

Chapter 36

When William the Conqueror had come to England and overthrown the rule of the Anglo-Saxons, it had seemed the great nation was on the verge of becoming a massive force to be reckoned with in the world. William had looked to across the Channel to France, seeking to expand at the expense of the equally mighty French Empire, and had given little thought to King Malcolm of Scotland.

But when Malcolm's sons had done the unthinkable and stolen their father's armies and invaded Egypt on the far edge of the world, it had spelled the beginning of the end for England. William's son Rufus had believed that with Edward and Edmund in Egypt and King Malcolm dead, the lands to the North were his for the taking and laid siege to Edinburgh. But Edward's absence from Scotland did not mean he no longer cared for the land of his birth, and his brother Alexander had returned with a crusading army meant for Toulouse and scared the English back. After being goaded by Scottish diplomats, Rufus had ridden against Alexander Canmore and met his doom, and that had been the start of the rapid fall of the English Kings.

Rufus' successor, Symond, died in mysterious circumstances, and it was Robert - another of William's sons - who replaced him. Known as the Curthose due to his short stature (his father had called him *brevis-ocrea*), the short man had nevertheless fallen a long way to the courtyard far below his private quarters, though it was never clear if he'd jumped or been pushed.

Godwine - related distantly to the mighty Conqueror through Harold Godwinson - had been given control of England at a time when the extent of the once mighty empire had been reduced to the immediate area outside of Antwerp. Godwine had been a brave man, but not an effective foil to the Scottish, his men serving more as fodder to distract the Scots from Milan. Finally, after the death of his Uncle Tostig at Bruges, Godwine had seen that it was futile to throw away men against Scottish walls and turned instead to the East and the Holy Roman Empire. His cousins - themselves more directly related to William than Godwine, even if it was illegitimately - had ridden and taken Hamburg and Frankfurt, while at the same time the Scottish had ridden forth and finally crushed Antwerp, killing Godwine and his General, Thomas Weste.

So the crown had fallen to Harry the Honest, and now that his mad brother Augustine was dead, he was the last blood of William the Conqueror, the last in the line of English Kings.

And a true successor to William the Conqueror.

The screenshot shows a character detail window for King Harry the Merciless. At the top, the title is "Enemy Character Details". Below it is a portrait of a man in a crown, with the name "King Harry the Merciless" and "Age: 38". To the right of the name are four stars and a row of ten dots. Below the name are four rows of skills: "Governor", "Command", "Chivalry", and "Authority", each with a row of five dots. Below the skills are four rows of traits: "Proven Commander", "Dauntless", "Wall Taker", "Merciless Leader", "Feels Appreciated", "Utterly Immaculate", "Loyal Beyond Question", "Gets Merry", "Night Fighter", "Faction Leader", and "Perfect Politician". To the left of the traits are three portraits of other characters, labeled "Retinue" and "Subterfuge". At the bottom, there is a text box with a red border containing the following text: "Doing the right thing is core to this man's beliefs - he is too proud of his character to succumb to worldly vices. +3 Loyalty, 300% increase to cost to bribe, +6 to law (improves public order)".

Loved by his men, admired by his soldiers, strong and handsome and still comparatively young, Harry had proved that he was both an able General and Governor and an inspirational King. He had been known as Harry the Honest when he was first raised to the Throne, but his actions since then had seen him become known as Harry the Merciless. He had refused to send reinforcements to Hamburg that might have saved his brother from death but left Frankfurt undefended; he'd sacrificed an able young Diplomat to Duke Puccio of Milan's less than tender mercies to gain England an ally; his friendships and even his romantic liaisons always came after his duties to the Crown.

And he'd sacrificed London.

Acting under his command, English agents had infiltrated the former Capital of the English Empire and sowed discontent against Adam Canmore, which had been a far easier task than might have been expected. Adam was an unpopular disappointment, still living in the shadow of his late father Alexander, and there were many residents in London who still considered themselves English living under the yoke of a foreign invader. His agents had incited those malcontents into civil disobedience, protests and riots, and rising up in their thousands they'd sought to overthrow Scottish rule.... and been brutally smashed down at Adam's command.

Just as Harry had hoped.

Now, with the deaths of thousands of their "countrymen" in their minds, the English soldiers under Harry's command were eager for vengeance. The Scottish Commander - Hew Mar - was marching against Frankfurt with twice the number of English soldiers left in the entire "Empire", and Harry had been researching heavily into what he knew of Scottish tactics. He knew they preferred to attack in force, that walls and city gates were no match for either their Spy network or their long range Bombards. He knew that trying to defuse their superior numbers by moving them into narrow streets rarely worked, as Milan's Duke Puccio had discovered. Another plan suggested by Harry's advisors had been to let the Scottish onto the walls and fight them there, and also to let them through the gate and hold them there as long as possible while English Catapults and Trebuchets opened fire against tightly packed masses of Scotsmen. Harry had initially dismissed the idea, suspecting that even then the Scottish would still break through and at that point force of arms would be useless.... and it was then that he'd settled on his plan of defence, one that would leave him with two options; one a long shot, the other having better than even odds of success.

"Your Majesty, the Scottish have arrived," spoke his second. Harry nodded and pulled his helm on, ready to face what he hoped would not be the end of the English empire, but the start of its rebuilding.



Hew Mar, that was his name now, he had to get used to it. He found it odd that since becoming effectively a member of the Royal Family, the only thing that felt different in his life was his name. Hew was his first name now, allowing him to honor his Father's surname, but other than the fact he got to sit on a horse during battles now, nothing else about his life had changed.

Maybe things would be different after he'd killed a King.

"Our man inside Frankfurt has organized for the gates to open," informed Hew's second, "Shall we order the Bombard to fire on the men manning the walls?"

"Aye," grunted Hew, then held up a restraining arm, squinting in surprise as he saw movement on the walls, "What the devil are they doing?"

To his great surprise, the majority of the English appeared to be abandoning the walls, moving down into the interior courtyard. He frowned, confused by what seemed to be a cowardly retreat performed with the military precision of an orderly withdrawal.

"Send archers to open fire on the men still holding the walls," grunted Hew, "Send the infantry forward in force and hope our man inside is as good as his word."

As his men moved forward, Hew frowned, something was wrong here.





The Scots flooded through the gates, that opened on cue as promised by Patrick Boyd, the Spy who had infiltrated Frankfurt, and found the interior courtyard empty. The English troops that had abandoned the north-eastern wall had moved out of view along the ground, then back up onto the North-western Wall.

"We can't get stuck between those bastards up there and the other bastards inside the city!" cried the Infantry commander, "Up onto that wall, lads!"

Far down the streets of Frankfurt inside the City Square, King Harry received news that the Scottish were moving onto the walls to meet the large collection of Knights he'd ordered there.

"Good," he grunted, "Send the catapults and trebuchets to the walls, more Scottish will be coming in, I want them to be tightly packed and ripe for the crushing."

As his orders were followed, on the North-western wall it was bedlam as the Scottish smashed into the waiting English. Their numbers were equal, thanks to Harry's decision not to try and defend both walls, but the English were being hit by flaming arrows fired from outside the wall while Bombard fire smashed into the wall they were standing on.

"Move forward into the Scottish!" cried the Knight-Commander, "If they want to bring down this wall, they'll have to kill their own men to do it!"





The English moved forward, but then a Bombard blast smashed into the wall directly where they were fighting the Scots, and the wall buckled beneath their feet, throwing men violently aside, English and Scottish both.

"THE BLOODY CANMORES WILL KILL THEIR OWN MEN TO GET WHAT THEY WANT!" screamed the Knight-Commander, precisely as his King had instructed him to, "PULL BACK!"





As the English Knights abandoned the wall and ran, the English artillery had arrived at the gates only to find them flooded with Scottish troops. The Artillery Commander gritted his teeth at the sight of the baying Scots, then swallowed his pride and followed his orders, shouting, "DON'T BOTHER FIRING ON THEM LADS! THE CANMORES DON'T CARE HOW MANY THEY LOSE! RUN!"



Following orders, the English retreated down the central Frankfurt street as the Scottish followed, unit after unit, hundreds upon hundreds of Scottish soldiers eager to kill the English.

"Perfect," grunted King Harry, "Ride forward now men!"







As a flaming trebuchet blast smashed into the tightly packed Scotsmen, Harry's mounted Bodyguard rode directly into the Scottish and knocked back the first line of men into the others. The domino effect caused the first several lines to stumble or be pushed backwards, but in moments those Scotsmen behind them would push forward and it would be Harry's bodyguard that was pushed back.... he had to strike now.

"KILL THEM LADS!" cried the Bodyguard Commander, "THE CANMORES ALWAYS HAVE PLENTY OF FODDER FOR OUR BLADES! IT'S ALL THEY'RE GOOD FOR!"

As he spoke, he and the rest of the mounted men cut quickly and haphazardly about them, killing some, wounding more, making all feel pain as trebuchet blasts rained down and the English continued to cry out over the expendable nature of the men on the frontline.





Then, just as the Scottish were about to regain their footing and push back, the Commander of the Bodyguard gave the signal and they pulled back, leaving the Scottish to stumble forward unexpectedly, leaving a gap of dead bodies between them and the English.

And that is when King Harry the Merciless rode forward and spoke.



"I WOULD SPEAK WITH THE **MEN OF SCOTLAND!**" he bellowed, his deep baritone grabbing attention. The assembled Scotsmen stared, the English soldiers behind the King sitting with swords drawn but making no move towards their enemies, "I WAS LED TO BELIEVE THAT THE CANMORES ALWAYS RODE AND FOUGHT ON THE FRONTLINE WITH THEIR MEN!?! THAT THEY FOUGHT AND DIED WITH THEM, AND NEVER ASKED MORE OF THEIR SOLDIERS THAN THEY WOULD GIVE THEMSELVES.... BUT WHERE IS ADAM CANMORE!?!"

The Scotsmen stared at each other uneasily, battle they understood, speeches they understood.... but a speech from the enemy King in the **MIDDLE** of a battle?

"**THE TRUTH IS THAT ADAM CANMORE DOESN'T CARE ABOUT YOU, YOU'RE NOTHING BUT FODDER FOR HIS WAR MACHINE! WHILE DOMNALL CANMORE LEADS HIS MEN TO VICTORY AGAINST MILAN, ADAM IS IN EDINBURGH BETWEEN THE THIGHS OF HIS MISTRESS! WHILE AED CANMORE KILLS REBELS NEAR ALEXANDRIA, ADAM IS IN YORK SPENDING THE MONEY YOUR CONQUESTS BRINGS HIM! WHILE AODH CANMORE CARRIES HIS BROTHER'S ASHES TO CAIRO, ADAM CANMORE IS IN LONDON KILLING THE COMMON PEOPLE!**"

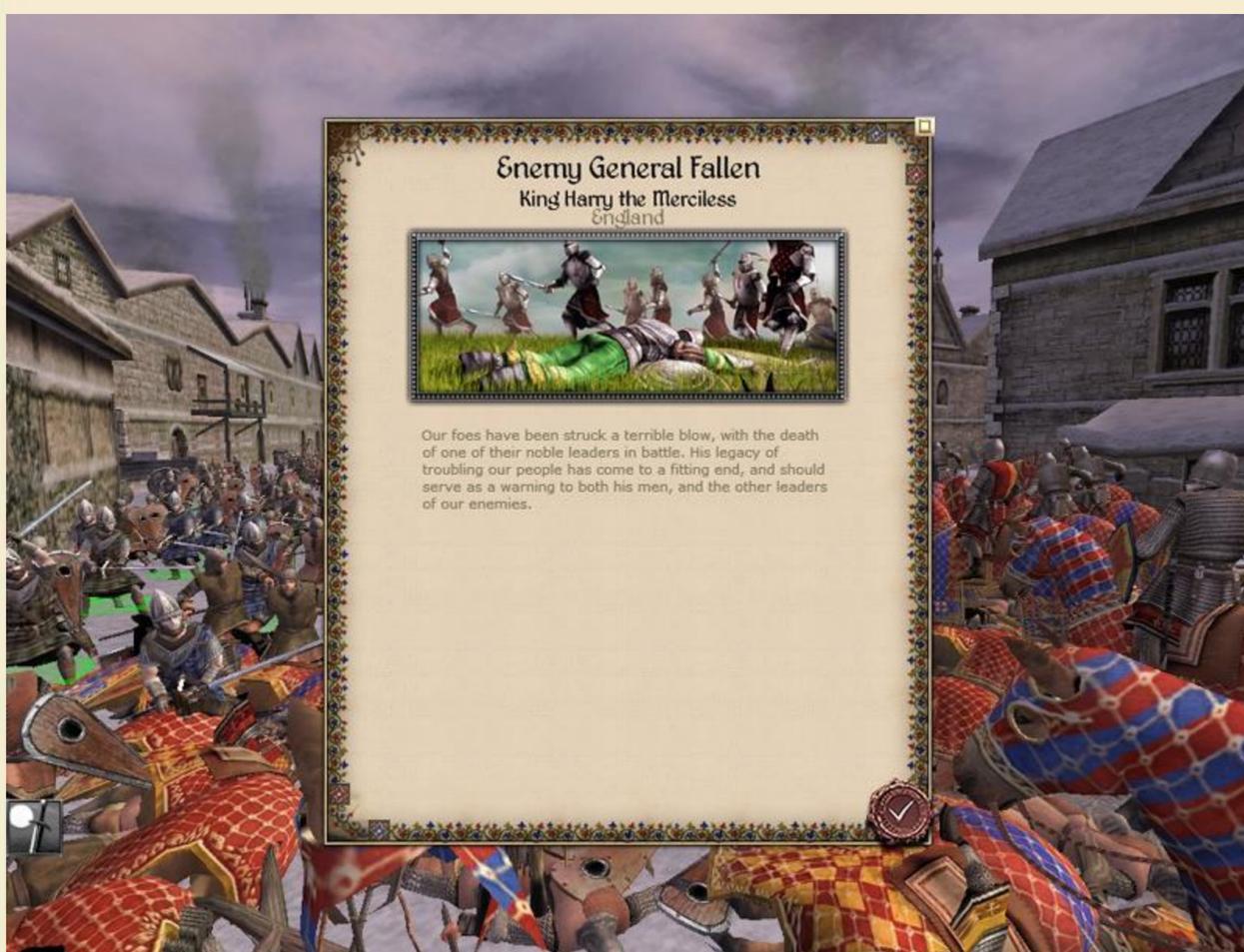
The Scottish seemed spellbound, Harry spoke well and had the common touch, he was a perfect politician, and he could make anyone believe anything. He had succeeded in stopping the battle, albeit temporarily, but he knew that even he couldn't convince all these men to turn on Adam Canmore.... at least not before wiping out the English first. But he'd gotten his foot in the door, and that meant now he could suggest his other option, the one that had a better than even chance of success.

"**AND IS HE THE ONLY ONE?!**" cried King Harry, "WHERE IS YOUR GENERAL? WHERE IS HEW MAR? HE SITS BEYOND THE CITY WALLS WHILE YOU FIGHT INSIDE FOR HIM! I SAY IT IS HE WHO SHOULD FIGHT FOR YOU! LET HIM COME INTO THE CITY, LET HIM FACE ME AS A MAN! LET ME REPRESENT ENGLAND, LET HIM REPRESENT SCOTLAND, LET ONE OF US DIE, NOT HUNDREDS OF **OUR** COUNTRYMEN!"

He stopped, and tried to keep his face looking earnest and not desperate. If the Scottish went for this.... if the brutal crushing of dissent in London of men, women and children that he knew at least some of these soldiers knew on a personal basis had had the desired effect.... if the chance to end the battle without endangering their own lives proved tempting enough.... if their own stereotyped belief in the superiority of themselves over the English held true.... so many ifs, but the only chance he had to preserve England and foment rebellion in the lands held by Adam Canmore, the true weak link in the Canmore Clan. King Harry was nearing 40, but he had no doubt he could kill Hew Mar, despite the 20 year age difference, Mar was barely out of boyhood and still living in the shadow of his infamous father.

Finally, one Scottish soldier stepped forward, a Highlander carrying a massive two handed sword slick with the blood of Englishmen. He eyed up King Harry critically, then gave an answer on behalf of all Scots everywhere.

"Ye paint a pretty picture, Harry, but there is one thing ye did nae take into account.... forget all the other bollocks about the Canmores, about General Hew Mar, about London and whether our **Scottish** noblemen take us for granted. Ye're English, and that's all the reason we need to kill ye."



The ranks of Scotsmen roared in approval as King Harry was brought down, crying out in dismay and trying to the last to talk his way out of death. Harry's bodyguard tried desperately to come to the defence of their liege, but it was too late, and soon they too were fighting for their lives as much of the remaining English infantry surged into the fray to avenge the last King of England.

Bodies littered the city square as the English were forced back, the once proud banner of the Empire left undefended as the Scottish charged in and laid waste to the increasingly smaller number of English defenders. The Scottish roared with laughter and sang with joy as they saw the impending end of their oldest and most hated enemies, and for their part the English quivered with terror as they saw that same doom approaching.







Except for one unit.

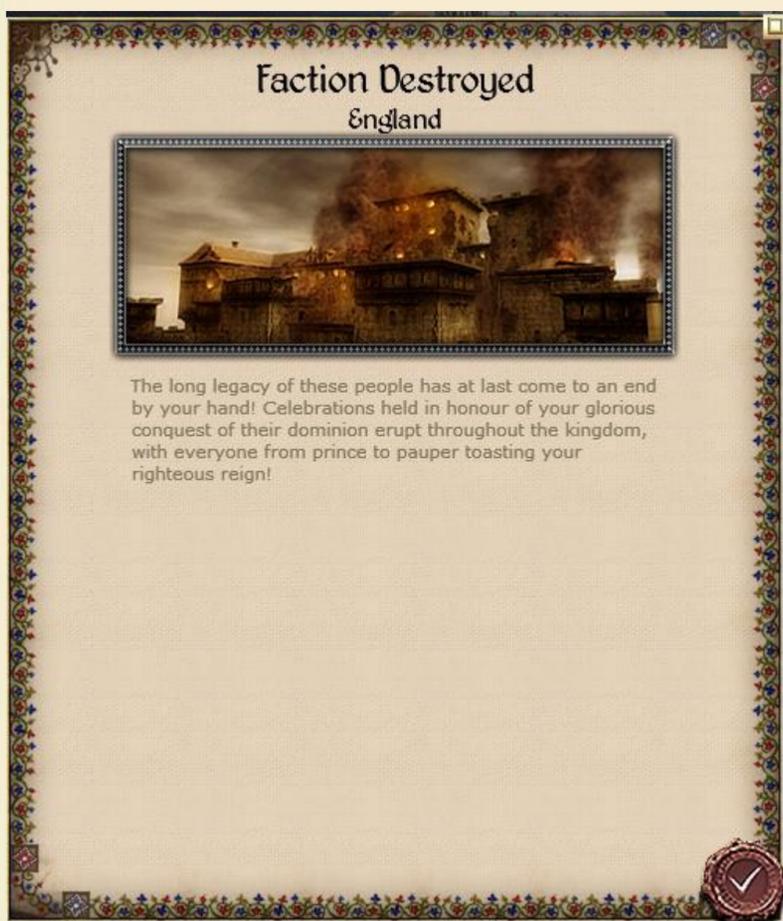


"This is it then, lads," grunted the Knight-Commander as he and the few remaining members of his unit stood and waited for the Scottish Horde to crash down upon them, "It has been an honor to fight alongside you, no matter the quality of the Kings we followed. Let us die now with the honor with which we lived."

"For England," nodded his second, and the Knight-Commander nodded as he turned to face the oncoming charge of the Scottish, led by Hew Mar who had joined in the mopping up of the English. Grimacing behind his helm, the Knight Commander and his men cried out their defiance to the last.

"FOR ENGLAND!"





"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."

The Inquisitor betrayed himself with the slightest of smirks as he spoke, unable to completely hide his glee at being able to lay this charge on a member of the highly vaunted Canmore Clan here in the burial chamber of his Father and legendary Uncle. He was young and inexperienced, but a successful trial against a Canmore would gain him great prestige in the Church and then th-

He squawked in shocked outrage as Aodh Canmore suddenly jerked forward and grabbed him by the collar of his robes, shoving him out of the Burial Chamber and hard against the wall of the corridor beyond. Aodh slammed him once, twice, then released him and stepped back, panting roughly and looking furious.... but not as furious as the Inquisitor.... he had dared to lay hands on an Agent of the Inquisition!

"HOW DARE YO-" started the Inquisitor, and then Aodh roughly backhanded him, knocking him to a knee where he remained, staring in horror at the Scottish Prince.

"How dare I?" demanded Aodh, fury in his voice, "How dare YE!?! HOW DARE YE POLLUTE THE BURIAL CHAMBER OF MY FATHER, MY BROTHER, MY UNCLE!?! HOW DARE YE SPEAK SUCH VILE WORDS IN SUCH A HOLY PLACE!?! HOW DARE YE ACCUSE ME!"

"You ca-" started the Inquisitor, beginning to rise to his feet only to grabbed around the throat and forced once more to one knee like a supplicant before the Priest. Aodh shoved his own face into the Inquisitor's, the guttering torch painting flames on his face and making his appear a devil.

"I have carried the ashes of my Brother with me to Cairo," hissed Aodh in fury, "A Brother who died to a plague that nearly killed me! It was God who spared me from death, and he did nae do so a whimpering, pale worm like ye could insult me and my family's name. How dare I? How dare ye! Ye accuse me of heresy? I accuse ye of opportunism and exploitation! HOW DARE YE!"

Abruptly Aodh pulled away and to his feet, causing the Inquisitor to drop to his face as if he was debasing himself before the Scottish Prince. Aodh roughly kicked at his shoulder and the man scrambled backwards, fear plain in his face. He had looked deep into Aodh's eyes and seen something there that terrified him.

A complete lack of fear of the Inquisition.

"Ye have made a formal charge of heresy against me," spoke Aodh, his voice horrible in its levelness, no emotion of any sort to be found in it, "And ye have looked me in the eye and heard my words, that is trial enough. How do ye find, Inquisitor?"

"I... I... I..." stammered the Inquisitor, face flushed red with humiliation and eyes watery with both fear and horror, "INNOCENT!"

