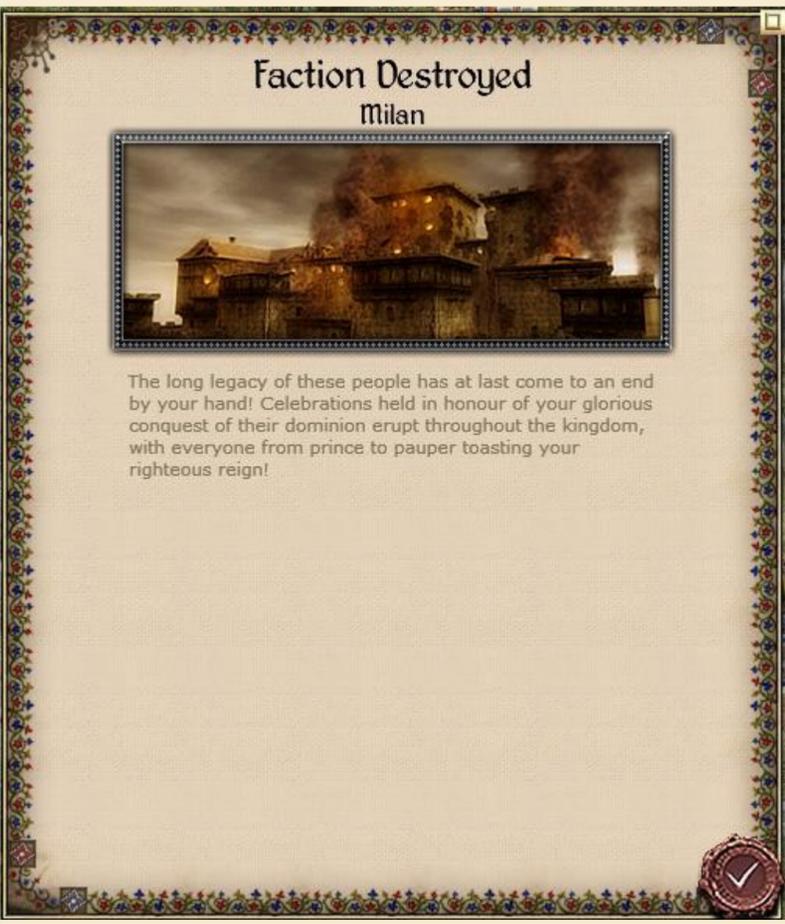


Our foes have been struck a terrible blow, with the death of one of their noble leaders in battle. His legacy of troubling our people has come to a fitting end, and should serve as a warning to both his men, and the other leaders of our enemies.



Clear Victory

	Battle Results			Enemies Killed
	Men Deployed	Men Lost	Men Remaining	
King Domnall the Killer	1391	638	753	599 (21)
Duke Puccio the Cunning	628	628	0	652 (35)



Faction Destroyed

Milan



The long legacy of these people has at last come to an end by your hand! Celebrations held in honour of your glorious conquest of their dominion erupt throughout the kingdom, with everyone from prince to pauper toasting your righteous reign!

Chapter 35

The flickering light of their torches exposed impossibly smooth walls, etched into which were alien symbols that hurt the eye to look upon. Nevin frowned, he did not like mysteries he could not unravel, but these symbols were as beyond him as they had been beyond Fearghus Campbell and Edmund Canmore.

He followed Prince Aodh down narrow corridors and dusty floors marked by prints made by dead men, and though he was not a superstitious man, Nevin could not help but feel a chill run down his spine at the thought that he was walking in the footsteps of men dead from before the time of Christ.

"This path is etched into my mind for all time," Aodh whispered as he lead the way deep into the massive pyramid, one of the seven great wonders of the world, "I thought it the height of blasphemy to bury Father and Uncle Edward here.... until I saw the chamber."

Nevin said nothing, he knew about the chamber that served as the final resting place of King Edward and Prince Edmund of course, but he did not know what about it could have caused as devout a Christian as Aodh to overcome his objections to the blasphemy of burying his Father inside a place built by heathens hundreds, possibly thousands of years before the birth of Christ.

And then he saw it.

"By God," whispered Nevin, uncharacteristically shocked into revealing his thoughts, "That cannae be!"

"But it is," smiled Aodh, looking back over his shoulder with a smile.

The narrow corridor leading deep into the interior of the pyramid had widened to reveal the sealed entranceway to the burial chamber holding the remains of Edward and Edmund Canmore. The strange symbols of the ancient Egyptians adorned the walls here as all others, but set directly above the entranceway was a series of symbols that instantly stood out as recognisable, despite having been chiselled into the wall untold millennia ago.

