

Chapter 55

"FIRE THAT TREBUCHET!" screamed Inge, "EARN YOUR BLASTED KEEP AND KILL THOSE SCOTTISH BASTARDS!"



"Get down that slope, crossbows!" Inge roared, "FIRE ON THE SCOTS! MAKE THEM COME TOWARDS US, GET THEM INTO THE BASE OF THE HOLLOW AND WE'LL SEND IN OUR INFANTRY TO CRUSH THEM!"

Inge's stunned men stared down the steep snow-covered slope, at the ancient standing stones, and then up the next slope to where the Scottish were waiting in far larger numbers than their own. Inge cursed at their indecisiveness and roared angrily, hoping to either shame or scare them into action.

"MAYBE WE'LL DIE TODAY, BOYS!" he roared, "BUT ONE THING IS GUARANTEED! IF YOU **DON'T** TAKE IT TO THE SCOTS, WE **WILL** BE SLAUGHTERED! NOW GET DOWN THAT SLOPE!"

Across the hollow, King Domnall watched as a trebuchet blast crashed into the ground ahead of the forest line where his men waited, and allowed a harsh grin to cross his face.

"They're going to try and bring us to them, lads," he called out, "Crossbowmen, archers, step forward and open fire on them! Infantry, be ready to give them their wish, but only when I give the word!"



Arrows and crossbow bolts launched through the air on both sides of the standing stones, and fell just short of their desired targets. Inge cursed as the Scottish seemed reluctant to take the bait, while King Domnall sat amongst the trees smiling.

"My King, we make no progress this way," Hew Mar pointed out. He'd been chosen to accompany the King after Patrick Makfulchiane had been left to govern the newly conquered Danish Cities, but he wasn't sure if it was to be considered an honor or not. King Domnall kept his own counsel, and seemed consumed by a still only vaguely explained hatred for the Danes. Now that they'd encountered another large number of them, Hew had expected Domnall to charge straight in, but he seemed satisfied to hold the men back.

And then his answer came in the frantic blowing of a Danish Horn.

Inge twisted about to stare behind him as a bloodstained Danish scout emerged from the trees, clutching a horn to his lips and blowing frantically.

"What is the meaning of thi-" started Inge, and then heard the thunder of hooves and realized to his horror what the presence of the Scout meant. They're believed they were a day's ride ahead of Angus the Mauler.

They had been wrong.



The men manning the trebuchets were struck down as Angus the Mauler charged his Cavalry into them, cutting them down as the Danes standing in formation before them cried out in terror. The great monster that had been pursuing them had arrived, and they rushed down the slope of the hill with no other thought than to escape him.

"INFANTRY!" roared Domnall, watching with glee as the Danes moved into range of his archers and crossbowmen, "FORWARD!"

Inge cried out, desperately trying to hold his own unit of men in place as he watched the bulk of his army charging into the trap that had been so simply set for them. His men stared about in uncertainty, unsure whether to join their fleeing countrymen or stand with their Captain. Then all thoughts of anything but staying alive were banished as Angus rode his men into them, and they fought desperately for their lives.



As their Captain struggled to stay alive, the bulk of the forces under his "command" drew swords and halted in the midst of the hollow, the pagan standing stones of their past to their side as the Scottish Infantry marched towards them. Their immediate panic had gone and now they recognized the danger of their predicament, and too late they prepared to make their stand.





The fighting was brutal and merciless, and to their credit the Danes gave as good as they got. The cold was forgotten, men moved through the snow as if it wasn't there, and cried out their defiance as they were cut down. Scotsmen fell before the blades of the Danish, but every one that fell was replaced by two more, and to the horror of the Danes, many of those cut down were seen to rise up again, in pain and clutching their wounds, but also charging back into the fray.

And all the time that they fought, the Danes knew that Angus the Mauler waited behind them, and in the trees up the hill before them, King Domnall Canmore himself sat watching their destruction.

And then the King came to them.

"Forward, Mar!" he snapped suddenly, "We must let our lads ken that we fight with them.... and besides, why should they get all of the fun?"



Inge stared about him in despair, watching as the numerically superior Scottish began to surround his men; watching as King Domnall rode out of the trees and towards one of the Dane's exposed flanks; watched as a screaming Angus the Mauler terrified his men into dropping their weapons and being cut down by the Scottish Cavalry almost without a fight.

"IN THE NAME OF GOD, HELP US!" he screamed suddenly, "PLEASE GOD, I BEG OF YOU! HELP US! HELP ME!"

Inge got his wish... just not in the way he expected.



A crossbow bolt fired from the throng of fighting men somehow shot its way clear of the fighting and plunged into the back of his neck and out through his throat. He managed to make a single grunt of surprise, and then he tipped backwards into the snow, lying dead amongst his men. Almost as if the death of their Captain marked the turning of the tide, the Danes (many of whom were unaware of Inge's fate) suddenly broke before the crush of the Scottish and turned to run, their only thoughts to make it to the trees and evade capture. All thoughts of Denmark and defending the honor of their King were gone, all they knew was that the Scots meant to kill them, and the only way to escape that was to run.

Enemy General Fallen
Captain Inge
Denmark



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



A number managed to bypass Angus' men as he dealt to the last of Inge's unit, leaving behind the hollow and the Standing Stones, passing the now useless trebuchets and rushing towards the forest they'd only just recently left behind.... and found themselves running directly into the rearguard of Angus' army.



"CHASE THEM DOWN, LADS!" roared Domnall, eyes wide and mouth parted in a cruel grin, "HUNT THEM DOWN LIKE ANIMALS!"

And the Scottish followed their orders with great delight.





Angus sat his horse and looked down the slope of the hollow and the Standing Stones, and he had to fight to keep himself still from his excitement. Far below him, he watched as King Domnall's man - Hew Mar - gathered together the roughly two hundred Danish who had been captured, while the rest of the army regathered around them while King Domnall himself rode past them, offering words of encouragement and jest here and there.

"It's finally time," Angus whispered to himself, his usually cruel sneer replaced by a visible excitement that seemed alien on his features, "My time has finally come."

Angus was a respected and feared leader, his own men thought of him as a legend, but they also feared his brutish temper and wild, impetuous nature. He'd been thrust into the responsibility of guarding the Northern Border at a young age, and then when Nectan Canmore had died of the plague, he'd had to take responsibility for the huge expanse of desert stretched from Yerevan to Baghdad to Jerusalem. He'd done all this without a complaint, and proved a competent and capable Governor and General, but never had he received a word of thanks or respect from the Canmores or the other ruling Lords of the Scottish Empire.

But now... now here he sat in the midst of Danish Lands, the King of Scotland himself waiting below to meet him. Angus would ride down in triumph, and the King would greet him as an equal and give him the command of the armies to finish the Danish Campaign... and then from there, who knew? Maybe Hungary, or even their supposed allies in Poland? It mattered not to Angus, what was important was that Domnall Canmore was growing old and talk had reached even as far as him of his growing drinking habit. Domnall would want someone capable to run the armies, and who was better suited to such a task than him?



He rode his men down the hill, passing soldiers who whispered and pointed at him, recognizing him as the Mauler, the man who had ridden deep into the Russian Winter and killing a Russian General by tearing his throat out with his teeth. They watched as he rode towards where King Domnall stood beside Hew Mar, giving him instructions.

Angus dismounted, his helm tucked under one arm and his most winning smile on his face... which wasn't a pleasant sight.

"Domnall Canmore!" he boomed with a laugh, "This is truly an hon-"

King Domnall turned and without changing expression lashed out with a mailed fist, smashing into Angus' face and lifting the Scotsman bodily up off of his feet before crashing hard into the ground. Shocked silence descended over the gathered army, and King Domnall turned back to Hew without a backward look.

"How many prisoners are there?" he demanded.

"J... just over 200, my King," replied Hew, eyes wide as he stared behind the King at Angus, who lay in the snow cradling his face.

"Kill them," snapped Domnall blankly, "Then prepare the men, we ride for Vilnius as soon as we are able. I mean to winter in Bjorn's own Capital City."

He marched off, and every eye followed him, including Angus'. All of them finally understood that King Domnall had shaken off the shackles of peace and returned to war. He was no longer King Domnall the Lewd.

He was King Domnall the Merciless.

Army Details



King Domnall the Merciless Age: 49

Faction Leader

Command ★★★★★○○○

Dread ○○○○○○○○○○

Authority ○○○○○○○○○○

Diety ○○○○○○○○○○

Dread
Even the dauntless must be forced to face such a man

Keenue	Traits
 Mercenary Captain	Legacy of Chivalry
 Pagan Magician	Understands Logistics
 Notorious Berserker	Night Fighter
 Veteran Warrior	Totally Closed
 Shieldbearer	Dauntless
 Master of Assassins	Shamelessly Lewd
 Military Engineer	Natural Commander
	Speaks of Loyalty
	Swift to Judge
	Drunken Heathen
	Poor with Taxes
	Faction Leader
	Master of Espionage
	Great Commander
	Pillager
	Deceptive
	Confident Attacker
	Cruel and Cunning
	Merciless Conqueror
	Can Tell a Tale
	Tyrannical Leader
	Wall Taker
	Feels Appreciated

Breaking out of his awed silence, Hew snapped at the men to execute the prisoners as per King Domnall's orders, then turned and approached Angus the Mauler carefully. He knew the man's reputation, and he worried how the firebrand General would react.... he would have to handle him carefully.

"Angus, dinnae take the King's actions as a personal insult," he said quietly as he offered the bleeding General a hand. Angus ignored it, getting to his feet and staring after the King with wide eyes aflame with something Hew did not at first recognize. He tried again, "Angus, the King values ye, ye must ken that, dinnae do something fool..."

"Do something foolish?" snapped Angus irritably, "Why would I do something like that?"

And finally Hew recognized the look in Angus' eyes. It was not hate or hurt or surprise or rage.

It was pure adoration.

"Take his actions as a personal insult?" gasped Angus, eyes wide, mouth wide open as he shook his head softly, "I would follow that man into the gates of Hell!"

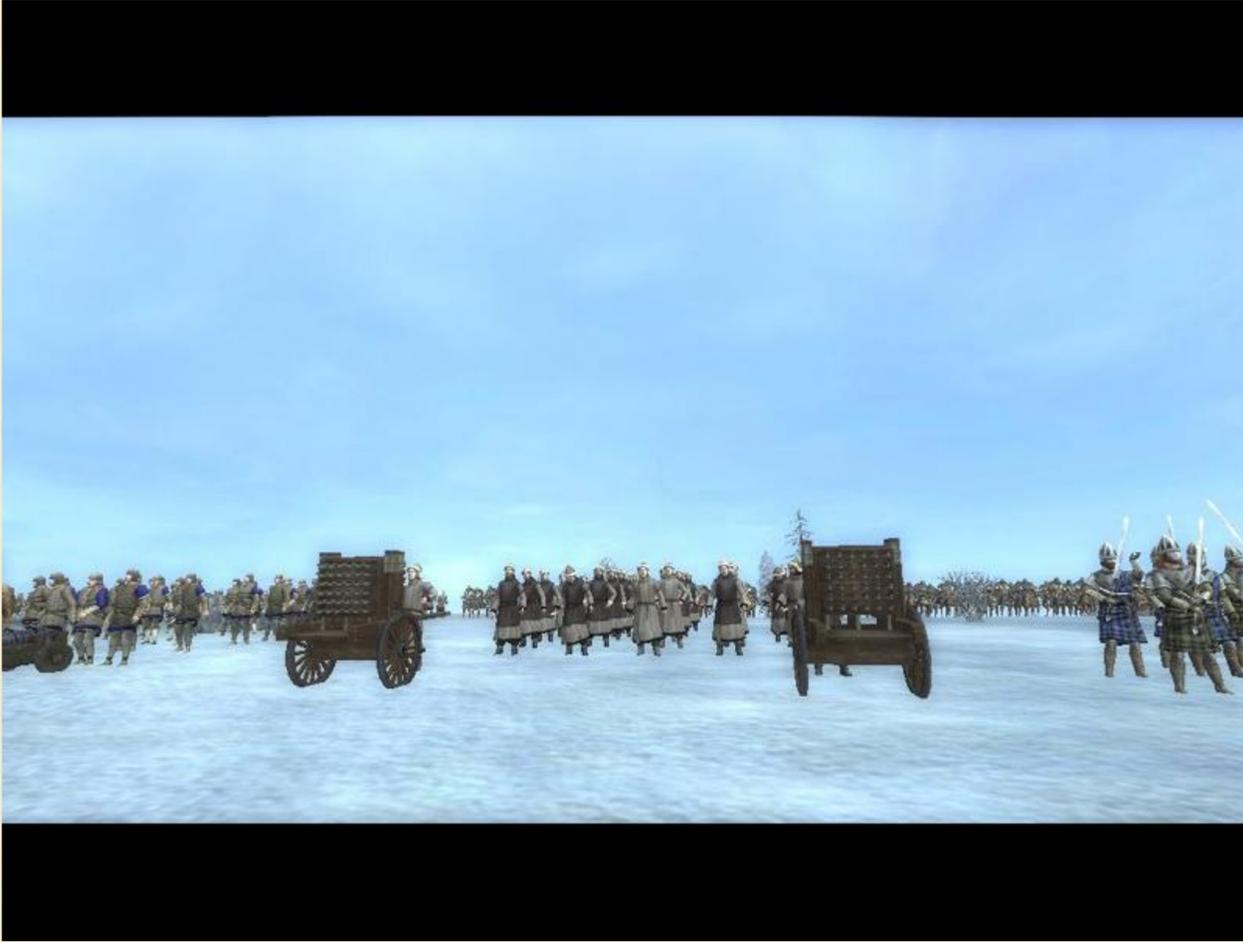


Chapter 56

The Scottish army stretched out before the walls of Vilnius, Capital City of the Danish Empire. Its walls were not higher than the walls of other cities that had fallen before the Scottish, nor were they thicker or armed with more men. But these walls **WERE** different, and Domnall knew it, Aodh's talented spies had made that clear to him.

He rode his horse along the frontlines, smiling and sharing words of encouragement with the men, many of who stared up at him with awe. Grey was beginning to creep through his beard, but the King radiated a presence undiminished by time, and those who had questioned whether he was past his prime had been struck silent. He was Domnall Canmore, King Domnall the Merciless, son of the brilliant Edmund Canmore, nephew of the near mythical Edward Canmore, and all knew him.

Including the Mongols.



"Do ye ken who I am, lads?" Domnall asked, stopping before the Mongol Mercenaries that had been under Angus' command and were now his men.

"You are the Kanmor Khan," replied the Mongol Leader, "The Domnall Khan.... you killed the Horde."

"And?" asked Domnall, eyes narrowing.

"Nothing, Great Lord," replied the Mongol, "The Horde was strong... the Skot-tish were stronger... now we are Skot-tish."

"It's nae as simple as that, lad," Domnall grinned, and turned on his horse to point at the walls, "Show me ye strength is worthy of Scotland, bring down that wall for me."

The Mongol - Abuqha - grinned, exposing several missing teeth, and saluted the King as he rode away. Turning, he barked harsh orders to his men, who quickly set up the Rocket Launchers, a devilish device whose origins were unknown even to the Mongols themselves. All those who served Domnall knew was half-superstition and half religious - strange and obviously false tales of a green and verdant land far to the East where almond-eyed half-breeds of man and demon lived beyond a great wall that spread the length of the world, and were led into battle by demon-faced men of metal who controlled fire and could kill with their hands. But what the Mongols did know was how to use these rockets to great effect, as the 1000 Danes guarding the city of Vilnius were about to find out.





Rockets thundered against the walls - some crashing to the ground before the walls and others whizzing over to hit buildings within the city and set them on fire - but most hit their mark against the massive stone walls. Again and again the rockets hit and exploded, the Danish soldiers standing on the walls ducking and bracing as the wall shook under the steady impact.... and then finally the assault relented, as the Mongols ran out of the rockets they had prepared.

And the walls of Vilnius still stood.



"How is this possible," gaped Abuqha, staring at the walls which were cratered and blackened but still solid, "Never has a wall held up to our rockets."

"This is the Capital City of a race of warriors who plundered and pillaged their way across the world, lad," laughed Kirk, the Bombard Commander whose men were positioned besides the Mongols, "They built those walls to last, it'll take more than a few little rockets to take them down."

Kirk turned and barked an order to his men, and they began loading the Bombards as Kirk threw his arm around Abuqha's shoulders and laughed as the surprised Mongol flinched in surprise, then shared his wisdom with the mercenary.

"It's going to take A REALLY BIG rocket!"





"If I may, my King," Hew Mar asked King Domnall, sitting his horse beside him as they watched the Bombards thundering against the walls, "What was the purpose of humiliating the Mongols like that? Our man inside the City warned us about the remarkable strength of the walls."

"HA!" spat Angus with contempt, shaking his head, while Domnall's face remained fixed on the walls, his hatred for the Danes dancing in his eyes even though his face remained blank.

"Because the Mongols respect strength," the King replied finally, "So they will nae take it as humiliation, while our men will be keen to show off to them their own prowess. It will bring them closer together, the Scots as teachers and the Mongols as students, and once they have fought together, they will be Brothers. The Mongols need a Horde, I mean to see to it that every one of that cursed race who survived extermination come to consider themselves true Scotsmen."

A great cheer suddenly rose up from the men, and Domnall allowed a cruel smile to lift one corner of his mouth. The Bombards had smashed their way through the wall that the Mongols had weakened, and Danes were scrambling to race to safety as the ground beneath them collapsed.



The walls of Vilnius had been breached.

