

Chapter 45

Nicolao Salamo leaned back in the wagon and closed his eyes, enjoying the sun on his face. His weather-beaten face looked like it had absorbed decades of the harsh Spanish sun, his eyes squinted and narrow and lined. His short cropped hair was still a dark black, making his age impossible to determine, he could have been anything between 30 and 50 years of age, but there was no doubting his vitality. His body was lean and scarred, and even lying back against the wagon it was clear he was a man who carried himself well. In any other group of men he would have stood out as a soldier and a man to be reckoned with.

Amongst the men in the wagon, however, he was just another man.

The wagon pulled up short outside the gates of the city, and the driver answered a series of questions from the guards stationed there. Nicolao's face did not change nor did his body move, but his ears strained to hear what was being said over the quiet conversation going on amongst the other 10 men in the wagon. It was a lost cause, he caught only a few words here and there, and the only one that seemed important was "Domingo".

One of the guards walked down the length of the wagon, peering at the men inside, and then looking under the wagon itself. Nicolao sat up and craned his neck up the length of the stone walls, taking in the towers and the other guards he could see patrolling between them.

"This city is like a woman's legs," muttered one of the other soldiers, noting what Nicolao was doing, "A great treasure within, but it takes the right type of man to get in."

Nicolao allowed a thin smile to cross his lips, and then turned his head as the guard stopped beside him and peered at him closely.

"Qué?" he asked.

"Who issued your orders to come here," demanded the guard.

"Gyyllemes," muttered Nicolao, sounding bored. The guard nodded and moved around to the side of the other wagon, and asked a different question of another of the soldiers aboard the wagon before moving down to the next wagon behind theirs, and then the one after that and the one after that.

Finally after close to an hour, the wagons began moving again, Nicolao having long since taken advantage of a trick of old soldiers everywhere and fallen asleep regardless of his position or comfort. But as the wagons crossed the threshold into the gate, Nicolao's eyes opened a thin slit and took in everything around him.

Finally, Nevin of Shetland had gained access to Zaragoza.

Hew Mar rode through a world turned grey, snorting back a dripping nose and absolutely miserable.

Word had reached him from King Domnall himself, he was to ride West to Caen to secure the city against a potential attack from the Spanish. Scotland had found itself in the unfamiliar position of being on the defensive, trapped in a war where the movement of their armies was restricted by the enemy. He had been enjoying the brief period of peace Scotland had enjoyed following the destruction of the Sicilians, learning the ropes of Governance in Frankfurt, where the last King of England had met his demise and seen his Empire die. Now he was riding 700 men through the miserable grey cold of a late winter, leaving the luxury and warmth of Frankfurt to travel to Caen.

"My Lord," noted his spy - Cennedig of Ayrshire - returning from his scouting to meet Hew along the paved road, "There are men in the forest ahead, hiding amongst the trees."

"How many?" asked Hew, frowning. A small band of outlaws would hide from his forces, but a larger band might risk attacking from the trees and running with what equipment they could grab. In a winter like this, outlaws could do desperate things.

"Over 600, but the trees make it difficult to get an exact number," the Scout replied, surprising Hew, "I heard some speaking, they are English Rebels, my Lord, they may be John Allen's men."

Hew's frown deepened, John Allen had been an English soldier who had refused to give up his belief in his Empire even after it was destroyed. He had been gathering up smaller bands of surviving English soldiers over the last few months and proved a nuisance... but if he was waiting in the trees ahead with over 600 men then he was more than a nuisance, he was a threat.

Enemy Character Details

John Allen Age: 29

Family member
Command: ★★ ★
Chivalry: 🏰 🏰 🏰
Loyalty: 🏰 🏰 🏰 🏰 🏰
Piety: 🏰

Retinue: None

Traits:
Aspiring Commander
Budding Bureaucrat
Very Loyal
Fair Fighter
Conforming
Severe

Spotted By: Cennédig of Ayrshire
Subterfuge: 🏰 🏰 🏰 🏰 🏰 🏰 🏰 🏰 🏰 🏰

"We cannae go around them," grunted Hew, "Nor should we, this is our land now, nae theirs."

He called over his Unit Commanders and issued quick orders, and then they resumed their march forward towards the trees and the waiting Rebels. Hew cursed Allen for choosing this time and place to come forward, he had no doubt he could put down the rebel band, but what worried him was the loss of life of his own men and the delay of their journey. Spanish ships had been seen near Caen, and they needed to be there as quickly as possible.

If that meant riding directly over John Allen to get there, then so be it.

Battle Deployment

Your forces attack an army of Rebels (Flemish Rebels)



Your Forces

Scotland

★★★★○○○○○○



Hew Mar
694 men

Reinforcements: 0

None



Enemy Forces

Rebels

★★○○○○○○○○



John Allen
629 men

Reinforcements: 0

None



Balance of power



Attempt a night attack



As they rode forward, Allen's men become visible, appearing out of the trees like ghosts, moving with disturbing military precision. When Allen had been younger he'd been unsuccessfully tried for heresy, and ever since had embraced a severe, rigid discipline that obviously rubbed off on his men. This was no disparate band of rebels, outlaws and criminals, this was an English Army in all but name, appearing like a ghost from the corpse of their Empire to take revenge.





Hew sent his crossbowmen forward as Allen's archers pulled up and prepared to fire their arrows into the Scots. Hew gritted his teeth, he knew Allen would have studied his techniques; it only made sense too considering he Governed Frankfurt now. But it meant this battle had the disquieting feeling of facing himself.



"Infantry, get up in support of the crossbowmen," ordered Hew, then muttered to himself, "If ye've done ye studies, Allen, ye'll be riding up to attack our crossbowmen now. Ye archers will be able to continue firing on us while ours will be trapped in battle... but I have a little surprise waiting for ye."



As the Infantry swamped Allen's cavalry, Hew allowed a grin to cross his face as he heard one of the riders cursing loudly. That had to be Allen, and now he knew exactly where to aim his next attack.

"SCOTTISH CAVALRY!" he roared, "FOLLOW ME!"



They crashed into the Rebel Cavalry, and Hew cast about him with a fury, taking out his rage at being taken out of his comfortable new home and life, at Spain for ruining Scotland's rare peace, and at the English for refusing to die long after they should have.

He spotted Allen pulling clear of the fray, blowing his horn and screaming for his armored Swordsmen to cover the retreat of his cavalry. To Hew's surprise, they did just that, throwing themselves into harms way and certain death to allow their General to escape.

"Dammit, they've turned him into a Symbol for their damned Rebellion," hissed Hew angrily, "DINNAE LET THAT BASTARD ALLEN ESCAPE!"



Allen pulled clear off the rest of his men and rode away, putting distance between himself and those fighting and dying. Hew's eyes never left him, though, and he pushed his own horse faster, chasing after the English Rebel.



"TURN AND FACE ME YE COWARDLY BASTARD!" roared Hew, taking a leaf out of his Father's book and screaming a series of curses at his fleeing enemy. His horse was a trained warhorse, faster and better cared for than Allen's, and he quickly caught up to the man. Allen twisted his horse about and glared at Hew from his armored helm, clearly furious.

"This land is ENGLAND!" he roared.

"Nae ye idiot," hissed Hew contemptuously, "Ye mad fool, ye're fighting a rebellion for a dead Empire in land that used to be owned by the Holy Roman Empire... ye've nae more historical tie to this land than I do... the only difference between us is that I earned the right to rule this land in battle."

"Then I shall do the same," growled Allen, "I shall kill you!"

"Ye're more than welcome to try," smiled Hew cruelly, and then both men rode their horses towards each other.

In Rome, Gordon of Edinburgh sat patiently while the elderly Pope smiled uncertainly as he looked over the documents the Diplomat had brought him. Since the death of Gille Calline the Balleol, Gordon had struggled with tasks that had seemed so easy while under the legendary old Diplomat's tutelage. He had never realized how much Gille Calline's reputation and past actions had eased the traditionally difficult task of seeking an audience with The Pope.... plus The Balleol had also run all aspects of his household, including the finances and the hiring and firing of servants and workmen.

But slowly and surely, Gordon had been learning the ropes, discovering the patience Gille Calline had tried to instill in him, as well as the lessons about acting as if one was constantly being watched and judged.

In Rome, Gordon had learned, that wasn't paranoia.

Now he sat in a private meeting with the Pope, only his fourth since Gille's death, despite the fact the old Diplomat had held weekly meetings with The Pope for years before he died. He had organized this meeting at King Domnall's request, after spending a week writing up the proposal in a variety of different ways. Finally he had come up with what he believed to be a compelling and foolproof argument for Scotland's request of The Pope.

The ex-communication of Spain.

"You raise many valid points, my friend," smiled The Pope, finally finishing the document. His voice was quavery, and his hands trembled, and Gordon was careful to hide his distaste as a thin line of drool hung down from The "Christ-on-Earth's" mouth, "But ex-communication is a very serious matter, King Mallobo has always been a good Christian in the pas-"

"Your Holiness," smiled Gordon winningly, speaking in fluent Latin, "Adam and Eve always followed the word of God **until** Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. Cain always loved his brother Abel, **until** he slew him. Spain may have served God in the past, but they do not serve God now, they have attacked Scotland without provocation, and Scotland **has** always been and is now, the servants of God."

"Yes yes," muttered Saracinus, nodding his head slowly, "It is in the Bible that all answers can be found... if your left hand offends you, cut it off.... thou shalt not covet.... I am who I am...."

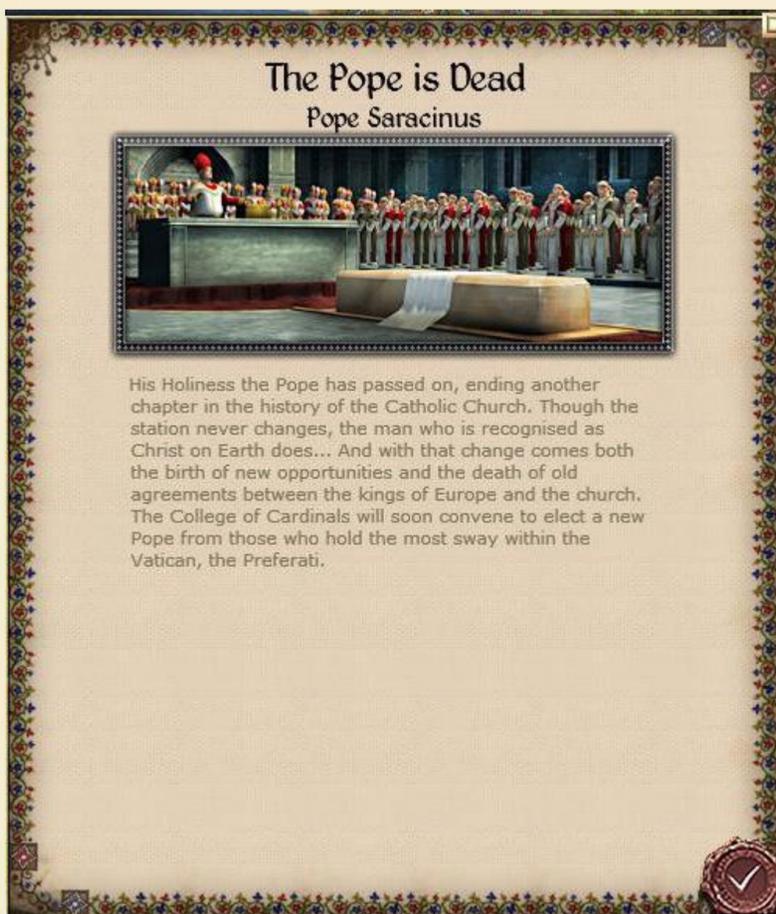
"Your Holiness?" asked Gordon, powerless to prevent a quizzical look.

"...for God so loved the world..." muttered Saracinus, then shook his head and gave the same uncertain smile that had been on his face for so long now, "Yes yes, Spain shall be ex-communicated, I will wri... I will write up....I will... I...."

"Your Holiness?" gasped Gordon, standing up as exhilaration and apprehension welled up within him. He was so close to gaining what King Domnall wanted, "You will write u"

In horror, Gordon watched as the Pope suddenly sat up straight in his chair with his face locked in a shocked rictus, then collapsed forward against the table with a sickening thud. Gordon stood staring, eyes wide, and then he finally found his voice.

"Oh shit.... not again."





The Rebels had broken off and retreated back down the road, leaving behind the Scottish and their own dead. Bodies lay strewn across the road and between trees, and as a group of Highland Nobles moved to rejoin the rest of the men, they heard the sound of approaching hooves. Holding their swords at the ready, they watched a figure ride through the trees leading a riderless horse, emerging from the shadows to reveal his identity.

"Regroup men," Hew Mar ordered them, pulling up beside them on his horse as he held up John Allen's severed head, "Then we ride and show those Rebel bastards their "symbol" is dead and their rebellion with it."







As the last of the Rebels disappeared into the trees of the surrounding forests, Hew Mar was satisfied he had seen the last of them, at least in such large numbers and organization. He had cut the head off of the serpent and the body would die, but now he was left with a fresh problem.

He had been meant to bring 700 extra men to the garrison at Caen and scare off the potential Spanish invaders. Now he had been delayed, the men he had left were in need of repairs to their armor, he required replacement horses and, worst of all, he'd lost over half of his men. Of the 694 he had brought from Frankfurt, only 304 remained.

King Domnall was not going to be happy.



Nevin of Shetland moved through the streets of Zaragoza with the smooth gait of a soldier at ease, blending in perfectly with the other Spanish soldiers. He had been there for a week now under the guide of veteran Spanish soldier Nicolao Salamo, and had been as readily accepted as the other men he had traveled to Zaragoza with.

It was a strange city, lightly populated in terms of citizens, with a garrison of highly disciplined soldiers given the run of the city. Normally this was a recipe for disaster, but the city ran with military precision, and there was surprisingly no crime, no brawls over drink or women, the soldiers that were off-duty even watched how much they drank.

Nevin put it down to the man who run the city, which of course was not the Governor, Goncalui Guyllemes, but the mysterious Domingo Manuel. Nevin had a great deal of respect for the mysterious man, who ran Zaragoza like it was a self-contained world, preventing outside incursion from even the people of his own Nation. All military planning took place under Manuel's supervision, who took orders only from King Mallobo himself, who sent him coded messages by bird that would be indecipherable to any by Mallobo and Manuel. Nevin knew that for a fact, before they had become desperate enough to risk him trying to infiltrate the city, he and Aodh Canmore had intercepted several such messages and failed to translate them. Nevin was still sometimes taken aback with the breathtaking simplicity that had allowed Spain to bypass and castrate Scotland's unparalleled Spy Network. They simply ran all plans through one untouchable man in one inaccessible city.

Still, he had successfully infiltrated Zaragoza, and over the last week he had gleaned invaluable information regarding the city, but nothing about Spain's campaign against Scotland. The soldiers in Zaragoza's garrison were here to defend the city on the off-chance that Scotland left the gateway city of Toulouse undefended to attack them, which in turn would open up the entirety of Scotland's French and Milanese Holdings. What Nevin really needed was to infiltrate the inner circle of Zaragoza's rulers - the mini-spy network that Domingo Manuel controlled absolutely - men whom he had names for but no faces to place them.

Esteban Macia, Jacome Bernaldo and Vaasco Curral.

The three Spies served as Manuel's advisers and confidants, and were the only ones who could offer Nevin any "in" into Manuel's mind. The important thing was to be careful not to arouse suspicion, he had to play things ju-

He passed an alley way and suddenly he was crashing into the ground, dragged into the alley by a lightning quick grab. He rolled instinctively backwards and came to his feet, finding himself face to face with a man in a hooded brown robe.

"What is the meaning of this?" he growled in Spanish, "Yo-"

A thick rod smashed into the back of his head and he collapsed to the ground, revealing the other hooded man standing behind him.

"This is him?" asked Vaasco Curral.

"Yes," grinned Jacome Bernaldo, "Help me gather him up, Manuel is waiting."

"GORDON OF EDINBURGH!" came the shouted cry, and Gordon winced as he stood and felt every eye in the Court on him.

It seemed Pope Villanus had a different approach to audiences than his predecessors.



With the election of the new Pope, Gordon had requested another audience with The Pope and been pleased to be granted one immediately. He'd been less pleased, however, when he discovered that EVERYONE had been granted audiences with the new Pope, and they were all going to be public.

Pope Villanus believed that the workings of God should be seen by all to show that the Papacy was above the petty politics of humanity, and this decision had thrown the Court into chaos, because "petty politics" was exactly how the Church had operated for hundreds of years.

"Speak your request of his Holiness!" came the cry, and Gordon hid a sigh as he felt hundreds of eyes on him. Not just Nobles and other Diplomats, but commoners enjoying the rare privilege of viewing their betters.

"I come to speak of Spain, and their unwarranted aggressions against Scotland!" he cried, "I come t-"

"UNWARRANTED!?!!" shouted another voice, and Gordon had to hold back a wince, that was one of the Spanish Diplomats, just as he'd expected, "SCOTLAND INSULTED SPAIN BY TAKING CAGLIARI OUT FROM UNDER US! THEN THE SCOTTISH KING DELIBERATELY INSULTED SPAIN'S HONOR BY REFUSING TO APOLOGIZE! UNWARRANTED!?! HOW DARE YOU!?!"

"No Scotsman ever attacked any Spaniard, it was Spain that opened up aggressions against us," replied Gordon smoothly, holding back his own temper in a desperate desire to look like the voice of reason, "But this is not the ti-"

"I agree," spoke the Pope, who despite his age of 51 had a strong and commanding voice, "This is not the time to speak of the politics and aggressions of two nations when a far greater peril threatens this Church. I care little for which Catholic Nation holds what stretch of land, for all is in service to God in the end. I have called you all together today to speak of the danger of heretics, and the threat they pose to the Church and to the souls of humanity. Their words are like honey, and entice with "common sense" and "calls to reason", and that is what makes them so dangerous, they pervert the natural truth and message of God! We must..."

As The Pope continued on, voice growing louder and more histrionic as he launched into what would end up being a nine hour speech on the dangers of allowing heresy to go unchecked, Gordon settled back into his seat and let his mind race as he struggled to retain the blank face Gille Calline had so often stressed as a necessity. There would be no help from the Church in Scotland's campaign against Spain, as had been the case for so long in their history, they were on their own.

Nevin was in darkness.

He had awoken several minutes earlier and staggered to his knees, but attempts to get higher had resulted in a beating with sticks till he had acquiesced to the silent demand and stayed on his knees. His wrists were tied behind his back, and his ankles tied together as well, a hood placed over his head, his knees digging into hard stone. He sniffed deeply and got a full order of his own sweat and the harsh wool of the hood, but also soil, mold and a faint decay. The only noises he could hear were muffled by the hood, but appeared to be restricted to breathing and nothing else. He could hear no people, no animals, none of the usual sounds of a city but also none of the sounds of a farm or forest... so he could only speculate that he was in a basement of a building or an underground prison cell. The lack of the smell of other people indicated this was not a cell, even an abandoned one, and no smell of vegetables or manure indicated he was not in a rural setting. He doubted he had been unconscious long enough to be transported far, so he was still in Zaragoza, in a basement somewhere, and the sounds of breathing could be isolated... there were four people standing close by, staring at him.

"By now he'll have figured out more than the hood can hide," spoke a cultured voice, and suddenly the hood was pulled clear. He blinked, even the faint illumination of guttering torches on the wall of the basement enough to nearly blind him after the darkness of the hood. He stared at the silhouettes of the men in front of him as his vision cleared enough to show him his captors, and he could not help but smile.

"Let's see how good you are.... Nevin of Shetland," smiled the tallest man, a dignified silver-haired Spaniard in his fifties, "I am sure you know our names, can you attach them to our faces?"

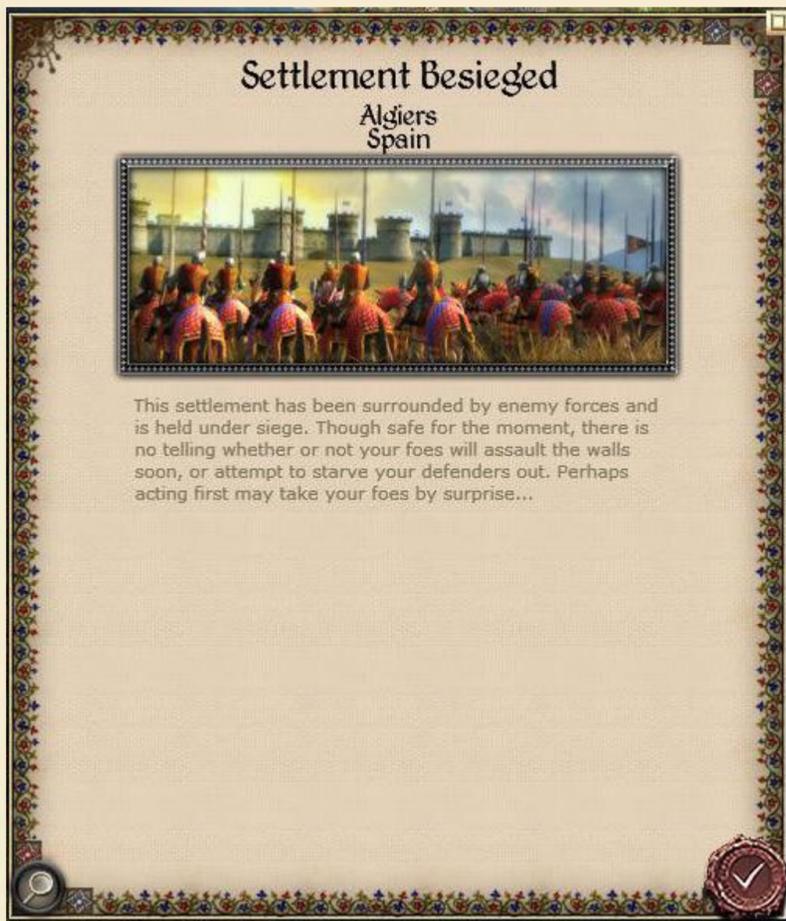
"You are Domingo Manuel, that is easy," replied Nevin, his face blank, "From left to right, I would guess Vaasco Curral, Esteban Macia and Jacome Bernaldo."



"Oh yes, he's good," smiled Jacome, "Anyone else I'd say guessed Vaasco by his age, then took the 50/50 chance between me and Esteban... but not him, no.... this one is too clever to live."

"And too valuable to kill.... yet," smiled Domingo, "First we have to pick his brains."

"Aodh, look at this," grunted Domnall, handing a slip of paper to Aodh.



"Ye ken that I had all ready heard of this, Domnall," nodded Aodh, who had long since - against Nevin's own advice - told his Brother that Nevin was not the true Spymaster of the Scottish Empire, and that before that job had come to Aodh, it had been their dead brother Nectan's.

"Aye," sighed Domnall, sitting in Aodh's study and somehow seeming smaller than at any point that Aodh could remember in his life.... he looked defeated, "But it is but another in an endless series of setbacks for us.... Aodh, I cannae fight a war like this... this.... this waiting! This goes against everything I know, everything Uncle Edward taught me about war, every instinct in my body. Father might have been able to do this, but he never taught me, and I dinnae have the knack to lay back in wait like a spider. Those men in Cagliari who died... they died fighting for Scotland, I should have had an army ride to their aid... and I should have been at their head! But I did nae and I was nae, because of those accursed Spanish ships! I feel like a prisoner here in Milan, and my sentence is served for the deaths of every one of those soldiers who died at Cagliari and Algiers because I could nae send them aid..... Aodh, I NEED TO FIGHT!"

"Ye need patience, Brother," replied Aodh calmly, "As ye told me so long ago, ye must choose when to fight.... but when the time is right, ye will unleash the fires of hell on the Spanish."

"But when, Brother? WHEN!?" howled Domnall in anguish, standing up and stalking about the room, "If I was out there in the field I would at least ken that I could do **something!** Everything that has happened to us leaves me feeling impotent... the fall of Cagliari; Mar losing half his men to some mad English Rebel; the death of Pope Saracinus; Pope Villanus' obsession with heresy costing us Church Support; this fresh siege of Algiers; and ye mysterious friend disappearing.... nothing is going right for Scotland, Aodh, we have fallen from peace into dark days!"

"Domnall," smiled Aodh sadly, feeling his Brother's pain and wishing that he could tell him more, "Have ye ever heard the saying, it is always darkest before the dawn?"

"Do you really think you can make me talk?" Nevin asked.

"There is not a man alive who cannot be broken without the proper tools," grinned Domingo, "Do you have any idea how long I have dreamed of this day?"

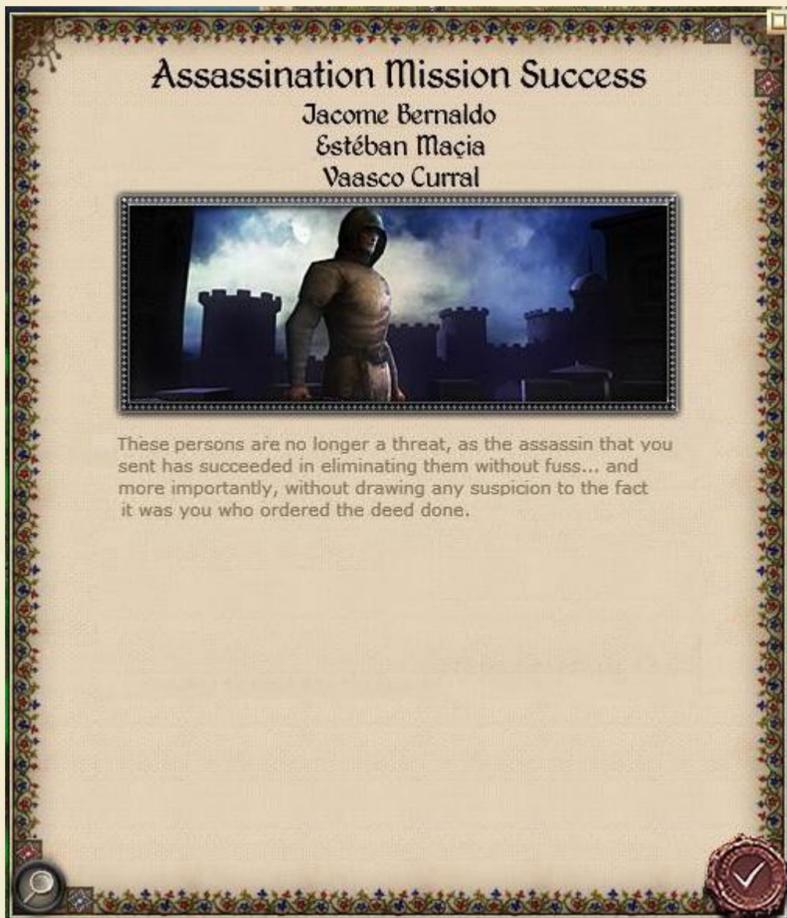
"I am sorry to ruin your dream for you," Nevin sighed, "But I will not talk."

"Oh?" chuckled Domingo, "And pray tell why not?"

Finally, Nevin's blank face revealed emotion, as a huge smile broke out over his face, "Because of him."

Jacome squawked as he collapsed to the ground, spasming wildly as Vaasco's throat suddenly erupted with blood and Esteban crumpled bonelessly to the ground, eyes rolling back in their sockets. Domingo's jaw dropped open in shock as he twisted around, and a black shape emerged from the shadows. To the Spanish Spy's credit, his reaction was almost immediate as he grabbed at the dagger on his side and moved into a defensive stance. But the shadowy figure moved like quicksilver, darting around Domingo's thrusting arm and snapping his wrist, causing him to drop the dagger as a heel was driven into the back of his knee, dropping him to the floor. A hand gripped his hair and pulled his head back, exposing his neck, and he felt a blade pressed against his neck as he was turned to face the similarly kneeling Nevin.

Domingo Manuel had just been introduced to Farquar the Killer.



"Now what?" grunted Domingo, swallowing nervously and trying but failing to keep his face blank despite the tumultuous events of the last few seconds.

"Now?" asked Nevin, still grinning as he stood up straight and held out his hands, the ropes that had bound them falling away - as if by magic.

"Now I am going to pick **your** brain."

Chapter 46

Captain Sebastian was confused. As the senior Infantry Commander of Zaragoza's Garrison, he was used to having to fulfill orders he didn't understand... but these were more confusing than normal. He'd been ordered to take a sizeable portion of Zaragoza's garrison north through the mountain passes between the Spanish City and Toulouse, which was currently in the hands of the Scots. An outlaw band was apparently using the pass as a base of operations, and the order had come from Goncaluo Guyllemes to put an end to them.

As far as Sebastian could tell, having an outlaw band in the pass between them and the Scottish was a **good** thing, but it was not his place to question orders. Especially when they came from Guyllemes, which in reality meant they came from Domingo Manuel.

When Manuel gave an order, you followed it.

As his men moved up through the cold mountain pass where the snows of winter still sat, the silence seemed to bear down on Sebastian's soldiers. He was a Believer, he felt that when he died he would go on to eternal reward in heaven, and thus like many soldiers he credited his own finely honed instinct to danger to divine communication, a warning from God.

"This is all wrong," the Spanish Captain muttered, "Something isn't right he-"

And then he saw it.



"By God," gasped Sebastian, "Domingo has betrayed us."

"Captain, we must return to Zaragoza!" cried his Crossbow Commander, horrified, "The Scottish are coming from Toulouse!"

"Run?" grunted Sebastian angrily, "Yes, but not away from them... they'd cut us down before we were out of the valley. **CHARGE MEN! OUR ONLY HOPE IS TO PUT OUR LIVES IN THE HANDS OF GOD!**"

And his men, believers all, charged up the steep slope of the mountain pass towards Dougall Macdonchie and his 900 baying, bloodthirsty Scotsmen.



