
再生之神通傳奇
姆本是道

Tales of the Reincarnated Lord

– 重生之领主传奇 –

- Volume 7 -

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[LiberSpark]

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URUBAHA DUCHY

GOLDEN COAST

GOLDEN COAST

CREATED BY : A_MINERVA

Chapter 301
Jillin Harbor

Even though Jillin Harbor used to be the empire's only port city at the Cursed Coasts, it was not that huge. It had a population of only 20 thousand and incomplete harbor facilities.

Ever since the formation of the Andinaq kingdom, the new kingdom inherited the policies of the empire that tended to neglect naval transportation. While Jillin Harbor did rise in popularity due to the increased risks of land travel during the empire's civil war, due to the heavy taxes the second highness levied on goods transported by sea, the harbor gradually returned to its former tranquility.

When the smugglers no longer came to Jillin Harbor, all that remained was the trading plaza, which trading almost nothing but seafood. It was the largest seafood bazaar in the whole of the kingdom. The fishing folk toiled during the day and sold their catch in the evening to the fishmongers. The fishmongers would deliver the food straight to the nobles' dinner tables that same night.

In the past, Silowas' fishermen would sell their catch at the bazaar as well, but they stopped doing so due to the fishmongers' exploitative business practices. The choice to stop was made a lot easier by the Firmrock Legion's demand for seafood. Should the fishermen end up with extra seafood, they would dry them in the sun instead of bringing them to Jillin Harbor. The only contact Silowas and Jillin Harbor had was a single ferry that made a roundtrip every three days.

Lorist had always had plans for Jillin Harbor. Even though Silowas was a great place, it was an isolated island. While it would be ideal as a consolidation point for goods, it was inferior to Jillin Harbor when it came to how easily goods could be distributed to the continent, which was what most merchants wanted. Currently, the Salt Merchant Committee that Count Kenmays managed was fighting for market share in the northeastern area of the former empire. The committee's influence had already stretched over the entire Iblia kingdom and half of the Madras duchy. In recent times, the count's ambitions were to establish a new trade route to the four central duchies.

Given that Silowas was a little bit to the south, Lorist wanted to use the Peterson

Merchant Guild to help distribute his dominion's products to the areas which the Union had influence over. However, he did not think that the Union's sphere of influence would decreased so severely after the War of Glass. The Peterson Merchant Guild themselves had suffered quite a few of losses and could not afford to help out with Lorist's ambitions anymore. It would take them at least two or three years to recover.

The coast from The Northlands all the way to Silowas was referred to as the Cursed Coasts. The coasts were sheltered from the ocean by a barrier of reefs that made the entire stretch unsuitable for harbours. It was for that reason that Lorist appreciated Jillin Harbor. If he could get the harbor under the control of his house, Lorist believed that he would most certainly be able to develop the place into a thriving port city in a few short years and expand the trade routes to the Redlis kingdom in the south.

The preface for Lorist's sending of Supervisor Hansk to the imperial capital was to show concern for the second highness's recent predicament, but in reality he wanted to use the opportunity to put in some effort to rescue his king. Naturally, there would have been a catch if the Nortons were actually asked to deploy their troops. After all, there are no free favors in the world. With the war between the Andinaq kingdom and the Redlis kingdom lasting more than a year, even the rats within the kingdom's treasuries had starved. Lorist had hoped to have his aid repaid with jurisdiction over Jillin Harbor.

While it would be ideal if he could make the area around the harbor part of his dominion, he found that the second highness would hardly agree to such terms and thought better of it. Instead, he would only ask to be given administrative rights. If the imperial capital agreed to the conditions, the Nortons would send their troops to Kanbona and help the second highness reestablish contact with the kingdom. He did not think that Marquis Reid would refuse his offer of aid and even have the harbor's garrison be extra wary of his troops.

If the order to not allow the Norton soldiers get on shore had been made in secret, there was nothing Lorist could do about it. He didn't think that the knights escorting Hansk would reveal it due to a petty disagreement. They actually dared to reveal a sensitive order like that just to humiliate his men. It gave him an opening to put his plans into action.

The former defense force at Jillin Harbor was the third division of the first royal local defense legion, with Gold-ranked Knight Fewermante as the commander. Once, he had

brought his troops to Silowas in the name of assisting Viscount Aslan, but in fact, he was there to threaten the islanders into paying his taxes. In the end, he had encountered Lorist and been given a harsh wallop. Even though the second highness later saved him, he was worried that Lorist would not let the matter go and transferred the third division away from the city. His departure forced the formation of a new garrison.

As a locally formed defense unit, the garrison was treated like the illegitimate child given birth to by one's mistress. The unit was severely under equipped, they only had a spear and a wooden shielf. The regiment commander and his vice-commander were the only two that had been given something approaching armor: old, torn leather garments. The soldiers' salary wasn't stable either. They often went months without payment, as a result they often abandoned their posts to work at the bazaar.

Lorist was really curious to know where Marquis Reid got his confidence from. Did he really think Jillin Harbor's garrison posed a threat to his forces? Wherever he got it from, he had enough of it to order his troops to stop the Norton soldiers from getting on shore.

At that moment, Lorist was standing at the port of Jillin Harbor with a regiment of a thousand guards getting off the ship behind him and into formation. Jillin Harbor's hundreds of garrison soldiers gathered around and witnessed the sight with amused chatters. All they could do was be envious of the awesome and complete gear the Norton guards were assigned, not a single soldier stepped forward to stop them from disembarking.

However, it did not take long before someone attempted to smash a rock using an egg. Two half-armored knights rushed out of a tavern nearby and began roaring. With their alcohol-tainted breath, they called for the guards on shore to leave the port immediately.

Lorist tilted his head and a few of his men gave the knights a harsh beating. It only took a few moments for the knights to begin crying for their parents.

"Let it be known that any who dare bar my way, the way of Count Norton, will be deemed an assaulter of my person. Have them write their testimonies complete with their thumbprint before throwing them into the harbor's prison. For now, follow me to the administrative center. I'd like to see who at the imperial capital gave that order," instructed Lorist.

As a noble, it was well within Lorist's rights to travel with an escort. Even though Lorist brought a regiment of a thousand guards and a division of five thousand soldiers with him, he could easily explain it away as him being extra careful and bringing more soldiers with him precautionarily. As long as Lorist's troops did not harass the locals and was fed from Lorist's own pockets, there was nothing wrong with them following Lorist around.

As for the order from the imperial capital to not let a single Norton soldier set foot on land, it was nothing more than a joke. It was not like the Norton troops were rebelling, so there was no legitimate reason for Lorist to be denied his escort. The order could be argued to be putting Lorist himself in unnecessary danger. Even if the matter was brought to the second highness, Lorist would definitely still be in the right.

As the one in charge of Jillin Harbor's security, Baron Fenston was rather satisfied with his position. The bribe he had given the men serving the second highness had paid off. As a noble, Baron Fenston felt that only idiots would be satisfied with the income of their own dominion. He was well aware how poor the folk in his dominion were. Instead of investing money to develop it, it would be far better to bribe his way into a well-paying position. It certainly had a far greater return on investment.

Having been the security chief of the harbor for over five years, Baron Fenston had long earned the cost of his bribery back. And now, his salary was easily several times more than the income his dominion provided. He was currently trying to form a small fleet with seven medium-sized armed ships so that he could purchase some luxury goods and fashionable clothes from Morante. He would be able to get acquainted with some powerful men at the same time as well. He could also use the fleet to conduct business with the merchants or nobles at Jillin Harbor. Through that, he would be able to profit alongside those who chose to invest in him without spending all his capital.

However, he was rather troubled by the order he had received from the imperial capital two days earlier. It required him to increase the garrison to prevent the forces of the Norton household from getting on shore.

Baron Fenston was of the opinion that the one who gave the order probably got rabies, for him to dare lash out at just anyone without giving any thought. Given that the king was trapped within the Redlis kingdom, the kingdom's situation was far from stable. The people in charge of the imperial capital still dared to challenge the Nortons at a time like this? He recalled that the Nortons recently sent an ambassador to the imperial capital. The baron was certain that he had somehow offended the people in

power. Either that, or they did not bring with them a fitting gift for the visit.

Baron Fenston really wanted to throw the decree into the wastepaper bin. But he thought better of it and kept it instead. After all, the imperial capital sent six knights with the decree. Not only were they supposed to take over control of the garrison, they would also be reorganizing it into three regiments with three thousand men in total.

Thus, Baron Fenston decided to go along with it. After all, he did not have money nor equipment and could only barely pay for the salary of the troops in his garrison. He would want to see what the knights could do with his force.

Hmph, do those guys think the Nortons are to be messed with so lightly?

He recalled that one of his family members made a trip to Morante recently and brought back one of the newspapers. It's headline was of the Hanayabarta kingdom's extermination. Not only did the Nortons exterminate the slave kingdom, they also slaughtered 170 thousand of the kingdom's civilians and used their heads to build a pyramid.

The baron believed the report without question the moment he first read it. He had received a secret order from the king not too long before he had set off on campaign. He was to monitor House Norton's activities and report any suspicious moves. He had done so dutifully and diligently until everyone lost contact with the second highness. However, the baron did not forsake his duties and continued to receive reports from the sailors that traveled to Silowas once every three days. Baron Fenston would collect and compile the reports and submit them to the king when he returns.

Silowas had recently suffered a pirate attack and the island itself had become living hell. Back then, even the ships at Silowas were caught in the attack. Fortunately, the ferry captain managed to escape when he felt something was off. Jillin Harbor was also thrown into disarray during the attack as they feared that the pirates would come for them too. After being on full alert for a whole month, they only got to know that the pirates had departed when the Norton ships traveled to Jillin Harbor to resupply. The remaining pirates were all annihilated and Silowas reclaimed.

Later, House Norton gathered large numbers of troops and ships at Silowas. Fenston soon came to understand the extent of their military might. The soldiers soon disappeared and returned two months later with an abundance of resources. Even though the captains and sailors were prevented from getting off the island, they could

easily estimate roughly how much resource and people the ships carried.

After reading the newspaper report, Fenston came to know that the resources had definitely come from the Hanayabarta. It was no wonder his king was so wary of House Norton and instructed him to keep an eye on them. He recalled one of the rumors he had heard some time earlier. It said that Count Norton had some enmity with Count Aslan. As a result of his enmity, the latter brought ten thousand men to encircle the count's group without notifying the king. In the end, not only were Count Aslan's forces defeated, the count himself also lost his life. The king had eliminated the whole of House Aslan in a fit of rage and was unable to do anything to Count Norton either.

That was why, when he heard that Count Norton had come over to his place, the administrative center, he instinctively understood the reason for the visit. Not only did he receive Lorist warmly, he also brought out the decree he received and showed it to Lorist. He also made sure to insult and berate the nobles at the imperial capital for giving such an asinine order.

Lorist waved the decree in his hands and said with a smile, "Since the imperial capital has already ordered for the garrison's expansion, but Jillin Harbor isn't able to afford such an expense, House Norton will contribute for the sake of the kingdom. We will help out with expansion. What do you think, Lord Baron?"

"That would be wonderful!" Fenston exclaimed, "Lord Count, your patriotism and loyalty to the kingdom is beyond description. It truly is worthy of my deepest respect. I'll be counting on you for the expansion then."

"Will it be okay with you if I bring the garrison soldiers to Silowas for three months of training and reshaping?" asked Lorist.

"There definitely won't be a problem. I will leave it entirely up to your discretion, Lord Count. I've long heard about the unrivaled might of House Norton's troops. There can't be a better candidate than you to restructure the garrison. To be frank with you, Jillin Harbor's garrison is stepping out of bounds quite often. While they try to bolster their esteem by bullying the common folk, they are completely useless when sent to the frontlines. Lord Count, please feel free to discipline them as you see fit. Heck, you can even kill them as punishment. You must know how troubled I am for receiving more than 20 complaints daily about the garrison soldiers… I even have to clean up their mess."

"Well, there's no secret in raising disciplined and strong soldiers. All you need is to pay them and feed them well, and provide them with appropriate equipment. When training them, make sure to not let them feel like they're expendable fodder that are inconsequential and disposable. Also, make sure to be strict on military regulation and teach them to be proud of being part of the military. Doing this will naturally raise their combat ability. How about this, during the time the garrison is trained, let our house take care of security. It's fortunate that I brought a division of soldiers with me on this trip. Let them stand guard here for three months. Will that be alright, Lord Baron?"

Baron Fenston thought, *I don't think there has been a noble that brings a whole division of troops along on a casual trip. Sheesh, he really has too much money to spare. I wonder how much it costs to maintain a division of soldiers for a day…*

Smiling, he said, "That's great! I was just getting worried about the security here during the absence of our garrison. With your division stationed here, I'm relieved. But Lord Count, the financial situation here at Jillin Harbor is a little tight nowadays, so I'm not sure if it can sustain a whole division of soldiers. Is it possible for you to decrease the number of soldiers you station here?"

Lorist shook his head and smiled before saying, "There's no need to worry, Lord Baron. All you have to provide is the food that you usually give to the three thousand garrison soldiers. The House Norton will take care of the additional expenses. Actually, I have another reason for bringing a division of soldiers with me. I've heard that there are a lot of refugees within the kingdom's borders. We are trying to recruit some to help develop The Northlands' wastelands. It will also lessen the kingdom's burden to feed them."

Fenston said with a respectfully, "Lord Count, you are far too magnanimous and benevolent. To think that you are willing to provide a means of living for the poor refugees… You are truly the prime example of what a noble of the kingdom should be. Alright. I will now draft the necessary paperwork to let your house take charge of the security here at Jillin Harbor."

Since Baron Fenston was being so cooperative, Lorist nodded and said, "Lord Baron, if you have anything you might need us to help you with in future, please don't hesitate to look out for us. We will definitely aid you in any way we can. This is the pledge of I, Norton Lorist."

"Thank you!" said Baron Fenston with a genuine look of gratitude.

And so, on the 3rd day of the 7th month, Jillin Harbor fell under the jurisdiction of Firmrock Legion of the Norton house.

Chapter 302
The Child's Play Siege

"This trip will take another thirty minutes, Milord. There is a small stream up ahead, and after crossing it, we'll arrive at the valley of Wolf Mountain. That's where the barony of House Dina is located. There is a small hill in the valley on which their castle is built, their village is right next to it," reported Kumod.

He was the one who had come to the barony last time, along with Els.

"Let's go. We'll get some nice food and rest when we arrive. Curse this weather… To think it'd rain out of nowhere like that… Be careful, the road will be slippery," replied Lorist.

The 7th month's weather was usually rainy and stormy. Lorist had just experienced a very quick shift in the weather. It left half his guards dripping wet before they even had time to put on their raincoats. By the time they got them on them on, the rain had stopped.

The mountain path was wide but the rain had left it muddy. The horse's hooves were caked yellow with mud and they were unable to go any faster than a steady walk. The two carriages' wheels dug deep into the mud and brought quite a bit back up with them, at times it was hard to distinguish wheel from mud.

Lorist was on this trip to bring the girls and their young aunt away. When he had attended the Paradise Gathering the previous year, he had gotten to know a girl called Dina Arriotoli and her aunt, known only by her alias: Chessy. They had spent a fulfilling night together and the girl had said that she fancied Lorist quite a lot. She even promised she would no longer attend the gathering, but wait for Lorist for three years. If Lorist was willing to take her hand in marriage, she would wed him along with her younger sister.

In the previous year, Lorist had Els pay them a visit on his behalf and sent over a thousand gold Fordes with a bunch of other gifts. When Els returned, he reported that the girl was incredibly down after learning of Lorist's true identity. Given that she and her sister were of low status, they were not fit to be Lorist's wives. She originally

thought that Lorist was just a knight, which she and her sister could marry without problems. If 'knight' Lorist tried hard enough, he might even be titled a baron.

Lorist did not wish to force them to come with him. Andinaq was in a dark situation, however, and their dominion was near the northwestern area of Redlis.The moment the second highness's forces were defeated, the northwestern area of Redlis would fall under the Union's control. If the Union sent their forces over, House Dina and its barony would be one of the first to fall. Lorist did not wish for the girl and her family to fall into the hands of the Unions mercenaries. The possibility was not something he was willing to ignore.

Upon exiting the forest, he was greeted with a large and gentle valley. At the foot of the mountains were some farmland. There was a small hill in the distance on which stood a small castle beside a village surrounded by a tall wooden palisade. It was the Dina's barony.

"Milord, it seems the barony is under attack," interjected Reidy, holding up a telescope as he did so.

"Oh?" mused Lorist.

He took the telescope and looked as well. It was indeed so. A few knights were visible on the empty ground in front of the castle. A petite girl wearing yellowish-copper armor stood on top of the castle's small walls wielding a longsword heroically. Her posture and motion made it seem she was cursing at the knights below.

"Pfft!"

Lorist tried to stifle his laughter when he recognized the girl. She was Dina Arriotoli. He had not thought she was the kind to go on the battlefield herself. The main issue was her physique, it made her look a little awkward wielding a 1.4-meter longsword.

"Milord, it seems it's a skirmish among the local nobles. The troops at the camp over there are less than 500. Some are even armed with nothing but wooden sticks. They look like children playing a wargame," pointed Reidy as he continued to observe with the telescope.

Lorist turned back to look and saw the 200 or so guards he had brought with him, all of whom were mounted and lightly-armed.

"Reidy, take the guards with you and give them a hand. Crush their campsite and capture a few horsemen. Also, tell the troops not to kill them outright. Those poor farmers were only forced to fight by their lords. Try to catch them alive if you can," instructed Lorist.

He did not have the slightest interest in meddling personally.

"Understood, Milord," acknowledged Reidy before he barked a few simple orders.

The guards cleaned the horses' hooves, adjusted their armor, and waited for the order to charge after mounting once more.

Reidy waved his hand and the guards began moving at a trot. The distance was still rather great, so there was no point in starting a charge already. If they charged right away, they would be tired by the time they reached the camp. As the group advanced, a few orders from some company leaders saw the 200-odd cavalrymen split into four 50-man units. When there were only 300 meters between the guards and the camp, Reidy appeared at the front, gave a loud cry, and charged.

The people within the camp had already noticed the oncoming horsemen. The girl on the castle walls also revealed a look of shock. The knights who were beneath the castle walls turned back to the camp hurriedly, raising their arms and shouting at the top of their lungs.

The camp's construction was far too flimsy. It didn't even have a trench around it. Reidy tightened his legs around his mount, it leaped upwards over a meter-tall wooden fence, before he gave his greatsword a swing. He used the flat of his blade to stun a huge soldier who was merely standing there in befuddlement. The man collapsed. The man should have thanked Reidy for lightly swatting him away. Otherwise, he would have been crushed by Reidy's steed.

The skirmish concluded soon after the guards stormed into the camp. The knights didn't even make Reidy break a sweat; they all collapsed with a single strike. Even though he wielded his greatsword with only one arm, it easily weighed two times what a normal two-handed greatsword would weigh. Thanks to Reidy's unnatural strength, he was able to use such a heavy sword as deftly as he would a delicate needle.

After the horsemen fell, the farmers in the camp surrendered nearly instantaneously. There were ten-odd fellows equipped with leather armor and armed with shield and

sword who cast their weapons away the moment they saw what happened before raising both their hands in submission, obediently following the guards' instructions.

The girl on the walls began cheering out loud. She probably realized the guards were on her side. Perhaps, she knew that their armor was that of House Norton, given that Els had gone there once the year before. The girl soon vanished from the walls and was probably preparing to lower the drawbridge.

When Lorist arrived at the camp with ten-odd guards and two four-wheeled carriages, the drawbridge had already been lowered. The girl walked out of the castle with six armed guards. She was currently talking to Reidy, who was keeping watch on his mounted captives.

One of the kneeling captives cursed them as cowards for using a sneak attack without a formal declaration of war and berated Reidy for not having any chivalric spirit. Before Reidy could retort, the girl had already pointed her fingers and started cursing the man. Her guards reacted immediately and began pummelling the old knight. The girl did not fail to sneak in a few kicks at her leisure.

Lorist watched it all happen with a face full of cold sweat. He had not once imagined that the soft and gentle girl he had once caressed and embraced would be so brash. Lorist rode forward and leaped off his horse before smiling at the girl.

"Should I call you Daisy or Arriotolli?"

The girl wore a stupefied expression before her eyes reddened. She tossed her two-handed greatsword to the side and began pummeling away at Lorist's chest with her fists.

"So, after all this time, you finally thought to come and see us. You big meanie…"

Lorist chuckled as he caught her fist.

"Apologies, I have been far too busy lately and haven't had the time. That's why I sent my subordinates here to see you last year. Haven't I come to see you now, the moment I finally have some time for myself?" asked he.

The girl looked like she was about to say something, but pouted instead

"You liar, you told me you were a knight. Your subordinate told me that you're actually

a count. Why did you even bother to come?"

"Well, I couldn't help myself, since a certain foolish lass said she would wait for me for three years. I just couldn't stop myself from worrying, so I'm here to take you away," said Lorist as he stroked the girl's long, brown hair.

"Hmph," the girl mumbled as she jerked her head to avoid Lorist's hand, "You are a great and mighty count. I'm merely the sibling of a baron. I must be no different from a village girl in your eyes. And there's no way you'll be able to take us as your formal wives, so why bother coming for us? Do you want us to be your concubines? I will never agree to it."

Lorist only looked at her with a smile, "Alright, stop fussing. Let's deal with the mess facing us right now first. What's going on here? Who are they and why are they attacking your castle?"

The matter was cleared up soon enough. The barony actually only occupied half of the valley. The other half was controlled by the old man kneeling not too far away, Baron Andrew. When the second highness launched his campaign against the Redlis kingdom, the two sons of Baron Andrew had joined the second highness's army. His older son Pulist was one of the many involved in the occupation of Frederika. While he was fortunate enough to survive crossing the Cloudsnap Mountains, he was only half alive when they arrived. After the successful occupation, the second highness made the noblemen that made contributions knights of the royal family.

When the soldiers at Kanbona surrendered to the second highness, the newly-appointed knight of the royal family was brought back home by his brother so he could recover. So he managed to avoid being trapped with the second highness in Redlis. After half a year, his injuries had mostly recovered.The two brothers were terrified of the second highness's ambitions and no longer felt like returning to his side. So, they holed up in their homes with the excuse of recovering from their injuries.

The Dina barony and the Andrew barony was relatively similar in size, and both houses were 'fallen' nobles whose prime had long passed. The two houses used to have a mutually-beneficial relationship. But since the older son of Baron Andrew had become a royal knight, he felt that he had more of a backing and started to get more ambitious. He starting to eye the Dina barony for himself.

The old man came up with a most splendid plan, he would form a marriage alliance

with the Dina barony. He had two sons and the Dinas two daughters. His wife had also passed away recently, so he was the perfect match for their widowed aunt. A triple marriage to seal the alliance was completely possible. As for the ten-year-old Dina heir, he could take him as his own adopted son. That way, he would have the Dina barony for himself.

However, the moment the old man proposed the idea, his dreams were shattered in the most amazing fashion. The current temporary head of the Dina barony, Arriotoli, cursed the old man so harshly that he almost suffered a heart attack. Baron Andrew had never seen anyone scold someone with such fervor. With the two baronies interacting over the years and given Arriotoli's excellent memory, she managed to recite each and every one of the old baron's past shameful mistakes and used them as ammunition for her rebuke. The old man had never felt so humiliated in his life, especially since they were in full view of the peasant farmers when the scolding happened. The grudge formed that day was not one that would go unpaid.

The angered old baron rallied up around 500 farmers the moment he went back and declared war against House Dina. Baron Andrew himself had twelve garrison soldiers while the Dinas only had eight. Baron Andrew was a two-star iron rank, his older son was a one-star silver royal knight, and his younger son was a three-star iron rank. House Dina, on the other hand, had a two-star silver household knight, who had also been the late baron's personal bodyguard, and Arriotoli herself who was a one-star iron rank. Both sides were of roughly equal strength.

In terms of numbers, however, Baron Andrew had the advantage. The farmers and refugees he recruited as well as the servants numbered over 400 people, whereas the Dina barony only had around 200 male and female youths, half of what the enemy was capable of fielding. But they did have the protection of the castle, so both sides were tied again.

That conflict had already been ongoing for a month and seven days with casualties on both sides… only numbering less than ten injured. Not even a single one had died. The unluckiest casualty was none other than Knight Pulist, who had suffered two broken ribs as a result of being stepped on by his mount. The main method employed in the siege was none other than trash talking. Baron Andrew and his two sons shouted at the top of their lungs at the walls, with Arriotoli shouting back. Basically, the insults boiled down to 'come down if you dare' for the Andrews and 'come up if you dare' for the Dinas.

It was no wonder all that seemed like child's play to Reidy.

"How do you think we should deal with them, Arri? Let's just have them hanged, alright?" said Lorist with displeasure, feeling more than willing to kill off the enemy that annoyed him.

The three captives were horrified at having the fate of their lives so casually decided, even though they were supposed to be exalted nobles of a mighty kingdom. In territorial conflicts between nobles, captive ones were not supposed to be killed, only held prisoner until their ransom was paid.

"I… I'm a knight of the royal family… The kn-knight of the king himself… You… You wouldn't dare to kill me…" said the puffy-faced Pulist.

"Oh, a mere knight of the royal family. I once attended a banquet and killed a viscount in front of the second highness himself. After that, the elder brother count of that viscount I killed brought ten thousand men seeking me for revenge, all of whom were killed by me, of course. I supposed there were a number of royal knights among those I killed, but I didn't keep count back then. Even so, the second highness didn't do anything to me," said Lorist without batting an eye.

"Yo-you're Count Norton? T-the Raging Bear of The Northlands…" mumbled Pulist with a pale look. The incident concerning the Aslan brothers was taboo which no one dared mention in front of the king. However, the grapevine in the army was rather far-reaching. With Pulist having served under the second highness once, he had heard of many retellings of the incident concerning Lorist and the two brothers.

"Arri, please spare us. Remember when we were young? You were our boss lady," begged Pulist. The moment he recognized Lorist, he changed his attitude right away.

"Eww, don't bring something so far back up again. And weren't the three of you boasting that you'll make me your wife?" humphed the girl with dissatisfaction.

"But Arri, I really like you for real. It was you who didn't consider us brothers seriously. That's why we agreed to help our father out with his ambitions. After all, if we succeeded, I would satisfy my own desires as well," said Pulist in a frustrated tone.

The girl seemed to be in deep thought before she regained her cheerful demeanor. Raising her head, she told Lorist, "Whatever, let them go. It's pointless to go further than this anyway."

Lorist waved his hand and a few guards returned the weapons and mounts to the three men. Actually, even the guards did not crave the stuff that they just returned, given their impressive loadouts.

"Arri, will we never be able to meet again?" Pulist said as he stopped and turned back after walking a few steps with his horse.

The girl did not bother with him and headed into the castle, clutching Lorist's arm.

Chapter 303
Anna and Arri

The castle of the Dina barony was not huge. It was at most around 15 meters tall, built of stone boulders secured with clay pasted between the seams. With time, the walls had turned dark-colored. Even thought it was cleaned often with limewater, there were still traces of moss in some corners of the building, with most of the rocks at the base of the structure covered in a mossy-green coat.

There was a small courtyard past the bridge and entrance. Most noble castles actually used this kind of architectural layout. Howard guided the two four-wheeled carriages to the side to park before bringing the four horses that pulled the carriages to the servants nearby. After that, he had the coachman and guards bring down four huge chests, which contained the gifts Lorist brought for the two girls and their aunt.

The boxes were brought to the main hall before they were opened. In three of them were various kinds of fashionable clothing and jewellery, while the other contained beauty products like makeup, combs, mirrors, perfume, silk handkerchiefs and many more. That was also one of the many benefits of the extermination of the Hanayabarta kingdom. Lorist had picked out four chests' worth of clothes matching the figures of Arriotoli and her aunt that were deeply imprinted in his memory.

Not long after, Lorist finally got to meet Arriotoli's aunt, whom he called Chessy back then, after two long years. The young aunt looked like she lost some weight over the years, but that only helped make her prominent chests seem more apparent. Had it not been for Arriotoli, who was still clasping Lorist's hands, the young aunt might just leap into Lorist's embrace right away. However, she managed to control herself and only stared at Lorist with teary eyes. It was not until Arriotoli made a few short coughs that she regained her composure.

It was, however, Lorist's first time meeting Arriotoli's younger brother and sister, as well as the silver-ranked knight of their household. As the heir to the position of the head of the Dina house, the 11-year-old boy looked thinner and paler than other boys of his age. However, he did thank Lorist politely according to noble etiquette for lending them a hand in a time of need, allowing them to obtain victory over the

territorial dispute.

Perhaps because the boy was told to memorize what to say beforehand, he delivered his words with a little bit of stammer. When he finally finished, Arriotoli allowed him to leave, causing the boy to quickly pull the silver-ranked knight Massa away with him.

Arriotoli's sister, on the other hand, did resemble her quite a lot. The girl did not lie; her sister was indeed quite the beauty. She seemed gentler than most girls of her age, yet carried with her an elegant air. Arriotoli herself also gained a more heroic aura since two years ago when Lorist last met her.

Arriotoli's sister was called Fennazali. Both she and her young aunt loved the gifts Lorist prepared for them, as was apparent from how they busily rummaged around the four huge chests. Every time they found something that they liked, they would cheer loudly with joy and surprise, matching the clothes against their bodies or asking Lorist and Arriotoli whether something looked good on them or not.

On another note, Lorist was quite curious at the gaze Fennazali looked at him with -- it had a hint of shyness, which was natural for a girl whom he only met for the first time. Their young aunt on the other hand had a gaze filled with burning passion, one that showed how much she was struggling not to jump to Lorist for a hug on the spot. Despite Arriotoli's presence, she did not refrain from giving Lorist suggestive looks.

Arriotoli, however, only looked carefully at the gifts Lorist gave them without nearly as much excitement as her sister and aunt.

Lorist asked curiously, "What's wrong?"

The girl revealed a bitter smile and said, "I am happy that you gave us so many luxurious items, but seeing as how our dominion is within this rural valley, there aren't many people we can show them off to."

"Ahh," Lorist mused as he scratched his nose awkwardly, "Arri, you can always come with me. I have even more nice clothing at my place, all of them my spoils of course. You can take any of your choice. You don't have to stay here anymore."

Arriotoli shook her head and said, "After my father's fall in battle, the childish me only ever wanted to rely on someone with power and backing to help us maintain control of our barony here. In the end, I managed to get to know Princess Carey and attended her paradise gathering, thinking that I've finally found some good backing. However,

the more I interacted with the princess and the rest, I found that I could trust them lesser and lesser. It was pure coincidence that I met you there, so I thought I should just marry you to leave that circle of people…

"In the two years I've been waiting for you here, I started training my bronze-ranked battleforce which I gave up long ago. Initially, I thought that I could rely on others to ensure the survival of my household. However, I came to understand recently that there's nobody more reliable than myself, so I started training hard in battleforce and the swordsmanship technique passed on through my family. Just look at both my hands…"

The girl stretched out both her palms that was full of callouses and blisters. Her skin had dulled quite substantially, and was quite far off from the fair, tender state that Lorist remembered.

Lorist grasped her hand and caressed it lightly.

The girl laughed bitterly and continued, "When your household knight came last year and told me your actual identity, I knew that the dream I've been clinging to would no longer come true. I've always thought that you were a knight, so I wanted to marry my sister off to you to stimulate your ambition and earn an achievement worthy of land just like my father. That way, both my sister and I can become the wives of a baron.

"To think that you're actually a count whose might even the king is wary of… You even dared to not give His Majesty any face. I've already long heard of the rumors of the Norton house's actions at the imperial capital. It was then when I realized that a count like you had far superior suitors than us. As long as you desired it, the nobles would offer up their daughters and wives to warm your bed without even asking for anything in return. After all, you're the power Count Norton. I doubt that there are any nobles in the kingdom worthy of being your bride, unless you're looking to take Princess Carey as your wife.

"As for us sisters, we're naught but nobles from a small and rural barony. Our status is too far off compared to yours, so I knew that there's no way that we can get married to you formally. Even if you are willing, the subordinates of your house will definitely be against it, because that would actually be a mark of humiliation of your household. All that's left for us sisters is to be your concubines.

"Locke, I think I won't be going with you. I've gave it much thought in these two years

and I think that I'll probably just remain here in the dominion to wait for my brother to mature and succeed the title and land. After that, I will become the household knight of the Dina house and protect my home for the rest of my life. Don't try to convince me otherwise, I'm really confused right now. Let me have a few more days to think, alright?"

Lorist did not utter a word and merely nodded.

The dinner served that night was the best Arriotoli could serve. The toast bread with honey tasted surprisingly well according to Lorist. Even though the bread was not of the soft variety, being made of cruder wheats, it was surprisingly soft and sweet, making it extremely pleasant to eat. There was also roast turkey, goose, lamb ribs, baked fruits and potato mash. The dinner closed off with a delicious serving of mushroom soup.

The dinner table where they dined was long and rectangular, with the future heir of the Dina house, Arriotoli's brother, sitting at the main seat with a solemn look on his face. Sitting to his left were Lorist, Reidy and Howard. On the boy's right were the two sisters and Knight Massa. For some reason, the young aunt of the sisters was not present with them.

The young boy's excited gaze belied his solemn look. He did not know how long it has been since he had got such a lavish meal. Lorist took note of that and brought the food the boy laid his eyes on to his plate. Within a short moment, the boy's plate contained three lamb ribs, one large goose drumstick, one baked apple and a roast chicken wing.

The boy's mouth got more oily the more he ate, slowly growing more and more fond towards Lorist by the moment. That was especially the case when Lorist stopped his elder sister from harshly disciplining him, saying that he should not worry about his elder sister and eat all he wants in order to grow large and strong. Thus, the boy ate his fill and soon ended up bloated, having to be carried away by Knight Massa. Arriotoli was so mad that she stomped harshly on Lorist's feet a few times.

"Why isn't your aunt here?" asked Lorist.

The girl rolled her eyes and said, "The food you're eating here is all cooked by her. Without her in the kitchen, we'll be gnawing away at raw potatoes instead."

After finishing the delicious meal, the girl brought Lorist to his room at the third floor.

He got the master bedroom whereas Howard was assigned a room for guards beside it. Reidy on the other hand had to live at the guards' quarters at the camp outside, as the castle was too small to accommodate Lorist's 200 plus guards. Lorist simply had them use the camp set up by Baron Andrew and his two sons so as to save Arriotoli the trouble.

Opening the window of the roo, Lorist could see the scenery of the village behind the castle. The village was rather small, with only tens of unlit grass huts within it. In the center of the village was a large bonfire, which was what the patrol soldiers and other villagers used during the night for illumination. Several butt-naked children were playing beside the fire, tossing grass and other stuff into the pile. But the adults soon came and gave them a few smacks on their behinds before bringing the crying children home.

A soft knocking on Lorist's bedroom door could be heard.

"Come in," said Lorist as he turned around.

The one who entered was the aunt of the sisters. In her hand was a tray and candle.

"I… I've come to make your bed," the young woman said with a flushed face, "Al-also… Here's some bread and fruit wine for your enjoyment…"

"Thanks, just put it on the table there," said Lorist as he acknowledged it with a nod.

The woman closed the door before putting the tray and candle on the side table and proceeding to make the bed.

Seeing the two round, rear protrusions when she bent over to adjust the sheets, Lorist approached her and placed his hands on them.

The young aunt suddenly froze, before half-kneeling on the bed without making a single move. Lorist flipped her skirt up without the slightest sign of hurry before removing his own belt and pants. He later propped his hot and hard member between the two soft lumps.

The woman let out a long and pleasurable moan from the depths of her throat as she matched her hip movements with Lorist's thrusts. Burying her head deeply into the pillow, her soft rear shook and shuddered as a slight pinkish tint slowly surfaced.

"Should I call you Chessy like before, or something else?" asked Lorist as he removed yet another one piece of the woman's clothes. Two years back, she had attended the paradise gathering with Arriotoli as Chessy and Daisy. It was only during the end of the gathering that the girl told Lorist her real name. However, her aunt had long passed out from the sheer exhaustion of pleasure making with Lorist and did not get to tell him her real name.

"Just… Just call me Anna. M-my real name is Dilianna."

Lorist's hands caressed the two glorious lumps hanging from her chest nonstop, causing her form to soften like water yet again. He then shed all his garments before giving it another push, engaging in an act of union with the young widow.

As the two continued, Lorist increased his pace. But right before the climax, he heard a knocking at the bedroom door. He suddenly burst into a series of quick piston thrusts, the sudden rise in pace causing the aunt to roll her eyes in climax before she slumped onto the bed powerlessly, still moaning and panting lightly.

Come on, thought Lorist in annoyance, *to think that someone would come bother me just when I was about to climax…* Tying a makeshift skirt around his lower body with a sheet, he rushed angrily to his door. He was surprised to find that the one beyond it was Arriotoli.

"Eh? What's with this smell?" asked the girl the moment her sensitive nose picked up on the distinct smell produced by 'male and female interaction'. But given that she had not engaged in any such activity, she could not quite recall what kind of smell that was. It was not until she entered the room and saw her aunt lying flat on the bed that she understood what had happened.

"Hmph, auntie, how dare you take your niece's man from her? That's going too far!" said the girl in anger, as if her favorite toy had been taken away from her.

"Nonsense, he's my man as well." Now that nobody other than Lorist and Arriotoli was there, Anna did not hold back from standing up for herself.

"Ugh…" Arriotoli was speechless. After all, it was none other than she who invited her aunt over during the gathering to spend a night with Lorist, so she could hardly blame her aunt for it.

"But we're not at the paradise gathering anymore," retorted the girl weakly.

"I don't care," Anna said, "I also stayed chaste for him for two whole years. I'm going to leave with him this time, even if it means becoming his concubine. I'm satisfied as long as I can be together with him. Locke, do you want me to follow you?"

Lorist nodded without hesitation. As Anna was only 30, only one or two years younger than Lorist, she was in her prime of beauty. Only idiots would not desire her.

"Arri, stop being so stubborn. The fact that Locke came over to see us means that he cares about us. Think about the rest of our lives. I believe that Locke is the best one we can possibly spend it with. He won't disappoint us," advised Anna.

"I don't want to be his concubine," said the girl, shaking her head.

"Arri, please come with me. Even though you won't have official status, you will still enjoy all the benefits a wife of mine would. If any of you bear children, I can list them under the family registry and they will also qualify as formal heir candidates. Also, I don't think I might ever take a formal wife. Like you said, there aren't many who are qualified for that position."

Holding onto the girl's shoulder, Lorist said sincerely, "I've come here this time, determined to take you and your family back with me. The situation of the kingdom looks to be in bad shape, and the nobles at the imperial capital are panicking without taking any effective measures and can only watch as the second highness's military campaign fail. I've obtained reliable information that the Union will probably head in this direction after defeating the second highness. Nobles like your Dina house who are situated near the borders will be the first to feel the brunt of their might."

The girl shook Lorist's hand off and said, "I still need time to consider… His Majesty the King wouldn't lose that easily…"

Lorist kicked the door close and hugged the girl, bringing her towards the bed, before he said, "You can take all the time you want to think about it later. But right now, you have to make it up to me for disturbing me just before I climax."

Initially, Arriotoli was being slightly resistant. But under the mutual assault of Lorist and Anna, she eventually succumbed to pleasure.

Chapter 304
The God of War's End

Lorist, Anna and Arri made love all the way through the night before finally ending up in each other's embrace and falling into deep slumber. Lorist only awoke the next day from the noise outside the castle. He realized that he was alone in the bed, with Anna and Arri no longer there with him.

The previous night had done wonders to refresh him. Lorist got off the bed and felt completely relaxed. All the fatigue that had built up vanished completely, allowing him to be at his best state. Everything almost seemed to sparkle in Lorist's eyes. Simply slapping on some clothes, Lorist went to the room next to his and had Howard wake up to gather some water from the well downstairs to prepare for a bath.

Howard walked out with dark circles under his eyes and complained, "Milord, you were making too much noise yesterday and I was unable to sleep at all! I only managed to fall asleep when it the sky started to brightened, but then you came to wake me up almost right away…"

Well, since I'm in a good mood, I'll refrain from bickering with this little bastard. Knocking on Howard's head, he said, "Alright, go get some sleep. I'll take a bath myself."

Howard groaned sleepily before closing his door and going back to sleep.

Lorist brought the bronze basin in his room and a towel to the well behind the castle before he started using the water to wash himself. Given the hot weather of the 7th month, goosebumps manifested on Lorist's skin the moment the chilling water splashed onto him.

Beside the well was a drinking fountain. The four horses pulling the carriages were being fed water and brushed by some servants. Just as Lorist was about to go close to see, he heard someone call out to him from behind. One of the female servants came over and said, "Milord, the mistress has invited you over for breakfast."

When Lorist made his way to the dining hall, he was surprised to see Howard there.

Curious, he asked, "Weren't you going to get some more sleep?"

Howard gave a bitter laugh and said, "If only it were that easy to fall asleep again! This castle only has single-layered walls and the echo is especially strong. I'm able to hear the slightest movements of others super clearly. The noise of people and horses is too much for me to bear. I think I'll go take another nap at the camp outside later."

Howard was not wrong, as the castle of the Dina barony was built like a clock's circular structure. The advantage to that was that it was hard to attack, but the echo of sounds was a side effect. Just like a bronze clock cover that would hum when the bell beneath it rang, the upper floors of the castle would be affected by the sounds beneath.

Anna enthusiastically instructed a few servants to serve Lorist and Howard a lavish breakfast. there were bread coated with goat-horned bee honey, cheese, turkey bacon, fresh filk, some honeyed milk as well as some self-brewed fruit wine.

Arriotoli later arrived at the dining hall clad in leather armor, armed with her two-handed greatsword. Behind her was her younger brother and Silver-ranked Knight Massa. Seeing their sweaty looks, they must have finished morning training not too long ago.

Arriotoli placed her greatsword on a rack nearby before removing her leather gloves and placing them in a bronze basin to be washed. Using a rag given to her by a servant to wipe off some sweat, she came over and sat opposite Lorist.

Lorist gave her a blinding smile, only to receive an eye roll in return. It was at that moment when Fennazali sneezed as she walked into the hall and took her place beside Arriotoli. "Sis, where did you go yesterday night? I think there was a cat in heat somewhere in our castle. It was calling out so loudly that I wasn't able to sleep properly. I wanted to find you to chase that cat away together, but you weren't in your room. The sound only quieted down when daybreak came…"

Pfft! Howard tried to stifle his laughter and said, "I'm sorry, I'm already full. I'll be taking my leave here. Enjoy your meal…"

He then left.

Arriotoli said with a flushed face, "Zali, I didn't hear any screeching cat…"

"Well, there's no way a cat can hear itself screech, can it?" Lorist interjected. Having

spent quite the time with both Anna and Arri the night before, he found that Anna was the quiet type who would only lightly pant even after achieving climax. Arriotoli was different in that she would moan like a soprano singing in an opera. Her moans built up in tension and went completely out of control when she climaxed. It was no wonder her sister thought that there was a cat in heat somewhere in the castle.

Arriotoli's face was red with embarrassment. Gritting her teeth, she tried to stomp on Lorist's feet beneath the dining table, only for her leg to be clipped between Lorist's own legs.

"Arri, have you made your decision? Will you come with me?" asked Lorist as he picked up a honeyed bread for himself.

Arriotoli looked at Lorist with a hateful glare until her leg was released. Then, she revealed a smile as she shook her head and said, "I don't want to leave this place. This is the Dina barony, the dominion of my household. I will not abandon it."

Lorist began to worry and said, "Idiot, did all the sword-training turn your brain into solid muscle? Leaving now doesn't mean that you're abandoning your dominion. Instead, you need to do this to ensure the survival of your house and bloodline. Are you prepared to bury your own family here in this valley? If all of you perish, there would be no more Dina barony. Your brother is still young. Let him return here once he has matured to inherit the land. I can promise that your dominion will be returned to your house when the time comes.

Arriotoli started to get angry as she tossed the bread in her hand to Lorist and yelled, "While it's easy for us to leave right now, coming back in the future will be incredibly hard. Just like you said, it'll take another eight years before my brother comes of age. If I don't stay here in our dominion, who will acknowledge that is the case in the future? Who would remember us?"

"That's easy. We only need to use our swords to stimulate their memory," Lorist said with a chuckle, "With the House of Norton behind your back, there's no need to worry about the matter of your dominion. Arri, perhaps when your brother grows up, the House of Dina won't just have a small barony. You can even have a whole viscounty."

Arriotoli rolled her eyes and said, "Hmph, you say that like it's true…"

Fennazali asked curiously, "Lord Count, is the House of Norton really powerful?"

Lorist nodded and said, "I'm sure your sister knows better that our house is the strongest within the whole of the Andinaq kingdom."

"Since the kingdom is in trouble, why does the House of Norton not help His Majesty out of his dangerous predicament?" asked Fennazali naively.

"Well," Lorist began, "Second mistress, it's not that the Norton house doesn't want to contribute to the kingdom. The people in power at the imperial capital themselves have refused our offer to help out. Not only did they forbid our house from sending aid to the frontlines, they also instructed us to stay within our own dominion without taking any rash action. If that wasn't the case, I'm afraid I wouldn't have the time to come visit all of you.

"Did you hear about the War of Glass that concluded just last year? The Union and the Teribo kingdom got into war over the secret of glass production, ending with the extermination of the Teribo kingdom. The Union now controls the territory of the kingdom, and an estimated number of seventy percent of Teribo nobles have gone missing.

"It was later revealed that those nobles had encountered raiding mercenaries and private military outfits when they attempted to defend their own dominions. Those private armies and mercenary bands either killed or hanged the nobles. To the mercenary bands of the nobles, the more land the nobles they kill control, the more impressive the title they will be awarded for the deed.

"That's the reason I want you all to leave with me. Let's not hand ourselves to those enemies on a silver platter. Bring your house's land deed and title certification documents with you. When your younger brother matures and you wish to take your dominion back, the Norton house will definitely offer aid. We will definitely not disappoint you."

Arriotoli stood up in troubled fashion and said, "That's enough, Lord Count. Let me have some time to think about what I should do."

The girl has always thought that Lorist was exaggerating the facts and believed that the king would not lose that easily. Even though Auguslo had been trapped within the three provinces of the Redlis kingdom, he still had 170 thousand men under his control. Arriotoli felt that the Union would not be able to do much as long as the army was still with the king.

Lorist spent half a month of worriless days at the Dina barony, enjoying the company and hospitality of Anna. However, Arriotoli herself still had not made up her mind yet. On some nights, she would sneak into Lorist's bed and squeal like a cat in heat. But no matter what, she still did not want to leave her dominion and depart with Lorist.

By the end of the 7th month, word from Morante and Jillin Harbor finally let Arriotoli understand the direness of the situation.

A report by the Morante Daily, titled 'The God of War's End', recounted the events during the 2nd month of the previous year when the second highness crossed Cloudsnap Mountains with his army and stormed Frederika despite the odds, making him gain the reputation of a god of war of the new generation overnight.

It was a shame that the second highness got gravely sick following his conquest of more than half of the territory of the Redlis kingdom. Having missed the opportunity to unite the land of the two kingdoms, the second highness allowed the enemy to regroup and reform and even suffered quite a number of losses from the reckless arrogance of his subordinates, much to the detriment of his army's morale. By the time the second highness realized that something was wrong and took command despite still being sick, it was already too late.

At the frontlines within the Redlis kingdom, the second highness faced more than one enemy. For instance, the Wessia Merchant Guild from the Union had conquered part of the Redlis kingdom's territory, and the four central duchies had refused to abide by the second highness's demand to relinquish their independent status and return under his reign, launching into revolt. As for the nobles of the Redlis kingdom, they pressed their attacks on the Andinaq kingdom's royal local defense legion thanks to the second highness's refusal to give them the due preferential treatment nobles like them deserved.

On the 13th day of the 7th month, the four central duchies formed an allied army numbering 140 thousand men and sent it to attack the army of the second highness, which was stationed at the borders of the Handra duchy. They also slaughtered all the livestock in the vicinity and celebrated with a huge banquet, causing the 100-thousand-strong army of the second highness to crumble from the lack of food, giving the four central duchies a major and easy victory, allowing them to move their forces into Majik Province.

On the 21st day of the 7th month, the second highness retreated from Anderwoff

Province and gathered around 20 thousand soldiers that were still willing to obey him to defend Frederika. The ones that encircled the city that time was the Wessia Merchant Guild's private army of 20 thousand men and 30 thousand more soldiers of the Union and other private parties, as well as the 80 thousand soldiers of the four central duchies and another 20 thousand soldiers of the nobles of the Redlis kingdom. The second highness had to deal with almost 150 thousand men, trapped within Frederika without food or reinforcements. The writer of the article opined that the time was nigh for the god of war's end.

That report was published on the 21st day of the 7th month in the Morante Daily, and the current date was the 34th day of the 7th month. Thirteen days had passed during the delivery of the paper to Lorist, and it was unknown whether siege on Frederika had begun, or whether the second highness still survived.

Lorist was enraged after reading the emergency report from Jillin Harbor. *To think that the second royal local defense legion near the borders of the Madras duchy is still groveling slowly towards the frontlines at a time like this… They also sent 45 thousand men from their ranks over to Jillin Harbor to take over the security and instructed for the forces of the Norton house to return to Silowas… and demanded that we don't take any refugees?! Demands…*

Gosh, they have so many demands! Lorist stroked his chin and thought, *I see that I don't have a choice but to teach these fellows a lesson. They actually spread themselves thinner by sending 45 thousand men as a precaution against our house, leaving only 30 thousand men to save the second highness… Those people there at the imperial capital are completely treating us like enemies! I wonder if their stance represents the second highness's…*

Arriotoli was completely dumbfounded by the article and the report from Jillin Harbor.

"How could this be?" stammered she.

Lorist laughed in a cold tone and said, "Do you know that those fellows at the imperial capital don't even know what to do about the predicament their king is in? They're still struggling for power over one another at a time like this… I think I understand now. They believe that allowing the Norton house to rescue the second highness is an opportunity for us to gain his favor, so they want to stop us from getting on the second highness's good side, lest they lose the favor themselves. That's why they sent the royal local defense legion to Jillin Harbor to chase our troops back into the ocean

without even caring about how their king is being encircled this very moment…

"We don't have much time, Arri. Let's leave now. There's no point in thinking about this anymore. Don't make me force you to come along," said Lorist solemnly as he looked at Arriotoli.

"I'll come," the girl said, "But I won't be your concubine. If Aunt Anna wants to, she's free to do so. I can, however, be your lover. But you must make me a female knight and raise my younger brother into a fine knight and dominion lord."

"Deal," Loirst said, "Make your preparations quick. Only take what you need. We'll be leaving first thing tomorrow. You can bring the folk in your dominion along if you want. I won't split you up from your subjects. You can definitely nurture and train your subjects into a force that will defend the Dina house in the future."

"Thank you, Locke," said Arriotoli.

Chapter 305
The Odd Situation

By the time Lorist arrived at Jillin Harbor with the Dinas, Fimrock Legion's first division had just got into a small conflict with the second legion of the royal defense legion. It all started because a group of one thousand riders wanted to storm the refugee camps the Nortons were in charge of to chase those refugees away so that the Nortons would not be able to recruit them.

When their warnings went unheard, the riders launched their attack. The soldiers of the Norton house did not hesitate to retaliate with their steel ballistae against the charging riders. Under the rapid fire of bolts from all 500 steel ballistae, the whole group of one thousand riders perished after only five volleys.

This time around, the second royal defense legion was in a verbal argument with those of Firmrock Legion. Potterfang announced that anyone that dared approached the refugee camp within a radius of 200 meters would be killed without question.

On the other hand, the messenger sent over by the second royal defense legion roared with a face flush with anger, "We have orders from the authorities at the imperial capital to take over Jillin Harbor. If the Norton house doesn't comply and insists on occupying the harbor and attacking our forces, you can be charged for treason!"

Potterfang laughed and said, "Open your eyes wide and look. This is the official permission drafted by the security chief of Jillin Harbor, Baron Fenston, that allows our forces to stay here for three whole months. Where is your evidence that we occupied this place by force? The number of refugees is only growing because of the volatile situation at the frontlines. Baron Fenston had asked us to help only because he was worried for the safety of Jillin Harbor. To think that those at the imperial capital would not only refuse our offer to go to the frontlines to help out His Majesty… I really don't understand what you fellows are up to.

"It's like you guys don't even care that His Majesty is trapped. Your second royal local defense legion took one whole month to crawl slowly like snails from Yungechandler Province to the imperial capital, and the first action you take is not bust through Kanbona Province to restore contact with His Majesty, but send half of your forces

here to take Jillin Harbor back. Am I going crazy, or are you the crazy ones? What's so important about Jillin Harbor? Will occupying this place help you save His Majesty? I'm really curious about what your intentions are.

"Even with the forces of the Union occupying Kanbona Province and sending small units to pillage the two southwestern provinces, the imperial capital didn't do anything to retaliate. Instead, you guys ordered the defending soldiers to abandon most of the citadels and hole up to protect yourselves, allowing those of the Union to do as they please without obstacle, killing and plundering our people and forcing them to have no choice to become refugees to escape! Yet, you want to forbid the Norton house from helping them out? What the heck are you thinking?! Is that how you repay the trust the king has shown you by allowing to take charge?"

The messenger was not able to retort with Potterfang's arguments, only bringing out a handkerchief to wipe some sweat off before he said, "Sir, those at the imperial capital have their own thoughts on the matter as well. Even though His Majesty is currently trapped, he does have 100 thousand elite soldiers with him, so he won't be defeated that soon. Also, Jillin Harbor is a port of the kingdom, so it would be incredibly inappropriate for it to be occupied by a private military outfit. It was because of this that those at the imperial capital sent me here. Now, you may hand Jilin Harbor back to us. With us here, you don't have to worry for the safety of this place any longer."

"Then tell me, what's the deal with you sending your one thousand riders to attack the refugee camp?" questioned Potterfang unforgivingly. He did not have the slightest intention of letting the harbor go either.

It was then when Lorist stepped into the main tent, causing Potterfang to stand up in a hurry for a salute.

"We can give Jillin Harbor back to you, but we demand that we be allowed to gather refugees outside a 2-kilometer radius of Jillin Harbor. If we don't butt into each other's businesses, then we won't bother each other. Tell those backing you to not infringe upon the interests of the Norton house, lest you want to make enemies of us. Naturally, you may not enter the range of our troops either. Those who do will be killed without question!"

Upon getting Lorist's promise to give the harbor back, the messenger hurriedly returned to make his report. As for the thousand riders who were completely wiped out, nobody remained hung up on that matter, since getting Jillin Harbor back was

worth far more casualties than that. The important thing was that their goal had been achieved.

"Milord, why are you giving Jillin Harbor back?" asked Potterfang, dissatisfied.

Lorist brought out a newspaper and tossed it in front of Potterfang. The commander flipped open the paper and saw that it was the Morante Daily published on the 27th day of the 7th month, which detailed the successful occupation of Frederika by the allied army and the king of the Andinaq kingdom being missing in action.

"The second highness is…" mused Potterfang with great shock.

"Read the headline down there," said Lorist.

Potterfang took a look only to read an article about how the Union was going to form a negotiation council in preparation for a visit to the Andinaq kingdom, with eventual peace on the horizon. The report below that was an opinion piece by a journalist that stated that even though the second highness was nowhere to be found, some reliable sources claimed that he had actually fallen sick and was unable to show up on the battlefield. Now that Frederika has fallen, it was believed that the god of war of the new generation would soon be found and captured.

The journalist believed that the reason for the Union's occupation of Kanbona Province of the Andinaq kingdom was due to the looming threat of the young god of war's possession of a force of 300 thousand soldiers to the Union, and the fact that he did not acknowledge the unification of the Lormo duchy and the Union. The attack on Kanbona Province was meant to be a wake-up call for the god of war to remind him of the Union's might.

Now that the army sent to the Redlis kingdom by the Andinaq kingdom had mostly been decimated, with the second highness missing, and the remaining forces within the borders of the Andinaq kingdom numbering less than 100 thousand men, the kingdom did not have enough forces to launch an attack, but was more than capable of defending itself. That was why the folks of the Union who felt that the conflict had been dragging on for a little too long formed a negotiation council that would travel to the imperial capital at the Andinaq kingdom to begin peace talks.

"Do you understand now? The authorities at the imperial capital isn't quarreling with us over this matter because they want to control more territory. They're worried that

their talks with the Union would be leaked, causing them to be blamed as traitors to the kingdom. I would like to see what the second highness's reaction will be when he hears of the plans of his subordinates," explained Lorist to Potterfang in an insulting tone.

"Milord, do you think that those at the imperial capital don't know about the news that the second highness's army has been defeated and about his disappearance?" asked Potterfang.

"I'm not too sure about that, but I can be rather certain that someone at the capital has some kind of thing going on with those of the Union. Perhaps, they are merely pretending to be ignorant of that so that they can put pressure on the second highness together. Right now, we should compromise with them and see what their true plans are. From the newspaper, we can see that the Union is planning to visit the kingdom for the talks, and the fastest way to travel from there to here is through sailing to Jillin Harbor. That was why the folks at the imperial capital want it back so badly. They would even be willing to lose more than half of the second royal local defense legion to kick us out from here. Given this state of affairs, I don't wish to clash with those idiots. Let's just hold ourselves back for the moment."

The forces of the Nortons smoothly ceded control of Jillin Harbor back to the second royal defense legion and set up another main camp at the shores roughly two kilometers away from Jillin Harbor. There, they would recruit fleeing refugees and send them to Silowas through a temporary port they had built at the shore.

Ten days later, the recently strengthened Oceanic Legion encountered two long-distance merchant vessels in the oceans roughly ten kilometers away from Jillin Harbor. On the ship were the negotiation council and guards from the Union. An interesting thing was how the arrogant negotiation council members instantly turned obedient the moment they heard that they were dealing with the Oceanic Legion of the Norton house, answering every question with a smile, stating that they had been invited to the imperial capital by the authorities there to seek a peaceful resolution for the situation at the Redlis kingdom while requesting to be allowed passage.

Senbaud reported the information he got from questioning those of the Union to Lorist. After some consideration, Lorist instructed for the negotiation council to be allowed to pass and ordered Potterfang to hurry up with sending the refugees to Silowas before retreating with all their troops there, leaving not a single soul behind at Jillin Harbor. At the same time, he would send back the reorganized Jillin Harbor

Garrison back to Baron Fenston.

"Milord, are we going to stop meddling with the matter here at Jillin Harbor?" asked Supervisor Hansk, the governor of Silowas.

Lorist nodded and said, "The current situation smells extremely fishy to me. If our forces stay at Jillin Harbor, we might be perceived as an obstacle by some. It's better if we step back carefully to see what they intend to do. Stopping the negotiation council in their travels can be passed off as giving them a friendly greeting. With them knowing that we are not far away, those from the council should know that any decision they make concerning the kingdom must take us into account."

On the 20th day of the 8th month, a messenger from the imperial capital arrived at Silowas with a document that required Lorist's signature. Lorist scanned the document and realized that it was a proposal. Given that King Auguslo, the second highness, was missing, and the fact that a kingdom cannot be without a leader, the nobles of the Andinaq kingdom were requested to pass a motion to allow Princess Carey to temporarily take the throne and position as queen so that the peace treaty between the kingdom and the Union can be signed to put an end to the war.

Lorist merely laughed and refused to give his signature, causing the messenger to threaten that the Nortons would be forced out of the noble circle of the Andinaq kingdom and not be recognized as nobility by those from the imperial capital.

Lorist simply said that the senior noble of the Norton house is the Andinaq royal family, which was led by the king himself. With the king being missing, the Norton house would not submit to any other. Even though Princess Carey carries the blood of the royal family of the Andinaq kingdom, she was far from qualified to be a senior noble of the Norton house.

Thus, the messenger left. But Lorist did not expect that what transpired after would be even weirder. After another half month, Lorist received a report that left him speechless.

The Redlis kingdom had officially been eradicated, with Majik Province being absorbed into the Handra duchy. On the other hand, Anderwoff Province and Bodolger Province where Frederika was situated became the territory of the Union, with Anderwoff Province becoming the official dominion of the Wessia Merchant Guild.

Hanstmost Province of the Andinaq kingdom, where the Dina barony was located, and the northwestern area of the Redlis kingdom had united and formed a new duchy, called the Zitram duchy, with the new duke being rumored to be one noble of the Redlis kingdom that had used the flooding tactic to defeat the second highness's army of 70 thousand and crowned a new genius military strategist.

The two southwestern provinces that used to belong to the Andinaq kingdom had also fused to become the Allied Duchies of Britt, with three dukes having joint control of the Union. One of them was President Britt from a smaller, second-rate merchant guild. Another was the leader of a famous mercenary band, called Dragon's Talon, with the last being the head of a military-based noble house from the Teria duchy that had defected to the side of the Union, who had sent his troops in the first wave of attacks on Frederika and succeeded greatly, ending with him being made a duke.

Currently, Andinaq kingdom was ruled by the queen. Princess Carey had been coronated only recently and had also signed a peace treaty with the Union. Not only did she cede away the conquered northwestern area of the Redlis kingdom, and the two southwestern provinces of the kingdom, as well as Hanstmost Province. All the Andinaq kingdom had left was Central Province where the imperial capital was, Welbassia Province, and Yungechandler Province which used to belong to the Madras duchy.

Nowadays, the imperial capital had already become a border city, with Flowater Creek at its northern border and Jillin Harbor at its west. The funniest part was in drawing of the new territory of the Andinaq kingdom on the map: Silowas had actually not been included within. In other words, Princess Carey and the other nobles of the Andinaq kingdom no longer acknowledge the House of Norton as being one of the kingdom. In other words, the Norton house was a rogue noble house with no senior noble.

"What the hell is going on here?" Lorist scratched his head in a troubled manner, no longer understanding the implications of the current situation.

Potterfang and Supervisor Hansk on the other hand looked elated.

"Milord, our current situation is just like the one of the founding emperor of the Krissen Empire. With nobody commanding us around as a result of the Andinaq royal family's willing abandonment of the Norton house by not acknowledging us as their junior noble house, we are just like the house of Count Krissen a few centuries ago.

However, back then, Count Krissen was first exiled before being cut off. It was from then on when he gathered his troops at The Northlands and the northeastern area and ended up founding the old empire. However, our current situation is far better than his," said Supervisor Hansk with joy.

"You're saying that the lands our forces conquer will belong to us solely and that nobody would question the legitimacy of our ownership over those lands and revolt?" asked Lorist.

"That's right, Milord. With the Andinaq kingdom's territory not including Silowas, that is a sign that they no longer care about us. With only a word from you, Milord, we can take Jillin Harbor right away and let our troops storm straight to the imperial capital," said Potterfang.

"No, something that convenient won't just fall out of the sky like that," Lorist said as he scratched his chin, "Let's wait a bit more for now. We'll train our forces prim and proper before we look for our next target. Either way, this situation still seems too odd to me. Tarkel!"

"Milord, I'm right here," said Tarkel as he stepped in from the door.

"With the war at the Redlis kingdom ended, I want the agents of Furybear to infiltrate Frederika and see if you can find the whereabouts of the second highness. I have a feeling that he would not be defeated that easily. Go take a look so that he doesn't pop out of nowhere and cause trouble for us at the most crucial moment," instructed Lorist.

"Yes, Milord," replied Tarkel, before he made a cutthroat gesture and said, "Milord, do we give him a 'sendoff' if we find him?"

Shaking his head, Lorist said, "Just report to me if you locate him. Don't act without instruction. This is not something you can decide, understood?"

"Understood, Milord."

Chapter 306
Return to Morante

Lorist left Silowas for The Northlands along with the Dinas. The young aunt of the Dina sisters, Dilianna, had already become Lorist's concubine. As for Arriotoli, the elder Dina sister, she was prideful, maintaining her relationship with Lorist as lovers while also training hard to become the first female knight of the Dina house.

As for her sister, the second mistress of the Dina house, she had expanded her horizons after meeting Lorist. As she enjoyed Lorist's treatment and hospitality, she grew intimate with him and even flirted with him often, sometimes seeming envious of what her aunt was doing as well. She did express that she did not mind being Lorist's concubine, much to her elder sister's displeasure. It seemed like it would not take long before she fell to Lorist's 'demonic grasps'.

Lorist had the Dinas move into Firmrock Castle, solving the problem of him having to spend his nights alone. Since Arriotoli wanted to become a knight, Lorist helped her reorganize her training routine and content. Within a year and a half or so, she would definitely achieve her ambitions.

As for her brother, the heir of the Dina house, he already had a training plan prepared for him at the young age of eleven. Given the early death of the late Baron Dina when the boy was only two, and the subsequent passing of her mother from grief, the child grew to have a rather weak constitution as an indirect consequence of his parents' absence. Lorist decided that he would first work on mending the boy's physique before sending him off a year later to the Nico Academy, which would be launched by Telesti soon. He would continue his studies there for the next three years as he matures before having his battleforce awakened and beginning his knight training course.

Lorist felt substantially more relaxed upon returning to The Northlands. Even though the weird situation at the Andinaq kingdom did worry him, being isolated from the kingdom made him feel a kind of relief. He could finally decide the fate of his house on his own terms. The next course of action for him was to consider carefully the next action he would take.

Lorist did not wish to launch another military campaign right away. After all, the forces of the house had just been expanded and would still require a little more time to be up to proper shape for combat. Additionally, many household knights had taken a vacation to break through to the gold rank, not to mention the refugees recruited from the Andinaq kingdom would require time to be settled down. That was the reason for Lorist's decision to stay put for the next two years within the dominion. On one hand, he could observe the changing situation outside, on the other, he could use the opportunity to sneak in some of Furybear's agents into the four central duchies, given that the Norton house had almost no way of gaining information from there.

The 100 thousand plus refugees brought over from the Andinaq kingdom had departed for the western part of The Northlands where a new settlement was being prepared. It was called the Greatriver settlement. Like Salus and Redriver Valley, Greatriver would also have eight knight manors built there.

At the end of the 11th month, Count kenmays, Baron Felim and Baron Shazin once again came to Firmrock Castle. While the main reason was the distribution of dividends from the salt merchant committee, the other was for them to spend winter at the castle together to improve the relationship of the four houses.

Count Kenmays looked at the three beauties from the Dina house with drool dripping down the side of his mouth, thinking that while his number of maidservants far surpassed that of Lorist, their quality was vastly inferior. He also managed to get Lorist to abide by his word to bring him to Morante. Baron Felim and Baron Shazin were both interested in making the trip as well, so Lorist decided that he would bring them there during the 5th month next year to expand their horizons.

During that time, Howard came crying to Lorist. The reason was that his fiancee Katrina, the 17-year-old daughter of Baron Felim, had failed her battleforce awakening, causing her to be in a rather sour mood during her visit to Firmrock Castle with her father. In the end, Howard had no choice but to seek Lorist for help on the matter.

Lorist laughed out loud and invited Baron Feilm and his daughter to his study. After giving Katrina a pulse reading, Lorist told them that the reason for her failed attempt was from a cold she had suffered when she was young, the effects of which still remained, with traces of 'cold' energy still within her blood. As long as she goes through some simple reconditioning, she would be fine. He also mentioned that if the baron did not mind, he should leave Katrina at Firmrock Castle and said that he was

confident that she would be able to successfully awaken her battleforce in another half year. Filled with joy, Baron Felim placed his daughter in Lorist's care. Lorist drafted an eating routine and some herbal medicine prescriptions and left the rest of the matter to Howard.

The nobles lived lavish lives even at a time like winter, unlike the commoners who mostly stayed in their houses, doing nothing but eating and sleeping. Thanks to a variety of magic beast furs, the forces of the Norton house were properly prepared to venture around in the cold weather. Lorist brought his three allies on a sled and traveled to the wastelands for a hunting trip. They ended up returning with a whole bunch of magic beasts, mostly carnivores that had took the initiative to attack their party, relinquishing the need to search for hunting targets on the snowfield.

By the time they returned to the dominion from the wastelands, it was already the 2nd month of the new year, and the rainy season was upon them. Following the rainy season was the winter harvests, so the three allies of the Nortons returned to their own dominions and would only return after overseeing their winter harvests. They would then head to Northsea and sail towards Morante to experience it for themselves.

During the 3rd month, Lorist received two pieces of good news: Irina, who was living at Maplewoods Bastide, gave birth to a son, whereas Telesti, who was staying at Nico Academy that was situated at the borders of Wildnorth Town and Bladedge Mountains, had given birth to another daughter. The latter had named the child Nico Freycia, bearing the family name of her mother, much to Lorist's displeasure.

In the 4th month, Howard sent over good news from Firmrock Castle, mentioning that his fiancee Katrina had successfully awakened her battleforce. Howard was completely overjoyed and brought Katrina to Maplewoods Bastide with him to see the newborn child of Irina.

On the 24th day of the 5th month, the three allied families and the three Dina women all went to Northsea. It was on that day when Lorist started his journey there to meet up with them. After that, all of them boarded a brand new merchant vessel bearing the same name as the port city and sailed towards Morante.

Northsea was a brand new large-class, long-distance merchant vessel. The only difference between it and other common ships of that class was that it was designed to transport people, with emphasis on providing a speedy and comfortable journey

instead of transporting more cargo. She had received the best features possessed by traditional merchant ships while also having a luxuriously decorated inner cabin. Lorist was prepared to have a few more similar ships built so that he could use them as ferries from Silowas to Northsea.

After boarding the Northsea, Lorist was successively bedded by the three Dinas. Dilianna wanted to give birth to Lorist's child as soon as possible so that she can have a decent standing in the house. Arriotoli on the other hand was rather irritated at the fact that Lorist's only concubine, Irina, had given birth to two of his sons that were both drafted into the family registry of the Nortons. There was no doubt that the mother and sons had rather high statuses in the house. Even if Lorist were to take an official wife, that concubine could rely on her two sons to maintain her status. Even though Arriotoli's wish was to become the first female knight of the Dina house, that did not stop her from venting her frustrations on Lorist in bed.

As for Fennazali, the second Dina mistress, all she wished for was for her to be able to keep living her current life. She did not have any lofty ambitions, wanting only to live a good and comfortable life, and becoming Lorist's woman was one of the easiest methods to achieve that. Thus, she laid with Lorist, albeit shyly, during her first time. As her aunt Dilianna was there to help her, she did not suffer much during her first experience and smoothly became Lorist's lover as she had wished.

Arriotoli did not have much thoughts about her younger sister's decisions. After one of their tiring rounds of bedsport, she warned Lorist not to treat her sister ill in any way. Lorist merely snickered and said, "Rather than looking out for your sister, you should worry about yourself. I haven't had enough yet."

The Dina mistress retorted stubbornly, "Hmph, bring it on!", before she took on 'Demon Lord Lorist' alone and ended up turning into putty after the whole affair, causing her to have to rest for two whole days in bed.

When the ship passed Sidgler Province of the Madras duchy, Count Kenmays eyed the Platinum Beach enviously. That was the only famous tourist spot along the Cursed Coast of the former Krissen Empire. Nowadays, travel there had been forbidden by the decree of Duke Madras, which was a huge waste of potential in the count's eyes.

Count Kenmays scrutinized the beach like he would a family heirloom. Platinum Beach was the widest beach at the empire with its sands fine as grain and white as jade. When sunlight covers the beach, it would give off a sparkling sheen, which was

probably the origin of the place's name… The seas over there were the deepest blue, with lots of priceless and rare fish and corals at shallow waters. It was the number one spot for a retreat for centuries when the empire still existed.

However, Duke Madras betrayed the empire and occupied that place for himself. For decades, Platinum Beach had been sealed off apart from the few occasions when the duke came over for a trip. Count Kenmays said with regret that it was a shame that Duke Madras did not have any business sense. If Platinum Beach was in the control of the Kenmays house, he would definitely develop it into a tourist spot that would easily earn its weight in gold back.

Twelve days later, Northsea arrived at Silowas. Lorist brought his three friends to survey the Firmrock Legion that was stationed at the island and also organized a grand banquet. Count Kenmays, being an adept businessman from a family with a long-running background in the field, quickly grasped the importance of Silowas. He told Lorist that with both The Northlands and Silowas, the Norton house was definitely on its path to prosperity. However, the Kenmayses were located at the eastern part of The Northlands, so they would not be able to take part in trade through the ocean, which would no doubt be one of the post profitable activities to engage in during a time of peace.

Lorist brought Count Kenmays to Jillin Harbor for a survey trip and expressed his intention to develop it into a trading hub that could allow for the expansion of trade routes to the Redlis kingdom and the center of the Andinaq kingdom.

Baron Fenston was a little at loss at how to deal with Lorist, as he was a noble that had been excommunicated by the kingdom. While he did not know exactly how he should receive Lorist, he would definitely not dare to chase him away. In the end, the baron struck a compromise and received Lorist as he would a noble from the Union, complete with throwing a customary welcoming banquet and praising Lorist's notion of developing the harbor into a trading hub, expressing his complete support.

However, the baron did not call the shots when it came to Jillin Harbor. The second royal defense legion still remained there, led by a noble of the kingdom, who was also a gold-ranked knight that had witnessed Lorist kill Viscount Aslan right in front of the second highness and defeat the arrogant blademaster in the process. He had also heard about Count Aslan's defeat and death, so he chose to feign ignorance about Lorist's presence at the harbor. As long as the Norton house did not occupy the place, he would be willing to shut an eye or two.

After staying at Jillin Harbor for two days, Lorist returned to Silowas. Just before he was going to leave for Morante, a messenger from the Andinaq kingdom hurried to Silowas. That messenger was sent by Marquis Reid, carrying a letter that stated that if Lorist was willing, he could take Queen Carey as his wife and be made prince consort, which would also come with the enfeoffment of Jillin Harbor. Through that method, Lorist would be able to once again be included in the ranks of the nobles of the Andinaq kingdom.

While Lorist was tempted by the offer of Jillin Harbor, he was not the least bit interested in Queen Carey. The queen was beautiful, no doubt, but Lorist's memories of her whorish behavior was not the least bit fond. Perhaps, most nobles would be more than proud to be married to a queen, and perhaps even tolerant or ignorant or who the queen sleeps with, but there was no way in hell Lorist would be willing to take a wife like her. Being partly influenced by the ideals of his past life, he would not be willing to be on the side of the cuckolded.

Even though Arriotoli and her aunt Dilianna had participated in the paradise gathering a number of times and had no doubt had sexual relations with several men before, they were rather frank about it and stopped going to those gatherings after getting to know Lorist. Not only that, they returned to their home and waited patiently for him for two whole years. Based only on that, Lorist felt that they were much cleaner than Queen Carey. There was also the fact that they were only his concubines, not his actual wife.

Lorist still recalled hearing a rumor about the queen during his attendance of the banquet organized by Baron Fenston. It was said that she frequently laid with her ministers and based her decisions on the policies of the kingdom on those interactions. Rumor has it that she listened to the minister that pleased her the best in bed. That was probably the main reason male aphrodisiacs were rising in price at the imperial capital. Lorist felt that Queen Carey was definitely comparable to the queen of the Iblia kingdom in their frivolous demeanors.

Shaking his head, Lorist did not even bother to pen a letter of refusal to the offer and instructed the messenger to be sent back to the ferry. After that, he left for Morante on Northsea with his three allies and the three Dinas.

