

Steel 321

Chapter 321: Austrian Ghosts

Within the valleys beneath the Italian Alps, the Italian Army had begun to resort to unconventional tactics. The Italian commanders had come to recognize that there was no conceivable way to win a field battle with the Royal Austrian Army.

As such, they had begun resorting to guerilla warfare, utilizing skirmishers dressed as peasants, villagers, refugees, and merchants to attack the Royal Austrian Army via ambushes. As a result, Berengar had slowed his march to Milan and instead sent out his Jaegers to hunt down and destroy the Italian guerillas.

These Jaegers were an elite unit of marksmen and skirmishers armed with the 1419 Jaeger Rifle, which was based upon the Whitworth rifle from Berengar's previous life. These weapons were capable of engaging targets out to 1000 yards and, thus far in Berengar's service, acted as snipers hidden behind enemy lines.

However, they were more than simple marksmen, seeing as most of these men came from a hunting background, they were skilled trackers, scouts, and light infantry. The Jaegers were also fully capable of sustaining themselves in the field. As such the Jaeger Corps were among Berengar's most elite units, and thus he equipped them in such a manner.

While initially dressed in green and black Landschnekt style clothing, this fashion proved to be widely ineffective in the field. As such, Berengar had recently begun experimenting with rudimentary camouflage patterns.

Unlike his primary units, which were designed to attack in formations, this specialized unit of skirmishers was intended to blend in with their environments and take out high-profile targets from long range.

As such, Berengar had opted for a far more modern approach to their uniforms. Rather than the flashy Landsknecht pattern attire of Austria's regulars, the Jaeger units fielded uniforms that were a mix of WWI and WW2 German uniforms from Berengar's previous life. The base attire was a standard m43 pattern uniform in the color of feldgrau. These men would wear

a splinter camouflage smock over their field jackets and a matching m43 field cap.

They were also equipped with a more modern style helmet based upon the m38 stahlhelm used by German paratroopers in WWII. This stahlhelm was painted like the breastplate and had a wire net around it which contained various forms of fabric to act as faux foliage.

These Jaegers wore hardened and quenched high carbon steel breastplates based upon WWI German trench armor designs. However, they had been modified to make it easier to shoulder a rifle and were lighter weight with improved mobility. These breastplates were hand-painted in earthly colors by the soldiers who wielded them, in a pattern similar to that seen on old German M38 Fallschirmjäger Stahlhelms from WWII in Berengar's previous life.

Over these breastplates was a brown leather webbing in the form used by Imperial German Soldiers during the Great War within Berengar's past life. The primary difference was that this web gear was made out of dark brown leather, and was designed to carry their quick loading tubes as well as other tools like bayonets, canteens, and spades. Their boots were also made of the same dark brown leather.

When compared to the renaissance style uniforms fielded by Berengar's regular troops, these Jaeger's were far more modern in appearance and were very hard to spot when adequately concealed. As such, they were the perfect unit to hunt down and destroy the Italian Skirmishers.

At the moment, a Captain of a Jaeger Company was crouched within a tree line, observing a group of potentially hostile targets in the distance. This officer was named Andreas Jaeger; Like so many of the men in this elite unit, he was a hunter before being drafted into the Austrian Army during Berengar's previous campaigns. For some time now, he had fought among Berengar's forces and was one of the first to be trained into the role of a Jaeger.

With ample experience in unconventional warfare, he was the ideal candidate to lead the more veteran Jaegers in the hunt for the Italian Guerrillas. While he and his soldiers quietly marched through the Italian Alps, they spotted a trade caravan roughly 500 yards in front of them.

Captain Andreas motioned for his troops to hold their position and conceal themselves; as they did so, he pulled out a pair of binoculars from his webbing and began to observe the Caravan's movements. What he saw confirmed his suspicions; this alleged merchant caravan was comprised entirely of relatively young men.

These men appeared to have weapons within their wagons, such as crossbows, longbows, and rudimentary hand cannons. At the moment, they were gathered around a fire drinking wine and feasting on a fresh game that they had hunted.

Andreas placed his binoculars within his webbing before unslinging his rifle. After doing so, he cocked the flintlock action on his weapon, where he began to adjust his iron sights so that they were set to the appropriate distance.

While he was doing this, his soldiers took note of his actions and prepared to take their shots. After Andreas lined up his sights upon his target, he gave the order to his nearby troops in a hushed tone.

"Fire at will!"

With this said, Andreas squeezed the trigger on his rifle, where the flint struck the pan and ignited the gunpowder contained within, sending the hexagonal projectile down range and into the torso of a man who was barking commands at the rest of the Italian Skirmishers.

The 1419 Jaeger Rifle had a muzzle velocity of roughly 1200 feet per second, thus breaking the sound barrier. As such, the hexagonal-shaped bullet struck the target before he could even hear the sound of gunfire go off.

Shortly after the echo of gunfire was heard in the distance, the Italian soldiers began to panic; this was because the man's torso was blasted apart by the .451 projectile before they could even hear the crack of gunfire.

Before long, more thunderous echoes could be heard in the distance, which followed the deaths of their comrades. With this in mind, the Italians broke free from their shock and began to take cover behind their wagons.

When Andreas saw this, he motioned for his troops to flank the enemy position. Two smaller groups of Jaegers immediately broke off from the main force and approached both sides of the enemy encampment.

One Italian soldier reached into the wagon where he grabbed ahold of a longbow contained within and a quiver of arrows. However, before he could get back behind cover, he was shot through the gut by Andreas who was hidden in the distance.

The man instantly fell to the ground while grasping ahold of his punctured gut. He struggled to hand off the weapon and its ammunition to a nearby soldier as the life faded from his eyes. The Italians were shocked by the recent development; aside from the muzzle flash, and the following smoke plume; they could not make out the slightest semblance of the enemy's figure.

At a distance of 500 plus yards, the camouflage pattern uniforms considerably broke up the silhouette of the Austrian Jaegers who continued to maneuver and fire upon the Italian Skirmishers from the treeline on the hills above.

Eventually, one of the Italian soldiers managed to get ahold of a bow and randomly fired into the distance near where one of the muzzle flashes went off; however, the Jaeger was far out of range of the primitive weapon and remained utterly unscathed.

Instead, such actions brought the fury of the soldier who was targetted, and his next shot penetrated right through the forehead of the Italian soldier who had dared to fire upon his location. Before long, the Austrian Jaegers had flanked the Italian Skirmishers on all sides and set up a crossfire where the remaining Italian soldiers were gunned down, like the dregs they were.

After it was confirmed that all of the Italian skirmishers dressed as traders were killed in battle, the Jaeger's approached the encampment to search for anything of value, whether that was intelligence or simply supplies.

A few Jaegers were put on guard while the remainder ransacked the camp until finally, an exciting find was made by one of the Austrian soldiers. The man who found the piece of parchment quickly brought it over to Andreas, where he laid it out on the ground.

This large piece of parchment contained the deployment of all Italian scouts and skirmishers within the region. It was a valuable piece of intelligence; when Andreas saw this, he grabbed ahold of the man's shoulder and grinned emphatically.

"Private Mueller, you have done well! With this, we know the general locations of our enemies and can quickly ambush them. I want you and your squad to copy down this information and relay it back to the main force!"

The young soldier quickly saluted Captain Andreas before following his orders. With this piece of information, the Austrian Army would have an easy time cleaning up the Italian Soldiers who sought to hamper their advance through unconventional warfare.

While this company of Jaegers had engaged in an ambush on the enemy skirmishers, others like them were fighting throughout the Northern Italian Front, advancing upon the Italians while hiding within the terrain like a unite of specters, reaping lives while moving unseen. As soon as the information of the enemy's whereabouts was spread to the other units, a slaughter the likes the Italians had not expected would occur.

The invention of camouflage would play an important role in Austria's future success with the many conflicts they would engage in. The Italians would come to refer to the Jaegers by the nickname "Fantasmi Austriaci," in other words, "Austrian Ghosts."

Chapter 322: Battle of the Adriatic

While Berengar's Jaeger Corps was in the process of hunting down and eliminating the Italian Skirmishers who had embedded themselves along Berengar's path to Milan, Grand Admiral Emmerich had begun the single most decisive Naval Battle of the Austrian War for Independence.

A massive force of several hundred Italian Warships had gathered; their goal was simple. To cause as much damage to the Royal Austrian Navy as possible. Unfortunately for them, the size of the Austrian Armada had been growing as the weeks passed by, and the Austrians now he over eighty Berengar class Frigates at their command.

Meanwhile, the cities of Venice and Genoa had been devastated to the point where they were incapable of producing new vessels. After the Privateers and Austrian fleets had begun sinking the Imperial trade convoys, the Emperor was left with only one option on the sea, and that was to trigger a large-scale naval battle and hope that God favored him.

As such, 80 Frigates flying the Austrian Flag had gathered in the Adriatic sea, across from them was what remained of the Imperial Navy, a mix of galleys, carracks, and caravels, most of which were armed with less than five cannons on board.

Grand Admiral Emmerich was at the lead vessel, the SMS Berengar, where he stood upon the bow, gazing at the hostile fleet in the distance through his binoculars; From what he could gather as he observed the enemy vessels, they were loading what few cannons they had with whatever they could arm them with.