"Get out of here before I leave ye with the rest of the Grave Robbers who dared walk into this hallowed ground.

The Inquisitor turned tail and ran, disappearing down the narrow corridor and leaving behind the most humiliating experience of his life.

Found Innocent at Trial

Prince Aodh



Accused of foul acts of heresy, it would appear this man's ways are pure enough to spare him being found guilty of heresy

"20 years ago ye would nae have been able to do that.... nae even 10 years ago," muttered Nevin of Shetland, startling Aodh who spun about to find the Spy emerging from the shadows as if he was a part of them, "And even today, there are only so many who could do so."

Aodh glared angrily at the Spy, then moved to the entrance and moved the secret lever to close the stone slab and seal up the burial chamber, then twisted about, his face contorted with rage, "Did ye ken he would come here, Nevin? What were ye hoping to accomplish by allowing this farce to occur?"

"I needed to ken if ye were still slave to the Church above all else," replied Nevin simply, "When a man looks death in the eye and survives, it changes the man. I think the plague has left ye a better man."

Aodh stepped up to within a foot of Nevin and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Dinnae make a habit of such "tests", Nevin, and dinnae presume to ken anything about my relationship with God."

The Spy stared directly back at Aodh, then bowed his head slightly in acquiescence before Aodh turned on his heel and strode down the passage. Nevin waited a moment, then followed after.

They emerged into daylight, the guards at the entrance to the Pyramid saluting Aodh respectfully, Nevin noting the almost awed looks in their eyes. As he'd planned, they'd seen the Inquisitor enter the Pyramid and then seen him retreat with tears in his eyes and his face burning with humiliation, and by week's end all of Cairo would know the story. People would speak of Aodh and compare him to his Father and Uncle, and say he had inherited the best traits of both.

As Aodh stopped outside of the pyramid and stared across the desert towards Cairo, across the ocean his brother Domnall Canmore was in mourning for their brother Nectan; his cousin Adam was ordering the violent quashing of a revolt in London; and Hew Mar was preparing to ride on Frankfurt and end the English once and for all. Nevin stepped up beside him and looked expectantly at his Prince, asking, "And what will we do now that Nectan has been put to rest?"

"I have considered carefully," muttered Aodh, "Our first stop is Cairo, and the nobles taking such advantage of Aed's hospitality. They're about to learn the price of their privilege, and then we set sail to achieve a long lost dream of my Uncle's."

"For the glory of God then," smiled Nevin, and the Prince who had only recently learned a fresh lesson - that there was a difference between God and the Church - turned and frowned at the spy, shaking his head before correcting him.

"For Scotland."

Chapter 37

Crown Prince Tamim hated the letter S.



To his West, the Spanish, to his East, the Sicilians. Two Nations that had between them whittled away the once vast holdings of the Moors and left them with only the Desert City of Algiers and the inhospitable sands to the South. It was the Spanish he feared the most, their warriors were fierce and their armor and weaponry beyond compare. The Sicilians were fierce as well, but their King's latest obsession was with Venice across the sea to the Northeast, with their coastal cities left lightly garrisoned as a result.



If Tamim had his way, he would march his army to Tunis and wipe out the Sicilian Garrison there, but he knew doing so would only satiate a momentary desire for vengeance. After that, the full force of the Sicilians would come down on the Moors, and even if they fought them off, the Spanish would be waiting to crush what was left.

So now he did what he could to safeguard what small portion of land the Moors had left. As the more immediate threat was the Spanish, he had taken his men on manoeuvres to the West to dissuade the Spanish from marching against them.

"My Prince," noted a Commander respectfully, "One of our scouts returns."

Tamim noted the man approaching, riding a camel at full speed, lashing at its side with unmistakable urgency. He frowned, the only reason for such haste was for news of great import, but was it good or bad? He had a feeling he knew.

"Speak," he demanded as the Scout staggered off of his exhausted camel and staggered to his knees before his Prince, "What news from the West?"

"M.. my Prince....," gasped the Scout, breathless and sweating profusely, "For-- for-forgive this... humble.."

"OUT WITH IT!" demanded Tamim.

"It's the... the S.... the S....." moaned the Scout, and for the first time Tamim realized he wasn't simply exhausted but driven near mad with fright. His eyes were bugging out, sweat ran freely down his face and his eyes mouth was constantly working even when he wasn't speaking, "The S....."

"The Spanish? The Sicilians? Who man?! How many!?"

"S.... S.... SCOTLAND!" screamed the Scout, "THE DEMONS OF SCOTLAND APPROACH!"

Tamim's eyes widened at the unexpected news, and looked to the West where the Scout had come from, seeing the first signs of a rising dust cloud, lifted by the hooves of hundreds of horses and the feet of hundreds of men. The most dreaded fighters in the world were on the march to do battle with the Moors, and Tamim spoke the words out loud that all the Moors knew.

"We are dead men."







Tamim fought desperately as the unending wave of Scottish rolled over his men. As his most trusted friends and comrades died around him, he saw an armored figure beneath the banner of the Clan Canmore. The man pointed directly at him, and suddenly he was surrounded by Scottish on all sides, dragging him from his horse as he flailed uselessly to try and prevent them. Hitting the ground, he was pinned down as the battle moved on beyond him, and he stared up through squinting eyes and gritted teeth at the armored Scotsman who had ordered his capture, watching as he rode past without a second look.

"Ye just relax now, lad," chuckled one of the men holding him down, "Ye part in this fight is done."

He watched in desperation as the few surviving members of what had been his army were chased down by the Scots, wondering as he did what they were doing here. The last he had heard Scotland was recovering from its expensive war with Milan, how had they moved so many men to Moorish land without creating tensions with the Sicilians?



Tamim was hauled to his feet as the Scottish returned to formation, and he noted a number of the many horsemen rode under banners both Scottish AND their own personal family crests. This was no ordinary army, these were Noblemen that had wiped out his men, which meant that a man of great importance must be leading them. He had heard that King Domnall was locked away in mourning for the death of his twin, Nectan, but it seemed the man thought war and conquest was more important than honoring his brother. That was disgraceful, a man should put the life of his Brother above all other concerns.

The Scottish Noble who had ordered his capture approached, and Tamim fixed a suitable unimpressed scowl onto his face. This man rode under the crest of the Canmores, so it seemed to Tamim that he had been defeated by a truly worthy foe, the King of Scotland. But then the man removed his helm, and Tamim's emotionless mask shattered in shock. Dim memories of a trip to Alexandria twenty years earlier, seeing the same man during a diplomatic meeting between the Moors and Scotland. The man's hair hadn't been so dark then, but the face was the same and the eyes unmistakable, he'd never seen such cold, hard eyes on any man, even his Father.

"Edmund Canmore," he gasped, "What devilry has kept you young and alive? I heard you died facing the Mongols."

The man laughed, though the laughter did not touch his eyes.

"Edmund Canmore?" chuckled Aodh, "Nae, but ye'll soon wish I was. I intend to use ye in a far crueller way than my Father ever would have."



Sultan Jalaf stood on the walls of Algiers and stared at the vast Scottish horde stretching out before the final stronghold of the once mighty Empire of the Moors.

And his Brother.

Aodh Canmore stood behind the kneeling Crown Prince Tamim before the walls, a sword held to the back of Tamim's neck. He had just called up the conditions for Tamim's release, Jalaf would take the men he had left to him (less than 100) and leave Algiers, paying a 10,000 florin ransom for his Brother. They would then be free to disappear into the desert and survive as best they could. The price was clear - Jalaf's Empire for his Brother.

He refused.

"Very well," muttered Aodh carelessly, then shoved his sword through Tamim's neck and out his throat as the Moor stared in horror up at the walls and his older Brother. The last thing he saw before death claimed him was his Brother turning his back and walking away.



"Bombards!" snapped Aodh, "Smash down their gate, the fool's pride has brought him a few extra minutes of life, but I'll nae let him have any more!"



Inside, Sultan Jalaf sat his horse and buckled on his armor, preparing to join his Brother in death.

"Why did you refuse their offer!" gasped the Commander of his Bodyguard and closest adviser, "We could have raised a new army, or found a new desert stronghold far from the Scottish and Spanish and Sicilians-"

"All I have left is my Empire, such as it is," interrupted Jalaf coldly, "I would rather die than live like a bandit in the deserts my Father once ruled over. It was better for Tamim to die than live like that, and better for me to die in glorious battle than alone and unmourned in some desert cave."

"You've killed us all," gasped the Commander, and Jalaf smiled.

"We were dead men the moment the Scottish landed on our shores, the least we can do is die with honor."



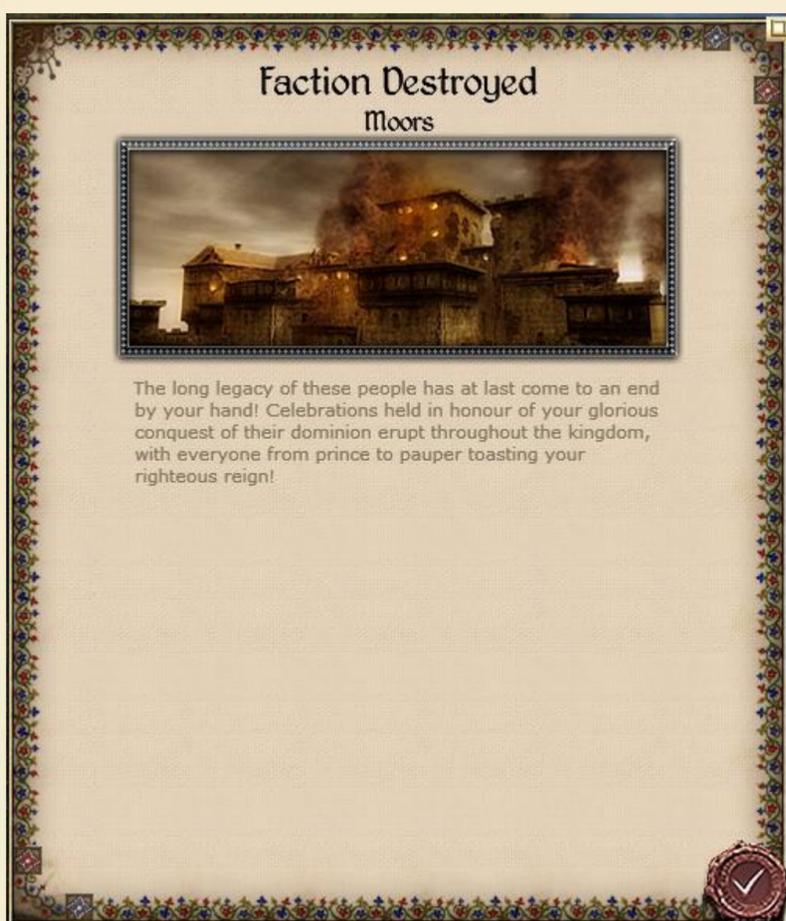




Aodh Canmore stared from the balcony of the Algiers Palace across the sea towards unseen Milan, where even now his Brother Domnall mourned the death of his twin, Nectan. He hated to admit it, but his Brother's mourning had given him the chance to make his move against the Moors, which in turn would allow him to take his next step. He heard loud laughter from deeper in the palace and hid a frown, practising again at holding back his emotions as Nevin had taught him. The Nobles he had recruited to his cause at Cairo were for the most part a useless lot, only handy for the mounted Bodyguard that rode with them. Some had potential, he had to admit, but most were young and more used to a life of politics and court intrigue. They had been enjoying the hospitality of his cousin, Aed, but had been quick to latch onto Aodh who was, after all, second in line to the Scottish Throne. So be it, let them think they were using him, he would use them instead. Each of them would get exactly what they wanted, power, but it would be as Governors of the Coast Desert Cities of North Africa.

"What next, my Lord?" asked Nevin, appearing behind Aodh as if from nowhere, speaking as if he had been reading Aodh's mind. For all the Scottish Prince knew, he had been, the man's knowledge sometimes seemed almost supernatural.

"My Father and Uncle Edward's campaign against the Moors was aborted before it began because of the Sicilians," he muttered, leaning over the balcony's stone railing. "Soon after the Mongols came and Scotland became locked in an expensive and brutal war that it won at the cost of my Father's life. Domnall had his revenge on the Mongols, now I shall take mine on Sicily. Let them suffer the same fate as the Moors, and the sooner the better."



Chapter 38

Dougall Macdonchie sighed into his palm, pretending it was a cough and trying desperately to look like he was anything but panicking.

He sat the throne, though he was not King, as he had for close to three weeks now, hearing petitions, issuing orders for the Governance of the city and receiving reports on the governance of other cities throughout the Empire. It was tiring, thankless work, and worst of all he didn't even get the added benefit of respect/fear that he would have as King.

All the work, none of the benefits.

He did not complain, however, he was a loyal Scotsman, and his King needed him during this dark time. Domnall Canmore had received word of his twin brother's death and gone into mourning almost immediately, leaving Dougall to govern Milan in his absence. The King was locked away in his chambers, taking only what food and drink he needed to survive as he came to terms with the loss of a man who had been a constant presence from even before he was born.

But Dougall was a soldier first and foremost, and this, this was beyond his ability to deal with.

Rainulf Arundel and Franco Didaz, diplomats from Sicily and Spain respectively, had demanded an audience with Dougall, and stood now before him making demands and accusations.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," grunted Dougall, wishing not for the last time he hadn't granted a private audience. If they'd had others watching, maybe they wouldn't have been so fired up.... or maybe they would have been worst? He hated diplomacy, he would have preferred to settle matters with the sword, "Please, talk one at a time and we ca-"

"I DEMAND SATISFACTION!" roared Rainulf, "This deliberate provocation cannot go unpunished! I dema-"

"YOU DEMAND!?!!" hissed Franco, "Sicilian, your Empire crumbles under the mad rule of a sex crazed sloth! What you demand means nothing. **SPAIN** demands reparation for ou-"

"**SILENCE!**" roared a voice, and Dougall's eyes widened in shock and then relief.

The great doors to the Court once ruled over by Duke Puccio the Cunning had been thrown open, and standing between them in crumpled clothing, unshaven and tousle-haired, was the King of Scotland.

Domnall Canmore's mourning had ended.

One Week Earlier

To the North of Cagliari on the island of Sardinia, Captain Cederno was preparing a trap for the Spanish. The invaders had landed two days earlier to the West, shortly after word had reached Cagliari that Tunis had fallen to a surprise attack by the Scottish. It seemed that Scotland and Sicily were at war, and the Spanish were looking to take advantage.



But Cederno did not mean to let the Spanish take Cagliari, and so he had struck out with 100 men to draw Captain Pedro into battle. The Spanish Captain was obviously merely the advance force for a larger army, but if Cederno could goad Pedro into attacking, then he could draw him back into a trap against Captain Magianino, who was hiding in the hills with over 500 men. Together, they would obliterate the invading Spanish, and send a warning to their brethren AND the Scottish, the Sicilians would not give up their lands.

"SCOUT!" cried a voice, and Cederno marched through the lush grass past his Knights to watch as a scout approached quickly, concern on his face.

"What news?" Cederno demanded.

"The sounds of battle to the South, Captain," reported the Scout, "Near Cagliari itself. I sent up colored smoke and received no reply, I believe Captain Magianino has come under sudden attack."

"Dammit," hissed Cederno, "The Spanish have outflanked us and played me for a fool, Pedro was a diversion! **MARCH! MARCH!**"

To the South, Captain Magianino was in the fight of his life. He and his men had been marching through the hills to prepare for their ambush of Captain Pedro when they had crested the top of a hill and seen discovered that it was them who had been ambushed.

But not by the Spanish.



"What is this...." whispered Magianino in horror, "The Scottish... here?"

"Kill them," Aodh demanded, his voice cold and eyes flint, "This land is Scottish, it just dinnae ken it, yet."

The Cavalry charged forward downhill towards the horrified Sicilians, as Captain Magianino screamed orders that fell on deaf ears, desperately trying to clear his men from the death that was about to come crashing down on them.





As the bulk of Magianino's men were crushed, run over or struck down, a few found themselves outside of the killing zone and milled about, confused as to whether they should run or try to assist their fellow Sicilians. But then the choice was taken from them, as Scottish Pikemen marched in the wake of the cavalry and bore down on the Sicilians, while in the heat of the fighting Magianino was cut down and died bleeding into the lush, fertile earth of what had been his home all his life.

Soon to be Scottish.



Cederno's men arrived on the scene in time to witness the decimation of the last of Magianino's men, the few survivors charging through Cederno's Knights as if they weren't there, screaming in terror and thinking of nothing but escaping the demons of Scotland.

"The Scottish...." whispered Cederno in disbelief, watching as the Pikemen who had been pursuing Magianino's men grew closer, "Well Scottish, Spanish, Venetian.... it does not matter. This land is Sicilian, and I'll die to keep it so! CHARGE!"





An hour later, Aodh rode his horse past the bodies of dead Sicilians whose blood was soaking into a land no longer theirs. A scout cried out warning, and the army moved back into formation as a small force of Spanish marched to the battlefield.

"Captain Pedro, I presume?" asked Aodh from his horse as the Spanish Captain approached, forced to look up at the Scottish Prince which only reinforced the weakness of his position.

"You would be Aodh Canmore, then," replied Pedro, removing his helm and looking about at the large numbers of Sicilian dead, "It seems I owe you thanks, our intelligence did not report such large numbers of Sicilians, they were leading me into a trap."

"Saving you was paramount to my desires, of course," Aodh noted deadpan, and Pedro frowned, unable to read the man. Was he being sarcastic? Caustic? Or did he simply not care?

"I also thank you on Spain's behalf," smiled Pedro, "You have proven a great ally to Spain, we meant to take Cagliari by force and you have made that unnecessary. The city is emptied of defence, we need simply ride through the Gates and claim it."

Aodh stared calmly at the man, then offered a smile that chilled Pedro's blood.

"I will be leading my men into Cagliari within the day," he said, "Our path takes us straight forward, and currently you are standing in the way.... I suggest you move."

Today

"We demand Cagliari back!" snapped Rainulf angrily, "And Tunis! This unprovoked act of war against Sicily is int-"

"Shut up," snapped Domnall, and Rainulf quieted immediately. It was one thing when Dougall Macdonchie asked for silence, it was another when the King of Scotland demanded it.

Domnall sat his throne, brooding quietly as Dougall stood at his side. He had heard the tale of Aodh's gathered army of Nobles, their destruction of the Moors, the attack on Sicily's desert coastal cities, the capture of Cagliari and humiliation of Spain's Captain Pedro. Despite the sudden influx of information, Domnall had born it all without a change of expression, and now he sat thinking as Rainulf and Franco stood waiting.

"Franco, our Alliance with Spain is designed for many things.... but conquering for each other is nae one of them. Ye Captain Pedro landed in Sardinia with less than 200 men against Cederno's 600, my Brother landed in Sardinia with 900 and crushed Cederno's men. Cagliari is his by right of conquest, and his humiliation of Pedro was a result of the man's insulting claim to that city. Take my apologies to Spain, but ye'll nae be given a city just because ye were there first."

"But.... your Majesty...." gaped Franco, "We-"

"Go, Franco," growled Domnall, glaring at the Diplomat, "Spain and Scotland are still allies, so go before I change my mind."

The Spaniard stared at the King's bloodshot eyes and saw he had gained all he could, and nodding his head he turned and walked away, exiting the Court and leaving Domnall and Dougall with Rainulf.

"I congratulate you on your handling of the Spaniard, your Majesty," smiled the Sicilian, "But there remains the matter of your Brother's unfounded war against Sicily. Surely between us we can co-"

"Sicilian, ye nation is at war with Scotland and ye come making demands," growled Domnall, "Ye think that I would side with ye against my own Brother? Ye think that I would hear ye wails of "unprovoked war" when it was Sicily that declared war on Scotland in my youth? My twin Brother is dead, but when he lived he faced down ye armies and scared them away with words.... and ye think I would shy away from war with ye? Get out of my sight, Sicilian, the next time I see one of ye kind, I'll be shoving a sword through his belly."

The Sicilian squawked in outrage, but when Dougall took a step forward from Domnall's side, he turned and fled from the court. Dougall smiled, then turned and frowned as he saw Domnall with his head buried in his hands.

"Majesty?" he asked.

"Aodh has taken Nobles under his command and led them to war; Hungary is allied to Sicily and our own alliance will be strained by this War," he sighed, "Aodh has done all this under his own volition, without seeking official sanction, and he may have used my mourning for Nectan to accomplish this.... I need to meet with my Brother and have a very long talk."

Dougall nodded, and Domnall stared up at him.

"Dougall, at Toulouse to the West, Papero Galliano holds a garrison of 600 men. He is Sicily's finest General in these lands, with their lazy bastard of a King wasting lives against the Venetians to the East. I want ye to ride against Toulouse and take it for Scotland."

Enemy Character Details

Papero Galliano Age: 34

Governor
Command: ★★★★★
Chivalry: ★★★★★
Loyalty: ★★★★★★
Piety: ★

Retinue

- Tutor
- Guard Dog
- Biographer
- Siege Engineer

Traits

- Talent for Command
- Seethes with Anger
- Scarred
- Brave
- Feels Respected
- Aspiring Commander
- Can Tell a Tale
- Loyal
- Mindful of Risks

Spotted By: Donnchadh the Clever
Subterfuge: ○○○○○○○○○○○○

"Aye, Majesty," saluted Dougall, and moved to leave, but Domnall stopped him.

"Dougall, send a message to my cousin Adam. His Father rode in a Crusade against Toulouse, though it was merely a way of riding to Edinburgh's aid unknown at a time when the English threatened. I doubt Adam has the same strength of will as his Father, but we will give him a chance to prove his manhood, such as it is."

Dougall nodded and walked away, leaving Domnall Canmore to sit in his throne, fresh from mourning the death of his twin and now thrust into a new war by his younger Brother.

Chapter 39

Adam Canmore walked around the massive skull, trailing his fingers along its polished surface with a slight smile on his face.

"Ye found this.... in the ground?" he asked.

