

Chapter 61

Life was good.

Gordon of Edinburgh moved down the streets of Rome with a smile on his face and a song in his heart, enjoying the summer sun on his face. The last two weeks had been like a dream for the Diplomat, and at a time when most men were facing the ever present spectre of Death, he felt like his life was just beginning.

A month earlier, he'd received a personal letter from Prince Aodh Canmore himself, asking a personal favor of Gordon. A fortnight later, "she" had arrived, the most beautiful woman that Gordon had ever seen, a woman who hung on his every word and stared at him with plain adoration, stroking his ego in ways no one else ever had. She'd been sent to him because of Aodh's fears that her beauty and her desire to experience new things would see her virtue spoiled. So what better person to put her in the care of than an old man? And what better place to preserve her innocence than the holy city itself, Rome.

"She" was, of course, Prince Aodh's eldest daughter - Joan Canmore.

She'd been finely educated from a young age, both by the finest tutors - one of whom had accompanied her to Rome - and her father himself. At her coming of age, she'd been introduced as an observer to the intricacies of diplomacy and the Genoa Court, and shared letters with her cousin Muriel, who had taken an active part in helping her husband Aed run the Court in Cairo. Aodh had trusted her with a few carefully escorted diplomatic missions, but her great beauty had seen her saddled with the unwelcome attention of many would-be suitors, and according to Aodh, her knock-backs of those men had seemed less than outraged... almost as if she welcomed the attention.

So she had been sent to Rome, and Gordon had been smitten from the very beginning. Her physical beauty was no more or less than many other fine women he had been - whether noble born or commoner - but she had a grace, a way of carrying herself and a sparkle in her eyes that added something "extra" to her appearance. She was also a voracious reader, and always full of questions, and she'd coaxed much information out of Gordon, who had been more than pleased to have such a beautiful captive audience. He'd told her about the history of politics in Rome; the current climate; who was well regarded and who not; what local politicians could be trusted (the corrupt ones) and which couldn't (the honest ones); and, when he'd grown more comfortable with her, who was sleeping with who (or what) and why. She'd listened to it all with wide eyes, remarking often on how much he knew, how smart he was, how tapped into the pulse of the city, and he'd found himself feeling more than the usual lust he felt for young pretty women.

He was falling in love.

Of course, being who he was, Gordon's feelings were mostly based around his own personal gain. If he was to marry Joan Canmore, he'd be a member of the most powerful Royal Family in the world, and the King and Prince were both getting older and living dangerous lives.... should one or both die - heaven forbid! - why who would be better to take the throne than a man with decades of experience as the premier Diplomat of the mightiest Empire in the world? A man with a close personal connection to the Pope (well, he was allowed to attend the Pope's Court with the other diplomats) and a deeper understanding than any man living (and maybe dead!) of the ins and outs of world diplomacy.

He'd woken this morning to find Joan had all ready left the Diplomatic Residence, leaving him a note saying she had business to attend to, but she looked forward to seeing him later in the day. He'd laughed at the note, her "business" was likely the shopping that she so seemed to enjoy, perhaps moreso than her thirst for knowledge. With thoughts in his head of taking her for his wife and enjoying having her beneath him in bed as he taught her a few other things she didn't know, he'd dressed in his best and set out for the Holy Court of Rome, to hear the Pope give another of his interminable speeches on heresy.

He arrived at the Palace and noted the surprised looks of the Guards as they granted him entry, and allowed himself a smile. Yes he'd had his hair dyed, and obviously the woman he'd hired had done an admirable job, making him appear ten years younger and surprising the guards with his youthful look. He himself had been astounded at the change, he'd always felt his silver hair gave him a regal, dignified appearance, but now with his hair jet black, he looked vital and virile.

He moved through the long corridors of the Palace unerringly towards the Court, a path he could have walked in his sleep, he'd taken it so many times now. If he'd timed things right, he'd be seating himself just before the Pope made his entry, saving himself a boring wait for the Pope to arrive followed by the even more boring hours of the Pope's speech. The great doors to the Court opened and he stepped in, finding the Court all ready filled to capacity by diplomats, lesser nobles and merchants. When Villanus had first risen to Pope, he'd made it clear that his words were for all the peoples, but it hadn't taken long for a hierarchy to reassert itself, either through the use of diplomacy, bribery or outright theft. Now the Pope's speeches were attended by almost always the same people, who used the opportunity not only to be seen as one of the elite, but also to gather together and network, form relationships, do business and forge alliances.

As he entered, a few heads turned to note his entry, and as he moved towards the unmarked seat that everyone knew was "his", he felt more and more eyes upon him, and heard surprised murmurs rising and rising all around him. He knew at once that this was more than comment on his new youthful appearance, and he tried to bite back a frown as the noise grew and grew as he took his seat.

"What the hell is going on?" he hissed in a whisper to the merchant sitting beside him, a Hungarian he'd developed a mutually beneficial relationship with years earlier that saw him given access to fine wines before anyone else in the City.

"The Pope is giving a private audience," started the merchant, "And..."

"The Pope doesn't give private audiences!" exclaimed Gordon in surprise, "He has never granted a single one since he was named Pope!"

"More than that, Gordon," whispered the merchant, "We were informed that the Pope had granted a private audience.... to you!"

"What?" snapped Gordon, trying to keep his voice down and ignore the rising level of chatter around him, "No one said anything to me."

"The Papal Guard announced it to us," insisted the Merchant, "His Holiness The Pope had granted a private audience to Scotland's Diplomat to Rome."

"I'm going to get to the bottom of this," grunted Gordon angrily, and stood up, all talk around him ceasing instantly.

"Now see here!" he snapped, "I-"

"His Holiness, Pope Villanus II!" came the cry, and instantly everyone was standing and bowing low, forcing Gordon to do the same as the Pope entered the Court, joined by....

"Nae," whispered Gordon in horror, the shock knocking every refinement he'd forced upon his natural accent away, "It cannae be..."

"And," continued the Herald, announcing the name of the woman accompanying the Pope a respectful step behind him, "Scotland's most noble new Diplomat to the Holy Church, Princess Joan Canmore."



Life was terrible.

Gordon of Edinburgh moved down the dirt lined streets of Arguin with a frown on his face and a dirge in his heart, feeling the salty air of the sea wind blowing against his face under a stormy sky.

Six months ago he'd thought he was in love. Six months ago he'd discovered he'd been played for a fool, used like a pawn by his Prince and pumped for information by his Princess. Using her relationship with her Father - beloved by the Church and particularly by Villanus himself - Joan Canmore had gained a private audience with the Pope and explained her Father's feelings that as important a relationship as that between Scotland and the Church - the premier powers on Earth - should not be trusted to someone without a blood tie to the Scottish Royal Family. So he had sent his daughter - the ugly, conniving bitch! - to become the new Scottish Diplomat to Rome, and she'd been welcomed to the Court with the personal endorsement of the Pope himself... the stupid, blind old fool.

Gordon had been livid, but held in his rage, swallowed his pride and allowed an impotent internal fury to rage inside of him as she sat in pride of place behind him as he gave one of his usual speeches on heresy, but this time more fired up and energetic than anyone could remember. It seemed the harlot had been working her female wiles on him too, and Gordon cursed the Pope for a fool. With the audience over, he'd tried to corner Joan to confront her in silence, but she'd been too highly in demand, mixing easily with diplomats, merchants and nobility alike, charming all around her, the idiots being lead around by their cocks instead of their brains, Gordon despised them all.

Finally she had deigned to notice him, and he'd found himself tongue tied as she approached with a smile and taken him by the hands and kissed him softly on one cheek, then whispered into his ear, "Ye'll be rewarded commensurate to ye service, Gordon, have nae fear."

With that she'd stepped away to chat with a young Hungarian Captain, showing she was daring indeed considering the current heightened tensions between Hungary and The Church. Gordon had been left standing gaping, considering the implications of her words and wondering what it could mean.... a Governorship, perhaps? Not Toulouse, but maybe Valencia?

And now, six months later, Gordon found himself standing in the dusty, sandy, sunbaked VILLAGE of Arguin, a shithole sitting on the edge of the world.



Gordon did not know - neither would he have cared had he - that he currently stood near where Gille Calline the Balleol had once stood and counted his blessings to be a servant of Scotland. All he knew was that this posting was an insult, some bad taste joke at his expense. He stared distastefully at the approaching collection of local townspeople, rough red-haired Scots with skin burned and blistered to a thick, leathery tan.

"Ayup, laddie," snorted the biggest of them, "Name's Rory, I Captain the garrison of this here shithole... and this pack of useless shites, HA!"

The men laughed behind him and clapped him on the back as if this was the height of wit, and Gordon sighed.

"Hello," he grunted, "My name is Gordon of Edinburgh, I will act as diplomat to any fool stupid enough to come to this "shithole" and try to open negotiations with the Scottish Empire.... any questions?"

"Aye," chuckled Rory, reaching behind him and down into his kilt, rummaging his hand around between his arsecheeks before pulling his hand free and lifting a finger in Gordon's direction, "Does this smell?"

"Oh Lord," sighed Gordon as the men fell about themselves laughing, "So this is my life."

Doge Tusco the Scarred was King of all he surveyed.

Currently that was the tree stump, the forest wall and a small babbling brook running through the clearing he'd stopped in for the night.

Humiliated and stripped of everything by King Domnall the Merciless, Tusco had fled into the forests with what was left of his personal bodyguard (which was also now the entire "army" of Venice) and wandered aimlessly for months, driven increasingly madder by the paranoia and derangement that had plagued him throughout his life, and that he had finally surrendered to.

His men had gradually abandoned him as his madness became clearer, though none blamed him for retreating into despair and lunacy. Now only five remained - his strongest supporters and best friends - and right now their leader, Michael, was trying to convince Tusco that they should get out of Scottish lands. This was a task made harder by the fact that often Tusco seemed to forget Michael was his Bodyguard Commander and not his late brother, the former Doge.

"We cannot stay in these lands, Doge," whispered Michael now, hoping to get through to him, "The Byzantines would offer sanctuary surely."

"We cannot leave Scotland," whispered Tusco, shaking his head and staring far away, "Domnall Canmore told me he would guarantee my safety while I was in Scottish lands.... Domnall Canmore is a man of his word... he's a man of his word, yes, yes... yes he is."

"It's no use," sighed Michael, standing up and turning to what was left of his men, "He sees assassins under every rock and behind every tree, he's become convinced he will only be safe in Scottish lands."

"And so he is," spoke a new voice, and Michael twisting grabbing at his sword hilt, only for a thin blade to plunge into his throat. As their Commander fell choking and clutching at his throat as blood bubbled out of his mouth, the remaining soldiers grabbed at their own weapons, pulling blades loose and looking around in shock.

There was no one there.

"ASSASSIN! ASSASSIN!" squealed Tusco in terror, staring at Michael's corpse, "ASSASSIN!"

"Where?" howled one of the soldiers, casting his eyes about the shadows amongst the trees, "KING DOMNALL SAID WE'D BE SAFE!"

"Nae, lad," chuckled the voice, directly behind the soldier, "Only ye Doge."

The soldier rasped horrifically as his throat was slit, and the three remaining soldiers swung their swords at the brown blur of the robed figure dancing backwards towards the trees.

"Stand still and fight like a man!" howled one of the Venetians. Suddenly the brown robed figure froze in place, the soldier rushing past him unable to check his forward momentum, and he felt a horrible pressure and release in his gut as his belly was cut open.

"ASSASSSSSSSSIN!" squealed Tusco, sitting in his own filth and unable to move as he watched the assassin dispatch the last two soldiers, then grab the hair of the one he had gutted and pull back his head, slitting his throat with brutal efficiency.

"Aye, Assassin," whispered Farquar the Killer, turning to grin at the Doge, "BOO!"

Tusco welped in fright and stumbled off of the tree stump he was sitting on. As if the movement had broken his paralysis, he scabbled on all fours through the brook and into the treeline, while Farquar grinned and cleaned off his blades, then set out after him.

He following the panting, uncontrollably weeping Doge through the trees for ten minutes, shaking his head and chuckling as he made certain to shepherd him in the direction he wanted to go. Finally, he seemed to have had enough and quickened his pace, grabbing the Doge by the ankle with one big hand and physically flipping him over onto his back.

"NO!" cried the Doge, "DOMNALL CANMORE IS A MAN OF HIS WORD!"

"Aye, he is," smiled Farquar, "Thank ye for being so accommodating.... we crossed the Hungarian Border five minutes ago."

"No... no... NO!" screamed Doge Tusco, as Farquar leaned down and ended the once mighty Venetian Empire in the most humiliating, undignified way any could have possibly imagined.

Micheil Broune frowned at the head of the table as the other men laughed, thoughts far away from the large, lavishly furnished command tent he was sitting in.

"Something bothers you, Micheil?" asked Duncan Forster, who had insisted that they share drinks in the Command Tent ahead of the upcoming battle. The others had been willing enough to break the tension, but Micheil couldn't get his mind off of what was coming. He'd been having strange dreams recently, and a sense of foreboding was....

"Nae, nae," he grunted, and forced a smile, "This was a good idea, Duncan, we need to relieve the tension ahead of the battle tomorrow.... I am sorry if I do nae seem entirely here."

There were five of them gathered in the tent - Generals of the Northern Desert, men who had either dim memories of their ancient homeland on the other edge of the world or none at all. Though he was not the eldest, Micheil was their chosen leader, and he was joined by Dougall Inchmertyn (the eldest of them); Duncan Forster who was Micheil's own age; Comgell of Carnavarane who was younger; and Farquar Makfulchiane, the youngest of them.

Army Details

Age: 36

Family member
Command: 5/10
Chivalry: 4/10
Loyalty: 3/10
Piety: 2/10

Retinue	Traits
Tax Farmer	Confident Defender
Chivalrous Knight	Scarred
Veteran Warrior	Smart
Mercenary Captain	Proven Commander
Shieldbearer	Bastion of Chivalry
	Dutifully Religious
	Poor with Taxes
	Firm Ruler
	Feels Appreciated
	Social Drinker
	Dauntless
	Night Fighter
	Lacks Compassion
	Confident Attacker
	Wall Taker

Selected Mercenaries (Total cost: 0)

Character Details

Age: 49

Family member
Command: 3/10
Dread: 2/10
Loyalty: 6/10
Piety: 1/10

Retinue	Traits
Judge	Cruel and Cunning
	Lacks Justice
	Feels Respected
	Prim
	Great Speaker
	Conscientious Trainer

Character Details

Age: 37

Family member
Command: 3/10
Chivalry: 2/10
Loyalty: 1/10
Piety: 1/10

Retinue	Traits
Military Engineer	Proven Commander
Biographer	Dauntless
Siege Engineer	Drillmaster
	Budding Bureaucrat
	Noble in Battle
	Speaks of Loyalty
	Enjoys a Wager
	Gets Merry
	Extravagant
	Feels Unappreciated

Character Details

Age: 30

Family member
Command: 5/10
Dread: 2/10
Loyalty: 4/10
Piety: 1/10

Retinue	Traits
Pagan Magician	Understands Logistics
Siege Engineer	Promising Strategist
Master Archer	Promising Commander
Veteran Warrior	Talent for Command
	Smart
	Religiously Proper
	Feels Appreciated
	Gets Merry
	Night Fighter
	Poor with Taxes
	Uninhibited
	Brave
	Marks of War
	Winning First

Not at all embarrassed about embracing another man.
-1 Authority

Character Details

Age: 27

Family member
Command: 3/10
Dread: 2/10
Loyalty: 3/10
Piety: 1/10

Retinue	Traits
Siege Engineer	Proven Commander
Biographer	Night Fighter
Military Engineer	Mixed Loyalties
	Cruel and Cunning

"Micheil, do nae worry yeself," chuckled Comgell, taking Broune by the hand. Micheil forced himself to leave his hand there, reminding himself that Comgell was a very "tactile" person, "So our conquering of Smyrna raised the alarm of the Byzantines? So they're sending 2200 finely trained soldiers who have had 1000 years of the finest military training our way? So we're a hastily assembled group of 1500 Scots with barely any infantry? Bah.... ye're forgetting that we have one advantage over them."

"And what is that, pray tell?" grinned Dougall.

"Why, ye dinnae ken?" asked a shocked looking Comgell, then let a wide smile cross his face, "We're Scottish!"

Slow smiles crossed all their faces, and they raised their cups to Scotland and drank deeply, Micheil included.

In the overcast light of day, Micheil looked at the vast numbers of the Byzantium soldiers spread out across the slope before him and realized that there was only one thing worse than finding yourself facing 2200 soldiers out for your blood.

Doing so with a hangover.

They stood at the border between Scotland's new territory (formerly Venice's) and Byzantium land, soldiers shouting insults across the invisible line of territory and goading each other. The Byzantine Captain - Tobromeros - had acted wisely and brought large numbers of archers, and though Micheil had his own archers at his disposal, they could not match the Byzantium numbers, and certainly not their skill. Though they spoke Greek, these were Romans, or at least what the Romans had become. The Holy Roman Empire had long ago split off from their Eastern cousins, but what both retained in common was a proud martial tradition and deadly competent training ethic. The archers could outshoot and do more damage than their Scottish counterparts, and Micheil had a horrible feeling this battle would consist of his men being whittled down before his very eyes and their recent land gains lost.



Comgell and Dougall rode up beside Micheil and looked over the gathered host, and finally Dougall spoke.

"Comgell has a plan."

"Mmmm?" asked Micheil, who had been trying to throw off the sense of foreboding doom he'd had since learning that the Byzantines were marching on their border.

"Their archers are the key," Comgell spoke hesitantly, looking to Dougall for encouragement and getting it, "They mean to attack us from a distance and pull back from our infantry when they try to engage, and send in their own cavalry. Then when he send in our cavalry, they will pull back and allow their archers to fire on us again."

"That would be the traditional way of doing things, yes," nodded Micheil, "Ye idea?"

"A Scottish General rides on the frontline with his troops," Dougall quoted, and Comgell smiled hesitantly, and Micheil started to see what they intended.

"We hit them by surprise with something they will nae expect," Comgell said, "We flood their archers with our cavalry - ALL of our cavalry - right from the start of the battle. We completely negate their ranged advantage, it'll be mass confusion, we slaughter their archers and bog them down in fighting so their cavalry has to ride into the fray, and we hold them there and allow our own archers to fire on them while our infantry sandwiches them with out cavalry."

"It could work," muttered Micheil, stroking his chin thoughtfully, "But ye realize, lad, ye're suggesting what is essentially a suicide charge.... we'll lose a great number of cavalry doing this, and we'll be on the frontline of that attack."

"Aye," noted Dougall, "But the alternative is to lose hundreds of men and be sent running from the field of battle licking our wounds.... that's nae way for a Scotsman to live."

"The Byzantines will nae see it coming," Micheil whispered, "Aye... aye so be it. I've had this foreboding feeling since I learnt they were coming... there is nae point in running from it, I'll meet it head on with my sword and my horse, and we'll see who blinks first, me or death."

"I'll inform the men," Dougall smiled, and prepared to ride away when he suddenly turned back and called out Micheil's name.

"Aye, Dougall?" asked the General.

"For Scotland," smiled Dougall.

"Aye, for Scotland," smiled Micheil back.











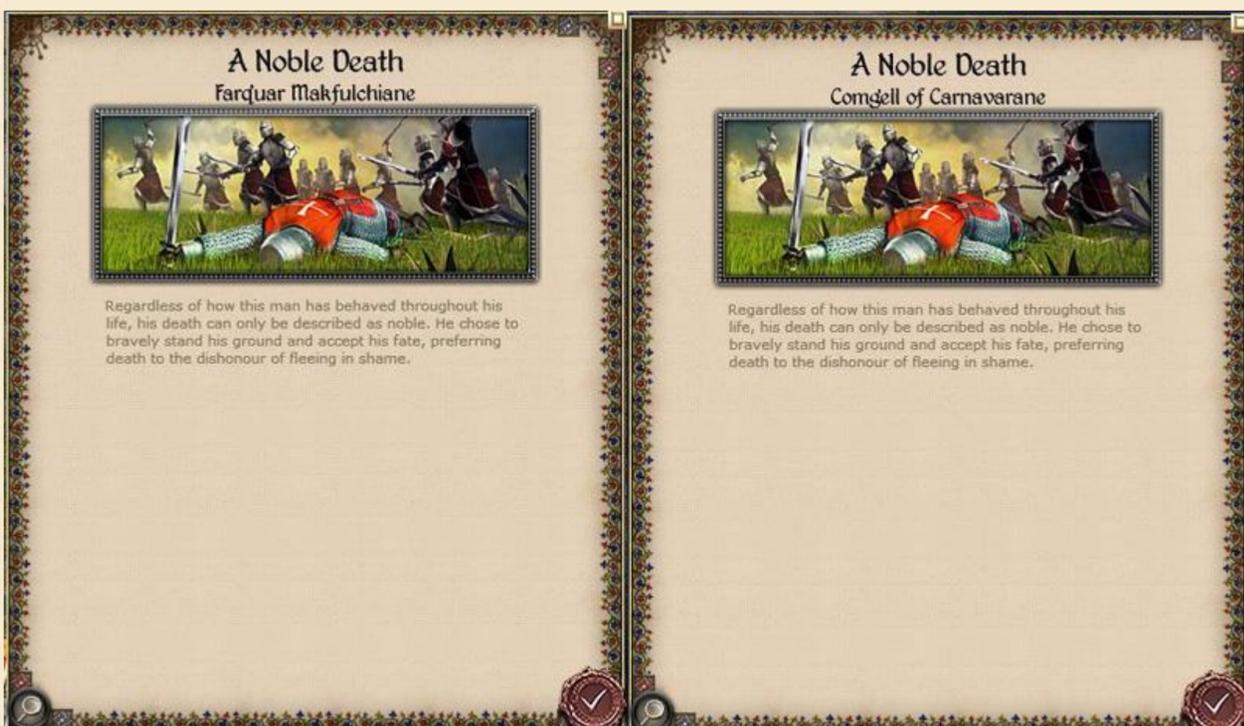
Micheil sat on his horse, sweating and panting roughly, staring about him in disbelief as around him his men cheered and roared out, "SCOTLAND! SCOTLAND! SCOTLAND!"

