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Tales of the Reincarnated Lord

– 重生之领主传奇 –

- Volume 2 -

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[LiberSpark]

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Chapter 51
The Sloph Slavers

After four days of travel on sea, the Armatrin Harbor was within sights.

“Meh, this place looks rather small. The size of the harbor itself is at least ten times smaller than that of the Hidegold Bay’s.”

Lorist laughed and said, “How can you compare a place like this to Morante City? Originally, this place started off as a group of fishing villages. Had it not been for formation of the Lormo Duchy, nobody would even bother to come here after six years of war. Rumor says that the smuggling operations run by the Forde Trade Union in the empire were mostly carried out here. For it to be developed into a small town right after the war is already a rather amazing feat. I bet that in a few years it would evolve into a rather populous port city.”

“No matter how populous it becomes, it has nothing to do with us anyways. Milord, you said that the fatty is waiting for us there?” asked Els.

“He told me in the letter that he would set up camp outside of town. We’ll get to know more when we ask around after we get off on the port,” replied Lorist with uncertainty.

While the harbor was already within viewing distance by noon, they only managed to dock their ships around three in the afternoon due to the curvy waterways which made it hard for anyone to reach the harbor safely without getting stranded on shallow sea if they didn’t have a guide.

Lorist, Els, Alisa, Howard, Reidy and Patt all got off the boat and noticed that nobody was at the harbor to receive them and felt that something was off. *That’s weird, Charade said that he would send someone over to the harbor in the letter, but why haven’t I seen a single one of our people?*

Els nodded towards Lorist without saying a thing and headed towards a tavern nearby with a sign that depicted a beer cup and a fish to gather some information.

Lorist waited for a while and the tax collector got off the boat with Shadekampf

following behind. Lorist waved towards him and the tax collector came over respectfully. “Milord, how may I help you?”

“I believe that around 3000 people got off at this harbor around ten days ago. Do you know where they have set up camp?” asked Lorist as he stuffed a gold Forde into the officer’s pocket.

The officer’s face instantly gleamed as he said, “Of course I do. They’re within a small pine forest to the south of the town. They must be your subordinates, right? The raging bear symbol on their flags is identical to yours.”

Lorist nodded at that statement.

The officer continued, “Milord, I’m afraid that your people have run into some trouble. The place where they set up camp is near the Sloph Slavers’ camp. I heard that some sort of conflict had sparked between the two parties and your people have been stranded within the vicinity of their camp for four days now.”

“Oh? And who is this Sloph fellow?” asked Lorist.

“This…” The tax collector started hesitating.

Lorist tossed him another gold coin and his expression changed. In a low voice, he said, “Milord, Sloph is a famous leader of a mercenary group. He is really formidable and he is closely affiliated to the people at Port Nupite. If it’s possible, I advise you to send someone to visit him with a gift and apologize for your subordinates’ actions to settle the issue.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you for your kind advice,” said Lorist, unmoved.

The officer gave a bow and replied, “You’re welcome. Then, I’ll take my leave here.”

…

“Everyone, get back onto the boats. Reidy, ask Terman and Yuriy to come over,” instructed Lorist.

…

Els quickly got back to the boat and told everyone the news he had obtained from the

people at the tavern. According to him, the mercenary group leader called Sloph was in actuality the head of a slave trading syndicate and is currently the local hegemon whose power and influence rivals even that of the local lord's. The lord had no choice but to come to a concession with Sloph that states that as long as his slaver group doesn't impede the businesses in the area so that he can collect taxes from the business owners, he would leave the group alone.

Els said that Charade had arrived 11 days ago at the harbor and had set up camp within the pine forest south to the town, which was within vicinity of the syndicate's own camp. For some reason, they have attracted the slavers' attention and battles broke out between them. Having not enough weapons and armor for his forces, Charade could only quickly have someone cut down several trees to block up the entrance of their camp. It also seemed that several people have already been captured with a few more dead.

Sloph's syndicate also had a formidable fighting force at their disposal, including three Gold ranks, more than forty Silver ranks as well as at least two hundred Iron and Bronze ranks. It was no wonder that the dominion lord didn't dare to find trouble with them. There were even rumors that a brother of Sloph was a Blademaster, however he rarely spent his time with them.

Everyone was sullen at hearing the news. None of them would have expected to run into an obstacle that early in the journey.

"Patt, Reidy and Shadekampf, you guys stay on the boat and take care of Howard and Alisa. Yuriy, make sure you have at least twelve other guards with you and protect our goods. Even though the boats fly the flag of the Peterson Merchant Guild and not many people would dare to get on their bad side, we must prepare for the worst. Set up the carroballistas and make sure they are well shielded. If anyone attacks, kill them."

Currently, Lorist was filled with an air of bloodlust. "As for the rest of you, suit up in your armors. Terman, prepare five carriages and load a large amount of crossbow bolts onto it and follow me to the camp. We'll kill anyone that dares bar our way."

There were 38 senior students from the academy that were willing to accompany Lorist on this journey, among which 12 departed early with Charade, another 12 stayed behind with Yuriy and 5 of the 14 left wore full body armors like Terman. Another 7 of them and Els were equipped with the light cavalry armor purchased from the Dawn Academy, each armed with a crossbow and five javelins. Lorist picked a scale

armor that only protected his upper torso and tried moving around in it. Satisfied that it wasn't impeding his movement and agility, Lorist got on his horse with 12 javelins within the quiver hanging from side of the saddle.

Renting five transport carriages from the port at a high price of one large silver each, Terman had the coachmen follow them to Charade's camp and promised that they wouldn't be held responsible if they lose the cargo should an attack break out.

With six fully-armored knights as the vanguard and Terman riding at the very front, they set out towards the south and quickly exited the city and proceeded towards the highway that led to the pine forest.

After traveling for a while, they could see a simple roadblock up ahead which was formed by a few trees stacked up together. A few other people could be seen standing around the area and one of them signaled for Lorist's group to stop.

Without a single word, Terman lowered his lance and pointed it towards the front. The other knights behind him soon followed suit with exception of the one in the middle holding the battle standard of the Nortons up high in the air.

All five lances of the knights emitted a blade of light as they charged forward. "Gah! They're all Silver ranked knights!" The road blockers didn't dare to stand in front of them and hastily moved to the side and started running to their grazing mounts as they cursed out loudly.

The first one to crash against the trees blocking the way was Terman. Bang! A loud sound erupted when the trunk was smashed into smithereens, clearing up the path ahead. All five of the carriages and the rest of the group rushed forward without delay.

Pointing at the carriages while swearing in loud voices, some of the enemy got on their mounts and gave pursuit while the others fired at Lorist's group with their bows in a fit of rage. In the midst of all that chaos, a sudden cold, crisp voice could be heard. "Men, ready your javelins! Kill them all!"

Screams of agony rang out on all over the place. Els's group dashed around the battlefield and the ones closer to the enemy fired their crossbows with some further away launching javelins in the enemy's direction, killing ten or so overwhelmed fighters in but an instant. The few archers of the enemy were the first ones to fall, followed by two mounted fighters with their horses nailed to the ground from the

javelins aimed at them. The shrieks of the fallen horses were extremely unpleasant to hear.

Holding his horse by the reins, Lorist picked up a javelin with his left hand, focused on his target and let the javelin fly. In a few moments, 12 of the road blockers died beneath the lightning-bolt-like javelins. Upon seeing Lorist run out of javelins, one Silver Swordsman who was playing dead rushed towards him with a loud cry and jumped high up in the air with both his hands raised as he prepared to unleash a downward slash, aiming to strike Lorist off his mount and escape with it himself.

A blade of light started emanating from the assailant's sword. When the assailant saw Lorist drawing his sword and preparing to parry his own, he didn't give it much heed as Lorist's blade did not have a glow on it. *Hmph! An Iron rank like him wants to block a strike from me, a Three Star Silver rank? He'll die instantly after I break his sword in half and then the horse will be mine.*

Beyond the assailant's expectations, Lorist's sword didn't break and instead, a strong force could be felt passing through his own sword into his hand. His weapon was sent flying far through the air as he helplessly stared at Lorist's agile sword strike slither like a snake through the space between them and going for his throat before everything turned pitch black…

Corpses could be seen scattered all over the road. Of all the people who dared to block their way, more than 30 of them were lying on the ground dead with four or five others frantically escaping whereas Lorist's group of nine were completely unscathed. The result of the battle was really satisfactory to Lorist. He didn't expect to kill 13 people just at the start of the battle, as well as 10-odd of the 20 plus people that followed later. Els and the rest of the group didn't even have to face one person each of the remaining enemies.

One senior student came up to Lorist and saluted him respectfully with an expression full of admiration.

"Check the bodies again and make sure to drive a blade down the ones who are still alive. Collect their belongings, I'll join you guys shortly," instructed Lorist.

The belongings referred to the enemies' mounts, weapons, clothes as well as provisions and other resources. Lorist believed that he was already quite generous for not taking their undergarments. Had Charade been the one to manage this, he'll leave

the bodies stark naked on the ground after stripping them of everything they had.

“Yes, milord,” replied the senior student.

“Els, when we arrive at the camp later, give them the mounts, weapons and armor that you’ve collected. As for the money, you guys can divide it among yourselves. Don’t forget to leave some for Terman,” Lorist told Els.

“Milord, the way loot is divided is already set by Charade. You can’t just decide by yourself to change the regulations like that,” reminded Els.

“Oh, apologies. I’ve forgotten. Then let’s divide it according to the regulations,” said Lorist.

———————————————————————————–

After taking a turn at the road, the flag of the Raging Bear could be seen within the camp. There was another encampment two hundred plus meters away from the aforementioned one, fortified by a rampart made of mud and stone, making it look far more secure and tidier than Charade’s camp that was constructed with simple wooden trunks. *That must be the slavers’ camp.*

When the main gate of the camp was finally open, a cheer erupted when the ones inside saw Lorist. The slavers in the other camp gathered to see what was going on with some of them riding to where they set up their road block, obviously curious at how a small convoy of five carriages managed to make their way to the pine forest.

Getting off his horse, Lorist told Terman, “Secure the area and distribute the spears and the crossbows.”

A senior student from the academy with a bandage on his head hurriedly came over to salute them. Lorist recognized this fellow: he was one of the 12 academy students that set off with Charade’s group.

“Ah, you must be Dulles. How did you get injured? Is it serious?” asked Lorist worriedly.

Dulles replied gratefully, “It’s just some bruises, nothing big. Lord Locke, you’re finally here. Charade is within that tent over there and he has been injured while Knight Potterfang is resting up because he was on patrol last night. I’ve already sent someone

to notify him."

"Alright. Bring me to see Knight Charade," said Lorist.

…

Pushing open the tent entrance, Lorist saw Charade sitting down all wrapped up like a dumpling.

"Hey, fatty. Somehow, you don't look as fat when you're all wrapped up!" joked Els.

Staring at Els, Charade pouted before saying, "I knew that you would come along. It's a shame I didn't make a bet with somebody, otherwise I would've won myself quite a bit of money."

"Sol…" Els was completely speechless.

"How are your injuries? Are they grave?" asked Lorist.

"It's fine, I only got slashed a few times and lost some amount of blood. Lundmorde told me that I'll fully recover within 20 days. Lord, I really didn't expect for us to falter right at the start of our journey," said Charade.

Lundmorde was one of the 12 senior students of the academy that went to Port Nupite with Charade and he was a beginner rank herbalist.

Els sat down by Charade's side and patted on his thigh as that was the only part that wasn't wrapped up in bandages. Els said, "Fatty, who did this to you? Your brother will definitely make him pay."

"The likes of you? Drop that notion. That fellow's a Gold Swordsman! I already got seven wounds from fighting against him for only a while. If you were there, you would've been stained red with your own blood in no time," Charade replied.

"Sol, don't forget that I'm stronger than you. I'll show you how I take care of that guy," said Els, dissatisfied at being looked down upon.

"Alright, cut that. Charade, tell us more about the situation," said Lorist.

Basically, after Charade and Potterfang arrived at Port Nupite, the latter got in touch

with several of his old comrades. One of them was working as a bodyguard for a slave trader and Potterfang managed to easily purchase over 700 young and fit slaves from him without a hitch. It was worth mentioning that all of them had awakened their Battle Force and most of them were of the Iron rank with the rest being Bronze ranks. Many of them used to be troops of the former Krissen Empire or garrison troops from different cities who have been taken captive during the conflict and sold to slave traders. They were mainly held back from escaping due to their captured family members.

Charade said that he managed to get the slaves for a total cost of 16000 gold coins and also spent quite a bit on clothing and food. However, after paying the downpayment for the food he ordered, he noticed that he was only left with around 4000 gold coins and he still needed to pay around 3000 gold coins to settle the whole bill as well as transport the food. That's why he was hesitant to purchase weapons and armor to equip the slaves he had just obtained, since he expected Lorist to bring those over when the time came to meet. It ended up with the Sloph Slavers setting their preying eyes on them due to the slaves not being armed.

The slavers had been paying attention to Charade's group for two whole days after they set up camp and believed that they were another rival slave trading group due to the slaves they bought. That being said, Sloph's group weren't going to let them off that easily and sent someone to notify Charade of their conditions. First, they were to pay 5000 gold coins of toll. Second, they must leave at least half of the slaves they had behind.

Naturally, Charade refused those conditions and explained that they weren't slavers but rather the army of the Norton Family. However, the other party was completely ignorant of the existence of the Nortons and even said that even if the Nortons were nobles, they must also heed their demands.

Originally, Charade would still try to negotiate peacefully with them if that was an option. However, the moment the Norton Family was humiliated like that, Charade instantly killed one of them and beat up the rest before chasing them away. It was after that when Charade noticed that something was wrong as the folks of the town viewed them in hostile light and refused to sell them any weapons, even down to the smallest kitchen knives.

Unable to do anything about the fact, Charade quickly went back to the camp and tasked the soldiers to fortify their it with an ad hoc wall made from tree trunks. With

less than a hundred sets of equipment and more than 3000 people, they almost crumbled under the forces of the slavers. It was fortunate that Potterfang and his two ex-colleagues managed to hold back the enemy's Gold rank fighter. Coupled with the 12 academy students' rampage, they managed to cause the slaving group roughly 30 casualties and forced their forces to retreat.

For the past three days, 17 slaves have already died with 50 more injured and 40 others captured. 7 of the 12 academy students were also wounded from the battle and were currently recuperating from their injuries. The slavers have also changed their tactic and started to besiege Charade's camp and waited for them to run out of food and other resources before finishing them off. Thankfully, Lorist's group arrived just as the provisions were about to run out.

At that point, the tent's flaps were pushed open and Potterfang came in with two other men.

Upon seeing Lorist, Potterfang said, "Milord, you're finally here."