Emmerich had a smug grin on his face as he gazed at the enemy armada; his Executive Officer noticed his expression and sighed heavily before asking the question on his mind.

"Sir, what are your orders?"

In response to this, Emmerich stowed away his binoculars before addressing the Executive Officer's concerns.

"Have the fleet load the guns; we are going to sail in between their fleet and tear them apart!"

In response to this, the Executive Officer sighed once more before accepting his orders.

"As you command Admiral"

After saying this he immediately proceeded to inform the fleet of their tasks. It did not take long for the fleet to be fully armed and prepped for battle, as such, They immediately began to sail towards the Imperial Armada.

When the Imperial Admiral saw this, he thought that the Austrians must have gone mad; after all, they were sailing right into the trajectory of their cannons. As such, he made a jest to his executive Officer as he witnessed the Austrian frigates closing in on them.

"It appears the Austrian Admiral has lost his mind, well, I am glad to see that they are making this easy for us!"

When the executive officer heard this, he began to chuckle before asking the question on his mind.

"Your orders, Admiral?"

In response to this, a wide grin appeared on the Admiral's face before letting his decision be known to all.

"Open fire when they approach; I'd like to see how their ships survive the barrage of our combined might!"

After saying this, the Imperial fleet prepared themselves for the upcoming battle. Though the Imperial Admiral's mood was relaxed, the same could not be said about his sailors. Many of them had heard rumors about the effectiveness of the Austrian weapons and spent what they viewed to be their last minutes praying to God for salvation.

Before long the Austrian vessels got into range of the Imperial Armada's primitive cannons, When the Imperial Admiral noticed this he gave the command

"Open fire"

Upon hearing this, the gunners lit the first set of guns where they were quickly fired off at the swiftly approaching Frigates. As the few cannons mounted on the galley fired onto the bow of the SMS Berengar, something happened that outright shocked the Imperial Admiral; the bow of the Austrian Frigate deflected the cannonball.

Due to the thin layer of steel plating covering the hull of the Austrian Vessels, they were well defended against basic cannonballs, and as such, it would take

more than a few of them to pierce through the hulls of the Berengar Class Frigates.

When the Admiral saw this. His eyes nearly popped out of their sockets, and he quickly began to panic. After all, he knew their weakness was that they had far fewer guns than the Austrian vessels and that once the Frigates reached their broadside range, they would be completely defenseless. As such he called out to his sailors to take swift action.

"Quickly reload and fire! Fire at will!"

As such, the hundreds of Imperial ships began to fire their three-pound cannons at the oncoming vessels; however, the solid balls fired from these primitive bronze cannons were far from enough to inflict severe damage onto the Austrian Frigates.

The most damage that the frigates had suffered was from a few of these projectiles landing upon their wooden decks and causing minor destruction. Before long, the agile steel-plated ships made their way in between the Imperial Vessels, where Emmerich gazed at the enemy Admiral with a wicked grin on his face before giving the ultimate command.

"All guns fire!"

The moment this command was driven all 3520 explosive shells were launched from their cannons onboard the 80 frigates, where they were propelled into the ranks of the hundreds of Imperial Vessels. The moment these shells impacted, they exploded, causing massive devastation to the tar-treated wooden ships.

Those who weren't immediately blasted into smithereens were quickly engulfed in the resulting flames of the hundreds if not thousands of small explosions. The Imperial Admiral, who was so confident not thirty minutes prior, could only gaze in horror for a brief second before dozens of cannonballs impacted upon his war galley, instantaneously blowing the vessel apart, and he along with it.

However, Emmerich was not satisfied with the results, as the enemy Armada lay torn asunder and engulfed in flames on the Adriatic sea. There were still a few partially intact vessels, and as such, he gave an order.

"Reload all guns and fire once more!"

Despite such an action being complete and total overkill, the ships within the fleet soon heard the command and, as such, reloaded their guns. The few sailors who had survived the initial volley gazed in horror to witness the grim reaper descend upon them and claim their souls. The moment the second volley was fired onto what few ships remained partially intact, the fiery explosions filled the air and engulfed what remained of the imperial fleet.

Emmerich gazed with a wicked grin on his face as he broke out into mad laughter; with the overwhelming technological advantage of the explosive shells and the 24 lb cannons capable of firing them, his fleet would be utterly unchallenged on the world's oceans for years to come.

He was amazed that Berengar could invent such unique Naval Technology and was glad to be the First Grand Admiral of the Royal Austrian Navy. As such, he turned around to boldly declare their victory over the Empire in this war.

"Men, we have done it! In a matter of minutes, we have single-handedly brought down one of the largest powers on the Mediterranean; with the overwhelming advantage of our ships, nobody in this world can challenge our might on the seas. It is a dawn of a new age; the era of Austrian dominance is upon us! You all have witnessed this historical moment with your very eyes. For King and Fatherland!"

The moment Emmerich said these words, the crew aboard the SMS Berengar shouted at the top of their lungs in response.

"For King and Fatherland!"

The more they repeated this phrase, the more the nearby ships joined in, as the chant began to spread across the whole Austrian fleet like a virus. Tens of thousands of voices could be overheard in the middle of the Adriatic Sea, among the burning wreckage of the Imperial Armada as they chanted over

and over again the words that had become one of several battle cries among Austria's Grand Military.

With this Victory, Austria had defeated any armed support the Holy Roman Empire could provide as an escort to their remaining merchant vessels, meaning that privateers and pirates alike were now free to raid the Imperial shipping without fear of recourse from the Holy Roman Empire.

When news of this victory eventually spread to the other powers of the Mediterranean, it would begin a new Naval Arms race. The balance of power in the western world had shifted overnight, and Austria now claimed to be the region's most supreme power.

Only by experimentation and construction of new vessels could the other powers hope to contend with the Austrian Navy. For now, the Austrian sailors who had taken part in the brief but historic battle decided to sail back to port and celebrate their overwhelming victory.

Chapter 323: Advancements in Munitions Technology

Aldo von Passau stared at the substance in his hands with a cautious expression upon his face, almost as if he were afraid that the slightest movement would cause the petri dish in his hands to blow up in his face. The substance contained within the glass was none other than Mercury Fulminate, an explosive compound most commonly found within munitions such as percussion caps during Berengar's past life.

The middle-aged Chemist gazed fondly at the substance; after years of experimentation, he and his team had finally created a chemical compound that could be used to enhance Berengar's military might.

While Berengar's enemies had begun the lengthy process of reverse engineering matchlock and flintlock weapons captured in warfare, it could be said that Austria had now reached a crucial point in arms development due to the efforts of the Kufstein Chemistry Department.

It had been close to three years since the Chemist found himself fleeing the church's wrath into the then Viscounty of Kufstein. As Berengar's borders expanded, so too did the number of Alchemists who were forced into Kufstein's labs to learn the science of Chemistry.

With more Chemists appearing among Aldo's ranks, they had begun to experiment in many different directions within the field of chemistry; one of these directions was research into explosive compounds.

After years of study, they had finally created mercury fulminate, which Berengar himself was incapable of doing. Though Berengar had a photographic memory filled with many important inventions from his past life, his knowledge of Chemistry was basic, to say the least.

As such, the young King had left the development of chemical compounds to the men best suited to the task, and that was Aldo von Passau and his Department of Chemistry. Aldo was quite excited about this new discovery.

The mere thought of his newest invention brought a smile like no other to the man's face. His subordinates stared at his curious expression from afar, thinking that the man had gone mad.? After a few moments of awkward silence, Aldo von Passau announced the results.

"We have finally done it! We have created mercury fulminate! What we need to do now is create as much of this compound as possible so that by the time King Berengar returns from his war for independence, we may surprise him!"

When the man's subordinates heard this, they immediately began to frown; they were already overworked as it was, now they had to produce a stockpile of this new compound? It would appear that Aldo wanted to work his men to an early grave.? Despite their reservations, they did as they were instructed and began to prepare another batch. It would be well over 12 hours before they were finally afforded any form of rest.

While the chemists of Austria were busy mass-producing mercury fulminate, Aldo had brought a sample of the substance with him to a man who was quite renowned within the city of Kufstein. Baronet Ludwig Schmidt had become an exceptionally wealthy man since Berengar's rise to power. Though he was getting on in the years, he continued to work in the industrial sector, overseeing Kufstein's massive industry.

Ludwig, at the moment, was preparing his son Jakob to take over his role within the next five to ten years; after all, he planned to retire when he

reached an appropriate age and leave his work in the hands of his eldest son, who he knew would serve Berengar faithfully.

While he was in his office, with his son, the older man heard a knock on his door, as such he immediately got out of his chair and walked over to it, where he was surprised to see the head of Berengar's chemistry department standing in his doorway with a vial that was filled with a fine white powder.

Immediately Ludwig's cheerful expression began to sink when he saw the dapper older man gazing at him with contempt. The contrast between the two men was quite substantial; Aldo was tall and refined in appearance, with a clean and elegant sense of attire.

While Ludwig was short and ragged, dressed in a blacksmith's apron that was covered in filth. Even his skin had oil, and soot spread across it. Ludwig gritted his teeth as he asked the question on his mind to the gentleman standing before him; as he spoke, it was not in the friendliest tone of voice.

"What are you doing here, Aldo?"

Aldo's expression was filled with smugness as he responded to Ludwig's question.