"Death blinked," he gasped, pulling his helm off and staring around him at the dead bodies littering the battlefield - so many of them Byzantium, so few Scottish.

Dougall rode up beside him and removed his own helm, shaking his head in disbelief as Micheil grinned and nodded his head.

"A famous victory, Dougall," he smiled, "Comgell should be proud, his plan worked perfectly."

"Would that he could," replied Dougall sadly, "He fell in battle, trying to protect Farquar... they both died under the hooves of the Byzantium Vardariotai."

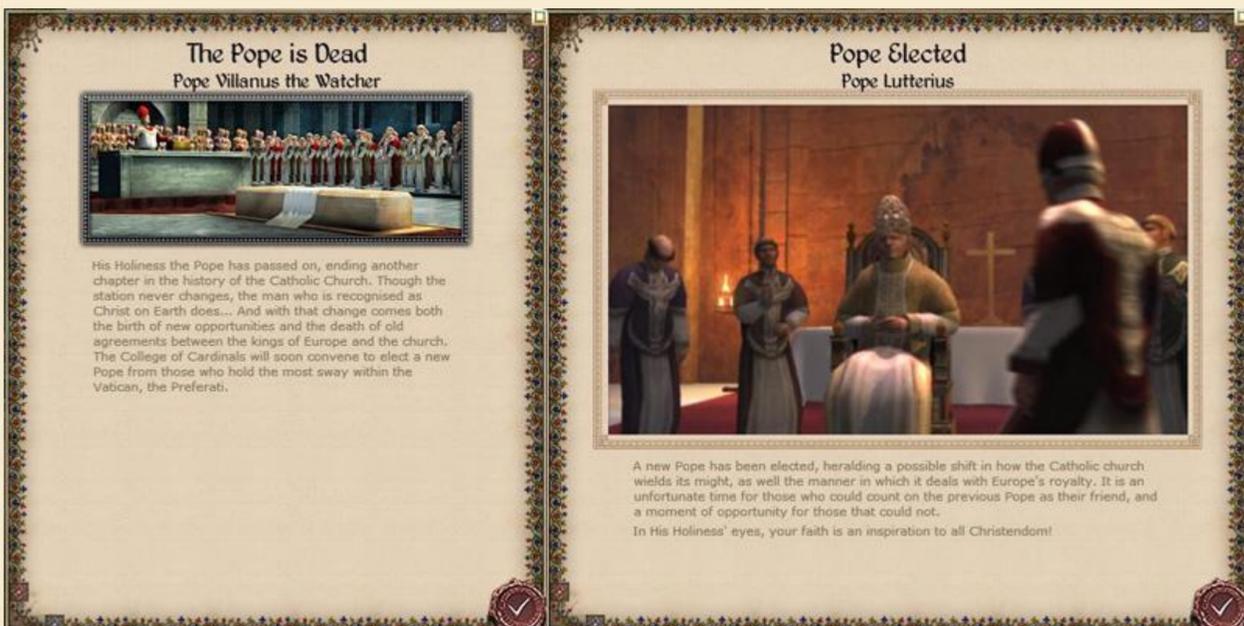


"Dammit!" snapped Micheil angrily, cursing himself for a fool. Death hadn't blinked it all, it had simply taken a different target. For a moment, Micheil had felt free of the pressure that had been coming to bear on him, but now it was back, that horrific sense of foreboding.

The Byzantines would be the death of him, he knew it.

The Pope was dead.

Long live the Pope.



Villanus had died in his sleep, vital and alive one day, stone dead in his bed the next. Some superstitious commoners spoke uneasily that one of the heretics his Holiness had hounded in life had taken their revenge, while calmer heads instead noted his advanced years and commented that these things happened.

In the newly refurbished dining hall of the Scottish Diplomatic Residence in Rome, Joan Canmore was hosting a dinner for diplomatic representatives of Poland and the Holy Roman Empire, both long term allies of Scotland. She had been accepted into their fraternity with open arms, though she suspected their acceptance had more to do with a combination of their lust for power, information and influence and their lust for what was under her dress. Now they shared idle gossip and complimented her on her choices of wine, far superior to the Hungarian muck that Gordon of Edinburgh had insisted on foisting onto them. Finally, one of them brought up what she knew would have to be said, they simply could not resist lording it up over a diplomatic opponent, whether friend, foe, man or woman.

"I must say, my Lady," smiled one of the Holy Roman Empire Diplomats, "I was surprised that you instructed your Cardinal to vote for Ugolinus to be the new Pope, surely you saw that our Friedrich had the support of the Polish Cardinals and would be the clear winner.... it was a surprising choice for one who has shown such a gift for diplomacy."

"I too, must admit some surprise," nodded Joan, acknowledging the point, "I did nae think the Cardinals would overlook what they did."

"Hmmm?" asked a Polish Diplomat, raising an eyebrow.

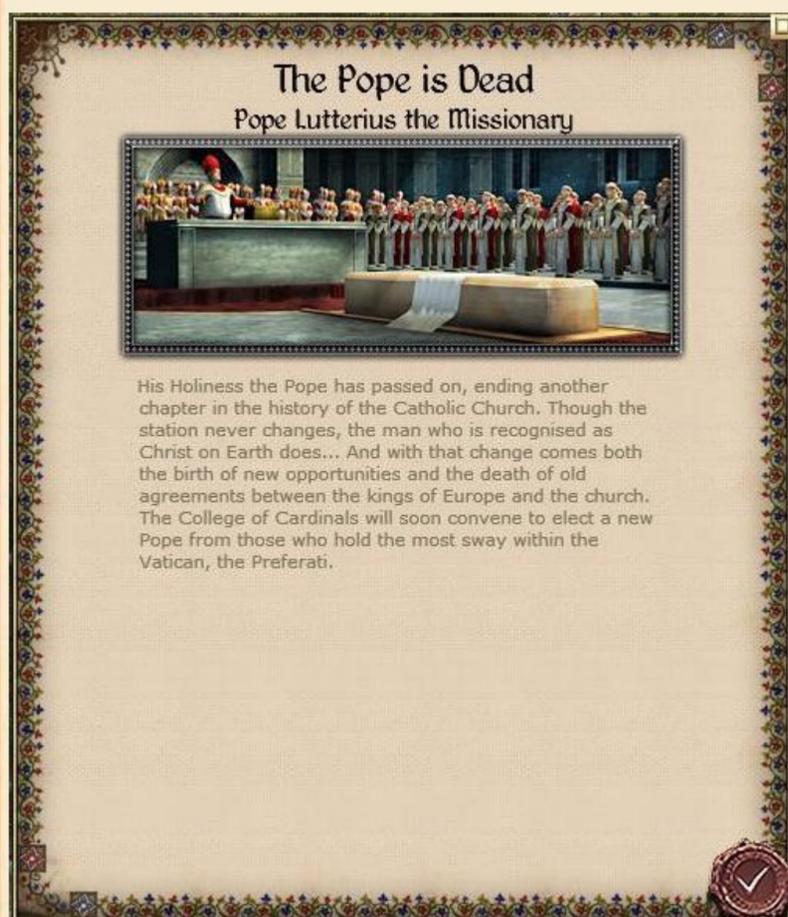
"Friedrich's recent turn," Joan spoke off-handedly, as if it was common knowledge, "His physician instructed him he was lucky not to lose the use of his limbs, and that any pressure or stress could potentially kill him. I did nae think the Cardinals would add the pressure of making him Pope onto his shoulders, but I must acquiesce that obviously they know more than this poor woman could ever hope to understand."

"His... recent turn....?" whispered the HRE Diplomat in growing horror, "How did you know?"

"It was nae common knowledge?" asked Joan, affecting ignorance, "I thought all the diplomats of Rome had that information?"

"Excuse me, my pardon," whispered the Diplomat, his face pale as he stood and bowed awkwardly, "I had forgotten some urgent matters that needed attending too."

He quickly excused himself, and within ten minutes the other diplomats in attendance had done so as well. Joan sat alone in the dining hall alone, quietly eating her meal until a note was brought to her by a harried looking messenger. She opened it and a thin smile crossed her lips.



"Well, here's to progress then," smiled Joan, and raised a glass of wine to herself.

"Farquar Makfulchiane is dead" cried out a voice, but Farquar Makfulchiane's expression did not change at the rather chilling news, "Farquar Makfulchiane and Comgell of Carnavarane have died in the victory against the Byzantines! Micheil Broune had won a great victory, and even now rides on Nicaea!"

If Farquar felt any remorse at the news of his relative and namesake's death, he showed no sign. He moved through the streets of Thorn where his current accommodation was maintained, looking forward to settling his aging bones into a hot bath and washing off the dust of his long travels. He maintained many such homes in different cities around the Empire (and outside of it) and maintained no servants, and allowed no one but his young apprentice entry to any of them. As he moved through the streets, he silently cursed the recent Scottish victory that had seen people come out into the streets at a time when they were usually deserted to celebrate and revel.

A busty woman, beautiful but clearly glassy eyed from either too much wine or some drug, almost tumbled into his arms, but he moved aside indifferently and let her stumble to a stop against a wall instead.

"Thanks for ye help, ye bastard!" she spat back at him, betraying a far more uncouth upbringing than her beauty and fine clothing suggested. He ignored her and continued on as she shouted at him some more then seemingly forgot about him and moved on to "stumble" into the hands of another man, this one more than happy to get a handful of her flesh as he "saved" her, while she got a handful of his coin purse.

Farquar continued on through the streets, getting darker now, the revelers thinning out. As he passed an alley, a young man called out to him in a low whisper, promising him forbidden pleasures like none he'd ever known. He ignored the man as he'd ignored the woman, continuing on but making sure to slide into the shadows one street on. Moments later, the young catamite slinked noisily down the street and looked about, confused to have lost him, and put his dagger back into his tunic and returned to the alleyway to look for another mark.

Farquar continued on until finally he reached the home, and he stopped across the street to observe it carefully, noting no obvious signs of unauthorized entry. Slipping between the two buildings, he moved to the door blocked off from street view, checked the lock for signs of picking, then unlocked it and entered the house. Once inside, he did not visibly relax, instead sniffing at the air and frowning, then moving through the narrow corridor and opening the door to reveal the wide room where he kept a library, desk, bed and chair.

A man sat at his desk smiling.

"Ye're very good, Farquar," smiled the stranger, a young bearded man in a red hooded robe.

"Ye need work," replied Farquar simply, "The catamite and courtesan roused my suspicion rather than dulling it; ye failed to remove the blood scent entirely from the house when ye killed my apprentice; and ye allowed a candle to burn in here thinking to blind my night vision when I enter, ignoring the torches of the revelers that I have all ready adjusted too."

"The revel was an unexpected complication," acknowledged the red robed man, "Ye are nae upset ye apprentice is dead?"

"Ye must plan for unexpected complications," replied Farquar, ignoring the question, "If ye mean to kill me and replace me as the premier assassin of the Empire, ye must be better than this."

"If I can kill ye, that means I am all ready good enough," smiled the assassin.

"Nae one is ever good enough," grunted Farquar, rolling his eyes in exasperation, "Now if ye mean to do this, let me see ye best."

The red robed man slid his hands out of his sleeves, revealing a strange cylindered object with a handle that he pointed at Farquar, rather than the blades he had been expecting.

"And what in the devil is that, then?" he grunted, and then the cylinder was exploding with light and Farquar was pitched backwards against the door, half his face missing and an acrid stench filling the air.

"That?" smiled Duncan Colison, "That, my friend, is progress."

Character Details

 **Duncan Colison** Age: 25

Assassin
Subterfuge 

Retinue

-  Prototype Handgun
-  Catamite
-  Skilled Courtesan

Traits

- Talent for Murder
- Assassin

A deadly and dangerous prototype of a new concealable firearm, something no man is ready to defend against.
+1 Assassination +2 to law (improves public order)

Has a sick talent for spotting the moment of opportunity arrive to end a life without drawing notice.
+2 to agent's skill

Subterfuge
Foxes and weasels have nothing on this man in terms of raw cunning

Chapter 62

Captain Allan had been late all his life.

He was born late, during a Winter storm in which his mother died. He walked and talked later than all his brothers, he was slower to learn, his body changed from a boy to a man long after his friends had entered manhood. He joined the army and was a slow learner even there, struggling with discipline, with formations and marching, rank and training.

But slowly, surely he had made his way, a stubborn, sluggish push upwards through the ranks based more on pure bloody-mindedness than any real skill or potential. He'd become a Captain in the Army, and found his place in the world at last.

But he was still late.

When General Micheil Broune had been tasked with protecting the border from the Byzantines, he'd sent out a call for all available artillery units that could be spared to be brought under his command. So Captain Allan had found himself given the "reward" of being put in command of 100 men and one aging, rickety old pair of trebuchets that had been stored at Iconium - their glory days from the height of the Mongol Wars long since past. Allan had set out full of himself at the great task he'd been given, but the entire journey so far had been a disaster. They'd been so delayed on their journey by breakdowns, dysentery and appeals for help from local farmers that they'd missed Micheil's great victory on the border.

But the army had continued on towards Nicaea, which was the personal city and playground of the Byzantium Prince Asemopoulos, and in Allan's mind, dreams of a last minute arrival that turned the tide of battle their way rang through his head. He'd been late all of his life, but he intended to see to it that he WOULD arrive on time, this time.

In Rome, two men sat in a darkened room deciding who would be the most powerful person in the world.

The two Portugese Diplomats had been instructed that the next Pope WOULD be Portugese, and they'd been left to figure out a way to make that happen. Portugal had neither thrived nor suffered under Pope Villanus, and Lutterius hadn't lived long enough to affect them one way or another. Now the small Nation had a chance to gain a friend in the highest of places, thanks to the vote of their two Cardinals for Vaasco the Missionary and the likely split the Polish Cardinals would face thanks to internal politicking amongst their own five Cardinals. All that remained was to use the diplomatic tools at their disposal to somehow convince the Holy Roman Empire to cast the votes available to their Cardinals for Vaasco the Missionary. There was just one fly in the ointment.

Joan Canmore.

"The wretched woman either knows too much or not enough," grunted Alfredo Resendes.

"She's a witch, is what she is," snapped Domingos Arruda back at his compatriot, "You heard about the frantic state the Romans and Polish were in when they left her Residence the night that Lutterius died.... they say she knew he had died.... before he had died."

"I wouldn't be so quick to make such a claim," warned Alfredo, "The Canmores have always been closely linked to the Church. Edward took Jerusalem in the Crusades; Aodh studied to join the Church in his youth; the Holy Lands were placed under Christian control thanks to the Canmores..."

"And Edmund Canmore was a prominent atheist, and Joan Canmore is his Granddaughter," retorted Domingos.

"And Aodh is a prominent believer, and Joan Canmore is his daughter!" snapped Alfredo angrily, "Which is all besides the point - you do not casually accuse a Canmore of being either heretic or witch, whether you believe in God or not they have friends in the highest of places. Let's get back to the issue at hand, how will Scotland place their vote for Pope, and how can we exploit that to our advantage so that the other Cardinals place their votes for Vaasco?"

"Scotland voted for Ungolinus over Friedrich," noted Domingos, "Vataliano's recent death means that Zbigniew Puch stands for Pope now, but will she cast her vote behind her Polish allies or seek to give the honor to Ungolinus and retain the gratitude of the Papacy?"

"I believe she is smart, dangerously smart," Alfredo mused, "The obvious thing to do would be to cast Scotland's support behind Poland's Zbigniew Puch... but maybe she knows that we know that, and means to continue to support Ungolinus... but then maybe she has anticipated this as well and will actually support Zbigniew?"

"You're arguing yourself into circles," warned Domingos, "What we have to worry about is that she will make it known she means to support Vaasco and create the impression we are seeking to gain power beyond our means...."

"Which we are."

"....which we are, and thus scare the Cardinals into voting en masse for her **true** chosen Cardinal, Ungolinus, to prevent us from achieving our goal."

"So do WE make it publicly known we intend to support Ungolinus instead? Wouldn't that merely push support to Zbigniew? How do we convince them to split their support so that it is the votes of our Cardinals that push Vaasco over the top?"

The two men debated long into the night, pitching and shooting down idea after idea, struggling to wrap their minds around the possible machinations and double-crosses that Joan Canmore might have ahead for them.

During the same night, Joan Canmore slept comfortably in her bed, having remembered the lesson of the Gordian Knot her Father had once told her. Sometimes the simplest solution was to slice through the knot, and so she had taken simple, direct action and left Rome's other diplomats to founder in her wake, tripping themselves up with their own imagination, fears and suspicions.

A week later, Zbigniew Puch was delighted to receive a quick majority vote in the College of Cardinals from five Polish Cardinals, three Holy Roman Empire Cardinals and one Scot. Ungolinus the Peaceful found support only within the Papacy, while the Diplomats of Portugal were humiliated when the Portugese Cardinals proved themselves still bound to the secular world by voting for a Portugese Pope, the only ones who did so.

And Alfredo and Domingos found themselves being informed in a very short, sharp letter from their Homeland that they would be receiving new postings away from Rome very soon.

Papal Election Results

Pope Alferius of Poland
 Zbigniew Puch (Poland) has been named the new Pope and guide to all Christendom. You were wise to support him in the last election and he will not forget your show of faith.



Preferati	Votes
 Ugolinus the Peaceful	
 Vaasco the Missionary	
 Zbigniew Puch	

It simply wasn't fair.

Prince Asemopoulos had led a charmed life over his forty two years, enjoying luxury and wanting for nothing. As son of the Emperor, he was like unto a God to the Byzantine People, and he never tired of enjoying what was his by right of birth. As a child he'd delighted in the efforts of the Court Magician and playing at war with his friends (he was always the General, and he always won) to the despair of the Royal Tutors whom he treated with disdain. Let his brother Loumbertos deal with the hassle of education, diplomacy and the taxes he so despised... he would be Emperor one day, Asemopoulos would always be a Prince, so he meant to enjoy the benefits of his station and suffer none of the responsibilities.

When their Father died at Constantinople, losing the city to the Hungarians, Loumbertos had moved the capital to Corinth and left Asemopoulos to govern Nicaea while he negotiated a peace settlement with the Hungarians. Asemopoulos had enough of a grasp to politics to understand that he'd been left so close to their former Capital in case the Hungarians tried to attack again, killing a Prince of the Empire would be bad, but not as disastrous as if the Emperor had died and Asemopoulos was left to rule as Emperor. Expecting death at any point, the all ready jaded Asemopoulos had thrown wild parties and held depraved orgies as he indulged in every earthly delight he could imagine.

When his childhood friend Valsamon Comnenus had returned to Nicaea and informed him that Loumbertos had successfully negotiated peace, Asemopoulos had at first been delighted, then depressed to think that the party was finally over... and then he'd realized it didn't have to. Why stop now? There were advisers and financial wizards who could run the city for him, why not continue his hedonistic lifestyle? It hadn't taken much convincing to get Valsamon onboard, and together the two had turned the Palace at Nicaea into the most depraved celebration of flesh seen since the days of the decline of the Ancient Roman Empire that had formed the basis of their own.

To Asemopoulos' delight, he'd discovered that Valsamon had a talent for collecting taxes, which had helped finance their depravity. Loumbertos was not overly pleased to learn of the expense, but Nicaea still bought in more for the Empire than was spent on it, and he had his own concerns with securing the borders of their Empire, and so for Asemopoulos and Valsamon, it seemed the party would never end.

Prince Asemopoulos

Age: 42
 Faction Heir

Command	★★★★★●●●●●
Dread	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Loyalty	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Piety	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●

Retinue	Traits
 Pagan Magician	Wildly Extravagant
 Treasurer	Introverted
 Adulteress	Active Builder
 Inventor	Promising Defender
 Alchemist	Infertile
 Overseer	Born to Command
 Brilliant Scribe	Proven Commander
	Dauntless
	Feels Appreciated
	Night Fighter
	Promising Attacker
	Marks of War
	Heir Apparent
	Steady Drinker
	Gambler
	Conscientious Trainer
	Firm Ruler
	Superstitious
	Conforming
	Morbidly Mortal
	Refined Tastes

Spotted By: Nevin the Clever
 Subterfuge: ●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●



Valsamon Comnenus
Governor
Command: ★★★★★●●●●●
Chivalry: ●●●●●●●●●●
Loyalty: ●●●●●●●●●●
Piety: ●●●●●●●●●●

Age: 43

Retinue

-  Overseer
-  Treasurer
-  Drillmaster
-  Alchemist
-  Magician
-  Biographer

Traits

- Superstitious
- Talent for Command
- Very Loyal
- Trustworthy
- Promising Attacker
- Aspiring Commander
- Scarred
- Brave
- Winning First
- Fine with Blood
- Gets Merry
- Night Fighter
- Feels Appreciated
- Thorough Taxman
- Enjoys a Wager
- Smart
- Wildly Extravagant
- Religious
- Expensive Tastes
- Slow to Trust
- Mindful of Risks

Spotted By: Nevin the Clever

Subterfuge: ●●●●●●●●●●

And then it ended.

Battle Deployment

Your forces attack an army of Byzantium



Your Forces

Scotland ★★★★★★

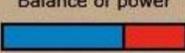
 Micheil the Chivalrous
1216 men

Reinforcements: 97

Scotland ●●●●●●

 Captain Allan
97 men

Balance of power



Enemy Forces

The Byzantine Empire ★★★★★●●●●●

 Prince Asemopoulos
999 men

Reinforcements: 0

None

Attempt a night attack

"Why should I have to deal with this?" moaned Asemopoulos as he was fitted into his armor.

"This is the price of the opulence and luxury in which we live, old friend," replied Valsamon as he sucked in his gut to allow his breastplate to be fitted on, "We live a life of luxury, but we are expected to stand in defense of the Empire when it is threatened."

"Well I never signed on for such a deal," whined Asemopoulos, "I live a life of luxury because of who I am, I shouldn't **have** to do anything!"

"Try telling that to those mad Scotsmen outside the gates," smiled Valsamon.