After that, he introduced the two men beside him to Lorist. "Milord, these two are my former comrades in the army. This one here is Lode Wales and he's a Two Star Gold Swordsman and this is Mons Malek and he's at the peak of the Three Star Silver rank. Both of them would like to follow us to the Northlands to check that place out."

What Potterfang meant was simple: these two wanted to find a family to serve, but they didn't understand Lorist's demeanor well enough. That's why they decided to join the journey to see whether Lorist would be a good fit with their principles before deciding whether to join the forces of the Norton Family. Potterfang hoped that Lorist would allow them to tag along.

Standing up and saluting the two, Lorist said, "I thank you two for helping us out. Had it not been for you guys, the camp might have been breached long ago. The Norton Family will definitely not forget this favor. If there's anything the Norton Family can help the two of you with, we will try our best."

The shorter guy, Lode Wales, smiled and said frankly, "My, you're far too polite. It goes without question that we would help our comrade Pog here out when he's in trouble. There's no need to go out of your way to thank us."

Mons Malek wore a serious expression without saying anything and merely nodded.

Just as Lorist was about to continue speaking, Dulles rushed into the tent from the outside with a nervous look on his face. “Lord Locke, the enemy is preparing to attack us again!”

Chapter 52
Slaughter

“Oh, the slavers are here already? Well, I guess it’s a given since we destroyed their roadblock and killed 30 plus of their people. I’ll go check it out,” said Lorist as he turned towards the tent exit.

“Oh? Milord you managed to kill so many of them?” asked Charade. Potterfang and the other two were stunned.

“That’s right. What other fate would they have for daring to obstruct our passage? Milord ordered us to obliterate the roadblock right away,” answered Els proudly as he followed behind Lorist.

“But milord, you’ve just arrived. Shouldn’t you take a short rest?” Potterfang asked. Lorist understood the hidden meaning in Potterfang’s words: Potterfang was suggesting that he not act rashly and analyze the situation at hand first. He didn’t know that Lorist already had a clear grasp of it from asking around at the port and already had already made a decision.

“That’s not needed. It wouldn’t be too late for me to rest up after wiping them out,” Lorist answered. He then instructed, “Dulles, go to the carriage and get me a few quivers’ worth of javelins. Remember to stick close to me later.”

It was much more efficient to eliminate the enemy by throwing javelins infused with internal energy. Even a fully prepared Silver Swordsman couldn’t take it head-on, not to say much of one who is unwary of the threat the javelins posed. During the battle at the roadblock, two riders and their mounts were nailed to the ground by javelins thrown by Lorist.

“Pffft…” Lode Wales who was following Potterfang laughed out loud. He said, “Pog, your lord is quite the bloodthirsty one. He can even say something like wiping all of them out like it’s the easiest thing in the world. Don’t forget that they have three Gold ranks.”

“If Lord Locke says so, he’ll be able to accomplish it,” said Potterfang without turning

back as he headed towards the camp's main entrance.

Arriving at the entrance, Lorist told Terman, "Organize these fellows and get those who are armed and equipped to follow me. Also, prepare the knights for a charge. Els, bring a few mounted soldiers with you and carry more javelins. We'll definitely kill the rowdy bunch of slavers who dared to mess with the Norton Family."

Upon hearing what Lorist had said, the whole group of people around him started cheering out loud while waving their weapons in the air. "Kill them all!"

The entrance of the camp was opened and Lorist rushed out as the vanguard towards the attacking slavers.

The two camps were only 200 meters apart and at that moment, the group of slavers numbered around 240 people. They had just crossed the middle of the battlefield and were shouting something along the lines of avenging their fallen comrades. Seeing the camp's door open and Lorist rushing out, they stopped in their tracks. There was only a distance of tens of meters between the attackers and the camp now.

Seeing the horde of slaves holding spears and crossbows, the attackers' expressions changed.

"Damn! We really shouldn't have stopped attacking a few days before. Now that they are armed, they'll be far more troublesome to dispose of and cause us even more casualties," said a yellow-faced man who was wearing a One Star Gold Battle Force badge.

"There's no point mulling about it now. It's all the fault of the useless ones we sent to block the road. If they were half as competent, they wouldn't have let them transport the weapons back to their camp. Oh well, I'm sure they'll rush back into the safety of their camp once we kill a number of them," said another bulky middle-aged man beside. On his chest was a Two Star Gold Battle Force badge.

"It's not just that! Only 5 of them managed to come back with the rest all dead. The main reason for that was I didn't expect the enemy to have any reinforcements and only intended to stop them from going to the town to purchase food and other provisions. I thought that we could crush them after they run out of resources. What I'm more worried about now is whether we have actually mistaken the forces of the Norton Family for another slaver group. If that's the case, then the aftermath definitely

isn't something to look forward to," said yet another old man who wore a Three Star Gold Battle Force badge in a worrying tone.

"Stop worrying about it, old chum. Didn't the ones who returned tell us that they only had 5 Silver ranked knights and 10 other Silver Swordsmen? They said that the main reason they lost was because they were caught off guard. It's still not too late to hold them off right now. Also, when Master Pike and boss come back in ten days, the enemy will no doubt be crushed. Even if we don't manage to break into their camp, at least we can still hold them here," said the middle-aged man confidently.

Currently, Lorist by himself was already within 20 meters of his enemies. The first thing he said instantly enraged the attacking slavers.

"So, trash like you dare to obstruct the Norton Family's way? Do you have a death wish? You guys had better kneel and expose your necks so that you may enjoy the luxury of a painless death."

The yellow-faced man was the first one to succumb to the provocation. He said, "I don't know how you got the galls to spout bullshit like this. I'm anticipating the look of your face when you beg for mercy the moment I defeat you."

"Since you came over to die on your own accord, I'll grant that wish of yours," said Lorist as he drew his sword and rushed forward.

"Hahahaha…" The middle-aged man standing at the back starting laughing uncontrollably. "Damn, I even though he was some kind of Sword Saint judging by his attitude and the way he spoke! But in actuality, he's just an Iron rank who doesn't even have a blade glow! You gotta respect him for being brave enough to come forward to offer his life. Third brother, make sure you make a good example out of him so that the enemy attackers will think twice before acting."

Even though Lorist didn't wear a Battle Force badge, the absence of the blade glow on his sword gave his rank away. The group of slavers started laughing out loud at the incongruous situation.

The yellow-faced man readied himself and with a gleaming flash of his sword, he sent a light blade projectile towards Lorist's silhouette. But the shadow of Lorist suddenly jerked and the light blade passed his body by a hair's breadth. By that time, his longsword already slammed hard into that of the yellow-faced man, burying it deep

into the ground. The distance between the two closed within an instant.

Badly startled, the yellow-faced man attempted to retreat only to discover that he wasn't able to move from his spot from having his sword stuck in the ground from Lorist's previous strike.

With a loud swish, Lorist's left hand drew a short sword from his waist and traced a path with it across the yellow-faced man's neck. After the blade reemerged from the other side of the neck, the head of the man flew off and landed on the ground with blood spurting all over and the body still standing slumped and unmoving.

All that happened within a time frame so short that the observers only saw the two figures clash once before witnessing the gruesome death of the yellow-faced man.

The Two Star Gold rank standing behind was shocked into a stupor. Before he recovered, he heard Lorist say, "It's your turn next."

Seeing Lorist rush over like an unstoppable storm, the middle-aged man scrambled to draw his sword and infuse it with Battle Force to parry the incoming strike.

Like a raging tempest, the sword in Lorist's hand lashed out in a series of attacks nonstop, with each strike creating a loud, crisp sound of clashing metal.

Clink! The sword of the middle-aged man which was radiating a faint blade glow snapped into two from Lorist's attack. Unable to believe what just had happened, the man stood there unmoving and in but a flash, one of his arms was severed and was sent flying through the air.

"Arrgh!" cried the man in much agony, before Lorist decapitated him and silenced him permanently.

"You…" The Three Star Gold ranked old man standing nearby was retreating nonstop as if he had just seen a wraith. Seeing Lorist turn his attention to him only served to unnerve him even more.

"Old man, now it's your turn to pass on," said Lorist with a smile. In the old man's eyes, the smile looked ever so sinister and terrifying. The contrast between Lorist's low voice and his light-hearted laughter sounded like the cry of a bloodthirsty demonic being. For two Gold ranks to fall under his blade within but a moment was something that old man could never dream of. Given his knowledge of the abilities of the two

other swordsmen, one of whom had a sword style that was even more devious and aggressive than his own, the old man understood that to face Lorist head-on was akin to suicide.

Scared beyond his wits from being targeted by Lorist, that old man backed off until his way was blocked by the people behind him.

As he approached, the old man shouted loudly, “Everyone, let’s attack together! He’s only one person! Turn him into mincemeat…”

After that, the old man disappeared into the crowd.

Even though the slavers at the front witnessed Lorist slaughter the other two Gold ranks, the ones behind were not aware of the situation and started rushing towards him at the sound of the old man’s shout, pushing the ones in front forward as well.

Lorist laughed and said, “Just in time!”

The sword in his hand whooshed as it arced through the fabric of space. Lorist completely abandoned his usual principle of keeping his abilities hidden and engaged in total massacre. After all his friends joined him on the journey despite having to forsake their comfortable lives at Morante City, nobody would have expected for them to be oppressed by the slavers right after their departure. If he still wanted to hide his abilities at this point, there was no doubt that his soldiers would lose their morale and cause many issues to surface in the future.

To foster the confidence of his forces and take action in response of his injured family knights and the other senior students of the academy, Lorist steeled his resolve to not spare any one of these slavers. Thus, the first battle on the journey north broke out.

At that moment, Lorist felt extra energized and focused. From his dynamic vision, the incoming enemies looked like a horde of slow, stunted puppets. With a low grunt, Lorist danced with his sword into the sea of people…

Blades flashed all over with chunks of meat airborne as fountains of blood stained the whole battlefield. Amidst severed heads and limbs as well as broken weapons, Lorist was akin to a tiger that had gotten into the middle of a herd of sheep. Chaos broke out wherever he went: everything could be summarized into a series of agonizing screams, swords clashing and surprised gasps. The enemies started to retreat as quickly as they had rushed over, much like the coming and receding of a wave at the

shore of a beach.

The slavers all backed off from Lorist, leaving him standing alone in the middle of a circular space. Bathed all over with blood, his whole form was dyed dark red with about twenty seven or twenty eight corpses lying on the ground beside him, some of which were headless or had their limbs separated from their body.

The whole battlefield fell into complete silence with everyone looking at Lorist, speechless at the gruesome sight. The slavers were all dumbfounded by that scene while the Norton Family's forces looked upon him with crazed fervor, admiration, and respect.

Wales and Malek both had their mouths agape. Looking at Potterfang, Wales asked, "Is… Is he really an Iron rank like you said…"-

Wiping some blood off his face, Lorist could see the Three Star Gold ranked old man gingerly moving away from him.

"Hehehe…" Lorist started laughing lightly. "Old man, where do you think you're going? You better stay there obediently so that I don't have to waste so much energy on you."

The old man instantly broke into a run…

Lorist quickly followed and slayed those who dared to impede him. The slavers who got out of the way had temporarily survived while some who were still dumbfounded found themselves on the ground the next moment with their necks slit.

The slavers' group quickly collapsed as most of their members tossed their weapons and ran back in the direction of their camp, terrified.

Terman waved his hand and his group of knights leveled their lances and started their charge…

Riding over with ten other senior students of the academy, Els shouted loudly on horseback, "Norton!"

Their other students responded by shouting in unison, "Norton!"

The cheers were echoed by the multitudes of slaves as well. They all shouted the name of Lorist's family spiritedly.

…

That old fellow was rather sharp as he didn't return to the slavers' camp but instead circled around it to escape to the town. He believed that he would be able to blend in like a fish in the sea the moment he reached and escape that horrifying youth.

Huffing and panting, the town was already within sight. The old man stopped and breathed a sigh of relief. But the moment he turned to his back, his soul almost fled his body.

Behind him was that freakish youth who still had blood dripping all over his body. With a face full of smiles, he said, "Go on, keep running. I'd like to see for how much longer you can last."

That old man felt both his legs give out at that moment and he couldn't do anything about it. He even felt the irresistible urge to relax his bladder and let out the contents within.

Kneeling in front of Lorist, the old man said, "I… I surrender…"

"Hey, old man, you think that we're playing pretend war like little kids? Do you think I will spare you just because you said you'll surrender? It doesn't work that way, you know." Lorist felt that the old man's action was pretty laughable.

"I, I'm already pretty old and I've been thinking of quitting for some time now. I only stayed with them because I had no other choice. Also, I didn't even kill one of your men and only managed to wound that fat one lightly in the first battle, which isn't anything he shouldn't be able to recover from…" The old man kept kneeling as he tried to find excuses for himself.

Oh, so Charade was hurt by this old guy.

"Then you're implying that I should be thankful to you for that and let you go?" laughed Lorist.

"I wouldn't dare…" replied the old man while he shook his head.

Sounds of horses galloping could be heard. It was Dulles who came over with two horses and some other javelins.

“Milord, sorry I’m late,” he apologized.

“Hehe, it’s no big deal. These slavers turned out to be quite a piece of cake. They’re all bark but no bite,” replied Lorist. He looked over to that old man and said, “Oldie, no matter the circumstance, you’re still a Three Star Gold rank you know. Shouldn’t you at least draw your sword and die from a glorious death?”

The old man shook his head fervently and he said, “That’s merely suicide, I don’t want to do that at all. I only ask for you to spare my worthless life.”

Alright, this old fellow seems like a pretty laid back fellow. Taking out a javelin from his quiver, Lorist hurled it towards that old man and it landed only inches beside him. The old man’s body twitched as he wet his own pants on the spot.

“Sol, oldie… You actually got so scared you wet yourself… You truly bring shame to Gold Swordsmen…” cursed Lorist.

“I… I’ve always been the cowardly sort… I couldn’t hold it in after seeing milord’s mighty form,” stammered the old man with a face reddened from embarrassment.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind sparing you, but what’s in it for me?” asked Lorist.

“I… I’ll give half of my savings to you, milord. There should be at least 1000 gold Fordes,” said the old man after considering it for quite a while.

Lorist shook his head and said, “It’s not enough. You’re a Gold Swordsman, and it’s not like I lack any money either. I’d rather cut your head off and show it off to the others than take your measly amount of money.”

“I’ll even give you my high-ranked Battle Force manual,” added the old man.

“Hehe, it’s already a given that I’ll get it after I kill you,” said Lorist as he readied another javelin.

“It is not with me right now,” said that old man stubbornly.