Lorist felt quite safe traveling to the Union right now as he did not feel any threat from the kingdom. The main reason for that was the current queen's signing of the peace treaty with the kingdom. Other than that, he was no longer considered an Andinaq

noble, but a rogue one. Additionally, his house had already achieved peace with the Chikdors, so there was no need for any unnecessary conflict to arise. Had it not been for those facts, Lorist would not have risked bringing those three country bumpkins with him to the big city.

On the 11th day of the 7th month of Year 1775, Lorist once again set foot on Morante. It has already been ten years since his departure from the great city after receiving the summons from his household.

Chapter 307
The Plight of Dawn Academy

The span of ten years passed swiftly as the wind. Lorist slowly stepped into Dawn Academy, looking at the various familiar sights while soaking in nostalgia. For the rest of the day, Count Kenmays, Baron Felim and Baron Shazin would be bringing their female family members to shop around at Rotary Street, the most prominent shopping street in the city. The three Dinas had also tagged along, whereas Howard had been allowed leave to spend some time with his fiancee. Lorist refused the offer to join in and said that he had other affairs to deal with, leaving the guards with the three Dinas while he left alone to visit Academy Head Levins and Blademaster Claude.

What made Lorist wonder was how the academy did not change one bit from how it looked ten years ago. He recalled that the glass production method that he gave to the academy head to auction off proceeded successfully according to a newspaper he had read. The academy should have received lots of money as a result. But why did the academy not expand one bit? It had remained the same all this time.

It was then when Lorist realized that the academy that used to be crowded and busy was currently empty like a ghost town. Seeing people dressed in student attire and wearing a badge was uncommon at best. Even if there were people, they would merely pass through in a hurry, making the academy seem all the more empty than usual.

The greyish-green tower looked more worn down as time passed. Even though it was still technically complete, Lorist felt that it was barely holding on, ready to collapse at any moment.

Academy Head Levins was incredibly surprised at Lorist's visit. The 70-year-old man already had liver spots manifesting on his face, with the condition of his body gradually deteriorating. Lorist was dressed in a long-sleeved shirt in the mildly warm weather of the 7th month, but Academy Head Levins merely sat atop a chair wrapped in a fine-wool blanket.

"Little Locke, I didn't think you would come all the way here to visit me," Levins said with obvious effort as he pulled on the rope beside him, causing a chubby maidservant to show up, whom he instructed to boil some water and call for Blademaster Claude

to come over.

"There's no need for such pleasantries, academy head. Why has your health degraded so quickly? I remember seeing you just two years back and you looked rather vigorous back then," said Lorist.

"Well, this is what happens when one ages. It's about time I return to the heavenly kingdom of Singwa," Academy Head Levins joked, "Little Locke, I bet you didn't expect Dawn Academy to be closing down soon…"

"What did you say?!" Lorist exclaimed with shock, "Academy head, what's going on? Is the academy lacking funds? If that's the case, I can sponsor the academy and help it persevere through this trial."

"Money? Hehe, Dawn Academy has more money than anything else. The academy has never amassed such a large fortune before in its history. The treasuries underground are filled with gold," Levins said with a chuckle that carried with it a tinge of frustration and regret, "Little Locke, the glass production method and recipe you have given us netted us almost two million gold FOrdse, enough for the development of the academy for the next decade to come. I had wanted to make Dawn Academy one of the top three academies in the whole of Morante, but the coming of the War of Glass and the implementation of the nobility system brought with them unpredictable consequences. The Forde Trade Union used to be deeply entwined with the tens of nations that neighbored it. We touted freedom, openness, and peace, that caused guests from all over to flock here and enrich us. The academy sector at Morante was the haven for scholars…

"But the implementation of the nobility system and the War of Glass destroyed everything. This is an unprecedented and historical setback. Not only did the Union betray the ideals of its founder, Duke Forde Morante, by splitting its subjects into multiple classes of citizens, it also implemented the nobility system which was nothing but divisive.

"Even though the Union has become the nation with the largest territory on the continent, even larger than what the Krissen Empire had been at its peak, the Moranites who were cheering gleefully didn't realize the significance of that which they have lost!

"Formerly, the Union was allies with its neighbors, allowing its trade routes to span

nation after nation. All the other nations were welcoming to us merchants and admired our proud history of resisting the Krissen Empire for more than a century. But now, we have taken the place of the Krissen Empire and stretched our filthy hands towards the allies that had helped us out in the past! Broken relationships and trade routes soon followed with the inevitable treatment of the Union as a common enemy by the neighboring nations!

"During the last month, there was a fool at the council of the Union that pushed for even more expansion of our military power so that we can use the might of the Union forces to crush the nations that cut off our trade routes. He said that since money isn't working, we should just use our fists. To think that there would be people who actually supported his motion…

"This is the result of letting merchants run a nation. They lack foresight; their tunnel vision only see the short term profits in front of them. Even if they don the luxurious mantle of nobility, their bones still reek of the stench of vultures seeped in rot and decay. All that is reflected in their eyes are gold coins. They actually think that the Union has finally achieved superpower status without thinking about how long they can keep this situation up! Cough… cough…" Perhaps because of the intensity of his emotions, the old man broke into a coughing fit.

Lorist hurriedly gave his back some patting to ease the old man's coughing.

Academy Head Levins had Lorist push his wheelchair towards the window before he spent some effort to open it and said, "Little Locke, back during the year when you were an instructor here, our academy was so merry. Swarms of people went from one place to another, filled with the vigor of life. Do you recall how many students we had back then?"

Lorist gave it some thought and replied, "I think Charade told me before that more than nine thousand students were registered here at the academy."

"That's right, the students were that numerous back then. It was so noisy that my head would hurt. Funny how that memory is actually pleasant to me now," said Levins as he closed his eyes to reminisce on days long gone.

After a few moments, Lorist heard the old man whisper, "Little Locke, did you konw… Last year, there were only 1400 or so registered students, with only 74 of them being new entrants…"

"What?! There's no way that's possible!" said Lorist. After all, Dawn Academy was ranked number eight among the other academies. There was no way there would be so few people enrolling.

"I forgot to tell you one main thing. All 74 students are citizens of the Union, with more than half of them being Moranites. Also, the total enrollment count of all academies ranked first to third is 325. Our Dawn Academy has fared quite well relative to them. Do you remember Saint Marceau Academy? They only got eight new students last year."

"What you're saying is…" mused Lorist as he began to grasp the situation.

"Last year, of the 27 academies in the academy sector of Morante, four shut their doors for good. Eleven others followed suit during the 5th month of this year. I believe that our Dawn Academy will be joining them during the next year… Sigh…" said the academy head exasperatedly as he sat back down.

"There are no more students," mumbled Lorist.

"That's right. There are no more students, meaning that academies are no longer necessary. During the joint academy council this year, it was suggested that only the three top-ranked academies be allowed to operate, with the other academies absorbed into them. That's why, whether Dawn Academy has money or not, we won't be able to continue operating. Us shutting down next year is already certain. Without new students, there is no point for the academy to exist," said Levins with a bitter laugh.

The academy sector of Morante has always been accepting of people from all over the continent. No matter the nation, as long as one fulfilled the admission criteria, one would be allowed to enroll to further their studies. In all 27 academies of Morante, the students from the Union itself amounted to less than ten percent of the student population; most of the student body comprised of people from all over the continent. Naturally, most of them were descendants of nobles or rich families, but there were quite a number of studious commoners that worked and studied at the same time. It was because of them that the academy sector of Morante gained so much prestige as the holy land for learning.

"Would the Union actually become a new superpower with just a single War of Glass and the implementation of the nobility system? What a load of bull! All I know is that

it's ruined the academy sector, all 24 academies within it! Nobody ever comes here to study again. The trade routes are no more and the various faiths are deteriorating. No one wants to come to Morante ever again. The various students we have raised are now enemies with the Union.

"Did you know, Little Locke? Back when the Union's army forcefully annexed the lands of the seven other nations, the Moranites actually cheered to no end while the citizens of the occupied nations cried and despaired. At that time, even more students within the academies from many other nations packed up and left the Union…

"With the war over, all participants received benefits. The Union organized a marvelous entitlement ceremony and handed out titles and dominions. But nobody was aware of the fact that the Union had already stood on the opposing side of the nations surrounding us. Nobody would ever consider the Union as an ally ever again. Instead, they would ally up among themselves and resist the Union like we did against the Krissen Empire so many years ago.

"I had refused the title of the baron the Union entitled to me, as well as the dominion at Callisto Hills. My greatest wish is to make this academy flourish and become one of the best the continent has to offer. However, it is all no more. What use would a title or dominion be?" complained the academy head.

"Academy head, this is all my fault. I shouldn't have gave you the two letters to auction off. If that didn't happen, the War of Glass would never have occurred. I was the one who has doomed Dawn Academy," said Lorist with deep regret. There was no worse thing he could do than to ruin the lifelong dream of a dying old man.

Back then, he had given the letters to be auctioned off to cause friction between the Union and the Teribo kingdom and turn the Union's sights away from the territory that used to belong to the Krissen Empire. That would also allow his household to develop Silowas with lesser pressure. After all, facing only the Chikdor Merchant Guild was far easier than facing the whole Union.

Never would he have expected that the two letters would cause such a huge chain reaction, resulting in an all-out war between the Union and the Teribo kingdom. Even though most of it was due to the simple-mindedness of Teribo VII, who involved seven other nations in a war of eradication that could have been settled diplomatically, that result was far beyond what Lorist had predicted. Currently, Dawn Academy was naught but an unfortunate casualty of all that had transpired.

"This has nothing to do with you," Levins said while shaking his head, "You acted with good intentions to give the academy funds it needs to develop. It's a shame that things happened beyond our imaginations. All of us didn't think that the Teribo kingdom would actually use such extreme measures, causing the whole situation to dissolve into mindless chaos beyond our control. Add to the fact that the Union wanted to start having a nobility system, which riled up the ambitions of many lying in wait, it was no surprise that things cascaded far more than we thought it would. The responsibility of the state of affairs is not yours, so don't feel burdened by it."

Lorist lightly pushed the academy head back to his office desk and made some macks with the water that had just boiled for him. He still remembered that the academy head liked it straight without milk or sugar.

A knocking could be heard before Blademaster Claude entered the room.

"Eh? Locke, when did you arrive?"

"Only just now. I had a talk with the academy head about the current state of the academy."

"You already know all about it?"

Lorist nodded and said, "Instructor Claude, how many people are left in Dawn Academy? Also, what plans do you have with Instructor Anfya?"

Claude took a deep breath before he said, "Well, what plans could we have? Both Anfya and I don't wish to leave Dawn Academy. As the academy head doesn't have any children, it is up to us to take care of him. Even if the academy closes down the next year, we will continue to remain here. Perhaps, in the future, we will have another opportunity to rebuild the academy. Most of the instructors have already left the academy, with only less than ten remaining teaching two classes that are about to graduate this year. When that happens, Dawn Academy would no longer have any students."

Lorist fell into deep thought for a good moment before he looked at Levins and said, "Academy head, did you hear this saying before? 'Rooted trees die in a fire; humans simply walk away'. Since Morante is no longer able to support Dawn Academy, why don't you just move it away to another nation?"

Blademaster Claude laughed out and said, "Locke, things are not that simple. It's not

like we haven't considered our options. Not one of the neighboring nations are willing to allow an academy from Morante to move over to their lands. Saint Marceau Academy had already tried asking around and received only refusals. Starting an academy is not something that can be decided by the words of only one. We still require land, buildings, and lots of funding on an annual basis. Small nations won't be able to sustain that kind of cost, and neither are they willing to bear a burden like that."

"Then, will you be willing to head to The Northlands? Start an academy in my dominion. We can move the whole of Dawn Academy there. Leave the land, buildings, and funds all to the Norton house. Not only that, we will also give research grants so that you only have to focus on conducting lessons and research. All the academy has to provide is capable and talented researchers. Those who wish to head to The Northlands will receive beneficial treatment; I will provide those instructors with comfortable residences and not inconvenience them one bit," offered Lorist sincerely.

"Hehe, Little Locke, this has nothing to do with you. Don't put the matter of Dawn Academy on your mind and try to make it up to us," Levins said as he shook his head, "The Northlands is rural and only has a small population. How many people there would actually come enroll in our academy? We would only just be a burden on your house. I think it's best we forget it."

It was now Lorist's turn to laugh. "Academy head, you look down on The Northlands and the House of Norton far too much. Merely the population within our own dominion number around 1.2 million, all of whom live decent, prosperous and stable lives. We already have Nico Academy within our dominion, which was launched by the daughter of the famed scholar of the former empire, Lady Nico Albess. They don't take in many students given their stringent admission requirements, so the dominion still requires a more general-purpose academy. If Dawn Academy is willing to move over, I believe there will be lots of room for development.

"As for funding, that is not something you have to worry about either. You should know that my house has mobilized our troops against the Hanayabarta kingdom and successfully eradicated it. The wealth we obtained there is enough for the house to sustain development for more than two decades. Taking a small chunk out of that annually is definitely no burden to the house. Perhaps, for the first few years, the students will only number around the hundreds, but I believe that the academy will definitely grow far more as time passes.

"Of course, you don't have to take my word for it. How about this, when I head back to the dominion, you can send someone to come with us to check the situation there out for yourself. The trip back will take two months at most. Will that be alright?"

Academy Head Levins and Blademaster Claude gave each other looks before nodding. "Little Locke, since you already made your offer, do inform us when you want to head back. I will send someone to go with you. Thank you for this."

"It's my pleasure, academy head. I have always been a member of Dawn Academy after all."

Chapter 308
Nostalgia

After finishing their discussion to send people to check out The Northlands with Academy Head Levins and Blademaster Claude, Lorist talked to them more about the condition of the Union before taking his leave. He did take a stroll around the academy sector and found that the academy head's words rang true. More than half of the academies there had already closed down, with only a few people left behind to guard the premises.

Even the food street at the sector that used to be full of students was incredibly quiet. Many shops were closed down with signs hung outside indicating that they were up for rent.

So, is this what the butterfly effect is about? thought Lorist as he stroked his chin. The two letters containing the secrets of glass production were like the wings of a butterfly that ushered in one of the largest changes on the whole of Grindia -- the rise of the Union into the largest nation on the continent ever to exist. Despite that, all that was only on the surface. From within, it did not look so good.

To Lorist, that result should have been ideal. It had given him the opportunity to take in the eighth-ranked academy on the whole of the continent into his dominion. Not only did the academy hold a special place in his youth, its establishment in The Northlands would raise the educational standards of the citizens there. Lorist was considered to be rather emphatic about the importance of basic education, given the number of basic learning centers he had opened within the dominion. If Dawn Academy does move to The Northlands, it would fill out yet another educational void.

The more Lorist thought about it, the more excited he got. He decided that he would support them in terms of both land and funding to ensure that their venture to The Northlands was a success. Even though the dominion looked rather prosperous, it was still in its initial development stage and still lacks any notable talent. Thinking back at the small number of literate officials he hired over the years, Lorist could not help but feel troubled.

By the time Lorist realized that he had walked aimlessly while immersed in deep

thought, he found himself in a rather familiar place. *Oh, I know, this place is two streets away from the mercenary guild. Back then, I would go there often to take up missions. Perhaps, I should go there for old times' sake.*

The mercenary guild was quiet as expected. Lorist took a look around and did not find a single person he recognized. One round-faced female clerk came over to ask Lorist what he needed, making him reflect back at the indifferent attitudes of female clerks at the guilds so many years ago. Back then, the guild was filled with people to the point that one could not quite hear each other. Nowadays, all that occupied the hall were three cats. It was no wonder the clerk was so eager and sincere.

Lorist waved his hand and entered the hall, ordered a cup of ale at the bar and began sipping. Back then, every time after he completed a mission, he would get some drinks with friends and listen to the other mercenaries spout their tall tales and experiences. The bar was filled with mercenaries back then and the price of ale was rather high due to the demand. Even so, the mercenaries did not hesitate to get a good drink after a mission.

Now, however, only Lorist sat among the dozen tables in the hall, enjoying his drink alone. The round-faced clerk looked intently at Lorist, perhaps because of how relaxed Lorist look and the rarity of his long-sleeved robe. Maybe she thought that Lorist was there to submit a mission request to the guild. After all, one wearing clothing embroidered with platinum patterns around the sleeves' cuffs would definitely not be a rough mercenary. The price of the robe Lorist donned would be worth a month of busywork for the clerk.

Lorist raised his cup towards her and said, "Lass, you're making me embarrassed with your intent stare. Should I treat you to a drink?"

The young clerk blushed before she turned around and pretended not to hear Lorist's flirtatious comments.

Ah, at least it's better than before in this regard. Back then, anyone who flirted with the clerks would be rushed out by the guards of the guild. Lorist had seen his fair share of people getting into fights over the most trivial of things like that.

A mercenary in his fifties rushed into the guild hall noisily, submitted a mission report, before clutching a few silvers and heading towards the exit.

"Hey, Brother Gudd, where are you rushing to? Come here, let me treat you to a drink," greeted Lorist with a smile. That middle-aged man was one of his acquaintance who was a two star silver rank. During one of the man's missions, he had fallen rather gravely injured. While he recovered in time, the time it took to do so harmed his body and caused his battleforce to no longer be able to progress. So, he could only work as a low-ranked mercenary. Lorist recalled when he made and sold rucksacks that Gudd was one of the people who supported his business quite well, being a trustworthy and decent man. He even joined in on several missions with Lorist and Charade and taught Lorist many of the tricks of living the mercenary lifestyle.

The middle-aged man stopped in his tracks, looked at Lorist and said gingerly, "You are?"

"Hehe, Brother Gudd, have you forgotten me? I'm Lorist. Locke, remember?"

"Aha! So it's you, Brother Locke!" the middle-aged mercenary mused with joy, "Long time no see. It must've been ten years already. I really didn't think that I would see you over here. Back then, you became a legendary figure in Morante and the last I heard about you was how you were returning to your dominion to inherit the title and the land. I never thought that we would have a chance to meet again."

Lorist stood up and hugged the man warmly before ordering him a cup of ale.

The middle-aged man gulped his drink down, wiped the froth off his mouth and said, "Ah, it's still the same familiar taste. It's just a shame that I haven't been able to drink like that for more than half a year."

Lorist laughed and said, "Don't hurry. You can drink all you want. Boss! Can we have two more cups please? It's my treat, Brother Gudd, so make sure to drink to your heart's content."

"Thanks, Brother Locke. You're generous as usual," said the mercenary. He was not about to hold back either, finishing what remained of his cup of drinks. Lorist pushed the drinks that just arrived before the huge man.

"Well, why did you show up here today? Are you here because you have a mission request for the mercenaries?" asked the man.

Shaking his head, Lorist said, "Well, it's nothing important. I came to Morante for a trip a few days ago and thought back to the past. I still remember that I have a mercenary

badge here, so I came over to hang out for a bit and have some of that good old ale. But I didn't thank that this place would become so desolate. It's completely different from the crowded hall I remember. Fortunately, I was able to meet you here, so my visit wasn't in vain."

"Sigh," Gudd muttered before taking a few more gulps, "Brother, we're still rather lucky. Good thing you came over here right now, because it will be closing down in the next year. There is no more mercenary guild. I, on the other hand, lucked out from being able to meet you and getting treated to some delicious drinks."

Gudd burped and said, "The mercenary guild no longer has any future in the Union. Brother, I bet you didn't expect that mercenaries will be gone completely from the Union. Well, even if some remain, they definitely won't be around Morante. There are no missions for us to do here, and even if there were, it's not something we can handle. At the subterranean caverns within the Urubaha duchy that's now the dominion of the Chikdor Merchant Guild, a new mercenary will be formed to facilitate expeditions into those caverns. I heard that the pay there is rather good. Most of the independent mercenaries have moved over there."

"Oh? The closing of the guild? What's with that? Wasn't the Union known as the nation of mercenaries? What happened to all those mercenary bands and the tens of thousands of mercenaries?" asked Lorist curiously.

"Nation of mercenaries? Haha, every mercenary has already gone their own way. Most of them have pledged their service to nobles. Did you know, Locke, the leaders of the top ten mercenary bands have all received a noble title, with the weakest of them being a viscount. The others are mostly counts. The leader of the fourth-ranked mercenary band called the Dragon's Talon, Lexinba, was even made a duke. He really lucked out over there. All mercenary bands have already dissolved, with most of the lackeys of the band leaders becoming knights. The lowest of them even have jobs as garrison soldiers.

"Did you know that the Union gave out 451 titles all in one go? Those who were capable were also enfeoffed land and the mercenaries that remained were recruited by nobles to become knights. Only less than a hundred of us mercenaries are left who all don't feel like lowering our voices and bowing our heads to others and only want to rely on ourselves to make a good living. Even so, I only got a large silver and three small silvers after working for half a month. I won't be able to feed my family with that, given the ridiculous prices of things lately," complained Gudd.

"No way, that's too many titles," Lorist mused with shock, "But at least that means that there is no more competition for missions, is there? Isn't that a good thing?"

"A good thing my ass!" Gudd yelled, "Back then, the merchant guilds in the Union from the neighboring actions would come over frequently to lodge requests with us. Everyone got their share of work. But now that the trade routes are no more, mercenary requests have gone with it. We have no choice but to secretly cross the borders for missions, and those who are captured would be either whipped or be accused of being a spy and hanged without trial.

"And that's not even the worst of it. We could just not take missions from other nations. However, there are only few missions left that originate from within the Union. Apart from the Falik Plains, every other piece of land of the Union has become the dominion of someone. If anything happens over there, they would just send people from their household to deal with it instead of lodging a request over here., The worst of it is how mercenaries like us have to pay a toll to cross into their dominions for a mission…"

Gudd downed a few more gulps, wiped his mouth, before pointing his finger at the guild and saying, "Brother, do you remember the boss of this guild, that old bastard Schlok? Even that stingy freak got made a viscount, with his dominion located within the territory formerly belonging to the Teria duchy.

"The mission I just finished was from within that bastard's territory. I hunted for a rabbit in the wilds for sustenance like the old times only to be caught by one of that man's subordinates who claimed that the firewood and prey I got was the property of their dominion and asked for reparations, forcefully taking two large silvers from me. Had I not said that I was on a mission from the guild, they would have paraded me around in public as a criminal too."

It appeared that some merchants had far fewer standards than most nobles. No matter how frugal a noble was, they would at least care about their reputation. But all merchants worried about was how much coin they had. Lorist wondered how much the citizens would be left with should a merchant noble apply their business practices on them. But there was nothing he could do about it apart from sympathizing with them.

"What are you going to do in the future, then?" asked Lorist. He knew that Gudd already settled down and had two sons and a daughter. When he left Morante, Gudd's children were only four to five years old, with the daughter being a newborn. His

eldest son was only aged around 15 right now, living in a most troubled time.

Gudd said with eyes full of grief, "I don't really know. There's no more point in being a mercenary. Perhaps, I will work as the guards of those merchant guilds. All I need is a salary that I can raise my family with."

Lorist got up and stuffed a gold Forde note into the despairing man's pouch. Gudd was already half asleep, given that the ale he just finished was his seventh cup.

"My gift to your son is inside your pouch. Take a look at it when you get back. If Morante is no longer the place for you, you can come to The Northlands to look for me. Just go to the Peterson Merchant Guild and say that you're a friend of mine and they'll send you and your family to my dominion promptly."

Following that, Lorist got Gudd a carriage and told the coachman his address. He also paid for the fare and was confident that the family of the mercenary would take care of the rest after that.

When he went back inside the guild, Lorist told the round-faced clerk, "Get the person in charge over here. I want to purchase the Burning Blood Battleforce."

At least, that will be a good souvenir for my visit to Morante. Lorist still remembered that he once thought the hereditary battleforce of his house to be a fire attribute one. After he lost contact with his house and was unable to obtain a copy of the silver-ranked section of his technique, he spent lots of money purchasing many other fire attribute high-ranked battleforce manuals, only to realize that they were completely different from the technique of his house. After that, he bought many other manuals of different attributes but was still unable to continue his training. In the end, he started to work on the Aquametal Technique of his past life in desperation and ended up becoming Iron Locke, the Silver Undefeated.

The Burning Blood Battleforce was one of the most precious treasures of the guild, being priced at 15 thousand gold Fordes. It was one of the most expensive manuals in the whole of Morante. While Lorist did have an interest in the manual, the price was a little too high for him back then. Other than that, he did not even consider that his technique would be a blood attribute one. In retrospect, if he had purchased that battleforce manual, he could probably have broken through to the silver rank and would not ending training in the Aquametal Technique.

If Lorist had went down that path, he would not be able to fight enemies beyond his abilities and had to train slowly from the silver rank to the gold. Maybe he still would not become a blademaster even at his current age. The Norton house would not be as prominent as a result, unlike how mighty and prosperous it was in reality.

Lorist decided to buy that book because of what it could have meant to him. With 30 thousand gold Fordes on his person, that manual did not strike him as being too expensive. The person in charge had wanted to recommend a few more high-ranked battleforce manuals to Lorist, only to be rejected. Currently, the House of Norton had hundreds of different kinds of high-ranked battleforce manuals and that was more than enough to be awarded to the household knights. The extermination of the Hanayabarta kingdom alone netted them more than 50 manuals, so there was no point in buying extra copies of them. The Burning Blood Battleforce was different in that it was the second blood attribute the household had, apart from the Crimsonblood Battleforce which was passed down in the house for generations. The extra manual would serve as a good reference for his descendants for their training.

After leaving the guild, Lorist called for a carriage and headed to Selliguea District to see the crimson four-storey building. Lorist still remembered the girl that danced naked in the moonlight. It was her who had let him experience the wonders of first love and made him a man. Similarly, it was also her who had caused him heart-searing pain. Seeing her leave with another man was ever so disheartening an experience to recall.

Faced with the old building that was filled with rooms for rent, Lorist realized that he was much calmer than expected and was not shaken as he was before. There was only a fleeting feeling in his mind as he wondered how the girl that used to be the most important person in his life was doing.

Time flowed on, indifferent to the woes of man. At that moment, the memories that surfaced within Lorist's man was his finest and worst. The fairy-like girl and her two energetic maidservants were no longer there. Giving the crimson building one last look, Lorist sighed before he turned and walked into the alley.

The fruit stall at the opening of the alley was no more, replaced by a grocery shop. But the owner was still the sharp-tongued Uncle Girald, whose hair had whitened over the course of ten years. It seemed that his days were troubled ones as well.

Uncle Girald was surprised when he realized who Lorist was. He went on a long lecture

about the changes to the area and people here, like the girl Lorist frequently bought fruit candies for, LIttle Loney, and how her grandmother passed away when she was ten. She had left the place with her father, who seemed to have become a knight of some duke.

Lorist chatted for almost an hour with Girald before he left, giving him a gold Forde note as a gift.

"Coachman, get me to Red Grace Inn," instructed Lorist.

Chapter 309
Dauslyke Hotel

Lorist and his allies stayed at the most famous hotel in Rotary street, Dauslyke, during their trip. It was one of the most luxurious establishments in Morante and was naturally the most expensive as well. Lorist did not want for funds, however, so he reserved the whole fourth floor to accommodate all of them.

Count Kenmays had brought two maidservants, four attendants, two household knights and ten guards with him. Baron Shazin brought all five of his concubines -- he did not exactly have a choice -- none of them were willing to give up the chance to go shopping in the Union's most prosperous city and begged to be brought along. Baron Shazin ended up being the one who had brought the most people along, a total of 24 people including the maidservants for his concubines, guards, and servants.

Baron Felim brought only one concubine and two maidservants, as well as his daughter Katrina and her four bodyguards. Lorist brought his two disciples, Reidy and Howard, Blademaster Shuss, Divine Marksman Josk, who had once again left his unit, as well as the three Dinas who were served by three maidservants and 20 guards. The whole group was 89 people.

Prior to the War of Glass, Dauslyke was the place where the foreign nobles who visited Morante would stay. There were always parties or balls being held, which provided an opportunity for the elites of the Union to mingle with the nobles and discuss business. Dauslyke was no longer as merry as it used to be. Lorist's group was one of the largest there.

When Lorist arrived at Red Grace, he was surprised to see Reidy sitting there with the owner, Charlando, drinking and chatting. Seeing Lorist approach, Reidy hurriedly stood up to greet him.

"Eh? Why are you here? What about the others?" asked Lorist.

"They have all returned to Dauslyke, Milord. I came over to see pops since I had some free time," answered Reidy.

As Lorist sat down, Charlando gave him a white-eyed look.

"Locke, now I really regret letting Els and Reidy follow you to The Northlands…"

Stunned, Lorist asked, "Why's that, old Char?"

"There were so many chances this time around… If Els were here, I would definitely get him to form a mercenary band and head to Teribo for a run. I bet he'd have returned with at least a viscounty to his name and could have become a noble right away. That would've been far better than going with you to the desolate Northlands fighting high and low," said Charlando before he sighed.

"Hehe, Reidy, do you regret following me?" asked Lorist without bothering with the old man.

Does that fellow really think that being a Union noble is that easy? Even though they gave out many titles, many of those are just for show. Apart from some who have always been regarded highly by the Union, such as Academy Head Levins, there is no doubt that the other entitled nobles made a bunch of other under-table dealings.

"Milord, I have never had an ounce of regret! Being able to follow you is my honor!" replied Reidy steadfastly.

Charlando pointed at Reidy and yelled, "You… To think that you've learned how to kiss ass! Look at yourself… You've followed him for ten years already… You were a two-star bronze rank back then, and now you're only a one-star silver rank! It's obvious that he neglected training you! Els only attempting to breakthrough to the gold rank now is only usual, since the dark attribute battleforce passed down in his family is harder than most. But for you, if you had stayed here at Morante, you would've already reached the peak silver rank and perhaps even broken through to the gold rank! After all, your constitution is far better than most normal people's!"

"I don't want to run the inn with you…" retorted Reidy.

"You… Stupid brat, pissing me off so much… Even though you've already botched your future, you still don't repent… I'm only worrying for your sake!"

"Hey, hey… old Char, how could you say that? What's that about me botching his future? Oh, I forgot to tell you that Reidy will stay at the one-star silver rank for good and won't be able to break through anymore. That's because he's training in my special

technique, not battleforce. Even if you're a one-star gold rank, you are no longer Reidy's match." interjected Lorist.

"There's no way that's true! I'm a gold rank and he's a one-star silver rank. I can easily suppress him based on only the difference in rank. Come on, Reidy, have a match with me right this instant! If you lose, I won't let you follow him no more!" yelled Charlando, angered.

Reidy looked at Lorist helplessly.

"Go ahead, Reidy. Be sure to hold back."

Charlando's mood worsened even further when he heard Lorist's comment.

"Aren't you going to watch our match?" asked he.

"What's the point? The result was clear the moment you challenged him. My being here won't change anything," answered Lorist.

The old man turned and left, followed by Reidy. The match ended rather quickly; when Lorist just finished ordering some dishes from the maidservant of the inn, Reidy came back.

"How many strikes did it take?"

Reidy stretched out five fingers.

"Huh, five strikes? You need to work harder. I thought you would only need three," said Lorist, dissatisfied.

"That's not it," Reidy explained, "We had two matches. I defeated pops with two strikes in the first. He wasn't convinced and challenged me another time, which he lost after three strikes."

"Ugh," Lorist groaned before he turned to look at the rear of the inn.

Not seeing Charlando, he asked, "What about old Char?"

"He's sulking," said Reidy.

"I didn't mean that. What is going on with him tonight? He seems like he swallowed a whole barrel of gunpowder," said Lorist.

"He's embarrassed himself badly," Reidy laughed, "He had been gambling with maze cards at the old street. Just when he was in the heat of it, Madam Louise asked him to watch the two children when she went shopping. He agreed but didn't take it to heart. The kids drank alcohol secretly and ended up getting drunk. Madam Louise used an iron wok to pummel him quite a few times whilst he was still in the middle of the game and chased the other players away. She even had him kneel in the corner of the room and forbade him to leave while she brought her drunk children home."

Lorist could not help but laugh uncontrollably. Charlando had married Louise ten years earlier. Back then, he was still in rather good shape and managed to get Louise pregnant twice. He now had one ten-year-old and another seven-year-old. Perhaps because they were raised in an inn, the two children loved to drink and would do so the moment they were not supervised. Louise blamed it all on Charlando who had let them taste alcohol back when they were still feeding on nothing but milk.

But even Lorist did not expect Charlando to grow so fearful of his wife. The moment Louise's anger flared, Charlando would shrink up like a turkey about to be slaughtered. He completely lost the proud air of a gold-ranked swordsman.

"No wonder I felt the inn weird when I entered… Louise wasn't at the counter and I didn't hear the noise of the children," said Lorist.

"When I came in here, pops was kneeling in the corner over there. When I asked the maidservant what happened, he heard my voice and came over to vent on me. Fortunately, you came here in time. Otherwise, I would've been nagged to death…" sighed Reidy.

At that moment, the maidservant served the food Lorist had ordered.

"I guess we came at a wrong time. Let's leave after we finish the food. Help me eat some of this," said he.

"Alright, Milord," Reidy agreed as he poured Lorist a cup of blackcurrant wine, "Milord, we ran into some arrogant nobles when we were shopping at Rotary street just now. Some of them came over to flirt with the younger Dina sister and Baron Shazin's five mistresses. It ended with one of the nobles having a broken leg. The guy left barking

some threats."

"Oh?"

Lorist was surprised that something like that could happen at Morante. Only an idiot would provoke or flirt with female nobles at Rotary street. He had never heard of something like that happening during his ten-year stay at Morante. However, given the number of new nobles that had just been entitled by the Union, Lorist supposed it was nothing surprising. Perhaps, they were the relatives of such nobles. Even after bearing a title, a merchant would always be a merchant, they lacked a sense of the proper etiquette and behavior expected of a noble.

"Alright, I doubt it'll be an issue. Next time, make sure to break all four of his limbs. If he doesn't learn, cut off his trouble-making member. House Norton doesn't have to tolerate such crap from anyone," said he, nodding.

Lorist and Reidy walked back leisurely after finishing their meal. About half an hour's walk later, they could see Dauslyke's facade behind a few buildings. The moonlight was rather bright and the majestic buildings along Rotary street looked all the more magnificent for it.

Eh? Something's wrong. Why are there so many people gathered in front of the hotel? Something is definitely going on.

Lorist and Reidy gave each other a look before they hastened on. They quickly arrived at the entrance and saw just over ten guards standing at the entrance. On the plaza opposite the hotel were hundreds of badly dressed mercenaries waving their weapons around, demanding the hotel hand over a murderer.

Reidy pulled Lorist along.

"I think those people are here for us, Milord."

"Oh? Then are they the men of that noble you guys broke the leg of earlier today? Did anyone die from the conflict?" asked Lorist.

"Haha, while we did break the noble's leg, he brought quite a number of guards with him. Even though a few guards were lightly injured, almost two-thirds of the rest had to be carried back. Even I don't know if there are any who were injured too badly and died before they could be helped," answered Reidy.

"Oh, so that's the case. Let's circle around and go in through the wall behind," suggested Lorist as he pointed at the walls surrounding the hotel.

Upon entering the hotel, Lorist met with the manager, a polite man who had greying hair. When he saw Lorist, the manager let out a breath.

"Sir, are you the one who got into a conflict with Marquis Bejisanro's son?" asked he politely.

"Marquis Bejisanro? What's the deal with that? That's not a noble surname at all," chortled Lorist.

The name was far too weird to be the name of a noble house.

It was common knowledge that there were two sources of family names on Grindia. One of them was hereditary, a name passed down from a heroic ancestor. For example, the Norton family name was translated to Raging Bear in the language of fairies. Another source was a given surname, a surname granted to a person from another of status, like Baron Shazin's. A name like Bejisanro meant 'lowest of the alley'. It was a typical commoner surname.

The manager was also embarrassed by a name like that. Being someone who had tended to many nobles from various nations, he was also well-informed about the names of noble houses. He had no choice in the matter, unfortunately. It was no surprise given the sudden entitlement of more than 400 nobles in the Union, many of whom did not really understand what it meant to be nobility and only thought they would be able to act as they pleased.

While a name like Bejisanro sounded rather unique, those who understood the history of nobles knew that names like that were used before the magi of the magical civilization invented Grindia's current lingua franca. Following the introduction of the new language, many surnames were made using the language of fairies for those of magical heritage. Names like Bejisanro denoted that their ancestors were of the lowest social class that were not given names in the new language.

However, it was a miracle in itself that a surname like Bejisanro managed to be passed down for so many generations. Currently, the chief speaker of the Union's sub-council was none other than Marquis Bejisanro. It was rumored that the man was one of the ones who advocated for brute force expansionism. He had pushed for the Union to use

their invincible force to destroy the nations that cut off their trade routes. He even proposed for a 100-thousand strong army to be formed to teach the nations that were unwilling to submit to the Union a harsh lesson. That kind of brainless rhetoric was surprisingly welcome to Morante's commoners, however.

After the manager introduced the background of the marquis, Lorist snorted.

"This afternoon, our ladies were harassed by the son of that asshat of a marquis during their shopping trip. He dared to have his guards forcefully take our ladies away! This is ridiculous. Since when did Morante become such a lawless place? That was the reason we gave him a little lesson. I was just about to make a complaint to the Union. Are all the nobles of that bearing? What an embarrassment to the other noble houses on Grindia they are!"

The manager laughed awkwardly.

"Lord Count, the nobility system was implemented only recently. Some rough spots here and there are to be expected. I should let you know that even if you make a complaint now, it would be pointless. Marquis Bejisanro is the current chief speaker of the Union's sub-council and he wouldn't bother with the complaint at all."

"Doesn't the Union have another high council?" asked Lorist.

"Lord Count, the high council members are the presidents of the big seven guilds. They aren't in Morant any longer. They are in their own dominions, so Morante is controlled completely by the sub-council. That's why Marquis Bejisanro's son is so arrogant and even dares to harass noble ladies at Rotary street. It doesn't help that he is not fearful of causing trouble or conflict, given how his father is in the expansionist faction."

Good Sol, to think that the Union has their own version of fascist skinheads, thought Lorist, stroking his chin. He looked at the raging crowd outside on the plaza.

"So those people want you to hand us over?"

The manager nodded awkwardly.

"That's right. But don't worry, Lord Count, since you have chosen to stay at Dauslyke, we will guarantee your safety. We only hope that no other incidents occur during your stay here in the next few days, so I hope you will watch over your guards and make sure they don't provoke more conflict."

"Alright then, we'll just rest here for three days. If the marquis still doesn't let up by then, don't blame me for not giving them any more chances," said Lorist, revealing the slightest hint of killing intent.

Chapter 310
President Bejisanro

"Are the people from House Mireitas still not willing to let us into Dauslyke?" asked a fat man from the side to a tall and slim middle-aged man beside him as he used an intricate silver knife to cut into a juicy, fatty piece of beef.

"It is so, Lord Speaker," the middle-aged man replied with a bow, "Marquis Mireitas said that anyone who lives in their hotel is their guest, so those who cause trouble for guests are causing trouble for him. They are even willing to a conflict. They also sent for Blademaster Mike and 300 guards."

The fat man enjoying his meal was the chief speaker of the Union's sub-council, Marquis Bejisanro. He was currently the president of a rank eight merchant guild in the Union, the Rosanji Merchant Guild.

The Rosanji Merchant Guild controlled all the businesses relating to ale production. Following the War of Glass, the rising food prices had caused the price of ale to increase several times over. The guild had not just made a great profit from the situation but had captured a sizeable share of the market for wheat-related products.

As the personal attendant of President Bejisanro, the tall, thin middle-aged man knew his master's intentions: to control the Union's food market. This put them in direct competition with the Forde Merchant Guild, whose strength was in the food business. President Bejisanro wanted to occupy at least half of the Union's market.

Wandering bards had sung about the prosperity of the Falik Plains around Morante, but they had forgotten that the farmlands could not sustain a population of two million people. The Union had one million people living in Morante alone The seven other cities across the plains each had roughly 500 thousand citizens. Around 100 towns, villages and hovels dotted the plains as well. The most crucial factor was that many of the crops weren't edible.

The Forde Merchant Guild controlled Falik Plains and offered guarantees to their farmers that they would purchase their crop in exchange for being their exclusive dealers. Without the guild's permission, the farmers would not be able to sell their

produce to other merchants. Within the monopoly, the farmers had to plant according to the requirements and choices of the guild, so their crops were usually those that had a higher price in the market, for instance, Falikean long rice. Other than that, the guild had to import large amounts of food to sustain the population.

However, apart from Falik Plains, the Union also controlled Callisto Hills. Compared to the plains, Callisto Hills was far more desolate and rural. The farmers planted mostly wheat, potatoes, and other foodstuffs. The guild did not care for crops that were not worth much, so the Rosanji Merchant Guild controlled all of Callisto Hills' produce and used them to make ale.

Many of the Union's alcoholics thought that the ale they drunk was brewed solely from the crops of Callisto Hills, but that was not the case. The guild imported food from different neighboring nations, most of it expired. Such wheat was not worth much and cost only around 30 gold Fordes per 5000 kilograms. Such wheat was occasionally used to brew ale instead of proper, more expensive, crops.

The War of Glass caught the Forde Merchant Guild completely off guard. They did not have much food stocked up, which lead to the sudden inflation of food prices in the Union. With the neighboring nations closing up their trade routes and putting embargoes on food products and many other goods that were of strategic significance, the guild could no longer purchase food even if they had the money for it. Even if they did manage to purchase some, there was no way they could ship it to the Union.

The Rosanji Merchant Guild fared a little better. The mossy wheat they dealt with was worth rather little, and they had also managed to close a rather large deal before the war ended. Of their purchase, they were able to transport 3 million Pors (1 Por = 50 kilograms) to Morante. As they were worried that the fact that half their shipment was old mossy wheat, the guild used a smuggling troupe to transport their goods and evade the Invincible Fleet's checks at Hidegold Bay. With the food in hand, along with their already existing stockpiles, the guild's president, Bejisanro, decided that the volatile nature of the market was the heaven-given grace that would give him a chance at controlling the low-tier food market. As for the high-tier foods, he would leave it to the Union.

While President Bejisanro was rather ambitious, he was no idiot and had never yearned for the seat of one of the big-seven. All these years, he had managed his guild with care to never step out of hand. His years of experience left him clearer the most on what befell guilds that encroached on the big-seven's interests. As the Union's chief

speaker, he had never spoken against the big-seven's wishes. Even if he did not follow their instructions down to the letter, he never directly disobeyed them. He made sure the guilds never had a legitimate reason to kick him from his post.

However, in the nobility system, the president saw an opportunity to become a member of the high council. Since he could not replace any of the big seven guilds, he could ask for a promotion instead and have his seat on the high council. Even Duke Lormo managed to join the high council after he joined the Union; there was no reason President Bejisanro could not. It was especially the case given the good opportunity that had landed in front of his guild.

President Bejisanro opined that the Forde Merchant Guild, being the largest distributor of agricultural products in the Union, had made a crucial mistake. They had overlooked the food demand of Morante's population. Without enough food, its price would rise without fail. The Forde Merchant Guild had already become the target of criticism for many citizens, and this was a good opportunity for the Rosanji Merchant Guild to take control of Morante with the food stock they had in hand.

Add to the fact that the big-seven guilds were busy dealing with matters in their own dominions, the sub-council managed to become the highest power within Morante. Bejisanro drafted a simple plan to make use of his position as the head speaker for the sub-council. First, he would use the food his guild possessed to win the hearts of the Moranites and raise his reputation. He would simultaneously use the Moranites' adamant xenophobia and hatred for the closed-off trade routes to push a forceful foreign policy.

As long as he could pull off these two components of his plan, he could suggest the formation of a Union army in the next council meeting with the support of most of the other representatives from the second and third rate merchant guilds. The other smaller guilds had also been driven to the brink by the closed trade routes and were desperate to do something, anything, about it.

As for the citizens' representatives, they would not dare to object to his motion given the fiery rage of their constituents. In truth, Bejisanro's goal was not to launch a military campaign against the other nations but to obtain a standing army that answered only to the sub-council and was under his direct control as the council's head speaker.

With such an army in hand and his newfound reputation among the citizens, the big-

seven would not be able to do much to the guild even if they turned their attention back to the city. By then, all he had to do was push for a seat on the high council and he would be formally inducted.

However, the incident he was currently trying to address posed quite the problem for him. His good-for-nothing animal of a son actually dared to flirt with noble ladies in broad daylight on Rotary street and even had his leg broken, not to mention the many injured guards. The president knew that his son had gotten what he deserved.

Hmph, does he really think that, just because I'm the chief speaker, he can do whatever he wants? If word of this spreads, it'll reflect horribly on me. The name of nobles within Morante would also be tainted all over the continent… The big-seven will definitely not let my son off lightly…

Fortunately for him, none of the big-seven were present at the moment, and, given the Union's isolated state, few nobles actually remained within the city. There was no need to worry that this matter would spread.

The offended party this time looks to be bumpkins from The Northlands, purchasing luxury goods here like they've never seen any in their life. They must be some low-class house that happened to earn a bit of money lately…

Bejisanro had already been informed in detail of the proceedings and knew well that it was his son's lust that had gotten him in trouble in front of so many people. Many shop owners had already expressed their displeasure, their sales to nobles had dropped as a result of the incident already.

Well, they're just a few nobles from the backwater Redlis anyway… No matter how rich they are, they can't afford to mess with the Rosanji Merchant Guild, can they? And with Iblia in its current condition -- its king captured and killed by Andinaq's king-- they are in an even worse spot.

The matter had been reported in the Morante Daily and many thought the capture of Second Prince Iblia was the result of Second Highness Auguslo's actions so that his father's burial would be followed by that of his traitorous brother.

I doubt anything will happen if I deal with these nobles.

Bejisanro already had a method in mind. First, he would compensate the shop owners at Rotary street for their lost business -- in essence, buying their silence. He would

then spread rumors about how Iblian nobles had been causing trouble for the merchants and shops in the area and claim that his son had actually been trying to stop their disrespect, only to have one of his legs broken and have many of his guards killed or severely injured.

Since the matter could no longer be kept quiet, all he had to do was use the rich commonfolk's xenophobia and envy. All these years, Moranites had a sense of pride, of being above others, especially after the War of Glass had ended with more than half of Redlis' territory swallowed up and allowing the Union to become one of the largest nations on the continent. It had only served to reinforce their pride.

The entitlement of hundreds of nobles after the two conflicts further whetted the Moranites' appetite for a noble title. Thus the incredible outrage when the trade routes were cut off. This mentality and these attitudes were what allowed Bejisanro to garner the support he now had.

He had decided to deal with the ignorant Northlander nobles since no matter how useless his son was, he was still his flesh and blood. If he did not pursue the matter, surely he would become a laughing stock. Only by harshly teaching them a lesson would everyone shut up. There was a saying: 'a lie uttered a thousand times becomes a truth'. Similarly, if he did not 'punish' the Northlanders for what they had done, there would be a logical dissonance with the narrative of his son's heroic actions he was about to spin.

After finishing off the last piece of his beef, the fat man wore a calm expression on his face. He put down his utensils and used a white cloth to wipe his mouth.

"Hmm, House Mireitas dominates the Union's hotel business. Even though their guild is rather small, they are not to be overlooked easily, they are backed by too many powerful factions for that. We should give them face and only encircle their hotel to prevent those impudent nobles from leaving. Don't enter the hotel itself or step onto their grounds."

"Yes, Milord," the middle-aged man replied respectfully, "But whether they understand that we're showing them goodwill is still not certain. Others might also misunderstand that we are not acting because we fear their house. We cannot allow that to happen."

Bejisanro tossed the cloth away and snickered.

"Just because we're giving them face by not barging into the hotel doesn't mean they can act as they please. Didn't House Mireitas have Blademaster Mike moved to the hotel? He's only a rank 1 blademaster. We can simply send Blademaster Danhema to deal with him. I believe a rank 2 blademaster like him will be able to give Blademaster Mike some pressure. Additionally, send 500 guards over to intimidate them. Let's see who has more men under their belt."

The Rosanji Merchant Guild easily had far more military power than the other small guilds. They had hired three blademasters, one rank 2 and two rank 1s. As none of their blademasters were allowed to participate in the War of Glass, not a single one was injured or dead. The Rosanji Merchant Guild's force was almost comparable to the big-seven after the war. This gave the president more leverage to demand a position in the high council.

"Also, send some people to rile the commoners up to cause trouble for Dauslyke. Everyone who does so will get 2.5 kilograms of food every day. I'd like to see how long Dauslyke can continue shielding their guests. If a carriage leaves the premises, have the commoners check it. If the carriage won't allow us to check them, don't let it leave. I want to see whether House Mireitas has it in them to act against the commoners…"

"A wonderful plan, President," the middle-aged man praised, "I bet House Mireitas won't dare to touch the commoners."

"Hahaha, I think so too. If they do act against them…" Bejisanro said with a smile, "Well, it won't be pretty. All we have to do now is see whether House Mireitas will succumb to pressure or the Northlanders will finish spending their money during their stay at the hotel and be chased out. There's no rush. We can play with them for as long as we want."

"I believe after this matter your reputation in Morante," the man said as he brought his hand up in a thumbs-up gesture, "will be grand. I will have your instructions carried out right away. Please await the good news, Milord."

Chapter 311
Preparations

Sol, I brought my friends to Morante for fun, not to be trapped inside a hotel! This is ridiculous!

Lorist was currently on the hotel's fourth-floor balcony, watching the angry crowd that circled it.

That guy is far too sinister. He not only he spread lies, he also paid the various publications in Morante to spread word that this matter was because of us acting shamefully and harassing the merchants… He's spinning the story that his son was being heroic. Darn, to think the commoners would be completely fooled by a story with that many holes. I bet most of them were intentionally riled up by others to surround the hotel and call out for our deaths. And the numbers just keep growing after the Rosanji Merchant Guild said they would give 2.5 kilograms of food to any who attend, so even those who see the flaws in the story are willfully ignoring it… Guess I can't blame them for doing so since the Moranites don't have much to do nowadays anyway. There won't be a better deal than getting a few potatoes for a day of standing around…

At the very least, they're being very ordered about this and haven't come into the hotel at all. They're nothing more than a nuisance, honestly.

Lorist looked at the supply carriages stopped by the citizens. The coachman and some workers were suffering a harsh beating after saying something Lorist couldn't hear.

Sheesh, do they want us to die here? It's already been three days, and the situation grows direr by the day. Even with so many citizens surrounding the place, the hotel's carriages are still allowed to travel around, but not without being checked by the citizens.

Perhaps, the other merchants will stop supplying the hotel with food and other resources in a few more days to force the hotel management's hand.

Hidegold Bay Chronicles was a business-oriented publication that focused on trade and market prices but the headlines of the day read, 'Northland Barbarians Must Pay with Lives -- Restore Morantian Pride!'. The article that followed was filled with the

seething arrogance the Moranites were so well known for and a hint of hatred and killing intent as if the arrival of the foreign nobles to their city was a sin in and of itself.

Very well, I'll remember you, Hidegold Bay Chronicles.

Lorist rolled the paper in his hands into a ball and tossed it into a trashcan nearby.

"What's wrong?" asked Count Kenmays, coming onto the balcony.

"I think there's more today," said he with a pale face, "What's going on with the Moranites? This is completely unlike what I expected them to be."

"Nothing," Lorist said, clicking his tongue, "Those that come all have something wrong with their heads! After the second highness' defeat and the occupation of much of Redlis following the War of Glass, the Moranites believe that the Union is the strongest nation on the continent and look down on everyone, even nobles. It must be due, in part, to their inferiority complex, given their mercantile background.

"Now that the Union has implemented the nobility system, many of them are nobles as well. It's like they've transformed. They've been given instant status above others. Their arrogance stems from thinking that a small title makes them nobles without question. Given how a matter like noble ladies being harassed in broad daylight can happen, it goes to show how low the character of the Union nobles is."

Count Kenmays nodded.

"'Tis true. You have no idea how shocked I was about the incident in Rotary street. House Bejisanro's young master actually dared to do what he did there. My first impression of their house is that they are noble imposters. No noble should ever behave that shamelessly, especially with how the young master ordered his guards to take the women away forcefully after his advances were refused. Heavens, is that something nobles are allowed to do?

"Even in messy Iblia, women of two noble houses with a death grudge would greet each other politely if they meet. That is the culture of nobility. I didn't think I'd actually run into something like this. How embarrassing this is for other nobles! I will definitely publicly refuse to acknowledge these fake nobles when I return home. Being associated with them as nobility feels so disgusting that I feel like puking."

Lorist chuckled.

Count Kenmays, aren't you from a mercantile family yourself? Then again, your father was given a title, if only honorary, in the last days of the empire. You were no doubt educated in the ways of nobility. It would explain your effortless integration into the society of proper nobility when you were given a fief.

"Do you think you can even make it back, my old friend?" Lorist said in an effort to give the count a scare, "Look at the crowd. They want to make us stay here and spread word of this matter according to their lies. Didn't you read the report in the newspapers yesterday? The one about how the heroic young master is still recovering from his broken leg?"

As he expected, Count Kenmays' face paled even more.

"Will… Will it really turn out like that? My friend, you aren't messing with me, are you?" asked he, jittery.

"Do you see the new guards that arrived this morning?" Lorist asked, pointing at the hotel's fully-armed guards on the ground below, "Dauslyke is one of the many businesses run by the House Mireitas. They've always controlled the hotel business in the Union. If they did not feel the situation was dangerous, would they have sent for 300 additional guards and another blademaster?

"You should be thankful that you're living in Dauslyke right now. It's your lifeline. House Mireitas won't allow any of their guests to come to any harm. They will guarantee your safety as long as you are in the hotel. Do you still think we're paying more than we should?"

"No, it's definitely worth every coin! I brought more than 100 thousand gold Fordes' notes with me. If all of us spend around 200 in total, we can stay here for a whole year. Let's see if those outside can afford to wait that long," said he, sighing in relief.

Lorist laughed bitterly, thinking, *This fellow's going to use his money to slap others for the sake of his safety again… There's no way those outside will let us stay here for a whole year. Besides, even if you can stand being kept here for a year, others can't.*

"How stupid can you be?" Lorist said, glaring at him harshly, "There's so much that needs to be done in my dominion. There's no way I'm staying imprisoned here with you! What we need to do now is think of a way to break out and leave Morante by ship. There are roughly 20 thousand people surrounding the hotel and I doubt it'd take

much for them to become violent. Do you think those guards will be able to stop them?"

"You do have a point." agreed Baron Felim as he came to the balcony with Baron Shazin.

Looking at the dense crowd, Baron Felim said with a solemn look, "Brother Kenmays, you were away from the frontlines for the duration of the empire's civil war. You've never seen how scary a violent crowd can be. I have seen a crowd of tens of thousands of starving refugees barge into military camps that had 3000 or so soldiers. Even though half the crowd perished as a result, the gold-ranked and silver-ranked knights, and all the troops they led were completely wiped out.

"Locke, I've been paying attention to the crowd these two days. They're acting in an orderly fashion. Someone's organizing them. There are people that come and go almost like they're changing shifts. In the afternoon, they are also people who bring food and drinks for them.

"The commoners are being rallied to surround the hotel. The moment more of them come together, they might just be instigated to charge into the hotel. The blademaster and the 300 guards won't be able to protect themselves, much less us. We must leave this place soon, or we won't have a good end."

"You're right. This is urgent," Lorist agreed, "We must notify the manager and have them provide us with a carriage. Apart from the women and maidservants, all male servants and guards should be armed and guard the carriage. I'll find a way to head to the port and check if anything has happened to Northsea. If everything's fine, we can board right away. As long as we set sail, we'll be safe."

Count Kenmays asked hesitantly, "Can you actually make it out there? There are so many people and they will be checking every carriage that goes through."

"It's fine. I lived in this city for a decade. I'm familiar with their accent and habits. Also, I wasn't there with you at Rotary street, my face shouldn't recognizable. There is no more suitable candidate. Don't worry, I'll be back soon," said Lorist, smiling.

However, Lorist did not expect the manager to refuse his request.

"Lord Count, I really don't think you should head out. It's far too dangerous outside. As long as you stay in here, we can guarantee your safety. There's no way the people

outside will rush into the hotel with Blademaster Mike here," retorted the manager.

"I am incredibly thankful for all your house is doing for us. There is truly no one better in terms of hospitality and service. However, I wish to put an end to this farce myself as soon as possible. The Peterson Merchant Guild and Chikdor Merchant Guild have some ties with our house. Even though their president is not here, I want to send a letter to them so they can send someone here to mediate," said Lorist.

The manager pondered hesitantly for a moment. Lorist's proposal was rather reasonable, and he also wanted the situation to be resolved as soon as possible. If what Lorist said was true, the Peterson and Chikdor Merchant Guilds would definitely be more capable of handling the matter than House Mireitas. While Marquis Bejisanro could afford to ignore his house, they definitely had to take a step back in front of the two big-seven guilds.

"Sir, I'm afraid we aren't able to escort you. Given how messy the crowd outside is, it's incredibly difficult for us to bring you out of here; almost impossible, in fact, with the presence of the Rosanji Merchant Guild's rank 2 blademaster, Danhema," interjected Blademaster Mike, brows furrowed.

"I believe both of you misunderstood me. I never intended to have you rush out with me. All I want is to borrow a set of servant garments so I can disguise myself as a coachman and drive a carriage. I can blend in and leave easily in such a manner," smiled Lorist.

"Oh?" the manager mused, "Do you know how to drive a carriage?"

"Hehe, of course. I studied at Dawn Academy for ten years and am also very familiar with the city. I didn't think that bringing my friends here would land us in such deep trouble, though. Morante has changed too much over this last decade," said Lorist wistfully.

"Oh, no wonder I felt you were a little different from your friends. It's no wonder you're like us Moranites. So you grew up here. If you don't mind the trouble, we can lend you the clothes and wish for your successful endeavor," acquiesced the manager.

As expected, Lorist faced some trouble leaving. Not only was the top and bottom of his carriage given a thorough check, his whole body was searched to make sure he wasn't carrying any letters. Even the small silvers in his pocket were taken. He was even

kicked a few times before he was allowed to leave.

Lorist eventually arrived at the headquarters of the Peterson Merchant Guild with his carriage. He gave the door a few knocks before entering. Once inside, he soon understood that the guild's higher-ups were all absent, they had gone to their dominion. They were currently sorting out the noble hierarchy there. President Peterson was at the top, no doubt, and he wouldn't return for some time. Given that the trade routes were cut off, the big-seven used the opportunity to set their dominion up. Most would probably only return to struggle for power in the city much later. Their dominions were of incredible importance to them, a kind of packup plan.

Since the Peterson Merchant Guild was not able to offer any help, Lorist left the carriage and used another, one of the guild's, to head to the port. Northsea was still docked, but the captain and sailors were filled with worry. They had heard of the situation. Had it not been for Lundmorde's orders, the sailors might have already armed themselves to slaughter their way through the crowd.

"If you had really done that, not only would you be charging to your deaths, you would also needlessly expose Northsea. How would we leave if we do break out in that case? You guys are trained for naval combat, so don't be reckless on land. All you have to do is make sure we have a means to leave. Your duties will start when we board the ship!" rebuked Lorist.

Once he felt they'd had enough lecturing, he ordered them to prepare for departure. They were to be on alert at all times and leave the moment Lorist's group finished boarding.

"Milord, this is some information about the Rosanji Merchant Guild and Marquis Bejisanro. He is the chief speaker of the sub-council and is also the Rosanji Merchant Guild's president. This is the declaration of his intent to form an army to deal with the neighboring nations, and here are the twisted reports about the mess his son caused," reported Lundmorde.

As the chief intelligence gatherer of the house, the information he collected was incredibly detailed.

Lorist read the reports and quickly determined the location of the guild's warehouse.

"Lundmorde, I need you to have something prepared for me. We'll go there for a trip

tonight."

"Yes, Milord."

Chapter 312
Arson

"Is this the Rosanji Merchant Guild's storage area?"

"Yes, Milord. This entire circle of buildings is the guild's food storage area. It's said that there are over 500 of them. The one that has a lamp up there is the main entrance to the storage area. The guild's brewing area isn't far from here either. The Union's ale is mostly supplied by them. They are the largest brewers around," replied Lundmorde.

"Weird, why is there no security? I only see a few patrolling guards. With food prices as high as they are, isn't the Union worried about people stealing from the silos?" asked Lorist curiously.

"Perhaps these warehouses are empty? Maybe there's no longer anything to guard," suggested Lundmorde.

"Well, that could be. Let's go check."

The two scaled the walls, entered the storage area, and hid behind the dome-shaped stone building. It did not have doors or windows and was roughly 5 meters tall, the standard food silo design on Grindia. Besides the part visible above ground, the building stretched a further 3 meters underground. A single silo could store near half a million kilograms of food.

"I think I smell moss," said Lundmorde as he pinched his nose.

"I do too, the stench is quite noticeable. Let me go up and check."

"Wait, Milord, making a hole in the wall is much more convenient," interjected Lundmorde, pulling on Lorist.

He pierced into the silo's wall with his blade-glow. As they were situated behind it, nobody noticed anything. Lundmorde traced a huge circle before pulling his sword out, making a hole in the warehouse. Grains started pouring out through the hole and spilling onto the floor.

"It's wheat," said Lundmorde as he picked some up.

He quickly tossed it away and he jumped in shock.

"It's old and grassy… All this wheat is moldy as feck…"

Fanning the air in front of his nose, Lorist grunted, "The smell is too strong. I can't stand it."

"Ah, I know now. No wonder I've seen the guild bringing in carriage after carriage of lime. I thought they were using it to for sterilization and cleaning, but they were using limewater to wash the moldy wheat. Curse their ancestors… I won't drink their ale ever again," cursed Lundmorde.

"SO that's there aren't any guards around," Lorist said after some thought, "Nobody would steal moldy wheat. The guarded warehouses must be where they store the editable, sellable food. Lundmorde, make more holes in the other warehouses so the moldy wheat can leak out. I'll go to the front and set fire to the place. When people come to deal with the fire, they'll surely notice the moldy wheat on the ground and the matter will be exposed for all to see."

"Understood, Milord. Please be careful."

"Don't worry. You should be wary as well. I remember seeing these silos labeled 'wheat' on the roof, and there are around a hundred. You better act fast."

They two were currently in Morante's southern suburbs. The Rosanji Merchant Guild had built a large storage area with more than 300 permanent stone silos and 200 temporary mobile wooden warehouses. Together, they could store up to 300 million kilograms of food, which was what fueled the guild's ability to fight for the food market at Morante.

Lorist and Lundmorde had gone to set fire to the area to prevent the guild from paying the crowd that was gathered in front of Dauslyke. While there was the option of escaping by force, Lorist had to consider the safety of his allies and the women that came along with him, so he had no choice but to resist the burning urge to lash out. He would finally be able to teach the guild a lesson by burning the food stores.

So you have too much food to spare, huh? Let's see how you pay the crowd when I burn it all!

"Hey! What are you doing? Someone's setting a fire!"

It did not take long for the smallest embers to attract the guards' attention. They noticed Lorist pouring fuel on the warehouses in a casual and unhurried manner.

A huge wave of shouting guards leaped towards him. But, in a few flashes of the sword, all the guards collapsed on the ground, struggling in their last moments while Lorist continued pouring fuel just as casually as before.

After the third wave collapsed on the ground, the remaining hundred or so coachmen, transporters, and guards quickly crumbled into chaos. A few unlucky ones, who were using wooden buckets filled with water to try and douse the fire, were cut in half by Lorist's sword. Those who survived cast away whatever they had and scrambled for the entrance. Lorist, disguised in black pants, shirt, and scarf, looked like a demon of slaughter. He casually dispatched more than 200 guards in the most relaxed manner without showing the slightest bit of mercy.

Lorist was not interested in chasing people down. Besides, the guards he killed had allowed him to vent most of his pent-up anger. All that remained was to set the rest of the warehouses on fire before returning to the hotel to bring the rest away. He believed the fire would be visible to almost the entirety of Morante, and the chaos that would inevitably ensue might help increase the chances of their escape.

"Milord, I've only managed to make holes in 60 warehouses. Why is the fire this big already?" asked Lundmorde as he stared wide-eyed at the flames that consumed the silos behind Lorist, causing smoke to billow towards the skies.

"Let's go, that's more than enough. If we stay here, we'll be burned alive," said Lorist before he grabbed Lundmorde and ran.

The air had already begun to heat up as occasional embers fell on his body. The pair scaled the walls and took to the carriage. It was quickly turned around, and they left.

"Lundmorde, come steer this thing. Just send me to the area near Dauslyke. Check if the preparations are finished after you drop me off. We will begin our escape the moment I get back."

"Alright, Milord," said Lundmorde before he spurred the horse into a gallop.

They quickly arrived near the hotel. The crowd stared at the southern skies, where

signs of smoke and fire could be seen.

Lorist jumped off before pretending to stumble around as he shouted, "Everyone! Go put out the fire, quick! The food storage area is ablaze! If we don't put it out, we'll run out of food! Quick!"

The crowd was originally waiting for their day's pay, they had been promised 2.5 kilograms of potatoes which they had yet to receive. The fire only served to unnerve them, and Lorist's cries confirmed their fears. The commoners panicked and thought their day standing around would be wasted if all the food burned up. The frontmost people began rushing to the storage area immediately, followed closely by those behind them.

"Go put out the fire! We can still take some food out of it and help our families last a few more days!" continued Lorist.

The rest, who originally did not intend to go, snapped out of their trance. They thought it would be a good opportunity for them to get more free food before the inevitable rise in food prices because of the fire. Most of the people surrounding the hotel ran south, only around 500 Rosanji guards remained.

Lorist snuck into the hotel quietly. Once inside, he immediately rushed to the back.

"Reidy, go prepare the carriages. As many as you can. Have everyone begin packing. We leave in thirty minutes!" instructed he.

There were seven carriages in Dauslyke's backyard, but only a dozen horses. Lorist had the three Dinas assigned to the first carriage. The second carried Count Kenmays and his two maidservants, the third Baron Shazin and his five concubines, and the fourth Howard, his fiancee, Baron Felim, and his concubine. The final three carriages were for the other maidservants and the luggage. The coachmen were the attendants that followed them. Since Northsea was docked at the Peterson Merchant Guild's port, they could have the guild send the carriages and horses back to the hotel.

Blademaster Shuss was seated atop the first carriage and Josk on the luggage rack of the second. Lorist believed that the marksman would be able to protect the other four carriages in front. Should their escape go wrong, the three rearmost carriages with the maidservants and luggage could be abandoned. Reidy was in the third carriage. As for Baron Shazin and Baron Felim, since they were gold-ranked knights, they were

tasked with protecting the flanks of the third and fourth carriages. The guards that came along followed them from behind.

Just as Lorist was preparing to rush out of the hotel, he saw Blademaster Mike standing in front of him with a solemn look, saying, "Were you the one who sparked the fire?"

"So what if I am? Do you want us to be stuck here forever?" retorted Lorist, furrowing his brows.

"I only want to tell you that you'll have nothing to do with House Mireitas the moment you step out of here," Mike sighed, "I've already checked outside; Blademaster Danhema is still here. He's a rank 2 blademaster. Your blademaster can take care of him, but bare in mind that there are around 500 guards behind him. It's best if you stay here and wait for the big-seven to return and help you out.

"Additionally, with the food storage area set ablaze, there's no need to worry about the crowd surrounding the hotel anymore. As long as you stay here, House Mireitas will ensure your safety. I hope you don't act recklessly and rush to your deaths with so many of your family with you."

"Apologies, nobles from The Northlands don't have the habit of leaving their fates in the hands of others. We come from the wilds and it is in our nature to battle. Dying on the battlefield is a source of pride for us. House Norton asks not the numbers of the enemy, only where they are!" declared Lorist as he drew his sword.

Blademaster Mike looked at Lorist intently before sighing and waving his hand to the side. The guards by the gate opened it in response.

Blademaster Danhema had already made his preparations and instructed the 500 guards to get into five neat rows, blocking the road in front of the hotel. He realized that something was off when he saw the smoke billowing up from the south, especially when the crowd dispersed to put it out, and figured that the Northland nobles would use the chance to escape. However, being a rank 2 blademaster, he swore that he would disappoint those bumpkins.

Lorist burst out of the gates on horseback and rushed straight for the enemy formation. The bearded man at the front manifested his gold blade glow and yelled, "Dismount and kneel to surrender!"

"Who's doing the sparing here?!" shouted Lorist in reply, before he kicked both his legs to spur his mount forward.

Assailed by the pain, the horse neighed and jumped straight into the enemy formation. The guards at the front did not think that Lorist would pull such a move and hurriedly ducked to both sides. The bearded man positioned his blade glow and attempted to cut Lorist in half from his mount.

Lorist revealed a smile and pulled his horse in a circle while holding his sword out with his right hand, causing the blades to clash. A bearded head went flying, still wearing an expression of disbelief, as blood gushed out of the stump of its neck. Lorist continued to cut into the crowd and slaughtered away, causing the guards to cry out for their parents as they scrambled around in chaos and confusion. Not only was their formation heavily disrupted, more than 40 men had already fallen under Lorist's blade.

A flash of a blade traveled in an arc towards Lorist's back.

"Despicable scum!" cursed Lorist as he thought, *this shameless rank 2 blademaster actually hid behind his iron-ranked guards to launch a sneak attack!* However, he had long taken into account the presence of the blademaster and wondered where he had gone since the start of the battle and increased his alertness. If the blademaster had attempted to escape, he might have survived. But now that he had shown himself, there was no escape.

Clang clang clang!

The sound of clashing blades resounded throughout the area. After ten or so strikes, Lorist had already dismounted and stood in front of his assailant. With an insidious smile on his face, he said, "Rank 2 Blademaster Danhema, I presume?"

Chapter 313
Closing Act

In front of Lorist stood a short old man. While he looked rather unassuming, there was a shred of hatred that could barely be seen between his brows. The old man was breathing incredibly heavily with a terrified look. Lorist had been able to receive the tens of lightning-fast strikes he had launched. Not only that, he had not expected Lorist to get off his mount to strike at him first.

"Who… Who are you?" asked Blademaster Danhema as he struggled to stabilize his breathing.

Denhema was quite informed about fighters within his league within the Union but he had never heard of such a young blademaster. Most people who managed to make it to his rank rank were middle-aged men of at least forty to fifty years. Only a swordsaint could possibly revert to a slightly younger look after breaking through, but there were only three or four swordsaints on the entire continent. They either started their own sword schools or were hailed as national treasures. Which one of them would actually bother to visit Morante?"

"Hehe, who am I, you ask? I am the Northlander bumpkin that's been causing you guys so much trouble. You guys really are full of shit, you know that? Is twisting the narrative and pushing all the blame on me really that fun? You even had a crowd surround this place and wait for us to walk to our deaths. Is this what Morante has become? All the praises I hear belie what this place truly is. When we return, we'll make sure that all the continent's nobles know how low the Union nobility is!"

Two guards struck at Lorist during his speech, but their bodies joined their brothers regardless.

Danhema leaped forward and roared, "In your dreams…"

When the blademaster jumped forward, Lorist was still recovering his posture. The blademaster was fully intent on taking advantage of the situation and launched into another flurry of attacks.

"Old guy, I think practicing how to ambush others should be what you ought to do from now on," said Lorist with a cold smile as he took a few steps back and allowed the sword in his hand to dance and intercept his opponent's attacks.

Clang clang clang clang! Yet another chorus of blades resounded in the area.

"It's my turn now, old man," taunted Lorist.

His words had barely left his mouth when his sword began pelting the man like waves of rain in a thunderstorm.

Danhema already felt that he was in a bad spot. He had thought that Lorist was merely a rank 2 blademaster like himself, but the fact that Lorist was able to launch a counterattack despite having just parried his own was evidence to the contrary.

This is no rank 2 blademaster, he's at least rank 3!

Each and every of Lorist's strikes struck ethereally. Even though the silver moon was shining brightly in the sky, the blademaster saw nothing but sword strike after sword strike, more than he could parry.

"Wait… Wait a second!" cried Danhema, struggling to hang on.

Lorist did not pay the pleading any heed and pierced his sword into the old man's left shoulder. A kick followed his blade, and his blade his kick. Before the old man could recover, the second strike leveled Lorist's blade on his neck.

"What did you want to say?"

Danhema pressed against his injured left shoulder.

"Ki-kid… You've won. I've lost completely, so you may leave now…" said he, venom in his eyes.

"Hehe."

An insidious smile crept over Lorist's face as he giggled.

"Did I need you to remind me of that? Anyone with eyes that can see already knows the result."

"Sp-spare me… I promise that the guild will no longer press this matter," said the old man stubbornly.

"I'm sorry, but if there's anything that I fear, your guild is definitely not it," said Lorist.

He flicked his wrist and Danhema's head tumbled to the ground like so many flakes of ash.

Lorist pointed at the nearest guard.

"Kill!"

"Kill!" roared Blademaster Shuss, Baron Felim, and Baron Shazin in unison as they leaped off their mounts.

The 30 plus guards on Lorist's side followed quickly behind and slaughtered away at the guards. The first carriage entered the passageway with the second following behind. Josk was visible on it with his green bow outstretched. Bolt after bolt of green lightning flashed from his direction. It nailed guard corpses to the ground one after another.

The road ahead was finally unobstructed. Many Rosanji guards cast away their weapons and ran away like rats. Those that did not escape ended up on the ground, unmoving. Lorist grabbed the side of a carriage and flipped himself onto it.

"Let's go!" instructed he.

Sounds of bumbling carriages could be heard throughout the way to Hidegold Bay. Blademaster Mike stood in front of the hotel with his legs shivering and his hands cold, watching the carriages disappearing between the buildings.

What a close call that was! To think I thought of a ferocious tiger like him as a gentle lamb… I thought the only blademaster the group had was the rank 1 blademaster. I even attempted to stop them because I suspected them of burning down the storehouses…

Even though House Mireitas and the Rosanji Merchant Guild were at odds, the act of burning the stored food caused the citizens of Morante to lose much of their reserves. The price of food would surely rise yet again, worsening the food crisis for everyone.

Even though he sounded like he cared about Lorist and the gang's safety, it was naught

but an excuse so he could hold them back and let the big-seven guilds deal with them when they return. That way, the issue would be addressed without involving the house.

Fortunately, they didn't do as I said… Otherwise, it would only end badly for me. I didn't think the normal-looking count could actually defeat Rank 2 Blademaster Danhema in a few moves… Come to think of it, the others preparing to leave before the count started fighting seemed to anticipate the result. They seem oddly confident about their chances. If I'm not wrong, the gold-ranked barons were whispering about a bet on how many strikes it would take Blademaster Danhema to be defeated…

The group consisting of one rank 2 blademaster, one gold-ranked swordsman, tens of silver-ranked swordsmen and more than 400 Rosanji guards could not even hold up against the charge of a small group of ten-odd people and even suffered heavy losses. Blademaster Mike looked at the corpses littered all over. Not all were dead, but none were saveable.

Thank goodness I let them leave, thought Blademaster Mike in relief.

The hotel's manager came over and looked at the bloody pool of corpses before he sighed.

"Even so many of the guild's guards weren't able to stop them?"

The blademaster shook his head.

"It's not that they didn't try. The Northlanders are far too powerful. Even Blademaster Danhema was killed in a few bouts. Without him, the rest of the guards were no more than a bunch of panicking pigs at a slaughterhouse. Either way, the Rosanji Merchant Guild is done for."