The family crest of the Clan Canmore.

His name was Hew, he was a Captain in the Scottish Army, and he was at war with England.

Unfortunately, he was not his Father.

Malcolm Hew had been a crude, belligerent and - quite frankly - horrible man. Quick to anger, foul-mouthed and a drunk, he'd also been an excellent leader of men and the bane of what was left of the English Army. After killing King Godwine, Malcolm had received an angry message from Adam Canmore demanding he cease his aggression against the English. Malcolm had expected as much, which was why he'd ridden against Godwine before the expansionist-shy Adam could order him to stop, but even Malcolm hadn't been mad enough to ignore a direct order from the man known as Adam the Cruel for his harsh and paranoid leadership. But when word had reached Adam that his cousin - King Domnall - had wiped out Milan and personally killed the highly regarded (and hated) Duke Puccio, jealousy had forced him to order Malcolm to continue his campaign and end the English once and for all.

Malcolm had died as he lived, cursing, drunk and fighting. After making camp after heading out to meet one of England's few surviving marching armies, he'd gotten drunk with his most trusted commanders and gotten involved in a brawl amongst some soldiers over a gambling debt. He'd broken up the fight but then collapsed from a massive heart attack, and his son would never forget the last words of his father.

"Always get ye round in, son."

Now command of Malcolm's forces had fallen to his son, who had encountered a small force of English just north of Hamburg led by Jacob Townsend. Victory was almost certainly assured as Hew had almost five times the numbers of Townsend's men, but he kept in mind some more advice his Father had once given him while drunk.

"Dinnae think ye're such a clever bastard, son, or I'll thrash the shit out of ye."



"We outnumber them greatly, Captain," noted Hew's second, "We can overwhelm them quickly and make short work of this."



"Aye, and lose close to the same number ourselves," noted Hew, "I'll nae throw away Scottish lives needlessly. Note they have trebuchets and catapults but do nae want to leave their high ground to get within range of us. Send forward archers to open fire on them, and have our bombardrs fire on their frontline, we can fire on them from further range than they can on us. We'll do this the long way, and save some Scottish lives in the meantime."

His commander saluted and began to move away, but Hew called him back.

"Note Townsend's banner?" grinned Hew, "Have the bombardrs target it."





As the English milled about in confusion due to Townsend's sudden death, the Scottish archers and crossbowmen marched into range and opened fire. Bolts slammed through armor and shields as flaming arrows rained down from above, the flaming, oil-soaked rags wrapped around the arrowheads in turn catching their targets on fire. Captain Hew grinned fiercely, doubly so when he saw a bombard blast smash directly into the English spearmen, then into a trebuchet, shattering it. Everything was going exactly according to plan!





The English spearmen - tired of standing still and being slaughtered by crossbow bolts and flaming arrows while their own trebuchet and catapults fired to hit their Scottish targets - turned and ran to get clear, as the Commander of Townsend's stunned mounted bodyguard screamed at them to hold their positions. Seeing that they were beyond reason, routing in terror, the Commander cursed and ordered his men forward to take over their position. They had to hold the line while the catapults and remaining trebuchet found their range, once they had it then they could thunder down death on the Scottish, perhaps in enough numbers to get them to retreat. He felt a momentary satisfaction when he saw one trebuchet blast smash down into the Scottish infantry, but then he was cursing again as he tried in vain to protect himself from the deluge of crossbow bolts and flaming arrows bringing down his fellow Englishmen.

But as each volley came, there were less and less Englishmen to stand beside, and soon to his horror, the Commander of Jacob Townsend's bodyguard found that not only was there no Jacob Townsend to protect anymore, now there was no bodyguard.





Captain Hew watched as the remaining English broke and ran, and smiled.

"Should we chase them, Captain?" asked his Second.

"Nae, they are going to the same place we are," replied Hew, "We'll meet them at Hamburg, and send them on to meet the friends they deserted on the field this day."

His second saluted and marched off to order the men back to camp, while Hew smiled and basked in the afterglow of his first command victory.



The massive door lay open behind them, opened by a secret catch that only a small handful of men in the world were aware of. Aodh and Nevin stood inside the burial chamber of the Scottish Kings of Egypt, final resting place of Edward and Edmund Canmore.

And now Nectan Canmore, Edmund's son.

Aodh had reverently placed the urn holding Nectan's ashes into a recess in the wall above a bare stone slab and now knelt before it in prayer, while Nevin looked about the impressive chamber in wonder. Of course almost everyone had heard tales of the ancient Pharaohs of Egypt, and the gigantic pyramids they had built to house their mortal remains, but it was another thing to be inside such a pyramid and witness the opulence and audacity of their design.