“Relax, I’m sure there’s someone who would recognize you. I’ll just have them lead me to your home and take that whole place apart if I have to,” consoled Lorist.

The old man despaired and he finally said after hesitating, “I… I have a granddaughter

and she's really beautiful. She's only 18 and is still a virgin… I'll… I'll let you have her, milord."

"Sol, old man… You're too shameless you know. For you to offer your own granddaughter to others for your own life is the worst thing you can do as someone's elder!" shouted Lorist angrily.

"That's not the case. My granddaughter can only survive if I am alive. The only reason she's not being oppressed is because people take into account that I am her grandfather. If I die, she'll be helpless on her own and might even suffer a fate worse than death. That's why at the very least I have to survive to ensure her safety and well-being," declared the old man forthrightly.

"Oh, you do have a good point. However, that still doesn't cut it. I can easily get your daughter the same way I get your other belongings after I kill you," said Lorist.

"Milord, I beg you… What can I do to make you spare me?" The old man couldn't help but break into tears.

"Dulles, what do you say?" asked Lorist as he made a hand sign to him.

Dulles got the message and started playing along. "Milord, that old man is so pitiful, and it's not like he actively acted against us and killed any of our comrades. Why don't you let him live?"

"That won't do. Those who dare go against the Norton Family must be punished without exception," said Lorist as his killing intent filled the surroundings.

"Then, how about this? Milord, why don't you take him in as a slave? Let him serve you for 10 years and if he does well, he'll be able to regain his freedom by then," suggested Dulles.

"But do you think he'll be willing?" Lorist pretended to be interested and shook his head. "I think killing him will be easier though, otherwise I'll be worried that he'll act against me one day."

At that moment, the old man started kowtowing and said, "Of course I'm willing! I'll definitely serve milord to the best of my ability and be loyal at all times!"

"Alright, then I'll you live. Dulles, tie him up and make him sign a slave contract once

we get back to the camp. After that, take his gold coins, Battle Force manual as well as all his family members along. Don't forget that pretty granddaughter of his," said Lorist.

"Yes, milord."

Chapter 53
Occupying the Bastide

Seeing Lorist and the other two return to the battlefield, Els rode over to greet his lord.

“Milord, the battle was a huge success. We even managed to conquer their main camp,” said Els excitedly with a face reddened with excitement as he shouted towards Lorist’s group of three.

Lorist asked, “What are you doing? Walking the horses?”

“Nope, Knight Potterfang had me scour the area for any slavers that might have escaped,” Els answered.

“Did you just say that we conquered their camp?”

“That’s right. Locke, when you unleashed the beast within and started slaughtering nonstop among their ranks, the slavers’ forces broke formation and rushed back towards their main camp. We have successfully taken advantage of that and occupied their base in one fell swoop. Just now, Charade had someone carry him to the enemy base so that he can help manage the loot and asked me to call you over.” Even though Els was a Norton Family knight, he was pretty casual when he talked to Lorist and frequently forgot the formal nature of their relationship and behaved as he would when they went on mercenary missions.

But Lorist didn’t mind it as it made him feel less awkward around him. He asked, “How are our casualties?”

“Casualties? There were none, other than two slave soldiers who accidentally tripped and fell during the charge and sprained their ankles and got some bruises here and there. The two of them instantly became the laughing stock of the whole camp. As for the slavers, at least half of them perished and the rest were all apprehended by our forces. Oh, and you better head there quick. There are still another 2000 plus captured slaves waiting to be handled based on your decision,” Els said.

“There’s no rush,” said Lorist. He turned to the old man behind him and asked, “Hey,

old man, where did you guys get the slaves in your camp from?"

The old man looked rather pathetic as he was tied up all over with a long rope with its end held in Dulles's hand. A quiver with five javelins was also hung on his back because Lorist was worried that the horse would tire out quickly from the load. Lorist said that even though the captured fighter looked aged, he was nevertheless a Three Star Gold rank and had incredible physical endurance. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to run all the way to the town in one breath. Having just escaped the fate of certain death, the old man could only accept his treatment without a single complaint.

The old man replied, "Master, these slaves had all been purchased or captured from the Redlis Kingdom during the past half year. I heard that some of my colleagues had razed several villages and killed all the elderly while enslaving the young and able."

Life in troubled times truly is akin to that of a dog's. As a common peasant, not only did they have to labor tirelessly to pay the unreasonable taxes levied by their lords, they also had to survive invasions from enemies, especially slave traders. The common folk could be carrying out their daily routine like any other day only to end up as slaves with their family members killed overnight from slaver attacks.

Lorist said disdainfully, "Old man, as a Three Star Gold Swordsman, why are you hanging around these scum that are no better than foul beasts?"

The old man said, "Master, I did not have a choice in that matter. Six years ago when I was on the way to Morante City with my granddaughter, she fell ill when we were resting at Armatrin Harbor and I didn't have enough money to give her the appropriate treatment. She only managed to survive because I relied on the slaver group. During these six years, I have never harmed a single slave and even helped quite a number of people…"

The old man was originally a garrison captain of a small city back in the days of the Krissen Empire and lived quite a decent life. However, when the three princes started the struggle for power, the first wave of battles engulfed his hometown. WIth his son and daughter-in-law both dead, his own wife soon passed away from extreme depression. Worried about his daughter's livelihood, the old man deserted the army and brought his 12-year-old grandchild to Morante City, only to be forced to stop at Armatrin Harbor due to severe seasickness. When he found that he had no way to overcome that hurdle, he met the leader of the slaver group, Sloph and joined their group to ensure her daughter's health and safety and has remained within it ever

since.

The old man said that the leader of the group knew that he didn't like to do dirty work, so he was tasked to stand guard and protect their army camp instead. He explained that he managed to stop some others from needlessly hurting the slaves during his years of service there.

"But in the end they were still sold off, right?" said Els in a dissatisfied tone. "Old man, since you are of the opinion that slavery is an unethical business, why didn't you leave right after your granddaughter recovered? For you to have stayed there for 6 whole years… They say birds of the same feather flock together. Since you stuck with them for so long, don't pretend to be a good person."

"Do you think they'll let me leave just because I want to?" said the old man bitterly. "When my granddaughter recovered, they moved us to the Sloph Bastide right away and we have stayed there ever since. That is Sloph's main base of operations and the security there is nothing to laugh at. It would still be fine for me to escape alone, but there was no way I would be able to pull that off with my granddaughter. Aside from that, Sloph himself is also a Gold ranked fighter with his cousin brother Pike being a Blademaster. At that time, I could only accept my fate."

Lorist's expression was a little heavy as he said, "Old man, tell me about Sloph and his bastide as well as that Blademaster cousin of his. I'll need as many details as I can get."

Having spent six years with the slavers, the old man was quite informed about their situation. He said that in the early days, Sloph used to be a mercenary who somehow got to know a slave merchant at Port Nupite and started catching slaves for him. The internal conflict within the empire was a golden opportunity that he exploited and over the years, his band of slavers had expanded quite a lot with over 300 men in present day. Even the local lord couldn't do anything about Sloph.

When Sloph started profiting quite a bit from the slave trade, he commissioned for a bastide to be constructed over a large plot of land and made it his home base. Within it lived the family members of the slavers as well as 800 other slaves who worked at the vineyard within the bastide. The wine produced by Sloph had started gaining quite a reputation in recent years.

There were two main factors that contributed to the bastide's strong defense: terrain and manpower. However, just last month, Sloph intended to get a noble title and

establish himself as a landed noble and brought a couple of people to the capital for that purpose before proceeding to Port Nupite to handle some other business dealings and would only return after around 10 days. Now that most of the slavers were at the camp in the pine forest, the bastide's defense was currently at its weakest with only 10-odd Silver Swordsmen and 50-odd Iron ranked constables who were put in charge of patrolling the town and keeping the slaves in check.

Even though Sloph was a Two Star Gold Swordsman, his recent successes had caused him to gain quite a bit of weight and his combat ability to even deteriorate. Right now, his main backing was that Blademaster cousin of his.

"Have you sparred against Blademaster Pike before?" asked Lorist.

Nodding his head, the old man answered, "Yes, I have. It was almost half a year ago during a banquet held in celebration of the harvest festival. I was picked to be his sparring partner and fought for about 10 bouts and dropped my sword and surrendered when I saw his displeased expression. I estimate that I can continue on for a hundred more moves and might even stand a chance to win."

Nodding, Lorist already had an idea about the Blademaster's skills.

"Oh, that's right. I forgot to ask for your name," said Lorist.

"Milord, I am called Engelich," replied the old man.

…

After arriving at the main camp, Lorist saw that the the main entrance was open. As he was about to bring his horse to the stable, he saw Charade sitting on a cushion in the middle of the camp plaza, enraged. It turned out that Charade was angry because the scribe he tasked to write down the things he said because his hand was injured had terrible handwriting and kept getting the words wrong. The senior student who was helping him out also had a rather bad temper; after being scolded, he threw the pen and beastskin down and said that his hand was meant to wield a sword, not to write and that Charade should be grateful that he bothered to help out in the first place. After that, that man left and Charade started blowing up again.

Trying hard to suppress his laughter, Lorist picked up the stuff on the ground and handed it to Dulles. "Dulles, go to the slave camp and pick a few of them who can write well and let them serve Charade. Els, bring Knight Potterfang and Knight Terman over,

I have something to discuss."

Without delay, Terman, Potterfang and his two comrades came over hastily.

After briefing the knights on the situation of Sloph, Lorist suggested that they attack the bastide right now as it is at its most unguarded state and handle Sloph and his cousin Blademaster Pike when they returned ten days later.

Lorist planned to have Engelich, who had just surrendered to him, trick the guards of the bastide to open the gates before having Terman bring his troops to quickly wipe out any resistance that sparks. Finally, he would have Dulles lead the slave soldiers to clear out the bastide while Els would lead another group of slave soldiers who could ride to seal off the entire bastide to avoid letting anyone from within to escape. When the trouble settles, the group would then abandon the camp in the pine forest and move over to the bastide entirely.

And while they attack the bastide, Potterfang was to stand guard at the camp and make sure nothing out of the ordinary happens.

Everyone agreed to Lorist's plans except for Potterfang who was worried Lorist would run into trouble by bringing the Three Star Gold ranked old man alone with him to trick the enemy to open their gates. However, Wales said, "Why don't I accompany Mister Norton here on that trip? I've been feeling quite bored and don't have anything better to do anyway."

Potterfang was extremely pleased that Lode Wales had offered himself to help and thanked him while patting his shoulder. Lorist politely saluted him and expressed his gratitude as well. "Mister Lode, I shall be troubling you to help me out. I'm really grateful for your assistance."

Wales quickly returned the greeting. "Mister Norton, you're being too polite. If you don't mind, you can call me Loze just like Pog does."

Lorist laughed out loud and stretched his hand out for a handshake. "Alright, Loze. You can refer to me as Locke too. That's what my friends call me."

…

After taking a bath and changing out of his bloodstained garments, as well as letting Engelich wash up and change his urine-stained pants, he got the rest to complete the

preparations and rode off to Sloph's bastide with Loze and Engelich.

The bastide was approximately 7000 meters from the slaver camp. Several buildings could be seen on the hills west to the main highway near the town. Lorist and Loze chatted and laughed along the way to their destination.

In actuality, Loze was quite a candid and proud youth. He said that his father used to be a mercenary and had left him a high-ranked Battle Force manual, hoping that he would one day become a legendary mercenary. However, due to having been exposed to stories of knighthood and chivalry at a young age, Loze enlisted for the army without letting his father know. His dream was to become a knight instead of a mercenary and that enraged his father to the point where he almost got a stroke.

In the Whitelion Legion, Loze was known as a fearless and unparalleled general. However, the legion was disbanded after the civil war tore the empire apart. Loze returned home only to find his family and friends all gone. Suddenly losing everything he cared about, he no longer had any attachments and formed a group with a few other of his comrades to go venture the world. On one fateful trip, he rescued a slave trader from a bandit attack and got hired as a bodyguard and followed him all the way to Port Nupite. It was then when he bumped into Potterfang who was there to purchase some slaves to form the main force of the Norton Family on the journey to the Northlands. Intrigued by the prospect of adventure, Loze brought another friend who was unwilling to continue working as a bodyguard for a slaver, Mons Malek, along to see Potterfang.

The conquest of the bastide went without a hitch with Loze not even having to fight himself. Any sign of resistance was settled swiftly by Lorist using his javelins. Upon reaching the gates, the guards who were on duty dropped their guard entirely after seeing Engelich and lowered the drawbridge for them to enter. After Lorist slit the guards with his sword, the other Silver ranked guards all rushed over to swarm Lorist's group, thinking that they had an edge because of the disparity in numbers.

At that moment, Lorist took a javelin out of his quiver and with lightning speed, flung it out one after another, unleashing a rain of javelins unto the enemy forces. Of the ten Silver ranks that rushed over, easily half of them fell from the first volley with the rest preparing to cut down the javelins with their swords, only to be met with following waves of incessant javelin fire and ultimately experiencing gruesome deaths from being pierced straight through. After Lorist expended three quivers' worth of javelins, not one enemy remained standing.

Having witnessed that terrifying scene, Engelich started shivering and felt extremely fortunate that he recognized the might of that man and surrendered quickly, thus having his life spared in the end. Loze on the other hand was admirably praising Lorist's skill.

Terman subsequently brought the rest of his troops into the bastide and successfully occupied it, followed by him cooperating with Dulles to clear out the whole bastide of enemy troops. Even though the Iron ranked slave supervisors attempted to retaliate, under the assault of Terman and the senior academy students, they gave up entirely after ten or so of their own died with not even one of Terman's men injured in the slightest. Dulles commented that the supervisors were digging their own graves for being crazy enough to take on a fully-armed group of Silver Swordsmen with only a few whips and shortswords.

Lorist then instructed Terman to bring a group of people to go back to the camp and inform Charade and Potterfang to move over to the bastide and have some carriages go to the port to transport their other resources and equipment.

After that, he told Dulles to gather the slaves in the bastide together before detaining the other family members of the slavers and kill anyone who dares to resist. He also instructed Els to increase the level of security at the bastide. The tasks he had to do just kept piling up.

Wistful cries at the residential area of the bastide could be heard as the fierce, imposing slave soldiers marched inside and gathered the residents per Lorist's orders. Some sounds of battle and conflict rang out as well.

However, the resistance was short-lived and was soon quelled, resulting in a few lavishly-dressed corpses littered around the pavements and yards of the houses. It could be seen from the state of the corpses that the pent up rage and hate harbored by the slaves was no small matter.

During all that, Lorist followed Engelich to his granddaughter's residence. Along the way, the patrolling slave soldiers all greeted him respectfully and the families of the slavers looked at him with hateful glances.