"My department has just finished making something incredible; I brought a sample over for you to test. Be careful, I know it is difficult for a simple man like you to understand, but this is a hazardous explosive compound.

When Ludwig heard these words, his natural prejudice towards Aldo immediately flew out the window, instead, his curiosity had replaced any inner fury that may have been dwelling within him. Ludwig carefully grabbed ahold of the mercury fulminate and gazed upon it with keen interest. He could not help but ask another question of the man who was his bitter rival.

"Tell me, Aldo, what exactly do you want me to do with this?"

Aldo's arrogant expression never shifted as he spoke to Ludwig as if he were an inferior.

"You're the engineer; it is your job to design new weapons for Berengar's forces to use. Figure out how to use this compound most effectively! Make it quick, too; we have no idea how much longer King Berengar's war for independence will last."

Ludwig took a deep breath as he calmed himself; he never enjoyed spending time with Aldo; the man acted so high and mighty around him, all because he was born to a much more prestigious position; Aldo was one of the many older men in Austria who still treated the nobility as if they were superior to the common folk in every way. After Ludwig had reached a state of mind where he could deal with Aldo's taunts, he responded to the man's outrageous demands.

"I will manage to make something by the time that our King returns from the battlefield, but Aldo, I will need more than just this tiny vial if my experiments are going to be successful. Are you certain that those chemists of yours are up to the task to produce the amount that I will require?"

In response, Aldo merely scoffed as he held his head high, with a haughty expression on his lips.

"You can rest assured, Ludwig; my Chemists will be able to produce more than enough to satisfy your so-called experiments. Just make sure you produce good results with the mercury fulminate that I will be providing you. I want Berengar to come home and see the contributions that my department has made with a proper demonstration."

After saying this, Aldo did not wait for a response; he simply departed from the factory with a look of disgust on his face. Though he knew Ludwig had provided much aid to Berengar's rise to power, he could not understand why the King would promote such an uncouth man to any form of nobility.

After Aldo had departed, Ludwig sighed heavily before returning to his son, who was sitting patiently observing the conversation. He placed the mercury fulminate in a safe location before commenting on the experience.

"That guy is such a pompous ass! Never mind that... Do you have any good ideas on how to use this stuff, boy?"

Jakob thought about the matter for some time before he was suddenly reminded of a serious complaint that his father had always mentioned regarding the existing flintlock mechanism. As such, he quickly got to action and searched amidst the piles of papers stacked throughout the office until he found what he was looking for.

The young man cleared the table with a wide grin on his face and pointed at the rifle design that Ludwig had been attempting to create for some time now, the purpose behind this rifle was to solve the issues regarding weatherproofing that the flintlock action had by nature and to increase the rate of fire of the average soldier.

"Father, the critical component of your rifle design that has been missing was a means to ignite the paper cartridge once it sealed within the chamber, correct? Well, what if we filled a small metallic cup with the explosive Aldo had given us and encased it within the paper cartridge?"

I mean, we don't know how this explosive works yet, but with some experimentation, we might be able to make this work!"

Ludwig was shocked; until now, he had completely given up on the needle rifle design that he was experimenting with, but what his son had said was entirely feasible. With that in mind, the father and son immediately got to work, as they would begin to revise the blueprints and experiment with the explosive powder.

Though the two men had no way of knowing it, they were about to invent an essential piece of military technology that Berengar had been planning for some time now. One that would allow Austria to remain dominant in a world where its enemies had begun to reverse engineer its current weapons.

Chapter 324: Surrounded by the Enemy I

Captain Andreas Jaeger rapidly loaded his quick loading tube into his 1419 Jaeger rifle's muzzle. After finishing this task, he affixed his bayonet upon his rifle and prepared for the next wave of attack. He was surrounded and outnumbered while running low on munitions. If something did not change soon, he and his company of elite light infantry would quickly be defeated.

Recently he and his company of Jaegers had been deployed to the front lines to hunt down and destroy the various Italian skirmishers that had popped up on the field of battle. With the superior range and camouflaged equipment, these brave men had led the charge in the ongoing campaign against Austria's enemies within Northern Italy.

The Jaeger Corps had taken up the role of the Royal Austrian Army's premier light infantry as they advanced beyond their main force and hunted down all potential obstacles on their journey. After discovering the locations of the Italian Skirmishers by sheer coincidence, they had begun an extensive campaign to clear the path towards the city of Milan.

Unfortunately, the Italians realized their information was leaked after the Jaeger Corp several minor skirmishes between the Italian ambushers and the Austrian Jaegers. Because of this, the Italians had responded by successfully encircling Andreas' Company while forcing them into defending their position within a small village against a couple of thousand Italian soldiers.

At the moment, the Austrian Jaegers were holed up inside an agricultural village that lies within the vicinity of Milan. During their brief period of respite, they had used their time wisely gathering whatever resources they could find within the town to create a makeshift barricade in an attempt to funnel the Italian Soldiers into their line of fire.

As Andreas finished loading his Jaeger Rifle, he popped his head out from behind cover, aimed down its sights at the charging Italian Horde, and fired his projectile straight into the torso of one of the Italian men at arms.

The hexagonal bullet pierced through the man's breastplate as if it were made of butter before blowing out his insides. Blood flew into the air. However, Andreas did not enjoy the sight. Instead, he ducked behind cover once more and rapidly began to reload his weapon.

While this was going on, all of his men were using a similar strategy. However, in between shots, arrows would rain down upon Andreas, and his forces, one of these arrows fell upon Andreas' camouflaged steel helmet, getting stuck within the netting and faux foliage contained within.

Luckily for him and his men, their armor was vastly superior to the primitive weapons used by the Italians, and they could easily resist the attacks; with this in mind, Andreas finished loading his rifle before aiming down its sights at the next attacker.

The moment he pulled the trigger, the hammer of his action fell, and the flint sparked the gunpowder propelling the hexagonal bullet downrange and into the torso of the man who was no more than five meters away.

After doing so, Andreas did not load his rifle and instead prepared himself for the enemy charge. Before long, the soldiers under his command had also prepared their bayonets and thrust them towards the oncoming Italian soldiers, piercing through their mail and gambeson armor and into their vital organs.

The Italians were funneled into the gaps between the makeshift barricades, a few men at a time while facing the bayonets of a dozen or more Austrian. After well over a hundred Italian soldiers, the wall began to break apart, and Andreas was forced to retreat. As such, he gave the command to his soldiers while gritting his teeth in defeat.

"Fall back to the secondary line!"

With this said, his soldiers who were still standing against the onslaught abandoned the first barricade, where they advanced back towards the second line of defense constructed within the village. As Andreas and his soldiers crossed back to the secondary objective, the defenders behind it opened fire upon the rampaging Italians, where the Austrian Jaegers quickly began to reload their rifles and fire a second volley.

Andreas seriously wished at this moment that he had a Schmidt gun nearby to help deal with the massive numbers they were fighting against. They were too far ahead of the main army to gain support, and the closest units nearby were other Jaeger companies who were most likely unaware of their ongoing predicament.

As his men were firing upon the nearby enemies, he noticed that one of his soldiers was carrying a pouch filled with several grenades, the moment Andreas saw this, he ran over and questioned the man.

"Where the hell did you get these? We're not grenadiers!"

The soldier was so focused on fighting the battle that he forgot he was carrying grenades with him, as such a wide grin appeared on his face as he took ahold of one of the primitive steel grenades and lit its fuse before tossing it into the Italian mob. As it exploded, the device sent shrapnel in all directions, claiming the lives of the nearby Italian soldiers. When the soldier saw this, he began to cheer before answering Andreas' question.

"I had forgotten I had these little bastards! I won them in a card game with some grenadiers; I suppose we're just lucky that high command hasn't begun to crack down on inter-unit gambling yet!"

As he said this, the soldier began to distribute the grenades to the nearby Austrian Jaegers, who lit them and tossed them into the fray, blasting the Italian army apart, causing massive casualties to the enemy forces. After the vanguard of the Italian ranks was utterly decimated by volley fire and the grenades, the remaining Italian soldiers fled from the village and back into the field where their commander was gathered.

Andreas sighed in relief; the Austrians had successfully defended against another wave, but how much longer they could hold out was another question entirely. As such, he quickly gave his orders to the men gathered beside him in the village.

"Rebuild the front line! Attend to the wounded and prepare for the next wave; all we can do is wait and hope for reinforcements to arrive!"

Though Andreas severely doubted that aid would arrive. This was already the third wave of attack that they had repelled, and there was no sign of reinforcements on the horizon. They had no way to signal back to the main camp, and enemies had surrounded them on all sides. Things were looking grim for the Captain and his company of Jaegers.

Before long, the Austrian soldiers had refortified their position; there would be no grenades for this next wave, and they had no artillery support. Many of the men were beginning to run low on munitions; as such, they would not easily defend their position.

Andreas waited, with his rifle loaded, and flintlock action cocked back; before long, the next wave showed themselves, so he gave his troops the command to open fire.

"Fire at will!"

With this said, Andreas squeezed the trigger of his Jaeger Rifle and sent the hexagonal bullet down range and into the torso of the enemy soldier; in doing so, the man dropped to the ground struggling on his last breath.

After this volley was fired, Andreas and his soldiers quickly reloaded their rifles before firing another round of shots down range and into the crowd of Italians. While Andreas was preparing his next load, a crossbow bolt flew past him and into the eye socket of the soldier behind him, killing him instantly.