As the crossbowmen faltered and staggered under an onslaught of bolts from their Scottish opposites, the Spanish Sword Militia charged up behind them, using their fellow Spaniards as human shields to get closer to the Scots.

And then Dougall sent in his Highlanders.



The Spanish gaped in astonishment at the awesome sight of hundreds of baying Scotsmen dressed in nothing but kilts leaping through the snow as if it was a balmy sunny day, while the Spanish were feeling the bite of the cold even in their full armor. The two forces clashed, and while the Spanish struggled to move in their heavy armor with limbs turned sluggish by cold, the Highlanders roared and laughed and taunted them, darting about agilely, seemingly untouched by the weather. It all proved too much for the Spaniards, who turned and ran in spite of the knowledge they would never make it out of the valley alive. Dougall watched with a fierce grin on his face, and then raised his sword and gave the order, and his cavalry charged over the rise and down into the pass after the Spanish.





Captain Sebastian had stood longer than his men, screaming at them to hold their places and trust in God to deliver them. But standing alone, he realized what so many others had learnt over the centuries.

God helped those who helped themselves.



As the Highlanders chased down the last of the Spanish, Dougall cleaned his sword and exhaled happily, feeling as if a great weight had lifted off of his shoulders. Finally, after so long on the back foot, Scotland was finally taking the fight to the Spanish, and it felt good.... so good!

"My Lord," nodded his Crossbow Commander, stepping up beside Dougall's horse, "It was a grand fight, but I'm concerned, will the Pope not be displeased with us for killing fellow Catholics?"

"Whatever do ye mean?" smiled Dougall, "The Spanish came here to do away with a band of outlaws, and they were obviously wiped out by that band. It has nae to do with us."

"But what of those who escape?" asked the Commander, confused, "Surely they will return to Zaragoza an-"

"They will nae reach Zaragoza alive," grinned Dougall confidently, "Even if they escape our men, ye have my guarantee on that."

And somehow, the Commander did not doubt the word of his General.



Aed Canmore sighed into his palm as Duncan Forster cried out for more music and the women draped over him giggled with delight. He'd been dragged out by Forster to experience "the fleshpots" of Cairo after revealing to the man that he had never partaken in them despite spending almost his entire life in the city. The man was a buffoon who let money drip through his hands like water, was far too fond of gambling and spoke far too loudly of his own devotion to Scotland. But he was also an adopted member of the Arthyn family, whose late patriarch Finguine had been a highly trusted friend (and in fact adopted son) of Edward Canmore. Coupled with the reputation of Finguine's late son Gawain as a vanquisher of the Mongols, just being associated with the Arthyn's was enough to guarantee Duncan's place in Cairo's Court. Aed always made it a point to be well regarded by everyone, having long ago learned that if everyone was your friend, no one was your enemy... and that people also tended to let their guards down around "friends". So he'd come out to the fleshpot, and not regretted it bitterly. Men staggered around drunkenly openly groping women, lewd talk came from man and woman both, there was too much drink being passed around and far too much money being spent. It reminded Aed of the old tales of the debauchery of the Roman Empire before it collapsed, and he feared for the future of the nobility if this was an example of how their youngest sons lived.

"Maybe Aodh was right to take so many of them on his Moorish Campaign," Aed muttered to himself, remembering how livid he had been when his Cousin had arrived at Cairo and promptly dragged away some of the best and brightest of the Nobles in Aed's court, "A good bit of war woul-"

"Would what, Cousin?" asked a sweet voice, and Aed spluttered in his mug of water as he turned to find himself facing a pretty young girl - no surprise in such a place as this - whom he knew very well.

Muriel Canmore.

"Muriel, what in the name of God are ye doing here!?" he whispered harshly, shocked beyond words. Muriel was the youngest of the King's four daughters, a small girl who had grown into a pretty woman as she completed her studies in Scotland's true capital, Cairo. But she was still only 16, a grown woman now but still far too young, innocent and.... NOBLE! to be in a place such as this.

"Continuing my education," grinned Muriel cheekily, and looked over at Duncan across the room as he groped at one of the whores grinding against him, "What a lovely sight, he's meant to be my Husband, ye ken?"

"Aye," grunted Aed, head still spinning that Muriel even knew a place like this existed, "He thinks ye comely and has requested in writing to the Council of Nobles to argue his cause to the King."



"Romantic stuff," chuckled Muriel, "It's how I always dreamed my proposal would come as a wee lass."

"Muriel...." started Aed, hesitating, "Ye... ye deserve better."

"Aye," grinned Muriel, fading back into the shadows of the fleshpot as a group of men passed by, "I do. But deserve has little to do with it. Ye have never married; ye brother Adam has given his **wife** no children; and Father and Uncle Aodh seem predisposed to creating girls. If Father cannae have a Canmore boy to continue the line, he'll take the next best thing he can get and spread his daughters out amongst the finest noble lines in the Empire.... like I said, romantic."

"Aye, to romance," grunted Aed, and lifted his mug.

"To romance," agreed Muriel with a giggle.

Agosto de Leon sat as tall on his horse as he could manage without looking like that is what he was doing, staring with what he hoped was an imperious stare at the walls of Algiers.

"Algiers, you have spurned my advances in the past," he noted out loud, "But I will not take no for an answer this day. Today I shall enter you.... and you will *enjoy it*."

"My Lord?" asked his Bombard Commander, used to the eccentricities of the Spanish Lord, "Shall we launch the attack?"

"Not yet," replied Agosto, watching the setting sun and waiting for the moment when the shadows were cast at their most dramatic. His conquest of Algiers **WOULD** be beautiful this time, dammit, he meant to see to that, "Wait on my word."



"This is nae good, my Lord," muttered Ian's Knight-Commander sitting inside the walls, "Agosto learned his lesson from his previous defeat here, he has brought a siege tower, bombards, catapults, ladders and battering rams. He means to break through the walls come hell or high-water."



"Then I will bring hell to him," grunted Ian, "That bastard Makmartane had the right idea, damn him, if I can get out there with my cavalry and cut down their artillery operators, it'll prevent them from getting into the city."

"Nae my Lord," the Knight Commander corrected, shaking his head, "Lord Makmartane only had one unit of Knights to ride with him, he had no choice but to ride out... and it is to my eternal shame that he died when I lived. I will lead our mounted Knights out there against the artillery, and ye will stay in here and command the defense of the walls."

"It is my duty to protect this city," growled Ian angrily, "I'll nae let ye d-"

"And it is **MY** duty to protect ye," snapped the Knight-Commander, "A task I failed for Lord Makmartane, and a task I will nae fail for ye."

Ian glared at the man and he glared back, and finally Ian acquiesced, cursing himself for feeling relief.

"Ye name is Arcill, is it nae?" he asked.

"Aye," nodded the Knight-Commander.

"Then ride with honor, Arcill," grunted Ian, saluting, "And then ride back with ye life."

Outside the walls, Agosto had judged that the sun had set to a point now where the lengthening of the shadows created enough a dramatic counter-point to the stark contrast of the walls of Algiers. He raised his sword, ready to make a dramatic speech that would sear the heart of his men and give them the courage to fight gloriously.... and then the Scottish ruined it all.



"No! No!" snapped Agosto angrily as he watched line after line of Mailed Knights ride out of the city gates, a slow solemn procession that was completely destroying the magnificence of HIS moment, "ARTILLERY! FIRE ON THE WALLS! NOW! NOW! FIRE!"

The Spanish had been waiting patiently for their Lord's order, and when it finally came they sprang into action at once. Bombards and catapult fire blasted almost instantaneously all at the same point, crashing into the wall beneath where the Highland Archers stood patiently waiting.



"RIDE!" cried Arcill as he watched in horror the walls buckling and crashing down under the artillery assault,"RIDE NOW FOR SCOTLAND!"





"My beautiful artillery!" gasped Agosto as he watched the Knights sweep through the catapult and Bombard Operators. He gritted his teeth angrily as he saw his Swordsmen charge up on all sides to put paid to the Knights, and then shook his head clear and began screaming orders in a higher pitched voice than his men were used to hearing, "FORGET THE FUCKING KNIGHTS! THERE IS A HOLE IN THE WALL! KILL THE SCOTSMEN INSIDE! KILL THEM!"

"Here they come," grunted Ian, sitting his horse behind the Highland Nobles waiting in the breach in the wall. Past them he could see Agosto leading his men in a charge towards the breach while swordsmen charged with ladders towards the wall still standing. He lifted his head to the archers still standing atop the remains of the wall and those just behind it, and gave an order that did not need to be given, "KILL THEM!"



The two sides crashed together with tremendous force at the breach, the Highland Nobles swinging massive two-handed swords that took out the legs of the horses the Spaniards rode. As they dragged Spaniards from their horses, far above them their brethren tossed Spanish Swords Militia bodily over the side and roared their defiance at men whose major training had been in shining their armor so they would look good while marching in formation.

Agosto stared around him in panic as he watched his beautiful Spanish army turning and running back towards the desert, while those who stood their ground were cut down without hesitation. How had it all gone wrong? The glorious epic he had been having his minstrels prepare ahead of time had never seen it happening like this... he was being defeated at Algiers for a second time!

Turning and abandoning his men, Agosto tried to run from the battle and his humiliation... and found his earlier decision not to obliterate the Scottish Mailed Knights coming back to bite him on the ass.

"That's their strutting peacock of a leader!" roared Arcill, riding his remaining men back towards the city, "BRING HIM DOWN!"



Seeing Agosto fallen, whatever had held the Spaniards in place broke and they turned and ran, chased by the Scottish, more and more of them cut down as they were broken into small groups and cut down by the baying Scots that screamed in delight as they took their revenge.

Ian slowly rode his horse through the breach and over the dead bodies of Scotsmen and Spanish alike, coming to a stop by Arcill and smiling at his bloodied Knight-Commander before offering a salute.

"So ye fulfilled ye duty, then?" he asked with a grin.

"Aye, my Lord," smiled Arcill wearily, "And ye fulfilled yours."

Ian turned and looked back at the city, frowning at the breach in the wall, "Aye, but that wall will need repairing... who can ken when the Spanish might return."

Coughing laughter surprised them both, and they looked down beside Arcill's horse where Agosto lay, his body broken and ruined, his face a bloody mess from where he had been repeatedly trampled by Arcill's Knights.

"Sooner tha... than you think, Scotsman," laughed the Spaniard, "You st... you stopped me here to....day, but more are coming... thousands more!"

He broke off in to harsh coughing, then smiled again, his eyes wide with madness, "My Ki... my King has been planning... been planning this for qui... quite some time, all you... all you have won today is a re... reprieve from your execution. You'll die... **YOU'LL ALL DIE! YOU'LL ALL DIE!**

Arcill slid down from his horse and slammed his sword through the gap in Agosto's chestpiece, directly into his heart and cutting off his laughter immediately. He pulled his sword clear and spat on Agosto's body, then turned and looked at Ian.

"Do ye think he spoke the truth?" he asked.

"It doesnae matter," replied Ian, his eyes hard, "Let them come in their hundreds and their thousands, as long as true Scotsmen stand in defense of these lands, Algiers will nae fall."



It was only two days later that Ian sat in the banquet hall of Castle Algiers, laughing with his men - including Arcill, whom he had struck up a close friendship with - when a guard broke into the hall in a panic, warning that an army was marching on the city.

Ian ordered the garrison to assemble immediately, and quickly had himself dressed in his armor before riding his horse alongside

Arcill towards the gates of the city, and the breach in the wall that was being rapidly repaired but was still nowhere near completion. Upon arriving at the gate, he dismounted and moved into the tower stairwell, rushing up as fast as his heavy armor and the winding stairs would allow him till he reached the top and strode out onto the thick walls of the city. He stared out across the dark stretch of desert, noting the silhouette of a massive army approaching, marching in an obviously disciplined formation. This was not some prize army put together by a strutting peacock like Agosto, the army approaching now was obviously well trained and a force to be reckoned with.

"There must be close to 2000," gasped Arcill, and Ian felt his own brash, brave words of only two days earlier coming back to haunt him. How could they hold off 2000 Spaniards with their battle-weary 863? And with half a wall missing? Had they defeated Agosto only to see his dying proclamation come true.

He stood and watched as the army strode to within a few hundred yards of the walls and came to a stop, still hidden in shadows from his gaze. All was silent for several minutes, and then a lone figure rode forward into the light cast by the torches on the city walls and in the hands of the guards on the walls. Ian stared in disbelief at the man appearing before him.... it could not be!?

"Well then, lad," shouted King Domnall Canmore with a smile, crying out up the walls to Ian, "Are ye going to let ye poor old Uncle in for a drink or aren't ye?"

Chapter 47

Aed Canmore sighed as the Russian Diplomat stared blankly forward, as motionless as a statue. He could hear the sounds of the sea coming through the window and felt a sudden desperate desire to rush out to the beach and just spend the day swimming rather than sit here with the maddeningly stubborn Russian.

He'd moved to Alexandria a week ago following an outbreak of the plague in Cairo, taking most of the Court's Nobles with him, essentially moving the centre of the Scottish Government to the first city Edward and Edmund Canmore had captured. After a week of breaking in new servants and officials, he'd finally felt he was settling in... and then the Russian had shown up.

Russia, alongside Poland, was one of the only Nations that Scotland knew little about. They had few dealings, each Nation's allies had little to do with each other, and Scotland's infamous Spy Network had uncovered little information about them. This was not due to being unable to get the information, but simply because it had been kept busy in other parts of the world and had never had any need to get at it. But now this Diplomat had arrived at Alexandria's Court, dropping cryptic hints that he might be willing to open up the mysterious frozen land.... if offered the right incentive.

So far, Aed had failed to find it.

"This would be easier, my friend, if ye gave me an indication what ye are after," Aed suggested tiredly, "We have offered ye trade rights, discussed military access, alliances and gifts... even out and out money. What is it ye want?"

"I vant for Russia enemy be crushed," grunted the Diplomat, and Aed hid another sigh. How could he help "crush" Russia's enemies if the man wouldn't even say whom they considered enemies. The door to the meeting room opened and a female servant carried in a tray of cool drinks to dull the desert heat. Aed smiled gratefully, then widened his eyes when he realized just who the female was.

"Perhaps I can help?" Muriel Canmore asked, staring at the Diplomat with a disturbing sparkle of amusement in her eye.

"My Lord," Dougall Macdonchie's Second asked him as they rode into formation outside the city walls, "The mountain pass was one thing, but I have to ask again.... how are we to explain this to the Pope?"



Dougall smiled at the stone walls of Zaragoza, then turned to grin at his Second, "And as I told ye before, dinnae worry yeself with such matters. God smiles on Scotland."

Dougall's Second nodded, but as his General raised his sword and began his pre-battle speech, he could not help but wonder. God might smile on Scotland.... but would the Pope?

Inside Zaragoza itself, Goncaluo Guyllemes stood staring in horror at the massive Scottish army that had come up somehow unseen right to the walls of the city. How was this possible? Manuel would surely have known, how could he miss....

"Manuel has betrayed us," whispered Goncaluo in horror, realization dawning on him. The Spy never made appearances in person, somehow getting his orders directly to Guyllemes sight unseen, which meant that if he had chosen to throw his lot in with the Scottish, he could have done so without fearing retaliation. It was Manuel who had ordered him to send men into the local mountain pass, emptying out much of the City's Garrison... now Guyllemes could only presume the men had been led into a trap. What made things worse was that he could not even send a message to the King, even by bird, as the only trained means of communication allowed between Zaragoza and King Mallobo was through... Domingo Manuel, "He has doomed us all."

A cry rang out amongst the men as a Scottish Bombard blasted into the gates of the city and tore through them, and Goncaluo twisted on his heel and exited the City Wall, heading for his horse to prepare to defend his city as his swordsmen left the walls to block the gaping hole where the gate had once been.

As the rain began to fall and dark clouds rolled over the city like an omen, Goncaluo had no illusions over who would hold Zaragoza by day's end.





Dougall stepped his horse past the dead bodies of the soldiers who had - until today - ruled and ran Zaragoza. Thunderclouds still rumbled overhead but the rain seemed to have stopped, and the General felt it was a further sign of God's favor. His Second rode up beside him and saluted, then stared around at the carnage.

"My Lord, we have killed many fellow Catholics today... I pray that ye assurances regarding the Pope prove true."

Dougall remembered his pre-dawn meeting with the hooded man who had inserted himself unseen into Domingo Manuel's place and smiled once more.

"Aye, my friend," he grinned, "Let me put it this way, I would nae want to be around King Mallobo for the next few days."

"ZARAGOZA!?!?!!" screamed King Mallobo, smashing his fist into the table before him, then flinging it bodily through the air in a rage, "ZARAGOZA!?!?!!"

"Zaragoza," nodded Gomes Tarcia, the brash young man who had been prepared to depart for Toledo from Valencia later that day in triumph. But instead, he'd been given the unenviable task of reporting the loss of Zaragoza, which was not only the City acting as the first guard-post between Spanish and Scottish territory, but also as the Command Centre of Spain's Scottish Campaign. Tarcia had been chosen because he was Mallobo's favorite, and thus stood only a 50/50 chance of being murdered in a rage by the hot-tempered King.

"How cou... how could Manuel let this happen!?" gasped Mallobo, standing panting roughly, his face red with rage, "They are in our territory now... they can push through directly into the Spanish heartland."

"What are we to do, your Majesty?" asked Gomes warily, bracing for a fresh outbreak of rage.

"We must get word to Pasqual de Cordoba," grunted Mallobo, still shaking his head in shocked disbelief, "It violates the rules I set forth to only take orders from Manuel, but he must listen... if he can attack Caen or Bruges, he'll draw the Scots back over the border."

"That makes sense," nodded Gomes, "We still have the fleets t-"

"Your Majesty," spoke up a hesitant voice, and suddenly Gomes found himself shoved aside as a furious King Mallobo stormed forward and grabbed the horrified messenger who had risked his life by intruding on their meeting. The King hauled the man bodily into the air and slammed him into the ground, slamming him in the face with a closed fist and bloodying his nose, screaming at him for intruding on their meeting.

"YOUR MAJESTY! MY KING!" screamed Gomes, holding himself back from putting his own life at risk by hauling the Spanish King away from the now bloodied messenger, "HE WOULD NOT INTRUDE UNLESS IT WAS IMPORTANT!"

Mallobo checked his fist and glared first at Gomes, then back at the blubbing messenger who was weakly thrusting a scroll in his hand in the direction of his King. Cursing furiously, Mallobo hopped off of the messenger and tore the scroll from his hand, opening it and reading the contents.

To Gomes great shock, the King's reaction was the last thing he'd ever expect to see from Mallobo. He staggered backwards while reading the scroll, then slumped into a wooden chair and dropped the scroll, his face pale and his eyes wide with horror. Gomes stepped forward and took the scroll from the King's limp fingers, and read the contents with the same shock.



"What is the meaning of this?" Gomes demanded of the messenger, who was sitting up and clutching his broken nose, "Ex-communication? WAR!?! Why!?!"

"Th.. The letter..." stammered the messenger.

"What letter?" demanded Gomes.

"The letter that came to The Pope in the midst of his latest Conference on Heresy," gasped the messenger, as if it was common knowledge, "The one that called his Papacy a farce.... and he a foolish old man whose quest for heretics was making the Church a laughing stock. He was furious, and declared it would be the focus of his Papacy to destroy Spain."

Gomes was horrified, a letter insulting the Pope? In public? The Church devoted to ending Spain's existence? How would the people of Spain react to this news? They were devoted Catholics and the Christ-on-Earth was now devoted to their destruction.

And then King Mallobo asked the question that Gomes SHOULD have been asking.

"Who sent this letter?" he asked, voice quivering and making him sound old for the first time in his life, "Who sent this abomination?"

The messenger stared in confusion at his King, and when he gave the answer, King Mallobo knew that Domingo Manuel had truly betrayed him completely.

"Who sent the letter, my King? Why.... you did."

The Russian Diplomat bowed as he left the room, actually giving Muriel a shy smile as he went, and Aed smiled warmly at her as she returned her own coy grin. Guards stepped in behind the Diplomat as he continued down the halls of the Palace, though their presence was meant more to honor him than because of any perceived threat to him or from him.

Aed leaned back in his chair and let it all sink in, while Muriel stared at him with an expectant smile, waiting for his congratulations. He would give it to her, she deserved it after the masterful way she had played the Russian into revealing far more than he'd ever intended or Aed could have ever expected. But first he needed to come to grips with the knowledge she had uncovered.... the mighty Russian Empire was striking out more aggressively than ever in its past, and the reason why was something no one could have ever suspected.

The Russian Tsar had died and his heir had been unable to secure control of the throne. Now as the heir struggled to regain control, various Generals and even peasants took control of their own regions within the Tsar's former regions.

For all intents and purposes, the Russian Empire was no more.

Faction Destroyed

Russia



Once a legitimate power, now these people are but a memory, one that will soon seem distant. While this leaves your people with one less potential obstacle on their journey to conquering the known world, it does nothing to change the fact that those who have fallen were defeated by a power other than your own... Will your lands become their next target of conquest?



At Granada on the Southern Coast of Spain, Captain Antonio received news of Spain's Ex-Communication with the same shock as his men and the rest of the population. These were dark days for Spain, and the most bizarre thing was that only the day before everything had been seemingly going so well. King Mallobo had put Scotland on the back foot; the Spanish Fleet had held their armies back; the rich Island of Cagliari had been captured by the Spanish; and Algiers had been ripe for the plucking.

But then Agosto de Leon had died trying to take the former Moorish City; there were reports King Domnall Canmore had somehow bypassed the Spanish Fleets to reinforce Algiers; Zaragoza had apparently fallen to the Scottish and now Spain had been ex-communicated. Captain Antonio could only be grateful that his small command at Granada was still relatively safe. Domnall would need to fight his way along the coast to Marrakesh if he wanted to get to the Spanish mainland, and there were any number of large Spanish armies currently marching between Granada and Marrakesh that would be more than a match for the Scottish King.

"Sails on the horizon!" cried a voice, and Antonio smiled. One of the Spanish ships was returning to port, which was always good news since it generally meant a reinforcement of troops as well as a restock of supplies. He stepped out onto the balcony on the coastal side of Castle Granada and looked over the ocean at the approaching sail of the vessel, and then frowned as it grew closer and he noted the flag flying from its mast was not Spanish.

"That can't be," he muttered, peering through squinted eyes as the vessel grew larger and the flag became more apparent. The vessel was not Spanish.

It was Scottish.



Domnall Canmore's men marched off of the ship onto the Spanish Mainland in staggering numbers, moving in disciplined formations as they stretched before the city of Granada. King Domnall watched as birds took to the air from the high towers of the Castle and smirked, knowing that they carried panicked messages warning that the Scottish had arrived. It did not matter, Granada could not hope to hold against the upcoming onslaught, and any reinforcements that arrived would find themselves having to smash through their own city to get at the Scottish. After so long on the back foot, Domnall truly felt himself again, he felt....

"I feel like a Scotsman," he said out loud, and laughed. Sitting in Milan with Aodh and planning battles and troop movements without being there on the frontline with his men had rankled Domnall badly, and he'd felt himself going mad trying to find distractions. Finding himself with too much time on his hand, Domnall had reflected on the brushes with death he had all ready had, most notably the horrors of the plague. Thoughts of his own mortality had in turn made him think about the fact that there were only four male Canmores left in Scotland, and time was running out for any of them to provide a male heir to carry on once they were gone. The hastily arranged marriages of his elder daughters had been his attempt to at least somewhat control who would replace the Canmores as Kings of Scotland when he, Aodh, Adam and Aed passed on.

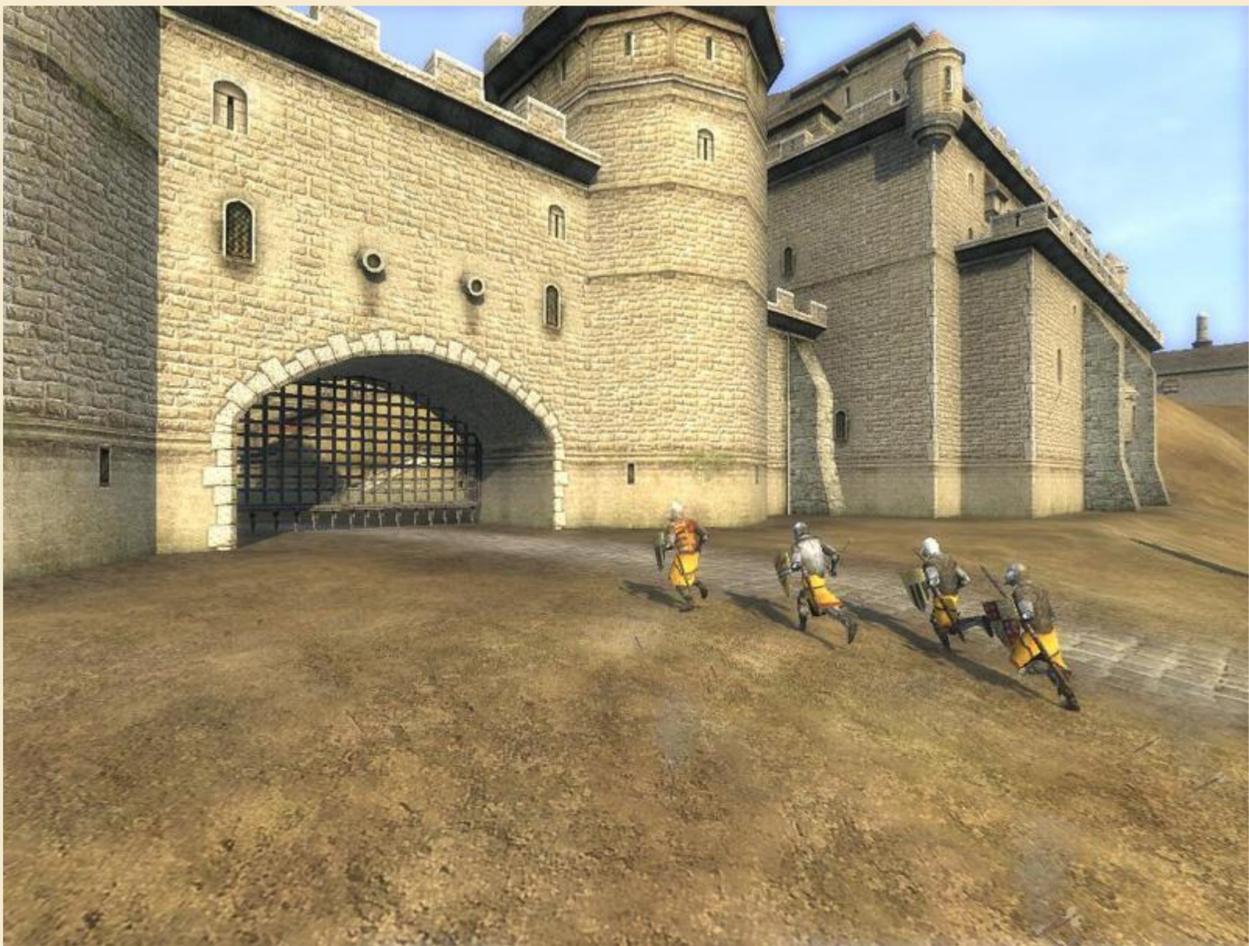
But now all thoughts of mortality had gone from his mind, oddly enough at a time when he was at more risk of dying, on the battlefield. Aodh had been pleased to inform him that Zaragoza had been neutralized, and as a result they now had a way to confuse and misdirect the Admirals of the Spanish Fleet. He'd instantly traveled by boat to Algiers, and from there reinforced his own men with Ian of Moray and his newest Son-in-Law, Patrick Makfulchiane before traveling over the ocean again to land at Granada thanks to Aodh's "friend" sending the Spanish boats patrolling the waters on another wild pirate chase.

"Ian my lad," laughed Domnall as the young Noble rode up beside his King alongside Makfulchiane, "Are ye ready to take the fight to these bastards on their own land?"

"Aye, Uncle," replied Ian, despite the fact he was closer to a second cousin than a nephew, "For a long time now."

"Well wait nae longer, lad," chuckled Domnall, "Ahhh but it's good to be back in the saddle and ready to go to war.... I'm going to enjoy this more than a God-fearing man should."







Domnall pulled off his helm and enjoyed the feeling of the sun on his face as his men cheered all about him, shouting his name and "Scotland!" over and over again. Patrick Makfulchiane rode up beside him, his own helm removed and a thin trickle of blood running down the side of his head, a wide grin on his face.

"Did ye like ye first taste of battle then, lad?" Domnall asked cheerfully.

"Aye," smiled Patrick, "It is an.... interesting.... way to release tension."

"I prefer women myself," chuckled Ian of Moray, riding up to join them, "Speaking of which, I imagine there are a number of them in this city looking to welcome their new Masters."

"Careful, Ian," grunted Domnall seriously, "Remember that we mean to rule in these lands when the Spanish are gone, and gestures of kindness now will go a long way to smoothing our own reign."

"This all seemed almost... too easy," added Patrick, "I ken there were nae many Spanish guarding this city, but even so..."

"Dinnae worry about a challenge, Patrick," laughed Ian, "With Macdonchie taking Zaragoza, we control only the Northern and Southern tips of the Spanish Mainland."



"He's right, lad," nodded Domnall, "Aodh arranged any number of misdirections to enable us to get here, but now we're down to the meat of it. The mainland is filled with large Spanish armies, not to mention their desert holdings to the South, and they'll all be heading directly towards us the moment they hear I am leading our armies here in the South. This war is only beginning, and things are going to get bloody before this is all over."

Chapter 48

Aodh Canmore walked down a long dirt road, past shoulder high fields of wheat. Along the side of the road ahead of him he could see three figures standing side by side, waiting for him.