Lorist was relieved that the slave soldiers didn't break any regulations, and only killed the ones who resisted without harassing the women nor taking the slavers' belongings as they pleased. Though, perhaps that was because the knew that they would have to

hand in the loot anyway and would end up being punished for any attempt at embezzlement. After forcing the family members out of their houses, they patiently awaited their next order.

Engelich's granddaughter was quite the beauty, being quite fair-skinned and having a quiet air about her. She stood in front of the yard with a slight look of terror on her face beside a 16-year-old handmaiden. After seeing her grandfather, she leaped forward and hugged him tightly, unwilling to let go.

Nodding towards a saluting slave soldier nearby, Lorist checked out Engelich's granddaughter before saying, "Let's talk when we're inside."

Even though the hut was small, it was quite well-kept. Lorist saw a half-written beastskin on the table and picked it up to take a look. The words on the beastskin were organized and neat except for the last one, which ended in a very long stroke. It was apparent that she was in the middle of writing the document when the slave soldiers attacked.

"Are you copying a book?" asked Lorist. The girly shyly nodded.

"Your words are pretty neat," praised Lorist.

"Engelich, it's time you handed over your goods," Lorist continued.

The old man's expression turned downcast as he entered a small room and took out a small box with a beastskin book. Upon opening the box, a pile of glimmering gold coins could be seen.

"This… This contains all my savings over the years. There are 1437 gold Fordes within," said the old man with a pained heart.

Taking out one gold coin, Lorist said, "Old man, do you know how much blood and tears have been spilled for these gold coins? These coins are unclean and tainted. If you spend them, you will one day face the consequences. If you don't get punished, eventually, your descendants will. I think it would be better for both of us if I take it away and resolve that problem for you."

He then took out a pouch from his pocket and tossed it to the old man. "Within that is 10-odd gold coins which are clean and rightfully earned and isn't the product of anyone's suffering. You can spend them with a good conscience, knowing that nobody

has been harmed for those gold coins. I'll be giving them to you."

"As for this water attribute Battle Force manual…" Lorist flipped through the manual and tossed it to the young girl beside. "Have your granddaughter make me a copy and keep the original for yourself. During these two days, you are to stay here with your granddaughter and her handmaiden while I think about how I should handle you. If you need anything, just tell the patrolling soldiers outside, understood?"

The old man quickly saluted and said, "Thank you, milord. I will await your further instruction."

Lorist then took the box full of gold coins and left the hut.

Chapter 54
Reorganization and Maidservants

At the central plaza of the Sloph Bastide was a sea of people. It was the third day since Lorist's group occupied the bastide.

In the middle of the plaza stood around 700 spear-wielding slave soldiers with their family members all gathered up beside them in the square, along with another thousand plus slaves who worked in the bastide's vineyard.

Appearing before all of them on the balcony of a building that faced the center of the plaza was Lorist who could be seen holding an iron bullhorn in his hand. On the second day the bastide was conquered, his armed forces have moved over entirely to the bastide from the camp in the pine forest. WIth the miscellaneous matters out of the way, what followed was the force's reorganization. Lorist intended to give a speech to the slaves present and inspire hope and dreams within them as well as confidence for them to join him on the journey to the Northlands.

Putting the bullhorn to his mouth, he said, "I'd like to introduce myself. I am Baron Norton, the head of the family of the Roaring Raging Bear of the Northlands." Lorist introduced himself while shamelessly adding that he was the head of the Nortons even though the official ceremony of succession hasn't been carried out.

"I believe that many of you here understand back then that my knights have paid quite a heavy price to liberate the likes of you from the grasps of the slave traders at Port Nupite along with your family members to join us on the journey to the Northlands and promised your freedom when we reach there. However, what I didn't expect was for us to run into the assault of these asinine slavers who wished to deprive you of your birthright and treat you people like nothing more than products and property whose sole purpose is to make them profit.

"Before I could send reinforcements to your side, you have managed to fend of the attack of the slavers despite being not properly equipped and managed to keep the camp secure before my arrival. After that, you have also successfully swarmed the camp of the slavers and even occupied this bastide, which is their main base. During the whole process, you all have managed to fulfill your responsibilities and obey the

regulations that we have set up and completed the tasks we have assigned you. Your performance has truly won my heartfelt respect, as well as earned yourselves the freedom you deserve.

“As the head of the Norton Family, I, Baron Norton, hereby declare that from today onwards, you are no longer slaves and are instead proud and noble soldiers of the Norton Family…”

“Yeaaahh!…” All the slave soldiers at the plaza gave a loud cheer that shook the eardrums of everyone present.

Lorist waited for a while and gestured for the crowd to quiet down. “By the time we reach the Northlands, your families will be treated as free citizens and will be eligible to enjoy benefits that are entailed to family members of the Norton Family Armed Forces. You will also be assigned houses and farmland and will be able to lead the rest of your lives in peace…”

At that moment, the family members of the slave soldiers cheered loudly together as well.

“During this resistance against the slavers, 17 of our heroic soldiers has sacrificed their lives for our victory with four others injured and handicapped as a result. However, the Norton Family will not forget the contribution and loyalty of our soldiers. The family members of the fallen soldiers will still be entitled to the treatment of that of families with members in our army and will also receive 1 large silver every month as a pension for up to twenty years. This applies to disabled soldiers as well, but they will be able to continue receiving the pension for the rest of their lives. This policy of mine will definitely not change.”

The soldiers of the family were all moved by the speech with some of the family members of the fallen soldiers breaking out in tears. It was apparent that they were quite worried about being abandoned by the lord as they would effectively be a burden on the convoy. For normal foot soldiers who lived their lives walking on tightropes, their biggest worry was the fates of their family members after their deaths on the battlefield. If they served under a generous lord, their family might receive a few silver coins as reimbursement for their loss. But for selfish lords who didn’t care about the welfare of their families, not only would they blame the loss of the battles on their own soldiers, they might even sell the family members of the fallen soldiers to slave traders for a small profit.

The promises that Lorist had made were completely unprecedented in the history of the Grindia Continent. It was common knowledge that as the number of fallen soldiers reach the tens of thousands, the pension fee would add up to a rather large sum which would become an unbearable burden on the ruler. In the midst of a war-torn age, there was no lord who dared to make promises like that to their soldiers.

In actuality, Lorist had gotten into quite a big argument with Charade over the issue. Even Potterfang was against Lorist's decision, citing his experience in the Whitelion Legion that the family members of the fallen soldiers were only paid a year's worth of the soldier's salary in a lump sum and not throughout the span of twenty years like Lorist had decided.

Lorist then brought up the battle with the slavers. By the time he had killed more than 30 people alone, which was not even half of the number of people the enemy had, the slavers crumbled and retreated right away. After Terman and Els's assault, they killed another half of their forces but didn't sustain any casualties at all, apart from the two jokers which had hurt themselves from tripping.

Lorist told Charade and Potterfang back then that he wanted to foster the kind of army that was willing to fight until their last breath and wouldn't give up even during the gravest of circumstances, to the point that they would gladly sacrifice their own lives just to give their own forces the slightest age in battle, unlike the slavers they had fought who turned and ran the moment the battle was to their disadvantage. Only an army like that could become a force to be reckoned with and deter any other powers from preying on the Norton Family and make them think twice whether it would actually cause them more loss than gain should they decide to provoke the Nortons.

And to build that army, Lorist said that the first thing that should be handled was the alleviation of the soldiers' worries and attachments so that they would not hesitate to perish for the sake of their families, which was what the whole point of the pension plan he had in mind was centered around. He also told Charade and Potterfang that the pension fund wouldn't be that big a burden that they had thought: twenty years worth of pensions for a fallen soldier would only amount to 240 large silvers, which was equal to 12 gold Fordes in total.

Even though 12 gold Fordes might not seem like a huge amount to a soldier on the battlefield, it would be able to provide their families with 20 years of security and comfortable living. Additionally, the pension was to be handed out gradually and not all that once. It was akin to the Norton Family borrowing 12 gold Fordes and paying

an interest of only one large silver a month and the money could be used to develop many things in the dominion. A large silver of interest per fallen soldier was actually a relatively small amount.

It was at that moment when Charade and Potterfang realized the real benefits of the plan and felt that they didn't think as far as Lorist had. Lorist also mentioned that this was only the first step, and that there were still many things to be managed within the family's armed forces such as educating the soldiers to obey orders and regulations, as well as developing their sense of pride and belonging to the armed forces of the Norton Family. However, that wasn't something that could be done in a short amount of time and had to be gradually nurtured and polished from long periods of training and participation in battles.

As the cheers from the people at the plaza started to quiet down, Lorist once again raised his bullhorn and said, "Soldiers of the family, the Northlands are still far away and the journey will no doubt be arduous. Before we resume our march, you will have to undergo reorganization and further training. I will provide you with helmets to protect yourselves and sharp weapons for you to cut down anyone who dares to bar our way. Whether they're bandits or greedy lords who dare to set their sights on us, they will no doubt end up as ash and dust beneath the wheels of our chariots! Nobody can stop us from going home! I promise that I will not abandon any single one of you in the name of the Raging Bear! We will definitely return to the Northlands and live the rest of our lives in bliss!"

The crowd in the plaza instantly erupted and began chanting, "Norton! Norton!…"

Once again raising the horn to his mouth, Lorist addressed the slaves who had been liberated from the bastide and the enemy camp. "There are no slaves in the Norton Family, and the family will also never deal with slaves. Hence, I am declaring the slaves who were liberated by us from the camp and the bastide free men and women!"

Once again the people at the crowd broke into loud cheers.

"However, even though you've regained your freedom, you will not be allowed to leave just yet and will temporarily have to remain in this bastide until the day we depart for the Northlands. At that point, we would also provide the ones who wish to leave with funds for transport and food. If you have nowhere else to return to, we also welcome you to join our army and let your families enjoy the benefits of being one of our soldiers. For those who do not wish to stay, you shall be assigned work and be paid for

your efforts before we depart."

He then placed the bullhorn down and waved to the crowd, triggering loud applauses and cheers once again before he turned and left the balcony.

"Giving a speech in front of so many people is still a first for me. I was nervous as heck," Lorist muttered, before receiving the linen cloth Shadekampf passed over and wiped his face with it.

The lounge on the second floor of the building was currently fully-seated with Charade leaning on a soft couch and Terman and Yuriy seated beside him. Opposite to them sat Potterfang and his two comrades with the rest of the people in the room being the 38 senior students from the Dawn Academy, some of whom were still wearing bandages from the injuries they had sustained.

Els and Patt were absent from the meeting as they were tasked with patrolling the area while Reidy brought Alisa to the park in the bastide for a walk. Howard on the other hand, stood beside Lorist as his personal attendant with a solemn look on his face.

Aside from them, Engelich could be seen leaning on a wall at a corner of the room with his beautiful granddaughter beside him, patiently waiting to hear what Lorist had in mind for them.

Lorist sat down on his seat and Shadekampf stood at his place beside Howard.

"So, we'll be executing it according to what we've discussed for the past two days," said Lorist. "Knight Pog, I will assign the task of reorganizing a 500-strong heavy-armored battalion to you."

Potterfang stood up and saluted before he said, "I will not let milord down."

"Yuriy, the reorganization of the 60 men light cavalry must be hastened and not taken lightly as that unit will serve as the eyes and ears for our army."

"Yes, milord. Please be assured," replied Yuriy as he got up.

"Terman, your knight brigade is a little too small with only 14 men in it. How about this, let every one of your knights pick two attendants who will be granted the rank of a squire when their Battle Force reaches the Silver rank. Should they earn an

achievement, they will also be allowed to join the ranks of the family knights."

Of the 38 senior students from the academy, only 13 others and Terman have formally received training to be a knight. As knights served as the main assault force on the battlefield, Lorist decided to add a couple more to their ranks even if they weren't properly trained ones so that the brigade would seem more domineering and threatening on the battlefield.

"Understood," replied Terman.

"Dulles, I'll leave the 12 carroballistas to you. Assemble some people to operate them as soon as possible."

"Yes, milord," saluted Dulles.

"Lundmorde, how's the formation of your herbalist unit going?" asked Lorist.

"Milord, I have found a beginner rank herbalist as well as two herbalist apprentices from the slave camp. Unfortunately, those three were the only ones who had remotely any knowledge in the field. I've already recruited them into the unit. However, there seems to be a man and his daughter in the bastide who are respectively mid-ranked and beginner rank herbalists who were employed by Sloph and are currently in detention. Milord, how about it?" said Lundmorde, standing. He was one of the senior students at the academy who had the qualifications of a beginner rank herbalist, but had somehow gotten into an argument with a herbalism professor in the academy, Nate Borg, and had his own status as a herbalism instructor revoked. He was then convinced by Charade and joined the northbound journey in the heat of the moment.

"Hmm, go ask the slaves and see if the father and daughter have committed any atrocities towards them like their masters. If that is not the case, then release them and return their belongings before asking them if they want to join us. Should they be reluctant to do so, do not force them and let them leave as they please,"said Lorist.

"Yes, milord. I will do as you will."

Sigh, we're still quite lacking in capable people, thought Lorist as he started to set his sights on Potterfang's two other comrades.

"Mister Mons and Loze, can I ask the two of you for a favor?" asked Lorist politely.

Loze gave a carefree smile and said, “Lord Locke, please do not hesitate to state your request. We’ll be honored to be able to help you out.”

Mons Malek also nodded in agreement.

“Well, the thing is, I want to form another 360-strong company of crossbowmen with another pike infantry regiment. Can I temporarily invite the two of you welcome guests of the family to serve as the officers in charge of these two units? I believe you also know that many of my mates from the academy have no experience in the army and wouldn’t be too appropriate for the role of an officer at the moment. Given that the two of you are experienced military officers, would you mind lending me a hand in this matter?” asked Lorist.

“No problem. How about you, Malek?” Loze answered quickly without hesitation and looked at his partner for his response.

Mons Malek merely nodded.

“How about this, since Malek was originally the military judge of the Whitelion Legion, let him take charge of the crossbowman company. I’ll lead the pike infantry regiment since getting up close and personal with the enemy is more of my thing,” said Loze.

“Then I’ll be relying on you two from now on,” said Lorist with much joy.

“Currently, we only have about 700 official members in the family’s armed forces. But we have liberated over 3000 slaves just recently and most of them are strong youths whose families have been either killed or captured by the slavers. That’s why I hope that you guys will do your best to encourage them to join our army. But make sure you do not force them to join unwillingly, alright?”

“Yes, milord,” replied everyone in the hall.