Lorist arrived at Hidegold Bay and lead the carriages to the port. On the way, he had Lundmorde arrange a few carriages filled with firewood prepared as a surprise gift for their pursuers. It was a shame that the Moranites' focus of the night was on the food storage area's blaze -- no one witnessed Lorist's slaughter. After the first assault, however, not a single person dared to give chase, so Lorist's carriages went to waste.

When everyone got on board the ship, Lorist penned a letter each for President Peterson and Academy Head Levins and had the port supervisor send the carriages and horses back to Dauslyke after tipping him a small sack of gold Fordes. With the

carriages on their way back, Lorist set sail for Silowas.

Seeing the skies above Morante tinted red, Lorist could not help but snicker. Count Kenmays, Baron Shazin, and Baron Felim all revealed hints of smiles on their faces as well. While their trip to Morante was full of dangers, they managed to leave completely unscathed, and that was certainly something worth celebrating.

Beside Lorist, Josk mused, "Milord, I really don't know what you're so glad about. Even though you've lived in Morante for ten years and are practically half-Moranite, you were chased away during your two recent visits."

"Oh…"

Upon being reminded of that, Lorist was no longer able to smile fondly at his memories of the city. He gave Josk a hateful glare.

Before Lorist even got two full days' rest after arriving at Silowas, Count Kenmays suddenly got the impulse to go to the imperial capital for a vacation. Lorist was incredibly troubled as Queen Carey was the current ruler of the kingdom. If he traveled there just like that, it would be akin to jumping into a trap. In the end, he could only send Blademaster Shuss and 500 guards along to protect him, Baron Shazin and Baron Felim on their trip to the capital with Baron Fenston at Jillin Harbor accompanying them as a guide.

This time around, the three nobles did not bring their loved ones with them, lest they have to fight their way out of a predicament once again. Lorist worry was unwarranted, fortunately. He received news soon after their arrival that the three were fitting in like fish in water. He even heard tell that Count Kenmays had obtained the queen's favor with his adept way with words. Not only did he become one of the queen's honored guests, she even organized a few paradise gatherings for the three. They were indulged in so much pleasure that they almost wished they would not have to return.

During that time, Lorist was busier than ever before. The big-seven guilds had returned to Morante and sent the Peterson Merchant Guild's vice-president to Silowas to meet with Lorist. Firstly, the vice-president expressed his deepest apologies for Lorist's recent experience and mentioned the way the big-seven guilds had dealt with Marquis Bejisanro.

Given that the marquis had defended his son's criminal deeds and tainted the reputation of the Union, Marquis Bejisanro was stripped of his title as well as his position as chief speaker of the sub-council. Not only that, his guild was fined heavily for using old and expired wheat to make ale, putting the citizens' health at risk. The guild was basically no more and Marquis Bejisanro had little choice other than suicide to relieve him of his pain and shame.

Hmph, the big-seven are merely splitting the spoils among themselves, Lorist winced, *I bet they see the Rosanji Merchant Guild as a fat, juicy pig waiting to be slaughtered. I was just the unlucky fellow that happened to be at Morante to provide a reason for them to carry out their scheme. Even if the Rosanji Merchant Guild didn't dream of a seat on the high council, they would've been fed on sooner or later…*

After discussing the guild's fate, the vice-president began to voice his objections to Lorist's actions. He was of the opinion that Lorist should be held accountable for setting fire to the food storage area. After all, the 800 thousand citizens of Morante relied on it for sustenance, and torching the whole area was really over the board.

I even wanted to set the whole of Morante on fire. Burning only one storage area is relatively calm even for me. Also, the food over there was used for paying the crowd to stick at the hotel, so if I didn't burn it, I would still be in trouble, he laughed.

As expected, the vice-president began to lay out his demands after finishing his complaints. He hoped that Lorist could supply the Union with food, as much as possible, to relieve the food crisis, even if it would cost them more. Lorist instantly shook his head. He could not help since his own dominion was rather tight on food.

He did give the vice-president a suggestion, however. They could target Andinaq's food supplies. Two years back, the second highness had prepared a large amount of food to feed his army. But after obtaining large amounts of resources following the occupation of Frederika, there was no need to touch his stockpiles, most of which still lay in their silos, completely untouched.

During the past two years, the campaign against Redlis also went rather well and further filled their stockpiles. If the Union was willing to spend lots of money to purchase food, the hedonistic princess, Carey, would be more than happy to oblige and sell off all the extra food, relieving the Union's crisis. As for transport, as long as they could get the food to Jillin Harbor, Lorist would be willing to offer his own transportation fleet to help out with the effort at a discount price.

The vice-president was so racked with joy that he did not even stay for his welcoming banquet and left for the imperial capital immediately.

Twelve days later, the vice-president returned and reported that he had successfully made a deal with Andinaq and had purchased over 5 million Pors of food, more or less 250 million kilograms, and would be tasking the Norton house's transportation fleet to send everything to Morante.

The fleet returned in the 9th month from their first trip to Morante. Onboard were a handsome couple, Blademaster Claude and Instructor Anfya, as well as three other instructors from Dawn Academy, two of whom were Lorist's former course mates.

Count Kenmays, Baron Shazin, and Baron Felim had finished their month-long vacation at the imperial capital and were sailing back to The Northlands aboard Northsea at the same time.

Chapter 314
Ridden with Matters

Lorist started working again the moment he returned to the dominion. Being the dominion lord was akin to having work that he could never finish. Despite only taking his three friends to Morante for a short trip, a mountain of paperwork had piled up on his desk. Even though most of the matters had already been dealt with, Lorist still had to sign off on the orders to acknowledge that he had been informed.

Blademaster Claude and Instructor Anfya refused his offer to accompany them around The Northlands. They requested only that he give them a guide to take them and the other Dawn Academy instructors around so they could search for a place to build the new academy.

Lorist had initially wanted it built at Northsea, but when Count Kenmays, Baron Shazin, and Baron Felim found out about Claude's intentions, they all fought for the opportunity. Count Kenmays was especially vigorous in his temptations. He mentioned that if they were unable to find a suitable place at the Nortons' dominion, they could build it anywhere they wanted in The Northlands and everyone would chip in to support the endeavor.

The Nortons' dominion alone had over 1.2 million people. Coupled with the dominions of Count Kenmays, Baron Shazin, and Baron Felim, The Northlands' population was around two million. If Dawn Academy were to rebuild there, there would be no shortage of students. Even if only one student in a thousand qualified, they would still have at least two thousand new entrants each year.

The dominions' citizens were quite well-off. All the houses within The Northlands had followed in Lorist's tracks and focused on developing their dominions instead of reaping their citizens like crops. This allowed most of the families in their dominions to be able to afford sending their children to school.

Additionally, the one resource all the houses lacked was talent. The Dawn Academy was one of the few multi-disciplinary academies in the world and was ranked in the continent's top ten. Their students were usually skilled in more than just combat. If they were to start a new branch in The Northlands, they would probably be able to

supply most of the area's demand for talent. Cultivating in-house talent would greatly benefit everyone, in the long run, so Count Kenmays and the others were incredibly supportive of the idea.

At the end of the 10th month, the academy's expedition returned to Firmrock, followed by Count Kenmays, Baron Shazin, and Baron Felim. It had been decided that the academy's new grounds would be at the foot of Bing Mountain. It was not in any of the houses' territories, nor had it seen even the slightest development.

The location had likely been picked exactly because it was completely undeveloped. With how focused the four houses had been on developing their lands, a patch of land would only be undeveloped if it wasn't in anyone's territory. Not only was it out of anyone's jurisdiction, it was also right in the middle of the four dominions.

Claudes explanation for his choice naturally didn't touch on this factor, however. He explained his choice as resulting from a desire to be able to draw from the populations of all four dominions, which naturally made the spot he chose the best choice.

The four dominion lords had a lengthy discussion and finally agreed to cede portions of their territory around the location Claude had chosen, which added up to roughly a barony's worth of land, to the academy. A mutual treaty was signed soon after, and the land officially belonged to the academy. They also gathered a million gold Fordes between them for the academy's construction. Half of the money came from House Norton, with House Kenmays paying three tenths, and Barons Felim and Shazin each contributing one-tenth.

When that matter was concluded, Blademaster Claude and his group returned hurriedly to Morante to prepare for the move. House Norton's transportation fleet would be incredibly busy in the following year and they would have to spend one whole year to fully transport everything the academy had to The Northlands. After all, rebuilding the academy in completely was a time-consuming job. Lorist estimated it would take about two years before the academy was ready to start accepting applicants.

When Lorist tired of dealing with paperwork, he placed his feet on his desk in frustration. His mind soon wandered to matters of less consequence.

Why do the transmigrators in other novels just focus on killing and fighting all day? They usually only need to give out vague instructions and their minions will take care of all

the troublesome bits -- without needing any supervision. The commoners in their dominions also seem to behave like NPCs all the time; they do what they're told without causing any trouble…

Lorist read the document on his desk a second time, slightly slower than the first time. His brows furrowed, but he eventually drew a circle on it and wrote two lines of words inside: 'Guilty as charged. Sentenced to Death'.

This was the first case of murder within the dominion. To think that something like this happened after only a few short years of life without worry for food or wear. The case involved two neighbors that partnered up to start a snack stall. They very quickly began to make a good profit, and in just two years they wealth had become quite impressive. The happiness didn't last, however.

One of the two started an affair with the other's wife. When the other found out, the cuckolded man strangled his former friend, neighbor, and business partner to death. He tossed the corpse into the nearest well to cover up his misdeed.

The case would have gone unnoticed had the man not got together with dead man's wife openly shortly after the incident. Additionally, the neighbors soon discovered the corpse and notified the police, who quickly put the puzzle pieces together and arrested the couple, still insisting that the man had fallen into the well and drowned. In the end, it was the former security chief of Whitebird Town, now the head of law enforcement, Kriston, that found evidence pointing to murder.

The case was actually rather simple. Victims of drowning usually had lungs full of water, but this corpse's lungs were empty, which indicated that he was dead before he entered the water. When asked why they strangled the man before tossing him into the well, the couple admitted that if they had not done so, the man would have been able to call for help. Additionally, he was rather good in water and would not drown that easily. Since it was the first murder case in the dominion, the criminal couple was sentenced to death and Lorist was the one who would have the final say on their fate.

Sigh, this is troublesome! To think that a dominion lord would have to deal with so much stuff.

Lorist recalled that when Kriston had come over to report the case, he had mentioned that the house lacked investigators. Even though every town or settlement had their own police units, they could only deal with simple cases like brawls and robberies.

They would only make a mess if they tried to deal with more complicated crimes. Additionally, according to Kriston, several underworld organizations had begun to take root in towns around Salus and Felicitas. The house had to take measures to keep them from becoming a threat.

Not only that, Kriston even suggested that the house come up with a new set of regulations that could accommodate the dominion's rapid development. Before this, the traditional laws of administration the house used to govern had been sufficient. But with the population approaching 1.2 million, a new set of laws was required to ensure everything stayed in order.

It all caused Lorist to do nothing but sigh all the time.

I've never read about transmigrators having to deal with troublesome stuff like this… In the webnovels I've read, they would be able to construct a 250-kilometer-long 50 meters high and wide wall with only 30 thousand people, and to it all in just three months! Some even camped at a small town and ambushed a force of a 100 thousand! One could even pay 3000 silver taels for a single meal and not have to bother with the change…

Compared to them, am I not actually super weak?! Those people can have huge harems with hundreds of beauties without any issues, yet a few women are already more than I can handle!

During the past two months, Lorist had gone to Maplewoods once as well as Nico Academy. When he got back to Firmrock Castle, the three Dinas were jealous and pinned Lorist down together to get their share of his attention and energy. Arriotoli's young aunt, Dilianna, even wanted to bear Lorist a child so she would have something to lean on when she gets older. Arriotoli on the other hand had her own goals. She wanted to push her younger sister, Fennazali to the position of the household matron. She felt that Irina, merely a maidservant, was far beneath her younger sister. The scholar at Nico Academy was completely absorbed in her research and had willingly given away her claim on the position. Her aunt had a rather dark history, so she wasn't fit to compete either. Her younger sister was as pure as jade and had offered her first time to Lorist. Being a mere concubine was out of the question, so, since there was no one to claim the position of household matron, it seemed only natural that she be the one to take it.

Lorist was rather troubled by Arriotoli. He couldn't be too hard on her, but he also couldn't let her prance around like she owned the place. Despite his displeasure at her

behavior, however, he had to admit that he was rather satisfied with Fennazali. The younger Dina did not have any ambition at all, she was perfectly satisfied with having a stable life, her nightly activities with Lorist was a bonus.

Unfortunately, she would not stay the same forever. People grow and change over time. Lorist's maidservant, Irina was the boss of Maplewoods, where she resided -- nobody dared to go against her wishes. Lorist now understood why she was so insistent on staying there. If she had followed Lorist around, she would only be a concubine. But at the bastide, she called the shots. Lorist really could not imagine that the timid and shy maidservant Irina used to be actually had such ambitions.

Irina was now 27 and in the prime of her youth. She was incredibly proactive in bed and did her best to pleasure Lorist as best she could. Perhaps because she had birthed two of Lorist's children, she was no longer as timid as she used to be. She had even displayed coquettish behavior and thrown tantrums, not to mention requesting gifts from him.

All that aside, Lorist was most troubled by their two sons. The younger was one and a half years old and could still not walk on his own. Apart from being unable to sleep without Irina by his side, however, he had no discernible faults. The elder son, Lysecott, on the other hand, was eight and behaved as domineering as a child his age could. It was especially the case given his status as Lorist's firstborn and the first in line to become his successor. The child was spoiled so heavily that he had become a little dictator. He insisted on having his way no matter what and would threaten to throw massive tantrums if his whims weren't catered to. Lorist had tried to tolerate Lysecott's behavior the best he could, but when he saw the young kid grope a maidservant's rear through her skirt, he lost it. He caught the bastard and gave him such a thrashing that his rear was swollen like a bubble for a whole week.

It provided Lorist a momentary sense of relief but only added to his trouble thereafter. Besides the fact that Irina cried the whole day, the child burst into tears whenever he saw Lorist after that day. He even refused to call Lorist his father. Whenever he looked at Lorist his eyes would hide a glint of hatred in their corners. Lorist decided that the kid could no longer stay at the bastide the day he first noticed the glint. He could not let the kid become the same kind of incompetent brat Lorist had despised so much as he grew up. He would not let his children undo his work and ruin the house he had shed so much blood and sacrificed so many lives to get to where it was today. He felt like a failure of a father, but he didn't have much choice in the matter. The house always required his unwavering attention so had never managed to spare the time necessary

to take care of his children. As a result, his children's upbringing and education had been neglected.

He decided to visit Irina and the two sons, apart from also seeing the illegitimate child of his elder brother, Helias, who had been sent to be raised by Knight Pajik's family with the knight his adoptive father.

Helias turn twelve after the new year and would leave Knight Pajik's home according to the long-standing agreement. He was to be sent to Nico Academy for a few years of study before returning to Lorist's side when he turned 15. From there on Lorist would cultivate the child himself. He would be allowed to choose either to train in Crimsonblood Battleforce, the house's technique, or walk the same path Reidy had.

Lorist visited Helias and was surprised to see that his nephew had grown to become a handsome and magnificent young man. Not only was he talented, he was exceedingly polite. House Norton would have yet another talented individual if Helias was cultivated with proper care. In the future, he might even be on par with Howard in terms of abilities.

It was a shame that Knight Pajik was in seclusion for his preparation to break through to the gold rank. Otherwise, Lorist would have wanted to have Lysecott put under his care as well. But after giving it some thought, he gathered that he could not rely solely on Pajik for raising his children. Additionally, Pajik's house was within the bastide and Lysecott did not fear the couple as much as Lorist would like. He had to find an even more strict person to take care of his little troublemaker.

After a long time spent pondering, Lorist remembered Iron-faced Malek, a gold-ranked knight that was as good as emotionless. According to Loze, Malek's wife had a similar demeanor and was also incredibly strict with her children. The two sons and the daughter they had were prime examples of what children ought to be. Lorist decided to let Malek's wife take care of Lysecott for four years until he turns twelve and would leave for Nico Academy. He would complete his studies there in three years and finally serve by Lorist's side.

Lorist wrote a letter to request Malek's return from Silowas. When Malek returned Lorist made his request, to which Malek eagerly agreed. He did not take any nonsense from either Irina or Lysecott and soon left to return to his manor in Salus.

Malek's wife was waiting for him when he returned him.

"This child is an orphan of one of my deceased comrades," he explained as he tossed the kid through the door, "He's incredibly naughty and lies all the time. He constantly claims he's hour dominion lord's heir. I was worried for his sake, so I decided to bring him back here and instill some discipline in him."

His wife believed the story and took hold of Lysecott. Malek didn't say anything else, nor did he waste his time at home. He turned around and returned to his post on Silowas right away. On his departure, the young master kept crying about how he really was the dominion lord's son and wanted to return home. Malek's wife, however, took it as a sign of the kid's intention to escape and gave him several thorough canings. Lysecott was so frightened he nearly lost his voice and quickly fell in line.

The matter at Maplewoods was a damper on Lorist's mood, especially the way Irina had glared at him when he took Lysecott away and how she refused to sleep with him. In the end, he left with a stomach filled with anger. Before he departed, however, he told Irina that if she insisted on Lysecott's return, he would lose his place in the line of succession. The threat struck home and, though she cried unendingly, she didn't dare to go against Lorist's decision anymore.

Lorist went to Nico Academy, but Telesti refused his advances as well. She argued that she wanted to focus on her research and on managing the academy, and had little time for Lorist and his petty distractions. So, instead, he sent most of his time there with his two daughters for a few days. He returned to the academy a day after he left to drop Helias off before leaving for Firmrock with a heavy heart, only to realize the Dinas had been awaiting his return, filled with jealousy.

How do other transmigrators manage their harems? I have only five women in three different places, and it's already more than it's worth. It's even worse now that I have children. Even though I'm incredibly busy and unable to spend time with my children, those breeding stallion transmigrators always have at least ten beauties waiting for them. How do they manage it? There's a saying that goes, 'three women are like 500 ducks'. Wouldn't a whole harem with more than ten beauties be far worse? Seriously, how do those transmigrators do it?

Lorist continued to daydream with his feet on the desk as Howard entered the room. Seeing Lorist's posture, he sighed.

"You're a noble, Milord, a dominion lord! You should behave accordingly! The way you're sitting is not acceptable at all!"

"Save it," Lorist interjected, "Only you would come in without knocking. By the time others finish knocking, I would be in the proper posture. Tell me, what's going on?"

"Well, I just received word from a messenger of House Kenmays that Princess Sylvia is in The Northlands. She will arrive at the dominion around noon tomorrow," replied Howard.

Chapter 315
Reasons for Coming

Oh, Princess Sylvia? Does she need anything? thought Lorist.

"Howard, how many years are left until our agreement with Fisablen expires?" asked Lorist, thinking that some change must have happened to the agreement.

"This year's transaction was completed without incident and next year's will be the last," replied Howard.

Time really flies. So it's already been four years since the agreement was signed, huh?

"What have House Fisablen been up to over these years?"

Howard shook his head.

"The salt merchant committee's largest target market is Wild Husbandry, Milord. The governor is Viscount Kristoph, and our informants are well aware of the situation. They were unable to infiltrate Eastwild, however. It's where the duke himself is, and his security is far greater. We were only able to get very rough and vague bits of information. The house has tried sending a group of spies into the province disguised as merchants before as well but they were quickly chased out.

"We did manage to learn that Duke Fisablen reformed his two legions and reorganizes the garrison force. Currently, the two legions total 46 thousand men. Coupled with the three garrison divisions he reorganized, his local defense legion, and personal guard regiment, he has a total force of 136 thousand people. The three garrison divisions are stationed in Wild Husbandry, Eastwild, and Southern respectively.

"Not only that, the Skywolf Legion commanded by Viscount Kristoph and the Tigerhowl Legion at Wild Husbandry launched large-scale military efforts against the grassland barbarians. According to the salt merchant committee's reports and Furybear's informants, almost a hundred grassland barbarian tribes have been eliminated. More than 150 thousand have been taken captive, most of whom are women and children. Duke Fisablen had his officers take the women as their wives.

Apparently, everyone ranked squad leader and above were allowed to take a wife and a concubine."

Lorist sat down properly and asked, "How much is the three provinces' population?"

"Eastwild and Wild Husbandry's population is less than 800 thousand and the desolated Southern has only 160 thousand. Our forces alone have almost 300 thousand people."

Lorist waved his hand.

"Their house is far from being able to compete with us. Our next targets should be the Madras duchy and the Iblia kingdom. We'll rest for another year before we launch another campaign.

"I didn't think Duke Fisablen would be able to assemble such a large force. That old fox is definitely wary of us. It seems we will have to focus on gathering intelligence from Eastwild soon."

Princess Sylvia arrived on time, and as expected, Count Kenmays was present during the welcoming.

After the princess and her cohort settled down, Lorist arranged for a magnificent feast to welcome her.

The two hadn't met for several years and Princess Sylvia had grown even more beautiful in the meantime -- like a flower just blooming, the beauty of which was so glaring that nothing could obstruct it. Amidst her hopeful stares hid her sweet smiles. Even Lorist was unable to resist the dreamy allure of her emerald-green eyes.

During the banquet, Princess Sylvia announced the reason for her trip. She was here to negotiate the next arms deal between the two houses and to invite Lorist to the knighthood tournament her father was organizing at Iblia's royal capital during the 5th month of the next year. The tournament was to identify talent for the kingdom. The princess was sent specifically to request Count Norton's attendance.

When Lorist heard what she had to say, the first thought he had in his mind was that it was a trap. Everyone within Iblia knew that House Norton had led the three other houses of The Northlands to conquer Windbury City, capture the former king, the second prince of the Empire, Iblia, and send him to Andinaq's capital where he was

finally sacrificed during the third prince's burial. Lorist couldn't help but feel suspicious of the invitation.

He was not afraid of an attempt on his life -- he would be able to escape unscathed without issue. Besides, as the leader of House Norton and the most powerful count in The Northlands, he would definitely bring with him a legion and Blademaster Shuss would he attend the tournament as well. Lorist was confident that he could fight his way out even if he fell into an ambush.

However, Lorist found that participating in the tournament would be incredibly boring. Frankly speaking, he believed his combat abilities had long surpassed those of most other knights., with the exception of Duke Fisablen, a rank 3 blademaster, who would probably last a few hundred bouts. Lorist would rather stay within the dominion and enjoy his time at his own leisure. Lorist was rather lazy for some reason and did not feel like leaving the dominion for the tournament.

Lorist did not refuse the princess's invitation outright during the banquet, however, even though Count Kenmays said that he would. Princess Sylvia did not take his comments to heart and merely expressed her welcome to the count, before turning to look at Lorist with hopeful eyes. Lorist could only put it off by promising that he would go along if the house did not require his presence at the time.

The princess pouted and threw a small tantrum at his answer. The banquet fell into a slightly awkward mood. Lorist was left with no choice but to end the banquet early.

As the host, Lorist was expected to invite Princess Sylvia into his study for a good conversation. He only made his invitation out of obligation, but he did not think that she would roll her eyes and walk towards the study without saying anything. She was followed by her teacher, Blademaster Xanthi, and the busybody Count Kenmays.

In the study, Count Kenmays plundered the wine stash as usual. Blademaster Xanthi sat on the couch in the corner, drinking the cup of tea Howard poured her. Princess Sylvia stood in front of Lorist's desk and stared at him with angry eyes.

Gosh, this is going to take a while, smiled Lorist bitterly, "Your Highness, please calm your anger. Look at all this paperwork on my desk, I truly am really busy!"

"Hmph!" snorted the princess before she turned around and ignored Lorist.

"By the way, Your Highness, I brought some souvenirs back for you from my last trip.

I hope you like them," said Lorist with utmost reverence.

He hoped his offering would calm the princess' seething wrath.

In the drawer at the left of the table were five intricate boxes decorated with purple silk. The one at the bottom was the largest, which Lorist took out and opened, revealing a black-colored velvet cushion on which a platinum necklace was placed. At the center of the necklace was a thumb-sized emerald of immense clarity and glow. The necklace was accompanied by a matching pair of earrings and a jade bracelet.

The jewelry instantly caught the attention of Princess Sylvia the moment it was brought out; even Blademaster Xanthi could not help but walk to the princess's side to inspect the ornaments for herself.

As expected, women are a little like the dragons of legend: greatly attracted to shiny objects.

"Gosh, Locke, where did you get these babies from? They look like priceless heirlooms!" exclaimed Count Kenmays.

How should I respond to him? thought Lorist, rubbing his nose, *This is one of the spoils I got from Hanayabarta. It used to belong to the queen consort.*

There were four more boxes in the drawer, but the items he just brought out were the most valuable of them all. They were worth around 200 thousand gold Fordes. Had it not been for Princess Sylvia's alluring green eyes, Lorist would have forgotten about the emerald jewelry entirely.

Well, I better not say that I looted them from the corpse of a queen consort…

The jewelry in the four other boxes was also taken from the dead bodies of the other concubines. That was why Lorist hesitated to gift them to his lovers.

"Well, I robbed someone and got them," said Lorist.

Well, the target of my robbery was a whole kingdom, but some things are better left unsaid.

"Huh? Do you think me an idiot?!" Count Kenmays said angrily, "What kind of idiot would wear something that precious in broad daylight? Something like that would be

precious family heirlooms that wouldn't ever see the light of day!"

"Seriously, I kid you not," Lorist said with sincere honesty, "I robbed a whole kingdom."

"Only the dead would believe you," Count Kenmays retorted, "Let's see what you have in the four other boxes in that drawer of yours, shall we?"

While the jewelry in the boxes were not as complete as the emerald set, they were still incredibly precious. Count Kenmays, Princess Sylvia, and Blademaster Xanthi were all filled with awe and amazement.

"Locke, my friend,… I would like to…" stammered Count Kenmays.

"Fine, pick the one you like. Oh, and, Blademaster Xanthi, feel free to choose one box as well. Everyone who saw these boxes get one. Is that fair enough?"

Lorist knew perfectly what the count was getting at, so he gave the boxes away generously. After all, the jewelry in the other boxes was only worth a few tens of thousands of gold Fordes, a far cry from the emerald set. The main factor of Lorist's generosity, however, was still the fact that the items had been looted from corpses, which was somewhat of a taboo for him, probably because of how he was brought up in his previous life. Count Kenmays and the rest, however, did not pay that any heed.

Princess Sylva really did not think that Lorist would give her such an expensive gift. With a face full of smiles, she said, "Elder Brother Locke, thank you so much for your gift. I love the emerald jewelry a lot."

"Great, as long as you stop being mad at me," Lorist smiled.

Lorist prepared to refuse the invitation for next year's knighthood tournament while the princess was still in a good mood.

"Well, Your Highness, I'm worried that I will be a little busy during the 5th month next year, so…"

"Locke, I'm already 24 this year…" muttered the princess shyly.

Oh? So what if she's 24? I'm already 34, thought Lorist thickly.

"Oh, the last time I met you, you were only 20. It's already been four years, huh? Time

really flies. To think that you already broke through to the two-star gold rank! You really are talented. You should be able to reach three-star gold rank by the time you're thirty," praised Lorist.

"I'm going to be 25 next year, so my grandfather is organizing a knighthood tournament, for… You know… Do you understand now, you blockhead?!"

Princess Sylvia stomped on Lorist's foot.

"Ouch!" cried Lorist.

Princess Sylvia took the box and left.

Blademaster Xanthi got in front of Lorist and said with a slight smile, "That lass has been training hard in seclusion for four whole years and finally broke through to the two-star gold rank. Not only that, Duke Fisablen is organizing a knighthood tournament **for her sake**, yet she came all the way here to inform you. You don't need me to spell it out for you, do you?"

Seeing the blademaster leave the study, Lorist looked at Count Kenmays but only saw a bumbling drunk gulping down wine with abandon.

"What are you looking at?! I… I didn't think that th-the princess would actually fall for the likes of you!" barked the count with eyes bloodshot with rage.

"Me…?" mumbled Lorist as he pointed at himself with his finger.

"Yes, you! Don't you get the hints she's practically laying out for you?! The princess was right, you really are a blockhead!" Count Kenmays exclaimed, "Even though I'm far more handsome than you are, and have a better demeanor and aura, the princess still fell for you."

"Hey, I'll duel you with one hand behind my back. I can mop the floor with you after only three moves," Lorist retorted as he limped to the couch and reached out for his feet, "Darn, that lass's stomp sure was heavy. It still hurts even now."

"Hmph, you deserve it for being so dense. Her Highness already made it clear that the reason the duke is hosting the tournament is that she's already 24."

"Wait, so you're saying that the tournament's for picking a fitting suitor for the

princess? Isn't that basically dueling for her hand in marriage?" asked Lorist.

"Dueling for her hand in marriage? Yeah, to think that you could put it so succinctly, blockheaded as you are," said the count as he nodded.

Lorist said curiously, "Isn't the princess the beloved granddaughter of Duke Fisablen? Why is there a need for her to find a suitor in such a roundabout way? There's no need for a knighthood tournament to be organized just for this, is there?"

Count Kenmays leered at Lorist.

"Once a bumpkin, always a bumpkin. Do you think that a person with the status of the princess can find a suitor that easily? Let me tell you, the matter of her marriage is far more complicated than our own. Even though there are many who strive for her favor and affection from all noble ranks, can a proper suitor be determined only based on that? The Iblia kingdom has a few dukes among their peerage as well, but are they qualified to marry the princess just because of that? Most of them are mere honorary nobles. Even a prince would not stand a chance.

"A person like Duke Fisablen has to take the matter of Princess Sylvia's marriage with great consideration, in terms of status, household might, and most importantly, how good a fit the couple is for each other. Otherwise, the couple would become a laughing stock for the other nobles. Given the princess's status, the ideal candidate for her husband would be someone who is in line to succeed a duchy, or a throne to the kingdom, or even a very powerful noble like you. Heck, when I look at it that way, you **are** qualified to be the princess's suitor after all."

"But… I'm older than her by ten whole years," mumbled Lorist.

"What's the problem with that? Do you know that Duke Melein's daughter was wedded to the third prince despite there being a 14-year age gap? 14 whole years!" exclaimed the count.

"Duke Melein's daughter and the third prince?"

"The three princes of the former empire also faced the same problem and weren't able to find suitable suitors. With the reputation of the first and second princes being rather bad, most powerful nobles weren't willing to form a marriage union with the imperial family, and the noble houses that were willing to do so did not even qualify given their low status. That was why the first and second princes had illegitimate

children that further tainted their names. When the third prince was 30 years old, Duke Melein's daughter had already matured into a fine woman and the Melein household was willing to form a union with the imperial family. That's why the third prince was chosen to become the rightful heir to the empire. It was also because of that matter that caused the first and second princes to be dissatisfied with the manner in which succession was decided, as there was precedent where former emperors inherited the throne without empress consorts."

"Why were the powerful nobles not willing to be united with the imperial family?" asked Lorist, confused.

"It's simple. They would be ostracized by the other noble houses. After all, the imperial family is always at odds with the rest of the aristocracy, and those who side with the imperial family are also regarded in the same light. The imperial family is always hoping to strip away the powers of the noble houses so they don't become strong enough to threaten their rule. When the imperial family is strong, noble houses would ally together to protect their own interests. Not only that, should a mighty noble house unite with the imperial family, the influence of the imperial family would be further expanded and threaten the interests of the other noble houses. The final reason is that a noble house would be involved in the matters of the imperial houses, just like Duke Melein who was forced to participate in the civil war on the side of the third prince. To protect the rightful heir to the imperial throne, the Melein house had put in lots of resources and sacrificed much of their vitality, causing them to now be too weak to even protect themselves," explained Count Kenmays in detail.

"Then, what if the duke isn't able to find a proper suitor during the knighthood tournament?" asked Lorist again.

Count Kenmays shrugged and said, "Then, the matter would be even easier to deal with. The victor of the tournament would be a fitting compromise even if his status and family is relatively low. But, the catch is that the husband would effectively be married into the Fisablen house, and their descendants would bear the name of Fisablen as well.

"That's why, Locke, don't let the hopes and deep feelings the princess has for you down. No matter what, you have to attend the knighthood competition during the 5th month next year! Don't let the princess get married to some powerless lowborn!"

Chapter 316
Huge Purchase

"Duke Fisablen has made Princess Sylvia his representative to sign the trade agreement with House Norton to purchase 70 thousand sets of Rider Gear Number 103, 50 thousand sets of tessellated warrior armor, and various other products of daily necessity for a total of 1.27 million gold Fordes," announced an old goateed supervisor.

He passed the list in his hand respectfully to Howard, who then passed it on to Lorist.

Lorist stared at the list for a good while before he looked at Princess Sylvia, who was sitting by his side.

"Your Highness, the trade deal we have with House Fisablen will only conclude next year. You've signed it yourself, so I'm sure you haven't forgotten about it, have you?" inquired he.

"Even if I discount your new order, each set would still cost around 65 gold Fordes. 70 thousand sets would amount to 4.6 million. The tessellated warrior armor would cost 35 gold Fordes each, for a total of 1.8 million for 50 thousand sets. The daily products you've ordered amounts to 8 million. Your Highness, can you tell me how Duke Fisablen plans to pay for all this?"

"With horsehoof gold," the princes explained, smiling.

Horsehoof gold?! thought Lorist, surprised.

Horsehoof gold was the standard currency of the grassland barbarians. Normally, they only bartered among their own tribesmen, but when there were large purchases to be made from merchants not from their land, they would use horsehoof gold. The exchange rate for each piece of horsehoof gold was 100 gold Fordes.

Even if House Fisablen eradicates 100 tribes of grassland barbarians, it wouldn't be able to gather that much money. I don't see why the barbarians haven't been hunted to extinction long ago if that really were the case. Then again, given how House Fisablen

has occupied the grasslands for decades, it's not surprising for them to have at least that much in their treasury…

So, the matter I should concern myself with is why they are buying so much equipment at this kind of time? What is that old fox, Duke Fisablen, planning?

After finishing his train of thought, Lorist asked the princess, "I heard the duke has already formed two legions of 92 thousand men each. The speed with which our house has been supplying the equipment wouldn't hinder the growth of your army, and given the quality of our products, I doubt you would have so many wear out and spoil during your battles with the barbarians. Can you tell me the real reason why House Fisablen wishes to purchase 70 thousand more?

"Forgive my frankness, Your Highness. It's not that House Norton is unwilling to agree to this deal but it's obvious that Duke Fisablen is trying to expand his military. Even though your house already has two standing cavalry legions, the purchase of another 70 thousand sets of rider armor foretells the formation of yet another. As your neighbor, it's inevitable for us to be wary of your movements. I don't wish to meet you on the battlefield but before we know who the duke's target is, we cannot agree to your request."

Princess Sylvia chuckled.

"My grandfather was right. He said that if I didn't tell you the real reason, you wouldn't agree to the trade. House Fisablen has no wish to change the present or the future of Iblia. He might have wanted to make my younger brother, Hollycost, the king in the past but ever since he was diagnosed with congenital heart disease, my grandfather has cast away all such thoughts."

Hollycost truly was Iblia's legitimate heir. As the king, Second Prince Iblia had gone to Duke Fisablen to request support for amassing his army to storm the Madras duchy. But it ended up with him locked up together with the duke's daughter, the current queen of Iblia. Both were drugged with aphrodisiac to produce an heir, Hollycost.

It was common knowledge that the marriage between the second prince and Duke Fisablen's daughter was purely political. The second prince was known to be rather lecherous, even during the days of the empire, while the duke's daughter was also famed throughout the grasslands for her promiscuity, to say the least. Each had their own personal life, the two didn't interfere with each other's. The queen had given birth

to two illegitimate children, while the second prince sired three out of wedlock.

In the end, the duke was no longer able to bear the state of affairs and forced the couple together and used an aphrodisiac to stimulate their 'interactions'. However, when Hollycost was born, the second prince did not even acknowledge his existence. He considered him a product of his drug-infused passion. Hollycost was left behind at the Fisablen house and was raised by Princess Sylvia.

"Oh? What condition does Little Prince Hollycost have?" asked Lorist with surprise.

"Prenatal heart disease," Princess Sylvia, sighing, "My grandfather deeply regrets it and insists it was his fault for forcing the king and queen to mate under the influence of aphrodisiac. It probably was one of the factors for Hollycost's condition. The herbalist said that it would be hard for him to even live past 20. Even doing activities like reading for long periods are dangerous for his health. This is a condition he was born with, and there's no known way of treating it."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke. She had raised Hollycost with her own hands, so finding out that he had such a disease was no small shock to her.

"My apologies, Your Highness," consoled Lorist.

"It's no big deal. I'm already used to it," the princess said as she received a white cloth from Blademaster Xanthi, "Supervisor Polo, please bring the map over."

Polo was the goateed old man. He was also the supervisor for the princess's trip. Upon hearing her summons, he hurriedly brought the map over and held it open with the help of another maidservant on the other side.

It was a complete map of the northeastern grasslands, and easily one of the most detailed Lorist had ever seen. Even every spring on the grassland was marked.

The northeastern grasslands were described by some geography books as starting at the foot of the Magical Dragon Mountains. It was the northeasternmost area ever settled by humans on the continent. It had relatively level terrain and was almost five times The Northlands' size. It was said that one would require a whole month to travel from the southernmost part of the grasslands to the northernmost part on horseback.

Just like the mountain barbarians living in the Magical Dragon Mountains, the grassland barbarians were the northeastern grasslands' biggest pests. They had

branched off from the mountain barbarians some time ago and turned into nomadic, herding tribes. From a young age, members of the grassland tribes would be taught horse-riding, herding, hunting and raiding the others living near the grasslands to obtain manpower and resources. The mounted barbarians were called 'the dread riders of the grasslands' and were the most elite warriors of the tribes.

They were quite a problem for Winston and Southern before the empire. Their largest invasion involved more than 100 thousand riders. They managed to make their way into the Great Andalou Plains and across Egret Lake, causing the nobles nearby to hide in their castles, unable to resist the horde at all. They had to watch helplessly as the horde crossed their lands. It was one of the worst incidents, but it was also their last moment of glory.

Following the empire's formation, the founding emperor, Krissen I, led his armies across the grasslands. After half a year of war with the barbarians, suffering huge casualties, he successfully managed to eliminate 100 thousand. He conquering what was now Wild Husbandry in one fell swoop and isolated the barbarians from the rest of the empire. Besides Eastwild, he made sure to station soldiers around the borders to ensure that the barbarians would never again encroach on imperial territory.

When Duke Fisablen did the same and conquered the barbarians again, they no longer had much vitality left in them. Apart from occasionally raids on with about 20 thousand riders, most of the time the grassland barbarians would be engaged with the two divisions of cavalry troops the duke had stationed there. Even during the civil war barbarians were unable to cross the borders defended by House Fisablen's troops.

Princess Sylvia stood up and walked to the map.

Stretching out a finger, she declared with pride, "During the 21st day of the 6th month this year, House Fisablen's 70 thousand elite soldiers successfully eliminated more than 200 thousand of the Hubet tribe's members. They suffered only 18 thousand casualties and conquered the greater and lesser golden creeks. My grandfather announced that the unified area will be a new province, named Goldcreek. The province will be ruled by our house now on."

No one present could help but gasp, especially Count Kenmays, who darted in front of the map immediately.

"You actually passed through the dense forests and Ghostshriek Cliff?! No wonder you

were able to assault the golden creeks. House Fisablen literally struck gold…" stammered he.

While the terrain around the northeastern grasslands was mostly level, it was not without its hilly areas. The greater and lesser golden creeks were rather close to Eastwild but there was a natural barrier separating the two: the forests surrounding Ghostshriek Cliff. Once lost within, one would find it exceedingly hard to make it back out. Whether they be the barbarian riders or the cavalry troops of House Fisablen, going through the forests around Ghostshriek Cliff was nothing but a suicidal endeavor, and both sides viewed it as a natural, impassable barrier.

The greater and lesser golden creeks' are was famed for its gold. The magi had surveyed the area and recorded their finding in an atlas which was still passed down to the day. Gold was not a precious material during the magic civilization's era, however. Magic metals were far more useful and valuable. Even though they knew of the existence of the gold veins, no humans bothered to go mine them.

During the thousand-year dark age, the greater and lesser creeks became infested with barbarian riders that fought each other to conquer the place. In the end, the three greatest tribes managed to gain permanent occupancy. The Hubet tribe was one of the strongest, with around 360 thousand riders in their ranks. No one would have imagined House Fisablen would eliminate them in one go.

Lorist finally understood where the money came from. It was obvious that House Fisablen obtained more horsehoof gold than they could use as spoils. To think that house was busy conquering the barbarians and taking the golden creeks when the Nortons were exterminating Hanayabarta; it seemed their neighbors weren't slacking off.

"Locke, my friend, it seems House Fisablen is rich. Our salt merchant committee can increase trade volumes with them without worry. Did you know the golden creeks generate at least 1.5 million gold Fordes' worth of gold every year? That's 300 thousand gold Fordes more than our house makes in our best years!" Count Kenmays stammered.

Lorist looked at the map.

With Eastwild at the center, Goldcreek and Wild Husbandry are like two horns on its flanks. So the duke wants to purchase equipment for the new cavalry legion he's going

to form in Goldcreek. The golden creeks' hilly terrain is more suitable for the settlement of normal humans than grassland barbarians. The grassland barbarians will never be able to enjoy the golden creeks again if the duke builds a few well places castles and citadels.

"My heartfelt congratulations to House Fisablen, Your Highness," Lorist congratulated, "I agree to the trade and will hasten the equipment's production to show our admiration. Please pass on my respects to the duke, especially for how he has not abused his power and stormed into the inner continent.

"To show my sincerity and concern for the brave soldiers of House Fisablen, I will donate a million gold Fordes' worth of daily necessities. I hope the duke will give them to the families of those who gave their lives during the campaign."

Donating a million gold Fordes' worth of goods was a rather generous move. Even Princess Sylvia was shocked.

"Thank you, Brother Locke…" she finally managed to squeeze out.

The agreement was signed soon after. Lorist promised to fulfill his end over two years. House Fisablen would also make a downpayment of 20 thousand horsehoof gold up front.

Only after the deal was signed and Lorist gave his word to participate in the knighthood tournament was Princess Sylvia relieved enough to travel around the dominion for leisure. She hunted, picnicked, attended dance balls, and fished in the sea until the 11th month before she left ever so unwillingly without forgetting to remind Lorist to be present for the knighthood tournament.

Chapter 317
Charade Returns from Seclusion

Lorist descended into his pool of work after sending everyone off. He did not expect that Senbaud would send over news about Shyarsia's submission. During the 9th month, Senbaud's Oceanic Legion was deployed against a Shyarsian fleet. But, after only a single volley of cannon fire, the kingdom raised the white flag immediately. They were apparently so terrified by the human-head pyramid that lost all will to fight.

Even King Lud III's cousin, the queen regent and heir to the kingdom, was poisoned by her royal uncle. She was decapitated and her head presented to Senbaud as an apology for their misconduct. The group that delivered the head also brought two million gold Fordes' worth of treasures and the king's seven-year-old younger brother from another mother, who was to serve as a political hostage.

How should I deal with this? thought Lorist in a troubled manner.

There was been no precedent for such a thing, a kingdom swearing fealty to a single independent noble house, a mere count no less. Others might not acknowledge it. However, given that Shyarsia was located on an isolated island, away from the continent, perhaps they had never seemed to be much in the eyes of the continental nobles in the first place. Add that that the Chikdor Merchant Guild had offered up their trade routes to Shyarsia, it was only natural for the kingdom to fall under the Nortons' rule.

Torin and Tok, the father and son pair, traveled with the transport ships this time. Torin reported Shyarsia's situation to Lorist in detail. He was of the opinion that the island kingdom was controlled mainly by the young king's royal uncle, Saham. The king was young and likely controlled by his uncle, a mere figurehead. It would certainly explain why he had such hatred for the man, besides the fact that it had been his uncle who'd murdered his mother.

The royal court is messy no matter where it is! thought Lorist, sighing.

"I do not want to be distracted by some Shyarsia's internal politics. I care only for their spices. Our people live a high quality of life, the common man has meat as his staple

food. This is true for most of The Northlands as well. If we can obtain their spices, our profits will be immeasurable," declared he.

Lorist was prepared to form another maritime trading fleet to establish trade routes to Shyarsia as well as make it another market for the dominion's produce. The fleet would ship their products to the kingdom and bring back their spice. As for their internal power struggles, the house would not interfere as long as the kingdom could continue to supply spice.

"Milord, what do we do about the young hostage and the decapitated head?" asked Old Torin.

"Send the head back to the young king. This is such a waste of a perfectly fine crystal box. Of everything they could put in there, they chose a human head," complained Lorist with a wave of his hand, "Well, the hostage is still young, we'll put him in Nico Academy for a few years before we send him off to Dawn Academy. Whether he learns something is entirely up to him. We will make sure he lives without worries at the very least and give him pocket money equivalent to the salary of a gold-ranked knight. They did send us two million gold Fordes, after all, we shouldn't mistreat him. With him around, we'll have a contingency if something goes wrong in Shyarsia."

"Understood, Milord."

After dealing with matters, Lorist started planning where Tigersoar should train. The successful occupation of the greater and lesser golden creeks by the Fisablens made Lorist more nervous and alert; he could no longer tell whether his Tigersoar could rival the Fisablens' cavalry legions on the field of battle. In terms of unit type, their cavalry forces were standard cavalrymen akin to the Nortons' light cavalry scouts. They specialized in mobility and deftness. They could only be countered with heavy-armored units.

As for Tigersoar, even though they were cavalry too, they were mid- to heavy-armored ones whose defense capabilities rivaled that of the imperial family's royal knights. They were organized and focused on orderly formations and brute charging force. They used carroballistae for ranged attacks and steel lances for their charges. They also possessed mobile catapults for siege warfare. It was a shock unit that performed best on the open field.

If the legion was to be described as a long spear, the Ragebear knight brigade headed

by gold-ranked knight Terman would be a huge hammer that smashed any formation they charged through. Their defensive capabilities were impressive beyond belief. Loze's Tigersoar troops were equipped with stainless steel plate armor, while their mounts wore steel plate for protection. Each person-and-mount pair weighed more than a ton. They were essentially the medieval equivalent of tanks. Only ballistae posed a threat to them, the normal bow weaponry and arrows couldn't do them any harm.

Had it not been for the fact that quick warhorses with great endurance were hard to obtain, Terman's knight brigade would have long expanded to a division of its own instead of the small 10-thousand-man unit it was currently. However, Lorist realized that when faced with the cavalry legions of House Fisablen, both the knight brigade and Tigersoar would find it hard gain the upper hand with charging tactics alone. The problem was that Duke Fisablen was no idiot. He was an old, cunning fox. He would no doubt use anti-cavalry tactics to suppress the Nortons' knight brigade and Tigersoar legion.

The duke used primarily light cavalry, so the knight brigade and Tigersoar cavalrymen would only be wasting their time if they tried to chase them down. In fact, if they tired their horses out, they might end up out-manoeuvred instead. But, if they did not pursue, they would be harassed and gradually worn down. Even if they didn't sustain huge casualties, it was still nothing to scoff at. As the saying went, 'one can be a thief for a thousand days, but none keep watch that long'. Being on high alert all the time would cause the troops' focus and morale to waver and they would become ripe for an ambush.

Since the best method against their cavalry is using light cavalry, should I form another legion?

Lorist discarded the idea soon after, however.

Princess Sylvia traveled around The Northlands for fun for a whole month, and per Tarkel's instructions, Furybear sent large numbers of agents posing as coachmen and servants to get in touch with the princess's cohort and gather intelligence. The endeavor proved quite fruitful. Amongst other things, they learned that Duke Fisablen had absorbed the captured barbarians into his forces. Thanks to their uptake, he had largely recouped his losses from the campaign.

The grassland barbarians were practically born and lived in the saddle, so they

required minimal training to be effective. House Norton's cavalry, however, had to spend long periods of time in training and had to make use of the best armaments to match these saddled-birthed foes. For the time being, apart from not having a reliable ranged weapon that could be used on horseback, the formation of yet another light scout cavalry legion might court the objections of the house's officials. After all, the combined expenditure of the Tigersoar, Firmrock, and local defense legions amounted to more than three million gold Fordes. Even with the wealth obtained from Hanayabarta, they could not afford to be so reckless with their spending.

It'll better to let Grandmaster Sid and the rest research better ranged weapons that can be used on horseback first.

Lorist was certain that his house would not find itself in conflict with House Fisablen within the next two years, he had, after all, just signed another trade agreement with them. Additionally, if he participates in the knighthood tournament the next year, a union of marriage might form between their houses. Should he take Princess Sylvia as his official wife, House Fisablen would become his unquestioned ally and their cavalry troops would no longer be a threat to him.

Speaking of Princess Sylvia, Lorist did not quite know what to make of her. Even though the house's officials were incredibly in favor of their union, with Governor Hansk and Governor Hector writing letters to encourage the marriage as well, Lorist couldn't help but feel a little weird about what was requested of him. He had always seen Princess Sylvia as an adorable and beautiful little sister. He had never imagined she would end up falling for him.

To Lorist, the only benefit of the princess's visit was that she caused the members of his harem, especially Arriotoli, to calm down. The elder Dina mistress had discovered that, be it status, looks, battleforce, aura or family background, neither she nor her younger sister could compare to the princess. They didn't even have the right to be jealous. It was also because of the fact that almost all the officials of the house supported a union between Lorist and the princess.

Arriotoli had no choice but to stop her efforts to push her younger sister to the position of Lorist's wife and the household's matron grudgingly. Shortly after the beginning of the princess' visit, she declared her entry into seclusion for training, she intended to break through to the silver rank and become her house's first female knight. Lorist was so amused that he almost laughed out loud. He had not heard of anyone who required seclusion to break through to the silver rank, only to the gold

rank and above. The angered girl instantly leaped on Lorist and gave him a few harsh bites the moment she heard what Lorist said.

Despite his desire to accomplish something for the house quickly, there was not much Lorist could do, so he sent Fiercetiger Loze with his legion to hunt herbivorous magic beasts in the wildlands and had Blademaster Shuss follow along. He himself lazed around in Firmrock Castle for the utterly uneventful winter.

He felt almost a little depressed when he reflected on his thoughts. During the decade since he returned to the dominion, he had been busy nonstop. He was always tending to one matter or another. He didn't even have many a moment to spare for himself. But now that he had nothing better to do and had to spend the end of the year at the castle, he felt a little unaccustomed to all the free time. It was one of the reasons he had gone to Morante. Unfortunately, he would not meet the peers that had accompanied him again for the winter.

Lorist felt lonely and bored.

Had it not been for the three Dinas by his side, Lorist would have joined Loze in the wildlands.

Bored beyond his wits, he decided to sweep the dominion clean of the syndicates that had just started taking hold. It proved a rather simple job since most of the members were also waiting out the winter in their homes. As he dug out the syndicates' roots, he found that over 20 household knights were involved. He needed more proof to implicate them before he could take any further action, so they were marked for further investigation. Three silver-ranked knights ended up being expelled from the house and stripped their knighthood.

When Kriston, the head of law enforcement, made his report, he pointed out that those who joined the syndicates were mostly fighters that slacked off often on their duties or had too much time. Many were from knightly, or military families, or even from the families of household officials. Some retired warriors were also among their ranks. While they frequently caused small-scale trouble, they were careful to avoid causing huge commotions. Gradually, they had grown into a force that posed a threat to the civilians and had gained monopolies over sections of the economy.

Kriston believed the best method to deal with them was to come up with strict operating protocols and increase the training and authority of the police units.

Lorist left most of the work to Kriston and had him bring the protocols and regulations to Telesti. With so many scholars over there, they would be able to draft effective regulations for the house based on the ones of the old empire.

I bet the old guys at the academy would be interested in doing that, thought Lorist.

And so, Year 1776 of Grindia passed. Apart from the near two thousand criminals that were sent to the Hanayabartan archipelago, the rest of the dominion was bathed in prosperity.

After the 3rd month's rainy season, Fiercetiger Loze and his legion returned from the wildlands and brought more than 100 thousand magic beast carcasses. Lorist inspected the legion and found that the winter hunt had allowed their abilities to mature considerably, much to his delight.

The 4th month came with good news. Charade had successfully broken through to the gold rank. At the same time, Els and Pajik, who were both training at Maplewoods, had also become gold-ranked household knights. With the addition of these three, the house now had 14 gold-ranked knights.

The month was not without its setbacks, however. Pete and Waxima had failed to break through and would require another half a year to recover from the backlash. Dulles, Jim, and former bandit Ovidis, on the other hand, were still training.

The greatest benefit of CHarade's breakthrough for Lorist, however, was that he could take over the house's administration once again. The months of sowing Lorist had done with the Dinas had also finally brought about a crop -- Dilianna was pregnant.

When Charade was caught up with the year's developments, he was surprised to find out about the Dawn Academy. After all, he was also an alumnus. He praised Lorist's involvement to encourage the academy's move to The Northlands. According to him, it was 'an act that would change the course of history for the house for hundreds of years to come'.

As only Charade could, he immediately began his planning. They would first have to gather the manpower necessary to construct the academy. It had to be built as quickly as possible. He wanted the academy ready to begin recruiting and training new students as soon as possible.

As for Lorist and Princess Sylvia's marriage, Charade had a different take on the mater,

a more conservative attitude. He believed that House Norton and House Fisablen's alliance would not be without its shortcomings. Instead, he was wary of why Duke Fisablen would make such a move in the first place. House Fisablen, which controlled three whole provinces, was a force to be reckoned with, after all.

On the 15th day of the 4th month, House Norton hosted yet another general meeting. As the household's chief knight, Charade outlined their goals for the year to come. Lorist's preparations to participate in the knighthood tournament was next on the agenda. He resolved himself to bring Princess Sylvia back to his dominion for good.

Chapter 318
Viscount Eidis

"I didn't think the Winston province would be more desolate than The Northlands. I see that you two ravaged the land quite thoroughly," said Lorist when he turned to Baron Felim and Baron Shazin, who were riding behind him.

"No, this is not our fault," Felim countered, shaking his head, "We haven't touched the province since you brought us to conquer the capital. You might not believe it, but half of the new civilians in our domains came of their own accord. Winston's nobles have caused such a huge mess that we don't feel the urge to get wrapped up in it at all. Many civilians ran from the province for the sake of their survival. We didn't even need to threaten them to have them come."

Shazin nodded in agreement. They were currently on their way to Windbury for the knighthood tournament. After looking around, Lorist recalled a line from a poem he had read in his past life: Whites of bones litter the wilds, not a single chicken chirps for kilometers.

Little more than a decade ago, before the civil war began, Winston was the fourth province in the empire to have a population of over 600 thousand. Despite having only a seventh of the area of The Northlands, the trade developments were well known across the empire.

The province used to be one of the empire's largest livestock markets, with merchants from The Northlands, Eastwild, Wild Husbandry, Southern and the seven central provinces all flocking to Winston and bringing with them lots of different products and supplies.

It was said that a baron in Winston was richer than a Duke in The Northlands. Not only was the saying a point of pride for the people of the province, it also signified the mocking manner the people there viewed Northlanders. After all, even though The Northlands was the largest province of the empire, it was the poorest.

The tides of time, however, turned the whole situation around. Only ten odd years had passed since Winston was at its peak, and it was now far more desolate than The

Northlands had ever been. It was probably in part thanks to the second prince's rampant scouring of resources and his military failures, but Lorist's intentional encouragement for his allies to sabotage the vitality of the province certainly played the largest part. Those that controlled the province at the moment didn't have the might to mediate between the quarreling nobles -- battles raged without end.

Winston had been relatively peaceful during the last two months, however. No nobles had gotten caught up in any territorial disputes. It was quite obviously due to Duke Fisablen's deployment of two cavalry divisions to Windbury. With the one known as 'The War God' even when the empire was still around present, even the most arrogant nobles had to think twice before taking action. Most did not dare to make a move and were on their best behavior.

Since the reason for the duke's presence was nothing alarming, the nobles were content to wait out the months of the duke's stay before taking up the feuds once again. It was also a welcome reprieve for the nobles, most of whom had been exhausted from the years of conflict. They could make the best of the short break in hostilities to prepare for their new offensives. There were also those nobles confident in their martial prowess who wanted to show off in the tournament.

Rows of mounted troops continued to travel across the ruined paths of the province. Lorist brought with him an escort of 3000 men. Patt, who had been injured during the attack on Silowas, had spent a year in the local defense legion following his recovery and was transferred back to Lorist's personal guard to become a regiment leader. Patt had been rather fortunate despite suffering injuries. After he recovered, he managed to take the beauty Martha from Whitebird Restaurant as his wife. Too bad Lorist was busy at the Hanayabarta archipelago at the time, so he could only congratulate his old rival and playmate for settling down when he returned.

Count Kenmays came with a thousand guards, while Baron Shazin and Baron Felim each had 500 men. Due to Lorist's request, the three brought only cavalry guards. They were followed by Fiercetiger Loze and one of Tigersoar's heavy-armored cavalry divisions and two carroballista brigades, who maintained about a day's distance. Should anything unexpected really happen, the 20 thousand men would be able to respond in time.

"This place is far too run down. We've already traveled for three days, yet we haven't seen a single castle. Where have the darned nobles gone?" asked Josk, bored.

Shazin struggled to suppress his laughter.

"What are you laughing at, Hennard?" barked Josk angrily.

He was the baron's old opponent. Back when the Duke of the Northlands, Loggins, sent Knight Chevany to attack the Norton dominion, Baron Shazin, or Hennard, as he was known back then, was one of the commanders of the duke's forces. Even though Josk did not personally fight against the baron, he got to know him during the time the baron was held captive. The two had developed a strong friendship in the time since then and spoke informally in private settings.

"This is all your lord's fault," Shazin said, pointing at Lorist, "You'll understand once you ask Felim about it. Back then, Locke had us raid and pillage the whole Winston precisely to make the place barely habitable, especially the stretch of road from here to the capital. We swept the area a number of times. All the nobles whose whereabouts you wonder about, we hung them all. That's why so many commoners have been flooding into our dominions."

Josk didn't comment on Lorist's use of scorched-earth. Even though Windbury's nobles weren't worth much, standing behind them was Duke Fisablen, and Lorist could not be too careful when dealing with such a dangerous adversary.

"Be patient, Josk," Shazin consoled, "We'll arrive at Dawok tomorrow. It's Viscount Eidis's dominion. His castle is there as well. The last time we led our soldiers to storm the city, the viscount knew what was good for him and donated a great sum of money and food to us. Given his rather good reputation, we spared him and his dominion. I heard he's been developing quite well during the past two years, a rare breed of good noble in Winston. He doesn't have a good relationship with the queen, so he's allied with a bunch of nobles and has quite a bit of influence these days.

"We can have a nice, filling drink when we reach Dawok tomorrow, my friend. Then again, it's all Lorist's fault that we have to hold off on the road. Even I can't stand not drinking for that long, not to mention you. My mouth's felt so tasteless during the past few days, eating only bread and dried meat on the pretense of keeping vigilant. We're going to attend a knighthood tournament! Why does it feel like we're preparing for war?!"

Shazin's complaints displeased Josk.

"Come on, Hennard, Milord's doing this for your own good. This time around, we, the four houses of The Northlands, are attending the knighthood tournament together. Milord's being extra careful about this to make sure nothing goes wrong. Otherwise, Milord could've traveled with just Els and me. It's because we need to protect the rest of you that we brought so many men with us, yet you're here complaining ungratefully."

"You… And to think that I bothered to console you. Now, you're blaming me for this instead! It was you who brought the subject up in the first place," Shazin retorted.

The messenger they sent to the capital when they arrived at Dawok return at noon the next day. He brought with him the noble Duke Fisablen had sent as his ambassador, Count Richard.

Count Richard welcomed Lorist warmly before expressing that the duke was overjoyed for the participation of the four great houses of The Northlands in his knighthood tournament. Not only that, the duke was also willing to let the four houses be in charge of the south gate of the city's defenses.

Lorist only was only truly relieved when he heard the count say that. Duke Fisablen's suggestion was obviously made with the intent of easing the four great houses' suspicions. The gesture's implication was that Duke Fisablen only wanted to organize a knighthood tournament and was not plotting anything sinister behind the scenes.

Count Kenmays expressed his thanks to Count Richard and praised Duke Fisablen's open-minded approach, not failing to mention his admiration for the house. And so, the two launched into a chain of time-wasting pleasantries, which could not be avoided - it was what etiquette demanded. Even if one was annoyed, one must always retain a smile to show one's cultured demeanor.

In the end, Count Kenmays accepted the duke's suggestion and shook hands with Count Richard in an intimate manner, like long lost brothers who had just reunited.

Viscount Eidis, who had waited for a good while, approached them and expressed his welcome. He also greeted Count Richard and invited all of them on a tour of his castle. He also organized a welcome banquet.

Dawok was rather prosperous an populous, with an estimated population of 30 thousand. What surprised Lorist was that shops and businesses lined both sides of the

main street, complete with large signs to attract customers.

Perhaps seeing Lorist's surprised reaction, Viscount Eidis explained that since the second prince set Windbury as the kingdom's capital, the trade routes to it were cut as soon as the civil war began. Additionally, the livestock reared near the capital made it stink of manure. The prince couldn't stand it, so he outlawed the rearing of any livestock near the city. With the ban in place, no one dared to get involved in the business but, the last couple of years without the second prince's meddling, along with the stability of the neighboring regions, saw a resurgence in the trade. Even with the nobles duking it out amongst themselves frequently, the province still frequently saw traders from the four central duchies.

It was too late to restart the livestock in the city itself, the high entrance fees saw to that. The Queen's tax collectors cut such a huge slice off the merchants' profits, that it was hardly worth it for them. Viscount Eidis, as he had done with Lorist's invasion, had seen an opportunity. He rushed to develop a livestock market and industry in his dominion and its prosperity has not waned since.

"Even though the livestock industry here is not that big, our market still wants for furs and beast tendons," said the viscount bitterly, "Such items are valued rather highly by the armies, they buy them in absolutely absurd numbers, which is why we have so many shops just to sell those two items."

Dawok's improving economy also attracted the envious glares and greedy eyes of many nobles, many of whom had already gotten into fights and skirmishes with the viscount a number of times. The viscount was forced to ally with a number of other nobles, whose interests aligned with the survival of Dawok, in order to protect his own. The success of his town was also one of the reasons for his fall-out with the queen. Once she became aware of his success, she sent a tax collector over with a demand for 70% of the town's profits. A demand the viscount naturally refused.

"That queen's so blinded by money she's gone insane! What sane person can make a demand like that?!" exclaimed Lorist.

"That's right," Viscount Eidis agreed, frustration infused in his voice, "Even though my dominion's prosperity allowed me to profit a little, most of the money I earn is invested back into its defense. The money goes in a huge circle and has yet to achieve anything productive. And that's not taking into account the time and effort I've had to put in to train the men that man the defenses! I'm so busy that I can't even afford a

good night's sleep. I'm starting to wonder if developing my dominion was even worth it…"

Lorist couldn't do anything but sympathize with the viscount's troubles. Viscount Eidis would have thrived had they been in a time of peace and stability given his keen eye for business and benevolent attitude towards his subjects. Unfortunately, this was not a time of peace and not an era of stability. His prosperity served only to attract hungry wolves like moths to the fire, only these moths could bite against the fire and the wolves could do more than howl at the moon.

Dawok was originally just 100 meters away from the viscount's castle but given the rapid expansion of the town and increase in population over the years, Dawok had already connected with the castle. A wall had already had to be erected between the two. It had four firing posts similar to blockhouses around it. The design allowed the garrison to react equally quickly and effectively whether it was the castle or the town being attacked.

Eidis's castle had a century of history behind it. According to the viscount, his grandfather was granted the title for his military achievements and took root as one of the nobles of Winston. The castle was constructed by his grandfather, whose portrait still hung within, alongside one of his father.

Eidis joked that even though both his father and grandfather were well-known gold-ranked knights, he was only a two-star silver rank without any hope of breaking through to the gold rank. His father's fame was especially prevalent in Winston, but he had perished in the empire's last invasion of the Union. It was a matter from 30 years ago and the viscount had been only 16 when he became the house's head.

Lorist could see the portraits of the viscount's white-haired grandfather and his heroic-looking father dressed in knightly armaments in the castle's great hall. At the entrance of the hall, Eidis's wife, two sons, and daughter, as well as three other noble guests, received Lorist and the rest.

Lorist greeted the viscount's wife before he presented the gift he brought with him. Ever since he exterminated Hanayabarta, he was never short on precious gifts. As expected, the sapphire-embedded platinum necklace caused the other nobles to stare with utter awe. While the materials themselves were expensive in their own right, the craftsmanship was what gave it most of its value. In the days of the kingdom, unskilled slaves would find it very hard to survive after all.

After the viscount's wife expressed her gratitude, the viscount introduced Lorist to his two sons and seven-year-old daughter. His two sons were 24 and 21 respectively. The elder was a three-star-silver-ranked knight and the younger a one-star silver rank. All of the viscount's hope of the house having another gold-ranked knight lay firmly in his two sons.

The three nobles present were the viscount's allies whose territories neighbored his. Baron Klaus's dominion was a livestock breeding-ground, Baron Wade's was farmland while Viscount Zindler's produced mainly feed. All three of the nobles dealt in activities related to the thriving industry in Dawok, which made it easy for them to ally -- they had numerous mutual interests, after all.

During the banquet, Eidis requested that he, and his three allies, be allowed to travel with their group to attend the knighthood tournament. He was worried that he would face dangers on his journey to the capital, given his sour relationship with the queen. He had yet to decide to participate precisely because of that. But, if he could travel with Lorist, they would not have to worry about their safety. Should any mishap occur, they could still make it back to their dominion through the city's southern gate.

After some consideration, Lorist agreed. The banquet ended with the guests parting on friendly terms.

Chapter 319
The Duke's Welcome

Viscount Eidis brought the two excited sons of his and 20 mounted guards along. Besides Viscount Zindler, Barn Klaus and Baron Wade brought all their children and 50 guards. To the four nobles, being able to gather up roughly 70 men was already their best. The four stared at the Northlander soldier's armor. They realized that even the knights of their household, which they cherished dearly and looked after as well as they could, did not even have equipment as complete as the Northland guards. The realization took quite a bit of wind out of their sails.

Viscount Eidis's elder son, Warridge, was the 'boss' of the other youths that followed along. In a fit of dissatisfaction, he actually challenged Els to a duel. Thus, a small sparring match was organized at noon between the descendants of the four Winston nobles and Lorist's guards. What Warridge did not imagine would happen was that his comrades actually fared rather badly from even the most common of the guards. In the end, he joined the fray himself and managed to fight Patt to a draw. Throughout the whole fight neither could gain even the smallest advantage over the other. However, Patt was still a two-star silver rank, having been unable to train when he was recovering from his injuries, while Warridge was a three-star silver rank.

Eidis and his fellow nobles seemed to have predicted such a result and were pleased that their arrogant children got put in their place. At the very least, they would reflect on their actual capabilities and not engage in any reckless or risky behavior during their travels.

It took at least a full day to reach Windbury. The scenery along the way seemed more normal than before, with the occasional noble's carriage or group of mounted knights passing them by. There were also many carriages that transported various kinds of resources to the capital, as well as some roaming knights that dressed just like normal mercenaries.

When Lorist's group resumed their travels, those in their way immediately stepped aside to make a path, even the nobles stood at the roadside and bowed respectfully. It appeared that the flag of the Raging Bear attracted the most eyes and bows.

From time to time, nobles on the side of the road would call out to Eidis. Count Kenmays was also rather busy with greetings as the number of nobles he knew did not lose out to that of the viscount. With Lorist's permission, their whole group slowed down as many other affiliated nobles wanted to travel with them. Lorist felt that Kenmays had a point when he said it was better to travel leisurely and arrive at the capital the next morning, rather than rush all the way there to arrive during the night. It would be easier to take over control of the southern gate's guard stations in the morning as well.

What Lorist wondered about was how Kenmays did not know Viscount Eidis despite the depth of his knowledge of Iblia. Even though he was entitled by the second prince and had a mercantile family background, he had quite a large network of acquaintances, as was apparent from how eight or nine out of ten nobles they passed knew him. So, why did he not know Viscount Eidis?

"Well, I've heard of Viscount Eidis before," Kenmays laughed, "but we've never met before. Frankly, I am a noble of the kingdom, just like Baron Felim. We are both in King Iblia's faction. Baron Felim knows the nobles of Southern well and is on bad terms with the queen and her faction of nobles. However, Viscount Eidis and the rest belong to the Winston faction, nobles who are known to form alliances for their own protection and staying neutral on most matters. They are also rather powerful as a whole. As long as the second prince didn't threaten their interests, they'd maintain their neutrality. They don't normally interact with the queen's faction, so it's not weird for me to not be acquainted with him."

Sheesh, to think the nobles of a small kingdom like Iblia would have so many factions, thought Lorist, frustrated.

Count Kenmays proceeded to explain that only two factions remained after Lorist captured the second prince, which were those of the queen and Winston. Without the second prince in the picture, the nobles of Southern had no choice but to join the queen's side, changing their former aim from developing their own dominions to causing trouble for Winston's nobles. Most of the conflict and provocations Viscount Eidis and his fellow nobles received were from the nobles of Southern.

The number of people on the road increased as they neared Windbury.

When the rest saw a flag that depicted a round horseshoe with a sword pierced through it, Baron Felim, who was usually calm and collected, exclaimed, "Is Bonawar

going to the capital as well?"

Just as the Felim left the group and attempted to catch up, the people bearing the horseshoe flag sped up their course and quickly disappeared.

"Who's that Bonawar you mentioned?" inquired Lorist.

"That's one of the second prince's former generals. He served him during the first years after the kingdom's founding," explained Felim, "He's adept in battle and comes from a famed family of knights. He is also a gold-ranked knight. Two of the second prince's three victories were thanks to him. But, when the kingdom was founded and he was awaiting his entitlement, the second prince actually demanded a sizable donation from him. He left in a fit of rage and disappeared for good. I didn't think that he would show up here to participate in the knighthood tournament…"

Lorist nodded before he patted Felim's shoulder.

"Oh well, it's obvious that Bonawar doesn't want to interact with a huge group of nobles like us. Don't worry, you'll have your chance to meet him at the capital."

In the evening, Lorist instructed everyone to set up camp earlier than usual at a small mound not far away from the main road. During the night, when Lorist was about to start his patrol, he realized that a regiment of troops was rushing towards the capital with lit torches. When they neared, they were surprised to find such a well-guarded camp. After hesitating for a while, a few of the riders brought their torches towards the camp and requested the people at the camp identify themselves. After a squad of patrolling guards told the riders the camp was set up by nobles intent on participating in the tournament, the riders returned to their group and resumed their journey.

The night was cloudy. The dark grey puffs obscured the silver moon's brightness. Perhaps it would rain the next morning. Lorist watched the group pass by and disappear into the distance from a vantage point on the mound.

A few thousand cavalry soldiers and more than 40 carriages… Was that a merchant convoy, or one belonging to a noble?

Just as he was about to finish his thought, the squad of patrolling guards came over and reported that the group that just passed them were from the Forund duchy. It appeared the duchy's young prince would be participating in the tournament as well.

Oh, I see that word has traveled far… Even those at the four central duchies got wind of it. It goes without saying that the prince is intent on forming a union with House Fisablen. Sol, even though the four duchies' army just destroyed the the second highness's at Redlis, they're clamoring for a union. It truly is rather smart of them to garner support so aggressively. If I allow it to happen, the four duchies and the Fisablen duchy combined would be like five huge mountainous obstacles blocking my way… I must not let it happen.

Originally, Lorist did not care too much about whether he would succeed in winning the princess's hand. But, when he realized that there were others competing with him, he felt as if he had been crossed somehow and resolved to not let others soil his princess.

Noon the next day, when Lorist's group was roughly 5 kilometers from their destination, a loud horn tune was blown. The guards sent to check it out came back and reported that Duke Fisablen was on his way with more than a hundred mounted guards to receive The Northlands' four great nobles. Not only did the news surprise Lorist, Viscount Eidis and the other Iblian nobles were also shocked. Given Lorist's title and the other nobles' weak understanding of their might, it was as if the duke's welcome was a departure from normal etiquette.

Tch, that old fox is roasting me on a fire.

Lorist knew well that the duke had come to receive only him. 'Welcoming The Northlands' four great nobles' was just an excuse for the duke to see for himself the might of Lorist's house.

Given how I see him as a potential enemy, there's no doubt that he also thinks of me the same way. His subordinates suffered quite a loss at my hands, after all. Also, had it not been for the fact that I provided them with military equipment, that old fox might not even have thought of reaching his hands into the greater and lesser golden creeks…

This was Lorist and Duke Fisablen's first meeting. Under the gazes of the Iblian nobles, Lorist dismounted when the duke approached on horseback. Count Kenmays, Baron Felim, Baron Shazin, and their guards followed suit. The Norton's three allies stayed slightly behind Lorist of their own accord, whereas the guards of all four houses got into formation on two opposite sides, forming two rows of ten square formations facing each other, each numbering 500 men.

It was said that Duke Fisablen was well above his seventies. However, given that he was a rank 3 blademaster, he looked only around fifty. Alert and sharp, he saw Lorist and his cohort dismount and spurred his horse forward. He made his way through the hundred plus guards in front of him. He quickly arrived before the group and hopped off his horse with a hearty laugh before setting his gaze on Lorist.

"So, you're Count Norton. I've long heard your impressive name," said he jovially.

Lorist clutched his chest with his right hand and bowed slightly. It was the former empire's standard greeting.

"House Norton of The Northlands greets the Empire's Duke, Wargod of the Plains, Your Grace, Duke Fisablen. Let me first offer my most heartfelt congratulations on your recent successes at the plains."

Duke Fisablen stretched out his hand and patted Lorist's shoulder.

"Hehe, the Raging Bear of The Northlands, House Norton, has protected the empire's borders of for generations. I've long heard about your prestigious name. It is my pleasure to have you and your allies attend the tournament."

"Your Grace, it's our honor to partake in your knighthood tournament," said Lorist politely.

"There's no need to be so humble," the duke said, waving his hand casually, "I really meant what I said. Let me guess, this elegant and cultured person must be Count Kenmays, am I right? I've heard so much about you, but I've never had the opportunity to meet you in person. Seems like that wish of mine has finally come true."

"It is my pleasure to meet you too, Your Grace." returned Count Kenmays.

"And this collected person here with the visage of a true knight must be the descendant of the House of the Pegasus, Gold-ranked Knight Baron Felim."

Baron Felim smashed his right fist on his breastplate, making a knight's salute.

"House Felim pays our respects to the Lord Duke!" announced he.

Baron Shazin also did the same.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Duke. I am Hennard of The Northlands' House Shazin. I pay my respects to House Fisablen, the renowned riders of the grasslands!"

Duke Fisablen laughed and knocked on Baron Shazin's breastplate

"What a fine man," praised he.

All the Iblian nobles greeted the duke afterwards, the latter only hummed and nodded in response before turning his attention to the guards.

He turned around and questioned Lorist, "Count Norton, is this your household's force?"

No shit. Can't you see the Raging Bear crests on their breastplate? Lorist snorted inwardly.