"Our soldiers had best earn their pay today," pouted Asemopoulos, "My blade cost me a fortune and I won't have it notched on those redheaded bastards."

And together the two friends rode to do their duty and defend Nicaea.

"Are ye ready then, men?" cried out Micheil to the gathered line of soldiers standing before the walls of Nicaea.

"AYE!" roared the Scotsmen, and Micheil forced a grin onto his face as he tried to shake off the ever growing pressure of his sense of foreboding.

"DO THOSE MEN ON THE WALLS SCARE YE!?" he cried.

"NAE!" cried the men.

"THEY SCARE ANGUS!" cried one wit, and the men laughed, and Micheil laughed with them, while the Angus in question laughed loudest of all before booting the man who'd spoken up the arse.

"DO THE WALLS OF NICAEA GIVE YE PAUSE!?! DO THE GATES THREATEN YE WITH THEIR RESOLUTENESS?"

"NAE!" screamed the men.

"NOR SHOULD THEY!" roared Micheil, "FOR NAE WALL CAN STAND BETWEEN A SCOTSMAN AND HIS ENEMIES! AND NOW I SHALL PROVE IT TO YE!"

And before the startled eyes of his men, Micheil the Chivalrous charged his horse forward, his own men quickly giving chase as Dougall Inchmertyn and Duncan Forster rushed to join him. The infantry and archers stared in shock as the Cavalry rode before them straight towards the gates of Nicaea and - almost as if by divine mandate - the gates opened before them, much to the horror of the Byzantium Soldiers standing on the walls.



Micheil had discussed the risky proposal with Inchmertyn the night before. Their man inside the city - Nevin Nevell - could guarantee opening the gates, but Micheil had wanted to impress upon the men that their Generals fought with them... and upon the Byzantine soldiers the difference between the Scottish Nobility and the notorious drunkard, gambler and carouser Asemopoulos. He also hoped it would be a telling psychological blow to the Byzantines, to see the gates of their own city open up as if at the command of the Scottish General.

"FORM A WALL, MEN!" roared the Commander of the Byzantium Spearmen, standing at the head of the main road of Nicaea, "DON'T LET THEM THROUGH!"



Dougall Inchmertyn spurred his men on against the line, calling out orders as Micheil and Duncan did the same across from him. Their part in this battle was almost done and Dougall was eager to pull back and leave the Infantry and their mercenary archers to do their work. The plan called for the Generals and their Cavalry to hit the Byzantines with a shock impact, wipe out the first line of defense to the main access-way to the centre of the city, then pull back and allow the Infantry to move into their place. From there the Infantry would progress slowly forward with the archers backing them up, firing arrows overhead into the Byzantines and driving them back further and further until they were all collected together into one easily slaughtered mass.

At least, that was the plan until a Byzantine Soldier ruined it all by shoving a spear into Dougall's belly.

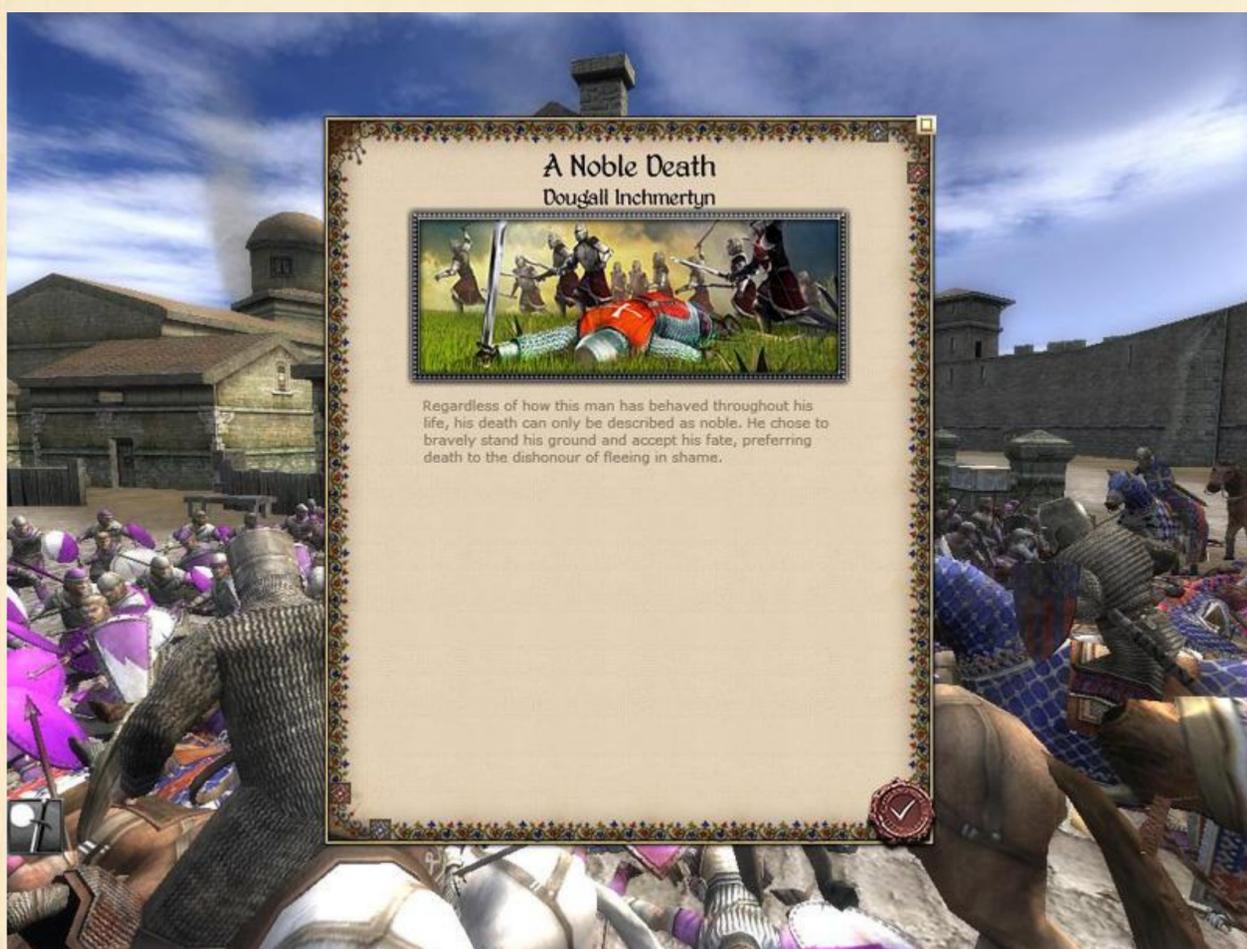
"What?" gasped Dougall as he felt the hot, searing pain punch through him, "What!?!"



He slice down with his blade and the soldier fell back clutching at his face, the spear pulling loose from Dougall he stared with wide eyes at the punctured hole in his armor and the blood falling out of it.

"I'm dead," gasped Dougall in growing horror, feeling the color seep out of his vision and a growing numbness spreading over him. He turned and stared at Micheil, who was slashing away at the Byzantines around him none the wiser to Dougall's predicament, "MICHEIL! I'M DEAD! I'M DEAD!"

"Wha?" grunted Micheil, turning to stare in surprise at the older Scotsman, who was now babbling the same two words over and over again, crying out that he was dead. Dougall's horse stumbled to the side and Dougall fell out of the saddle, hitting the ground a corpse as the Byzantines swarmed around him against the sudden gap in the Scottish line.



"DOUGALL!" screamed Micheil, "THE BASTARDS HAVE KILLED DOUGALL! KILL THEM, MEN!"

He pressed his men forward with renewed vigor, wheeling the Byzantines around so that Micheil's men ended up behind them.

"MICHEL!" cried Duncan, "THAT'S NAE THE PLAN! THAT'S NAE THE PLAN!"

But Micheil ignored his fellow General, charging his men forward further up the main road, dividing their forces and leaving the Infantry and Archers waiting for the word to attack, still outside the city gates.



In the great City Square, Asemopoulos sat sweating in his armor, which was uncomfortably tight and much too chafing. He had expected a lot of horrors from warfare, but he hadn't expected things to be so... boring? So far all they'd done was sit while the fighting was done elsewhere... not that he was in any rush to fight himself, but he'd at least expected to get to see the gory details from his vantage point.

"One of the Scottish Generals has fallen!" cried out a Scout, and the men cheered. Asemopoulos looked about confused, so that was good?

"Huzzah!" he cried out, not wanting to look like he didn't know what was going on. Unfortunately for him, he'd lifted his sword and kicked in his heels as he did it, and his Warhorse suddenly vaulted forward, Asemopoulos squawking and gripping tightly to try and keep his seat. His men cried out in surprise and followed after him as their Prince charged down the road towards the frontline of the fighting, and Valsamon shook his head in surprise, so Asemopoulos had grown a pair of balls had he? Well let him be courageous, he'd sit and let the soldiers do the work they were trained and paid for.

"Ahhh! Ahhhh!" cried Asemopoulos, and to his surprise heard his men let out a roar behind him, mistaking his yelps for a war-cry. Looking ahead of him, Asemopoulos saw the bright blue colors of Scotland as a group of Cavalry tore through a hapless collection of Town Militia, joined by Sudanese Tribesmen who had rushed up to join their Scottish Masters at the slaughter.

"Well uhh...." gulped Asemopoulos, raising his sword, "Let's do what we do then!"



"Yes yes... that's it!" Asemopoulos called out, riding himself up against the edge of a wall behind his men and watching as they fought the Scottish, "You there... kill him with your sword! You! You fine fellow there, hit that man, stop him from living now!"



"ASEMOPOULOS!" screamed a voice, and Asemopoulos twisted his head around in fright as he saw an armored man pushing his horse through the throng, hate filled eyes glaring through his helm, "ASEMOPOULOS! FACE ME!"

"Oh God what does he want!?!!" squealed Asemopoulos as Micheil pushed towards him. The Scottish General was irate, forcing all of his rage and grief over Dougall's death into a focused hate of Asemopoulos. He tore free from the crashing together of horses, men and swords and shot straight towards the Byzantium Prince, who sat on his horse frozen in terror.

"DIEEEEE!" screamed Micheil, swinging his sword.... and then a Byzantine soldier forced his horse between the two Generals, screaming out to his Prince to run. Micheil slashed the man down in a moment, but it was enough for Asemopoulos, who broke his terror and spurred his horse on, straight into the thick of the fighting but clear of the mad Scotsman.



"PROTECT THE PRINCE!" came the cry from his own men, and a flood of Byzantium Spearmen rushed down to shore up the defense of Asemopoulos' Cavalry.



"ASEMOPOULOS!" screamed Micheil, charging into the thick of the fighting to try and get at the Byzantium Prince, who had somehow managed to come through the other side unmolested.

"MICHEIL FOR GOD'S SAKE!" screamed Duncan, who had called on the Infantry and Archers to enter the city and then ridden his own men to try and keep Micheil alive, "THIS IS NAE THE PLAN!"

"GET THE GENERALS!" roared a Byzantine Soldier, and Micheil found himself surrounded, thrashing out with his sword against the enemies surrounding him in a rage, the sense of foreboding that had been pressing down on him forgotten in his determination to kill Asemopoulos... but then the swords and spears of the Byzantine soldiers began to find their mark, and as he cut at them angrily, he began to notice flashes of black between the press of their armor, began to see an eternally grinning face peeking at him as he fought, and the sense of foreboding returned fully as he found himself staring face to face with Death and finally realized something.

Death couldn't blink, it had no eyes.



Surrounded, pushed too far ahead of the main force of their army and losing heart to see their General die, the Scottish began to be slaughtered by the dozen, and Duncan Forster found himself amongst the steadily declining numbers of Scotsmen.

"It's not fair," he muttered as he lashed out and took down a Byzantine Spearman, "I was supposed to rule Cairo."

Years ago, he'd been assured of the hand of the fair Lady Muriel Canmore, and enjoyed a high life similar to (but not to the same extremes) as Asemopoulos in Cairo. But she'd chosen her own cousin Aed instead of him, and the two had quickly taken complete control of the Desert Holdings of the Scottish Empire, sending Duncan north to the former lands of the Turks where he still enjoyed a good life, but nothing as enticing and exciting as the fleshpots of Cairo. The whores were fatter and hairier, the wine thicker and more cloying, the climate... well the climate had been just as harsh as Cairo.

But he'd never expected his life to end here, in Nicaea, due to the sudden insanity of a man he'd thought had more sense. Another Scotsman was cut down beside Duncan and he shoved his sword into the breach, piercing the throat of the Byzantine, then felt a blade sink into his side and gritted his teeth, slashing back only to take another blade in his other side.

"BASTARDS!" he roared, "COME AND TAKE ME THEN! I'LL HAVE A PITCHFORK WAITING FOR YE ARSE IN HELL!"

And then Duncan Forster was cut down, leaving the Scottish leaderless.



"Precious Daughter," smiled Pope Alferius, "It warms my heart to see you."

"And mine to see ye," smiled Joan Canmore, "I brought ye a sample of a rather fine wine shipped from my Father's vinyard near Milan, I hope ye will enjoy it."

"Ahhh, precious daughter," smiled Alferius, "You know better than that by now, surely? I cannot enjoy such things while my mind must remain fixed on the task at hand, finishing the work that Vilanus started."

Joan smiled, they went through this every time they met for their weekly private audience, the new Pope was an Ascetic, denying himself luxury of any sort, enjoying a simple life despite the sheer power he wielded.



"Before we start our discussions for the day," Alferius smiled as he seated himself behind the simple wooden desk, "I had an issue I wished to discuss with you."

Joan smiled as she took her own seat, even as internally she rolled her eyes at what was sure to be another warning about the dangers of heresy, and the failure of Scotland's leaders to deal with the heretics in the far flung corners of Scotland's vast Empire. It was an ongoing issue for the Pope, who had been raised to Cardinal by Vilanus because of his own hatred of heresy, which he believed was the biggest risk facing the Catholic Church. But for once, Joan found herself surprised by the new Pope.

"There are disturbing rumors in the City that the beautiful but unmarried Joan Canmore has taken a lover," Alferius spoke gravely, "That she has engaged in.... unseemly activities.... and does not believe in the sanctity of marriage."

To her credit, Joan recovered instantaneously, greeting the disturbing news with a laugh.

"Holy Father, forgive me," she smiled, "I am but a woman in a man's world, doing my best not only for my own Nation and my Father, but for the good of the Church itself. My Father taught me well the arts of diplomacy, and he gave me good warning of the perils I would face, not least of all jealousy and the power of rumor. There are some diplomats in this City who feel their own positions are threatened by what they view as a raise in my fortunes, linking it to a fall in their own. These people see me as a threat, and their reaction to a threat is to lash out with what weapons are at their disposal. So they spread rumor, and call me vile names, and claim I take lovers and indulge in depravity. They are rumors, and nothing else, and they would be best suited in spending the time they take in creating and spreading them in working for the betterment of their nations."

The Pope smiled, clearly mollified, and soon the two were back to discussing the rampant and immediate "danger" of heresy.... while Joan paid only half a mind to the now familiar subject, while she wondered about her very real "secret lover" and who the idiot had been speaking to... the fool could ruin everything.



The Scottish were being pushed back towards the gate of the city, though oddly enough there was not a Scotsman amongst them. The Armenian Archers that had been hired on as mercenaries to enjoy the sacking of the Byzantine Empire now found themselves fighting desperately to save a failing Scottish assault.



As the Armenians - forced to forget their bows for the moment and fight with blades - were pushed back, the Mercenary Captains called out to each other, asking where the Scottish were... and coming to the same conclusion.

The Scottish were dead.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?" howled one Captain, "We're mercenaries, we fight for money, not for a country!"

"If we turn now, they'll slaughter us as we run!" warned another.

"Only if you can't run faster than me," replied a third, and that kicked it off, as the Armenians turned and rushed for the open gate.

"HAHA! LOOK!" squealed Asemopoulos in delight, "They're running away! After them! Kill them!"

The Byzantine Prince started to spur his own horse forward, and then from amongst the horses of the Alan Light Cavalry that had found themselves trapped in the fighting emerged the last of three Scottish Infantryman, wheezing with pain as he lifted his sword and struck with what might was left to him into the Prince's side, his blade cleaving through Asemopoulos' armor and deep into his side.

"EEEEEE!" squealed Asemopoulos in pain and disbelief, falling backwards from his horse. His breath was knocked from his body and he kicked like an upturned turtle, trying desperately to get to his feet as the bone-weary Scotsman towered over him, "IT'S NOT FAAAAAIIIIIRRRRR!"

"Life is nae," grunted the Scotsman wearily, placing his sword against the Prince's throat and shoving it forward, "Get used to it."



As the Armenians fled through the gates of Nicaea and out of the city, and as the furious Byzantines fell on those who remained - as well as the three surviving Scotsmen who were quickly cut down, Valsamon Comnenus was riding his men against what he believed to be the flank of the Scottish Army.

Unaware that his childhood friend and Prince was dead, Valsamon had ridden his men through the side streets of the city to come at the Scotsmen from the side and relieve the tension on the frontline. He was shocked as he twisted the corner to find not a long line of Scotsmen snaking through the main gate and into the heart of the city, but paving stones covered with blood and the bodies of Scotsmen, and a few of the surviving Alan Light Cavalry men sitting on their horses watching in despair as their comrades were slaughtered, while Armenian archers disappeared through the gate, obviously routing.

"My God, Asemopoulos you old bastard, I didn't think you had it in you," grinned Valsamos, "Come on men, let's get them!"



Valsamos' Heavy Cavalry tore through the lightly armored Alan Light Cavalry, while those up the main road were either cut down or crushed under the weight of the Byzantines bearing down on them. Valsamon struck his blade down on a Cavalry Man's chest and grinned as he saw his men bring down the last of them, and he lifted his sword high.

"Shall we show these Scotsmen why our Empire has lasted all these centuries, my friends?" he cried, "Let's rout them from the field!"

The men cheered and they charged through the gate out of Nicaea, Valsamon letting out an unexpected laugh when he saw a catapult brought up by the Scottish burning as its operators tried frantically to put it out. The Armenians were fleeing past them and ignoring their cries to stand their ground, and Valsamon decided to show the Scots why the Armenians' course of action was the wisest, and drove his men directly into the shocked Scottish, cutting them down by the burning remains of their artillery.



"HAHA!" laughed Valsamon to the man at his side as the Catapult operators suddenly scrambled clear and rushed away, "See how they run man, they are cowards!"

"AYE!" laughed the soldier, "They-"

He never got to finish that sentence, unless Valsamon had been inclined to consider his screaming cries of agony as he burnt to death a final statement.



Valsamon was not so inclined.

"Dammit!" he hissed as he twisted in his saddle and spotted the Bombards reloading, and - more disturbingly - their angry Scottish Commander roaring at the Armenian mercenaries who actually appeared to be listening to him and following his commands, getting back into formation.

"Back into the city!" he roared, and spurred his horse back through the gate of Nicaea and past the heaped corpses of Scottish, Armenian, Sudanese and Byzantium alike, passing the body of his Prince and three Scottish Noblemen without knowing it.



"Right then, what's all this bollocks with running away?" demanded the Bombard Commander - Captain Dougall - of the Armenians who stood shamefacedly before him outside the city.

"Well all the Scottish were dead and we thought..." started one Armenian, then trailed off.

"Do I look dead to ye, laddie?" demanded Dougall, "Nae, I'm living, and while I'm alive and a man I'll fight on for Scotland. Ye? Well, maybe ye're living, but are ye a man? Ye run away? And what then? Live out the rest of ye pathetic days like a mewling woman? Nae, get back in there, man and show those Byzantium bastards that ye are a real man!"

"But we're archers, not infantry!" cried another Armenian Captain.

"Then use ye damned bows, ye idiot!" snapped Dougall, "And dinnae let the bastards get close enough to ye that ye have to draw ye blades! We'll be backing ye up, ye just get us close enough to set up our Bombards, and we'll show them the fate of those who think they can fight Scotland."

Slowly, hesitantly the Armenians returned through the gates of Nicaea, staring about uneasily in the eerie calm and silence. There were no Byzantines to be seen, apart from those lying dead on the ground alongside the fallen Scottish. One by one they entered and looked around, bows and arrows at the ready as they waited for what seemed an inevitable ambush... and finally they heard the sound of marching.

"Something's wrong," grunted one of the Mercenary Captains, "The marching is out of step, undisciplined."

"Here they come!" cried another, as around the corner of the city appeared what looked like over a hundred Byzantines. The Armenians nocked their bows and looked about each other before nodding and firing the flaming projectiles into the air, arcing them into the approaching soldiers who... began screaming and crying and then broke into a panicked run.

"They're peasants!" gasped a Captain, "They're nothing but peasants pressed into battle!"

The peasants ran screaming towards the Armenians, but not to fight, they were simply charging in panic to escape the flaming death raining down on them.

"Forget the bows, boys," grinned one Archer, "Let's draw blades and put the poor bastards to the sword."

It was remarkable how easily confidence could be restored by the wholesale slaughter of terrified, unwilling participants in a battle.



But as the peasants were slaughtered, Valsamon was learning from the survivors of the crush where the Armenians had been turned back that Asemopoulos was dead. Valsamon's first reaction was shock, and then fury as he heard the screams of the peasants from far down the body-choked streets of the city.

"REVENGE!" he roared, "IF YOU WOULD AVENGE YOUR PRINCE, COME WITH ME!"

He charged his horse, and the collection of Byzantine soldiers huddled together turned and stared at each other, questioning whether they wanted to risk returning to a fray they had only just survived.

For Valsamon, however, there was no such hesitation.



"YOU KILLED ASEMOPOULOS!" he screamed as he rode alone through the startled Armenians, slashing out with his sword as his horse kicked and bit at those who tried to stop its forward progress, "YOU KILLED ASEMOPOULOS!"

"NO I DIDN'T!" screamed an Armenian back in horror, throwing up his own sword to block Valsamon's attack, "IT WAS THE SCOTS!"

"RARRRGH!" screamed Valsamon.

"ARHHHHH!" squealed back the Armenian, and slapped Valsamon's sword aside and drove the blade into the Byzantine General's side, pitching him off of his saddle and dragging his horse down with him, as the Scottish Catapult operators who had joined the Armenians with their own small daggers darted in to finish him off.