He passed them in silence, looking straight ahead but feeling their gaze burning into him. The first was a tall, dignified, dark skinned Turk who glared at him with hate; the second a grey-haired, pale-skinned man whose eyes bore deep into Aodh while his mouth curled up in a sneer of contempt; and the third a black-eyed, swarthy Mongol whose eyes were unreadable but whom seemed to radiate insanity. Aodh had never met any of them before, but he knew them all instinctively.

Tutush, Puccio and Subutai.

He passed them and continued on up the road, and found himself at a crossroads. He stood on the Southern Road, and three other men stood on the others, all staring at him expectantly.

"Go North, Aodh," said the man on the North Road, a balding man with dancing, happy eyes that belied the downcast appearance of his brow. Aodh recognized him, unchanged from his youth for good reason... he was dead, "Always move on, always look to the future.

Alexander Canmore.

"Go East, Aodh," said the man on the East Road, a man who could have been Aodh's twin except for his white hair and lined face. Aodh knew him too, it was a face he would never forget as long as he lived, "Do nae let the past catch ye unawares."

Edmund Canmore.

"Go West, Aodh," said the man on the West Road, a pale, sickly looking man whose smile did not meet his eyes. Aodh instinctively knew his name, but was surprised by the dull unease he felt in the pit of his stomach as he stared at a man he had always been taught had died a hero, "Make a fresh start."

David Canmore.

"Go ye own way, lad," said a voice from behind him, and though Aodh did not - he could not - turn his head to look, he knew the voice of the man almost as well as he knew his Father's, "Trust in God and make ye destiny from what he sends ye."

Edward Canmore.

Aodh stepped into the centre of the crossroads and felt differing thoughts and feelings welling up inside of him. What should he do? Where should he go? Who should he trust? It was all so difficult, how could any one mortal man decide?

And then the answer came to him with a flash of light and a booming voice.

Aodh sat up in his bed with a start, clutching at the sheets and panting heavily, eyes wide and mouth gaping open.

"Aodh?" asked Katherine, "Aodh what is the matter?"

"Nae, nae, calm yeself," he gasped, running a hand through his sweat-soaked hair and turning to stare at his wife, "It was a dream, nae more than a dream."

She stared at him uncertainly, but he smiled reassuringly and she lay back in the bed. He did the same and only minutes later he heard her breath slow into the deep, rhythmic beat of sleep. He lay still for a few more minutes to be sure he would not disturb her, then slid out of the bed and quickly dressed himself, stepping out of his bedchamber into the halls of the Palace at Genoa.

He walked himself to the same seaside balcony where Duke Puccio had once watched Domnall Canmore sail his army to the docks of Genoa, and breathed deeply of the air before smiling.

A dream? No, what he had just experienced had not been a dream.

It had been a vision.

Genoa - Large city

Prince Aodh
Governor
Age: 41

Command ★★
Chivalry ●●●●●
Loyalty ●●●●●
Piety ●●●●

Retinue

- Mentor
- Military Engineer
- Pagan Magician
- Intrepid Explorer
- Swordbearer
- Veteran Warrior
- Siege Engineer

Traits

- Legacy of Chivalry
- Vision of Prophecy
- Generally Loyal
- Night Fighter
- Promising Tactician
- Talent for Command
- Holier than Thou
- Heir Apparent
- Conforming
- Feels Respected
- Marks of War
- Disrespects Prisoners
- Courageous
- Winning First
- Wall Taker

Unshakable in his belief the almighty has spoken to him directly in his dreams, fuelling him with religious conviction.
+4 Piety

Hew Mar stepped up onto the platform in the Caen Marketplace with a heavy heart, feeling as if his legs were weighted down by chains. He stepped to the centre of the platform and looked out over the gathered throng, some of whom were staring at him expectantly while others continued to dicker and barter with each other over various goods and foods. He coughed lightly into his fist to clear his throat, then raised his voice and called for attention.

"People of Caen, Scotsmen all!" he cried, "Ye country needs ye!"

"The wife needs these potatoes more!" laughed one wit, and a roar of laughter spread up through the throng, and even Hew had to grin.

"Aye, run home to ye woman then!" he called out, "I only needed to speak to the men, anyway!"

Now the laughter turned on the heckler, good natured shouts breaking out from several sources. Hew let them continue on for a few moments, getting their lewd comments and jovial insults out of their system, then continued on.

"The men of Spain!" he called, and boing rose from the throng, and he let it raise before continuing on,"The men of Spain even now find themselves trapped between Scottish armies to their North and South, with their old senile bastard of a King caught smack in the middle!"

Now the Scottish cheered, and again Hew let them work it out of their system before going on.

"But the war with Spain is not restricted to the Spanish mainland," Hew warned,"They have used their fleets to move an army up to these lands. Ye would have heard tell of farmlands to the East being ravaged... that is the work of Pasqual de Cordoba, a Spanish Nobleman who means to destroy ye farms and lands, starve out ye cities and then crack them open like an egg!"

"The wife won't like that!" shouted one man, and there was laughter, but scattered and uneasy. They **had** heard the rumors of an army moving to the East, but until now they had only been rumors. It was Winter, and they had stocks to last them through it, but if their lands and farms were destroyed, even if they fought off the Spanish, they'd not have time to replant and harvest crops for the next Winter.

"Cordoba's men are highly trained and well equipped," shouted Hew over the angry and frightened conversations that were breaking out,"And with much of our Northern Cities' garrisons stripped down to fight the Spanish in their homes, we have left our own lands dangerously unprotected. My own army was halved by a recent battle with English Rebels, which has left me severely undermanned!"

"So what's the bad news then, lad?" snapped one of the men bitterly, and Hew felt the mood of the throng turning ugly, and knew now was the time.

"The **good** news," he shouted,"Is that we've cleared out many of our soldiers to fight in Spain, but we have nae cleared out all the men! Whether ye be young or old, ye country needs ye! Join me and what soldiers I still have under my command, and we'll show de Cordoba that the finest Spanish soldier is no match for any single Scottish man!"

As the throng burst into excited, frantic multiple conversations, Hew stood and watched them, and wondered how many of them would answer the call to arms.

And whether it would make any difference.

As Pasqual de Cordoba caused problems for Hew Mar near Caen, King Domnall Canmore was causing problems for Prince Ferrando in Cordoba.

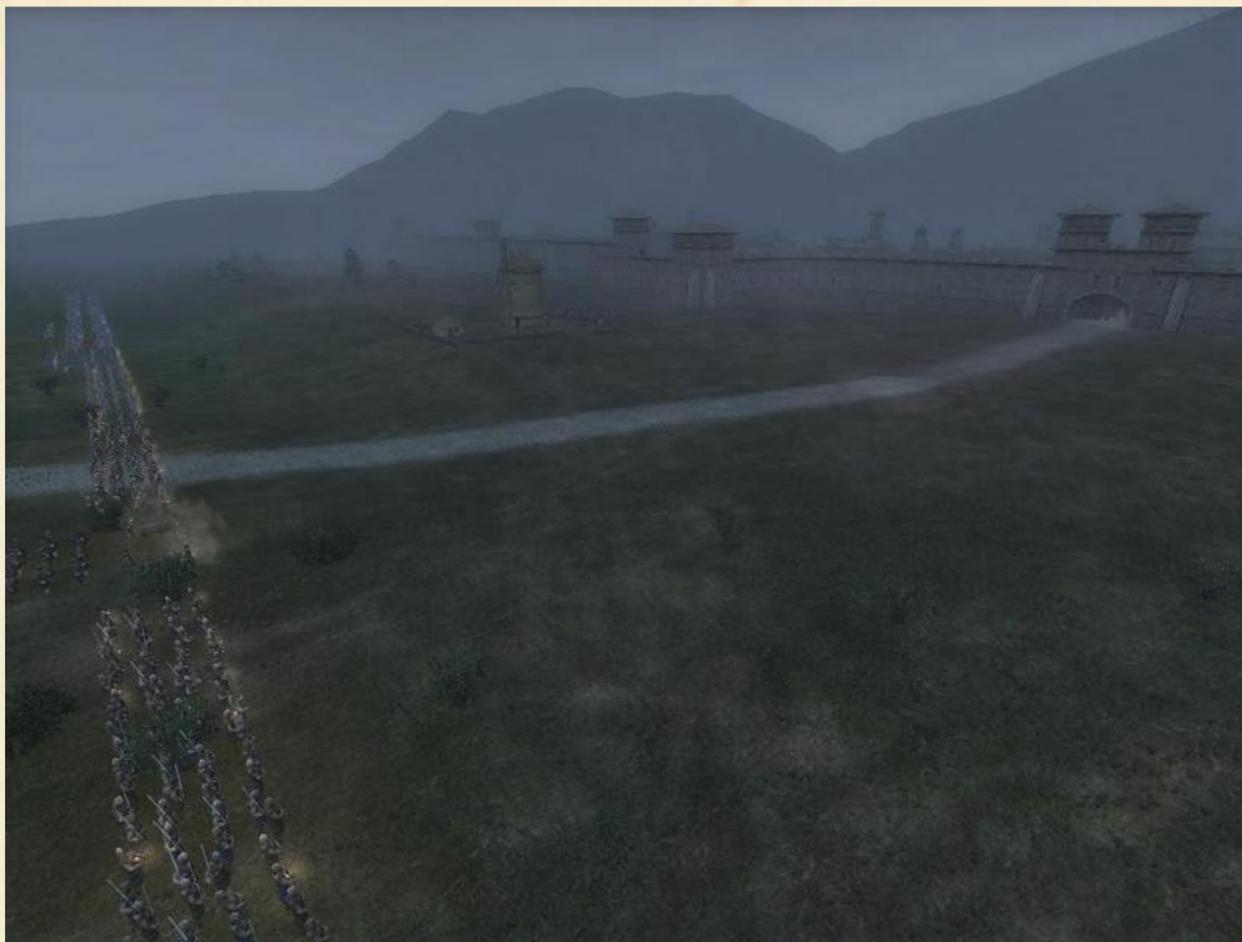
Domnall had left several hundred men at Granada and then ridden his men hard to the North, taking advantage of the misinformation "Domingo Manuel" had been spreading that had seen Spain's armies out of position when Scotland had taken Granada. At Cordoba, Prince Ferrando had barely 400 men, and Domnall knew that if they pushed hard and took the city, they would have an easily defendable base to fight off the Spanish armies. In the meantime, Allan of Nairnshire was moving a force of men from Algiers to Marrakesh which would again serve to divide the Spanish armies, while Dougall Macdonchie would be able to attack cities to the North. The Spanish would not be able to survive a four front war and be forced to call their fleets back in to deliver the armies on board back to the mainland, by which point Domnall was hopeful he could have surrounded the surviving Spanish in order to finish them off in one fell swoop.

And then he had plans for King Mallobo in Valencia.

But the entire basis of his plan relied on taking Cordoba quickly, and a fresh complication had just arisen.

A late winter storm.





As the Bombards fired on the walls of Cordoba, Ian of Moray stared up at the rain with distaste and shook his head.

"Even the Winter Storms in this Godforsaken country is warm," he grunted, "All this heat cannae be good for the mind, nae wonder these blasted Spanish are so mad."

"They used to say the same about the Scottish and the cold," chuckled Patrick Makfulchiane, "Until Edward Canmore up and conquered Egypt and proved the Scottish are mad whether in hot or cold."

Ian grinned behind his helm, Patrick was a good lad with a fine sense of humor, he'd found himself growing fond of him as they'd ridden together. He knew that Domnall was grooming him as a potential heir - married as he was to one of the King's daughters - should the current line of male Canmores fail to secure a male heir of their own. A world without Canmores barely seemed worth contemplating to Ian, who was the adopted son of one of the legendary Edward Canmore's daughters himself, but he could see the seeds of greatness in Makfulchiane. There would be worse men to follow.



"HO! There we go!" laughed Patrick as the gates exploded open, and Domnall lifted his sword and commanded the Infantry forward.



Archers fired flaming arrows up into the air at the few Spanish who could afford to stand the walls, but the shifting storm winds snatched most of them away, serving to do little more than illuminate the walls in the gathering darkness.



As the Spanish swordsmen on the ground were torn through by the baying Scottish, a group of Highland Nobles broke free and charged up the steps of the gate tower, breaking through onto the walls and into the Spanish still standing there.



As the Spaniards were slaughtered where they stood, Domnall turned to look at Ian and Patrick, inclining his head as both repeated the mantra he had drilled into them, a variation of the one he had often repeated to Aodh and that his Uncle had told him.

"A Scottish General fights on the frontline with their men."





As the Scottish Cavalry rode through the city gates, Prince Ferrando led his own against them. The Spanish heir was an experienced General, the 59 year old younger brother of King Mallobo who had all the same talents and strengths of his brother without the blinding rage that so often affected the King. He led his charge not in a passionate rage but in a cold calculating fashion. He knew that he was a dead man, his men could not prevail against the overwhelming number of Scots, but he could do what damage he could before he died.

He meant to take King Domnall with him.



As Spaniards and Scotsmen clashed and died, knocked from their horses and ridden over, or put through by swords, Ferrando cast about him with his blade and looked about for the King. His eyes narrowed as he spotted the full-armored Scot charging into a bundled up group of Spanish horse, cutting them down and roaring in delight, lost in the bloodlust that the Scottish were infamous for.

"Enjoy the blood, Scotsman," hissed Ferrando, driving his heels into the sides of his horse and thundering forward, "I hope you choke on the laughter when you arrive in hell!"

Ferrando grinned as he saw the King twist his head about at the last second, some battle instinct telling him that death was coming. In desperation he raised his sword, and Ferrando grunted as he felt the Scot's blade plunge through his armor and into his belly even as his own sword pierced his opponent's side.

"DEEEEAATHHH!" screamed Ferrando, struggling to pull his blade clear, but his victim did so first, swinging his sword wildly and slashing open Ferrando's throat before he plunged from his own horse and crashed into the ground, his frantic horse riding over him in a final indignity.

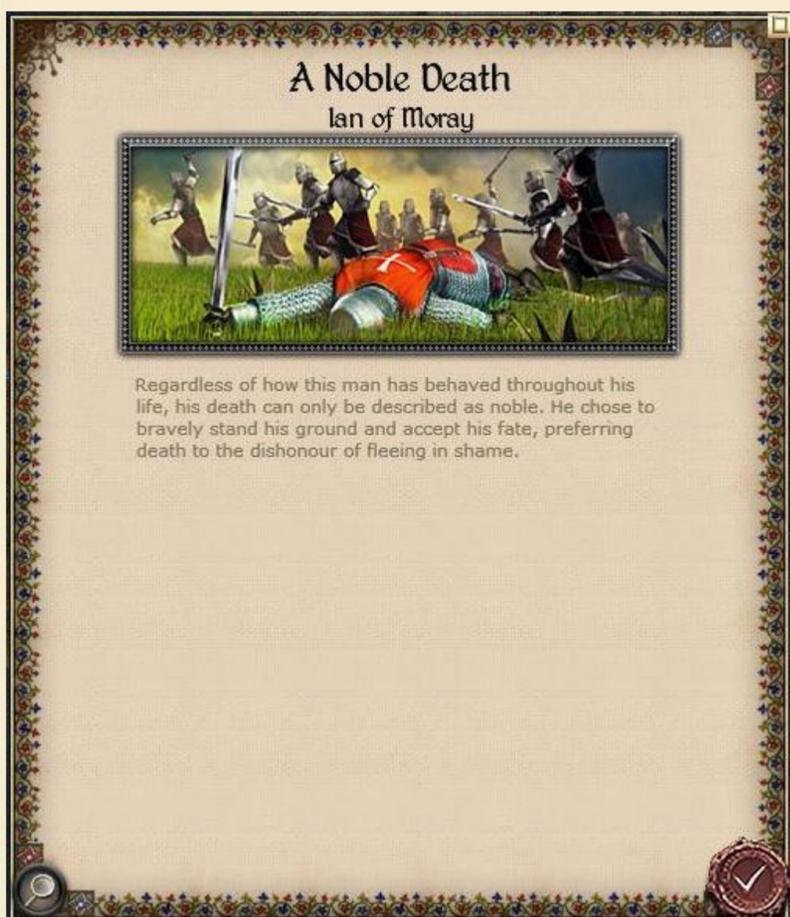


"NAE!" screamed Patrick Makfulchiane, cutting through the Spanish around him, ignoring his own wounds as he smashed his horse to his fallen mentor's side. He leapt down from the saddle as the battle continued around him, grabbing at the body and desperately seeking any sign of life. All around him the Scottish seemed unaware of their loss, as they continued fighting, chasing down the last of the Spanish and putting them to the sword. Patrick did not notice them, he did not hear the cheers as he pulled the helm from his mentor's head and stared with sinking dismay at the unseeing eyes.

"A Scottish General fights on the frontline.... and can die on the frontline too," said a voice, not unkindly, from behind him. Patrick turned and stared up at the speaker with tears in his eyes as he spoke again, "Being in the Royal Family is nae protection from Death's embrace, Patrick, a lesson that too many do nae learn."

"Aye, I understand," sobbed Patrick, hanging his head and embracing the dead body, "I understand, my King."

And Domnall Canmore settled his hand down on Patrick Makfulchiane's shoulder as his son-in-law wept over the dead body of his mentor, Ian of Moray.



"Aed, why have ye nae married some nice woman yet?" Muriel asked, surprising Aed Canmore. He looked up from his desk, where he had been reviewing reports of the financial cost of the plague in Cairo, and over at his Cousin, who had been assisting him by making sense of the latest diplomatic news from around the world.

"Why do ye ask?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Who do ye nae answer?" she replied, smirking, causing him to laugh, "Seriously, Aed, ye're an attractive man, ye're still *fairly* young, and ye're in the Royal Family, surely ye're a catch for any lass?"

"Adam fulfilled his obligation by marrying the right woman," Aed replied cryptically, "There was nae need for me to do so."

"That worked out well for Mor," muttered Muriel, rolling her eyes but leaving unspoken what was common knowledge throughout the empire regarding Adam and his extra-marital obsession, "But if duty did nae call ye to marriage, surely love must have?"

"If I ever met a woman I loved, perhaps I would marry her," nodded Aed thoughtfully, "But intelligent, thoughtful women who are nae looking to marry for power are few and far between in this part of the Empire... and I've nae had the same "obsessions" that other men seem to have with the less "romantic" aspects of being with a woman... nae, nae marriage for me, Muriel."

"It must be nice to have the choice," Muriel said quietly, and went back to reviewing the diplomatic notes. Aed cursed himself for a fool, only now realizing that Muriel's curiosity could only be because of the pressure being exerted on her to accept Duncan Forster's suggestion of marriage. He stood and walked to her side, placing a hand on her shoulder, and moments later she took his hand in her own, leaving them both on her shoulder as a quiet sobbing overtook her.

The men of Scotland had answered the call to arms.

Hew stared with awe at the 1600 men that he now commanded, swelling his ranks by over five times. They made an incredibly impressive sight, with only one major issue that Hew could identify.

Almost 1200 of them had never been seen battle before.

Hew had been able to train them for roughly a week, showing them the basics of battle formations and trying to stress how important it was to think as a unit rather than an individual. But that was all that he had the time to do, and finally he'd had no recourse but to head out into the field to meet with Pasqual de Cordoba's army, which was half the size but full of exceptionally well trained, armored Spaniards eager to kill as many of the Scots as they could.



"Captain Comgell has a small force of men, a last resort only if things go horribly wrong for us," Hew told his Second, "If it comes down to it, I'd prefer him to turn and run with his tail tucked between his legs."

"There are few Scotsmen who would do that despite the greatest odds," his Second replied firmly, and Hew nodded even as he thought to himself that they'd soon see how tough the average Scotsman really was once they encountered a few hundred well trained Spanish killing machines.



"FORWARD SPEARMEN!" roared Hew, and the bunched up ranks of the Spear Militia who had answered the call to arms moved forward in a staggered frontline, rippling along the line as some ran to catch up to the others while others slowed so they wouldn't get too far ahead. Hew sunk his head in his hand, knowing that their sheer numbers may have daunted Pasqual at first, but by now he would have realized how ill-trained they were.

And moments later he was proved right, as a confident de Cordoba ordered his men to charge directly into the oncoming Scottish line.



Hew ordered his own Pikemen and Highlanders to move up to brace the lines of Spearmen and provide a stabilizing point from which to fight the Spaniards and hold the ends of the Scottish line, which he was sure would buckle and run at any point. Pasqual obviously could see this tactic for what it was though, and with a cry charged his mounted cavalry directly against the Spearmen, meaning to break their spirits and send them running in terror, which would create a chain reaction that would send the entire army fleeing.

And then something happened that neither Pasqual or Hew had expected.

The Scottish held.

Scores of the militia fell to the sword of the Spaniards, crashing in heaps and bleeding into the snow of the lands they called their own. But with every Scot that fell, two more would step up to take his place, and they did not blanch in the face of danger, they did not quake in fear or fall into shock. They stood and they fought, and they screamed their defiance and laughed as they cut down the Spaniards that came at them. The Highlanders roared in approval, and then to Hew's astonishment they began to sing, a song taken up by more and more, including Hew himself. He recognized the song of course, it was as ancient as the Scottish themselves, tracing back to even before the time of Harry Byrne, words of loss in battle that changed with the time and the enemy. But surprisingly it was not a dirge, but a celebration of their fighting spirit and stubborn refusal to ever surrender.

*I've heard the lilting, at the yowe-milking,
Lasses a-lilting before dawn o' day;
But now they are moaning on ilka green loaning;
"The Flowers of the Forest are a' wede away".*

*As buchts, in the morning, nae blythe lads are scorning;
The lasses are lonely and dowie and wae.
Nae daffin', nae gabbin', but sighing and sobbing,
Ilk ane lifts her leglen, and hies her away.*

*In hairst, at the shearing, nae youths now are jeering,
The Bandsters are lyart, and runckled and grey.
At fair or at preaching, nae wooing, nae fleeching,
The Flowers of the Forest are a' wede away.*

*At e'en, in the gloaming, nae swankies are roaming,
'Bout stacks wi' the lasses at bogle to play.
But ilk ane sits drearie, lamenting her dearie,
The Flowers of the Forest are a' wede away.*

*We'll hae nae mair lilting, at the yowe-milking,
Women and bairns are dowie and wae.
Sighing and moaning, on ilka green loaning,
The Flowers of the forest are all wede away.*

"What madness is this," moaned Pasqual in horror as he watched his men falter and stutter, their formations breaking up as the Scottish pushed forward and surrounded them, and Pasqual found himself trapped in the middle of a circle of baying, laughing, weeping and singing Scotsmen.... and then a blade was slammed through his back.

"This is nae ye land, Spaniard!" hissed the Scotsman, a 45 year old farmer whose farm would have been razed by de Cordoba's army within the week had they not marched against them, "I hope Hell is hot enough for ye!"



The remains Spaniards broke in terror from the Scottish, and Hew watched them run with satisfaction, then snarled and bared his teeth before letting loose the cry, "LET NONE OF THEM LIVE! KILL THE SPANIARDS!"

"KILL THE SPANIARDS!" screamed the Scottish, and they charged as Hew snapped angrily at himself a lesson he should have learned from his Father.

You never underestimated a Scotsman.



In the end they did not achieve their goal of killing every Spanish soldier that had dared enter their lands.... three escaped.



Hew decided he could live with that.

Duncan Forster lounged in his cushioned, high-backed chair and grinned lazily at Aed as they sat in the Alexandria Court, preparing to hear what would be the final submission of the day. Usually Duncan did not bother with this aspect of Court life, but he had special reason to be here today, and was clearly enjoying himself.

The doors to the Court opened and there were several gasps as Muriel Canmore entered through them. Despite her youth, her time acting in diplomatic support to Aed had seen her gather a poise and grace beyond many twice her age, which only accentuated her natural beauty. She was a person of great interest to the unmarried men of the Scottish Empire (and many of the married) and now she was here to announce her acceptance of a marriage to Duncan Forster, who was reveling in his moment of glory.

"Heavy is the head that wears the Crown," Muriel spoke, her voice clear and authoritative, "And my Father's head grows heavy indeed. As he wages war against the Spanish and deals with the affairs of State, a further pressure has been added to his shoulders. Where are the male heirs to the Canmore line? Who will continue the lineage of Edward and Edmund? Of Alexander and Domnall? Of Aodh? This is a pressure that must be lifted from my Father's shoulders, and thus I have come today to announce a proposal of marriage."

Excited murmuring rolled around the crowds of nobles and merchants in the Court, while Aed hid a small frown. There was something peculiar in the wording Muriel had used that he couldn't quite place his finger on, and Muriel was too intelligent to make a mistake. Was there something else going on here?

"Duncan Forster, ye have made ye intentions clear, ye wish to marry me," she asked.

"Aye, I want ye for my Wife, Muriel," Duncan said, putting on an absurd baritone.

"It is nae the place of a Princess to allow herself to marry any but the right man," Muriel replied, nodding her head thoughtfully, "Ye are a good man Duncan, a brave man of Noble birth...."

Duncan could not help but smirk in agreement.

"....which is why it is such a shame I cannae marry ye," Muriel finished, and Duncan's smirk faded as his eyes widened. She turned away from him, and now Aed was horrified to find she was facing him.

"Aed Canmore," she asked, "Will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

And Aed Canmore, for the first time in his life, spoke without first thinking of the consequences or how it would affect the way others saw him.

"Aye Muriel.... aye, I will."



As news of the shocking marriage rocketed through the Scottish Empire - and indeed the world - with a speed that even Nevin of Shetland would have thought impossible, in Toulouse another woman awaited "her" Canmore.

Cassandra was in her forties now, but still a woman of astonishing beauty. She too carried herself with a regal grace, but she was not a Princess or a Lady, not a wife or a mother. she was what she had always been.

The other woman.

News of Muriel's "shocking" marriage proposal had reached her early in the morning, and the scandal of it all had delighted her. Not because she found the idea of two Canmores marrying shocking, she had seen and heard of far worse in the English Court, while the French... well the French were something else all together. No, in her mind there was no offence to be found in the marriage of two second cousins whose familial relationship was based almost entirely on sharing the same last name. What amused her was the sure to be outraged reactions of the more conservative Nobles in Toulouse's Court.

And Adam's, of course.

Her long time "lover" had often spoken of his younger Brother in a fashion that was more akin to how a younger brother would speak of his elder. He had long wanted to achieve and surpass Aed in many fashions, which was part of the reason he had agreed to taking part in the siege on Toulouse when offered. He'd always hated that his Brother was recognized as the man who had killed one of the infamous leaders of the Mongol Horde, something he would never be able to emulate. His part in assuring Toulouse's fall had gone a long way to improving his own self-image, but now the news of his brother marrying and bedding the young, beautiful Muriel Canmore would be sure to inflame his jealousy once more.

So she lay nude on the bed waiting for him, knowing he'd be desperate to prove his virility as soon as possible. She chuckled to herself, she knew him better than he knew himself, he was so predictable, he would burst in at any moment and she would act surprised, then let him "dominate" her and assuage his insecurities between her thighs. Once sated, she would whisper into his ear as she often did, and quietly dictate policy for the running of Toulouse as she'd once done in Edinburgh and York.

Adam stalked angrily down the corridors, frightened servants darting aside when they saw the black rage in his face. He twisted a corner inwardly cursing his younger brother, then burst into the room at the end of the corridor, the woman lying on the bed sitting up in shock.

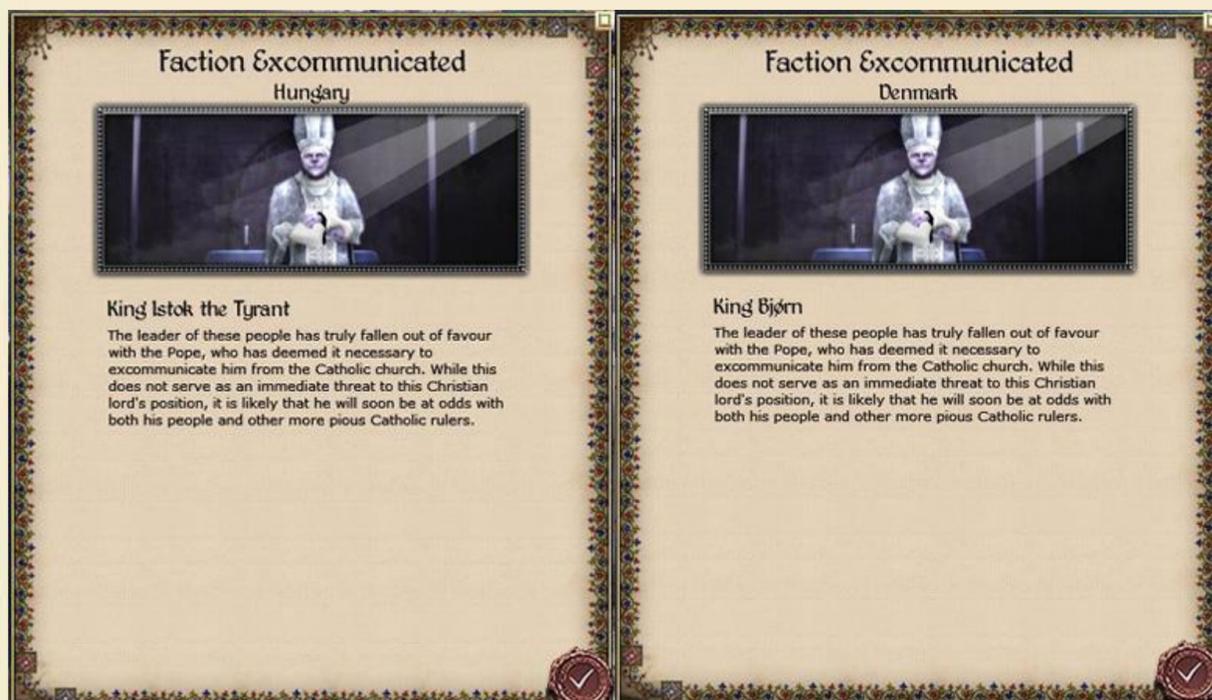
"Wha... what is going on?" she asked.