“Knight Charade’s task will be the heaviest of all of you. He’s the chief supervisor of our convoy and all matters large and small must be handled by him. I have also appointed Shadekampf to be his aide. Other than that, I will also have Knight Els recruit some people to form a constable unit that will be in charge of maintaining the order of the people of the convoy,” said Lorist. He then looked towards Engelich who was leaning on the wall and his granddaughter before waving for them to come over.

“You guys are really lucky,” said Lorist as he looked at the pair intriguingly. “I have just

made an oath publicly that the Norton Family will not have slaves, so you two are still free people. However, the fact that Engelich had participated in the fight against our forces still stands true. Even though I've spared your life, you must still pay for the consequences of your actions. I have here two contracts for you and your granddaughter to sign. Don't worry, they're not slave contracts but servant contracts instead. After ten years of service, the two of you are free to leave the Norton Family."

Shadekampf came over from the side holding two beastskin parchments and a pen and handed the items to Engelich and his granddaughter.

Staring at the contract with his face twitching for quite a while, Engelich gave a large sigh before signing his name and putting his fingerprint on the contract. His granddaughter followed suit with a pale look on her face.

"So, you're called Molise?" Lorist asked as he looked toward that pale-faced girl.

"Yes, milord," replied the girl in slight fear.

"Your handwriting is really neat and the Battle Force manual I had you copy for me was nicely done without any errors. Don't worry, I won't be letting you do menial chores like serving drinks and the such. Do you see that fatty over there? He was hurt by your grandfather and is unable to write due to his injuries. That's why from today onwards, you will be his personal maidservant and act as his right hand. Not only would you have to look after him and attend to any of his needs, you'll also have to write down whatever he needs you to. Your role is to basically be his assistant and secretary, understood?" said Lorist as he pointed at Charade.

The girl bowed and said, "Yes, milord. I will do as you wish and serve as his maidservant and secretary."

Charade had a stunned look on his face. "Milord, milord… Locke, stop kidding around. I don't need any maidservants. Why don't you keep her by your side?"

Charade was so flustered to the point he called Lorist by his nickname.

Lorist responded with a straight face, "This is my decision and it is final. It's not like I need a scribe following me around anyway. I'm sure you'll appreciate the extra help as you'll get pretty busy soon enough. Also, your tent is as messy and dirty as a pig's sty! You'll definitely need to have someone help you keep the place orderly. Also, you can also use the other slaves who helped you out with the writing to carry out your

errands and help you out with the matters of the convoy.

“Oh, and Molise here also has a maidservant herself. According to what I’ve heard, her parents were both killed by slavers and Molise was the one who purchased her from the slavers. Right now, she has regained her freedom. Charade, you may also get her to sign the servant contract and have her serve you together with Molise. Engelich, please stay by Knight Charade’s side for now and obey his instructions.”

“Understood, milord. Your will is my command,” said Engelich as he breathed a relieved sigh. He was satisfied as long as he would be able to be by his granddaughter’s side.

…

Everyone had left after the meeting, including Howard who had gone to look for Alisa. Rubbing his temples gently, Lorist thought, *gosh, it’s so tiring being the head of the family… I need to manage almost everything. Thank goodness I have Charade helping me out. Otherwise, I’ll definitely go crazy from doing every little thing by myself.*

“Hey, Locke, I heard that you gave a beautiful young lass to that fatty.” The only one who dared to speak like that to Lorist was no other than Els.

“Ah, you’ve come,” said Lorist as he raised his head to see Els rapidly approaching.

“Just now, I heard Yuriy and the gang talk about how jealous they were of Charade when I passed by.”

“Surely they can search for their own maidservant, right? I heard from Shadekampf that we have liberated more than ten beautiful virgin girls from the slaver camp who were originally going to be sold for high prices at Port Nupite. Shadekampf even tried to get a few of them to be my personal maidservants but I’ve rejected that offer. Later, you can tell Yuriy and the others that they are allowed to let any of the girls sign a servant contract, but only if they do so willingly,” said Lorist.

“Huh? Something’s not right. Locke, are you not feeling well or something?” asked Els curiously.

“Hmm? What about me?” Lorist was also confused as to why Els asked something like that.

“Let’s see, there was that one time you did it with Louise on your birthday, and then there were five times with Nina over the years, four times with Sala, three or four times with Jumile and finally, we have the new girl Molly, whom you did it with the most, somewhere around seven times. You’ve basically bedded almost every girl in the inn. It’s not like you’re impotent or against having intercourse with women. But this time, not only did you give such a great beauty to Charade, you also refused to take in the pretty, young girls as your servants. Is something wrong your junk?” said Els as he looked at his hands and recounted the times Lorist engaged in coitus.

“Good Sol…” Lorist really didn’t know what to say and freaked out by grabbing hold of Els and gave him a good pummeling. “I’m a man who has needs too you know. At that time, I’ve just broken up with my girlfriend, so where else do you think I could have gone for some intimacy? The brothel you’ve opened? Who asked you to peep, huh? Who gave you the permission?”

Needless to say, the fact that Els was so informed about the matter was because he was observing every one of Lorist’s encounters in secret. Even Lorist himself wasn’t that clear about the number of times he had intercourse with a woman.

Lorist felt much better after giving Els a good beating. Sitting back on his chair, he said, “Sigh, Els, you should understand best… We haven’t even started heading north, but we’ve already run into our first obstacle. Who knows how much tougher it will be on us during the rest of the journey? What do you think others will think of me if I lust after women at this point in time? Wouldn’t they be disappointed and leave me in disgust? You’ve also been the leader of a syndicate yourself. Surely you understand how the people who follow you think. If I’m really that desperate for women, I wouldn’t be leading this convoy in the first place.”

Els stood up again and nodded. “You do have a point. But still, a girl that pretty is really a shame to not have by your side.”

Even though he pummeled Els in the face, Lorist didn’t use too much force and Els got up looking fine without showing any sign of pain nor injury. Then again, it wasn’t the first time Lorist hit him like this.

“That’s hardly anything to feel unfortunate about. Beauties are all over the place. During this journey north, I must also make sure the senior students that followed me get some benefits as well. It is my hope that they find their soulmate during the journey so that they may settle down in the dominion when we finally arrive there.

Also, Els… You've reminded me of something. Didn't we also detain the concubines of Sloph and Blademaster Pike? You should go get Loze and Mons Malek and let them pick one girl each to be their maidservant. Let the rest of the senior students choose from the remaining ones after that. Actually, you can pick one yourself too," said Lorist.

"Understood, milord," Els answered as he bowed and saluted.

Chapter 55
Ambush and the Yields

"Milord, I really don't have the guts for this… The moment I stand in front of you, I lose all my will and energy to swing my sword. I don't usually feel this frightened even when facing a Blademaster like Pike. However, the moment I see you, I have the urge of dropping my sword and surrendering right away. I… I really don't know why I feel like this as well…" stammered Engelich.

Sol, this old man has had his balls burst from fighting against me that one time and wouldn't spar with me at all... Lorist lazily waved his hand and said, "Fine, you can leave."

The old man felt like he had been spared a death sentence and left hurriedly after saluting Lorist.

Currently, the most important thing on the list was handling Sloph and Blademaster Pike when they return ten days later. Lorist was confident that he would be able to take care of Gold ranked combatants, but he's never fought against a Blademaster before, so he still wasn't sure if he would be able to tough this hurdle through.

He recalled that time when we went to visit Instructor Claude back when he just broke through to the level of a Blademaster. Back then, Instructor Claude felt the increase in his abilities and confidently stated that should he fight against Lorist in a duel, it wouldn't end up like the last time on the island when Lorist managed to last more than 200 moves.

Even though Instructor Claude considered Lorist at the Iron rank of power, he was unaware of Lorist's cultivation at the peak of the Bright Stage when they were on the islands, not to mention that Lorist had already broken through into the Dark Stage by the time he made his visit, which would make it even harder for Instructor Claude to completely dominate him in battle. During the visit, Lorist asked Instructor Claude about the differences between a Three Star Gold Swordsman and a Blademaster.

Scratching his head in thought, Instructor Claude then took out a few cups and made a simple demonstration for Lorist. He first placed the smallest cup on the table and

said that upon the awakening of Battle Force, it was as if the body had a vessel that was like that cup which could store and release Battle Force. He then took out a larger cup and said that if the smaller cup was the Bronze rank, then the larger one would be the Iron rank. Lorist nodded to signal his understanding.

Claude then placed two bowls, one large and the other small, on the table. He pointed at the smaller one and said that it represented the Silver rank while the larger represented the Gold rank. He then proceeded to explain that the difference between the various Battle Force ranks, Bronze, Iron, Silver and Gold, was a quantitative one rather than a qualitative one. For example, there wasn't a difference between the size of the blade glows at the Gold and Silver rank, but rather the amount of time the blade glows could be generated. An Iron rank could circulate their Battle Force for tens of minutes while a Gold rank would be able to easily reach one hour of Battle Force utilization.

That's why, it wasn't too surprising for an Iron rank to defeat a Gold rank if the difference in swordsmanship of the Iron rank makes up for the relatively lesser amount of time the Battle Force could be used. Claude then took out a large plate and said that it represented a Blademaster. According to him, Gold Swordsmen and Blademasters didn't differ much in terms of Battle Force capacity. For example, both the bowl and plate could contain the same amount of water as each other.

The main difference was that the area of coverage of the plate was far larger than that of the bowl. When one fights against a Gold Swordsman, as long as one stayed outside of the bowl, one wouldn't be affected much. However, during combat with a Blademaster, one would inevitably be within the range of the plate and each and every action would no doubt be restricted within that area of influence. Instructor Claude took the bowl that represented a Gold Swordsman, placed it on top of the plate and spun it around. The bowl moved around within the plate but not once did it move outside the range of the plate onto the table.

It was then when Lorist felt enlightened and fully comprehended what Instructor Claude was trying to express. The qualitative change that came from breaking through to the Blademaster level from the Gold rank was akin to having a three dimensional solid spreading its volume flat over a larger surface area. While the actual surface area of the object didn't change, the range of influence definitely increased.

"Then, how about Sword Saints?" Lorist asked.

"Hmm, I believe they will be like the table on which the bowls and plates are placed. This table is like a Sword Saint's domain and we are like the tables and plates on the table. No matter how we move around the table, we will still not be able to escape the influence of the domain," said Instructor Claude resignedly.

According to Instructor Claude's explanation, Lorist came to the conclusion that the difference between a Gold rank and a Blademaster was the field of influence they had. Instructor Claude added that when he sparred with his wife, Instructor Anfya, right after he broke through, no matter which direction or method she swung her sword, he seemed to have a precognitive instinct that allowed him to predict his wife's every move, even when she attempted to change her fighting approach entirely.

To Lorist, it sounded this ability of Blademasters was on the same level as his dynamic vision. However, that ability was not as specific as his own in that it only gave one a general 'feeling' instead of true visual feedback that his dynamic vision provided him. That was to say, a Blademaster would be able to predict the direction a strike was coming from and react to it, but Lorist could even perceive the velocity and force of any incoming object.

Engelich also said that he was confident in being able to withstand up to a hundred strikes when confronting Blademaster Pike. That's why Lorist wasn't that worried about being defeated by him and felt that they would arrive at a draw at most. Even so, that didn't mean that Lorist didn't intend to exploit the fact that he knew about a Blademaster's range of control that was far superior to that of a Gold rank. With a plan in mind, he decided to see whether his 'range of influence' was far superior to that of the Blademaster.

Lorist stood at a balcony which was the highest one in the entire bastide that allowed one to oversee each and every corner of the place with absolute clarity. Rumor also said that this was Sloph's favorite hangout. Perhaps it was because it offered him a sense of control and domination over the whole area.

At the plaza opposite the main building, Dulles could be seen directing the twelve carroballistas around. Even though each only required three men to operate, Dulles had up to five people on one and cited that the larger chariots allowed for more people to be on board and the extra two could help with shielding the rest from enemy fire or stabbing enemies with halberds, thus effectively increasing the defensive and close

combat capabilities of each unit. The extra people also allowed for the injured to switch out with someone else to retain the core functionality of the carroballistas, ensuring that their assault wouldn't be stopped halfway just because one or two men got injured from enemy resistance.

On a small hill not far from there was Terman and 13 other knights who were coaching their 28 Iron ranked attendants to remain within formation when they charged toward their enemies. 40 plus horses could be seen racing around the small hill, causing a cloud of dust to cover the whole area.

On the far end was an even larger vineyard plot which Potterfang had repurposed into a training field. The sight of 600 men who were equipped with black helmets, black plate armor as well as black shields standing within formation seemed like a large black beast from afar and gave others a feeling of danger and distress. Satisfied with the results of the training, Lorist felt that Potterfang was indeed perfect for the job given his military background. Within but a few days, he had managed to train the 600 men which constituted the heavy-armored battalion into tip top condition.

The slaves they had managed to liberate this time from the camp and the bastide numbered around 3000 and many of them were more than happy to join the armed forces. Other than a few who yearned to return to their homelands, all of the youths and their family members had decided to join the convoy on the journey. The total number of Iron ranks including the soldiers they had bought at Port Nupite was around 900 with 400 more being of the Bronze rank.

That was why Lorist had decided to reorganize the various types of units he had. Firstly, he increased the number of soldiers within the heavy-armored battalion from 500 to 600. After that was Dulles's carroballista unit which totaled around 65 people with 60 assigned to the 12 ballistas and the remaining five including Dulles acting as messenger troops which were in charge of relaying orders within the group for them to be able to effectively function as a unit.

And then there was Terman's knight brigade. While the number of knights didn't actually increase, the 28 attendants they recruited all had Three Star Iron ranked Battle Force. As for Yuriy, he had expanded his light cavalry scouts to 80 people who were each equipped with chain mail and leather armor and were given two mounts each. Other provisions included 24 javelins, one crossbow with 24 bolts, a scutum shield[1] and longsword as well as some makeshift tools such as nets or throwing axes which could be used as weapons according to their preferences. Even Potterfang was

envious of the equipment the light cavalry scouts were getting; they were far better equipped than the troops of the Whitelion Legion back in the day.

Most of the soldiers who joined these army units were of the Iron rank with the remaining 100 or so were recruited by Els into the constable unit he led along with 7 other Silver Swordsmen who were forced into slavery from being threatened with their family members' lives. The rest of the Bronze ranks formed the basis of Mons Malek's 420-men-strong crossbowmen company with only a few Iron ranks and Bronze ranks joining Loze's pike infantry regiment. Loze complained that even though the unit he led was the largest, their actual combat potential was the weakest of them all. They were only equipped with pikes and leather armor and most garrison troops in other dominions were far better equipped than they were.

Lorist apologized for that and said that the main function of the pike infantry regiment was to maintain the order of the convoy during the journey and that the main force on the battlefield would be the heavy-armored battalion, the carroballista unit, the knight brigade and the light cavalry instead of them. The pike infantry regiment's participation was actually only limited to bolstering their numbers to make their fighting strength seem much higher than it actually was and to clear up the battlefield after each skirmish.