The Chamber was huge, seemingly far larger than Nevin's own knowledge of the corridors leading up to it suggested. The strange symbols - hieroglyphs they were called - covered the walls, and stone slabs were placed along the sides of the chamber, recesses set above them. Two of the slabs held marble coffins, the images of their occupants carved into them - Edward and Edmund Canmore.

"This chamber was empty?" asked Nevin, noting not only that the other eight slabs were empty, but covered in the dust of ages, they had not been disturbed.

"Aye," responded Aodh, not taking his eyes off Nectan's urn, "It was first opened by Father and Fearghus Campbell shortly after Edward had destroyed the Egyptian Empire, Father was fascinated by our family crest of course and wanted to know more, and it was Fearghus that found the hidden switch to open the seal."

"I wonder why it was never used?" pondered Nevin, more to himself, but Aodh answered.

"The ebbs and flows of different Egyptian dynasties saw "history" re-written more than once in these lands, no one lives today who knows the true lineage of their mighty "Empire". No one can even read these hieroglyphs, the best Egyptian scholars available to Father all professed to have theories, but none could adequately translate even a small section of wall, let alone master the language. All we ken is that the ancient Egyptians were obsessed with being prepared for death and all Father could guess was that the people this chamber was meant for never had a chance to use it. Either they were wiped out in a war, or died far from the lands they believed they ruled."

"It cannae be a coincidence that ye Family Crest is on this wall," grunted Nevin, "There must be a connecti-"

"Father believed so too," laughed Aodh, standing and turning to face the Spy, "But even he had to admit defeat figuring out what. What connection could there be between an Egyptian Dynasty over a 1000 years in the past and the Clan Canmore in Scotland on the other edge of the world? The answer is none, of course, no man-made connection, I believe it is a divine sign that Father and Uncle Edward's Egyptian Conquest was blessed by God."

"God is too easy an answer for too many men, Prince Aodh," warned Nevin, his eyes suddenly cold and emotionless, his face blank and unreadable. Aodh frowned angrily, but Nevin continued before he could voice an objection or cry blasphemy, "There is nae wrong with being a believer, Aodh, but as Spymaster of the Scottish Empire ye must learn to question everything and look for answers where they cannae be."

Aodh's frown deepened, then he turned and knelt back before Nectan's urn. Aodh sighed and went back to looking over the maddening hieroglyphs, thinking to himself that Aodh would soon discover for himself the dangers of putting your faith entirely in God.

King Godwine had been a weak and ineffective leader for England, with his General Thomas Weste responsible for what few successes he had achieved for England. Despite this, his death had been mourned by the peoples of the English Empire, because he was one of the last in the line of William the Conqueror, the last great King of England. Now Captain Hew led his men towards Hamburg, ruled over by another of William's blood. Like William, Prince Augustine was a born conqueror, with just the right mix of aggression, diplomacy and tact to be successful both on the field of battle and the trials of Governance. He had ridden with his brother, Harry, to take Hamburg from the Holy Roman Empire and finally expand England's borders years after they had been driven back to Antwerp by the hated Scottish. He had ruled Hamburg ever since with an iron fist, with all agreeing that he was a fine man and a great leader, with the potential one day be a great King if the worst should happen and King Harry die. There was just one small problem.

Prince Augustine had become quite mad.

Enemy Character Details

Prince Augustine Age: 25

Governor

Command ★★★★★

Dread ☠

Loyalty 👑👑👑

Piety ☀

Retinue

- Tutor
- Master Archer
- Drillmaster
- Military Engineer
- Siege Engineer

Traits

- Speaks of Loyalty
- Dubious
- Night Fighter
- Promising Tactician
- Quite Mad
- Born Conqueror
- Overly Suspicious
- Mindful of Risks
- Scarred
- Dauntless
- Winning First
- Wary of Rebels
- Heir Apparent

Not making sense most of the time, often launching into tirades of utter nonsense.
-2 Authority, -2 Morale for all troops on the battlefield

It had happened slowly, dismissed at first as eccentricity, then stress, then sickness. Now it was undeniable, the man who ruled Hamburg was for all intents and purposes a raving lunatic who believed the moon waxed and waned at his command and that birds carried messages across the wind for him.