"Nae time fer talk, Mor!" snapped Adam, pulling off his shirt as his wife stared at him with wide eyes, "Get ye kit off woman, we've got an heir to make!"

Chapter 49

Ex-Communication.

The word had been much on Aodh Canmore's mind of late, though not due to any fear that Scotland could face such a fate. The new Pope, Villanus, was obsessed with heresy and did not seem capable of understanding why others might not share his same passion. The Kings of Hungary and Denmark had only recently joined the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in discovering this to their detriment, when their denouncing of heretics in their Empires had not happened at a fast enough pace for Villanus' liking.



It was Villanus' contention that heresy eroded the authority of the Church, and the only way to stamp out heresy was to exert the Church's authority dramatically. He had gone so far as to write letters to the rulers of all the Catholic Nations, expressing this desire, and Aodh had read those sent to Domnall with keen interest, curious to get an inside look at the workings of the "Christ On Earth's" mind.

With these thoughts on his mind, Aodh moved silently through the streets of Genoa. He had retired early to his chambers complaining of headache, then disguised himself in hood and cloak and ventured out of the palace and into the streets. The skills that Nevin had taught him served him well, as he confirmed to his own satisfaction that he was not being followed on his way to his rendezvous. He slid down a dank alley and found himself standing by the heavy wooden door of a large merchant warehouse, which he rapped on in the careful, pre-arranged code.

A different knock answered him, and he knocked again in the pre-arranged fashion before the door was unbolted and opened for him, a similarly cloaked and hooded figure stepping aside to allow him entry. Aodh stepped through without a word and the door was closed and bolted behind him, then the man who had opened it lead him deeper into the warehouse, where two other men in ragged cloaks stood waiting.

"Prince Aodh," said one of the waiting men, "This meeting is as welcome as it was unexpected."

"This meeting is as dangerous as it is foolhardy," replied the other man, "Let us be done with this quickly, then go our separate ways as quickly as possible."

"Indeed," nodded Aodh, "But while we are here, let us talk of the Church and the Pope.... and what may be done to correct its inadequacies."

The four men gathered together, an unlikely quartet. One was a Prince of Scotland, but the other three were all noted heretics, their lives forfeit by order of Pope Villanus. Just being seen with them was enough to gain the attention of the Inquisition, to discuss openly religious issues with them was to almost guarantee death and ex-communication.

Aodh was taking his greatest risk yet.

Dougall Macdonchie stared up the hill at the massive fortress-city of Toledo, grinning behind his helm as he considered the challenge of the easily defended city. As had been predicted, the presence of King Domnall to the South and drawn all of Spain's armies in the field towards Cordoba. That was reckless tactics at best, made possible by King Mallobo's hot blooded temper, and Dougall was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Part of the reason the armies had moved South was also down to Toledo's natural defensive formations and large city-garrison. Toledo's new Governor Gomes was a favorite of Mallobo's and had been named new heir after Domnall had killed Prince Ferrando, and as such he had a large bodyguard at his disposal and some of the best, most capable men to defend his Fortress.



"Be conservative with your cannonballs, men," Dougall ordered his Bombards as he rode along the frontline of his men, "Toledo sits on four levels, each guarded by strong stone walls and gates. The Spanish will be forced to retreat from us multiple times today, I have nae doubt, and we will need ye to smash through them for us."

The Bombard Commander nodded and saluted with a grin, and Dougall continued on down the lines, offering words of encouragement and a jovial exchange when it seemed appropriate. This entire campaign felt different to any other Dougall had taken part in. The campaign against Milan had been filled with a savage hatred as the Scottish under his command had released pent up fury at the nation that had needled and poked and prodded them as they had to sit and take it while first King Edward and then King Domnall dealt with the Mongols. The campaign against the Sicilians had been more like pest control gone wrong, as Dougall and Adam Canmore had found themselves fighting drugged up madmen desperate to kill as many Scotsmen as they could before their own inevitable demise. The campaign against Spain had a different feel, after the initial disorientation of Spain's attacks and preventative measures putting them on the back foot, the Scottish had plunged directly into Spanish land and made quick gains. The atmosphere in the camps was one of eagerness and even fun, as the Scottish enjoyed teaching the Spanish a lesson for breaking their alliance. Since the fall of Zaragoza - which had happened unseen a long time before Dougall led his men out of Toulouse, he knew that much - they had been in complete control of the entire campaign, with the Spanish seeming to fall over themselves to make it easy for Scotland to defeat them.

Even now, with Toledo presenting a daunting defensive concern, Dougall could not help but feel at peace. Everything seemed right, and he had no doubt that despite the formidable nature of Gomes' men, Toledo would be his by the end of the day.

"FIRE!" he roared, and the Bombards fired on the city gates, tearing through them quickly as the soldiers standing the walls quickly moved off of them and deeper into the city. They understood that the first line of defense had been breached, and had fallen back in the hopes of thinning the Scottish horde now thundering towards them.







The fighting was bloody and close, no room for anything fancier than shoving swords at the soldier opposite. The Spanish were well armored and equipped, and disciplined to hold their places against overwhelming odds. The Scottish were not armored as well as their Spanish opponents, but their weapons were of quality, their fighting spirit undaunted, and they had the huge numbers advantage. Sheer weight alone began to tell on the Spanish as the Scottish infantry continued to charge through the shattered remains of the city gate, and finally the Spanish Commander called for his men to retreat back to Toledo's first interior wall. As they moved, men posted on that wall sent word back to Toledo's inner-most courtyard, and Prince Gomes gritted his teeth in a fury. Much like his mentor, King Mallobo, he had a temper that easily drove him into fits of rage with his subordinates, but unlike Mallobo he recognized this for the character flaw it was and refused to let it rule him.

Enemy Character Details



Prince Gomes

Governor

Command: ★★

Dread: ★

Loyalty: ★★

Piety: ★

Age: 19

Retinue

-  Tutor
-  Siege Engineer

Traits

- Easily Riled
- Iron Fisted
- Understands Logistics
- Talent for Command
- Feels Appreciated
- Heir Apparent

Spotted By: Nevin of Shetland

Subterfuge: ○○○○○○○○○○○○

"Send forward another two units of Swordsmen," he hissed through gritted teeth to his Second, "Have them hold the hill, ensure they have the interior wall at their backs so the Scottish have to come uphill in a narrow formation to get at them. Their primary duty is to keep that damned Bombard from getting into a position to fire on our gates."

His Second saluted and moved away, and Gomes again cursed the fate that had seen him made heir to the Spanish Throne, a privilege he had dreamed off all of his young life.

Now his dream had become a nightmare.



"Crossbows," Dougall said when word reached him off the new units standing on the hill before the first interior wall, joined by the fleeing Spanish who had engaged with his men after they entered the City, "Fire on them from a distance and draw them off, then send in the Infantry to surround them and put them to the sword."

"My Lord," nodded his Second, then hesitated, "The Spanish will surely see this for the trap it is?"

"Aye," replied Dougall, "But recognizing a trap and standing still while crossbow bolts are fired into ye flank are two different things. They'll have no choice but to attack and trust in their own sword arms to save them.... when faced with certain death, men must make decisions in battle they ken will likely be the death of them. Better to trust to chance than to stand still and accept death."

Dougall's words proved true, Crossbowmen circled around Toledo's buildings and opened fire on the Spanish holding the hill, and they reacted as expected. The Unit Commander knew he could not retreat back through the gate, Prince Gomes would only send him back out again, but he also knew if they charged the crossbowmen, Scottish Infantry would come up on them from behind.

"I'm not going to stand and die trying to decide between a rock and a hard place," he scowled at last, "Attack men, and watch your backs!"



"Bombards, I want that second gate down!" Dougall snapped as word reached him that the Spanish Units were being torn to shreds by the Scottish. He turned to stare at his mounted Bodyguard, "Time to enter the City lads, keep an eye out for Gomes, if he's stupid he'll attempt a cavalry charge on our infantry, and I want to be ready to ride on him the moment he comes out of hiding."

The Spanish tore free from the Scottish that had managed to come at them from two sides, the survivors running in desperation up the hill towards the walls. They scrambled through the gates, knowing that there were Scottish behind them, not stopping to think about the fact that the gates were open and twisted metal lay bunched on the ground in front of them. They twisted around the wall in relief, knowing that there would be more Spanish waiting to give them aid....

....and they ran directly into the Scottish that had all ready moved through the gates after the Bombards blew through them.



Gomes clenched his fist angrily as news reached him that the Scottish had breached the first interior wall, and ordered another Armored Swordsman Commander before him.

"Do you think **you** can follow orders, unlike your predecessors?" he snapped.

"My Prince!" saluted the Commander, understanding immediately. He ordered his men to follow him, as they moved through the city towards the second interior wall in an attempt to hold it against the Scottish. As he left, Gomes cursed himself for not putting all 800 of his men behind the City Gate to create a massive killing corridor. He'd been concerned that the severe losses they would have faced would have caused his men to break and the Scottish to win the city by default, but now it seemed they were going to win it in bits and pieces, as his own men were cut down piecemeal until he had none left. There were only three options left to him now, he could wait here and die; abandon the city; or....

"Prepare the men," he ordered the Commander of his Bodyguard, "I have a plan."

As Gomes gave his orders, the Spanish Swordsmen he'd sent to almost certain death were facing it, as they attempted to hold the overwhelming Scottish numbers at a chokepoint before the hill leading to the second interior defensive wall. They meant to hold their position no matter what, but as had all ready been proven earlier in the battle, there was a difference between thinking of facing overwhelming odds to the death and actually doing it. All it took was one soldier breaking, and then another and another, and suddenly all of them were fleeing back towards the uncertain safety of the wall.

"FOLLOW THEM!" ordered the Highland Captain, "THEY'LL OPEN THE GATES FOR THEIR COUNTRYMEN AND LET US IN WITH THEM!"







As the Scottish fought with the Spanish trying to hold the gate, word was sent back to Dougall that the bulk of the remaining Spanish Infantry seemed to be bunched together in the nearby Courtyard.

"Why aren't they aiding their countrymen?" Dougall wondered aloud, "It does nae matter, send Crossbowmen up onto the walls and have them fire on the waiting Spanish from above. If that does nae jolt them into action, our Highlanders and Spearmen will soon enough."

"There is nae word on Prince Gomes, my Lord," noted his Second.

"Aye, he'll be behind the last wall, hoping against hope for a miracle," grunted Dougall, "I had heard he was easily riled, but it seems he was nae more than an angry coward, hiding away from the battle. I swear these Spanish Generals seem to be more interested in shiny armor and brushing their hair than fighting war."





"The Spanish are being slaughtered, my Lord," noted Dougall's Second as word came back to him on the progress of the Scottish, "It seems only the final Gate remains between us and Prince Gomes."

"Good good, it is time we joined our men on the frontline then," nodded Dougall, "Order the men forward."

They moved their houses at a quick pace through Toledo, approaching the corpses of the first wave of Spanish that the Infantry had all ready dealt with.... and Dougall was given a reminder why it never paid to make assumptions of victory before the last of the enemy had been put to the sword.

"CHARGE!" screamed Gomes, giving full vent to his fury as he charged his Mounted Bodyguard out from between two houses and into the side of Dougall's own Bodyguard, slashing with their swords. The Spanish Prince had moved his men through a side gate as the Scottish Infantry was distracted fighting the Spanish at the gate, and been able to move them unseen through Toledo to lay in wait to ambush Dougall.

"IT'S A TRAP!" screamed Dougall, slashing with his sword as a Spaniard tried to take his head off, "FIGHT FOR YE LIVES!"



"SCOTSMAN!" roared Gomes, charging his horse towards Dougall, who had his back to the Spanish Prince as he fought Gomes' men, "I'LL KILL YOU SCOTSMAN!"

Dougall's Second had been separated from his General in the heat of battle, but he had heard Gomes' cry and seen him charging. Lashing out with his sword, he caught Gomes high in the chest with his blade, sending him flying off of his horse and crashing to the ground. Horses rode over him in the confusion and desperation of the fight, and King Mallobo lost his second heir



The last of the Spanish were quickly put down, Gomes' desperate last gamble not paying off. Dougall cleaned his blade, and then grinned as he heard the sound of cheering coming from deeper within the city.

"It's over," he grinned, "Toledo is ours."



Toledo was Scotland's.

King Mallobo ordered the quivering messenger gone with an oddly flat voice, then crumpled up the note telling of Toledo's fall and Gomes' death and tossed it aside.

"First Ferrando, now Gomes," he grunted, "Who shall lead Spain when I am gone?"

His options now were few, there was Diago Ruberto who was leading the siege on King Domnall at Cordoba, but despite Ruberto's strengths he had proven in the past that his loyalty only stretched as far as his own self interest.

Not for the last time, he considered his pathetic son, Bernardo. The boy had showed promise in his youth, but for too long he had coasted along on Mallobo's own fearsome reputation to instill fear, rather than his own actions. He also lacked the spine for political maneuvering, far too keen to have the nobility consider him a friend while taking out his aggressions on the common people. Mallobo had given him the Governorship of Leon to the North to see how he dealt with ruling a City, and so far his disappointment in his son's actions had been only made worse by Bernardo's seeming belief that his Father was rewarding and honoring him, rather than testing him.

Still, he **did** bring in a lot of money through taxes.

Enemy Character Details



Bernardo el Valiente Age: 37

Governor ★★☆☆☆☆

Command ★★☆☆☆☆

Dread ★★☆☆☆☆

Loyalty ★★☆☆☆☆

Piety ★★☆☆☆☆

Retinue

-  Siege Engineer
-  Overseer
-  Master Smith
-  Adulteress
-  Military Engineer

Traits

-  Natural Commander
-  Dreaded Father
-  Everyone's Friend
-  Promising Tactician
-  Cruel Leader
-  Feels Honoured
-  Gets Merry
-  Good with Taxes

King Mallobo winced as a sudden bolt of pain ripped through his chest, and he grabbed at his heart with one hand as the other slammed against the wall for support. He gritted his teeth and the veins on his neck stood out as he fought through a pain that seemed endless and then finally, mercifully, was gone. He slumped to his knees, sweating profusely and feeling an unfamiliar weakness in his limbs that he did not like.

"Not yet," he finally managed in a ragged whisper, "I have too much work to do yet..."

Aodh sat once more with the three Heretics, this time in yet another seemingly randomly chosen location within Genoa. Despite previous concerns over the dangers of meeting, their encounters had proven so mutually satisfactory that they'd agreed to meet again. The man that Aodh had come to think of as the leader - Pontius - had organized a drop point for Aodh to discover the location of their next meeting place, and only with an hour's notice. Such paranoia was how Pontius had lived as long as he had, and his two companions - Cederno and Pero - were more than happy to follow his lead.

"Will you tell us more of your vision, Prince Aodh?" Cederno asked with a smile as they settled down, "I am curious as to the symbolism of the fields and Scotland's previous enemies by the roadside."

"Pah," snapped Pontius, "It was nothing more than Aodh's mind telling him a truth his conscious mind would not accept, that the Pope and the Church are the enemies of the world."

"Now now," smiled Pero uneasily, "God speaks to us all in different ways, something the Church cannot and will not accept, but something true nonetheless. We are blessed to have Prince Canmore with us."

Aodh smiled, the three heretics were as different and opinionated as some of the scholars he remembered from his youth, arguing passionately amongst themselves as they were overseen by his Father, a man who had craved and loved new discoveries, new information, and further education. It had taken Aodh a long time to respect not just his Father, but his Father's need to know and understand things others took on faith. How he wished the man he was now could talk to his Father, but they would not meet again until the Day of Judgment, and who knew what might conspire to keep them apart while they waited to learn their fates from God himself.

For everything that Aodh knew now, he still did not know if his Father would be forgiven for his lack of faith.

Pontius was a complete skeptic, he did not believe in either God or Religion, but in science and education. He believed man was an animal that had learned to dominate and control its environment, and that self-awareness was nothing more than an accident, a twist of fate.

Cederno was a believer, but in an entirely different God to that of the Catholic Church. He believed that God was a being of such immense magnitude that man could not understand him in anything but metaphor and symbolism, and that the Bible as taught by the Church now was merely the translations of disparate authors of the symbology and metaphor they had encountered in their time.

Pero was also a believer, but in the concept of God as opposed to the strict religious guidelines as laid down by the Catholic Church. He believed that every man was capable of a personal relationship with God, but one filtered through their own beliefs and concepts. Like Cederno he felt that God was something beyond the ability of man to understand, and thus every person would see God differently.... and thus the Bible and the teachings of the Church could not be seen as the Word of God, because the Word was filtered through the imperfect understanding of different men.

Aodh had told them of his vision in great detail, but it was one particular facet that had enthralled them all, even Pontius. In his vision, as Aodh had dropped to his knees trying to make a decision as to which of the four roads to take, a white light had shone on him and a booming voice spoken, a voice he believed to be that of God. What it had said had been cryptic but unmistakable in its implications.

"The Rock of my Church erodes, Aodh Canmore, you will give it strength once more."

"The Rock of the Catholic Church is the Pope," mused Cederno, "That symbol has always been clear, even if nothing else in the Bible is."

"And the erosion means that the Pope is weakening the Church with his clamp-down on heresy," nodded Pero.

"And you will strengthen it, Aodh," finished Pontius, "In anyone else I would say that was personal vanity, but not you. You are one of the only people in the world who could challenge the authority of the Pope and *maybe* survive it. Scotland rules over half of the world and your devotion to the Church has always been known... and the tale of how you challenged and bested the Inquisition is the stuff of legend amongst the common people. If you were to speak out against the Pope and call for the Church to accept the idea of different interpretations of religion.... including atheism.... you might be able to pull it off."

"What do the rest of ye think?" Aodh asked, "It was hard to get ye together, but I did so because the three of ye are considered amongst the most influential and well regarded of the "heretics"."

"Yes, yes," nodded Cederno, "Every day that the Church presses its constrictive interpretation of the Bible on man is a day too far."

"....yes," mumbled Pero nervously, then more resolutely, "Yes, I am tired of the Pope telling me how I must feel about God."

Aodh stood and pressed his hands against the table, "That was what I was waiting for, resolution and determination, ye have made my course of action clear, and it can be nae other way."

The three Heretics leaned forward eagerly to hear what he had to say next, but he spoke only one word, and despite the loudness with which he spoke it, they did not immediately understand.

"NOW!"

Realization dawned in Pontius' eyes first, shock followed by utter dismay, and then the doors around them burst open and armed guards stormed in, grabbed the three Heretics and slamming them roughly to the floor, pikes pressed against the backs of their necks.

"Take them away," he ordered coldly, "They are to be charged with heresy and blasphemy."

Pontius spat at Aodh in a rage as he was dragged away, but the Scottish Prince did not deign to react, simply watching as the three men were removed, and then new men entered.

"We thank you, Prince Canmore," nodded Lanbertus de Arizio, Inquisitor of the Catholic Church, "These three have long eluded Justice."

"Your Faith is beyond reproach, Prince Canmore," added Gratianus Martini, another Inquisitor, "It must have galled you to hear such blasphemy and have to bear it."

"We all must make sacrifices for God," Aodh replied, and the two Inquisitors nodded in understanding, before moving on and leaving Aodh alone in the room.

"Even if they are human sacrifices," Aodh thought to himself, his face blank against the possibility he was still being observed, "God forgive me, but I did what must be done."

Blasphemer Executed!
Pontius



Your attempts to denounce this vile wretch via a trial of heresy have proven successful! They shall be executed for their crimes against the one true faith, as their souls are purified over a mighty pyre.

Blasphemer Executed!
Cederno the Unorthodox



Your attempts to denounce this vile wretch via a trial of heresy have proven successful! They shall be executed for their crimes against the one true faith, as their souls are purified over a mighty pyre.

Blasphemer Executed!
Pero the Unorthodox



Your attempts to denounce this vile wretch via a trial of heresy have proven successful! They shall be executed for their crimes against the one true faith, as their souls are purified over a mighty pyre.

Chapter 50

Aodh Canmore, I extend my greetings to you, loyal son of Christ.

In this age where the Church feels besieged on all sides by the tides of heresy, I feel truly blessed to know that despite Scotland's oft-times unsettling domination of the corporeal world, the sons of Scotland remain faithful to the Church and God.

My predecessors were blessed by your Uncle Edward, who recaptured the Holy Land for the Church and spread the word of God. However, since he stemmed the tide of the vast Mongol Horde that your Brother then vanquished; and you yourself put an end to the heathen Moors, the world has become a scandalous place. I fear that complacency has allowed the rock of the Church to erode, people no longer long to the Church for guidance, they trust to false idols as surely as the Jews betrayed Moses as he received the Ten Commandments. Today's golden calf is heresy, the concepts of "symbology" and "atheism" and such blasphemy as the "Sacred Feminine" that goes so far as to claim Jesus Christ was mortal man and fathered children with the whore Magdalene.

So it is with glad heart that word reached me of the trap you laid for the heretics that have done the most damage with their "preaching". The death of Pontius in particular was of particular good tidings for me, but more so the knowledge that Scotland stands in defense of the faith. Surely it is a sign of God's good graces that the two mightiest Empires in the world - Scotland and Poland - are strong in their faith and support of the Church.

You have given this humble servant of God much comfort, and so I in turn hope to give comfort to you. The Spanish King Mallobo has insulted both the Church and Scotland in recent times, and I have exacted a just punishment in ex-communicating him from the Church, guaranteeing his eternal damnation for his folly and arrogance. But the purpose of the Christ-On-Earth is to deal to matters both spiritual and corporeal, and thus I offer Scotland this comfort.

Two Papal Armies have issued forth on vessels from the port of Rome to make dock near the city of Cagliari, only recently lost by Scotland to the Spanish. In the name of God we will retake Cagliari and return the people of that city to the Governance of Catholic Rulers. To the north of Cagliari sits the Spanish city of Ajaccio, which itself is divided only by a thin stretch of sea from your own home of Genoa. Would it not be remarkable to see Scotland rule in Ajaccio and Cagliari governed by an agent of the Papacy? Truly such would be a reflection of the current relationship between our "Empires", at least in the corporeal sense!

I leave you with the blessings of Christ and the heartfelt thanks of the Papacy. Truly Scotland is blessed, and truly you are blessed, Aodh Canmore.

Villanus

Aodh read the note with a blank face, then sat in thought for several minutes, indicating no emotional reaction to the oddly personal letter from the Pope. To simply see the Pope was the dream of most of the faithful, to receive a letter from him a fantasy, and to receive a personal letter of thanks beyond the realms of the wildest fantasy, but for all Aodh's reaction he might as well have been reading a note on the disbursement of funds for the purchase of cabbage.

Finally he reacted, pulling out two sheets of paper and writing brief letters on both, choosing his words carefully. He checked the small oddity on his personal desk, a remarkable device created in Cairo that was quickly spreading amongst the nobility. The clock - which marked not only the hours of the day but also the minutes themselves - recorded a time of half past the hour of nine in the morning, and he made notes on the two letters based on this.

Your Holiness,

I feel truly honored that my small part in the endless charge to preserve and strength the Church has been recognized, but I did only what any good Christian should. Heresy, as you have noted yourself with great passion, is a fractious influence on not just the uneducated, but those who should know better.

It was my pleasure to serve the Church in my own small way, following as I was the example you yourself have provided all Christians in your addresses on heresy. All it would take is every good Christian to denounce heretics in their midst, and they would soon discover that True Faith cannot be overcome by their false claims.

Regarding Cagliari, I feel a somewhat un-Christian vanity in the parallels between my thoughts and your own. It is a human weakness that I must ever seek to vanquish, and through the grace of God perhaps I one day shall. My vanity stems from the fact that just this very morning I dispatched a force of men with orders to retake Cagliari, and now I learn you have done the same! I only wish I could contact them in time to call them back, or to stand their ground until they could reinforce your own men. Still, whether men of Scotland or men of the Papacy capture Cagliari, I take solace in knowing that men of God will return to Governance of that land.

God truly works in mysterious ways,

Aodh Canmore.

He rang a bell and a servant quickly entered, and Aodh told him to summon a messenger and a young Captain of the Genoa Garrison. The former arrived quickly and was given the message for the Pope, dispatched quickly even as Captain Lulach arrived and saluted his Prince.

"Ye orders," Aodh said, passing the second letter to him, "I apologize for asking the impossible, Lulach, but ye must gather together a force of men and dispatch from the docks before the cry of 12, it is imperative ye leave Genoa before the morning passes. That letter contains my seal, giving ye authority over the location of ye conquest."

"Aye, my Prince," nodded Lulach, surprise in his eyes and accepting the order, "...May I ask, what **is** the location of my conquest?"

"Why, Cagliari of course," smiled Aodh, "We are to make her Scottish again.... Scottish no matter who stands in our way."

The War was over

King Mallobo of Spain stood staring out across Valencia, his city, his home, and tried to come to terms with the fact that it was true.... the war was over.

And so was Spain.

It had all gone wrong, and he knew now there was nobody he could blame but himself. His plans had been sound, the execution flawless.... and yet somehow Scotland had still found a way through, using the Devil's own luck. The early gain of Cagliari and the inexorable pressure being placed on Algiers had seemed great omens, and the genius of staging the war from Zaragoza under the command of the deadly Diego Manuel had seemed at first to completely negate Scotland's infamous Spy Network.

But then Manuel has seemingly betrayed the Spanish, Zaragoza had fallen; the Spanish Fleets had been sent chasing phantom fleets of Pirates and Scottish ships; Ian of Moray had killed Agosto de Leon; King Domnall had reinforced Algiers and then taken Granada, then Cordoba, killing Mallobo's heir Ferrando.

It was the speed with which the Scottish moved that had truly shocked Mallobo, what had kept the Spanish on the back-foot from the moment the Scottish regained their forward momentum. Spanish armies had marched thinking to meet the Scottish where they should have been, only to find they'd all ready conquered the cities they'd laid siege to and moved on. As the Spanish wheeled about struggling to catch up to King Domnall's armies, focused as they were on trying to demoralize the Scottish by killing their King, Dougall Macdonchie had secured the garrison at Zaragoza and then bashed his way through the seemingly impregnable walls of Toledo and killed Mallobo's next heir, Gomes.

Even then Spain could have possibly recovered and even taken the front foot, of that Mallobo had been convinced. But then word had reached him that an army consisting of farmers and peasants led by Hew Mar had killed Pasqual de Cordoba and his elite soldiers in Scotland's northern holdings. The implications of Scottish farmers being capable of slaughtering Armored Spanish Knights had dealt a horrifying blow to the Spanish morale... and then Diago Ruberto had dealt the killing stroke.

Enemy Character Details



Diago Ruberto

Age: 22

Family member

Command



Chivalry



Loyalty



Piety



Retinue

None

Traits

Aspiring Commander

Dauntless

Night Fighter

Noble in Battle

Disloyal

Spotted By:

Micheil Macconel

Subterfuge:



Ruberto had been laying siege to Cordoba with the bulk of Spain's remaining elite soldiers. Taking a cautious approach to ensure every variable was taken into account for when he finally attempted to break the walls, he had spent weeks preparing siege towers, battering rams, ladders, trebuchets and Bombards. When word reached him late at night that Toledo had fallen and Gomes with it, he had immediately seen the writing on the wall.

Spain was finished.

The next morning dawned in the siege camp outside Cordoba with an important, integral asset missing - the Commanders. Ruberto had held a meeting in the dead of night with his most trusted Commanders and laid out their predicament. King Mallobo's competent heirs were dead, leaving only his simplistic son Bernardo el Valiente to rule when the old man died, which he surely would sooner rather than later.

By the time the sun rose, the Spanish soldiers found their Commanders had fled the field, either taking the Sentries they encountered with them or killing those who refused to see reason. Panic spread through the ranks of the Spanish soldiers, then arguments, then fighting as larger and larger groups of men broke away from the siege and disappeared into the land they knew so well. The stream of men soon became a torrent, watched with disbelief by the Scottish from the walls of Cordoba, and before noon, the siege camp lay deserted of all but the bodies of Spaniards killed either in fighting or trampled in the mad rush to escape.

By mid-afternoon, King Domnall sat his horse in the remains of the siege camp alongside Patrick Makfulchiane, and remarked to him what Diago Ruberto had all ready realized and that King Mallobo would not come to admit for some time.

"Spain is finished, lad," King Domnall stated flatly, "Those cowards have done more than win this battle for us, they have won the War. Word will spread of this desertion, both by the deserters and others, and it will spread like wildfire throughout all of Spain. Morale will plummet, Spain's hold on its lands will weaken, and we will appear at all the right points to exert pressure."

He stared in the direction of far distant Valencia and smiled cruelly, "I have orders to write up before the sun sets, it is time to show Mallobo the cost of declaring war on Scotland."

The end began in Ajaccio.

Captain Lulach had seized back control of Cagliari even as the Pope's armies marched up within sight of the walls of the city. Pushing his men to breaking limit, he'd set up a city garrison and put engineers to work repairing damage done from the battle. Representatives of the Pope's armies had come to inspect the city and offer "graciously" to take the burden of governance away from Lulach so he could concentrate on the war with Spain, but he had insisted instead that they return to Rome to do the duty God had chosen for them, protecting the Pope.

They had left with strained, formally polite words and Lulach had cursed not having a Diplomat with him who could have made the words prettier, then put them from his mind and took control of the better half of his remaining army to lead them north to Ajaccio in case the Papal Armies decided to further "help" Scotland by conquering the Spanish there. On Lulach's way he heard that the Spanish Garrison Commander had sent several hundred men to meet them in the hills, but they never arrived, instead spiriting away either into the hills or commandeering boats and disappearing into the sea. Word had arrived of Ruberto's desertion, and the Spanish soldiers in the field appeared to agree with Ruberto's own conclusion.