"My Father was a warm man, friendly and loving, good humored," Aodh Canmore had started, sitting in the interior garden alongside his friend and closest confidant, Nevin of Shetland. The War with Spain was over, Scotland was once more at peace, and Nevin - who had made a career of knowing people better than they knew themselves - found himself less and less able to read Aodh. During the Sicilian Campaign, Aodh's confidence had grown dangerously overbearing, he'd become arrogant, and Nevin had been forced to humble him for his own good. But when he'd returned from his own larger than life adventures in Zaragoza, he'd found Aodh Canmore harder to read than ever, completely confident in himself without falling back into arrogance... and involved in a potentially lethal game with the only thing that could challenge the might of The Scottish Empire - The Church.

Aodh had refused to tell Nevin his plans, and the Spy had felt oddly... left out. As if he couldn't believe that Aodh had grown to the point where he no longer needed Nevin's help. Aodh had seemed to sense this, and sensed his unease and disappointment, and had settled down with Nevin to tell him something that previously had only been shared with his own Brother.

He told him of the "special mission" his brother The King had given him.

"But in battle, my Father became "numb", "Aodh continues, "That was his word for it. He felt a numbness pass over him and he became detached from the world. Detached from emotion, detached from fear or sympathy or nausea. The men he struck down in battle were nothing to him, the fear that the greatest Mongol Leaders instilled in their opponents washed over him to nae effect. Even the wellbeing of those closest to him, included his beloved brother Edward, meant nothing - if a man could be thought to be capable of removing his soul, then my Father did just such a thing when he was in battle."

"But when the battle was over, the numbness faded, and he was Edmund Canmore again. He was the man who bought gifts for his children when he returned from journeys or war; he was the man who loved his wife and his family; the man who loved to pursue knowledge and question everything; the man who could stand beaming in a room full of arguing theologians and philosophers as he soaked up their wisdom... or lack thereof. He was my Father, and though his greatest attention was always for his older sons - Nectan and Domnall - he was always kind to me, always showed me love and made me know how important I was to him. There are nae so many boys who can say the same about their fathers, whether Noble or Common, and I was smart enough to ken how lucky I was and nae feel anger or resentment for the greater attention he gave my brothers. Truth be told, Nevin, I welcomed it, because I had no expectations attached. Nevin was the smart one, the one who had inherited Father's desire to question everything. Domnall was the leader and the fighter. I was but the extra son, the one who would have been shipped off to Govern some small inconsequential city out of the way and raise a few Grandchildren for my Father to dote over on infrequent visits... or at least I would have been if I hadn't shown such an interest in the Church at a young age. I was marked for the Church early, and I think in his wilder moments my Uncle Edward harbored fantasies that one day I would become Pope, though Father knew I was more likely for the Priesthood or some kind of theological scholar."

"When Father died, my first thought was for my Father's eternal soul. He was a good and kind man, but he did nae believe in God, and that marked him for Hell. I prayed for his soul, and gave no thought as to my fate. My destiny in the Church had been sidelined by an unfortunate ex-communication through no fault of my Uncle or Father's, and I'd found myself at a loose end, dabbling somewhat unwanted in the fields that were my brother's domains. Nectan had tried his best to tutor me, and Domnall seemed mostly uninterested... until I saw the chance to serve Scotland and the Church at the same time and sent men to kill Sultan Tutush, leader of the Turks. My plan succeeded, but Domnall was outraged and berated me for my short-sightedness, and took it upon himself to teach me the personal side of warfare."

Aodh leaned back against the trunk of the tree and stretched his legs, the smiled at Nevin with a sparkle in his eye, "Tell me true, Nevin, what was ye first impression of me when ye met me on the dusty road to Cairo?"

"Ye were... grief stricken by the death of ye Brother," Nevin offered diplomatically, then smiled, "And ye were still like a child, my Prince, ye seemed so unaware of the greater truth of the world outside of ye Bible and ye scrolls and tutoring."

"And yet ye tested me with the Inquisitor so early, Nevin," teased Aodh, and Nevin felt himself truly relaxing for the first time since the "unpleasantness" of Zaragoza.

"The Canmore Steel was always in ye, Aodh, it just needed to be brought out," Nevin smiled, "And the plague... it had started the process, the Inquisitor just finished it."

"Aye the plague," sighed Aodh, "That is where it began... but there is one thing I have always wondered, even to this day. The plague killed my brother, and ye came to me shortly after on the road to Cairo to lay his ashes to rest... but why me? Nectan was Spymaster because he was suited to the role... but why was I chosen to replace him?"

"Ahhh," Nevin had smiled, "That is a story in and of itself."

"KNIGHTS! HOLD THE LINE!" roared Captain Inge, commander of the Garrison at Vilnius. The Capital had been left in his command by King Bjorn himself, and he would be damned if he was going to let the Scottish take it. They'd breached the walls, and now hundreds of the feared Scottish Infantry were charging through the snowy fields before the walls, "HOLD THE LINE! ANY COWARD WHO RUNS FOR HIS LIFE WILL LOSE IT TO MY BLADE!"





Flaming arrows arced over the walls and amongst the men, who to their credit held formation as they roughly beat out the flames or snuffed it under handfuls of snow. Those struck in limbs then pulled the arrows free, staunching the blood as best as they could and braced themselves again. Those unlucky enough to be struck fatally were pulled aside by comrades and left on the ground, the thoughts of the living unable to be wasted on the dead. Inge watched as the Scottish approached, and thanked God quietly that at least the breach was in the wall and the City Gate still held in place, restricting where the Scottish could enter the city.

And then, of course, the Gates opened.



"A SPY!" roared Inge in fury, "HOLD THEM AT THAT GaTE!"

And the battle was joined.



Unlike the Danes the Scottish had recently fought in the field, these could not turn and run in the hopes of finding safety in the fields and forests. The Danes held in place, fighting for their lives and every foot of territory that the Scottish wanted to gain. They were fierce; they were skilled; they were well armored and equipped; they were excellently trained; they stood in similar numbers to those of their enemies....

They were no match for the Scottish.





The Mongols watched in awe as - if by sheer force of will - the Scottish forced themselves through the gate and the breach in the wall and drove back the heavily armored Danes.

"This is our new Horde," Abuqha whispered, "It is greater than anything Genghis Khan ever dreamed of."

The Danes flung themselves at the Scottish in their desperate last-gasp effort to keep them from fully entering the City. Danes were cut down and lay in great heaps, Scots falling alongside them but in lesser numbers, and being replaced by more and more. Deep in the back of the minds of the Danes the ugly reptilian voice of survival was beginning to hiss and bite, telling them to run from the death looming over them. Thought of Captain Inge's threat held most, but finally one man and then another broke, and when they saw what had become of Captain Inge, the cry went up that broke the rest of the Danes as well.

"CAPTAIN INGE HAS RUN! CAPTAIN ANGE HAS FLED THE BATTLE!"

They broke and ran, but in their mindless terror to get deeper into the city to find some kind of sanctuary, they ran through the ranks of the Scottish swelling through the gates. Scotsmen struck the fleeing Danes down by their scores, and within minutes the hundreds who had been standing and fighting had been whittled down to tens, and then ten, and then one, and finally none.





The Scottish held the gates of Vilnius, and they shared it with the dead of Denmark.



In Antioch, Aodh Canmore had stood before a man whom even time and the closeness of death had not diminished, and fought miserably to hide his fear.

"Come closer, lad," the man lying on his deathbed spoke, "I would see ye eyes when we speak."

Aodh approached, and the man peered at him with those horrible dead eyes. Even propped up by pillows and painfully thin, Fearghus Campbell was still an awing presence, and Aodh struggled to meet his eyes.

"Ye did nae have ye dream, lad," Fearghus whispered, his voice harsh, "Ye did nae get to live a life amongst the dusty scrolls and books of the Church, far from the machinations and unpredictable actions of men."

"what of it?" Aodh asked, trying to hide his nervousness and growing fear, not very successfully.

"Ye Father died well, lad," Fearghus said, a sick grin on his face, "Better than any man could hope for, with a peace of mind few have ever had before.... will I die as well, do ye think?"

"...I....I...." started Aodh, unsure how to continue.

"Whatever it is eating away at my insides will nae let me live much longer, young Prince," Fearghus grinned, and despite the wasted nature of his body, he seemed to radiate health and rationality, and Aodh had a sudden, suspicious fear that the man's body would die but he would keep on talking, keep looking around and seeing things that others did not and plotting and planning as he had in life, "And maybe I do nae have the peace of mind that ye Father had... maybe I fear for my eternal soul, and infinity in the clutches of Satan? Maybe I seek absolution for my sins, for though they were in service to Scotland, they were sins indeed... I have killed and caused to be killed, Aodh Canmore, and I have held the lives of men in my power without ever meeting them, and used them like pawns to achieve a destiny they were unaware of.... I have set myself early in life on the path to hell, paved with good intentions as it may have been.... and I ask ye now, will ye release me from that damnation? Will ye grant me absolution?"

"Ye... ye want me to absolve ye of ye sins?" asked Aodh, shock and outrage overwhelming his fear of the man who had been the boogeyman of his youth, "I am not a Priest, Campbell!"

"Aye lad, but if ye were... would ye absolve me of my sins? Would you at least hear my confession?"

Aodh stared at the man in the bed, and Fearghus watched with mounting excitement as he saw a fire grow in the young Prince's eyes, and watched his entire body shift in place till he held himself in a completely different manner to usual.

"I would hear ye confession, yes ye vile bastard!" Aodh spat, fire in his eyes but his voice cold and composed, inhuman, "And then I would tell ye that there was no absolution for a man who did nae believe, and confessed only from fear. I would tell ye of the inevitable torments that were waiting for ye, and I would hope that ye final thoughts on dying are that every moment of the eternity of suffering ye will face were richly deserved, and that eternity was nae enough!"

Aodh finished and glared coldly at Fearghus, and then the fire faded from his eyes and his posture shifted back to its usual position, and he looked shocked by what he had just said. He stared at Fearghus as if waiting for the monstrous figure that had haunted his childhood nightmares to raise up from the bed and point at him, denounce him for his unchristian attitudes. Denounce him and make all aware off the secret workings of his mind - the terrifying detachment and almost mechanical working of his inner thoughts that went against every Christian ideal he had. But Fearghus did not react that way, instead a wide smile spread across his face and he roared with laughter, hale and hearty and healthy, and Aodh fled from the room in horror.

Fearghus stopped laughing and coughed roughly, and a hand pressed against his back and steadied him. From the shadows stepped a hooded man who had watched the proceedings at Fearghus' request, and after Fearghus' coughing had subsided, he stepped back and waited for his Master to speak.

"I always knew he had the Canmore steel in him, perhaps more than any of them," wheezed Fearghus, grinning happily, "This recent business with the plague made it clearer than ever that we needed a backup plan.... if the worst should happen, if Nectan Canmore perishes.... ye must forge the steel inside Aodh."

And though Nevin of Shetland had thought it unlikely that such would ever come to pass, he had agreed.

Castle Vilnius sat atop an easily defended hill, the main entrance opening out onto a hill leading down into the central city square. Captain Inge had fled from the Scottish in a panic at seeing their relentless push through men he had trained himself and had thought the match of any soldiers in the world. Now he sat his horse in the City Square with Castle Vilnius looming up high behind him, seeming to bear over him as if the King was still inside, staring down at him and judging him. His Cavalry sat at the rear of the reserve Infantry who had heard the cries that he had fled, cries that contradicted his tale that he had ridden back to command the defense of the Square. They stared at him, and he saw the contempt in their eyes, struggling for dominance with their fear of the Scots.



"We can turn this Square into a slaughterhouse, men," he spoke, struggling to keep his voice even as the men glared up at him, "We failed at the walls before we did not hold them back, but there they poured through unfiltered.... here they must travel narrowly down the streets and come against us a few at a time, if we can hold them back, the only thing we need fear are our sword-arms growing tired!"

The men glared at him without reply, and then a cry rose up, a massive cheer from the Scottish further up in the city.

"What are they cheering about?" Inge asked, fearing he knew the answer. Moments later his fears were confirmed, as the call came down from the men stationed within the Castle Towers to give warning of the movements of the Scottish.

"HE COMES! THE SCOTTISH KING IS RIDING ON THE CITY WALLS!"

"Then we kill a King today, men!" roared Inge, hoping that he could convince them since he could not convince himself. If King Domnall was truly coming, then they were all dead men, even if they survived the battle.

King Domnall the Merciless did not take prisoners.





"The hell with this!" shouted a Dane suddenly, then turned and pointed up at Inge, "And the hell with this coward! If the Scottish King is coming to kill us, then I'll not stand here like a woman and wait for death to come! I'm going to go out there and meet it head on!"

He stormed away and Inge opened his mouth to order the man back into place, but then another joined him, and then another and another, and then some of Inge's own horsemen rode past him, and then more, and Inge stared in horror as the Danes rode towards certain death.

His horror only grew as he found himself joining them.... and that reptilian hiss of survival become a muted weak roar of disbelief as he rode past them all and ahead of them, and he realized the roaring noise he could hear was himself screaming his defiance as he rode directly into the oncoming Scottish Cavalry, and the cheers and cries of encouragement were coming from the men that had only moments ago hated him.

He had just enough time to enjoy their adulation before death took him.







Vilnius - Capital City of Denmark - was now Scotland's.

"I was the opposite of my Father," Aodh continued, after taking in Nevin's story, "After the plague, after Nectan died... I felt guilt that I had survived, that I had lived when someone far more useful and important to Scotland had lived. Ye gave me purpose, Nevin, when ye told me I was to become the new Spymaster of Scotland, but I still felt an odd detachment... like I wasn't quite connected to the world anymore. The feeling only grew worse, and I found myself taking advantage of my brother's grief over the death of Nectan to fulfill the plans I had... and I felt nothing, no guilt, no distaste... I was just doing what I felt was right."

Aodh's eyes tracked up to the stone balconies surrounding the gardens, and when he did not see what he appeared to be looking for, he returned to his story.

"I grew progressively more numb, but unlike my Father, it was not during battle but at every other point. In fact, in battle was the only time I felt truly attached to the world, so I pushed myself further, and I took out my aggressions and rage and grief for my Father on the Sicilians, and I wiped them from the face of the Earth.... and that is when Domnall found me, and made me bow before him, then embraced me and called me his Brother true, and I finally felt an attachment to the world again outside of battle, I finally felt an emotion.... and it was guilt."

Aodh's eyes tracked around the balconies again, then returned to Nevin, who was waiting patiently. Almost everything he had told him so far he all ready knew, it was all just a precursor to the revelation of his "special mission", the one that the King had given him.

"In Milan, as preparations were underway for the wedding of ye half-brother to my niece Deredere, Domnall finally told me about the "special mission" he had in store for me," Aodh explained, "And it was nae what I expected. It was nae a campaign or a plot or diplomacy.... nae, he saw in me the numbness that was so different to what our Father had experienced, and he told me that he meant to see me gain the peace of mind that my Father knew."

"Tha... that was it?" asked Nevin, finding himself flummoxed for the first time in a long time, "He wanted ye to be happy?"

"It's nae as simple as it sounds, Nevin," smiled Aodh, looking up at the stone balconies again, "He wanted me to be happy; he wanted me to feel attached to the world and to my people, and to my family and to him; he wanted me to be a better man, the type of man our Father was.... and that meant I had to give up the inner detachment that was also one of my greatest strengths. When I was detached, I could plot and plan without my own.... humanity.... getting in the way. I was raised believing - and I still believe - in true Christian values, and if I wasn't numb, if I wasn't detached, then I knew I would not be capable of doing my duty as Spymaster for the Scottish Empire.... but I also **WANTED** to be a better man, I wanted to know the peace my Father knew, he was... he was the greatest man I ever knew, in spite of all his flaws, in spite of his atheism, I always wanted to be like him."

"I ken the ending to this story but nae how ye reached it, Aodh," Nevin said at last, after a long silence, "Ye are still Spymaster of the Scottish Empire, but at different times I have seen ye happy, and called ye my friend as well as my Master... but also seen ye make hard decisions and hard choices without any obvious emotional impact."

"Aye," nodded Aodh, and he stood and cocked his ear, a smile crossing his face as he heard something. Nevin's own exceptional hearing picked up multiple footsteps approaching, and from the weight and pace, he had a fair idea who it was... which meant his time with Aodh was growing shorter.

"My Prince... Aodh?" asked Nevin, getting his attention again, "Did ye fulfill ye mission?"

"I did," smiled Aodh, "Even as far back as Deredere's wedding I knew I could feel attached to the world again. But I was in distress for a long time after as I simultaneously dealt with the guilt of my continuing actions as Spymaster and the numbness that periodically affected my dealings with my family. I suffered in silence, until finally I found the answer in my prayers... or rather, in the daydreaming of my own mind while I prayed. Always that inner detachment is thinking and turning over ideas beneath all my other thoughts and feelings, and it came like a divine call to me all of a sudden, and I had the answer. It was my Father, of course, he was the answer."

The people Aodh had been waiting for moved into sight on the stone balconies overlooking the garden, and one spotted Aodh and called out to him. He waved back, and they moved quickly to find the stairs that led down to the garden where he waited.

"My Father was a Governor when he needed to be; a General when he had to be; Spymaster because it was required of him.... but he was always a Father," Aodh told Nevin, turning to smile at him, "And so I finally realized the answer was that I could not be one or the other, I must be both Spymaster and Father; both monster and man. I learned to separate utterly the one from the other, and I finally felt that peace of mind that my Father had been gifted with. His ability for contentment came from his utter conviction that there was no God, and that he had worked and achieved everything for his family. Mine comes from an utter conviction that there is a God, and that all I work for is both for my Family and a better Scotland, and that with a better Scotland will come a better world. So I can make the hard decisions, Nevin, and the cruel decisions, and sometimes I can even manipulate my own beloved Brother to achieve the greater good for Scotland, and I can do it all with a clear conscience and sleep soundly at night."

They entered the garden, and Nevin took the chance to ask his final question before they reached Aodh.