Andreas did not have time to lament the soldier's death. Instead, he finished loading his weapon before aiming his rifle and firing another shot at the enemy formation. Bullets were sent downrange, and arrows were returned upon his position, pelting his soldiers with the projectiles.

Some died, some were wounded, and others were entirely unscathed by the grace of God. It did not take long for the Italian soldiers to arrive at the barricade, where they struggled to break through; a few men at a time were able to squeeze through the gap where the Austrian Jaegers pierced through their armor's weak points with their triangular bayonets, inflicting death on the men unfortunate enough to break through their defenses.

Some of the Austrian Jagers had resorted to sharpening their spades and began using them as blunt instruments as they cracked the Italian soldiers over their steel helmets, causing concussions and even death to occur among their ranks.

The battle was bloody, and both sides suffered losses as the Italians struggled to seize the ground where the Jaegers had occupied; if they could not get rid of these Ghosts, their army would suffer throughout this entire war. The thousands of Italians that were present threw everything they had at the Jaegers' makeshift defenses.

However, in the end, by sheer force of will, they were repelled once more, falling back to their encampment. The night was beginning to fall upon the land, and with it, the sounds of gunshots and death throes came to a halt.

Andreas did not know what the Italians had planned for the next assault, but if things continued as they had until now, defeat was inevitable, and that was something he was unwilling to allow. The Austrian Captain would have to come up with an innovative idea if he wanted to defeat the Italians who had encircled the lightly fortified village.

Chapter 325: Surrounded by the Enemy II

Night soon descended as the sky was filled with darkness, and the stench of death permeated the small farming village where Andreas and his men had set up their line of defense. They were surrounded by an army of over a thousand Italian Soldiers, and they had less than a hundred able-bodied men at their disposal.

The Austrian Jaegers were running low on munitions, and most of them were wounded to some degree. One thing was sure; if they remained within this village, it would become their grave. Andreas was having a serious discussion with his two Lieutenants as they tried to come up with some plan to survive.

One of the men in question had his helmet in one of his hands and his rifle slung over his shoulder. His face was covered in dirt as he presented an idea to the other two officers.

"We have only one option; we must launch a night raid and kill as many of their men while they sleep. We do not have enough cartridges left to sustain ourselves against another assault."

However, the other officer was against this idea; it was risky and most certainly would result in the deaths of their soldiers; as such, he began to offer his own plan of action.

"That will never work, there are too many of them, all that will do is get our soldiers killed, what we need to do is flee under cover of darkness, there's less than a hundred of us left, I say we pick up our gear, we build some stretchers, and we get our brothers out of here before we all meet our demise!"

Immediately the first Lieutenant argued against this point; there were too many valuable supplies they would be leaving behind for the enemy to scavenge if they left the field of battle.

"You are saying that we abandon the corpses of our brothers? What about the equipment they have, their painted breastplates and helmets, their camouflage uniforms? Their Jaeger rifles!?! If such valuable equipment falls into the Italians hands, it will be used against us in the future!"

In response to this, the other officer snickered before commenting on the worst-case scenario.

"If we all die here, they will have 120 jaeger rifles and camouflage uniforms to use against us in the future. Do you want to give the Italians such firepower?"

After hearing this, the officer who suggested a night raid gritted his teeth before bowing his head in defeat. A night raid against such a large force would not allow them to achieve victory. If they attempted such a suicidal move, they would be caught before they could kill even a hundred of the Italian soldiers.

At this moment, a feminine voice revealed itself from the shadows, Startling the three officers as they pulled out their weapons.

"Might I make a suggestion?"

After posing the question, an above-average-looking woman revealed herself from behind a nearby hay bale. Andreas' two officers pointed their weapons in her direction while shouting commands.

"Don't move!"

"Identify yourself!"

Seeing the frightened expressions on the officer's faces, the woman sighed heavily before reaching into her bust and pulling out a special badge.

"Agent Artke Lientz, Austrian Royal Intelligence. Now can you put down those rifles before you accidentally blow a hole through my torso?"

Andreas sighed heavily before motioning his two officers to lower their weapons; after doing so, he asked the question on his mind.

"What exactly is one of his majesty's spies doing in an insignificant farming village like this?"

Artke frowned before responding to Andreas' question in a deflective manner.

"I am afraid that is classified; however, what I can tell you, is that if you insist on running away, there is no possibility of you making it out alive. You are surrounded, and they are expecting you to make a break for it; I know I would if I was in their position..."

Upon hearing this, Andreas frowned, he expected it would be a bloody battle if they attempted to escape, but if the enemy were anticipating them to do so, it would only lead to a massacre. As such, he relented and asked Artke what she had on her mind.

"What's the plan?"

A sadistic smile spread across the female agent's face as she revealed her dastardly plot to defeat the enemy.

"It's simple, you have an entire village filled with hostages, release them all, and I will sneak into the Italian Camp amid the chaos, in the process I will poison their food and water supply. Tomorrow morning they will all be so sick that they won't be able to resist, and you can sweep into their encampment and kill them all."

Andreas thought about it for a few moments before he sighed in defeat.

"Very well, we will go with your plan; I will go round up the civilians; when we cut them loose, you will have your opportunity."

In response, the girl nodded; afterward, she was bound up in rope and carried off to where the other civilians were being held. Before long, Andreas soldiers had gathered the civilians in the middle of the village, where he began to speak to them in an authoritative tone of voice.

"Tomorrow morning, the Italians will attack this village, and they will slaughter everyone within it to ensure our deaths. Let it be known that I Captain Andreas Jaeger, in service of his Majesty King Berengar von Kufstein, am a merciful man; as such, I hereby release you! Go forth to your masters and seek their protection!"

With that said, the Jaegers walked behind the villagers and cut their bindings; as they did so, the Villagers immediately fled from their homes and into the direction of the Italian Camp, utterly unaware that there was a spy embedded in their ranks. After they were out of sight, one of Andreas' lieutenants approached him while lighting a hemp cigarette.

"Do you think she can succeed?"

In response to this, Andreas shrugged his shoulders before responding.

"I have no idea, but she is right; her option is the best hope we have..."

While the Austrian Jaegers prepared themselves for battle, Artke had successfully infiltrated the Italian Camp. The Commander of the Italian forces was shocked to see that all of the villagers were still alive and even more surprised to see that the Austrians had cut them loose.

This made him wary, he did not know what the Austrian Captain had hidden up his sleeve, and as such, he sent a few of his forces to go scout out the village, while the rest of his soldiers sought to prepare accommodations for the villagers who were now embedded within their Camp.

As for Artke, she had already found her way into the water supply, where she took out a pouch full of white powder; this was the arsenic that Berengar so commonly employed in his assassinations.

Her real reason for being in this village was that she had botched an assassination attempt against the Duke of Milan and fled from the nearby city. While she had escaped her pursuers, she soon found herself trapped in the village while the Jaegers fought for their very survival.

After spiking the water containers with the poison, she soon made her way to the butcher's tent and the grain storage, where she spread the toxin to the

wheat and meat supply. After doing so, she double-checked to see if she had been followed before making her way to where the rest of the refugees were located within the Camp, where she began to blend in perfectly.

With this, the Austrians had ensured their victory, as such many hours passed before the sun rose in the sky above, it was only after it was well past ten in the morning that the Austrian Jaeger's advanced into the Italian encampment.

While the Jaegers cautiously approached the area, they soon realized that the Italian soldiers and civilians alike were sick to their stomachs, and too feeble even to stand.? With this in mind, Andreas smiled before giving his orders to his troops.

"Kill every soldier you come across, as for the civilians, leave them be!"

With this said, a slaughter began to unfold within the Italian encampment as men too weak to defend themselves were stabbed to death by the thrusts of the Austrian bayonets. Thousands of men met their end at the hands of the Austrian Ghosts that the Italians had just the day before pushed to the brink of death.

When the massacre was finished, Artke revealed herself to the Austrian soldiers; they were surprised to see that someone was not affected by the poison which had been inflicted upon the Italian soldiers and civilians. After all, Andreas did not reveal the entire nature of his plan to his troops.

the identities of Berengar's agents were a highly regarded secret.? As such, Artke did not reveal her information to the whole company and instead saluted to the Captain as she made her request.

"Captain, I am afraid that I require extraction. My cover has been blown, and I must confess that I have failed in my duties. I have to inform his majesty of this information as quickly as possible!"

Though the Austrian soldiers did not know who this woman was, to salute the Captain in such a manner and make such a request meant that she was most likely tied to Austrian Intelligence. As such, they did not comment on the situation at hand. Instead, they merely allowed their commanding officer to handle it.

With her so publically asking for extraction in front of his men, Andreas had no option but to do so; the Agents of Austrian Royal Intelligence were highly regarded and could control military units if necessary.

If he declined her offer, she would simply order him to do so in front of his troops, which would be a significant blow to his prestige. The fact that she had made a request in front of his soldiers was a sign of respect. With this in mind, he nodded his head with a stoic expression before agreeing to her terms.

"Alright, I will escort you back to the main force. However, we will be taking my route, is that understood?"

Artke saw no fault with these conditions, and as such, nodded her head in silence; as she did so, Andreas gave his orders to his troops.