Spain was finished.

Captain Lulach arrived at the walls of Ajaccio with Spanish trebuchets liberated from Cagliari in tow, while inside the city, Spain's Captain Sebastian found himself with barely 100 men left, the rest having deserted long since. He gulped as he felt the shudders running through the walls as the trebuchets blasted through the thick stone and heard the screams of the Scotsmen as they charged through the breach.

All there was left to him was to die a Spaniard.





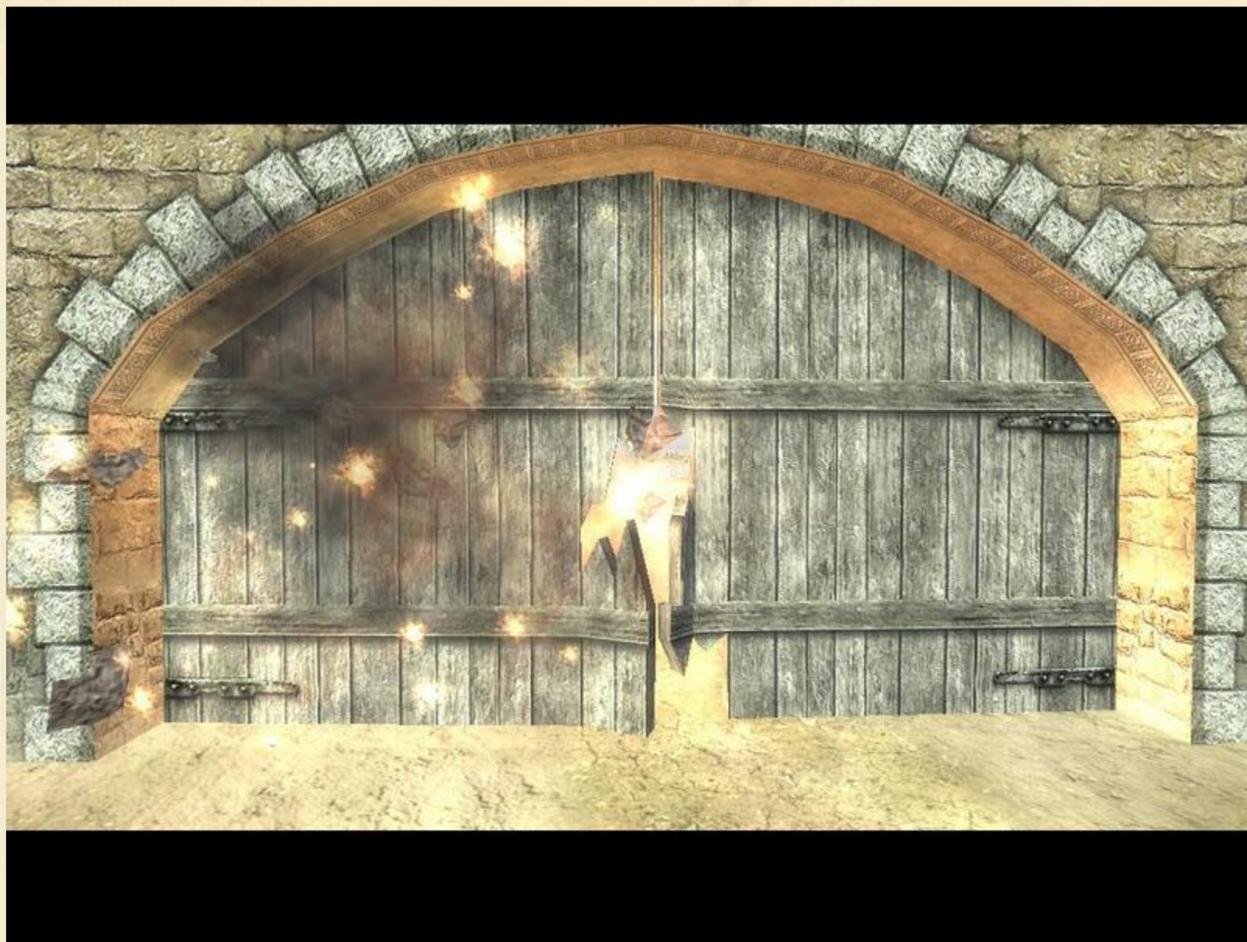
The end continued in Marrakesh.

Captain Jacome had always felt isolated from the rest of Spain in Marrakesh, in fact he'd always felt isolated from everyone. The city sat on the Westernmost Coast of the world, the last stretch of land before the endless sea.

But now he knew what isolation really felt like.

Allan of Nairnshire had sent a force of 700 men under the command of Captain Micheil west from Algiers to attack the coastal city, even as news trickled down to Marrakesh of the disastrous desertion of the army at Cordoba. His own men deserted the city seemingly overnight, leaving him with only 80 men who stood as true Spaniards.

And the gates were coming down.



"There is nothing but death for us here, Captain," Jacome's Second said as they stood in the dusty courtyard of Marrakesh and watched the wave of Scottish pouring down the main street towards them.

"Nothing but death," nodded Jacome, "Some say it is better to live in dishonor than die nobly... let them say it till their dying day, and may every night they live be cursed with nightmares for their cowardice."

He spat on the ground, and waited for death to come.



He awoke early in the morning to hear the sounds of panicked running and shouting, footfalls thundering down the corridors of the palace. He grunted and slapped his arm over at his mistress to get her out of bed and find out what was going on... but she was not in the bed. Confused, Bernardo slid out of bed and pulled on a pair of tights and a shirt, and stumbled out of his bedchamber into the palace, watching bemused as servants ran about clutching silverware and other valuables.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked one servant, grabbing his arm as the man tried to tear past him.

"The Scottish have arrived!" cried the servant, then tore himself loose and continued running, while Bernardo snorted with amusement. So the Scottish had arrived and now the servants were moving the valuables down to the treasury it seemed... why bother? The Scottish were sure to breach the walls with their Bombards, but their 600 men could not defeat Bernardo's 1200 loyal men. He strode confidently down the halls whistling a tune, happy at last to put paid to the long simmering tension of the city.

He strode into his war room and smiled when he saw the Commander of his Bodyguard all ready fully armored, hastily reviewing a map of the city with his Military Engineer.

"So the time for battle has come at last, eh?" he chuckled, "Why was I not woken?"

"You could not be roused, my Lord," bowed the Commander, "It seems your Mistress drugged your wine."

"Hmmm?" muttered Bernardo, vaguely remembering feeling dizzy after his wine with Alicia the night before... why would she drug him? Surely if she wanted to ensure he had a good night's sleep she could have waited until he'd spent himself between her thighs.

"We have been reviewing our options, my Lord," his Engineer said, breaking his reverie, "I am afraid they are few."

"Well of course they're few," Bernardo laughed, "We sit at whatever point they breach our walls and we kill them until they're piled near as high as the walls themselves.... I swear, why do you try to make things more complicated than they are?"

His Engineer and Bodyguard Commander shared a look, and then his Commander took his arm.

"My Lord, I think it best if you review the troops."

"Of course," sighed Bernardo, "But first I must be armored, where is my bodyservant?"

"Gone, my Lord," said the Engineer, "But allow us, we shall armor you."

Half an hour later, Bernardo strode resplendent in his armor into the courtyard where his mounted Bodyguard of 40 men awaited. He was aided into his seat and smiled warmly at his men, who seemed oddly tense, then turned to look at the Commander.

"Well man," he said with a smile, "Take me to the troops then!"

"My Lord," sighed his Commander, Miguel, "You do not understand. The troops have deserted Leon.... these 40 men are all that remains of the garrison. The Scottish outnumber us by over six times the number of men.... Leon will fall, my Lord, we who remain are going to die before the day ends.

And for perhaps the first time in his life, Bernardo finally saw things for how they really were.

Unfortunately for him, it would also be the last time.



Outside the walls of the city, Dougall ordered the bombards to fire and forced himself to calm himself. Events had unfolded quickly after Ruberto's desertion, and it seemed Spain's capitulation had been almost too fast for Scotland to keep up with. But now here he sat before Leon, and once it fell, all that would be left to the Spanish in their own heartland would be Mallobo at Valencia. He was sure that by the time he'd completed today's bloody business, Timbuktu would have fallen as well, and then it would be all but done.

Spain would be finished.

The gates shattered open under the assault of the bombards, and Dougall lifted his sword high, giving the command. The frontline rippled and moved forward like a giant arrowhead, and thundered their way into the Spanish city of Leon.





"Fly," Bernardo whispered, and the raven lifted into the stormy air and flapped off directly towards Valencia, the final letter to his Father tied to its leg. He forced himself calm, bitterly biting back the tears that threatened to overwhelm him, the desire to scream that this wasn't fair! His soldiers had deserted him after all the kindness he had shown him! It just wasn't fair!

He was lifted back up onto his horse and gripped tightly to the reins, pulling shut his helm.

"So it had come to this," he grunted, loud enough for the men to hear, "Perhaps I have not always been the best son, the best General, the best Governor, the best man..... but I mean to die the best way I can. I will die fighting to my last breath for Spain... will you join me?"

"If we meant to desert you, we would have with the other cowards," Miguel replied, "Let us ride to our deaths then."

"And what glory we can find in it," nodded Bernardo, and lead what pathetic remnants of men he had left against the Scottish.





"It's over," Dougall sighed as the last of the Spanish were cut down, "All over bar the shouting."



It is over, Father.

I am sorry I could not be the son you wanted me to be, I only hope my death in noble battle will make you proud. Do not surrender, Father, Spain will continue on without me, it MUST continue on without me.

I love you, Father, as you love Spain. Fight for it as I go now to fight for you.

Bernardo el Valiente.

"Stupid little shit," hissed Mallobo, crumpling the letter from his dead son and tossing it over his shoulder without a backward glance as he stomped to the balcony of his study, "Of course Spain will continue without him.... I AM Spain, as long as I live, it lives."

He gripped the stone railing of the balcony and grimaced as he felt the now familiar pain in his chest, and waited for it to pass as it always did.

He was Spain incarnate, his Father had taught him that, the King was always Spain incarnate. But the country itself was falling apart. News had just reached him that Timbuktu had fallen, and the Scottish held Marrakesh, Granada, Cordoba, Toledo, Leon and Zaragoza.

And now King Domnall marched on Valencia.

His soldiers were deserting their posts in droves, his own Commanders and Advisors - men he had known and thought broken to his will for years, some decades - had abandoned him. There was no control or authority in the streets of Valencia, there were open riots and the City Watch were too terrified to stop the looting... or too busy taking part in it.

But as long as he lived, Spain would live.

"I will not die," he hissed, face turning red as he called once more on the fury, spite and bile that had sustained him for so long. Some called for the squashing of emotions to make impartial decisions, but Mallobo believed in the purity of rage. Anger gave him clarity, he made connections that eluded others, more importantly he put people off balance because they could not predict him. It had been the key to his success as King, to why he'd lifted Spain into a world power.

Only to see it all fall apart when his rage had turned him on Scotland.

Pain wracked at his chest but he ignored it, burying the pain under his rage as he built it and let invective spill from between his clenched teeth, screaming out his fury at the Scottish; at the incompetence of his Generals; the cowardice of his soldiers; the ineptitude of his son. And all the time that he vented his rage, he sought that clarity that only rage could bring him.... and then it came.

"As long as I live, Spain lives," he hissed, and twisted about to stare wildly at his over-sized study, "So the Scottish will try to kill me to kill Spain.... King Domnall marches on Valencia, but he will want me dead before he arrives.... Scotland is all ready here."

He smashed aside a table and desk, then tore open a cupboard, eyes wild with hate and understanding. He knew now, HE KNEW!

"SCOTLAND IS ALL READY HERE!" he screamed, and tore down a tapestry, revealing dusty cobwebbed walls. He twisted and pulled another one down, then another and another, screaming over and over again that he knew, he knew Scotland was here all ready, SCOTLAND WAS HERE!

And finally only one tapestry remained.

It was larger than all the others, his favorite, telling the story of his greatest triumph defending Zaragoza from an army of Milan in his youth. Duke Puccio had bloodied his nose against Mallobo and retreated, never to threaten them again, and it had been the making of Mallobo, who at the time had been but one of many potential heirs to the throne. How as he stood staring at it, he wondered if that was a slight bulge he saw in the tapestry, if maybe the uniformity of the dust at the tapestries base was TOO uniform, as if it had been laid down.

"I see you...." he hissed, spittle frothing from between clenched teeth, "I know you're here, Scotland, I KNOW! I KN-"

He gasped as his anger was finally overwhelmed by pain, and he gripped at his chest loosely as he collapsed to his knees halfway to the tapestry. The pain was incredible, more than he'd ever felt in his life, and his arms and legs seemed to have lost all feeling, his mind almost overwhelmed by the agony.

Almost.

"I know!" he insisted, practically crawling towards the tapestry, his right hand clenching at the stone floor, the left trailing limply behind, his legs loosely shifting about behind him, "I KNOW YOU'RE THERE! I KN.... I K.... I.... i...."

Finally, King Mallobo said no more, his body crashing into place in a dead weight, his hand twitching one more time and then finally pausing. He lay that way for several minutes, unmoving, not breathing.

The tapestry twitched lightly, and then Farquar Makfulchiane stepped out and gently toed Mallobo's corpse, turning it over and revealing a face contorted by rage.

"Well that was interesting," the Assassin muttered, "I dinnae feel I can really take credit for this one."

The end had come in Valencia. King Mallobo was dead, and with him, Spain.

Faction Destroyed Spain



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



King Domnall rode through the gates of Valencia at the head of an army of 1000 Scottish soldiers, and stared about him at the gathered masses. The people of Valencia were bruised, battered and frightened from an orgy of looting, rioting, arson, rape and murder after Mallobo's men had abandoned the city and all authority. Now they stood waiting to see what Scotland had in store for them, their minds filled with the stories they had heard of the demon Scots.

"Your Majesty," said one man, one of those who had fought his way to a position of leadership over the last week of lawless anarchy, "What are your plans for us? We are Spanish, we are your enemies."

Domnall smiled, and to the surprise of the people of Valencia, it was not an unkind smile.

"Spanish? Nae lad, there is nae Spain anymore," he spoke clearly, so all could hear, "There is only Scotland."



Nevin of Shetland sat under an apple tree inside the grounds of the palace at Genoa, shining the green apple in his hand and enjoying the sun on his face.

"Welcome home... "Domingo"," said a voice, and Nevin smiled up at Aodh Canmore, the Scottish Prince arriving right on time. Nevin had not announced his return, he wouldn't be much of a Spy if he had, but he had made certain to be somewhere where Aodh would see him, and as expected the Scottish Spymaster had been quick to reacquaint himself with his most important "adviser" and close friend.

"Manuel was a fascinating man with a fascinating history," Nevin acknowledged, "He told me and my "associate" all about it after we applied the proper encouragement... he was eager to tell us everything he could."

"And it won us the war with Spain," agreed Aodh, settling down beside Nevin under the apple tree, "At least, far faster than we would have."

"I am nae a torturer, my Prince," Nevin spoke after a companionable silence, "Which may sound odd considering where I have just returned from, but I did what I did because of extraordinary circumstances... I would nae ever wish to do and see the things I did in that basement in Zaragoza... we reduced a frighteningly competent Spy into a blubbing wreck who would have licked knife blades if we'd ordered him to. I can mask my emotions and quash my humanity when the need arises, but I dinnae have the taste for this messy business, I'm nae Farquar Makfulchiane."

"Nae," smiled Aodh, "Ye're Nevin of Shetland, and I'd nae have it any other way. I shudder to think of what ye'd be capable of if ye had Farquar's mindset, or he ye talent for Spycraft."

They sat again for awhile in companionable silence, and then finally Nevin spoke up with what Aodh had known he would inevitably ask.

"The Heretics, my Prince, ye play a dangerous game when the Pope is one of the pieces on the board," he warned, "I dinnae ken what ye plan is, or even if ye have one, but I do ken ye dinnae follow the man blindly as the Christ-On-Earth, ye actions in taking Cagliari out from under him proves that... what are ye up to?"

"I did nae think ye'd ever be the one to ask **me** that," chuckled Aodh, but Nevin did not share in his mirth. Aodh sighed, then nodded his head, "I cannae tell ye what I plan, Nevin, this game I play is for the largest stakes of all, and if I fail it may nae cost me just my life, it may cost Scotland the Empire. If this fails, I will see to it that I am the only one to pay for it, not Domnall, not Aed, not ye, not even warty old Adam in Toulouse."

Nevin stared at his Prince and his Spymaster for a long time, and Aodh stared back, and for perhaps the first time since they'd met on the long dusty road from Antioch to Cairo, Nevin found he could not read Aodh Canmore.

"It will be as ye wish then, my Prince," he said at last, and took a bite out of his apple, settling back against the trunk of the tree. Aodh smiled at him, sensing his disappointment and, more importantly, that the Spy was actually upset that Aodh did not trust him. He could not tell him his plans, but maybe he could assuage his bruised ego in another way.

"I do think, however," he noted nonchalantly, "That perhaps it is time I told ye about the special mission Domnall gave me after we destroyed the Sicilians."

Nevin did not move, but Aodh knew he had his complete and total attention. The Prince smiled, and began to tell his friend about one of the most personal aspects of his life, something before then only ever spoken off with his brother.

It was a boy!

The Canmore Clan had grown huge with the number of marriages and adoptions that had swelled its ranks, but the constant influx of new men had been either by adoption or marriage, with new sons born with the names of their Fathers and not the name Canmore.

But now a male Canmore had been born, a boy who could be expected to be groomed for leadership. Despite Edmund Canmore's best efforts to educate and remove the old fears of superstitions, there were still many who would see the lack of a male Canmore to continue the line as some kind of divine condemnation of Scotland's King. Men who deserved to lead or to rule would be passed over in favor of someone with the name Canmore simply because of that name. Finally, even Edmund had not been immune to the oldest reason for a desire of male children. Fathers wanted to give sons everything they themselves had worked for, when King Edward had been willing to pass on the throne to the most talented of his General's (first Comgell, then Gawain), it had been Edmund who had seen to it that his son Domnall succeeded his Uncle.

The birth of the newest male Canmore was a great surprise to many despite the wedded status of his parents, in fact maybe because of it. Knowing who his parents were, many had considered there would be no heir, male or otherwise. When she had fallen pregnant, many had feared that child could be stunted, or an idiot, or die before she could give birth. Certainly they had expected complications, but her pregnancy had gone smoothly, the birth had only been as difficult as any other woman's birth-giving would be, and the child seemed healthy and as responsive as any other.

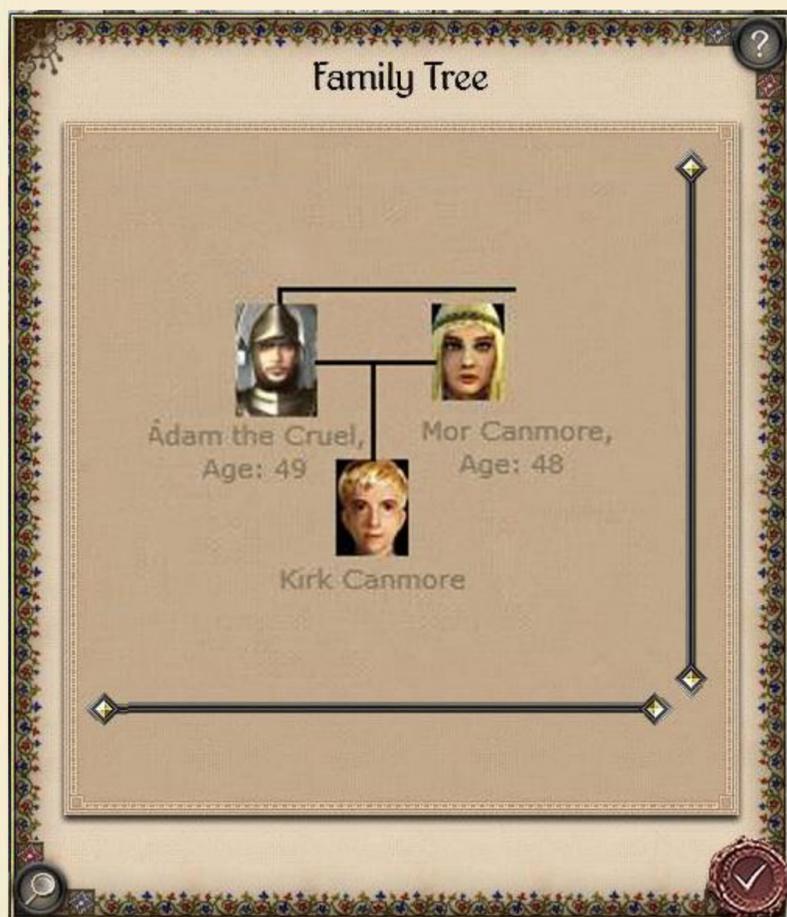
More than that, the boy's father had discovered something else as unexpected as the birth of an heir... he'd discovered he loved his wife, truly loved her. It was a baffling discovery for him to make and it changed his entire worldview, but then, birth often had that effect on new Fathers.

Kirk Canmore's Father stood over the bed where the infant slept soundly, making light breathing noises that he thought would break his heart. He felt he finally understood his own Father now, how a man could suddenly forget all about himself and think only of sacrificing everything for his son.

"Happy, darling?" asked his wife as she joined him to stare down at their unexpected child.

"More than I ever dreamt," he replied, and placed his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close to him.

Adam and Mor Canmore stood that way for quite some time.



Chapter 51

Peace.

The world was at peace again, though an uneasy, troubled peace. Scotland lay still, a slumbering giant that the rest of the world tiptoed about carefully, none wishing to suffer the same fate as Spain. The Pope spoke himself hoarse warning of the dangers of heresy, while the Holy Roman Empire struggled with an empire made smaller now made smaller by a split in its lands. For the first time in centuries, there were mutterings of having two Emperors again. Portugal found their once deadly enemies the Spanish gone from the world, replaced by the Scottish who had never made any aggressive move towards them. There were dark mutterings of the foolishness of Portugal's past aggressive diplomacy with the Superpower, and many nights found the Portuguese looking worriedly across their borders for an enemy that might come at any time. Denmark and Hungary both troubled themselves with internal matters, as their Catholic populations expressed anger over the ex-communication of their Kings. Venice sat surrounded and wary, clutching tightly to what small land it had left, while the once mighty Byzantine Empire looked out at a world it once ruled and wondered how it had all come to this. In the cold north-east, Poland sat confident and secure, the only world power left that could consider itself safe from Scotland. The alliance with Scotland they had brokered with the legendary Gille Calline the Balleol had served them far better than it had The Holy Roman Empire, and Spain had proven the cost of breaking such an Alliance. When Poland thought of the future now, it thought of a time when the world was divided along South-Western Scottish and North-Eastern Polish lines.

And what was left of the Russians fought amongst themselves for scraps of a once mighty Empire.



In Scotland, King Domnall and his son-in-law rode out of their newly conquered Spanish territories and came to Toulouse. There, Domnall visited with his cousin Adam and was introduced to the newest male Canmore, Kirk, delighting in the birth of a possible male heir even as he marveled at the changes to Adam himself.

In Genoa, Aodh Canmore continued his tutelage under Nevin of Shetland, learning still more about the art of Spycraft and the surprising revelation that a world at peace could be more dangerous than a world at war.

In Alexandria, Aed Canmore and Muriel Canmore found life at Court finally returning to a semblance of normality as the shock of their marriage finally wore off. The two had struggled at first with their own concerns over their marriage, was it one of convenience or love? But time together as man and wife had finally seen them embrace the marriage fully, and Aed had finally discovered what it was like to have a woman he could feel love for, while Muriel delighted in being with a man who recognized her as more than breeding stock.

And in Yerevan.... the Court sat empty.

North of Yerevan, an alien army moved armed to the teeth with impunity through the Polish territories. Riding at its head was a horrified Scottish Noble, Roy Macgoulchane, whose life had become a nightmare with one person looming large over every action he took.

Angus the Mauler.

"You paid HOW MUCH!?" he demanded in a harsh whisper, eyes wide as Angus rode at his side, puffed up with pride and determination.

"15,000 florins," chuckled Angus, "Cheap at half the price, Macgoulchane!"

"15,000.... 15,000!" gaped Roy, "Ye dinnae HAVE 15,000 florins! Ye gave them a promissory note I assume, what happens when they demand the money, Angus!?"

"I dinnae have 15,000 florins **now**, Macgoulchane," smiled Angus cruelly, "Money will nae be an issue soon enough, believe me."

"15,000 florins for military access to Polish lands," sighed Roy, shaking his head in dismay, "And for what? Some mad dream of military glory against an Empire that does nae exist any more!"

Angus let the corner of one lip lift in a half-sneer, half-smirk and gave no reply, and continued to lead his army towards Novgorod.

Towards Russia.

In Novgorod, Voislav Miloslavov stood staring at the corpse of the man he'd considered a father - Chernenk Malov.

Malov had been the last of the noble blood of the Tsars, bastard though he had been, and the last chance for Russia to reunite under one banner once more. Now he lay dead, having apparently choked on his own tongue in his sleep, but Miloslavov did not believe it. The Danish and the Polish had both been eying their borders since the rebellions had done away with the sons of the late Tsar, who had been too distracted by their own power plays to prevent their overthrow. Malov had put together a massive army of mostly woodsmen and other peasants and taken Novgorod in the hopes of starting the Empire anew. Russians had killed other Russians in bloody warfare, but Malov had been successful, and restored pride to a proud people.

And now he was dead.

"What now, my Lord?" asked the elderly servant who had found Malov dead, "With Master Malov dead...."

"Now we continue on in his name," grunted Miloslavov, "Malov fought for Russia and gave it hope, and I will not let Russia's hope die with Malov. I swear this, I will fight to my last breath, till the last drop of blood is gone from my veins, to recreate the Russian Empire."

The servant bowed as Miloslavov strode from the room, knowing that despite Miloslav's youth, the man's word was his bond. As long as he lived, he would not let Novgorod fall.



The Scottish stretched out through the night outside the walls of Novgorod, 13038 strong.

And 40 Mongols.

Roy Macgoulchane grimaced as he stared at the Mongol mercenaries, yet another of the little surprises Angus had sprung on him. They'd encountered a mercenary band on their march towards Novgorod and Angus had spoken at length with the mercenary captain, apparently coming to a mutually beneficial agreement. They'd parted ways, but been joined by a small band of the mercenaries while the others headed West, and Roy had been horrified to discover they were Mongols, survivors of the Great Desert Wars of Edward and Domnall Canmore who had found a new life selling their skills to the highest bidder. Others amongst the men had obviously been disturbed by the presence of the Mongols, but their near obsessive devotion to Angus kept them quiet. Roy was a different matter however and had demanded to know what the men of the desert could possibly offer to aid their attack on the walls of Novgorod, and Angus had simply sneered and told him he would soon find out.



The Russians who rushed to the walls to stand in defense were not armored or finely armed. They were woodsmen and peasants, armed with pitchforks, spears and rough swords and cudgels. But they were resolute, proud and determined to defend their city from the invading force, crying out their defiance as arrows were fired from the towers towards the waiting Scotsmen. Angus sneered, delighted to finally be ready to fight against the men whose sheer indomitableness he had grown up hearing tales of. He ordered arrows to be lit and fired at the walls, and they rose high and then arced down towards the walls, slapping mostly usefully against the high walls.

"Fire the catapult on the gates!" he ordered, and a burning ball of fire shot almost instantly forward. The Russians cried out in alarm and flaming arrows fired from the towers towards the source of the attack, setting the first of the two catapults alight as the Scotsmen manning them cursed and stepped back. Roy frowned and turned to look at Angus, who was staring with rapt attention at the walls, muttering something under his breath. Roy leaned forward and heard the words, ".....st a real fight...." and groaned inwardly. Angus was mad, so determined for a battle like those he had heard of in song that he did not seem to realize this battle was NOT going their way. The Russians were burning their artillery; they had more men; they held the walls; and even if the gates breached, there would be hundreds of Russians ready to stand in defense of the breach.



"Oh ye of little faith, Macgoulchane," chuckled Angus sourly all of a sudden, and Roy bit back a wince as he realized that Angus had been entirely aware of his gaze all along, "Ye did nae ken why we needed the Mongols? Well.... NOW!"

The Mongols rushed forward pushing the carts they had dragged on the march with them, one that had until now been covered up. Pulling the sheet from it, the Mongols stepped back and allowed one man to rush up and press a lit torch against strings hanging from multiple tubes set inside the cart and then.... then a shocked Roy Macgoulchane watched the walls of Novgorod fall within moments.





"What heathen sorcery is this!?" gasped Roy in horror as he watched Russians falling to their deaths or being crushed under the tons of rubble that had been their walls.

"Not sorcery, Macgoulchane!" laughed Angus, and now more than ever Roy was convinced of the man's insanity, "SCIENCE! EDMUND CANMORE WOULD BE PROUD! EDWARD CANMORE WOULD BE HARD! ANGUS THE MAULER WILL CONQUER! FORWARD! FORWARD! INTO THE CITY! CONQUER IN THE NAME OF SCOTLAND!"

The men roared in delight and were unleashed by Angus' command, tearing forward towards the smashed remains of the walls and the shell-shocked Russians who had survived the destruction.





Voislav Miloslavov cursed as news reached him off the destruction of the walls. The Scottish had used some strange magic to bring down the walls, or so the superstitious men under his command believed.

"Have the men retreat up the main street," he ordered, "Narrow the path the Scottish must take to get to them, tie them down in street fighting!"