"But are ye, my Prince, or are ye truly at peace?"

Aodh knelt down and held out his arms, and the smallest of the group that had joined them in the garden rushed to him, leaping into his arms. He stood up and turned around, holding his youngest daughter in his arms, Ede, while the elder daughters - Joan, Ada and Ellen - stood with wide grins behind him alongside their Mother, Katherine.

"Where are we going today, Father?" asked Joan respectfully.

"A picnic, my dear," Aodh smiled, "And I shall show you a fun game I learnt in my own youth, in Cairo, with a marvelous construction called a kite."

The girls all grinned up at their Father with obvious love, and Aodh smiled at Nevin.

"Yes Nevin, my friend," Aodh had smiled, "I truly am."

Nevin smiled at the memory that had come to him unbidden as he lay in bed. He was more devoted to Aodh than his first meeting had ever prepared him for, all those years ago, and it pleased him to know that his Master had such peace in his life. He only wished he himself could feel the same, but after decades of suppressing and hiding the impact of his life as a spy for Scotland, he found himself now haunted by nightmares of his actions and motives. He knew no inner peace, just a weary resignation to the "reward" he knew he had coming for him, and that right soon.

For Nevin had finally found a foe he could not out-think, that he could not out-manuever or fool. Whatever wasting disease had killed Fearghus Campbell had journeyed through the years and decades to find him.

Nevin of Shetland was dying.

As the winter months stretched on, King Bjorn of Denmark suffered the humiliation of an occupying Scottish Force within his Capital City of Vilnius. In Halych where Bjorn spent his Winters, blame was beginning to be placed more openly on Bjorn for getting Denmark into this situation, and thoughts expressed as to how his brother Sten would never have allowed things to get so bad for the Danes.

In Vilnius itself, the Scottish had settled in for a comfortable winter, and the peoples of Vilnius had found that there was little difference to be found in being ruled by Danes or Scots... with the exception that everybody felt safer under the rule of a Scottish King than a Danish one.

Within Castle Vilnius, King Domnall had quickly settled into the role of Governor of Vilnius, and turned it into a temporary seat of power from which he undertook the duties of State. But thoughts of the war with Denmark were never far from his mind, and at least once a week he met with Angus and Hew to discuss how and where they would continue their assault come Spring. The first such meeting had happened within a week of the capture of Vilnius, and the results had been.... interesting.

"If we kill Bjorn," Domnall had grunted, "A new King will be crowned - probably Sten - and the Pope is likely to reconcile Denmark... which means a Holy Order not to kill any more Danish Catholics."

"So we leave Halych and take the rest of Denmark's Cities," Hew had nodded, "Then return to put an end to Bjorn."

"We let him watch as his Empire is taken from him piece by piece, city by city," grinned Angus cruelly, "Oh aye... I like the sound of that."

"Bjorn does nae concern me," grunted Domnall, "It's his Brother, Sten. At some point we must either take the war to him or he will bring it to us.... and he is nae Bjorn, some of that old Viking Spirit lives on in him."

Prince Sten the Scarred Age: 41

Governor
Command: 6 stars
Chivalry: 4 stars
Loyalty: 3 stars
Piety: 1 star

Retinue

- Soothsayer
- Niels Ebbesen
- Veteran Warrior

Traits

- Proven Commander
- Confident Attacker
- Generally Loyal
- Bastion of Chivalry
- Brutally Scarred
- Conforming
- Flawed Defender
- Courageous
- Healthy
- No Nonsense
- Sanguinary
- Night Fighter
- Can Tell a Tale
- Heir Apparent
- Feels Appreciated
- Respects the Enemy

Not open to hearing talk of divine and mystical perils that may befall us. Why have these things not happened then?
+2 Authority, +1 Morale for all troops on the battlefield

Cannot wait to see his foe's blood stain his own tabard in battle.
+2 Dread, +1 Command, -1 Morale for all troops on the battlefield

This man is not entirely comfortable with defending, possibly intimidated by the scale of it all.
-1 Command when defending

"Bah, let me have him, my King!" snapped Angus, "If the Russians could nae kill me, no Dane shall!"

"And what of Niels Ebbesen?" asked Hew, raising an eyebrow, "Will ye kill Sten, Ebbesan and their personally trained army of thousands all by yeself? Will ye empty the garrisons holding control of our new Danish territory and take to ship to get to Oslo, leaving these lands ripe to be taken back by Bjorn... or the Polish? Or the Hungarians?"

"Are ye saying they're better than me, lad?" growled Angus dangerously, "What's so tough about this Ebbesen, anyway?"

"The Tyrant Slayer," muttered Domnall, folding his fingers together, "Some say he was a common murderer, others a great hero. His presence alone lends his men strength and passion."

Retinue

- Niels Ebbesen

Known as the "Tyrant Slayer", he is renowned for his heroics in the struggle for his homelands.
+2 Chivalry, +2 Command, +2 Morale for all troops on the battlefield

"The Mauler versus The Tyrant Slayer," grinned Angus, eyes taking on the wild shine that Hew was so used to by now, "That would be one for the bards to sing of."

"Angus," snapped Domnall suddenly, standing up and catching the attention of his two Generals, "Talk to the mercenary Captains ye brought with ye - including that Mongol, Abuqha - and find out if they ken any other large mercenary bands near Novgorod, then send the information to Roy Macgoulchane, I will have work for him in the Spring. I ken how to deal with Sten, sadly it's nae quite in the fashion I would have preferred... or ye, Angus."

He walked away, leaving the two Generals looking confused as they were left alone in the War Room.

"We're done then, I take it," Hew muttered at last, "That was decidedly unenlightening."

He stood and prepared to walk away, but Angus grabbed him by the wrist, halting him in place.

"Not quite yet, lad, we've got some issues to sort out first."

"Oh?" asked Hew, staring down at the smiling Mauler who still clutched his wrist, and not liking the smile on his face.

"I need to explain a few things to ye, lad, about being a bully."

"A bully?" Hew asked, confused.

"Aye lad, a bully," chuckled Angus, "Do ye ken what a bully is?"

"What is the meaning of thi-" grunted Hew, starting to get angry.

"A bully is someone who seeks the limits of power," Angus interrupted, still smiling, still clutching Hew's wrist, "Some say a bully is a coward hiding fear behind bluster, but that is nae true... at least, it is nae true in my case. I was a bully, Hew... in fact, I still am a bully, and all I'm doing is seeking to understand who has power and to what extent. King Domnall put me in my place, and I dinnae resent it, I respect it.... but now here we are in Vilnius, and ye and I are his Generals, and I dinnae ken which of us sits higher than the other, so I mean to find out."

"And how do ye intend to do that, Angus?" asked Hew, his anger replaced now by a coldness that caused Angus' grin to grow even wider, though it still did not touch his dead shark-like eyes.

"Oh Hew," chuckled Angus, "How have ye gotten this old without learning a few life lessons?"

Suddenly Angus shot up to his feet, his free hand lashing out and striking Hew in the chest, sending him stumbling backwards and crashing into one of the wooden chairs, shattering it into pieces. He lay wide eyed in the wreckage, then scrambled backwards as the grinning Angus approached him.

"Ye're insane!" Hew gasped, and Angus threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Ahh lad, Macgoulchane had that figured out a lot sooner," he laughed, then stooped down and picked up a splintered chair leg, "Ye're a bit dim, are ye nae?"

Hew staggered to his feet as Angus thumped the chair leg in his palm, and then to the Mauler's surprise, a wide grin crossed the Scottish General's face.

"Oh? What's this?" Angus asked, delighted, "Ye have some balls after all?"

"A bit dim? Mayhaps," grinned Hew, "But I always learned the lessons my Father taught me, and if anyone could ken what being a bully was about, it was him."

"And what did he teach ye then, lad?" asked Angus.

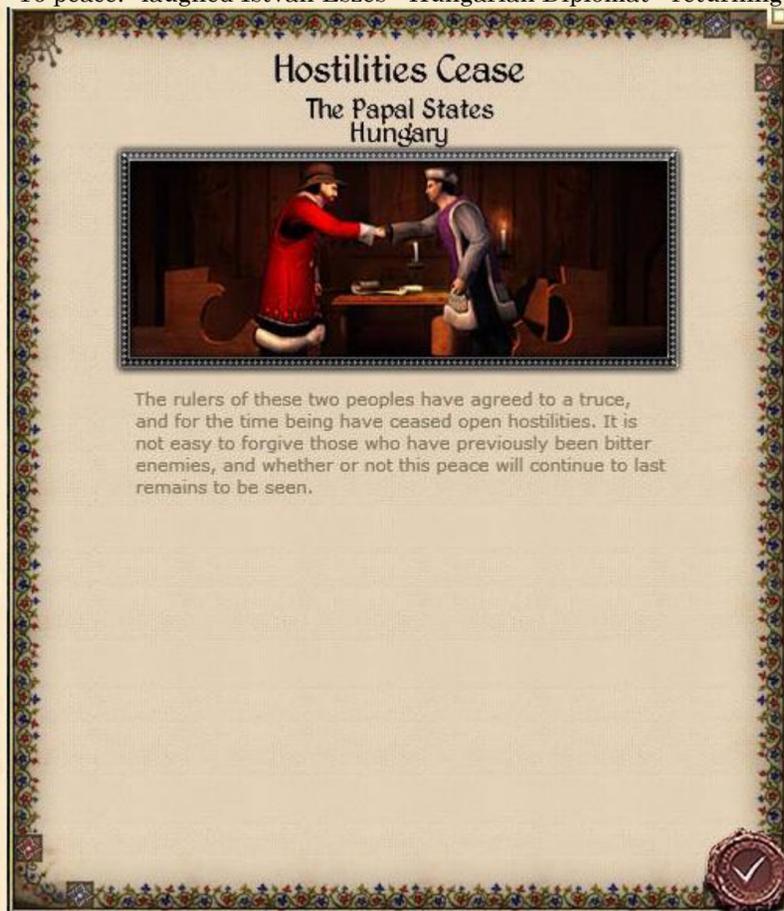
"He taught me, 'lad'," grunted Hew, picking up one of the whole chairs and grinning at Angus, "That if some bastard comes at ye with a chair leg, ye come at him with a chair!"

And the two Scotsmen charged directly at each other.

Chapter 57

"To peace, my friend," smiled Gordon of Edinburgh - Scottish Diplomat - raising his wine.

"To peace!" laughed Istvan Eszes - Hungarian Diplomat - returning the toast, and both men drank deeply.



"Well, it's a long way from reconciliation," grinned Istvan as he placed his wine back on the table, "But at least the "Christ-on-Earth" isn't sending armies our way anymore!"

"Not a believer, I take it?" asked Gordon conversationally, and Istvan smiled, recognizing the rather clumsy trap. Sometimes he wondered how as blunt a diplomat as Gordon could have received such a plum posting as Rome, and other times he wondered if it was all an act, as Scotland continued to gain concessions beyond any other Nation.

A servant approached to remove one of the near empty wine bottles and replace it with a full one, something that normally neither man would notice. But Istvan raised an eyebrow as the servant tripped on one of the rugs placed for effect in the spacious, warm and inviting dining room and had to stumble quickly to regain his footing.

"Oaf," grunted Gordon, rolling his eyes, "It's hard to find good help even in a City like Rome... the Diplomatic Academy insists that all my servants be Scottish, and that fool Angus is the bastard son of some wealthy merchant, so I've had him thrust onto me against my better nature."

The servant - whose name was Eoin, not Angus - did not react to the blatant insult to his parentage and his skills, simply standing quietly in the background and waiting for his services to be required again.

"The Pope has agreed to see me at some point within the next month," Istvan muttered, changing the subject, "A few minutes in one of his private committees on heresy to press my case for reconciliation, he would not even consider the idea of a private audience. I must sit for hours as he drones about the dangers of heretics before I have a chance to speak to him."

"He still will not grant me a private audience," nodded Gordon, commiserating, "The time was that the Balleol had a weekly private meeting at a time that suited HIM, now I must either make a public submission or book in advance to sit in those same boring committee meetings. The Pope is not a believer in privacy."

"Ha, very good!" laughed Istvan, "The Pope is not a believer!"

Gordon stared at him for a moment, confused, then realized what he had said and laughed himself, "Oh yes, that was quite good!"

Hours later, a misty light dawned over Rome, though any closer observers would have seen a very sorry sight.

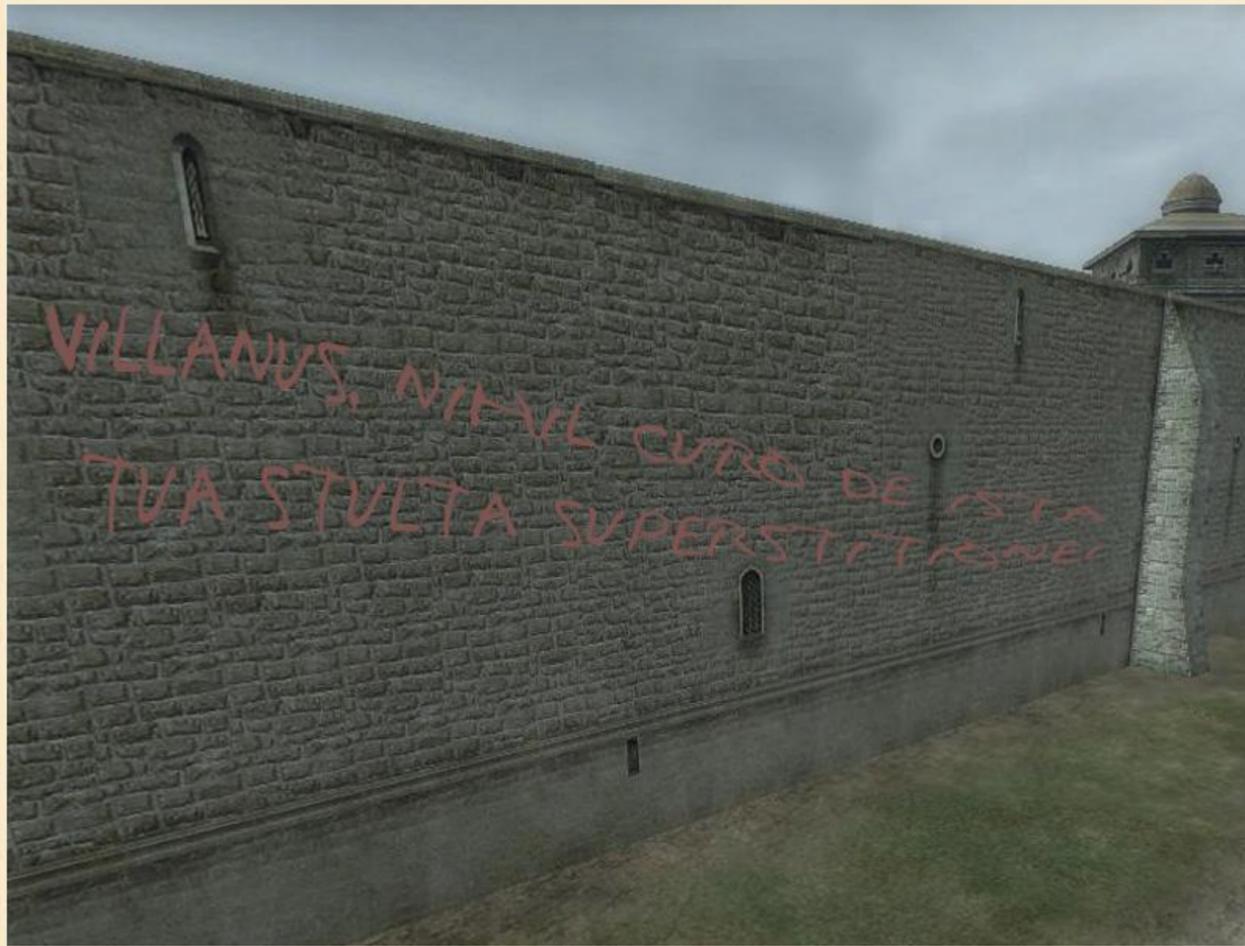


Following a dinner that had featured more drinking than eating, Istvan Eszes had staggered out of Gordon's Diplomatic Residence to find his bodyguards waiting to escort him through the streets to his home. He'd stumbled on as the blank-faced guards marched steadily beside him, until the sound of a lute and sweet singing had attracted his attention. A street performer - a bard - had been singing a song he had not heard in years, a Hungarian tale of bravery and valor, and he'd stood with tears welling in his eyes as the man sang away. When he finished, Istvan had flung him several florins and applauded, and the bard had bowed and smiled, then told him if he wanted to hear more, there was a tavern he knew where Hungarians tales were still told and songs still sung, despite the recent war with the Papacy. Still feeling on a high from his recent diplomatic success in negotiating a ceasefire with the Pope's top diplomats, as well as heavily drunk from the wine he had shared with Gordon, Istvan had overridden his guard's objections and agreed to see the tavern... after all, the night was young!

Now, as dawn lifted the sun into the sky, Istvan came to lying face down in the streets of Rome, his guards mysteriously missing and a dog was licking happily at his ear. With a groan he slapped it away and rolled onto his side, moaning miserably. He sat up on the cobbled road and looked around, confused as to where he was and how he had gotten there, and why his head felt like it was splitting in two.

"ECCE HOMO!" cried a voice, and he winced, feeling a spike of pain through his head. Fighting through his fuzzy thoughts, he struggled for his Latin as he heard the voice continuing to make demands of him.

"Pax, pax," he muttered, waving his arm limply behind him, hoping to shut the man up. Staggering to his feet, he looked behind him and cocked his head in confusion as he saw the man making demands of him was in fact a City Guard at the head of a patrol of them. The man seemed quite agitated, and he couldn't understand why, until he turned his head back and looked up at the wall stretched up high above him.... and what was written there.