But he understood the duke's intentions.

He nodded and replied, "Your Grace, you are the famed Wargod of the Plains. Please rate my troops and give them some pointers."

"Attention! Pay our respects to His Grace, Duke Fisablen!"

Every time the duke passed by a square formation of troops, the regiment leader would call out in that exact manner and his subordinates would salute the duke in unison.

Duke Fisablen returned each salute, nodding as he did so.

Duke Fisablen stopped at the last formation after he finished his salute and knocked on the breastplate, helmet, and pauldrons of one of the guards. He turned to Lorist, who had accompanied him all the way.

"Kid, are you making a fool out of me? Even I can't train troops that disciplined!" he exclaimed, "Every one can become, at the very least, a squad leader in my household, perhaps even a company leader. Other things aside, they are far better equipped than even my own knights.

"Tell me honestly, are all your soldiers equipped with steel armor? The feeling I got from knocking on it is a little different… The defensive capabilities of your troops'

armor are far higher than the equipment you sold me…”

As expected of an old fox. Even Count Kenmays didn't realize that my troops were armed with steel, yet Duke Fisablen was able to tell at a glance.

"Well, it's not strictly steel armor. We also added a steel mesh beneath to increase its structural integrity. However, the manufacturing costs are at least double as a result. I thought that mass production would allow me to decrease production costs, but after making 3000 sets, I realized the cost was still sky high, so I called for production to cease immediately. The armor sets they are wearing cost more than 180 gold Fordes each. Only my personal guard is equipped with this armor. We are far from capable of doing the same for the rest of our troops."

To prove his point, Lorist pulled out the steel mesh beneath the armor of one of his guards for the duke to see. A mesh could indeed be seen through the gaps of the greyish-green armor. The duke scrutinized it and gave it a few more knocks suspiciously.

Apart from that small interlude, Duke Fisablen was full of praises for the Norton forces. He did not fail to give credit to Count Kenmays, Baron Felim, and Baron Shazin's guards either. After a good while of pleasantries, they finally got back on their mounts and followed the duke into Windbury.

Chapter 320
Welcoming Banquet

As promised, when Duke Fisablen arrived at the southern gate, the soldiers stationed there quickly gathered together following another bout of the tune of welcome, before turning away and leaving the gate unattended. Only three soldiers remained to receive everyone.

"Count Norton, you may have your soldiers take over the defense of the southern gate. Those three are just here as guides and you can ask them should you require any guidance or assistance. They are well-versed with the gate and surrounding wall's layout," said Duke Fisablen as he pointed at the three garrison soldiers with his horse whip.

"Thank you, Your Grace. You are far too kind," smiled Lorist.

Patt took a thousand guards and quickly had them take up positions with the help of the three garrison soldiers.

"Oh, also, I am holding a welcoming banquet at noon for Forund's little prince, as well as Count Dalek from Shabaj and Count Chujway from Handra. I hope the four of you will attend it to for my sake. Organizing the knighthood tournament has put quite a dent in my finances, so it'll be great if you can be welcomed during the same banquet instead of having to organize another one," invited the duke with a chuckle.

"Oh, we'll be in your care then. We're more than glad to make some new friends," said Count Kenmays after giving Lorist a look to ascertain his intention.

"It's great that we'll have the opportunity to meet them. I've long heard about how the four central duchies are the most prosperous of all the dominion in the former empire. It's about time we nobles from The Northlands got to know what the trends in the central part of the empire are, so I hope you can introduce us."

"Hahaha," laughed the duke happily as he looked at Count Kenmays, "Introductions are in order of course. I didn't think that this little tournament of mine would actually attract the attention of the four central duchies. Their sudden arrival is one of the

reasons I'm unable to host a banquet for your sole sake. I hope you don't mind. Let's go, the banquet's already prepared. We're just waiting for you to begin."

The banquet was being held at the Rose Palace's pavilion where the second prince used to live. When Lorist and his companions arrived, there were more than ten people in front of the pavilion waiting for the duke.

Forund's little prince, Doke, looked to be 24. Clad in noble robes embroidered with gold thread, the little prince truly looked graceful and handsome. Lorist couldn't help but think the prince was far better looking than he. Not only was he young and handsome, he was just a white mount short of ruling many maidens' dreams.

Beside Doke were two people, one of them a red-faced old man, whom Lorist recognized as a rank 2 blademaster whose abilities should be close to that of Shuss. The other was a three-star-gold-ranked knight which Lorist didn't care much for. As for Little Prince Doke himself, he was only at one-star silver rank and looked rather arrogant.

I bet this baby-faced Little Prince is going to rely on his looks to gain Princess Sylvia's favor. Well, he might possibly win if this were the world of my previous life, but it's a shame that the lass has 'a man who can defeat her in combat' as her criterion for a partner. This poor prince stands no chance at all, thought Lorist with envy while he revealed a superficial smile and greeted the other nobles pleasantly.

Count Dalek of Shabaj was a man of huge physique and seemed to be in his thirties. He was a two-star gold rank and had a rather quiet personality. Lorist took note of a trace of disdain the Count revealed in his eyes when Duke Fisablen introduced him and the rest as nobles of The Northlands.

Count Chujway of Handra, on the other hand, felt like a younger clone of Count Kenmays. He was better in terms of battleforce training, however, being a one-star-gold-ranked knight. He was sociable and charismatic and the duke treated him even friendlier than he did the Little Prince.

When Lorist was being introduced, Count Chujway asked in a cautious tone, "Lord Count, may I inquire whether Silowas Island is House Norton's?"

Lorist smiled and nodded, before following Duke Fisablen to the next person he would be introduced to. As he continued on, he noticed that Count Chujway's gaze lingered

on him for an unnaturally long time.

Apart from the four central duchies' nobles, there were another three Iblian nobles present. While Lorist only barely recognized them, Count Kenmays was incredibly well-acquainted with them and even gave them hugs when he greeted them. After the introductions, Lorist realized that he had in fact interacted with the three previously. Back when he attacked Windbury, the three had represented the queen to negotiate with him.

The final two were introduced as the gold-ranked household knights of House Fisablen. One was called Blud and was a three-star gold rank, and the other was a two-star gold rank called Loseff. The two looked to be the duke's personal aides. Oddly enough, Viscount Kristoph, which Lorist had looked forward to meeting again, was not present. The duke mentioned that he was stationed at Goldcreek.

Upon entering the pavilion, Lorist realized that the banquet was in the long-table style. There were 20-odd smaller long tables arranged into two rows, much like the banquets Lorist saw before in movies of the 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms'. The only difference was that the corners of the tables were not rounded. Each table was covered with a white linen cloth and a row of round wooden stools sat on each side of the table.

Duke Fisablen naturally occupied the seat in the center of the table. Lorist was seated to his left, followed by Count Kenmays, Baron Felim, Baron Shazin, Blademaster Shuss, and Josk. Els, on the other hand, refused to sit together and joined the 500-odd guards outside, who were served hot soup, meat, and alcohol.

Standing behind Lorist was Howard, and Lorist couldn't help but notice that there were two impeccable beauties serving Little Prince Doke from behind. Count Chujway did not bring any servants with him, contrary to what his likeness with Count Kenmays might suggest. He sat alone and smiled back at Lorist when he noticed the latter's gaze.

The moment they settled into their seats, a large number of maidservants and attendants began serving the dishes. Some half-naked and muscled servants hauled a large rack with a half-ton heavy calf on it around. The calf was roasted on demand, fresh for the meal. Servants would even slice a specific piece requested by one of the nobles. A group of maidservants carrying various musical instruments performed in a corner nearby.

Duke Fisablen raised his golden cup and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you all to the Royal Capital of Windbury. This toast is for those who came all the way to participate in the knighthood tournament! House Fisablen is incredibly honored to receive such high regard. Cheers!"

The duke gulped down the wine in his cup before he said, "That will be all. Let the feast begin!"

Various cries rang out from the crowd that stood up to return the cheer.

"Thank you, Lord Duke!"

"Your Grace, you're being too humble!"

"You truly overstate your praise for us!".

Lorist stood up and mumbled his own share of pleasantries. Just when he was about to sit down, he heard Little Prince Doke say something to the duke.

"Your Grace, I've long heard that Princess Sylvia is the number one beauty in the whole of Iblia. I wonder if she will be present to meet us? I've been yearning to see her for myself for quite a while."

I knew it! He's here for the sole purpose of the princess!

"Hahaha…" the duke laughed heartily, "Your Highness, there's no need to be impatient. Something happened in my dominion a few days ago that required the lass' attention, unfortunately. She will be here in three or four days and I will introduce her to you all when the time comes. But let me warn you that as a result of being spoiled too much, she's developed quite a temper. I hope you will tolerate her."

Doke sat back down with a disappointed expression.

Lorist finally understood why he hadn't seen the princess since his arrival, not even during the banquet.

"Your Grace, I heard the knighthood tournament is an event held to find the perfect suitor for the princess. Is that really the case?" said Count Kenmays, standing up.

Duke Fisablen sighed lightly.

"That is indeed so. Time really flies. Sylvia has grown into such a fine lady. I can still remember when she was small like it was yesterday. She looked so weak when I cradled her in my arms. Now she's grown into such an amazing gold-ranked knight. Since she turns 25 this year, I will no longer let her delay this matter. This tournament is indeed related to her marriage. It's all her fault for setting her sights so high that so many of her other admirers were unable to match up. I have no choice but to use this method. I hope she will find a fine man to marry during this tournament."

"Your Grace, Princess Sylvia is the finest flower of our Iblia and also the most precious gemstone to ever grace our eyes. Her marriage is naturally something worthy of much consideration. What would happen if Her Highness picks a suitor of which you do not approve? After all, Her Highness is already an adult and no doubt has her own views on things. Also, if the one you find worthy to be her husband is not to Her Highness's liking, she would not live a life of bliss either," elaborated Count Kenmays a little hesitantly.

Nodding, Duke Fisablen looked at Lorist.

"You're right, Count. I've promised Sylvia that she'll have the final say. The only condition I have for the person of her choice is his sincerity to form a union with House Fisablen."

"Hehe, Blademater Fisablen, I don't agree with this notion, however," said the rank 2 blademaster who was seated beside Little Prince Doke, "We are nobles, and the marriages of the descendants of nobles have always been decided by their parents. Only commoners will be allowed to pick and choose one's spouse after spending a good while understanding each other like what the Lord Count mentioned. As nobles, we enjoy the wealth and power that comes with the household names we bear. However, the matters of our marriage are no longer a matter of our own choice. We have to consider the household and be prepared to make sacrifices for the best interests of the house. Personal bliss and happiness should not be something we factor into the equation."

"That's true, Blademaster Rimad does have a good point," said Duke Fisablen as he stroked his mustache.

"Your Grace, what if the person Princess Sylvia fancies is also someone who will benefit the Fisablen house and will become a worthy ally? Wouldn't that be the perfect scenario where everyone ends up happy?" retorted Count Kenmays.

"Hahahaha, this count speaks sense! That way, the perfect candidate for Princess Sylvia would be our very own Little Prince Doke. Your Grace, just look at how talented our Little Prince is. He's both handsome and proficient in combat. Last year, when the four central duchies' army was deployed to Frederika, it was His Highness who led the soldiers into battle! In the end, not only did we manage to exterminate the remnant forces of Second Highness Auguslo, our little prince also attained quite a number of military contributions.

"If Your Grace is willing to form a union with Forund, given how the four central duchies have backed each other, House Fisablen would get four allies for the price of one! Surely, this arrangement would be the ideal one that even the Silvermoon Goddess herself would approve of. Even though our little prince's talent in battleforce is not as amazing as that of Her Highness, given how learned and famed he is in our duchy, I'm sure Princess Sylvia would find fancy in His Highness's many talents."

Not one of those present expected rank 2 blademaster Rimad would actually spout such embarrassing words in public. Even Duke Fisablen seemed a little startled by his audacity. Little Prince Doke acted like it was the most natural thing in the world to have praises sung about him in public, which was apparent from his raised head. It seemed like he was studying the empty ceiling intently.

Lorist lost control of himself completely and laughed.

Oh my, the Little Prince is nothing but a spoiled brat… I'm sure he's heard so many sycophantic praises that he's gotten completely full of himself!

A low voice rang out on cue with Lorist's laughter.

"Oh, the Little Prince led his troops on the battlefield himself, you say? That can't be right, why didn't I see House Forund's standard when I called for reinforcements?"

The one who spoke was Count Dalek. Even though the four central duchies were allies, Count Dalek didn't have to give the little prince any face as a noble of the Shabaj duchy. While he wouldn't care if Blademaster Rimad only wanted to make his little prince seem better, he had an issue with the blademaster's exploitation of the battle for Frederika.

"Hehe, Dalek my friend, everyone knows that you lead the main forces and were the first to breach Frederika's walls. However, Shabaj was only occupied with attacking

the north gate, Forund took care of the south gate. It's no surprise that you weren't able to see us," countered the three-star-gold-ranked knight that came with the little prince.

However, Count Dalek gave him a weird look.

"The south gate? Wasn't that part occupied by the Union? What business did you have over there? It's no wonder we were only able to spot Forund troops after we beat the Union."

"Pffft!" Baron Shazin and Baron Felim couldn't help but spit out the wine they had in their mouths.

The gold-ranked knight wasn't able to step down from his 'podium', so he directed his anger at his new targets.

Staring at the two barons angrily, he yelled, "What's so funny?!"

"Oh?" mumbled Baron Felim as a cold look flashed across his eyes.

He didn't fear Forund in the least, but just before he was about to make his retort, Baron Shazin stole the spotlight

"I didn't know we needed your permission to laugh during Duke Fisablen's banquet!"

The moment the statement was made, the three-star-gold-ranked knight snapped out of his anger and realized that he was attending a banquet hosted by the duke. He wasn't in Forund and couldn't afford to act brashly. Stealing a glance, he saw that the duke wore a dark expression. He turned to the house's knights and could see their deathly stares aimed straight at him.

At that moment, Rimad stood up to defuse the situation.

"Come on, even if the wine served by the duke is that good, you shouldn't have gotten that drunk! How embarrassing. As a gold-ranked knight, you should be preparing for the upcoming tournament instead of mouthing off at other people. Your Grace, we're very sorry about this."

Duke Fisablen waved his hand.

"It's no big deal. I heard you guys conquered Frederika last year and eliminated the second highness' remaining forces. Can you tell me more about the battle?"

"I would be glad to, Your Grace," answered Rimad.

Chapter 321
Count Chujway's Narrative

"Your Grace, even though I'm a Forund blademaster, I'm not too informed about the specifics of this matter. We were led by our little prince to reinforce the front at Frederika in the later stages of the battle. As Count Chujway was also present during the campaign, I'm sure he's the one that has the best grasp of the situation. I think we should have him tell us about it instead," said Blademaster Rimad.

Duke Fisablen nodded as he turned to Count Chujway.

"Lord Count, could you tell us about the battle? As a military man myself, I'm really curious how the surprising result came about. When I heard that the second highness occupied Frederika, I thought his victory was already set in stone. I didn't expect the tables would turn completely only two short years later. It is truly shocking. I'm sure you have lots to say as someone who was there."

Count Chujway had not expected to become the centre of attention. He cursed Rimad under his breath before standing up and giving Lorist a glance, only to see his curious expression, much to his relief.

"Your Grace. We did indeed take part in the conflict but it was only because the four central duchies had no choice but to resist the second highness's advances. We did so only in self-defense originally. The later developments are far from what we desired. They forced us to fight."

Nobody expected the count to speak of the battle in such a way. Little Prince Doke, who had little to do with the battle, only humphed with dissatisfaction as if he was displeased with the count's apparently self-praising words. Rimad and the gold-ranked knight were even more surprised. Count Dalek remained seated with a melancholic look.

Count Chujway took a deep breath before he continued.

"As everyone knows, the four central duchies have always been the main load-bearing pillar of the empire. Of the 29 provinces that comprised the empire, the eight that

make up the four central duchies occupy 45 percent of the empire's territory. In the days of the empire, whether it was conflicts with external forces or internal revolts, the dukes have always been the ones to lead the effort to defend the empire's interests and contributed to the empire. Even during the 170 plus years of conflict with the Union, the four central duchies contributed the most.

"During the civil war, when the three princes fought for the throne, we four dukes had no choice but to protect the prosperity of our territories by forming our own armies. Even during such a straining time, we still offered a lot of help to the third prince because we respected his imperial heritage. However, following Duke Madras' revolt, things started going down a path no one expected. The empire eventually split into the three kingdoms and seven duchies.

"Even though we declared our independence, we didn't fail to unite against the first prince's threat. Two years of draining resistance against him finally lead to our victory. But right after we started recovering, the second highness sent his forces over and made unreasonable demands to say the least. We were once again forced to come together to face an external threat."

"Oh, what sort of demands did the second highness make?" asked Duke Fisablen, stroking his moustached chin curiously.

"He demanded we accept the relocation of our dominions and wanted our forces to attack the Madras duchy," replied Count Chujway.

Duke Fisablen pulled a few hairs off his moustache in shock.

"Was the second highness out of his mind? Wasn't he practically making enemies out of allies with demands like that?!" exclaimed he.

Count Chujway shrugged.

"Even I don't know what he was up to when he made those demands. Everyone knew they were unreasonable and that we would never accept. We have held these lands for almost three centuries. Much like what Duke Farkel had claimed, we had long deeply integrated with the lands over which we rule. Nobody can make us leave.

"When the second highness ascended to power in the Andinaq kingdom, we were even glad and rested our hopes for a reunified empire on him. To us, being nobles of the mighty Krissen Empire was a sign of pride. We have proclaimed that we are willing to

relinquish our independence and reunite with the empire should it be required.

"We didn't expect the second highness would suddenly defeat the first prince, lead his forces to our doorstep, and make his ridiculous demands. He also intended to put the eight provinces under his royal family's direct control. Our peerage and fief would be decided by our contributions in the campaign against Madras.

"We finally understood that the second highness considered all of us traitors. Not only were we enraged, we were also incredibly disappointed. We sent a representative to voice our objections to the second highness, but nobody was able to see him. All we heard was that he had fallen incredibly ill. We thought it was an excuse for him to avoid seeing us. It made us boil with rage. We implored the four dukes to form a coalition army to resist the threat and support Redlisian nobles. We used them to push back against the second highness's forces.

"No one wanted to be a traitor, but the circumstances forced us to become the second highness's enemies. We didn't intend to push him all the way back at first. We only wanted to station our troops on the borders to discourage the second highness from taking action against us. We didn't think that the claim that he was really sick was actually true. Without him there, the army kept fighting losing battles with Redlis' nobles. 70 thousand men were even lured into a trap and washed away by flood waters at one point. The situation changed completely in a moment. The frontlines only stabilized once the second highness returned to the frontlines.

"To be honest, while our army didn't have any huge conflicts with the second highness, we did pay quite a price. The six years of peace allowed us to recover some of our vitality, but the second highness's army actually put quite a bit of pressure on us considering the threat we pose. Even though the second highness mobilized his troops to exterminate Redlis' army, nobody was quite sure when the axe the second highness was pointing at Farkel and Handra would fall.

"During the empire's most prosperous time, the eight central provinces' population was around three and a half million. It was the best place to be in the entire empire. Apart from the great Andalou Plains, where the imperial capital is situated, no other province could rival the central provinces' level of development. But the population has decreased to two point eight million since the civil war. Not long after the civil war, the first prince's forces invaded and caused lots of chaos. In his wake cam starvations, plague, and genocide. Our population fell even further, to around 2 million, in just two short years. We lost nearly half our population to the war and the invasion."

Count Chujway wore a tense expression.

"The four central duchies do not want war. We seek only peace. However, the second highness didn't come for peace, he wanted to force us to abide by his demands and put us on his bandwagon. He threatened to declare us traitors if we didn't obey. We had no choice but to form our own army as a failsafe. We stared each other down across our borders, but, after a year, we'd used up our resources. What's even worse is that we'd conscripted most of the young men, so there was no one to plant a new generation of crops. It seemed we'd face another food crisis for at least 2 years."

"I apologize for interrupting, Count Chujway, may I ask how the second highness was able to feed his army for that long, considering the fact that the four central duchies have a hard time feeding themselves?" interjected Lorist.

"Oh, according to my understanding, the second highness had about 270 thousand soldiers when he was in Redlis. He also had another 120 thousand former Redlis troops stationed at Kanbona. Originally, the second highness only brought the first local defense legion with him and had the surrendered soldiers launch an attack to the Redlisian nobles. It didn't end well. Most of the attacks were complete failures, and the war dragged on.

"When 70 thousand of his soldiers were washed away by the flood, the second highness lost all confidence in his indentured forces and transferred the third local defense legion from Andinaq to reinvigorate his campaign. The first legion would unite with the indentured forces and put pressure on us. There were 130 thousand men in total that threatened to attack us.

"When the second highness conquered Frederika, he also got hold of all the arms and resources the first prince had been gathering. We estimated it'd last eight months. We thought the war might end soon with his victory. We didn't expect the Redlisian nobles to continue to hold out. Even with his army 100 thousand men lighter, it seems the second highness still felt it was just too wasteful to feed all of them all through the winter.

"It was then when the second highness employed three methods to curb the consumption and raise the morale of the frontline troops. The first was his orders for food expropriation, where the army would extort all the food produced by the commoners of the Redlis kingdom and leave them with a small share cooked as porridge so that the frontlines could remain fed. After that order, the second highness

was in direct opposition of the commoners of the Redlis kingdom and revolt after revolt had to be quelled.

"The second method was confiscating the wealth and resources of the noble houses of the Redlis kingdom and using the confiscated goods to reward the soldiers that survived the winning battle. With that, he was able to restore morale to his troops, but he pushed the neutral nobles to their tipping point and forced them to join the revolting nobles, hence their sudden surge in power and subsequent surf to multiple victories.

"The last method was to transport food from the Andinaq kingdom to solve the food crisis. However, given how far the journey would be and the frequent raids by the revolting nobles, only around 15 kilograms per 50 kilograms of food transported would arrive at the destination. So, the soldiers at the frontlines were only half-fed at most, with their stores frequently hitting the three-day-remaining mark.

"The four duchies' chief commander, Duke Farkel, aptly realized that there was an opportunity to be grabbed. Following the surprise occupation by the forces of the Union at Kanbona Province that cut off the logistics route from the Andinaq kingdom to the Redlis kingdom, Duke Farkel ordered for us to gather livestock and have them cooked into stew to solve the hunger problem we faced when standing off against the second highness's other forces."

"I have another question. Why were the nobles of the Redlis kingdom, meaning those of Anderwoff Province, resist the second highness so desperately? According to my knowledge, the nobles of Anderwoff Province don't get along with the first prince and even formed their own union to resist the first prince's infringement on their interests., The second highness, someone who has conquered the Redlis kingdom at that time, should know about this well, and that he would require the help of those nobles if he wanted to stabilize the Redlis kingdom. What happened to cause the second highness to become lifelong enemies with the nobles of Anderwoff Province? Do you know about that, Count Chujway?" asked Lorist again.

"Hmmm," the count murmured in thought, "I think I know part of the reason. I've met some nobles from Anderwoff Province before and they said that the second highness's conditions were for their titles to be downgraded and their fiefs to be moved. They were also asked to pay a tribute to make amends for following the first prince into rebellion, hence the crumbling in negotiations. The nobles there only wanted to not cooperate with the second highness because of that at first, but they didn't think that

he would strike them first instead, causing a few noble houses there to be exterminated. So, they had no choice but to rebel."

Lorist smiled bitterly and thought, *he really let all the power get to his head. The Second Highness actually thinks he can claim the realm with only a few hundred thousand soldiers. Even though he already suffered a loss from the nobles of Anderwoff Province, who would've thought that he'd repeat the same mistake with the four central duchies, forcing former allies to become enemies? He had all this coming for him.*

While downgrading a peerage and relocating a fief was a decent method to decrease the power of a noble house, it could only be used in certain circumstances where one has complete control over the situation. The second highness had failed in that regard as he perceived himself to have the control he did not possess just because he had a decent number of soldiers with him.

"Oh, and Count Chujway, did you guys manage to find the second highness after conquering Frederika?" asked Count Kenmays.

"We didn't. Nobody was able to find out where he went. He disappeared without a trace just like the first prince. ACtually, the four central duchies intended to sit back and relax after we defeat the 100 thousand soldiers he stationed at the border and not engage in other conflicts with the second highness. However, he actually had Duke Melein's army backstab us from the Shabaj duchy, raiding and pillaging as they went across the weakly defended areas, killing thousands of women and children and incurring our wrath.

"It was at that time when the Union sent over their representative. In the end, the four dukes decided to attack Frederika, with each duchy supplying 20 thousand soldiers with the rest of their forces focusing to drive out that of the Melein duchy. On the 21st day of the 7th month, our army surrounded Frederika and requested for the surrender of the second highness and even guaranteed his life. But that proposition was refused by a gold-ranked female knight who was in charge of the city's defenses."

"A gold-ranked female knight?" asked Lorist, sitting straight up.

"Yes. The second highness has one female and five male gold-ranked generals, collectively known as the flower and five tigers, who are his most trusted subordinates. The female gold-ranked knight was called, Nor… Gl-Glacia…" In the midst of realization, Count Chujway slowly turned to peek at Lorist, feeling chills down

his spine.

Chapter 322
Duel

"Ahaha, what a shame, I heard the second highness' female knight was quite the beauty. Rumour has it she was even his lover. It's a shame we weren't able to spot either of them when we conquered Frederika. What a shame. I would've liked to meet her, and perhaps make her my concubine, hehe," Blademaster Rimad commented, much to Count Chujway's relief, given that he was no longer the center of attention.

"Is that so?" asked Lorist as he flashed the blademaster a chilling glance.

The glance made even Howard, who was standing behind him, freeze when he felt the seething killing intent radiating from Lorist.

Lorist looked at Count Chujway.

"Can you tell me about the second highness' subordinates? He must have many fierce knights at his disposal. Can you tell me about the other five male gold-ranked knights you mentioned?"

"But of course, it would be my pleasure," said Count Chujway as he stood up and wiped away another drop of sweat on his forehead.

Count Dalek, who was seated to the left of Count Chujway, looked at him with a weird gaze. He could feel that something was going on.

It's as if he's afraid of the little count. He's acting even more respectfully to him than the duke.

"Actually, the second highness had around 20 to 30 gold-ranked knights, around 300 silver-ranked knights and two rank 1 blademasters by his side. The two blademasters, however, were hired by the Andinaq royal family to protect the third prince, and had only been assigned to the second highness's side following the former's death.

"Among the second highness' many gold-ranked knights, the ones he trusted most were the flower and five tigers. The flower is the elegant gold-ranked knight, Glacia,

and she was the leader of the second highness's personal guard. She could give orders on behalf of the second highness. The five tigers were the other five gold-ranked knights. While they might not have been the best at combat among the second highness's men, they were the ones best at leading soldiers.

"The one that is the commander of the first local defense legion is Bowen Ketty, a three-star gold rank, who's said to have been by the second highness for the longest time. The commander of the second local defense legion is Sysraid. The other three are division commanders. One of them, Gold-ranked Knight Ribalo, was made the commander of the indentured legion. When he lost 70 thousand soldiers in the flood, he could not bear the humiliation any longer and fought to his death.

"The other two-star-gold-ranked knight, Bensji, and one-star-gold-ranked knight Yaritom, are both long-time subordinates of the second highness as well. Yaritom, however, didn't accompany the second highness to Redlis. It seems he was injured during an assault on the manor of a noble from Anderwoff and was sent back to Andinaq to recover. The ones trapped at Frederika were the female gold-ranked knight and the two legion commanders.

"We searched Frederika for a long time after we took it but didn't find the female gold-ranked knight or the legion commanders. We suspect the second highness left with his most-trusted subordinates and escaped the city during ir just before the beginning of the assault. The most frustrating part is that this group disappeared all of a sudden like the first prince. We didn't find anything even after conducting extensive searches."

"Count Chujway, may I ask about two friends of mine that serve the second highness? One is called Karitoke and the other, Sander. They were three-star silver ranks around five years ago. I wonder if you've heard of them and know where they are?" asked Lorist.

Count Chujway furrowed his brow for a good while before he shook his head

"I apologize, Count Norton. I don't recall hearing those names before. I've personally checked the list of captured or killed gold-ranked knights but I don't remember seeing the names. There were only three three-star-silver-ranked knights that surrendered to us, but they were not them either. I can't confirm whether they perished in battle or not but I'll check it for you when I return. I'll send someone to inform you if I find something."

"I am most grateful for your assistance," thanked Lorist, saluting.

"Don't worry about it, Count Norton. It's my pleasure to be able to help," replied Count Chujway, returning the salute.

"Hahaha," laughed the gold-ranked knight sitting beside Little Prince Doke as he pointed to Lorist.

"No way, Count Chujway, are you actually afraid of a little noble from The Northlands? Haha, this is too ridiculous… Are you intentionally playing the fool?" asked he.

"Shut it!" exclaimed Count Chujway, his expression morphing into one of rage.

"Count Chujway, please take note of your stature. You are a count of the four central duchies! You don't have to lower your head to stray dogs and cats! Remember who you represent!" hissed Rimad.

Bam!

Josk thumped on the table and stood up.

He pointed at the blademaster as he barked, "Old fool! Who did you call strays?!"

Enraged, Rimad retorted, "You dare to point at me like this?!"

The rank 1 blademaster seated beside Josk stood up and made a beckoning gesture to Rimad, causing the latter's face to flush.

He actually dared to challenge me? Ridiculous!

Just as he was about to stand up, he suddenly felt the blademaster emit a thick aura of blood. Petrified, he remained seated as if his arse was glued to the stool.

Rimad was no idiot and had heard his fair share of stories of rank 2 blademasters being killed by rank 1 blademasters. In the world of blademasters, only those almost at the swordsaint level would not be provoked. A talented rank 1 blademaster had a real chance of defeating a rank 3 blademaster under the right circumstances.

That rank 1 blademaster must be someone who broke through thanks to countless bloody battles. Even though he's rank 1, it's best for a rank 2 blademaster like me to lay

low. No blademaster who broke through using battles is easy to deal with, thought Rimad with regret for the words he had uttered.

"Your Grace, look," said Rimad as he turned to the duke with a troubled expression, as if he had been provoked by Josk and Shuss through no fault of his own.

"Hmm…?"

Duke Fisablen was looking forward to the show, he didn't think Rimad would shift everyone's attention to him. If the two sides had clashed, he would be able to find out more about Lorist's strength and mediate after a side had obtained victory. But since he had been asked to intervene as host, he had no choice but to act.

"Count Norton, Rimad only mouthed off casually without being specific about who he was talking about, so please don't be so tense. Sit back and relax, here's a toast to you."

Given that the duke himself had spoken, Lorist waved his hand lightly to gesture Josk and Shuss back to their seats.

However, the storm was far from over. Just when the two were about to sit back down, Doke chuckled.

"Wow, these little nobles have quite the temper! What's wrong with calling you strays? Your Grace, I don't understand why we had to wait outside for so long to receive these barbaric uncultured folk. On what basis do they deserve our welcome, the ones who defeated the mighty 300-thousand-strong army of the second highness? I want a satisfactory explanation, Your Grace."

It was apparent that the little prince was dissatisfied at being asked to wait and welcome Lorist's group. As Duke Fisablen didn't personally receive him, on what basis did the Northlanders deserve the duke's welcome? He took it as an affront to the four central duchies.

A loud thump resounded from the table once more, this time Baron Felim and Baron Shazin joined Josk and Shuss.

"What did you say?!"

Doke rolled his eyes without a care.

"Well? Was I wrong? Northlander barbarians will be Northlander barbarians. They don't care about noble etiquette at all."

Lorist laughed lightly, rose from his seat, and waved the others to calm down. They grudgingly obliged and sat back down, glaring at the little prince.

Lorist looked around before he waved to a guard by the entrance.

"You, come here."

Surprised, the guard pointed at himself, and looked at the duke, only to see him nodding. He hurried to Lorist's side.

"Milord, what are your instructions?"

"Apologies, let me borrow this for a bit."

With a swift movement, Lorist took the guard's left gauntlet. The armor the guard wore was of the rider gear number 103 make, the design House Fisablen had purchased from the Nortons. The gauntlet was made from iron plate with an inner lining of leather. It weighed quite a bit.

"Thank you, I'll return it shortly," said Lorist as he turned around.

A moment passed and the gauntlet flew through the air in a straight line. It's flight terminated in the little prince's face. As if he was clobbered by a giant's palm, the prince groaned, grabbed onto the iron gauntlet, and clutched his nose. Blood and tears flowed all over his face.

"The fuck did you do?!" Rimad cried out as he stood up, accompanied by the gold-ranked knight.

Both glared at Lorist. The knight had already drawn his sword and stood in front of Doke as if he was faced with his worst adversary.

"Calm down. Didn't Little Prince Doke claim that we didn't know noble etiquette? That is a dire insult to our house's honor. I thought it best to repay it with blood. In a most noble fashion, I have challenged him to a knight's duel. He has taken up the gauntlet and accepted my challenge. I am delighted to see he still has some guts. Well, Little Prince, are you ready? Take your time to prepare for the duel."

Lorist stepped to the center of the pavilion.

"You two, stand aside. This is a matter between your prince and I. Are you prepared to violate the sacred tradition of the duel? What weapon will he carry? An axe, a spear, or perhaps a longsword? Maybe he wants to compete mounted? I'll leave him the luxury of choosing the manner in which we duel."

"A duel," muttered Rimad and the knight as they turned to see Doke holding the iron gauntlet.

Hell, aren't you supposed to throw a white glove? Those Northlander barbarians really don't know their etiquette. How can one throw an actual gauntlet? Wait, there's no saying that one can't… No, don't get distracted. The issue is that the little prince picked the gauntlet up and accepted the duel! Oh, Lord Singwa, what can we do?

Doke finally recovered and waved the gauntlet in his hand, teary-eyed.

"Kill… Kill him! He… He flung this straight at me!"

"Yo-your Highness… He tossed over a glove to request a duel. You picking it up means that you accepted it! You have to fight him!"

Count Kenmays, Baron Felim and the rest fanned the flames even further.

"Yes, it's a duel! I guess I misread the little prince after all! He's got guts! To duel Locke to the death… Haha, he must want his corpse cut into eight pieces!"

"Stand forward! Let us all witness the bravery of the four central duchies' nobles!" roared Josk.

"What? A duel to the death… No, I won't do it!" Doke cried.

He glanced at the gauntlet in his hand and threw it to the ground.

"Your Highness!" exclaimed Rimad and the knight, panicked.

Holding the gauntlet but refusing the duel would spell the end of the Forund nobility's honour. Doke would have to bear the name of a coward for the rest of his life.

"I-I didn't think this was a glove… If I knew, I wouldn't have caught it… I… I won't duel

that lowly savage! Given his status, he's far from qualified to duel me!" argued the youth stubbornly.

"Your Highness, that won't do. If you don't accept the duel, the duchy's reputation will be tainted forever! Trust me, if His Grace knows about this, you'll lose your right to the throne for sure! It's alright if you go to duel him. This Count is only an iron rank. A silver rank like you will definitely win," advised the gold-ranked knight.

"N-no way… That guy's so strong and huge, there's no way I'll be his match…"

"I say, are you done deciding yet? Your Highness, if you don't dare to duel me, I will allow you to nominate a champion to fight in your stead," said Lorist impatiently.

"Is… Is that true?" asked Doke, delighted.

He quickly pointed at his gold-ranked knight.

"Henriman, you shall duel in my stead."

Henriman drew his sword and walked in front of Lorist. Relieved, the prince recovered his former arrogance.

"Henriman, teach him a good lesson! Cut off his hands and tear off his mouth!"

"Are you not going to draw your sword?" groaned Henriman angrily, his expression turning cold.

"Using a sword against someone like you would stain my honor," Lorist replied.

Henriman was so angry that his hair stood on end. His vein popped on his arms and forehead from his iron clasp on his sword's hilt.

"M-man you're frustrating! D-die!"

A golden blade glow manifested on his sword he leaped forward.

All the observers saw was Gold-ranked Knight Henriman's silhouette flashing past Lorist's figure before they heard a soft thump. Henriman, standing behind Lorist, had stopped moving. He tried to reach for his neck, but when his hands reached his chest, he collapsed. His face dug into the ground. His last movement was two twitches.

One move! Lorist had killed a three-star-gold-ranked knight in one move. And with his bare hands!

Chapter 323
Intelligence Center

"Milord, Count Chujway definitely knows about our might. He seems to be quite fearful of you. But what I don't understand is why Forund's little prince, his knight, and that blademaster don't seem to know about the situation.

"Didn't you provoke them to send someone to avenge the knight? I saw Count Dalek was just about to stand up but Count Chujway stopped him almost reflexively," said Howard.

They were currently on their way to the inn. After Lorist's killing of the gold-ranked knight, Henriman, everyone present was completely flabbergasted. Even Duke Fisablen, who was prepared to enjoy his show, had his eyes popping out of their sockets as he stared incredulously at the knight's corpse.

In one move, one instance of crossing figures, the knight's throat had been completely obliterated. Only the most agile body movement, and lightning-fast reactions, could make a three-star-gold-ranked knight like him lose his life so helplessly. Even if Baron's Felim and Shazin were confident they could beat the man, they certainly couldn't do it in any less than a few hundred exchanges. They might have to trade an injury or two.

Duke Fisablen was completely shocked, Blademaster Rimad stared terror-stricken at the corpse, while Blademaster Shuss watched admiringly. The last sparred with Lorist regularly, so he could see that Knight Henriman's frenzied charge was what had sealed his fate. Lorist merely gave a small step forward to mess up his position. The momentum Henriman built up along the way prevented him from pulling out of his attack; he could only watch as Lorist's hand reached for his throat… and crushed it.

This is absolutely sublime, Shuss had thought, awed by Lorist's movements.

Blademasters at that level had to be close to becoming swordsaints. Lorist was only 34. People able to reach the gold rank at his age were already considered absolute geniuses.

But Milord is no genius… he's a monster. He's already a quasi-swordsaint at such a tender age, it would be more surprising if he didn't advance to the swordsaint rank than if he did…

Josk urged his horse to Lorist's side.

"Did Milord notice that Count Chujway tried to make it sound like the four duchies were the conflict's victims, unlike those arrogant Forund idiots? I think Howard has a point; the count definitely knows our house well."

"Hehe, you've noticed it too? Well, how about this… Take a few guards when we get to the inn and invite the count over. I have a few questions for him," answered Lorist.

Lorist had smiled after killing Henriman and asked the little prince whether he would like to send someone to take revenge but the young man was already so terrified that his bladder let loose as he shook his head. Lorist felt there was no point in staying any longer and bid the duke goodbye. Duke Fisablen knew that Lorist already had an inn reserved near the south gate, so he didn't stop him from leaving.

Not far from the gate was an inn called Anna's Abode. It was five storeys tall. The first floor was a tavern and the four above it rooms. Anna's Abode was quite well known in Windbury, not for its service, but for the tragedic story linked to it.

During the fifth emperor's reign, Windbury was a city that had just recently developed its livestock trade. There used to be an old grocer's where Anna's Abode now stood. Its owner's daughter, Anna, was a mute. She was a gentle and sweet girl who frequently took in stray animals and even looked after orphans.

When Anna grew up, she was married to a hard-working young lad and the two ran a humble little grocer together and adopted just over ten orphans as their own. The couple eventually saved up enough money, along with their inheritances to build a two-story building. The lower floor was made into a tavern and the upper floor into rooms which they rented. Because of their sincere and honest service, their business fared rather well and Anna also had more than enough money to rear the stray animals and orphans she so frequently took in. The couple eventually expanded the building to five floors.

Unfortunately, the expansion drew the attention of several greedy nobles. They charged her husband with smuggling, had him arrested, and threatened Anna with his

life should she not sell the business and the building to them for one imperial gold coin. She had no choice but to accept.

When they received word of her acceptance, the nobles did indeed return her husband but as a mutilated corpse. Anna's mind crumbled when she saw her husband. She knelt at the city's hall for three days and nights straight before letting out a despairing cry and banging her head against the flag pole's stone base to her death.

During her three-day catatonia, there were thousands of citizens who surrounded the city's hall and offered her food. She touched none of it. She did not move when others advised her to either. The citizens rallied together to make sure the city administration gave a satisfying resolution to Anna's case, but the mayor just holed up in his manor. Unfortunately, before the people could pressure the mayor into taking action, Anna committed suicide.

Her death sparked the first recorded civilian revolt in the empire's history. Countless angry citizens and merchants set fire to the city's hall. They broke into the mayor manor and hung him. When word of the revolt reached the imperial capital, the enraged emperor sent someone to investigate the matter. The most laughable part was that the first ambassador was bought off by the nobles involved in Anna's case. He put the blame for the whole matter on the mayor. The protesters, however, refused to accept this conclusion and flooded the city with armed bands.

In response, the first ambassador ordered the nobles of the province to mobilize their forces and suppress the revolt. The nobles outside the city, however, refused to take action. They were convinced the fault lay not with the citizenry, but the greedy nobles. When word of their refusal reached the emperor, he ordered the imperial family's knights deployed and tasked the brigade's commander with the issue's resolution.

When the knights arrived at Windbury, the armed bands surrendered and opened the city gates right away. They also submitted a letter of complaint that detailed the chain of events and requested the nobles be punished.

Confronted with such a clear statement of fact, the imperial knights took immediate action. They killed all the nobles involved, around two-thirds of the nobles in the province were stripped of both fief and peerage. The first noble ambassador sent to deal with the situation was also hung as a result.

In the history of the Krissen Empire, Windbury's revolt was quite a well-known event.

It was also the first confrontation between the imperial family and the rest of the nobility. While the imperial family weren't able to stop the nobles from governing their own territory, they definitely wouldn't allow them to stretch their hands into imperial territory. Windbury and a few other major cities were under the imperial family's control, and the nobles enjoyed decreased tax rates for conducting business there. Their intent to procure the citizen's businesses there was akin to reaching their hand for the imperial family's profits.

Because of the incident, Krissen V suspended many business operations the nobles had in the city and that was why many considered Krissen V's 35-year reign the empire's golden age.

Nowadays, Anna's Abode was run by the couple's relatives and descendants. Even during the second prince's reign after Iblia's founding, nobody dared to reach their hands into the inn's business. To the nobles, the building was a disaster waiting to happen, so the demographic of the inn's customers was dominated by merchants and mercenaries. Almost no nobles bothered to stay there.

Anna's Abode's business had suffered quite a lot in recent years, though. So much so that they were just barely hanging on. Lorist didn't mind, however, and reserved the whole inn to accommodate his entourage.

"Milord, Tarkel and Reidy have been waiting a good while for you," reported Howard.

"Oh, have them come in right away," Lorist said as he wiped his face, "Also, have the servants bring a bathtub and some hot water. I want to soak for a while."

The two soon arrived. They had been at Windbury for two months already, first to set up Furybear's intelligence center, then to check whether the duke had some hidden agenda with the knighthood tournament.

"How are things going?" inquired Lorist.

"Milord. We've united the city's three underworld syndicates into one organization and its new leader has already pledged allegiance to Furybear," Reidy informed, stepping forward.

Lorist pinched his nose.

"The smell of blood on you is thick."

Reidy shrugged, a gesture he picked up from Lorist.

"Had no choice. There were too many that knew too much for their own good. I had to send them back to Singwa's paradise for eternal rest."

Lorist turned his gaze to Tarkel, who reported, "Milord, the one backing Lunika, one of the three syndicates, was Viscount Vizinska. He was a noble from the Southern and in the queen's faction. The queen trusted him deeply. Reidy 'helped' him fall from his horse. He's dead.

The queen thinks her father, Duke Fisablen, had a hand in it and their relationship is rather tense for it. Despite no longer having Viscount Vizinska's support, Lunika thought they could continue their rule on their own merit. Sir Reidy tried to negotiate with them last night but it didn't turn out well. So far, about eight of Lunika's leaders are still alive. Sir Reidy killed the other 34."

"Did Duke Fisablen make any noteworthy moves?"

"Nope, we've been investigating him thoroughly for the past year but we haven't notice House Fisablen doing anything suspicious. The duke's probably genuinely trying to host the tournament. He spent around 50 thousand gold Fordes to demolish the city's slums and built four large, square stadiums for the tournament. Some of our informants have infiltrated the mercenary groups defending the four stadiums and are monitoring everything. They'll report any sudden changes they discover."

"You did well. How are the nobles reacting to the queen and duke's relationship?"

"Apart from the queen taking ten thousand gold Fordes from the duke's pockets after a huge argument, the other nobles obediently cooperated with the duke for this knighthood tournament. While they couldn't provide any funds, they did provide their supervisors and manpower to help out. Some of them even helped the duke with his resource purchases."

"And is the intelligence center set up?"

"We've already set up three and none of them know of the other's existence. We can cross check the reports they submit to verify their accuracy. We did encounter some difficulties; we weren't able to set up messenger-falcon stations. They are too easy to discover and might incite the nobles' greed, who I worry will capture our falcons and sell them. The best solution for this is to set the stations up outside the city at the late

Viscount Vizinska's manor. The manor's quite perfect, actually. We can't do it without revealing our identities, though," replied Tarkel.

Messenger falcons were part of the plan, suggested a few years earlier, that involved training falcons to deliver messengers over long distances. After a few years, they were finally able to procure a good breed, which they termed messenger falcons. If a station was set up at Windbury, news could reach the messenger-falcon station at Northsea in a day, as opposed to the dozen it would take for the message to be delivered by horse.

"Aren't there any nobles in the city who support our house?"

"We did not find any, Milord. The nobles here are mostly brain-dead idiots who don't care about what's going on in the outside world. They only care about their meager little plots of land. Their impression of our house is still the same as a few years ago when we attacked the capital and captured the second prince. Basically, they are afraid and distrustful of us."

"Forget it. Let's think of another way. What will you do next?" asked Lorist.

"The plan is to head to Melein after we finish things here," said Tarkel.

A knock on the room's door interrupted -- the servants had arrived with the bathtub and hot water. Reidy brought the tub in and helped mix the water.

Lorist stripped right in front of the two and crawled into the tub before he splashed some water on his face. Reidy rubbed Lorist's back with a clean linen cloth.

"Alright, Reidy, just give it a simple scrub," Lorist said as he placed a cloth over his face, "Tarkel, I saw a few nobles from the four central duchies at the banquet. I'm rather interested in why they came. Check on them during the next few days and go to the four central duchies after the knighthood tournament. Set up intelligence centers there before you go to Melein.

"I have a feeling the four central duchies will become an obstacle. We have to be prepared and understand their intentions as soon as possible. Also, I've already had Josk ask Count Chujway to come over. When he's here, pretend to be an attendant and observe what kind of person he is. I hope he will be sensible and not reject my request."

"Yes, Milord. By your will."

Chapter 324
The Tournament Begins

The sound of the carriage wheels gradually faded away as Lorist stood by the windowsill of his room on the fourth floor, looking at the dark alley nearby in silence.

"Milord," Tarkel's voice behind him rang out.

"How does it look?" asked Lorist without turning around.

"Milord, it looks like that Count Chujway didn't tell the complete truth. He said that he had gotten word about our house from the Union and had seen the head pyramid at Hanayabarta for himself, hence his fear. As for the matter of the allied army being deployed at Frederika, he told us a half-truth. His claim that he didn't find the second highness should be true, but the reason they allied up with the Union was probably fake.

"Milord, when I was standing behind him, I could quite clearly see that he would clutch his pants with his left hand under the table when he tensed up. I saw him do that when you asked him about the agreement the four central duchies reached with the Union, and he clutched his pants when he gave his answer where you wouldn't see it.

"He also did the same when he said that he had come to Windbury to see the knighthood tournament. I feel it's rather weird for him to want to lie about a small thing like that though. Perhaps he said that because he knows that you've come over to take Princess Sylvia's hand in marriage and lied because he was afraid because he came for the same reason? Hehe, Milord, I see that you have quite a lot of rivals…" Tarkel knew that his lord wasn't one to fuss over trivial things, so he didn't hold back his laughter.

"Speaking of Princess Sylvia, do you know why she left Windbury in a hurry to go back to the Fisablen dominion?" asked Lorist without turning back.

"I'm not sure, Milord," Tarkel replied, "I heard from a few guards of Duke Fisablen that when the princess left a week ago, she got into a fight with the duke. It's said that it was something about having the duke call the knighthood tournament off, but the

duke wasn't willing to do so. The princess went to the queen weeping. But it only ended in another confrontation between the two women, so the princess hurried back to Eastwild with her escort and Blademaster Xanthi. The duke has sent three messengers in the last two days to have her come but he hasn't heard anything from any of them yet."

"Don't tell me something happened at Eastwild? It can't be, if that were the case, the first one to worry would be that old fox himself. Since he's still here organizing his knighthood tournament, there shouldn't be anything wrong in Eastwild."

"I'm sorry, Milord. We were unable to send our informants into Eastwild. This is my mistake," said Tarkel.

"No, it's not your fault. Eastwild is House Fisablen's dominion and there isn't any large city like Windbury over there. It's no surprise they are able to restrict flow of people into and out of the province. What you need to do is use the month of the tournament to see if you can bribe a few of the duke's to serve as our eyes and ears."

"Yes, Milord. I will do my best."

"Also, investigate the nobles from the four central duchies. I feel they didn't just come for as simple reason as winning Princess Sylvia's hand in marriage."

"Understood, Milord."

……

"What did you say?!" exclaimed Lorist, shocked.

"It's true, Milord. The Little Prince and his blademaster left with their thousand guards during the night. They even left the four carriages' worth of gifts they had prepared as the princess' bride price. Duke Fisablen said that since the princess wasn't wedded to any of them, he will give the gifts to you as compensation for your victory at the banquet yesterday. They're going to send them over soon."

"We originally tried to start working our way through the little prince and the counts from Sabaj and Handra's servants and attendants," Tarkel continued, standing in front of Lorist, "but they are the quiet and alert types that don't frequent the tavern at all. We weren't able to get any information from them.

"The prince, on the other hand, brought an escort of more than a thousand people, among which

about a hundred were servants and attendants. They were the easiest from which to extract information. All we had to do was force feed them three cups of horse urine and they would let everything loose including how they peeped at their mothers bathing when they were small. But it's too bad that you scared them away yesterday. Count Chujway must've told everyone about the might of our house and caused them to leave during the night."

“Ugh," Lorist groaned, "Whatever. Since the tournament will take place over a month, take your time to get to the servants of the two counts that stayed. Perhaps some of them might accidentally leak something that we need and allow us to understand their reasons for coming. We'll leave it to fate."

At ten in the morning, Duke Fisablen brought the four carriages over to Anna's Abode.

When he saw Lorist, he laughed out and said, "Lord Count, you really surprised me yesterday. I didn't know your house managed to exterminate an entire kingdom. How impressive."

“You praise me too much, Your Grace. It was but a pirate lair that called itself a kingdom despite no nation on the continent acknowledging it. Everyone knows that had it not been for their attack on our dominion, we wouldn't have bothered with them. If it were Your Grace, you wouldn't need to deploy all your forces like we had to; you would only need to send a division to crush them completely. Your conquest of the greater and lesser golden creeks is the achievement truly worthy of awe and praise,” replied Lorist humbly.

His words had obviously struck a good chord with the duke, for he smiled like a blooming flower.

"Haha, not bad, not bad…” the duke chortled, “I'm starting to admire you more and more. Even though you're this young, you are not only quite calm and collected, your personal strength is also worth reckoning with. Very good."

After his generous praise, the duke recalled why he had come.

"Oh, Lord Count…”

"Your Grace, you have seniority. Please just call me Locke. Lord Count is a bit much," interjected Lorist.

“Alright, then I'll call you Locke. Well, it's like this. Since you won the duel yesterday, Little Prince Doke should've given you compensation for your victory. However, I received word that he had to return to the Forund duchy urgently and had no choice but to depart during the night. Before he left, he left the compensation he owed you to me and asked me to apologize for his breach of etiquette on his behalf."

Lorist nodded as he listened to the duke spouting his nonsense like it was what really happened before he praised the duke's trustworthiness for keeping his word. In actuality, both of them knew these were the goods with which the little prince intended to propose to the princess. He had not left them for Lorist, he was just in too much of a hurry and couldn’t take them with him. Them being made compensation for Lorist was purely the duke's doing.

Lorist wondered why the duke bothered to cover up for the little prince. According to Tarkel's report, he had left during the night without even saying farewell. It was said that the duke only found out about the prince's departure in the morning as well and called him a coward in front of his own guards. The gifts packed in the four carriages must have been left behind intentionally as compensation for the duke's troubles, but Lorist was sure that the little prince hoped they would end up in Princess Sylvia’s hands.

So why is the duke giving me these gifts instead? He has no reason to stand up for the little prince and cozy up to me on his behalf. He easily could've kept the gifts for himself and even spread the word that the cowardly prince didn't bother to compensate me for my victory. It would ruin the little prince’s reputation! Don't tell me Duke Fisablen has something he needs from Forund? It can't be, it should be the other way around…

A smile could be seen on his face as Lorist racked his mind over the matter.

“I didn't think Little Prince Doke would be that attentive to noble etiquette, as expected of a prince from Forund. Actually, he could've sent a servant over to pass the message. There was no need to have Your Grace come."

Duke Fisablen's face twitched when he recalled Count Chujway telling them how House Norton exterminated Hanayabarta, had almost everyone, save around 30 thousand young women, beheaded, and used their heads to build a pyramid. Everyone

had been completely stunned, some even doubted the truth of the count's words. Count Chujway swore what he said was entirely true and that he had personally seen the pyramid and had fallen ill for a few days at the sheer terror it inspired. He saw the pyramid every time he closed his eyes and heard the heads snicker and laugh. That was why when the duke saw the man who had ordered such a monument's construction, he wondered how cruel a man must be to be able to give such an order. It was also the reason he treated Lorist so carefully.

Had it not been for Count Chujway coming to tell me about Little Prince Doke's escape this morning, an escape which would compromise my plan, I wouldn't come over here to clean up the prince's mess for him! What would I do if your forces interfered with my plan?

The duke patted Lorist on the shoulder lightly.

"No worries, there's no need to be so polite. Right now I'm the host and you were willing to spend your precious time to come here to be my guests. Naturally, I have to tend to your needs and solve the problems you have. This is but a simple matter for me to settle.

"The opening ceremony will begin the day after tomorrow and I'm planning to host another banquet before the ceremony. I am inviting all the nobles to attend and pray for the tournament's success. Locke, you must not turn down my invitation."

"Naturally, Your Grace. I shall most certainly attend."

"Alright. It's a promise. I will send someone to escort you there tomorrow," said the duke, smiling.

……

The tournament finally began the day after the banquet but Lorist felt a little bored as he could not participate personally. Since he could kill a three-star-gold-ranked knight instantly, it didn't make sense for him to compete against other gold and silver ranks. Lorist wasn't thick-faced enough to do so either. It was especially the case after the duke secretly made a personal request that Lorist not compete which Lorist agreed to without argument. He could only send his subordinates to participate on his behalf.

The knighthood tournament was rather traditional. It involved archery, swordsmanship, and jousting matches. The archery and jousting matches did not

discriminate between battleforce ranks. Gold and silver ranked competitors participated in the same category. The swordsmanship competition, however, separated the two ranks. The separation didn't hold for the winners of each rank, who could fight one another if the silver winner wished.

Lorist could only bite his teeth when he saw Reidy defeat the silver ranks in his category with one or two moves.

Gah, Reidy's disguising himself as a pig to feast on tigers… Even two-star gold ranks aren't Reidy's match, not to mention these puny silver ranks…

It went without saying that Josk dominated the archery competition. He didn't even have to try hard to win. Originally, there was a good number of those participating in the archery competition were there to try their luck, but they gave up on the notion after seeing a ridiculous anomaly like Josk participating, lest they embarrass themselves unnecessarily.

The jousting matches were the most popular section of the tournament. Apart from the silver-ranked guards, their leader Patt was the first one to be eliminated. Baron Shazin and Baron Felim both won nine straight rounds and had already qualified for the next phase. As for Els, he was resting near the stadium. He had already won six rounds and only needed three more victories to qualify as well.

The jousting matches' rules were mostly similar to that of the normal duels. Participants had to own a knight's badge and bring their own mounts, armor, lances on spears as well as a longsword or some other secondary arm. Only after being checked could one participate. Should one lose in battle, one would have to surrender their mount and equipment to their opponent or pay a ransom of equal value. However, one could participate again after a loss if one was rich enough.

The o e who had been faring the worst among Lorist's group was a guard named Loji. A two-star silver rank, he had already lost four times successively. As his equipment belonged to the house, he could not surrender them and had to pay the ransom out of his own pocket. Given that the armor was appraised at 100 gold Fordes, Loji owed 350 gold Fordes already.

Seriously, even though he knows he isn't capable, he still wants to compete… Is he trying to give away money for free? thought Lorist angrily.

He forbade those who lost once from participating again.

"How many other guards owe money?" asked Lorist.

"One hundred… One hundred and forty one…" answered Patt with a troubled expression.

"What?!" Lorist stuttered, "Why are there so many?"

"Milord, well," Patt lowered his head and explained, "Apart from ten or so who lost in the first match because of bad luck, the rest lost after winning a few rounds. However, the value of the equipment they wore caused them to be in debt despite their former victories…"

Good Sol, thought Lorist, *the ones my guard defeats only own equipment that amount to roughly 40 gold Fordes, but they have to pay out 100 gold Fordes if they lose… It's no wonder so many received challenges, even some gold-ranked knights shamelessly challenged my silver-ranked guards… With them getting a hundred gold Fordes for each win, they're treating me like a money tree, aren't they?*

"Those who wish to compete aren't be allowed to use the equipment of the house!" declared Lorist.

"Milord," Tarkel called out as he arrived in front of Lorist, "We discovered that Duke Fisablen's subordinates are recruiting the knights that lost all their equipment and gold coins."

"Oh?" Lorist wondered with frustration, *knighthood tournaments like this are the ideal place to recruit household knights, however, one would usually recruit those who performed well. What would Duke Fisablen gain from recruiting those who lost?*

"Do you know why?"

"I think they're not recruiting household knights, but rather people to join the Fisablen army. They will only gain a chance to be promoted to the position of a household knight after five years of good service," replied Tarkel.

Since it was just normal soldier recruitment, Lorist wasn't too concerned.

“What about the two counts from the four central duchies? Have they been making

any moves?"

"Count Dalek participated in the jousting section and so far has a win streak of nine. He's waiting for the next phase to begin. Count Chujway hasn't participated. It seems he's only here to support Count Dalem. He seems to be acting normally even in private. Other than that, the messenger Duke Fisablen sent to Eastwild is back. It seems Princess Sylvia still isn't willing to come over. The duke broke a gold chalice when he heard the news. There's also other, rather bad, news, Milord…"

"Out with it!"

"Did Milord notice a gold-ranked knight competing right now who moves rather familiarly? Your commander, Sir Loze, snuck into Windbury secretly to participate in the tournament. To prevent you from noticing, he's wearing his own weapons and armor. Had it not been for the golden tiger insignia on his armor, I might not have even taken note of him since he is lumped together with the other wandering or freelance knights in the tent in the far corner of the

stadium…"

"Good… Good Sol!" Lorist cried out before gritting his teeth, "After returning to the inn tonight, I

want to see this fellow who's showing off at the stadium before me!"

"Understood, Milord."

Chapter 325
Three Requests

Fiercetiger Loze stepped through the inn's entrance, feeling rather good with his performance during the afternoon. He had racked up nine consecutive victories and won four sets of knights' armor, four mounts, and more than 200 gold Fordes. Selling the spoils he got to a reseller netted him another 200 Fordes, so he decided to treat a few of the friends he made in the wandering knight's tent to some drinks. He had heard that The Rose, a tavern nearby, had hired a number of wild dancer maidens. They charged so much for their service that few could enjoy it.

Loze patted his money pouch with a lewd smile, thinking of the relaxing time he would have later that night. Since the second round of the competition would only begin in a few days, he wasn't worried that he would be too worn out from the 'workout session'. Just as he was about to head out, he saw Tarkel standing before him angrily.

It's over, thought Loze.

He had been bargaining with the merchant a few minutes earlier and had forgotten to lower his visor again.

Tarkel saw Loze desperately trying to escape his notice and smiled.

"Sir Loze, stop trying to hide. Our Lord already recognized you when you were fighting this afternoon. He wants you to see him during dinner, you know the place. Good luck," advised he.

……

Currently, Loze was standing curled up in front of Lorist, as if it would make him invisible. Lorist was angered and amused at the same time at his pathetic state.

"Stand properly. Don't shrivel up in the corner like a turkey. Loze, what do you have to say about leaving your legion behind to come play in the city? Can you tell me where that your legion is?"

“The legion is fine, Milord, Yuriy is in command. It's just 30 kilometers outside the city. It can make it here in time if anything happens," reported Loze as he stood up straight.

"So that's why you abandoned your post to participate in the tournament?"

"Yuriy wanted to come too, Milord, but he lost in a round of rock-paper-scissors, so I'm the one who got to come," explained Loze in a troubled manner.

"You guys… really get on my nerves," said Lorist, not knowing how he should admonish his subordinates all of a sudden.

Baron Shazin came in at that moment and saved Loze.

"Oh? Loze, you're here too?" he said before he pulled at Lorist without listening to Loze's reply, "Locke, come with me! Let me introduce you to someone. Hahaha, I'm really too delighted today. Did you know that Bonawa finally agreed to be my household knight? Let me tell you, Bonawa…”

Lorist was thusly dragged out of the room by Baron Felim without being able to say anything else to Loze. Howard followed closely behind.

"Well," Els mumbled, "I should rally the guards and follow."

Loze looked at the rest still in the room.

"I should be fine now, right?" asked he.

"Well, given how busy our lord has been over the past few days, I don't think he'll recall that he hasn't punished you yet,” answered Josk.

"I'll go take a rest now. I still have to accept challenges tomorrow,” yawned Reidy, leaving.

"As long as you perform well and don't anger our lord, he might just let you off," said Tarkel.

"I don't care anymore,” answered Loze, rolling his eyes, “I won quite a bit today, so drinks are on me tonight. I heard the tavern hired a few magnificent dancers, how tempting."

"I ain't going, I still have a match tomorrow," declined Josk.

"I'll go with you for a drink, but you can keep the women," agreed Tarkel.

……

The one Baron Felim wanted to introduce to Lorist was Knight Bonawar, whom he had met on the way to Windbury. According to the baron, he had been promoted alongside the man because of his contributions right after joining the second prince. Baron Felim kept charging into the forefront of the conflict and his performance increased as the danger did. Unlike Lorist's deceased elder brother, however, Baron Felim suffered no lasting injuries from his military exploits. Even though the unit the second prince assigned to his command was frequently beaten up, the baron had always managed to lead his household troops back safely.

Knight Bonawar was a different kind of officer. He was raised to the art of war based on the traditional tenets of the Krissen Empire. He focused on military regulation and efficiency, and monitoring casualties. He was one of the most well-received commanding officers among the second prince's subordinates. Of the three victorious battles that preceded the founding of the Iblia kingdom, two were thanks to Bonawar.

One involved the elimination of the noble army of the first prince's faction. Bonawar had commanded a ragtag bunch against the army, which had numbered 18 thousand, and still managed to emerge victorious after three months. The battle led to the crumbling of the army and the eventual extermination of the houses involved on the enemy's side. If the battle had not ended as it had, the first prince would have influence over Southern and might even threaten Winston's peace.

The other battle was when the second prince led his troops to attack the Melein duchy for the first time, only to be defeated by the Fiercegale legion. At the time, Duke Melein led his troops in pursuit of the second prince. When the second prince was at his wit's end, Bonawar, who had been sent there with some food, managed to arrive in time to save the second prince. The second prince had already given up all hope and even excused himself by saying he'd go to Duke Fisablen's to borrow soldiers for a comeback, intent on leaving the mess of a battlefield to Bonawar. However, the situation did not faze the knight and he ordered the logistics heavy-armored troops to pick another spot and set up camp while he reorganized the remnants of the army. He used the opportunity when Duke Melein pressed his pursuit to cut off their path of retreat and managed to turn the battle in their favor. It ended with Bonawar's victory

and the extermination of all 8000 of the enemy. Duke Melein managed to escape but with only ten riders from his personal guard.

Despite being such an accomplished tactician, Bonawar had always been the target of the second prince's jealousy and oppression given his straightforward demeanor and impressive reputation. When the time came to entitle the nobles who had contributed to the kingdom’s founding, despite his contributions, which qualified him for peerage at at least the level of baron, the second prince requested he pay a hefty sum to fill the kingdom's barren coffers before he could be entitled and enfeoffed land. It made him leave with anger and coop up in his manor for a long time.

Since the Lorist's group encountered Bonawar’s group en route to Windbury, Baron Felim had spent a few days looking for his whereabouts in the city and finally managed to locate him. After asking about his situation, the baron learned the knight was not faring too well. The relationship between House Felim and House Bonawar actually went far back, with his ancestor actually being a baron. However, due to an incident at Windbury that caused House Bonawar to lose their peerage, he was left with just a knight's manor in Southern.

Just like how Baron Felim had been, Bonawar was trying hard to revive his house. It was too bad he wasn't as recklessly brave as Baron Felim. While he was also a one-star-gold-ranked knight, he wasn't particularly talented in battleforce training. In other words, he was only a talented tactician.

He had come to participate in the tournament because he didn't have much of a choice. As he put it, he was there to 'sell himself' and find a decent house to serve. The 50 or so young men he had at the manor had a really hard time defending it. Southern had been ruined by the war between the second highness and Duke Melein, and the province was overrun by beggars and deserters-turned-bandits. Even though he came from an accomplished military family, he was helpless before the thousands of bandits and had to consider the safety of the women and children in his manor.

That was why Bonawar finally decided to try his luck in the tournament. Any choice that made his house safe was a good one. Given his lack of martial talent, he didn't think that people would actively recruit him, so he could only rely on those who knew his reputation to come to him.

It was too bad that he had been refused an audience with the queen, whose time was far too precious to spend on a knight. He was similarly unable to meet Duke Fisablen,

who was busy with his own matters. On the third day, he traveled around to socialize with the nobles of Southern with whom he was familiar. While they did recognize his talents, given Iblia's horrid state, there wasn't much room for him to use his skills.

It was at that moment that Baron Felim made his visit and even came over for the next few days. When Bonawar found out that House Felim had formed a legion of 46 thousand in The Northlands, he was finally convinced. Baron Felim made it a point to mention that, while letting the troops of the second prince perish under his lead was fine since they weren't his own, the house's new legion was one constructed with lots of effort and funding, so the baron wasn't willing to just throw it away. Bonawar's style of command was cautious but effective, so Felim felt he was the perfect man for the job.

Felim was completely elated when Bonowar pledged allegiance to his household. He held banquets for three days straight. Lorist was present throughout and even made some suggestions. He offered to have Reidy, Josk, and a thousand of his own guards go along with the baron's own guard to transport the knight's family to their new home safely after the tournament concluded.

Windbury regained some of its former livelihood thanks to the tournament. It was far livelier than before, at least. Even the marketplace looked rather prosperous. The nobles had also partially gone back to their previous leisurelY lifestyles. A large feast was held at the Rose Palace once every three days and a smaller party in

between. Every night, there would be a ball where elaborately dressed noblemen and ladies would dwell throughout the night.

It all felt pointless to Lorist, which further exacerbated his boredom. Not only was he forbidden from participating in the tournament, he didn't like to interact with other nobles either, especially those at the balls who greeted each other superficially wearing their fancy masks. The noble ladies flocked about him were more than willing to share his bed, but not without some sort of remuneration. Lorist was no saint either and had sexual urges like everyone else. However, his current situation made it inappropriate for him to sleep around. He had come to the city to win the princess's hand, after all. Should he act promiscuously and carelessly, rumor would no doubt spread across the city only to incite the princess's anger.

But for some reason, even after 12 days passed, Princess Sylvia had yet to return to Windbury. Duke Fisablen was visibly angered, which prevented Lorist from meeting

with him and making his proposal. It frustrated Lorist greatly as well. The silver lining was that the house's reputation grew by leaps and bounds during the tournament. To no one's surprise, Josk had become the champion of the archery segment. Reidy managed to defeat a gold rank with his silver rank battleforce in ten-odd minutes, much to the shock of the audience.

The jousting segment, which was the largest among the three, had also just entered its second round. Two of the top ten were knights of House Norton, with Fiercetiger Loze obtaining the champion's seat. Lorist decided that, as reward, he wouldn't be punished. The other winner was Els. The two had successfully defeated their enemies in quick succession and earned the right to enter the third round, which would begin in a few days and would decide the ultimate winner.

During the second round, Loze was faced with Count Dalek. The two had clashed many times and exchanged hundreds of blows before Count Dalek surrendered. That evening itself, Lorist received word of Count Dalek and Count Chujway's departure for their dominions.

Was my gut wrong? Lorist thought, stroking his chin, *Weird, those two seem like they came for nothing but the tournament, they left the moment they lost.*

Perhaps, he was being over sensitive about everything because he was worried about Princess Sylvia.

When the jousting's third round began, Tarkel came to Lorist.

"Milord, Duke Fisablen left with a squad of guards for Eastwild early this morning. We think he's probably there to bring the princess over. After all, many of the nobles participating in the knighthood tournament want to witness her famed beauty. Some of them have already started complaining and some rumors are floating about that the princess left because she was scolded by the duke. That's probably why he has no choice but to go fetch the princess himself."

Duke Fisablen managed to rush back before the third round was over. He was just in time to present Fierceger Loze first prize. During the ceremony, Duke Fisablen didn't look particularly well; his laughter seemed a little forced but everyone knew the reason was the princess's refusal to follow him back.

The moment they left the stadium, Lorist saw one of the duke's guards who said that

the duke wished to meet him at the pavilion.

"Your Grace, I wonder if I can be of service in any way?" asked Lorist when he saw the worn-out duke.

Duke Fisablen breathed a long sigh before he said, "Locke, I know why you've come. You want to form a union with House Fisablen by marrying Sylvia, right?"

"That's right, Your Grace," replied Lorist straightforwardly.

"Time really flies, to think that lass is of marriageable age already," the duke mused, "It must be because I spoiled her so much when she was young and caused her temper to develop like that. It has been incredibly embarrassing for me. You guys must have had a great laugh at my expense."

Lorist merely listened on, speechless.

"I don't oppose an alliance with your house, nor a marriage between you and my granddaughter. In fact, I am looking forward to it," said Duke Fisablen.

"Oh," Lorist started, "Your Grace, does that mean you agree?"

"That's right. I hold you in high regard, Locke. The moment the matters are settled, you'll have to call me grandpa, haha" the duke said before giving a hearty laugh, "However, I'm a little curious about the kind of price House Norton is willing to pay in exchange for my precious and beloved Sylvia."

"Your Grace, please feel free to state your demands. As long as they are within my house’s capabilities, we will definitely not let you down," promised Lorist as he thumped on his chest.

"Alright, I like how frank you are. I only have three requests. First, I will require House Norton start ten new factories in Wild Husbandry so House Fisablen will be self sufficient in two years. Don't worry, I won't force you to build refineries, only factories for daily necessities. Can that be done?"

"No problem,” Lorist nodded.

Duke Fisablen stared at Lorist with his hawk-like eyes, stretched out his second finger, and said, "Second, I want ten thousand sets of the armor your personal guard wears.

That's the minimum."

“Your Grace, we only managed to produce three thousand sets of these ourselves, yet you're asking for 10 thousand! That would amount to more than two million gold Fordes already and is incredibly troublesome! But for Princess Sylvia's sake, you have a deal!" agreed Lorist.

"Haha, good," Duke Fisablen cheered, "My last request is not even worth mentioning, to be honest. You know that Sylvia is the treasure of our household, so I wish for her to not suffer any discomfort when she goes to you. How about this, all you have to do is to have your concubines and illegitimate children leave House Norton to spare my Sylvia the pain of not being your one and only."

Chapter 326
Apologies

That last request was a given in Duke Fisablen's mind. When two noble houses unite in marriage, the household of the bride has a right to request the groom's house to exile their concubines so that they don't cause any trouble during succession in the future. At the same time, there would no longer be an incentive for the illegitimate children to harm the rightful heir.

That was the case with the third prince and Duke Melein's daughter's marriage. The third prince had four concubines prior to his engagement, with one of them being a daughter of a minor noble who had given birth to a son. She was unwilling to leave and propped her son up as the result of her efforts of serving the third prince. In the end, the former emperor had to poison her drink to ensure the successful union of the imperial family and the Melein house and send the two-year-old illegitimate son somewhere far away where he would never be heard from again.

The union of two noble houses through marriage didn't only show the favorable relationship between the two houses, it also related to the benefits those two houses would receive upon their union. The first two requests made by Duke Fisablen looked out for the interests of his own house. In terms of total cost, Lorist would have to pay out roughly three million gold Fordes to be allowed to wed Princess Sylvia.

However, the final request was made for the princess's own sake so that she would live a life of bliss, untroubled by the jealous wiles of the other women in the Norton household.

Lorist kept quiet the whole time after he heard the third request.

Duke Fisablen was in a very good mood when he said, "Servants, have some food served here. I wanna have a few cups with Locke right now."

"I apologize," Lorist said, "Your Grace, I won't be able to do it."

"Huh? What are you saying?" the duke asked disbelievingly while turning around. He still had his finger outstretched from when he instructed his servants, which seemed

to be frozen in place like a withered branch.

"Your Grace, I am unable to fulfill your third request," Lorist said as he raised his head and looked at the duke solemnly.

Duke Fisablen stared fixedly at Lorist's face before he croaked, "Aha… ha… haha… Count… Count Norton… You're just joking around with me, right?"

Lorist shook his head and said, "I am serious. To me, they have become my women the moment I took them in as concubines, and I am their man. Men of the Norton house don't abandon their women. Not only that, I believe that Sylvia will understand and accept why I think so too."

Bam! Duke Fisablen thrust his palm harshly against the table, causing it to crumble into several pieces on the ground. Standing up, the duke exploded like a flaming volcano, "Whether Sylvia understands or not is her own matter. But are you really willing to refuse the request of I, of House Fisablen?"

Lorist stood up without showing any weakness and said, "I only care about Sylvia, not House Fisablen. I've already accepted the first two requests of your house, but I would never allow House Fisablen to stick their hands into the affairs of my house. You have no right to demand that I abandon my women!"

Duke Fisablen was so angered that fumes seemed to waft out from his head. "You… You requested to be allowed to marry Sylvia from our house, yet you're unwilling to give up on other women. Is this the 'care' you said you had for her?"

"Does that sound conflicting to you?" Lorist asked and laughed, "It's because I care for Sylvia that I want her to be my official wife, the matron of House Norton. She will have everything that she is due, but she has to respect the traditions of the Norton house as well. Should she become my wife, she will have to treat my other women well also. That is one of her responsibilities as the matron," declared Lorist now that negotiations have completely fallen off the table.

"You… You insolent little!" roared the duke, almost coughing blood into Lorist's face. *What do you think the Fisablen house is?! You said that the most precious flower of our house has to take care of your other women after being wedded there? Ridiculous! If word of this spreads, how would I be able to show my face in front of others in future?! We are not like those other fallen noble houses! We are House Fisablen, the Lion of the*

Northern Grasslands!