"My Lord," noted his Second as the messenger rushed to give the order, "The Scottish will simply send men around the streets and our own men will end up encircled."

"I hope that their arrogance will see them committed to trying to break through our own men," Voislav explained bitterly, "Our men are true Russians, they will not retreat, and that will drive the Scottish insane, they have never met foes who did not break and run before.... and for the first to ever do so to be woodsmen without armor.... the insult to their manhood will be too much."

His Second nodded and Voislav frowned. He knew his men would not run, but he also knew that they were superstitious and the "magic" that had brought down the walls might see their morale shattered, affecting their fighting efficiency. He pondered the real possibility that the Scottish General would realize his strategy and bring his Cavalry to flank them.

"He must," grunted Voislav to himself, "I must show the men that that the Scottish are only human."





The fighting in down Novgorod's main street was intense and fierce. As Voislav had feared, his men were not fighting effectively in groups, their superstitious fear seeing each man struggling desperately for his own individual survival. But despite their fractured defense, none broke or ran as the Scottish crashed against them again and again, and the Scottish were becoming visibly frustrated as their opponents reached the point where most men broke but continued to stand.

The Russians battered and flung themselves against the Scottish despite the poor quality of their weapons and lack of armor, and the Scottish cut them down easily. But despite received wounds that should have been lethal, many of the Russians simply rose again, grabbed whatever weapon they could and continued to fight. The Scottish found themselves fighting against men missing limbs, men drenched in their own blood or with vicious cuts exposed on their faces and necks.

"DIE!" screamed one Scotsman, plunging his sword into the head of the bearded Russian swinging a cudgel at him... and to his horror, the Russian tore his head away from the blade and kept coming, his brain exposed momentarily before blood filled the hole in his head. The Scotsman smashed him in the face, knocking the man onto his ass, and he breathed a sigh of relief and stepped over his foe to attack the next one. Behind him, unseen, the Russian staggered to his feet and swung blindly at the next Scotsman, who dodged the blow and stared in horror.... did the Russians even feel pain?

"Our men have been bogged down in street fighting," Roy grunted as word reached him of the crowded fighting inside the city, "The Russians refuse to die, they continue fighting despite lethal wounds."

"So the legends are true," smirked Angus, as always his prematurely lined face making a smile look like a sneer, "The Russians do not feel the cold, they do not feel pain, and they do not surrender... finally, Macgoulchane, FINALLY A TRUE CHALLENGE TO SCOTLAND!"

"Ye're mad, Angus," snapped Roy, "Our men are DYING in there!"

"Then let us ride to their aid," chuckled Angus, "We shall outflank them using their own city streets and come at them from behind, and crush them between us."

Roy nodded, finally some sense from the man! They needed to take the city relatively intact if they wanted to sack it to cover the cost of the military access Poland had granted them, and Roy was terrified that Angus' own desire to kill Russians would see him bankrupt Yerevan and other Scottish Desert Cities within his realm of Governance. God alone knew how much he'd offered the mercenaries.

Roy ordered his own men to follow him, then set off after Angus as he rode through the breach into Novgorod, to finally personally kill Russians for himself.

Inside the great city square, word reached Voislav that the Scottish General was leading his men into the city.

"Quickly, pull back a force of Woodsmen into the square!" he ordered, "And pull back our cavalry so they cannot be seen!"

"My Lord, you mean to sacrifice our men to lure the Scottish into a trap?" asked the man.

"I mean to show our men that the Scottish are flesh and blood," replied Voislav angrily, "And the only way to do it is with the blood of our own countrymen.... now give the order!"

His Second nodded and saluted, sending a messenger to pull back the Woodsmen at the rear of the street fighting, wondering what his General was planning. Malov would not have sacrificed his own men... would he?





Angus roared with laughter as he cut down the Russians around him who he had not ridden down with his horse. He had led his Cavalry, Macgoulchane's Bodyguard and a group of Armenian cavalymen down side streets and into the City's great square, crashing into a group of startled Woodsmen. The fabled Russian hardiness did not seem to extend to surviving being charged and stampeded by scores of horses charging at full tilt, the men he'd ridden down lay still and dead, while the men he cut down appeared to stay down. He actually felt disappointment, maybe the Russians were not as hardy as he'd been lead to bel-

"SCOTSMAN!" roared a voice, and Angus' head twisted as he found himself staring across the Square at one of the few armored Russians - was this their General?



"FACE ME, SCOTSMAN!" roared Voislav, "FACE ME IF YOU ARE A MAN!"

"Aye, now there's a true Russian," grinned Angus in delight, and Roy stared at him in horror. He couldn't possibly intend t-

"FOR SCOTLAND!" roared Angus and spurred his horse forward, and the Russian did the same. Before the startled eyes of the Scottish Cavalry and the surviving Russian woodsman in the square, the two Generals rode across the square and directly into each other, their horses smashing together and the two men slamming against the other, Angus tipping Voislav off of his saddle and sending them both crashing into the cobbles.



"Nae," whispered Roy in horror and prepared to kick his horse into action, but a hand restrained him. He turned and found himself facing David, the Knight-Commander who had assisted him to achieve his victory at Trebizond and thus complete his first command for Angus.

"This is what the man has wanted since the sun boiled his brains and his injuries turned him bitter," David said, "He wants to be a man of legend like Edward Canmore, and he grew up on tales of the strength and resolve of Russians, if ye interfered now, he would kill ye for it."

Roy turned and stared around him, unable to believe that the battle within the square itself seemed to have stopped. Scotsman and Russian alike had stopped fighting and stood - some besides each other - watching as their two Generals fought on the ground as their horses stumbled away, dazed by their collision.

"SHOW ME WHAT RUSSIAN METTLE IS!" demanded Angus as he smashed Voislav into the ground, tearing the man's helm off and slamming a gauntleted fist into his face. The Russian exposed smashed teeth in a snarl, then tossed Angus off of him and onto his belly before leaping onto his back and smashing the man's helm directly into the ground. Angus slammed back with his elbow into Voislav's side, knocking him off of him, then hauled himself to his feet and tore his own helm off, exposing a freshly broken nose spouting blood.

"I thought ye Russians were supposed to be tough!" laughed Angus, eyes rolling wildly, "Show me! SHOW ME!"

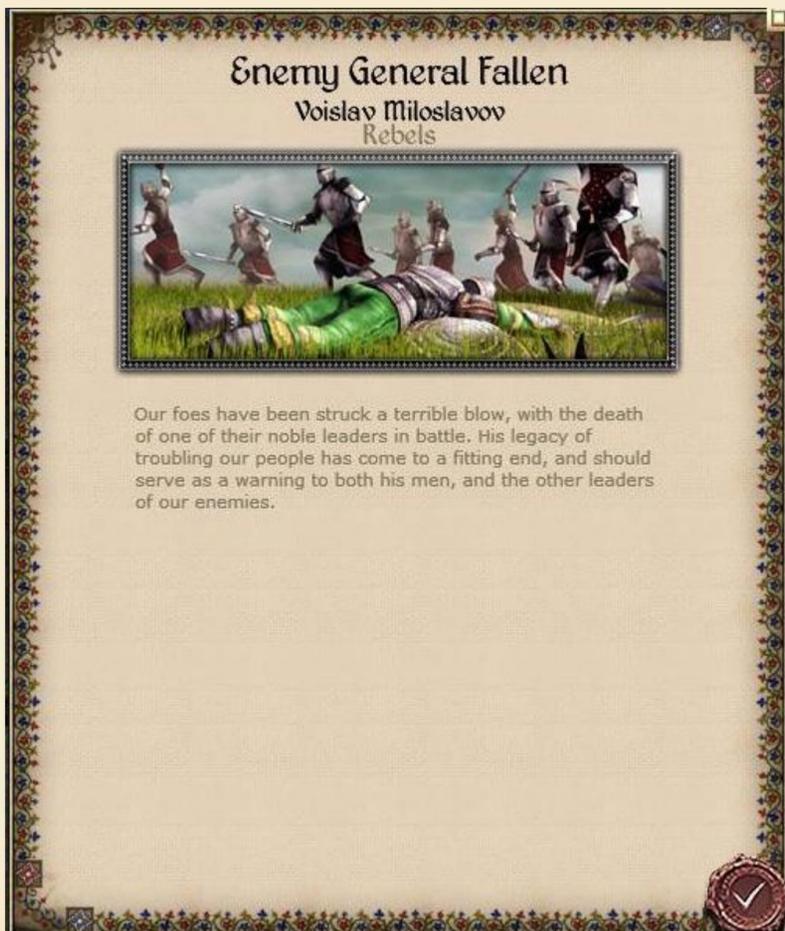
"RARRRGH!" roared Voislav and launched himself at Angus, smashing against him and slamming his fist into the Scottish General's side where his armor connected and exposed flesh. The Russian was powerful, and his blows seemed to lift Angus off of his feet even as they drove the air out of his lungs. He tried to pull free, but Voislav grabbed him around the neck, holding him in tight as he struck again and again, then physically tossed Angus through the air onto his back.

"RUSSIA!" roared Voislav, leaping at Angus who raised a leg and smashed him in the belly, the Russian's armor protecting him from being winded but sending a shockwave through his body and putting him off balance. Angus slammed both arms up against Voislav's side and knocked him to the ground on his side, then grabbed at his neck, throttling the Russian as he sucked in air himself. Voislav tried desperately to breath as the Scotsman throttled him, then flailed wildly with his arms at Angus' exposed side where he had all ready repeatedly struck him. Angus cried out in pain and his hands loosened around Voislav's neck, and the Russian smashed him aside and pushed past the pain off his oxygen starved lungs to leap on top of the Scotsman. He smashed Angus in the face with one mailed fist, then again and again, flattening his nose, swelling shut one eye, breaking off many of the Scotsman's crooked and yellowing teeth.

"NOVGOROD FOR RUSSIA!" roared Voislav as he laid into Angus' face again and again, even as his panicked mind desperately thanked God. His gamble had paid off, by killing the Scotsman with his own two hands in front of his men - as well as the surviving Woodsmen he had used as bait - he would show them the Scottish were human, he would give his men resolve and they would start working cohesively, they would push the Scottish down the street and outside of the city, and Novgorod would remain theirs, "NOVGOROD FOR RUS-"

Angus sat up suddenly as Voislav's exhausted arms slowed in their pummeling, and he sunk his teeth deep into the Russian's throat and then.... tore. Voislav felt a sickening ripping even as he heard it, and as he stared with dismay into Angus' eyes he had time to come to a final realization, something that Roy Macgoulchane had known since he was a boy.

The Scotsman was completely insane.



There was silence in the courtyard for what felt like an eternity after Voislav Miloslavov's body slumped backwards off of Angus. The Scotsman knelt over his fallen foe, his mouth dripping with blood as he spat out the remains of the Russian's throat, and then slowly he lifted himself to his feet, standing between the Russian Cavalry and his own Scotsmen.

"Angus..." whispered Roy, his horror palpable now as he stared at the insane animal before him, a man who could not possibly have a soul. If he had doubted it before he did not now, Angus the Mauler was not a man, he was a Demon.

"This. city. is. SCOTLAND'S!" roared Angus suddenly, and lifted his hand to point at the horrified Russian Woodsmen, "I BRING YE DEATH!"

It happened in an instant, the Russians own superstitions and fears finally overrode their pride and stubbornness. They broke into gibbering panic and ran, chased by Armenians as Daudid charged his Knights past Angus and into the knot of horrified Russian Cavalrymen. Roy heard wailing and cries of terror escalating as the Russians reached their comrades still locked down in fighting with Scotsmen in the streets and told them garbled, panicked versions of the horror that Angus had just performed. He slowly rode his horse forward till it stood beside Angus, who stood panting roughly, wide eyes and grinning more widely than Roy could ever remember.

"Was this worth it, Angus?" he asked, "All this death.... this thing you have done?"



"Worth it, Macgoulchane?" replied Angus, staring up at Roy with wide eyes sparkling with excitement and delight, "I have never felt so alive..... I cannae wait for the next battle, there is still a force of Russians in control of Riga to the West, we can be there within a month an-"

"Ye cannae be serious," moaned Roy in despair, "Ye have fulfilled ye dream, ye have fought and defeated the Russians... ye have had ye ultimate grand fight! Winter will be here in a matter of weeks, and a Russian Winter is something even the hardiest of Scotsmen will balk it.... ye will at least let us Winter here in Novgorod, by which point ye will have surely seen sense."

And in reply, Angus simply threw back his head and let loose with loud peals of mad laughter that echoed down the city streets.

Angus the Mauler was completely insane, and he had only just begun.

Chapter 52

Winter in Russia.

Hell.

In some regions, the temperature reached as low as -60°C and even in the more "temperate" regions, could reach as low as -30°C . Cold blasts of wind seemed to penetrate clothes, furs and armor as if they were not there; even saltwater ports could freeze over; and if fires were not tended to throughout the night, people had been known to freeze to death in their beds.

The fact that people could not only survive through such conditions but thrive was testament to the hardiness of man and to the peoples of Russia in particular. Many an invading army had found to their doom that it was not just the stubborn, proud people of Russia you fought when you came into Russian land, but also the very land itself. Entire armies had frozen to death and been buried beneath huge hills of snow, their equipment and weapons taken by Russian farmers and children come the melts and converted into ploughs and other farming gear, or used by children as toys.

So it was that Captain Zhiznobud moved his small band of troops with impunity through the snow. Everyone in what was left of the once Russian Empire had heard of the mad Scotsman who had taken Novgorod, with some saying he had actually eaten alive the City's Commander. But Zhiznobud also knew that no matter how mad the Scotsman was, no non-Russian was mad enough to move an army through the wind-blasted, snow-blinded landscape of a Russian Winter.

In fact, sometimes Zhiznobud actually wondered if he was mad to be out in these conditions himself. He was moving his men towards Riga, where his cousin Miloslav controlled a garrison of 800 men. With his own 271, he could bring the size of the garrison up over 1000, and with a full winter to train militia units, they could have 1500 men ready to defend Riga come Spring.

He held his arm up in front of his helm, blocking out the wind and trying desperately to peer through the almost pure white air before him. He thought they were headed in the right direction, but it was difficult to say for su-

"What the hell is that?" he muttered, as he looked up past the scouts leading them saw first one pin prick of light in the sky, then a series more as the sky seemed to light up with strange orbs of light brighter even the white sky.



"What in the name of God is thi-" grunted Zhiznobud, and then got his answer.



"FLAMING ARROWS!" roared Zhiznobud, and charged forward over the crest of the snow-covered hill to try and see through the poor visibility.

What he saw made him wish the conditions had left him blind.



If the Highlanders were put off by the cold on their exposed skin, they gave no sign, merely firing volley after volley of flaming arrows through the air in the rough direction of Zhiznobud's men. The sounds of screaming as Russians were set alight told them they were hitting at least some of their targets. Angus grinned behind his helm, his bruised and battered face almost healed now, sitting on his horse and staring with pride over his assembled men. After less than a month in Novgorod, even as the cold winter settled in, he had told them he was marching West to deal with an outland band, and none had even hesitated to join him. The cold truly was more than even the staunchest Scot had faced before, but they suffered without complaint, marching on through the snow and cold to kill more Russians.

But even the Scottish had limitations, and for all his madness, Angus knew that they could not last long in the cold. So he meant to end this battle quickly and decisively and use the boost in morale to push them on towards Riga.

No matter what Roy Macgoulchane had to say on the matter.

"CAVALRY!" he ordered, "CHARGE!"





"RUN!" screamed Zhiznobud, "LOSE YOURSELF IN THE SNOW! DISAPPEAR INTO THE TREES!"





In the end, Zhiznobud himself managed to complete his last orders, but only four of the men managed to do the same. The dead bodies of 266 Russians joined 70 Scotsmen to freeze and disappear beneath the snow, and his cousin Miloslav would not have the reinforcements he was expecting.



"BRAVE SCOTSMEN TRUE!" roared Angus as his men cheered, the cold forgotten in the heat of battle, "LEGEND TELLS OF THE HARSH WINTER OF RUSSIA! BUT LEGEND WILL ALSO TELL OF THE MEN OF SCOTLAND WHO PROVED ITS MASTER! NOW WILL YE FOLLOW ME ONWARDS AND PROVE THIS IS NO FLUKE? WILL YE FOLLOW ME TO RIGA!?"

The men roared in approval and Angus felt his body flush with pleasure... and then Roy Macgoulchane spoke.

"Nae, Angus," he snapped, loud enough to be heard but not shouting, not raging, sounding more irritated than anything, "The winter will only get worse and the euphoria of victory will carry these men only so far. We return to Novgorod now, and if ye are still mad enough to want to add Riga to ye list of conquests, we will return in the spring. But nae now, Angus, nae now."

Angus stared furiously at his "Field Commander", but Macgoulchane returned his glare steadily. Not for the first time, Angus cursed the streak of steel he'd sensed in Roy from the first time they met as children, and not for the first time he found himself unwillingly impressed by it.

"Are ye suggesting they are not man enough to survive this Winter, Macgoulchane?" he demanded.

"I am suggesting they are man enough to not follow an obsessed man blindly," replied Roy smoothly, "Riga will still be there in Spring, Angus, what point is there in killing half the men before ye arrive at the battle? Ye are being impatient, which can be tolerated only to the point where it starts threatening the lives of the men under our command."

The gathered soldiers stared in fascination at the battle of wills going on between their two Commanders. Angus was a figure of legend to them, the scarred and uncompromising General who had fought alongside them as they secured the Northern Border. But Macgoulchane had impressed them with his willingness to fight beside them, and the efforts he took to save the lives of his men.

"I am returning to Novgorod," Macgoulchane announced as Angus continued to glare at him, "Those of ye who wish to live can follow me, those who want adventure and glory so badly that it blinds them to oncoming death.... follow ye "hero" to Riga."

Roy turned and led his horse in the general direction of Novgorod, and to Angus' horror, first a few single soldiers started to follow him, then more, then more. Finally they were gone, disappearing into the whiteness that surrounded them on all sides, and Angus looked around at those men who had remained. Of the 1400 he had led out of Novgorod, only 450 remained with him in the middle of the bleak Russian Winter. A soldier stepped forward and stared up at the black-faced General and asked the question on the minds of all those who had remained.

"My Lord, can we take Riga with so few?"

And in reply, Angus threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Can we? Ach my lad, Roy Macgoulchane has nae learnt all of my tricks just yet!"

His name was Robert of Edinburgh, named for his father and his place of birth. He had much in common with his Father - his name, his face and body, his good humor and easy, laughing demeanor. His fits of rage when piqued, his ability to hold a grudge, his tolerance for ale and weakness for women.

And Cassandra.

After Robert of Edinburgh had returned from Egypt along with Alexander Canmore and thrown back the English, he'd quickly fallen back into old habits. He slept his way around the brothels of the city, sired any number of bastards, gambled wildly and got drunk with his men. When Alexander died, Robert wasn't sure if he was happy or sad. The man had vowed to take the crown back from Edward the Pretender, but upon his return to Edinburgh had shown more interest in lavishing attention on his son Adam. Adam himself had always struck Robert as a particularly shallow and mean-spirited child, and he'd never understood why Alexander seemed to think the sun shone out of his ass. When Adam had quickly violated his marital vows by all but openly taking on a beautiful young courtesan called Cassandra as his mistress, Robert had only found it more reason to despise the whelp. He became obsessed with Cassandra, wanting to understand what she saw in Adam, and when she became aware of his interest she encouraged it, seeming to take delight in teasing and enticing him.

Finally she was his, and in the aftermath of having her, he asked her all the questions that had been running through his head and she answered them all. What did she see in Adam? Power, of course, and the potential for more power. He soon came to realize that other than satisfying her own desires, her only interest was in taking power and exercising it. Even their own affair was more about her desire to exert control and power, and it gave her a sadistic satisfaction to be sleeping with another man when she was supposed to be the "property" of Adam Canmore.

Together they continued an affair that extended for over a decade, until Robert's accidental death following a heavy drinking session where he slipped on icy cobbles one winter and split his head over on the ground. Cassandra's grief had extended only so far as she no longer had a proper sexual outlet (Adam had never done much to satisfy her), but she had attended the funeral out of a desire to see who attended and how Robert was remembered. It always amused her to see how the public recognition of a person meshed with the private reality, and thus she had been forced to stifle laughter as the priest spoke of Robert's fidelity and honesty and his commitment to the Crown. The funeral had also seen her introduced to Robert's son, imaginatively named Robert, and she'd been instantly struck by his similarity to his Father. Though only a youth, he all ready had the height and shoulders of his father, and his face was a near perfect match. From the moment she saw him, she set upon seducing him, making him a new lover in his Father's image, teaching him all the things from the beginning that she had taught his Father.

He became an eager lover after she got him over the initial immature "moral" objections to sleeping with his Lord's Mistress, and she'd soon urged him to grow resentful at the power that Adam's quirk of birth had given him. Together they spoke treasonous words, and thus she tied him close to her, and became what she'd groomed his Father to be for her. More than just a sexual outlet for her, he was a secret weapon, a poisoned arrow to be directed at Adam Canmore's heart if he ever turned against her.

And now the time had come for Cassandra to use it.

Captain Miloslav knocked back his vodka and winced slightly, feeling the burn in his upper chest and running his fingers across his unshaven cheek. He hadn't asked for the responsibility of running a city, but he'd been left with little choice after the Russian Nobility had managed to be wiped out or wipe themselves out. Now in the midst of Winter when all he wanted to do was sit by a fire and drink, he had to worry himself with such mundane things as managing Riga's food supplies and setting patrol schedules for the City Watch.

"Captain," snapped a voice, and Miloslav turned from the window to stare at the Commander standing before him.

"What is it?" he asked, trying to keep the boredom out of his voice, "Another fight in the market? Has Leo been putting his prices up again?"

"Captain," repeated the Commander, "The mad Scotsman has ridden a force up to our walls."

"In the midst of Winter!?" gaped Miloslav in shock, "How many?"

"450 Scotsmen," started the Commander, and Miloslav laughed.

"450? Against our 800?" he laughed, "He truly is mad, we'll wipe him out."

"And close to 1000 mercenaries," finished the Commander, and Miloslav's laughter died out.

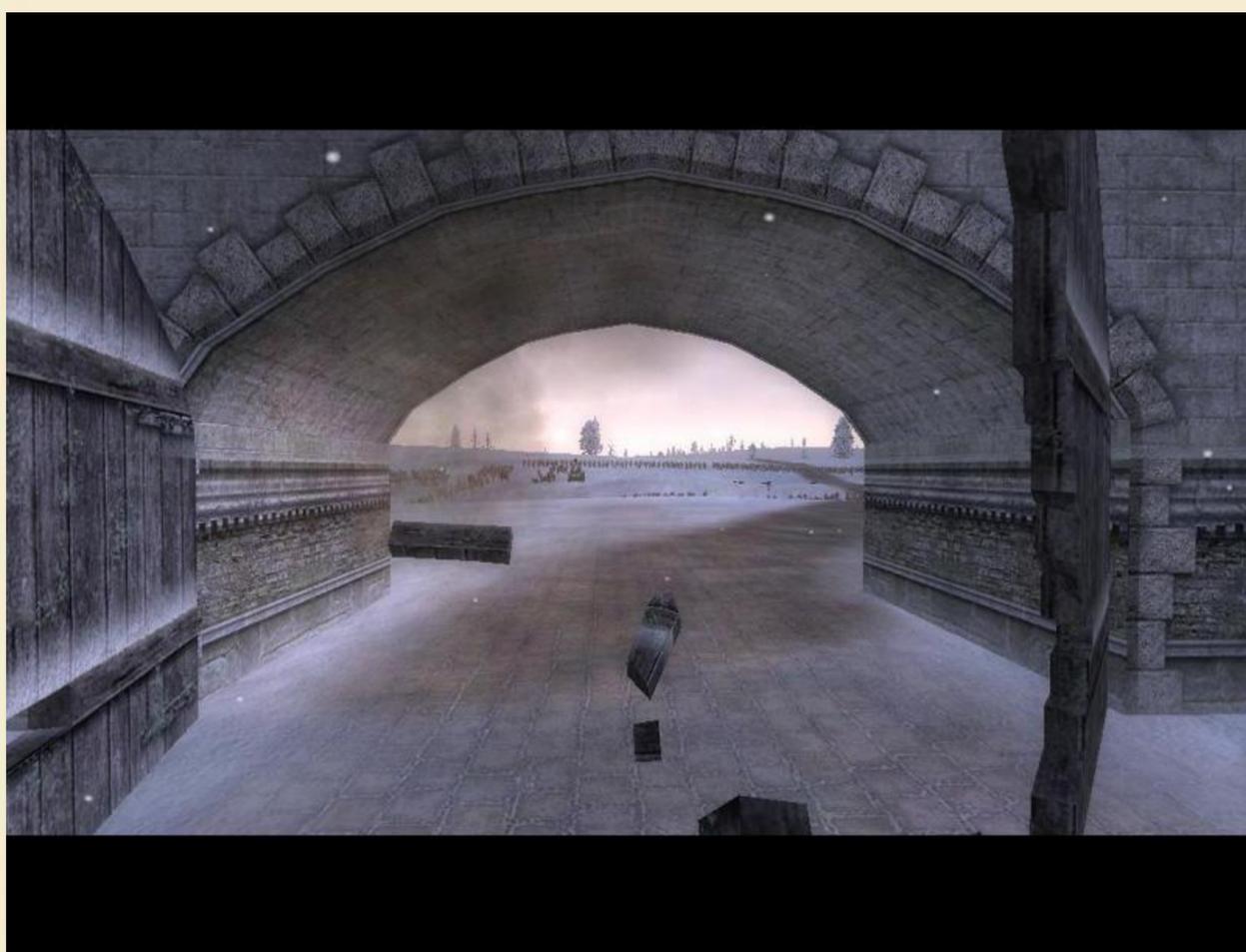


Angus grinned fiercely behind his helm. The weather today was crisp but bright, the cloudy sky lit bright by a strong sun that made the day *almost* warm. The walls of Riga loomed up before him and his army, but they did not concern him. He blessed the foresight that had seen him arrange for the mercenary camp he had encountered when he first rode into these lands to move West towards Riga to await his call. He had promised them money he did not have, but after sacking Novgorod he'd had enough to pay the Polish their exorbitant fee for military access as well as the cost of the mercenaries with more left over besides.

He watched as panicking Russians rushed onto the walls and fired arrows wildly into the air and allowed a sneer of contempt. The pride and stubbornness of the Russians had been the thing of legend, but now he knew - and soon the world would too - that they were as nothing compared to the Scottish. With their royal bloodline gone, they were left under the command of fools and simpletons, men who could fight well enough but not lead.

"The men on those walls irritate me," he snapped to the Mongols who had wheeled their cart of rocket-launchers through the snow without complaint, "Do away with both of them."





"Are ye as tired of these snows as me, lads!?" roared Angus with good cheer, "Then through those breaches! Those Russians are in **our** city, they just dinnae ken it yet! **GO AND TELL THEM!**"





The Russians moved to block the breach but found flaming arrows raining down on top of them, and then hundreds of Scotsmen and mercenary spearmen thundering through the holes in the wall and the shattered gates to smash into them. They turned and ran in desperation, thoughts of the atrocities at Novgorod fresh in their minds. Everyone knew the Scottish were demons, but their leader was a monster, a blood drinking, flesh eating monster, and even the hardest of Russians feared him.

As they fled up the narrow streets followed by the Scottish, Captain Miloslav took a desperate gamble and rode his horsemen directly into the narrow vanguard of the Scottish forces, hoping to break them and send them stumbling back, creating a ripple effect and stalling their forward progress. But instead he found himself riding into veterans - whether mercenary or Scots - who parted around the horses to allow them in before swallowing them up in their ranks, and Miloslav found himself with nowhere to go but down, torn from his mount by baying, laughing mercenaries.



Angus rode his own cavalry through the streets as his Scotsman and mercenaries tore through the Russians. He rode into the main City Square where a small reserve force stood waiting, and he screamed in challenge to the terrified Russians and charged them. His Highland Archers had followed, and with expert aim they fired into the Russians as they were charged down by Angus, those who survived trampling and the sword being set alight by burning arrows.





Angus sat his horse between the burning, writhing bodies of the last of the Russians, then turned to stare at a Highland Archer who had dropped to his knees and was screaming in a mixture of defiance and joy.



"Aye lad, Macgoulchane does nae ken what it means to conquer," smiled Angus, speaking to himself, "But he soon will. The Russians are gone, but I am nae done yet.... the time has come to convince King Domnall to go to war once more.... it does nae matter with who, but as long as any part of this world is nae Scottish, my work is nae done."

"Ye want me to do what!?" gaped Robert, staring at Cassandra in dismay.

"Ye heard me," smirked Cassandra, laying nude beside him in bed and running fingers up his body. They had finished making love and had just been talking, something that Robert almost enjoyed more than the physical act of love itself.

Almost.

But what she had asked him to do... it was beyond the treason they spoke of post-coitus. It was more than just words, she was asking him to match action to word and commit an act of treason... more than that, an act of blasphemy.

She wanted him to kill Kirk Canmore.

"A wee bairn, ye want me to kill a defenceless wee bairn?" he gaped, "What in God's name are ye asking me woman! This is madness!"

"No, madness is Adam Canmore crossing me after I served him as mistress for more than two decades," hissed Cassandra, her voice dripping with venom, "Madness is tossing **ME** aside like I was some whore he paid for at a tavern. I want him to learn the cost of his madness, I want him to suffer, I want to take everything away from him that he loves. I want his precious child dead, and I want his wife dead.... raped first, if you can get it up for that dry old bitch, and make it clear she was raped as well, to truly hammer it home for him. I want everything taken away from him, all he loves and holds dear. Dougall Macdonchie is his man as well since Adam saved his life taking this city, so I'd like him dead too, but he's still in Leon so I guess he will have to wait."