"Ahhh shit, Valsamon's dead!" moaned the leader of the Byzantine soldiers who had been leading those brave enough to rejoin the fight down the road towards the Armenians and Scottish, "Come on then, boys, let's finish this."

They joined battle with the Armenians.



And then they broke and left battle with the Armenians.



"WHERE ARE YOU GOING!?!!" demanded the Byzantine Captain - Donald - watching in disbelief as his men ran.

"Bugger this for a laugh!" cried back one of his men, and Donald cursed and chased after them as the Scottish screamed at the Armenians not to give chase, but reform and approach cautiously.

"Right, ye stupid bastards!" shouted Dougall as he reformed the Armenians, "Now, we don't ken how many of them are left, but if ye play this smart, there is nae reason for any more of us to die. Wait for them to come to us, fire ye arrows and break them, as we ken they will now."

The Armenians grinned amongst themselves, their confidence returned after seeing the Byzantines break multiple times against them now. They moved into formation and waited, and Dougall's prediction came true. Slowly, small collections of Byzantine soldiers left the central city square and moved over the slope of the road into view, and at once the Armenians fired flaming arrows into them, sending the survivors running in terror and causing the Armenians to cheer and laugh amongst themselves.



Slowly but surely the Armenians and the Scottish worked their way up the slope, the Scottish under Dougall's command pushing the heavy Bombards towards the top of the rise. Periodically, Byzantines would appear over the edge and be sent scurrying by the Armenians arrows, and Dougall allowed himself to think that maybe this disaster would end well for them after all... which is, of course, when the worst happened.

"We're out of arrows," said one of the Armenian Captains.

"Okay," sighed Dougall, "Tell your men to draw swords but maintain formation then, we'l-"

"You don't understand, man," grunted the Captain, "We're out of arrows, we're not going any further."

"Are ye mad, victory is just over that slope!" growled Dougall in disbelief.

"An unknown number of Byzantine soldiers is waiting over that slope," replied the Captain, "Men trained as Infantry, which my men are not. We're archers, and our efforts to use swords today have seen many of our kin die. We will NOT go any further."

"Ye'll go further if I have to boot ye arse over that hill!" snapped Dougall angrily, but the Captain just shook his head and turned, walking back down the slope, joined by first a few of his fellow archers, and then more and more until all were heading down the street and out of the City.

"Nae," whispered Dougall in disbelief, finding himself standing on the edge of victory and suddenly having the great bulk of his remaining "army" taken from him.

"What do we do, Captain?" asked one of his men nervously, "We dinnae ken how many are over the rise, do we go on?"

"We go on," growled Dougall angrily, "We've come too far to turn back now, and I'll nae turn tail and run."

It was the brave thing to do.... it was also the last thing that Dougall ever did.



And so the last of the Scottish died, while the Armenians heard the cheers of the Byzantines and hastened their exit from Nicaea, passing the bodies of the dead without a backward glance. They would speak no more of this disaster, and there would be none to expose their cowardice, because there was no one left alive to tell.

Their exit was watched from the empty guard tower on the Eastern wall of the City by Nevin Nevell, who shook his head in despair to see the disaster unfolding before him. Perhaps most galling of all was that the battle had been a disaster for both sides, and as over 300 Armenian Archers fled the field of battle, barely 30 Byzantines remained in the City Centre, exhausted but alive, knowing that one more wave of attack would have ended them.

And then Nevin turned his head and looked out over the Eastern Field of Nicaea, and felt his mouth drop open as the last thing he had expected happened.

Late - as he always had been his entire life - and with three quarters of his men lost to desertion, Captain Allan had arrived.

"Has there been word from Micheil at Nicaea yet?" asked Aodh Canmore as he put aside the last of the notes he and Eoin had been poring over.

"Nae," replied Eoin, leaning back and stretching, "Nevin Nevell is a good man, he'll get word to me the moment word can be gotten."

"Emperor Loumbertos has nae love for his brother, but honor will dictate he seek revenge," Aodh noted, "It would be unfair to ask Micheil to lead a force so soon against Corinth, but there are few with the battlefield experience he has that can arrive there quickly. Perhaps we should seek negotiation with the Hungarians on military access to their lands, and send The Maule"

Aodh broke off as a hesitant knock came at his door and a harried looking messenger poked his head through.

"What is it, lad?" he asked, irritated at being interrupted.

"The Hungarians, my Prince," gasped the messenger, and Aodh and Eoin exchanged raised eyebrows, they had just been speaking of them.

"What of them, lad?" demanded Eoin, "The Prince is a busy man, out with it."

"Forgive me, sir, please," panted the messenger, bowing low, "But the news... the Hungarians... the Hungarians have marched on Rome!"

Captain Allan stood within the Eastern Gate of the city, eyes wide as Nevin Nevell explained the situation to him. The trebuchet that they had struggled so valiantly to bring to the battle lay abandoned on the slope of the hill behind him and his men, too tall to travel through the gate in any case.

"Man for man ye match them," Nevin said, casting an eye over the Scottish soldiers, "You seem tired from ye travel, but believe me they are more exhausted from the exertions of battle. If ye push forward now, ye can overwhelm them."

"Better late than nae, eh lads?" grinned Allan, smiling at his men who returned unsure smiles, "Let's save the day!"





The Byzantines who rushed in one last exhausted wave to defend Nicaea were cut down by the relatively fresher Scots, but Allan found that moving his men from one knot of Byzantines to another was exhausting. As his surviving men clashed with the three Byzantines standing in the centre of the square, he saw his Second - Donald - stumble and the Byzantine prepare to stab him, and shouted out warning.

"DONALD! BE CAREFUL MAN!"

"Wha... what?" gaped the Byzantine soldier, pulling up short and staring at Allan, "Are you talking to me?"

All of the soldiers froze in place, confusion on their faces as they all turned to look at Allan.

"What? Nae man," replied Allan, confused, "My man there ye were about to stab is called Donald."

"HA!" laughed the Byzantine, "MY name is Donald too!"

"By Saint Andrew," chuckled Allan, surprised, "What are the odds of that, then!?"

"Oh I don't know," chuckled the Byzantine Donald, "BUT THEY'RE ABOUT TO GET LES-OH!"

What Donald had intended to be an incredibly dramatic moment fell flat on its face as Donald did just the same, slipping on a slick paving stone and crashing over in front of his Scottish namesake, leaving all the gathered soldiers in a state of shock for a moment before attacking each other again.



The Scottish made quick work of the Byzantines, and then Allan pointed out two more hiding behind the abandoned catapults in the centre of the square. They charged in and cut the terrified men down as quickly as possible, and then they stood panting roughly in the preternatural stillness of the now bloody city... and realized it was over, they had won.

"We did it! We did it!" screamed Donald, "WE WON!"

And that's when he exploded.



"Don... Donald?" grunted Allan in surprise, and turned his head towards the mouth of the City Square, where three Bombard soldiers who had run when they saw the Allan's men coming had taken control of Dougall's Bombards and opened fire on Allan, obliterating Donald.



"Oh shit," gasped Captain Allan, "Oh shit oh shit oh shit!"

"RELOAD!" screamed the Byzantine soldier.

"OH SHIT!" screamed Allan.

"THEY'RE GOING TO BLOW US UP!" screamed one of Allan's men, "DO SOMETHING!"

"..... GET'EM!" screamed Allan, and charged forward, followed by his men, all of them screaming and roaring as they charged the Byzantines who were frantically reloading their stolen Bombards. All ready they were loading up the cannonballs, and Allan knew they weren't going to get there in time, and as he watched the Byzantines duck away from the Bombards and before his entire world turned yellow, he knew that it was the story of his life all over again.

He was going to be too late.



Captain Bulscu wiped the spit from his face and smiled.

"Oh, I am going to enjoy this," the Hungarian Captain grinned, and thrust his dagger into the belly of the man who had spat in his face. He had killed many people all ready this bloody night, but this one was special.

It wasn't every day you killed a Pope.

Alferius gasped as the blade entered his belly, and Bulscu stepped back and grinned down at the blood seeping from the Holy Father's belly.

"Just a man, after all," he smiled, watching with delight as the Pope staggered backwards and crashed to the floor, clutching his belly and howling in pain, "It's almost disappointing."

Outside fires still burned in the city and bodies still lined the streets. The Hungarians had attacked as if from nowhere, hundreds of men emerging to line up before the walls, bombards smashing through the city gates, baying Hungarians flooding through the city streets and slaughtering all in their path. The Papal Garrison had put up a valiant fight, but their training and religious fervor had been no match for the battle-tested Hungarians. None of the soldiers serving in Rome had fought in a war for years, in some cases decades, and the Hungarians had made short work of them. Bulscu had led them, though it was his Second - Denes - who had brought them into the city. Bulscu had been living in Rome for close to a year now, learning much about the City's defenses even as Hungarian Diplomats had made efforts to repair the rift between the Church and Hungary.

And now, the greatest City on Earth - the home of the Catholic Church - was in the command of the Hungarians.

"What now, Captain?" asked Denes, staring in wonder at the dying Pope.

"Now?" grinned Bulscu, "There is a certain Scottish Princess who I am keen to introduce myself to."

"..... GET'EM!" screamed Allan, and charged forward, followed by his men, all of them screaming and roaring as they charged the Byzantines who were frantically reloading their stolen Bombards. All ready they were loading up the cannonballs, and Allan knew they weren't going to get there in time, and as he watched the Byzantines duck away from the Bombards and before his entire world turned yellow, he knew that it was the story of his life all over again.

He was going to be too late.

"H... HOW COULD YOU MISS!?" screamed the Byzantine soldier to the two men who had loaded the Bombard and fired it at almost point blank range.

Mere feet from them stood Captain Allan and his men, and to their shock they were alive. The ground before them was cratered from the blast of the Bombard, but impossibly, the Byzantines had missed them.

"I... I..." grunted Allan in total disbelief, "I... GET'EM!"



The Byzantines died screaming and then finally, blessedly, it was over. Nicaea had fallen to the Scottish, even if there were only ten left of the 1300 who had woken this morning ahead of the battle.

"What now, Captain?" asked one of Allan's men, and he shook his head in wonder, still unable to believe he was actually alive.

"We... there are Armenians out in that field," he grunted at last, "They ran like cowards, but we need them to help keep control of this city. Go out and find them and bring them back, remind them there is a city to be sacked that will more than pay for their mercenary fees."

The man saluted and started away, and then Allan called all his men back to give them one final order.

"Men," he told the 9 men left of the 100 initially under his Command, "We will nae speak of this disaster of a battle ever again."

It was something they could all agree on.



"Leave us," Bulscu commanded authoritatively, but the handmaiden stood her ground bravely.

"I'll nae leave ye alone with the Princess," she insisted, "Have ye no honor, man?"

"Leave us, Ada," Joan commanded, the authority clear in her own voice, "The man may have been mad enough to put his soul at risk by attacking the Church, but he isn't mad enough to risk his life by defiling the daughter of the mightiest Nation on Earth."

"My Lady?" asked Ada, unsure of herself, but Joan simply smiled and nodded her head, and finally the woman left, leaving Bulscu and Joan standing alone in her bedchamber, which would have been scandalous anywhere in the world, but especially so in Rome.

"Alone at last," grinned Bulscu lecherously.

"Ye are mad to attack Rome," she told him gravely, "Completely and totally."

"Aye," chuckled Bulscu, "They say love will do that to a man."

And suddenly Joan's face cracked into a welcoming smile, and she fell into Bulscu's embrace as the architects of the fall of Rome kissed each other passionately.

Scotland



Neutral for 29 turns



Hungary



Joan Canmore
●●●●●●●●●●

Details & Behaviour

Relations: Poor
Reputation: Despicable
Power: Supreme
Wealth: 24067
Religion: Catholic

Make offer

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

Make demand

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

Make declaration

- Cancel trade rights

Your proposal is most worthy. We gladly accept. Know that both our King and his people genuinely appreciate this gift you have offered us today.

Demeanour: Happily Accepted

Your offers

We will give 10000 florins
Attack faction : The Papal States

Your demands

Something suitable in return for our offer

Make offer



Captain Bulcsú
●●●●●●●●●●

Details & Behaviour

Priorities: Unknown
Reputation: Untrustworthy
Power: Supreme
Wealth: Very Poor
Religion: Catholic

Allies & Enemies

Allies: The Holy Roman Empire
Enemies: The Byzantine Empire
Rebels

Current Treaties:

Trade rights granted 36 turns

Chapter 63

Bulscu smiled as Joan pulled - obviously reluctantly - away from his embrace and stood up, walking away from the plush couch to stare out the wall over the streets of Rome. Smoke rose on the horizon, the end result of a riot put down earlier that day by Bulscu's right-hand man, Denes. The people of Rome had not taken kindly to the Hungarian's occupation of their city, moreso when word had leaked out that the Pope had died personally at the hands of Bulscu. Multiple riots had been savagely put down, the city jails were bulging with malcontents and vandalism and graffiti was affecting residences, businesses and marketplace stalls on a nightly basis.

But Bulscu had plans to change all that, or rather... Joan did.

"I fear sometimes ye have too much of a hold over my senses," Joan said at last, and Bulscu's grin only widened. The remarkable woman had actively pursued him since their first meeting after Joan had been named the new Scottish Diplomat to Rome, though always in secret, away from prying eyes. It would not do for any diplomat to be seen to be in a close relationship with any Hungarian at a time when the Pope was actively condemning their King, let alone a Royal Diplomat, let alone a female one, let alone with a lowly common-born soldier, no matter what his rank.

"ME?" laughed Bulscu, "You're all I think of, Joan."

"Me or what I can offer ye?" asked Joan, still staring out the window, "Both in terms of territory and power... and physically."

"Woman, if I'd wanted just that, I would have taken it the day "I" conquered Rome," laughed Bulscu, "You may have no love for the Pope personally, but you're still a good Christian woman who won't give away her body till we're married... and when will that be?"

"When my Father arrives in Rome," smiled Joan, turning towards him, "Then all our problems will end... when a man as well regarded by the Church as my Father gives his blessing to Hungarian rule of Rome, and his personal blessing to our marriage as a way of unifying our two Nations together for all eternity."

"Until that glorious day," smiled Bulscu, standing and gently kissing Joan on the forehead, "Every moment I wait is an eternity... now let us put on our little act for our "audience"."

Joan nodded, then stepped back and raised her voice, demanding he leave her presence. The door to her quarters quickly opened and the Hungarian guard who constantly stood outside her door peered through, joined by the prim faced handmaiden who so foolishly believed she was safeguarding the "Virtue" of her Lady.

"I am tired of ye coming here daily to lord ye victory over me!" Joan snapped angrily, "When my Father arrives ye will learn the folly of ye arrogance."

"Let him try," sneered Bulscu, "I killed a Pope, do you think I fear some soft Scotsman who has lived in his Brother's shadow all his life?"

"OUT!" roared Joan, and Bulscu gave a mocking bow and exited the room, as Joan's handmaiden rushed to her side to "comfort" her.

Outside, Bulscu winked at the guard as the door was closed and moved easily down the corridor of a Palace once occupied daily by servants, guards and diplomats from all Nations. Captain Denes quickly fell in beside him to give his report on the daily riots, but it was not long before his only confidant could not resist asking.

"Today?"

"No," grinned Bulscu, "The silly whore is not so lovesick that she will give up that ultimate prize to me just yet, but I mean to have her by the end of the night that her pious bastard of a Father arrives to convince the idiots living in this City that "God" wants Hungary to rule Rome."

"And what then?" asked Denes.

"I will be Royalty," grinned Bulscu, "And she's attractive enough, she'll pop out a few heirs for me and I'll enjoy all the benefits of the royalty she takes for granted - the luxury, the money, the privilege... most importantly, the money."

For Bulscu, conquering the greatest city on Earth and marrying a Princess from the greatest Nation would not be enough.

He wanted it all.

Emperor Loubertos stood on the walls of Corinth, looking out as the assembled army of Scotsmen that had landed on the island within the previous day. They numbered over 1000 to Loubertos' own 750, but there was something strange about the army he couldn't quite place his finger on, they seemed less like an army and more like an assemblage.

"They seem.... unfocused, Emperor," suggested Loubertos' military engineer, who had been casting a critical eye over the infamous Bombards that the Scottish had used to bring down the walls of so many cities.

"That is exactly it," grunted Loubertos, pleased to finally have the word he was looking for, "Unfocused... they are disciplined enough, but they seem almost to be milling about in place, no one man seems to be commanding them."

"Their Generals all died in that farce of a battle at Nicaea," muttered Loubertos' Biographer, who had accompanied the Emperor since the day he ascended to the throne, chronicling his every move - celebrating his success and glossing over his failures, "I had heard that Rory of Bute had been commanded to take control of the army that Domnall Canmore ordered here, but that an agent of the Inquisition delayed him at trial... surely a good sign for us, they are an army without a General."

"Perhaps," muttered Loubertos, staring out at the gathered army once more, unable to shake a feeling of foreboding, a dark pressure on his shoulders. They had no General, but the Scottish were highly vaunted for their fighting prowess, would a lack of Command merely mean this would be the unfocused destruction of the Byzantine Empire?

Enemy Character Details



Emperor Loumbertos

Age: 55

Governor
Command
Chivalry
Authority
Piety



Retinue

- Master Archer
- Military Engineer
- Stablemaster
- Guard Dog
- Siege Engineer
- Biographer
- Pagan Magician

Traits

- Aspiring Commander
- Drillmaster
- Loyal
- Noble in Battle
- Brave
- Feels Respected
- Faction Leader
- Morbidly Mortal
- Introverted
- Poor with Taxes
- Social Drinker

Spotted By:
Subterfuge:

Cormac Feniss

Battle Deployment

Your forces attack an army of Byzantium



Your Forces

Scotland

Captain Duncan
1039 men

Reinforcements: 0

None

Enemy Forces

The Byzantine Empire
 Emperor Loumbertos
748 men

Reinforcements: 0

None



Attempt a night attack



Outside the walls of Corinth, Captain Duncan snapped irritably to his men to get into formation, frowning as the line staggered and shifted as the Commanders of each unit struggled to quiet their men and get them into position. Rory of Bute was supposed to be leading this battle, but his trial had seen him delayed beyond the impossible deadline that Aodh Canmore had set for the elimination of the last of the Byzantines. Rory had been found innocent at trial, but it would be at least a week before he arrived, and the Byzantines - by royal proclamation - had to fall today.

"Forward now, men!" he cried, "The City Gate will open for us... KEEP IN FORMATION DAMN YOU!"

Slowly, staggered and almost casually, the Scottish soldiers moved up the hill towards the gate of Corinth, and as Duncan had promised, the gate rumbled open to the horror of the Byzantine soldiers standing on the walls.

And then battle was joined between the men of Scotland and the last of the Byzantines.





The Spearmen had been the best trained in the Byzantine Empire, even before they had become amongst the ONLY spearmen in the Byzantine Empire. They were the last in a line of soldiers stretching back over 1000 years, disciplined and deadly either as individual units or collectively. They held their place as the Scottish charged eagerly into them, responding to the shouted orders of their commanders as they braced, held and attempted to counter the chaotic, screaming and laughing Scotsmen.

But a wall, no matter how well built, cannot stand forever against the lashing of a wild ocean, and the Byzantines found their tight ranks being split, the Scottish pushing through, fighting with wild abandon and a reckless frenzy as their bloodlust demanded to be sated, their aggression unleashed thanks to the lack of an established, respected General.





Archers stormed down from the walls and the Scottish roared in delight to have fresh blood to kill, but as they turned to charge the terrified looking Byzantines, a trumpet sounded and the thunder of hooves grew louder down the dusty streets of Corinth. The Scots turned and saw to their horror they'd left themselves completely exposed to a cavalry charge from Vardariotai and the personal cavalry of Emperor Loumbertos himself.





Suddenly the walls shook as the Bombards opened fire on the archers still standing on the walls firing down into the throng of fighting Scotsmen. Captain Duncan screamed at them to save their firepower and they turned to stare at him in confusion, and Duncan cursed before turning to his own cavalry.

"Come on then, lads," he grunted, "Let's save the Infantry's ass, as usual."



"CAVALRY!" roared Lumbertos, pointing them out to his men, "DEAL TO THE INFANTRY, QUICKLY!"

"THAT'S THE FUCKING EMPEROR!" screamed a Pikeman in astonishment, pointing out Lumbertos in turn, "GET'EM LADS!"

This time, the assembled Scottish were more than happy to follow an order.



"THE EMPEROR!" screamed Loumbertos' men as they saw him fall, and then the Cavalry smashed against them, thundering past their own infantry to deal the finishing blow to their morale, sending the Byzantines running in terror, their discipline broken.



"WE'VE DONE IT LADS!" roared Duncan in delight as he watched the Byzantine horsemen fleeing... and then a flaming arrow plunged into his neck and he fell from his horse, choking and spasming as the Scottish wheeled about in confusion, remembering too late that Byzantine archers who had come down from the walls to be slaughtered before the Emperor had arrived to save them.





The Infantry fell onto the archers in a fury, slaughtering them as they struggled in desperation for their own blades. Any control that had been exerted on the unfocused army was completely gone now, as the battle shifted into a massacre, with the Scottish attacking with reckless disregard for their own lives to destroy the Byzantines.

Finally, when all were cut down, the red haze lifted from the Scottish, and they stared around at the heaped bloody bodies surrounding them, confused as to what to do now. Their "leader" was dead, who was going to command them.

"There are Byzantines left, lads," spoke a Highlander finally, "Get those bloody Bombards in and let's go deal to the last of them."

And together the Scottish set out to deal the final, killing blow to a once proud and dominant Empire that - in its heyday - had stretched out further than even the mighty Scottish Empire.



They marched through the streets to the hill upon which sat the interior wall of the City. Byzantine Archers lined the walls, and as the Bombards rolled up to fire on the walls, the surviving Vardariotai rode out to hold the Infantry in place for the archers to fire upon them.