"No.... no," gasped Istvan, then turned wild-eyed towards the guard who he now recognized was accusing him of this blasphemy, "Ita erat quando hic adveni!"

The Watch Commander glared at him, then turned as one of his men approached from where he had been inspecting the wall, carrying the empty wine bottle he had found beside the bucket of paint and brush that had been used to mark the wall.

"Corpus delicti," the Guard said, and the Watch Commander raised his furious eyes upward to Istvan, his nose easily picking up the stench of wine on Istvan's clothes and skin.

"Sunt pueri pueri, pueri puerilia tractant," tried Istvan, shrugging and attempting a lame smile.

"Adversus solem ne loquitor!" snapped the Commander, "Caro putridas es!"

"Quis est haec vervex?" asked the Guard who had handed the Watch Commander the wine bottle and bucket. The Commander scowled at Istvan, waiting for an answer.

"Ni... nihil declaro," stammered Istvan, feeling the sweat breaking out on his stinking body. He felt nauseous, not just from his hangover now but the growing realization of what this meant, not just for him, but Hungary as well.

"Non compos mentis!" he moaned, attempting what he hoped looked like the smile of a lunatic, "Mea culpa? Non compos mentis!"

"BAH!" snapped the guard, but his Watch Commander snapped a finger and quieted him.

"Absentem laedit cum ebrio qui litigat," he hissed contemptuously, then leaned forward and let a cruel smile cross his face, "Istvan Esves."

Istvan groaned, the bastard **KNEW** him!

"Confiteor," moaned the Diplomat, wondering how long till word of the insult he had evidently written in a drunken stupor would reach the Pope.... and how long until that ill tempered man took out his anger on Hungary. As he was dragged away, he began to sob in dismay.

He - and by extension Hungary - were "raptus regaliter".



Two old men sat at a campfire together in the dark, enjoying the heat in the fading cold of the Danish Winter. They were roughly halfway between Thorn and Vilnius, and the slightly younger of the two men had been listening now for hours in rapt fascination to the tale the older man was telling him.

Godfred was 59 years old, a former Priest who had been stationed for decades in the wilderness converting the Vikings from their pagan ways. The extermination of the fierce warriors by order of King Bjorn had outraged him, and he had disappeared into the land, only to emerge years later as a wild-eyed fanatic, speaking out openly against the Church and the Danish King. The irony had not been lost on him, once he had been dedicated to purging heresy, now he was a "heretic" himself.

Enemy Character Details

Godfred the Missionary Age: 59

Heretic
Piety

Retinue
Monk
False Relic

Traits
Blessed
Purger of Heresy
Beacon of Faith

Spotted By: Cormac Feniss
Subterfuge: 10

Piety
Has embraced his faith to a point of fanaticism

But his own story paled next to that of the man speaking to him, a large man with big hands and gray hair whom age had not broken down like so many before him. Sometimes when Godfred looked at his reflection in a pool of water he saw a frightening burning vitality that seemed to be stripping the fat from his flesh... when he looked at this man, he saw the solid denial of time.

And he heard a tale of horrors.

"Fearghus Maknab took me under his wing, taught me more in a day than I'd learned in a year," the man spoke easily, conversationally, "Watching him move, he did nae seem to be of this world. He went where he wanted, did what he wanted, and left. He could be as messy or as clean as the situation demanded, but more than that, he was fun."

"Fun?" asked Godfred.

"Oh aye, he had a wonderful sense of humor. When the mission called for it, he'd joke with his targets too, though most often they didn't appreciate it. The thing about him was that he didn't look fun, maybe that's why his jokes always struck me so, he was like a spider, all long legs and arms, constantly folding himself up into nooks and crannies. His fingers were like thin, crooked sticks but I dinnae think I ever saw such nimble, wonderful work.... maybe Campbell, he could do tricks when he had to, but the mood rarely took him."

"Campbell?" asked Godfred.

"Someone else," muttered the man dismissively, "He was nae fun, just scary. I was scared when Maknab did nae come back, as well, and I did nae ever discover what happened to him.... I can only assume that someone somehow got the better of him on a mission, he did nae tell me what they were if I was nae going along with him. Maybe he stepped on some loose masonry, maybe a guard somewhere got lucky and stuck him with a blade? I dinnae ken, it does nae matter, I finished my training and went out into the world... and do ye ken what I found? I found that my training was useless, it was what Maknab taught me that made the difference, that made me the best at what I do. All those missions I told ye about earlier? Most of them would have been impossible without his tutelage, and so I realized what I had to do, I had to find someone worthwhile and train him myself, because the world needs people like me, who can do the things I do, and the training they give us will nae create men who can do it."

The man sat back on the thick log he was using as a seat and stretched comfortably, his tale obviously done.

"Tell me," Godfred asked, "You came to me at Sunset, disguised as Pontius, the monk I have been traveling with off and on for years, and you told me you had a tale to tell, and I heard it. Now I ask, to what purpose? You know me for a Holy Man, yet you tell me with glee of how your Master killed an Inquisitor, a man who - for all the faults of the Church - was like unto a Saint. Is this your confession? Do you seek absolution?"

"Oh nae, nae," chuckled the man, "This was nae a confession, it was a distraction."

"A distr-?" started Godfred, and then a blade sliced quickly across his open throat, spilling blood that sizzled across the open fire. His arm jerked once, and then the heretic slumped backwards over the back of the log.

His killer stepped into the firelight, revealing a young boy with dark eyes who stared expectantly at the man watching him with a smile.

"Good lad," smiled Farquar Makfulchiane, standing up and patting the boy on his head, "There's a good lad."

Character Details

Farquar the Killer Age: 61

Assassin
Subterfuge

Retinue
Exquisite Blade
Young Apprentice
Skilled Courtesan

Traits
Talent for Murder
Schemer
Master Assassin

Assassination Mission Success
Godfred the Missionary

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

"Well congratulations, Gordon," chuckled Francisco Paulo, Venetian Diplomat, "I expect you to pick up the tab at our next drinking session."

"HA!" laughed Gordon, standing on his balcony looking over the city, "With your new ally, I expect **YOU** to have the water turned into wine!"

Richest Faction



Our kingdom's wealth is unfathomed by the reckoning of other peoples. We boast the largest treasury in the known world thanks to your shrewd rule.

Diplomatic Information



The following factions have declared that they are allies:



Venice



The Papal States

They stepped off of the balcony and moved into the spacious dining room, opened up during the day to allow the air through, taking advantage of the natural light to expose the lush interiors, particularly the library shelf containing a series of hardbound books on a series of different subjects, mostly religious. Gordon had never actually read any of them, they were there for appearance only, and their daily exposure to the sunlight meant they quickly faded, so Gordon was forced to pay for replacements often. The price was well worth it, in his opinion, visitors to his Diplomatic Residence would see Scotland (and by extension himself) was wealthy, and that he himself was well read.

"In all seriousness, Francisco," Gordon lied, "I'm glad to hear of this alliance, Venice's lost territories have weighed heavily on my mind, for purely selfish reasons of course, our friendship is important to me."

"And to me as well," Francisco lied back, "I feel the Pope has realized the value of holding the remaining Catholic Nations close to him, especially after that.... unpleasantness... with Istvan Esves."

"Ugh," grunted Gordon, "Don't remind me, I had an Inquisitor crawling over my home afterwards, asking me all kinds of questions. It was rumored I was the last person he dined with before writing that blasphemy on the walls, luckily his guards were found sleeping off a drunk in a tavern and were able to fill in his movements afterwards... the old drunk got smashed while singing songs about Hungary and disappeared after declaring he was going to impress Hungary upon Rome forever."

"Speaking of drunks," chuckled Francisco, "I heard that your King Domnall has been having some issues with his Generals in Vilnius... The Mauler doesn't get on with Hew Mar?"

"HA! Quite the contrary!" laughed Gordon, always keen to share gossip, "They get on too well! The tale goes they got involved in a brawl over some unimportant matter, quite a violent one in fact, and beat each other to within a hairsbreadth of death. Realizing that neither had the advantage, they came to a truce, The Mauler going so far as to call Mar a brother in blood."

"Oh," muttered Francisco, sounding disappointed, "I had heard they remained at each other's throats."

"Oh they did," laughed Gordon, "That's the best part! The Mauler decided to celebrate their new kinship in the best way he knows how, drinking himself into a near-coma. He insisted that he would buy the drinks, but Mar kept insisting that his Father taught him that he must always get in his round, and they ended up half-tearing down the local tavern in another fist fight over it."

"And King Domnall? How does he react to this madness?" asked Francisco, fascinated.

"Apparently he finds it quite amusing, and as long as they don't do any permanent damage to each other that will effect his planned Spring Campaign, is content to let them," chuckled Gordon, "And so it goes in Vilnius, The Mauler and Mar get on famously well, and then some issue comes up over which neither will back down, and they end up smashing furniture and each other until they reach an inevitable impasse and make peace and go out drinking... which generally prompts another fight."

"You Scotsmen are fascinating people," grinned Francisco, and finished his wine before looking to the small mechanical clock on Gordon's mantel - another ostentatious display of his wealth, it was a miniature version of the great Clock Tower recently constructed in Milan - and frowned, "I must go, my friend, the duties of my office call."

Gordon saw his "friend" out, thinking smugly to himself that the fool had told him much without meaning to. He now knew that Venice had a spy based in or around Vilnius that knew about the goings-on of the court there, but not in any real detail. Francisco, meanwhile, was thinking smugly to himself that Gordon had, as usually, given away far more than he thought. Venice had no spy near Vilnius, but rumors and tales of the fighting between The Mauler and Hew Mar had reached him in Rome, and he'd used it to get the naturally gossipy Gordon to talk, and now he knew that King Domnall was set on going ahead with a planned continuation of hostilities with Denmark come the Spring. He headed down the street flanked by his bodyguards with a spring in his step, eager to be back to his Residence where a scientist named Walter Merle was waiting to show off a new system that Francisco believed would make Venice richer than Scotland could ever dream. And the best thing was, he was going to poach the man out from under Gordon himself, who had scheduled an appointment with the man on the morrow.

Gordon returned inside and frowned when he saw a servant standing at the door outside of his private Office, something that was only supposed to happen when he had petitioners or other Diplomats in attendance.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, struggling to remember the man's name. Then it came to him, it was the same as the King's brother, "Aodh."

"Ye noon petitioner is waiting, Master," replied the servant, whose name was Eoin - not Aodh - calmly, "I am standing in position to assure ye privacy."

"I have nae noon petitioner!" growled Gordon angrily, "I have nae petitioners at all today!"

"Oh my," spoke Eoin in surprise, "The man was unsure if he had the right day, he seemed slightly absentminded, I think he is a scientist... I just assumed ye had called for him.... his name is Walter Merle."

"Merle? That mad English bastard!?" snapped Gordon irritably, "You oaf, Aodh! He was supposed to meet with me tomorrow.... dammit, if he's here now I might as well see him."

Bold Predictions



An aspiring English scholar by the name of Walter Merle claims that he is able to predict the weather - unlike the mystical ramblings of yesteryear's heretical pagans who claimed to have a spiritual insight into when the heavens will open up, Merle has stated he can do this simply by scientific observation.

Apparently Merle's predictions are correct more often than not, but his system is still being perfected. Surely it will only be a matter of months now before man knows exactly how the weather will behave.



Winter passed, and as Spring turned the fields of Danish land green again, the city of Kiev on the western border of Danish lands awoke from a long cold slumber to find an army at their Gate.



Lars of Kleppr hauled on his armor and barked commands as his men - most still fat or out of shape from the long, cold Winter - scrambled to stand in defense of the city.

"Sir, it is the Scottish!" cried one soldier.

"Then it'll be a good fight," grunted Lars.

"Sir, they have many mercenaries, including some of those accursed Mongols!" cried the soldier.

"Then it'll be a dirty fight," grunted Lars.

"Sir, they have more than twice our men!" gasped the soldier, despair in his eyes.

"Then it'll be a **LONG** fight!" snapped Lars, "Now stop gaping like a fish and get into formation! We've got a city to hold!"



Lars of Kleppr
Governor

Age: 40

Command: ★★☆☆☆☆

Chivalry: ★★☆☆☆☆

Loyalty: ★★☆☆☆☆

Piety: ★☆☆☆☆

Retinue
None

Traits

- Aspiring Commander
- Drillmaster
- Very Loyal
- Noble in Battle
- Terribly Scarred
- Dauntless
- Can Tell a Tale
- Feels Unappreciated
- Wall Taker
- Religious
- Fair in Rule

Spotted By: Nevin Nevell

Subterfuge: ○○○○○○○○○○

Fear is not something that troubles this man. He will valiantly accept grim odds without complaint.
+2 Morale for all troops on the battlefield



Roy Macgoulchane sat his horse in the fields, looking up at the dark and cloudy sky and feeling the trapped heat of the Spring day roasting him in his armor. The word had come to him from Angus in the midst of Winter, a short and terse letter informing him that The King wanted him to recruit as many mercenaries as he could and including a list of names he should try to find. The mercenaries had wintered at Novgorod with them, and by the time they rode out together, most had become accepted by the Scottish soldiers. The Mongols in particular had been well accepted, which would have once surprised Roy, until fate had brought him to Yerevan and he'd discovered a multi-cultural diverse group of people who all called themselves Scotsmen.

"I'm not a man for grand speeches, lads!" Roy shouted, "But most of ye ken what kind of man I am, most of ye have fought at my side before and ken I prefer action to words! So all I'll say to ye is that our King wants that city, and who are we nae to give the King what he wants!?! It seems fair enough to me, one city in exchange for the Empire he has won for us and the safety and prosperity he has created for our family and our children!"

Most of the men cheered, and Roy grinned, he wasn't sure if it was Angus rubbing off on him or just a natural change of mindset that came from leading men in battle, but he'd be damned if he wasn't enjoying this.

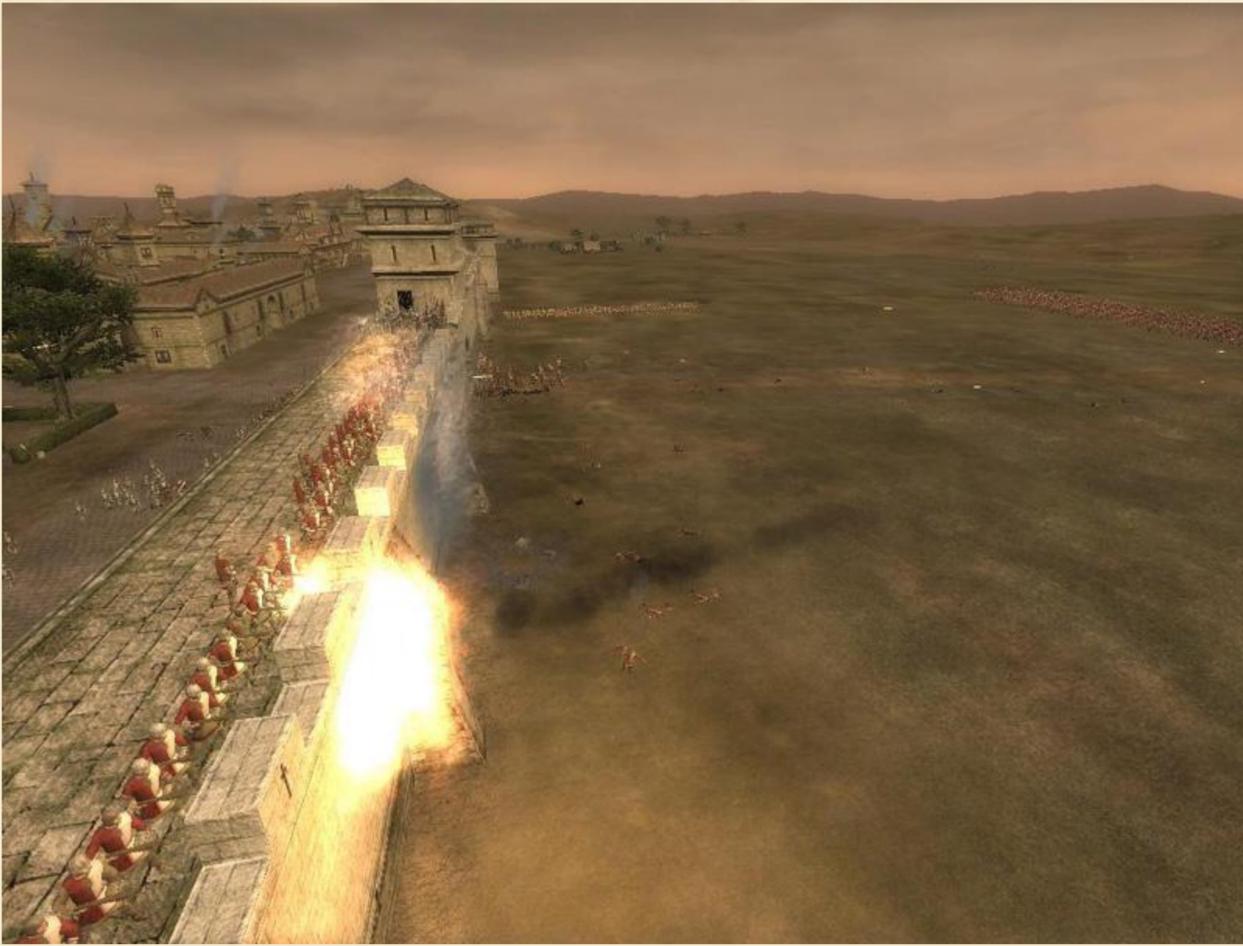
"Ye mercenaries, if ye'd claim a piece of Scotland for yeselves, and maybe find yeselves a home and an Empire to protect ye families in, then Kiev before us is ye chance to take one!" he cried, "I want ye through that gate the moment it is opened, so charge now, and trust in the men manning those bombards, they'll clear ye a path!"

