

The Sovereign Hearth

The hearth in the snug cast a warm, flickering amber glow across the oak paneling, catching the crisp starch of white piqué waistcoats, tailored black evening coats, and the gold links of watch chains. Inside, they had the



brainpower—the intellect, the engineering, and the quiet dignity of men who refused to let standards slip. Outside, the not-quite autumn rain lashed the high mullioned glass of the Social House, but inside, the silence between the three men was colder than the gale.

On the low mahogany table between their glasses of golden ale lay several wooden tokens stamped with a crowned portcullis—the newly revived seal of the High Ridge Turnpike Guard—alongside a feather-light ingot that gleamed with a pale, silver-white luster in the firelight.

"They threw the toll chains across the lower pass at noon," Otto Krieger said from the hearthside chair, resting a broad hand near the lightweight ingot while his gaze lingered in the flames. "Four men in long livery coats, armed with Martini-Henry carbines. They turned back two dray wagons carrying Ward's tooling. Said Lord Sterling's estate holds the Crown patent on the ridge road now."

Baron Von Kessler scoffed softly from the right, raising his glass of ale as firelight glinted off his wire-rimmed spectacles. "Sterling was a coward when London burned, yet the moment the smoke clears, he buys up destitute magistrates and calls his private thugs 'Turnpike Guards.' The landed gentry clutching their royal charters like holy relics. It is pathetic, but predictable."

"It is not merely Sterling," The Commodore replied from the center, his voice low, sharp, and measured as he looked down at the table. "Sterling is financed by the remnants of the Admiralty old guard who still think in ironclads and heavy coal. They are fighting for yesterday's scrap while the world moves beneath their feet. Even the Secret Intelligence Service acknowledges the reality: aluminum is the new gold. Light, corrosion-resistant, impossibly strong when alloyed with Martian tech. Whoever controls the smelting and the transit of aluminum controls the industrial future."

"Ignorant fools across the Channel are still scavenging heavy steel," Von Kessler murmured, his clipped mustache tightening with dry amusement. "They will bankrupt themselves hauling dead weight, while Whitehall suffocates in its own red tape."

"The immediate problem is our valley's access," Krieger grunted, his dark evening coat shifting as he leaned over the table toward the tokens. "Sterling's guards choke the grain shipments coming into Hearthcombe, and they demand exorbitant tolls on every ounce of raw bauxite and salvage we move up from the south. They claim they are restoring imperial order. They are choking our supply."

The Commodore turned, dipping his head slightly, taking notice of something beyond the window. Through the drumming rain came the faint, unmistakable rumble of a modified, heavy-combustion engine laboring up the switchbacks—a low, rhythmic growl running without lights.

"Devlin," Krieger muttered, his brow furrowing.

"Devlin," The Commodore agreed, his gaze steady on the rain-streaked glass. "Running black-market Martian tech through the mud. He avoids Sterling's gates, yet he knows a turnpike chain won't stop five tons of reinforced iron. We do not need to fight Sterling in the mud, gentlemen, nor do we need Devlin's back roads."

The Commodore sat back slightly, the gold chain of his waistcoat catching the candle's flame.

"Let Sterling keep his gates and his Crown seals for now," The Commodore continued, meeting the eyes of both men. "A toll gate only holds power over a wagon. In a week, we drive the final spikes on the private line connecting Hearthcombe directly to Thornwick; in six, we connect to the Vale beyond. We bypass the turnpikes entirely. Once the iron rails carry our agriculture, our products, and our aluminum freight straight through the pass, Sterling's road becomes a useless strip of dirt—and his guards can collect tolls from the rain."

Commodore Burton Ward, Baron Von Kessler and Otto Krieger are fictional characters and part of the Duffy & Ward Brewing Company™ brand universe, created by Sloane Duffy Media LLC. She rides every morning, manages the books every afternoon, and has never once missed a brew day. © 2026 Sloane Duffy Media LLC.

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