Duke Fisablen glared at Lorist with anger as the energies within his body coalesced. His right hand was already holding tightly onto the longsword hanging by his hip, as if he wanted to cut Lorist into two halves.

While Lorist seemed incredibly relaxed with both his hands down, his feet had already gotten into a steady position, ready to receive the duke's rage at any moment. If gazes and thoughts could materialize, the space between Lorist and Duke Fisablen would've been obliterated.

"Count Norton, give up on your concubines and illegitimate children. This is the request of House Fisablen, and is also the requirement you have to fulfill to take Sylvia as your wife. It is also your chance to express your sincerity to her. If you can't do that, I will take it as an affront against the Fisablen house. Do **not** test our patience. As her grandfather, I will definitely not allow her husband to have other women and children," said the duke after a long while as he greatly suppressed his anger.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace. I mentioned that I wouldn't be able to do it. This is not an issue of the union between our two houses. It's one of the responsibilities of a man. Abandoning one's women and children is a mark of shame for any man. That is something I'm definitely not willing to do."

All of a sudden, Duke Fisablen dispersed his threatening air and sat back down onto his chair in a crestfallen manner. Waving his hand, he said, "Count Norton, you should head back. I hope that you can consider the third request I made. Only after you consent to it will I allow Sylvia to marry you."

"Your Grace, you should consider this as well: if I give up on my concubines and illegitimate children for Sylvia today, what's to say I won't give up on Sylvia for some other women in the future? That's why…"

Before he finished, Duke Fisablen lifted an ornament on his desk and tossed it towards Lorist. "Scram! Get out of my sight right now!"

Lorist quickly took his leave. When he emerged from Rose Palace and saw Els and the rest waiting there, he stopped, stroked his chin and said, "Wait, why didn't that old guy cut me down immediately? That's weird, even when I said that before I left, all he did was throw things at me. Didn't they say he had a bad temper? And he's a rank 3

blademaster to boot, so he shouldn't fear me, should he? How weird…”

By then, Els and the ten-odd guards had walked up to receive Lorist, so he could only keep the thoughts for himself and ponder upon them when he returned to the inn.

Count Kenmays had been waiting in the hall of the inn for Lorist's return. The moment he saw Lorist enter, he jumped and pulled on Lorist's hand, asking, "Did Duke Fisablen want to see you because of your marriage with Sylvia?"

Lorist nodded.

"Did it work out?"

Lorist shook his head, shrugged, and said, "I don't think so, since I didn't accept his third request."

Stunned, Count Kenmays asked, "What were the requests?"

"The first concerned our house starting ten factories at Wild Husbandry Province so that they can produce enough daily necessities to sustain themselves," recalled Lorist.

Count Kenmays jumped as he said, "No way, we definitely can't do that! He's trying to cut out the salt merchant committee! Locke, daily necessities are what that province requires the most. Even though the profit per unit is low, the sheer volume of things traded is enormous! Currently, the salt merchant committee has a monopoly on the daily necessities market at Wild Husbandry Province and Eastwild Province, with two-thirds of our profits coming from there! That's because the products made at other places can't compete with ours in both price and quality, eventually stopping production altogether because of us. And hasn't the duke conquered the greater and lesser golden creeks? I was just about to charge them a bit more since they have started to mine gold over there."

Count Kenmays lost all his previous flair suddenly and said, "Well, Princess Sylvia's matter is what's important right now. At least we know that Duke Fisablen doesn't want us to mine gold coins from his dominion. Maybe they're interested in making a profit using our goods as well, hence his request for you to help him set up those factories. No matter, even if we lose that profit, we can think of other ways to increase them on other fronts."

"The second request was for my house to provide them with ten thousand sets of

armor that my guards wear," continued Lorist.

Count Kenmays burst out once again, "That's going too far! This greedy old bastard is really shameless!"

The armor worn by the three thousand guards were admittedly different from those of the other household soldiers. Even though the household soldiers were armed with stainless steel armor, the defensive capabilities were slightly lower than the ones worn by the guards. Even though the design was similar, the color differed slightly -- the armor worn by normal household soldiers were lead grey in color while those worn by the guards were greenish-grey. That armor was exclusive to Lorist's personal guard.

Count Kenmays, Baron Felim and Baron Shazin all thought that the armor worn by the Norton house were same as theirs, being made of stainless steel, because they weren't able to tell the different metals used to manufacture them based on only the color. However, they did know that the armor worn by Norton guards had the highest defensive capabilities. Lorist told them that each set cost 180 gold Fordes and that the house had only managed to make a little over 3000 of them, before gifting each of the three two sets of armor made of the same materials according to their preferred design.

Yet, Duke Fisablen had asked for ten thousand sets in one breath. Count Kenmays complained, "Is that old guy nuts? No matter how large the lion's mouth is, even it would choke to death if it tried to swallow prey in one go. The marriage between the third prince and Duke Melein's daughter only involved a transaction of two million imperial gold coins that amount to only 800 thousand gold Fordes at most. Yet, he had asked you to pay such a huge price for marrying the princess. Is that why you refused?"

Lorist replied, "I've agreed to both those conditions."

"Ugh," Count Kenmays gasped, before he snapped out of his stupor and said, "Well, it's fine. It is fine House Norton is truly impressive, for you to be able to accept those conditions. Then, was the third request even more ridiculous?"

"Well, not really. His third request was for me to exile my concubines and illegitimate children before he would agree to the union between our two houses."

Count Kenmays stayed silent for a good moment before he patted onto Lorist's back

and said, "I really want to call you an idiot for refusing a request that pales in comparison to the former two, but I feel relieved that you didn't agree to it somehow. I think Baron Felim and Baron Shazin would feel the same after they hear about this. We would no longer have to worry about the alliance between our four families to rift just because the Norton house got too powerful."

Lorist laughed bitterly and said, "But now, I don't know how I should answer to the princess for this…"

Count Kenmays laughed and said, "Locke, I can only ask you to grieve and move on. We'll always stand behind you and offer our moral support no matter what kind of chaos you cause."

"Good Sol, is that all you have to do as allies? Isn't it better for me if the alliance was called off, then?"

"No way, you're the unquestioned head of our little alliance. It was you who called for the alliance's formation, so if we don't leave it, you won't be able to back out either, unless you want the reputation of the Norton house to suffer and abandon all noble niceties altogether," said the count in a serious tone.

"That can't happen, I don't believe I can't dissolve the alliance when I choose to…"

A guard interrupted their joking around and said, "Milord, Duke Fisablen's messenger requests to meet you."

"Oh? Let him in," said Lorist as he wondered, *what does the duke want this time around?*

The messenger was but a normal guard instead of a noble. "Lord Count, I have come on behalf of the duke's orders to report that the banquet to celebrate the conclusion of the tournament has been canceled because the duke isn't feeling well. I hope my lords will understand."

Count Kenmays mumbled wide-eyed, "No way… The celebration must always be held for the nobles and knights for any kind of tournament. This is tradition, why would the duke call it off just like that?"

Lorist smiled coldly and said, "Well, I can't really blame the duke for being a little petty? After all, the swordsmanship and archery competitions were dominated by us, House Norton, with Loze taking the crown at the jousting competition and Baron

Felim getting number two, Baron Shazin getting number five, and Els getting number seven. Not only that, not one of the rest are people from House Fisablen, so it's understandable that he has nothing worth celebrating.

"If he had agreed to the marriage union with us, he could still announce and brag about it. But now that I've refused his requests, he would never acknowledge us as the true winners of the tournament and give a free boost to the reputation of the four allied families of The Northlands. I think I understand now why he didn't draw his sword to flip out on me when I refused him. Hehe, so he's still holding the arms deal he signed with our house in consideration. He's afraid that we'll stop supplying him with the goods."

"Will you do so?" asked Count Kenmays.

"No," Lorist said, shaking his head, "This is an agreement we signed before he had a disagreement, and I will honor my word to him. That's because this concerns the reputation of House Norton and is not a matter I can decide based on my whim.

"Alright, let's pack up tonight and leave first thing tomorrow morning. I doubt we'd miss attending his little banquet. We can just hold our own when we return to The Northlands. I believe that many will be disappointed by the duke's neglect to host one, and perhaps might cause some kind of trouble while they're at it. Believe it or not, I think the duke will have to use his troops to chase the wandering knights away tomorrow, so it's best we leave early."

Morning the next day, Lorist and the rest left Windbury. As Knight Bonawar, who had just pledged allegiance to Baron Felim, had almost 200 members in his household, their journey was held back slightly. After meeting up with the division under Yuriy's care, they traveled for another six days and would cross Hendliff Suspension Bridge the next day.

A smoke signal could be seen in the distance as three mounted men rushed over. The moment they encountered Lorist, the three riders leaped off their horses and reported, "Knight Charade ordered us to inform you that Princess Sylvia has arrived at Firmrock Castle five days ago!"

Chapter 327
The Princess's Heart

Since Princess Sylvia already arrived at Firmrock Castle, Lorist traveled ahead of his escort so that he would arrive sooner. He was curious how she knew of his refusal of the duke's conditions already.

She's not here to interrogate me, is she?

Count Kenmays, Baron Felim, and Baron Shazin mocked Lorist jokingly as he left with Reidy, Howard, and ten-odd guards, wishing him a 'blissful life'. It took them just three days to reach Firmrock Castle.

The moment Lorist dismounted, before he could even dust himself off, Princess Sylvia rushed over and hugged him -- tears streaming down her face.

Lorist hurriedly tried to apologize, "Sylvia, I'm So--"

Before he finished, Princess Sylvia bawled even louder, mumbling, "Brother Locke… Hollycost… He… He left just like that… He's not even ten!"

Wait, what? Who's Hollycost? That name sounds familiar, thought Lorist for a good while before he finally remembered, *Isn't Hollycost the young prince of Iblia? That child of the second prince the queen birthed after their drunken lock-up?*

Unfortunately, perhaps because of the use of drugs, Hollycost was born with a congenital heart disease. One of his herbalists said he would likely not even see his twentieth birthday.

The young prince was abandoned by the queen after his birth and was put under Duke Fisablen's charge, who treasured the child like his very own kin. However, when he found that the young prince had a birth defect, he no longer cared as much and didn't consider him a trump card anymore. In fact, it was Sylvia who had dragged the child along with her and raised him like her own little brother.

After she stopped crying thanks to Lorist's consolations, she explained why she didn't

participate in the knighthood tournament. Hollycost had passed away suddenly without warning. The servants initially thought he had simply fallen asleep. It was only in the evening, when the servants felt that he had slept for far too long and attempted to wake him, that they realized that his body had cooled and he was no longer breathing.

When Princess Sylvia received word at Windbury, she requested Duke Fisablen postpone the tournament by a couple of months so she could return to Eastwild to tend to the matters resulting from poor Hollycost's death. After all, he was technically the rightful heir to the kingdom's throne. However, Duke Fisablen refused. He thought the prince, who had just died wasn't of much use to him in the first place, and the knighthood tournament concerned the reputation and future of the house, especially because it involved Sylvia's marriage. It had to go on no matter what. As for the dead Hollycost, he would deal with it as he would with deceased household knights.

Sylvia was angered and disappointed at Duke Fisablen's cold and heartless decision. After a huge argument, she looked for her aunt, the queen, to report the death of her son.

She didn't expect the queen to be even more heartless than her father.

"I never cared about him when he was alive, why should I now that he's dead?" was all she was on the matter.

Fuming with rage, Sylvia threw a huge tantrum before she brought Blademaster Xanthi and her guard with her back to Eastwild to bury Hollycost.

However, she realized that she wouldn't be able to give Hollycost a burial fitting a prince no matter how hard she tried, because even in the entire kingdom, Hollycost's name itself was somewhat of a taboo. Since the queen herself didn't want anything to do with the dead prince, the nobles treated him like he didn't exist. In fact, the queen and the nobles were relieved that they didn't have to bother with the prince's burial.

So, Sylvia could only carry out the matter herself. While she did receive Duke Fisablen's incessant letters demanding her return to show her face at the tournament, the letters only made her angry and caused her to ignore the messengers completely. But when the final messenger came over with a letter that stated the princess would be dragged to the capital by the duke personally, she made the decision to run away. She headed for Firmrock Castle. She did so because she felt the Norton dominion was

the only place her grandfather couldn’t drag her out of.

Lorist breathed a long sigh.

So the princess isn't here to ask about my refusal after all.

However, Lorist soon found himself troubled. Should he tell the princess about his objection to the duke’s conditions and the subsequent annulment of their engagement, or not? Lorist saw Sylvia’s tender emotional state at pr sent and decided to keep quiet on the matter for the time being. He would tell her once she was more stable.

In the month that followed, Lorist traveled around with Sylvia in an attempt to lighten up her mood, which meant that Count Kenmays and the barons weren’t greeted by anyone when they arrived at the castle. The angered count wrote Lorist a letter. ‘You bastard! You’re putting hoes before bros. You’re so caught in your lust you’ve completely forsaken friendship!’ were but one of the many things he had to say in his letter.

Lorist didn't really mind the count's comments. In truth, he felt rather guilty towards the princess, perhaps because he still hadn’t informed her of his refusal of the duke's requests. Her mood had improved substantially over the last couple of days and her smile started to regain its former glamor. Lorist really didn't feel like ruining the good mood by bringing up his falling out with the duke.

The moonlight melded with the waters and illuminated the clear waters. The proud hull of Northsea cut across the silvery surface of the sea and sailed on the infinite waters of the ocean.

After having fun at Silowas for about half a month, Princess Sylvia was finally in the condition to return to The Northlands. During that time, Sylvia was just like a lovestruck maiden falling in love for the first time. She grew closer and more reliant on Lorist, which only served to intensify Lorist's guilt about the matter. He knew well things might not remain as they were for long, with the mountainous obstacle that was Duke Fisablen standing between them.

The round silver moon appeared like a gleaming plate of silver, hanging from the dark blue veil of the night.

Princess Sylvia leaned on the ship’s railings and stared out over the ocean. as she

looked at the ocean.

"Brother Locke, I never imagined the sea could be this beautiful. I remember grandfather brought me to a cliff near a beach once. It was the first time I saw the sea with my own eyes. All I saw were harsh waves bashing against the cliff harshly. The water was black and the wave's splashes were unbearable. The winds were very strong. I clutched onto my grandfather with all my strength, I didn't dare let go. He told me such was the sea, borderless and infinite. I've always had the impression that the sea was something ferocious and that sailing was a huge risk on one's life.

"I didn't think traveling to Silowas with you would make me realize that the sea also had times it is calm and gentle. We can build sandcastles, collect seashells, and even play by the water. I didn't think it would be that fun," she said, the moonlight on the water shimmering in her eyes, "Look, Brother Locke, the moonlight looks like silver sparkles on the sea's surface. How beautiful…"

"It's the 7th month right now," Lorist said smiling sweetly, "It's when the northern seas are the calmest. When the 11th month comes, it will become harsher, almost like what you saw in your childhood. Sailing then will definitely be very risky. I once sailed to The Northlands during the 11th month. The waves were so tall they could reach the ship's deck. Fortunately, the ships built by our house are sturdy. There's no worry of them being crushed by the waves."

Sylvia's eyes gleamed.

"Brother Locke, you're amazing," whispered she.

"Well," mumbled Lorist as he stroked his nose shyly, *Why do I feel like a middle-aged man tricking a little girl with a lollipop?*

Despite his slight sense of forbiddenness, Lorist couldn't help but feel a certain sense of pride and achievement from seeing Sylvia's adoring gaze.

Sylvia accosted Lorist and leaned on his body. He froze like a statue.

"Brother Locke, you still haven't told me about your experiences in the tournament," Sylvia whispered.

Lorist grit his teeth. He had known the time would come eventually.

"I'm sorry, Sylvia. Your grandfather brought up three requests I couldn't accept."

"I knew it," the girl sighed, "You wouldn't be accompanying me on this trip otherwise, would you? Can you tell me what the requests were?"

Thus, Lorist informed her about the requests without holding any detail back.

Sylvia turned around slowly and looked at Lorist with her starlight-like eyes.

"Brother Locke, don't you fancy me?"

"Sy-sylvia… I… I do like you, that much is true… But if it means having to e-exile them… It isn't f-fair to them… After all, t-they're my women and children, and I am their man and father. I f-feel responsible for their well being…"

Sylvia leaned on Lorist's chest. Her arms slipped around his waist, clasped his back, and drew him into a deep hug.

"I… I know, Brother Locke. I can see your sincerity in the first two requests. I don't blame you for turning down the third. In fact, if you had agreed to it, I would have looked down on you. It's because you aren't cruel and heartless that you stood your ground. I… I can't help but envy your lovers and children…"

The girl slipped into silent weeping as the last words left her mouth.

"H-hey, don't cry now Sylvia… It's my fault," mumbled Lorist in a panicked fit.

Sylvia raised her tear-covered face, her crystal eyes pierced into Lorist's soul.

"Kiss me…" she whispered.

Lorist's arms wrapped the princess in his embrace. He lifted her to him and the two kissed under the gentle gaze of the moon. In the corner of the deck, Blademaster Xanthi let out a soft sigh. She stayed quiet for a long moment before she spoke.

"It's getting late, Sylvia. You should get some sleep. You wouldn't want to catch a cold, the winds are rather chilly."

The pair separated. Lorist stared silently at Sylvia's red face, like a moon-rising on a wet evening, one last time before she darted for her cabin. He glared at Xanthi but only

got light giggles in return.

When they arrived at The Northlands, Sylvia told Lorist, "I'm going to return to the house. Brother Locke, you've already agreed to the first two requests for the sake of House Fisablen. As for the third, I should have a say in it since it concerns me directly. I'll make sure my grandfather understands and doesn't make an issue of it."

Lorist finally relaxed after the girl departed. He decided to take a stroll around the dominion instead of returning to Firmrock Castle right away.

Charade, busier than ever, rolled his eyes at Lorist once he returned.

"Aren't you carefree as always? Traveling with a beauty at a time like this…"

"Well, it's because you're here that I'm able to take it easy. Tell me, is there anything important going on within the dominion?" laughed Lorist.

Charade put down the folder in his hand.

"Did you forget Els is going to get married? The big day's on the 10th day of the 8th month," inquired he.

Oh, there was that too, thought Lorist as he slapped his forehead, "Ah, I think he mentioned it while we were still in Windbury. He said he was going to take Mancheny's daughter as his wife after he broke through to the gold rank. I think the ceremony will be held in Redriver Valley, at his manor. He also said that he would go to Morante to see his uncle and his other pals, so I gave him a three-month leave."

"Very well, we ought to present him with a great gift," Charade snickered, "I still remember he caused so much trouble during my wedding. I'll finally get my chance to pay him back. Haha, I'll definitely make sure he regrets what he did…"

Lorist wiped the sweat off his forehead.

To think this fatty would hold a grudge for such a long time! He's still on about that thing during his marriage even though his son's already a few years old!

Lorist knew Charade was just fooling around and wouldn't go too overboard, so he didn't interfere.

"Is there anything else?" asked Lorist.

"There are two pieces of good news and one bad one," said Charade.

"What are they?"

"Ovidis and Dulles have managed to break through to become gold ranks. The two remaining manors at Redriver Valley have owners now. As for the bad news, Jim failed his breakthrough and must take half a year off to recover according to the herbalist."

It was definitely good news for Ovidis and Dulles to succeed in their endeavors. Despite being a former bandit, Ovidis had been loyal ever since he pledged his allegiance, which was why Lorist trusted him deeply. Enough to give him command of the Thunderbolt Brigade. It was a definite improvement for him to breakthrough to the next rank.

As for Dulles, he had been traveling with Lorist ever since the days of Dawn Academy. Being the founder of the carroballista unit and its commander, he had gained many achievements over the last decade. However, his silver rank battleforce had caused him to stand out in a bad light even more among the commanders of his army. Now that he had broken through to the gold rank, he had become one of the 16 gold-ranked knights of the household. Being another person Lorist deeply trusted, he would definitely be utilized more often now.

It was too bad that the joy of hearing about Ovidis and Dulles's successes was dampened significantly by word of Jim's failure.

"Jim was in too much of a rush to break through," Charade sighed, "Even though he was injured in Hanayabarta's conquest, he insisted on trying to break through the moment he was reasonably healed. He might have stood a chance if he'd waited another six months. You ought to visit him when you're free. I checked on him a few days back and he seemed rather down and unstable."

Lorist nodded and was just about to say something when he heard hurried footsteps coming his way.

"Milord!" Tarkel yelled the moment he opened the door.

"Come in!"

Breathing raggedly, Tarkel reported, "Mi-milord… There's word from Iblia. On the 30th day of the 6th month, the four central duchies united and launched a military campaign against the Melein duchy. They sealed off the roads into and out of the duchies so we only got word from our informants fifteen days ago. We just received word that the duchies' army attacked Messen Castle on the 23rd day of the 6th month. Duke Melein also died on Mount Leiffdema surrounded by enemies. Melein's been completely wiped out!"

Chapter 328
Missed Initiative

Knight 1: Charade, also known as ‘The Fatty’, bore the title Chief Knight of the House and was a one-star gold rank. He was born in a family with a mercantile background and used to be the supervisor of Dawn Academy’s enforcement division. He was also one of Lorist's close friends.

Knight 2: Three-star-gold-ranked Grei Potterfang, nicknamed Pog, was of common birth and use to serve as a regiment leader in the Krissen Empire’s Whitelion Legion. He was the first gold-ranked knight to pledge allegiance to Lorist.

Knight 3: Loze Wales, nicknamed ‘Fiercetiger Loze’, was a peak three-star-gold-ranked knight whose father was a mercenary. After he matured, Loze joined the army and became one of the legion’s generals. He joined House Norton along with his friend, Potterfang.

Knight 4: Mons Malek, who bore the moniker ‘Ironface’, was a two-star gold rank of common birth who used to serve as a regiment leader in the Whitelion legion. After the legion’s dissolution, he joined Lorist along with Fiercetiger Loze.

Knight 5: Josk, affectionately called Joe, was a three-star gold ranked knight known as the ‘Divine Marksman’. He was born in a family of knights and was adopted by a noble. He joined Lorist for the sake of vengeance. He pledged to live life alone forever so that he wouldn't forget his deceased fiancee.

Knight 6: Chino Freiyar, a three-star gold rank who used to be a mercenary, had been forced into a labor camp because he had fought against some nobles. He was rescued by Lorist's convoy alongside his family and traveled to The Northlands to become a gold-ranked knight of the household.

Knight 7: Belnick, or ‘Beck the White-haired’, was a three-star gold ranked knight born to a servant family of the Norton household. When he was still a silver rank, he had been poisoned and remained in his sickbed for years before Lorist treated him. After being given a high-ranked battleforce manual, he eventually trained to the gold rank.

Knight 8: Brennan Evanport, known to most as Els, was a one-star gold rank who used to be a syndicate boss in Morante. He ended up following his close friend, Lorist, to The Northlands and became a silver-ranked knight of the house. After ten years of training, he eventually became a gold rank.

Knight 9: Waprey Terman, a one-star gold rank who was born in a family of freelance knights, was the first one to join Lorist's northbound convoy. Deeply trusted by Lorist, he got the position of the commander of the Raging Bear Knight Brigade.

Knight 10: Yuwen Ridest, nicknamed Yuriy, was a man from a line of shepherds from the grasslands. One of Lorist's close friends since the days of the academy, he joined Lorist's northbound convoy and eventually ended up being the commander of the light cavalry scouts.

Knight 11: Pajik, a one-star gold rank of common birth, had become the captive of the first young master of the Norton house during the time of the civil war. Following the first young master's death, he kept his word and was eventually knighted by Lorist when he returned to the dominion.

Knight 12: Senbaud, a two-star gold rank ex-pirate who had been forced to serve House Norton during one of Lorist's expropriation missions and eventually pledged allegiance to Lorist, was the commander of the Oceanic Legion.

Knight 13: Two-star-gold-ranked Jades used to be a slave. Originally a wandering knight, he had been captured and enslaved by a Hanayabartan slaver band and forced to fight for his masters' entertainment. He was eventually rescued when Lorist exterminated the kingdom and pledged his allegiance to his house.

Knight 14: Messen, a one-star gold rank who used to be a slave, used to be the captain of a village garrison before his enslavement. He eventually pledged allegiance to House Norton since he no longer had a home to return to.

Knight 15: Ovidis, nicknamed 'Big-beard', was a one-star-gold-ranked ex-bandit. After surrendering to Lorist and serving him, he eventually made many contributions to Lorist's cause. His trustworthiness and sincerity were the qualities that convinced Lorist to knight him.

Knight 16: One-star gold rank Dulles. Being of common birth, he had joined up with Lorist when he was still at Dawn Academy because he admired Lorist's

swordsmanship. Dulles was utilized extensively and was the one who founded the carroballista unit so monumental to the northbound convoy's success. He was also one of Lorist's favorite subordinates.

Those were the 16 gold-ranked knights under Lorist's command. Their reputation had yet to truly become widespread, and they had no way of knowing that they would eventually come to be known as the Raging-Bear King's 16 Wings. With the growing might of House Norton, the Raging Bear sharpened its claws. Eventually, the time when their reputation spread far across the whole of Grindia would come.

……

In the guards' residential quarters, Lorist walked through the corridor and stopped in front of a room with a red-colored door. The door was shut, but not locked. Upon pushing it open, Lorist saw someone lying face-flat on the bed.

"Didn't I tell you? I don't feel like eating. Don't bother me," said the person without raising his head when he heard the door open.

On the table beside the bed were some honeyed bread, wheat porridge, meat soup, roasted fish, and two baked apples. There was also some warm goats milk in a glass jar nearby.

"Hehe, the sick menu looks rather good. It's far better than what we had at Dawn Academy. I still remember when we only had black bread and wheat porridge and nothing else. I cry a little bit inside every time I eat it again," said Lorist, standing in front of the table, looking at the food.

The person on the bed started before he got up hurriedly and said, "Mi-milord… Why have you come?"

"To check on you, of course. I hear you've been depressed so much you won't eat."

The person sitting on the bed was none other than Jim, who had failed his attempt to break through to the gold rank. Lorist had come to visit him.

"I'm disappointed Jim, not for your failure, but your current condition. Failing a breakthrough isn't a big deal. You can always recover with enough time. As the second in command of my guards, don't tell me you don't have the courage to face a little setback? Waxima, Pete and some others have also failed before, but they didn't fall into

despair like you. Oh no, they're working hard to recover.The house trusts you all and will help you make your next breakthrough."

"Milord, it's my fault… I shouldn't have taken out my failure on others and cooped myself up in my room," said Jim with his head lowered.

Lorist sat down and stretched his hand to Jim's left hand.

"It's fine, as long as you recognize your mistake and learn from it. Make sure to finish your food and rest to recover your body. You will become my gold-ranked knight. For now, let me check what's going on with your body."

There were three methods with which a person could train their battleforce. The first was the basic method which one would use after awakening one's battleforce. It was the simplest and easiest to master and people of all battleforce attributes could use it. However, it was only good for use up to the iron rank. one would have to use a mid-to-high-ranked battleforce technique to breakthrough to the silver and gold ranks.

The second method involved the use of the standard battleforce technique taught in the military. The military battleforce technique was more complicated than the basic battleforce technique given its focus on attack techniques and practicality. Without a proper foundation in battleforce training, one might injure oneself from erroneous training techniques. Similar to the basic battleforce technique, the military battleforce technique could be used by battleforce users of any attribute, with most people able to reach the peak of the silver rank with it. Potterfang was one example of a person who reached the peak silver rank through training in the military battleforce technique. It was only after he started training in a high-ranked battleforce technique that fit his attribute that he broke through to become a gold-ranked knight.

The last kind of battleforce technique was the kind that was passed down from one generation after another in noble houses. One advantage of these techniques was that they were purer and could improve one's battleforce strength and output. Not only that, it could decrease the difficulty required to breakthrough to the next rank. Potterfang himself had to spend a lot of time getting acquainted with the different circulation diagrams of his high-ranked technique as he had developed many habits from using the military battleforce technique for too long. One had to keep circulating one's battleforce according to the high-ranked technique. Should one revert to the old military battleforce technique, one would fail when attempting to make a breakthrough like Jim, injuring oneself in the process.

That was the reason for the long time of seclusion training required before one broke through to the gold rank. Normally, breaking through from the bronze to silver ranks posed little problem as the major circulation diagrams only increased in complexity by a little. However, the major circulation diagrams for the gold rank was far too different from that of the silver rank. One had to spend large amounts of time to practice and get used to the new circulation diagrams to breakthrough to the gold rank.

For instance, a bronze rank only had to circulate their blood through 20 blood circulation nodes. The number could go up to 28 for iron ranks and a range of 36 to 45 for silver ranks. Gold ranks had to circulate through 80 to 100-odd blood circulation nodes. Only after one was familiar with the new major battleforce circulation cycle could one not make the mistake of using an old circulation path. That was what differentiated those who succeeded in breaking through to the gold rank from those who didn't, and was also the main reason people failed during their breakthrough.

Jim's situation was similar in that he had accidentally used an old battleforce circulation path while he was familiarizing himself with the new paths, causing the force within his bloodstream to clash and injure him. Currently, he was just like a cripple who could not use the slightest bit of battleforce. However, all he had to do was rest for half a year to recover. Not only that, he could start training with the high-ranked battleforce technique right away without having to retrain his old techniques. It would take him roughly eight months to a year to breakthrough the bronze and iron ranks to regain his former strength as a silver rank. Having experienced failure, he would still have gained some experience from the attempt so the effort was definitely not in vain.

After checking Jim's condition, Lorist offered some more words of consolation. Only after seeing that he had regained some spirit and finished his food did Lorist leave. When he arrived at his study at Firmrock Castle, he saw Tarkel waiting for him by the door.

"Milord, the detailed battle report was just delivered," reported Tarkel.

"Give me the report. Thanks for the hard work, go take some rest," said Lorist.

That report was about Melein’ destruction as a result of the death of Duke Melein, a rank 2 blademaster and one of the three renowned war gods of the former empire.

In the time of the empire, the first one to be hailed as war god was the Wargod Knight, Duke Yanjinov, commander in chief of the imperial troops. Too bad he perished during a great battle thirty years earlier during the conflict between the Empire and the Union. Duke Yanjinov was blamed for the mistake that saw the empire's only swordsaint die in an ambush. He was stripped title and land. He faded from the limelight not long after and died ten years later. His death caused the overly ambitious first and second princes to pull out all the stops and start the civil war.

The second one to be hailed as war god was Duke Fisablen, Wargod of the Plains. The old fox had resisted the grassland barbarians' invasions without a single failure for many years, but he hardly ever left his dominion and was far away from the empire's administrative center.

The third wargod was Duke Melein, mainly because he held the position of Commander of the Fiercegale Legion, one of the empire's three largest armies, for almost a decade. The difference between the imperial local defense legion that mainly defended the empire and the Whitelion legion that fought in conflicts with other nations was that Fiercegale specialized in dealing with internal threats such as revolts and bandits. The reputation gained by Fiercegale over hundreds of battles was far less in comparison to that gained by Whitelion, which fought in open and large-scale battles. Even so, Fiercegale had come to specialize in mobility and flexibility thanks to Duke Melein's training. It had impressive offensive capabilities.

When Duke Melein wedded his beloved 16-year-old daughter to Third Prince Andinaq and united his house with the imperial family, he retired from his position as Commander of the Fiercegale Legion and returned to his dominion to spend the rest of his life. When the civil war began, however, Duke Melein had to stand at the third prince's side and fight the second prince's forces frequently. Even though there were some battles lost, in the end, he still managed to ruin Southern and successfully suppress the second prince. However, because Duke Fisablen was on the second prince's side, there was nothing much Duke Melein could do about the prince.

After the civil war, Duke Melein formed the Melein duchy. Originally, he had been on good terms with the four central duchies and had trade relations with them for quite some time. However, when the second highness rallied his soldiers and embarked upon his quest to reunite the empire, the duke had greatly supported him. When the second highness ended up trapped in Frederika, Duke Melein responded by attacking Shabaj with his troops. He hoped it would enough to help the second highness out. But, due to the years of fighting Melein had gone through, the duchy had long

expended most of its resources. Duke Melein ended up unable to help the second highness much and gaining four new enemies for himself in the process.

The attack on Frederika by the four central duchies exterminated most of the second highness' remaining troops. While they didn't manage to find the second highness himself, they managed to stabilize the situation and decided to take out Melein and his duchy. Perhaps because they thought the second highness was hiding in Messen Castle, they decided to go all out to kill him lest he causes more trouble in the future. So, the four central duchies contacted Duke Fisablen and stated their intentions to invade the duchy without warning.

Duke Melein, who was trapped in his own castle, found that his soldiers were far too weak to resist the enemy's assault, so he abandoned The castle in an attempt to break out of the encirclement. He was stopped by Duke Fisablen's cavalry divisions at Mount Leiffdema. He was killed on the battlefield by ten arrows.

According to the report, Melein and Rimad provinces were absorbed by Shabaj whereas Duke Fisablen moved more than 100 thousand people from the duchy to Eastwild. It was said that it was part of the agreement between Duke Fisablen and the four central duchies.

I totally missed the initiative! Lorist sighed, *Duke Fisablen hid everything from me and I wasn't able to find out why the two dukes were there. I thought they were going for Princess Sylvia just like I was…*

If I knew their target was Melein, I could've taken Southern and Winston after Duke Fisablen deployed his troops and trapped them in Melein. I would've been able to force House Fisablen to give in to my demands and may even have stood a chance at taking Wild Husbandry! I could've made them reliant on House Norton for their survival and eliminated a target for worry while I was at it!

Now that the chance is missed, the effort to bring in more refugees from those two provinces will be affected. Before this, Duke Fisablen wanted it for his own dominion but he wasn't able to do so as his house didn't have that much money. However, now that they've conquered the greater and lesser golden creeks, their financial crisis is solved and they're also able to afford buying gear from our house to strengthen their forces. They will be able to import labor from Southern and Winston to solve their lack of manpower.

The most important part is that without Melein, Duke Fisablen gains a reliable route to the four central duchies. He might e en be able to send livestock over there in droves and trade with them for the resources he needs instead of with the salt merchant committee… our monopoly is in shambles! We are no longer able to control House Fisablen's trade!

Lorist shook his head as he looked at the map and thought that the house would definitely face heavy opposition from House Fisablen if he tried to conquer Iblia. Now that Duke Fisablen had the support of the four central duchies, there would definitely be a huge war in Winston and Southern. The unforeseeable missed initiative had cost more than Lorist had imagined!

"Have all the knights leading the three legions to gather at Firmrock Castle for a strategy meeting. Also, send someone to notify our allies. Have Count Kenmays, Baron Felim, and Baron Shazin come over to discuss the expansion of our influence."

Chapter 329
Dominion Replacement

"Do you want to take a whole province for yourself?" asked Lorist Count Kenmays, who was busy picking some fine wine off the racks.

The count was the fastest among the three and had already arrived. Baron Felim and Baron Shazin would take another day.

"You're finally going to act?" asked Count Kenmays with two bottles of wine in his hands.

Lorist nodded.

"Which province? I don't want the bad ones," said the count.

"See for yourself," said Lorist as he pointed at the purplish-black veil that was on the wall.

Count Kenmays put the wine bottles down and pushed the veil aside to reveal a large map on which two red arrows were drawn. One was pointed at Wild Husbandry while the other was pointed at Delamock.

"Are you going to act against the Madras duchy and House Fisablen?" Kenmays asked, "Can we really hold off against the combined attacks of those two?"

Lorist shook his head. "We can't attack both sides at once. What we have to prepare for now is to attack Madras first and conquer the Metropoulos River’s northern streams. In other words, we have to take control of the floating bridges that are sealed off there to connect Delamock with The Northlands.

"We can thus increase our four houses’ spheres of influence. We will then turn our blades to Iblia to see whether we have an opportunity to swallow up Winston and Southern.

"However, before this can happen, we need your houses to move to fitting dominions.

As your armies are built to be greater in defense than offense, you won't be much of a threat against House Fisablen. So, I have to take over the eastern part of The Northlands, which is where your dominion is situated. I can only station Tigersoar there to put pressure on Duke Fisablen that way. He'll have to station at least one of his cavalry legions opposite me to be at peace."

Count Kenmays walked to Lorist's front and felt Lorist's forehead with his palm, before raising three fingers and asking, "What number is this?"

Lorist glared at the count angrily and said, "What are you up to?"

Count Kenmays said, "It seems you don't have a fever. So I take it you're serious about what this. Do you think attacking the Madras duchy will be an easy feat? That old turtle Duke Madras has done nothing but build fortresses and citadels and other defensive fortifications across his dominion all these years. Even though the Metropoulos River's northern streams are rather peaceful, the opposite shore is full of defensive walls and barricades as well as moats, not to mention that we won't be able to get ashore given how our boats won't make it to the opposite side. I recall that punk Hennard telling me that he had wanted to procure some fresh fish and had some of his men construct some boats to fish at the river When his men got a little too close to the opposite shore, two of the boats were sunk and seven or eight men drowned. He was so mad he almost went to war.

"Also, just look at the border between Iblia and Madras, the intersection point between Winston and Delamock. Back when Duke Madras defeated the second prince at Kobo, he managed to reclaim the southeastern area of Delamock. To stop the second prince from once again breaching the south, the duke spent three whole years building seven citadels around Sanderson Hills. That area is basically an iron wall defended by more than 40 thousand troops. When the salt merchant committee deals with them, we have to pass through that area. While you might not know much about it, I've seen how strongly defended that area is for myself. Are you going to waste all your soldiers conquering the citadels over there?"

"Are you done?" Lorist asked, rolling his eyes, "You don't have to worry about how we attack the area. I have confidence in my ways to take down the duchy."

"Confidence, eh?" Kenmays said, unconvinced, "Locke, I really don't understand… Even if Duke Fisablen refused to let Sylvia marry you, you have to maintain your calm. You shouldn't act like this just because you received a bit of a shock. War is not to be

initiated this recklessly."

Not knowing whether he should be humored or annoyed, Lorist said, "This has nothing to do with Sylvia."

"Then why are you in such a rush?" Kenmays asked, "Right now, the salt merchant committee has a monopoly on the daily necessities and salt of Duke Fisablen's dominion. If you're patient enough, we will eventually be able to control their salt supply and limit our trade on the products to force the duke to lower his head to us. If he doesn't want his dominion to fall into chaos and revolt, he has to abide by our demands. You can take up your role as groom then. This is also war on the business front. At any rate, it's better than taking our weapons out carelessly, right?"

"The Melein duchy is gone," said Lorist, shrugging.

"What did you say?" the count asked, not having heard it clearly enough, "What is gone?"

"The four central duchies worked with House Fisablen to attack Melein. Duke Melein died on the battlefield and the duchy is no more. I have a detailed report in the blue folder on my desk," said Lorist as he pointed at the folder he mentioned.

Kenmays leaped over and flipped the folder open before he jumped and exclaimed, "Deploy our troops! We have to attack immediately! We have to take Southern as soon as possible! We have to seal the trade route between Eastwild and the four duchies! We can't let our years of effort go down the drain like this! If we don't, even if we stop supplying salt, the four central duchies will provide House Fisablen with large amounts of it. If House Fisablen takes control of the trade route, then the salt merchant committee's monopoly on the three provinces under their control will be ruined!"

Count Kenmays had made a 180-degree turn from a pacifist to a warmonger in mere moments.

Lorist laughed and coughed as he tried to pull Kenmays to the couch before he brought him a cup of wine.

"Calm down. Now, you understand why I said we should act, don't you? It's obvious that Duke Fisablen's relationship with the four central duchies is growing by the day and he might eventually end up our enemy. If we don't take down Madras, The Northlands will only have two metal suspension bridges to rely on and might be cut

off from the rest of the continent should Duke Fisablen attempt to do so.

"That's the reason I've decided to act against Madras. After we conquer it, we will move your dominion there and station Tigersoar in your current dominion to add pressure to the troops at Wild Husbandry. It will force the duke to station more troops on our border to rebalance the power disparity, diverting resources from the defense of the kingdom and allowing us to take Winston. We will gain the initiative to press our attack or defend our ground."

Count Kenmays took another sip of the wine in his cup before walking to the map.

"So which province are you going to make my dominion?"

"This one," Lorist said as he pointed at Sidgler, "This is the old lair of Duke Madras and I am going to let this place be your replacement dominion. You should know well the advantages this province provides. It's easy to defend and incredibly hard to attack, with the only passageway to the outside world being Xith Citadel. Additionally, Platinum Beach is also there with no other landed nobles around either, so you won't have any trouble to deal with in the future. That's far better than your current dominion in the eastern Northlands."

Kenmays grit his teeth before he said, "That's not enough. It'll be hard for me to answer to the rest of the house if all I get is Sidgler Province. However, if you can do Delamock, then there's no problem."

“That won't do,” Lorist said, shaking his head, “I need to split Delamock into multiple smaller fiefs, so I can’t hand it to you."

"Fiefs? Are you going to found a kingdom?"

"No. There are still 17 nobles staying at Firmrock Castle. It’s because we conquered their dominions. We owe them new fiefs. I'm not going to let them have their new dominions in The Northlands, so Delamock’s land will be enfeoffed to these nobles. The land there is rich and fit for agriculture, so I'm sure they'll be happy to agree. Additionally, the household knights that gain enough achievements will be made vassal houses one day, and I plan to give them fiefs in Delamock as well, " explained Lorist.

"I see. My house is also taking care of five Northlander nobles deprived of their dominions. Why don't you make similar arrangements for them and give my house

Vanades? They would agree to a relocation if that's the case," said Kenmays, attempting a compromise.

"There'll be no problem with moving the five nobles to Delamock," Lorist said, shaking his head, "But I can't hand you Vanades. It's the largest city in the duchy and the largest trading hub in the entire northwestern area. There's no doubt that it will become the center of our dominions' trade once we take it. I can't let your house have sole control over the city. I can let you be the city's custodians. You can have it for the first five years, and, if you do well, you can keep the position for another term. Additionally, I'll make it up to your house and construct a port for you at the coasts so you can form your own trading fleet."

"Are you serious?" Kenmays said, wide-eyed, "You can actually make a port at the Cursed Coasts? You're not kidding me, are you?"

Lorist took out a rolled-up diagram from his scroll bin and handed it to Kenmays.

"See for yourself. This is the blueprint for a wooden-box port that allows offshore activities. My house already has two at the Bladedge Mountains and they're holding up pretty well. Your house can also use this flexible port to trade and ship things across the sea. However, if you want to build a more permanent port that can weather the strong winds, you still have to reclaim the land for a proper structure to be constructed."

Kenmays held onto the blueprint like he would a delicate heirloom.

"Alright, I'll agree. When can we relocate?"

To the count, born to a line of merchants, controlling a trade route was akin to gaining a way to generate incessant profits. It was far better than their gold mine at the eastern Northlands which would run dry sooner or later anyway, so he was more than willing to make the trade.

"There's no rush. We still need a bit of time but I can promise you the relocation will happen next year," said Lorist.

"Do you need me to do anything? If you need our forces on the battlefield, feel free to let me know," offered Kenmays generously.

"No, I won't be needing it. Our forces will take Sidgler and pass it to you in good

condition. All you have to do is to fortify your new dominion, then station your troops at Vanades to keep the Andinaq kingdom's soldiers in Yungechandler in check. You'll have to watch out for attacks from Farkel and Shabaj to your east. Even though the only connection between the two nations is the 500-kilometer path through Egret Lake, you can't be too careful."

"No worries. While our forces aren't good at attacking, we're more than capable of defending ourselves. What of Baron Felim and Hennard's arrangements then?" Kenmays inquired.

Lorist tapped on the southeastern area of Delamock.

"After conquering this, I will give it to Hennard. Since both he and Baron Felim are nobles with military backgrounds, unlike you, their forces will be relatively better in offense. Sanderson Hills is the two provinces' point of intersection. If Hennard is there, he can attack Winston and reinforce Vanades should it come under attack.

"At the same time, I will construct a few floating bridges over the Metropoulos River's northern streams to link The Northlands to Delamock. You don't have to worry about how I'll come to your aid in the future. As for Baron Felim, his dream is to reclaim House Pegasus' old dominion in Southern, which they had occupied for over a century previously. We will help him fulfill his dream.

"Southern's been completely ruined by the wars. If Baron Felim wishes to restore the glory of House Pegasus, he'll need to invest a lot; he'll need our help as well. If we can occupy Southern, we'll have caged the lion called Duke Fisablen. By then, we won't have to worry about that old fox causing us trouble anymore. As long as we can cut off the dominion's trade, the old fox will have no choice but to play nice."

"What do you plan on doing with these two?" asked Kenmays, tapping on Winston and Windbury.

"If everything goes well, Southern will go to Baron Felim. I will use Winston to settle in the nobles that join our faction. When we attack Madras, there's bound to be nobles who surrender. I will relocate their dominions to Winston. I also plan to make it the trading hub of the southeastern area like Vanades to develop the land surrounding it," said Lorist.

"Locke," Kenmays said, eyes flashing, "You should found a kingdom after you conquer

Madras and Iblia. The Norton Kingdom… I can't help but think about how splendid that sounds. Naturally, I would be willing to become a Norton noble."

Lorist exploded with laughter.

"We'll see. It's not too late to consider it after Duke Fisablen properly submits. For now, we only have to focus on taking Madras and ensuring the first phase of our plan succeeds. When Hennard and Felim arrive, we'll have another formal discussion. We'll require their cooperation, after all."

"Locke, I'm actually quite curious what gave you the confidence that you'll be successful in taking Madras. Don't be mistaken, Madras is no turtle. It's a shriveled up porcupine. If we get dragged into a drawn-out war, even if we end up winning, we'll lose far more than we gain. It would be even harder for us to deal with House Fisablen in the future if that happens," said Kenmays.

"Don't worry, I have my own methods. When Hennard and Felim come over, I will bring you all to see our secret weapon," said Lorist as he nodded again, confidently.

"What secret weapon?"

"You'll know when the time comes."

"Come on, Locke, don't be so petty! Can't you tell me about it first?"

"Nope."

Chapter 330
Plan of Attack

"Fire!"

Ten large, wooden constructions hummed momentarily. Ten long staves flipped ninety degrees from the horizontal to the vertical. Ten basin sized lumps of rock arched through the sky. They shrunk over the course of two or three seconds until they vanished, as if they'd popped out of existence entirely. Three or four long seconds of silence passed before, in the distance, several dust clouds popped into existence, followed a second later by as many loud thumps and the sound of crashing and crushing stone. When the dust cleared, a heap of rubble became visible. At the two edges of the mound, a few stones stood packed on one another, trying their best to remind the observer that there had indeed once been a wall.

Count Kenmays, Baron Felim, and Baron Shazin stared wide-eyed at the ruin in the distance. They had sworn just moments earlier that only through the reckless swarming of soldiers without regard for casualties, with the use of siege ladders, could that very wall be conquered. Only after wearing down the defending forces by paying a high price could one take it.

They never expected Lorist only needed to instruct Ovidis to bring ten thunderbolt catapults over and set them up about 350 meters from the wall. Lorist only needed a few minutes to undo what was likely years' work. They felt like complete fools for saying what they had.

"The next target will be the tower on the right. Prepare the flame meteors!" ordered Ovidis once more.

Flame meteors were spherical balls wrapped up in rope and doused with fuel. They were first placed inside a metal catapult bucket before a soldier set it aflame. The ten stone balls were soon burning brightly.

"Fire!"

The flaming balls soared through the air towards a rectangular structure on a hill in

the distance. The structure was quite a bit smaller than the wall had been – granted, after the last volley the two were now about even – so several shots missed. They weren't far off, though, and landed just beside it. Those that missed set fire to the leaves around the structure, whilst those that hit made three large holes in it. Soon smoke billowed out the of the holes to join the smoke already rising from the ground around the tower.

"This is amazing," Felim praised, "With such a weapon in hand, we won't have to worry about any castle standing in our way!"

"So this is where all your confidence came from!" Kenmays said, tugging on Lorist's arm excitedly, "Hahaha, I bet Duke Madras can't imagine that he won't be able to resist our attack anyway regardless of how hard he tries to shrink up like a turtle! We'll be able to raze his defenses to the ground without anyone being able to stop us! Well, he only stands a chance if he confronts us in a field battle… Perhaps not even then! Hehe, he'll lose even faster if he comes out of his shell."

"Locke, give me a few! I want to obliterate the sentry outpost and the walls near the stream!" Shazin said with both his hands clasped.

It seemed that he held quite a deep grudge against those who manned the defenses at the northern stream.

"Don't be in such a rush. 'll sell you as many as you want after we take the duchy. However, Hennard, I will allow you to lead Ovidis to the stream so you can exact your revenge. We'll force the duke to gather his forces there in response to our surprise attack. After you return, gather your men to make as many rafts as possible. We will load our catapults onto the rafts and bring them across the river. Naturally, we'll be sending as many woodworkers and boat makers as we can to help you," said Lorist with a smile.

"No problem. I'll get the required materials and manpower ready when I return. However, Locke, won't we alert the duke of our activities if we start building rafts on our side of the shore?"

"Don't worry, it's all the better if they are alerted. What we want is for the for the duchy to concentrate there as much as possible so the defense at other places is weakened."

Shazin Hennard rubbed his palms together.

"Hehe, well, I was just saying what came through my mind. With Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade helping me out, I'm confident I'll be able to storm my way through and raze the seven citadels all the way across Sanderson Hills to the ground. My rage will only calm if I do so much."

Lorist shook his head and said, "I would advise against doing that, Hennard. Don't forget that Sanderson Hills is where your dominion will be. It won't be good for you if it's ruined. Actually, I have a method to force the soldiers defending it to surrender and hand the seven citadels over. You don't even have to bother considering how you will deploy your troops. It'll save you both time and effort, which is ideal."

"You're saying we should go straight for Vanades right after busting through the defense line at Metropoulos; that we should take Xith Castle and storm all the way to Sidgler in one go? So we're going to give this attack our all and capture Duke Madras dead or alive to force the rest of the soldiers to surrender, right?" asked Felim.

"Well, that's the best plan we have for now," Lorist said, nodding, "Unless we have a better strategy when the time comes, that's how this will all play out. Our only worry after crossing the stream is encountering the duke's heavy-armored soldiers, which would drag the conflict on unnecessarily. Even though we have a weapon like the catapults, we must still be wary of any accidents.

"Even if Duke Madras is nothing but an aging turtle, he's one that has years of experience. We must not be careless in the slightest. It's the 8th month right now, we'll launch a few probing attacks at the end of the 10th month to see if we can lure more of their troops to the wilds to weather the elements. If the soldiers spend their time camping outside in the winter to defend against our attacks, they'll be severely worn out by spring. That will be our chance to strike."

After Kenmays, Felim, and Shazin went their way, Potterfang met with Lorist.

"Milord, I heard you're going to sell the catapults to our allies?"

"That's right. What's wrong?"

Potterfang stood ramrod straight.

"Milord, I am against it. Even though the three houses are our allies, the catapults are secret weapons only our house has. It's the ideal tool for besieging castles and defending them. Selling these weapons might introduce a new threat for which we

have to watch out."

“It’s not as serious as you think,” Lorist laughed, “The catapult will be outdated soon enough."

"Outdated? That can't be. How could anything outstrip the catapult?"

"Did you forget about the bronze cannons the Oceanic Legion employs? Grandmaster Sid and Professor Balbo have already perfected the cannons for ground use. Their power far exceeds that of the catapults. These catapults are only standing targets for our cannons. I've already instructed Howard to pick a group of reliable people and train them as cannoneers. In time, the gun carriage will be part of your legion’s arsenal."

"Understood, Milord. Please excuse my rudeness. I wasn't aware of it," said Potterfang.

“It’s fine,” Lorist said, waving his hand dismissively, “If I know you as well as I think I do, you must've been prompted to confront me about that issue by the others, right? I'm sure you know that we already have our own plans regarding this just from Charade's silence. If selling the catapults would truly have endangered our house, he would definitely have been the first to throw a tantrum."

"Milord, I should've known better…”

"Don't worry about it. Have you gathered the Oceanic Legion and Firmrock legion’s leaders yet? If they're here, we'll start the meeting right away."

……

Facing a group of knights gathered tightly together, Lorist used a long, fine stick to point to the large map.

"What I'm telling you now is our real attack plan; even our allies aren't aware of it. They believe we will launch our attack from the Metropoulos’ lower stream after Thunderbolt Brigade has pulverized the enemy’s defenses and forced them into the open. Actually, that part of the plan is just bait to lure Madras into deploying its forces by the river, thus pulling forces from other front’s, weakening them.

"Our true target is here," Lorist said as he pointed at a spot on the map, "Sidgler province’s Platinum Beach. We will launch our attack at the end of the 12th month."

Apart from Charade and the rest who could already see what was coming, many household knights expressed gasps of disbelief.

"This attack will be headed by Firmrock with the aid of the Oceanic Legion. You may ask any questions you have now," said Lorist as he looked at the chattering knights.

Potterfang stood up.

“Milord, going on shore during the winter season is a rather huge risk due to the winds. The waves and winds in the northern seas have always been rather harsh during winter and we may incur heavy casualties if we're not careful."

“Senbaud, I'll let you respond to Potterfang's query."

"Sir Potterfang,” Senbaud explained, “in the recent years, I've had people document the weather changes over the seasons in the northern seas and discovered that between the 32nd day of the 12th month and the 35th day, which is a few days before the coming of the new year, the northern seas will be incredibly calm. No accidents will occur If we sail to their shores during that time. Apart from using the smaller boats to travel ashore, Our Lord has also ordered us to prepare lots of wooden box parts. We only need ten hours to build two floating ports that connect to the shores for our comrades to go ashore from our ships safely."

Malek stood up next and asked, "Milord, how will we get our troops ashore without being detected by the local garrisons? Sidgler is the duke’s headquarters; if our movements are discovered, the odds of our surprise attack being successful will plummet greatly. After all, the enemy is cooped up in the city and has the defender’s advantage."

Lorist nodded in acknowledgment before he addressed the point.

"Actually, between the 32nd and 35th days of the 12th month in the past two years, I've sent people to go ashore on Platinum Beach for a survey. We noticed that the defenses at Sidgler during that time is rather lax because nobody expects there could be an attack at that time. Over here lies the city of Edelise, named after the duke's daughter. It’s also where the duke's household is situated.

"Every winter, Duke Madras will invite the nobles across his duchy to gather there for a celebration and to count down to the new year. That is when the defenses at Edelise will be at its most lax, which is also part of the reason I decided to launch an attack

during the 12th month. Getting off the shore is so that we can capture all the nobles gathered at Edelise in one go. We won't have to plow through entire duchy to find them this way.

"Our plan is to deploy, launch a surprise attack to conquer Edelise, and use the seal of the duke right away to transfer their soldiers away or take Xith Castle by surprise, followed by Vanades and Kobo. Through this one route, we will have conquered three cities in one go. This way, the duchy will be good as gone. I will be in one of the first batches of people to participate in this surprise attack."

"Milord, you don't have to take such a huge risk. Just leave this attack to us. We will not disappoint you," Potterfang protested.

"Duke Madras has a rank 2 blademaster by his side," Lorist argued, "He is my target. Firmrock will have to be transferred to a temporary campsite at the foot of Bladedge Mountains to prepare for the battle. In the meantime, Pog, Malek, you two must make sure to train the soldiers to board and disembark from the ships so they don't screw up during the actual mission."

"Understood, Milord."

"Freiyar, when the Firmrock legion leaves Silowas, I want you to lead a local defense division and defend the island."

"Yes, Milord."

"As long as we can conquer Kobo, the duchy's bread basket, the troops guarding the seven citadels at Sanderson Hills, and those gathered near the riverbank will lose all their supplies and face surrender or collapse. That's how we take Madras during the winter. I hope you will all lead the house to success!"

"Yes, Milord!"

"Alright, meeting adjourned. Fiercetiger Loze, Dulles, Joe, and Yuriy, I want you to stay back for a bit."

Apart from the aforementioned four, Charade also stayed.

"If everything goes well, we will have to face House Fisablen right after taking Madras," Lorist said with a solemn tone, "After the relocation of Count Kenmays, Tigersoar will

be stationed in the eastern area of The Northlands to apply pressure to the troops in Wild Husbandry. But given Tigersoar's trait as a heavy-armored cavalry unit, it will find it hard to deal with the mobile and agile cavalry troops of Duke Fisablen. That's why I've already discussed forming a brand new light cavalry division similar to those of the duke with Charade, which shall be called the Jaeger legion, the troops will be known as mounted jaegers. Joe will be the legion commander and Yuriy his second-in-command."

Josk looked surprised and seemed to have something to say, but Lorist raised his hand to stop him.

"Joe, I don't think there is anyone more fitting to lead the legion than you. Yuriy is also working as your aide of his own will. The best countermeasure we have against the duke's cavalry are the mounted jaegers. The only other method we have to deal with them is to crush them with pure numbers in an open field battle, but we're fighting in the grasslands, the duke's home turf, he won't afford us that kind of luxury. We will also suffer in terms of terrain. I have put my hopes in you. Do you think you're up to it?"

"Milord, I will definitely not let you down," Josk started.

Lorist patted on Josk's shoulder.

"We don't have much time. After we take Madras, it will take about a year for the situation to stabilize, including having the Kenmays and Shazin houses relocate. But after the year passes, we will have to deal with House Fisablen. Joe, Yuriy, I have already ordered all the legions to allow you to recruit from them. You can pick whoever you think are fitting for the Jaeger legion, but make sure to leave some people in the groups from which you recruit. Even so, you only have a year to get the new legion in shape. Do you think you can do it?"

Josk and Yuriy stood up, saluted to Lorist, and said in unison, "Understood, Milord. Please be assured that you will not be disappointed."

Chapter 331
Incident and New Equipment

Charade rushed into Lorist's room with a folder in his arms.

“What's going on?" Lorist asked, raising his head.

Charade laughed bitterly.

"There was an incident while the Firmrock legion was practicing their landings. One of the rafts flipped over. Only 7 of the 25 onboard at the time survived."

Firmrock was the main force of the house’s invasion of Madras. Their camp had been moved to Whitestone Beach in the middle of the passage near Bladedge Mountains, the beach the four families lf Wildnorth Town had used as a part of their smuggling route. Reaching Sidgler province from the beach only took six short hours. Lorist had scheduled the invasion two months from now. Firmrock would be aided by the Oceanic Legion. No one had expected an accident, especially not one of this nature.

"How did it happen?"

"According to Potterfang, the rafts we’re using are designed to be lifeboats, not landing craft. The soldiers can’t control them well and they flip quite easily in a swell or strong breeze. The soldiers are also fully kitted – they are very heavy. They sink straight down once they’re in the water, even with a lofe-log. Firmrock just submitted a request for the improvement of the deployment rafts and equipment for emergency situations at sea," said Charade as he took out a beastskin document and handed it to Lorist.

Lorist stood up, his face dark.

This is due to my carelessness. When I came up with the plan, I didn't think the deployment through properly enough. The lifeboats we're using are far too bad at resisting the waves and winds.

It would be fine if those using them were sailors who knew how to swim and were also trained to preserve their lives as best as they could at sea. But most of the soldiers

being deployed by ship didn't know how to swim. Coupled with their full load of armor and weapons, they would be no different from iron blocks should the raft flip. Even though it was but a small accident, the lives of 18 household soldiers had been lost just like that. The wooden planks they used as floats that would be thrown to an overboard man were not of much use either, given the soldiers' weight.

Lorist took up his quill and began drawing a few sketches of life jackets and some circular floats.

"Send these drawings to the metal refinery and have Supervisor Camorra make them. Stuff the jackets with small pieces of wood. As for these circular floats, they will be made out of wood and put around one's waist to keep one afloat."

With life jackets and waist floats, drowning was no longer an urgent concern.

What should I do about the landing craft? Adding a keel will help with the tipping but the raft will sit deeper in the water? So it won't be able to get as close to shore…

Given that the time the soldiers would be deployed was around the end of the 12th month, the chilling weather made it so that no one would be able to resist the low temperatures of the water which might leave traumatizing injuries.

Wait, if I can't add a keel to the bottom of the raft, I can add more planks at the side. Not only would that increase the surface area of the raft to aid with buoyancy, allowing more weight to be carried, the weight would also be more evenly distributed. That's it! thought Lorist as inspiration flashed across his mind.

He began drawing a flat-bottomed landing craft that had three long poles laid horizontally on the boat, with each side having large planks that made contact with the surface of the water. The spaces between the three sticks would allow for the boat to be rowed forward without interference.

"Alright, this will do. These three horizontal poles will not be fixed in place to allow the boat to approach the shores more effectively. First, we'll deploy the boat as it is, install the three horizontal poles and load our soldiers on board. This will help reduce the chances of the boat from flipping over. I'll need you to have someone from the shipyard at Bullhorn Bay construct a few prototypes for Potterfang to test. Send some worksmiths over as well so we can change the design as needed," said Lorist as he handed Charade the blueprints.

Charade nodded and took out another file from his folder.

“Milord, this is a report from the Jaeger Legion. Josk and Yuriy have picked 28 thousand members from the various legions and garrisons and formed the legion’s first division, numbering five brigades of three thousand men, further divided into four regiments. There are also a carroballista regiment and a logistics regiment that have five thousand horses, 100 carroballistae and 100 four-wheeled cargo carriages. The second division is still under construction. So far, they're still recruiting members from the dominion."

"Oh?" Lorist mused, "Why does the Hunter Rider Legion need carroballistae? Shouldn't they focus only on swift attacks and retreats? Wouldn't carroballistae slow them down instead?"

Charade looked at the file and said, "Milord, Josk says that it's for the protection of his logistics unit from being attacked by enemy troops when the main unit is out for assault. That way, their horses and supplies would be safely guarded. Should they lose their supplies, the whole legion would crumble from having nothing to feed the horses with."

Lorist gave it some thought and nodded.

"Alright. Since Josk and Yuriy are in charge of the Jaeger Legion, I trust their judgment. They may have Supervisor Camorra send them the carroballistae they need."

"There's one more thing. Josk and Yuriy both submitted a request yesterday, asking for us to confirm the ranged weapons and other equipment they will use for their legion so that they can begin training to raise their mastery to increase combat ability. They think the current equipment of the household soldiers aren't suitable for use for the legion. They hope the house will provide even stronger armor."

"I already know that without needing them to tell me. This afternoon, Grandmaster Sid and Grandmaster Fellin will bring the aforementioned items here. You should stay back and check them out too. I've already had Els send for Josk and Yuriy," Lorist said, "Is there anything else?"

Charade brought out yet another document and said, "Milord, this is the report Supervisor Spiel submitted. During the past two years, the house has been spending money like water. We've already reorganized 20 local defense brigades in the previous

year, costing us almost three million gold Fordes. Not only that, the transportation of the liberated slaves to The Northlands for the development of Greatriver is estimated to cost a million. Coupled with the cost of other miscellaneous spendings, the house is over budget by almost five million gold Fordes.

"Even though we'll be able to earn that amount in our deal with Duke Fisablen, the research funds of one million gold Fordes each you intend to allocate to Grandmaster Sid and the gunpowder lab, the two million gold Fordes you've used to purchase warships for the Oceanic Legion, as well as the cost of giving away daily necessities, buying military supplies, and the payment of pensions all amount to one million gold Fordes. We've already spent most of what we earned from the arms deal.

"And now, we're trying to form a whole new legion which will cost us at least three million. Your preparations to attack Madras will easily cost us a million as well. And don't forget the relocation of House Kenmays which will also cost a million gold. The various costs you have to bear for launching Dawn Academy at The Northlands will also cost quite a significant amount, making us over budget by six million gold Fordes this year.

"Supervisor Spiel wrote this report to caution us on our spending. Even if the extermination of Hanayabarta netted us a staggering 27 million gold Fordes, our treasury will run dry if you keep spending like this, Milord."

Lorist laughed like it was the most natural thing to do.

"Supervisor Spiel's always like this. He can't help but stuff the treasury full with gold coins. I'm sure you know that gold coins won't reproduce in our treasuries. If you take inflation into account, one cow that costs five gold Fordes this year will cost seven to eight in a few years. Only by reintroducing the gold coins into the market can we gain even more of them. Even though my recent spending is huge, that doesn't mean it’s done recklessly. These are all investments to solidify the foundation of the house's future."

Charade made a bitter smile.

"Milord, this is 27 million gold Fordes we're talking about. While I can agree with what you said about investment, I feel the investments we make won't pay off until the time of our grandchildren. If we didn't form a new legion and sink funds into military conflicts, our income during the past two years is actually rather good. If we're savvy,

we'll have a net profit of a few hundred thousand gold Fordes.

"Additionally, the house's policy is to enrich the commoners. We've already completed development on Felicitas, Salus, Redriver Valley and Northsea, but we're only charging 40 percent in taxes, 30 for the household of garrison soldiers, and 20 for our household soldiers and officials' families, while only ten for the households of our knights. Even though some of the tax collected remains after paying off the administrative costs, it doesn't help at all with the spending of our military.

"So far, our military spending is dependent on the business of the factories the house helped launched as well as the profits we gain from selling daily necessities to the territories of House Fisablen and the Iblia kingdom through the salt merchant committee. But if House Fisablen really establishes a trade route to the four central duchies, their purchases from the salt merchant committee will no doubt decrease. Should that ever happen, our military expenditure will be nothing but an unnecessary burden.

"Milord, Supervisor Spiel has suggested that the house raise the tax rate by ten percent across the board and increase our shares of the factories and shops our house helped open from 30 to 50 percent. As for the smaller stalls and shops that we only collect ten percent of earnings from, we'll raise it to 30 percent. Compared to the other nobles who take 60 to 70 percent, we're still far better off. Not only that, we'll be able to collect an estimated additional 300 thousand gold Fordes from doing so which can sustain a little more than half of our military expenditure."

Lorist shook his head.

"Raising taxes is one of the dumbest things we can do. There are many ways we can get the common folk to give us the coin in their pockets. Just leave Supervisor Spiel's report over here, I will write him a reply when I'm free. While I am thankful for his consideration and contributions to the house, I can't use his suggestion at all because that would sway the loyalty and trust our subjects have in us."

"Alright then. I will sort out the things you want done. See you later in the afternoon," said Charade before he left.

……

At noon, Lorist shared lunch with the pregnant Dilianna. She had already been

pregnant for six months, so her stomach was visibly swollen. A herbalist, who came over to check on her, said she could be bearing twins and required more nutrients, so the young aunt of the Dinas had grown quite puffy in recent days, almost twice the size she used to be. Apart from her change in figure, she also craved sleep frequently. Right after finishing lunch, she yawned and made her way to her room for more shuteye.

As for Arriotoli, who had just recently broken through to the silver rank, she had dragged her younger sister with her excitedly to Nico Academy to visit her younger brother. A knighting ceremony of the Dina house would also be carried out there to make Arriotoli a knight of the house, as well as the leader of the house in her brother's stead. Only when her brother reaches the age of 18 would the position of leader be handed to him. The two Dina sisters wouldn't return to Firmrock Castle anytime soon.

Lorist also took a short nap after the meal. He went to his study thereafter. One hour later, he received a report from Howard that grandmasters Sid and Fellin had arrived by carriage. Not only that, Josk and Yuriy have been waiting for quite a while at the guest's hall.

"Have them come up to the meeting room on the third floor. There's a courtyard over there near the rear mountain, so if the grandmasters brought over some long-ranged weapons, that would be the ideal place to test them out for Josk and Yuriy to see. Get Charade to come over as well," said Lorist.

"Understood, Milord."

It didn't take long for all of them to gather at the meeting room. The two grandmasters had brought with them three huge boxes this time around, the first of which contains a mesh and chain hybrid mail that was unlike any currently worn by Norton soldiers. The helmet accompanying that set was made in the shape of a conical hat, much like a round, point-tipped shield.

Grandmaster Sid began his introduction, "Milord, this set of armor is designed per your requirements for the armor of the Hunter Rider Legion to be light and tough along with the suggestions I gathered from many light cavalry scouts about how their armor can be improved. As our house's new unit will mainly be pit against Duke Fisablen's cavalry troops, who use the armor we designed, the armor we designed for our Hunter Rider Legion is a modified version of the one they use. Not only is it lighter and more agile than armor set 103 bought by the Fisablens, it is also far tougher.

"The main method of attack used by the duke's cavalry is mid-ranged weapons. Their troops would frequently dismount when their enemy is a hundred meters away to fire three subsequent volleys of longbow fire before mounting and leaving once more. They also use mangonels with an effective range of 50 meters, and use javelins or throwing axes when they are even closer to their enemy. That's why, the Hunter Rider Legion must mainly be protected from the ranged attacks of the duke's cavalry instead of charging attacks like our own.

"The most effective type of armor against ranged attacks is this chainmail. We made the individual linked chains with steel wire meshes, allowing for greater defense against ranged attacks when compared to plate armor. That's especially the case with the conical helmets that will render longbow attacks useless once tilted at an angle. It can also be used as a shield for close-range encounters. A layer of magic bull leather armor will be worn over the wire-chain mail that will increase the defense slightly and also serve as a windbreaker to keep warm.

"Not only that, we also embedded the steel wire mesh into the armor of the mounts to give better protection for them from attacks from the front. The whole armor set, including the armor of the mount, weighs in at 80 percent of the weight of armor set 103 and is definitely more heavy duty as well. We also made improvements to the saddles and stirrups of the mounts so that they'll last longer and control easier compared to the older version."

"Very nice," Lorist praised, "Thank you for your efforts, Grandmaster Sid, Grandmaster Fellin. I am very satisfied with how thorough you've been when designing this new armor set. What I worry about is whether the production can keep up with our demands."

Grandmaster Sid, elated to receive Lorist's praise, said, "Of course, Milord. The production of steel wire can already be automated by our watermill machines. I've also designed a machine that can easily cut the wire into set lengths and roll them up. The only part that still requires human hands is the weaving of the armor. The estimated rate of production is a thousand sets per day."

"Good, then it's decided that the Hunter Rider Legion will be using this armor set. I will instruct Supervisor Camorra to arrange the necessary manpower for the formation of the legion. On another note, Sid, I'd like to ask you whether you've finished designing a ranged weapon for our soldiers of the new legion? I hope that the Hunter Rider Legion will have an advantage in terms of ranged weapons against the

duke's cavalry troops to stand a better chance in battle," said Lorist.

"Hehe, Milord, please witness the culmination of Grandmaster Fellin's and my effort!" announced Grandmaster Sid as he opened the second large box and took out an oddly-shaped crossbow.

"Milord, this is the compact crossbow! The most cutting-edge ranged weapon yet!"

Chapter 332
The Trouble with Compact Crossbows

"Steady!" Lorist pulled onto his reins and his mount reared backwards with both forelegs in air before landing back down to the wet, grassy ground.

"Let's set up camp further up on the hill. We should be able to reach Baron Shazin's riverside encampment by tomorrow."

It was the 30th day of the 10th month and Baron Shazin had sent a messenger to relay that the rafts have been completed. Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade had also arrived at the encampment at the lower stream of Metropoulos River. With the preparations all finished, he asked if Lorist was going to head there soon. If he didn't, the baron was going to have Ovidis launch an attack on the outposts on the other side of the river.

Naturally, Lorist said that he would be going. He was just about to head there to deliver some life jackets to the soldiers there. After all, they were going to battle aboard rafts, and the catapult operators that took lots of resources and time to train would be a huge loss to the house should they drown just like that. That was why it was best to have some precautions in place.

Not only that, Lorist also wanted to escape the commotion back at the dominion, which all started when Lorist made a huge order from the grandmasters, Sid and Fellin, to make a total of 50 thousand compact crossbows for the Mounted Jaegars, with each compact crossbow costing 38 gold Fordes to make.

The price to make one of those was truly staggering. Even the steel ballista cost only 35 gold Fordes to make, yet a small compact crossbow that was far inferior than ballistae in terms of power cost even more. Charade was the first one to object to it, followed by supervisors Spiel and Camorra.

For that matter, they had argued for two whole days. But Lorist still insisted on ordering so many of those compact crossbows, causing the cost of the formation of the Jaegar Legion to be two million gold Fordes above budget. Charade and the two supervisors didn't appreciate Lorist's decision, as was evident from the sour faces they wore.

But that was not the end of it. While the compact crossbows cost a lot to make, the cost of manufacturing the bolts were even more staggering. One gold Forde could only produce 20 of those bolts, with each bolt costing around a large silver. That was the main reason Charade objected to the manufacturing of those crossbows. Even if the cost was high, it was still bearable. But the expendable bolts cost far more than what they were worth!

A legion of Mounted Jaegars had 60 thousand people, split into four divisions, or 20 brigades of three thousand men each. Not counting the carroballista brigade and the logistics unit that includes the coachmen and other miscellaneous helpers, there were at least 40 thousand combatants in the Jaegar Legion. If every one of those men fired one shot with the compact crrossbows, it would be akin to them shooting out two thousand gold Fordes! How was that different from sinking money down the drain? Not taking into account the fact that each user of the compact crossbow had to receive special training, the bolts that were fired were not recoverable for reuse. Charade even estimated the cost of bolts to train an average soldier to use the compact crossbow would amount to 30 to 50 gold Fordes and had objected to the use of that weapon immediately.

Actually, Lorist had a feeling that he messed up the technological tree somehow after making that order. He didn't think that the two grandmasters wouldn't make much progress with firearms in the past two years and instead managed to improve in the art of making crossbows. The compact crossbow was almost like a crossbow gun that had more firepower than an old musket of his previous world.

Crossbows were fundamentally different from longbows. A longbow could loose an arrow that could travel 100 meters in a straight line, and it was known across the continent that an arrow could be fired up to 300 meters away with a parabolic shot. However, Sid later discovered that the most effective range to use longbows was 70 meters. At that distance, only half the bowmen could hit their targets. Given how small they were from a distance, some luck was required to get in a good hit, with the exception of a genius marksman like Josk who could still hit his target all the time even when it was 100 meters from him.

In the battleforce-driven world of Grindia, longbowmen could even use their battleforce to increase the power of their shots. A silver-ranked archer could fire a battleforce-infused arrow through metal or rock, and that was the reason it was hailed as one of the most effective long-range weapons over the millennium. In stark contrast, a crossbow-like weapon had to be cocked and strung and couldn't fire too far

away. But the main flaw was the inability for one to infuse battleforce into bolt projectiles. Despite that, it only took three months of training for a crossbowman as opposed to the two years a longbowman would require due to the ease of aiming and accuracy.

The compact crossbow the two grandmasters invented had already surpassed longbows in certain ways. Constructed out of steel and wood, it could be fired at a low angle, and reloading it was easy and quick through the use of a lever mechanism. The lever on the right of the crossbow only had to be pulled to string the bow and make space for the bolt to be loaded before the next shot could be taken. Even though it couldn't quite compare to the rapid-fire capability longbows had, it was far better in comparison to traditional crossbows.

The biggest improvement of these new crossbows were their firing range of 70 to 80 meters.[1] Grandmaster Sid promised that a longbowman and crossbowman firing at each other from that range would see the longbowman lose. That's because a longbowman had to estimate the shot whereas the crossbowman armed with a compact crossbow can aim down the sights to fire at its target.

Other than that, even though the compact crossbows can't fire 300 meters away like longbows can, Grandmaster Sid did manage to include a long distance firing mode in its design. Engraved on the crossbow was a scale diagram that could be used to orient the weapon to an angle which will allow it to fire the projectile in a parabolic arc, allowing the projectile to land as far as 150 meters away, which was ideal for a volley of fire to weed out some enemy numbers.