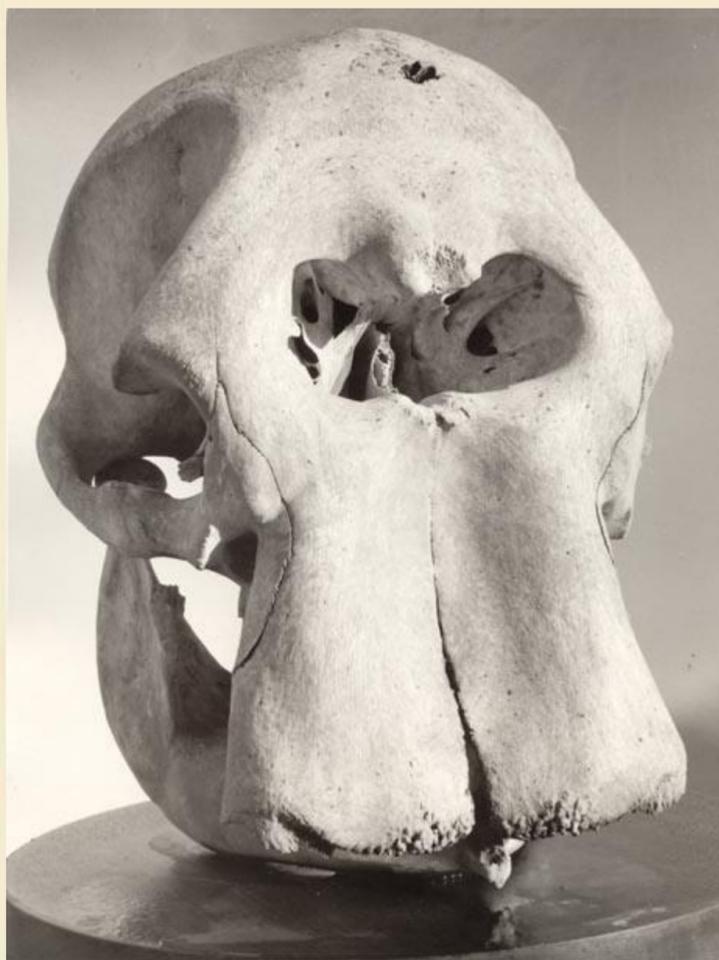
"Oh aye, my Lord," nodded the old farmer eagerly, "My boys dug it free and my girls polished it up. We were going to have it mounted at the local pub when we received word that ye wanted to see it."

"Fascinating," muttered Adam, crouching and peering through the head-sized eye socket, "What manner of beast made this?"

"The wife thinks it is a giant, Lord," offered the farmer hesitantly, "I think it looks more like a dog's skull myself, but I dinnae ken what those tubes at its front are for."

"I thank ye for indulging my curiosity," Adam said suddenly, standing up and tossing a small sack of florins to the farmer, "Ye may do with it as ye please, it would look good mounted on a pub wall."

The farmer bowed and thanked Adam gratefully as his two large sons silently lifted the giant skull up and carried it away, Adam smiling as he watched them go.



"That man farms a plot of land where historians say Harry Byrne defeated Vortigern," noted Adam's old tutor, Malcolm, who still served as the Noble's adviser, "Legend says Byrne had a pack of giant hounds with fangs that curved up from their mouths and trampled Vortigern's men into the ground, this may have been one of them.... my Lord, the Canmores can trace their ancestry back to Harry Byrne, ye could claim that skull by right."

"Aye," chuckled Adam, "Or I could claim it by right of Governance regardless of Harry Byrne, who fucked his way into the bloodlines of half the peoples of Scotland if the legends are true. Nae, let them have their oddity, and let them remember that I let them keep it and gave them coin besides. I have been thinking lately that ruling with an iron first instils fear through loyalty, when it would be better to instil loyalty by love. My brother Aed is beloved in Cairo because he treats the people well, makes seemingly random gifts to them, and is always certain to be seen when performing "heroic" acts.... perhaps he has something to teach me."

A messenger entered the court and saluted Adam, presenting him with a sealed envelope. Adam broke the seal and drew out the missive, raising an eyebrow as he read its contents.

"And now a chance to be seen being heroic," he chuckled, "Dougall Macdonchie is riding on Toulouse and has invited me to complete the task my Father did nae complete, I believe I shall accept."

"Ian Mensies has died," muttered Nevin, running his finger over a coded message.

"I met Ian many times," mused Aodh as he slapped away his manservant's hands and tightened the straps on his armor, "He was a kindly man, always with a kind word."

"Aye so his family believed too," nodded Nevin, "He was also a heartless, cold bastard who helped Scotland bring Empires to their knees.... though I doubt there will be any mention of such in his eulogy."



"Is there anyone's secrets ye dinnae ken, Nevin?" asked Aodh as he relented and allowed his manservant to make a final check off his armor.

"Only those that are nae important to ken," replied Nevin flatly, "I ken little about the personal lives of Captain Enrico and Vitale who ye'll be fighting today, but I do ken that their men are amongst the best Norman Knights in Sicily and will nae surrender Tripoli without a fight."

"Good," grinned Aodh, and pulled on his helm before striding out of his tent into the desert sun.

Battle Deployment

Your forces attack an army of Sicily

Your Forces

Scotland
★★★★●

Prince Aodh
1152 men

Reinforcements: 0

None


 Balance of power


Enemy Forces

Sicily
●○○○○○○○○

Captain Enrico
481 men

Reinforcements: 121

Sicily
●○○○○○○○○

Captain Vitale
121 men

Attempt a night attack





"Men of Scotland!" roared Aodh as he rode his horse past the last two Nobles not yet given positions of authority in recently conquered cities - Allan of Nairnshire and Eoin of Midlothian - and brought his mount to rest at the side of his bodyguard, "What is the name of that city!?"

"TRIPOLI!" roared the men.

"Men of Scotland, who controls that city!?"

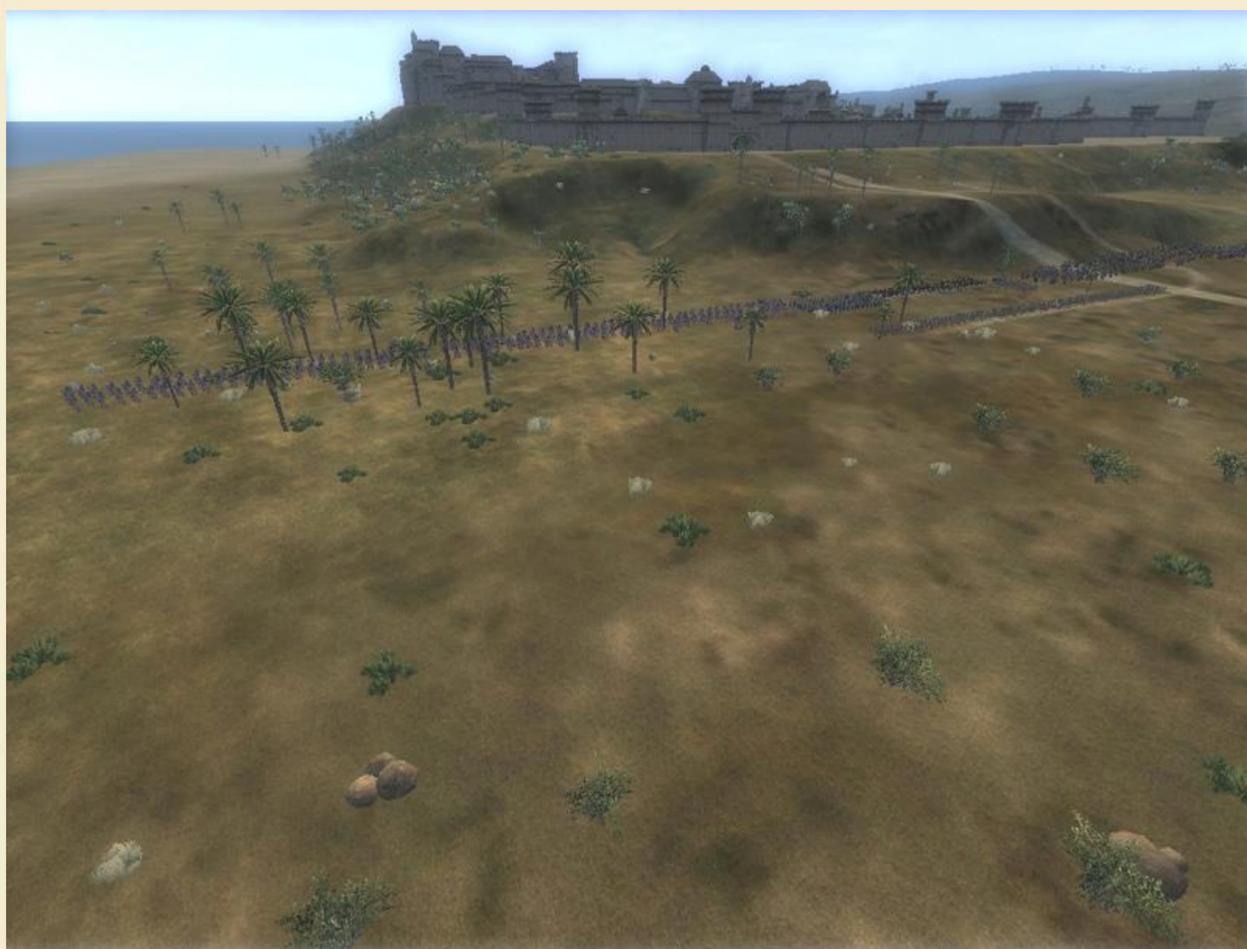
"SICILY!" roared the men.

"Men of Scotland, whose is Tripoli's TRUE master!?"

"SCOTLAND!" roared the men in approval.

"THEN TAKE IT FOR SCOTLAND!" roared Aodh.

"FOR SCOTLAND!" roared the men, and charged up the hill towards Tripoli.





Noble Cavalrymen rode through the gates of the city, blown open by blasts from Bombards, and wheeled left directly into a unit of waiting Sicilian Knights.

"Backs against the wall men!" screamed Captain Enrico, "Their horses can't break through us or get around us! We can fight them man for man!"

The Scottish rammed against them, but Enrico's strategy was sound, they were able to hold in place and drag the horses to a halt, forcing the Scottish to fight from horseback without being mobile, making them into large targets. Sicilians died, but so did Scotsmen, and soon a natural barrier of dead was rising up between the two groups.





"BRING UP THOSE SUDANESE!" roared Allan of Nairnshire, who found himself in the unfamiliar position of being outnumbered by his enemies. Quickly, Sudanese mercenaries jogged between horses and bodies and drove into the Sicilians, assisting the Horsemen in killing as well as protecting them from attack. With the reinforcements, Enrico found his men dying quickly, and himself surrounded by Scottish and a wall at his back preventing him from running.





As the last of Enrico's men were cut down, a fresh unit of Knights emerged from the dusty streets of Tripoli while from the Eastern end of the city came a defiant cry as Captain Vitale led his personal unit of Knights forward, hoping to trap the Scottish in a vice at the gate and prevent reinforcements from breaking through.



But as Allan reformed his men amongst the corpses of Sicilians, Sudanese, Scottish and horses, Eoin of Midlothian rode his cavalry through the gates and spotted the approaching Sicilians. He lifted his sword and ordered the charge, and they rode directly into the unprepared Knights, thundering them down and causing them to turn and run in panic, directly into Vitale's men.



"BRACE MEN!" roared Vitale, "THE SCOTTISH ARE CO-"

A Scottish horse rode directly into and over him, and his men cried out in dismay, leaderless and in disarray as roaring, laughing Scotsman rode through and around them, cutting them down.



A final unit of Unmounted Norman Knights marched down one of Tripoli's narrow and dusty roads, watching with blank faces as they saw their countrymen cut down. Eoin's horses would not be able to ride wide and surround them, and they were braced to absorb a charge. None of the Sicilians expected to win the fight, but they mean to take down as many Scotsmen as they could.

And then Eoin's horses stepped aside, and made room for the men the Sicilians would actually be fighting.



"Oh..... shit," grunted the Sicilian Knight-Commander, and then the long arm of the heavily armored Scottish Pikemen came down on them. They held for mere moments, desperately slapping at the pikes with their swords, watching their companions die around them, and then their noble intentions to stand and die in defence of their city disappeared as their survival instincts kicked in and they turn and ran.

Chased all the way by the Scottish.



They retreated to the outer courtyard of Tripoli's imposing fortress, turning as their panic faded and they realized that they would HAVE to stand and fight. The Scottish Pikemen marched on them, as behind them came the thunder of hooves, as Aodh Canmore joined Eoin and Allan to put the Sicilians to the sword.





With the battle done, the majority of the army was set free to sack the city, a necessary release of tensions for the men as well as an effective way of recouping the cost of the Sicilian Campaign and cutting down on the numbers of the surviving Sicilian civilian population. Aodh did not take part, and handpicked men to go about the garrisoning of the city, so that when the rest of the army was sated there was someone left to restore order.

As darkness fell over the city, Aodh stood in the forbidding fortress that dominated Tripoli and stared with cold eyes over a world map. Scottish blue marked almost half the world now, with large swathes of North Africa now in hi... in Scotland's command.

"-" started Nevin of Shetland from his position in the shadows, but before he could properly begin Aodh spoke over him.

"Sicilians have blockaded Tripoli's port," he said, and allowed a small smile when he was answered with silence before Nevin stepped out of the shadows with an appreciative nod, "And I ken ye were there 30 minutes ago."

"An hour," corrected Nevin, and it was Aodh's turn to nod appreciatively, "And the Sicilians marching on Tripoli are the least of your concerns. Ye ken that Adam Canmore is marching to join Dougall Macdonchie in siege of Tripoli."

"I am nae concerned with my cousin Adam," replied Aodh with a sneer, "He'll play at General then return to Edinburgh to lose himself between his mistress' thighs, and allow her to continue ruling the city through him. I have no fear of his superior age putting him above me, I am still heir to the Scottish Throne."

Nevin nodded, conceding the point, but he wasn't done, "Ye also ken that the Spanish were grossly insulted by ye capturing Cagliari from underneath them, and that was compounded by ye Brother sending them away empty-handed."

"I welcome the Spanish," grunted Aodh, stroking his fingers over the portion of North Africa still not marked in Scottish blue, "Let them break our Alliance, the lands they hold were rightfully Scotland's, my Father should have been the one to conquer them, now I shall do so in his stead."



"Ye also ken, my smart Lord," sighed Nevin, "That ye sometimes forget that there can be such a thing as too much confidence."

"Nevin ye are trying my pati-" started Aodh, and then gasped as he felt an arm around his neck as a large hand pinned his arms behind his back. He coughed as he was lifted bodily into the air, feeling the air being choked from him. Then he was suddenly sent crashing down into the table, spilling the map over onto the floor as he lay coughing and gasping for breath.

"Ye ken I was there because I let you ken," Nevin whispered gently, crouching down besides Aodh, "And ye were so focused on me ye did nae notice who else slid past ye guards undefended."

Turning, still coughing, Aodh stared up at the large man standing over him. His hands were large, his body well muscled, and his eyes black soulless pools.

"This is Farquar Makfulchiane, the deadliest assassin in the Scottish Empire," whispered Nevin, "He is here because a Sicilian Priest has been preaching of ye wickedness and soulless nature since ye took Tunis, and he was poisoning the people against ye."



"Wh... why," gasped Aodh, and Nevin knew he was not referring to the assassination of the Priest.

"Because ye've been TOO successful, my Lord, ye were growing arrogant," Nevin warned, "A good Spymaster must also show caution and respect for the threat posed by his enemies, even if it is an improbable threat. Fearghus Campbell could balance caution and daring, confidence and respect.... ye must learn to do the same."

Nevin stood and extended a hand, helping Aodh up. The Prince turned to say something to Makfulchiane, and his eyes widened when he saw the man was gone, having not said a word the entire time. He turned back half expecting Nevin to have disappeared too, but the Spy simply stood waiting.

"Very well," Aodh gasped, rubbing once more at his throat, "I accept it, perhaps I have been too overco... too arrogant. Ye have something else to tell me."

"Aye," nodded Nevin, "Ye Brother has set sail from Genoa, at the time he meant to land at Tunis but word will reach him of ye victory here. The King has always kept his own counsel, but word is that he is nae pleased to have heard of ye unauthorized aggressions."

Aodh nodded, absorbing the information, and finally he answered.

"Aye Nevin, the Sicilians I can handle, Adam I can ignore, the Spanish I welcome..... but my Brother the King? **THAT** may be a problem."

Chapter 40

Dougall rubbed his hands together against the cold and stamped his foot against the solid, dead ground. The lands around Toulouse had been razed to prevent the sieging army from gaining any sustenance from the countryside, and the forbidding stone walls of the city set against the battered and beaten land created the impression of a mausoleum.

Toulouse was a City of the Dead.

The Army had arrived three days earlier and Dougall's Siege Engineer had immediately taken control of the construction of the machinery that would bring down the walls and shatter open the gates. Dougall had set about doing what could be done with the barren land, setting up camp, creating patrols and guards and digging latrines.

Now as the early morning fog rolled out, Dougall raised an eyebrow as he heard the distant sound of music, while a soldier approached with a bemused expression on his face.

"My Lord," the soldier said with a grin, "Adam Canmore has arrived."

Dougall nodded, then watched with wide eyes as Adam led his small contingent of troops to join the sieging army.... as well as his retinue. A thickset dog trot protectively at the side of Adam's horse, and Dougall could only surmise it had been riding in the wagon that held Adam's other possessions for the greater length of the march. A bard skipped about beside Adam's bodyguard, singing merrily of the "Brave March of Adam Canmore" and the upcoming "Glory at Toulouse". A Fool capered along dancing, flipping and cackling madly between the horses of two serious looking unarmored men who were casting critical eyes over the siege camp.

"At least he left his Mistress at home," sighed Dougall under his breath, then forced a wide grin onto his face and marched forward to greet the Scottish Prince.

Character Details

Adam the Cruel

Family member

Command: ★★☆☆☆☆

Dread: ☠☠☠☠☠☠

Loyalty: 🏹🏹🏹🏹🏹🏹

Piety: ○○○○○○

Age: 41

Retinue	Traits
Adulteress	Cruel Ruler
Bard	Sober
Military Engineer	Effete
Fool	Totally Closed
Guard Dog	Brave
Siege Engineer	Talent for Command
Master Archer	Religious
	Tax Farmer
	Feels Respected
	Enjoys a Wager
	Warts

"Dougall Macdonchie," smiled Adam with a thin smirk that didn't touch his eyes, staring down at the man from his horse, "Hero of the Milan Campaign, Governor of Milan during my cousin's recent mourning, and now leading the siege on Toulouse.... I remember when ye were but a lad that I sent out to fight the Milanese."

Army Details

Dougall Macdonchie

Family member

Command: ★★☆☆☆☆

Dread: ☠☠☠☠☠☠

Loyalty: 🏹🏹🏹🏹🏹🏹

Piety: ○○○○○○

Age: 26

Retinue	Traits
Stablemaster	Proven Commander
Military Engineer	Confident Attacker
Siege Engineer	Siege Expert
	Loyal
	Religious
	Lacks Compassion
	Feels Respected
	Dauntless
	Scarred
	Winning First
	Firm Ruler
	Counter-Spy

"I have always appreciated the faith ye showed in me, my Prince," replied Dougall courteously, and bowed deeply before Adam. The Prince had a reputation for cruelty but Dougall knew from his time at the Edinburgh Court that Adam was anything but stupid. He used cruelty because he feared he was not as respected as his late Father, Alexander, who was also known as the Savior of Edinburgh, "My heart leapt with joy to hear ye would honor the siege with ye presence."

"Ye've killed so many Milanese ye absorbed their snake-like tongues, Dougall," grunted Adam, then let out a short bark of laughter, "We'll see if ye retained enough of ye Scottishness that ye can remember how to kill."



Two Days Later

Dougall sat his horse and stared down the long lines of his men. Their only horse were his bodyguard and Adam's, the bulk of their force made up by Scottish Pikemen, archers and crossbowmen. Two bombards would break open the gates of Toulouse easily enough, and it seemed from what he could see that the walls were undefended, Papero Galliano obviously seeing them as a lost cause and hoping to convince Dougall to engage his men on the ground at the gate. Let it be so, he had faith in the quality of his Pikemen against the Sicilian's Norman Knights.





Dougall noted Adam watching him carefully and knew the Prince was judging him. The last two days had been a nightmare as he handled bowing respectfully to Adam's wishes and maintaining the best interests of the siege. Adam had demanded his own Siege Engineer and Military Engineer take control of building the siege towers and ladders, and Dougall had capitulated while at the same time moving forward plans to abandon taking the walls and instead blasting through the Gates with the Bombards. The trick then had been convincing Adam that using the Bombards was **HIS** idea, which luckily hadn't taken long. Adam was not impressed with the roughness of life in the Siege Camp, and the idea of drastically reducing the time spent there was fine by him.