As the walls finally crumpled under the attack of the Bombards, the archers abandoned the walls, lining up within the breach to fire wave after wave of flaming arrows into the Infantry, holding them back as surely as the wall had.

"KEEP THEM PINNED DOWN!" screamed the Byzantine Archers' Captain, "DON'T LET THEM GAIN THE HILL!"

"FIRE YE BLASTED BOMBARD AT THEM!" screamed a Highlander to the Bombard Commander as flaming arrows raining down onto him and his men.

"THERE IS NAE MORE TO FIRE!" roared back the Bombard Commander, "RUSH THEM!"

"YE RUSH THEM!" snapped the Highlander angrily, then spat on the ground angrily, "To buggery with this, pull back lads! PULL BACK!"

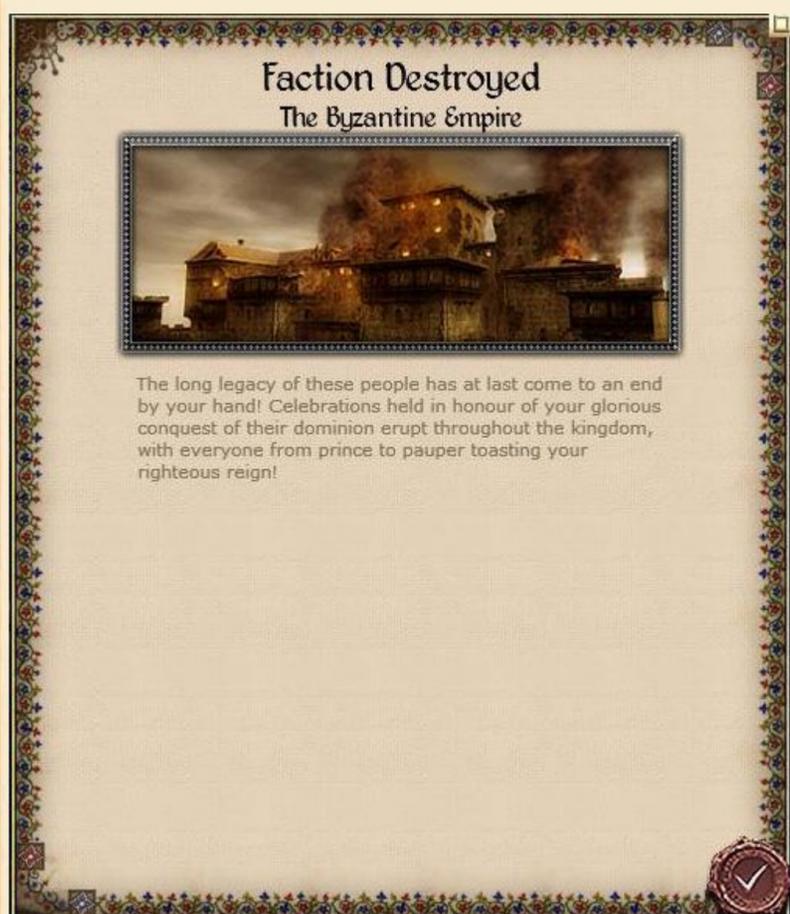
And to the astonishment of the Byzantines, the Scottish did just that, pulling back out of range of the archers and then, out of the city itself.

"It's... it's over," gasped one of the soldiers, "We held off the Scottish... WE BEAT THE SCOTTISH!"



The men cheered raggedly, but then their Commander angrily shouted them down.

"Oh yes, we chased them off," he snapped angrily, "All it cost us was our Emperor, the walls and most of our men. You idiots don't get it, do you? Their General has yet to arrive; they're hardly running far since we're on an Island; the Noble line of the Emperors has been broken.... we won the battle, but we've lost the War. The Byzantine Empire is ended."



Bulscu rode out on horseback resplendent in his armor, highly polished and sitting high in the saddle. Hungarians lined the walls of the city, and the streets of Rome were deserted, a curfew strictly enforced by Denes to avoid any embarrassment as he met with one of the most powerful men in the world (now that Bulscu had killed the Pope), and soon to be his Father-in-Law.

Aodh Canmore.

Aodh had landed and disembarked from a fleet of ships on the shore two days ride from Rome and made his way with his personal bodyguard to meet with Bulscu outside the gates of the city under a diplomatic flag of truce. Joan had spent the last week carefully preparing Bulscu for the meeting, telling him what to say and what not to say, stressing the importance of not revealing to anyone what only she, Bulscu and Aodh knew - that Aodh had masterminded the Hungarian capture of Rome.

After Joan had successfully pursued and captured Bulscu, many of the long nights they spent together in secret were spent discussing their disdain for the Pope - who was determined to continue his predecessor's obsession with heresy, interfering with the workings of the rightful rulers of those nations, questioning their determination and desire to be good Christians and creating unrest in their populations. Even the lauded Scotland had faced such issues, most recently Rory of Bute being delayed on the way to battle with the Byzantines due to an Inquisitor acting like a law unto himself.

Bulscu had known that Joan would not give herself "fully" to him until they were married, but that there was no chance of a common soldier marrying a Royal Scottish Princess. But when Joan had suggested to Bulscu that perhaps he could prove his worth to her Father by removing the Pope - something a "loyal" Christian like Aodh could never do - he had leapt at the chance. He could marry Joan and bed her, which would be nice, but the true prize on his greedy mind was becoming Royalty himself, ruling Rome and gaining great prestige in the eyes of his own King - a terrifying man who did not give out praise readily.

So the conspiracy had been born, and Bulscu had conquered Rome, and now Aodh had arrived ahead of a large army put together purely for appearance's sake. They would meet outside the gates of Rome and - once again for the sake of appearance - go through the motions of accusation, defense, negotiation, compromise and finally acceptance. By the end of their negotiations, Aodh would be invited into the City where he would dine with Bulscu and his own daughter in the former Palace ruled by a once unbroken line of Popes, then tomorrow he would speak to the people of Rome and give the blessing of the Scottish Empire to the Hungarian rule of Rome. He would also announce the marriage of Bulscu to his daughter Joan to "ensure" that Hungary would have spiritual guidance, and then he would remain for a few months governing Rome before handing over power to Bulscu and Joan to rule together... though of course, Bulscu meant to rule in name only, let Joan do all the hard work of Governance, he meant to simply enjoy the benefits.

"Keep up appearances," Bulscu warned Denes, who was riding beside him, "Remember, we're supposed to be terrified that he is bringing the full fury of the Scottish Empire upon us."

Denes nodded, struggling to keep his smile down as he imagined the "scraps" he would be getting from the "Royal Table". He was a loyal hound dog, and the Royal hound dogs were always well fed... as the confidant to the Governor of Rome he would have power beyond even that of his own King.

"Noble Lord," Bulscu said with a bow as he reached Aodh, who was glaring at him with steely, unreadable eyes, "You have my undying gratitude for agreeing to this diplomatic meeting, it is my greatest hope that the terrible misunderstanding over the Pope's death can be resolv-"

Aodh spat in his face.

Bulscu mouth hung open in shock, his carefully rehearsed speech completely wiped from his mind by the unexpected action. Aodh leaned forward in the saddle and when he spoke, his voice was so laden with contempt and hate that Bulscu felt each word like a physical blow.

"Ye killed the Christ on Earth, ye miserable pile of dung," hissed Aodh Canmore, "I will nae rest until ye hang by ye own guts from the walls of the City, and there ye will remain until stray dogs pull ye body down and to pieces."

Before Bulscu's astonished eyes, Aodh turned his horse around and rode away, leaving the Hungarian Captain sitting stunned on his own horse. The Scottish Prince rejoined his men and turned back to look at the Hungarian, and then said two words that struck even more terror into his heart.

"Dougall Macdonchie."

The guard outside Joan Canmore's "quarters" high up inside the Palace yawned, wondering how long it would be until his replacement arrived. His boredom was broken though by the sounds of running, and he relaxed his hand on the hilt of his sword, wondering if those fools who had been rioting recently had broken into the Palace. He relaxed slightly when the source of the running footsteps was revealed to be his Commander - Captain Bulscu - charging down the hall, until he frowned and wondered what the cause of his rush was.

"OUT OF THE WAY!" roared Bulscu, slamming the unfortunately guard aside and ripping open the door to Joan's quarters, "YOU BITCH! YOU LI-"

For the second time that day, Bulscu found himself at a loss for words. He charged through the quarters, flipping the heavy bed, the furniture, tearing through the wardrobe and ripping down the tapestries. But no matter where he looked, no matter what he destroyed.... the quarters remained empty.

Joan Canmore had somehow disappeared from her quarters, which had only one entrance and was constantly guarded.

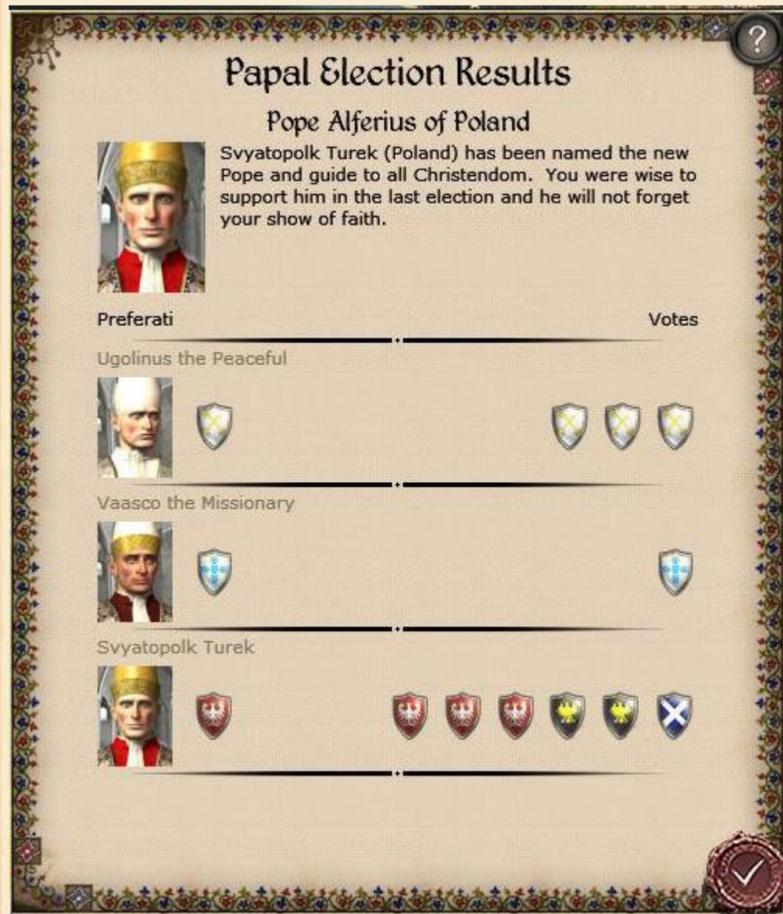
Bulscu dropped to the floor with a thud as the final sick realization of what had happened overcame him. All her protests of saving herself for marriage, the way that she always managed to disentangle from him when their embraces grew too passionate... the way she had approached him, had first put the conspiracy into his head, had promised him so much on her word and her word alone.

Bulscu had never bedded Joan Canmore, but now he realized that she had somehow still managed to find a way to completely fuck him.

Chapter 64

Aodh Canmore had seen and done much in his lifetime, but he'd never thought he would find himself sharing dinner with the Christ-on-Earth in a command tent on a field near a Rome fallen to Hungarians.

"To a return to reason," smiled the Pope, raising his glass, and the Scottish Prince returned the toast, smiling warmly at the new Pope who had - in memory of his murdered predecessor - taken the name of Alferius.



"Rome will be back in Christian hands within the week," noted Aodh, "Bulscu will be even now shivering in his boots over the name I left him with at our meeting."

"Ahh yes, Dougall Macdonchie?" asked Alferius, "Tell me, my son, why do they call him "Unstoppable?"

"Because he cannae be stopped, Holy Father," smirked Aodh, "While my brother is renowned for his talents on the field of battle, Dougall is equally regarded when it comes to sieges. He learned much from the conquering of Toulouse, in the Spanish Campaign he perfected his techniques... there is nae a city in the world that he cannae take, and there is nae a General alive who does nae ken it."

"Truly then he is a gift from God... as is Scotland, and particularly you, my son," smiled Alferius.

"Ye flatter me, Holy Father," replied Aodh, obviously pleased, "I merely serve God, as all good Christians should... as ye do."

"Sometimes it seems men forget that simple lesson, Aodh," nodded Alferius, the wine loosening his tongue, making him more familiar and less remote, "To serve God... what more can any man do?"

"And yet so many do nae recognize this, and create unnecessary complication," agreed Aodh, "I can only imagine the pressures and stress ye face as Pope, Holy Father, to be forced away from meditation upon the spiritual needs of the world to focus so much on the material, on the secular."

"Indeed, if only I could," smiled Alferius sadly, "I would spend my days in prayer and reflection, so that God could speak to me and I could in turn spread his word to the people. Sometimes I feel like Moses, coming down from the Mountain with the word of God inscribed on stone tablets, only to discover his people fallen to decadence and worshipping a false idol."

"Heavy is the head that wears the crown, so goes the old saying," noted Aodh, "To be the man chosen to represent the King of Kings.... as I said, I can only imagine the pressure."

The two sat in silent rumination for several moments, and then the tent flap opened and a messenger stepped through, bowing apologetically for interrupting the dinner.

"Obviously you had good reason to do so," smiled Alferius beatifically, "Speak, my son."

"Captain Bulscu has ridden an army of 2000 out of Rome towards our location," spoke the messenger, "And a force of 1200 Hungarians have been seen marching from the mountains in the East where Bulscu's forces originally rode out to take Rome by surprise."

"I suspected he might do the former," noted Aodh, "But the latter is a surprise, it seems Bulscu was not as frank as he might have been with my contact inside Rome... he's smarter than I gave him credit for."

"You have a contact in Rome?" asked the Pope.

"My daughter, Joan," smiled Aodh, "Her position kept her safe from the depravities of the Hungarians, but her beauty was enough for Bulscu to become smitten with her and reveal more than he should have in an attempt to impress her."

"I have never understood the male infatuation with women," sighed Alferius, "I take it that this news does not affect your timetable to recover Rome?"

"I doubt it, we camped here and I revealed Dougall's name to Bulscu hoping for just such a result... Bulscu is about to discover a fatal lesson my Father and Uncle taught the Mongols - numbers do nae matter when ye opponent holds the terrain advantage."

Battle Deployment

Your forces are attacked by an army of Hungary



Your Forces

Scotland



Dougall the Unstoppable
1970 men

Reinforcements: 0

None

Enemy Forces



Hungary

Captain Bulcsú
2041 men

Reinforcements: 1201



Hungary

Captain Tamás
1201 men



Balance of power



Attempt a night attack



As the Scottish soldiers were ordered into position by a busy Dougall Macdonchie, Aodh Canmore sat his horse looking over what would be the site of the battle, and mused on what some would call a coincidence, but that he saw as a sign from God.

"In hoc signo vinces," he whispered to himself, as he stared over the Milvian Bridge, where 1000 years earlier Constantine had defeated Maxentius before taking control of Rome and ending the persecution of the Christians.

And on the other side of the bridge, he knew that Bulscu was just as aware of the parallels, including the fact that Maxentius' decision to ride out of Rome to meet Constantine had spelt his doom.



"Pikemen, I want ye on the end of that bridge, ye shall nae let any pass!" snapped Dougall angrily as he pushed the last of his men into position, "This bridge will be their corridor of death, dinnae let any pass!"

The Pikemen cried out in excitement as they stepped onto the ancient Bridge, getting their own blood up for what would be the most brutal and bloody part of the battlefield that day. On either side of where the bridge became part of the Via Flaminia road, Pikemen stood waiting to reinforce and support them, with archers and pavisé crossbowmen stretching out to either side waiting eagerly to open fire on what would soon be a bridge tightly packed with Hungarian soldiers fighting desperately to get across. On the farthest flanks of the army lines, two bombards each meant to do just the same, though to more devastating effect. Behind them all stood the cavalry, waiting to charge and destroy any Hungarian that somehow, someway made it through the lines to the other side of the bridge.

"Is all in readiness?" Aodh asked Dougall as he rode back into place beside the Prince.

"Aye, as battles go, a bridge fight is more like a siege than open warfare," nodded Dougall respectfully. He had fought alongside Domnall and Adam and knew both men well - he considered Domnall with awe but also enjoyed his company, and he respected the man Adam had become and was eternally grateful for the man saving his life at Toulouse - but he had never been able to come to grips with how he felt about Aodh. He respected the man's obvious intelligence, but when you looked into Aodh's eyes you saw nothing that he did not want you to see, the man was guarded and careful about his true feelings, and it made him difficult to be friends with, "Bulscu will be emboldened by his reinforcements and will seek to push through over the bridge by sheer force of numbers and weight, and he'll learn the lesson that Subutai learnt when Edward Canmore removed his head."

"I would hope so," nodded Aodh, "Command the men, Dougall, victory today will see Rome returned to Christianity."

"Hold ye places men!" cried Dougall, his voice carrying easily across the preternatural stillness, "They will come to us soon enough in their droves, eager and excited to feel the blades of true men, maybe they think our arms will grow tired and our swords dull from overuse... but what they dinnae ken is that a Scotsman never tires of three things - fucking, drinking, and killing! So kill away, lads, and when we get to Rome, the fuckings are on me.... but ye'll have to pay for ye own bloody drinks!"

The men roared with laughter and turned to brace, ready to absorb the impact of the Hungarians they knew would be coming at any moment. Their laughter continued as the Hungarians fired their own artillery from far back amongst their ranks only for the blasts to smash harmlessly on the ground far before the Scotsmen, and they laughed louder as the Scottish fired back with a salvo of their own artillery and smashed into the ancient trebuchet sticking up amongst the Hungarian ranks, shattering them.

But the laughter died and the faces became serious, and then confused as angry muttering spread through the ranks... because the Hungarians did not seem to have received their copy of the expected turn of events for the day.

They were not coming.





"Redirect on their front ranks!" roared Dougall, "They must either retreat or come forward onto the bridge, FIRE!"

The Bombards were quickly shifted back into position by their experienced, efficient crew, and the results were immediate, as a fiery ball was propelled directly into the tightly packed mass of crossbowmen that seemed to be waiting for the Scottish infantry to move out further onto the bridge. The reaction was immediate but not what Dougall had hoped for, as the crossbowmen simply moved quickly and - more disturbingly - efficiently back into formation several steps back, out of the effective aimed range of the Bombards.



"Archers!" growled Dougall, "Open fire on those ranks, if those obstinate bastards think we're coming to them, they can think again!"

Highland Archers rushed forward through the ranks of armored Pikemen on the bridge and opened fire, shooting flaming arrows high into the air. The Hungarian Crossbow fired volleys of their own across the length of the bridge, but most fell short or harmlessly at the feet of the Archers. But again Dougall found his strategy ineffective, as the crossbowmen simply turned their backs, the flaming arrows either lodging in or bouncing off of the thick shields they wore on their backs.



"What the hell are they doing?" grunted Dougall angrily, then squinted his eyes and cursed as he saw the Hungarians roll up a catapult behind their crossbowmen, preparing to fire over the bridge and into the Archers, "Damn it, why would they refuse to come at us? They have the numbers, it suits US for them to stay in place."



"Because they're realized what this is," grunted Aodh angrily, "A siege."

"My Lord?" asked Dougall, confused.

"Dougall the Unstoppable," Aodh mused, "When Bulscu heard ye name, he near to shat his pants... because how could he defend Rome from ye? But how could he hope to beat the Scottish on the field of battle? Even with an extra 1200 men coming to his aid could he guarantee victory, considering our history of destroying vastly superior numbers? How to beat Scotland? By creating a "new" siege, of course, by doing what Maxentius did but doing it right. Instead of defending the multiple entrances to Rome and spreading his men thin, he has set up location on the other side of the bridge and refused to move from it. We must come to him if we want to fight, he is no Mongol, he kens that sheer force and numbers are nae enough.... once again the bastard has proved himself smarter than I gave him credit for."

"So what do we do then?" asked Dougall.

"Why is it nae clear?" said Aodh, and a wide smile crossed his face that again reminded Dougall how difficult it was to read the Scottish Prince, "We become Mongols."

Miles from the battlefield, Pope Alferius sat reviewing notes carefully. His sudden rise to the Christ-on-Earth had been a surprise to him, but a welcome one. He sorely regretted the death of his predecessor, but once benefit from the long reign of Pope Vilanus had been that the College of Cardinals had all shared a like mind. All the shortlived Popes that had followed Vilanus had been cut from the same cloth, and shared in the same ideals that Alferius himself believed in. Heresy was the greatest threat to the Church, and the Church itself needed to be in constant communication with the leaders of the world's nations, to remind them that God's will was paramount over all others.

Take Scotland for example - a paragon of virtue and true example of Christianity, but still with all too human and mortal flaws. Alferius had many plans to discuss with Aodh Canmore once the man had recaptured Rome for him, a long standing dream of his had been to create Royal Papal Officers - men who would work alongside Kings, Princes and Emperors on a daily basis guiding them in the Church's direction. Perhaps one day the two roles would become one, and the Kings of the Nations of the World would become - as they rightly should be - servants working to fulfill the wishes of God.

And those wishes - of course - would be communicated through - and by - him.

"Before my Uncle turned the world on its ear," Aodh pronounced loudly, grabbing the attention of the soldiers glaring angrily and impotently across the bridge at the Hungarians, "This was how war was fought. Two sides yelling insults at each other across a gap, whittling away at the edges until the patience of one was broken and the slaughter commenced."

He paused for effect, knowing that their attention was on him fully.

"Boring, it is nae?" he asked, and the men laughed in surprise.