The compact crossbow bolts were specially made with armor-piercing capabilities as well, with the body of the projectile being half hollow and three small metal fins attached to its back. The fins that would break after one shot was also the reason the bolts couldn't be reused.

Lorist thought back at Yuriy who was completely lovestruck by the new weapon who said, "Milord, if you can arm the Jaegar Legion with these compact crossbows, I promise that they will be able to rival the cavalry legions of House Fisablen within three months."

Perhaps, it was that statement that thoroughly convinced Lorist to make that decision despite the fervent disagreement he faced from Charade and the others. In retrospect, Lorist was regretting his decision slightly as Charade's objections did have quite a bit

of merit. So, he requested the grandmasters to modify the prototype of the compact crossbows so that the cost of making them would be below 20 gold Fordes, with the bolts being changed to cost one gold Forde per hundred of them.

While they said that it was possible to do so, it would take at the very least two years. Given that Lorist needed the Mounted Jaegars to gain as much combat capability as they could as soon as possible, as well as how strong the financial situation of the house was, he ordered 50 thousand compact crossbows, including some extra in case any defunct ones needed replacing, much to Charade's anger.

Howard had already set up Lorist's tent as well as some simple bedding. Lorist walked to the side of his bedding and saw Howard preparing tea for him.

"Howard, do you think the order for 50 thousand compact crossbows was a little over the top?"

Surprised and silent for a good moment, Howard said, "Milord, it's not my place to comment about it…"

"Don't worry, just speak your mind. As an outsider, your perspective might provide some much-needed insight."

"Well, how do I say this… Milord, I think you're a little too impatient. I've realized that you seem to be a little hasty these days when it comes to arming the Mounted Jaegars. You're also regarding House Fisablen like they're already our enemy. I feel that to be a little contradictory," said Howard after giving it some good thought.

"Contradictory? Why do you feel that?" asked Lorist as he sat up.

Howard furrowed his brow and explained, "Milord, if you really think that House Fisablen will be our foe, you should stop the military gear agreement you have with them right away. Their preparations will only be complete in the following year when our trade deal concludes, so Duke Fisablen will definitely not declare war against us before that happens. So far, only a third of the deal has been fulfilled. If you really think that Duke Fisablen will become our enemy, you should've stopped the deal with them. That's far more an effective way than arming the Mounted Jaegars is.

"Also, I can understand why Knight Charade and supervisors Spiel and Camorra object so heavily to this. We truly don't lack time right now, so there's no need to make such a huge order that soon. Also, the compact crossbow isn't as perfect as you seem to

think it is. Its wire string and specially made metal plates have to be switched out frequently. Not only does that add to the cost, it also increases the usage difficulty.

"Grandmasters Sid and Fellin also mentioned that the tests for this new compact crossbow isn't fully run through yet. There's still much to learn and improve upon. When you made the order for 50 thousand to be produced, both of them turned pale all of a sudden. I suspect that there's no way that they're able to go into mass production yet. I feel that they probably didn't dare to raise any objections when you said that you want to improve the ranged attack capabilities of our troops regardless of the price.

"Also, the special bolt the crossbows will require seems to require hand made tail fins. All 100 of the bolts they brought to the presentation were completely handmade. Think about how much time it would take to make 20 bolts each for 50 thousand compact crossbows. I don't think it's something that can be finished within one year.

"Knight Charade makes a lot of sense when he mentioned the riding bows and normal crossbows that can be used to arm the Mounted Jaegars. The new armor they will be given already puts them a level above normal troops in terms of defense anyway, so even if they're using similar weapons to the enemy, they'll still hold a great advantage over them. There's no need to use such an expensive weapon like the compact crossbows. If you do, your legion should be called the Gold Coin Legion instead of the Jaegar Legion."

Lorist laughed heartily and said, "You're right, I was far too hasty in this matter. Get me a blank paper. I will write Charade and order to cancel the production of the compact crossbows as well as an apology to him and the other two supervisors. It's my inadequacy that caused all of them so much trouble.

"Grandmaster Sid and Grandmaster Fellin will also each receive a thousand gold Fordes as reward for inventing the compact crossbow. At the same time, encourage them to improve the design of the compact crossbow with the aim for mass production in the future.

"I will also write Josk and Yuriy a letter to tell them the reason the house won't be able to supply them with compact crossbows and express my hopes for them to train their troops so that they get up to shape as soon as possible."

"Yes, Milord. I will prepare it immediately," said Howard.

As it was only a temporary campsite, there were no tables, so Lorist had to use a saddle to pen his two letters.

"Howard, you're really maturing fast. I think you'll be able to breakthrough to the silver rank in two years, after which I can draft you into the military for you to gain experience. Do you want to be a brigade commander?" asked Lorist as he wrote.

"Nope. Brother Reidy said that I can train in the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique when I reach the silver rank."

"Oh, you want to learn that as well?"

"That's right, master. I am your disciple as well and will naturally want to learn your ancient eastern combat monk training technique using internal energy. Brother Reidy said that he's incredibly happy to have chosen the path of cultivating internal energy that allowed him to defeat those gold-ranked knights and swordsmen with ease at the knighthood tournament," said Howard enviously.

"Very well. Since you like it that much, I'll teach you the technique of the eastern combat monks."

After deciding on letting Charade handle the matter of the compact crossbows, Lorist took a short nap after he handed the letters to a guard to be delivered. By the time Howard woke him for his meal, the stars had already filled the skies. The sound of an approaching carriage can be heard from the distance. After a while, Count Kenmays's angry complaint could be heard. "Why the heck did you travel so fast? I had to give chase for three whole hours you know! The road was so bumpy that my bum is all numb!"

"It's your fault for traveling in a carriage. The road from here to Metropoulos River is small and not suitable for carriage use. I thought that I could go on for another two hours, but I had to set up camp earlier to wait for you to catch up," returned Lorist the complaint.

Count Kenmays sat down beside Lorist and began drinking the ale in Lorist's cup in huge gulps before he asked Howard to get him a serving of smoked goat. "Fine, I'll travel on horseback tomorrow as well. Who knew that there isn't a path for carriages over here? If I knew better, I wouldn't have to suffer in the carriage. Then again, this ale tastes quite good. It's always best to have ale after a long journey."

"Will the forces of your house be able to arrive at the riverbank today?" asked Lorist.

"Don't worry, they departed ten days ahead of us. I think they'll arrive on time even if they have to crawl their way there. It took us only three days to travel using the small path, so if they don't arrive using the main highway in ten days, I will have to punish them for it. My house doesn't wish for our army to be a bunch of useless goons after all," said Count Kenmays confidently.

"That's true. This is the time for your army and Hennard's to shine. I'm sure the combined cry of 100 thousand troops will make the Madras soldiers on the opposite side of the bank feel the pressure of the incoming conflict and cause them to mobilize the rest of their forces to reinforce the bank. All you have to do is to be as domineering as possible. Make sure to not attack them carelessly to avoid unnecessary sacrifice. All we need is Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade to smash them to pieces," warned Lorist.

"No problem. We will just bait them for now. The plan is to go into battle during spring next year after all," said the count as he nodded.

Chapter 333
Arrival of the Second Highness

On both sides of the bank of the lower stream of Metropoulos River, tightly congregated camps could be seen. Rectangular tents were packed tightly along the banks of the river, bringing with it the prophecy of war. The moment the side of The Northlands finished their preparations, the war would break out. But from how the defenses on the side of the Madras duchy seemed, the forces of The Northlands didn't look like they would be able to pull through. Even if they dyed the whole river red, it seemed like an impossible feat for the forces of The Northlands to breach the defenses at the opposite side of the bank.

The 32nd day of the 10th month was a cloudy day with strong winds and light drizzles. Lorist looked at the opposite bank on horseback using a telescope before he turned to Baron Shazin Hennard and asked, "Is everything ready?"

"Of course. All the rafts and boards for the floating bridges are already prepared. This part of the river stretches around 300 meters to the other side that is filled to the brim with barricades, moats, and short walls for obstacles. A hundred meters away from the bank is where the defense towers are situated. The towers have an octagonal structure and has five floors, bringing it up to around 15 meters in height. There are two ballistae each on the upper three floors. The fishing boats I sent were shot down before they crossed the stream halfway back then," said Hennard as he grit his teeth in anger.

"You can give orders for the bridge to be built now. You'll soon be able to exact revenge on those on the other side," said Lorist with a smile.

Hennard waved his hand downwards, causing a few guards behind him to blow their horns. The loud blowing of the horns resounded across both sides of the river as groups of soldiers flooded to the riverbank alongside carriages filled with materials. By then, a group of worksmiths and soldiers had already began laying out the rafts with the wooden boards.

Lorist once again used his telescope to observe the opposite bank and saw that the soldiers of the Madras duchy wearing an assortment of leather and metal armor

flooding to their battle stations. All of them knew that the battle has begun.

The rafts were each laid with an extra wooden board on top and relied on a soldier to push it along slowly using an oar. More than a hundred such rafts lined themselves side by side by the bank as the worksmiths secured the finger-thick boards together with large chains. By the time noon came, a long boat ramp roughly 300 meters in length was fully constructed.

Lorist said with a little bit of frustration, "Hennard, you should've constructed the boat ramp beforehand. That would've saved us quite a bit of time."

Hennard laughed and said, "It was my intention to trick those idiots on the other side of the bank by intentionally waiting until now to build the boat ramp. Locke, look. They thought that we were going to approach through transporting our soldiers on rafts on the other side before making our charge. Not only that, those guys on the other side were busy building barricades to resist our charge while we waited. Do you see all those barricades they're tossing into the river over there? I've practically made them work hard for nothing at all. They didn't think we would approach slowly using our boat ramp. What they definitely won't see coming is our catapult bombardment that will precede the docking of the soldiers on the other side so that their defensive fortifications will be crumbled beforehand."

After lunchtime, the gigantic boat ramp was already 40 meters away from shore. Currently, the worksmiths were busy working on a floating bridge that would connect to the boat ramp. As the bridge got longer, the boat ramp would be pushed along further into the river.

"I believe that we only have to push forward another 30 meters before we start moving the catapults onto the ramp," said Hennard as he looked at the floating bridge.

Lorist said, "Watch out for the fire arrows from the other side. Since that ramp is made of wood and interconnected, all it takes is for a couple of fires to start to burn it down to ash."

Hennard said, "Don't worry. I've already made some estimations. We will be roughly 320 meters away from the defense towers by the time the floating bridge grows another 30 meters in length. Since their ballistae can only shoot as far as 300 meters, we are just slightly beyond their firing range. Not only that, the catapults can fire roughly 350 to 400 meters away, so we can pulverize them without worrying about

their attacks reaching us. Not only that, I will have the soldiers splash some river water onto the surface of the ramp as a precaution. There's no way it'd be set on fire that easily."

Count Kenmays looked rather bored as he yawned and said, "How much time left until we start launching our boulders?"

Hennard thought for a bit before he replied, "I think there's still another hour or two to go."

"Fine," Kenmays said carefreely, "Then I'll go take another nap within my tent. Make sure to call me when the action begins. I drunk a little more than I should in the afternoon so I still feel rather dizzy now."

After another two hours, the boat ramp finally got into position. The worksmiths no longer worked on building the floating bridge and took the opportunity to rest after a long day of work. On the other hand, Ovidis commanded the troops of Thunderbolt Brigade to retire the horses pulling the catapults and had them carefully load them onto the boat ramp in two neat rows. After securing the catapults on the ramp, the soldiers began moving rock projectiles of various sizes for the squad of soldiers on the ramp.

After an hour's hard work, the preparations were finally complete. Count Kenmays came over on his own accord without needing anyone to call for him.

"The prep work is far too troublesome. Almost a day has passed since we began," said Kenmays.

"No worries," Hennard said, "We can still fight during the night. Darkness or not, they will be smashed all the same. Give the signal for Knight Ovidis to begin."

After hearing the horn signal, Ovidis quickly ordered the 500 catapults on the ramp to begin firing. Rocks and boulders rained all over the opposite side of the bank, causing one defense tower after another to collapse into a rubble of smoke. When three volleys of rocks were fired, not a single defense tower remained standing, with the cries of numerous soldiers from the other side crying out in despair after the baptism of rock. What remained of them retreated backwards as quickly as they could in an attempt to escape the fate of those that were manning the defense towers. Initially, after the first two volleys of rock were fired, the troops in the defense towers that still remained

standing began firing back in the direction of the river. Half of the projectiles they loosed seemed to be set alight as well. However, all of those projectiles landed straight into the river tens of meters before they reached the boat ramp. In the dozen of minutes following that, apart from more than ten ballistae operators that were unwilling to accept the results of their retaliation and wanted to try again, the rest of the soldiers in the defense towers could only watch as the next volley of rocks came crashing town against the structures within which they stood.

A large empty space on the bank on the side of the duchy appeared following every volley of catapult fire. Not one defensive fortification managed to withstand the onslaught of falling rocks. The moment Ovidis ordered for the remaining defense towers to be felled, all soldiers within the towers had already given up on their posts and ran for their lives.

Now that the defense towers were no longer a threat, the worksmiths resumed construction of the floating bridge to push the ramp further ahead to connect it to the other side of the bank. Ovidis on the other hand began to fire jars filled with fuel towards the rows of barricades at the side of the river. It didn't take long before some cinders could be seen The light breeze near the river only served to help the fire to spread to the forest nearby.

Standing at a mound near the river, Lorist looked at the roiling smoke and flaming lands as he sighed and said, "The game is set. We will be able to get ashore by tomorrow. However, we still have to be on guard during the night. It's hard to tell whether the desperate soldiers of Madras duchy will launch a surprise attack on us."

Hennard laughed and said, "Don't worry, I've already prepared for this long ago. I guarantee that nothing bad will happen."

Despite Lorist's worries, the forces of the Madras duchy were not as resilient as he thought. By the time the boat ramp neared the other side, the worksmiths began to construct a simpler floating bridge for the catapults to be moved ashore, all the while a regiment of troops were sent ahead to the shore to stand guard. At the same time, a regiment of troops were on the opposite bank, around 10 thousand soldiers of the Madras duchy appeared and made a wary approach with the intent of chasing their enemy back into the river.

However, the enemy crumbled instantly right after Ovidis ordered for another volley of attacks to be launched. It didn't take long until all of them were far out of sight.

"Locke, with such an amazing weapon like the catapults, why don't we sweep past the whole of the Madras duchy? There's no need to wait for spring next year for the decisive battle," suggested Hennard confidently.

Lorist shook his head and said, "Let's just stick to our plan. Hennard, what I want is not just the Madras duchy's territory. Their population and resources are also very important to us. If we push our attack across the duchy, Duke Madras will definitely rally all the citizens to fight it out with us. Even if we emerge victorious, we will be left with a shell of what the duchy used to be. Not only would we have to spend money and resources to rebuild the area, we will also be hated by the surviving duchy citizens.

"If we want to make the duchy our domain, we will have to minimize the damages incurred by the commoners. What we want to deal with are the nobles of the duchy. Let's just follow our original plan to set up a defense line near the shore. We'll let the nobles of the Madras duchy take the offensive and let them have a taste of what our forces are capable of. After that, we'll start negotiations with Duke Madras and demand him to guarantee our passage on this side of the river for trading purposes. We can misguide him of our intentions this way, and that is also the reason I had Count Kenmays come over."

Hennard said disappointedly, "I know, I will secure the bank here as Kenmays does the negotiations. But I really want to go all out on them…"

"Did you forget about the second prince? Back then, he led his army of 50 thousand against the Madras duchy and still lost at the Battle of Kobo. While it's definitely possible for us to wipe out the duchy forcefully with the combined forces of all four of our houses, we would also incur huge losses in the process and gain the enmity of the neighboring nations. We must ensure that we as few casualties as possible to obtain our goal. This is the same for the Madras duchy as well. Not only would we be able to conserve our strength after our goal is achieved, we will have enough vitality left to stave off and deter any attack from other foes nearby. Do you understand now?" warned Lorist.

Hennard nodded a little begrudgingly.

"Hennard, you are currently under a false impression. You think that now that our side has catapults, we have won it all. Actually, catapults aren't as amazing as you imagine them to be. I already have more than ten methods myself to neutralize the threat of catapults. For example, light cavalry troops are one of them. Catapults are only good

for attacking stationary targets such as citadels or defensive fortifications and are not of much use in an open-field battle. Not only is the firing rate really low, the time the rock projectiles travel across the air is not short either. Any unit with enough mobility will be able to evade the area the rocks will land in.

"That's the reason why I think cavalry is an effective measure to use against catapults. If one was willing to sacrifice part of the cavalry unit's fighting force and have them hurl fuel jars in a suicidal manner at the catapults, one would be able to burn the catapults down. The catapults can also be taken out by surprise attacks when one sets up camp for the night. The soldiers of the Madras duchy only appear so terrified because this is the first time they're pit against the catapults. But if the war drags on, they'll no doubt gain more experience with each subsequent encounter and come up with effective measures to counter our strategy."

Thinking that what Lorist said made sense, Hennard laughed and said, "Ah, it's my bad for overlooking it. I'll follow your instructions, so don't worry Locke. I won't act on my own."

When Lorist patted on Hennard's soldier and was about to say something else, an urgent-sounding staccato of approaching horses could be heard. The horses seemed completely drained by the time they arrived at the foot of the mound. Three messengers wearing the armor of the Norton house dismounted and ran towards Lorist.

When they were within a distance of ten steps, the messengers stopped. Els went forward to check on them before he returned and said, "Milord, they are from the guard brigade. They rushed all over from the dominion with an urgent letter from Silowas."

"What? What happened?" After Lorist opened the letter and took a look, he gasped in shock. The letter was jointly penned by Supervisor Hansk and Knight Freiyar. One was an administrative official and the other a military officer. Something must've occurred for the two to sign the same letter.

When he read its contents, Lorist was completely stupefied. Count Kenmays asked curiously, "What's going on? Did something happen? Would it be okay for me to know about it?"

Lorist handed over the letter and said, "Just look."

Kenmays began to recite the letter, "At seven during the evening of the 24th day of the 10th month, the second highness and a few others snuck onto Silowas aboard an old fishing boat disguised as fishermen. Among his cohort were Norton Glacia and four other guards, with one gold rank and three silver ranks. Supervisor Hansk received them and Knight Freiyar hoped that they could rest for a period of time at Silowas while they awaited word from the main dominion. However, the second highness and Glacia insisted to be transported to The Northlands immediately to meet up with Milord Lorist. Unable to withhold them any longer, they were ferried to The Northlands on the 25th day of the 10th month, the same day when this letter was penned and sent to Milord through the Flying Fish of Dawn.

"The second highness is still alive and is coming to The Northlands?" said Kenmays after he finished reciting the letter and stared at Lorist. That truly was shocking news.

"But you're no longer a noble of the Andinaq kingdom. Why's he coming to The Northlands at all?" asked Hennard curiously.

"Idiot! Even though he's no longer a noble of the Andinaq kingdom according to the traditions of the peerage, the second highness is still the senior noble of the Norton house. He must've come here to ask you to lend him troops to restore his position of power at the kingdom," said Kenmays assuredly.

The current date was the 33rd day of the 10th month, so the second highness must've arrived at The Northlands already, given that it took only seven days to travel from Silowas to there. Even though Freiyar had sent the Flying Fish of Dawn to deliver the letter to The Northlands two days ahead of the second highness's arrival, the messengers took three days to deliver it to Lorist at Metropoulos River. Even if Lorist rushed back, it would already be too late.

"I still have to make my way back there, so I'll have to count on the two of you over here. Just proceed as planned. I will definitely notify you if there are any changes to be made," Lorist decided, "Els, have the rest make preparations to leave in 30 minutes immediately. We're heading back to the dominion."

"Yes, Milord."

Chapter 334
Refusal

"Welcome to the dominion of House Norton, Your Highness," greeted Lorist as he saluted in the manner of nobles.

As Count Kenmays had predicted, Lorist was currently trapped in a very awkward situation. Even though the Andinaq kingdom no longer considered Lorist one of their nobles, the decision was made at the sole discretion of Queen Carey and didn't have anything to do with Second Highness Auguslo.

Lorist could only truly be considered a rogue noble if the second highness personally exiled him, or if he had indeed died and the queen had thus legitimately inherited the throne. The founding emperor of the Krissen Empire had also been exiled by his senior noble, and that also came at the cost of his peerage. Count Krissen, as he was known at the time, had spent all the resources he had and gathered all his forces to declare war against his former senior noble. His campaign began in The Northlands and peaked in Winston. What followed was a smooth-sailing war that ended with the founding of the Krissen Empire.

Lorist was troubled because he knew perfectly well what the second highness had come for. However, he was unable to refuse him outright. As the senior noble of the house, who had been driven out of his rightful seat of power, Lorist was obligated to fulfill his responsibilities as a vassal to stand at the second highness's side. In other words, as powerless as the second highness was now, Lorist could not just ignore him according to the noble customs. At the very least, he had to provide all the help he could.

This is going to be hell!

Lorist met with the second highness at Maplewoods thanks to his cousin sister Glacia. When Charade first received word that the second highness's cohort arrived at The Northlands, he wanted to restrict them to Northsea but Glacia made a ruckus about it. As she was also a member of the house, Charade couldn't exactly stop her. So, they set out from Northsea and passed by Poplar Town before finally arriving at Maplewoods. During the five days Lorist wasn't there, the second highness and the rest visited

Felicitas' seven towns, Nico Academy, and would've visited the secret refineries and production grounds at Bladedge Mountains had it not been for Supervisor Camorra's interference.

The prosperity of the dominion greatly surprised the second highness. Everywhere he looked seemed to glimmer and Glacia didn't fail to take the chance to brag about her house's might. It was further exacerbated by Irina, who had little experience dealing with these matters. When she received the second highness at Maplewoods, she acted as respectful and obedient as she could and answered all of their questions, leaking all she knew or heard about the dominion. She even sent someone as a guide for the second highness's travels and allowed him to gain a better grasp of what House Norton was capable of.

"I really didn't think that the desolate Northlands would prosper under the rule of House Norton. This is truly eye-opening. I refused to believe my eyes when I traveled around the last couple of days. The seven towns at Felicitas looked so merry and populous, much like how the cities around the imperial capital used to be like. Lord Count, you truly are a genius for being able to manage your dominion so well, perhaps even better than the empire's better days!"

As the second highness expressed his thoughts about the Norton dominion, he approached Lorist and patted him on the arm like a good friend would to hammer home the 'friendly' relationship he intended to have with Lorist. Not a trace of enmity from the last time they met at the imperial capital was visible.

"Thank you for your kind praise, Your Highness. House Norton is only fulfilling our duties as per our oath to protect the borders of the empire. We have no intention at all to meddle in the internal affairs of the empire, and that is why our dominion was able to prosper in peace even in these chaotic times. After taking in many refugees who have lost their homes to the war, we were able to improve the dominion somewhat," said Lorist dismissively.

"I was in the wrong. I should've listened to your advice," said the second highness with a bitter laugh.

He let go of Lorist's arm and bowed to him, much to Lorist's shock.

Lorist hurriedly went to stop the second highness.

"Your Highness, what are you doing? This is not something I can bear!"

The second highness clutched Lorist's hand.

"Locke, I'm apologizing to you with all I can. It was my fault. I have been ridden with regret ever since I lost Frederika. If I had followed your advice and not rushed to reunite the empire and instead paid attention to the welfare of my subjects, I wouldn't have ended up like this. Now I can't even return home to serve the kingdom!"

Yep, you definitely had it coming, commented Lorist secretly.

However, it was true that the second highness was no longer able to return to the kingdom easily. He would no doubt be brought before Queen Carey unless he stayed within the Norton dominion. Given that the first highness, Queen Carey's father, had mysteriously passed away in his sleep, it stood to reason that she might act against the second highness secretly as well. Though, it was also entirely possible for her to do so for the sole sake of her throne.

"When I heard about your loss and disappearance at Frederika, I was truly frantic and worried. Back then, I wanted to send my troops to Frederika right away to look for you, Your Highness, and I made sure to ask those at the imperial capital for permission to mobilize my troops. But I was refused and warned not to meddle in this affair. They even recalled the third local defense legion from the borders of the Madras duchy to keep an eye on us. In the end, I had no choice but to recall my troops."

Lorist received the official notice from Howard and handed it to the second highness as he spoke.

"Your Highness, take a look at this. These are the two refusal notices the capital sent in response to my request. They didn't allow me to take any action to search for you, but thanks to the protection of Wargod Singwa, Your Highness managed to appear safe and sound before me. It really gladdens me that you were not harmed in any way."

Lorist had no option apart from playing the role of a loyal subordinate, but what he actually hoped for couldn't be further from what he said. He couldn't wait for the second highness to disappear from the realm of man. But now that he managed to survive and appear before him, Lorist had to at least act the part in front of others.

The second highness's expression changed as he released Lorist's hand and balled his fists.

"Traitors… They actually ceded the kingdom's territory to those darned merchants for their own benefits… I will definitely not spare them. Brother Locke, to be honest, I've come here to seek your aid. I hope House Norton will be able to exterminate the traitors and restore order to the kingdom."

Lorist sighed as the second highness finally made his request. As the leader of House Norton, he had to give a formal response.

"Your Highness, let me ask you this first. What will House Norton gain if we deploy our troops for you?"

While it was the tradition for vassals to serve senior nobles on Grindia, the senior noble had to offer compensation proportional to the help they received. Otherwise, no vassal would willingly aid their senior noble for free. Given the way things turned out, Lorist could only see that he would be promptly rewarded for his efforts. Otherwise, he would be able to fulfill his responsibilities as a vassal by simply providing a few hundred sets of armor and gear to the second highness and nobody would criticize him for it.

"Locke, His Highness has agreed that if our house intervenes, he will make you the Duke of The Northlands. All the territory you conquer here will belong to the house," said Glacia happily as if House Norton had been offered a heavenly boon that couldn't be refused.

Lorist glared at her.

"Glacia, do you understand The Northlands' situation right now?"

She shook her head as expected.

"If that's the case, I refuse to mobilize any of my forces. The title of the Duke of The Northlands is of no use to House Norton at all. Your Highness, there are only four noble houses within The Northlands. Apart from us, the Nortons, Count Kenmays occupies the eastern part of The Northlands, with the southern part jointly ruled by Baron Shazin and Baron Felim. All three of them are our allies, so we will definitely not breach our alliance with them for no good reason. The title of the Duke of The Northlands is good as nothing to the house," proclaimed Lorist.

The second highness and Glacia were both stunned at the revelation. They didn't know that there were only four houses left in The Northlands that even formed an alliance.

Not only would the title mean nothing to House Norton, it would also cause fractures to form within the alliance of the four houses. It's no wonder Lorist refused the second highness's request without debate.

"I apologize, Brother Locke. that was not my intention. I didn't think it would be this way," apologized Auguslo hurriedly.

"There is no need to fret, Your Highness. You can't be blamed for being uninformed, you have only arrived recently. The banquet to welcome you is already prepared. I hope you enjoy the delicacies The Northlands has to offer and rest well. We, on the other hand, will explore our options and see in what manner we can help you reclaim your kingdom."

Lorist was rather mad at Glacia's straightforward but thoughtless actions. The second highness's ignorance about the matter was also no doubt feigned. Even though The Northlands was relatively segregated from the rest of the continent, the four houses' alliance had been formed years prior. While the house actively restricted information flow, the three other houses were the opposite, so the second highness's claim that he didn't know about the situation was a straight out lie.

Hmph, even after you've lost almost everything, you're still trying to scheme till you get your way. You think you can get away with asking for my help while jeopardizing my relationship with my allies?! How much of an idiot do you think I am?!

During the banquet, Auguslo persistently tried to change the subject of conversation to helping him restore the kingdom, but Lorist excused himself from agreeing by saying that he had to discuss the matter with his knights.

Only after the troubled monarch drowned himself with booze and had to be sent back for a rest was Lorist finally free. He returned to his residence and bathed with Irina's aid as he considered how he should respond to the second highness.

Just as he was about to pull Irina into the tub for release and relaxation, a guard downstairs could be heard.

"Who goes there?!" asked he.

"It's me, Glacia."

"Oh, what business do you have here, Milady?"

"I want to see Lorist."

"I apologize, Milady. I'm not sure whether Milord has gone to sleep already. It's best not to disturb him this late in the night. Can this matter not wait till tomorrow?"

The one who said this turned out to be Els.

"Scram! I am Locke's elder cousin sister and I'm here to see him. Do you think I'm here to assassinate him or something?"

"Assassinate? Hehe, Milady, it's not like I'm looking down on you, but even if there were ten of you here, you wouldn't be able to defeat the lord. Either way, I still have to make a report first. If Milord's asleep, then you'll have to come again tomorrow."

"No way. I want to see Locke right now."

Lorist sighed as he got out of the tub, rubbed himself hastily, put on a sleeping gown, and leaned on the windowsill.

"Els, let her in."

Glacia quickly climbed upstairs and entered the room. Lorist handed her a cup of macks Irina had made.

"Drink some macks and relax. What do you need me for this late?"

Glacia sat down in a chair angrily.

"Your guard is far too insolent, Locke. He dared to bar my way."

"He's just doing his job, he did nothing wrong. He can't let you into my room just because you're my cousin. You're also a knight of the Andinaq royal family, after all. You're not a household knight of the house, even if you were born as a member."

Glacia had her mouth agape, but no words came out of it. Lorist was right. It was a commonly held protocol in many noble houses.

Glacia snapped out of it after a good while.

"Locke, you've truly changed. You no longer resemble the crybaby I used to know."

"I had no choice little choice in the matter," he laughed, "If I was like before, House Norton would've been wiped out long ago. The circumstances forced me to adapt. Do you know how it feels to be a 17-year-old child who lost all contact with his family, a child with no choice but to work as a mercenary? To fill his stomach and pay for education, that boy had to slaughter magic beasts and risk his life. He lived like that for seven whole years until the people from the house came over to find him. Only then did he find out that most of his relatives have all passed away.

"When he returned to his house's dominion, he found it in such a terrible state. Despite the Duke of the Northlands's ill intentions and the second prince who was waiting to pounce at the opportune moment, that boy managed to survive and defeat them both. After that, he focused his efforts on the development of the dominion until its current prosperous state. However, right now, a group of troublesome people just came over and asked him to send his troops to restore that guy's power, all without gaining anything in return. Do you think that person will agree?"

Lorist made a point to stop the conversation before it started, causing Glacia to be even more disturbed.

"Locke, isn't this a good opportunity for House Norton? If we help the second highness get his throne back, our name will be recorded in history and we'll be remembered for all eternity for our deeds," said she carefully, finally.

"Cousin, have you turned into an idiot?" Lorist asked," Why should House Norton sacrifice our troops for the ambitions of His Highness? If we actually do that, the other noble houses will regard us as complete buffoons. If His Highness can't offer us a worthy price, I will definitely not agree to deploy our forces. Even so, I'll lend His Highness a decent sum of money and give him some military equipment to fulfill the smallest obligation I have as a vassal."

"Locke, what kind of benefits do you want to agree to help His Highness regain his throne?" asked Glacia stubbornly.

"Well, I'll have to think about it thoroughly for a while. Before that, can you tell me how you managed to escape Frederika? I'm actually quite curious how it all transpired. Nobody was able to find the slightest trace of you at all. Also, how many forces does the second highness have? I heard that when you disappeared from Frederika, His Highness's personal guard of 5000 men perished. How did you evade the enemy's search parties?"

Glacia's expression darkened.

"When we conquered Frederika, we discovered a secret path leading outside the city, which could be what the first prince used to escape. When Frederika was encircled, His Highness brought the rest of us through the secret path. Back then, we had 6000 men, but now less than 2000 remain because we ran into the first prince, who had gone missing until now."

"What?! The first prince?!" exclaimed Lorist with surprise.

"That's right. We didn't expect that to happen either," said Glacia as tears streamed down her face.

Chapter 335
Reinforcement

"It's over here," Glacia said as she pointed to the map of the Redlis kingdom Howard had brought over, "This is a small valley in the Cloudsnap Mountains located 50 kilometers from Greatsnow Mountain. His Highness had us scale across the Cloudsnap Mountains to make it back to the Andinaq kingdom so we could gather our forces and start over. The six thousand men following us were our most loyal and elite.

"After leaving Frederika using the secret path, we crossed a small stream to cover our tracks. We traveled about half a day from the river and turned towards the Cloudsnap Mountains when we were about 50 kilometers away from Frederika. On the way there, we passed through a dense forest where we took a short rest. His Highness wouldn't let us rest there for long, though. He wanted us to find a better spot so we could rest for a few months before we attempted the crossing after the winter. He wanted us to pass over Cloudmist Swamp before it thawed and head for the kingdom from there.

"We were surprised to discover from a map we obtained in the palace in Frederika that the valley near Greatsnow Mountain was actually a noble's dominion, specifically, Baron Krimando's. We later found out that the baron had never shown up at the royal court before, which explains why almost nobody knew of him.

"His Highness decided that Baron Krimando's dominion would be the best place for us to rest. As long as we had someone defend the valley's entrance and prevent anybody from getting in or out, nobody would discover what was going on inside. We headed for the valley and conquered the small castle near it in a night assault. Once we occupied the castle, His Highness instructed someone to advise Baron Krimando to surrender. Bowen Ketty volunteered and marched over proudly to carry out the task. Nobody expected his decapitated head would be hung above the walls of the baron's castle a few minutes later."

Lorist knew the name 'Bowen Ketty'. He was one of the second highness' trusted knights and one of the Five Tigers. Lorist never thought he would be killed as a messenger calling for surrender.

"We were almost driven crazy by anger," Glacia continued with teary eyes, "No sane

noble would do something as egregious as murdering a messenger! His Highness instantly ordered us to continue pressing our attack and avenge Knight Bowen. After two months of bloody battles passed, we incurred more than five thousand casualties; even Knight Sisreid died on the walls. Of the 13 gold-ranked knights that left Frederika with His Highness, only I, Ripleid, and Karitoke were left. One of the two blademasters protecting His Highness also perished. The other was heavily injured…"

Lorist's eyes brightened.

"Karitoke's still alive?" asked he.

Karitoke was one of Dawn Academy's alumni who had traveled with Lorist to The Northlands. But midway there, he had been poached by the second highness and became a knight of the royal family. It was a shame that of the 26 silver-ranked knights from Dawn Academy that joined the second highness's banner, only Karitoke and Sander remained. Lorist was more than glad to hear that his old friend survived.

Even though Glacia nodded, tears still fell nonstop from her eyes, perhaps because of the horrible result of the battle.

"Let me guess… Is Baron Krimando the first prince? Has he been hiding in the valley all along?" asked Lorist.

Glacia shook her head at first but nodded after.

"When we finally breached the castle, we got to know from our captives that the baron was actually the first prince's illegitimate son.

"The valley was the last resort the first prince left for himself should he ever require it. Within the valley were three thousand of the first prince's most elite troops. He had been hiding within ever since he escaped from Frederika and watched as the nobles of Redlis kingdom struggled against us, waiting for the opportunity to strike and rebuild his kingdom. I bet he didn't think he'd have to use his trump card early to deal with us, who were about to lock him within his little dominion.

"We killed and killed. His Highness almost broke down as well. We never dreamt of clashing head-on against the first prince there and casualties piled up on both sides. In a fit of rage, His Highness ordered us to kill all the captives and citizens we came across. After all, they were the enemy's families. His Highness also managed to behead the first prince and his illegitimate son personally before he coughed up blood and

fainted.

"The six thousand men were His Highness's best. If we were able to bring them back to the Andinaq kingdom, we would have been able to regain control easily. But most of them were incapacitated after the battle, only around two thousand were still alive with varying degrees of injury. By the time His Highness recovered, we received word that the situation was beyond saving. If we returned to the kingdom, our only fate would have been death. That's why we had no choice but to disguise ourselves and head to The Northlands to seek you out for help. We hope that House Norton will be able to aid His Highness in restoring his rightful position on the throne."

Is this first prince finally dead? The one who started the civil war by raising the banner of rebellion was the first prince, and now, both he and the second prince have died by the second highness' hands... Wait, is he the real main character of this story here?!

Lorist breathed a long sigh.

"Glacia, you've been by His Highness's side for almost 20 years now. Did he treat you well, now that you've been his lover for all this time?"

Glacia's face flushed.

"This… Well, he said that he'd marry me after he reunites the empire…"

"Will you be the empress or a mere concubine?"

"What's… what's the difference? I'm fine as long as I'm by His Highness's side."

"Glacia, you're three years older than me. You're not that young anymore. If it were the House Norton of the past, His Highness taking you as his concubine would be a sign of acknowledging all you have done for being his lover all these years. However, given House Norton's current might, if His Highness does the same, it would be a slight on the name Norton. Don't forget that the blood of the Nortons flows in your veins. The only way this would be accepted is if His Highness doesn't take someone else as an official wife and names you his first concubine.

"I'm not saying this for no reason, Glacia. Did you notice that His Highness is incredibly wary of our house's might? He was already like this when he was still the 'second highness'. Despite that, he used the northbound convoy to wipe out the kingdom's nobles that refused to abide by his will. He forced us to pay a price we had not been

willing to.

"A ruler should always be fair and just. Has the second highness? He's always been throwing empty promises at us, tempting us with nothing to back it up. Glacia, did House Norton ever harm His Highness in any way? During the time of the northbound convoy, we were almost doomed by him. He poached so many knights from us and how many of them are still alive now? And don't forget what happened at Kobo. We conquered the city and provided him with so much food to solve the hunger crisis of his army. All we wanted in return was that he held the city long enough to buy time for the convoy and the refugees.

"What did he do? Glacia, did you know that His Highness had his army destroy the heavily fortified wall before leaving? He tried to make the convoy bait to attract the attention of our enemies! Even though we helped him out so much, he thrust a blade up our backs instead. It was from that time onwards that I no longer believed in His Highness's character.

"And even though he had already enfeoffed Silowas to the house, he allowed his tax collection official, that annoying viscount, to run rampant without any care at all. He even pretended not to know about the noble descendants that forcefully occupied Seaview Manor. Do you think he really didn't know? When I killed that stupid viscount, his brother sent a division of soldiers and attempted to kill me. Do you think His Highness wasn't aware of it either? I don't believe it. He's pretending all the way while he looks for a way to beat us into submission so we do his bidding.

"I'm sick of all this, Glacia. Did you forget how our four houses defeated the second prince jointly and formed an alliance? That year, I wrote you a letter to tell you about the matter. Perhaps you might've forgotten about it, but do you think the second highness has? His proposition was to make me Duke of The Northlands so that the Norton house can have full control over the province. Do you know what would happen if news of this got out?

"He's intentionally sabotaging the relationship we have with our allies. Currently, House Norton is the leader of the four houses of The Northlands. Think about it, if they hear about His Highness's offer to me, wouldn't they think I'm coming for them next? Even at a time like this when he needs my help the most, he tries to find a way to cause trouble for me. He wants to see us fight till we're nothing but shambles before coming in to sweep up the benefits!"

"No, Locke, you must be misunderstanding His Highness!" Glacia tried to explain, swinging her arms, "There are many things His Highness doesn't know about! Back then, His Highness told me that it wasn't that he didn't want to help you out at Kobo. His Highness simply didn't have enough troops to do so! That's why he instructed the dismantling of the defense walls after seeing your group leave safely. The one who instructed it was Bowen Ketty, the person in charge of the division at the time, and he did so out of concern for His Highness's safety! He ended up being scolded harshly when he returned. I was there to witness it! His Highness knew that he had accidentally wronged the house…

"As for the matter of Silowas, His Highness really didn't know about it. You should know well that His Highness was busy gathering his troops and preparing to reunite the empire. It's only natural for him to not concern himself with small matters like that. The tax official, Viscount Aslan, really didn't have anything to do with His Highness! And His Highness didn't fail to exterminate House Aslan and revoke their title after he heard how Count Aslan set out with his soldiers to pursue you!"

"Whatever, those matters are already history," Lorist replied, shaking his head, "There's no point talking about it now. So, Glacia, are you here because His Highness wanted you to find out my thoughts?"

"Yes. His Highness is afraid you still hold misunderstandings about him, so he had me come over and ask what you wanted in return for your aid. As long as it's within reason, he will agree to all your requests," acknowledged Glacia.

"Tsk-tsk, just look, Glacia. Even at a desperate time like this, His Highness is still holding back. Can't you see? This is His Highness being overly cautious of our house again. I'd like to ask him what he can offer us instead. Tell him to spare us the empty promises."

"Locke, your attitude is a little uncalled for! Don't forget His Highness is your senior noble! A vassal like you should maintain respect and reverence for him!" said Glacia angrily.

"Fine, fine, Glacia. Just go back and tell His Highness that House Norton will not be able to deploy our troops. However, we can provide 100 thousand gold Fordes and equipment for a legion of soldiers. Naturally, I'm talking about the compensation His Highness gave the convoy for eliminating the disobedient nobles of the kingdom: the equipment of the Whitelion Legion. We still have 72 thousand sets, all of which I can

give him. That should be more than enough to fulfill a vassal's due and duty," said Lorist, a little frustrated.

The equipment of the Whitelion Legion was taking up quite a bit of warehouse space. Given that House Norton already had far better Sid steel armor, they no longer had any use for the outdated equipment. As the Whitelion Legion was one of the many symbols of the Krissen Empire, their equipment ought not to be sold away so easily. To Lorist, it was something he could do without. The fact that it was made up of alloyed metal also made it far more troublesome to simply melt down in the refinery. It was a far better choice to return the equipment to the second highness and save him the trouble of having to deploy troops to help the second highness restore his throne at the cost of Norton lives.

"Lo-locke… Are you really willing to give the Whitelion Legion's equipment to His Highness?" Glacia started.

Glacia never thought Lorist would offer such a thing. After all, each set of Whitelion Legion armor cost 70 gold Fordes to manufacture, so 72 thousand sets were worth roughly five million gold Fordes! Giving such a thing away without asking for anything in return meant nobody could question Lorist's loyalty and due assistance to his senior noble.

"Yes," said Lorist.

All that junk has been gathering dust and using up precious space. Supervisor Spiel has asked me multiple times to deal with it already.

"Then, we'll have to draft our soldiers from the dominion as well," added Glacia.

"No way!" refused Lorist.

How dare you even suggest that? You have no right!

"You can recruit soldiers if you want, but you cannot use House Norton's name for your cause. We have our own policies when it comes to enlistment, and even His Highness cannot force our subjects to die for his cause!"

No noble had any right to draft soldiers from another's dominion. To any landed noble, their subjects were their source of wealth. If it was an open recruitment, however, no noble could interfere. After all, those who enlisted would essentially be work for hire,

and private transactions were not within the jurisdiction of the local house.

"Fine, normal recruitment will do. However, you have to give us the 100 thousand gold Fordes you promised and can't intentionally do anything that will sabotage our call to arms. Lastly, the soldiers we recruited will be fed and sustained by House Norton while they are in The Northlands. Will that do?" pushed Glacia further.

She thought things couldn't possibly get any better. with 100 thousand gold Fordes in hand and the equipment of the Whitelion Legion, the second highness would definitely be able to recruit 70 thousand soldiers. All he had to do was pay each household one gold Forde as pension and people would be flocking to join his army. It was the same tactic the second highness had used to gather his 300 thousand soldiers."

"Fine, whatever you say," Lorist smiled coldly, "I believe you just can't wait to go back to report this to His Highness. I'm sure he'll be more than glad to hear it."

Seeing Glacia leave happily, Howard, who had been standing next to Lorist the whole time, asked in a worried manner, "Milord, aren't you worried that trouble will stir up in the dominion? As if giving His Highness equipment was not enough, you also allowed him to recruit soldiers here."

"I'd like to see how many soldiers he can recruit," Lorist laughed, "Naturally, if there are people who want to join the cause, we'll send their family members away to the army camp along with them and revoke their rights to homes and farmland. Since they want to serve the second highness, he will have to be responsible for their well being. I definitely won't allow them to take advantage of my house."

"Indeed, Milord, You couldn't be more correct," said Howard before he joined in with the laughter.

Chapter 336
Negotiations

"Milord, you have erred," said Charade solemnly.

He had rushed straight to Maplewoods from Firmrock Castle the night before.

Lorist hadn't met the second highness even once since he promised to provide him with 100 thousand gold Fordes and the Whitelion Legion's equipment. The latter had brought his men with him hurriedly to Felicitas' seven towns to start recruiting soldiers. Lorist, on the other hand, lazed around at Maplewoods for a couple of days. But, when news reached Firmrock Castle, Charade could no longer sit still.

Lorist, who was in the middle of teasing his second son, raised his head with surprise.

"What did I do wrong?"

Charade remained silent and continued staring.

"Come on, let's talk in the study on the second floor," said Lorist as he passed his son to Irina.

In the study, Lorist opened a bottle of fruit wine and poured a cup for Charade and another for himself.

Charade downed his in one gulp, breathed a long sigh, before handing his cloak to Howard and saying, "One more cup."

He sat on the sofa and said with his eyes fixed on Lorist, "Locke, do you not know what you've done wrong?"

Lorist raised his brow as he refilled the cup

"I really don't know," answered he.

"You shouldn't have given the Whitelion Legion's equipment to the second highness,"

said Charade.

"Oh, but Supervisor Spiel has long been prompting me to get rid of them. Not only are they heavy and space-consuming, their defensive capabilities pale in comparison to the armor we developed. It can't be sold either, given what he Whitelion Legion symbolizes. That's why I chose to give them to the second highness so our house no longer has to help him restore the kingdom."

"Sigh, Locke, you still don't understand? I didn't say it was wrong for you to give the equipment. The act of giving wasn't the problem. Your mistake was that you gave it away like you were returning it. Other things aside, even though the 72 thousand sets of gear are not much use to us, we can still sell them to House Fisablen or the four central duchies for 5 million gold Fordes. Your giving them away is like tossing that amount of money down the drain. And did the second highness express any gratitude for your generosity? No! nothing! He just rushed to Felicitas to start recruiting his soldiers! He's a chronic ingrate to the end!"

Charade had never held a good impression of the second highness and felt he was an underhanded person who tried to act just and fair. The convoy Charade had led had almost been cornered thanks to the second highness' antics. Had it not been for Lorist's timely aid, the consequences would have been unimaginable. Not only that, the second highness had used the opportunity when the convoy was in dire straits to poach 26 members who were Dawn Academy alumni. They were all silver-ranked knights when they joined the second highness, but it didn't take one year for a good number of them to be killed off in battle, much to the dismay and pain of Charade and the other household knights who were also from Dawn Academy.

Lorist smiled bitterly.

"I'm sorry, Charade. It's my fault. I only wanted to shoo them off as quickly as I could so they can't cause trouble. The following two years will be crucial for us, what with House Kenmays and House Shazin's dominion relocation, as well as our attack on the Madras duchy.

"I really don't have the energy to play the second highness's game right now, so I thought I could just give him whatever I had on hand so he would leave."

"Locke, you're wrong to think of the second highness as a dog. If you give a dog a bone, it will shake its tail happily at you. However, the second highness is a wolf. Not only

will he not be thankful, he will see our dominion as a ripe piece of juicy meat that's just begging to be bitten," said Charade without the slightest care for the Auguslo's status.

He was worried the fallen monarch would once again cause an uproar within the dominion.

"I don't think you did wrong by giving him Whitelion Legion's equipment since it's not worth that much anyway. What I have a problem with is how you've just promised to give it away without much thought. Ideally, you should've given him the equipment in small batches while you negotiate for the things we need from him. But now, we won't be able to get anything in return!

"Another point I don't really understand is why you've agreed to let them recruit soldiers from our dominion so easily. With money, equipment, and an abundance of people to recruit from, it's only a matter of time until he comes for us. I believe we should send the second highness away as soon as possible so it doesn't come to that."

Lorist laughed heartily before he took a drink.

"Charade, I admit that it was my mistake to give him the equipment so easily. I should've done what you said. However, you are looking at the matter of recruitment the wrong way. Believe me, the second highness definitely won't be able to recruit many people from Felicitas. Hahaha…"

"Why?" Charade asked, "The second highness is the Andinaq kingdom's former king, and the citizens at Felicitas are mostly refugees from his kingdom. They have a high opinion of the second highness and will definitely answer his call if given the chance. Also, that king of ours will definitely make tons of empty promises to seduce the foolish to become fodder."

"Haha," Lorist laughed loudly before, "Charade, you've been put in charge of administrative matters for far too long. Perhaps you've forgotten our house's enlistment policies. Our subjects have to go to the new recruit camp when they are 16 to awaken their battleforce, and those that can't must return home to work as farmers. The process will repeat once every three months until they're 20 and those that manage to have their battleforce awakened can join our forces. Being our household soldier is one of the most desired vocations in the dominion, and those that serve long enough might even be promoted to the ranks of the police brigades or the garrison

forces.

"Take, for example, the recently formed Jaeger Legion. The unit has already recruited most of the people in the dominion eligible for military service. Tigersoar and Firmrock have had many of their members transferred over as well, so they've had to run recruitment drives of their own to fill the void. Many people from the town garrisons and local defense brigades have also been recruited, so they'll have to start recruiting as well. As for those who don't qualify to become a member of our forces, they have their own jobs to do at the factories to feed their families. Given the situation, do you think the second highness will succeed in his recruitment?

"I heard he's going to use one gold Forde as payment to the families of the soldiers he recruits. When I heard he was going to recruit more than 70 thousand at once, I almost laughed so hard all my teeth fell out. He didn't even consider the fact that each person in our dominion will be able to earn two to three gold Fordes for a year's hard work and still thinks he can pay for a human life with one gold Forde. Hehe, Charade, the second highness will not be able to recruit any soldiers here. It's already been four days since his departure and he only has around 143! Hahaha…"

Charade breathed a sigh of relief and downed the rest of his wine again.

"I truly have forgotten our policies. Well, that settles that. As long as the second highness is unable to recruit soldiers, there isn't much he can do with the equipment he got. Then again, Locke, you should be careful not to let the second highness use us again like he did with the convoy."

"Don't worry. I've already had Tarkel and Furybear go all out and monitor each and every one of their moves. Oh, and you came here just in time. I was about to head to the warzone at the Metropoulos River's lower bank to see Potterfang. I'll need you to deal with the matter of the second highness. I feel like I didn't offer them enough hospitality…"

A loud commotion rang out on the lower floor, causing Howard to look out of the window.

"Milord, the second highness and Lady Glacia are here and they seem rather mad."

It didn't take long for the study's door to be pushed open. The second highness wore a displeased look while Glacia seemed completely fuming.

"Locke, what do you think you're doing?! Didn't you say you wouldn't get in the way of our recruitment?! Why did you do all that?!"

"What did I do? Can you be more specific?" asked Lorist curiously.

"After we recruited some soldiers, your men sent their family members to our army camp as well! What's your intention? Your men even said that since the ones recruited have chosen to serve the king, House Norton will no longer be responsible for feeding their family members, and it falls to us to take care for them! Tell me, did you order this?" roared Glacia angrily.

"Can you tell me where the soldiers you recruited worked originally?" asked Lorist coldly.

"Well…" Glacia found herself speechless all of a sudden.

"This, Brother Locke, the soldiers we recruited were only a little hot-headed and wanted to serve the kingdom in whatever capacity they can. It's something worthy of praise, we shouldn't trouble the family members," said the second highness hurriedly.

"Is that so? Are you saying that House Norton hasn't done enough already? Don't forget we just paid you 100 thousand gold Fordes and gave you Whitelion Legion's equipment. This alone equates to six million gold Fordes' worth of support. If this doesn't count, then what does? I doubt anyone in the history of Grindia has ever made such a huge donation before, yet we didn't even get a word of thanks in return," said Charade insidiously.

A trace of seething anger flashed past the second highness's subdued expression, but it only lasted an instant.

"Oh, Knight Charade, it's been so long since we last met. Congratulations on becoming a gold-ranked knight."

Charade puffed out the badge on his chest.

"That's nothing to be surprised about. Anyone can do this much with proper training. Your Highness, why haven't you responded to the aid the house has given you over these few days? Are you still not satisfied with what we've done?"

Charade's point struck the heart of the matter mercilessly. Normally speaking, a senior

noble must formally respond to the aid offered by a vassal. It could be in the form of a letter of gratitude that stated what the vassal contributed. In some cases where vassals sent their own troops to participate in a senior noble's campaign, the senior noble had to offer some more land along with a rank promotion or some other form of reward as compensation.

Lorist's contribution to the second highness could already be considered one of the biggest donations ever made in the history of Grindia, yet the second highness didn't respond in any way even after a few days had passed. Hence Charade's lack of hesitation to hammer home the point.

"Your Highness, at the very least, a letter of gratitude is due. We've already sunk in a legion's worth of gear, and we don't expect much in return apart from acknowledgment of our contribution. Or, is it because Your Highness feels that our contribution doesn't even merit your gratitude?" pressured Charade.

"Hehe, apologies," the second highness said after taking a deep breath and wearing a pleasant facade, "I formally express my gratitude to Brother Locke and House Norton for giving aid to a fallen king such as myself. As a simple letter of gratitude wasn't sufficient to express my heartfelt thanks, I had intended to leave the acknowledgment for a formal banquet I would host at the imperial capital. That's why I was busy trying my best to make preparations to take back my kingdom. Only then can I raise your peerage and give you the compensation you deserve. However, since you're in such a hurry, I can give you my reply right now."

The second highness nodded to Lorist and said, "Brother Locke, I hope you won't mind if I use your desk."

Without waiting for Lorist's reply, he sat down of his own accord before he started scribbling on two beastskin documents. After that, he removed his ring and sealed the documents with his wax seal near the place where he signed.

"Are you satisfied now, Knight Charade?" asked the second highness sarcastically as he handed the two documents over, intentionally avoiding Lorist.

Charade looked at Lorist only to see him shake his head slightly. Charade proceeded to read the two documents aloud.

The first was the letter of gratitude for Lorist and House Norton's contributions as

well as his hopes that they would continue to contribute to the kingdom. It was no different from the average gratitude letter.

After reading out loud, Charade complained, "Your Highness, I feel that you should've stated clearly in what manner House Norton contributed to you. This is something that'll enter the annals of Grindian history as one of the largest donations ever made, so it won't do to lightly pass it over like that. Well, since you didn't bother to write it down, we will make our own records of the matter in our household chronicles."

The second letter was a letter of promotion. As the senior noble of House Norton, and the person who bore the legacy of the Krissen Empire, the second highness officially promoted Norton Lorist to the position of Duke of The Northlands. All nobles within The Northlands would have to submit to House Norton, and any who were displeased were free to bear arms in objection.

Heh, this guy's still trying to give me trouble. It's a shame he doesn't know about the dominion relocation of the three other houses. With this letter in hand, House Norton will be able to rule The Northlands without contest, thought Lorist, smiling coldly.

"Thank you for the promotion, Your Highness. House Norton is ever so thankful," said Lorist with a salute.

He didn't even hesitate to express his gratitude when it was due.

"Well, it's what you deserve, my friend. Also, let's talk about the matter of soldier recruitment," said the second highness.

A knocking on the door could be heard before Howard entered with two letters in hand.

Lorist saw the blue markings on the letters and smiled coldly. "Your Highness, Glacia, is this how you repay my trust?"

Lorist waved the letters in his hand and continued, "While I did allow you to recruit soldiers from the dominion, I never said you could poach the members of the police brigades and garrison forces. They are also considered part of the Norton forces. Your Highness, how do you explain your actions?"

Glacia argued, "Locke, we didn't actively seek them out. It was they who wanted to serve His Highness and contribute to the kingdom of their own accord. Surely, you

can't stop them from wanting to do service to the kingdom."

"Since that's the case, what were you so angry about just now?" Lorist nodded, "On what grounds should we take care of their family if they no longer serve the house? You should know their homes and farmland are theirs to use solely because one of their family members are part of the Nortons' military forces. Now that they've abandoned their status as a Norton household soldier, they naturally relinquish the benefits they've enjoyed so far. You can't expect us to continue to care for someone who turned their backs on us, can you? Also, I didn't do anything to stop them from pledging allegiance to you."

"This…" The second highness wore a bitter smile.

Not only did most of the 400 thousand or so citizens of Felicitas not want to enlist, they only managed to recruit a hundred or so mercenaries and wanderers after four days of effort. It was completely unlike what happened in the Redlis kingdom, where people flocked to be enlisted in the military. The second highness had only reached out to the garrison soldiers and factory guards out of desperation, but he didn't think that he would stir up so much trouble after only recruiting a dozen of them. The sight of the family members being sent to their camp was even more unbearable: they had clamored and complained as they chased down their family members who had just been recruited, as well as cursed the second highness and the rest for tricking them to give their lives away.

But, where would I recruit soldiers if not here? It was almost guaranteed for him to be attacked the moment he showed his face anywhere else. To the second highness, his enemies lurked everywhere apart from The Northlands. He no longer had anywhere to go. Since he was unable to recruit many soldiers in the Norton dominion, his best option was to have House Norton deploy soldiers on his behalf. However, they had already offered up so many contributions. It was no longer a feasible option.

Lorist didn't care about the second highness and Glacia's angered looks.

He opened the second letter and put it down immediately before he said, "Your Highness, I have to apologize for not being able to host your stay any longer. I have to rush to the frontlines. Knight Charade will be in charge during my absence. If you need anything, seek him out and he will see that you're tended to."

"What? Is House Norton at war with someone?" asked the second highness, surprised.

"No, Your Highness. It's our allies, House Kenmays and House Shazin. The two houses are invading the Madras duchy, and, being their allies, we have to send our soldiers to aid them in their assault. This is the least we can do as allies."

"You're attacking the Madras duchy?!" said the second highness with a start, before he snapped out of his stupor, "Brother Locke, would you mind if I followed you there for a look?"

Chapter 337
Conditions

In the end, the second highness insisted that he follow Lorist to the war zone.

"Your Highness," Lorist said, "even though House Kenmays and House Shazin are our allies, they are still considered nobles of the Iblia kingdom. Given the hostile situation between them and the Andinaq kingdom, I am rather worried for your safety. I think it's best if you don't head to the frontlines."

The second highness patted on Lorist's shoulder with a smile.

"No worries. With Brother Locke around, I don't have to worry for my safety. As for Baron Shazin and Count Kenmays, since they're your allies, I believe they wouldn't be interested in a kingdom's former monarch like me. Also, I'm only going there to take a look, not to meddle in military affairs. I believe I will be treated well as a fellow knight there to observe the tide of war."

And so, Lorist had no choice but to bring the second highness along.

Four days later, Lorist and company crossed the floating bridge that stretched across Metropoulos River and arrived at the borders of the Madras duchy.

The Northlands's army was situated not far from the river's crossing point. After destroying the enemy fortifications and routing their troops, Count Kenmays and Baron Shazin ordered their troops to a mound nearby instead of having them press their attack into the duchy. They set up camp where Baron Silas' castle once stood. The baron had been hung some years earlier. The troops fortified their camp so heavily that it seemed they intended to stay there for quite a while.

Lorist had received a letter from Count Kenmays five days ago, stating that the army wouldn't press their assault and instead cooped up at the castle ruins atop the mound. As Lorist predicted, the Madras duchy's nobles' private forces, as well as the duchy's main force, seemed to have run completely amok, savagely attacking the allied army's camp. Those hectic times lasted for more than ten days until the Madras forces lost more than five thousand men from their assaults. They finally halted their attacks and

sent a messenger to the enemy's camp.

"Locke, your plan to stand our ground instead of attack truly is marvelous! Hennard himself said if we had continued to advance, we would've been attacked by the private armies and the duchy's main force. It would no doubt have multiplied our casualties. All we had to do was occupy this area and defend it to crush their counterattack attempts without breaking a sweat! Umm, who is he?"

When Count Kenmays saw Lorist, he began to boast about how effective the latter's strategy had been, until he saw the smiling second highness whose eyes were gleaming with excitement.

Lorist briefly introduced the two, causing Kenmays to act rather awkward, given that he was a noble of the Iblia kingdom and the king of the enemy kingdom was right in front of him. However, the second highness was only a former king and had also come as a fellow knight to observe the battles, so Kenmays didn't intend to do anything about his presence.

The second highness, on the other hand, acted very amiably to the count, first praising the Kenmays house for running the largest construction guilds back during the time of the empire, expressing what a shame he thought it was for them to have pledged allegiance to the Iblia kingdom, as well as mention how much he admired the count's talent. In just ten minutes, the second highness and Kenmays were already close to the point they decked shoulders like long lost brothers and chatted happily without end.

When they arrived at the tent, Shazin Hennard had also just returned. After Lorist introduced the second highness to the baron, the second highness expressed his friendly and familiar attitude once more. However, Shazin didn't really trust the display and maintained a formal and polite demeanor.

The reason Lorist had to rush over was that of the matter of the messenger. At first, Kenmays only demanded the trade routes through the duchy be restored and for the allowance of crossing through Metropoulos River with low taxes for merchant convoys. He didn't think the messenger would return quickly after being sent back with an agreement to all of the count's requests. Since it had already been achieved, there would no longer be a reason for their troops to stay. In essence, they would have to withdraw their forces once more and the war would end.

Not knowing what he should do, the count wrote to Lorist while he tried to delay the

duchy as best he could. After hearing about the count's explanation, Lorist laughed.

"Don't care about them. We just have to mind our own business. For now, we must make sure this camp has enough resources to winter here. If you have time on your hands, sweep some of the local nobles' castles or demand they pay a tribute for the war. Only attack them if they don't comply."

"What if their messenger comes to object to our actions?" asked Kenmays.

"Simple. Who was the cause of this war in the first place? It's none other than the arrow outposts situated at the duchy's defensive line that not only forbade passage through the river but also sunk two of Hennard's fishing boats. We must have the duchy pay for their mistakes as well as make up our military expenses. Just make ridiculous demands, if they want to bargain or negotiate, make sure to drag them on for as long as possible. All we have to do is maintain the status quo until winter is over. We must also have the duke himself sign on our agreement and not some nobody who claims to be able to accept the conditions on behalf of the duchy. Only then will we withdraw our forces."

Kenmays was overjoyed to the point that he slapped his thigh.

"That's right! Spending so much time in this military encampment has rusted my mind. I didn't even think of such a simple solution and felt a little odd when I thought about how easy it was to defeat the duchy. The moment I heard their agreement to our conditions, I thought we had lucked out, but I almost ended up tricked by them. I can almost be sure the duchy's folks won't acknowledge the agreement after we withdraw our forces and deploy their troops at the bank of the river once more."

"All we have to do if that's the case is launch another attack," said Hennard confidently.

"Locke, if the duchy accepts the rest of our conditions, what do we do?" asked Kenmays after some thought.

"Then we have no choice. If Duke Madras is willing to pay such a price, we will have to withdraw. However, we can use the excuse of not trusting them to request for a plot of land near the riverbank to garrison a division of troops two reasons. The first is to protect the bridge and the second is to ensure safe passage for the merchant convoys from The Northlands," replied Lorist.

"Very well, we'll do just that. I'll tell the messenger that when he comes again. If they

are able to abide by our conditions and show the duchy's sincerity, we will agree to end the war."

Originally, the second highness only intended to watch their discussion with a smile. However, he felt something was off the more he listened to the point he couldn't resist his urge to speak.

"Apologies for interrupting, Brother Locke, Count Kenmays, may I ask you the reason for this war?"

"Oh, Your Highness, it all started like this. Duke Madras sealed off the crossing point at the river and even sunk two of House Shazin's fishing boats. This attack was made in retaliation for the duchy's acts. If Duke Madras agrees to no longer seal off the river and reopen the trade routes, allowing our merchant convoys to conduct business within the duchy, we will end the war," answered Kenmays politely.

"Does that mean you're not willing to conquer the duchy and make it your own dominion? That would achieve your goals as well, won't it?" asked the second highness curiously.

Kenmays rolled his eyes and looked at the second highness like he would an idiot.

"Your Highness, it's not that we don't want to occupy the duchy, the price we have to pay for it is far too high. Even though we are able to pull it off, our goal is first and foremost the reopening of trade. Why would we bother with conquering the duchy? We'd have to invest much more resources to develop the place as well if we do, and we're not stupid enough to. As long as Duke Madras agrees to our conditions, it won't hurt to end the war."

The second highness looked disappointed because he thought the reason the Nortons and their allies attacked the duchy was to exterminate it instead of just giving it a small poke to re-establish trade. He had thought that he could use the chaos that would result from the war to recruit the refugees into his new Whitelion Legion so he could travel through the duchy to reclaim his throne. His dreams were shattered without any mercy at all.

Seeing the second highness's disheartened look, Lorist tried to resist his urge to smile. He had already known the true goal of the second highness for making this trip. While Lorist had his own plans for occupying the duchy, he wouldn't let the second highness

take advantage of it.

"Alright, let's get something to eat. Also, Hennard, please see that His Highness is settled down and rested. We have traveled for quite a number of days, so let's rest after our meal and leave any talking to tomorrow."

Even though it was wartime, with the spoiled and indulgent Kenmays around, the ad hoc banquet was as plentiful as ever. However, the second highness appeared rather down for the most part and didn't have much of an appetite. It didn't take long for him to leave for the room Hennard had prepared with the excuse of feeling a little tipsy.

"Why did you bring him along? It was so awkward for me just now," complained Kenmays.

"I didn't have a choice either," Lorist shrugged, "He insisted on following, and I can't just refuse my senior noble without good reason. Since he's no longer the king, there's nothing wrong with him coming here as a noble knight."

"Didn't he disappear for quite a while? Why has he showed himself all of a sudden? Since you were already a free noble, it must feel quite bad for your senior noble to pop up again all of a sudden," said Hennard.

Lorist breathed a long sigh and told them about how the second highness managed to escape his predicament, as well as what he requested of the Norton house.

"Hahahaha!" Kenmays and Hennard both laughed upon hearing how the second highness wasn't able to recruit soldiers at the Norton dominion.

"You know, Locke, don't you think that ex-king of yours is rather useful? You can use him and his name to send your troops to reclaim his kingdom. You can then install him as a puppet ruler. He can jump to your will whilst you pull the strings from the shadows," said Hennard with a flash of inspiration.

Kenmays didn't hesitate to put a damper on the thought.

"Forget it, I'm sure you know of the ambitions that man has. He's always wanted to be the emperor that reunites the empire. Controlling him is out of the question. What a mastermind requires is a cowardly dog, not a wolf king that'll take a bite out of him at the first opportunity.

"Just look at how he treats Lorist. Not only did he use him while he called him Brother Locke, he's actually rather guarded and fearful of House Norton's might. Now he got himself into this pool of trouble, he still wants to rebuild his army and rely on himself to reclaim the throne instead of letting Locke do the honors and agreeing to the terms of his house. That alone should be enough to show how hard it is to control someone like him."

"I sent someone to have Ovidis hide his catapults before I came; the second highness won't learn of our secret weapon. Make sure you order your subordinates to not leak it either. It's fine if the second highness wants to see anything else. Since we're not in conflict at present, the frontlines are rather peaceful. I'm sure they won't be able to hold on for a few more days. It'll be much easier for us when they leave. All we have to do now is follow our original plan," said Lorist as he stood up and concluded the banquet.

Lorist didn't feel like going to rest after a full meal. Since it was still the afternoon, he had Els bring him two fishing rods from Kenmays's tent. He had just tasted some fresh whitefish from Metropoulos River during the banquet and Kenmays didn't fail to boast about his fishing skills. Hennard, on the other hand, said hatefully that when he was busy beating away the duchy's forces, Kenmays was fishing. However, there was naught Hennard could do but complain, given how his favorite woman was the count's cousin.

After three hours of fishing, they got many different types of catch, all apart from whitefish. Seeing that it was getting late, Lorist and Els rowed their fishing boat back to shore and returned to their camp.

The ruined castle on the mound had already been restored halfway. It was the center of operations for the army as well as Hennard and Kenmays' temporary residence. It was arranged for Lorist to stay in a building not far from the main castle. He ordered a couple of guards to deal with the catch as he climbed the stairs to his room for a bath.

After Lorist entered the tub, a guard outside reported that Kenmays had come over, probably to invite Lorist for dinner. Lorist didn't mind and let Kenmays into the room. Since they were both men, there wasn't anything to be shy about.

Unexpectedly, Kenmays's first words were.

"Your king got me to chat with him for the whole afternoon. Do you know what he's

up to?"

Surprised, Lorist asked, "What?"

"He promised to grant many of my wishes and drew a huge picture of what I would receive if I agreed to pledge allegiance to him," Kenmays laughed, "He said he would elevate me to the status of a duke and give our house a whole province."

"Do you trust his word?" asked Lorist, laughing.

Kenmays shook his head.

"Not really, but I can't say I'm not moved by his words."

"Why?"

"Locke, House Norton is a military-based noble house; it has centuries of history in the Krissen Empire. We are not. House Kenmays only used to be the largest construction guild during the days of the empire. We practically paid the second prince for our noble title, and that guy's a traitor to the empire. Now that he's dead, Iblia's future is on a precipice of uncertainty. If the kingdom is exterminated, nobody will be willing to acknowledge our peerage. The Andinaq royal family, on the other hand, has the legacy of the Krissen Empire. That, is what the second highness symbolizes."

Chapter 338
Pledging Allegiance

Of The Northlands' four houses, the Nortons were the strongest in terms of might, the Kenmayses second, the Felims third, and the Shazins last. And in terms of how established a house was, in terms of legacy and inheritance, the name of the Roaring Raging Bear was well known across the former empire. The Felims were known as the House of the Pegasus. Next was House Shazin. While they used to be a vassal of the Duke of The Northlands and being only a small baron house, they had a three-generation heritage stretching back a century.

House Kenmays, on the other hand, was relatively new. They had emerged from a mercantile background just a couple of decades ago. It wasn't easy for them to gain the acknowledgment of the other nobles, especially not so given that their house had only for two half-generations. Kenmays was moved by the second highness' words for these reasons. House Kenmays had been in existence for far too short a time and the second prince, who was the one that had given the house their peerage, was a traitor who had already been put to death. Iblia was also on the brink of extinction, it was fated to be a short-lived dynasty. The moment the kingdom was wiped off the map, who knew if there would still be anyone that acknowledged the Kenmays name.

The second highness had adeptly noticed this weakness and was confident he could bring them under his grasp, as he put forward an opportunity that would make them legitimate landed nobles. Kenmays knew if the second highness rebuilt his army and swept across the empire, his house would have to face extermination. Demotion of rank was not even up for negotiation. The best he could do was to give out the wealth his house had gathered over the years in exchange for their lives. They would at best return to being commoners, and not even the wealthy commoners they had been previously.

The second highness may only be a former king at present who didn't even have soldiers to his name, with his throne occupied by his own niece, but he was still the rightful bearer of Krissen Empire's legacy. If House Kenmays pledged allegiance to the second highness, they would be able to receive the acknowledgement of the other landed nobles and the count would truly be accepted as a peer of the realm.

"Did you agree to his proposition?" asked Lorist, seated within the tub.

"Not yet. I postponed by saying it was a huge matter for the house that merited serious consideration. I'll give him an answer within the next two days. I came to look for you immediately after seeing him off," said Kenmays.

"Apart from your pledge of allegiance, what demands did he make of you in exchange for becoming a duke and being given a province?"

"He wanted me to encourage you guys to press the attack," Kenmays shrugged, "He'll make me a duke the moment the duchy ceases to exist. However, I did warn him that we wouldn't be able to exterminate the duchy without House Norton's aid. Given the combined might of House Kenmays and House Shazin, we would be able to defeat our enemies. But exterminating the whole duchy would be a rather big stretch."

Lorist furrowed his brow in thought while Kenmays stood near the tub, patiently waiting for a response.

As the water within the tub cooled, Lorist finally raised his head.

"Perhaps, this will be a great opportunity for all four houses. We can use this chance to swallow the whole Madras duchy. Here's what you have to do: put the second highness off for two days before you say this to him…"

……

During the past two days, Baron Shazin Hennard brought his troops to raid the nearby nobles' manors and returned with plentiful resources. Delamock still lived up to its name of being the largest food producer of the former empire. Hennard managed to raid four manors during the two days and gained enough food to feed the army's 100 thousand soldiers for the whole winter.

The second highness felt like he was on vacation. As Hennard had gone pillaging, or put more eloquently: 'gathering resources', the second highness wasn't able to work on his relationship with the baron. Kenmays didn't want to meet with him for some reason, so the second highness was unable to press him for a response. As for Lorist, he was busy fishing with his guards on the Metropoulos River as if he didn't care about the ongoing war at all.

Even though the second highness was well cared for in the camp, his freedom was

severely restricted. Whenever he attempted to leave, there would be a really polite guard who would remind him of his status as an observing noble knight and of how he wasn't allowed to leave the campgrounds for no good reason to avoid causing trouble for its owners. The reasoning behind it was that even though the Northlander troops were only having a small skirmish with the Madras duchy's forces, if the second highness's presence was discovered, the consequences would be severe and the war would turn out really differently.

For the sake of his greater goals, the second highness resisted the urge to leave. He didn't want to be treated like an unwelcome personage by the army, especially during a time when he could take House Kenmays under his wing. So, he could only waltz around the camp with his attendants and drool at House Kenmays and House Shazin's pristine armor and fantasize about them destroying his enemies under his command.

There were roughly 36 thousand Shazin troops, 46 thousand Kenmays troops, and 12 thousand Norton troops in the camp, bringing the total near 100 thousand men. Apart from the raiding excursions Baron Shazin and his gold-ranked knight, Tabik, conducted, the rest of the troops that were not involved in patrolling or training were assigned miscellaneous tasks, such as chopping firewood, repairing the lodges to prepare for winter, fishing, hunting, and herding the livestock they had brought along.

The army looked completely unprofessional in the eyes of the second highness. He felt soldiers should only be concerned with war and spared the need to do the work of servants. If he had been in command, he would've swept half of Delamock already. And after gaining territory with such an elite force, he was confident he would be able to defeat Duke Madras. He would make sure the duke stayed cooped up in his lair in Sidgler while he made his way to the imperial capital.

The second highness's patience was finally rewarded when Count Kenmays showed up in front of him three days after the offer was made.

"Your Highness, House Kenmays is willing to pledge its allegiance to you and fight under your banner. We beseech the light of the mighty Wargod shine upon our kingdom and bring Your Highness endless victory," said Kenmays after he saluted respectfully.

The second highness was overjoyed when he heard the count's sincere reply. Now, he had yet another mighty noble house loyal to him alongside House Norton. It greatly increased his confidence in achieving his goals.

However, the second highness saw Kenmays's troubled look and asked out of curiosity, "What's wrong, count? Is there something troubling you?"

Kenmays replied with a bitter smile, "Your Highness, even though I and my house had pledged you our allegiance, we are unfortunately unable to fulfill your wishes. We won't be able to attack the duchy, nor were we able to convince our ally to resume the offensive."

"Why is that? My fine count, my word to you is no light matter. I make an oath on my status as the ruler to make you duke as long as you can exterminate the duchy. When I reunite the empire, you may freely pick a province as your dominion."

Kenmays shook his head.

"Your Highness, you've misunderstood. If you want the duchy exterminated, all four houses have to attack with full force. It is not possible to do so with only Baron Shazin's and my forces. Additionally, Baron Shazin has zero interest in pitting his men against the duchy's forces. As for our house, my father will definitely oppose the casualties likely to be incurred should we press on now."