Robert stared at her in horror, terrified more by the way her voice became steadily more matter of fact as she detailed atrocity after atrocity.

"And ye think I will commit these blasphemies for ye?" he gasped, "Ye are mad, woman, truly mad."

He stood up and began dressing himself, prepared to walk away... but then she spoke words that stopped him in his tracks.

"Your Father would have done it for me."

He turned to stare at her, and she smiled cruelly, "Oh yes, I never did tell you, did I? Before I made you my lover, your Father was mine. He was obsessed with me, he did anything for me just for a chance to be between my thighs, and he wouldn't have hesitated a second to do what I asked him... he was a real man."

"Then consider me a boy," Robert replied coldly, and turned to move on out of her room within the Palace of Toulouse. But once again she said words that stopped him in his tracks.

"Leave and I'll ruin your Father's name," Cassandra said, and her voice was ice. He turned and found himself facing Cassandra's true face, ugly and contorted with rage, jealousy and bitterness, "I have letters, some he wrote to me and others he wrote to Alexander Canmore. Your Father and the so-called Hero of Edinburgh once plotted the overthrow of Edward Canmore, if I was to reveal those letters your Father would be remembered as a traitor and Adam Canmore's Father along with him. I could have my revenge on Adam that way, if this is what you'd prefer, or you could save your Father's name and ruin Adam.... the choice is yours."

She smiled smugly, knowing that she had him trapped, he had loved and respected his Father and the thought of the man being posthumously dishonored would be more than he could bear. He would commit infanticide to prevent it, he would rape a 50 year old woman and murder her, and then he would truly be hers, body and soul.

That was the thought that went through Cassandra's head as Robert of Edinburgh stood staring at her.

The thought that went through her head moments later as an incoherently screaming Robert lap on top of her strangling the life from her was that she hadn't considered just what it meant when you took away a man's every option.

Old Rory had seen and done it all in his time. He'd been a farmhand, a soldier, a mercenary and a soldier again. He'd fought the Egyptians, English, the Milanese, even the Danes once. He'd grown too old for War by the time the war with the Spanish came about, and had settled in to his duties as a City Guard in Toulouse. He enjoyed his life, he slept the days away, enjoyed food and drink with friends in the early evening, and then patrolled the streets through the night before returning to his small but comfortable lodgings to sleep. It was a life of food, friends and drink, which suited him just fine. He'd been married in his youth but his wife was long dead and his sons long since grown up and gone on to soldiering careers of their own, making him proud by fighting alongside the King in Spain.

As he moved down the quiet streets keeping an eye out for footpads (unlikely) or drunks (far more likely) he was surprised to hear a dragging noise and what sounded like sobbing. Placing his hand on the hilt of his short sword, he moved down the cobbled streets and came across a most unwelcome sight... a man dragging a body.

"Hold ye ground!" he snapped angrily, drawing his sword as the man dragging the body froze in place. He stepped up and held his torch up, illuminating first the body, then the face of the man dragging it... and sighed unhappily, "Robert of Edinburgh?"

"A... aye," nodded Robert unhappily, tears streaming down his face.

"Well lad, ye've made a big mistake here," grunted Old Rory, staring down at the nude body of a woman who had obviously been strangled to death.

"Aye, I ken," moaned Robert, "But she said, and I said.... the things she..."

"Ye misunderstand me, lad," sighed Rory, and walked around the nude body and grabbed her ankles, "Ye're dragging her body down the back alleys but they only lead to the City Walls.... ye want to take her down to the Garonne River and dump her body there."

"Wh... what?" gasped Robert in shock.

"Oh come now, lad," chuckled Rory, "Ye dinnae think ye are the first noble to get carried away with a whore in bed.... come on now, no need to ruin ye life for such as her, I'll help ye get rid of her."

Robert stood gaping at the old guard for a few moments, then grabbed Cassandra's shoulders and lifted her, and together they took her body to dump it in the river.

Cassandra - Adam Canmore's long serving mistress - was dead.

None would miss her.

Chapter 53

Domnall and Nectan Canmore bit back giggles as they watched the magician performing his tricks for them. The old Egyptian had been in the Court at Cairo for a week now and quickly become a favorite with the nobility, with demand for his services in high demand. It seemed he had once entertained the Egyptian Nobility before Edward and Edmund Canmore had set sail from the Scottish Coast, and spent much of the intervening time honing his art for a new audience.

With a flourish, the old man whipped a sheet over the collection of ceramics he'd used as props throughout his act, and before the boy's wide eyes they simply... vanished! They applauded with delight and the old magician smiled, bowing low and somehow becoming a large bird that hopped about as they burst into outright giggling, before gasping in awe as the "bird" spread its wings wide and seemed to fall apart, becoming a number of birds that flew up into the sky, leaving no magician behind.

"WOOOHOOO!!!" squealed Domnall in delight, leaping up and tossing his fist into the air, "THAT WAS GREAT!"

"How'd he do it!?" gasped Nectan, scrabbling with wide eyes over the Palace Garden grounds where the magicians had disappeared, "How'd he do it!?"

"Magic!" sneered Domnall smugly, "He used magic!"

"That's stupid!" snapped Nectan back at him, "It was a trick or something, I just don't know ho-"

"How do ye turn into a giant bird and then turn into a bunch of birds and fly away unless it's magic!" grunted Domnall angrily, "Ye always have to ruin everything! Why can't ye just accept things the way they are?"

"Because the leaders of Scotland can nae afford to take anything at face value, Domnall," spoke a smooth voice, and the two young brothers twisted around in surprise. Standing a few feet away from them were two men, their Father Edmund Canmore, and... him.

Fearghus Campbell.

Edmund stepped forward and knelt before his sons so they were at eye level, and placed a hand on Domnall's shoulder, "Childhood is a time for joy and wonder and play, Domnall, but the years are not far away when ye will both be considered men... it is time ye learnt that ye cannae just accept what ye see with ye eyes."

The two boys stared at their Father uncertainly, wondering what he meant and fearing that it would somehow involve Fearghus. No one knew exactly what the man did, but rumors were rife in the palace that he was some sort of personal killer or private executioner for Edmund, and many of the noble children had been told by their nannies at one point that if they weren't good, Fearghus would come and take them down to his hidden rooms beneath the Palace.

Domnall gulped while Nectan tried and failed to keep the trepidation out of his face as Campbell approached and reached into his robes, then pulled loose... a coin. With wide eyes, Domnall and Nectan watched as a blank-faced Fearghus placed the coin on his knuckles and then seemingly made it begin to dance. It rolled and twisted along and between his knuckles, seemingly jumping up and down of its own will, twisting onto its side and running up and down the length of Fearghus' forearm. It rolled back down between his knuckles and then bounced into the air, and as Domnall and Nectan's eyes followed its flight it suddenly... disappeared!

"Magic!" gasped Domnall.

"A trick!" gasped Nectan.

"A magic trick," whispered Edmund with a slight, almost sad smile on his face, "Show them, Fearghus."

Still blank faced, Fearghus turned his hand around and opened his fist, revealing the coin in his palm. With exaggerated slowness, he shifted his hand so the coin seemed to travel back around till it was on his knuckles. Then he began to bump his knuckles up and down, making the coin move between them, and as the boys watched he slowly made the movement of his knuckles slighter and slighter till it seemed as if the coin was dancing by itself. Then he visibly bumped one knuckle again so that the coin rolled up onto his forearm, then shifted the angle of his arm so it rolled back down. This time when he tossed the coin into the air, the boys watched in surprise as it only lifted an inch or so into the air before he turned his hand around and palmed the coin.

"But before... ye threw the coin into the air!" Nectan insisted.

"Nae," replied Edmund, "Ye eyes became so focused on the coin "dancing" over his knuckles that it was trapped there. When he threw it into the air, it went only an inch before his quick hand grabbed it, and because ye eyes were nae focused on his hand and it moved so fast, ye mind decided that the coin was still rising through the air. By the time it realized that the coin was gone, his hand was back where it always had been, so ye mind simply told ye eyes to "stop" seeing the coin."

"Oh," muttered Domnall, and the disappointment in his voice was clear.

"Oh!" gasped Nectan, and the delight in his voice was clear.

"Oh indeed," nodded Edmund, standing up again and smiling down at his boys, "One day, lads, ye will serve as Princes of the Realm.... maybe more. Ye cannae afford to nae see everything around ye and understand it for what it really is, nae what it only appears to be. I am sorry to take magic out of ye lives, but from now on whenever ye see something or hear something, I want ye to really look and really listen, nae let ye mind simply accept what it thinks it is seeing and hearing. Do ye ken?"

"Aye, Father," nodded Domnall glumly, even as his brother said the same with obvious enthusiasm.

"Run along now and play," smiled Edmund, and the two moved away, their voices quickly growing louder as they discussed Fearghus' trick and began playfully teasing each other over who would learn to emulate it first. Edmund felt a burst of love for his children and not for the last time wished he could let them stay innocent forever. But such was not to be, they both had duties to serve that would end their childhood soon enough. At least he would never need to teach this lesson to Aodh, the young lad was studious and naive, and even now he sat up in his rooms engrossed in his books. The young lad would spend his life in the Church and never know the true darkness and dangers of the real world, and for that Edmund was eternally grateful.

"Do ye think they will learn their lessons, Fearghus?" he asked his Spymaster.

"Nectan will, the lad is bright," replied Fearghus smoothly, "Domnall will learn the lesson slower, but he will learn it."

"Aye," nodded Edmund with a sigh, "Christian has provided Edward with only Afraig, and it does nae seem likely she will give him a son any time soon. Edward will have nae choice but to name one of those boys the next King of Scotland."

"Nectan?" asked Fearghus.

"Domnall," replied Edmund with a shake of his head, "He is the one who the common man will follow, the one who will lead by example.... the one with the sheer bloody-mindedness that makes Edward so effective."

"And what of Nectan then?" asked Fearghus, though he knew the answer.

"When we are gone, old friend," smiled Edmund, "Nectan will replace us both in protecting Scotland in a completely different way to Domnall. He is the only one who can do so."

Edmund walked on through the gardens, but Fearghus remained behind a moment. The Spymaster lifted his eyes a window in the high walls of the Palace facing onto the garden. He allowed a small smile to cross his face as he saw the small white face that had been peering through the window disappear.

"I wonder," he muttered to himself, "I truly wonder."

Scotland was truly blessed.

Worlds First Hüge Cathedral



If there were any lingering doubts as to the power of the church, they were dispelled once the people gazed upon God's greatest house on earth. Its towering presence here shall ensure Christian dominance throughout the land.

Construction Complete

Milan

Your masons, serfs and architects have completed a truly striking structure that is sure to serve this place well for countless generations to come.



Hüge Cathedral

Though the Hüge Cathedral is a place of piety and purity, jealous lords who have ambitions of divine grandeur consider these structures of unrivalled magnificence to be a vulgar display of wealth. For the ruler that has such wealth, the benefits are undeniable, as the huge cathedral ensures Catholic dominance in the region, and does much to spiritually satiate his subjects.

Papal Approval

Milan

It is fairly common knowledge that you have shown your devotion to the cause before, but now that your workers have finally completed construction of the first great cathedral in the world, the Papacy considers you to be a true pioneer of pious rule, and an example to the other Catholic leaders. Simple warlords show their faith in battle, great kings such as yourself can show it in ways such as this, that will last through the centuries.



Hüge Cathedral

Relations Improved

The Papal States
Perfect



In light of recent acts of friendship, goodwill and mutual consent, it would be fair to say that your relationship with these people has improved considerably.

"She's a beautiful sight, Aodh, I have to admit," smiled King Domnall as they stood within the massive Cathedral, "Ye can see where every one of the significant florins went."

"It is not the cost in florins but the measure of devotion," noted Aodh smoothly, and Domnall roared with laughter, the sound echoing ominously throughout the rafters. Not quite officially open yet, the new Cathedral at Milan was being visited by the King and the Prince late at night to view the interior.

"Aye, Aodh, have ye ever noticed that the more the florins, the higher the so-called devotion?" chuckled Domnall, shaking his head with a smile, "The Church is a funny old thing, is it nae?"

"The Church is the House of God, where man may communicate with the Divine," Aodh warned him, "And those who serve the Church have a way of hearing things."

"Fucking inquisitors," grunted Domnall grumpily and Aodh hid a wince. The King had returned to Milan only a few months ago and Aodh had been shocked to discover that what had once been the odd burst of lewdness from his Brother had become a far more regular occurrence. The people had taken to calling their King (good naturedly) Domnall the Lewd, and it concerned Aodh. The King of Scotland needed to be respected and loved by his people, true, but he also needed to be feared. Domnall was becoming a "character" and eccentric, which was a nice and respectful way of saying he was becoming odd.

Now instead of talking with awe about the Scottish King, the people were more likely to speak of Angus the Mauler, and his now legendary ride through the Russian Winter to take new lands for Scotland on the frozen Northern Edge of the world. It worried Aodh, not just because of how it affected his own plans and his own needs, but because Domnall was his brother, and it pained him to see a once great man brought low by advancing age, drink and the complacency of peace.

As Domnall moved up the aisle trailing his fingers along the pews and looking up at the massive vaulted windows, Aodh watched him walk and came to his decision.

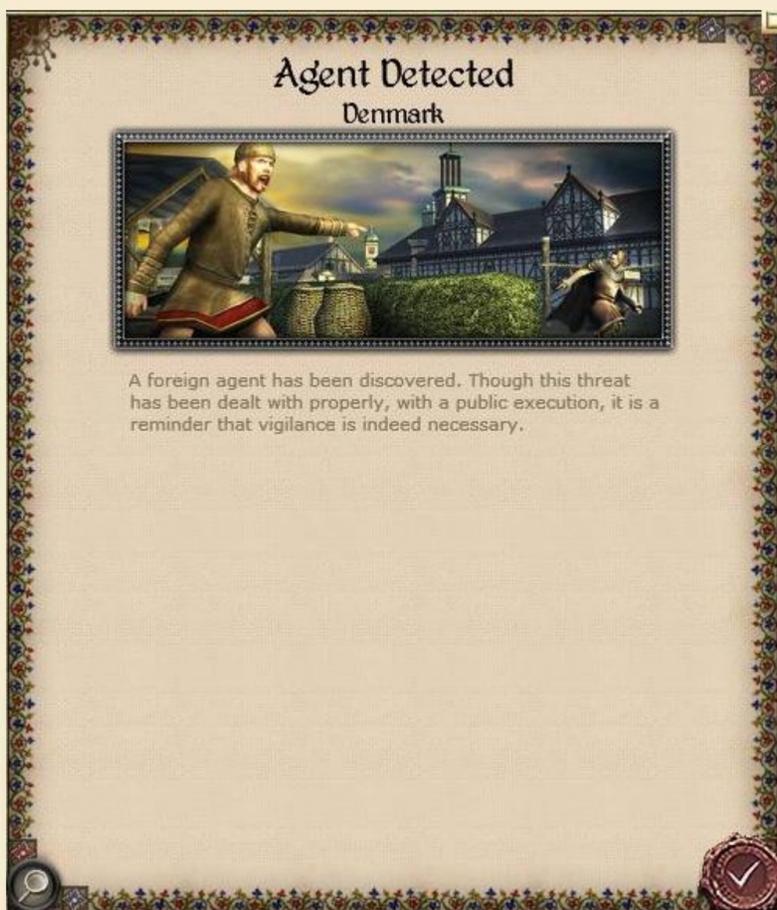
It was time for Scotland to go back to War.

Dere King Domnal

it is gud to right to you my King you hav many tiem in the past herd report from me on Scotlands northen holding but this is first tiem i hav chance to right in person it is cold in winter in Russia but the men of Scotland are strong they maek me so ~~pride~~proud you shud haev seen the fight it was gloriu*s* i fight the russian nobelman hand to hand i kills him and now Scotland ~~is~~ have have moar lands this is good this is rite Scotland needs to gro and it is but we need moar my King everi tiem we taek new land we gro closer to our enemys everi tiem they look at us and are jelus my King my men report that haev found ~~spe~~isspies they maebe think that maebe they are Danes the Danes are strong but they haev always been scare of Scotland after we fort them off long tiem ago maebe they think becaus we a long way aways at Novgrad and Riga the rest of Scotland wont coem and saev us liek we need saev but we dont but we kild crush them betwen us my King i ask your permission to go to war with Denmark.

Your Servant Angus

Domnall chuckled as he read the letter again. He had brought it with him for the urgent meeting that Aodh had requested, hoping to amuse his brother. Angus the Mauler was a very good General, and he was a surprisingly competent Governor, but his motivations and desires were incredibly transparent. Go to war with Denmark? Why would he break the peace that he'd fought so desperately to regain after Spain attacked them? Why go to war with the Danes, a nation well known for their fighting spirit, based only on the selfish phony suspicions of a half-mad General whose mind had been boiled by the Desert Sun.



Aodh entered his study where the King waited on him and forwent the usual traditions, something they had long since abandoned when not on public display together. Aodh often walked beside the King, spoke casually to him, joked (rarely) with him and shared stories of their children and Domnall's own Grandchildren. As Domnall opened his mouth to greet his Brother and tell him of the letter, Aodh shook his head and sat down heavily, his eyes looking haunted.

"Aodh, for God's sake man, what is it?" asked Domnall with concern, Angus' letter forgotten.

"Look at this, Domnall," gasped Aodh, hanging over a bundle of documents held together by thin string, "I did nae ever expect results from this inquiry, I did it more from duty than an expectation of results, but.... just look."

Domnall stared at his Brother, then undid the knot of the string and began to look through the documents, first with confusion, then growing alarm, and then finally.... fury.

It took him an hour to read through everything, and he never said a word or looked up the entire time. Aodh sat in silence watching his Brother, and when he finally finished the documents and looked up at Aodh, the Prince flinched back in spite of himself.

"Denmark," growled a Domnall Canmore not seen in quite some time. This was not Domnall the Lewd, this was a Domnall Canmore full of rage and hate focused entirely on one thing and one thing alone.

"I am going to wipe Denmark off the face of the Earth."



In Magdeburg to the Southeast of Hamburg, Jens Slyngebard had been living the good life. He ruled a good sized Fortress in the midst of a green and verdant land, right on the border of Denmark's land, meaning he did not often have to deal with the demands of the other Danish Royalty.

How he wished he lived closer now.

He had been preparing for bed when word had reached him that an army was marching on Magdeburg, and he'd wondered who was mad enough to attack 300 elite Danish soldiers in an impregnable fortress of solid stone.

2000 mad Scotsmen, that was who.

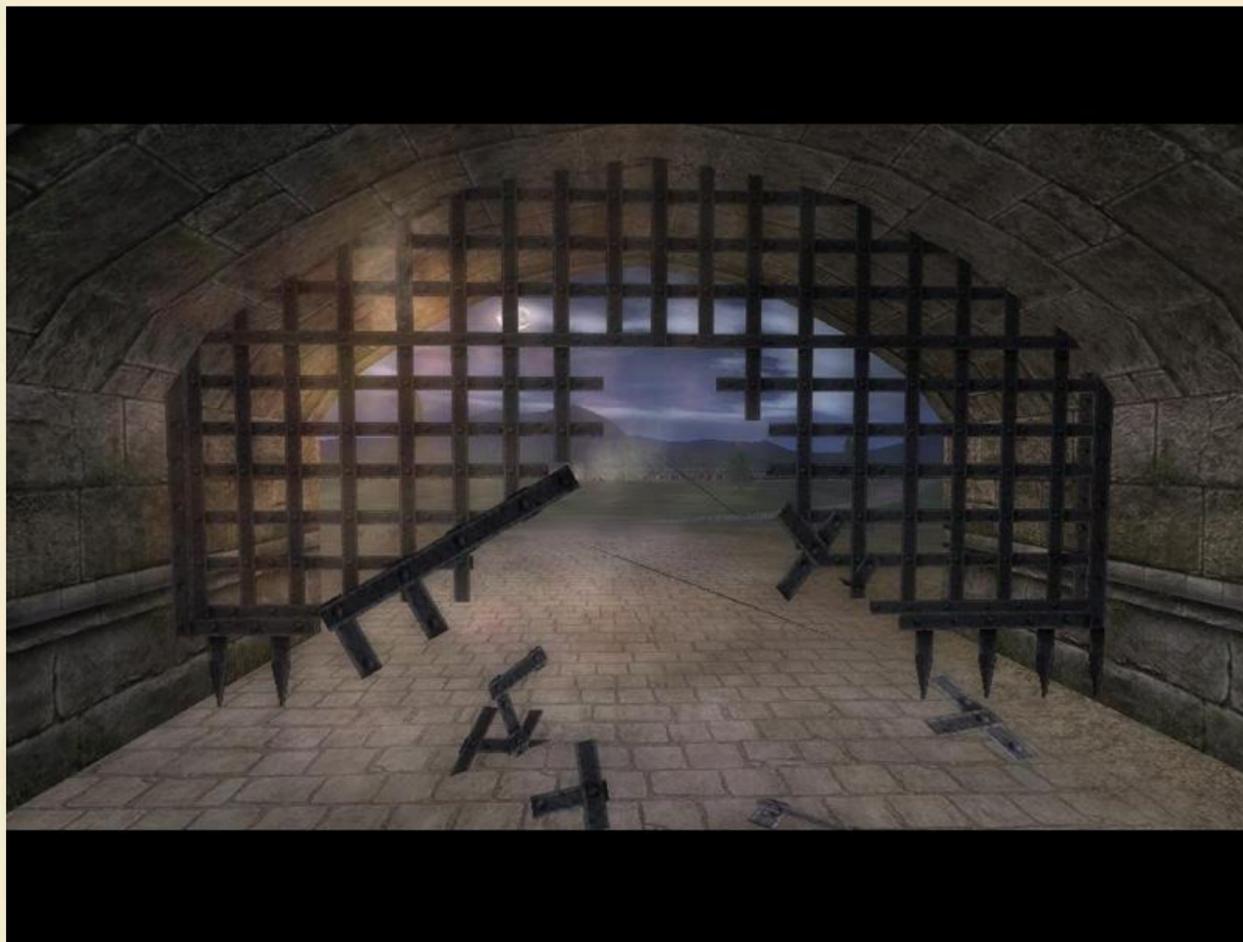


"I want the gates torn down and the men inside put to the sword," growled Domnall Canmore to his two Generals, "There will be no mercy, do ye understand me?"

Patrick Makfulchiane exchanged a look with his fellow General, Hew Mar, and nodded. Domnall's son-in-law had been shocked by the change in his King when summoned to him to prepare for war. The man had been in the midst of a chillingly controlled fury, his every word dripping with malice as he ordered the gathering of the troops. Makfulchiane had seen the writing on the wall, this would not be a smooth campaign accompanied by instruction and advice from a kindly King, this was going to be a bloody and brutal war. He did not know why, and he did not expect to be told, it was only for him to do his duty.

They'd ridden north within days, and joined with a force commanded by Hew Mar outside of Hamburg. Makfulchiane had heard somewhat of Mar, he knew he was a life-long soldier practically raised in the army by a somewhat infamous Father before being adopted almost by accident into the Royal Family. Since then, Mar had proved himself an asset, and featured at least peripherally in the tale of The Farmer and the Spaniard, which told of how Scottish farmers and villagers had risen up in force under Mar's command and wiped out an army of elite Spanish soldiers. The two got on well enough, and both seemed to understand their position in the army that Domnall had raised. They were to handle the day to day operation of the army, and come the battle itself, King Domnall himself would lead them.

"Bombards!" hissed Domnall, a harsh grin crossing his face, "Bring down the gates, let our men IN!"



"CHARGE!" screamed Domnall, and the men - who had picked up on his mood quickly on the march north - screamed with him as they charged the walls of Magdeburg.



The Danes who had been standing ready to defend the walls turned and fled before the screaming army of Scotsmen. They recognized in the contorted, raging faces the pure hate and fury that King Domnall had spread amongst the men without ever having to say a word, and the Danes fled from that senseless hate in the desperate hope that Jens Slyngebard could save them.

He did his best.

As the Scottish chased the Danes through the narrow streets and then up the hill towards the second Fortress Gate, Jens ordered the archers on the walls to open fire, hoping to break and panic the Scotsmen.



The flaming arrows did not seem to give the Scotsmen even slight pause, and Jens gritted his teeth and gave his next order. As the Danish soldiers passed through the Fortress Gate, Jens rode his men down the hill and charged directly into the vanguard of the Scots, using momentum and sheer force of weight to send the Scottish stumbling back, causing a ripple effect directly down the long column of Scottish soldiers.



"WHY WON'T THEY BREAK!" screamed Jens as his spare men rode back and around again and again to drive against the Scottish, while those caught up in the fighting slashed down on the Scotsmen and used their horses as weapons to kick and ride over Scots. But the men stood and fought despite the deaths of their comrades, and Jens stared in despair at the faces of his enemies, at the hate and fury there, and he wondered why, what had caused this? Why was Scotland suddenly so desperate to destroy the Danes?

Flaming arrows suddenly came raining down on his men, and now the Danish Cavalry found itself splintered as the Scottish regrouped for a final push, and Jens turned and shouted his final command to his men.

"CLOSE THE GATE!"

As the portcullis thundered down, Jens turned his horse and stared at the gathered Scotsmen, watching as the last of his cavalry was cut down.



"Why is this happening?" he whispered in horror, and then a crossbow bolt slammed into his neck and he pitched back off of his horse, his world reduced to the white hot pain centered in his neck... and then he felt no more.



"The General is dead!" cried one of the Archers on the walls, "THE GENERAL IS DEAD!"

The gathered Danes inside the second level of the Fortress turned and stared at each other in concern. The suddenness with which their worlds had been turned upside down was terrifying, and now the man who was supposed to lead them was dead.

"Will the gate keep the Scottish out?" asked one Dane to another.

"They're rolling up the Bombards!" cried out the archer on the wall again.

"SCOTSMEN ON THE WALLS!" cried another as they spotted a small group of Scotsmen fighting their way along the walls, having worked their way up around the outside wall, "THE SCOTSMEN ARE ON THE WALLS!"

"What is the reason for this madness," whispered the Danish soldier who had asked if the gate would protect them, "Why this attack? Why this unrelenting hate? WHAT DID WE DO!?!?"

He never found out the answer.



Two days after the Danish were wiped out to the man at Magdeburg, King Domnall received word that a Mercenary Captain was requesting to meet with him. He agreed, and the man came to the small hall that had doubled as Magdeburg's meeting room, banquet hall and war room. The Mercenary Captain was named Steaphan, and his accent seemed a strange hybrid of Scottish and French, indicating his mixed parentage and upbringing. He bowed low upon entering the King's presence, who bid him with some irritation to get to the point. Domnall had all ready begun the process of preparing the army to ride North towards Stockholm, his lust for Danish blood not sated by the death of a mere 280 Danes.

"I understand ye mean to ride North soon, my King?" asked Captain Steaphan.

"Aye, what of it?" grumbled Domnall, in no real mood to waste time.

"Might I suggest ye wait a week or so, mighty King," suggested Steaphan, and Domnall sneered at the sycophancy.

"And why would I do that?" he grunted angrily.

"To the Northeast is the Polish City of Stettin," noted Steaphan, "And the Danish have recently been looking to expand North. A sizeable force of Danish under the command of Skapti Orvendilson is riding to lay siege to Stettin, unaware that ye have taken control of Magdeburg. Skapti has control of 1900 men, but must fight through close to 1000 Polish soldiers to take the city. If ye were to wait, the Danes will take Stettin at a bloody cost and then ye can sweep in and take the City for ye own."

"And ye would ride with us.... for a cost of course?" asked Domnall, taking in this information.

"Aye, mighty King," nodded Steaphan, "We may even forgo out normal charge for service if we can be allowed our part in the sacking of Stettin when ye take it."

"Poland is allied with Scotland," Domnall noted, "Ye wish me to take control of a Polish City?"

"But that is just the thing!" grinned Steaphan, not seeming to notice the tone in the Scottish King's voice, or the contempt in his eyes, "It will nae be a Polish City when ye take it! It will be Danish, and ye will in fact be avenging ye Polish allies!"

Domnall stood from his makeshift throne and approached the Mercenary, who for the first time seemed to realize that the King was not overly excited by the proposal being put to him.

"A Scotsman earns his money, lad," growled Domnall, placing a hand firmly on Steaphan's shoulder and squeezing it painfully, "Ye want me to sit on my arse and wait for our allies to die at the hands of those bastards the Danes? Nae, ye and ye men will ride with me and those that live will be paid well for it."

"Sur... survive, my King?" asked Steaphan uncertainly.

"Oh aye," said Domnall, smiling at last, a cruel and hard smile, "We're going to meet this Skapti Orvendilson on the field of battle, and I'm going to kill him and every last bastard Dane he has with him."

Word had reached Skapti Orvendilson of the Scottish Army overrunning Magdeburg only that morning, and he had still been in a state of shock when his second surprise of the day had come. He'd been considering whether to abandon the march on Stettin or not when the decision had been taken out of his hands.

The Scottish Army had found him.



"Their numbers are about the same as ours," his Commander informed Skapti, "But our scouts have reported back to us that the Polish had a small force of reinforcements coming to aid the Garrison at Stettin.... if we do not end this quickly, they will ride up on our flank."

"Then we end it quickly," Skapti had grunted, "The Scottish are infamous for their fury in attacking cities and defending them, but they'll soon learn that on the field of battle, their bombards and arrows will not deal out the quick kills they are used to."

Skapti's Second considered reminding his General that the Scottish army was led by Domnall Canmore, a man who had once ridden against two Mongol Armies in the wide open spaces of the desert and wiped them out, and then thought better of it.

They would need all the morale they could get.