"Poets speak of the glory of war!" he continued, "And bards tell tales of the valor of men fallen defending their country, their home, their family! But rarely do they tell the truth that only a soldier kens... that war is brutal and bloody and stupid... but necessary. The men of Scotland who have fought and bled to drag ourselves back from the brink of extinction to dominate the world did so with glad hearts because they ken that what they fought for was WORTH every death, all the blood, every injury and crippling and horror that they saw! And yet now, in a battle for the most noble of causes, as Scotland reaches the culmination of everything it has fought for.... we return to the past? This piddling farce of a battle? Are we gentlemen playing chess? Do we think so little of our men and our own lives that we place them and play them like pieces? I say NAE! I say that the greatest difference between Scotland and the rest of the world is that ye leaders, ye noblemen, ye Generals, aye even ye King.... will face every deprivation and sacrifice right alongside ye. A Canmore fights on the frontline with his men... and where is nae frontline... we will make one."

"He can't mean..." started Dougall, realization dawning on him alongside equal parts horror and disbelief.

"So I say that the MEN of Scotland will ride across that bridge and to hell with "strategy", to hell with "tactics"! I say that WE are better than the Hungarians, man for man we are better than them! So across that bridge, lads, and show the men of Hungary the price of crossing God and Scotland!"

The men stared in horror at Aodh, what he was suggesting was suicide! Did he really expect them to rush headlong across the bridge into certain death? If the crossbows didn't kill them, the vast numbers of Hungarians on the other side would once they trapped the Scottish at the end of the bridge.

"And as I said, lads," smiled Aodh as he stared across the dumbstruck faces of his soldiers, "A Canmore fights on the frontline with his men... so if any of ye are men, ye'll follow me, and if I'm any sort of man... I will lead ye."

And with that, Prince Aodh Canmore rode his horse past his soldiers, past his archers, onto the Milvian Bridge, prepared to test his greatest beliefs. God helped those who helped themselves, but he was about God's work today, and he was convinced he would be the "in hoc signo vinces" for his men.

If he was wrong, he'd find out **VERY** quickly.



"The fool has given us victory!" gasped Bulscu in delight as he watched Aodh lead his suicide charge across the bridge and into the Crossbowmen, "HALBERDS! GO AND GIVE THE IDIOTS AND THEIR HORSES A GOOD POKING!"

The Halberds cried out in delight and rushed to join the throng, which was easily resisting the pressure of the cavalry trying to push through them. Dougall Macdonchie and scores of Feudal Knights had ridden to the aid of the Scottish Prince, but the Infantry remained standing across the length of the bridge, staring in disbelief as Aodh Canmore reenacted the great Mongol Battles of decades earlier... but from the other, losing side.

"Spurn me, will you, Joan Canmore?" grinned Bulscu fiercely as he watched his men surrounding the end of the bridge where the Scottish Cavalry was now trapped, "Spit in my face, Aodh Canmore? I will end your lives and take your cities... I'll send your heads to your pathetic old King, the time of the Canmores is over, the age of Bulscu is beginning."

And then, from far across the bridge came an almighty roar, and Bulscu looked up in alarm as he saw the Scottish Infantry - almost as one - lunge forward towards the bridge, rushing to the aid of their Prince. A Canmore fought on the frontline with his men, and now his men were rushing to the frontline to join him.

"No matter," sneered Bulscu, "Let them all die together then."





"AODH!" roared Dougall as he rode up beside the Prince, who was hacking energetically away at the grasping Hungarians surrounding him, "HAVE YE GONE MAD!?!"

Aodh twisted in his saddle to look at Dougall, and Macdonchie was taken aback by the shining joy in his Prince's eyes, and the exalted look on his face. The man had seemingly fallen into a religious fervor, but when he spoke, his words sounded not mad, but inspired.

"By God man, we've become so detached!" he cried, slashing away a Halberd and booting the man holding it in the face, "Fighting our battles from afar, turning war into an intellectual affair... **THIS** is war, Dougall, man against man, and may the best man win!"

"There are THOUSANDS OF THEM!" gasped Dougall, "YE'VE RIDDEN US INTO AN IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION!"

"If there are thousands," retorted Aodh, sweat running copiously down his features and the huge grin still plastered across his face, "Then we'd best get about killing them!"

And so they did. Noblemen, commoners, infantry, archers, cavalry and officers all bunched together and fought side by side. The Hungarians came endlessly at them, knowing that the Scottish were trapped where they stood and could not run without being slaughtered. Tamas' men had long since arrived and reinforced the Hungarians, and Bulscu screamed orders to his men to slaughter every last Scotsman where he stood, intending to turn the Tiber River red with their blood. People still spoke of Mongol Bridge over Blood River where Gawain had turned aside the first Mongolian Horde, and the final stand at Emperor's Bridge where Edward had removed Subutai's head from his shoulders. In the future, Bulscu was convinced, Milvian Bridge would not be remembered for Constantine's conversion, but for the location of the beginning of the end for the Scottish Empire. After all, as brave as the Scottish were, as legendary their toughness and stubborn refusal to surrender.... it was simply impossible for them to overcome such odds, Bulscu **HAD** learned the lesson - numbers did not matter, control of the terrain did.







There was just one problem with Bulscu's grand vision.

No one had told the Scottish.



Before Bulscu's horrified eyes, the Scottish repelled wave after wave of Hungarians, and despite the never ending pressure of the weight of the Hungarians bearing down on them, the Scottish stood firm at the edge of the bridge. Aodh Canmore and Dougall Macdonchie were like banners drawing the Hungarians to them hoping to kill the Prince and the General, but they stood their ground and fought off their would be assassins, and scores, perhaps hundreds, of Scottish Infantry rushed to their aide, proud to fight alongside and die to protect the Prince who had ridden alone into the frontline of the Hungarians to remind them what it was to be men.

"SCOTLAND! SCOTLAND!" the chant had started, deep within the ranks of men, and it had swelled and swelled before shifting and changing to, "CANMORE! CANMORE! CANMORE!"

The age of the Canmores was not over just yet.

Bulscu watched as his men began to break and run in terror from the laughing, singing, chanting Scotsmen, first in single numbers, then in their dozens, their scores and finally their hundreds.

And then the Scottish began to chase after them.

It was at that point that Bulscu decided to hell with his Grand Vision, turned tail and ran alongside his men.



"Chase down as many as ye can," roared Aodh, "They presumed to take Rome!?! They presumed to fight the men of Scotland!?! They presumed ANYTHING!?! KILL THEM ALL!"

At that point, the men of Scotland would have gone to hell if he'd asked them to. They rushed eagerly after the fleeing Hungarians, ignoring the exhaustion of their own fatigued bodies, moving on pure adrenaline. They chased after the Hungarians who had survived, leaving behind the bridge where all had expected to meet their end only a few minutes earlier.... leaving behind a slaughter that WOULD be spoken of for decades to come, perhaps even centuries, but not as Bulscu had hoped.





Tamas cursed the day he'd ever heard the name Bulscu. As he ran from the Scottish, he wondered how their King would react to this terrible humiliation. Bulscu had taken Rome without permission, hoping that the prize of the Greatest City in the World would mollify his King, but now they had lost Rome, lost two massive armies, been humiliated by the Scottish.... if he survived this, could he ever show his face to the King again?

Unfortunately for Tamas – or perhaps fortunately considering Istok's reputation – that was something he would not need to worry about.





For his part, Bulscu tried to lose himself amongst his fleeing men, surreptitiously tripping men where and when he could, hoping that the Scots would be delayed in killing them and allow him to escape. But then the sounds of hooves began to thunder louder and louder behind him, and he knew there was one man who would never let him escape, no matter what.

"It's no... it's not fair," he gasped as he tried in vain to outrun the horses, "He USED ME!"

But if any heard his complaint, none offered him any solace. Bulscu had gambled and lost, acting without consent of his King and against the Greatest City in the World, killing the Christ on Earth, and now Aodh Canmore was bringing down the wrath of God upon him.

Bulscu's final thoughts before Aodh rode him down were that it was strange that Aodh Canmore was the instrument of God's will... because Bulscu was sure he was the Devil.



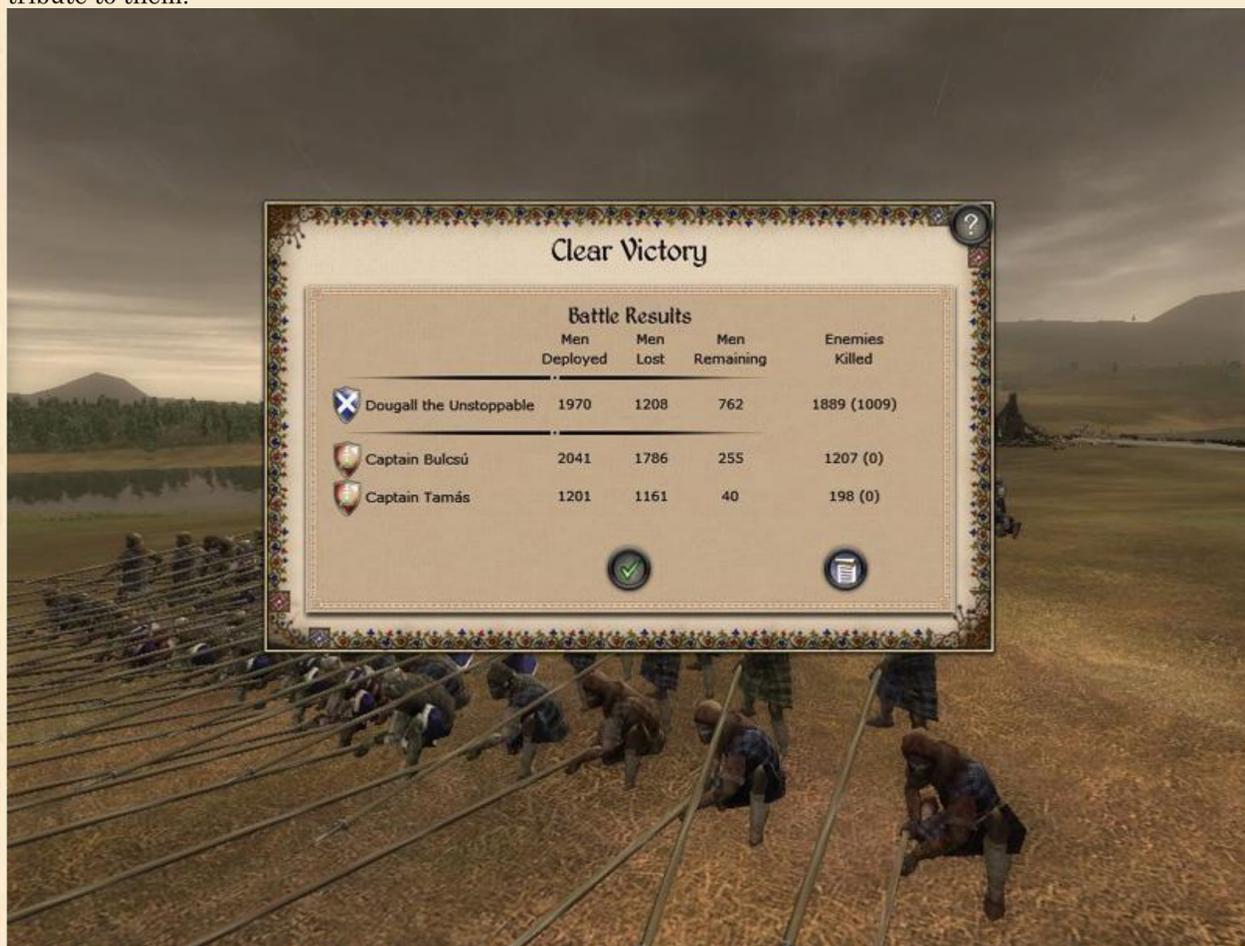
Finally it was done, of the more than 3200 Hungarians that had taken to the field and rushed against what should have been the final stand of the Scottish, less than 300 escaped the field of battle alive. Dougall Macdonchie stared around him in amazement as the Scottish let loose cheers and began chanting Aodh's name, and Dougall eagerly joined in. What Aodh had done was unheard of, and pure madness... but magnificent madness, the same type of madness that had seen Edward Canmore take control of the Holy Lands.

"Nae, nae," cried Aodh, raising his hands and silencing them, "Ye give me credit? The credit is nae mine for this victory."

Dougall lowered his head respectfully, expecting to hear the pious Prince offer a prayer of thanks to God for their victory. But once more, Aodh surprised him.

"The men of Scotland proved themselves just that this day," Aodh called out loudly, so all could hear. He gestured to the bloody, exhausted men standing, squatting or sitting across the length of the battlefield, "To the General's go the glory, but nae this day, this day the liberation of Rome and the return of God's grace to it's people goes to the fighting men of Scotland."

And ragged and exhausted though they were, the Infantry managed to raise a cheer to join that of the cavalry and archers paying tribute to them.



Outside St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Alferius spoke to the adoring and rapt crowds of Rome as he ushered in the return of the Holy Father to the Greatest City in the World. As he spoke, invoking his blessing upon the brave men who had risked their lives to riot against the brief Hungarian rule and proclaiming God's punishment on those same Hungarians - including Captain Denes, who had fled the city with his small garrison when word had reached him of Bulscu's death, Aodh Canmore sat staring at the Obelisk sitting in the midst of Circus Gai et Neronis, surrounded by thousands of Christians, many of whom had no idea that only 1300 years earlier those who shared their religion had died with the last sight they would ever see being that same obelisk.

"This is a day for signs," Aodh whispered under his breath, remembering that the obelisk had come from Egypt at the behest of the Roman Emperor Caligula. Egypt, where inside an ancient pyramid built by a heathen culture could be found stone chiseled hieroglyphs in the form of his own ancient family crest. He had fought the Hungarians at Milvian Bridge where 1000 years ago Constantine had defeated Maxentius and brought Christianity to the Romans. He had finally reached the crossroads to match the one he had once reached in his long ago vision, and now the Pope himself was giving him the final weapon he needed to complete a plan he had set in motion so many years ago.

All these were signs from God, as far as Aodh Canmore was concerned, whether Alferius knew it or not, the Pope was finally achieving the goal he'd been created for - to communicate through human terms the Word of God.

"...dh Canmore, a true Christian son of a truly Christian nation!" the Pope was proclaiming, "He came to the defense of Rome in our hour of greatest need, and put all his trust in God as he threw himself bodily into the Hungarian frontline! He is a man that my predecessors were glad to call friend and a true servant of God, and I too name him such! I present to you, peoples of Rome, the man who has all ready agreed to govern Rome in service to the Church!"

The crowd roared their approval and cheered as Aodh stood from his seat on the hastily erected podium where the Pope had been holding forth, but now stepped aside and beamed with pride at the Pope. Behind him sat Dougall Macdonchie, Joan Canmore, and several of the dignitaries, diplomats and prominent merchants who had survived the Hungarian occupation... and one other man. All eyes were on Aodh as he stepped into the Pope's place and waited for the cheering and chanting of the name "Canmore" to die down, and then he raised his voice and cried out a speech that he had been preparing for years now, his voice traveling easily to the gathered masses.

"Scotland serves the Church, and the Church serves God!" he proclaimed proudly, "And it is the Pope who communicates to us God's will! Who among us can imagine the pressure, the stress, the unrelenting tension of trying not only to communicate the message of the Divine to one we can all understand, but also deal with the all too human concerns of politics, diplomacy and even city governance!?! Truly we as sheep have thrown too much weight onto the shoulders of our shepherd, Pope Alferius, truly we have allowed our own petty squabbles to distract him from his meditations upon the spiritual needs of the world, to focus so much on the material, on the secular."

The Pope raised an eyebrow, he recognized those words, from their recent dinner.

"I am sure that the Pope would prefer to spend his days in prayer and reflection, so that God could speak to him and he could in turn spread his word to the people," continued Aodh, "And this consideration more than any other is why I have agreed to govern Rome at his request.... and why I have decided that I will make it my life's work to give our Pope the freedom to commune with God."

"Aodh!" gasped Alferius, struggling to his feet as his robes conspired to trip him, seeing all too clearly where this was going. As he reached his feet, a hand reached out to steady him and suddenly Alferius felt himself grow weak, dizziness overwhelming him and causing the assembled crowd to gasp out in horror. As Alferius stumbled backwards, the hand steadying him instead fully supported him, and he found himself being lowered back into his chair, the stranger who had helped him kneeling beside him, apparently checking on him before announcing to Aodh that the Pope was merely overwhelmed by the stress of the day.

"Thank you, Eoin," smiled Aodh to Eoin Makartane, who had - as ordered - administered a paralytic to the Pope on the off-chance he had objected to Aodh's speech. He turned back to the concerned looking crowd, "Here we see the result of the pressures on our Pope, overwhelmed and weakened by the pressures that **we** have put on him. This basilica behind me is named for Saint Peter, who died in this very square as the first Pope. Christ told Peter that he would be the rock upon which God's Church would be built, the foundation on which it would rest. But that foundation has been crumbling as the Pope has been forced to focus too much on the secular world, pursuing heresy and trying to impart God's wisdom to the rulers of the nations of the world. Well I say nae more, I say it is time that we grew up and took responsibility for ourselves! I say that we allow the Pope his meditations and prayers, let him commune with God and present his thoughts and feelings, his spiritual guidance to all the peoples of the world from this very spot, here in Rome. In the meantime, we shall govern our cities and run our nations and work our every day lives. We shall focus on secular matters, always safe in the knowledge that the Pope will always be there, praying for us, handing down guidance and wisdom gained through meditation and prayer with God... let us become worthy of God's love!"

And the crowd roared their approval, women weeping and men's hearts swelling with pride as Aodh's speech worked to perfection, weaving a spell that told them everything they wanted to hear, and promising them everything while they in fact were handing over control of their lands and homes to the Scottish Empire.

As the Pope was escorted to his chambers by Eoin Makartane and the crowd chanted both his name and Aodh's, Joan Canmore hid a small smile. She knew her Father had done it for what he truly believed to be good, moral and - more importantly - divinely mandated reasons, but the fact was, Scotland had just removed the Papal States from existence and guaranteed an end to the random interference of the Church into the dealings and rulings of the world's nations.... all without spilling a drop of blood in anger.



It was later in the week that the city of Rome fully celebrated the removal of a hated occupier and the embracing of a beloved one. The Pope had been removed to his own personal chambers after - still disorientated from Eoin's drug - signing a declaration authorizing Aodh's transfer of control of the Papal States, effectively annexing the lands of the Church into Scottish hands. After a day, the Pope had angrily summoned Aodh before him to accuse him of masterminding a bloodless coup, and had found himself left dizzy again, but this time not due to drugs but Aodh's effortless and humble speech. The Scottish Prince had affected surprise at the accusation, reminding Alferius of his own comments regarding his desire to return to meditation and prayer so as to better offer spiritual guidance to the Christian peoples. He'd then pointed out that Alferius - and several previous Popes - had often spoken highly of Scotland and Aodh himself as true Christians, and so how could there have been a coup if a true believer and Prince of a nation of true believers was governing the lands of the Papal States? As Alferius had struggled for an answer, Aodh had reminded him that the purpose of the Pope was to provide a guiding light for all Christians to aspire to and to communicate God's voice and offer spiritual guidance to the Church, NOT to run countries, handle diplomacy and take an interest in the economies of other nations. He'd then turned the tables on Alferius, implying that the Pope was more interested in the power of his position than the duties of the role. Completely flummoxed, Alferius had ended up apologizing to Aodh, who had found himself in the remarkable position of offering forgiveness to the Christ-on-Earth.

It would take time, but Alferius would soon come to terms with the new "old" take on his role as Pope. He would come to relish his weekly speeches, and enjoy the pleasure of having thousands gather at the Basilica to hear his proclamations and guidance. By the time he died and a new Pope replaced him, the idea of the Pope as a political figure would be a thing of the past, which was all for the best. Aodh had achieved his goals for noble purpose, he truly believed that his long ago dream had been a vision, a direct communication from God. He had been seeking purpose all his life and found it in the words of God, warning him that the foundation of the Church was crumbling. And now Aodh had centered and reinforced that foundation by returning it to its origins, and guaranteed the protection of the lands and peoples of the Papal States by placing them under Scotland's control. He had finally found a way to reconcile his devotion to God and his devotion to his family, and now Aodh Canmore found himself not only at peace with himself, but satisfied that he had accomplished what he'd been born to do. The nervous boy who had only wanted to retreat into the safety and comfort of the Church to escape the strange workings of his mind had grown into a capable man and loving Father, then a deadly competent Spymaster. Now at fifty years old his hair was grey and his body scarred from the vicious battle with the Hungarians, but he had never felt more content.

Army Details



Prince Aodh the Scarred
Faction Heir

Age: 50

Command	☆☆☆☆
Dread	☆☆☆☆
Loyalty	☆☆☆☆
Piety	☆☆☆☆

Retinue

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

Traits

- Legacy of Chivalry
- Vision of Prophecy
- Generally Loyal
- Night Fighter
- Promising Tactician
- Talent for Command
- Holier than Thou
- Heir Apparent
- Conforming
- Feels Honoured
- Brutally Scarred
- Disrespects Prisoners
- Courageous
- Cruel and Cunning
- Wall Taker
- Poor with Taxes
- Mean Leader
- Promising Commander

Loyalty
This man is spoken of far and wide as the epitome of selfless obedience, and is universally admired for it

"Father," smiled his daughter, Joan as she joined him on the balcony looking out across the city where fireworks exploded in the air and the sounds of revelry rang up from the streets. The soldiers of Scotland now patrolled the streets of Rome, and the peoples of Rome had all ready embraced their new protectors as well as their new "secular focus". All were true Christians, but now it was Sunday that was put aside as their day to celebrate this, and they felt free on the other six days of the week to work, to run their businesses and spend time with their families,"I understand ye had good news from Uncle Domnall today?"

"Indeed, he has agreed that we have reached a new era," nodded Aodh, placing his hand on his daughter's shoulder,"Edinburgh was the Capital City of my Grandfather's Empire, and Cairo was the Capital of my Uncle and Father's Empire.... but now Rome shall be the Capital of Scotland. This is the Greatest City in the World, and it seems only fitting that it be the capital of the Greatest Empire, too."

"And what now for me, Father?" Joan asked,"Ye rule Rome now, and ye have our fine friend hiding in the shadows there to find secrets out for ye."

Eoin stepped out of the shadows onto the balcony with a respectful nod towards Joan, who smiled back at him,"I grew up with "Uncle" Nevin coming and going as he pleased, there are very few men who can hide from me."