The original plan was for Engelich to be the officer in command of the pike infantry regiment as he had experience being a garrison officer back in his day. However, Lorist was worried that the old man wasn't completely loyal to him yet and decided to hold off giving him a position for a period of time while he observed his behavior and made sure of his intentions.

At present time, Yuriy had led his light cavalry scouts somewhere outside the bastide and their location was currently unknown. In the vineyard far away, volleys of arrows could be seen being fired as the training for the crossbowmen company was being conducted. On the walls of the bastide stood the members from the pike infantry regiment and the others who were not on wall guarding duty were split into small companies and were training under the instruction of their respective officers in charge.

Lorist's armed forces now numbered 2300 people with 3000 others being the family members of the soldiers. If the near 6000 people convoy were to depart for the north without any training or regulation, chaos and confusion would no doubt ensue. That was the main factor behind Lorist's decision to continue his stay at the Sloph Bastide

for a couple more days before restarting the journey.

That night, the injured Charade brought his maidservant Molise over to report the gains they had acquired during the recent days. Ever since occupying the Sloph Bastide, the main supervisor of the place was most reluctant to give out the location of the hidden treasuries. As a result, he was put onto the spinning chair before being spun around on the hollow rotor. After that, the old supervisor confessed the location of Sloph's two secret treasuries after he emptied the meals he had that day from his mouth, bladder and intestines uncontrollably.

The two treasuries increased their total assets by a staggering amount. The larger one was for the use of the bastide administration and it was filled with various coins from different currencies which amounted to around 50000 gold Fordes in value. The smaller one belonged to Sloph personally and the gold coins and gold Forde notes within totaled up to 70000 gold Fordes. The armor and equipment stored within the treasury was also distributed by Lorist to his knights whereas the other expensive items like rare paintings or treasures were kept just in case he would need them as a gift to improve his relationship with some other party in the future.

To sum it up, the convoy gained an extra 100000 plus gold Fordes, thus solving their financial bind at the moment. The other resources within the armories, taverns and food warehouses further replenished their resources. Els even personally suggested to Lorist that they resort to raiding bastides should they run low on resources in the future.

However, that was not all. When Lorist brought Engelich's box of gold coins to Charade, he realized a huge fact that he had neglected the whole time. Charade quickly got all the family members of the slavers and put them through the same process they did to the old supervisor of the bastide and had them confess the locations where they hid their gold and other valuables.

"Milord, after three days of searching and questioning, we have gathered around 30 to 40 thousand gold Fordes' worth of assets from the 300 plus households in the residential area as well as 7 high-ranked Battle Force manuals and some other treasures, which I have already handed to Shadekampf for safekeeping and sorting. The only remaining issue now concerns the treatment of the slavers' family members," reported Charade.

There wasn't a simple solution for that as they wouldn't be allowed to join the journey north nor could they be released scotch-free. There wasn't a doubt that they harbored seething hatred for Lorist's group for ruining their livelihoods. However, Lorist wasn't willing to kill them off as the ones who did wrong were their family members who joined the slavers rather than them. Even though they could also be considered partly responsible for the slaves' woes, they were not the main cause and thus didn't deserve the death sentence. A few days prior, Els suggested that the families of the slavers to be sold to slave traders so that they may have a taste of their own medicine.

However, Lorist was hesitant about that idea as there was no way that he could trade slaves after announcing that the Norton Family does not endorse slavery. *Gosh, what a headache. I guess I'll figure something out later since there would be some time left before we leave,* thought Lorist as he irresponsibly postponed the issue for another time and decided to temporarily detain the families of the slavers for the moment.

A three-masted barque[2] flying the flag of the Sloph Slavers could be seen approaching Armatrin Harbor. This was Sloph's personal ship that he used for his excursions. As the crew of the ship were the locals of Armatrin Harbor, there wasn't a need for them to use a guide to navigate shallow waters.

"The harbor is much deserted than usual. There's not even a shadow in sight," Sloph said to Blademaster Pike who was standing beside him. Sloph's figure had bloated up like a barrel after two years of nothing but indulgence.

"Well, you should be aware that the people of the town use your name to scare their children into obedience or face the consequences of being caught and sold by you. It isn't weird for there to be nobody at the harbor if you consider that fact." Blademaster Pike was an aged man of tall build who usually wore an expression of pride and arrogance.

"Hehe, I guess that's true. Then again, I suppose it's a good thing to be feared. If I show a little bit of kindness, that might come of as a sign of weakness in these lowly folks' eyes and they'll start to think of ways to weasel more benefits from me. It's better to have them fear and revere me and not cause me any trouble," said Sloph, snickering as he shared his experience in dealing with people with his cousin.

As the barque docked at the harbor, the sailors on the ship jumped off and tied several

ropes around the stakes at the harbor before placing a walking board as a makeshift bridge. Sloph and the Blademaster got off the ship with twenty other sailors who hauled large chests following behind them.

Sloph looked around the harbor and started cursing vilely. "Did I leave for too long this time around? Those bastards at the bastide should be coming here to receive me by now! I'll make sure to give them a lesson that they'll never forget when I get back."

At that moment, Blademaster Pike inspected the surroundings and his expression tensed up. "Be careful, something doesn't feel right……"

The sound of a pair of hands clapping could be heard as Lorist approached the harbor followed by Reidy and Patt who were each carrying three quivers of javelins in their hands.

"Who are you?" asked Blademaster Pike as he narrowed his eyes to stare at Lorist with the sharp gaze of a hawk.

Ignoring him, Lorist continued to clap and 600 heavy-armored soldiers who carried black diamond-shaped shields in their hands showed up behind him and surrounded the harbor. After that, 400-odd other crossbowmen appeared behind the ranks of the shield-wielding soldiers.

If the heavy-armored battalion had not shaken the Blademaster, the crossbowmen definitely did. The400 crossbow-wielding soldiers would without question be a serious threat to even a Blademaster like Pike.

"Who are you and what are you up to?" shouted the Blademaster. The fat slob who stood beside him had a pale look on his face. Sloph retreated behind two of his chain-mail-wearing men and revealed a fierce expression.

"My identity is of no importance. What you need to know instead is that I intend to take your lives," answered Lorist calmly with a tone full of confidence.

"If you want my life, you'll need to be capable enough to take it," said Blademaster Pike as he drew his sword from his scabbard.

Lorist waved his hand and the twangs of hundreds of bowstrings could be heard. Within but an instant, more than 400 arrows were airborne and headed towards Sloph's group……

The sword in the Blademaster's hand danced frantically, shattering many of the arrows that came its way……

The rain of arrows stopped and Blademaster Pike looked extremely haggard. However, not one injury could be seen on his body and it was apparent that he had managed to deflect all of the arrows that threatened to harm him.

Taking advantage of the crossbowmen who were reloading, Blademaster Pike let out a loud grunt and dashed towards Lorist with near-lightning speed……

As the two were only twenty meters apart, Lorist smiled coldly and took out a javelin from the quiver……

The sharp sound of the javelin being shot out at breakneck velocity reverberated throughout the area. The javelin's velocity caused the Blademaster to be unable to avoid it and be forced to deflect it head on……

Bam! The javelin was shattered into smithereens with the Blademaster staggering a few steps back from the force of the impact. His expression instantly changed as he had never felt a javelin thrown with that much energy. However, before he managed to complete that thought, Lorist sent a fusillade of javelins in his direction.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Series of sounds of javelins being smashed apart could be heard as the Blademaster was forced to retreat from the successive impacts of the javelin……

"Agh!" Cried the Blademaster in agony.

"Ugh," grunted the Blademaster with much suffering.

After all six quivers of javelins was expended, Lorist exhaled loudly with his face flush red and his hands and legs relaxing from having used all that energy. He had launched 72 javelins packed with his internal energy in quick succession and that has sapped up most of his energy reserves and left him in a difficult position. He made a mental note to not perform this kind of feat ever again so that he would have enough stamina for emergency situations.

While Blademaster Pike was still alive, a large javelin had found its way through his thigh and another could be seen infused within his right shoulder. The most serious injury came from the javelin that hit his torso and went straight through his body and reemerged from his back. For him to be able to block off the 69 other javelins was

already testament to his abilities as a Blademaster. It was too bad that he wasn't able to do the same to the remaining three.

"You… You didn't give me a chance to utilize my skills……" grumbled the Blademaster as blood flowed out of his mouth.

"I'm not stupid enough to fight you head on. That's far too risky and dangerous." Even though the Blademaster's voice was exceedingly soft, Lorist heard it clearly and waved once more to signal the crossbowmen to fire. The Blademaster ended up looking like a huge porcupine by the time the arrows stopped flying.

As for Sloph and his other followers, they had long perished from the first volley of arrows and died miserable deaths.

"Clear up the battlefield and occupy the ship. Also, cut off Sloph and Blademaster Pike's heads and bring them with us," instructed Lorist.

Chapter 56
Baron Miranda

At the harbor, the family's soldiers detained all the sailors who manned Sloph's ships and brought the captain and the three vice captains back to the bastide for vetting.

Sloph and Blademaster Pike's heads were impaled on stakes and held up high in the air. Lorist displayed their heads at the town for three whole days to let the townsfolk know who's currently in charge. If the same situation where Charade was denied access to weapons and other provisions were to come again, Lorist didn't mind punishing a few of the townsfolk in case his message wasn't clear enough.

Sloph's henchmen had carried down three large chests and one small one from the ship before they died. The first large chest stored various goods such as tea leaves and macks. In the second one was Blademaster Pike and Sloph's personal belongings. The third large chest contained cosmetics and clothes for women. It was apparent that Sloph was rather fond of his concubines and often spoiled them with gifts. Too bad he wasn't alive to see that the women had already been distributed among the senior students of the academy back at the bastide.

Lorist opened the small chest and found around 10000 gold Fordes within and thought, *Charade would definitely be delighted to see this.*

After that, Potterfang and Loze got off the ship and said to Lorist, "Milord, the rest of the stuff on the ship is mostly food, mainly rye flour and bran, that is probably meant for the slaves. There are also a few piles of rough linen and a couple of spears and armor."

"Alright, transport all these stuff to the bastide. Loze, have a pike infantry company stationed here to watch these ships," said Lorist.

"Yes, milord." Potterfang and Loze saluted and left.

Dulles rode over on a horse and dismounted. He appeared quite downcast as his carroballista unit didn't get to show off their might. Lorist had originally planned for them to fire at the Blademaster along with the crossbowmen company if his javelins

weren't having any effect on him. It was a 'shame' that the Blademaster couldn't last until that moment.

"Come on, don't look so down. Get these chests onto your carroballistas. One of them contains stuff for women. Go pick some stuff from it to gift to your maidservants. I'm sure they'll return the favor graciously during the night," teased Lorist.

Suddenly, a cavalry scout could be seen riding quickly into the plaza. Stopping in front of Lorist, he said, "Milord, there's an armed group heading towards the Sloph Bastide. Sir Yuriy believes that they're the forces of the local dominion lord. They number around 1500 to 2000 people, with most being civilian farmers and a few knights. Sir Yuriy asks if he should attack them. Currently, the light cavalry scout unit is only observing from afar."

"Tell Knight Yuriy not to be reckless and send someone over to communicate with them. If the other party is hostile, use hit-and-run tactics and try to keep the casualties low. If they're not here for a fight, tell their commander that I'll meet up with him and explain the situation right away," said Lorist to the scout.

"Yes, milord." The scout quickly left the way it came.

Scratching his chin, Lorist was thinking that the dominion lord's reaction to this situation was a little too slow. He had already wiped out the slavers and occupied the bastide for eight whole days. And during the last two days, he had also enforced a curfew on the citizens at the town to make sure that no word of his ambush spreads out. In normal circumstances, the dominion lord should be aware of a situation right away. However, not one of their scouts could be seen during the past few days at the bastide until after he sealed up Armatrin Harbor. The lord probably assembled an army to come inspect the situation as the harbor was probably pivotal to the dominion's economy.

"Patt, put those two heads into boxes and pack them up nicely. We're going to give the local lord a gift," instructed Lorist.

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Lorist quickly arrived at a small hill, guided by Yuriy and his scouts, who then took got into formation and lined up neatly.

"Milord, look. If we charge over from here, I'm sure those people would definitely turn

into shambles right away. They're just farmers, not true soldiers," said Yuriy, full of confidence in his own unit.

At a hill in the distance, groups of farmers with pitchforks and woodcutting axes as weapons loitered around in a disorderly manner. Yuriy must have already sent someone to inform them that they were not the forces of the slave traders but rather the personal armed forces of another baron. That was why they looked so relaxed and didn't bother to get into formation. Some even sat down to rest and and chat with the others around them.

On the top of the hill were a group of armored knights who looked straight in Lorist's direction. Behind them was a flag that depicted a small white flower. Lorist didn't recognize the family from the insignia, however.

"So, tell me. What comes after you beat them into shambles? You want to cause trouble with the rest of the nobles around here and prompt them to form an alliance against us? Here in foreign lands, we have no one else to rely on. From an ethical and legal standpoint, we are in the wrong as this is not our home dominion," said Lorist.

"Ugh…" Yuriy stopped talking right away. He merely felt the unbearable urge to attack the disorganized farmers without thinking too much about the implications.

"Patt, bring the family flag with us. Reidy, carry the boxes with you. We're going over there for a bit," said Lorit as he got on his horse and wanted to leave right away.

Yuriy pulled on the reins of Lorist's horse and said, "Milord, wouldn't it be dangerous for you to go personally with so few people…"

"I'm fine. We will appear more sincere and less hostile with lesser people. And don't forget to look to your back. Potterfang's heavy-armored battalion is almost here and Terman's knight brigade is already stationed there. The crossbowman company as well as Dulles's carroballista unit is also on the way. Trust me, they wouldn't dare try to mess with the likes of us," said Lorist as he pointed to the back. Yuriy turned his head to look and saw Terman's knights arriving at the foot of the hill.

"Then, may your departure be swift and safe," said Yuriy as he let the reins go. Lorist then led Patt and Reidy to the opposite hill in the distance.

When they reached the foot of the hill, Lorist dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to Reidy and paced towards the group of people clad in extravagant-looking

armor quickly. Patt followed behind on his horse while carrying the battle standard of the Nortons with Reidy at the back with Lorist's horse.

"May I know which one of you is the dominion lord?" said Lorist to the group of armored men.

"I am Baron Miranda, Lord of Armatrin Harbor. May I know who you are?" said a fully-armored man at the front of the others as he removed his helmet to reveal his exhausted looking, middle-aged face.