"Men, recover the bodies of our fallen brothers and whatever supplies you can gather; I want you all ready to depart by noon. Do I make myself clear?"

Without hesitation, the soldiers all cried out in unison.

"Yes, sir!"

With that said, the battle had come to a close, and the Austrians did as they were instructed. While the other Jaeger units continued to battle the Italian Skirmishers, Andreas and his men would be extracting the female agent back to the safety of the main host.

Chapter 326: Near Effortless Victory

Days had passed since the Company of Jaegers led by Captain Andreas reached the main force and informed Berengar of their troubles. Berengar had a long conversation with the female agent about her failed mission before dispatching her on another classified operation.

Eventually, the Jaeger Corps returned with minimal losses from their operation; having cleared the entire path forward, Berengar and his army marched onto the city of Milan, where they were now outside its gates.

A siege camp was rapidly constructed in the same fashion that Berengar usually established; an extensive trench line was based around the

encampment, surrounded by barbed wire. Embedded within this trench line were the Cannons and Schmidt guns that bombarded the city and defended the camp.

Observation towers were set up, with snipers atop them, giving the Austrian army a select view of their surroundings and the ability to react to any threat that might appear. The thousands of tents were used to house the soldiers and their supplies within the center of the trench line.

Though the siege camp was established, Berengar had not yet ordered the bombardment of the city. Instead, he was within his command tent, overgoing the strategy of how the Austrians intended to take the city in the most efficient manner possible.

Surrounding Berengar was his highest-ranking officers, each one commanding a large section of his forces. Among them was the Colonel tasked with leading his elite Jaeger Corps, who, unlike the rest of the soldiers that were dressed in renaissance style armor and attire, was clad in relatively modern equipment.

Spread out on the table before the officers and their King was a map of the city; Berengar had marked the various gatehouses in the town and had begun to address his General, who was tasked with leading the Artillery Brigades.

"I want the cannons fixed on these gatehouses, I want the gates turned into splinters, and the entire gatehouse brought to ruin. Once the gatehouses have crumbled, our armies will charge into the city and slaughter any resistance they might come across!"

When the artillery General heard this, he saluted Berengar before responding to his strategy.

"It will be done, your majesty!"

As Berengar heard this, he smiled before addressing the officer in charge of the infantry brigades.

"After the artillery has brought down the gates, I need your men to penetrate the gaps as quickly as possible; I want this city picked clean by sunset. There

is no reason to prolong this siege; the longer we stay here, the longer the enemy has time to prepare for our advance."

The infantry General quickly responded to Berengar's concerns in the same manner as the artillery General; after doing so, Berengar began to address the Colonel of the Jaeger Corps.

"As for you, I want you and your soldiers to gather what supplies you need and prepare to move out at a moment's notice. I want the path towards Parma cleared before we even begin our march forward. We have spent far too much time already bogged down here in Milan."

When the Jaeger Colonel heard this, he nodded his head in response before uttering his acceptance of Berengar's terms.

"Don't worry, your majesty, we Jaegers are the spearhead of the Royal Austrian Army; I promise you won't see a single skirmisher on your journey to Parma!"

As Berengar heard this, he smiled and nodded before dismissing his officers.

"Alright, you all know your plans, quickly set to the task; I want our troops prepared to move out before nightfall!"

When Berengar said this, all of the gathered officers quickly saluted him before responding in the affirmative.

"Yes, your majesty!"

After saying this, they all exited the tent before preparing their troops for battle. As for Berengar, he pulled out a golden chalice and poured some fortified wine within it before taking a sip for himself. Thanks to his influence, the world was rapidly changing, and he knew it would not be long before his enemies began to adapt to his weapons.

Sieges would not always be this easy, and as such, he had to savor the swift victories while still managing to achieve them. When he returned from this war, he desperately needed to begin the industrialization process of Austria;

he had already advanced to the limits of pre-industrial society. If he wanted to maintain his dominance, the era of steel and steam would need to occur.

As he was thinking about such things, the cannons began to echo in the distance as they unleashed their fury onto the gatehouses of the City of Milan; with his current prowess, Berengar estimated that at most it would take an hour before the city gates were brought to ruin and his soldiers could swarm the city like an army of locusts.

As such, Berengar spent the remaining time of the bombardment within his command tent, overgoing his plans. The longer this war dragged out, the less beneficial it was for Berengar; he needed to quickly make his way to Bologna. However, there were several small cities in between, such as Parma, which he needed to pass through first.

After doing so, he would head to Florence to capture the Medici's wealth and bring down the Imperial Crown. If things kept going as planned, this war would take at most last a few months. As Berengar was making these plans, an officer arrived within the tent, where he informed Berengar of their progress.

"Your majesty, the gates have crumbled, and our soldiers have begun to advance into the city!"

As Berengar heard this, he smiled before grabbing ahold of his burgonet and placing it upon his head. An army of roughly 50,000 men was rushing into the city and ransacking it for its worth; it would be a matter of hours before they began to depart. As such Berengar intended to enjoy the sights and take a stroll through the city. With this in mind, he informed the officer of his decision.

"Gather my guard; I will be entering the city..."

The officer nodded before departing from the tent; his guard was already established when Berengar entered the camp a few minutes later. Most of these men were among their respective units' elites and had formed a rudimentary protection unit for some time now.

When Berengar saw this, he realized that he was now a King and needed a dedicated unit to protect himself and his family; he decided that after this war was over, he would establish a proper Royal Guard.

After gazing fondly upon his soldiers, Berengar mounted his steed where the unit tasked with his protection followed suit; after seeing that the team was prepared to enter the city, Berengar called out his commands.

"Forward march!"

With this said, the King of Austria and his Guard marched into the burning city as conquerors. As they passed through the gatehouse that was now nothing more than splinters and debris, Berengar noticed the pile of corpses, which mainly consisted of the Italian Defenders. The rear echelon of his forces was already piling the bodies up into wagons so they could be properly disposed of.

The scent of smoke and blood filled the air as Berengar advanced further into the city; what he saw was his troops looting everything of value and restraining the citizens so that they could not resist. It became increasingly clear that the level of resistance Berengar's army faced after entering the city was practically non-existent. Aside from a few hundred Italian Defenders held up within the City's Castle, the rest of Milan had already surrendered peacefully.

The city's citizens gazed upon Berengar with a mix of awe, and hatred, as they saw the legendary figure in the flesh, striding forth on horseback as if conquering their city, was as natural as breathing air.

In just a few hours, the once-mighty city of Milan had fallen, and its riches plundered by the Austrian invaders. Despite this, no citizens chose to resist; they were well aware of the futility of fighting against the Royal Austrian Army.

News of the defeat of Verona had already spread across Northern Italy, as well as the disastrous defeat in the Adriatic that sent the remainder of their navy to the depths of the Mediterranean. In the eyes of many Italian citizens, this war was already over, and the Empire had lost.

Despite this, the Emperor did not offer terms of surrender, nor would Berengar accept them, not until he had seized Florence and taken the vast fortune of the Medicis for himself. In doing so, he would cripple his most giant enemy financially, and that was the Catholic Church.

With this in mind, the City of Milan fell in a near-effortless victory for the Austrian Royal Army; what could have taken days of brutal conflict lasted a mere matter of hours. This would not be the last time Berengar ransacked a city in such a manner; after all, the will of the Italian people to fight against such an overwhelming foe who wanted nothing more than independence was waning by the day.

Chapter 327: One Last Act of Desperation

Emperor Balsamo Corsini was sitting upon his imperial throne within the City of Florence, news of Milan's fall had just reached his ears, and he could hardly believe it. If it were not coming from a trusted source, the man would never dare to believe such shocking words.

The Holy Roman Emperor swallowed the saliva built up in his throat before asking the question on his mind to the General standing before him.

"Can you repeat what you just said for me?"

Upon being asked this question, the General did not hesitate to respond with the words he had just spoken moments before. He sighed with defeat as he announced the grim news that he had only recently received.

"Milan has fallen; it took the Austrian Army roughly an hour to penetrate the city's defenses. Afterward, resistance to the Austrian invaders ended as swiftly as it had begun. According to reports, the Austrians have been ransacking the wealth of our Northernmost cities. Anything of value that can be taken has been stripped from the local populace, leaving the population poor and destitute."

With this clarification, the Emperor rested his head in his hands as he gazed at the floor with a panicked expression; he could seldom believe Milan had fallen so quickly, especially after he dispatched forces to hamper the Austrian advance. As such, he promptly asked about the status of his skirmishers.

"What about the troops we have set in the field? How many of them remain to slow down the Austrian Army?"

The General who had given the Emperor his report cleared his throat before speaking up about the status of their skirmishers.

"We have lost contact with the forces who were supposed to halt the Austrian advance; my guess is the Austrians found a way to hunt them down. The last message we received from any of our units in the field is a bit cryptic..."

The Emperor frowned as he heard this; in fact, he was quite afraid to ask, but he knew it was his duty to do so as such Balsamo masked his internal trepidation with a facade of confidence as he asked the General for his report.

"What were the contents of the message?"

The General once more did not hesitate to present the evidence; as such, he looked at the message written down with what appeared to be the blood of the man who had written it before speaking up.

"There are only two words... Austrian Ghosts"

Balsamo was a deeply religious and superstitious man. As such, his prior confident facade came crumbling down as soon as he heard the phrase. The Emperor immediately stood up from his seat with an expression filled with dread before breaking out into a mad outburst.