The two massive armies marched towards each other, the Scottish thumping in unison, chanting and singing a bawdry pre-battle song, the Danish marching and singing back a pre-battle dirge. They all knew that the last time the Danes had faced the Scottish in large numbers, the Danes - including the legendary Vikings - had been driven back.... but that had been attacking high stone walls, not in the open field of battle. Each man was confident, their numbers were equal, their armor and weapons on par.... this would come down to the quality and toughness of the men involved.

The Danes **knew** they were better than the Scots.

The Scots **knew** they were better than the Danes.

"Look at them men!" cried out Domnall, who had rode silently as the men sang around him. Their voices dropped and all eyes turned to their King riding in the saddle, waiting to hear him speak, "Look at the Danish! I ken that some of ye wonder, why do I hate them? why do I despise them and want to see them all lying dead before me? Well I'll tell ye, because I thought the Danes were like us! I thought them a proud people! A strong race of **men** who looked their enemies in the eyes and fought with honor!"

He extended his arm out at the army in the far distance.

"What did I discover? That they were no such thing! The Danes are a race of cowards hiding behind a facade of manhood! They plot in the darkness, they move in the shadows and they kill good men with their plots and planning! **THEY ARE COWARDS! AND I HATE THEM AND DESPISE THEM FOR IT! NOW WHAT SAY YE!?! WILL YE BE BESTED ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE BY COWARDS AND WOMEN!?!**"

"NAE!" screamed the men together.

"**THEN KILLLLL!**" roared Domnall, and he was wild with rage, Hew Mar staring on in almost horrified fascination. This was beyond anything he had seen, even his Father's legendary rages were nothing as compared to this, "**KILLLLL! KILLLLL!**"





And the Danes proved themselves cowards.

There was no finesse to the battle, despite Skapti's attempts to impose order on the chaos and to order his men about. The Scottish charged in a screaming horde directly into the Danish and began to kill, and to the credit of the Danes they stood and fought back, screaming their defiance. But the Scottish soldiers were fired up with the fury and the rage of their King, a contagious hatred that kept them fighting, gave them a strength beyond their normal stubbornness. Scotsman dealt critical wounds, would spit in rage and fight their way back to their feet to continue fighting, and all the time King Domnall rode into the frontline, striking down Danes who seemed unable to touch him. Even Hew Mar found himself caught up in the moment, and rode everywhere after the King, striking down the Danes that threw themselves in desperation at him.... and finally the Danes could take it no longer, and they turned and ran in desperation from the baying, mocking Scotsmen.



"AFTER THEM!" screamed Domnall, lifting his sword high and pointing after the retreating Danes, "EVERY DAY THE COWARD'S LIVE IS MORE THAN THEY DESERVE!"

"My King," gasped Hew, riding up beside him sweating and panting but feeling exhilarated, "I've just received word, two small forces of Polish are riding up on the flanks of the retreating Danish army."

"HEAR THAT LADS!?!!" cried Domnall, roaring with laughter, "THE POLISH ARE HERE! DINNAE LET THEM GET A BIGGER BODY COUNT THAN YE!"

He thrust his heels into his horse's sides and charged forward, and with a wild and impetuous laugh of his own, Hew Mar followed him.







King Domnall sat his horse in the midst of the field as he watched his men fanning out and mixing amongst the Polish as they broke up the fleeing Danish into smaller groups and cut them down.

"It is a good start," he grunted to himself, "But it is only a start."

He had wondered if his initial rage and hatred would diminish over the days and weeks, or after killing a few hundred Danes. But it hadn't, if anything it had grown stronger, and he'd found clarity in his rage that reminded him of some perverse version of the detached nature his Father had told him he felt in the midst of battle.

It was because of his Father that he felt this rage and hatred. That had been what Aodh had shown him in the documents he had brought him. His brother had undertaken a longshot investigation into the delayed letters which had prematurely ended Edward Canmore's planned Moorish Campaign... the very same campaign that had been meant to be Domnall's first. He still remembered how angry Edward had been, and also how intrigued his Father had been over the fact that someone, somehow had managed to delay letters from the Pope that saw Scotland technically guilty of defying the word of the Church, and led to Scotland's temporary ex-communication. They had returned to Cairo with their planned campaign postponed indefinitely, and shortly after the Mongols had come.

Edward and Edmund had ridden to Edessa and left Domnall behind, and Edmund had received wounds in the final great battle with Subutai the Merciless that had eventually caused his death.

And now Domnall knew who had been responsible.

Aodh had uncovered incontrovertible evidence that Danish diplomats at the time, under the order of their King, had been delaying the transmission of letters from the Pope to a large number of foreign rulers. There had been no plan or design to it, it had been a sloppy operation that had only succeeded because of an inside connection the diplomats had amongst the Papacy. It had ended shortly after, and somehow that made things worse... the plot that had indirectly lead to the death of Domnall's Father had been a scattershot wild plan not even directly aimed at Scotland.

His Father had died for no reason.

And Domnall meant to see to it that they all died for it.



"It has begun then," Nevin spoke up as he walked out onto the seaside balcony within the palace at Genoa. Aodh did not start even slightly, even when Nevin managed to approach him in complete silence, he was by now used to the man's voice coming out of thin air.

"Aye," he nodded, "Domnall shall take his revenge for our Father out on the Danes."

"Indeed," nodded Nevin, ".....only, the Danes are nae to blame, are they?"

Aodh turned to stare at his Spymaster, his face unreadable.

"Or maybe they are," conceded Nevin, "Maybe it was the Danes who caused Scotland's ex-communication all those years ago.... but if so, the evidence is long since gone and the perpetrators long since dead. Ye forged those documents, my Prince."

Aodh simply stared, and then he turned back around to stare out at the sea again. Finally, he spoke.

"I had my reasons to do so, some altruistic and others personal and selfish. Scotland was beginning to see their King as a loveable, affable buffoon past his prime, but today word on the streets is of the terrible, righteous fury of King Domnall the Avenger, King Domnall the Killer, King Domnall the Merciless."

"But that was nae ye only reason, was it?" noted Nevin.

"Suffice it to say, Nevin, that I needed to goad Domnall and rekindle the flame of his youth. His greatest victories came when he was trying to prove himself a worthy successor to Edward... but Domnall once told me something I would nae have guessed. He hates War, and he hates that he is so gifted at it. Once he achieved peace for Scotland he was loath to let it go, but for all of Scotland's strength, I need it stronger yet to achieve it's destiny.... so I gave him the excuse he needed to use his gifts."

"Ye manipulated ye own Brother," pointed out Nevin, his voice even and giving no indication what he thought of the fact, "And if he ever finds out, he will nae thank ye for it."

Aodh turned back to Nevin and smiled, and Nevin felt a chill run up his spine. For just a moment, he had not been looking into the face of his Prince and his friend, Aodh Canmore. Though Aodh's features were nothing alike, for just a moment, Nevin of Shetland had found himself looking once more into the face of Fearghus Campbell.

"My Brother will nae find out, Nevin," Aodh said calmly, "Because he did nae fully learn the lesson my Father wanted him to ken... a lesson my Father did nae intend for me to ever learn."

"The leaders of Scotland can nae afford to take **anything** at face value, even the word of their own family."

Chapter 54

King Bjorn of Denmark was an optimist.

He'd been struck through the belly with a sword during a skirmish with the Holy Roman Empire in his youth.... he'd lived.

He'd been ex-communicated by the Catholic Church.... Popes came and went, and this current Pope was old. Denmark would be reconciled.

Denmark's Treasury was stretched to the limit.... there were assets that could be sold to pay their debts.

The Viking Warriors had challenged his authority.... he organized for their extermination. Their ferocity on the battlefield had not been enough of an asset to accept their mutinous nature.

Scotland - the mightiest Empire in the world - had for some reason turned their wrath on Denmark.... but even the mightiest Empire had a weak point.

Roy Macgoulchane.

Bjorn sat in Council with his leading advisers, most trusted friends and influential Nobles, planning their response to Scotland's aggression. Many suggestions had been made, ranging from capitulation to bribery to defiance even unto the point of utter destruction. Bjorn had listened to them all, but from the outset his course of action had been set on.

"The mistake every Nation that had stood against Scotland has made," Bjorn spoke up smoothly as a burst of angry debate came to an end, "Was in trying to stack up to them and force them back man for man. Spain's King Mallobo almost got it right when he tried to use naval supremacy and reduced his military control to a single city, but Scotland overcame both obstacles. No, the key to defeating Scotland is not in matching their strength, but finding their weakness."

"And what is Scotland's weakness then?" asked one of the Noble Lords on the War Council, "Do you know some secret we do not?"

"Scotland's weakness is not in its armies, it is in its cities," smiled Bjorn, "And in this territory, they control Riga and Novgorod, two Russian Cities requiring constant Governance. King Domnall has called Angus the Mauler to join him in the field, believing that Roy Macgoulchane can govern Riga from a distance as well as Novgorod in person."

"And he cannot?" asked the Noble.

"Of course he can," sighed Bjorn, "There is a reason they chose him, he's a capable and well liked Governor as well as a competent General."

"Then how do w-"

"We kill him," grunted Bjorn, rolling his eyes, "We send an assassin and kill their Governor, and Riga and Novgorod will fall into anarchy, and Domnall Canmore will have no choice but to ride to the Cities to place them back under control. While things are at their most chaotic, we send Diplomats to sue for peace with Scotland, and diplomats to make peace with The Pope. Even if Scotland refuses our overtures of peace, with Denmark reconciled they will not be able to attack us without angering the Pope. And if the opposite should occur, then the Church will be forced to recognize that their great ally Scotland has accepted us as friends, and thus we shall be reconciled."

"But.... my King," muttered one old Advisor, "What if both the King of Scotland and The Pope refuse offers of peace and reconciliation?"

"Then we assassinate one or both," replied Bjorn simply, sounding almost bored, "It really couldn't be simpler."

King Bjørn Age: 43
Governor
Command ★★★★★
Dread ★★★★★
Authority ★★★★★
Piety ★★★★★

Retinue
Master of Assassins

Traits
Promising Commander
Budding Bureaucrat
Marks of War
Loyal
Trustworthy
Too Comfortable
Swift to Judge
Lacks Caution
Faction Leader
Perfect Politician
Cruel Leader
Espionage

Spot/Subt
Simply doesn't really believe that a grim or diabolical fate will befall him.
-2 from personal security (increases the chances of falling victim to assassination)

Has taken an interest in the field of espionage, having recruited numerous spies and agents.
10% discount on agent training costs

In Novgorod, an alien presence moved through the halls of the Palace silently, gracefully, deadly. His name was Jesper of Hadsund, a cruel and humorless man who took no pleasure in his work, not even a grim satisfaction when the job was done. He did what he did because that was what he'd been trained all his life to do, and despite his natural abilities and chameleon like nature, he had no desire to do anything else.

He did not drink, gamble or bed woman, man, child or animal. When he was not following his orders, he lived a monastic existence in which he ate, trained, slept and did little else. His imagination stretched only so far as how best to execute his orders, and he felt neither regret nor resentment for his life. It was all he had ever known, and all he would ever know until the day he died.

A drunken man's singing echoed down the turns of the many hallways of the Palace, though Jesper had been aware of his presence long before the noise became audible. Jesper sunk into the shadows and reduced his breathing to barely nothing as the drunken man - a servant - staggered by. Jesper could smell sweat and vodka on the man in almost equal amounts, which did not surprise him. Macgoulchane had retained most of the servants who had served in the Palace throughout their lives, and now that the Russian Winter had returned, they were finding heat where they could after their daily duties ended.

Jesper remained in place long after the servant was gone, then crept out of the shadows and moved silently through the dark halls again until he reached the sleeping quarters of Roy Macgoulchane. He entered quietly, his eyes all ready attuned to the darkness and picking out the slumbering form of the Governor. His hand slid into a hidden pocket in his tunic and removed a small blade, just enough to slit the man's throat quickly and quietly. Moving with preternatural silence, he moved to the side of the bed an-

Jesper of Hadsund collapsed to the ground bonelessly, dying as he lived - silently.



Roy sat up in the bed gasping in surprise, eyes wide and mouth opening to call for a guard, only to be stifled when the hand of his savior clamped down over his lips.

"Shhh," hushed Farquar Makfulchiane, "There is a dead assassin on the floor, do nae make me hurt a guard who thinks he is defending ye."

Roy heard the Scottish accent and visibly relaxed, and the hand over his mouth was pulled away. Macgoulchane heard rustling in the dark, and then a lantern was lit and Roy found himself facing Scotland's deadliest assassin, Farquar The Killer. He looked down at the slumped corpse of Jesper and back up at Farquar, and the question was evident in his face - why?

"I received orders to be here in case Denmark's King Bjorn was smart enough to try and throw Scotland's new Russian Territories into chaos," spoke Farquar calmly, "Apparently he is smart, and has very good assassins at his disposal, I almost didn't see him when I passed by him in the halls disguised as a drunken servant."

"The... the Danish King tried to have me killed?" gasped Roy, who despite being a member of the Nobility had never expected to be noticed by the "greats" of the world, "He... he tried to have me killed!"

"Aye lad," nodded Farquar, "While King Domnall and Angus the Mauler travel through the winter fields to war, ye sit here in Novgorod with a target on ye back.... what do ye intend to do about that?"

Roy stared wide-eyed at Farquar, and then finally his racing mind slowed, and Farquar smiled as he saw the Governor start to think.

"What am I going to do?" Roy said, and smiled, "What they'd nae expect me to."

As far North as civilized man had settled, close to the Northern Edge of the world, lay Helsinki. The Fortress City was one of Denmark's forgotten holdings, or so the Garrison Commander - Captain Knud - sometimes believed. Years would pass between visits by Danish Nobility, and decades since the last Danish King had come their way. Helsinki held no strategic value other than that it was a place in the frozen North where man could live in relative comfort.

Knud has served as Garrison Commander for close to a decade now, and in all that time had only seen combat once, crushing a half-starved tiny bandit camp. That had happened at the start of Spring five years earlier, and Helsinki had been at peace since then. He certainly did not expect any troubles, especially in the midst of the cold, bitter Winters Helsinki suffered through.

So the sight that greeted him from the walls this cold morning was the last thing he'd expected.

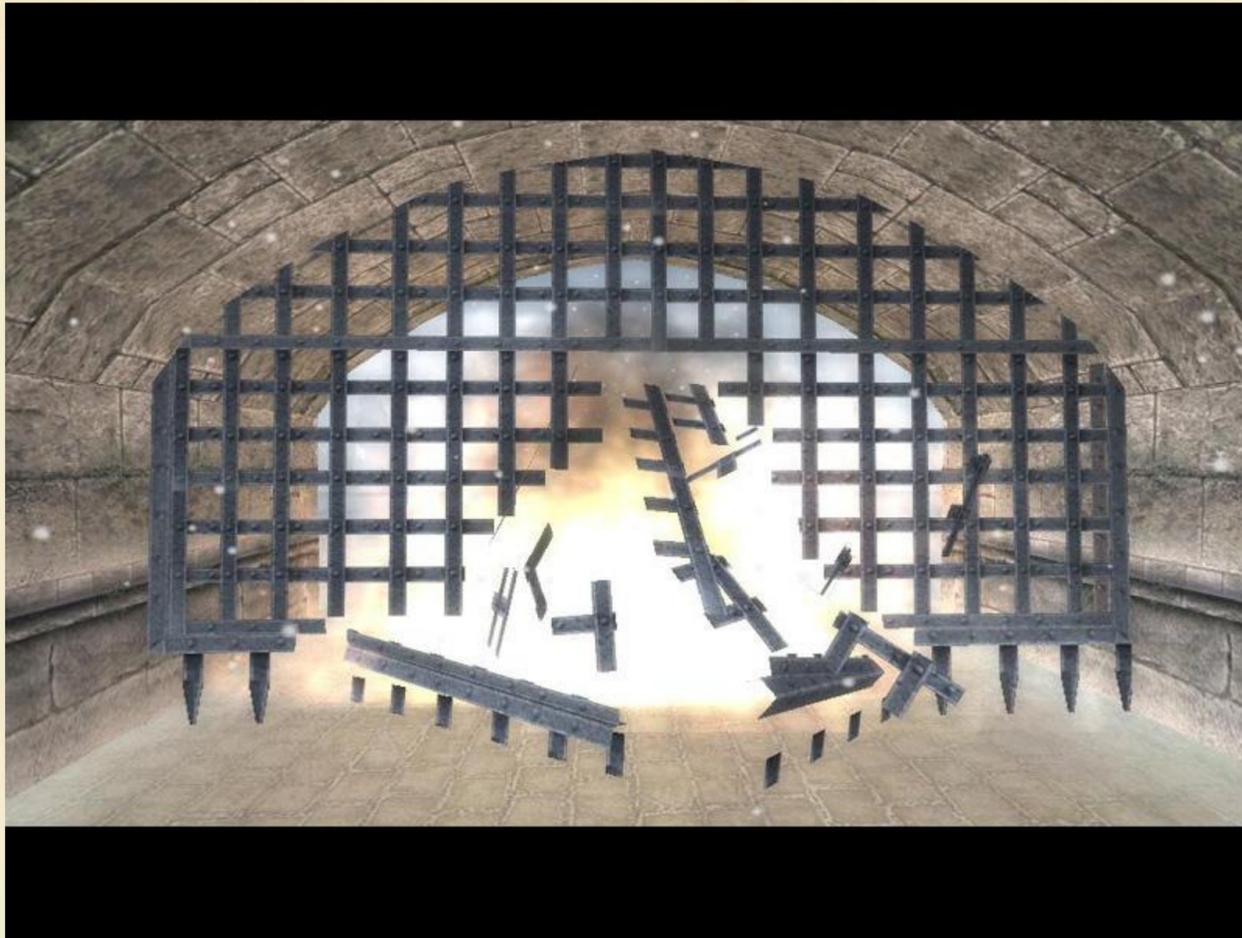


"Are they wearing.... kilts?" asked Knud in disbelief, "The Scottish are here?"

"The Scottish are here," nodded the man beside him, "You know what this means, Captain?"

"Oh yes," nodded Knud grimly, "We're fucked, aren't we?"





"If ye're cold, lads, warm up ye blood and get through that gate!" cried Roy, and his men charged forward towards the shattered gate. As they rushed ahead, Macgoulchane held back a shiver that wanted to run through his body and for the 1000th time questioned the wisdom of taking a force of men North to Helsinki in the midst of Winter. It was something Angus the Mauler would do, or King Domnall... not him.... and that was why he was here, because if he acted in a way that Denmark's King Bjorn's did not expect, then King Bjorn wouldn't think of him as an easy target to use to get an advantage over Scotland.

Just inside the smashed gates of Helsinki, Norse Swordsmen - the bastard offspring of the Vikings - stood waiting for the Scots to come. None of them were under any illusion that they could win this battle, everyone knew the reputation of the Demon Scots, and if they'd come in the midst of Winter then only one man could be leading them.

The mad Scotsman, Angus the Mauler.

But they were proud of their lineage, even if they were not proud of their King. Many had questioned the wisdom of Bjorn wiping out the Vikings, oddly enough citing the example of the way the Scottish had made the Highlanders their elite fighters. Now that decision was going to be the end of them, but if the Norse were going to die, they meant to die in a way that would have made the Vikings proud.



The Norse drove against the mercenary spearmen who took the vanguard aggressively, slashing and cutting with their swords, breaking through spears and shields, cutting down men by the dozen. The Spearmen fought back ferociously, plunging first spears and then swords into the Norsemen, but struggling to make forward progress through the gate.

The grim resolution of the Swordsmen began to shift towards shock and delight as they realized they could hold back the Spearmen, and pressed forward with renewed vigor.

"Is this it!?" laughed one Norseman, "Is **THIS** the mighty Scotland!?"

"Nae, lad!" laughed a fresh voice, "**THIS** is!"

And the Norse looked past the Spearmen they were fighting, and saw the Scottish Noble Pikemen come marching through the gate.



To say that the Norse broke would have been a lie. There really weren't any Norse TO break, once the Pikemen got within reach of the Swordsmen, they slaughtered them, till only twenty were left from over 100, staggering in horror back from the pile of their dead brethren.



The Dismounted Huscarls that had rushed down from the walls to aid the Norse Swordsmen saw them running and quickly joined them, charging through the snow laden streets to the interior Fortress Courtyard, where Captain Knud had gathered together as many of the trained Town Militia he could.



"Come with me, men," Knud ordered as he watched the Huscarls and surviving Swordsmen rush back through the gate, "They'll be bringing their catapult forward first to blast through the gate.... if we can destroy their catapults or at least the men controlling them, we can hold them off within the inner fortress until reinforcements arrive."

"Captain, surely they'll have men riding in support?" asked one of the militia men, obviously not enthralled with the idea.

"Probably," acknowledged Knud, who knew his men too well to lie to them, "But we have little other choice.... and the Scottish are arrogant, maybe we'll get lucky."

They moved through the gates, Knud marching them over the snowy hill and towards the exterior city gate.... and Knud discovered that today really wasn't his lucky day.



"PUSH ON! PUSH ON TO THE CATAPULT!" roared Knud as the Scottish surrounded them. He stormed ahead, lifting tired legs through the deep snow, slashing with his sword at any Scotsman who got too close, trying to keep them clear so he and the men following him could reach the catapults and destroy them. And then he saw them, far in the distance, pushed forward slowly along the ice-slick paved roads, but coming closer.

"There is it, men!" he cried out in delight, and looked behind him for the first time and saw how many of his men had followed him, "Men?"



"SHIT!" he screamed, forgetting all about the catapults and his earlier words that this was their only chance, and turned back towards the Inner Fortress.



He heard the thunder of hooves as the Scottish Cavalry rode down on his men and heard their screams of terror, and felt it as well. He knew as well as they that it must be Angus the Mauler leading that charge, and that turned his blood to ice. He staggered directly through the Scottish, ducking and weaving more out of instinct than anything else, still taking cuts and blows but somehow, miraculously coming through the other side still alive. Of the 150 men who he had taken with him out of the relative safety of the inner courtyard, only himself and one other survived. They stared at each other with the same panic in their eyes, and then turn and ran side by side for the seemingly impossible goal of the gate.





Somehow, impossibly, they made it to the gate. Knud gasped with relief even as he heard the thunder of hooves growing louder and louder in his ears. He looked through the gate and up the walls, where the Huscarls stood staring with wide eyes at him, and he realized that his run had been for nothing.

They weren't going to open the gates for him.

The hooves stopped and behind him, Knud heard the movement of the horses, their breath, the clink of armor and the grunts of the men controlling them.... and then the sound of a single horse approaching him.



"Order them to open the gates, lad," said the voice of the Scotsman, friendly and almost conversational.

"They won't open the gates," he replied, panting harshly, trying to keep his terror from overwhelming him, "And even if they would, I won't give that order."

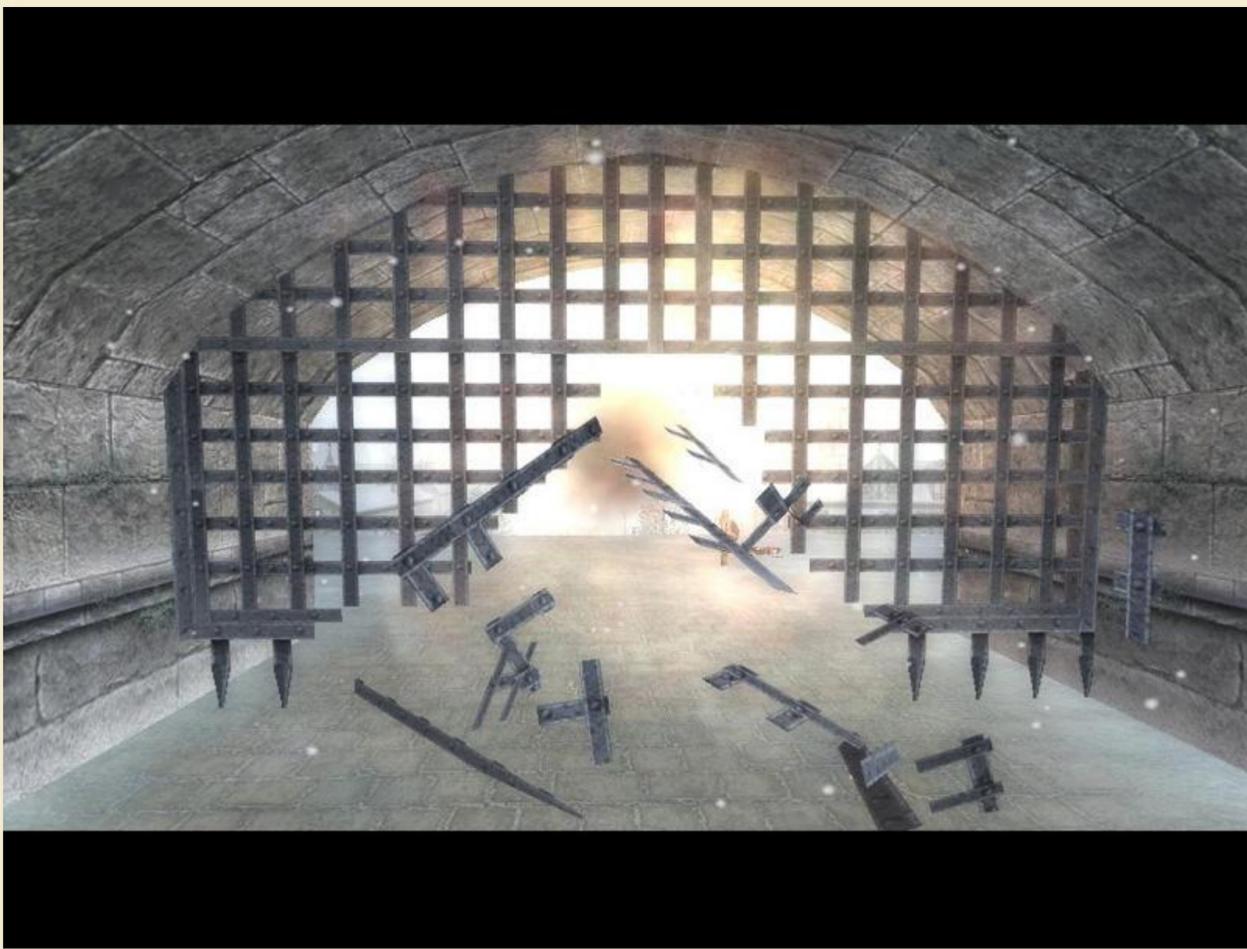
"Then ye're nae any use to us, are ye lad?" asked the Scotsman in the same conversational tone, and Knud closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable.



"General!" reported one of Roy's men as he pulled his Cavalry back from the gate, "The Danes managed to open fire from the walls and set fire to one of the catapults!"

"Damn it," cursed Roy angrily, "Make sure they protect the one we've got left, that Trebuchet is nae going to fit under the gate, the catapult is all we have left to break through."





"The gate is down, get in there men, and finish these troublesome bastards off!" Roy snapped, and his men moved instantly to respond. He was not Angus the Mauler, but they'd all learnt to respect his command over the years. They charged up the hill and through the shattered remnants of the gate, and captured Roy Macgoulchane the Fortress of Helsinki.



"I bet ye did nae see that one coming, did ye, Bjorn," grinned Macgoulchane, "Or ye either, Angus, ye crazy old bastard." Roy looked about him at the corpse littered courtyard, sitting high on his horse within a city that **HE** had just conquered. He was beginning to see why Angus loved this type of thing.

Angus loved this type of thing.

A Danish Captain named Inge had been leading roughly 850 men to rendezvous with another 500 riding down from the North. Together they had intended to ride Southwest to Thorn, to reinforce the garrison of 200 stationed there. They had believed that moving through the Winter snows would protect them, that Scotland would not move out of their newly conquered cities in Winter.

They'd thought wrong.

King Domnall has crushed the garrison at Thorn, and Angus had wiped out the reserve army that Inge was marching to meet. He'd hoped to lay an ambush for Inge as well, but word had gotten to the man through his scouts of the fate waiting for him, and he'd instantly turned South to march to the capital Vilnius, where a large garrison would be happy to have their numbers reinforced.

Now Angus was giving chase, delighting in making a larger army run from him. He had only 600 under his command, but his reputation had spread throughout Denmark, and now the name Angus the Mauler was enough to make men tremble. He meant to hound and chase Captain Inge all the way to Vilnius if need be, and kill as many of his men as he could. Then he would turn West and join up with King Domnall, and explain to his King a few things about how to fight this war. The King was a tough old bastard, he had to be to rule Scotland, but he was getting on in years now, and Angus meant to show him that it was time to hand over control of the armies and all warfare to him.

It was his destiny.

Captain Inge pushed his men on, moving through forest and field through HIS land, and that rankled him most of all. He was retreating from his homeland from an invading force smaller than the one at his command. For a proud Dane, it was almost too much to bear.

They crested the hill and found themselves within the large hollow where an old abandoned ring of standing stones was all that remained of the heresy that had once reigned supreme in the now Catholic Nation. Despite the faith of the Danes (despite King Bjorn's ex-communication) they still held a pagan fear of such places, but their fear of Angus the Mauler kept them moving forward despite it.



"This bastard trebuchet is slowing us up," grunted Inge as they paused at the top of the hill to organize their men to move the large siege weapon down the hill, "I'd say we should abandon it if I didn't think they could use it at Vilnius."

"We have maybe a day's lead on the Mauler, Captain," noted his Huscarl Commander, "Maybe we should take the time to go around this site, some of the men...."

"Some of the men would rather live, I'm sure," grunted Inge, "Besides, we.... what the hell is that?"

His Commander frowned, and followed Inge's gaze. He looked over the hollow, the standing stones, the upward slope and the forest and.... he saw it, a glint of light on metal, and he felt his heart sink.

"We've walked into a trap, Captain," he moaned.





Waiting for them on the other side of the hollow, with 1300 men, was King Domnall Canmore.