"Or many who would want to," suggested Eoin, bowing and kissing Joan's hand, causing her to laugh and Aodh to raise an eyebrow at them both.

"So Father?" Joan asked again,"Ye have Rome, ye have returned the Pope to what ye believe his proper place in the world, and gained more for Scotland than any could have hoped for... is my usefulness at an end? Am I to marry now, and bear children and become fat and old and bored?"

Aodh smiled and linked his arm with Joan's, and Eoin did the same on her other side before all three left the balcony and moved down the corridors of the Palace.

"I love all my daughters," Aodh said with a smile,"And have three all ready who will bear me Grandchildren to dote on.... but ye Joan? Nae, nae marriage for ye, I have only one daughter who could give me Rome."

The messenger trembled as he parted the material of the tent and stepped inside, bowing low as the man seated at the small table tore at a cooked bird with his hands.

"This had better be good," snarled the man at the table,"Speak!"

"N.. News from Rome, Majesty," stuttered the messenger.

"That idiot Bulscu?" he grunted angrily,"Taking Rome without permission, killing a Pope... he'd best have married that Canmore whore by now."

"Bulscu is dead, Majesty," moaned the messenger, sinking down even lower and hunching up his head and shoulders as if expecting a blow at any moment. When silence greeted his words, the messenger continued on,"He rode out to meet Scotland and lost three thousand men to Aodh Canmore and Dougall Macdonchie....."

"...and?" demanded the man angrily, wiping his greasy fingers across his tunic but not getting up from his seat.

"...an... and Aodh Canmore has now taken control of Rome and all Papal State lands, including the holdings at Adana to the East. The Pope has retired into Saint Peter's Basilica to meditate, pray and offer weekly sermons of spiritual guidance to the Christian peoples."

More silence greeted this message, and finally the messenger could take it no more,"Majesty?"

"Out," came the hissed reply, laden with contempt,"Get out."

Almost weeping with relief, the messenger rushed out of the tent, leaving behind the man to sit brooding on this news.

"Scotland... the Canmores," grunted King Istok the Cunning, dreaded King of the Hungarian Empire,"You've just picked a fight with the wrong man."

Enemy Character Details

King Istok the Cunning Age: 49

Faction Leader
Command: ★★★★★
Dread: ☠☠☠☠☠☠☠☠☠☠
Authority: 👑👑👑👑👑👑👑👑👑👑
Piety: ✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝

Retinue

- Swordbearer
- Pagan Magician
- Master of Assassins
- Biographer
- Military Engineer
- Overseer
- Harsh Judge
- Bard

Traits

- Proven Commander
- Brutally Scarred
- Talent for Command
- Speaks of Loyalty
- Religious
- Winning First
- Courageous
- Feels Respected
- Morbidly Mortal
- Overly Suspicious
- Steady Drinker
- Night Fighter
- Adopts Scouting
- Faction Leader
- Political Animal
- Total Deceiver
- Great Speaker
- Tyrannical Leader
- Mixes with Killers

Spotted By: Nevin the Clever
Subterfuge: ○○○○○○○○○○○○

Authority
His people consider his word nothing less than divine mandate

Dread
A man so malevolent, he considers honour and virtue foolish weaknesses

Chapter 65

Domnall Canmore,

Your very name is an insult to the honor of your once proud family, it makes me sick to my stomach to use that surname in connection with as pathetic a wretch as you.

Your Father's blood was watered down, surely the result of some dalliance between your Grandfather and a cheap, disease-ridden whore. Perhaps it was her who drained all the courage and strength of Malcolm? Your Father would know, he probably bedded his own mother often enough, and you are probably the result of their foul, hairy backed rutting. But your Uncle? There was a true man, brave and sure of himself when all others questioned his wisdom, your cowardly dog of a Father included.

That you are the one to continue his legacy must burn him in the hell were you can be assured he spends eternity. Though he was a brave man, making you heir to his Empire was the gravest sin any man could commit. Look at you, you useless sodomite, bandying about with your faithful, stupid hound Angus and Hew Mar, a lily-livered fop who has sought to find solace in your cock, and falls into a depression everytime you fail to live up to the standard set by the way his father used to fuck his sorry arse. Every accomplishment you have had has come on the back of another man's work, you have achieved nothing on your own, you stand on the shoulders of giants and call yourself Kronos.

Gawain Arthyn dealt the first blow to the Mongol Horde, your Uncle Edward dealt the blow that broke their back and you... you simply cleaned up the dregs and called yourself Vanquisher of the Horde. Baby Aodh was the one to attack the Turks, and you set Angus to guard your real borders, while you blubbered on your throne over the loss of your twin, or more accurately the cock he used to fuck you with as a child. That a weak, book minded academic like Baby Aodh killed the Sicilians while you wept for the arse you'd lost says much, and there is a reason that Dougall Macdonchie became known as The Unstoppable despite the fact it was YOU who lead the war against the Spanish.

And then you cemented your reputation as "Merciless" by striking at a spent force in the Dutch, allowing your dog Angus to tear out the throat of the crippled, dying body of the Russians before you both heaped yourself onto the pathetic "Empire" of the Venetians and then my neighbors, the Byzantines.

I name you coward, Domnall the "Merciless", I name you opportunist and weakling and self-aggrandizing sodomite. Now Baby Aodh has whored out his own daughter to fool some dolt sitting low in the ranks of MY armies so that you could take control of Rome and destroy the power of the Church like the snide cowards you are? Rather than face an enemy who could truly match you, you have struck from the shadows, played games as if men were chess pieces, and then proclaimed yourself men of peace?

To think I idolized the name Canmore when I studied war in my youth... and to see it come to this? And now Hungary is at war with Scotland? I would not waste away lives on you, Domnall Canmore, though I am sure you would happily throw away the lives of my men, and yours, to avoid your people discovering the truth, that you are a puffed up little boy dressed up in the clothes of your elders and betters, pretending to be a man.

Come to Gallipoli, Domnall Canmore, prove that you deserve that name. Face ME in combat, both of us acting as champions for our Empires, as was done in days long past. Let us spare our men the indignities of war and settle the affairs of the nobility in a noble way, amongst ourselves. Come and face me at Gallipoli Domnall Canmore, man to man, and prove to the world and to me that you deserve the name Canmore.

Istok - King

Domnall Canmore read the letter again, and looked up at Hew Mar, who had sat patiently in the King's private quarters in Vilnius as Domnall took in the contents of the missive from his Hungarian counterpart. Angus meanwhile had been stalking back and forth angrily muttering to himself, only barely holding his tongue in check over the dire insults that the letter contained.

"Tell me about this Istok," grunted Domnall at last.

"He's a bastard!" snapped Angus.

"He's a fighter," noted Hew smoothly, "Not a bad battlefield commander, but nothing special. He lets his Generals handle troops, strategy and the like, his special talent is in fighting, in terrifying his men into obedience and awestruck love and striking dread into the heart of the enemy."

"I'll give him a fight!" snarled Angus, "A hound dog am I? I'll tear his bloody throat out!"

"He has nae lost a fight, ever," continued Hew, "In personal combat he cannae be matched, whether on horseback, with a sword or his bare hands... he is hoping to goad ye into a fight and kill ye to destroy the morale of our troops, he must surely ken that as powerful as his own Empire is, it cannae match Scotland's... unless he makes our armies scared of him."

"The smart thing to do would be to ignore this letter," mused Domnall.

"Except the bastard has sent it to every Scottish city!" howled Angus, "All ready word will be spreading to every town, village and farm that the Hungarian King has insulted the Scottish King and challenged him to a personal fight for the honor of our Empire! If ye dinnae fight him, people will believe ye are scared of him.... men who believe their King to be a coward cannae respect him!"

"Do ye think the men of Scotland are so foolish to believe such a thing when their King has fought alongside them on the frontlines for decades?" countered Hew, "My Father used to sa-"

"Prepare the armies," interrupted Domnall suddenly, "We march within the week to Gallipoli."

"Ye will fight him, then?" asked Angus hopefully, eyes wide as he followed Domnall who stood and moved to the door to his quarters, "Ye'll prove him wrong?"

Domnall stood quietly for a moment, and then repeated himself, "Prepare the armies."

He turned and exited his quarters, leaving behind Angus and Hew to stare at each other uneasily.

King Istok stared with a delighted grin on his face, an unusual reaction to a sight that would strike fear into the hearts of most men.

The Scottish King had arrived with his army.



A herald stepped forward past the crossbowmen on the frontline of the Hungarian ranks, directed by his King to ask the question of the Scottish King.

"DOMNALL CANMORE!" he cried, his voice carrying across the field to the Scottish, "KING ISTOK OF HUNGARY ASKS NOW WHAT HE ASKED IN HIS LETTER TO YOU.... ARE YOU A MAN? WILL YOU STEP FORWARD AND MET HIS CHALLENGE OF PERSONAL COMBAT TO RESOLVE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN OUR NATIONS? OR ARE YOU A COWARD WHO WILL HIDE BEHIND HIS MEN?"

Domnall felt the eyes of his men, his commanders and his two Generals turn onto him, and the eyes of all the Hungarians as well. Of most weight though was the gaze of King Istok, whom he could see only as a distant figure on horseback beneath the Hungarian banner.... yet knew was staring directly at him.

"HOW SAY YOU, DOMNALL CANMORE!?!!" called the Herald, "ARE YOU A MAN OR NOT!?!!"

"Aim ye Bombards at the trebuchets," he ordered, his voice authoritative, "Archers, use fire on ye arrows and fire on their frontlines!"

An almost audible sigh of disappointment rose from the Scottish ranks, but then the roaring voice of Angus the Mauler and Hew Mar kicked their Commanders into action, who in turn shouted orders to their soldiers. Discipline and training overrode the disappointment of the Scots, who moved quickly and efficiently to complete their orders. Across the field, the Herald noted the activity and smiled, turning and moving back through the ranks of Hungarian soldiers as they jeered and laughed at the Scottish and hurled insults towards Domnall.

And then battle was joined.



"Byrta, why aren't our men firing?" Istok demanded of the General who was directing the battle for him.

"They are out of range of the Scottish archers, my King," responded Byrta Sido as he watched flaming arrows rain down on the frontline of the Hungarians while the trebuchet to their side crumpled after taking a direct Bombard blast, "If we can withstand this first assault, the Scottish Infantry will charge, that is how the Scottish fight their battles... an initial ranged barrage followed by hard in close fighting by the Infantry, and then a charge by the cavalry."

"The hell with that!" snarled Istok with a fierce grin, "MEN! FORWARD TO FIRING RANGE! BE PREPARED FOR THE SCOTS TO COME AT YOU!"

The Hungarians roared in delight, excited to be taking pro-active steps over the waves of flaming arrows coming towards them while Bombard blasts soared over their heads. They rushed forward, and the Scottish Infantry braced to rush to meet them.

"HOLD YE PLACE!" demanded Domnall angrily, and Angus - moments from ordering a charge - turned to look at him in surprise.

"My King?" he asked.

"HOLD, DAMN YE!" snarled Domnall, "Continue firing on their frontlines, bring down those other trebuchets!"

"I... aye, majesty," muttered Angus darkly, and gave the order.



Istok watched the small figure far distant underneath the Scottish banner and gripped his sword hilt tighter. He wanted so desperately to fight the man, even if he was barely a Canmore, he was still a Canmore, a family that Istok had read about and idolized since his youth. He'd wished so desperately as a young Prince that diplomatic relations would lead to an alliance between their Nations and he'd be able to ride under the command of Edward Canmore, but it wasn't to be. Now this Domnall claimed a position that Istok genuinely believed to be his, he was the TRUE heir to Edward Canmore, and he would prove it in battle the way Edward had proved himself against the mighty Mongol Warlord Subutai.

But as his trebuchets were shattered by dangerously accurate Bombard blasts and flaming arrows continued to pour down on the frontline of his men (while few of the Scottish archers were falling to his crossbows) his frustration grew... was Domnall Canmore truly such a coward that he would not commit his infantry to the battle and risk coming face to face with him?

"FORWARD AGAIN!" he roared, surprising Byrta.

"My King, is that wi-

"FORWARD!" roared Istok, directly into Byrta's face, and the horrified man swallowed nervously and turned to obey.







"They're goading us!" snapped Angus angrily, "WE HAVE TO CHARGE!"

"Continuing firing on their frontlines," replied Domnall, stony-faced.

"...aye," hissed Angus through clenched teeth, turning to give the order.

"It's a trick, Angus," Hew warned, "The King of England tried the same thing on me once, I was nae fool enough to fall for it. My Father once tol-"

"FUCK YOUR FATHER!" roared Angus, "AND FUCK YOU! THEY'RE CALLING US WOMEN AND GELDINGS! AND OUR OWN KING IS TO-"

Hew pulled his sword and pressed the tip against Angus' neck, so quickly that Angus didn't see him move.

"Be careful, Angus," Hew warned coldly, "Insult me, insult my Father... but never insult our King."





Istok snarled angrily and spat on the ground, still in disbelief that Domnall had proved such a coward. A flaming Bombard blast crashed down only a few feet over his head and into the men behind them, shaking the ground and causing Istok's horse to stumble sideways as his men screamed in agony.

"STAND!" snapped Istok at his horse, and the animal reacted to his master's voice instantly, calming beneath him and ignoring the stink of burning human flesh.



"Send the infantry forward to meet their lines," grunted Domnall suddenly, pretending not to have seen the recent stand-off between his two Generals. "No charge, march them slowly, I want the line straight when they meet. Send our cavalry to the southern hill, when the Infantry engage, charge them onto the flank."

"Against Istok?" asked Angus eagerly, forgetting that only a few minutes earlier his best friend's sword had been at his throat.

"Against the Crossbowmen," responded Domnall, his face still stony and his eyes unreadable, "Forget Istok and his men, the target is the Infantry and Crossbow."

"Dammit," hissed Angus under his teeth, then saluted and turned to give his orders.



Istok sat on his horse as his own men rushed to try and hold off the cavalry charge on their left flank, staring with hatred and contempt across the field at the tiny figure of Domnall Canmore. It was chaos all around him, the Infantry had joined in combat with their Scottish counterparts, replacing the crossbowmen on the frontlines. More crossbows were firing wildly at the Scottish Cavalry on the flank, hitting Istok's own men in the chaos, while Byrta screamed orders, trying to regain chaos. A Scottish horse broke free of the throng and charged at Istok, and screaming Hungarians threw themselves into his way, knocking down his horse and tearing the man to pieces as Istok finally relented and began to slowly back up his horse, eyes never leaving the far distant figure of Domnall Canmore.



"It is over," sniffed Istok contemptuously, riding up alongside Byrta, "Order all who can to retreat to the ships, we'll reinforce the garrison at Constantinople."

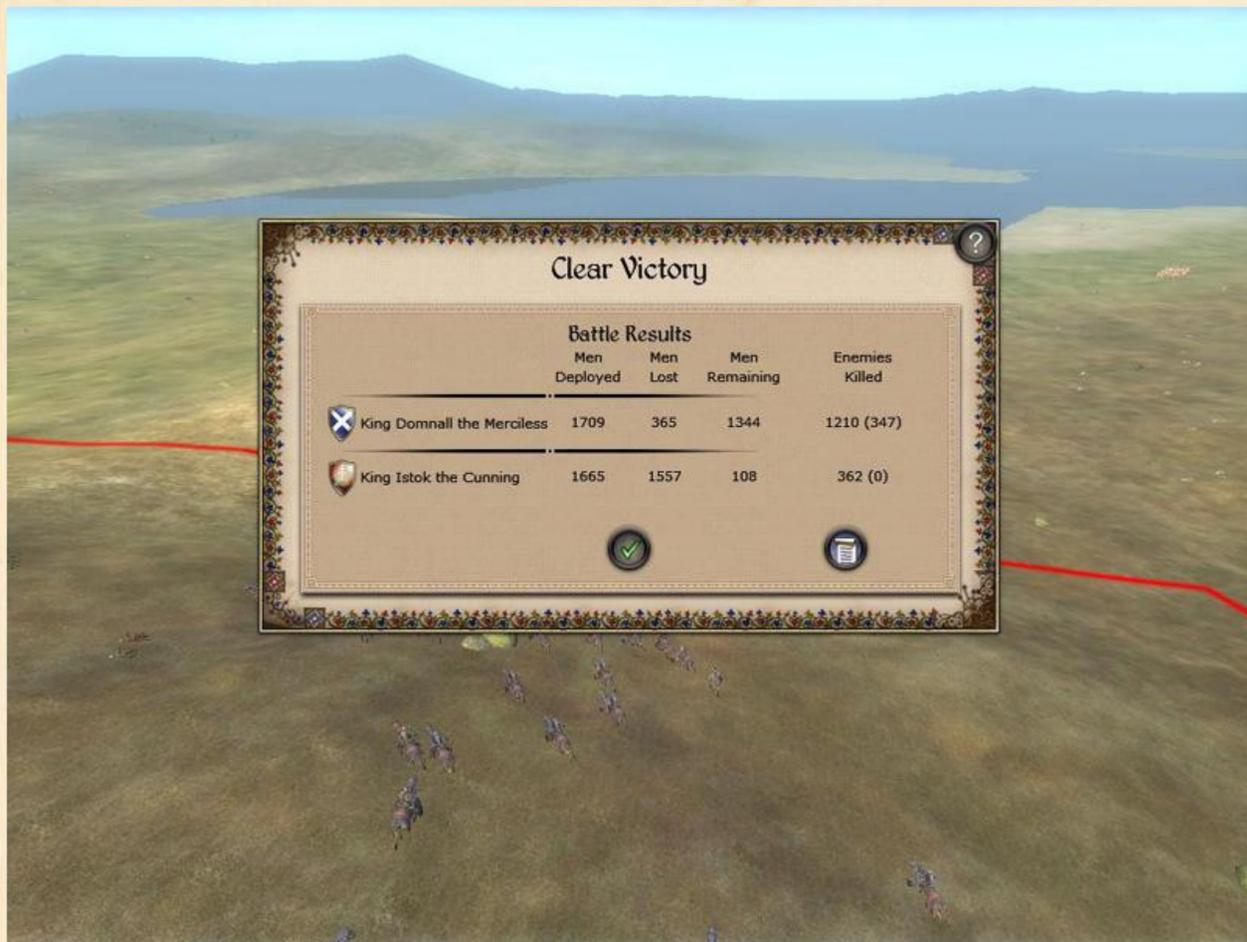
"My King, the situation is grim but we can still salvag-" started Byrta.

"I am not interested in defeating the Scottish army, I am interested in Domnall Canmore.... pathetic coward though he may be," snapped Istok angrily, "Now order the retreat!"

Biting back his pride, Byrta did as his King bid, and joined his men and what few Infantry and Crossbow were able to pull free off the Scottish. They rushed down into the rocky cove designed by nature to discourage enemy ships from landing troops (only madmen would ever attempt to land troops there knowing an army was waiting for them), to where ships waited to transport them north to Constantinople.

Those who were unable to retreat, soon left the field of battle by other, more permanent means.





"Victory, such as it is," spat Angus as the last surviving Hungarians were cut down, despite their attempts to surrender when their fate had become apparent, "I never thought winning a fight would leave such a bad taste in my mouth."

"The battle is nae done yet," Domnall grunted, his eyes on the all ready departing Hungarian ships, "We ride for Constantinople."

"Will ye face Istok there, my King?" asked Angus eagerly, too eagerly. Domnall turned in the saddle to glare at his wide eyed "Hound", and then around him at his soldiers as they too stared hopefully at their King. In Hew Mar eyes alone did he not see the unasked question - was he a coward?

"Prepare the men," Domnall spoke at last, coldly, then repeated himself, "We ride for Constantinople."

He turned his horse and rode away from his despairing men, back towards his Command Tent, leaving them to turn and stare at each other, the unasked question hanging in the air.

They feared that now they knew the answer.

Chapter 66

Domnall sat high on the wall looking out over the seemingly endless stretch of desert, his face glum, his shoulders hunched.

"What are ye doing up here, lad?" asked a familiar voice, and Domnall turned to look at his Uncle, the King of Scotland - Edward Canmore.

"Just thinking, Uncle," the young Scottish Prince - barely 11 years old.

"Aye?" asked Edward with a slight smirk, "Thinking? Or hiding from ye cousin, Adam?"

Domnall's eyes widened in surprise, and Edward's smile widened.

"How did ye ken?" asked Domnall, surprised.

*"I'm the King of Scotland, I ken everything," Edward spoke darkly, then a huge grin broke across his face, "Plus, ye Father told me... now **HE** does ken everything, nae forget it, lad."*

Domnall smiled uncertainly, and Edward pulled himself onto the wall to sit alongside his nephew, smiling fondly at him.

"So ye cousin beat ye down in the training field again, eh?" asked Edward, "That must rankle."

"It's nae fair," sniffed Domnall, "He's almost fully grown."

"Aye, it's nae fair," chuckled Edward, "And I think it's about time something was done about it."

"IT'S TIME TO END THIS, DOMNALL CANMORE!" roared Istok from the walls of Constantinople, breaking the Scottish King from his reverie.



"IT WAS OBVIOUS AT GALLIPOLI THAT YOU PREFER OTHERS TO DO YOUR FIGHTING FOR YOU!" laughed Istok, and his men jeered and shouted out insults at Domnall, **"BUT MAYBE THERE IS STILL SOME OF YOUR UNCLE IN YOU? SOME SMALL TRACE OF THE HONOR AND DIGNITY OF THE CANMORE NAME? COME AND FIGHT ME BEFORE THE WALLS, DOMNALL CANMORE! COME AND FIGHT WITH ME AND LET THE KINGS OF SCOTLAND AND HUNGARY DECIDE THIS WAR, NOT OUR MEN!"**

Again, Domnall felt the weight of the eyes of his men on him, and the eyes of Angus the Mauler most of all. They were all waiting and hoping that their King would prove the rumors wrong, that he was scared of Hungary's Istok, that he knew he could not best a man noted for being undefeated in personal combat.