"What sorcery is this? Berengar can control the souls of the damned! Is that what my soldiers mean to tell me! How can we defeat such evil!?"

While the Emperor was having a mental breakdown, the General cleared his throat and tried to present a reasonable alternative to his liege as such, he responded with a firm resolve.

"I don't believe the soldiers meant literal ghosts; I think what the report means is that Austria has hidden units that move in the shadows and swiftly attack our forces while remaining unseen. These alleged ghosts are a serious threat and need to be treated as such."

Upon hearing a reasonable explanation, the Emperor collapsed in his seat as he sighed heavily in relief; it took him a moment or two to calm his nerves, after all the manner that the Austrians had managed to advance through his territory was already border lining the supernatural.

The Emperor spent the next two moments reflecting on his options. The more he thought about it, the more he realized the possibility of victory in this war was practically non-existent. His Navy was utterly decimated and lied at the bottom of the Mediterranean.

His trade fleet was being pillaged by a combination of Berengar's privateers and foreign pirates with impunity, and as such, the economy had suffered severely. Without a proper navy, his trade would come grinding to a halt soon enough.

As for the Swiss front, it was a lost cause; half of the Nation had already fallen after the defeat at Zurich. The Swiss leaders were now convening to negotiate their surrender to Adelbrand and his Army of 25,000 Austrians.

Balsamo swore that if he were capable, he would march his armies into the Swiss Confederation and remind them who they were subject to. However, he could not do this, he had suffered serious losses against Berengar's Army, and the Austrians had cut off any route into the Swiss Confederation.

While all of this was happening, Berengar's main force was plowing straight through Lombardy and would soon enough be at his gates. Though the Emperor's forces had captured some weapons from Berengar's Army, it would be years before they could adequately reverse engineer such advanced weaponry; without a doubt, the war would be over long before then.

Thus the Holy Roman Emperor was left with two options, surrender and expect leniency, or fight in a last stand against the Austrian Army. The Emperor was too proud to bow his head to some lowly Baron who proclaimed himself King. No, there was only one way for this conflict to end; he would rather die than admit defeat to an upstart like Berengar.

Emperor Balsamo Corsini quickly rose from his seat and dusted off his attire before reclaiming his determination. After doing so, he boldly declared to his General his final plan for turning this war around.

"General, gather every man and child that can bear arms within our remaining territory. Equip them with whatever weapons you can find, and bring them to Florence! If Berengar wants to defeat me, he will have to take the city from an army of over a hundred thousand men!"

The General sighed when he heard this; bringing such a large army to Florence would deplete their food reserves; even if the Royal Austrian Army were to be defeated at Florence, the capital would starve by the time winter arrived.

The war was already lost, and yet the Emperor was too proud to admit defeat. Nevertheless, the General had his orders and nodded his head before responding in the affirmative.

"I will do what you ask, but your Majesty, as your General, I feel I must advise you against such a drastic measure. Regardless of whether we win or lose this battle, this war as a whole will be the end of the Holy Roman Empire!

Even if we manage to repel the Austrians, our armies will be devastated, and our economy will be in ruin. If we genuinely undergo such a disastrous option, we will no longer have the ability to project enough strength to control our vassals, and one by one, they will follow in the path of Austria..."

However, despite this advice, the Emperor was undeterred from his course of action; either Austria would break its back against the walls of Florence, or the Empire would crumble, however, the dignity of the Emperor would never falter, as such Balsamo Corsini glared at his General before responding.

"Your opinion is noted, but you will do what I ask, or I will find a General who will..."

After hearing that the Emperor was set on this suicidal path, the General sighed heavily before nodding his head. The future was bleak for the Empire, but he supposed all good things must come to an end. After all, the vassals that made up the Holy Roman Empire were largely autonomous, to begin with. With this in mind, the General steeled his resolve before responding to the Emperor's demands.

"Very well, you shall have your army, but when the Empire begins to fall apart, let it be known that I advised against this course of action."

The Emperor said nothing and allowed the General to depart in silence. Instead, he sat down upon his throne once more and took a large swig from

his chalice filled with wine. The man continued to drink until the contents within the glass were entirely within the confines of his stomach.

The Emperor had faith that Berengar would not so quickly seize the Capital of the Empire with such a large force of defenders. Even if most of them were nothing more than peasant levies, bodies were bodies, and Berengar's power could be overwhelmed eventually.

As such, while Berengar rapidly began to advance upon the city of Parma, the Empire had started withdrawing all of its forces within the field and the garrisons which guarded the northern towns to Florence. As for Southern Italy, they too were tasked with bringing forth troops to defend Florence from the Austrian invasion.

The Battle of Florence would become the determining battle in this war for Austrian Independence; whether or not the Empire would crumble in defeat was mere speculation at this point. After all, the union of the various Imperial States was still beneficial to most of its members. One thing was sure, though, this battle would have long-reaching effects on the power structure of the European continent.

Chapter 328: Developing the Needle Rifle

Ludwig stood on the range contained within the weapons testing facility that lies outside the boundaries of Kufstein City. In his hand was a prototype that he had been working on for some time now. Due to the advancements in chemical technology such as Mercury Fulminate and the creation of percussion caps Ludwig had finally been able to complete his design.

The working title for this weapon was the Schmidt Needle Rifle; the reason for this name was the fact that this single shot, bolt action rifle, used a long needle to penetrate through the end of a paper cartridge, where it would strike the percussion cap embedded within and thus ignite the powder propelling the bullet downrange.

The rifle was equipped with a 33.66-inch barrel that utilized the same polygonal rifling that the 1419 Jaeger Rifles were equipped with; it also used the .451 lead alloy projectile. Unlike the hexagonal bullets issued to the Jaeger Rifles, this Needle Rifle utilized a cylindrical projectile of a more traditional design.

The sights on this gun were a ladder-style iron sight that graduated from 100 to 1600 yards, though truthfully, that maximum range was being optimistic. Unlike needle rifle designs from Berengar's previous life, this rifle was manufactured with durability and reliability in mind, and as such, it utilized a reinforce locking system, and a more robust needle, that was easily replaceable from the rear of the action in the event that it became damaged.

Overall, its appearance resembled the Mauser Model 1871 from Berengar's previous life. Ludwig had designed a new blade-style bayonet that was similar to the 1871/84 pattern bayonet from Berengar's past life. The most significant difference between the Mauser 1871, and the Schmidt Needle Rifle, was that this was not a centerfire weapon, but a needle gun.

Ludwig loaded the hand-rolled paper cartridge into the chamber before shutting the bolt; after he did so, he aimed down the sights at a hundred yards before pulling the trigger. The needle on the bolt pierced through the rear of the paper cartridge and struck the percussion cap, igniting the powder and sending the .451 lead alloy projectile down range and into the target.

As for the rest of the paper cartridge, it was blown out the bore of the rifle; the moment Ludwig fired the cartridge, he cycled the action to the rear, where he placed another cartridge in the chamber before firing at the target once more. It was another solid hit; after doing so, he continued this for a total of 12 rounds in a single minute.

The garrison who were watching him test out this new rifle were amazed by its fire rate. However, they were uncertain of its effective range, and due to Ludwig being a poor shot, he had not hit all of his targets.

With this in mind, a man walked over to Ludwig; he was not wearing the standard army uniform. Instead, he was dressed in the feldgrau uniform used by the Jaeger corps. This man was using crutches as he approached Ludwig.

Evidently this young soldier was wounded in battle and sent home to recover; he just so happened to be hanging out with one of his friends from the Garrison when Ludwig showed up to test-fire his new weapon.

The Jaeger was blown away by the rate of fire of the weapon. However, he was not impressed with the accuracy, being the expert marksman that he

was, he deduced it was most likely due to a lack of proper training from the man who wielded it, and as such, he decided to volunteer for the position to test the gun after seeing it was safe to operate.

"My Lord, Corporal Lach Wickten at your service! It would be my honor to test this rifle for you to see how effective its range is! That is if you do not mind an old Jaeger like myself doing so..."

Ludwig looked over at the man and noticed he was dressed in a military uniform unlike one he had ever seen before, it was sleek and lacking the noticeable embellishment that most of Berengar's troops used.

Despite Ludwig's lack of formality with the uniform, the old man recognized the silver oakleaf pin on the man's field cap which designated him as a member of the Royal Austrian Jaeger Corps; it was a crime to reproduce the pin and use it without authorization.

As such, the man before him was either a member of Berengar's elite forces or a fraud risking a criminal sentence. Ludwig was betting on the former of those two possibilities and nodded his head with a stoic expression.

"Not at all; show me what you Jaeger's are capable of!"

The soldier smiled and sat down at the bench rest before grabbing ahold of the Needle Rifle and placing a paper cartridge in its chamber just as Ludwig had done prior; he then adjusted its iron sights from 100 yards to 1000 yards, a shot he was usually capable of pulling off with his Jaeger Rifle under ideal conditions.

He gauged the wind in the air before squeezing the trigger, sending the projectile downrange at a steel target that was sitting out at roughly 1000 yards, the audible ping of the lead crashing against steel resounded throughout the testing field and signaled to everyone present that the Jaeger had hit his mark.