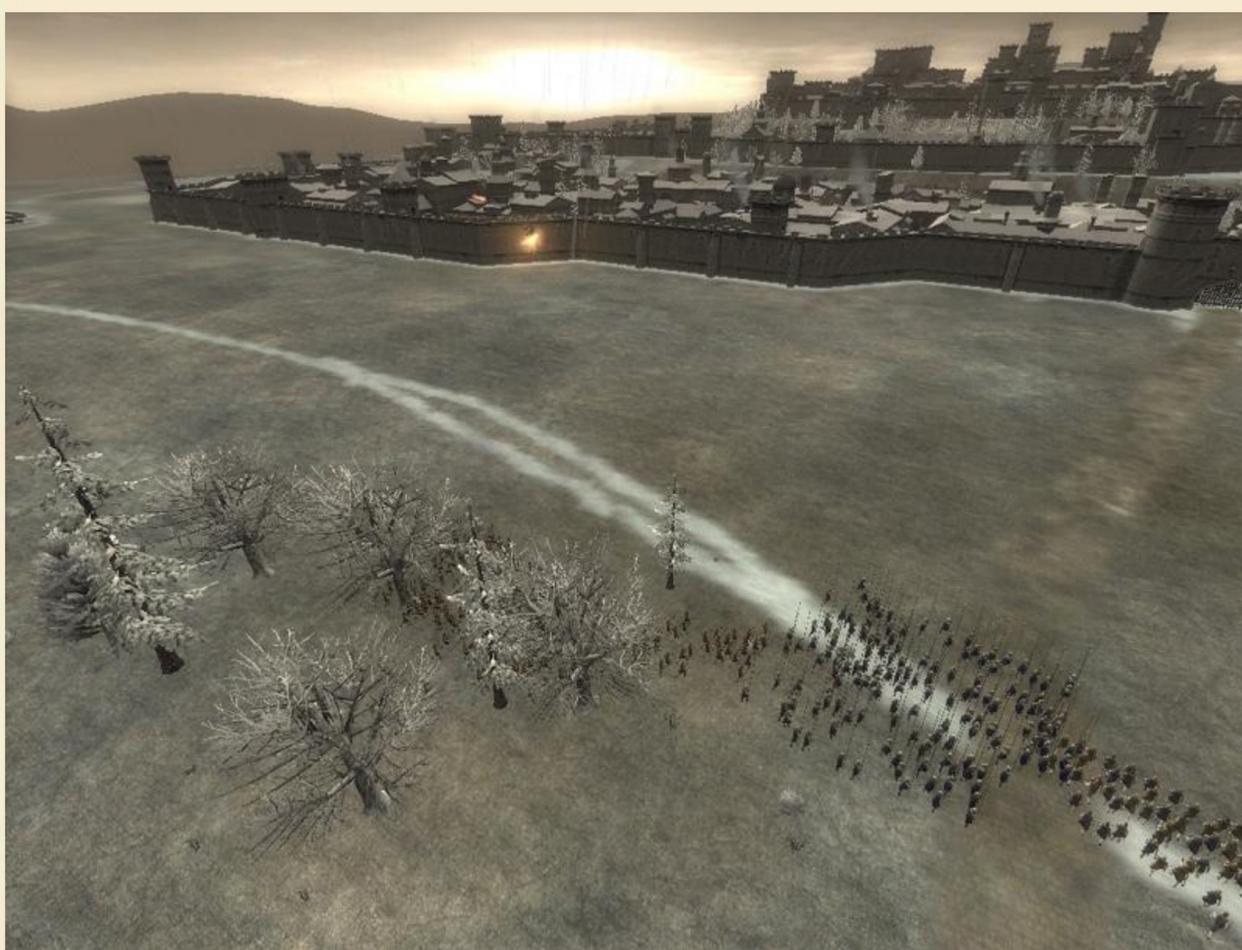
This morning he and Adam had met with their Commanders and Donchadh Makgullane, a talented spy who had intimate knowledge of the interior of Toulouse. As they had discussed their battleplans, word had come that the Sicilians had abandoned their defence of the walls all of a sudden, which had finalized the decision to use the Bombards on the gates and send the Pikemen in.

"All right lads!" cried Dougall, ready to launch into a passionate speech to fire up their blood and impress Adam Canmore, "The time has co-"





"Shit!" he cursed angrily as Muslim Archers suddenly rose up from their hiding places on the walls of Toulouse and fired into his Bodyguard, "Pull back! Bombards, FIRE!"



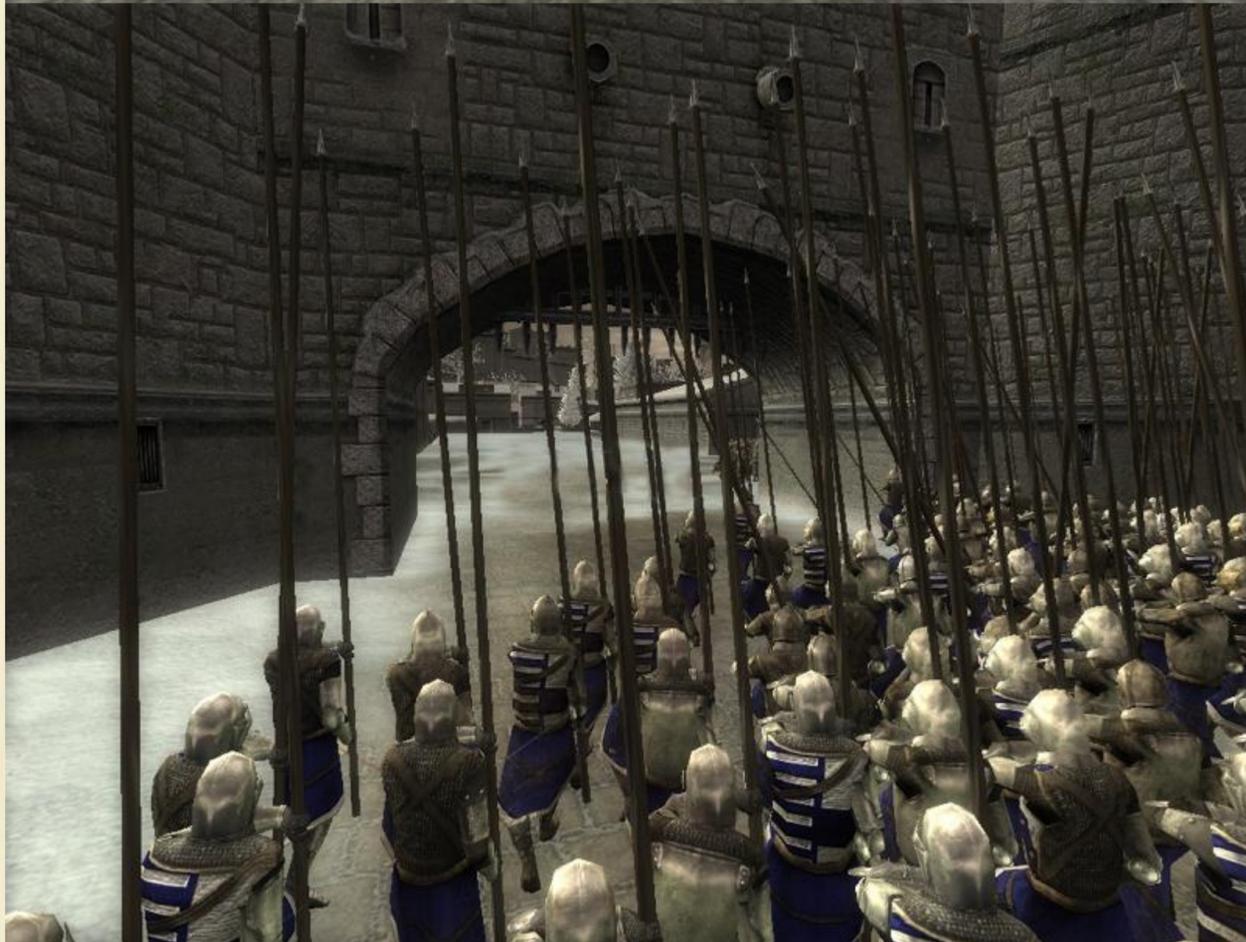
Bombard fire blasted into the wall beneath the Muslim Archers and Dougall cursed.

"Nae! NAE! FIRE ON THE GATES! PIKEMEN, MARCH!"

"So this is battle, eh?" grunted Adam to the Commander of his Bodyguard, "I somehow felt it would be more.... ordered."

The Bombards corrected and fired on the Gates, blowing them into twisted chunks of metal, and Scottish Pikemen quickly pushed forward towards the entrance to the city. On the walls, the Muslim Archers cried out warning to the soldiers below, and this time they abandoned the walls for real as they prepared to defend the smashed gates of Toulouse.





Amongst the Pikemen rushing the gate were two brothers, William and Thom. Both had been educated in hopes of marrying them into one of the many Noble Clans with large numbers of daughters.... maybe even to one of Domnall Canmore's daughters. But the two had quickly discovered that ancient links to the nobility and education alone was not enough to guarantee acceptance into higher Scottish society. Money was also a prerequisite, and so the two had joined the campaign against Milan and served under Dougall Macdonchie, then assisted in the capture of Milan under the command of King Domnall himself. The spoils of war had given them both some money, but more than that it had given them a taste for war and something money could not buy... the goodwill of the King of Scotland, who considered them and the other men who had survived the Milanese Campaign as veterans and true patriots.

As the Pikemen marched through the gates of Toulouse, William barked with laughter, this was going to be a slaughter! They had three times the men that Papero Galliano did, they were the finest fighters in all of Scotland, they could not lose!

And then the first group of Pikemen through the gate were smashed into on both sides by the Sicilians, as Papero's strategy became clear. He meant to block the first unit of Scots inside the gates, preventing others from breaking through, and turn the courtyard into a slaughterhouse.

It was going to be a slaughter, but William realized to his horror that it was not the Scottish who would be doing the slaughtering.





The Scottish behind the Pikemen dying in scores shoved and pushed in an effort to break through, but the Sicilian Knights were like men possessed, lent almost supernatural strength by their passion as they struck down Scotsman after Scotsman. Some Sicilians lept bodily into the Scottish, swinging swords and screaming incoherently, their eyes rolling back in their heads and froth spilling from their open mouths. They were like animals, and as William stood back to back with his brother and fought against them, he wondered what could have invoked such passion. They were at war yes, but this reaction was something different to all his experiences on the battlefield, even when he'd faced down the last of the Milanese at Duke Puccio's last stand. The Sicilians fought as if they'd surrendered their humanity, as if they'd sold their very souls.



"Crossbows, Archers!" roared Dougall, "Get up behind the Pikemen and see if you can cut down the Sicilian Knights! Make an opening for our men!"

"This seems.... different," muttered Adam, riding up beside Dougall, "How are the Sicilians holding back so many of our men?"

"I dinnae ken, my Prince," hissed Dougall, "The Sicilians have always been mad.... but these seem insane."

The Crossbowmen charged up, hundreds and hundreds of them, but they could find no angle to fire on the Sicilians, and their own men were too bunched up to risk firing and hitting. They milled about uncertainly outside the gates to Toulouse, watching helplessly as the trapped Scottish Pikemen fought desperately against Sicilians that had become ferocious armored animals, fighting on despite bloodloss, loss of limbs and injuries that should have killed or at least incapacitated them.



"Ahhhhhh SHITE!" screamed Thom as a sword struck his arm dumb and he dropped his sword, William twisted and struck his own sword into the Sicilian's belly, and gaped in wonder as the man screamed in hate and clawed his hands at him.

"PISS OFF!" roared Thom, punching the man in the face and knocking him out, causing him to slide off of William's sword. Thom scooped up his sword as William quickly decapitated the next Sicilian to come at them, and then they were back to back again as the Sicilians kept coming, all of them like the ravening madman that had almost killed Thom moments before.

"We're for it this time, William," grunted Thom, and then unbelievably he began to laugh. William's eyes widened at his brother's laughter, but then his own humor overtook him, and he too began to laugh.

"Oh aye, who'd have thought we'd survive war with Milan only to die in a French City defended by Sicilian madmen!" he hooted.

"Nae, nae today," laughed Thom, and raised his voice, "HEAR ME LADS, I'LL NAE DIE AT THE HANDS OF MADMEN! THESE SICILIANS HAVE LOST THEIR MINDS, BUT I'LL NAE LOSE MY MANHOOD BECAUSE OF IT! ARE WE NAE SCOTSMEN? THEN LETS SHOW THE SICILIANS WHY SOLDIERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD CALL US DEMONS!"

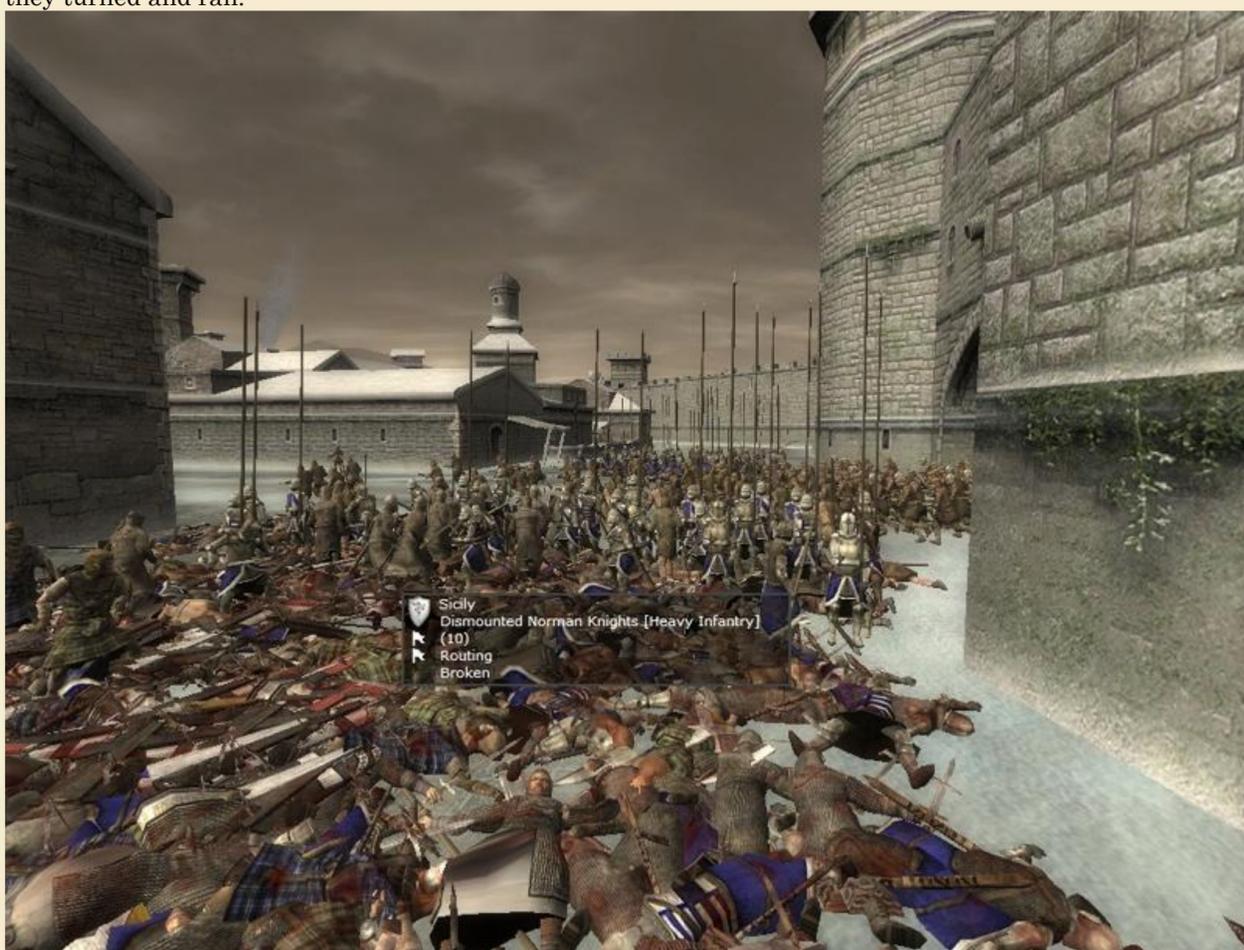
"AYE!" roared William in agreement, still laughing, "WHAT ANIMAL CAN STAND BEFORE A DEMON? FIGHT BACK, LADS! PUSH THROUGH.... PUSH THROUGH FOR SCOTLAND!"

"**FOR SCOTLAND!**" roared the surviving Pikemen, and with a burst of adrenaline and howls of laughter they stopped trying to merely survive the Sicilians and turned their minds to destroying them.





Nearly 400 Pikemen had entered the Gates expecting to wipe out the Sicilians, now barely 50 remained, but now it was the Sicilians who had to fight to hold them back, and their own inhuman rage had been surpassed by the laughter and determination of the Scots. Something in the Sicilian Knights broke, whatever had pushed them beyond the bonds of human endurance fled, and they turned and ran.



"We did it lads, we did it!" roared Thom in delight, throwing his arm around his brother's neck in delight, "We showed those Sicilian basta-"

His voice was cut off by the sounding of a horn, and the gaze of the surviving Scottish Pikemen fixed on the Sicilian Knights riding on horseback under the banner of Papero Galliano, who rode at their head. They were fresh, their rolling eyes and frothing mouths indicated they were as mad as the Dismounted Knights the Scots had already fought through.... and they were coming right for them.



"NAE!" screamed Thom in desperation as he saw William fall beneath the hooves of a Sicilian horse, and then his vision turned red as he plunged against the Sicilians and swung his sword in a fury, while others about him tried desperately to use their previously discarded pikes to hold back the horses. But the Scottish were exhausted from their desperate battle with the Dismounted Knights, and the fresh horses and insane men riding them began cutting down Scotsmen with brutal, haphazard strokes of their own blades.



Soon all the Scots had fallen, Thom lying gasping amongst the dead as his vision finally cleared and he found himself lying bleeding from cuts all over his body, his armor red with the blood of Sicilians, Scotsmen and himself. The Sicilian Horses milled about uncertainly, the Sicilian Knights riding them staring about seeming confused. Their eyes were dilated, their mouths dry, their skin burning to the touch as they panted far more hoarsely than their exertions warranted. They had cleared the interior of the Gates, and Thom stared with despair through the twisted remains of the gate to outside, where hundreds of Scottish Crossbowmen still milled uncertainly, holding back from entering Toulouse. Why? Why weren't they entering? Why had they abandoned..... and then he had his answer.



"SCOTLAND!" roared Dougall Macdonchie, charging his men into the side of Papero's. Beside him rode Adam Canmore, looking bewildered to be in such an unfamiliar position, but also feeling strangely.... exhilarated? Yes... exhilarated. Was this how his Father had felt in battle? This thudding of the chest? This prickling of the skin and quickening of the breath? He slashed a sword clumsily to his side and it buried into the side of a Sicilian's neck, and Adam felt another rush of excitement... he'd just killed a man with his own-

"RARRGGGH!" screamed the Sicilian and swung his sword at Adam, who pulled back in his saddle and watched in horror as the blade passed inches from his face.

"FUCK!" screamed Adam, pulling his sword free and then bringing it down with all his strength on the Sicilian's face, cutting into the metal of his helm, crushing his nose so far back into his head that it drove into his brain, causing the man to fall limply from his horse. Adam sat panting roughly, then a huge smile cross his face as he whispered in awe, "..... fuck."



The Scottish Cavalry swept through the gates and over the Sicilians, who fought with the ferocity their Dismounted brethren had shown earlier. But this time the Scottish were not trapped in place, and it was they who surrounded the Sicilians. This time Knights fell from their horses despite their apparently inhuman ability to keep fighting, and Dougall roared in triumph as he saw Papero's banner crumple and the man himself fall from his horse.



Dougall and Adam's men made short work of what was left of Papero's Cavalry, and finally came to a stop as they realized that the walls were finally, finally theirs.

But at a huge price.



"Get those Crossbowmen into the city!" demanded Dougall as he looked about at the carnage in the streets. This battle had been a disaster so far, and he blamed himself despite the bizarre resilience displayed by the Sicilians. All he wanted now was to end it, Papero was dead but Sicilians still held the city itself, all they had gained for so many lives was the walls.

Thom dragged himself to his feet and stumbled through the dead bodies of Sicilians and Scottish alike, looking desperately for his Brother as he noted the depressingly small numbers of his fellow Pikemen who had survived, less than 10. He found his Brother's body and dropped to his knees, biting back tears as he stroked the side of his beloved Brother's face and wiped away the blood on his forehead.

"Oh William, why couldn't it be me?" he moaned.

"Aye," grunted William, opening his eyes, "I was always better looking."

"YE BASTARD!" cried Thom in shock and punched his brother's shoulder, and William laughed through a wince, "I thought ye were dead?"

"Death wouldnae feel so painful," groaned William, "Help me up, that Sicilian bastard's horse did a number on me, I dinnae ken what is still there."

"Only one thing is important, and I'm nae feeling for that for ye, brother or nae!" smiled Thom, and helped his Brother to his feet.

Adam cleaned his blade off and looked about him smoothly, noting the business like way that his men and Dougall's intermingled, securing their position as Dougall barked orders at the Crossbowmen entering Toulouse through the shattered gates. He cast his eye along the interior wall of the city and noticed a glint of armor in the distance, and slapped his Bodyguard Commander on the shoulder, "What is that?"

His Commander squinted his eyes, then frowned before crying out, "More enemy! It may be the archers that fired on us before the battle was joined!"

Dougall rode his horse forward, ordering his men into formation as he fell in beside Adam, who kept his face smooth while trying to hold in his delight at the prospect of more battle. For so long he had fought war through proxies and on maps, and the visceral delight of actually participating was more than he had ever dreamed.

"If they are archers, the curve of the wall will prevent them accurately gauging a range on us, while our own archers can fire blind knowing they will nae hit us. Once we turn that corner, my Prince, prepare to charge, archers do nae wear heavy armor, and our horses will bring them down quickly."





The Muslim Archers did not share the unnatural vigor of their Sicilian Knight counterparts. As the Scottish rode over them, the survivors promptly turned and ran, moving quickly through the winding streets of Toulouse as Dougall and Adam led their men in pursuit, leaving their own archers and crossbowmen far behind in their eagerness to finish the battle.



They charged uphill after the fleeing archers, and then suddenly more horses appeared from over the hill, lightly armored Sicilians on fast mounts speeding downhill towards the surprised Scotsmen. Dougall tried desperately to pull his horse up, but the speedy Sicilian horses were all ready amongst them, their riders swinging swords with quick efficiency, cutting down Scottish Knights that could not react as quickly and were all ready tired from hard fighting with Papero's Knights.



Dougall gritted his teeth against the pain as a Sicilian sword slashed deeply against his side and he felt blood flood out of him. He reached out with a swiftness that surprised his attacker and grabbed the sides of his head, twisting violent and snapping the man's neck, causing him to fall from his horse which rode on past the battle and into the streets of Toulouse. He clutched at his side and stared about in frustration as he saw his Bodyguard savaged by the speed of the Sicilian attack. All ready the fast Sicilian horses had turned and ridden back uphill, waiting for the Scottish to come after them so they could launch another quick attack.



"Dougall, you've been wounded," noted Adam, riding his men up to join what was left of Dougall's Bodyguard. He'd fallen behind in the pursuit of the archers, and as a result had not been victim to the lightning quick attack, "How many are there?"