The men roared and charged, demonstrating remarkable faith in his words. The Bombards began loading to fire at the Gate, a direct line that would come dangerously close to hitting their countrymen if their timing was even slightly off. But these were Scotsmen, they knew no fear, and close to a century of fighting alongside a nobility that fought on the frontlines with them had earned the trust.

And today, Roy Macgoulchane meant to prove it was well-founded.



"GOOD WORK, LADS!" cried Roy as the gates were smashed wide open and Scotsmen began flooding through. He turned to the Mongols who had been waiting patiently behind their cart of rockets, "NOW TAKE DOWN THAT WALL! I DINNAE WANT THEIR ARCHERS TO BE ABLE TO FIRE ON OUR MEN, AND I WANT ANOTHER ENTRANCE TO OUR CITY!"



Danish Sword-Staff Militia slammed against the wide open gates, slamming them closed before being overwhelmed by the mercenaries and Scottish Pikemen who had all ready entered the city. The two groups clashed violently, long spears, sword-tipped staffs and pikes snapping and smacking against each other and then through the men holding them. Behind the Scots, a wide hole could be seen through the gate - it would not hold against even the slightest push, and the Danes knew that the only way for them to hold it shut was with their bodies, both living and dead.



Within the City Square, Lars of Kleppr rode his horse into formation and demanded to know the situation at the Gate.

"Sir, they're pushing through by sheer weight of numbers - the gate is broken and the walls crumbling," came the report, "Our men will be overwhelmed soon."

"Then let us ride to their aid," grinned Lars, spurring his horse, "These Scots haven't seen everything yet."

His confidence seemed misplaced given his position, but he had reason to be sure of himself. Maybe the Danish no longer had their fierce Viking Warriors, but they did have the closest Catholic equivalent in this day and age.

The Norse War Clerics.





"THIS IS THE FATE OF THOSE WHO WOULD CHALLENGE THE DANES!" roared Lars, riding to the front line and striking about him with his sword as War Clerics screamed out to God before exploding the faces of their enemies with their one handed maces, "DID YOU TRULY THINK I WOULD LET YOU TAKE KIEV FROM ME!?! THIS CITY IS MINE!"



"HAVEN'T YE HEARD, LAD!?!!" cried a voice near him, and Lars gasped as he felt a white hot blast of pain shoot through his side. His horse moved on underneath him and he crashed to the ground, feeling part of himself tearing free from the rest and actually feeling the pulsing of the blood escaping him, even as his men cried out in dismay. The mercenary who had brought him down appeared over him, raising his spear up high as he finished speaking, "Everything belongs to Scotland!"





"The walls are secure, my Lord," reported a scout to Macgoulchane, "Reports are coming through that the Danish General has been slain, and their Religious Cavalry are retreating back into the city."

"Religious Cavalry? Nevermind," grunted Macgoulchane, "Time to join the men on the frontline and end this."





The men cheered as Macgoulchane rode up alongside them and into the fray, helping to put down the valiant but hopelessly outnumbered War Clerics. The Norse threw themselves into the Scottish, hoping to kill as many as they could, but were cut down as wave after wave rode in, until there were no more, and Roy stared across a sea of corpses into the heart of the square, where the last of the Danish soldiers waited.

Literally.



"Oh aye lads, do ye think we can take him!?!!" cried Roy mockingly, and his men laughed and cheered, while the Dane stared in horror, knowing what was coming but unable to command his frozen body into action. He simply squatted and stared, as a seemingly never-ended wave of Scotsmen rode down on him.



Another Danish City had fallen to Scotland.

"For now, ye should put ye orders to the field through Cormac Feniss," rasped Nevin of Shetland, "He is a good and capable man, just nae one who could be anything more than a caretaker until my replacement arrives in Genoa."

"And who can replace ye, Nevin?" asked Aodh Canmore, sitting beside the bed that the Spy lay in, his body wasted away and his strength taken from him, though his mind remained as keen as ever.

"I have had plans in place by necessity," Nevin grunted, "My replacement will introduce himself to ye soon enough... if he does nae... then he will nae be the right person to take my place, and ye will have to find a man amongst our other operatives ye feel is best."

"That is nae what I meant, Nevin," smiled Aodh sadly, "I mean who will replace ye? I am nae just losing my top Spy, I am losing my greatest friend."

Nevin smiled, then coughed roughly and had to lay back in the bed to regather his strength, and they sat in a pained silence for some time, until finally it was broken by Aodh.

"Nevin, I have nae asked ye this before outright, but I cannae hold my tongue any longer.... are ye a believer?"

"Do I believe in God?" grunted Nevin, "Sometimes, aye... sometimes I do.... but sometimes I dinnae, and sometimes I just dinnae ken. I learned all my life to seek the hidden truth, but Faith has nae easy answers, even if ye ken all the secret hidden truths behind the Bible and the construction of the Church itself."

"I ask because ye did nae allow the Priest to read ye the Last Rites," Aodh said, obviously uneasy with a situation so close to the way his Father had died, "Ye have served Scotland all ye life, and ye have been a good friend to me, I would nae see ye soul put in jeopardy."

"Ahhh Aodh, my friend," smiled Nevin, "The things I have done, it does nae matter the reasons why, my soul has long since been past jeopardy. Nae confession, nae absolution, nae Last Rites can possibly save me from my fate... I deserve as much for what I did to Aylin, Deniz and Ceren... their deaths have haunted me in my old age more than anything I ever did before or since, even Zaragoza. I did nae ever learn the trick ye have, Aodh, to separate the necessity of my work from my humanity.... ye are a better man than me.... when ye die, if there is a God.... well, we will nae see each other again."

Aodh stood and turned around, and Nevin groaned. He hadn't wanted to hurt his friend like that, but he could no more lie to Aodh than the man would lie to him. Not now when death seemed to be hovering above him, just waiting. Aodh stepped away from the bed to the heavy oaken door and opened it, and for one panicky moment Nevin thought that the Prince meant to leave him to die alone. But then he heard Aodh's voice calling, and moments later the door was shutting again, and he found himself staring at two small boys standing before the Scottish Prince.

"Aodh, wha-?" he started, but Aodh silenced him with a look, and knelt down behind the two nervous looking boys, placing hands on their shoulders.

"Lads, this man is a good friend of mine, and he is very sick, do ye ken him?" he asked.

"Yes Uncle," spoke the slighter taller blond boy, staring with wide eyes, "That is Master Nevin, Father says he Scotland's best friend."

"That he is, lads," smiled Aodh, "Go to him, don't be scared, let him see ye."

Nervously the two boys approached the wide eyed Nevin, who reached out with one too-thin arm and gently stroked the cheek of the first boy.

"Edward," he grunted, then stroked the cheek of the second, slightly smaller boy, "Algune.... ye're good lads, are ye nae?"

"Aye, sir," replied both boys together, and Nevin's smile widened.

"Aye, good boys, fine boys," smiled Nevin, and withdrew his arm, laying back on his bed as Aodh ushered the confused young boys out of the room, offering them smiling reassurances. He returned to the side of Nevin's bed moments later, and smiled at his friend.

"My nephews, thought they do nae ken it," smiled Nevin, "Healthy and young, they make an old man smile."

"They would nae exist if it was nae for ye, Nevin," smiled Aodh, seating himself again, "They **are** good lads, fine lands, and ye've given them a life above anything that their Father could have given them in far off Shetland. Their blood is ye blood, Nevin, and it's also my blood too, when we are both dust, we will both live on in them and their children. They will be the leading men of Scotland, and perhaps one day, it is nae inconceivable that one of their children could raise as high as the Throne itself... because of ye, Nevin of Shetland, because of ye!"

Nevin smiled happily, tears welling in his eyes, and Aodh took his friend's hand for the very last time.

"I **will** see ye again, Nevin of Shetland," he insisted, and Nevin nodded weakly, "I **WILL** see ye again!"



Gordon of Edinburgh smiled coyly at the Portuguese Noblewoman, and she fluttered her eyelashes back even as she pretended to be shocked at his presumptuousness. That he had invited her to dinner alone was scandalous enough, that she had accepted more so, and he had a feeling that if he played his cards right, he wouldn't be sleeping alone in his bed tonight... or sleeping, for that matter.

"Enes Alvaro, such a lovely name," smiled Gordon in what he hoped was a seductive tone, "Your ruby red lips match the wine, I wonder if they match the taste?"

"Oh Gordon, your are SO scandalous!" she giggled, wondering how much money she could milk from him before he got frustrated with being strung along with promises of what was between her thighs, "Whatever is a lady to-"

She was cut off as a messenger entered with a knock, causing Gordon to snap angrily at him for the interruption.

"Forgiveness, Master," bowed the messenger, "The message arrived with explicit instructions to be taken directly to ye, and was marked with the seal of the Scottish Royal Family."

"Give it to me then, you idiot!" he snapped, then rolled his eyes at Enes who was startled out of staring wistfully at the handsome looking servant waiting near the fire to meet their needs.

Gordon broke the seal and opened the sealed envelope, and frowned as he read the contents of the single piece of paper folded inside and written on in an unfamiliar hand.

Gordon of Edinburgh,

Scotland has lost its greatest friend and servant

N

"Scotland has lost its greatest friend and servant? N? Who the hell is N?" he demanded, then shook his head, "This is either a mistake of a poor joke, enough of it! Cathad, bring us more wine!"

He tossed the envelope aside, all ready forgotten, while the servant - whose name was Eoin, not Cathad - moved forward with a bottle of wine prepared.... and then tripped on the rug that had caught his foot so many times before. The bottle flew out of his hands and smashed into the wall opposite, staining the wall purple as Eoin crashed into the table and knocked it over.

"YOU OAF!" screamed Gordon in a fury, leaping back from his seat as Enes squawked in surprise, "LOOK WHAT YOU'VE DONE!"

"Forgive me, forgive me!" cried Eoin in a panic, scrambling about picking up shattered pieces of plate and cup, "Forgive me, Master George!"

"George? GEORGE!?" screamed Gordon, livid with rage. How dare this worm forget **HIS** name! As Eoin crawled about he presented an inviting target, and Gordon swung his foot back and booted the hapless servant directly in his arse, sending him sprawling forward and crushing everything not all ready broken, "I HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF YOUR USELESSNESS, I DON'T CARE WHO YOUR FATHER IS, YOU'RE GONE! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!"

"Please, nae Master!" wept Eoin in terror, on his knees and staring up in horror at the livid Diplomat, "I dinnae have anywhere to go! I have nae money!"

"Do you think I care!?" roared Gordon, "Go now while I'm still leaving you alive!"

Weeping and moaning, Eoin staggered up and fled the room, and Gordon visibly calmed himself, breathing in and out for a few moments before turning back to Enes, who was staring at him wide-eyed, wondering if maybe this was the wrong person to try and con.

"Where will ye go, lad?" asked Marion, the plump, ageless gray-haired cook who had unofficially adopted all the younger servants. She was wiping tears from her eyes as Eoin collected his pitiful belongings, and the other servants who had been free of duty were standing with her in the kitchen, all visibly upset. Eoin had been a popular addition to the staff, and they were all horrified to hear he was leaving.

"I'm young and nae in bad shape," smiled Eoin sadly, "It's too late to join the military, but maybe I can find work as a mercenary or bodyguard? My Father will have nae to do with me, I'm a bastard.... but bastards who live have a tendency to be survivors.... I'll be all right."

Marion hugged him close and sobbed her goodbye, and he shook the hands and hugged the rest of the waiting servants, tears in his own eyes by the time he'd said his goodbye to all of them. He turned in the doorway as he prepared to leave and took one last look at all of them.

"I will nae forget any of ye," he promised, "Ye are all good people."

And then he walked out of their lives.

Eoin moved through the darkened streets of Rome, mostly safe at night due to the heavy patrols of City Watch, though any resident knew which streets to avoid and which were safe. He limped slightly from the kick he'd been given, and despite his height he was slouched over against the cold, holding his cheap looking robe close around him, hood pulled up over his head against the cold of the night.

He passed through a dark alley, but the man who emerged from the other side was tall, walking confidently with long strides and wearing a finely made robe. His face was confident and handsome, a grin dancing around the corners of his mouth. He moved easily through the streets, and whenever he came near one of those streets that residents knew to avoid, his gait changed again to a easy moving, graceful stride that warned any who watched that he was not some easy mark.

Unmolested, the man arrived soon at a stables where some of the finest horses of Rome were kept and maintained for various Diplomats, Merchants and Noblemen. He stomped impatiently inside the attached office building where a sleepy night staff were paid to be ready in the frequent cases when a horse was needed by their clientele no matter what time of night or time of year.

"Francisco Paulo's horse, quickly!" he snapped, slapping papers onto the desk of the startled Night Manager, "I am in a rush!"

The Night Manager peered at the papers, seeing the official Venetian Seal as well as official documentation that the bearer was granted full rights to any properties of the Venetian Diplomatic Embassy.

"Of course, my Lord!" he gasped, snapping for a stable-hand to prepare and bring the finely bred horse to the front of the stables. The man stood outside waiting, tapping his foot impatiently until the horse arrived, then pulled himself up onto the stables and tossed a florin without looking at the stablehand before walking the horse of.

"Gee, 'thanks'," grunted the Stablehand, stooping to pick up the florin, marked with the Venetian King's face, "Bastard, probably never worked a day in his life."

The man rode on horse through the darkness to the City Gates, where two guards stood on either side, peering irritably at the man who was forcing them to break up their conversation.

"Open the gates," he ordered imperiously, and handed down papers to the first of the guards, who peered in surprise at the seal and the orders within commanding all who read to follow the orders of the bearer. Quickly he called up to the tower above where others in the Night Watch were settled around a fire and gambling amongst themselves to open the gates, and with a groan the gates of Rome were opened. Snatching back his papers, the man rode his horse through, and the gates closed behind him, shutting him out of Rome and leaving him alone in the dark.

"Who was that?" asked the other guard, "Whose seal was that?"

"Believe me," grunted the guard, "You don't want to know."

And as the two men went back to their earlier conversation; as Gordon of Edinburgh failed miserably in his attempts to bed Enes Alvaro; as Farquar the Killer happily showed his young protégé how to dump a body in water without it rising; as Angus The Mauler and Hew Mar slumped over their drinks, passed out from a fiercely competitive drinking contest; as Domnall Canmore lay in bed thinking of the Danes still living while his Father was dead and buried in far off Cairo; as Aodh Canmore stood by the funeral pyre for his best friend; as all this happened, Eoin Makartane rode out of Rome and towards Genoa.

Towards his destiny.

The image shows a 'Character Details' window from a game. At the top, it says 'Character Details' with a question mark icon in the top right corner. Below this is a portrait of Eoin Makartane, a man with a dark hood. To the right of the portrait, his name 'Eoin Makartane' and 'Age: 32' are displayed. Underneath the portrait, the skills 'Spy' and 'Subterfuge' are listed, with 'Subterfuge' having a progress bar of 10 small circles, 9 of which are filled. Below the portrait area, there are two columns: 'Retinue' and 'Traits'. Under 'Retinue', there are two items: 'Beguiling Bard' (with a small icon of a bard) and 'False Documents' (with a small icon of a document). Under 'Traits', there are three items: 'Spying Talent', 'Thieves' Guild Journeyman', and 'Adept Agent'. At the bottom left of the window is a magnifying glass icon, and at the bottom right is a checkmark icon. The entire window is framed with a decorative border.

Chapter 58

Eoin Makartane walked smoothly down the corridors of the Royal Palace of Genoa, flanked by two guards who had fallen all over themselves to offer their escort after he'd presented them with papers identifying himself as a high ranking Papal Official. He'd demanded to see Aodh Canmore immediately and the guards - well knowing Aodh's devotion to the Church - had sent ahead a runner to tell the Prince to be prepared to meet the Papal visitor.

"I will enter alone," snapped Eoin, "This business is between Prince Canmore and the Church."

The guards bowed, opening the door and allowing Eoin to enter as they closed the door behind him... and locked it.

"Did that idiot really think he could waltz into the Royal Palace and straight to Aodh Canmore?" laughed one of the guards.

"That's the first time I've had a prisoner walk himself into his cell," chuckled the other.

The two men laughed, then snapped to attention as Aodh appeared at the end of the corridor and approached followed by several guards, nodding as the two men waiting at the door to his "office" saluted.

"Open it," he ordered, his face blank, "Let's see what this man is made of."

The guards opened the door, weapons drawn to protect their Prince in case the spy they'd captured tried a suicidal charge. The door swung open, and the men peered inside in surprise. The room - which had only one door and narrow window spaces sealed with iron bars - was empty.

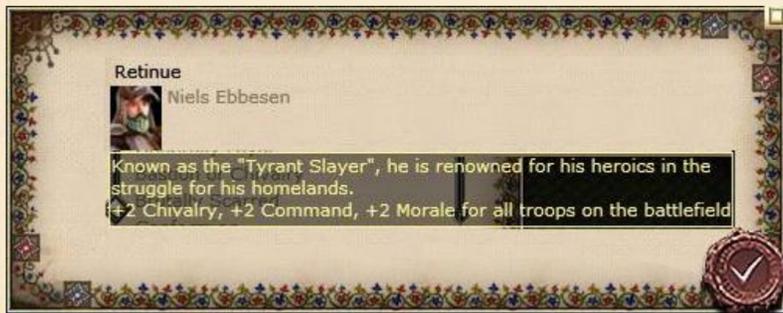
"How is this possible?" gasped one guard, but Aodh simply turned on his heel and began moving back up the corridor, his bodyguard rushing to join him. The two moved through corridors and up stairs until they reached Aodh's actual office, which was guarded by two trusted men. Aodh nodded briefly as they saluted and entered his office, ignoring his bodyguard's protest to go first.