Now as Captain Hew approached the city walls, Prince Augustine sat his horse and babbled quietly and merrily to himself as his commanders issued orders and prayed that today would be one of Augustine's "good" days. The walls were still being repaired from a recent failed attempt by the Holy Roman Empire to regain their lost city, and Augustine's commanders prayed that they would hold as the Scottish attacked.

An explosion rocked the city gates and Prince Augustine squawked in surprise, looking up at the sky and making cawing sounds like a bird as all around him the English Army braced for the Scottish. The gates had been blown open by their cursed bombards, and now thousands of the madmen were coming.



"Ride up!" squawked Augustine suddenly, "**THEY** are coming, I must be ready!"

His Commanders moaned in dismay, but the common soldiers cheered wildly at what they perceived to be bravery on behalf of their Prince as he rode towards the gate to wait for the onslaught of the baying, screaming Scottish Horde.





Augustine's bodyguard was quickly overwhelmed and brought down by the Scottish, Highlanders whooping with delight. It was one thing to fight the Milanese, to fight off the Danish, hell to travel across the world and wipe out Egyptians, Mongols and Turks.... but there was nothing like killing English!

Augustine sat calmly in the sea of Scots, smiling behind his helm. As his bodyguard were killed, his smile grew wider, and as the Scots surrounded him he nodded happily and cried out.

"COME TO ME MY FRIENDS! BASK IN THE LIGHT AND CATCH THE WIND! TOGETHER WE SHALL BE FREE!"

"Fucking crazy English bastard," muttered a Scotsman, and dragged Augustine down from his horse. As he fell, he gasped out his final words.

"Don't peck me, my little bird friends..... don't pec"





"We're inside the city!" roared Hew, "Track down the last of their soldiers and wipe them out! Make Hamburg ours!"





In the aftermath of victory, Captain Hew sat in Castle Hamburg and shared a quiet drink with his most trust men. The city had been sacked, allowing the men to let off steam in the aftermath of wiping out Augustine and his men, but even now as his soldiers caroused and drank and sang, Hew had quietly moved men to guard the gates, workers to repair the walls and damaged buildings. He meant to have Hamburg defended even in the midst of reverie.

"Where is Captain Hew!?!?" demanded a voice, and Hew looked up in surprise as a Royal Messenger entered the banquet hall, looking furious as he spotted Hew sitting in Augustine's former chair, "HEW! Why could ye nae have been in Antwerp, damn ye!"

"I am Captain Hew, what is the meaning of this?" demanded Hew.

"Prince Adam Canmore has decided that it is unseemly for just anyone to be leading his forces in his campaign against England," snapped the messenger, raising eyebrows at the table as Hew's commanders considered the suggestion that this was in any way "Adam's" campaign, "So I have been instructed to bring this offer of adoption into the Royal Family to Captain Malcolm Hew, but ye had to have moved on to Hamburg, and I've spent days trudging by horse through this horrible countryside instead of returning to London and civilization."

"Malcolm Hew?" grunted Hew, "Was my Father, I'm afraid ye're too late to offer him such an honor, he is dead."

"Oh for Go...." sighed the messenger, then quickly reviewed the formal note of adoption he'd carried with him, "It just says Captain Hew here, ye'll do fine, welcome to the Royal Family lad."

Hew blinked in surprise, then took the note and reviewed it quickly as the messenger tapped his foot impatiently. It did indeed only mention his Father by his rank and last name, with Adam Canmore's signature all ready neatly signed to the bottom. Grinning, he quickly signed his own name, and in so doing proved the lie to another piece of "advice" his father had once given him.

"Ye're a useless sack of shite, son, and ye'll never amount to anything."



Aodh frowned as his prayers for Nectan, Edmund and Edward were interrupted by the sound of footsteps echoing down the long pyramid corridor.

"Nevin, who is that?" he snapped, "The guards are nae to ever allow anyone but the Royal Family into the Pyramid. Nevin?"

He turned and looked, bewildered by the emptiness of the chamber tomb. Standing, he looked around, realizing for the first time that he was alone, Nevin was gone.... and the footsteps were growing louder.

"Nevin, is that ye?" demanded Aodh, "In the name of God I-"

He cut off as a shadowy figure stepped through the entranceway to the Chamber and emerged into the light cast by the torches Aodh had lit with the one he had carried with him. For a moment the combination of shadows, the hooded clothes of the figure and Nevin's disappearance had made Aodh fearful this was a trap, and the man an assassin. But when he stepped into the light, Aodh found himself facing something far worse.

"In the name of God indeed," hissed the Inquisitor, staring with distaste at the hieroglyphs chiselled into the walls all around him, "Prince Aodh Canmore, I formally charge you with heresy against the Catholic Church."