"I believe these are the last, my Prince," grunted Dougall as he clutched his side, concerned at the continuing steady flow of blood, "They ken they are doomed, but mean to kill as many of us as they can... the Sicilians in this battle have acted in a way beyond any strategy, they have been men possessed."

"Well how do ye plan to end it then?" asked Adam, looking pale as his gaze kept dropping to Dougall's side, as if the sight of another Nobleman bleeding had reminded him that he too was mortal.

"I command here, my Prince," grunted Dougall, "And I will be the one to put an end to this battle. I will ride with my men against the Sicilians and let them engage with us, and their speed and manouverability will mean they will decimate us. But we will hold them in place while ye lead yer men into their sides, and once held in place they will be no match for ye."

"But.... that will mean ye death," muttered Adam, as if Dougall had not considered this.

"Aye, my Prince," winced Dougall, clutching his side and feeling his vision graying. He forced himself to sit up straight, and saluted Adam, "It has been the greatest honor of my life to serve the Canmores. Men, RIDE!"



"ARE YE MAD!?!!" screamed Adam, grabbing at the reins of Dougall's horse as his men rode up ahead of him.

"What are ye.... what are ye doing?" groaned Dougall as he felt his vision fading.

"Saving ye fool life," snapped Adam, "Ye're too good a General to throw away on some mad pretext of noble sacrifice!"

He pulled Dougall's horse away and ordered his men to follow as Dougall's own bodyguard struggled against the lightning raids of the Sicilian Riders. Dougall tried feebly to protest, but his strength was fading too fast, and he cursed lightly to himself that Adam had cost him a chance to die in battle, rather than bleeding to death as he was led away from battle like a feeble old man.

"What now, my Prince?" asked Adam's Bodyguard Commander as they reached the base of the hill, "The Sicilians still hold the Castle."

"Now? Patience now," replied Adam curtly, "Every soldier is so bloody determined to die in glory. There are roughly 30 of those Sicilian Riders, and a handful of archers past them. We have hundreds of crossbowmen and Highland Archers marching through the streets now. We wait for them, and then we kill these Sicilians from afar.... I'll nae waste another Scottish life to the Sicilians today."

And so the battle of Toulouse ended, not in glory with the clashing of swords and horses, but with the buzz of crossbow bolts and flaming arrows fired from afar, and the screams of Sicilians gutshot and left to die on the ground where they fell.

But no more Scots died that day.



Adam settled down behind Papero's desk.... or rather, his former desk, and looked through the papers on his desk, taking a voyeurs delight as he was lent insight into the mind of another man, even if he was dead. Toulouse was now in the hands of the Scottish, and though it was Dougall Macdonchie who had commanded, Adam knew it was him who had won the day.

He picked up a loose leaf of paper with the broken seal of the King of Sicily and perused its contents idly, then sat up straight as he read on. His eyes widened as the implications of the document sunk in, and he quickly shot out of Papero's chair and shoved his way out of the former Governor's spacious quarters in search of Dougall Macdonchie.

He found him in the throne room, where he was angrily allowing a Doctor to work on the wound he had taken in his side. He would live, much to his shock, and Adam knew that the man would always believe he owed his life to Adam's actions... and thus be his man once more. But such was not his concern now, not after reading the contents of the last missive Papero Galliano had read.

"...used a derivative of Thorn Apple," Dougall's Doctor was saying, "Likely they didn't ken where they were, let alone what they were doing. Even had they defeated us most would have died from the exertion the drug causes, I cannae understand why they'd subject themselves to"

"I do," grunted Adam, interrupting the Doctor and thrusting the message under Dougall's nose, "Read this."

Dougall blinked in confusion, then did as he was bid, and his mouth dropped open in shock.

"Why did we nae..." he started.

"The message must have arrived this morning, after ye man Donnchadh returned to give ye his briefing," Adam explained, "That will be why they suddenly changed their battle strategy..... ye ken what this means, Dougall?"

"Aye, aye I do," nodded Dougall, "We must get word to the King..... my Prince, this changes EVERYTHING!"

Adam nodded, if anything Dougall was underestimating the impact of the message.

Scotland was about to face a challenge unlike any King Domnall had ever known.

Chapter 41

Roy Macgoulchane rode through the gates of Yerevan and felt his stomach roll and the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Yerevan was a large Town on the Northern border of Scotland's desert holdings, seemingly unimportant except for one thing.

It was the first line of defense between Scotland and enemies both existing and future.

As he and his men rode through the streets he peered about him at half naked children running about laughing and playing at war, while shirtless men sat in the open-walled pubs that were so familiar to the Desert Cities and Towns of Scotland. The women, sadly, were not shirtless, but moved confidently through the streets, the red hair of the Scottish mixing with the black hair and dark skin of the Egyptians, Africans and Asiatics whose blood had not yet been bred into the greater mix of the Scottish population. Yerevan was a multi-cultural town, the various races and religions all combining and somehow harmonizing under their Catholic Scottish Rulers. The reason for this was simple.

Angus The Mauler.

The young Scottish Lord ruled with an iron fist and the punishments for violating his laws were brutal and swift. It was by his command that Roy was riding to Yerevan, and it was their history that was causing Roy's stomach to flop. Three years Angus' junior, Roy had been just old enough to be caught up in the periphery of Angus' attention, and he'd bullied him mercilessly. Roy was no coward, and his Father had always taught him to stand up for himself, so he'd given as good as he could when finding himself suddenly taunted or beaten by Angus. But even as a boy he'd been a monster, sometimes reducing his tutors to tears, and Angus had almost always come out on top of their encounters. It had been the greatest relief of Roy's life when Angus had been called to govern Yerevan by Nectan Canmore, and over the years he'd heard tales of Angus' brutality without surprise. The man had faced sieges by rebel armies and bandit hordes made up of Scottish Deserters and half-breed Mongolians trying to turn themselves into a new Horde. He had won every battle and Yerevan's walls had never been breached, and the viciousness with which he destroyed his opposition and brutally slaughtered both survivors and the dead had seen his legend grow.

Now Roy had been summoned to Yerevan, and could not refuse. Angus was the highest authority in this part of the Scottish Empire now that Nectan Canmore was dead, and despite his brutal nature he was highly respected by the nobility, commoners and the Church alike.

He dismounted his horse and let a stable hand take the reins as he looked up at Yerevan's "Palace", which was in fact a converted fort that was still obviously designed for war over comfort. Swallowing down his growing concern, he marched to meet the servants waiting for him, who offered salutations and then regrets that he would not have time to refresh himself from his long journey, for Lord Angus demanded his presence immediately. So Roy entered the Fortress and allowed himself to be led to the Banquet Hall, where he found himself once more face to face with his childhood nemesis.



Angus looked twice his twenty-three years, his face was lined and his mouth curled down in a seemingly permanent frown of disapproval. He tore apart the flesh of the roasted bird in his hands with rough fingers and jagged nails, exposing crooked teeth growing yellow. His short sleeves exposed armed tanned almost black by the desert sun, except for down one arm where the skin was marked by a long pink stretch of a terrible burn and the white marks of scars criss-crossing his arms, neck and chest. His eyes narrowed as he took in Roy's appearance, and he grunted as he chewed noisily on his meal, then pushed the plate aside and lifted himself to his feet.

"Roy Macgoulchane," he grunted, "Do ye remember our first fight, lad?"

Roy ignored the use of the term lad from a man only three years his senior, remembering Angus' disdain for anything but a direct approach to anything in life.

"Aye, my Lord," he answered, "Ye thrashed me so badly I could nae walk for three days."

Angus grinned cruelly and wiped his mouth, "Aye so I did, and bugger this "My Lord" talk, ye'll call me Angus or nothing else. Do ye remember WHY I thrashed ye, lad?"

"I have nae idea," replied Roy, wondering if this was the entire reason Angus had called him here, to rehash the past, "I was practicing my sword work in the yard when ye suddenly roared a challenge at me."

"Bah," snarled Angus, "It does nae matter why the fight started.... I asked ye if ye remembered why I thrashed ye so badly after the fight started."

"Perhaps because I did nae stand and let ye throw the first blow?" asked Roy.

"Because ye kicked my in the balls, lad!" roared Angus, grabbing Roy by the shoulders and causing him to flinch. But then Angus threw his head back and laughed, stale breath washing over Roy's face, "And that's why I called ye here, because I need someone to press out with the army to take the war to the Rebels.... and ye're the only noble in a hundred miles with the balls to take a direct approach and win at any cost!"



Less than a week later, Roy Macgoulchane was riding at the head of an army of 600 men, passing through the mountains and coming to Trebizond on the shore of The Black Sea. Within the city were 500 Anatolian Rebels, remnants of the former Turkish Empire, who had believed that the mountains surrounding the Southern, Northern and Eastern approaches and the Black Sea to the West secured them from attack.

The Anatolians were not part of the rebel bands that had been haranguing the Deserts around Yerevan, but Angus wanted the city under Scottish Command. He'd explained in his gruff fashion that the Northern Border would not be secured until the Anatolians were gone, and also made it clear in no uncertain terms that the attack on Trebizond would be Roy's test to prove him worthy of the "honor" that Angus had bestowed on him - to be the Field Commander of the Scottish Armies in the North.

Angus' own reasons for wanting such a position to exist had been surprisingly pragmatic. At 23, he'd already been cut and sliced open in enough ways to kill 100 men, and he had no illusions regarding his mortality. While Aodh Canmore led the pampered Court Nobles of Cairo against the Moors and Sicilians and Domnall Canmore mourned the passing of his brother Nectan, Angus believed that he was the only remaining General in Egypt that could make properly lead the armies, and he meant to be sure that if he died there was someone else to replace him.



"Behold Trebizond, land of milk and honey," Roy grunted, "Or is that land of sand and salty water?"

"My Lord?" asked his Knight Commander.

"Dinnae concern yersel," sighed Roy, "Have the catapults brought up to fire directly on their gates, they will nae hold... this glorified collection of huts was nae designed to stand up to a direct assault. Have the men get into formation and I'll offer them what inspira-"

"My Lord," interrupted his Knight Commander respectfully but forcefully, "If I may make a suggestion, dinnae bother with a speech. Lord Angus is famous for his inspirational voice ahead of battle, and while I mean nae disrespect to ye, anything ye have to say will only serve to remind the men ye are nae him."

"The whole point of me being here is because I'm nae Angus," he hissed through gritted teeth, then sighed, "Fine, do ye have any other suggestions?"

"Aye, my Lord," nodded the Knight-Commander, "The men are veterans, and they all ken how to fight. I suggest ye orders consist purely of, "At them, lads." Lord Angus will be more impressed with actions than words.... prove yersel on the battlefield by killing Rebels, nae by making fancy speeches."

Roy frowned, it went against everything his tutors had taught him. As a member of the Nobility, the men relied on him to inspire them and convince them of the divine mandate to kill in the name of God and Scotland.... but the Knight-Commander was a veteran, and those same tutors had also told him to make use of the tools at your disposal.

"Send up those catapults," Roy said at last, "I will consider ye words."

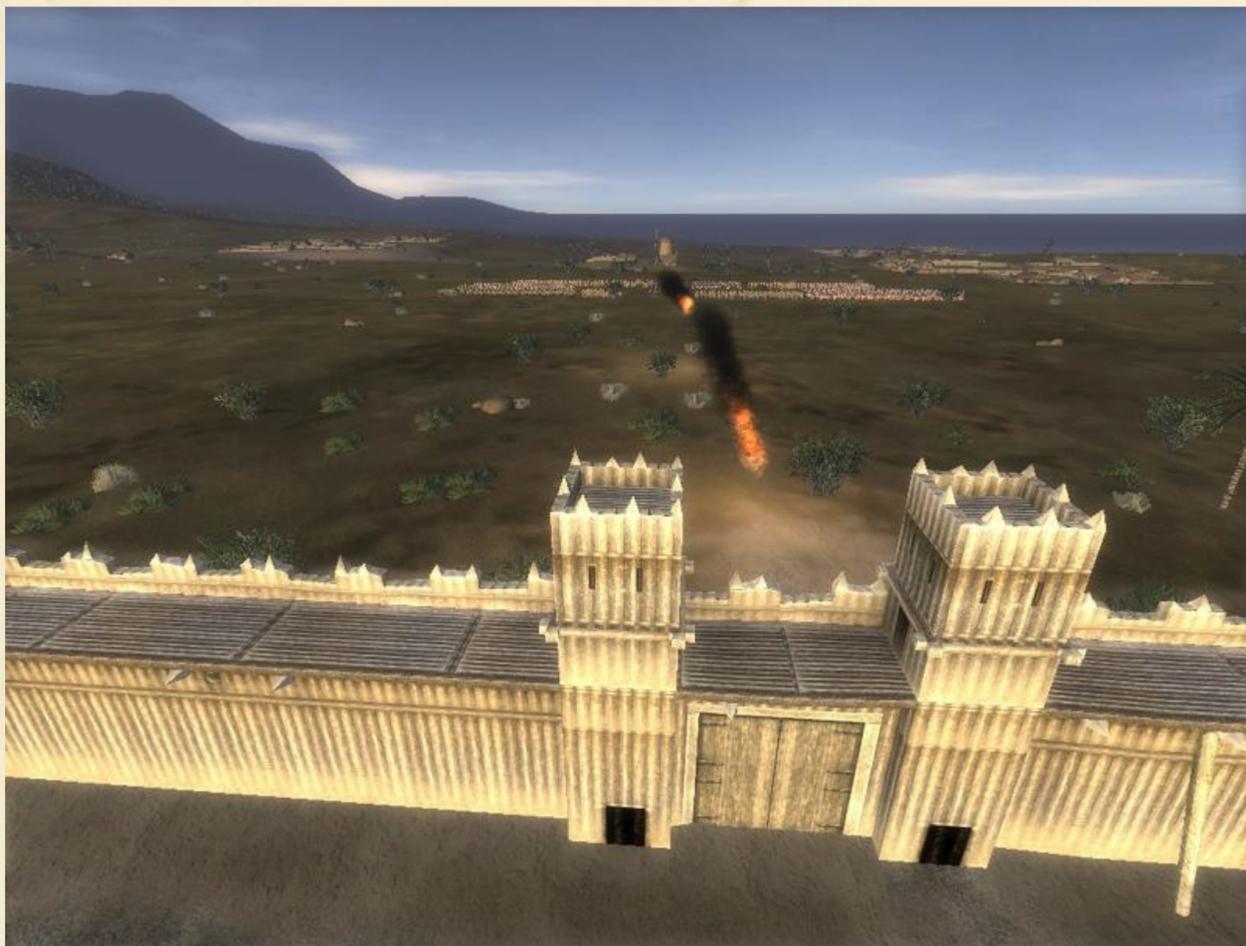
Inside Trebizond itself, the leader of the Anatolians - Captain Mavros - pulled himself up onto his horse in the central courtyard and stared around at the other horsemen and the assembled archers. They had lived a peaceful life here, not allowing the fall of the Turkish Empire to affect their own lives. Trebizond was not a beautiful city, and the Black Sea was not a picturesque seaside setting, but it was their home, and they had built solid lives here.



"The Scottish mean to take our lands, rape our women and wipe us from history, men," growled Mavros, "Our numbers are equal, and they must fight through our walls.... DO NOT LET THEM THROUGH! KILL THEM AT THE WALLS AND HOLD THIS LAND FOR YOURSELVES AND YOUR CHILDREN!"

His men roared their defiance, and then outside the catapults of the Scottish fired on the walls.





"TO THE WALLS!" ordered Mavros, "WHEN THEY COME THROUGH THE GATES, WE WILL HOLD THEM AND YOU WILL KILL THEM WITH ARROWS FROM ABOVE! FOR FREEDOM!"

"FREEDOM!" roared the Anatolians, and charged.



Roy watched as the catapults fired and smashed again and again against the surprisingly hardy walls, and then smiled in satisfaction as they smashed open. He rode ahead a few feet, and turned to face the men, who eyed him with grim faces. His Knight-Commander eyed him expectantly, waiting to see what he would say.

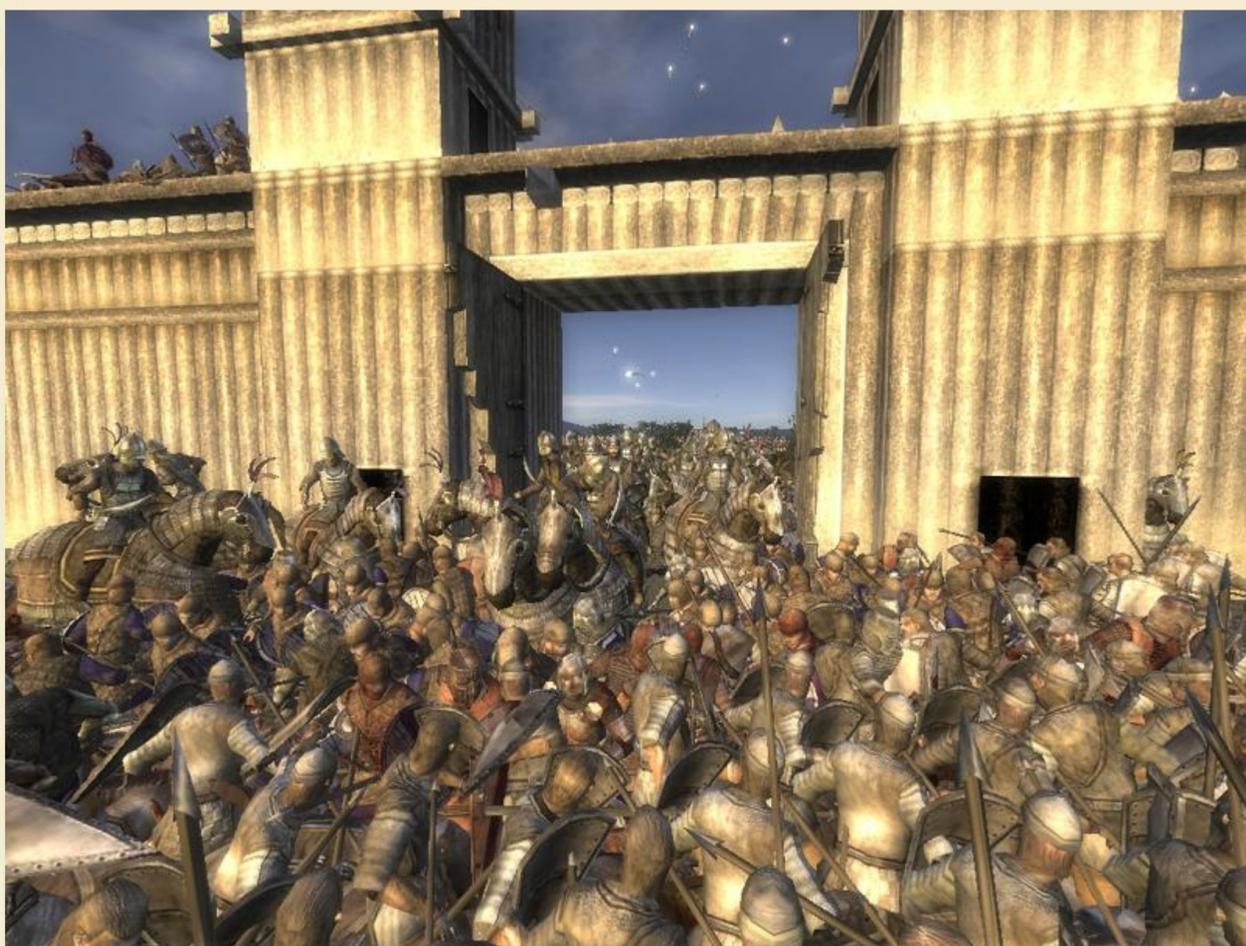
"Okay," he whispered to himself, then lifted his sword high and roared, "At them, lads!"



The men grinned and roared out, raising their own swords and then.... did nothing.

"Wha..." started Roy in confusion, and then watched in surprise as the Knights and Swordsmen parted and allowed their archers to move forward and lower themselves to brace and prepare to fire. Turning, Roy noted that Anatolians could be seen through the smashed gates approaching the walls, and then flaming arrows were arcing through the air and over the walls to land on the Rebels.

"CAVALRY!" roared a voice, and horsemen charged past Roy who stared in wonder as the men operated efficiently and structurally as an army.... all without a word from him.



The Mounted Knights charged through the gates and smashed into the Anatolians, and the Rebels found that while their numbers were roughly equal, there was more to holding back an Army of Scots than standing in their way at the walls of their town. Scottish infantry burst through and around their own Mounted Knights and flooded up the narrow stairwells inside the walls, bursting through to the top and cutting through the unprepared archers as they nocked their arrows to fire on the Scottish horse below.



"FIGHT ON FOR FREEDOM!" cried Mavros as he rode his own men against the Scottish, "WE CAN HOLD THEM! THIS IS OUR LAND! THIS IS OUR HOME! THIS IS-"

"SCOTLAND!" cried out a Scotsman, and the cry was taken up by the others. Soon they were chanting it like a mantra, their voices thundering out Mavros' cries, "SCOTLAND! SCOTLAND! SCOTLAND! SCOTLAND!"

"Aye, Scotland," whispered Roy as he rode his own men into the fray, and Mavros cried out in despair as he was struck down from his horse and trodden beneath the feet of the new masters of Trebizond.

Scotland.



The Anatolians who survived the destruction and slaughter wrought by the Scottish turned and ran in panic, looking to the comfort of the town even though they were only penning themselves in for further bloodshed. Roy roared for his men to follow and rode after the Rebels, and the Scottish roared and followed him. That was how they would remember the battle, when the last of the Anatolians had been slaughtered for daring to defend their land and they cried out in celebration and sacked the city. But Roy knew that they would have charged after the Anatolians regardless of anything he said. He had learned the first great rule of warfare - part of leadership was being in the right place at the right time.





He returned to Yerevan in triumph, having "lead" the Scottish to victory and gained more land for the Empire. This time when he was summoned to Angus' banquet hall, it was to share a meal with him, where Angus interrogated him mercilessly about the battle, extracting details Roy hadn't even realized he'd known.

Finally, the scarred and brutal General seemed satisfied, and raised his ale to his new Field Commander.