His office was empty and apparently untouched from when he had left it, but as his bodyguard moved to check tapestries and windows, Aodh moved straight to his large desk and used his key to open the hidden drawer contained inside.

"Well," smiled Aodh, looking at the now empty drawer that had contained his personal correspondence with Domnall regarding Prince Sten the Scarred, "It seems he is made of stern stuff indeed."

Outside of the palace, Eoin moved confidently through the crowded streets, ignoring the cries of vendors and hawkers as he slid into the marketplace and lost himself amongst the crowds. Contained within a hidden pocket in his cloak were the documents he had appropriated from Aodh's desk, and with it he had what he needed to answer the insult that had just been visited upon him.

In Oslo, Prince Sten the Scarred sat across the large dining table from his closest friend and confidant, Niels Ebbesen.



"Is it possible, do you think?" Sten asked, "That the answer to our prayers should fall into our laps like this?"

"Stranger things have happened, pride goes before a fall, after all," noted Niels, "History tells us that without his brother's calming influence on him, Aodh Canmore becomes arrogant and authoritative to his own detriment. It seems he finally angered the wrong person, and now we have something nobody has had over Scotland for a century... inside information."

Sten nodded, thinking further on the message that had come from him. An angry Scottish spy had turned on his masters and given Sten information on the garrison strengths of the cities on Scotland's Northern borders. With King Domnall taking Hew Mar with him on his Danish Campaign, the Northern Cities had been stripped down to the barest essentials, and in some cases even less. Given the size of Scotland's Empire and the number of cities in their domain, it would be impossible to reinforce one strategic city without putting another at risk. This afforded Sten an opportunity to seize the advantage back from Scotland, his personal army was the best trained and toughest left in Denmark, but it had been sitting up in the wintry climate of Oslo, unable to come to the aid of Sten's brother Bjorn as his armies were destroyed one after the other by King Domnall. Now, knowing what he knew, he could send his armies down past Arhus to Hamburg and take the Scottish City by force. From there, they could press out either East towards Magdeburg and retake the formerly Danish City or - more likely - West to Antwerp and Bruges, splitting Scottish lands between their United Kingdom and their lands in what had once been France and Milan.

"Finally we can go back on the front foot," smiled Sten, "I have hated sitting here on the defensive, waiting for the inevitable."



"Had you been King we would never have found ourselves in this position," Niels grunted.

"I'll not hear words against my brother," Sten warned.

"I've never put stock in respecting the station above the man," replied Niels calmly, "They don't call me the Tyrant Slayer because I meekly accept my lot in life."

"Bah," laughed Sten, "Let's not be bothered rehashing old arguments, let's start the planning for bringing down the Scottish Empire!"

It was two weeks later that Sten awoke confused by the sound of horns blowing and the sounds of panicked motion. A week earlier he had seen off his men, emptying the city of its garrison in order to march south to Hamburg, ignoring any protest that the Holy Roman Empire might give, to begin stage one of the counter-offensive against Scotland. That had been a night of revelry and celebration, the Danes under his command had seen victory after victory under his command, and though he was not personally leading them, they were confident that such victories would continue, especially considering how slight the resistance against them would be. Sten had provided the army commanders with meticulous detail of ways in and out of Hamburg, weaknesses that could be exploited, the strengths of the garrisons and exploitable traits of their commanders. His knowledge had, in fact, been almost frightening in its detail, and many soldiers spoke in awe of Sten's well known Soothsayer, who had saved his life multiple times in the past. Sten - whose information had come from a disgruntled spy high in the hierarchy of Scotland's unparalleled Spy Network - allowed such rumors to spread, despite his own disdain for signs and portents. He knew that the men would fight all the harder if they not only respected their Master, but feared him and his "supernatural" powers as well.

But now he rolled out of bed wondering what the noise was all about, and moved out of his bedchamber into the corridor where he bumped into Niels, who had obviously been rushing to get him.

"What's going on, Niels?" he demanded.

"We've been played for fools, Sten!" gasped Niels, "The Scottish have sailed an army here!"

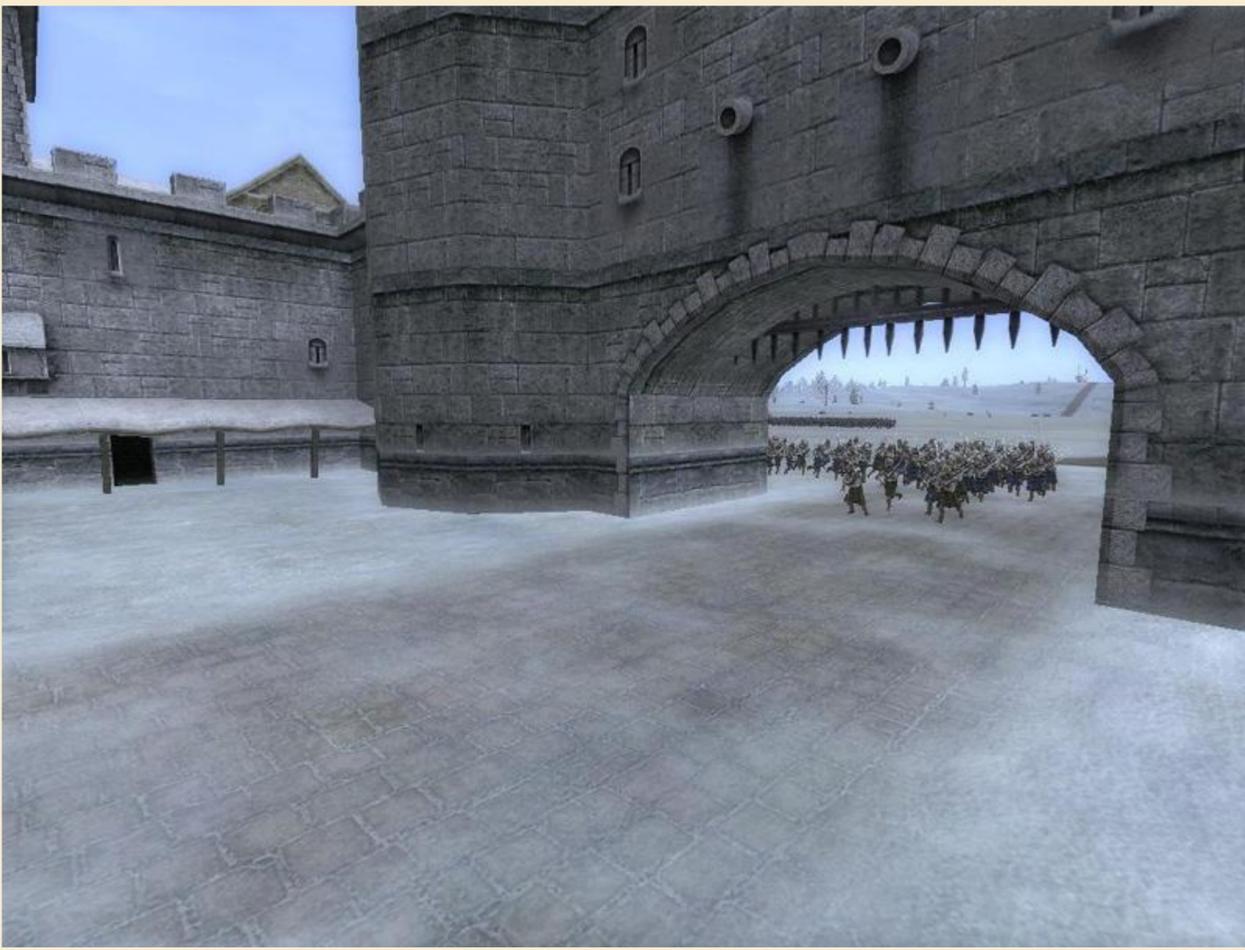
"How many!?!!" cried Sten in horror, "How many, man!?!!"

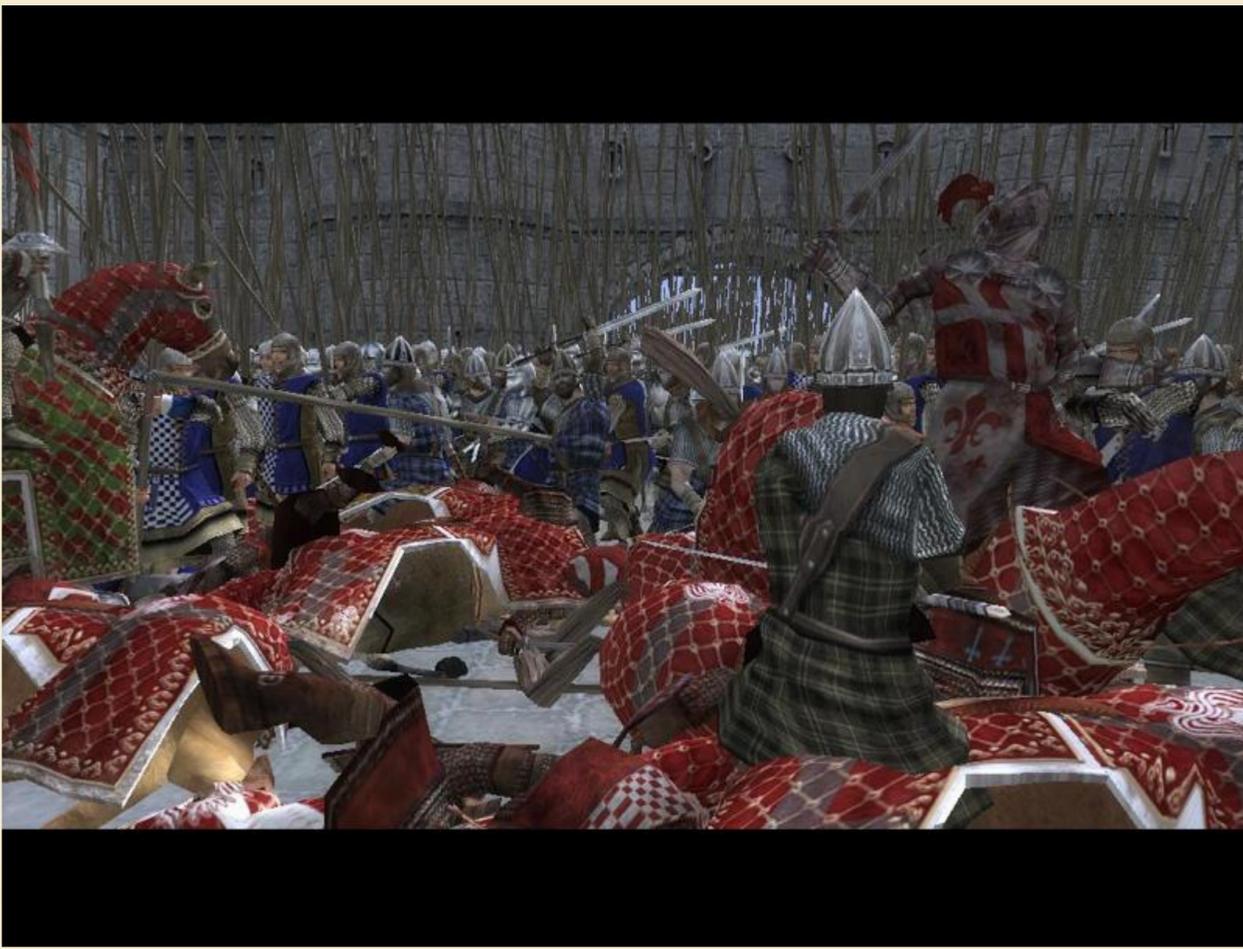
"1300..." whispered Niels, "1300 against out 60."

Sten gripped the wall as he felt the world threaten to turn black. He had allowed his desire to take the offensive blind him to news too good to be true, and now he was paying the price. Niels had been wrong, Bjorn was far better suited to be King of Denmark than him.

He had just caused the fall of Oslo.







Niels rode out of the fray biting his teeth in fury and squeezing his eyes shut to try and keep the tears from flowing. He had just seen his best friend cut down in front of him by baying, wild red haired savages, hundreds of them pouring through the city gates and over the Danes. Only a few of Sten's cavalry managed to ride out after Niels, and the Scottish were not far behind.



Of the less than 60 who had been left to defend Oslo, only seven made it back through to the inner courtyard, and Niels howled in frustration as he tried desperately to lower the portcullis and found the mechanism had been jammed somehow. The Scottish had come through the outer gate unhindered, but Sten and Niels had been too busy trying to survive to think too heavily about the implications. Now they were clear, somehow a Scottish spy had entered the city and opened the gates for the army.... and Niels knew who, the same bastard who had fooled them with false information. He had a brief moment to wonder what the fate of Sten's army now marching south past Arhus would be, as well as Thorgils and his small garrison at Stockholm to the East, and then the Scottish were charging through the inner gate towards him and his fellow survivors.



"So this is how the Tyrant Slayer dies," Niels muttered to himself, "Not against great Lords and Kings but mere men.... so be it. Let them come for me, they will find I do not die easy, and many more of their kin will precede me into hell."

The Scottish smashed into the side of the surviving Danes, and Niels began casting out with his blade, meaning to suit actions to words. Several Scotsmen died under his blade and the hooves of his horse, but not enough.

Not nearly enough.





Thorgils Hviid was not a loved man, nor was he a loving man. But he was loyal beyond fault, and Stockholm was a city of order and discipline thanks to the harsh judgments and cruel lack of compassion he brought to his role as Governor. Whether noble or common, when a man was governed by Thorgils, they were judged based only on the facts and the letter of the law.



Prince Thorgils Hviid

Age: 27

Governor

Command ★★

Chivalry ●●●●●●●●

Loyalty ●●●●●●●●

Piety ●●●●●●●●

Retinue

-  Alchemist
-  Harsh Judge
-  Judge

Traits

- Aspiring Commander
- Confident Defender
- Very Loyal
- Religious
- Cruel Leader

Spotted By:

Subterfuge:

Nevin Nevell

●●●●●●●●●●

So it was that the death of Sten had seen Thorgils named Prince of Denmark, now first in line to the throne should King Bjorn die. It should have been seen as recognition of his lifetime of tireless work to bring justice and order to the Kingdom, as well as a reward to his loyalty.

Instead it was a death sentence.





727 Scotsmen had appeared as if from nowhere outside the walls of Stockholm, catching Thorgils completely by surprise. When word had reached him of Sten's death, he had been preparing for the Scottish army to march from the West at Oslo. Instead, another army of Scotsmen had sailed up to the coast and marched quickly from the South to lay siege to the city, and Thorgils' messages to Sten's former army to return to Stockholm had gone unanswered, making him fear the worst for the army. Had they deserted or disbanded after hearing of their Prince's death? Or were they still marching blindly forward against Hamburg, which was almost certainly far better defended than they'd been led to believe? Thorgils did not know, all he knew was that over 700 men were preparing to charge the city walls, and he had only 80 to defend it.

Battle Deployment

Your forces attack an army of Denmark



Your Forces

Scotland 

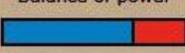
 **Captain Aidan**
727 men

Reinforcements: 0

None



Balance of power



Attempt a night attack



Enemy Forces

Denmark 

 **Prince Thorgils**
83 men

Reinforcements: 0

None

As rain began to pour down harder, Captain Aidan gave the order and the Bombards fired, blasting through the city gates. Aidan grinned and lifted his sword high to give the order for his men to march to the walls, and then through the gates. But as his sword lifted, he heard a cry coming from the Highland Nobles that had been rankling under his command ever since they'd marched out of Frankfurt.

"LET'S GET THEM LADS!" screamed the Highland Commander, and suddenly they were charging forward.



"Shit!" snapped Aidan, "After them lads, try and keep up!"

The Scottish began charging through the now muddy ground of the field, but the Pikemen and Spearmen were bogged down by their armor and padding as well as the wet and mud. Meanwhile, the Highland Nobles were dressed lightly in their kilts and helms, and quickly charged ahead of the rest, pouring through the gates before Aidan and his men had reached even the halfway point.

"Dammit ye idiots, dinnae get yeself killed and cost us this victory!" cursed Aidan, and then went back to concentrating on trying to keep his feet being sucked in by the mud.

Sitting inside the Courtyard outside the magnificent Stockholm Cathedral, Thorgils looked up at the holy building and said a silent prayer for aid from God. Moments later, the message came through to him that a small force of unarmored Scots had separated from the rest of the invaders and was coming close to the court now.

"That was quick," Thorgils smiled, looking into the sky and smiling at the gift God had given him, "Ride quickly men, and let's have the heads of these bastards to throw over the walls when their companions arrive!"



Aidan led his men through the gates and cursed angrily as the sounds and screaming of fighting reached him from the interior of the city. The fools had already engaged Thorgils, barely 100 unarmored idiots whose huge swords they seemed to mistake for penises, making them feel invincible. They would be getting slaughtered, and that would severely impact the morale of his men when Aidan led them to Thorgils' triumphant men.

"Stupid, thoughtless bastards!" cursed Aidan, and turned the corner to the narrow street leading to the City Square, where the words died in his mouth as he saw the impossible.