The second highness asked with a trace of suspicion, "My Lord Count, I've seen your and Baron Shazon's troops; they are very formidable. The near 100 thousand troops you have here are more than enough to clear out Delamock. You stand a great chance at victory even if Duke Madras resists with all his might. Why do you say you're unable to take the duchy?"

"Your Highness, perhaps you are uninformed about the current state of the duchy's forces. Actually, a few years ago, after Duke Madras clashed with the second prince at Kobo, he armed his troops heavily. Apart from the 48 thousand men of the Seamountain Legion, which he has stationed in Sidgler, there are four defense legions that number up to 100 thousand men defending the seven citadels in Sanderson Hills. There are another 20 thousand men each at Nadegas, Kobo, and the river bank respectively. In total, they easily have over 150 thousand troops. If the private forces of the various nobles are factored in, there are another 60 thousand men at their disposal.

"If Baron Shazin and I press the attack with our two legions, we will quickly get entangled with the 100 plus thousand troops of the duke. If that happens, even if we end up victorious, our vitality will be horribly sapped. Even if we win, Duke Madras

can continue to rest and recover given his dominion's abundant resources and population, while our houses will take up to ten years to recover.

"Your Highness, you should know that the Nortons have the most powerful military among our houses. Even if all through of our houses were to assault them at the same time, they would still win. There's also House Felim, which you might know as the House of the Pegasus. Baron Felim is the descendant of that house and his light cavalry legion has only recently shocked the world with their prowess. In contrast to those two houses, the troops of House Shazin are slow foot soldiers balanced in both attack and defense. House Kenmays's troops focus more on defense, with offense our weakness.

"Your Highness, I truly apologize for not being able to conquer the duchy. Our attack will do nothing but smash an egg against a rock. It is far from the rational thing to do. At present, the best I can do to show my loyalty is provide you some funds. I truly am unable to conquer the duchy, unless all four houses act in unison. Please forgive my incompetence," said Kenmays as he took out a thick stack of gold Forde bills that amounted to roughly 100 thousand gold Fordes and placed it carefully on the table.

The second highness seemed a little sour after hearing the response. What Count Kenmays said amounted to, 'I only pledged allegiance to you for the sake of officiating my house's title. If you want to use us to fight the duchy, we won't be able to help you. House Kenmays is willing to provide monetary support, but we definitely won't send our troops to the meat grinder for the sake of restoring your throne.' Naturally, the second highness was doubtful of what Kenmays said of the duchy's forces, but he was glad to have gleaned another piece of information that may prove useful to him.

"You mentioned the might of House Norton exceeds that of your three houses combined?" asked he.

"It does, Your Highness. The Nortons have two legions that number 120 thousand men. If you add their garrison soldiers to the figure, they have 150 thousand troops. Our own house only has 55 thousand in our legion, whereas House Felim's legion is made up of 46 thousand men, and House Shazin's numbers 42 thousand. The troops of the three houses combined don't even make up 150 thousand men. The Nortons are naturally the strongest," expounded Kenmays.

He intentionally understated the actual number of Norton troops by omitting the 25 local defense brigades in his count. As for three of the brigades that were present

within the camp, he pretended to have not noticed them, since the second highness didn't really grasp the organization of the Norton forces anyway.

"Since that's the case, I have another question," the second highness began, "Since The Northlands is already the four houses' domain, they no longer have to defend against other neighboring dominion lords given how all four of your dominions are connected. If that's the case, why do they still maintain such a huge military outfit? What are they planning? Aren't the three other houses, including yours, worried about the Nortons' ambitions?"

Kenmays smiled when the second highness tried to put the Norton house in a bad light just like Lorist said he would. He was trying to fracture the relationship between the allies.

"Your Highness, do you know why the four houses formed an alliance in the first place?" Kenmays asked, "There are only two reasons. First, to set our sights on the Iblia kingdom. Second, to resist Duke Fisablen and his cavalry legions."

"Set your sights on the Iblia kingdom? I can understand being wary of Duke Fisablen, but aren't the other three houses nobles of the Iblia kingdom? Why would you target your own kingdom?" asked the second highness interestedly.

"Your Highness, actually, after House Norton sent their troops to Windbury to capture the second prince, we three noble houses have been isolated by the rest of the kingdom's nobles. It's more appropriate to consider us nobles of The Northlands. The reason we're targeting the Iblia kingdom is that we're doing it for Baron Felim. You should know the original dominion of the House of the Pegasus is in Southern, and it's his dream to reclaim his ancestral land.

"However, Southern has already been made a wasteland from the conflict, and we'll have to conquer Winston first to reach it. At present, Duke Fisablen's daughter, Iblia's queen, holds power within the province. We will definitely be pitted against the duke if we attack it. Duke Fisablen was renowned as one of the empire's three war gods and his Frontier Legion was one of the most impressive forces in The Northlands. The reason all four houses are expanding our military so fervently is so we are prepared for a conflict with the duke. It's also why House Norton maintains such a huge force."

"Ah, I see. Duke Fisablen, House of the Pegasus, and Baron Felim…" mumbled the second highness, before inspiration flashed across his eyes, "Count Kenmays, if I am

willing to make Baron Felim a count and give Southern to him as a dominion, would he be willing to pledge allegiance to me as well?"

Kenmays wore a look of resentment as he thought, *this second highness is shameless to the core! Even though he doesn't have troops or power, he treats the empire like he owns it and promises land he doesn't own to others! Hmph, it's easy for him to promise to make Baron Felim a count, but is Southern even his territory in the first place? If Baron Felim pledges allegiance to him, he'd have to send his troops to fight for Southern himself, with the only benefit being having a good excuse to do so, since the Andinaq kingdom is at war with the Iblia kingdom.*

The second highness hurriedly realized what he just did when he saw Kenmays's expression. "Naturally, Lord Count, I won't forget your contributions as well. If you can convince Baron Felim to join my side, feel free to state what you require."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Kenmays said as he saluted, "I won't hold back either. If we can eliminate the duchy, I want Sidgler as the hereditary dominion of House Kenmays."

Chapter 339
Lobbying

As things played out, sending Count Kenmays to deal with the second highness was a brilliant plan.

Since Lorist was the second highness's vassal, he had to act respectfully and politely.

But faced with the suspicion the second highness held towards the house, Lorist would never bother to do anything to placate the second highness or calm his fears. Not only was it a sign of his confidence, it was also part of his pride. Whether the second highness be his former self that commanded 300 thousand troops or his current self -- no better than a failed noble -- Lorist maintained the same attitude he always had.

Since you're so suspicious of me, I can't be bothered to deal with you. All I have to do is do the bare minimum required of me.

Lorist thought the second highness wasn't one without talent. His reputation as one of the war gods on Grindia was nothing to scoff at. First, he had used the northbound convoy to pacify the kingdom's trouble-causing nobles. Thereafter he plotted to ruin the relationship between Duke Madras and the second prince and caused them to be on hostile terms to the point that Duke Madras had to cede Yungechandler.

On another front, the second highness schemed against the first prince and gradually chipped away his enemy's forces, ultimately causing his foe to fall into his trap before he invaded the kingdom, forcing the first prince to cede two southwestern provinces for a peace treaty. A few years later when war broke out once more, the second highness crossed Cloudsnap Mountains to circumvent the iron-wall defenses the first prince set up and managed to take over Frederika. It was a battle that greatly alarmed all on the continent.

The second highness may be a brilliant commander, but the way Lorist saw it, he wasn't a good king. While the second highness's governing policies weren't bad per se, he didn't have the wisdom or wit of a king. Lorist believed the second highness was a grudge-holding, petty, stubborn, authoritarian, and opportunistic man who always

thought he knew best. Lorist could easily name a ton more faults the second highness possessed.

The man's biggest problem was his self-importance. It was the reason Lorist wanted as little to do with him as possible. He had no right to instruct Lorist to do this or that. He was glad a landed noble like him could refuse unreasonable orders from his liege, unlike the knights that served the second highness -- who had to obey every single order without question.

Lorist's method was simple: do everything step by step and focus on building a firm foundation. It was far better than the second highness's alpha-strike mentality that got him to gather a force of 300 thousand, only to end up with nothing after a devastating loss, having nowhere to return to apart from The Northlands, resulting in him having to rely on Lorist once more.

When the second highness received the Whitelion Legion's equipment as well as 100 thousand gold Fordes, it showed the relationship between the second highness and House Norton was nothing more than one of a liege and his vassal. The second highness had baited House Norton with the same gear to have their forces exterminate the obstacles that would stop him from gaining power. The equipment's return signified Lorist desire to have nothing further to do with the Andinaq royal family, a sentiment which the second highness undoubtedly noticed.

Kenmays, however, thought differently. Given the might of House Norton, Lorist could refuse any unreasonable order from the second highness and the latter wasn't able to do anything about it apart from smiling in a friendly manner. Kenmays was a person from a merchant family, so he had his methods to make the second highness willingly jump into the hole dug for him. Even though the second highness didn't always have his guard down, Kenmays still managed to fulfill his duty without issue. All the while pretending to rally allies for the second highness through advising Baron Shazin and Baron Felim. He encouraged the second highness to accept the two nobles' demands.

When Kenmays brought out his request for Sidgler to be made his dominion after the Madras duchy's conquest, the second highness agreed because he felt Sidgler was a rather rural province that didn't have much value apart from Platinum Beach, which was a famed vacation spot. And, given that the province was in Duke Madras's hands, the second highness was more than happy to give it away to instigate the fight between House Kenmays and the duchy since it would cost him nothing.

"How do intend to convince Baron Shazin to join us in our campaign, Your Highness?" asked the count.

"What if I make him a count?" asked the second highness after some thought.

"Your Highness, it won't do if you only promise empty titles to others," Kenmays said, shaking his head, "You must come up with benefits that will actually move them to support your cause."

"What does Baron Shazin want?"

"This," Kenmays said as he pointed at the map of the Madras duchy, "He wants the land around Sanderson Hills in Delamock."

"There? Why does he desire that?" asked the second highness, a little troubled.

The location was the border of Winston and wasn't like the rest of Delamock, rife with ripe farmlands. It was rather odd for the baron to want such a place as his territory.

"Your Highness, you should know well that Baron Shazin is a man brought up in a military family. He doesn't really understand what it means to manage a dominion. He's the one with the tightest finances among all four houses. He frequently needs our aid. There are two silver mines and one copper mine in Sanderson Hills. It would help alleviate his financial situation. It's far better than selling crops, which is why he desires the area," explained Kenmays.

"But, I intend to use those mines to fill the national treasury," said the second highness hesitantly.

"Your Highness, Sanderson Hills is currently under the control of Duke Madras and there are seven citadels there manned by a 40-thousand-man garrison. If you agree to the baron's request, he will attack and conquer the area regardless of the cost. Your Highness can then levy a ten percent tax on the mines' earnings. That's far better than sending your own elite troops to the grinder that is the seven citadels, no?"

"You're right, Lord Count," the second highness conceded, "Tell Baron Shazin that I agree to his demand. Apart from giving him that area, I will also make him a count."

"Your Highness truly is wise. We are really fortunate to have you as our king. I believe you will usher the empire into a new era of prosperity."

It was something Lorist wouldn't be able to utter even if it killed him. Yet, Kenmays had managed to deliver the line perfectly as if it came from the depths of his heart.

"Let's talk about what we need to do to convince Baron Felim next."

"Oh?"

Before the second highness's smile faded, his face turned into a look of bewilderment.

"Baron Felim? Didn't I already agree to promote him to the title of count and give him Southern as his house's dominion? Is he not satisfied?"

Kenmays sighed deeply before he said in an annoyed tone, "Your Highness, don't tell me you forgot that Southern is not under your control right now. The Iblia kingdom rules that area."

The second highness's face flushed.

"Even though it's currently part of the Iblia kingdom, when I return to the Andinaq kingdom and reassume my throne, I will restart my plan to reunite the empire and conquer it. Southern will be my land to rule."

"Time, Your Highness. What you need is time," Kenmays said forthrightly, "Your Highness can no longer promise others apples before the apple tree produces any fruit. Nobody will know for sure whether the apple will be sweet or sour. If you make that kind of offer as a king, others will regard you as a conniving merchant -- quite a harsh blow to your reputation."

"Ugh…"

The second highness couldn't help but appreciate the truth in the count's words.

"Lord Count," he shrugged, "What you said may be true, but apart from promising others things I don't currently have, what can I do? I'm more than ashamed of being a king so incompetent to fall to my current state."

"Your Highness, please don't think of it this way. Even lions have times of weakness. Your experiences are nothing short of legendary and the people of the future will no doubt sing your praises," Kenmays praised, "Your Highness, what Baron Felim wants is simple. He is willing to pledge allegiance to you and attack the duchy on your behalf.

All he wants is your promise to back him up when he attacks Iblia to take Southern. He will also need a legion of troops in Southern to defend against any attack by Duke Fisablen."

"This…" mused the second highness as he fell into deep thought.

"Your Highness, are there any difficulties in doing so?"

"Lord Count, it's not that I don't want to agree to the baron's request, it's beyond my means," the second highness laughed bitterly, "As you said, a king shouldn't make promises lightly. Even if I manage to conquer the duchy with your cooperation, I can only form one Whitelion Legion and I have to use it to fight my way to the imperial capital. Even if I do manage to take the kingdom back, I'll have to rebuild the royal family's local defense legion to defend against the Union and the four central duchies. There's no way I can send a legion to help Baron Felim take back Southern."

After the second highness gained some understanding of the duchy's military, he predicted the three houses of Shazin, Kenmays, and Felim would be in shambles after engaging it. That was the reason he wanted to use his Whitelion Legion to reclaim his kingdom right away without bothering to aid them.

He believed the kingdom's garrison soldiers would hear of his return and surrender and he would have to reorganize his military to deal with the Union and the four central duchies after reclaiming his throne. He couldn't be bothered to send a legion to aid Felim. Duke Fisablen wasn't a person that could be angered lightly either. Sending a legion to fight with the duke's was sending them on a suicide mission.

"If Baron Felim is willing to wait a few years until I destroy the Union and the four central duchies, I'll send troops to retake Southern for him. I hope you, Lord Count, will do your best to convince him to endure for two more years for the sake of the greater good," said the second highness embarrassed.

He knew if the Union and the duchies were that easy to deal with, he wouldn't have ended up in his current state.

Kenmays shook his head as he understood the second highness's intentions to use the light cavalry legion of House Felim to conquer the duchy. After his goal was achieved, the issue of House Felim's rightful dominion could be postponed.

"Your Highness, I really don't understand why you don't use any of the many easier

methods at your disposal. Why don't you just use the Nortons mighty forces?"

"House Norton?" The second highness sighed, "Lord Count, it's not that I don't want their aid. It's that they're unwilling to give it."

"Unwilling? How so?"

"I've already made Lorist Duke of The Northlands in hopes that he would send his troops to retake my throne. However, all he gave me is some equipment and money. He didn't bother to give me even a single soldier," said the second highness with a hint of anger.

Come on, that's 100 thousand gold Fordes and the equipment of the Whitelion Legion, not just some money and equipment. That alone should be worth three Duke of The Northlands titles, thought the count.

With a smile, he said, "Your Highness, I believe the reason they're unwilling to deploy any troops is that you didn't offer them anything they want. House Norton has been rather troubled over one issue."

"Oh? What is that?" asked the second highness curiously.

"Back when House Norton clashed with the second prince and won, their forces swept across The Northlands and took care of all landed nobles apart from our three houses. Currently, there are 17 noble houses living in Firmrock Castle. They are all the old nobles of the Krissen Empire that have some relation with House Norton. But, given that The Northlands is already under our four houses' control, Lorist has been wanting to give them replacement dominions."

"What did you say? House Norton actually dared to attack the old nobles of the Krissen Empire?" exclaimed the second highness.

"Your Highness, don't forget that even though those landed noble houses stemmed from the Krissen Empire, by the time the Nortons attacked, they were already nobles of the Iblia kingdom who have pledged allegiance to the second prince," Kenmays sighed, "House Norton's actions are perfectly justified. They have already shown mercy because they were once nobles of the empire."

"Oh, so that's the case," the second highness hurriedly said apologetically, "I'm sorry, I've forgotten. What you mean to say is…"

Kenmays pointed to Delamock.

"Your Highness, if you agree to enfeoff land here to the nobles, I believe House Norton will help us. If you can also let Lorist have Kobo and the rest of the remaining territory, I'm sure he will further Your Highness's cause without any hesitation.

The second highness hurriedly shook his head.

"No way, Lorist is already Duke of The Northlands. House Norton has already been given the whole of The Northlands, yet they want to stretch their hands into Delamock? That won't do."

"Your Highness, please consider your current position. Also, Delamock is Duke Madras's, not the Andinaq kingdom's. If House Norton wishes to take over the area, they will be the ones to pay the price. There is no free lunch in this world. Only through giving will you gain! You're only being asked to strike the deal with the territory currently belonging to Duke Madras. In essence, you don't have to give away anything of your own! Not only that, you can let the Nortons help you reclaim your throne! Are you going to give up on this opportunity? Your Highness! Don't disappoint me!"

The second highness glared at Kenmays all of a sudden.

"Count Kenmays, why did you bother to come up with this? Was Lorist the one that had you come lobby for him?"

"Your Highness, you truly are a person with a suspicious nature," Kenmays laughed, "There are two reasons I chose to do this. First, the Nortons' forces far exceed that of our three other houses. With their involvement, we can decrease our casualties. Second, I wish to have five of the landed nobles we're rearing given land in Delamock along with those in the care of the Nortons."

"Is that so…" Since the count had revealed his own intentions, the second highness no longer suspected he had plotted this in conjunction with Lorist.

"However, I feel this benefits House Norton far too much. To the point it's a little undeserved," said the second highness begrudgingly.

You're still not satisfied even if they're going to fight to the imperial capital for you? Kenmays said with a smile, "Your Highness, if you accept this, you can leave the matter of reclaiming Baron Felim's dominion to House Norton. I believe they would be more

than capable of defending against House Fisablen."

"A great plan!" exclaimed the second highness.

The mere thought of having House Norton wear itself down against House Fisablen made his blood boil with excitement.

If those two houses fight intensely and end up both ruined, I'll be able to deal with them after I settle the Union and the four central duchies. Maybe I'll be able to rid myself of two problematic issues in one go!

"I don't think Lorist will agree. He is someone that won't yield unless he sees something in it for him," said the second highness worryingly.

"You can name him the governor of Winston and leave Windbury in his jurisdiction," suggested Kenmays.

The second highness raised his head.

"No way, that way, the Nortons would have two provinces!"

"That won't happen, Your Highness. When we conquer the duchy, there will definitely be nobles that will submit to you. I also know some nobles of the Iblia kingdom that are on friendly terms with me. All you have to do is move their dominions to Winston, and leave only Windbury under House Norton's control. If you make sure to support House Felim, one of the Nortons' allies, I believe you'll have caused House Norton quite a bit of trouble."

"Splendid!" the second highness cried with a clap of his hands, "Alright, I'll go with your plan."

Chapter 340
Regret

The sound of the horn resounded nonstop across the dry, withered plains as a group of soldiers marched into view on the horizon. They brought with them various banners and stood in the distance. Not long after, a few mounted men seemed to utter something, followed by some inaudible, confused cries from the men at the back. They began to move once more and headed for Duke Madras's camp at the foot of the mound.

The second highness could still remember clearly the time the messenger of Duke Madras once again visited the army's camp to urge the army to leave the duchy in a day's time after the four houses pledged their allegiance to him.

However, when Kenmays revealed the new conditions of retreat, the messenger laughed with insult laced eyes.

"Lord Count, are you treating the duchy like an ox you can simply slaughter? Do you think His Grace will agree? Don't forget a huge ox will have a pair of fearsome horns. As the messenger, I have no right to criticize you for how ridiculous your ambitions are. I can only repeat what you said word for word to His Grace. But I have to tell you one thing before I leave: since you want war, we won't disappoint you."

After the messenger's departure, the second highness was completely riled up and he instantly gave a spirited speech, which basically boiled down to how negotiations have fallen apart and that the army should use the chance to strike the duchy and take the rest of Delamock to gain as much territory as possible before they can ready themselves. That way, they can afford to drag the war on or crush them utterly.

However, the four nobles merely looked at the second highness with expressionless faces. Baron Shazin was the first to speak out. He explained that there was no longer any need to attack Delamock. He would instead raid the nobles' orchards and farmlands. Given his understanding of Delamock, he felt there would be no point in attacking the well-defended castles since they would have to station soldiers thereafter occupying them. It was no good to fragment their forces.

With a stern face, Baron Felim also criticized the second highness's plan. It was already the 10th month and winter would arrive in a month. It wasn't possible to take the whole of Delamock in just 35 days, not to mention the fact that apart from Kobo, the rest of Delamock worth taking were only manors of other landed nobles. Given that Kobo was a fortified city with 20 thousand men guarding it, it was incredibly hard to take. The army wouldn't be able to take the city quickly and any attempt to do so would only incur unnecessary losses.

Kenmays smiled and advised the second highness that there was no need to be in such a hurry. The messenger would require at least ten days to deliver the news to the duke, it would be the 11th month by the time word reached him. The duchy's forces would have less than half a month to prepare for winter, whereas their own army was mostly ready. By the time spring comes, the enemy would be severely weakened because of their lack of preparation and victory would be within their grasp.

In the end, Lorist concluded that they would go according to their predicted course of action and ignore the army that the duke would no doubt send. They would only fight after the duke gathered his army in spring the next year. Lorist expressed his confidence in the army's might. They would be able to take the duchy far more easily if the duke's army was wiped out first.

The strategy meeting ended on that note, with the four nobles leaving immediately without giving the second highness a chance to convince them otherwise. The second highness grit his teeth after everyone else left and regretted that he didn't ask for the right to guide the army's actions when he signed the agreement.

The contract of oath was a guarantee a liege gave to his vassals. As long as the vassal carried out the task given by their liege, they could go about it however they wanted without needing the permission or interference of their liege.

Usually, an oath contract came in three copies. Apart from the liege and vassal's copies, there would be another one for public announcement. The second highness's oath contract came in four copies, one each for him and the four nobles with the final one used for public announcement. During the new year, Kenmays would represent the four houses at the annual celebration in Gildusk and announce the agreement to the nobles currently deprived of dominions by the Nortons and Kenmayses. According to Kenmays, the agreement signaled the return of those nobles to the second highness's rule.

At first, the second highness wanted the smaller noble houses to sign the contract with each of the four houses respectively, but Kenmays mentioned that the act might make others think the second highness was intentionally trying to sabotage the alliance between the four houses. It was imperative that the four houses worked together to conquer the duchy, so all four houses should be involved in a joint signing. Only thusly would all the houses be in the same boat with regards to reputation and casualties.

Kenmays added that he would like to personally sign the agreement independent of the other houses because he didn't want to be dragged into the same pit with them. He said it would definitely incite Lorist's suspicion and the others by making them think the second highness had some private arrangements or benefits for House Kenmays. If it were allowed to come to pass, not only would the alliance be affected, the second highness's plan to reclaim his throne would also be ruined. So, Kenmays said he was willing to get into the same boat as the four houses, even if it meant potentially greater losses for him, so the second highness managed to successfully regain power in the kingdom.

The second highness praised Kenmays's sensible considerations and agreed to follow his suggestion for the four houses to sign the same agreement, with the conditions Kenmays stipulated. When the second highness stamped his finger on all six copies of the contract, Lorist, Felim and Shazin all nodded in acknowledgment. The second highness couldn't be more riled up. He thought the four houses were now at his beck and call. He would use them to wipe out his enemies and conquer the realm.

However, Lorist refused his suggestion to deploy soldiers almost immediately. When the second highness brought up the plan to conquer Delamock, he realized he didn't have any right to command the four houses' forces despite being their liege. Even the second highness' guards reported to the four houses. Apart from gold-ranked knight Ripleid, Glacia and his three silver-ranked knights were back at the Norton dominion recruiting soldiers and guarding the Whitelion Legion's equipment.

Not willing to give up, he sought out Lorist and the rest and tried his best to convince them once more to follow his plan and storm the duchy while the duke was busy moving his own troops in to position to defend against the upcoming assault, saying that allowing the enemy to gather their forces was the biggest mistake they could ever make. After all, Duke Madras had the advantage in terms of both terrain and manpower. Even if they fought to a point of losing, they would still be able to go on the defensive and drag on the war.

However, there was only a month before winter arrived, so the second highness suggested that even if they weren't able to conquer the whole of Delamock, it was still better than nothing if they managed to wear down on the forces of the duchy and force the troops at Delamock to be unable to receive reinforcements or support. That way, they could deliver the final strike when the enemy was worn out even further by the coming winter.

Since Lorist mentioned that he wanted to wipe out the duke's army in one go, the second highness intelligently changed his rhetoric. He said they had to decrease the enemy's combat strength before the final fight instead of sitting around and watching the enemy gather their forces. Given the current situation, the duchy was like a huge ox which the sole wolf that was their own army intended to hunt. The wolf ought to open as many wounds on the ox as possible to stall the ox from launching into a life-ending charge. Only after the ox bled most of its vitality out should the wolf engage in the killing engagement and spell the end of the duchy.

To convince Lorist and the rest, the second highness went so far to use himself as an example, citing his loss two years prior to the allied noble army in Anderwoff. Back then, he didn't command his troops to wipe out the allied noble army in one go and instead engaged in three to four smaller skirmishes which all ended in the horrible loss of the nobles. However, the nobles of Anderwoff continued to fight to the death even after Anderwoff had been taken. Having been driven to Majik, they continued to struggle against the second highness's forces until they received aid from the Union and the four central duchies which ultimately resulted in their triumph.

That was the reasoning behind his argument that Lorist's plan for an all-out battle wouldn't guarantee the duchy's fall. The second highness felt the army might repeat his mistake and end up in a huge predicament. He maintained that only by attacking first and conquering the nobles' manors in Delamock and crippling the duchy's forces was the way to go and that the army had to grasp the chance instead of leaving their troops cooped up within the camp doing nothing.

Lorist didn't bother to argue with the second highness and merely brought out a map of the duchy and began a simple simulation. Given the current state of the allied army, if they wanted to take the nobles of Delamock's manors, they would have to split up into four contingents, each contingent containing 20 thousand men. Only then would they be able to conquer the manors of those nobles. Even at the lowest possible casualty ratio of one to one, each of the four units would lose at least half their numbers after conquering around five of those manors and would have no choice to

retreat, ending up with only a third of Delamock under their control.

The biggest weakness of the strategy was how there wasn't a way to encircle Kobo mainly due to the fact that the duchy's reinforcements would arrive far too quickly. The duke would either send his strongest unit, Seamountain Legion, to disrupt their plans or send 20 thousand garrison soldiers stationed at the Sanderson Hills, making it extremely dangerous for the troops on the way to Kobo, even threatening the safety of the camp at the riverbank.

If they sent 50 thousand men to encircle Kobo, the duke's reinforcements wouldn't be able to deal with it. If they did that, however, the duke would send his troops to attack the camp at Metropoulos. If the camp was destroyed, the consequences would be unimaginable. They might lose their only way of retreat and perhaps be eliminated completely.

Lorist didn't hesitate to point out that the reason the second highness failed his attack on the Redlis kingdom wasn't that he had gotten into a drawn-out, to-and-fro battle with the nobles, but that he had his supply lines cut, which ended with the defeat of the troops stationed at Kanbona. Naturally, the second highness's ill-prepared resources also contributed to the problem when they had to battle for an unexpected amount of time. However, it still seemed the second highness hadn't yet understood where he truly failed and almost had them repeat his mistake.

Embarrassment turned into anger as the second highness stressed that the forces of the Nortons and Felims could secure the camp at the riverbank during the attack. That way, they would be able to guard the camp and even press the attack on the nobles.

It was then that Felim objected profusely and called the second highness out for not understanding his and the Nortons' forces. So far, the allied army's main force lay with Shazin and Kenmays, most were heavy-armored infantry only proficient at defense and interception. Not only that, Shazin's two cavalry divisions currently served as scouts and the camp had been set up in a way that would make it easier for the infantry to defend from enemy assault and spend the winter.

Letting the defensive infantry troops attack the nobles all the while defending the camp along with the Norton cavalry legion, which was optimized for attack operations, was nothing short of idiotic. Felim insinuated that even if his troops and those of the Nortons guarded the camp, it wouldn't be able to support the heavy infantry troops that returned from the attack. The resource consumption during

winter for the mounts of two legions was already astronomical.

"There's no need to argue further. We'll stick to the plan as previously discussed. All we have to do from now to winter is defend the main camp. As for whether we attack, that can wait. Your Highness, you ought to take a bath, calm down, and get some rest. Don't waste any precious time," said Lorist before he left.

The second highness almost coughed up blood from his anger.

What do you mean take a bath and get some rest?! Did he mean I was wasting his time?!

The angered second highness brought out the contract and tried his best to find a clause that would allow him to assert some control over Lorist. As he scoured the contract, he realized he had been duped by Kenmays, who had dug him a huge pit into which he had jumped willingly, to say the least.

All of the clauses in the contract were ran through the second highness and mandated by him personally. But after re-reading the contract, he hurriedly brought out a map of the empire and realized that even if he could reunite the empire, apart from House Fisablen's Wild Husbandry Province, the entirety of the Iblia kingdom would fall under the jurisdiction of the four houses. As long as the alliance held, a third of the empire's territory would forever be out of his reach.

Take, for instance, Delamock, which the second highness promised to the landed nobles deprived of their dominions. Most of them were vassals of House Norton, and Delamock would belong to the Nortons in the truest sense after the duchy was eliminated.

The worst part was how the second highness elected Lorist as the governor of Windbury. He had forgotten that Windbury was the capital of Winston, so even if the nobles of Winston were on the second highness's side, a governor like Lorist wasn't. And in the chain of command, any order the second highness had for the nobles of Winston had to go through Windbury first, so Lorist could just intentionally not pass the orders on while he dealt with the nobles himself.

The second highness's regret amplified. He had practically given the whole of Winston to the Nortons. He later discovered another clause that severely disadvantaged him: there was no date for when the Nortons had to help the second highness reclaim his throne. Not only that, the territory promised to the four houses would be in effect right

after the duchy's conquest whether the second highness regained his throne or not.

For instance, the second highness had promised Sidgler to Kenmays as his hereditary dominion with the count promoted to duke with the only condition being the conquest of the Madras duchy. Not only that, as long as the four houses conquered Winston and Windbury, Lorist's term as governor would be effective immediately and Windbury would fall under his control.

I was blinded! How could I believe Kenmays, a person from a sly merchant family?!

The second highness despaired with his realization, especially the one where he didn't stipulate when the four houses had to reclaim his throne. It could happen right after their conquest of Madras, or even 20 years later! The four houses would only have to sustain the second highness in The Northlands in the meantime while they carry out their strategy to suck as many benefits out of him as they could.

Even though the second highness felt rather generous when he was giving away almost all the benefits of conquering the Iblia kingdom to the four houses to ensure their loyalty, he realized that the current situation allowed the four houses enough territory to found their own kingdom after he reunited the empire. He almost wanted to cut his own hands off and wondered how he could be so misguided to put his thumbprint on such a contract.

There were no lieges that dared to go back on their word on an oath contract. After all, it was the most sacred form of agreement there was. It represented the promise of the liege to the gods and their ancestors. The second highness knew the contract was the only document ensuring the four houses' loyalty. If he truly breached it, not only would all his reputation and trustworthiness be gone, the four houses could use it as an excuse to revoke their pledge of allegiance to him and return to being rogue nobles. Not only would he not gain a single thing for which he had bargained with the four houses, he would also gain four mighty enemies.

Currently, the second highness was standing at the top of the castle in the middle of the mound where the camp was built. He looked at the horizon and saw the duchy's forces gathered at a campsite one kilometer away, busy digging moats and building up their defensive line. He also saw rows of carriages bringing in all sorts of resources.

I hope they gather as many as possible. I can only be patient and wait for spring to come now. Perhaps after the four houses' army clashes with the duchy's and end up crippled, I

can rise again. Maybe the only way I can go about this is to let the army get entangled with Duke Madras at Delamock while I build up Whitelion Legion on the sidelines to regain control over the situation, thought the second highness.

Chapter 341
Landing

The silver moon hung high in the sky and shed its silver glory onto the realm of man.

The weather was rather calm on the northern seas, which was rare for the winter season. The moonlight reflected off the calm surface of the ocean, giving it a sparkly sheen.

On the distant shore, a lit torch could be seen twirled around three times. It stood still for a few moments before it once again twirled thrice.

"Everything should be on track," Potterfang said, "Milord, I think we can make our move now."

Even though the weather was pleasant, in stark contrast to the strong winds all too common during the season, the chill of winter still made Lorist cold to the bone despite the thick layers of fur he wore.

"Let our troops drink some rum and warm their limbs. I don't want them going numb because of the cold and falling into the water. They're definitely goners if they get wet in this cold. I don't want to see any accidents happen. Prepare to move out."

"Yes, Milord. I will have them prepare right away. Don't worry, Milord. We've already trained for this many times; there won't be any problems," replied Potterfang, standing ramrod straight.

The orders were passed down quickly. The ships in front rotated until their sides faced the shore. The sailors threw a large net over the side and let it hung down the side of the ship to the water below before lowering the rafts.

The soldiers each took two gulps from their respective leather sacks, causing Lorist to get a whiff of the dizzying scent of rum. It served to raise the soldiers' body heat so they didn't get affected too much by the cold. Norton troops don't coop up in their camps during the winter. Instead, they would undertake all sorts of training exercises thanks to the need to exterminate the magic beast wave years earlier. It was already a

common practice and also served to improve their knowledge on staving off cold.

The standard rations of a Norton soldier included a small leather sack of rum. Drinking some rum and circulating one's battleforce would increase the body's temperature and help maintain it for a time, which would prevent one from being chilled numb by the cold.

After the soldiers had some rum and began flexing their limbs, they checked their armaments one more time before going over the railings and climbing down the net to reach the rafts. Some of Firmrock Legion's silver-ranked troops had already gone ashore not too long ago and awaited the rest's arrival.

A few more ships gradually approached the shore with chains of large wooden boxes trailing behind them. They were the mobile ports which the worksmiths on the ship would link together to form a 100-meter-long bridge through the reefs near the shore after the ships anchored. The legion's wheelbarrow-ballistae unit could only land once the dock was assembled and in place.

While it was usually harder to set up two mobile ports in the dead of night, given the calm weather and the moonlight, the task was completed in a few short hours. After the Firmrock troops completed their landings, the floating bridges would be retracted and left near the reef so House Kenmays could use them as a port as per the agreement between Lorist and the count.

As the saying went, 'to defeat an army, go for the commander'. Lorist had never planned to rely on defeating the duchy's army before making his move to swallow it up. The plan to wait till spring before crushing the duke's army was only something Lorist used to mislead the second highness. What the four houses actually wanted was for the duchy to be in a state untouched by war when they took over.

While the second highness's plan for the four houses to wipe the nobles in the province out to stifle their ability to resist was a sound plan, it would effectively render the territory useless even if they conquered the entire place. The four houses would have to invest lots of funds to redevelop the land. This was the true reason they refused to follow the second highness's suggestion.

When the duchy's most elite force, Seamountain Legion, arrived at the camp opposite the Northlander army, Lorist knew Duke Madras' lair, Sidgler, was no longer defended. It had already raised the odds of his plan to take Sidgler during the 12th month to 80

percent. As long as they were able to encircle Edelise without anyone noticing and capture the duke himself without letting word spread, he could use the duke's personal seal to enter Xith Castle, Vanades, and Kobo unimpeded without the defenders knowing any better. The duchy would effectively be no more after those three places were taken.

The second highness should've been invited or forced by Kenmays to go to the duke's manor in Gildusk to participate in the new year's celebrations. The second highness had already realized the tricks Kenmays played on him in the contract the previous month and changed his friendly attitude. Kenmays, on the other hand, maintained his polite demeanor as if nothing had happened. The second highness was unable to hate the man no matter how angry he was.

Lorist smirked when he thought about the fact that it was his idea to let Kenmays do the talking. He didn't think the second highness would actually fall into the trap that easily. Perhaps, he thought too highly of himself and only brought his guard up against the Nortons. Whatever the reason, he fell for Kenmays' flowery words.

The second highness might just realize spring next year that the whole of the duchy fell into the houses' hands when he was expecting them to just begin their attack. Only then would he truly understand the degree to which he had been duped. Without war-torn battlefields, the second highness won't be able to take advantage of the situation to recruit soldiers for his Whitelion Legion. That way, he won't be able to go to the Andinaq kingdom to deal with Queen Carey. As a result, he would have to rely on the four houses to spend his days and keep begging Lorist to deploy troops to restore him to the throne.

The other houses were not informed about the plan to encircle Edelise itself lest it was leaked. According to the plan known to all, the Nortons would deploy Tigersoar Legion at the lower stream of Metropoulos during spring the next year and cross the floating bridge to head to the final battle with the duchy's forces. While it was not part of Lorist's actual plan, he would still have to deploy the legion to face Queen Carey's forces.

"Milord, the first batch has landed. The sailors are heading back with the rafts," reported Potterfang.

They were at the narrowest part of the shallow seas near Platinum Beach situated only a little over a hundred meters from shore. Lorist snapped out of his thoughts to

look at the coast. He saw the sailors pulling the rafts back to the ships using the rope that connected the vessels. The rafts were mostly empty apart from the single sailor manning them.

Lorist recalled the three horizontal wooden boards he intended to use for balancing the rafts, but the shipwrights at the yard had found the design unusable. In the end, they redesigned the rafts to have a rounded back and a square front, which allowed for more people to be ferried at once while improving the craft's balance. They only needed one extra sailor to man each boat from the back.

"Milord, I've returned," said the figure that suddenly appeared on one of the rafts and scaled the ship.

It was Els, the guards', the first to be deployed, leader.

"What was up with those fishermen during the day? They forced us to delay our operation," inquired Lorist.

Originally, the plan was to be carried out during the day, but the folk of the Flying Fish of Dawn found it hard to scout the beach because of the fishing boats near the coast.

What the heck is wrong with them? Even though it's winter, there are still sailors willing to take the risk and fish! Nobody could've predicted…

In the end, Lorist had no choice but to wait until evening before he could begin the operation.

"They are from the Blackpearl Merchant Guild, Milord. Their salt farm and fishery are located at Platinum Beach's southernmost end. Our men have already taken control of the premises. According to the captives, the fishermen were out fishing to prepare ingredients for the duke's banquet tomorrow. It appears to be a yearly affair," replied Els.

According to Lorist's knowledge, the Blackpearl Merchant Guild was the largest merchant guild in the duchy. It was said they were one of the duchy's largest backers. They monopolized the salt and fish trade. The salt merchant committee's suppression in the duchy was their doing. Their method of salt production through boiling seawater was horribly inefficient. It resulted in ridiculous prices. In spite of their prices, there was still a market for their salt throughout the duchy.

The Blackpearl Merchant Guild also fished near the coasts and sold their catch to the four central duchies. Seafood was also one of the few specialties of Sidgler. Lorist didn't think the duke would go so far as to have the fishermen go to sea during winter just for his new year's banquet.

He looked at the two floating bridges that were only a fraction complete.

I don't think this will be finished anytime soon.

Lorist turned to Potterfang.

"Pog, I will go ashore first. Stay here and command the troops."

"Milord, why don't you rest in the cabin instead?" Potterfang asked, surprised, "It won't be too late to go there when the bridge is complete. It's far stabler that way as well. Also, taking a raft is rather risky."

"No worries," Lorist laughed, "I'll bring a few guards with me. I'm sure you've heard what Els said as well, right? I plan to interrogate the captives. We might be able to have more people infiltrate Edelise with us."

Now that Lorist had made his decision, there was nothing Potterfang could do. He had of the rafts reserved for Lorist and the guards, led by Els.

In an attempt to raise morale, Lorist chose to land in the same manner his troops had and took the initiative to do part of the rowing. He found the initiative rather displeasing by the time he neared the shore. Feeling the splashes of chilling water on his face caused him to start shivering slightly. His hands were almost chilled to numbness. He yearned for the shore all the more for it.

The closer they got to shore, the more ice crystals were visible in the water. When Lorist saw this, he found he had overlooked one important factor. Platinum Beach wasn't frozen as he thought it would be and had instead turned into a field of snow. Thick layers of snow gathered on the beach's surface, causing the part of the beach where water touched to form ice.

The squarish part of the raft bumped against the shore and caused some of the ice to fall off. A group of Norton soldiers rushed to the raft and pulled on the rope at the front of the raft while they shouted.

"Quick, get to shore! Take lighter steps and don't stomp on the ground. If any of you need to warm up, take a few swigs and start moving about."

"Oh, Milord, it's you," said one of the soldiers who realized Lorist's presence amidst the guards.

Lorist jumped on the shore lightly and patted on that soldier's shoulder.

"Well done. But why can't we stomp on the ground here?"

"Oh, Milord, the first group of soldiers to arrive had instantly stomped about to warm up the moment they got here. They didn't realize they were standing on a patch of frozen ice instead of the beach itself. The ice cracked and the whole group fell straight into the water," replied the soldier.

Lorist's chest tightened when he asked, "Then, how are they doing now?"

"They're fine, Milord," the soldier said with a smile, "Even though the unlucky fools got wet, the water only reached their thighs since the waters here are shallow. They were ordered to strip and dry their clothes near the fire before taking more rum and circulating their battleforce. They'll be back to normal after their clothes and armor are dry. They're still loitering around the fire naked over there and many of us couldn't help but laugh…"

Lorist felt relieved as he laughed at the thought of a bunch of naked men circling a fire. Fortunately, there was battleforce in Grindia. Had they been normal folk who couldn't use it, they would've ended up on the brink of death. Falling into water negative 30 degrees centigrade would no doubt bring a tragedy. Thankfully, the soldiers were at least of the bronze rank and were far stronger than average soldiers in Lorist's previous life.

Knight Pajik had been made an officer in Firmrock Legion following his breakthrough to the gold rank. Lorist was rather assured with the knight running the landing. It didn't take long for Pajik to rush over.

"Milord, why have you come?" asked the knight after he saluted.

"I wanted to come over for a look and ask the folk at the fishery and salt farms about Edelise while I'm at it. How many people do we have ashore at the moment?"

"One and a half brigades, Milord," replied Pajik.

"Good. Even though Edelise is a day's travel from here, you have to be wary since the road there is covered by snow. Have a brigade of fully-armed troops occupy that mound in the distance and monitor the surroundings. We'll set out for Edelise when the rest of the force has landed," said Lorist as he pointed to a snow-covered mound farther away.

"Understood, Milord. I will send some men immediately," said Pajik.

"Alright. Els, let's head to the fishery and salt farms."

"Understood, Milord. We'll have to walk across the beach to get there," said Els.

Chapter 342
Occupation

From the map, the land of Sidgler could be seen as a valley surrounded by Lizgna Mountains and Civilink Highlands. The valley was large enough to be a province in and of itself. Some parts even neared the coast. There was only one entrance, it was the pathway near which Xith Castle was built. The fact that only one castle was required to defend Sidgler was probably why Duke Madras made it his headquarters.

The second highness's strategy started with him encouraging the four houses to devastate Delamock. But he never thought they would attack Sidgler and only wanted the duke to coop up in his lair. He felt conquering Xith Castle was nothing but a pipe dream. The dangerous terrain aside, the narrow pathway into Sidgler prevented any army from displaying their true potential. Small waves of a hundred people going against the castle was nothing but suicide.

When Lorist led his convoy through the duchy, he had them disguised as merchants and successfully conquered Xith Castle. He left it in the care of the second highness's troops. But right after the duke mobilized Seamountain Legion from Sidgler, the second highness left after a few days because it was only good for defending against outside threats rather than inside ones. While Xith Castle was hard to take from the outside of the valley, the opposite was true from the inside. The reason was that the duke was afraid he would be trapped in the valley if anybody managed to conquer the castle and hold there.

The duke renovated the castle heavily over the past few years and made a simple citadel into a triple-walled contraption. The company he had originally stationed in the castle was also increased to a full regiment. Even if one managed to conquer the first wall, the troops defending the castle would still be able to put up resistance from the second and third walls. It was precisely because of Duke Madras's confidence in his castle that he allowed his most elite unit, Seamountain Legion, to head to the frontlines to give the Northland bumpkins a long due lesson and chase them back across the river.

It was a shame the duke never predicted the enemy would come from the sea during

the winter. Apart from the thousand guards that defended the central castle at Edelise, there were no more than two thousand men defending the inner and outer cities. Most of them were conscripts brought on board specifically to serve for the winter.

Nobody performed their duties fully; the cold was just too much. As they saw it, no enemy could get past Xith Castle. Had it not been for the banquet the duke hosted, which saw many nobles of the duchy going through the castle and tipping the soldiers on duty, none would bother to show up for their shifts.

It took one day to travel from Platinum Beach to Edelise on foot and around ten or so hours by carriage. One would take close to half a day even if one went by horse without rest. The duke renamed the city from Traft after his first daughter, Edelise - who was born there. He spent eight years expanding the city before he renamed it. He also moved his house there at the same time and made it their headquarters.

Lorist had a map of Sidgler unrolled before him

"Edelise is defended by three fortified walls, the center of which is connected to the keep," Lorist explained as he pointed at the city on the map, "All of the duke's family members are there. He will host his banquet at the duke's mansion, which is directly behind the keep. The area between the inner wall and the centermost wall is called the inner bailey, where most of the duke's relatives and rich merchants or tycoons live. Some of the duke's vassals also have dwellings there.

"Between the outer wall and the wall in the center is the outer bailey, where most of the family members of Seamountain Legion's soldiers, the servants of the inner bailey, members of the Blackpearl Merchant Guild, and farmers of the surrounding area live. Put bluntly, the citizens of Edelise have a really tight-knit relationship with House Madras. Duke Madras has managed Sidgler for close to 40 years already and has built the foundations of his house here at Edelise.

"Last night, we interrogated the captives of Blackpearl Merchant Guild's salt farm and fishery and got word that the defenses around Edelise are rather lax at the moment. We can take the two walls easily if we're undiscovered, but the central castle itself will prove troublesome. When we attempt to breach the third line of defense, we'll have to make sure the enemy doesn't have any escape routes. We cannot let them retreat to the keep and put up a defense there.

"As Edelise is House Madras' headquarters, I will have to give a special order. We are

Nortons; we don't lower ourselves to oppressing civilians. But as we attack Edelise, if there are any commoners that resist our advances, you may use any method at your disposal to pacify them, be they women or children. Otherwise, there will be a chance for someone to rile up a civilian revolt and bring us countless troubles, perhaps even affect the moves we can make. Understood?"

"Yes, Milord," replied the knights surrounding him.

Lorist asked Howard something before he turned back to the knights.

"It's around five right now. According to the captives, they are supposed to depart around seven to arrive at Edelise around five to deliver the seafood to the keep manager. Els, bring some men with you disguised as members of the guild and take the supervisors with you. You just need to get past the outer wall."

"Understood, Milord. I will definitely execute my mission successfully," replied Els.

"If we had to march to Edelise, we might not be able to arrive today," Lorist laughed, "Fortunately, we have our skis. They will let us travel even faster than the carriages Els is taking to the city. The only problem is there are six farmland manors along the way. If we're discovered, they might light a smoke signal to alert the city guard. That's where you come in, Malek."

"What are your orders, Milord?" said Malek as he stepped forward.

"I will leave the six manors to you. You have to prevent them from informing the enemy of our presence."

"Understood, Milord. I will not let any of the six manors inform anyone," said Malek.

"Pajik."

"Awaiting your orders, Milord."

"Take a brigade and seal the path between Xith and Edelise. As long as you do, even if there are people who manage to escape Edelise, they won't be able to reach Xith. With this, our plan can't fail."

"Understood, Milord."

"Pog, what comes after will depend on you. I'm leaving the attack on Edelise to you. My only role is dealing with Krisas, the duke's rank 2 blademaster. It is the key to taking Xith, Vanades, and Kobo. We can't afford any mishaps."

"Rest assured, Milord. I won't let you down," Potterfang nodded.

"Alright, there's little more than an hour left. Let's get to work and leave the moment you're ready. There's no need to wait for my order. Pog is in charge, follow his command. Understood?"

"Yes, Milord!"

……

The operation was executed without issue. Els managed to control the gates of Edelise easily after infiltrating the city. He even managed to let the first group of soldiers enter. They only took about half an hour to take over the outer wall. Snow began to fall just as the combat died down. The skies darkened and hid the invaders well from those further inside the city.

It was strange that they only had a small number of captives from the outer wall. When they questioned what few captives they had, they learned that most of the guards had given their shifts the slip. No one was willing to face to cold.

Els continued his mission. He donned the guise of a Blackpearl Merchant Guild member and brought his produce for delivery. Along with Potterfang's troops, he quickly took the second wall. Just as they were about to advance on the third wall, however, something unexpected happened. A few people approached from far and cursed at the group who were supposedly delivering the seafood for almost being late for the banquet. They hurried Els's group to the duke's mansion immediately.

When the people realized Els and the guards weren't people they knew, one smart one attempted to rush back to report. Els had no choice but to take care of them. Fortunately, none escaped. Three died and two were captured. It didn't take long to deal with them either -- nobody noticed the commotion. After quickly dealing with the corpses, they questioned the two captives and learned that the person in charge from Blackpearl Merchant Guild sent the five of them out because he was panicking about how late the seafood was.

After leaving a carriage to store the corpses and four guards to watch the captives, Els

led the rest straight to the backyard of the duke's mansion. The near-hundred guards split into two units. One stormed the keep the moment Potterfang made his move and the other headed to the third wall's gate to await Lorist and Potterfang's arrival.

Attacking the keep turned out to be quite the relaxing task. Only 200 or so of the original thousand guards that should have been on duty weren't absent. When faced with the horde of Firmrock Legion soldiers, they surrendered after ten short minutes of resistance.

"Argh!" cried an elaborately dressed fifty-year-old man. He was rank 2 blademaster Krisas. He lay on the ground, defeat by just six strikes from Lorist. Beside him lay his ceremonial sword, which he had used for the engagement. It was a most sorry sight.

The fight happened within the main hall where the banquet was held. Lorist had killed a rank 2 blademaster almost instantly in front of Duke Madras and tens of other noblemen and ladies. The bloody sight caused quite a number of women to faint.

"Who are you?"

Lorist rubbed his nose awkwardly.

"Norton Lorist of House Norton, Duke of The Northlands," replied Lorist.

"Duke of The Northlands? House Norton doesn't command that title," said Duke Madras suspiciously.

"You would indeed not know of it. I was only recently given this title by Second Highness Auguslo. I've also been enfeoffed the whole of The Northlands."

"Is that so… Then Auguslo's still alive and even made it to The Northlands… And those people from the Union claimed he was dead. What are you going to do to me?"

"Hehe, Lord Duke, it's not up to me to decide your fate. I will send your whole house to His Highness. It's up to him to decide your fate," said Lorist.

Duke Madras slumped back into his seat like a deflated balloon and laughed wryly.

"Haha, I already know my fate in that case. I have another question, though. How did you enter? Did the garrison troops at Xith Castle betray me?"

"I don't know whether the troops there betrayed you, Lord Duke. We came from the sea," replied Lorist.

Just like that, Edelise fell into Firmrock Legion's hands. The city's near hundred thousand citizens didn't know they were at the mercy of a different master. Lorist left the aftermath to Potterfang and occupied Duke Madras's bedroom on the uppermost floor of the keep. He indulged in his precious wines and enjoyed the snow gradually covering the city.

Not long after, something embarrassing happened. Loyal as Potterfang was, he was worried that his lord wouldn't have any company in his sleep. So, he picked two noble ladies from the captives and sent them to warm Lorist's bed. For those women, this was something unavoidable as it was noble custom. They might, perhaps, be able to use the opportunity to make a plea for their house. They never thought they would be serving Lorist, the man who had terrified some of them into unconsciousness when he killed Blademaster Krisas.

When they met Lorist, the two instantly panicked. One fainted and another lost control of her bladder. Lorist, much dismayed, had Howard send the women out, only for another misunderstanding to occur. The one who peed all over thought Lorist had just ordered their execution and fainted, while the one who just regained consciousness hugged Lorist's leg and pleaded to be spared.

The commotion was quite a way to spend the first night of the new year and Howard took the brunt of it as he had to monitor the servants who cleaned the floors while he brought a bathtub to Lorist and prepared some hot water before leaving promptly. Lorist had chosen to 'punish' the women personally. Their moans and cries rang throughout the night. It only calmed down at dawn.

Lorist only re-appeared at noon the next day.

"Let this be the last time you do this," he told Potterfang with a stern expression.

In spite of his reprimand, the two beautiful women were kept by his side and their households were spared.

……

During the 1st month of Year 1777, House Norton and their Firmrock Legion attacked Sidgler via Platinum Beach. They conquered Edelise and managed to apprehend Duke

Madras and tens of other duchy nobles. Firmrock Legion's commander, Gold-ranked Knight Potterfang, used Duke Madras's seal to gain entry to Xith Castle and Vanades for a surprise attack and managed to occupy both. On the 23rd day of the 1st month, Kobo also fell. From that day onward, the Madras duchy was no more.

On the 17th day of the 2nd month, the citizens of Edelise revolted. Near a hundred thousand citizens protested on the streets against the surprise attack and demanded House Norton leave and Duke Madras return. Only ten thousand of the legion's soldiers were present. Gold-ranked Knight Malek gave the order to kill to suppress the revolt, which resulted in the deaths of more than 30 thousand of Edelise's citizens and the capture of 40 thousand more. Malek, who gave the order without the slightest change in expression, was known henceforth as Ironface.

Chapter 343
Suggestion

A storm raged outside the window.

It was already the middle of the 3rd month. On Grindia, this was the start of the rainy season. The season lasted for nearly two months in the south of the continent. The Northlands was in the middle of the continent, however, and thanks to the naturally barrier of the Magical Dragon Mountains, not much of the weather from the south existed there. The Northlands only had 20 days of rain during the rainy season.

Lorist had already returned to Fimrock Castle and left Potterfang to deal with what was left of the duchy. After becoming Duke of The Northlands, he had to act the part per his subordinates' advice and not lead the charge every time there was a battle. All he had to do, and should do, was ensure the house was heading in the general direction of his goals. The details were up to the household knights and officials.

Nowadays, there were 16 gold-ranked knights serving the house. Had it not been for the fact that Duke Madras had a rank 2 blademaster by his side, Lorist wouldn't have bothered to be present for the operation. His desire for absence was because his presence made him miss Dilianna's delivery date. When Lorist was enjoying the service of his two new companions, the young aunt of Arriotoli gave birth to another child for the house at Firmrock.

Lorist looked at the map for a good while as Charade instructed Howard to get two more candles.

"Locke, are you still worried about the operation? Firmrock Legion has already occupied Kobo and cut off the supply lines of our hundred thousand or so enemies. From the successful occupation, we discovered they had planned to ship another batch of resources to their camp before the rainy season but were unable to do so before our arrival. I'm sure the soldiers of the duke's army will be worn out and starving by the end of the season. They won't have any option other than surrender."

"I know the situation in the duchy is mostly set in stone," Lorist answered, shaking his head, "I've already ordered Tigersoar to head west after the rainy season to force the

enemy to surrender. I'm sure you've also read Pog's report that we've already taken control of their supplies when we conquered Kobo. They were only unable to launch a counterattack to retake the city because the season is already upon us.

"I know the enemy we have to face is the 60 thousand men of Seamountain Legion. Originally, the garrison of Kobo and Vanades each had another ten thousand men. There are also 20 thousand troops stationed at Sanderson Hills, not to mention the 10 thousand private troops of the nobles. It's clear as day they're trying to fight back with the coming of spring in one decisive battle, but we didn't even give them such a chance.

"Without their supplies, the duchy's troops will struggle to survive. I expect what remains of their supplies and workhorses will probably last them through the season. I didn't intend for Tigersoar to fight them when I deployed them. I already wrote to Loze and told him his main purpose was to keep the enemy trapped in their camps. Since the harvest season follows directly on the rainy season, I definitely won't allow them to start harvesting crops to get out of their predicament.

"According to our plan, Tigersoar will keep the enemy in camp while Hennard brings the Shazin forces to encircle the seven citadels at Sanderson Hills. Without supplies from Kobo, the 20 thousand soldiers will have to surrender in at most two months. House Kenmays' forces will also head to Sidgler to take Firmrock Legion's place so the latter can return to Silowas for the next phase of our plan. As for House Felim's light cavalry legion, we will leave it to them to exterminate the nobles in Delamock that still resist. Given most of the Madras nobles have already fallen into our hands, I'm sure it will be an easy task for Felim."

Charade flipped open another folder.

"Locke, Firmrock Legion captured 38 landed nobles in total during the capture of the duke's mansion in Edelise. According to a list with their respective titles, there are members from 63 houses of the duchy. It should've been more than 80, but the second prince took out 20-odd houses when he stormed Delamock. The nobles that participated in the banquet at the mansion can't be considered the duke's confidants. The people he truly trusts probably serve Seamountain Legion and the garrison forces. We better be wary when dealing with the aftermath to prevent anyone from putting up a last stand.

"Also, even though the nobles of the houses trusted by the duke didn't attend the banquet, the female and younger members of those houses did and have also fallen

into our hands. There are around 100 noble ladies and young masters from these houses among those we captured. Perhaps, we can use them as bargaining chips to get their houses. As long as they give up resistance, we will allow them to leave the duchy with their wealth and family members go wherever they want. I believe it'll rid them of any desire to resist."

Lorist nodded.

"Alright, do so. I'll write a letter to Pog, Loze, and the rest to cooperate with you. Let's obtain victory at the smallest price possible. I hope the situation can be settled before the 6th month."

"Locke, would the second highness have any objections to us letting the nobles loyal to the duke go?" asked Charade.

Even though the second highness was the former king of the Andinaq kingdom in name, the knights of the house addressed him as 'His Highness' instead of 'His Majesty', and Charade was no exception.

"Don't care about him. Even if he sees those nobles as traitors of the empire for joining up with Duke Madras, there's no point in us sacrificing our house's troops to exterminate them. If the second highness wants to punish them, he'll have to catch them himself. Since there's nothing in it for us, we're not obligated to do anything."

The ten-odd years of experience as a dominion lord had familiarized Lorist with the norms of the world and the nature of his position. Causing trouble for the royal family is the favored pastime of almost all landed nobles.

"Understood. But what do we do about the 38 captured nobles?" snickered Charade.

"For the noble houses of the old Krissen Empire, those above the title of viscount will be demoted one rank. Don't bother with the barons. There's no way they can be demoted further. After you're done with the demotions, move their dominions to Winston. As for the nobles Duke Madras entitled, we don't have to acknowledge their peerage. Just release them and confiscate two-thirds of their assets. Let them leave with the rest and go wherever they desire," replied Lorist.

"Whoa! Then we won't have many landed nobles left! I've already estimated we'd only have around 20 houses left," Charade exclaimed, looking at his list.

"Locke, what do we do if the nobles close with the duke insist on keeping their titles and dominions?" continued he.

"Well, tell them they can remain nobles with a one-rank demotion as long as they become our vassals. We'll accept their pledge of allegiance if they can prove their worth. Duke Madras was no fool, and anyone he prioritizes must be capable to some degree. Perhaps, some of them might prove rather useful."

Lorist gave it some thought before added, "Also, House Yujink and House Sabri don't need to be demoted or moved. Just have them become vassals. Their dominions will have to be adjusted, though."

House Yujink and House Sabri were the houses of the two beauties with whom Lorist had spent that pleasurable night. Thanks to letting their daughters warm Lorist's bed, the houses wouldn't be punished and survived the transition to another lord smoothly with minimal losses, much to many's envy. At the same time, it showed the leader of House Norton, the Duke of The Northlands, was a person who cared for relationships and connections, instead of being cruel and heartless.

Charade tried to stifle his laugh as he commented, "I heard it gave you quite some trouble back then."

Lorist stroked his nose awkwardly as when he returned to Firmrock Castle from Edelise, he brought the two beauties along. It naturally enraged Arriotoli.

"We sisters and our aunt are already your women, and our aunt even birthed you a son! Yet, you used attacking the Madras duchy as your excuse to skip my aunt's delivery and even dare to bring two beauties back with you?! Do you think I'll just sit quietly and accept this?! I'll show you what I've got, you shallow, superficial bastard!" she had said at the time.

"How did you resolve it?"

Charade was rather curious about the matter. Even though Arriotoli was a jealous and envious woman, the household knights and officials had a rather good impression of her. Mainly because of the effort she put in to become a silver-ranked knight, as well as how she only kept her tantrums between her and Lorist. On one occasion when she tried to pitch her sister as the matron of House Norton, she made sure to ask the officials and knights about their opinions on the matter. But when she learned that it

wouldn't work, she dropped it without complaint instead of pestering Lorist.

"Nothing much. I just agreed to move House Dina's dominion to Delamock and take it as our vassal," Lorist said with a troubled smile, "I also promised I would bring the two sisters with me during my excursions in the future. They said it was necessary to stop me from bringing back more beauties after every trip."

"Hahaha," laughed Charade heartily.

Lorist got a bottle of fruit wine and poured Charade some during their little interlude.

"Oh, Milord, Knight Malek sent a report that requires your attention. He requested to be held responsible for the revolting citizens' massacre in Edelise," Charade said as he took out a piece of beastskin from his blue folder, "It arrived yesterday afternoon. Take a look."

Lorist gave it a quick glance before he did something that surprised Charade. He set the report on fire using a nearby candle and let it burn.

"Locke, what are you doing? We have to archive it," said Charade, stunned.

"No," Lorist said, shaking his head, "Not this report. No record will be kept of the revolt. I'll also reward Knight Malek and have him give me a list of people who managed to contribute to its suppression. This matter was dealt with swiftly. I've long told you that as Edelise has been the headquarters of House Madras for more than 40 years, the citizens are no doubt very closely tied to it. Having only ten thousand men stationed there is a little too careless. Had Malek not steeled himself and cut the root of the problem away, we would've been chased out of the city. If that happened, I have no doubt the whole of Sidgler would have joined in.

"Apart from Edelise, House Madras didn't enfeoff any other noble house land within Sidgler and instead constructed around 40 farmland manors and took in 200 thousand people. Among them are the family members of Seamountain Legion troops. It's the reason they are the most elite among the duke's troops. It's as if Duke Madras kidnapped their families. If they don't perform well, their families will pay the price. They were forced to give their all and fight to their deaths.

"According to the name list of the legion, which we got from the duke's mansion, I've already had Furybear collect the families' belongings. We'll send them to the legion after the rainy season to crumble their will to resist. Part of the reason those who

pulled the strings behind the scenes started the revolt was to stop us so the legion wouldn't be out of the fight. They hoped to buy time for an opportunity.

"Hehe, it's too bad they were merely dreaming. There's no way they can change the situation now. I bet they didn't think we would move House Kenmays's dominion to Sidgler. The huge move will wipe the province clean. It'll extinguish all insurgent factors. Let's see who'll have the last laugh."

According to the agreement with House Kenmays, 250 of the current 340 thousand people living in the eastern Northlands -- thanks to the Kenmayses' refugee recruitment effort over the last couple of years -- would be moved to Sidgler, while the Nortons would be in charge of the evacuation of the original Sidgler citizens so the Kenmays folk would have homes to live in and land to farm.

Put bluntly, House Kenmays planned to move most of their subjects with them to Sidgler to displace its original citizens, who would be in turn moved to the eastern Northlands. According to Charade, it was an unnecessary move, but House Kenmays felt it was best to bring their own subjects with them. Otherwise, their position might not last longer than a few years.

"Locke, will the soldiers of Seamountain Legion and the duchy's garrison forces be required to serve three years' labor to develop the eastern area of The Northlands?" asked Charade.

Lorist gave it some thought before he replied.

"The east's development has to wait. The vacation of the citizens of Sidgler, who are the family of many in Seamountain Legion, is to let them get used to The Northlands' environment. The skilled ones like smiths are the ones who will meld with our house the easiest since there isn't anybody but us who appreciate their talents more. They'll be given preferential treatment and be allowed to work at our factories to fill up the demand.

"As for the soldiers of Seamountain Legion and the garrison forces, let them build the roads in Delamock after they surrender. I hope we will be able to connect Vanades and Kobo in two years, before building another highway straight to The Northlands. I really don't understand how the empire was run back then. If they had built a highway, it wouldn't take more than five days to travel from Vanades to The Northlands. There's no point in making the journey curve and triple in traveling time…"

Charade laughed at Lorist's complaints.

"Locke, you didn't know how much the Krissen Empire spent to build the current connections. The reason behind its current state is the fact that the highway would have to pass through the dominions of many nobles. They've objected to its constructions vehemently for many decades. The empire rejected their demands to be allowed to collect tolls on the highway, so they refused to let the highway pass through their dominions. In the end, the empire didn't have a choice and had to build the pathway around the borders of those dominions. All this is recorded and archived.

"Not only that, many nobles stood to gain lots of profit from the construction of the current highway. The construction of the current road from Delamock is recorded to cost the most in the history of the empire. It took seven years to build and the cost involved was enough to build seven similar roads. I remember back then there were even newspapers that justified the way it took by arguing that it was the best way to facilitate the transport of the food produced in the dominions of all the nobles to Delamock, the main storehouse of the empire's food. What a shameless joke."

Lorist chuckled.

"I don't care about the things that happened in the past. Whatever the case, I want to make it clear that nobody may stop us from doing what we want in the lands we control. Oh well, the territories in Delamock will all have to be moved anyway. I expect there to be more than 100 thousand people who surrender. We'll just have them build the highway. A straight highway will save us so much time and allow us to better respond to military situations. I want this highway finished in two year's time."

"Your Grace," responded Charade as he stood up.

Ever since he was made duke, his subordinates and household knights began to address him as 'Your Grace'. Only a few people still called him 'Milord Lorist'. Privately, some like Charade would call Lorist 'Locke', but in official discussions, they would still use 'Your Grace'.

"There's a piece of bad news. The house is likely to spend more than the expense stipulated in our budget. Apart from helping House Kenmays and House Shazin with their dominion's relocation, we have to begin development on the eastern Northlands and the former territory of the Shazins, as well as take charge of the move of Sidgler locals. We have to mobilize Tigersoar to deal with Queen Carey soon as well.

"And now, you've just announced you'll be building a highway from Delamock to The Northlands. Our house has already exceeded our budget by six million gold Fordes. The way I see it, development is more important than war. Your Grace, I urge you to consider the stability of the house's finances. I suggest we postpone the war against the Andinaq kingdom's current administration. Restoring the second highness's throne will set our house back one million gold Fordes, and I believe it an unwise move."

Chapter 344
Reason

Lorist looked at the map of the former Krissen Empire for a good while before he shook his head.

"No. The war with Queen Carey cannot be dragged on. Only the second highness's restoration to power will give us enough time."

"Time?" Charade mused with squinted eyes, "Time for what, Your Grace? So far, everything is under control. There's no need to let the tiger back onto its mountain. Actually, controlling the second highness will be extremely beneficial to the house. We can even threaten Queen Carey to expand the kingdom's trade routes and force her to give us Jillin Harbor.

"Even if the second highness gets his throne back, he will still regard House Norton with caution and suspicion. Not only would we gain nothing, he'd also send his messengers to ask us for support shamelessly. The most important thing is that Duke Madras defeat is at hand. The Northlands will be connected to the Andinaq kingdom soon after instead of being separated by another power like before. I worry, Your Grace, that the second highness will be able to send a tax collection official to our dominion to collect all sorts of taxes when he becomes king.

"It would mean our house will have to give up hundreds of thousands of gold Fordes each year. We'll also have to publicly announce the farmland we have to the kingdom. Given the time the second highness spent at our dominion, he would've grasped that our chief income comes from production rather than agriculture and will seek benefits. He might even levy all sorts of new taxes.

"To our three allied houses, letting the second highness get his throne back isn't a good idea. They would also have to start paying taxes and find ways to prevent him from using their household forces to wage war against other nobles. As things are now, however, he is in The Northlands and doesn't have either power or soldiers. I strongly object to us dealing with Queen Carey. It's better to have her in power. At the very least, she's no threat to our house."

Lorist smiled bitterly before he poured another cup of fruit wine for himself and downed it in one gulp.

"You're right. But those are two relatively light consequences," Lorist said as he pointed at the map, "This year, we've exterminated the Madras duchy. The time we have left will only be enough to move its citizens. Next year, however, we're attacking Iblia. Duke Fisablen will be a formidable opponent and obstacle. That old man isn't just a cunning fox, he's a mighty lion. His title of war god is no joke. We can't afford to be careless at all."

Lorist sighed deeply.

"These days, I've been looking over some of the information we gathered on House Fisablen… We've severely underestimated the duke. Do you know how many men he has enlisted? Two hundred and forty thousand men, all full-time soldiers! He's not the war god for nothing…"

"What did you say? Two hundred and forty thousand? That's impossible… House Fisablen definitely can't feed so many people with the produce from Wild Husbandry and Eastwild alone. They physically can't produce the volume necessary," said Charade suspiciously.

"I'm not lying, it's true," Lorist said.

He pulled open one of his desk drawers and took out a thick folder.

"They don't need to rely on producing food. They can just pillage it from the grassland barbarians. When the barbarians eventually submit, he'll also gain access to an endless supply of livestock.

"Do you remember our first trade agreement with House Fisablen? Princess Sylvia asked for 100 thousand sets of cavalry armor number 103 when she paid the ransom for the five thousand cavalrymen. The total price was two million livestock to be paid in five years. Back then, I was elated to have the deal because it would force the duke to focus his efforts on the plains and bring him into greater conflict with the barbarians. I was sure he would suffer casualties in the process, which would lessen the threat he posed.

"I miscalculated. House Fisablen has been killing barbarians for a very long time. So long, in fact, that the barbarians fear them. This is a report from Tarkel. He mentions,

among other things, that he managed to procure a pair of eyes within the house. According to said eyes, around 30 thousand barbarian tribes have submitted and were already their vassals by the time they signed our first trade agreement. These tribes not only provide the house with livestock annually, their youths are also drafted into the house's forces.

"There's another report from Count Kenmays concerning the investigation he launched using the salt merchant committee into House Fisablen's purchases over the last couple of years. The count was incredibly pleased with the profits trade with the Fisablens was earning and our house also received a dividend of 12 thousand gold Fordes. Little did we know House Fisablen was reselling our goods to the barbarian tribes.

"Nobody could tell from the large order of salt and daily goods that the house was doing this. House Fisablen's territory had a population of at most 500 thousand. Yet, their consumption of salt and daily goods exceeded that of our own dominion threefold. We only had around one million subjects back then! I thought the duke was raiding the barbarians for the livestock, but in actuality, he was trading with them. Even after he sent his troops, he only made them yield to him instead of raiding or massacring them.

"His next move was indeed splendid as well. While we were worried he might be intending to start a new trade route by strengthening his house's relationship with the four central duchies, he was only setting up an insurance plan. Right now, the products sold to the grasslands are supplied by the salt merchant committee and we produce the products themselves. If we ever cut off our trade, House Fisablen would no longer be able to trade with the barbarians. What would they do if they have no resources all of a sudden? They'd arm themselves and start raiding again. It would send the dominion straight into fire and chaos once more.

"That's why Duke Fisablen banded with the four central duchies to end Melein. With the duchy out of the way, he would be rid of a troublesome foe and he would gain a new trade route. If we halt our trade with the duke now, he can procure what he and his dominion needs from the four duchies. As long as the great plains don't fall into chaos, House Fisablen can focus its efforts elsewhere. The greater and lesser golden creeks, for example."

Giving Charade, who was listening to his long lecture, a look, Lorist poured himself another cup of wine.

"Perhaps you think Duke Fisablen is only a powerful duke who's past his prime and only knows how to defend against threats. After I met him, however, I have this sense that he will be the most dangerous foe our house has, or will, ever face. I don't hate him because he didn't let Sylvia marry me. I only realized he is a true mastermind filled with ambition. Anyone who underestimates him will have hell to pay."

"Your Grace, it's not that I don't believe you, but, if the duke really is as you say, why did he not take control of Windbury when we captured the second prince? The city was in a state of chaos and nobody controlled it, yet he left after a few months. It shows he doesn't have the slightest bit of ambition -- he only strives for self-preservation. If he really were as you say, he'd use his forces to exterminate the nobles in the city and consolidate the kingdom's forces under his banner," argued Charade.

"This is where his cunningness truly shines. Think about it, what would be the consequences if the duke did as you are suggesting? His forces would have to suppress revolt after revolt by the nobles across Winston. Not only would it take him years to stabilize the situation, he would have to waste lots of resources and incur heavy casualties in doing so. Even if he succeeded in the end, he'd only be left with the province's war-torn remnants. What would be the point?

"Don't forget, when the Melein duchy still existed, it wouldn't hesitate to stab the duke in the back whenever it saw a chance. Should Duke Fisablen spread himself thin, Duke Melein would make his move. Do you think the four central duchies would give Duke Fisablen a chance to restore the kingdom? Viscount Kristoph had already suffered a loss at our hands at the time. Faced with our might, stepping down was the best choice he could make.

"After the duke returned to his dominion, he had Princess Sylvia come over right away, mainly to ransom his troops back while also signing a five-year deal. We initially thought it a show of amity by indirectly telling us that he harbored no hostile intent towards us. It made us put our attention elsewhere. Just like you said, we began to treat him like a harmless old man trying to extend his house's legacy.

"Now, however, I finally understand the old fox pulled a brilliant move with his retreat from Windbury. As long as he didn't act, Duke Melein wouldn't dare to invade. It essentially disarmed the Meilein duchy. Letting his daughter rule Windbury as queen also allowed the nobles of Southern and Winston to start fighting again, which spiraled the kingdom further into chaos. Even we thought we would be able to reap rewards after the two sides wiped each other out, so we began to wait.

"We were wrong. We were completely misled. It's all part of that old fox's plan. He knew better than anyone that as long as he was there, we wouldn't dare touch the ripe fruit that was the Iblia kingdom. It afforded him enough time to put his plan into action. When we were away at Hanayabarta, House Fisablen managed to swallow the greater and lesser golden creeks as they had planned. With the gold from the creeks, the duke finally revealed his true colors and turned his reticles back to the kingdom."

Lorist took a black folder from the desk and waved it around.

"This is the report Tarkel sent me about House Fisablen. It is a shame the sources he managed to bribe are only of low rank. They weren't able to procure more information for us, like how much gold the creeks produce each month. They don't know what the duke and his goons are up to either. But after seeing what they have for us, it's enough to let me think we should be on guard. House Fisablen's might isn't anything to scoff at!"

Handing the folder over to Charade, he continued, "You should take a look too since you don't believe what I said about them having 240 thousand troops. Our sources reveal that Duke Fisablen formed four Frontier Legions, each with 42 thousand men. It was the reason Princess Sylvia came over on her second trip to purchase another 70 thousand sets of armor 103. as well as 50 thousand sets of warrior-style equipment for another two garrison legions that each have 24 thousand men. One of those legions is stationed at the golden creeks, the other is at their main base in Eastwild, Crouchtiger Castle.

"Other than that, there is another reserve cavalry legion numbering around 28 thousand. They are formed from the barbarian youths that have submitted to the duke and play a huge part in attacking the other barbarian tribes that haven't submitted yet. Only those who perform well in battle will be enlisted in the Frontier Legion and be given equipment that our house made. It's also worth noting that more than half of the four frontier legions are made up of those barbarian warriors."