"Ye were the right choice, lad," he grunted, "Men like ye and me will be needed in the time to come."

"What do ye mean?" asked Roy, and Angus grinned slyly as he leaned forward across the table.

"The war with the Sicilians will nae last long. Aodh's Nobles are hardly hardy fighters, but the Canmore Prince has proven a surprisingly competent General, and the Sicilian's oaf of a King is leading his Empire into a steep decline. Aye, I received word that Domnall Canmore has ended his mourning and he too will soon be back to war, he's a true Canmore that one, like his Uncle Edward. With the Moors gone and the Sicilians beaten back, and alliances with Spain and Hungary in place... Domnall will be looking to expand our borders here to the North."

"The Russians?" asked Roy.

"I would nae be surprised," agreed Angus, "First the Russians, then the Polish. They're both hard bastards, but they've nae fought Scotsmen before. Mark my words, Sicily will call for ceasefire and then Domnall will sail back to the Desert and we'll march into the cold, forbidding wasteland of the Russians.... and then my fine new Field Commander, we'll have a real war like Scotland has nae seen since Edward cut off Subutai's head at Emperor's Bridge."

Roy nodded, and hid his horror at what Angus was suggesting. A war with Russia would mean marching thousands of men into the vast frozen wastelands of Russia against men who - legend told - could survive on nothing but the biting, burning alcohol they brewed themselves. What was worse, the glint in Angus' eye suggested he was looking forward to the notion, and for the first time Roy realized that Angus the Mauler was more than a brutal, iron-fisted General.

He was completely insane.

Chapter 42

Prince Aodh frowned as he heard the crunch of a foot against sand, and looked up from the desk inside his Command Tent as he heard murmurings from outside. The tent flap was opened and a guard stepped inside, holding his pike at the ready as a hooded man entered the tent and the guard looked at his Prince with an inquiring eye. Aodh nodded slightly, and the guard stepped back, letting the tent flap fall and leaving Aodh alone in the Command Tent with the stranger.

"My Prince," said the hooded man, bowing his head and sliding his hood back. His face was familiar but his name escaped Aodh, but Nevin's training was having the desired effect as Aodh's mind raced behind his blank face to match the face to whatever tickled the familiar sensation at the back of his head.

"We have met before, ye are a friend to Scotland," Aodh said moments later, identifying the man as a member of Scotland's extensive spy network, "Ye are nae who I expected, and ye have nae appeared in the manner to which I am accustomed... explain."

"I beg ye forgiveness, Lord," nodded the man, "My Master and ye Servant has been called away for... family concerns.... and has sent me in his stead to report on the Sicilians to the East."

Aodh frowned at this news, since his recent "lesson" at Nevin's hands he'd been concerned about whether his concept of serving Scotland meshed with the Spy's. But there was little that could be done about it at this current time, and the Sicilians to the East required his immediate attention, Nevin would have to wait. He motioned for the Spy to sit, and then spent the next several minutes reviewing notes sent to him from his network around the Empire, keeping him up to date with what was happening and who was doing what to whom and why. Finally, he pushed aside his papers and stared directly at the Spy, and inclined his head to motion he could speak.

"The Sicilians are led by Captain Bieda Basile," spoke the Spy immediately, as if he had not just spent five minutes sitting perfectly still and ignored, "A competent but unimaginative soldier who has gained his position of authority more by default than anything else. He commands 500 men, and has been serving his final orders blindly despite the Sicilian Nobles who ordered them being long since dead and the cities they commanded conquered by ye."

"To blockade the port of Tripoli," nodded Aodh, "And he commands men equal to my own in numbers... what is their quality?"

"Poor," noted the Spy, "They have not been reinforced, their weaponry and armor are old surplus pieces, their soldiers are a mix of veterans past their prime and untested boys... they are nae challenge at all, my Prince."

"And yet they ARE blockading Tripoli's port," grunted Aodh, "If they are still in place blockading the port, then we will reach them within a day's ride from here. With their deaths, the men of Sicily will be gone from the deserts of my Father. Ye may go now."

The Spy stood and prepared to walk away, then hesitated. Aodh frowned, and looked up to hear what he had to say.

"They are Sicilian, my Prince," said the Spy, "And they follow the orders they were given.... but they no longer fly the flag of Sicily."

Aodh narrowed his eyes, and then allowed a cruel smile to deliberately break his usual blank expression, "Then let them die nae for a country or a cause, but as honorless bandits put down like rabid animals."

King Domnall Canmore sat in his darkened cabin as the Scottish Fleet sailed through the night along the shores of the Scottish Desert. He was reviewing notes from the Egyptian North, where news from Yerevan - his first conquest - indicated that the Governor there was becoming too aggressive in his dealings with Rebels, pushing the Northern Border too far towards the lands of the Polish and the Russians. Domnall frowned, the Governor was a ruthless man, which was necessary for the Northern Border, but he would need to be reined in.

A knock at the door to his cabin interrupted his thoughts, and he snapped for whoever it was to enter. The door opened and a dark, hooded shape entered the cabin, instantly raising Domnall's guard despite the lack of outcry from his guards. A talented assassin could dispatch guards and then lower his target's guard by knocking on the door, and Domnall reached over and placed his hand over a dagger.

"Ye are wise to be cautious, my King," said the hooded man, "But ye have nae to fear from me."

"And who is "me", pray tell?" asked Domnall, his hand still on the dagger.

"My name is Nevin of Shetland," said the Spy, pulling back his hood, "And I have come with news that will change the Empire forever."



The endless sands of the desert broke here, at the shore near the port of Tripoli. The odd geography of the desert meant the port was situated a great distance from the city itself, and the palm trees that jutted out of the sand created a strange dotting of green that broke up the endless tan of the desert and the endless blue of the ocean.

God might see the world as such; Aodh thought as he rode his horse forward, seen from above, the world a series of colors that only God himself could translate. Sometimes Aodh turned his mind to the almost blasphemous notion of imagining the way God's mind worked. The idea that he could see both into the deepest heart of EVERY man, woman and child in the World AND also view it from afar, past, present and future... it was beyond the ken of any human. The machinations of Fearghus Campbell paled in comparison, and his own petty attempts with Nevin to continue Fearghus and Edmund's work was laughable. On a day like this, Aodh's mind often turned to God, because it was on days like this that he was forced to address the paradox of doing God's work AND destroying God's creation.

Today he killed.



"Today we finish our bloody business in these deserts, men!" cried Aodh, grabbing the attention of every soldier on the field. He had taken almost 2000 men with him when he'd first set out from Cairo to destroy the Moors and bring war to the Sicilians, and at each city he had conquered he had left some behind to garrison and Govern, until he had been reduced to 500. But they were the best of those he had brought with him, even the pampered Nobles of Cairo's Court had been battle-hardened alongside him, leaving him in no doubt that today's battle would be bloody, but only for the Sicilians, "The men we fight today are honorless dogs who have abandoned the flag of their Nation. They have abandoned their King, who though he is a drunken, slothful imbecile is still their King, and thus they have turned their backs on God. Cut them down like dogs, and show them what it means to be a true man, a true soldier, a true SCOTSMAN!"

Across the sands, the Sicilians stood under no banner and no flag. They had small numbers of cavalry on old and sick horses, and many of their crossbows were old and worn and not guaranteed to wind back after firing their first volley. But they stood in service of the only command they had left to them since the fall of so many of their compatriots in Tunis and Tripoli, their job was to hold the Port of Tripoli.



Bieda Basile gave the call and his Crossbowmen fired their first shot at the approaching line of Scottish Cavalry, most of their bolts falling short or bouncing harmlessly off of the sturdy armor of the Scots. Bieda ordered them to reload and fire, but they moved out of synch and with eyes constantly rising at the quickly approaching Scotsmen.... and then before they knew it the Cavalry was on them, crushing through the first line and causing the men behind them to turn and run in horror.



"COUNTER CHARGE!" roared Bieda in desperation, but he knew it was a futile gesture. As the Sicilian cavalry rammed against the Scottish line, their enemies barely even budged before rallying and tearing through their new opponents.



"RETREAT!" roared Bieda, cursing the duty that had been drilled into him that, coupled with his own pride, had seen him hold his men together here at the Port. Now as he watched the Scottish juggernaut roll over his men he saw the futility, and performed his last duty for his men as their Commander and ordered them to run. While the Scottish were held up in the slaughter of the cavalry, he would try and get as many of his men into the desert as he could, and from there they would be free to disappear. Let them make their way back to their homes, or join up with outlaw bands or even disappear into the city of the Scotsmen, but at least they would live.

So Bieda ran alongside his men, feeling his skin burning with shame as he heard the screams of pain and despair of those left behind to die at the Scottish hands. He ran with his men away from the battle and the ocean and towards the freedom of the desert, and he ran....



"No...." Bieda whispered in horror as he stared at the banner flying high above the armored General commanding the 500 extra Scotsmen blocking the escape of he and his men.

"KILL THEM!" roared King Domnall Canmore, "LEAVE NO SICILIAN ALIVE!"

Domnall's men crashed into the Sicilians, who could not run for fear of Aodh's men. Together, the armies of the two Canmores slaughtered and massacred the Sicilians, a proud race of fighters who could not fight Scotsmen with their pride or their heritage, and whose blood fed the sands like those of so many before them. Bieda fought with the ferocity of the damned, knowing that all he could do now was die a true man and fight to the end.... an end that came upon him quickly.



In the thick of the battle, some Sicilians found themselves falling through the gaps of the double-sided Scottish killing machine. They ran mindlessly from the death behind them, all thoughts of fighting or resisting burnt from their broken minds. But the Scottish did not distinguish between those who stood against them and those who had lost the will to fight. Aodh led his cavalry relentlessly after the runners, and cut them down to die in the sand far from their brethren. In the end, of the 551 men who had blockaded Tripoli's port, only seven survived the battle. Of those, only one ever emerged into civilization again, driven mad by exposure to the sun and babbling to the end of the days of the "Valley of the Kings" he had found and the endless riches contained within. He was treated kindly and died in relative comfort, his ramblings dismissed.



With the battle over, Aodh rode with his laughing men to greet the "reinforcements" who had ensured the bloodbath that had destroyed those who had tried to run. His men were in good cheer at the prospect of seeing their King, but Aodh knew that now was the moment of truth. He had instigated war against two different nations while his Brother mourned the death of his twin, set up Governorships and promoted men to General whom the King had never met. What would be his reaction?



"Aodh," grunted Domnall as Aodh rode up alongside him, all around him men riding about in delight and cheering as they were reunited with friends and family.

"Domnall," nodded Aodh, inclining his head respectfully.

"Off your horse, Aodh Canmore," Domnall suddenly proclaimed loudly, and all around him men quieted and turned to stare at their King. Aodh gritted his teeth behind his helm, and then did as he was ordered and hopped down from his horse.

"AODH CANMORE! REMOVE YOUR HELM!" roared Domnall, and Aodh complied, feeling the sea breeze cutting through the desert heat and cooling his sweating face from the exertions of battle. The Scotsmen had formed a circle now around the Prince and the King, and they watched silently as Domnall stepped down from his own horse and removed his own helm, glaring at his Brother with a face filled with righteous fury, "AODH CANMORE, YE WILL KNEEL NOW BEFORE YOUR KING!"

Aodh kneeled, keeping his face blank as he struggled to hide his despair at his Brother's reaction.

"AODH CANMORE!" Domnall roared, "YE HAVE TAKEN GOOD NOBLE MEN OF SCOTLAND FROM CAIRO'S COURT AND PUT THEM TO WAR, PUTTING AT RISK THE LIVES OF THE NOBLE BLOODLINES OF THE SCOTTISH EMPIRE! AODH CANMORE! YE HAVE SAILED AN ARMY WITHOUT ROYAL ASSENT AND WAGED WAR ON - AND WIPED OUT - THE NOBLE MOORS! YE HAVE GONE TO WAR WITH SICILY AT A TIME WHEN YE KING WAS IN MOURNING, TAKING ADVANTAGE OF MY SORROW TO ACCOMPLISH THE GOALS THAT YE DEEMED IMPORTANT. YE HAVE INSULTED THE SPANISH, STRAINED OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH HUNGARY AND EXTENDED BY TENS OF THOUSANDS THE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE THAT THE SCOTTISH EMPIRE MUST CARE FOR AND GOVERN..... AODH CANMORE, YE WILL STAND!"

Aodh rose to his feet, and Domnall grabbed him by the shoulders, staring fiercely into his face.

"AODH CANMORE!" he cried, and then a gigantic grin broke out over his face, "YE ARE MY BROTHER AND A CANMORE TRUE!"

Aodh's blank mask broke in astonishment as his brother embraced him, while all about them the watching Scotsmen raised their swords and cheered in delight.

"Aodh ye wily bastard," laughed Domnall, pulling back from his Brother but still gripping his shoulders, "Ye've wiped out the Moors, ye've thrown the Sicilians out of the desert and claimed the lands our Father and Uncle once dreamed of ruling! Ye make me so proud, brother, ye've grown to claim the best assets of Edmund and Edward... ye're a smart bastard that can fight!"

Aodh grinned despite himself, shouting to be heard over the laughing, cheering Scots that had gone back to greeting and embracing their own kin and friends, "I thought ye might be angry that I took us into a war that was not necessary, as I once did with the Turks."

"And ye did it anyway," smiled Domnall, "But this time ye did it after first weighing up the options and coming to a well thought out conclusion. And do ye ken what it is ye have accomplished, Aodh? I dinnae think ye do, word has nae reached ye yet... do ye ken why these men did nae fight under a Sicilian banner?"

Aodh frowned, this was indeed intelligence that had not reached him.... but **had** reached his Brother. Suddenly Nevin's failure to appear in his tent was speaking volumes, the Spy had taken news to Domnall instead of him.... why?

But all such thoughts fled from his mind moments later, when Domnall told him the news that had so shocked Adam Canmore and Dougall Macdonchie; the news that had seen Nevin of Shetland commandeer a fishing boat and ride to the Scottish Fleet to inform the King before anyone else could.

He told him the tale of King Nene The Lewd.

Neutral Character Details

King Nene the Lewd Age: 35

Faction Leader

Command: ★★★★★○○○○○

Dread: ○○○○○○○○○○○○

Authority: ★★★★★★★★★★

Piety: ○○○○○○○○○○○○

Retinue

- Tutor
- Military Engineer
- Astrologer
- Pagan Magician
- Judge
- Bard

Traits

- Totally Closed
- Drillmaster
- Slothful
- Promising Tactician
- Swift to Judge
- Shamelessly Lewd
- Natural Commander
- Lacks Caution
- Iron Fisted
- Enjoys a Wager
- Social Drinker
- Night Fighter
- Generally Loyal
- Faction Leader

Sleeps way too much, and does little that anyone could call work. -1 Authority, -15% to Movement Points (reduces the distance armies can march), 10% penalty on tax income

The Sicilian King had been a promising Noble in his youth, well regarded for the hard training he put his troops through and the iron fist with which he commanded them. He gave the men under his command the best reputation for efficiency and effectiveness in the Sicilian Army of his youth. Gifted with a natural ability for Command and showing promise in terms of tactics and strategy, he had quickly risen through the ranks of the army. When the King had died without a male heir, he had chosen Nene to succeed him and for once in the wide and disparate squabbling of Sicilian politics, consensus had been found - everyone agreed that Nene would be a wonderful King.

That was when the orgies started.

Having accomplished his goals and raising to a higher station than he had dreamed, Nene had ceased to have any desire to accomplish anything. Why bother when he had more power and wealth than he could ever realistically use? So he had changed from General Nene the Mighty to King Nene the Lewd, indulging himself in every depravity and perversion he cared to imagine. He became slothful, sleeping away entire days, sometimes forcing the business of Court to be attended in his bedchambers so he need not remove himself from his sheets. He grew corpulent and increasingly erratic in his behavior, as his sleeping habits started to interfere with the workings of his mind, reaching the point where he could not distinguish between dreams and the real world.

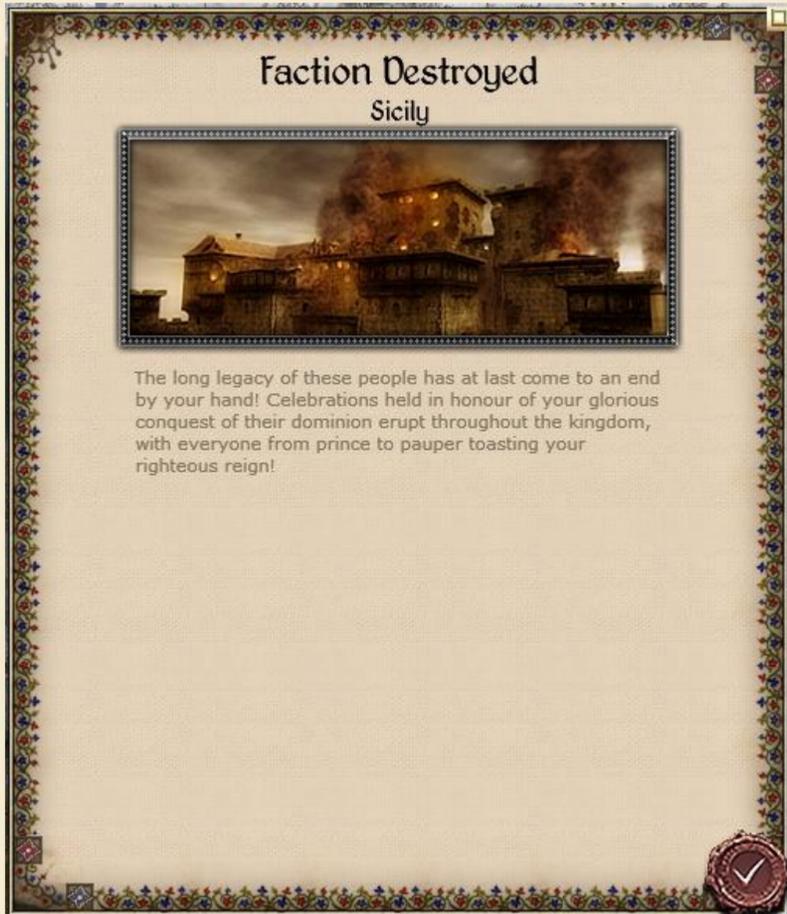
So it was that when he dreamed of a plot to oust him from his throne by the King of Venice in order to expand that Nation's own lands into Sicily, Nene could not be dissuaded from declaring war on his neighbor. with the single-minded determination that had made him a feared General in his youth, Nene had raised an army and ridden against the Venetians.... landing on Venetian soil at roughly the same time that Spain and Scotland began waging war on his now poorly defended desert and island holdings. When this news was imparted to Nene, he insisted it was misinformation being spread by the Venetians, named the messengers traitors, had his pet Judge try them in a farce of a public trial and then executed. But while his determination had returned, his old iron fisted drilling had faded, and the Sicilian Siege Camps became a joke, with guard patrols that turned into dice games; trenches and latrines left half finished; siege equipment left to rot in stormy weather; and King Nene himself neglecting the planning of the battle in favor of listening to performances by his pet bard and organizing impromptu orgies, bringing in a mixture of camp followers, whores and captured Venetian peasants to fill up numbers. What battle plans he did make were influenced more by his astrologer than the situation on the ground, and each day more and more men abandoned the army.

Finally, one afternoon after a particularly long celebration of a man Nene had interpreted as heralding imminent victory, the Venetians had ridden out of their sieged Capital and crashed down over the shambles of a siege camp. Soldiers had died struggling into their armor, and the Venetian Generals had been shocked when they'd torn their way into Nene's tent only to discover the man was still in bed, sleeping soundly next to a spilled skin of wine on top of the whore he'd bedded the night before and fallen asleep on.

They hauled him from his bed, but even then he was in such a stupor that he seemed unaware of what was happened or who held him captive. The Venetians had dragged him to a nearby tree and strung him up to die by hanging. They watched in disbelief as his corpulent body kicked weakly while the tree branch first bent and then snapped, dropping Nene to the ground where his bones broke beneath a soft, squelching noise. The Venetians had broken down then into tears of laughter, and after establishing that Nene was in fact dead, they'd rifled through his tent until they found his crown and robes, then "liberated" a large hog from a nearby farm and dressed it in Nene's attire. They had then run the confused and terrified creature through the streets of the city hailing it as "The Great King of Sicily."

"Nene was dead," Domnall continued, seated now in Aodh's Command Tent which they'd retired too as throughout the camp the Scottish prepared for a massive celebration, many of those who had ridden with Aodh informed by Domnall's men of the news that the King was now imparting to his Brother, "And with him almost all the Sicilian Nobility. Those left in these lands are dead thanks to ye efforts, Aodh, and when news reached Papero in Toulouse that he was now defacto King of a Nation that extended only to a city under siege by Scotsmen, his mind broke. He and his soldiers imbibed a drug that gave him strength born of madness, and they threw themselves with wild abandon at Adam and Dougall, only to be cut down and slaughtered until none were left. Do ye ken what that means, Aodh? I think ye do."

"Aye," nodded Aodh, shaking his head in wonder, "It means that there is nae a Sicily anymore... the men who thwarted Father and Uncle Edward's plans to extend the Empire to the West are dead."



Domnall smiled, and leaned forward on his stool, "And do ye ken what **THAT** means, Aodh?"

"It means that the Scottish Empire now stretches across half the world... more even," Aodh noted, "There is more Scotland than world now, Domnall... the world IS Scotland."

"More than that, Brother," sighed Domnall theatrically, then broke into a smile, "It means I now face a greater challenge than any faced by Father or Uncle Edward, or even our Grandfather. Aodh, with Sicily destroyed.... for the first time in more than a century, Scotland is nae at war. Our enemies are dead, the nations that stood before us buried or burnt into the history books.... I now face the great challenge of peace, of governing and ruling an Empire spanning over half the world with no wars to bring money into the coffers, with no great enemy to distract the population from the boring issues of the day - sewerage, civil order, laws and trade.... I must become a politician, Aodh."

Despite himself, Aodh laughed out loud at the look of dismay on his Brother's face, and instantly regretted it when Domnall smiled cruelly.

"Oh I would nae laugh just yet, Aodh," smiled the King of Scotland, "Because if I must focus on politics, then ye.... well, I have a rather "special" mission in store for ye."