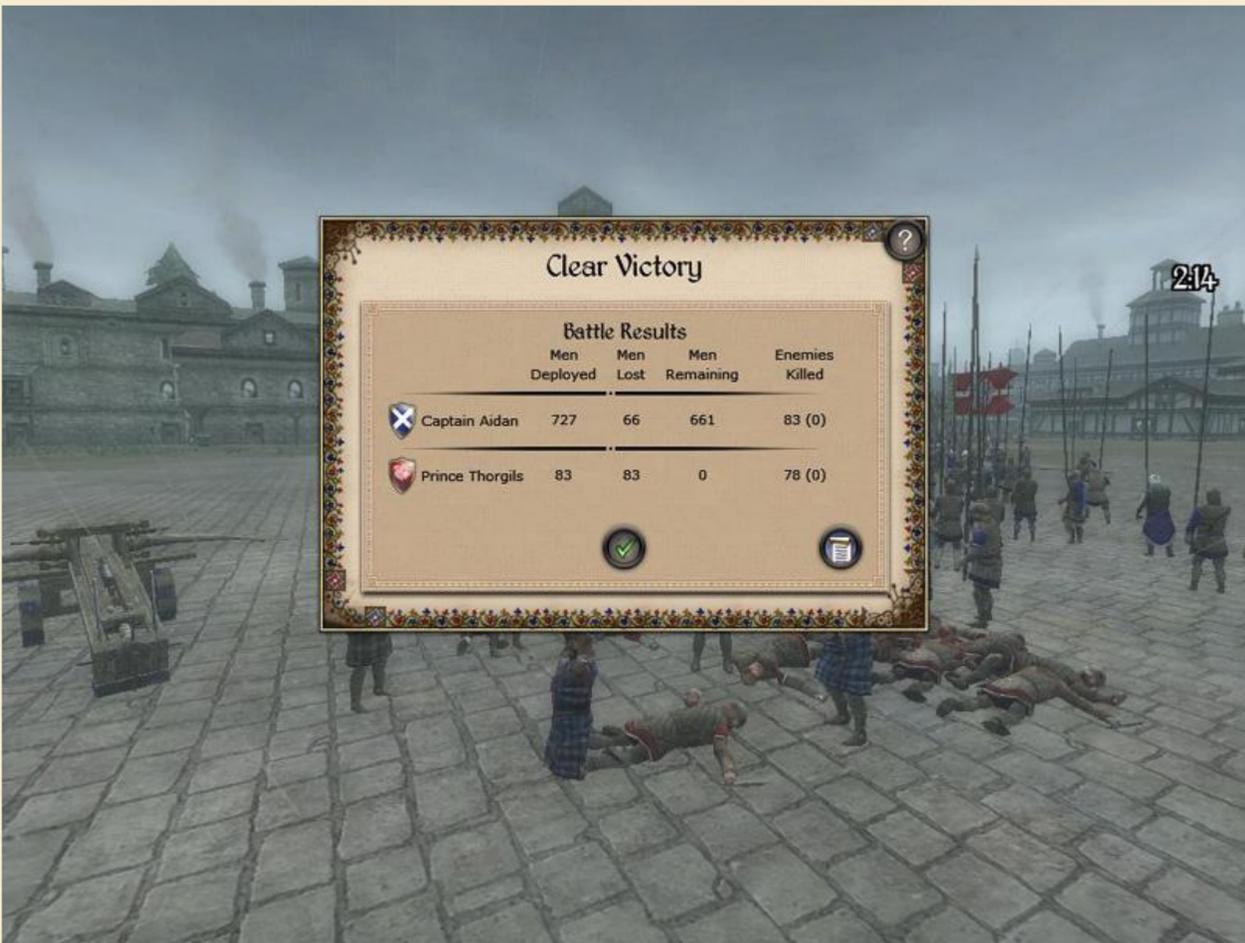


"They've... they've killed them all," gasped Aidan, as he watched the screaming, laughing Highlanders scramble over the dead bodies of the Danish Cavalry and charge after the fleeing catapult operators who Thorgils had been hoping could rain down death on the Scottish while his cavalry tried to hold them back.



Aidan led his men past dead bodies and horses, over the bloodstained cobbles of the courtyard to where the Highland Nobles were finishing off the last of the Catapult Operators. He shook his head in wonder as he watched the Highlanders cheer and laugh, embracing each other or falling to their knees to roar their triumph into the sky.

They had just killed every single soldier within Stockholm.... all by themselves.





Aidan reminded himself to never, ever aggravate a Highlander

Aodh Canmore sat in his study in the early morning darkness, the small clock on his desk showing the time to be 3 in the morning. He reviewed notes carefully, including reports from Stockholm where Captain Aidan had re-secured the garrison and put in a request for a Governor to come and control of the city itself so he could concentrate on more military matters.

There was no noise or other warning, but without raising his eyes from the paper he was reviewing, Aodh reached up a hand and spoke quietly, "Thank you."

A small package of papers were placed into his hand quietly, the personal correspondence that had been "stolen" from his office. Aodh put them aside and finished reviewing his notes, then looked up at the man who had entered his office silently and was now sitting across the desk from him.

"Well?" asked Eoin Makartane, "Did I perform adequately?"

"More than adequately," nodded Aodh, "Sten was going to be a serious problem for us, ye've solved that problem.... and the way ye overcame the challenges I set ye proved ye worthy to take the place of ye predecessor."

Eoin nodded and sat quietly, waiting for more, but Aodh simply went back to reviewing the papers before him, and finally the Spy stood up and prepared to leave the Prince's Office. Something made him pause and look back, and he found Aodh staring at him. Eoin found himself somewhat startled by the intensity of the gaze coming from the Scottish Prince, feeling like it was drilling into him.

"Eoin, forgive me for being brusque," Aodh said at last, "Ye predecessor was more than just a Spy, he was the best friend I ever had. It will nae be easy having someone else in the position of trust I once held him in."

Eoin nodded, then smiled, "Nae apology necessary, my Prince. Just ken that maybe I will nae be ye friend, but I **WILL** be Scotland's greatest friend and servant till the day I die."

King Bjorn was still an optimist.

Denmark had lost city after city; the Scottish were preparing their spring offensive on their remaining territories; and now Oslo and Stockholm had fallen and his brother - Denmark's finest General - was dead.

But King Bjorn was still an optimist.

He stood on the roof of his castle at Halych, where on a clear day you could almost see smoke rising from Vilnius, which had for so long been Denmark's Capital and was now under the control of King Domnall of Scotland. Domnall would come for him last, he was sure of it, the only reason Scotland had felt safe in attacking Denmark was due to Bjorn's ex-communication. Domnall would kill and destroy everything under Bjorn's control until he had nothing left, and then he would take the only thing Bjorn had left, his life.

And that was why King Bjorn was still an optimist.

He stood on the roof of his Castle and stared out across the lands that were his and those had once been, and thought about what would happen if he was dead. The Pope would reconcile Denmark, which in turn would force Scotland to pull back from attacking the Danes further. The Scottish were too closely tied to the Papacy to deny the direct orders of the Pope, and while Denmark would not be as large as it once was, it would at least be able to regroup and rebuild with the land that was left to it. But for that to happen, King Bjorn would need to be dead.

"I lived my life in service to you, Denmark," Bjorn whispered, and then without preamble flung himself from the roof of the castle and plummeted towards the ground far below. King Bjorn was an optimist, and as he fell to his death, his final thoughts were self-satisfied ones. He had done what no one else had ever managed to do.

He had defeated Scotland.

"So the war is over?" grunted Angus, tearing at a chicken as he shared dinner with Hew Mar and King Domnall, discussing the latest news regarding Bjorn's death.



"Denmark is reconciled," snapped Domnall grumpily, "We have maybe two weeks of grace before the Pope begins to grow angry at Scottish armies threatening Denmark."

"So it's over," sighed Hew, sitting back and stretching, "I dinnae like leaving a job half done, my Father always told me, "Son, if ye cannae get a job done, ye're a useless sack of shite and I'm sorry I fucked ye into ye mother.'""

"HA!" laughed Angus, slapping Hew on the back, "Ye father was a bastard, Hew, sounds like the kind of man I'd like."

"Are we quite done," snapped Domnall, "There is still the matter of Denmark to discuss."

"What is to discuss, my King?" asked Hew, "Ye said it yeself, the Pope does nae want us to kill Danes now that they are reconciled, and we cannae press aggravating our relationship with the Church."

"Nae, lad," Domnall replied, shaking his head, "That's nae an end to it. I set out on this course because the Danes are responsible for a great injury to me and my family, and nae man will stop me having my revenge. The Danes **will** die at my hands."

"But the Pope?" asked Hew, "Ye said yeself, we have maybe two weeks before he grows angry that we have nae pulled our men back out of the field."

Domnall grinned, and Angus returned it with delight, as Hew felt understanding dawn on him at last.

"Aye lad, only a couple of weeks," smiled Domnall, "So we'd best figure out a way to kill a lot of Danes, very, very quickly."



Chapter 59

King Domnall rode his horse slowly up before the walls of Krakow, eying the Danish Captain sitting waiting for him. The man's name was Eystein, and it had fallen to him to defend the last truly great Danish City. Domnall had ridden his men hard from Vilnius towards Krakow after splitting with Angus the Mauler - who had his own task to perform - and purposefully avoided contact from his Brother or any other Scotsman. If he was not in contact with him, he would not hear any instruction the Pope may have given to pull out of his Danish Campaign, and thus he could not be blamed for continuing it.

As Domnall's horse came to a stop directly opposite where Eystein waited alone, he eyed up the walls and the men visible on guard upon them. His intelligence had told him that Eystein's men matched his for numbers, roughly 1300 on each side. However he also knew that his Scotsmen were worth any two Danes, probably more, and he held no fear of being held back for long. Eystein knew it too, and that was why he had requested this meeting, Domnall was positive the coward was going to offer the terms of his surrender. He'd at least had the decency to ride out of the gates alone, and Domnall had returned the favor by doing the same, and now they faced each other alone.

"King Domnall," nodded Eystein respectfully, "I thank you for agreeing to this meeting."

"Rough weather is rolling in, Dane," Domnall replied curtly, "Let us make this quick. Say what ye've come to say."

"You have killed our leaders, all pure-blooded Nobles are dead, whether by your hand or their own," Eystein offered, "I hold the men together out of pure desperation here, they know that if they do not stand here, you will wipe them out. Denmark is all but gone, unless we reach agreement here today, it will no longer exist."

"I fail to see how this is a concern of mine," returned Domnall simply.

"The death of our King has had one positive result," continued Eystein, as if Domnall had not spoken, "The Church has reconciled us, and Scotland's standing is high with the Church."

Eystein fell quiet, leaving the words unspoken between them. As far as the Church was concerned, if Domnall was to kill any Danes now, it would be a Catholic killing other Catholics.

"So I offer you this, King Domnall," Eystein said at last, "You have what you wanted, you have destroyed the Danish noble-line. You have nothing to gain by destroying what is left, and everything to gain... so I ask you... no, I beg of you... leave us this land. Let us leave here, we are not a Nation anymore, let us live here until time and politics makes us what you would gain anyway, only without the bloodshed. The price in lives and blood of taking Krakow is not worth the gain you shall achieve from it, so I ask you to give us the land and keep all else you have captured, and give us peace."

"What you say makes sense," Domnall replied at last, after sitting blankfaced for a long, terrible time that saw Eystein begin to visibly sweat, "To push on now would be folly, it would gain me little at a great cost, and what type of King would do that?"

"I am relieved, King Domnall," sighed Eystein in relief, releasing his pent up tension, "I cannot tell you ho-"

"The King of Scotland, that is what type of King," Domnall continued, shutting down Eystein, "Ye small thoughts and petty hopes sicken me, Dane. Ye people grieved me sorely, and I will take my cost in the blood of Danes until there is none left to have. Peace? The only peace ye shall ken is the peace of the grave."

Domnall turned his horse around and began to walk away from the stunned Dane, but then the Captain spoke and gave him pause.

"You are a fool, Domnall Canmore," spat the Dane, "Did you think I would come and speak from a position of weakness asking so much? Our numbers within the city equal yours to the man, but more than that, we have 800 more Danes riding through the forests on your flank.... and more than that, "King" Domnall, we have arranged through the diplomatic means you so despise the assistance of Councillor Tusco the Scarred - heir to the Throne of Venice."

Domnall stopped and turned, a scowl of disbelief on his face.

"Ye expect me to believe that?" he demanded, "That ye could ride 800 men upon me unawares AND pull the crippled "Empire" of Venice into a War with the mightiest Nation in the world?"

"You yourself have cut off contact with the world outside of your army, for clear reasons," sneered Eystein, "We vastly outnumber you, Scot, and the Councillor has joined the battle because he knows we can destroy you to a man and leave none the wiser of his presence. Attack Krakow if you wish, you may kill many Danes... you may even kill me, but I guarantee you that you will find death waiting for you through that gate, and for all those around you. You'll not live to enjoy the blood you spill this day, "King".

Battle Deployment
Your forces attack an army of Denmark

Your Forces

- Scotland: King Domnall the Merciless, 1286 men
- Reinforcements: 0

Enemy Forces

- Denmark: Captain Eystein, 1280 men
- Denmark: Captain Inge, 833 men
- Venice: Councillor Tusco the Scarred, 65 men

Balance of power: [Blue bar] [Red bar]

Attempt a night attack:

Icons: [Sword], [Shield], [Bow]

Eystein spat on the ground between them, then turned and walked his horse back, Domnall left sitting wide eyed and shocked in place as cheers rose up from the Danes standing the walls. Finally, he turned his horse and walked it slowly back to where his army waited, including Hew Mar and a young Noble only recently raised into the wider Royal Family, Roy of Orkney.

"What is it to be, my King?" asked Roy eagerly as the King returned, while Hew simply sat and stared curiously, surprised by Domnall's unusual expression.

"They have played me for a fool," Domnall spat angrily, "And I have lead us into a trap. More Danes come on our flank, and the Venetians have invited destruction by riding to aid them... if we attempt to take Krakow, we likely face our own destruction."

"So there is to be nae battle?" asked Roy, the disappointment on his young face clear. The King stared at him with sad eyes for several moments, and then a huge grin broke out on his face and he turned and nodded at Hew.

"My Father always said," Hew spoke up, smiling back at the King, "If ye get yeself into a fight and find yeself taking a beating... start hitting the bastard harder!"

"Aye, Hew," laughed Domnall, "Come then, let's show these Danes what happens when ye back a Scotsman into a corner!"

In the gathering darkness of the stormy weather, the Scots formed up as Eystein watched from the walls, feeling his stomach sink. He had meant every word he said to Domnall, and he truly believed that the King was committing suicide as surely as Bjorn had by riding against Krakow... but Eystein wanted to live to see it, and he knew that once Domnall breached the walls, he would come straight for him.

"So be it then," he grunted, "To the death."

"So be it then," Domnall grunted, raising his sword high in direction to the Bombards, "To the DEATH!"



"CHARGE NOW! DO NAE WAIT!" roared Domnall, "HEW! ROY! CAVALRY! RIDE WITH ME NOW! RIDE AND KILL THE DANES! KILL THE DANES!"

"KILL THE DANES!" roared the Infantry, bouncing with excitement as they watched their Nobles riding hard and fast ahead of them. They knew that a Canmore always fought on the frontline with their men, but now they were seeing a Canmore BECOME the frontline, as they were left behind and Domnall rode to certain death at the hands of the Danes.... determined to send as many of them to Hell before him.



In the forest to the Northeast, Captain Inge pulled his men up as they heard the distant roaring of the Scottish, the booming sound of artillery and then the screams and clash of men and horses against each other.



"Too soon!" he snapped angrily, "Canmore was supposed to retreat, retreat or hole up to try and defend himself, he's attacking too soon!"

He shouted out to his men to double their pace, and they pushed themselves harder towards Krakow, Inge hoping they would arrive in time to crush the Scottish between the walls and the garrison.

Through the walls of the City, Eystein roared as he cast about with his sword from the back of his horse as the Scottish Cavalry poured endlessly up the road towards him. All around him, his Norse War Clerics smashed with religious fervor against their Scottish foes, but the Scots shared the same intensity, chanting words that sounded more like a promise than a threat.

"KILL THE DANES! KILL THE DANES!"





"DEATH TO THE SCOTTISH!" roared Eystein, hoping to overcome the Scottish cries. His men matched the Scots man for man, and they were all good and strong men, strong fighters and unafraid. So why was it that the Scots were pushing them back? Why was it that he could hear the defiant cries of his Danes faltering?

"DEATH TO THE SCO-" he roared, and then his sword was cut out of his hand and he cried out in alarm, twisting around and seeing the face of a demon, contorted with rage.

"YE GUARANTEE MY DEATH, DANE!?!!" roared King Domnall, swinging his sword and smashing it into the side of Eystein's neck and shoulder, "DEATH TO YE AND ALL YE DAMNED COUNTRYMEN!"



The Danes - held together only by fear of the Scots and the leadership of Eystein - cried out in horror as they saw their Captain cut down, and as the Norse War Clerics redoubled their efforts, driven mad with grief and rage, the infantry bogged down in the fighting amongst them turned and ran in horror from the fury of the mad Scottish demons that had come like something out of a nightmare to destroy their Empire. The sudden departure of the Infantry caused the Clerics to be pressed together by the thrust of the Scottish Cavalry, and their commander shouted out an angry curse and ordered the retreat. They were going to be cut to pieces in this corridor, they had to pull back.



"AFTER THEM, LADS!" roared Domnall, mad with bloodlust, "WIPE THEM OUT! WIPE THEM OUT TO THE MAN!"





Captain Inge stood in the hills looking over Krakow, staring in astonishment at the City and the Scottish army now completely inside the walls, tearing through the Danes as if they were made from paper.

"Captain, we need to march now before it is too late!" gasped Inge's second, "If we hit them from behind now, we still have a chan-"

"No, no," replied Inge, shaking his head, "My orders were clear, we wait for the signal."

Inside the central courtyard, a shaking Dane grabbed at his bow with trembling hands, trying desperately to cock an arrow to it. He had been ordered to give the signal for Inge to attack at Eystein's order, but with Eystein dead he had no idea if it was now too late. The oil-soaked rags wrapped around the arrow kept slipping it out of the bow and dropping on the ground, and the sweating Dane kept finding himself distracted by not only the Scottish Cavalry tearing through his fellow soldiers, but the Scottish Infantry now marching almost casually up behind them, hundreds of them, armed to the teeth and fresh for battle.