This was a phenomenal feat for the average soldiers of the garrison; most troops in the Austrian Army were unaware of just how proficient the Jaegers were at long-range combat; they had never witnessed them in battle due to them being a force deployed far ahead of the traditional battlefield.

After pulling the trigger and sending the round downrange, the Jaeger immediately cycled the bolt back to the rear and put another paper cartridge lying on the table into the chamber before sending the bolt home. After doing so, he aimed down at another target 1200 yards downrange and adjusted his sights to compensate for the difference in distance.

Having made his calculations, the young soldier pulled the trigger, and once more, an audible ping resounded throughout the range. This action of two shots in under ten seconds successfully hitting targets at such a distance shocked the crowd of soldiers even more.

After the Jaeger had followed up with a third shot at 1500 yards that also successfully hit its target, he cycled the bolt back to clear the weapon, not that it needed to do so, before chuckling to himself. As he did so, he cried out at the top of his lungs.

"Wonderful, simply wonderful! I need one of these for when I go back to the field; how much do you want for it?"

However, Ludwig shook his head as he informed the young soldier about the reality of the weapon.

"This is just a prototype; the final product will have to be approved by the King for service in the Army. You will have to wait until then..."

Despite Ludwig declining his offer the Jaeger was persistent and made a sizeable offer

"If you can make another one of these for me, I will pay two, no three Guildens! I know plenty of my comrades who would do the same!"

Ludwig was tempted to take the soldier up on his offer, but the weapon still hadn't been thoroughly tested yet, and he didn't want the man to lose his life due to a malfunction; as such, he declined once more.

"Once I figure out the kinks in the rifle and improve it, I will be happy to sell you one if you really can't wait until they become standard issue."

The soldier frowned in response to this, but he understood that Ludwig had good intentions; as such, he agreed to the man's terms.

"Alright, don't keep me waiting too long; in a few weeks, I will be back in the field, and I would feel a hell of a lot safer with this rifle as my primary weapon than the current issue Jaeger Rifle!"

Ludwig scratched the back of his head as he responded to the soldier's eagerness to purchase his rifle.

"I will see what I can do. Hopefully, I can have a functional variant made for you to use in the field by then."

After saying this, the Jaeger thanked Ludwig before picking up his crutches and heading off from the testing facility; he had a broad smile spread across his face like a kid on Christmas; such an excellent weapon solved his biggest complaints about the currently issued muzzleloading rifles.

As for Ludwig, he sighed in relief after the overly-excited soldier was gone before picking up his prototype rifle and bringing it back to the shop, so far everything seemed like it functioned properly, but he was going to need to stress test the weapon over the coming days to make sure there were no serious issues with it.

However, for the prototype, the weapon was beyond functional, and that made him happy. He could not wait until King Berengar could finally witness the rifle that the old man had designed entirely by himself. He could already anticipate the commendation he would get for creating such a revolutionary type of weapon.

With that said, Ludwig returned to the state-run armory that he managed, where he began to manufacture more paper cartridges to test the rifle in the upcoming days. By the time Berengar marched on Florence, there would be thousands of these Schmidt Needle Rifles in the hands of Berengar's most elite forces.

Chapter 329: The Swiss Confederation Surrenders

In the City of Geneva on the other side of the Swiss Confederation from where the Royal Austrian Army currently occupied, various high-ranking noblemen were gathered to discuss the reality of the war they were facing.

These men in their entirety spoke the German language and were considerably closer to the Austrians ethnically than they were to their Italian masters. As vassals of the Holy Roman Empire, they held a high degree of autonomy. With this in mind, they decided to exercise their right to negotiate their surrender to the Kingdom of Austria.

Adelbrand von Salzburg, General of the Austrian Army, tasked with invading the Swiss Confederation, had sent his demands to the remaining leaders of the Swiss Confederation. The terms that Adelbrand had made were simple; the Austrian Army would only yield their conquest if the Swiss Confederation in its entirety agreed to annexation by the Austrian Crown, where it would be reformed as the Grand Duchy of Switzerland.

The Grand Duchy of Switzerland would effectively become a Vassal State of the Kingdom of Austria and would be subject to all laws as established in the Austrian Constitution. To the Lords of the Swiss Confederation, this was not an appealing prospect. They would be giving up the degree of autonomy they had maintained under the Holy Roman Emperor in favor of a strong centralized government under the authority of a single Monarch.

Not only that, but they would be forced to usher in the military, political, economic, agricultural, and industrial reforms that Berengar had established in Austria; thus, these men would be losing a significant degree of political and military power. This thought specifically caused one of the more prominent noblemen. They had gathered for this meeting to be quite irritated as he presented his case against surrendering to the Austrian Crown.

"The upstart Berengar von Kufstein has gone too far with his demands! He expects us to kneel before him and beg him for mercy!?! Never! We should fight until our last breaths against this annexation; it is a humiliation to the Swiss people!"

This Count was not the only one who felt this way, as several members of the nobility immediately expressed support for this viewpoint.

"Hear, hear!"

"Aye, fuck Austria and their young King!"

"Death before dishonor!"

However, a few of the noblemen present were not entirely against the idea of annexation. These men were reformists, or at the very least, the population they ruled over was primarily comprised of reformists. As such, they had a responsibility to hold up the other side of the argument.

One of these men was a Count, the Count of Fribourg, and he was close personal friends with Count Rayner von Chur, who had surrendered to the Austrian Crown during the initial invasion. He understood better than anyone the reasons for doing so; as such, he presented an alternative to the more boisterous members of the Swiss High Nobility.

"It is in my opinion that these demands are not unreasonable; while Austria will hold more control over our lands than the Empire, it has become increasingly apparent that we are witnessing the rise of a new power with the Kingdom of Austria, one that might unify the German world into a single cohesive Empire! Before long, Florence will fall, and with it, the dignity of the Imperial Crown!

Under Austrian reign, we will become as wealthy and prosperous as they have become! The age of Feudalism and Knights is coming to an end; if we do not embrace this new era, we will be left behind in the darkness plaguing our lands! If we refuse the Austrians terms, they will conquer us, and when they do, they will replace every one of us with an Austrian Noblemen of their choosing!

We share many ethnic and cultural aspects with the Austrians, far more than the Italians. It is in the best interest of the Swiss People and its nobility to kneel before the Austrian Crown!"

When the men gathered heard this, they fell silent; what the Count said made sense; they did not have the military capacity to continue a war with the Austrians for much longer. If they chose to do so, they would only invoke the

ire of the Austrian Crown, which would surely result in them losing all of their power and authority over their lands, if not their lives altogether.

Despite this reality, many men were reluctant to hand over their long-held power to the Kingdom of Austria and its centralized government. As such, they began proposing new ideas to maintain their autonomy.

"Could we not negotiate with the Austrians about receiving the same degree of autonomy that we have under the Empire? After all, their demands of total surrender are a bit insulting. Surely the Austrian King can understand our grievances?"

However, those in favor of surrendering knew this was not likely and immediately dismissed this idea.

"With what power can we make such demands of King Berengar? The Austrians respect nothing other than the power of one's military might. They have made it clear that they want to incorporate us into their Kingdom, under their laws.

I can understand why, to them, we are backward and primitive people! With their advanced agricultural systems, they can feed their people a minimum of three meals a day, while ours are severely malnourished.

Such a thing has a significant impact on prosperity, productivity, and population growth. As noblemen, if we surrender, we might be losing a substantial degree of power, but we would be making up for it in the fortune our houses will gain!

This is the reality we are facing, a new era is upon us, and we can either submit to the winds of change or be blown away by them! If any of you wish to decline the terms presented to us, then so be it! However, I know that I will personally surrender to the Austrians, guaranteeing my family's future in the process! This is an unwinnable war, and you all know it!"

The words spoken by this man had a significant effect on the other noblemen present; they quickly began to realize that even if a few of them resisted until the end, others among their ranks would surrender on their terms. This

caused all confidence in a united resistance against the Austrian incursion to collapse instantly.

Those members of the Swiss Nobility who moments prior were yelling to resist Austria at all costs now had downcast expressions as they gazed at their compatriots who were ready to kneel before the Austrian Crown as their new master.

The Swiss confederation had become a hotbed of the German Reformation. They knew that the people they presided over were already sick and tired of fighting a war with the homeland of their faith on behalf of the Catholic Emperor.

With this in mind, a vote was now held between the various Swiss Noblemen who had gathered in this meeting. An older nobleman who had remained silent until now was the first to speak up.

"All in favor of surrendering to the Austrian Crown under the terms they have presented?"

Over three fourth's of the nobility within the room voted in favor of this agreement. The older man immediately noticed that a few men remained utterly silent in response to this vote. As such, he once more spoke up by proposing the second option.

"All in favor of resisting the Austrian Crown until our last dying breath?"

Despite the unwillingness of one-fourth of the noblemen to surrender, there was complete and utter silence regarding this vote. Those who once wished to resist were now abstaining. With this in mind, the older man sighed before making the decision known.

"Three-fourths are in favor of surrendering, and one-fourth are abstaining, the decision is final, we will surrender to the Austrian Crown under the terms they have presented, and allow the full annexation of the Swiss Confederation. From henceforth, we shall be known as the Grand Duchy of Switzerland, with the Grand Duke to be chosen by our liege, the King of Austria, his majesty Berengar von Kufstein!"