One week after Aodh and Domnall had been reunited on the battlefield, Aodh Canmore stood inside Milan watching the fireworks and marveling at how much peace had changed things all ready. The gunpowder used to smash down the walls of Scotland's enemies was now being used to entertain children in the street as celebrations rolled through the Empire.





In Milan in particular there was cause of celebration, as the second-born daughter of the King was married. Her husband was a good man, solid and dependable if a little older than expected for the husband of such a young woman. Rory was 44, a full four years older than the Princess' own Father, but if anything many expected he had been chosen to show Deredere the maturity and wisdom of age and experience.

Aodh, however, knew better.

A Suitable Prince

Betrothed: Deredere Canmore



Rory of Shetland Age: 44

Command ★★☆☆☆☆

Chivalry ★☆☆☆☆

Loyalty ★★★★★

Piety ☆☆☆☆☆

Traits

- Proven Commander
- Loyal
- Fair Fighter

This man could show promise as a member of the royal family, and is a fitting suitor for your noble daughter. Bearing in mind this would mean that her highness would cease to play an active role in representing our people any further, will you grant him her hand in marriage, embracing him into the family to serve lord and land?

Marriage Celebrations

Rory of Shetland
Deredere of Shetland



Celebrations erupt throughout the kingdom as news of the royal wedding makes its way to the far corners of the realm, and beyond. The people are already excitedly speculating whether or not their first-born will be a boy or a girl.

"Ye once told me ye had nae Father and ye Mother died when ye were young," Aodh said to the man standing behind him.

"Aye, and I did nae lie," Nevin of Shetland replied, "I had nae Father, because the man refused to recognize me or my Mother. She was a whore, he a minor Noble, and both of us represented nae but embarrassment to him. He denied us, sent her away without a thing, not even token moneys to have her gone from his life. She died of a pox when I was young, and the only thing I remember from her is the hate and bile she spilled to me of the man who was my Father."

"I will admit confusion then," Aodh muttered, turning to face the Spy who he had only been reunited this very day, the day of Deredere's wedding, "I ken that ye took the news of Nene's death and Sicily's destruction to my Brother in order to put in a good word for ye Half-Brother, but if what ye tell me is true, I dinnae understand why.... why would ye marry him into the Royal Family?"

"My Half-Brother was already courting Deredere, my Prince," Aodh said, "And for bringing him news of Sicily's destruction, I only asked ye Brother to consider Rory's proposal, nae to accept it. As for why.... I have already told ye, my Mother fed me bile for my Father and his family as sure as she fed me breastmilk as a bairn. It is a hatred I have never surrendered, and it has festered and bubbled inside me like a poison for decades.... while I struggled to survive on the streets of Shetland, I would catch glimpses of Rory living a life that should have been mine. Now I have drained that poison from my system, and am free to serve Scotland as I should, without emotional bias. It was a weakness, my Prince, and I beg ye forgiveness for indulging it."

Aodh stared at the Spy with surprise, Nevin had just expressed more emotion than at any time since first introducing himself to the Scottish Prince, and now he bowed on bended knee before him and waited his Prince's Judgment.... and finally Aodh gave it.

"I must continue my duties as Spymaster to the Empire even in this time of peace.... especially in this time of peace," he said at last, "But I must also serve the special mission my Brother has entrusted to me, and thus I require ye service still. I can think of no better man to serve the Scottish Empire than ye, Nevin.... but I will nae brook ye ever putting ye own needs above those of Scotland's ever again."

Nevin lowered his head in acknowledgement, then rose to his feet and fell in beside Aodh as they walked along the corridor, flashes of light from the fireworks painting the walls strange colors.

"Will ye tell me the nature of ye secret mission, my Prince?" asked Nevin.

"Will ye tell me why ye feel marrying ye half-brother into the Royal Family is "punishment" for his inherited wrongs?" retorted Aodh with a smile.

"That is hardly fair," chuckled Nevin, "The answer to that question is painfully obvious, and would be treason to speak of."

Character Details



Rory of Shetland Age: 44
Family member
Command ★★☆☆☆☆
Chivalry ★☆☆☆☆
Loyalty ★★★★★
Piety ☆☆☆☆☆

Retinue
None

Traits
Proven Commander
Loyal
Fair Fighter
Royal Ties
Wife is a Wretch

A vow of monogamy with this man's wife was one of his braver moments in life.
-2 from popularity (has a negative effect on public order), Decreases the chance of having children

Aodh laughed, feeling for the first time since the death of his Father that things were right with the world. He walked down the corridors of the Palace in Milan with his close companion and friend by his side, and let his mind play with the ramifications of the mission his Brother had given him, as well as the delightful challenges that a Scottish Empire at peace presented. Truly their family and the Empire as a whole were blessed by God, and Aodh Canmore was delighted to find that he was truly, wonderfully happy.

A savage storm raged across the seas, more powerful than any in living memory. Seaside villages were almost flattened by the power, ships unfortunate enough to be on the waters were torn to pieces or thrown so far of course as to be all but lost. Winds howled along the beaches and shores, rain thundered down, the skies shook with thunder and were rent asunder by lightning.

Storm

The Sea



A storm of mighty proportions and ferocity has struck, causing more damage than would be seen in several lifetimes of natural weathering.

In Valencia, the brutal storm was the perfect match for the temperament of King Mallobo, the merciless King of Spain whose rage had not been dimmed by age.



King Mallobo the Merciless

Age: 55

Governor

Command ★★★★★

Dread ★★★★★

Authority ★★★★★

Piety ★★★★★

?

Retinue

-  Biographer
-  Military Engineer
-  Master Archer
-  Guard Dog
-  Drillmaster
-  Pagan Magician
-  Tax Farmer
-  Herald

Traits

- Aspiring Commander
- Confident Defender
- Siege Expert
- Loyal Beyond Question
- Holier than Thou
- Driven by Rage
- Night Fighter
- Feels Respected
- Mindful of Risks
- Hoarder of Wealth
- Tax Farmer
- Faction Leader
- Convincing
- Merciless Leader
- Open to Murder
- Political Promise

He stormed across the floors of his war room lecturing his advisors and military commanders, each point seemingly punctuated by blasts of lightning or thunder. The heavens themselves were shaking at his rage, and each man in the room feared that he would soon turn his rage from a general fury to one focused on one of them.

Like the messenger currently lying dead on the floor.

The man had brought news to the King at great risk to his own life, moving through the storm to carry him tidings from the Pope. For his troubles the King had smashed him to the ground and beaten him to death before the shocked eyes of his advisors, and none of the servants dared to approach the body to remove it while the King paced about it venting his rage.

"THE POPE CALLS THE SCOTTISH BLESSED!?!?" he roared, "WHAT NATION HAS SERVED THE CHURCH MORE THAN SPAIN? WHAT PEOPLES ARE MORE DEVOUT THAN THE SPANISH?! WE HAVE NEVER GONE TO WAR UNPROVOKED WITH ANOTHER CATHOLIC NATION! WE HAVE TAKEN INSULT AND INJURY AT TIMES TO AVOID THE WRATH OF THE POPE! AND SCOTLAND? **SCOTLAND?** THEY SMASH THEIR WAY THROUGH THE LANDS OF HEATHEN AND CATHOLIC ALIKE! THEY WAR WITH THE EX-COMMUNICATED AND THE DEVOUT! THEY DESTROY NATIONS LIKE THEY WERE NOTHING AND THE POPE CALLS THEM BLESSED!?!?!?"

With a sudden inarticulate roar, King Mallobo twisted and grabbed one of the heavy wooden chairs on the floor beside him and hauled it bodily up despite its weight and his advanced years. He hauled it up over his head and then flung it with all his might through one of the windows, smashing through it and allowing the wind and rain into the room.

"YOU!" roared Mallobo, twisting and pointing at one of his Military Advisors who felt his testicles trying desperately to crawl up into his belly, "HOW DO YOU DEFEAT THE SCOTTISH!?!?"

"Ma.... ma.... majesty?" gasped the man, sweat pouring freely over his body, "You control the battlefield.... you outnumber and outrange the...."

"DON'T FEED ME THE BASICS OF WARFARE!" screamed Mallobo, charging forward and grabbing the man by the back of the neck and marching him angrily to one of the tables where maps were held down by weights and markers showing the current state of the world. Over half the map was marked in Scottish blue, and a depressingly small amount of space was marked as being in Spanish control.



"YOU CANNOT CONTROL THE BATTLEFIELD BECAUSE **THEY** HOLD ALL THE LAND!" he snarled, shoving the now weeping adviser's face into the map, "YOU CANNOT CONTROL THE NUMBERS BECAUSE THE SCOTTISH ALWAYS RIDE IN LARGE NUMBERS TO ENSURE SUPERIORITY! YOU CANNOT OUTRANGE THEM BECAUSE THEIR ENGINEERS MEET OR SURPASS THE QUALITY OF EVERYONE ELSE IN THE WORLD! SO. HOW. DO. YOU. DEFEAT. THEM?"

"I... I... I don't KNOW!" squealed the adviser in horror, "I DON'T KNOW!"

"No you don't," hissed Mallobo quietly, and tossed the man to the floor, "None of you know anything, you're all useless, and so is all of THIS!"

He motioned to the map and markers placed on them, eyes narrowing with fury.

"THIS!" he snarled, sweeping away the markers showing soldiers.

"THIS!" he roared, sweeping away the markers showing artillery placements.

"THIS!" he roared, sweeping away the small markers that indicated spies and assassins.

"AND THI...." he screamed, raising his arm to sweep away the last markers on the board. He checked himself, his voice trailing off as he crouched down and stared with wide eyes at the markers that indicated the Spanish Fleet, a Navy unmatched in the entire world. And then King Mallobo the Merciless did something that unsettled his advisers even more.

He started to laugh.

Chapter 43

For Scotland, the brave new era of peace lasted six months.

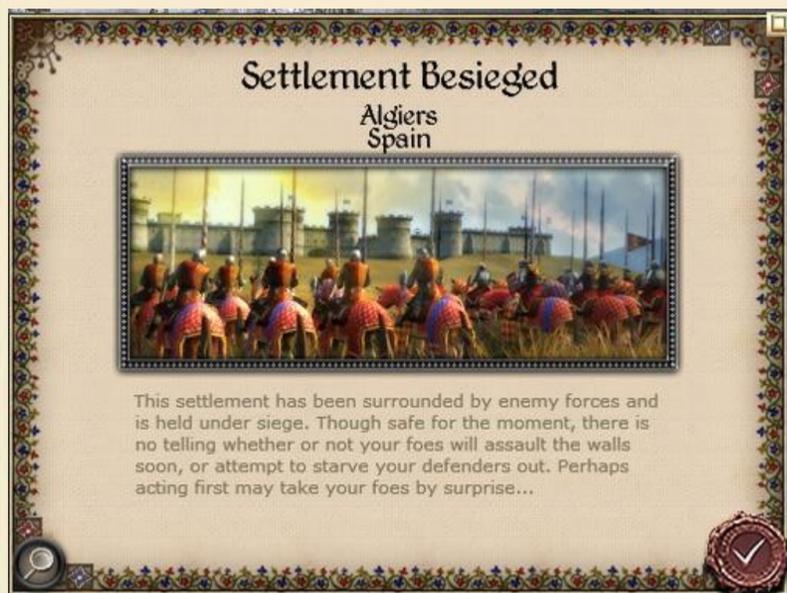


Aodh was woken in his bed by a harried servant instructing him that the King was calling for him, and he cursed under his breath as his wife woke and stared at him with concerned eyes. He had been absent from her life for great periods of their marriage, but since the Sicilians had been wiped out he had been able to devote more time to being a husband and a father. They had grown closer in these last six months than in the entirety of their marriage, and all ready he could see her fearing that this midnight summons would once more take him from her.

Dressing hurriedly, he strode down the corridor after the harried servant, Nevin appearing from the shadows and falling in one step behind him. Aodh was long past pondering how the man could seemingly appear from nowhere just when he was needed, always appearing fully awake and alert no matter what time of the night. Once Aodh had asked when he slept, and Nevin had replied cryptically, "When I'm dead."

"What is going on?" Aodh asked, not calling him by name as was their custom whenever anyone else was present, "I assume ye ken... I assume ye're the one who brought the information to Domnall."

"Spain," muttered Nevin, "It seems their angry King is also surprisingly crafty, they've laid siege to Algiers and Cagliari."



"WHAT!?" spluttered Aodh, then forced himself calm, forced himself to think as quickly as possible about all the possibilities, "Why crafty? It is madness to attack any fellow Catholic nation, especially Scotland. He'll bring the wrath of the Pope on Spain... nae to mention the wrath of Domnall, which may be worse."

"Ye'll ken soon enough," replied Nevin, "For now, the King waits."

The servant opened the door to a room not often used in the last six months, the War Room. Once Duke Puccio the Cunning had discussed military maneuvers against Scotland from here, but now Milan belonged to Scotland, and for now it was the home that Domnall had chosen for himself, situated as it was roughly halfway between his childhood home of Cairo and his ancestral home of Edinburgh. Domnall waited inside, surprisingly alone, Aodh had expected advisers, strategists and military commanders to be here as well.

"Those bastard Spaniards have ruined my peace," Domnall hissed angrily, "Ach Aodh, that clever bastard Mallobo has finally done what nae one else has. He's figured out how to put Scotland on the back foot in a War."

Aodh approached the large table in the centre of the room where battlefield maps of varying detail could be placed. The usual map of the world that showcased Scotland's holdings had been replaced with a more detailed map of the Northern African coast and the Southern European Coast. Markers showed where Spanish forces had laid siege to Algiers and Cagliari, but it was not those that grabbed his attention... it was the navy markers.

"Oh that clever wee bastard," whistled Aodh appreciatively, "We cannae reinforce our troops or break the siege, can we?"



The Spanish had broken their massive naval fleet into two armadas and moved one up the Eastern coast between Angers and Caen, the other just South of Toulouse. They were in position under the control of three Admirals each and a multitude of Captains, perfectly placed to sweep over any ships that the Scottish tried to use to send reinforcements to Cagliari or Algiers. Spain's King Mallobo had come to the realization that while he could not defeat the Scottish by pitching his forces against theirs in traditional warfare, he **could** control the waters around Scotland's holdings, and thus control the supply of reinforcements. Scotland's own fleet was of a respectable size, but scattered across much of the world, and any attempt to rejoin them would put them at risk from the Spanish. Without aid, the Scottish Garrisons could not hold out and the lands would fall into the control of the Spanish. The only non-naval way to get reinforcements to Algiers was by an overland march across the harsh desert climate of Northern Africa, the coastal cities of which were lightly garrisoned due to the long stretch of Aodh's recent campaign against the Sicilians. In the blink of an eye, Aodh saw this and recognized the implications... unless Scotland found some way to overcome Spain's naval superiority, they **would** lose lands to Spain. Spain's reputation with the Pope would be severely dented, but they would be in a position where they controlled Scottish land while they rebuilt their reputation.

"Ye're supposed to warn us before things like this happen!" snapped Domnall at Nevin, "What use is telling us about it after it happened? How did they get the jump on ye!?"

"Zaragoza," replied Nevin simply.

"Zaragoza," hissed Aodh, closing his eyes and lowering his head as he cursed his own stupidity.

"Zarawhoza?" grunted Domnall angrily, "Dinnae mind me, I'm just the King, nae need to let me in on ye little codewords."

"Zaragoza is a city on the Spanish/Scottish border," Nevin spoke smoothly, "Spain are creative in overcoming their shortcomings, as their naval maneuvers indicate. Unlike Dego di Spina and Puccio, Mallobo has realized that he cannae operate a wide-ranging spy network without it being infiltrated by our own... and Zaragoza was his answer. It is a closed city, a military city in all but name, governed and guarded by the most trusted of Mallobo's men, the one place in the world the Spy Network cannae reach. It seems to me that all of the planning for this War was done at Zaragoza, and likely where all commands will originate from this point."

"Then we sack Zaragoza!" snapped Domnall angrily, "The Pope will nae like it, Spain is one of the more Catholic of the Catholic nations, but we can make amends at a la-"

"Think of the Spanish Fleet by Caen, brother," warned Aodh, "Any army to march on Zaragoza would by necessity come from Toulouse, under the command of Dougall Macdonchie. That would leave our cousin Adam as General should the Spanish unload an army at Caen or Angers... he is a brave man despite his lack of battle experience and cruel nature, but he is nae an able General... and the death of any Canmore would be a massive morale boost for the Spanish and a devastating blow for the Scottish. His father Alexander is still considered a folk-hero in our ancestral lands."

"DAMMIT!" roared Domnall angrily, sweeping the markers off of the map, "THEN WHAT DO WE DO!?"

"We do what ye once advised me to do, when I was younger and had nae idea of the true nature of war," Aodh replied calmly, "We dinnae leap in and attack at the first presented opportunity, and we find a way to kill our enemies and save our people."

Domnall nodded, and together the two brothers and the Spy sat up long into the night to discuss a different kind of War than Scotland had ever faced in its history.

Fearghus Makmartane had never expected his life to end like this.

He had been plucked from the luxury and political intrigue of the Cairo Court by Aodh Canmore and thrust into war for the first time in his life. Along with fellow Nobles both liked (Eoin of Midlothian) and despised (Ian of Moray) he had killed Moors and then been given the "gift" of becoming Governor of Algiers while his fellows went on to kill Sicilians. He hated the dusty, sandy streets of the "city", he hated that most of the soldiers under his command seemed to like and get on well with the former Moors who were now technically fellow Scotsmen... he just hated the place.

And now he was going to die defending it.



The Spanish had ridden from the East and laid siege to the city against all reason, risking the wrath of the Scottish Empire. Fearghus had not been concerned, though, believing that within days reinforcements would arrive from Cagliari or Tunis, or possibly even Genoa or Milan. To his horror though, today he had received word that the Spanish had cut off even possibility of reinforcement, and due to the foresight of their General - Agosto de Leon - the Spanish would not even have to wait to build siege equipment, they could attack with the catapults they had brought with them.



"My Lord," suggested Fearghus' Knight Commander, "It looks grim."

"Oh aye, that seems an accurate description of our situation," sighed Fearghus, "They'll break down our walls and slaughter us... that could be considered grim."

"Aye my Lord," nodded the Knight Commander, apparently missing the sarcasm, "But... what if they had nae catapults?"

"What are ye ta..." started Fearghus angrily, then trailed off as he realized what the man meant, "Oh... aye I see what ye mean."

Suddenly he burst out laughing, shaking his head in disbelief at the lunacy he was about to agree to, two years ago he would never have believed this could happen.

"Aye, why not, eh?" he laughed, "We're all going to die anyway!"

Agosto de Leon sneered with pleasure as he looked over his troops, resplendent in their shined and polished armor, the finest troops of the Spanish army. He was a man who took great pride in appearance, and put great stock in perception. It was not enough to be victorious in battle, he meant for his men to look heroic as they did so, he could all ready see the glorious paintings that would mark this battle, he even had a name in mind, "Agosto at Algiers."

"CATAPULTS!" he roared, making sure to give his voice an authoritative timbre for the benefit of his biographer, "FI-what the hell?"

His command cut off and his eyes widened as the last thing he'd expected happened.





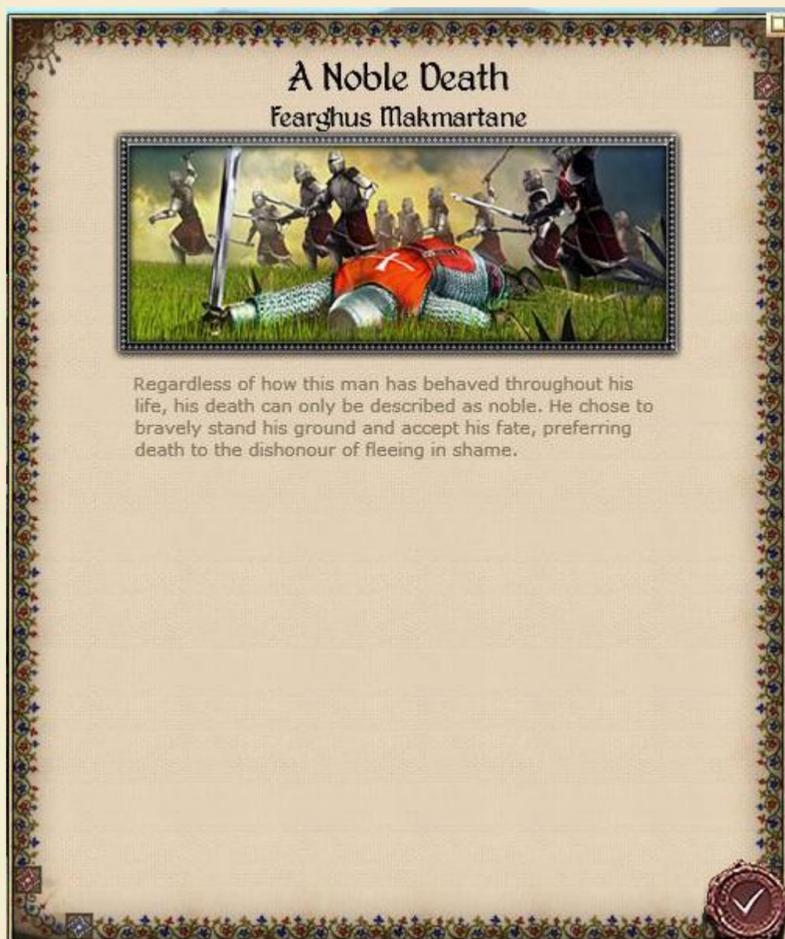
"The CATAPULTS!" roared Agosto in horror as he and his men stared in disbelief at this completely unexpected turn of events, realizing what the Scottish were doing, "KILL THOSE SCOTSMEN! KILL THEM!"

"TURN BACK!" roared Fearghus, his heart thumping at what felt like a 1000 beats a minute, his body tingling in delayed shock as he realized the audacity of what he'd just done. He'd ridden with careless abandon against the catapult archers because he'd convinced himself he was going to die anyway and he might as well go out in a blaze of glory. But as they'd cut down the last of the catapult operators he had realized that without them, the Spanish might not take Algiers after all... it was possible he could survive this, he could live for decades longer! HE COULD LIVE!