"I am here to pay my due respect, Lord Baron. I am Norton Lorist of the Northlands," said Lorist as he bowed and saluted the baron.

"Norton? I think I've heard that name somewhere before…" said the baron as he stared hard at the battle standard with the symbol of a raging bear that Patt was carrying.

"Oh, I remember now. The Roaring Raging Bear of the Northlands. The Nortons are a nobles who have been entitled by the emperor because of military merit. I'm curious as to why someone from so far in the north would be here in my dominion and even seal off my harbor?" asked Baron Miranda as he stared hard at Lorist.

Lorist shrugged and said, "Lord Baron, my army is just here to escort me back to my homeland to inherit the position of the family head. I myself didn't expect that they would get attacked by hostile forces within your dominion who intended to capture them and sell them off as slaves."

Baron Miranda's expression darkened as he cursed, "That damned slaver group…"

"However, they didn't know that we were actually an army and we wiped them out entirely after our reinforcements arrived and occupied their main camp. I think it was called, um, Sloph Bastide or something… As for sealing off the harbor, Lord Baron, I deeply apologize for that as we had no choice and had to ensure that we remove the enemy entirely. Reidy, bring me the box."

Lorist opened the box and showed the two heads to the baron. "Lord Baron, these are the heads of the leaders of the enemy who dared to provoke us, Sloph and Blademaster Pike. We neutralized them at the harbor just one hour ago."

"What? You managed to kill Sloph and Blademaster Pike?" said Baron Miranda, shocked. He then revealed an ecstatic expression and asked, "Is that for real?"

The baron's men also started chattering out loud and gathered to look at the heads within the box.

"The heads are right here. You're free to check them as you please, Lord Baron."

Baron Miranda personally dismounted and took the box from Reidy without even bothering to ask his subordinates to do it.

"Hahaha, it really is Pike and Sloph. These damned bastards, I didn't expect that they would ever end up like this." Baron Miranda was so elated that he started laughing out loud and lost all composure. It seemed that the rumors and reports that he received about the death of Sloph was true after all.

At that moment, the baron's men started a commotion again, as on the opposite hill, rows and rows of heavy-armored soldiers, crossbowmen, knights and carroballistas could be seen. The look on Baron Miranda's face instantly changed as he asked, "Is that your army?"

"That is right, Lord Baron," replied Lorist.

"Your army looks like it can even rival that of a kingdom! Why would the slavers even dare to attack you in the first place?" No sane person would dare to challenge an army such as that and expect to escape unscathed. Baron Miranda suspected that Lorist was merely using the slavers as an excuse to pillage the bastide.

"Lord Baron, when we first arrived at your dominion, we didn't intend to cause any trouble and wanted to keep a low profile. That is why I ordered my forces to disarm and not bring any of their equipment over. But, that made the slavers think that we were another slave trading group and demanded that we give them half of the people we had. We tried to explain who we really were but they didn't believe it and even sent people to attack us. I had no choice but to give the order to exterminate them. You can go ask the citizens of the town. We were truly unarmed when we first docked at the harbor."

After listening to the explanation, Baron Miranda understood that there was no way that Lorist could be lying as the truth could easily be discerned by asking the townsfolk. It would seem that the slavers truly did look for trouble themselves this time and ended up being completely eradicated.

Looking at the heads in the boxes again, Baron Miranda revealed a smile and waved

for two of his knights behind him and told them to ransack seven or eight different shops that he listed.

“These shops are all owned by Sloph’s relatives. The lot of them completely monopolized the whole market at the harbor to the point that I, the dominion lord, couldn’t collect even a single copper of tax from the sales they make, causing me to be unable to develop the harbor at all,” explained Baron Miranda.

Lorist nodded and thought that this baron did indeed have a knack for business and management. He called Reidy to accompany the two knights to the town so that their pike infantry company don’t attack them by mistake.

“You said that you already took over the Sloph Bastide?” asked Baron Miranda.

Lorist smiled and understood what the baron was getting at. “That’s right,, Lord Baron. Please rest assured as I will be staying here for another month at most. As there are many family members of the soldiers in my army, it would take quite a bit of time for us to prepare before we can leave. We should be leaving for the north during the new year and will hand over the management of the bastide to you.”

The baron’s face reddened with embarrassment as according to the traditions and customs of nobles, the bastide rightfully belonged to Lorist as he was the one who had occupied it and he had no obligation to return it to the local lord. Normally, if the lord wanted to reclaim the place, he would have to pay a sum of gold in return. However, Lorist was prepared to give it back unconditionally and only asked to be given a month’s time. This made Baron Miranda feel a little bad for gaining Lorist’s favor without paying any remuneration.

“How about this? Let me pay for all the resources and expenses you would incur during your stay at the bastide. I will definitely fulfill my responsibilities as the Armatrin Harbor’s lord,” said Baron Miranda.

“Thank you for your consideration,” said Lorist gratefully. “If you have the time, why don’t you come over to visit the bastide and let me offer you some hospitality while I’m here?” he offered.

Baron Miranda eyed the rows of soldiers on the opposite side and looked back at his subordinates before nodding and saying, “Alright, Your Excellency. Let me disband my men before I go to visit you at the bastide.”

As Lorist had yet to officially succeed the title and position of the family head, he couldn't be addressed as 'Lord Baron', so Baron Miranda could only refer to him respectfully as 'Your Excellency'. But it wasn't undeserved given the amount of soldiers Lorist commanded.

Lorist saluted respectfully once more and said, "Then I will await your arrival at the bastide."

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Baron Miranda only brought five knights and fifty other members of his personal guard during his visit to the bastide.

On that day, Lorist organized a grand banquet to receive the baron and his four knights and introduced his own knights to them as well, causing Baron Miranda to be envious of the talent Lorist had under his wing. However, he noticed that Lorist's servants behaved quite oddly, specifically, their mannerisms. Lorist laughed bitterly and said that the servants were actually family members of many of his subordinates who only worked for the sake of the banquet. He mentioned that he didn't feel comfortable with handing the task to the servants of the bastide just in case something goes wrong and has detained them along with the other family members of the slavers. He said that he would leave their judgment and treatment to the baron.

Baron Miranda was glad at that proposal and said that he would send some of his own servants over to help out within the bastide for the time being. Lorist also handed the family members of the slavers to his disposal. Whether he sold them or used them, the baron would profit either way.

When the banquet ended, Baron Miranda asked Lorist a question. Given that only three of Lorist's subordinates were Gold ranks, how did he manage to take care of Blademaster Pike? He mentioned that if Sloph didn't have the Blademaster backing him up, he would have taken the slavers out long ago as a lord like him couldn't let some other power call the shots within his own dominion.

Lorist thought for a bit before he took a silver cup and placed it into a small basin. "If one fights against a Blademaster in close combat, one would be like the cup inside this basin and would find it hard to escape the control of the basin. The method I used to counteract that is much easier."

He put the basin back on the table and tossed the silver cup towards it. With a clang, the basin shattered into many pieces.

"It's just that simple," said Lorist. He credited the death of the Blademaster to his crossbowman company. "Even if someone is a Blademaster, when faced with a fully-equipped and properly trained army, he wouldn't even stand a chance."

Baron Miranda nodded incessantly with a look of understanding on his face.

Chapter 57
Various Preparations for the Journey

Lorist really required the help of Baron Miranda as without his permission, no matter how strong his army or how wealthy he was, he wouldn't be able to gain the support he needed from Armatrin Harbor in terms of human and material resources and that would have a huge effect on restarting the journey north with so many new people in their convoy.

Lorist, Charade and his other knights have carried out various discussions and came to the conclusion that the largest tribulation for the northbound journey was the 1000 km route they had to take through the Redlis Kingdom. If Lorist only crossed the kingdom with ten or so people, that wouldn't pose much of a problem. However, he now had 6000 plus people in his convoy as well as a huge amount of precious resources.

The Redlis Kingdom was founded by the former First Prince of the Krissen Empire. During the days when the empire still existed, the First Prince had already been known to be a violent, untrustworthy and avaricious person who has had his right to succeed the imperial throne revoked by the emperor himself and was relegated to the Bodolger Province which was very distant from the imperial capital. However, that seemed to work in the First Prince's favor as he quickly managed to gain control of the military forces of the province and plundered the citizens of their wealth in the masses to form his own personal army. Sometimes he even had his soldiers masquerade as bandits to rob traveling merchants, making him the prime suspect for the demise of the Norton Family's merchant convoy.

When the emperor passed away, the FIrst Prince was also the first one to fly the flag of rebellion and effectively plunged the empire into chaos and civil war. Currently, only one year and a half after the peace treaty was signed, the First Prince started to look for an excuse to start another conflict with the Forund Duchy as that used to be one of the wealthiest provinces during its days under imperial rule. Fortunately, the various powers in the central part of the former empire's territory, the Farkel Duchy, the Handra Duchy, the Forund Duchy and the Shabaj Duchy were aware of the First Prince's intentions and have since formed a military alliance to resist the Redlis

Kingdom's invasion. Various skirmishes were already going on at the mid-southern area of the border between the four duchies and the Redlis Kingdom.

What Lorist and his knights were worried about was now that they were at Armatrin Harbor, which was a territory of the Lormo Duchy, they would have to enter the border of the Redlis Kingdom to be able to reach the Northlands. Given the amount of people and resources the convoy had, there was little doubt that they would become a target for the First Prince. Though, the First Prince didn't have it easy either as after he had plundered his own territory clean, bandits groups have mushroomed in response to the hard times the citizens were experiencing.

Additionally, with the incessant conflict between the Redlis Kingdom and the four duchies and the frequent plundering of the duchies' citizens by the First Prince's forces, not one of them did not hate the First Prince to the bone. That was why even if the First Prince were to retreat back into his own territory, the allied army wouldn't let him off that easily and would fight their way beyond the Redlis Kingdom's borders. There were even rumors that the First Prince was relying on loans to keep his army operational so that the front lines do not crumble.

Charade believed that if they were to take the main highway to the north, no matter how strong their army, they would no doubt be targeted by the First Prince's forces. Given that the First Prince had a grudge against the Nortons, he would probably want to use that opportunity to wipe the northbound convoy out and also take all the resources they had.

Potterfang and Charade both suggested that the convoy take a roundabout route to the northwest that was 150 km longer than the main route and pass through various other dominions of other noble families. The reason for that was because they would easily be able to suppress the various smaller nobles and force their way through with military might if necessary. The dominions were also plagued with bandits and that would serve as decent training for their soldiers as well as earn the favor of the nobles.

Potterfang also said that if they wanted to escape the fangs of the Redlis Kingdom, they would have to travel at a rate of 25 to 30 kilometers per day. That way, even if the First Prince were to receive word of their presence, his soldiers wouldn't be able to catch up to the convoy.

"If we manage to occupy this place, then we will no longer have anything to worry about," said Potterfang as he pointed to a spot on the map. That place, Benz Citadel,

was at the border between the Third Prince's Andinaq Kingdom and the Redlis Kingdom. Potterfang was quite well-informed about that area because he used to participate in battles over there back in the days when he was in the Whitelion Legion. He mentioned that the Whitelion Legion had defeated the First Prince's army before at that place but due to the support in the form of resources the prince had from the Forde Trade Union, they managed to siege the place and wait until the Whitelion Legion ran out of provisions and had no choice but to retreat, causing the crucial citadel on the border to go to the hands of the First Prince.

Potterfang said that ever since that event, both nations couldn't afford to keep fighting and were forced to sign a peace treaty. The Whitelion Legion was subsequently disbanded. As the First Prince wanted to focus his forces on the central area of the former empire's territory, he only left 1000 or so troops to defend the citadel. Potterfang discovered half a year back when he was passing through the area with his two children on the way to Morante City that the security at there was extremely lax. If they could take advantage of that situation and attack the citadel, they will be able to easily conquer the place without sacrificing too many of their soldiers.

Lorist understood Potterfang's intentions: if they manage to conquer the citadel and hand it to the Third Prince, they would be able to gain his favor and will also be able to avoid pursuit from the First Prince's forces and continue their journey to the Northlands without worry.

After deciding on which route to take, the next issue was to think about how they would be able to let the convoy travel at least 25 kilometer each day. It seemed that they had no choice but to rely on carriages. Otherwise, the children and the elderly among the family members of the soldiers wouldn't be able to keep up with the speed. According to Charade's plan, they would group four to five families together and fill up each carriage with around 12 to 13 people each, totalling up to 250 carriages solely for the use of non-combatants. Including the carriages for the main convoy, Charade concluded that they would require at least 600 carriages before they would be able to start the journey.

During the course of their stay at the bastide, Charade utilized the manpower of the non-combatants to the maximum and categorized them according to their various skills to start building their own carriages. However, the most they could build within a month was estimated to be only 200. Including the ones they already had, they would only have 300 by the time they had to leave. The horses required to pull the carriages was also lacking. A four-wheeled carriage required two horses to pull, so 600 of them

needed at least 1200. However, even after taking over the bastide, Lorist only had around 600 horses.

Lorist really didn't have much time to spare. He had to return to the Northlands to inherit the position and the title before the 3rd month of the following year. It was already the 11th month right now and he only had three months left to bring the whole convoy across a distance of over 2500 kilometers to reach the Northlands.

Even so, the decision to stay at the Sloph Bastide for another month was inevitable as they needed the extra time to prepare the rest of the carriages they needed before the start of the journey. As long as they manage to go through the Redlis Kingdom, the convoy would be able to proceed onward without any worries and Lorist can leave the convoy and bring a few others with him to go back to the dominion first to make it in time for the succession ceremony.

That was why Lorist really needed the aid of Baron Miranda. As long as the baron agreed to let the citizens within his dominion help out with the construction of the carriages, they would be able to leave on time within a month. Originally, Lorist was still troubled over thinking of a way to convince the baron to help. What he didn't expect was for Baron Miranda to offer aid of his own accord, much to Lorist's delight. The act of giving up the bastide for free as well as the families of the slavers to the baron was probably the main factor for his decision to help out.

During Baron Miranda's stay at the bastide, Lorist announced that he would rename the place into the Miranda Bastide much to the baron's delight. He then pledged that he would aid Lorist however he could and agreed to have his citizens help out with the carriage building and also provide up to 1000 horses for the convoy. Though, the main motivation behind the baron's actions might have been because he wanted the convoy to depart as early as possible so that he can truly take over the bastide.

The baron told Lorist candidly that he intended to make the Miranda Bastide his new home and headquarters of the dominion as its location was strategic and easy to defend, but incredibly hard for people to siege given the advantageous surrounding terrain as well as the defensive fortifications within. Secondly, he believed that his control over the Armatrin Harbor would be strengthened even further and expressed his intention to invest and develop the place further. He said that he could already smell all the coins that would be rolling into his pocket in the near future.