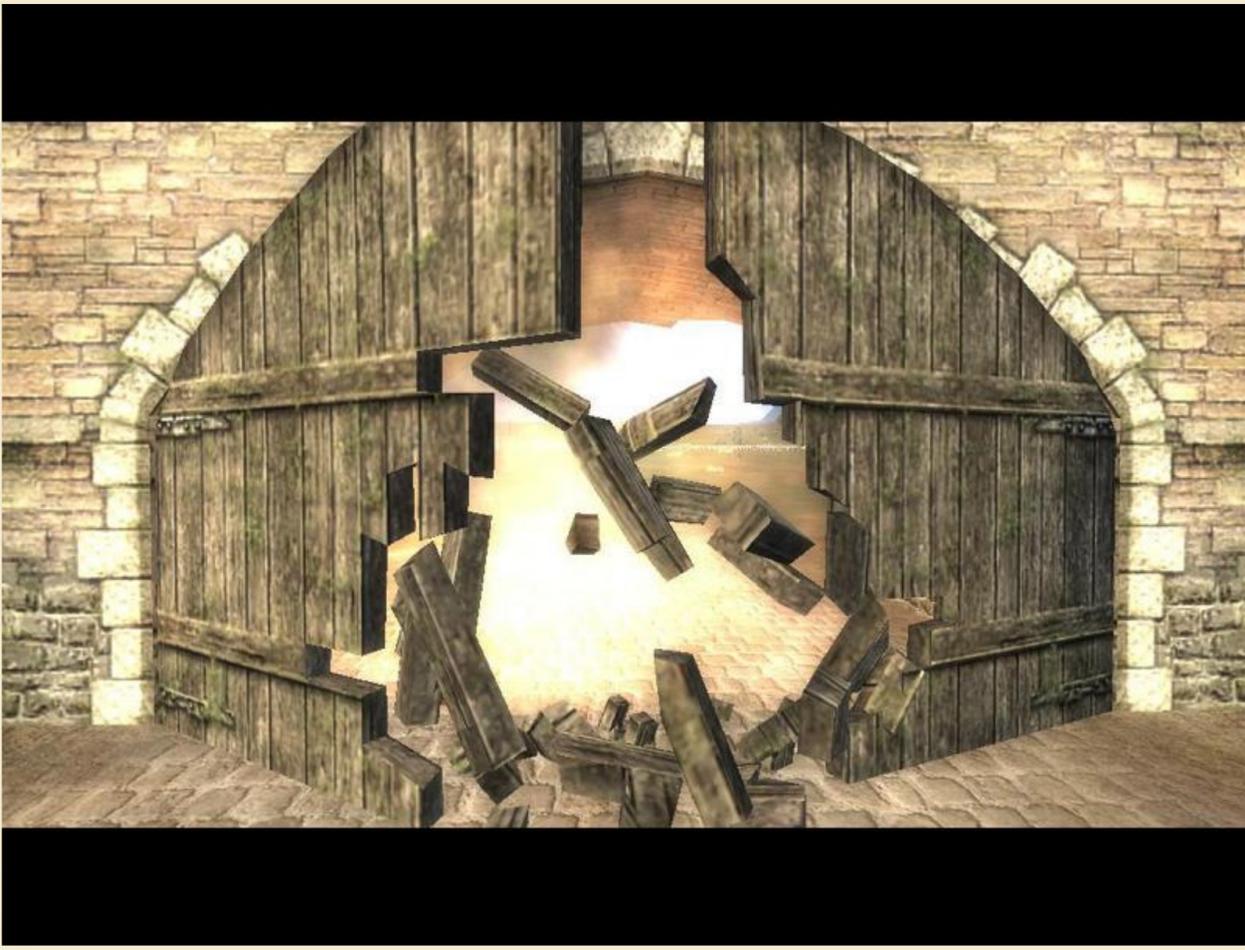
They would have to wait.

"Bombards, fire on the walls on my command!" Domnall called out, and saw the shoulders of his men sag, and the building rage in Angus' eyes. In Hew Mar's face he saw only concern, but also the same question - was Domnall a coward?

"PATHETIC!" snarled Istok, as the jeers rose up from his men, **"Come then, throw away the lives of your men on the walls of Constantinople, and when none are left and only you remain, I'll take great delight in squeezing every inch of your coward's blood from your neck!"**

"Fire," ordered Domnall, his face blank and his eyes unreadable.

And the Battle for Constantinople began.



As the walls came tumbling down, Domnall raised his sword and gave the order for his men to do what he had been unwilling to do - ride on the walls of Constantinople.

"Stand here, lad," chuckled Edward good naturedly as he poked his head around the corner of the wide, lengthy corridor within the palace at Cairo, "Adam will be coming from his studies soon, when he turns the corner, stand in his way and dinnae let him pass."

"But he'll give me a beating," gasped Domnall.

*"He'll try, aye," grinned Edward, "I'll be hiding in the next room, when he makes to strike ye, I'll step out and give him the fright of his life! Let's see how he likes it when someone bigger, older and stronger gives **him** a beating!"*

"Aye, Uncle!" gasped Domnall in delight.

"Adam will be returning to Edinburgh soon enough to be with his Father," smiled Edward, "We cannae have him going thinking he has the better of ye, eh lad?"

"Nae, Uncle!" laughed Domnall, hopping from foot to foot, excited. Edward ruffled his hair affectionately, then opened the door to one of the many large rooms set aside for visiting diplomats and closed it all but a crack, "Remember, dinnae let him pass!"

Left alone in the corridor, Domnall suddenly felt very small. He was still only a boy, and Adam was so close to being a man... but then he remembered his Uncle and King was standing nearby and felt ten foot tall.

So when Adam Canmore turned the corner, striding self-importantly on with a bow-legged old tutor struggling to keep up, it was all that Domnall could do not to launch himself directly into his older cousin and try to beat him down himself.

The cavalry passed through the blasted open gates of Constantinople while the infantry charged forward towards the breach in the wall. Their orders were simple, barked with fury by Angus the Mauler after Domnall's initial command - ride in, find the Hungarians and kill every last one of them!



"Is Canmore amongst them?" Istok asked his Generals as their men flooded out of the central city square down the slope into the Scottish.

"No, your Majesty," grunted Byrta contemptuously, "He sits outside holding his Hound on its leash while his faithful lapdog sits at his side."

"Their numbers are roughly the same as ours?" asked Istok.

"Roughly," nodded Byrta.

"Then kill theirs until there are none but Canmore and his dogs left," hissed Istok angrily, "And if I have to, I will fight through The Mauler and Mar both to get to him.... Domnall Canmore will die by my hands this day, and none other. Make it clear to the men, he is **MINE!**"

*"What do ye want, Dumbnall?" snapped Adam angrily as he turned the corner and found Domnall standing in his path. Tall for his age, Adam was naturally gifted physically but had a tendency towards sloth when he wasn't being drilled by his tutors and trainers. For the last few weeks he had been bragging to Domnall and Nectan that he would live better than Uncle Edward once he returned to Edinburgh, and that the people there called his father Alexander the King **IN** Scotland.*

Domnall just grinned, his body trembling with excitement at the idea that the bully would finally be put into his place. He was too excited to talk, and simply stood staring directly at Adam, who was impatient at the best of times.

"Bah, I dinnae have time for this! Out of the way or I'll walk over ye!" grunted Adam.

"My Prince, surel-" started the elderly tutor behind Adam, but the young Prince shushed him to instant silence, storming forward with his arm raised to strike Domnall. The boy stood his ground, waiting eagerly for Uncle Edward to burst out of the diplomat's room and smash Adam off of his feet.

The first blow caught him upside the head, and the next sunk deep into his belly, knocking the wind out of him. Domnall whooped in sudden shocked pain, and Adam drove his heel into the back of Domnall's knee, dropping him into a kneeling position. Grabbing Domnall by the side of the head, Adam launched him against the wall and out of his way.

"Stay clear of me, Dumbnall," sneered Adam, "Next time I will nae go so easy on ye."

The elderly tutor stayed behind for a second, staring uncertainly at Domnall, then rushed after Adam, struggling to keep up to him.

And Domnall lay curled in the fetal position, gasping for air and tears running down his cheeks, in tremendous physical pain but more concerned with an unanswered question.

Where was Edward Canmore?

"Word has come back that our men are struggling to push over the hill into the square, my King," Hew reported, as Angus sat scowling and muttering darkly to himself.

"You and Angus will ride in with your bodyguard to provide support," Domnall ordered coolly, "I want the road clear."

"Finally, at least **some of us** will be seeing action today," hissed Angus angrily, and ordered his men to prepare. As Hew moved to do the same, Domnall spoke unexpectedly.

"Hew," he said quietly, "A word."

Minutes later, Angus and Hew crashed their men up the sides of their own beleaguered cavalry and into the flanks of the Hungarians.

"AHHHHH! KILL! KILLLLL!" screamed Angus, practically frothing at the mouth as he released his rage and tension and disappointment on the Hungarians.



"DRIVE THEM BACK!" roared Byrta, finding himself amongst the Scottish frontline, "DO NOT LET THEM PASS!"

"Oh I'll have ye!" snarled Angus with cruel delight, and rode his horse directly towards the Hungarian General. As the two sides of horsemen struggled and fought up the slope of the road, the Infantry rushing up to buttress them.

"PUSH BACK!" roared Byrta, as Angus slashed down the group of Hungarians who had thought to ambush him as he chased Byrta, "ALL MEN IN, PUSH THEM BACK DAMN YOUR EYES!"

Sitting in the square, Istok watched as his men emptied the courtyard and rushed to add their numbers and weight, and felt a keen disappointment wash over him. Domnall Canmore was not going to come, he would have to kill all the Scottish first and then hunt the coward down. This wasn't what he wanted, he'd wanted a glorious battle to prove his rightful place as the "successor" to Edward Canmore.

So be it.





Angus screamed in triumph as Byrta fell to his blade, and the Scottish Infantry pushed up against the Hungarians, straining to send them backwards so they could crest the hill and flood into the City Centre. Angus lifted his sword to give the order, and then suddenly from behind him came Hew's voice, clear and filled with authority.... and what he said was the last thing Angus had ever expected to hear.

"MEN, STOP!" screamed the Scottish General, "BY ORDER OF THE KING.... PULL BACK!"

Domnall wasn't sure how long he lay huddled on the floor, gasping first for air and then to hold back his tears as he moaned in pain. Finally the pain receded enough for him to be aware of the world around him once more, and he looked up at the figure looming tall above him, staring down at him sadly... but kindly.

Edward Canmore.

"...." he opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"Why?" Edward suggested, "Ye want to ken why I did what I did?"

Domnall lowered his head back and again fought to hold back his tears, and Edward knelt down beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder. Domnall flinched at the touch, eyes lifting back up to Edward's, this time shining with anger.

"Good, good," chuckled the Scottish King, "Anger is good... if ye can control it. That's a difficult lesson to learn, ye Father learnt it well before I did... and Domnall, it's a lesson I've sought to teach ye today."

"Wh... what lesson?" grunted Domnall at last, sullenly, betrayed.

"To be a man means facing a fight ye cannae win," Edward explained, "To be a man means standing tall even when ye are scared. To be a man means ye dinnae let another man do ye fighting for ye. The Canmores always fight on the frontline with their troops, lad, and it's nae because we love to fight... though I do... but because we do nae ask our men to do for us what we would nae do for them."

"B.. but Adam is bigger..." moaned Domnall, "It was nae fair!"

"And when ye are a fully grown man, lad, ye'll lead armies against superior numbers, and sometimes against superior Generals. Ye have to learn now what ye cannae afford to learn then... life is nae fair, so ye must be prepared to face it nae matter what."

He grabbed Domnall's arm and lifted him easily to his feet, supporting the boy as a wave of dizziness rolled over him.

"What lessons does Adam learn from beating ye?" asked Edward, "That he can do as he pleases with those weaker and smaller than him? I would teach the lad a lesson, but that is his Father's place, not mine."

"But ye taught **ME**, and I am nae ye son," moaned Domnall.

"Aye, but ye and Nectan are the closest things to it," smiled Edward, "And besides this is a lesson ye Father would never teach ye, but one he kens that ye must learn, so he gave me leave to do so."

"It was still a mean trick," pouted Domnall, struggling still to hold onto his anger at his Uncle and King.

"Aye it was, lad," smiled Edward, "Life is full of those, too... perhaps one day ye'll be the one dishing them out."

"MEN, STOP!" screamed Hew Mar, "BY ORDER OF THE KING.... PULL BACK!"

"WHAT!?!!" roared Angus in disbelief.

"Pull back!" snapped Hew again, as his men looked around at him in astonishment, "Ye have ye orders, now follow them!"

Shocked, appalled... but disciplined still, the Scots broke off from fighting with the equally amazed Hungarians and slowly, hesitantly began to pull backwards down the hill. The Hungarians immediately retreated backwards as well to further secure the square against a fresh wave of potential attacks.

"What is the meaning of this madness!?!!" insisted Angus, eyes bugging from their sockets and teeth clenched as a vein on his forehead throbbed prominently.

"Ye work is done, lads," spoke a new voice, quiet but full of authority and carrying to the men, "Now it is my turn."

And the men turned to see Domnall Canmore - King of Scotland - slowly marching his horse up the street towards them.



"What is this?" asked Angus, eyes wide with pleasant, hopeful surprise now, "What does this mean?"

"Only a fool would let personal honor jeopardize his men, his Kingdom and his Nation," Domnall announced by way of answer, "And only an arrogant buffoon would presume to fight for his men... as if the men of Scotland were nae capable of fighting for themselves."

He look around him at the gathered soldiers, standing amongst the dead - equal numbers Hungarian and Scottish - and saw now in their eyes a mixture of hope and a swelling of pride as they realized his refusal to fight Istok had been not an act of cowardice, but a display of confidence in his own men.

"Ye have done ye jobs," Domnall repeated, "Ye have fought ye way deep into the Capital of Hungary, ye have killed Istok's Chief General, and ye have pushed his men as far as ye can. Now - and only now - that the time is right, will I take up Istok's challenge."

"Ye... ye will?" gasped Angus, delighted.

"Oh aye, clear a path for me," smiled Domnall, and in his eyes Hew saw the cold, deep-seated rage that his King had used to take revenge on the Venetians, "After his big performances, Istok will have nae choice but to order his men to do the same. I will fight him, but on my terms, not his."

Domnall rode over the crest of the hill, down the long road past Hungarian soldiers who stood aside to stare at him, entering the central city square of Constantinople, where King Istok the Cunning sat his horse waiting.

Exulting.



"So you've come at last," Istok grinned, lifting the visor of his helm, "Coward."

Domnall lifted his own visor and stared directly into Istok's face, still saying nothing.

"I have never lost a fight in my life, Canmore," sneered Istok, "And my scouts told me all that rubbish you fed your troops just now... you don't fool me, you've been pissing into your armor since you received my letter and realized that your name doesn't intimidate me. You're not the man you're made out to be, Domnall Canmore, you're a pretender to the name and the crown."

Domnall looked about him, at the Hungarians and Scottish now ringing the courtyard and the two Kings, foes standing side by side for the moment, their war forgotten in their eagerness to see the confrontation between the two Kings. Domnall stared in Angus' eyes and saw the brash overconfidence that Scotland would always overcome. He stared in Hew's eyes, and saw the concern that a King was - in the end - just a man, but a man whose death could turn the tide of battle in the enemy's favor. Both sides still held roughly equal numbers, and the blow to morale should Domnall lose could easily cost them the battle. Finally he looked into Istok's eyes, and what he was there was a complete and total confidence of a man who knew he could beat his opponent.

And finally Domnall spoke.

"Istok," he said, his voice calm, "Ye're nae as scary as ye think ye are."

In Rome, Aodh Canmore came awake with a start, startling his wife Katherine in bed beside him.

"Aodh?" she asked, concerned.

"A dream, nae more," he replied, smiling reassuringly at her before lying back in the bed. He closed his eyes and his breathing soon became relaxed, measured, and before long Katherine had fallen back to sleep beside him. When he was sure that his ruse had worked, Aodh opened his eyes and lay in the bed staring at the ceiling, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness as he pondered what he had assured his wife was just a dream.

And wondered if it had instead been a portent, another vision from God like the one that had come to him years earlier and eventually led to the breaking of the Church's vast secular power.

If it was... then God help them all.

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Istok sneered and lowered his visor, and Domnall did the same. The Hungarian King kicked at the flanks of his trained warhorse, and it immediately leapt forward at a run. Domnall's reaction was immediate, as he charged his own horse forward, sword drawn as he and Istok moved rapidly closer together.

Neither man broke, and their trained horses went forward despite their own instincts, the heavy animals crashing together as Istok swung his sword in a mighty overhead arc which Domnall easily ducked. He brought his own sword up toward the Hungarian's side, but Istok was all ready pulling loose a dagger with his left hand, sweeping down with the sharpened blade not for Domnall but the straps holding the saddle in place. Suddenly Domnall felt his saddle shifting beneath him, feeling the pull of his own weight back towards the ground. He flung himself bodily away, crashing to the ground and rolling along the cobblestones as Istok struggled to tear his horse free from Domnall's own.

The Scottish King rolled to his feet and looked up through narrowed eyes as Istok pulled free and charged towards his now unmounted opponent. Domnall braced, and as Istok moved to the side and swung his sword, Domnall did not move to block as expected but instead slashed at the ankles of Istok's horse, causing it to scream and tumble forward. Istok tucked his head and rolled forward off of the now useless animal, never losing his grip on his sword. He came easily to his feet and swung around, sword lifted in a high defensive position to meet Domnall's charge. The Scottish King swung his sword again and again, but Istok met each stroke easily, and Domnall gritted his teeth angrily as he heard laughter coming from behind the Hungarian's visor. Domnall was no slouch with a sword, though he was hardly a master, but every stroke he made seemed to be anticipated easily by Istok, who began to return strokes of his own, breaking Domnall's own forward momentum, halting his stride and forcing him to shift onto the defensive.

"A cowardly little boy in a pathetic old man's body!" barked Istok with laughter, driving Domnall backwards now as all around them soldiers on both sides screamed out encouragement to their King and jeers against the other. Domnall began to feel the impact of each sword stroke he blocked running up through his arm, and felt his feet tangling amongst themselves. Istok redoubled his efforts, hacking with increasing power and speed as if he did not feel fatigue or stress on his muscles. Domnall struggled to block, struggled to keep his feet, but found himself stumbling backwards, crashing to the ground on his ass, arm bracing himself as he flung his sword up to block Istok's attack.

"USELESS!" cried Istok, punctuating each word with the crashing stroke of his sword against Domnall's, "PATHETIC! EXCUSE! FOR! A! CANMORE!"

"He's going to lose," whispered Angus in horror.

"Be ready to brace the men the moment he falls," snapped Hew in a harsh, quiet whisper, "If we dinnae hold them here, the Hungarians will drive us back the length of their Nation and kill us off piecemeal before we can reach the Polish border."

With contemptuous ease, Istok followed a sword stroke with a boot that knocked the blade from Domnall's hand, leaving him completely unprotected. Istok did not waste time on theatrics like lifting his sword high, he simply plunged it straight towards Domnall's heart, knowing he could punch through the armor and..... Domnall caught the blade in his hand.

The sharp blade sheared through the thin metal of the gauntlet protecting Domnall's hand, but the Scottish King gripped tightly and then pulled, using Istok's own momentum against him to drag him forward and crashing into the ground.

Domnall pitched the sword aside and hauled himself to his feet, even as Istok rolled away and came up easily to a standing position. He grabbed his helm and pulled it free, eyes wide and a delighted grin on his face as he tossed the helm to the side, then grabbed at his gauntlets and pulled them free, leaving his hands bare.

"Not so pathetic after all," he laughed, "Good, good, I vowed you would die by my hands, it seems it will literally have to be that way."

Domnall pulled his own helm away, then his gauntlets, revealing one hand bloody from the cut the sword had given him, "Ye are welcome to try, let's see if ye can match action to words."

Again the two Kings charged each other, crashing against each other. Domnall slammed a fist into Istok's side where gaps had been left in his armor to allow mobility, but Istok seemed to absorb the blow easily, turning into it and bending to shift Domnall's weight and flip him over onto his back. He leapt on top of Domnall and landed a solid punch right into his face, then another, then another. Domnall lurched forward and unbalanced Istok, knocking him loose, and when the Hungarian King attempted to scramble back to a standing position, left himself exposed to a kick that smashed into the side of his face and dropped him straight onto his back again. Domnall stood weaving as a gasp rose from the collected soldiers watching, and then dropped to his knees, steadying himself as a wave of dizziness rolled over him.

"Dooooomnnallll!" howled Istok, struggling up and staggering forward, locking his hands around Domnall's throat and squeezing. Domnall lunged to his feet and gripped Istok by the throat with his own hands, cursing as the slick blood on his cut palm conspired to loosen his grip. He felt Istok's grip tighten in response and did his best to follow suit, as both men dropped to their knees, faces turning red and then purple as they glared with hatred into each other's eyes and squeezed each other's throats, each desperate to choke the life from the other.

The gathered Hungarian and Scottish soldiers stared in disbelief at the scene before them, as they watched two Kings reduced to their knees, leaning against each other, faces purple, eyes bugging out, teeth clenched as they choked and choked the other.

Finally, inevitably, one King felt blackness creeping into his vision, felt his grip weakening on his enemy's throat. His lungs burned from lack of air, his arms felt like lead weights and he knew he could go on no longer, he was beaten, he was... and then he felt the grip around his throat slacken, and with one last burst of energy he tightened his own grip and squeezed and squeezed and choked and choked until, at last, it was done.

A King was dead.

The hands no longer around his throat, the surviving King fell forward on top of his opponent, unwilling to release his grip on his opponent's throat until he was sure it was done. Finally, he released his grip and struggled to his knees, sucking in great lungfuls of air, fighting off the dizziness and blackening of vision as he attempted to regain his senses. He rose from knees to a crouch, hands on thighs, panting deeply before finally lifting to a full standing position and drawing in one final last great lungful of breath.

He stared around him at the gathered soldiers - his own men and the enemy - and finally he spoke, pointing at his enemies and giving the final order of the Battle of Constantinople.

"Kill them all."