"You' mean to say Duke Fisablen's absorption of the barbarians into his forces' ranks have decreased the burden of the military on his own subjects?" asked Charade.

Lorist nodded.

"I thought the duke only had around 600 thousand subjects across both Eastwild and Wild Husbandry, so maintaining three Frontier Legions should already have been

House Fisablen's limit. It's one of the reasons I didn't consider them a serious threat. If we ever attack the kingdom, the duke's forces will definitely disperse so as to not get on our bad side and watch the kingdom's end from the sidelines.

"I didn't think Duke Fisablen would have this move up his sleeves, doubling his forces by recruiting the barbarians. I always thought House Fisablen would have to station one legion at each of their three provinces, which would leave only one legion in reserve to engage in offensive operations and reinforce the others. I only just learned that all the duke's legions can attack together! The force of all 200 thousand light cavalry troops attacking together is staggering!

"Back then, House Fisablen didn't have enough funds and could only watch as we take in refugees from Winston and Southern while we wrote him off as harmless. Now the golden creeks have fallen into their hands and made up for their financial problems, they moved a hundred or so thousand youths straight to Eastwild right after conquering Melein.

"We all thought the duke held the knighthood tournament last year to find the princess a suitor. But after experiencing it for myself, I began to feel something was off. It was only after hearing about the Melein duchy's conquest that I realized the old fox's true aim is Iblia.

"After Melein's conquest, Duke Fisablen regained control of the kingdom and allied with the four central duchies. Given that we only have the two iron suspension bridges connecting The Northlands to the rest of the continent, it would be easy for the duke to keep us stuck here. The reason the knighthood tournament was held was to test the remaining strength of the nobles in the capital, to see if they'll prove troubling for him after he takes the city.

"Time is scarce for both us and the duke. The reason I insisted on attacking Madras was so we can open another way to leave The Northlands, expand our influence, as well as control Sanderson Hills, which is threatening to Winston. We might have a war in Winston the moment our trade deal with Duke Fisablen is completed.

"As much as I want to stop the arms trade as soon as possible, it's not an option. It's not a matter of breach of trust either. In fact, I worry that Duke Fisablen will storm Windbury, take Winston, and send his troops to The Northlands. We would be busy with the dominion relocation and remain unprepared. The moment the two suspension bridges are cut off, we can only circle around Sanderson Hills to launch

our attack, which is exceedingly unstrategic.

"We have to take the initiative in the war with House Fisablen -- we have to strike first. We'll start with invading Winston, conquering Windbury, and sending our troops to Southern to ensure we retain the initiative. If we fight the duke in Winston, he would be able to receive continuous support from the four central duchies and the war will drag on for who knows how long. It would be a catastrophe for us."

After a short pause, Lorist muttered, "It's because of those contemplations that I want to send Loze and Tigersoar Legion to deal with the Andinaq kingdom. The ones that'll worry the most after the second highness regains his throne are the Union and the four central duchies. They'll definitely watch his every move and decrease their support for Duke Fisablen as a result. The duke won't be able to escape our grasp no matter how hard he tries."

Charade thought for a while in silence.

"Your Grace, it seems to make sense," said he finally, "but it's too complicated for me to comprehend as a whole so I can't tell what choice would be the best. At any rate, I still think restoring the second highness to his throne is akin to 'counteracting a poison with a toxin', as those herbalists love to say. He might end up being even more trouble for us than the duke."

Lorist smiled bitterly, "All I want is send him out of The Northlands as soon as possible lest he causes more trouble. Since he's still useful, we might as well let him do his thing after he gets his throne. Given his personality, he definitely holds a huge grudge after his humiliating defeat at the Union and the four central duchies' hands. Before he gets his revenge, I doubt he'd come for us. As for the taxes you mentioned, I'll have Count Kenmays ensure we get a three-year tax exemption for all four houses as compensation for the immediate deployment of our troops. He'll no doubt agree to it. As for what'll happen after three years, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Chapter 345
An Audience

The southern area of The Northlands was House Shazin's dominion, where the former duke's mansion at Gildusk was located.

The days passed like years for the second highness. Fortunately, the sun would shine upon The Northlands once more after 20 or so more days of rain. Even so, he was impatiently waiting for the four nobles to invite him over as a spectator to the battle with the Madras duchy. After sending his henchmen to ask about the news, the response he got angered him so much that his face almost contorted irreversibly.

"What did you say?! The four nobles are busy with their winter harvests and don't have time to watch the battles?!"

He felt he truly didn't understand what was going on in their minds.

The duchy's 100 thousand plus forces have already waited through winter and the rainy season. Their morale must've dampened considerably. Forcing an enemy to a decisive battle will definitely lead to victory! Those fools are still bothering with the winter harvests at a time like this?! Are they out of their minds?! Once we lose this chance, it'll be too late for regrets! The enemy will be able to use the time to regain morale and vigor!

It wasn't that he didn't think the winter harvests weren't important. It would be equally troubling to miss the appropriate time to harvest and sow new seeds, but even so, was it more important than what was happening on the frontlines? The second highness hurriedly wrote a few letters to remind the nobles to not forget about how important the upcoming conflict was. He included an anecdote about his own failings and suggestions to avoid making the mistakes he had.

It didn't take long for him to receive a reply, however. Lorist's response was as short as letters get, containing only three words: I got it.

Baron Shazin sounded slightly more annoyed, saying: I'm the one at the frontlines. I know better than you.

Baron Felim's response addressed the strategic suggestions of the second highness. It pointed out that the two points the second highness put out wasn't exactly adequate, and explained the reason for his rebuttal.

Count Kenmays penned a really long letter filled with flowery words that filled up five whole pages, three of which were expressions of his concern and care for the second highness's living conditions and mental state. He even said that if the chef preparing his meals weren't satisfactory, the count would send his own personal chef to ensure the second highness got the best treatment during his stay. On the fourth page, the count stated his thoughts about the time he visited the imperial capital and expressed sympathy for the second highness's homesickness. The final page contained a whole discourse about how busy the count was within his dominion, as well as how his knights were acting according to House Norton's orders for the moment. The letter closed with, 'I believe the situation will stabilize soon enough. Victory is already in sight. Please rest assured, Your Highness.'

The letters caused the second highness to fume so intensely he wanted to tear the letters up in anger. Not one of the nobles bothered to invite him to the frontlines. Not willing to accept it, the second highness sent his gold-ranked knight Ripleid to check the situation.

However, Ripleid returned just three days later. He reported that he was prohibited from crossing the bridge into the duchy. He stayed there for a day and apart from seeing the Norton forces prepare for the construction of a citadel at the crossing, he didn't notice anything and had no choice but to return.

The second highness was even more depressed. It was apparent the four houses had come to an agreement to not let him meddle in the conflict. At the same time, it also showed that, even though the four houses considered him their liege, they were still very cautious of any of his advances. They knew of his plan to rebuild Whitelion Legion from the war-torn duchy. It definitely played a huge part in why he was forbidden from entering the duchy.

Gah, how frustrating!

The second highness hoped deeply that the four houses and the duchy's forces would have as huge a battle as possible. One that saw both sides suffer severe casualties. Perhaps only then would the four nobles recall the second highness's reputation as a war god and seek him out to save their sorry asses.

The only good news the second highness received when he arrived at Gildusk was the growth of the army with which he planned to restore his throne. They had recruited around 600 people from the Norton dominion. But at Gildusk, they were able to get more than three thousand in less than a month, with four freelance knights and around ten wandering knights pledging allegiance as well. The second highness ordered Glacia to have the Whitelion Legion equipment brought over while he remained at the army camp to train his troops.

Seeing that the 5th month would soon be upon them, the second highness decided to test the four nobles by offering his own troops as reinforcement. If they were making good progress, they would refuse his help. If the opposite was true and their forces were entangled with those of the duchy, they would definitely be more than happy to have the second highness on the frontlines. If that were the case, however, the second highness's newly built force would no doubt have to suffer heavy casualties.

Just when the second highness was pondering whether he should offer help, he heard a soldier outside the tent report, "Your Highness, Count Kenmays has arrived and wishes to have an audience with you. He's waiting for your summons outside the camp."

Count Kenmays is here? thought the second highness with joy.

Just as he was about to summon the count, he suddenly felt that he was being a little too rash.

I should put on some airs and let the count wait for a while first.

Thus, he announced, "Tell Count Kenmays I'm a little busy right now and have him wait for a bit."

The second highness felt the count must've come because of the conflict. Given that the total force count in the conflict was at least two or three hundred thousand, there was no way victory would be so easily decided, especially with the duchy's troops, which had a reputation of being incredibly hardy. Thinking of the time he tried to attack the Redlis kingdom with his army of 300 thousand, it was that old tortoise Duke Madras that had caused him the most grief.

The second highness looked for Ripleid for a sword training session. The second highness was also a three-star-gold-ranked knight at the end of the day. He took just

thirty minutes to defeat the two-star Ripleid. Sweating profusely, he ordered a bath and fresh clothes prepared. After all that, he felt it was about time for him to receive Count Kenmays, who had been waiting outside the camp.

The guard quickly left and came back alone, reporting, "Your Highness, after Count Kenmays heard you were busy, he left almost immediately on his carriage, saying he'd come visit again in two days."

The second highness was completely flabbergasted.

What's the meaning of this?! Wasn't the count going to see me for my opinions and strategies to use in the conflict? Did I guess wrong? Are the four houses actually holding up well against the duchy?

It can't be. While that old tortoise Madras isn't any good when it comes to attacking, his forces excel in defense. Such was the case when the second prince attempted to attack Kobo as well! The second prince lost eleven times and ended up wearing his own army out! The duke was able to turn it into a huge victory and forced the second prince back to Delamock!

Perhaps Count Kenmays was only pretending, thought the second highness hurriedly.

It was to be expected given how the count was responsible for the oath contract, which he realized too late and found he didn't gain any real benefits apart from being liege in name and even handed the authority to make the decisions to Lorist.

It's best if I am warier when dealing with Count Kenmays, lest I get duped again.

Having learned his lesson, the second highness finally called his guards to monitor the count's actions after a good moment of thought. Perhaps he would be able to get some inkling of his intentions after seeing what he did.

"Your Highness, Count Kenmays is going to organize a ball at his mansion and he has invited many noble ladies."

He's still in the mood to dance… there shouldn't be a problem with the war…

The second highness forced himself to stay calm so he wouldn't be misled by the count's many tactics.

"Your Highness, Count Kenmays went frolicking to the south of the city with a few noble ladies and even brought a few rattan balls for fun. He will also be partying with them at his mansion in the evening."

The second highness finished the fruit wine in his cup frustratedly. Had he gotten the wrong impression of the count's visit? Did the count only do so out of formality?

"Your Highness, this afternoon, Count Kenmays met with a few traveling merchants. At ni-night, he brought the merchants to the largest brothel in the city to… to let loose."

The second highness was so angry he instantly smashed the table he was using.

That darned bastard! What the heck?! Didn't he say he would come see me in two days? It's already the third day, and instead of coming to see me, he actually went to frequent the brothel?! How can he do that as a noble?!

"Your Highness, Count Kenmays is here."

"Oh, quick, have him come in…"

During the afternoon of the fourth day, the count finally came to see the second highness, who lost so much sleep his eyes had sunk noticeably.

"Ah! Your Highness, what's going on? You don't seem well! What happened?" asked the count after he saluted.

It's all because of you, bastard…

The second highness had tossed about in his bed for the whole night, not getting the slightest bit of sleep.

"These days," he sighed, "I've been rather troubled. I just can't seem to get any sleep the moment I think about the kingdom's situation. My throne was taken and now I'm here, stranded in The Northlands, looking at our great empire crumble day by day. The Union's influence is getting stronger while the four central duchies forgot about the glorious days of the empire and unite with the enemy. Hearing this tears my heart apart! How can I even get a good night's rest with all this happening?!"

"Your Highness, while it's your duty to be worried about the state of your kingdom as king, you must look after your health." Count Kenmays consoled, "Don't worry too

much about this matter and tire yourself out. The past has already happened, as long as you stay strong, you will definitely be able to regain your throne one day. With you on our side, we are confident the empire will return to its former glory. Since you're not in prime condition right now, I suppose I'll come visit you on another day."

What?! You're going to leave after just spewing a few lines of crap to me?! You haven't told me anything I want to hear about yet!

The second highness hurriedly stopped the count.

"No, I can't do this. If you're not in good shape, I definitely shouldn't disturb your sleep any longer. I… I think it's better if we do this another time," refused Kenmays.

No way I'll let you do that! snapped the second highness inwardly, *It's not like I'm actually king now, so there's nothing better for me to do! Staying at the camp all day long training those rookie soldiers is so dull I almost want to go count ants!*

"Wait a second," said the second highness as he grasped the count's hand and pushed him onto a chair, "Since you took your time to make the trip here, let's have a good chat. I'm feeling fine so there's no need to worry about me. I only lacked a bit of sleep over the past two days, it's no big deal."

"Then, it's more important if you rest! I think it's best for me to not interrupt."

"There's really no need. Lord Count, how's the war with the duchy going? Are the casualties great? Do you need me to reinforce you with the five thousand men I have here?"

The count looked shocked and said, "The war? It's going well and we aren't losing that many men. There's no need for you to send your men over, Your Highness. All you should do is get some good rest."

"There aren't many casualties? Then how are things progressing with the war?" asked the second highness anxiously.

"Ah, you were talking about the casualties for the final battle? The final battle hasn't even started yet!" laughed the count.

"Hasn't even… started? Why? Didn't you tell me you were going to attack and wipe the duchy's forces out in one fell swoop? Why aren't you going with the plan any longer?"

"Oh, it's like this, Your Highness… It's not that we weren't going to launch our attack. The duchy's forces surrendered before we could start."

"What did you say? Surrendered? The 100 thousand soldiers of the duchy surrendered to the four houses of The Northlands?" asked the second highness in disbelief.

"Indeed, Your Highness. Not only did they all surrender, Duke Madras has also been captured. The Madras duchy is no more," said the count with a face full of smiles.

The second highness sat back in his chair, stupefied.

What… what about the final battle? Aren't you going to go into a bloody battle with the duke's forces and end up badly hurt yourselves? Was it all just my imagination?

"How did you guys do it?"

The second highness began to smile bitterly the moment he realized all his plans had gone down the drain. Despite his bitterness, he was curious how the four houses managed to pull off such a feat. He didn't suspect the count's words at all because the count definitely wouldn't dare lie about having the duke captured.

"The sea," the count said, "Lorist landed his household forces on Platinum Beach and attacked Edelise, before occupying Xith Castle, Vanades, and Kobo. When the three locations were taken, the duchy's forces camped opposite our own lost their supply line and had no choice but surrender."

The second highness thumped on the table hatefully the moment he understood. He had also boarded the ship from Silowas to The Northlands during the previous year and even passed by Platinum Beach on the way. Yet he hadn't imagined that it was an avenue of attack he could use. When Duke Madras deployed all his soldiers to the frontlines, his headquarters was left undefended. It was a fatal weakness that Lorist had managed to grasp. With but a light push, the duchy came toppling down.

"So you came here to see me just to tell me this? Congratulations, my count. You've just become a duke," said the second highness mockingly.

How ironic. Even though the duchy was exterminated, a king like me doesn't get any benefits. As the contract states, as long as the duchy is no more, Count Kenmays automatically becomes a duke and Sidgler becomes his hereditary dominion, all without needing my permission.

The second highness was so displeased he felt his heart throb with pain. If it were other nobles promoted, they would have to present a sum of gold to their liege. Yet, the fellow in front of him had managed to skimp even on that. The second highness really could use more funds for his army.

"Your Highness, this is all thanks to your wisdom and leadership," thanked Kenmays habitually without caring about how insulting it could be construed as, causing the second highness to flush red immediately.

"We have conquered the duchy, but a situation has come up that we need your advice on, Your Highness. Our losses were minimal, so some of us think we should keep the momentum going and go for Queen Carey right away so you may get your throne back at the earliest moment possible. Some, however, were against the idea and think we should help Baron Felim attack and reconquer Southern first. Naturally, Your Highness, I'm on the side of sending troops against Queen Carey," said Kenmays.

I bet you are actually part of the camp wanting to attack Iblia!

The second highness took two deep breaths and forced himself to calm down.

"Why don't you strike down the illegitimate ruler first? I remember the contract contains a clause that necessitates the restoration of my throne. Are you about to go against your oaths?"

"Your Highness, we will definitely restore your throne, but so far, we've encountered a tricky situation. We lack the funds to deploy our troops, so many of us think we should slowly gather funds before we launch a campaign against the queen."

"Out with it. Just tell me what you want and stop going in circles," the second highness exclaimed as he stood up.

"I want a written promise from you, Your Highness, which is signed and stamped with your royal seal just like our contract," said the count as he stood up, "If we restore your throne in this year, you will exempt the four houses from any taxes for the next five years and pledge that you won't collect any form of payment from us. The five-year exemption will make up for our military costs."

The second highness furrowed his brow.

"Three years is the most I can do."

"It would seem it is best we gather the funds on our own then. Good day, Your Highness," the count said, preparing to leave.

"Fine, you win. I agree to your proposal, but you have to ensure I can return to the imperial capital by the end of this year," said the second highness.

Chapter 346
Settling Debt

The second highness took more than ten days to bring his army of five thousand to Kobo, fully equipped with the Whitelion Legion's gear. He hanged all 47 members of House Madras, including the captured duke. Even a four-year-old child wasn't able to escape his fate. There was even a sign engraved with these words beside the corpses: 'Thus is the fate of traitors to the empire'.

On the 14th day of the 5th month, Year 1775, the Andinaq kingdom's former king Auguslo hanged all the members of House Madras, exterminating one of the oldest noble houses of the Krissen Empire.

Kenmays, who was traveling with the second highness, wrote Lorist a letter and warned him to be wary of the second highness, stating that while the second highness appeared to be a forthright, ambitious and intelligent person on the surface, he had an extremely petty personality and was the kind of person to remember even the smallest grudges. Even in the starkest situations, he would persevere and endure. Such a person might prove troublesome in the future, especially when they had attempted to take advantage of him through the contract.

Lorist fell into deep thought after reading the letter. His reply was thus: 'Sheer might and our alliance. We'll execute the plan as scheduled.'

On the other hand, he wasn't too surprised at the fate of House Madras. When the duke suddenly announced the independence of his duchy, he had spoiled the third prince's chances to exterminate the rebellious first and second princes. Despite the third prince's efforts to conquer Kobo, he ended up retreating, defeated. It set the once mighty empire on the path of civil war and certain doom.

As the successor of the third prince, the second highness bore a deep grudge against Duke Madras. While Lorist was well aware of it, he didn't think the second highness

would actually go so far as to kill even a four-year-old child to ensure the blood of House Madras, passed down for three centuries, was extinguished forever. Perhaps, such cruelty was the second highness's shortcoming. A king should not act ruthlessly with exclusivity -- seeking the fear of his subjects -- he should also be willing to compromise and tolerate.

It was precisely the second highness' cruelty that caught Lorist's attention. When he regained his position on the throne, the four dukes of the central duchies would probably be unnerved, given what had happened to House Madras. Lorist believed they would definitely focus all their attention on the second highness's actions and thus decrease the extent of their support for House Fisablen.

Kenmays understood what Lorist meant in his short reply instantly. No explanation was necessary, it was clear that 'might' referred to the strength of the singular house. As long as one had might, one need not fear others. 'Alliance', on the other hand, obviously referred to the maintenance of the four houses' alliance. In the past, the four houses had stood united in The Northlands against foes outside. Now each of the houses had their own dominions and had expanded their power, they didn't have to worry about the second highness in the slightest -- if they could maintain their alliance. If he attempted to cross any of the four houses, the other three would definitely jump to their aid and resist him.

Kenmays suddenly felt helping the second highness back on his throne was a rather good idea. Even though he didn't believe Lorist when he said House Fisablen was the most dangerous enemy they would ever face, after some thought, he felt that, even without House Fisablen around, as long as the second highness was still there, the four houses would stand united against any enemy. Additionally, they wouldn't dissolve the alliance just because they no longer had a common foe.

Let's execute our plan. First, we'll make the second highness king again and let the Union feel threatened. We'll have to reorganize our dominions and military this year and attack Iblia next year. Let's see how Duke Fisablen intends to cope with us.

After leaving Kobo, the second highness and Kenmays continued their journey to Vanades. On the way, they passed the depressed citizens of Sidgler who were migrating to the Norton dominion, carrying with them whatever belongings they could take with a simple pull-carriage. Sounds of crying could be heard from both sides of the road where they passed.

When the second highness saw the Madras soldiers constructing the road, he couldn't help but reveal a desiring expression.

"Lord Count, could you give me these captives…"

Before the second highness finished, Kenmays interjected, "Apologies, Your Highness. We are nobles and must abide by the oaths we take. We promised these soldiers they would be allowed to reunite with their families after three years of service. Forgive me for being unable to agree to your request, we are truly unable to go against our word."

"Forget it then," said the second highness as he waved his horsewhip with dissatisfaction.

"Don't be mad, Your Highness," Kenmays laughed, "We just received word today that Tigersoar occupied Vanades yesterday. They'll rush to the imperial capital straight away. For now, the refugees and soldiers at Welbassia and Yungechandler are yours from which to pick. A good number of them are your old subordinates too. I'm sure you'll be able to form a new legion. Using the men you're familiar with is better than using the duchy's troops, no?"

"How could things go this fast?" the second highness exclaimed, "I fortified Yungechandler myself. Lichtana Citadel and Mountainmidst Castle are the core of the province's defenses and I've had many experts in fortification design the battlements, mainly to stop a sudden invasion by Duke Madras. Did the garrison soldiers surrender as well?"

"I'm not too sure about the details, Your Highness. Actually, Mountainmidst Castle was already conquered by the time we left Kobo. As I understand it, Tigersoar is the sharpest knife House Norton has. It is mainly a cavalry unit that excels at attacking. Its capabilities are beyond what we can imagine. If the troops at Yungechandler weren't well-prepared, it's not surprising that they didn't manage to withstand Tigersoar's assault."

Well, had they not needed to wait for the arrival of Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade, they might've already reached the Great Andalou Plains already. he thought as he spoke.

Both Lichtana Citadel and Mountainmidst Castle were unable to resist the Thunderbolt Brigade's barrage. Lorist had long told Fiercetiger Loze to ruin every castle they came across so they wouldn't become obstacles in the future.

After hearing about Tigersoar's performance, the second highness couldn't help but feel the burning desire to fly to the legion and command it himself during the capital's siege. He deeply desired to make his grand entrance into the palace.

It was too bad that the moment they arrived at Yungechandler, the second highness was held back by too many other matters. As the first province of the kingdom he retook, many acquaintances and old subordinates couldn't wait to meet with him. Additionally, there was the matter of absorbing the surrendered troops and captives into Whitelion. He was so busy he barely had time for a good meal.

Word of Tigersoar's results kept on coming, but the second highness was finally able to relax when he heard they finally began to face the royal defense legion at the imperial capital. That legion was originally the second highness's second royal local defense legion he had stationed at Yungechandler to defend it. They had joined Queen Carey's side and become the kingdom's only official legion, numbering just 76 thousand in total. They had been stationed at Flowater Creek and Jillin Harbor.

Faced with Tigersoar's fierce attacks, the ones in control of the kingdom had to order the royal defense legion to regroup. At the same time, they had sent a call for help to the Zitram duchy, Allied Duchies of Britt and the Forde Trade Union in the hopes they would be able to send reinforcements to prevent the second highness from returning once more.

The second highness hurriedly wrote an impassioned letter to Loze, first praising the general's results, before suggesting Loze hold his ground for half a month. He stated that he would be able to finish reorganizing Whitelion and be able to send aid by then. He wanted to unite the two armies in the effort to conquer the capital.

In less than half a month, however, word from the frontlines was that House Norton's Firmrock Legion had arrived at Jillin Harbor and encircled the capital completely. The royal defense force was defeated by the two legions' combined attack. The legion lost 30 thousand men and the rest either surrendered or deserted. The old empire's most prosperous city finally opened its doors to the Nortons. The victors, Firmrock and Tigersoar, stepped into the city proudly and hung the banner of the Raging Bear all over the palace's walls.

On the 11th day of the 7th month, Year 1777, The Northlands' House Norton

defeated the Andinaq kingdom's royal defense legion with the Firmrock and Tigersoar Legions, conquering the imperial capital. Queen Carey I and her three lovers drank poison to self-terminate. The former king, Auguslo I, once again took his position on the throne.

This stunning war showed others the overpowering might of the House of the Raging Bear. They had launched their attack on the 14th day of the 5th month and completed their objectives on the 11th day of the 7th month. In the span of just two months, they had swept three provinces of the kingdom without any apparent resistance, winning battles one after another.

When the neighboring powers resisted Tigersoar at the capital together, House Norton sent Firmrock to Jillin Harbor and dealt the decisive blow to the kingdom from behind. Their actions were so swift that the surrounding nations weren't able to react in time. Before they had even decided whether to send troops to reinforce the kingdom, the dust of war had already settled.

The battles saw the reputation of three of House Norton's gold-ranked knights soar. Naturally, among them was Tigersoar's commander, Fiercetiger Loze, who swept the battlefield with incredible ferocity and speed. Dulles had commanded the carroballista division and launched a massacre-like attack on the royal defense legion. Half of the 30 thousand dead had died by ballista fire, their corpses were piled up like mountains, accompanied by rivers of blood. The last knight was Ovidis. The heavily bearded guy crushed one citadel after another with the Thunderbolt Brigade. No matter how hard the defense, he managed to break it into shambles.

The second highness finally returned to the capital in the 7th month with the newly formed Whitelion Legion. His first action after he returned was to admonish the nobles who had betrayed him. Under the purview of Tigersoar and Firmrock, who were in charge of the city's security, the noble's blood was spilled. The massacre disrupted the city's hitherto peaceful streets. Soldiers, garbed in the Whitelion Legion's gear, stormed the lavish mansions and dragged the nobles out one by one before beheading them on the streets. As for the women, they were brought back to the army camp as spoils. Their cries and shrieks echoed across the plains and down the city streets.

"How can they do that?!" Loze roared angrily, "Did the second highness forget he's the

king and this his capital?"

"He doesn't have a choice," Potterfang said with a troubled frown, "You and I both know the second highness didn't bring much of his wealth with him when he escaped to The Northlands. Apart from the Whitelion Legion equipment and the funds the four houses gave him, he has nothing else, and that money is also almost entirely used up. I thought he would only punish a few of them at first, but I didn't think he'd exterminate them all. He's intent on clearing out almost all the kingdom's nobles!"

"His Grace shouldn't have let the second highness back on the throne. Given how cruel he is, he will definitely become a most fearsome threat to our house one day," said Loze as he gazed at the walls where many heads were hung.

"It's about time we left. Since you already rescued all your paramours, don't butt into the second highness's business any longer. Even though I think he doesn't have the bearing of a king, this is something His Grace should worry about. It's not our business to participate in this discussion. I will say, however, that the second highness will never be able to reunite the old Krissen Empire as he is now," said Potterfang.

On the 32nd day of the 7th month, Year 1777, Auguslo I -- who had just been reinstated as king -- ordered the bloody execution of all the traitorous nobles. Not a single one in the imperial capital was left alive, save a few exceptions. The massacre spanned three whole days and more than three thousand nobles had their heads cut off and displayed on the city walls. As for the young noble ladies, most were disgraced at the army camps until they expired and departed the world. Word of the atrocity eventually spread and shocked the whole of Grindia. The nobles of various nations considering the second highness public enemy number one. He was eventually known as the Slaughterer King, and the incident was later termed 'The Bloody Cleansing of the 7th'.

"He's a freaking demon, not a king!" Loze complained even after leaving the capital, "It's one thing if he kills the nobles, but do why the attendants, servants, and knights have to die? Not only did he not spare the women, he didn't even give them a swift death! This is something only a demon is capable of doing. He's destroying our honor as nobles! I really feel like we need another war…"

Kenmays was currently seated in front of Loze and Potterfang. He had accompanied the second highness on the way to the imperial capital and had witnessed everything.

"In terms of the law, the second highness wasn't wrong in what he did," he sighed, "Those nobles were traitors. They had intentionally delayed or ignored his decrees and caused Kanbona's. The second highness had already ordered the province be strongly defended, yet they didn't bother and caused the second highness's efforts to go to waste.

"When he was trapped at Frederika, not only did they not send aid, they even crowned Princess Carey queen. It's an indisputable act of betrayal. Perhaps, they thought all they had to do when the second highness returned was admit their wrongdoing. Even they didn't think he would hold his grudges so close. The second highness is not the slightest bit tolerant the way they thought he was. Since he had used up almost all his funds in rebuilding Whitelion, slaughtering the nobles and confiscating their wealth is only par for the course.

"Then again, we really didn't see how cruel he could get, for him to kill even the women and everyone else related to the noble houses by blood. He did it to extinguish any seed of revenge that may sprout in the future. The both of you are still right. The second highness doesn't act like a king should at all. He's just a slaughterer."

A guard entered the tent and reported, "His Grace is here!"

Chapter 347
Letter

Lorist read Loze's urgent letter and fell into deep thought. It was signed by Loze, Count Kenmays, and Potterfang, and contained three points of argument. The first concerned the second highness's settling the nobles' 'debt' and their fate. The second regarded the second highness wish that the Norton forces not retreat until they finished their obligations as stated by the contract. The third reported a rather inappropriate request, which Loze had already refused on Lorist's behalf.

Lorist did not feel much about the second highness's actions towards the nobles since he wasn't too fond of them either. They were far too corrupt to be allowed to exist if the empire's unification was still a goal. The extermination of such useless leeches was most definitely warranted. Had Lorist been in the second highness's shoes, he might've done the same thing, perhaps less harshly and using less extreme methods. It could be said that the reason for the second highness's extremity was his need for funds and possessions to alleviate the dire situation of the kingdom's finances.

'One's grounds is always decided on where one is sat'. For instance, Loze used to be a mere ex-officer of the disbanded Whitelion Legion when he joined the northbound convoy. After experiencing seven years of civil war within the empire, he hated the nobles with fervor and thought the empire fell due to their greed. It was for this reason that he didn't hesitate to take the actions he did and hang the members of around 40 noble households when he first agreed to a deal between the second highness and the convoy.

In a flash, ten years had passed, and as a gold-ranked household knight of House Norton, Loze was now a quasi-noble himself. With Lorist's ascension to dukedom, he would have a place among the barons entitled by Lorist himself. With that, his position on the matter changed and he resolved himself to live in a way befitting a member of the nobility. He went to great lengths to familiarize himself with the protocols and etiquette of the nobility. That was why he raged at the second highness's massacre; he felt such an action was an affront to all nobles.

Back then, he couldn't help but want to kill off as many nobles as possible. Yet, he was

now proud to be one of the peerage. On a side note, after conquering the imperial capital, he found himself four lovers of noble heritage and managed to save their households from the massacre.

After some thought, Lorist felt there was nothing much to complain about since he was in the same position. It would be a stretch to call him a noble loyal to the kingdom; even he wouldn't dare to don that reputation. After all, he was one who acted in the interests of House Norton first.

Perhaps, in the eyes of a king like the second highness, Lorist himself was even more dastardly than the nobles he had massacred. Only the house's might and its control over the whole of The Northlands deterred the second highness from doing anything.

The second highness's contempt for House Norton manifested in the next plan, which was the focus of the letter's second topic. The second highness made it clear that House Norton would only have fulfilled its obligation to reinstate his rule once the territories Queen Carey had ceded were once again part of the kingdom. Even though the imperial capital had already been recaptured, it still didn't change the fact that the territories relinquished as a result of the queen's actions remained outside of the kingdom.

In other words, the three provinces Queen Carey ceded for the sake of peace had to be returned to the kingdom before the second highness would consider the terms of the contract satisfied.

Hehe, Lorist thought coldly, *He's pushing his luck. He really is incredibly shameless for a king.*

The second highness's goals were simple: to cause conflict between House Norton and the Union and four central duchies, and to create an opportunity the second highness could take advantage of.

The latest maps showed that the province of Hanstmost, one of the former provinces of the Andinaq kingdom, had been fused with the northwestern area of the now defunct REdlis kingdom to form the Zitram duchy. The ruling duke was a former Redlis count from Anderwoff. After the flood in Majik consumed 70 thousand of the second highness' troops, and resulted in the death of Gold-ranked Knight Baroin, one of the second highness's five tigers, it could be said that the Zitram duchy was one of the second highness's sworn enemies.

As for the two southeastern Redlis provinces that had fallen into the clutches of the Andinaq kingdom following the first prince's defeat, they had been ceded to the ones who would form the Allied Duchies of Britt. The ones in control were three nobles who had made enormous contributions in the conflict against the second highness. Obviously, both the Zitram duchy and the Allied Duchies of Britt were buffer areas for the Union so any retaliation by the second highness wouldn't reach their territory directly. The Union seemed to be rather wary of all possible scenarios and had already predicted the possibility of the second highness coming back.

It seemed the two nations' leaders were on fight-or-die terms with the second highness and would definitely not compromise. The Union behind them definitely wouldn't either. Currently, the second highness intended to play coy and have House Norton reclaim the two southeastern provinces and Hanstmost before acknowledging House Norton's efforts to honor the contract. It showed how much he worried about the two nations. He was afraid they would attack one House Norton withdrew from the capital. Without Hanstmost and the two southeastern provinces, the imperial capital would be the battlefield and it would be incredibly bad for the second highness and his desire of reuniting the empire.

The second highness's plan wasn't bad, so to speak. He wanted to have Tigersoar and Firmrock attack the Zitram duchy and the Allied Duchies of Britt. Even after the territories were reclaimed, he could have the two armies stationed there just long enough so he could spark conflict between House Norton and the Union. Not only would it grind away at the Nortons' military might, the second highness could send out his elite forces after both sides wore each other out to take the rest of the Redlis kingdom's territory in one go.

Lorist didn't mind wiping out the two nations since they weren't formed very long. Without the Madras duchy's interference, the might of Tigersoar and Firmrock combined was more than enough to conquer the two nations easily. The only thing he worried about was Duke Zitram. Someone who could cause the second highness so much loss was not someone dealt with easily. Then again, if he let Firmrock attack the Zitram duchy, he believed Potterfang's reliability wouldn't expose any weaknesses of which the duke could take advantage. There were no rivers or large streams at Hanstmost, it was mostly mountains. Such terrain was where Firmrock excelled most.

Lorist was angry at the second highness; he had overstepped his bounds. He had ignored his subordinates' objections to restoring the second highness' rule so quickly because he wanted the second highness to attract the four central duchies' attention

so they would cease their support of Duke Fisablen. He also believed that, as a person of power, one had to consider all possible situations.

Lorist didn't deny he had considered the notion of forming his own kingdom. After all, he had already put in so much effort to meld with the battleforce-oriented world of Grindia as someone who came from another world. His soul stemmed from an ancient oriental civilization that had five millennia of history. While the original owner of his current body might have been a person loyal to the kingdom, he definitely wasn't. The fact that House Norton managed to become what it was today, bearing the title of Duke of The Northlands, was already far beyond the Norton ancestors' imagination. Lorist felt he had already done a lot for the house.

Similarly, others considered House Norton one of the second highness' mightiest supporters. There was nothing about Lorist's actions that anyone could nitpick, apart from duping him secretly for some benefits. Lorist had his own troubles, so he didn't really mind the king's shameless requests.

In terms of giving the second highness a legion's worth of equipment and mobilizing his forces to help the second highness regain his throne, Lorist had executed it all extremely well. Even if he were to fall out with the second highness in the future, nobody could criticize him for it. While the path of a ruler was filled with thorns and obstacles, both light and dark at every corner, rulers should always act fairly and justly, even if it was just for the sake of appearances. Any moral flaw a ruler displayed could be fatal to his ambitions. That was why the Norton knights and officials suggested he let the second highness remain at The Northlands for the time being.

The second highness's recent massacre would only incite disgust and hatred among other nobles. It would also deter them from pledging allegiance to him in the future.

Lorist started penning his reply. He told Loze and Potterfang they could attack the two nations to recover Hanstmost and the two southeastern provinces for the Andinaq kingdom. Since they were already 90 percent there, they might as well take the final step to make sure the second highness wouldn't have anything to say about their conduct.

Lorist made his own request of the second highness, however. The second highness must send men to hold the territory within 15 days of its capture. The two armies would retreat from the frontlines after 15 days whether they had been relieved or not, and would not return. He gave permission for Kenmays to iron out the details with the

second highness on his behalf in this regard. Should he not agree to this condition, Potterfang and Loze were free to return right away. If anyone was idiotic enough to try and stop them, they could kill them without question. They had his personal permission to slaughter their way back to the dominion if need be, even if their opponent was the second highness himself.

The second highness' awkward request, the letter's third topic, was that the catapults and steel ballistae be left with him. Lorist only had a single, short comment: 'Well done refusing the bastard'.

On what grounds does he think he deserves them? Because he's king? Even our three allies don't have them. Loze said it the best. Those weapons are our trump cards and if the second highness wants a piece, he better be ready to fight for it. All he has to do is declare us traitor and defeat us.

When Lorist finished writing his reply, he had Howard send it out using the messenger eagle. The birds only required a day to fly to Silowas. The letter would only take a further three days or so to reach Potterfang and Loze. It was much faster than how the count had his servants travel on horseback from the imperial capital, which took 17 whole days.

Lorist no longer worried for Firmrock and Tigersoar, Loze and Potterfang wouldn't let him down. Kenmays was with them, so the second highness wouldn't glean any benefits without their knowledge.

The following days saw Lorist occupied with many tasks, such as the enfeoffment and relocation of dominions at Delamock and the eastern Northlands' development. He also had to be present at the opening ceremony of Dawn Academy's Northland branch on the 15th day of the 8th month. The completion of the house's formal legal regulations also had to be screened. He also had to check on the newly formed Jaeger Legion as well as spend some time with Dilianna and his seven-month-old son. He couldn't help but wish he had the ability to create multiple clones of himself.

A rumor was also spreading in the dominion that worried him greatly. Word was that Lorist had begun to treat House Fisablen as a sworn enemy and had the intention to wipe it out after the duke refused to let Princess Sylvia marry him.

The first time he heard about it was in Tarkel's report. Tarkel had stammered when he described the rumor to Lorist. The matter of Duke Fisablen's refusal was no secret,

neither were the terms he wanted Lorist to abide by for Sylvia's hand in marriage. Even though many of them considered Lorist a person who treasured his relationships in his act of not abandoning his children and concubines, many also thought those concubines were not worth treasuring in comparison to Princess Sylvia. They believed their lord shouldn't give up on the union with House Fisablen for a few concubines.

At first, nobody cared much for the rumor since it only started as gossip in taverns. But as Lorist began to worry about House Fisablen's might and take preventive measures, the rumors morphed to state that Lorist had done all he had because he was bitter and that he was preparing to attack House Fisablen and fight for the princess instead. This version somehow clicked with the folks in the dominion and began to spread like wildfire.

Even though Lorist was practically fuming with rage over the rumor, there wasn't a target on which he could take out his anger.

Why have I become the crook that sends his armies out for the sake of a single beauty?

Tarkel observed Lorist's reaction quietly.

"Milord, should we forbid the rumor's spread by punishing those spreading it with labor?"

"Forget it," Lorist sighed, hopelessly, "Let people say what they want. There's no point in forcing their mouths shut. Taking any stern action would only confirm the rumor. Besides, it's a personal matter. I suppose I should just accept it as one of the side effects of being Duke of The Northlands."

On the 19th day of the 8th month, Year 1777, House Norton's Tigersoar and Firmrock Legions suddenly launched an attack on the Allied Duchies of Britt. Seventeen days later, they occupied all of the two southeastern provinces. The two dukes fell in battle. It was the end of the Allied Duchies.

On the 8th day of the 9th month of that year, Firmrock launched an attack on the Zitram duchy. Duke Zitram had his forces retreat out of Hanstmost. He stood his ground in the northwestern area of the old Redlis kingdom. On the 32nd day of the 9th month, Tigersoar and Firmrock handed Hanstmost and the two southeastern provinces over to Whitelion Legion and the Andinaq kingdom's

newly formed royal defense legion before beginning their journey back to The Northlands.

Chapter 348
Gold Coins (1)

"Your Grace, the inventory of the spoils from the Madras duchy is finished," said Spiel with a yellow folder in hand.

"How much is there?" asked Lorist.

"There were only 1.74 million gold coins in all the houses' treasuries, including House Madras'. It doesn't even make two million," replied Spiel, disappointed.

While the conquest of the Hanayabarta kingdom brought House Norton 27 million gold coins, the conquest of the Madras duchy only netted them 1.7 million. The disparity was akin to robbing a beggar after breaking into a tycoon's house.

It did seem reasonable after some consideration. The Hanayabarta kingdom was an isolated island kingdom that had enjoyed peace for nearly a century and profited greatly from the slave trade and managed to gather lots of resources, which eventually ended up in House Norton's hands. As for the Madras duchy, they were embroiled in conflict every couple of years. Lorist himself had plundered quite a bit of their wealth when he came through with the convoy. The second prince's 'reinforcement', actually a cover for taking advantage of the duchy, had caused the duchy huge losses shortly after. It took the duke a lot of money and effort to stabilize the duchy and fortify its borders thereafter. They would've finally had some peace, that was until the Nortons spoiled their plans by coming from the seas and wiping the duchy off the map altogether.

Just like an old man that punched with all his might but missed and hurt his back at the same time, Duke Madras's efforts and spending were all for naught. Whether it be the newly built citadels or his armies, they couldn't be put to any use in the conflict. It didn't change the fact that the duchy's treasury was in a pitiful state to say the least, however.

"Duke Madras spent over six million gold Fordes on his military over the past five years. I really want to see Kenmays's face when he finds out the profits he made from the duchy by selling our outdated armor left the duchy's wallet practically empty," said

Lorist hatefully.

"Your Grace, half of the six million was used to construct the seven citadels near Sanderson Hills and to fund the formation of the four garrison legions stationed there. What remained of the money was used to purchase equipment and weapons. Of that, one million was used to purchase iron ingots from the Handra duchy for their own smiths to work with," said Spiel after looking through the accounts.

Lorist dropped the account sheet on his desk.

"In essence, we got lots of military gear and resources?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Spiel said before he flipped the folder in his hand and continued, "The weather over the last couple of years has been rather benign, with no notable instances of natural disasters, allowing Delamock's storehouses to fill up with food. The accounts state that there are approximately 13 million Pors. We shouldn't have to worry about food for the next three years."

There were 13 million Pors, each representing 50 kilograms. The duchy's conquest netted the house 650 million kilograms of food -- definitely good news. Even though the Norton dominion had been developed rather extensively over the last ten years, the dominion's food production only just barely satisfied the demand. Should a natural disaster ever occur, the house would have to fret over the matter of securing food. Now that one of the dominion's larger problems had been solved, Lorist felt pronouncedly relieved.

"Your Grace, apart from food, there are also a lot of other military resources left behind by the surrendered soldiers. There is enough equipment to arm 300 thousand men. We've sorted it all according to quality, there are around 300 sets of superb quality armor, 70 thousand of decent quality, just over 100 thousand of average quality, and around 270 thousand sets of varied weapons. The armor of any worse quality has already been sent to the forges to be made into farming tools. How are we to deal with the armor and equipment we gained?" asked Spiel.

It was a rather worrying problem. Since the house already had Sid steel armor and many of their own weapons, they wouldn't use the outdated gear they sold to the duchy. That was also the case with their three allies, as their forces also used equipment produced by them. Lorist would have to find another way to strike a military arms deal.

"Keep the superb ones and around 30 thousand sets of the decent ones. When the house finishes entitling our vassals, we can assign these to their garrison and private forces so they'll be well-protected whenever they follow us into battle. As for the rest, send a portion to Silowas and ask whether the Peterson Merchant Guild wants to sell them on our behalf. If they're not interested, we'll wait for Count Kenmays to return. Didn't he say he wanted to start a new trade route to the four central duchies? We'll see if we can sell the equipment to them," said Lorist,

Shocked, Spiel said, "Milord, aren't they our enemies? Would it be appropriate to sell to them?"

"If not them, then to whom?" Lorist asked, rolling his eyes, "The second highness will only pay us in the form of credit, we won't get a single copper coin out of him. As for House Fisablen, the military arms deal with them still hasn't concluded yet. We have Peterson Merchant Guild collecting orders for us at the Union, but ever since the Chikdor Merchant Guild's purchase of the armor we produced, they didn't submit any further orders. That makes the four central duchies the only viable target.

"Supervisor Spiel, you have to be more confident in the house. If the four central duchies become our enemy, the equipment will just come back to us."

The lack of people to trade with was one of the negatives of The Northlands' ruralness. Grindia was rather large and irregularly shaped. Humans only populated two-thirds of the land area that formed the shape of a ladle. The Northlands wasn't truly located in the north of the Grindian continent, but rather the middle. The reason it was called as it was, was because it was the northmost point humans had settled. Past The Northlands was uncharted wildlands that humans hadn't frequented since the end days of the magical civilization more than two thousand years earlier.

Lorist was right in that there were no other targets for House Norton to sell to, apart from the four central duchies. It made him rather envious of the strategic location of the Union's territory; it was situated in the middle of the north and the south and had the neighboring duchies with which to trade. Perhaps, he could have Senbaud take the Oceanic Legion and start a new trade route to the Golden Bay. It just might bring the house even more wealth.

Spiel quickly realized the new Duke of The Northlands was gazing off into the distance with empty eyes, oblivious to what he was saying.

"Hrmm-hrmm."

"Sorry. My thoughts wandered. Could you repeat what you said?" admitted Lorist.

"Your Grace, even though we only obtained 1,74 million gold Fordes from the duchy, we found three underground treasuries at the duke's mansion in Edelise. They contain imperial gold, each treasury has just over 3 million. We have ten million imperial gold coins in total."

"Then we did end up earning quite a lot after all," Lorist exclaimed, elated, "Ten million gold coins make about three million gold Fordes."

"Your Grace, the duchy has never thought of exchanging imperial gold coins for gold Fordes," Spiel countered with a stern expression, "According to the mansion's butler, the duke intended to mint gold Fordes himself."

"What did you say? Duke Madras wanted to mint gold Fordes?" asked Lorist curiously.

"Yes, Your Grace. Currently, the exchange rate for imperial gold to gold Fordes is three to one. That rate is actually a small act of revenge by the Union against those of the empire. Simply put, of the three imperial gold coins exchanged, one would be pocketed by the merchant guild carrying out the exchange," replied Spiel.

"You're saying the real rate is two to one? Two imperial gold coins for one gold Forde?" asked Lorist.

Spiel shook his head.

"No. In terms of weight, the exchange rate is actually 1.7 imperial gold coins to one gold Forde, and that ratio hasn't changed for the past 30 years. When the Union first began minting gold Fordes, the exchange rate was only 1.2, which then rose to 1.5 and settled at 1.7, and hasn't changed since."

"Wait, aren't gold coin exchange rates dependent on the gold each coin actually contains? Since when was weight used as a measure?" asked Lorist curiously.

"Your Grace," mused Spiel with a troubled expression.

He found his lord often had no idea about common knowledge like this, even though information concerning gold coins were not all that well known.

"All gold coins contain the same gold ratio: 7.5:1.5:1; 75 percent gold, 15 percent bronze and ten percent chrome. That ratio has existed since the days of the magical civilization since only coins minted with that ratio can pass the liquid test. Even if coins were minted with 100 percent gold, they would still be considered fakes and nobody would dare to trade with them."

Lorist palmed his forehead when he finally recalled some information about gold coins. Back before Lorist transmigrated, the original owner of the body had been taught this at Dawn Academy. The memory wasn't his own, so he neglected it most of the time. All gold coins on the continent were made in that ratio. It was said the ratio was set by the magi for the common people during the magical civilization, whereas they used an even better kind of magical gold coin.

Coins made according to that ratio had one amazing quality: they wouldn't change in color and were extremely resistant to the trials of time. Even after long periods of use, they would still retain their shiny look. Even the imprint on the coins would still look good as new. The magi had also made a kind of liquid to be used to test the authenticity of such coins. Any coin that wasn't made in that ratio would sink straight down when put in the liquid, whereas coins made according to the ratio would float.

It was a truly mysterious and unique liquid. Lorist recalled that, during one of his herbalist classes, the professor prepared a large basin filled with the mysterious liquid. The materials used to make the liquid were extremely cheap -- around two small silvers -- and was used to drill the basics of mixing into the students. Lorist still remembered the fun he had when he tossed gold coins into the pool of water and the curiosity he had for how it worked. The professor said that if Lorist wanted to know the answer, he had to research the material himself, saying that the secret to finding out how the liquid worked was up to him.

He was reminded once again that he wasn't in his previous life where coins could be minted with varying ratios. Back then, there were many anniversary coins minted to commemorate certain events. One time, he bought a large amount from some sport event, thinking their price would appreciate in time, only to realize they actually began to rust.

Aren't these coins minted by the government? How can they rust?!

After getting them inspected by experts, he learned that the anniversary coins were minted with really small traces of gold by a non-government institution.

Grindia's the best after all. Since the ratio is the same, people only have to weigh the coins to determine their relative value. I remember someone said… who was it again? Ah, that professor from Dawn Academy said proudly that the number of gold coins minted by a nation represented its might. The citizens of the Forde Trade Union has always been rather proud of the fact that its currency was used all over the continent.

The stronger the might of a nation, the more reliable others would consider their currency. When the Krissen Empire was at its prime, imperial gold coins and gold Fordes only had an exchange rate of 1.7 to one. But now the empire was in shambles, the exchange rate actually became three to one. It was no wonder Duke Madras wanted to re-mint imperial gold coins into gold Fordes to cut his losses.

Lorist also remembered that his house used to trade mainly with imperial gold coins according to the three to one ratio. The loss of a third of the value made his heart wince with slight pain.

"Supervisor Spiel, doesn't our house have imperial gold coins as well? Were they all exchanged to gold Fordes?"

"Your Grace, back then, we used imperial gold coins according to the three to one ratio. But Knight Charade later instructed us to stop using them and stock them up instead. Since we didn't lack gold Fordes, we did as he instructed. After obtaining the ten million imperial gold coins from the duchy, I went to check our accounts. We have eight million imperial gold coins, most of which have been exchanged from the commoners with the three to one ratio."

The moment Lorist heard this, his heart skipped with excitement. With 18 million imperial gold coins in hand, he could try to re-mint the gold coins into gold Fordes as Duke Madras had attempted. If the ratio was two to one, then everything could be converted into nine million gold Fordes, which would do wonders to make up for the house's massive spending over the past two years.

"Can we re-mint the imperial gold coins into gold Fordes too?" asked Lorist hurriedly.

"I am only in charge of overseeing the treasury, Your Grace," Spiel said, shaking his head, "I don't know about minting coins. You should discuss this with Sir Charade."

"Alright. Howard, have Knight Charade come over immediately."

"Yes, Milord."

Chapter 349
Gold Coins (2)

Charade looked at Spiel, who was sitting alone quietly on the sofa in the study and couldn't help but wonder if anything went wrong.

Thanks to Howard, who had dragged him over in a hurry at Lorist's instruction, he was rather frustrated. He had quite a lot of matters to deal with as well. He was far too busy with the household's matters. Many things were still piled up on his desk awaiting his attention.

"Well, Supervisor Spiel, you said you instructed the house to stop using imperial gold coins and only bought them with gold Fordes from anyone who wanted to change it without any intent of spending them. So far, we already have up to eight million. This time around, we found that Duke Madras kept a stash of 10 million imperial gold coins with the intent of re-minting them as gold Fordes. It was a shame he perished before his ambitions were realized. I've asked you to come here today because I want to ask whether we can do the same. The exchange rate is far too high," explained Lorist according to what Charade had told him.

"Your Grace, I've seen the reports on the duke's intention to mint gold Fordes and I've also been considering what to do with the imperial gold coins. I wasn't able to come up with a proper proposal, so I didn't bring the matter up. I believe re-minting gold Fordes isn't a good idea," said Charade after some thought.

"Why? Gold Fordes have already become the most-widespread currency in Grindia. Even though the neighboring nations are rather guarded against the Union right now, they also use gold Fordes as their main currency. If we can re-mint imperial gold, we can start spending them right away," said Lorist.

"Your Grace, do you know which merchant guild is in charge of minting gold Fordes?" asked Charade.

He continued when he saw Lorist shake his head.

"Gold Fordes are produced by the largest merchant guild in the Union, the Twinhead

Dragon Merchant Guild, who are also the leaders of the big-seven. However, they only own 60 percent of the shares. Each of the six over guilds own just 5 percent. The last ten percent is used for covering the Union's administrative costs.

"As the materials and ratio of gold coins are identical, and the fact that all of them have to go through the liquid test, Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild produces them at a loss. In other words, for every 100 gold Fordes produced, 110 gold Fordes' worth of materials must be prepared. If there are any materials left after the coin production, that would be the profits of the guild. They produce 10 million gold Fordes annually on average. The record is 30 million.

"However, given the loss of ten percent for the production, the profits for producing 10 million gold Fordes per year isn't that high, only around eight percent. After deducting labor costs and maintenance costs, only around 300 thousand gold Fordes of profit is earned for every 10 million produced.

"The Union charges others 30 percent of the number of gold Fordes required to be minted, 25 for factions who have a good relationship with them. Your Grace, do you remember the Jigda kingdom? Marquis Lorf Fustat sent a good amount of gold and silver to the Union to be re-minted and Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild charged a commission of 25 percent. Actually, the real charge was only 20 percent, with the other 5 percent entering the marquis's own pockets. The Jigda kingdom had asked the Union to mint 15 million gold Fordes that year."

The Jigda kingdom… Marquis Lorf Fustat… The middle-aged noble who hugged the fairy-like girl during that moonlit night who wore a gold-ranked badge bearing the insignia of a phoenix… A wave of memories rushed to Lorist's mind, causing him to fall into a daze.

Charade stopped speaking considerately and signaled for Howard to bring him a bottle of fruit wine.

After a good while, Lorist snapped out of his daze. Charade was already having his second cup of wine.

"Why do you know so much about this?" said Lorist with a slight roughness in his voice.

"Well, I have a dumb friend who got heartbroken once. His lover left with Marquis Lorf.

I checked the marquis's background and learned that his household was far too rich and powerful, so I didn't have any other way to help my friend out. It's one of the things I regret most. At the same time, I also found out about the re-minting service, so I began to research the matter out of interest. In the end, I realized the conspiracy behind the exchange rate of imperial gold coins and had intended to buy some to earn some quick money, but I gave up when I learned that only Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild dealt with the purchase and sale of imperial gold coins."

"Well, aren't you rather incompetent?" laughed Lorist.

Well, it was just a passing though. The marquis was a gold-ranked knight, so a two-star-silver-ranked knight like me would only be looking for trouble if I tried to stop him. As for the delicious piece of meat Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild had, if a small vice chairman of Dawn Academy's enforcement department tried to bite into it, he'd no doubt be squashed to death," countered Charade.

Lorist took the bottle of wine and drunk straight from it.

"To the good times at Dawn Academy."

The two gulped down their alcohol.

Spiel, who was sitting on the sofa, shook his head helplessly. His lord duke didn't care about behaving in a manner befitting his title at all. How could a duke drink like a farmer or a mercenary at a village inn?

After finishing half a bottle, Lorist wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"I have a question for you. What method does Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild use to mint the coins? How are they able to produce so much each year?" asked he.

Lorist recalled that the various nations used a molding technique that utilized gypsum. First, they would engrave a piece of coin-shaped metal before pressing it between two gypsum pieces. When they hardened and solidified, the capillaries would be carved onto the gypsum plates to allow for liquid metal to flow in. When the metal cooled, the gypsum plates would be broken and the sides of the coin refined before it was tested. However, using this method generated a lot of waste. Taking into account the labor cost and materials, it was far from profitable.

"Your Grace, Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild uses a metal molding technique. They

have a secret alloy they use to make the three plates they use for molds. There's the faceplate, middle plate, and base plate. When they're put together, molten metal is injected. The plates are cooled with water before the base and faceplates are removed. The middle plate is struck with a wooden hammer to remove the minted gold Forde. They just have to shave away at the sides of the coin to finish it off. Each set of mold plates can produce 100 gold Fordes at a time, and each minting factory has tens of molds. If it is required, they can even make close to a million gold Fordes a day.

"I visited the guild's minting factories with Academy Head Levins once. The guild doesn't mind visitors of status. Our guide, a guild manager, explained that their coin-minting process was the most advanced in the whole continent. Other nations' minting processes cost 1.5 times the coin's value, whereas the guild's only require 1.1 times. That's the main reason so many nations rely on the Union to mint their coins, and that's also why gold Fordes see so much use across the continent."

Lorist raised his head.

"You're saying there's no need for us mint gold Fordes ourselves since we can just let Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild do it for us?" asked he.

Charade thought for a long while before he shook his head.

"Your Grace, I think it's best if you don't do that. The main reason Duke Madras gathered so many imperial gold coins is probably the fact that he can't ship all of them to the Union due to the lack of a proper route. The exchange rate isn't worth the effort either. The supervisor the duke hired even told me he spent lots of time and money hiring smiths to research how to make the molding plates… to no avail.

"While minting gold Fordes privately sounds easy, it couldn't be harder. While the ingredients used to make gold coins are largely the same, the special characteristics of the molding method and the long-lasting nature of the coins' features make it necessary for any privately minted gold Fordes to look exactly like those minted by the Union. There can't be the slightest difference. It's is the toughest requirement to fulfill when it comes to private minting. Due to the nature of the minting process used by Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild, each and every minted coin looks identical. However, there's no way any private minter can get their hands on the alloyed plates, so they can only rely on gypsum minting.

"Perhaps some coins minted using the gypsum process looks rather similar to gold

Fordes, but repeated minting with the same molds will no doubt cause the lines to fade ever so slightly. They will eventually be easily distinguishable. The molds will have to be changed every time, and it would raise the cost. The moment it's discovered, the value of the nation's gold Fordes would be decreased by half even if the coins pass the liquid float test. It's a disaster for whatever nation it happens to.

"Duke Madras only bothered to try because he had no other choice. However, there's no need for House Norton to go that far. It's incredibly easy to ship the gold coins across the seas and we can even get a deal on recommendation by Peterson Merchant Guild. We'll get the 20 percent rate rather than the normal 30. It's far more practical than attempting to mint our own coins. However," said Charade hesitantly.

"Would there be any difficulties?" asked Lorist curiously.

Since it would be more practical to just get Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild to do the minting, why did Charade advise him against it?

"Your Grace, I don't really know our house and The Northlands' standing. Given our close relationship with Peterson Merchant Guild, we can be considered a good business partner. But given our allegiance to the Andinaq kingdom, we're considered a vassal house of the second highness, who's the Union's sworn enemy. That's why I feel sending our imperial gold coins would be risky even if we have a written agreement with Peterson Merchant Guild. All it takes is someone's greed and our coins will be lost.

"The Union right now is no longer the one we knew from our days at Dawn Academy. I realized after the implementation of the aristocracy, the Union's people have fewer lines they're not willing to cross in comparison to nobles of other nations. Our trip to Morante last time is a good example. Additionally, I'm rather suspicious of Peterson Merchant Guild. They still owe us 500 thousand gold Fordes even now. While they're paying us back a portion every year, it's already really disappointing for a merchant guild of their size.

"I already gave instructions that our house is to no longer involve ourselves with them until they pay back their debt. They say the problem lies with the closed trade routes. The War of Glass ended several years ago, and yet even now the relations between the Union and its neighbors have yet to improve at all. I doubt severely whether they are even trying to improve their relations. I don't think sending our coins to the Union is a good idea."

Lorist tapped lightly on his desk with his index finger. Charade made a lot of sense. It was indeed far from advisable to let Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild mint the coins. If something were to happen, they'd have to go to war with the Union. While the Union would regret their greed when they met the Nortons' might, waging a campaign against an enemy that far away would no doubt drain them dry even if they emerged victorious. The one who laughed last would no doubt be the second highness. He would no doubt swallow the Nortons whole the moment he saw his chance.

"I guess it's best to keep the imperial gold coins for now," said Lorist as he stopped his tapping.

"Your Grace, I've been considering this for some time now… Should our house start minting our own currency?" asked Charade.

"Our own currency?" mused Lorist, Howard, and Spiel. They were all flabbergasted by Charade's far-out idea.

"Yes, Your Grace. Our dominion already has a population of over 1.3 million. By the time the dominion relocation is complete, we'll control the whole of The Northlands. The area of the southern and eastern parts of The Northlands will no doubt be able to fit seven more settlements the size of Felicitas. As long as we have enough immigrants, we'll end up with a population of at least three million. It's more than some kingdoms and duchies. It's entirely reasonable to start minting our own currency -- let's call it the Ragebear -- for use in our and our allies' dominions. As long as we set the rule for all trade to be done in Ragebear, we will one day be able to remove the Union's influence in our dominion through their currency."

"Forget it, stop dreaming," Lorist said with a laugh when he saw Charade's drooling face, "It's still not the right time for us to release our own currency. First, the second highness definitely won't allow a currency controlled by a noble house in the kingdom. It's something that'll affect the whole kingdom. Additionally, we don't have any gold mines. We won't be able to sustain the increasing demand for our currency. Maintaining enough supply is an issue that we'll have to deeply pay attention to. Not only that, what molding method are you going to use to mint coins? The gypsum method?"

"No, Your Grace," replied Charade seriously, "It's not that we're going to launch our currency right away, so there's no need to worry about the second highness for now. He'll be busy worrying about how to deal with the four central duchies and the Union

in the years to come, and he might even thank us for releasing a currency that'll replace both gold Fordes and the defunct imperial gold coin.

"As for the mines, I've already considered the matter. When our house takes all of The Northlands, Grandmaster Sid will form a foraging team to scour the place for any mineable resources. There's also a small gold mine at the eastern Northlands which House Kenmays controls. Even though it's been mined for quite some time, Grandmaster Sid is rather certain there are still gold veins waiting to be found. There's no way a small gold vein would exist just by itself.

"And even if we don't find any gold mines, we still have horseshoe gold and the gold dust Count Kenmays paid us with we can use to produce more than 20 million coins with the same volume as gold Fordes. That many is already enough to facilitate trade in the areas our house has influence. Even if we do happen to encounter a shortage, we can still purchase gold ore or gold Fordes for material.

"As for the molding method, I hope to use the same alloyed plates Twinhead Merchant Guild uses. I've already consulted with Grandmaster Julian and he expressed interest in researching a similar alloy. With that as material, we can make molds for our own coins and produce Ragebears at a low cost like Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild."

Upon hearing about the possibility of minting coins at low cost, Spiel stood up.

"Your Grace, I agree with Sir Charade's suggestion. I believe our house should start producing our own currency," said he.

Lorist gave it some thought before he nodded.

"Charade, submit a formal proposal. I'll consider our situation and have a meeting to discuss this soon. Let's end our discussion today."

"Understood, Your Grace."

Chapter 350
Bank, Entitlement and Real Estate

As a result of the worldview he had, limited by the culture and time he had lived in, Charade only considered releasing one's own currency as a method to increase the house's influence, much to Lorist's dismay. All nations in Grindia produced currency with the same ratio of metals. Their value was thus not determined by the metals inside, but their weight. The only true difference in the different currencies was that the Union's method was far more advanced and efficient than all the others.

It was in a merchant's nature to seek profit out. Lorist remembered attending a course about the history of gold when he was still the owner of his small workshop in his past life. In it, he learned that in the middle ages the Jews, who had lost their homes and traveled across Europe, noticed the profits that could be made in currency trading. They took immediate action and became primarily money-lenders, currency traders, and grocers. It was thanks to their domination of these three trades that they amassed so much wealth that they could even influence the world economy.

But, unlike the middle ages of Lorist's past life, the ones who controlled wealth and trade, and performed part of the functions the Jews had in middle age societies, was the shrine of the goddess Zejin. They did some things better than the Jews, in fact. For example, thanks to the trust they had from the public, they did appraisals for property and real estate. They were also witnesses to many business contracts and also released their gold Forde bills that could be used instead of the coins themselves. They also provided loans to nobles, merchant guilds, and even nations. In some ways, the shrine of the goddess Zejin was akin to a modern-day bank.

However, as opposed to a real bank, the shrine didn't provide services to store one's savings. That was the domain of large merchant guilds or even nations and noble houses. They also played a small part in private businesses, providing only services for exchanging gold Fordes into bills for ease of transport. The shrine's influence wasn't able to grow because they limited their activities. Almost no non-merchant commoners believed in Zejin. When the civil war started, the shrine left the empire. Now the closest branch to The Northlands was in Morante.

The plan that Lorist had to accompany Charade's proposal of releasing their own currency was to start a bank that could provide loans to any new businesses or factories that wished to start up and let commoners store their savings. It would definitely be beneficial to the house as it would own a share of 30 percent of all businesses started within the dominion. Lorist believed that after starting his own bank, he could use it to mitigate the burden of private business owners with his loans, providing an avenue for healthy competition. Not only that, the bank could also function as account auditors to decrease the rates fraud.

The most important thing was that Lorist would be able to regulate the flow of money within the dominion so he could decrease the burden of military and development expenditure on the house. Most people in Grindia had the habit of putting away their savings, normally by burying it, to prepare for urgent times. Given the population of the Norton dominion, which now neared 1.5 million, each household would have no less than ten gold Fordes in savings. Spiel estimated that the average citizen in Felicitas would be the first to gather a good amount of wealth. It was also the reason Spiel had suggested an increase in taxes.

Following the Hanayabarta kingdom's extermination by House Norton, the house obtained around 27 million gold Fordes. Lorist's spending in the following three years used up ten million.

According to Lorist's experience in the previous world, letting such a huge amount of currency into the market should've caused an economic crisis via inflation. However, the household's economic situation wasn't destabilized at all. This was mainly for two reasons: the house's subjects didn't spend much in the first place and were satisfied as long as they had food and a home, and they would save the extra gold without. This meant that Lorist's investments were essentially coins tossed into a well.

Lorist took out a beastskin and wrote the word 'bank' on it. He hoped that, within the year, he could wrap up the management issues within his dominion before launching his attack on the Iblia kingdom the following year and tangling with Duke Fisablen. When he made his move, he would leave most of the house's affairs to Charade, so he planned to write his plans down and leave their implementation to Charade as well.

Lorist spent the 11th month busy with one meeting after another. Charade was awed when Lorist suggested the formation of their own bank and even suggested an idol of Zejin be placed in the building to reassure people that the bank would carry out the functions of Zejin's shrines. It was an act in bad taste on Charade's part, as he wished

to see the looks in the clergy's faces when they went to The Northlands to request to be allowed to set up a branch after seeing how rich the place was, only to see that the bank had taken the shrine's place.

Lorist also finished dealing with the list of people to be entitled. The house was to entitle two viscounts and 12 barons in this round. No one expected the two viscount titles to be given to grandmasters Sid and Fellin. Lorist's reasoning was that without them the household wouldn't have gotten Sid steel armor, steel ballistae and catapults, all of which were central to the Nortons' successes. Rumour had it that Grandmaster Sid cried like a small child as he pledged to serve House Norton on behalf of his descendants for eternity during the ceremony. As for Grandmaster Fellin, he was so moved that he fainted on the spot. When he finally woke, he had his son give him a slap to see whether he was still dreaming.

The twelve barons unsurprisingly included Potterfang, Fiercetiger Loze, Ironface Malek, Divine Marksman Josk, White Belnick and Mercenary Freiyar, the first ones to join Lorist. There were supervisors Hansk, Spiel, and Kedan as well. They were the three household supervisors from Maplewoods. They were finally rewarded for their years of service, service that stretched back to even before Lorist inherited his position as head of the household, and their contribution over those years. The final three caused quite a stir.

The first was Charade. As the chief knight of House Norton, he should've been made a baron without question, however, in comparison to Els, Terman, Yuriy and some others, Charade's promotion seemed a little too fast. The second was Grandmaster Jilian, entitled because of his technical contributions. Due to the nature of his discoveries concerning materials, which were not as eye-catching as those of grandmasters Fellin and Sid, there was much argument about what reward Julian deserved. Camorra was the last one and came with many voices of objection.

Baron Camorra had once been an honorary noble entitled by the former Duke of The Northlands, Duke Loggins. After he wronged the duke and was imprisoned in the water dungeon, however, his title was rescinded. Lorist appreciated his talent and had him serve the house after his release. Camorra had started off as the lowest-ranked official. It was not until Kedan noticed his abilities that he began to climb the ladder step by step, eventually becoming an executive official. In the end, he was given the task of overseeing the most secretive arms-producing forges. Not a single problem had come up since Camorra took up the position. He also managed to increase the forges' efficiency greatly, thus lowering the manufacturing costs of anything produced there.

It was precisely because these achievements that Lorist insisted on his entitlement despite the opposition of some in the house.

When he received notice of his impending entitlement, the Camorra shut himself up in his quarters and cried for half a day, before he packed up and headed to Baron Jesder -- one of the seventeen soon-to-be-relocated nobles at Firmrock Castle -- for a visit. The reason for his visit was to propose a marriage between himself and the baron's widowed sister, who -- along with her 7-year-old son -- was living with him. Now that he was to be entitled, he could establish his own house, House Camorra.

Apart from the 14 noble houses already relocated, the nobles whose domains Lorist had conquered, were enfeoffed land in Delamock. They were demoted by a rank and made Norton vassals. In other words, House Norton was now their liege. One example was Count Spenseid, who was made a viscount and had pledged allegiance to Lorist.

To the 17 nobles, it was both a tragedy and a blessing. Those already barons were no doubt happy with the situation, as The Northlands couldn't compare to the once-prosperous Delamock. Their relocation meant a better life was waiting for them. The other nine, however, were rather troubled. The former counts were demoted to viscounts, while viscounts were made barons. Even with the penalties, House Norton was rather benevolent. It was already rather fortunate to retain a dominion even after having stood on the wrong side of history. It was their fault for siding with the second prince in the first place.

After ascertaining the list of relocated nobles and new entitled ones, Lorist also gave out six honorary titles. The first was Governor of Hanayabarta Archipelago, awarded to Hector. The might not come with land, and might not be hereditary, but this didn't mean it was anything to scoff at. An honorary title could be considered a stepping stone; if the awardee didn't make any mistakes, they were on track to receiving a proper, hereditary title at some point in the future.

The second to receive an honorary title was Old Man Balk. Actually, Lorist really wanted to make him a proper landed noble, but almost all of his officials and knights objected. They complained that he had only been the manager of a copper mine. He had nowhere near the contributions of the other nobles-in-waiting. To use an analogy, Balk was the one who erected the foundations while the three supervisors built the walls and floors. Everyone praised the beauty of the finished house, but nobody remembered the hidden foundations and the important role they played.

Next was Grandmaster Ciroba. The genius architect forced by Lorist to serve the house had already taken charge of all of the house's construction projects. He was currently neck deep in projects and had a rather fervent tendency of naming all the projects after himself, for example, Great Ciroba Dam, Ciroba Citadel, Ciroba Highway, and many others. While most of the names were later amended, it didn't change the old architect's habit. Just recently, he had named cannon station and lighthouse at Bullhorn Bay Ciroba Battery and Ciroba Lighthouse. In the end, Lorist changed the Ciroba Battery to Bullhorn Bay Battery, but he allowed the lighthouse to keep its original name.

Lorist's lover Telesti, academy head of Nico Academy, was also on the list for an honorary title. However, she refused to be made baroness. She only wanted to bear the same baronetess title as her mother. It was an honorary title above that of Knight of the Household, but did not actually convey peerage. It was thus the highest title of minor nobility.

The fifth and six titles of honorary baron were given to the house's two rank 1 blademasters, Engelich and Shuss. Shuss had prospects and ambitions of becoming a hereditary noble in the future, Engelich was already satisfied with his life as a rank 1 blademaster. While Shuss still actively served the house, Engelich was only willing to guard Firmrock Castle.

After he signed all the documents, Lorist finally relaxed. The decrees, although already made, would only take effect on the 1st day of the 1st month of the following year. Lorist planned to host a large celebration at Firmrock Castle both to welcome the new year and as an entitlement ceremony for his vassal houses. As the new Duke of The Northlands, Lorist had to hold new year's celebrations during winter just like the other dukes, to make merry with his vassals.

The land to be enfeoffed was in Delamock, but the nobles themselves couldn't stay there as they still had to serve the house. Apart from Josk, who was more than willing to leave his fief to his butler and collect the yearly income it generated, the other nobles let their family or relatives manage their fiefs while they continued to serve the house in order to stand a chance of getting a promotion to a higher rank and being given a larger fief.

Apart from preparing for the launch of a new bank and the entitlements, Lorist still had to deal with real estate. Spiel had once suggested the taxes be raised to cover the house's expenses as the subjects were gradually getting richer, but Lorist turned the

idea down. He had many more ideas, inspired by the experiences of his previous life, to make the subjects throw their savings at the house.

He decided to launch a small test run by developing a new residential area. The seven towns of Felicitas and the eight towns of Salus were among the first places the house developed. Seven years had passed since their initial development and their populations had increased substantially. It saw the rise of youths moving to other towns to work as factory workers since the jobs were far more profitable than farming. It also brought about the increase in personally constructed houses, which was an inevitability considering the fact that the house only built wooden houses for the initial settlers. The growth of the population would no doubt prompt some to figure out ways to build their own homes.

The land on which the houses were built, however, belonged to the house, strictly speaking. Spiel had thought of collecting rent or a management fee for those who used the lands. It was another way to raise taxes. Lorist, however, said that, since they have allowed them to live like that without paying a fee for so many years, suddenly introducing a tax on it would only harm the house's reputation.

So, Lorist decided to start a real estate business in the 15 towns. He would demolish the ruddy wooden houses and build proper residential areas and villas for the rich. They would have to increase the town's area and build more public and administrative facilities. Felicitas would be the first of the two to undergo the procedure and the funds would be collected from pre-purchases.

Lorist had Ciroba build a simple model of the modified house in Wildnorth Town and put it on display. Those who wished to purchase one had to put down a third of the total price as a deposit. The houses would be ready in two years after purchase.

At first, the folks of Wildnorth Town were rather suspicious. Even though the models and designs were rather nice, they couldn't help but worry about the fact that they would only receive them in two year's time. While their current houses were crude, they were free and served their purpose, there was no good reason for them to spend unnecessary money to buy the new ones. Lorist came up with a great way of dealing with their reluctance. He simply brought over people claiming to be from other towns interested in buying the houses. The sudden influx of outsiders sent the townsfolk into a panic. If the houses were all bought by outsiders, they would no longer have a place to live! Many dug out the gold coins they had buried to make buy the new houses.

"Do you see now?" Lorist asked Spiel, "We managed to get the money they stashed away, and we even let them make the purchase if they don't have enough. Those who incur a debt will just have to work for free for a few years to get their houses. They also have to pay the land lease, which will rise from 30 to 50 percent thanks to the rise in market prices. Even though the houses are theirs, the land belongs to us. If they don't pay their lease, they will be kicked out of their houses and we can even resell them. The next owner will also have to pay the lease, no exceptions. This is the right way to raise our taxes."

Spiel was so fascinated by the scheme that he instantly knelt before Lorist in admiration.



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