Finally the Dane managed to cock the arrow and light it on fire, but then it misfired out of his hands and into the ground and he threw up his arms in despair, drew his sword and rushed to join his brothers in their final stand.

To the Southwest of Krakow, Councillor Tusco the Scarred sat his horse with his small bodyguard of men, clenching his teeth angrily as word came back to him of the disastrous progress of the battle.



"Where the hell is Inge?" he snapped angrily, "This is all going wrong!"

"CAPTAIN!" cried Inge's Second, far distant from where their ally sat, waiting for Inge's own signal, "We must ride now, the Scots are slaughtering our brothers!"

Inge simply stood, staring over the city, seeing the Danish banners falling under a sea of glinting armor and blue Scottish banners.

"CAPTAIN!" cried Inge's Second again, and then wrinkled his nose and looked down at Inge's feet, cursing in disgust as he saw urine running out through the gaps in his Captain's armor. The man was no longer waiting for a signal, he was frozen in place in fear.

And in Krakow, the Danes made their final stand.







King Domnall sat panting on his horse, his armor coated in blood and his body cut in multiple places. He had thrown himself with reckless abandon at the Danes, attacking without thought of his own survival, tearing through his enemies without covering his back, expecting to die but not caring, wanting only to bring down the Danes he held responsible for the death of his Father.

But now the battle was over, the Danes lay dead and despite all his wounds, he still lived. He turned and looked back, the rush of battle fading to be replaced with the aches of living... and the awe at the sight of his enemies corpses laid out like a carpet across the streets of Krakow.





"That is.. that is battle?" asked Roy of Orkney, similarly coated in blood, his eyes wide as he rode up beside the King, joined soon after by Hew who was surprisingly unscathed, despite having been in the thick of the battle with them.

"That was an abomination," grunted Domnall, coughing roughly and feeling his back twinge uncomfortably, "And it is nae over yet.... Eystein said there was another army marching on our flank."

"Nae longer, my King," spoke up a lightly clothed scout, panting and sweating roughly from having rushed through the streets to bring his message, "A force of 800 Danes was seen arriving in the foothills near Krakow roughly an hour ago, they've since been seen to disperse and break up in separate directions."

"Cowards," spat Domnall angrily, "So much for Eystein's guarantee, the only death he accurately foresaw today was his own."

"Angus will be reaching Halych about now," mused Hew as the news of the cowardice of the other Danish army reached the rest of the Scots and they began cheering in delight, "It's getting dark, but he will nae wait for light.... before midnight the Danish Empire will have ceased to exist... it's over."

"It's just beginning," grunted Domnall angrily, slapping an Army Doctor away irritably as he came to tend the King's wounds, "Councillor Tusco of Venice thought to take advantage of this situation... and signed his death warrant by doing so. Get me papers and ink, Hew, I have orders to send to Aodh... I have a little surprise in store for our Venetian friend."

"You mean to kill him, my King?" asked Roy, wide eyed.

"Kill him? Nae, lad," chuckled Domnall, his eyes narrowing cruelly, "I mean to make the poor bastard a King."



Chapter 60

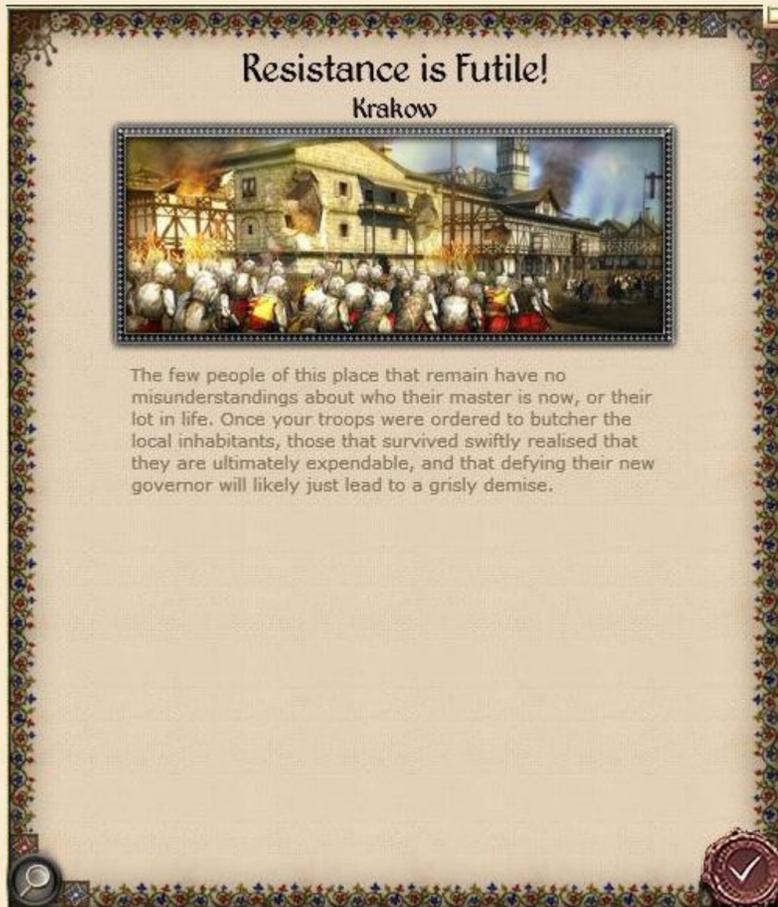
At Halych, Captain Sigifrid had been having a miserable day that was turning into a miserable night. He'd stubbed his toe in the morning after waking and been hobbling most of the day; then the meat he'd eaten for lunch had been spoiled; the day had been stormy and miserable threatening thunder and lightning all day; and word had reached him that another 30 men had deserted their posts overnight.

"Could this night get any worse?" sighed Sigifrid.

Thunder boomed in the air above the castle and the windows flashed bright with lightning as the threatened rain finally came, thundering down powerfully on the roof and against the windows.

"Dammit," grunted Sigifrid, cursing himself for tempting fate, "At least NOW it can't get any worse."

"Captain!" gasped a messenger, rushing into the dining hall where Sigifrid was sitting with his top men sharing a meager late night meal, "Word has come that Krakow has fallen to King Domnall! Captain Eystein's head sits on a pike above the wall and the population has been slaughtered by the mad Scot!"



"In the name of God," whispered one of Sigifrid's commanders, "It's over, Denmark is no more."

"There will always be a Denmark as long as there are Danes," snapped Sigifrid angrily, "May I remind you that it is Krakow that has fallen, not Halych!"

"Captain!" gasped another messenger, charging into the dining hall, "The Scots have marched an army out of the storm to the gates!"

"WHAT!?" demanded Sigifrid in disbelief, "Why have we not heard word yet from our scouts outside the city?"

"Face it, Sigifrid," sighed Inge, Sigifrid's top Commander and most trusted friend, "Any scouts we let out of Halych have disappeared into the forests never to return."

"Well I will not stand idly by to watch the Scots claim the last of the Danes without a fight!" spat Sigifrid, "We've had more than our fair share of bad omens this day, the time has come for the fair Lady Luck to smile upon us!"

"The Scots are led by Angus the Mauler," spoke up the messenger softly.

"THAT BITCH!" snapped Sigifrid in horror, then turned on the frightened messenger, "Anything else than, man? Have the Scotsmen learned to fly and shoot fire out of their arses?"

In answer came a thundering noise that was not thunder, but the shockwave of a bombard blast against the walls of Halych, and Sigifrid received his latest bad news of the day. Despite the dark of midnight and the thunder, lightning and rain.... the Scottish were coming now.



Outside Halych, Angus huddled up against the rain on his horse and watched with unblinking eyes as bombard fire flew through the air and crashed against the exterior gate.



"Aye, that's it, let's be done with these bastards for good," he grunted. This was miserable weather, but he would be damned if he'd hunker down for the night and give the Danes inside a chance to prepare their defenses. King Domnall had put his trust in him to ride and take the city, hoping that Krakow and Halych would fall at roughly the same time and Denmark would be wiped from the Earth before the Pope could order them to stop their campaign.

The gate shattered and Angus sat up straight, sneering a smile and turning to yell at his men, who passed his orders down the line. The teeming rain and the crash of thunder above them made the concept of a pre-battle speech ludicrous, and besides he didn't have time for one... he had Danes to kill!

"FOLLOW ME, LADS!" cried Angus and spurred his horse forward, the line rippling along behind him as word spread down through the cavalry and infantry and they began to charge for the shattered gate, pounding through the soaked fields before the city. Angus rode at their head, roaring with delighted laughter, his face contorted with battle-lust all ready, his eyes insane as he charged into Halych.... the last city of the Danes.





Angus cast about him with his sword, leering and laughing at the terrified Danes who slipped about in the wet ground beneath them as they tried to avoid his blade. Some came at him thrusting sword-pikes or blades, but he slapped them aside with a laugh, his men thundering through the gates behind him. Thunder crashed and lightning lit up the sky, illuminating Angus' face and deepening the shadows in the grooves and scars of his face, giving him an even more demonic appearance, and Danes fled in horror before him, causing Angus to roar with even greater insane laughter and lead his men on to cut more and more down.





"STAND! STAND AGAINST THEM!" screamed Sigifrid, limping to join his men in the fighting before the wall as flaming arrows peppered down around them and more and more Scots pushed through the gate. His cries of defiance gained him only the attention of the Scottish, however, and they surrounded him, slashing and thrusting their blades, spears and pikes at him as he desperately tried to hold them off, and found that the night really **COULD** get worse, as they pushed past his desperate defenses and he felt blades thrusting through his armor and into his body. He dropped to his knees and tried to speak, only for blood to spill out of his mouth. An armored Scotsman stepped up beside him and grabbed him by his shoulder, and he looked up through his helm in despair.

"It's nae so bad for ye, lad," the Scottish soldier told him, not unkindly, "At least ye will nae have to live to see the final humiliation."

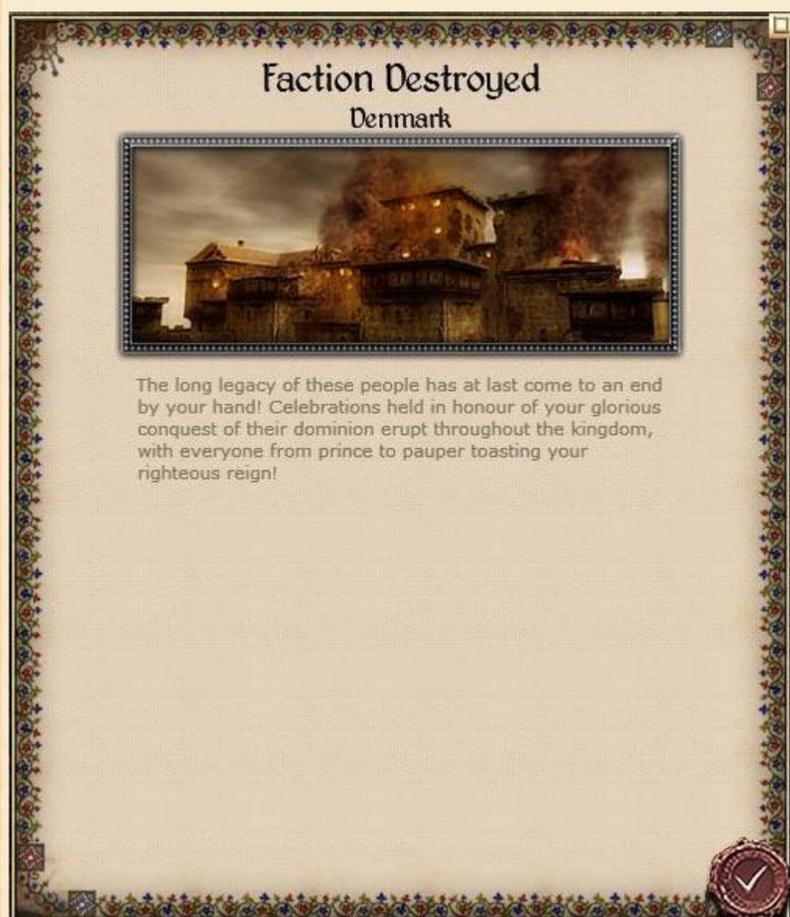


Captain Sigifrid died lying on the ground of his city, his blood mixing with the rain and the earth as his body turned cold and his eyes stared sightlessly into the stormy sky. His eyes did not see the final humiliation, of watching his men run in terror, of the Scottish chasing them down, of the final soldiers of the once proud Danish Empire were run down and killed one after the other.





He did not see the end of the Danes.



Councillor Tusco the Scarred was a paranoid man.

He had good reason; his scars came from an assassination attempt he'd suffered in his youth. It had left him shaken and determined to never let anyone get the drop on him again, and so he'd employed food testers; refused to grow close to any man or woman; gone to great lengths to cover his tracks even when moving through his own cities; and slept in a different room in a different home picked randomly on different days. Some days he did not get out of bed at all, so convinced was he that assassins or spies lurked around every corner.

Now he had extra reason to be paranoid, as he and his small contingent of men had found themselves trapped in the forests of what had once been Denmark. He'd made the mistake of siding with the Danes to take advantage of a rare chance to kill the King of Scotland, and his gamble had failed miserably. Domnall had taken Krakow, the Danish army that had been to reinforce them had fled in terror, and now Tusco was trying desperately to find a way to get out the new Scottish lands without encountering the marching patrols of Scotsmen maintaining the peace in their new lands.

But even a paranoid man recognized that there came a time when he had to put aside his fears and take a chance, and that was what Tusco was doing now as he lead his men through the forest into a clearing to meet the man who had guaranteed his safety on the name of his family.

And the name of the Canmore's held a great deal of weight.

King Domnall Canmore sat on his horse waiting patiently, a score of men waiting respectfully on the edge of the clearing behind him. The grey-bearded King sat tall in the saddle, looking completely at ease, almost amused as Tusco carefully rode into the clearing and shooed his own men back to the edge as he moved to meet with the King.

"King Domnall," he nodded respectfully.

"Doge Tusco," nodded Domnall back.

"Councillor Tusco," corrected Tusco, "My brother Michael is Doge."

Enemy Character Details



Doge Michael
Governor

Age: 30

Command	★★★★○○○○○○○○
Dread	●○○○○○○○○○○○○○○
Authority	●○○○○○○○○○○○○○○
Piety	●○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

Retinue
None

Traits

- Aspiring Commander
- Dauntless
- Marks of War
- Smart
- Speaks of Loyalty
- Winning First
- Feels Appreciated
- Faction Leader

Spotted By:
Subterfuge:

Micheil Broune

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"Of course," grunted Domnall, "Ye made a terrible mistake siding with the Danes.... but I can respect ye taking the opportunity, I would have done the same in ye position."

"Venice's fortunes have faltered in recent times," Tusco admitted, "Our alliance with the Papacy notwithstanding, we've lost lands to the Hungarians and been reduced to our far distant Mediterranean holdings. I had to take the chance to regain a foothold near our traditional home, it was nothing personal."

"Aye, I ken," nodded Domnall, "It's why I got word to ye that I would offer ye safe passage out of my lands if ye agreed to meet me.... there is nae to be gained in war between Venice and Scotland, Doge Tusco, I have only just achieved peace for Scotland again by destroying the Danes, what profit is there in going to war once more?"

"Councillor Tusco," corrected Tusco again, "I am glad to learn you are not a bloodcrazed lunatic who fights simply to fight, King Domnall... I have wronged you in seeking your death, and I can only spend the rest of my life trying to repay you this kindness, you can be guaranteed that when I return to Rhodes I will stress to my brother Michael the importance of opening better trade and diplomatic relations with your great Empire."

Domnall inclined his head and Tusco turned his horse away, keeping a warm smile on his face while inside he was jumping about in delight and relief. The madman had brought war to the Danes for absolutely no reason, and now had seemingly suffered a similar sudden change of attitude and offered peace to a man who had tried to kill him. The Scotsman was clearly mad, but his madness had turned out well for Tusco and for Venice.

"Of course, Doge Tusco," Domnall spoke up again, "Surely ye have the authority to do that now?"

Tusco stopped and turned to look back at the Scottish King, and he felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as he realized that he had been concentrating on Domnall's words and not his eyes.... eyes filled with contempt and hatred.

"Why do you keep calling me Doge, King Domnall?" Tusco asked.

"Because that is what ye are, "Doge", " replied Domnall calmly, "King of ye own pathetic little Empire.... which currently consists of that horse ye arse is sitting on and those men ye have cowering at the edge of ye clearing."

And Tusco, who had for the last two weeks been hiding in the forests of what had been Denmark out of contact with the rest of the world, realized that the worst had come true.









"Michael," whispered Tusco in horror, "Rhodes.... what about Lenuzo at Smyrna?"
Domnall smirked cruelly at Tusco, and told him.







"Wh... why?" gasped Tusco in shocked horror.

"I thought ye would be happy, "Doge"," sneered Domnall,"Ye tried to kill me and I rewarded ye by making ye a King.... or did ye think I would simply let ye insult go unanswered?"

"Bu... but you said you wanted peace!"

"Aye, and the only peace that could be guaranteed came at the cost of destroying ye pathetic empire," sneered Domnall,"I did nae want war with Venice, so I have destroyed Venice.... well, everything but, ye still live and with ye the Venetian Empire... but I wonder how much comfort that will bring ye at night, when ye sleep alone and unloved on the ground, no home to go to, no family to welcome ye. It is **YE** who are the Venetian Empire now, and may God have mercy on ye soul... for I will nae."

He turned and began to march his horse away, and Tusco spoke, his voice strained, tears in his eyes.

"Why are you letting me live, you bastard?" sobbed Doge Tusco.

"Why "Doge"," smiled Domnall cruelly,"Why do ye think they call me Domnall the Merciless?"