The moment these words were spoken, only silence filled the air. Even those ready to surrender were not entirely eager to see the changes that would come to Switzerland in the coming years. After all, to give up the degree of autonomy they had, to become a State of the Kingdom of Austria was not something to be taken lightly.

However, despite their reluctance, one thing was certain, the Swiss theater of the Austrian war for independence was over, and aside from a small occupying force left behind with the intent to establish control over the newly formed Grand Duchy of Switzerland, the remaining troops would be pouring into the Italian theater to support the main Army in their attempt to lay siege Florence.

With the Emperor's last stand on the horizon, Berengar would need every soldier he could muster in his attempt to siege a city filled with belligerents. It was bound to be a brutal and bloody conflict, and the 20,000 soldiers who would be arriving from the land formerly known as the Swiss Confederation was sure to aid in Austria's chances of victory.

Chapter 330: Returning to Service

Corporal Lach Wickten sat in the back of a supply wagon that was headed to the frontlines. The new and improved Schmidt Needle Rifle was in his hands that Ludwig had improved after thorough and rigorous stress testing. The young man cleaned the rifle with great care while dressed in his camouflage smock and field cap, with his helmet lying beside him.

This supply convoy not only brought forth much-needed supplies to the frontlines but reinforcements to replace the soldiers who were wounded or killed in battle. Some of these men, like Lach, were returning to the frontlines after being injured themselves.

The young Corporal could not wait to show off his new prototype rifle to the soldiers in his unit. As such, he was eager to regroup with them. By now, Berengar and his army had advanced beyond the City of Milan after stealing its treasures and was on its route to the small city of Parma, which lay between them and Bologna.

Any minute now, he would approach Berengar's army, where he would likely regroup with at least one of the Jaeger units that were nearby. While the

Italians had pulled back the majority of their soldiers to reinforce the city of Florence in a desperate last stand against the might of the Royal Austrian Army, they had kept some small amount of troops in the field in an attempt to slow down the Austrian advance to buy the main Italian army some much needed time.

When Lach finally saw the tents of the Austrian encampment appear in the distance, he slung his rifle over his shoulder and placed his helmet upon his head before rushing towards the camp. The young Corporal waved at the supply convoy as he departed.

When Lach arrived, he was surprised to see that his company was currently resting in the encampment and not out in the field; he quickly approached Captain Andreas Jaeger as he saluted the man with respect.

"Corporal Lach Wickten reporting for duty sir!"

Captain Jaeger returned Lach's salute before responding.

"At ease Corporal, I hope you are well rested because we will be deploying to the front lines shortly."

After saying this, the Captain noticed the rifle slung on Lach's shoulder was vastly different from the muzzle loading Jaeger rifles that were currently issued to the Jaeger corps and could not help but inquire about it.

"Corporal, what is that, and where did you get it?"

The moment Lach heard this, he unslung the weapon and presented it to his commanding officer.

"This is called a Needle Rifle; while I was away, Ludwig invented it. This particular rifle is a second prototype, but Ludwig has assured me it is free from any potentially harmful malfunctions. It has the same degree of accuracy as our currently issued rifles but is capable of firing 12 rounds a minute!"

When Andreas heard this, he was shocked that such a weapon existed, and as such, he wanted to see a demonstration; however, firing a gun while in

camp was explicitly forbidden, and thus he would have to wait to see how well the rifle functioned until it could be demonstrated in the field.

As such, the man sighed before giving the Corporal his orders

"get back to your squad; I am sure they will be happy to see you have made a full recovery..."

Lach saluted Captain Andreas once more before replying in the affirmative

"Yes, sir!"

After Andreas saluted the young man back, Lach returned to his tent, where he met with his fellow soldiers. As for Andreas, he immediately began to search for his commanding officer to inform him of this new weapon. Eventually, he found Colonel Dietrich von Lienz in a meeting with King Berengar von Kufstein within the Command tent.

Knowing his place, the man patiently waited by the tent side until his superior officer departed; however, when Dietrich finally exited the tent, he was alongside Berengar, who looked at the young Captain with confusion. Seeing the King in front of him, Captain Andreas immediately saluted to him.

"Your Majesty, Captain Andreas Jaeger, reporting to his superior officer about some information received from a soldier returning to service after medical leave."

Berengar was curious as to what valuable intel a returning soldier could have and, as such, spoke up before Colonel Dietrich could respond.

"Speak, if this is something so valuable that you would await by the tent side for your CO, then you are free to discuss it with me."

Captain Andreas looked over to his Commanding Officer to see if he had permission. Meanwhile, the aging Colonel gazed at Andreas as if he were an idiot and silently nodded his head. As such, Captain Andreas no longer hesitated to speak his mind.

"One of my soldiers, Corporal Lach Wickten has returned with a Prototype weapon he has purchased from Baronet Ludwig; he calls it a Needle Rifle and says it is capable of firing a projectile out to a similar distance that our Jaeger rifles are capable of with more than twice the rate of fire!"

When Berengar heard this, he was shocked; the only needle rifles he knew of were the Dryse and Chassepot from his previous life, and they lacked in terms of long-range firepower compared to the Whitworth rifle that he had based his Jaeger rifles upon.

Not only that, but as far as he was aware, they did not yet have mercury fulminate to manufacture percussion caps; as such, he was pretty skeptical of this claim. Thus he responded with a hint of curiosity in his tone.

"Did the soldier call it a needle rifle?"

When Berengar asked this, the Captain looked at him with confusion in his eyes before nodding his head. Was it possible that Berengar knew about Ludwig's designs? Then again, he was the King, so it made sense if he knew about experimental weapons that were shrouded in secrecy.

The moment Bernegar witnessed the man's nod, his expression turned serious as he spoke with an authoritative tone befitting a monarch.

"Take me to this man right away!"

Andreas led both Berengar and Colonel Dietrich to the tent where Lach and his squad were resting. The moment Captain Andreas arrived, the men jumped to attention, saluting their commanding officer. However, they were shocked to see the Colonel of the Jaeger Corps and the monarch himself standing behind their Captain.

Before any of the soldiers could get a word out, Berengar immediately said his decree.

"Which one of you is Corporal Lach Wickten?"

Lach was astonished to find that the King of Austria himself had come searching for him; as such, he proudly presented himself to Berengar with his chest puffed out.

"Corporal Lach Wickten at your service, your majesty!"

After hearing this, Berengar inspected the man closely; noticing that there was nothing out of the ordinary, he quickly cut to the chase.

"Show me the rifle you have brought with you!"

Lach did not hesitate to do so as he retrieved the needle rifle and checked to see if it was clear before handing it over to Berengar with the bolt open. The Royal Austrian Army had always stressed firearms safety as a priority in the training of the recruits. As such, a soldier would be punished severely if they did not first check to see if a weapon was clear before handing it over to someone else.

Berengar closely inspected the rifle and noticed that it greatly resembled a Mauser Model 1871 from his past life, except instead of a single-shot centerfire rifle, it was a needle-fired rifle. The gun's needle was easily replaceable if it was damaged, much like on the final design of the Dreyse Rifle that was added to the weapon variant in 1874.

Berengar gazed down the bore and inspected it to see whether it had traditional or polygonal rifling. To his surprise, Ludwig had gone the extra mile with these rifles and improved the rifling just like how the current issued Jaeger Rifles utilized. After closely observing the rifle, Berengar placed one of his hands out and ordered the soldier.

"Give me one of the cartridges."

When the man heard this, he rushed over to his cot, where he retrieved a paper cartridge from his web gear which contained the cylindrical .451 Whitworth style projectile. When Berengar saw this, a wry smile appeared on his face as he expressed his thoughts aloud.

"Ludwig, you are a genius..."

Without any guidance, Ludwig had done the unthinkable; he had manufactured a needle rifle from scratch, centuries ahead of its natural time. Having never shot a needle rifle before, Berengar was eager to test out the weapon, and as such, he swiftly walked out of the tent, where the others nearby pursued him.

After leaving the confines of the camp, Berengar gave a command to his soldiers.

"Set up a target 1000 yards out; I want to test this rifle."

The soldiers received their orders and placed a wooden bucket out at a thousand yards before returning to Berengar's side. Berengar immediately dialed in the sights so that they were at the appropriate distance, where he proceeded to shoulder the rifle in his left arm and gaze with his one good eye down the iron sights.

After acquiring his target, he inhaled deeply while holding his breath before squeezing the trigger; the moment he did so, the needle impacted the percussion cap and ignited the powder contained within, sending the projectile downrange at over 1300 feet per second where it struck its target, knocking the bucket into the air.

The moment he did so, Berengar exhaled deeply and cocked the action back before handing the rifle back to Corporal Lach with a broad smile on his face. He was pleased with the performance of the rifle and could not contain his joy; as such, he grabbed ahold of Colonel Dietrich before giving him an order.

"Send word to Ludwig; I want him to produce as many as these rifles as he is able; before we march on Florence, I want your entire Jaeger Corps outfitted with these weapons!"

With this said, Dietrich immediately saluted Berengar and responded in the affirmative.

"At once, your majesty!"

With this, Berengar gazed into the distance at the bucket he had just shot with a warm smile curved upon his lips. It would not be long before Ludwig could

create rifled breechloaders and cap and ball revolvers with a bit of assistance. Once more, a new era of warfare had just begun thanks to Berengar's intervention in the timeline.