The Spanish had overcome their shock and were moving in against the Scottish cavalry as they turned to race back to the gates of the city. As Fearghus and his men started to move, Scotsmen on the walls roared out encouragement and cheered for their escape, delighted with the audacity of the attack and the unexpectedness of its success.



"RIDE! RIDE!" cried Fearghus, laughing with incredulous disbelief, he was actually going to do it, he was going to li-



The Scotsmen on the walls cries out in dismay as they saw their General fall, but despite this a good number of his men did manage to pull clear of the Spanish, riding back through the city gates which thundered shut with finality behind them. The catapults were now without operators, and the only hope the Spanish had of breaking through the gates was a hastily constructed ram built more as a matter of form than for any use.

"BRING UP THE RAM!" roared Agosto, lifting his sword high and pulling back the reins of his mount so that it reared up dramatically on its hind legs, "We will smash our way through!"

Quickly his men moved to comply, sweat caking their hair to their heads and dust and sand clinging to their previously shiny armor, causing Agosto to grit his teeth angrily. Everything should have been beautiful and dramatic, like in the stories and songs that had infatuated him as a child. He watched as his men grunted and pushed the heavy ram along the loose sand, and then let out a volley of curses as the worst thing possible happened.





Agosto sat, mouth agape as he watched the ram burn and collapse while his men milled about, confused. He looked up at the high walls of the city, barely dented by the few catapult blasts they had managed to fire off. The gates were secure, the walls impenetrable, and they had no way of breaking through to the Scottish inside.

"Retreat," he whispered, and when his men seemed not to have heard and continued to mill about, he shouted it louder, his voice cracking and breaking as he felt shame burn through his body, "RETREAT!"

As his men wheeled about to follow his orders, the final indignity took place. The Scotsmen stood laughing and mocking as they turned to leave, and then one cried out, "Are we just going to let them turn tail and run, lads? GET THEM!"

Knowing that turning to fight would be futile, as the Scots would only be able to retreat to the safety of their city once more, Agosto bit his lip in frustration and ordered his men to move faster, and the first battle in the Scottish/Spanish war ended in farcical fashion.





As the Spanish disappeared into the desert, the Scottish cheers and laughter died as Fearghus' body was carried to his Knight Commander. The Scotsmen lowered their heads in respect, and the Knight Commander stared grimly at his fallen General.

"Shall we organize his return to Cairo, Commander?" asked a soldier.

"Nae," grunted the Knight Commander, "He died defending this city, let it serve as his tomb. I think he would have wanted it like that."

And thus, Fearghus Makmartane was buried with honor in a city he hated, for dying heroically while trying to flee from the enemy so he could live to leave it.



Chapter 44

Ian of Moray led his small force of men through the pre-dawn darkness quietly, musing on the odd turn of events in his life that had brought him to this place. He'd been born in Moray, youngest son of a noble family fallen into bankruptcy years earlier, and retreated to the only career available to so many like him, the army.

He'd worked his way through the ranks to Captain and distinguished himself on the battlefield, capturing the attention of a Noble General, Allan of Midlothian who took him under his wing as a battlefield mentor. When Ian had saved Allan's life, the man had adopted him into his family as so many had done in the past, but with a twist.

Because Allan of Midlothian was the husband of Afraig Canmore, daughter of the legendary Edward Canmore.

He found himself unexpectedly lifted to the station of Cousin to King Domnall and Prince Aodh, though distantly through levels of marriage and adoption as opposed to blood. As such, Afraig had dictated to her husband that Ian must learn the ways of Court, and he'd been sent to Cairo and thrust into an entirely different battlefield, court politics.

He'd instantly taken a disliking to - and been disliked by - Fearghus Makmartane - despite the fact that Ian's "Brother" Eoin got on well with both men. Perhaps it was because Fearghus had married Florie of Perthshire, the daughter of Feredac the Chivalrous who had been one of Edward Canmore's adopted sons, and he saw Ian's closer tie to Canmore blood as a threat? He wasn't enough of a politician or a student of court intrigue to know, maybe Fearghus simply didn't like him? He'd struggled at first but found Aed Canmore a kind and friendly ruler - beloved by the soldiers under his command, the nobles under his rule and the people of his domain - and learned from observation of the Cairo Governor how to behave, when to talk and when to be quiet.

Then Aodh Canmore had come to Cairo to lay his Brother Nectan's ashes to rest, and thrown Cairo into an uproar by declaring he was going to lay siege to the Moors final stronghold at Algiers, and he was taking Cairo's Nobles with him. Ian had found his life gone full circle as he returned to the battlefield under the command of a Noble of higher birth. Under Aodh's command they had crushed the Moors, then taken the war to the Sicilians and wiped out that crumbling Empire as well. Ian once more discovered the benefits of service in the field, as he was given control over the beautiful coastal city of Tunis alongside Domnall Campbell, a young man who he'd been pleased to mentor, seeing he was even fresher to the notion of politics. Campbell had married his wife out of love, but she was the daughter of Comgell of Carnavarane, one of the legendary Generals who had fought in the Mongol Wars with Edward and Edmund Canmore. As such, the young man had soon found himself thrust into politics when the haze of wedded bliss was still on him, and Ian had been happy to ease his transition into his new world.

But now that had changed, the Spanish had broken the blissful peace that had followed the destruction of the Sicilians. Fearghus Makmartane had surprised Ian by dying in defense of Algiers, saving the city from the Spanish but leaving it without a ruler. With the Spanish controlling the ocean, King Domnall could not organize to send one of his handpicked Generals like Rory of Shetland or Dougall Macdonchie. So the message had come by bird only two days earlier, Ian was to become Ian of Algiers, and rule it as Governor.



"My Lord," noted a Scout quietly, riding up to join the small force of mounted soldiers Ian was leading, "I have discovered an outlaw band moving towards us."

"Deliberately?" asked Ian.

"Nae my Lord, our paths are diverging by misfortune, not design. They are on foot and number 150 by my reckoning.... almost four times our number."

"Dammit," hissed Ian angrily, "Our path to Algiers takes us directly through them.... how long a delay can we expect if we ride to the coast and make our way to Algiers that way?"

"Two days perhaps, if we push the men," mused the scout.

Ian frowned... two days? He could brook no delay, but nor could he risk leaving Algiers' newest Governor lying dead in the sand. What the hell was he supposed to do?

Said smiled as the sky lightened, his band of Nubian Spearmen had made good time through the night on their trip to the coast. If they kept up this pace, they would reach their destination within a day, giving them plenty of time to relax before the pirates would land to sell them their supplies. The Outlaw Captain may live in a desert, but he made his life as comfortable as possible. The pirates were bringing fine spices and foods, medicines not available in the desert and a few luxury goods for Said's own personal use. Plus they would bring news; it was good to know what was going on in the world.

"Captain," muttered Said's personal bodyguard, "What is that?"

Said looked up into the foggy pale light of the rising dawn and frowned... were those lights? He felt his throat tighten as memories of vague superstitions crossed his mind, was this early morning magic or monsters?



He shook his head clear of such foolishness, he was a grown man now, and besides he could see vague shapes forming in the mist as the lights grew closer. He saw now that the fog had reflected the lights and made them appear larger, and what he saw coming into view was even more unexpected than a monster.



"Scottish Horsemen?" chuckled Said in disbelief, "There can't be anymore than forty of them? Are they mad?"

"They approach slowly, Captain," noted his Bodyguard.

"Perhaps the intend to surrender to us?" chuckled Said, "But knowing how arrogant the Scottish are, and the fact they're helplessly outnumbered, I'd say they intend to try and buy us off or hire us on as mercenaries.... HOLD YOUR PLACES, MEN!"

The outlaws stood waiting, clutching their spears in place and waiting as the Scottish slowly rode towards them.... and then lowered their lances.

"Are they mad?" gasped Said in astonishment, "SPEA-"





The Scottish thundered into, through and over the Nubians, who screamed in terror and pain as their frontline was driven back into the ranks behind them, plunging each other with their own spears as the Scottish sent men flying through the air and struck about them with swords after discarding their lances. Over a 100 died in the first charge alone, and Said was flung bodily through and air and sent crashing into the sand, his body broken and his life fast fading as he watched the remnants of his men being cut down by the Scottish Horsemen who had ridden in the rear.



The Scottish wheeled about, surveying the grisly scene. Of the 151 Nubian spearmen who they had ridden into, only one had survived. Only five of Ian's own men had been killed in the charge, and now the remaining Nubian ran in terror from the demons that had come from the mist hidden in the forms of men.



"THIS IS SCOTTISH LAND!" roared Ian as he rode after the fleeing Nubian, "TELL ANY WHO THINKS OTHERWISE! TELL THEM THIS LAND IS SCOTTISH!"

"THIS LAND IS SCOTTISH!" screamed the terrified Nubian, desperate to say anything that would save him, "I WILL TELL ALL! YES! YES! I WILL TELL THEM!"

"Nae," grinned Ian as he watched one of his men run the Nubian down and end his miserable life, "Ye will nae."



His second rode up beside him frowning, "My Lord, forgive me, but it was foolish to risk ye life to kill a paltry band of outlaws."

"What kind of ruler would I be if I ran from a "paltry band of outlaws" to the safety of the Fortress at Algiers?" asked Ian, "I needed to send a message, this land **IS** Scottish, nae the domain of outlaws or the Spaniards."

"And who will carry ye message, My Lord?" asked the man, "Ye have killed all the Outlaws."

"Aye," grinned Ian, "There was nae need for any to survive to talk, I've left a far clearer message than any words could ever allow."

And thus Ian of Moray rode on to Algiers, leaving behind a message that was clear in its brutal simplicity.





"Do ye think ye can pull it off?" Aodh asked.

"I think that I **have** to," Nevin replied, hunkered down beside Aodh in the war room as they reviewed the larger world map etched into the floor, "Whether that means I will..."

The Spy left the statement hanging, and Aodh nodded grimly. They both stood, and Aodh offered his hand to the man he'd come to consider a friend as well as mentor, "If this does nae wo-"

"Aodh!" shouted Domnall, staggering through the door with wide eyes and a pale face, looking more distraught than Aodh could ever remember his brother looking.

"Domnall, what is it?" he asked, concerned, "The Spaniards?"

"Nae, nae," gasped Domnall, holding back tears, "Mother!"



In Cagliari, Gille Patrick Makfulchiane swallowed nervously as he rode his horse towards the gates of the city, and wondered not for the last time how it had come to this.

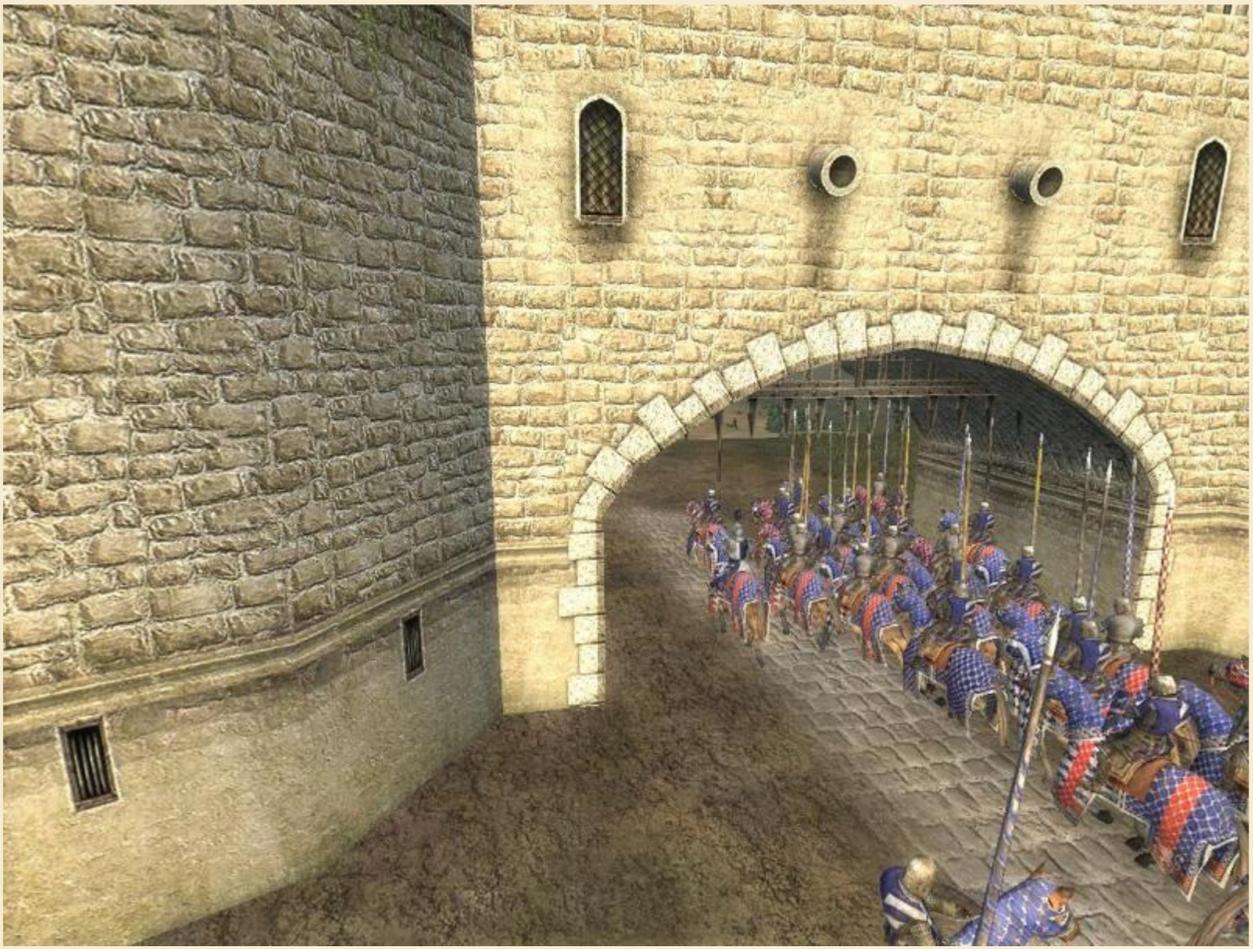


Of course it made sense that the Spanish had chosen Cagliari as one of their targets. Isolated by a sea that the Spanish now controlled, with a Spanish fortress in the smaller island to the North, they could send wave after wave of men at the Scottish.

Not that they would need to, the Scottish were doomed.

The natural defensive hill formation that Cagliari sat on was usually a defensive bonus, but the Spanish were showing the same creative flair that had seen them turn Scotland's massive military forces impotent. Hiding two catapults behind the hill, they were now firing over it against the walls defended by their depressingly small numbers of infantry. Gille's own catapult units were useless inside the walls of the city, and thus he'd found himself reduced to this last desperate gamble to try and save them from the Spanish.

He was going to put his own life at risk.





"Fearghus Makmartane died doing just this very thing," Gille grumbled as he stared down at the army of Spanish, twice the size of his own paltry forces, and many times the size of his Cavalry.

"Aye, and saved Algiers in the process," noted his Knight Commander.

"Let's see about saving the city **and** my life then," grunted Gille, "Dying heroically is all well and good, I'd like to live to enjoy being a hero, thank ye very much."



They thundered down the hill into the Catapult operators, who instantly struggled to defend themselves. For a moment, Gille felt exhilaration, they'd come down fast enough - hidden from view by the hills - to smash directly into the catapult operators, and if they killed them fast enough and turned quickly, they could ride back into Cagliari and hold out th-

"NOW!" roared the Spanish Captain, Fernando, who had been waiting for just such a manouver, "SURROUND THEM!"





"NAE!" roared Gille, casting about with his sword, trying desperately to smash his way free of the fray, "I WILL NAE DIE LIKE THIS!"

But the armored Spanish surrounded him on all sides, and as he cut at them they trapped his horse with their bodies and began grabbing at him, trying to haul him down so they could get at him with their weapons.

And they were successful.



Standing on the walls and afforded a view of the entire debacle, the Captain of the Pikemen - Algune - winced angrily. The Spanish had obviously learned from their defeat at Algiers, and not only had they been ready to bring down the Cavalry, but they'd spared the lives of their catapult operators, which meant they would still be able to bring down the walls and send 500 men against less than 200.

The surviving Horsemen rode back toward the gates leaderless as the Spanish Sword Militia marched up the hill to within arrowshot from the walls. Algune shouted orders and arrows began picking off the men who were too close, but more approached steadily, willing to take losses so they would be close to the walls when the gates were shattered by the battering ram being wheeled uphill towards them.

Algune's eyes widened in surprise and his heart swelled with pride as he watched the surviving horsemen turn back from the safety of the gates to face the Spanish. One craned his neck up so he had direct line of sight with Algune on the walls, and saluted stiffly.

"Die a Scotsman," Algune whispered, returning the salute, and then the Cavalry rode a suicide charge directly into the Spanish rather than risk the gates reopening and allowing their enemies through after them.



A full score of Spanish soldiers died under the hooves of the Scottish before they were overwhelmed and brought down, and Algune watched in despair as the last of them were cut down and cast aside, and then the ram continued its inexorable progress forward. Even the catapults had stopped now, not wanting to risk their own men from a misfire, and so Algune was forced to stand and wait with his men as they watched the ram wheel onwards towards the gate. Flaming arrows bounced off of the treated wood and failed to ignite, the Spanish having done all they could to keep the ram fireproof.



"Off these blasted walls!" Algune cried angrily, "Get down to that gate and stop those Spanish bastards from getting into the city!"

They rushed as fast as they could in their armor with their pikes, twisting around the narrow stairwell to the ground as the gates burst open under the assault of the battering ram. The Spanish thundered through the archway with swords drawn as the Scottish raced to meet them, and soon the entire city echoed with the screams of dying men and the clash of swords. The Spanish Captain roared for his men to kill the Scottish, and Captain Algune screamed at his men to kill the Spanish, and both sides followed their orders all too well.



"NOW!" screamed Algune as he saw more Spanish moving into the city, the force of their numbers turning the Scottish back on their heels and allowing the Spanish to wheel around, their backs to the Western Wall.... just as Algune had hoped, "FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, NOW!"

And the Scottish Catapults fired.



"SHIT!" screamed Captain Fernando as he turned in horror to see the Catapults. The operators had gotten off one good shot, taken out over a score of the Spanish soldiers but also cleaving through the ranks of the Spaniards and knocking aside many more, bringing their forward momentum to a staggering halt. Knowing they would not have time to reload and fire again, the operators abandoned their machines and drew swords, charging into the Spanish and crushing the Spanish between them in a classic pincer motion.

And the Spanish broke.



The Scottish broke out into ragged cheers as the Spanish ran, but Algune roared for silence. They had broken the Spanish who had come through the gates, but as they fought, more had brought ladders to the walls, and now they were swarming over the walls and down to the ground to smash into the waiting Scotsmen, led by a bloodsoaked Captain Fernando who had held his ground as his men broke around him.



Algune stood at the frontline with his men, roaring with fury as he cast about at the Spanish charging against them. There were so many, and though the Scottish seemed to be able to best them man to man, their numbers were rapidly dwindling as the Spanish's ranks swelled and swelled. Algune cut down a Spaniard, turning his highly polished armor red, then let loose a laugh of disbelief as he saw a bloodstained Scottish Knight ride his obviously injured horse into the fray. Somehow the man had survived, and instead of huddling in fear or lying still to avoid being seen, he had pulled himself back onto his horse and returned to the fray.

"Die a Scotsman!" grinned Algune, then gritted his teeth as he found himself face to face with Spain's Captain Fernando.

"This land is Spanish now, Scotsman!" hissed Fernando.

"Over my dead body!" snapped Algune angrily.

"I wasn't waiting for an invitation," laughed Fernando, and lunged forward.... and Algune cut his hand from his wrist, dropping the sword to the ground as well.

"The Spanish may take this city," laughed Algune wildly, slamming his sword into Fernando's belly, "But ye'll nae be there to enjoy it!"



And once more, the Spanish broke.



Less than 30 of them remained, and they watched in wonder as the Spanish turned and ran in horror from the demonic Scotsmen, babbling to each other what so many had said in the past. These could not be human, no man could continue standing through such pressure... the Scots were devils gifted superhuman strength by Satan, there could be no other answer.

"Well done, Captain," gasped one man, slapping Algune on the shoulder as he gasped for breath, still standing over the corpse of Captain Fernando, who had died with a look of stupid surprise on his face, "Is that the end of them then?"

"The end of them?" gasped Algune, standing tall and staring at the hundreds of dead bodies littering the ground, "This is only the beginning lad, make ye peace with God.... ye'll be meeting him soon enough.

And outside the walls, those Spanish who had not yet faced the Scottish in battle began scaling the walls to put an end to their dominion of Cagliari.



The next three hours passed in a red blur of exhaustion and rage for Algune, as again and again his steadily dwindling men held off wave after wave of the Spanish. Slowly but steadily they were driven back, further and further into the city as more and more of them died, but leaving a trail of Spanish dead all the way.

Finally Algune had a moment to breath, as he trudged with his final five companions towards the gate of the inner fort. The gate would not open for them, and they did not expect it to, they had come here to make their final stand, six Scotsmen against over 250 Spaniards. They had fought proudly and fiercely, and killed so many of the Spanish, but they had simply not had the numbers to hold them back... Cagliari was going to fall, and all Algune could think was that he had failed in his duty.

A whistling sound filled the air and Algune's heart nearly broke in despair as he watched his five companions fall, javelins piercing their all ready dented and bloodsoaked armor, and he was alone, the final standing Scotsman of Cagliari.

"Surrender!" cried the Spanish from over the crest of the hill leading to the fort, "There is nothing to be gained from fighting!"

"Nothing but honor," whispered Algune harshly to himself, then shouted out louder, "I WILL DIE A SCOTSMAN!"

"Then die, Scotsman," muttered the leader of the Spanish Javelin-men, pulling his sword from its sheath and motioning to his men to follow him. As they charged over the hill, Algune turned and stared through the portcullis at the Scottish banner flying proudly in the wind.

"I will die a Scotsman," Algune repeated in a whisper to himself.