Lorist truly admired the baron's eye for business and thanked him for his kind favor

of providing the carriages and horses for free. He presented the three ships that belonged to Sloph to the baron as a gift in return, thus fulfilling the baron's long dream of owning his very own small fleet. In actuality, the price of three hundred carriages as well as a thousand workhorses was about the same price as the barque that Sloph came in. But the nobles usually wouldn't engage in trading that straightforwardly like merchants would because it was considered uncouth. That was why the baron offered what he could for free and Lorist reciprocated by returning the favor.

As promised, three days after Baron Miranda left, he sent his main supervisor and almost a hundred servants to help out at the Miranda Bastide and specifically sent two young and beautiful maidens to serve Lorist personally. The supervisor even told him that the girls had already consumed the Mishla Elixir so he wouldn't have to worry about leaving behind any unintended offspring.

Naturally, Lorist quickly had his knights move out from the central building of the bastide to some of the other vacant houses so that the supervisor could start planning the renovations as that would be Baron Miranda's mansion in the near future.

Baron Miranda was quite impressed at Lorist's ability to read between the lines and thought that if Lorist didn't have to go back to his homeland to inherit the title, he would definitely love to have him as his subordinate.

Probably due to having gained quite a bit from ransacking the shops of Sloph's relatives, the baron also signed a contract with Charade during his stay. The clauses of the contract were as follows: First, Lorist will have to help Baron Miranda train a 720 men personal guard, a 120-strong heavy-armored soldier unit, 240 crossbowmen as well as 360 pikemen within a month.

Second, the personal guard will be assembled within three days and stationed at the former slavers' camp south to Armatrin Harbor and the equipment of which shall be provided by Lorist. The fee for the equipment and training of 20000 gold Fordes will be paid by Baron Miranda.

Third, Lorist will offer the extra weapons the convoy didn't need for sale at 60% of the market price to Baron Miranda.

Fourth, the baron will provide Lorist with 300 cows and 2000 sheep, the fees of which will be deducted from the sum he had to pay to Lorist.

After signing the agreement, the baron left the bastide to collect the funds and conscript people into his personal guard. Lorist and Charade called Els and Terman over and told them to head to Morante City right away to purchase all the worn out equipment from the other academies. Back then, Lorist only bought old equipment from 7 academies but there were a total of 28 academies within Morante City and there was still much profit to be made.

Charade then regretted that he didn't think about this ploy beforehand. If he had started to buy up all the used equipment and refurbished them for sale, he would already earned over 1 million gold coins! The armors that the heavy-armored soldiers only cost up to 10 gold coins each to buy and fix up. If he were to sell them at 40 gold coins each to the baron, he would turn a huge profit and the baron would still be under the impression that he got a good bargain.

Els and Terman then left for Morante City with 50000 gold Fordes to purchase not only the used equipment from the academies but also to order the axles needed for the construction of the carriages. Lorist also had them deliver a letter to request President Peterson to help them up with acquiring the axles.

Currently, the Miranda Bastide was bustling with activity. Lorist finally understood the true difficulties that came with managing a group of over 6000 people. In terms of clothing, Charade already had it covered as he had ordered quite a lot back in Morante City as well as confiscated quite an amount from the bastide's residents. They already had enough for the whole group.

As for food, it mainly concerned dry provisions that they could bring along on the journey. The whole group already consumed more than 5000 kilograms of food every day courtesy of Baron Miranda during their stay, along with quite an amount of treats like fruits, vegetables and meat, causing the supervisor of Baron Miranda to freak out and be forced to import more to curb the shortage.

Given that their needs were provided for by the baron during their stay, the food that they brought over could be saved up for the journey ahead. Charade decided to make black bread with the ingredients they had. Black bread was usually used to feed soldiers and it was different in that it was almost half a meter long and was thicker than Lorist's arm. Upon removing it from the oven, the bread cooled down and hardened quite a bit to a point where Lorist thought that it might even be harder than bricks.

Each black bread can last an adult ten whole days and the way one usually consumed it was different than that of normal bread. Should one attempt to bite it as it is, one's teeth would undoubtedly fall out. There were a few ways one could eat black bread. If there was ample time, it could be roasted over a fire and cut into half for meat to be sandwiched in between. If there wasn't enough time to roast it, the bread could be hammered into powder and cooked with water to make some gruel. It could also be consumed after simply softening it up with water and chewing it slowly before swallowing the clump.

It was relatively easy to prepare black bread. Using a mixture of rye, bran, salt and some optional additions, it only had to be allowed to ferment and baked. Potterfang said that during one food shortage, the Whitelion Legion even mixed sawdust and tree leaves into the mixture. Additionally, the bread wouldn't spoil for at least half a year. Charade planned to have 10000 long black breads made and have each soldier carry two and one for each family member. Lorist even joked that if a soldier's weapon were to break during a battle, he could still use the bread as a mace to hammer the enemy to death.

Other than black bread, Charade also planned to have the 300 cows and 2000 sheep given to them by Baron Miranda to be made into dried meat and jerky. He also ordered a large amount of pickled fruit and vegetables so that the convoy would have some snacks to spice up their meals.

When it came to shelter, there was only one solution. Tents. There was no way a group of 6000 people could stay within inns. Charade had considered the problem of accommodation quite extensively and had decided to allocate one tent for every carriage of people. The camp would then be set up in the center with the carriages forming a wall and surrounding it.

As for transport, they would primarily rely on four-wheeled carriages. However, the journey to the Northlands was unlike normal trips undertaken by normal convoys. Given the risks and dangers, the army that escorted the convoy would further complicate the process as the transportation of equipment, rations as well as the herbalist unit to go around to provide aid would need to be considered.

On the 23rd day of the 12th month, Els and Terman returned on a large ship of the Peterson Merchant Guild to Armatrin Harbor and brought back 700 sets of carriage axles with them. They reported that the President Peterson had his people buy up all the axles for sale in Morante City and even dismantled more than 100 of their own

carriages to make up for the demand.

Aside from the axles, they also spent nearly 20000 gold Fordes and emptied eight other academies of their used equipment. They didn't approach every academy, however, as they were worried that they wouldn't have enough time and space to ship all those equipment back.

Els and Terman said that the amount of equipment was truly too much. When Charade asked the baron to fulfill his end of the bargain to purchase the equipment, he was instantly flabbergasted as he realized that all his money could only afford a third of the equipment, and that was already discounted at 60% of the market price.

He could only use 60000 gold coins to purchase a quarter of the equipment. However, he still managed to turn a profit in the end by selling them to the neighboring nobles at a higher price.

That prompted Charade to realize that the number of carriages needed for the convoy would have to grow again to 800 to accommodate the increased baggage of the equipment. Thus, he decided that he would offer the equipment up for sale to the other nobles on the way to the Northlands and use the profit they would earn for the development of the dominion in the future.

Time passed quickly and it was already the new year. All the preparations for the journey had already been completed and the convoy would depart within another three days.

To celebrate the coming of the new year, Lorist announced that he would give every soldier one gold Forde and every one of their family members one large silver. He also decided to organize a large festival, causing everyone of the convoy to cheer with excitement.

It was already getting late into the night and Lorist found it difficult for him to fall asleep. He took a walk outside the yard and looked towards the stars hanging high up in the heavens, subsequently losing himself in his thoughts. *Now that the northbound journey is about to begin, I wonder how I will fare as a lord when I finally return to my homeland?*

Chapter 58
The Journey North Begins

On the 3rd day of the 1st month, Lorist bid farewell to Baron Miranda and began his journey.

The massive convoy used the main road and traveled up to 60 kilometers within that day.

On the 4th day of the 1st month, the convoy traveled another 20 kilometers before noon and left the main road for a forest path detour. Having just crossed a small hill, they arrived at the territory of the nobles of the Redlis Kingdom.

On the third day of the journey, just when the convoy was about to start moving again, Yuriy sent someone over to report that the local dominion lord, a viscount, has led more than 20 knights to the convoy and said that they would attack the convoy should they not leave ten percent of whatever they had as toll.

Lorist merely laughed and asked the scout who made the report, “Did Knight Yuriy tell the viscount that this is the army of the Norton Family and we’re only making our way back to our dominion without doing any business on the way?”

The scout replied, “Sir Yuriy has already told the viscount many times, but he refused to listen and stubbornly insisted that we are a smuggling group that is pretending to be a noble family. He even said that if we were going to impersonate nobles, we would be better off if we used a flag from some well-known one and not the flag of the Norton Family, a family that he hasn’t heard of before at all.”

Loris turned to his back and called out, “Terman, go forward to invite that viscount over. I’ll let him know personally what our family is made of.”

Without delay, Terman came back with the viscount as his prisoner.

Terman said that when he led the knight brigade on a charge, the viscount’s men either turned back to escape or got off their horses to surrender, leaving the viscount himself staring in disbelief as Terman and his knights took all 27 of the viscount’s men

prisoner.

However, the viscount still retained the proud, unyielding demeanor that was expected from a noble; even though he was taken prisoner, he still held his head up high and cursed, “You actually dare to go against me, the family head of the Mestre Family? Are you looking to start a war with us?!”

However, he also said that if Lorist was willing to reimburse him for his loss and apologize, he would be willing to let the convoy off due since he was a benevolent and forgiving person. “You are to offer a huge tribute to me as an apology and… Ooooh… This maidservant looks pretty decent…” He was referring to Molise who was standing by Charade’s side.

Lorist gave a bitter laugh and turned to Potterfang and said, “I suspect this guy doesn’t have a brain.”

The stuck up and arrogant viscount was instantly strapped onto the hollow rotor on the orders of the enraged Charade. Reidy had him go through more than ten minutes of the excruciating vertigo-inducing experience, after which the viscount was let go. He then answered every single question Lorist’s group had with tears and snot all over his face.

It appeared that Viscount Mestre was in the midst of a war with a neighboring baron. Just yesterday night, the viscount and his men had intended to raid a small village nearby but they returned empty handed. As they were on their way back to the castle, however, they saw the northbound convoy and the viscount tried to make up for his loss by demanding for a toll fee to be paid. He also mentioned that his castle and the rest of his forces was only 30 kilometers away at a lake nearby.

Lorist said happily, “Oh, so the viscount has come over to invite us to his castle as guests. Terman, bring this Viscount Mes-thingamajig to his castle and have his men surrender. Otherwise, have him hanged right outside his castle. Also, have Dulles and his carroballista unit accompany you as well. If they refuse to surrender, besiege the castle right away. We’re going to lodge there tonight.”

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Currently, Viscount Mestre felt extremely cold. Having just opened his eyes and still feeling a little woozy, he thought, *that cursed fatty, he actually dared to treat a noble*

personage such as me in that fashion… When I get back to the castle, I will gather the citizens of my domain and teach them a lesson… Wait, where is this? It seems quite familiar…

The viscount gave his face a pinch and felt much more conscious of his surroundings. He found that he could oddly recognize that place. Finally, he noticed that this was his castle and the room he was in seemed to be his bedroom. But why had his bedroom changed so much?

The viscount propped himself up from the floor and noticed that he was stark naked with not one piece of garment on his body. *What is this,* thought the viscount as he inspected the piece of cloth that was covering him when he was unconscious. It seemed to be a rough linen bag that was used to store wheat.

Ridiculous! What did they do to me? The viscount cursed and walked quickly towards the empty spot where his bed once was and pulled on the bell rope to summon his maidservant to help him dress up. However, when he pulled on the rope, it merely slipped downward with the other end having fallen on the ground. The rope was disconnected.

Pinching his nose at the smell of the linen sack, he brought it up to his waist and used the rope to fasten it and walked towards the exit barefoot. Looking along the walkway, he couldn't see a single soul. The viscount called out loudly for his servants, but no one answered.

Going over to an adjacent room, he noticed that it was completely empty just like his bedroom without a single article of clothing, furniture or footwear left behind. All that remained was an icy cold wall. He checked the other rooms only to find that the furnishings and decorations that used to be there all but gone.

Wandering around his castle, the viscount noticed that even the torches on the walls were all missing and started fearing for the worst. *What in the world happened? Where is everyone else?* He then rushed towards the balcony and felt the sunlight warming his skin up before breathing a sigh of relief.

From the balcony, he swept his gaze over the rest of his castle and noticed that it was surprisingly clean, so clean that not even a single carriage, metalware, textile, livestock or person could be seen. The castle was only left with nothing but the stones and wood that it was constructed from.

“Is anyone around? Is there anyone left?” cried out the viscount in despair from the balcony.

“Milord, you’re finally awake. That’s… that’s great.” A silhouette could be seen leaning on the castle walls from afar. The viscount narrowed his eyes and thought, isn’t that my loyal butler? Why is he half naked with nothing but a sack covering him like me?

The viscount quickly made his way to the yard where his butler was at and was met with the butler’s emotional ramblings. “Milord, you’re finally awake You have been out cold for two days already!”

The viscount rested his hand on the butler and asked, “Where is everyone? What happened to my castle? I can’t see a single thing anywhere!”

“Milord, did you forget? Two days ago, a group of bandits threatened that if we do not surrender and let them in the castle, they would have you hanged. We had no choice but to comply for the sake of your life and surrendered without resistance. The bandits said that they were the army of some Norton Family and complained that you have delayed their journey and also caused them to suffer a blow to their morale. They demanded that we pay them back for their losses. But, milord, you understand too that our family doesn’t have much gold coins left. The bandits then consumed all the livestock within the castle and took every single thing within it, not leaving even a single piece of cloth behind and also dismantled all the doors and took it with them,” explained the butler.

The viscount was already going crazy with rage. “Then, what about the servants? Why don’t I see anyone here?”

“They have all left with the bandits, milord. Before they left, they gathered everyone in the castle and a fatty asked all of us whether we wanted to leave with their group. I refused and they instantly stripped me naked and left me here while the others followed them and left long ago,” said the butler.

“Milord, they only left me two sacks after I desperately pleaded. I have only managed to find a porcelain bowl after two days of searching and I just used to cook up some oatmeal. Milord, do you want to have a meal first?”

Having heard that there was food, the viscount suddenly felt the emptiness within his stomach. “Alright, get me some then.”

At that moment, sounds of horses galloping could be heard approaching the main gates of the castle. The old butler's face instantly changed as he said, "Milord, this is bad! The Bocchi Family's men have come to attack us!"

"Shut the gates immediately," said the viscount anxiously.

"But, milord, the bandits took away the castle gates as well! During these past two days, I only managed to build a wall of rocks to shut the entrance of the castle…" said the old butler.

"We're finished…" said the viscount as he knelt down in despair.

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Charade wasn't concerned in the slightest about their encounter with Viscount Mestre at all. To him, the viscount was a complete imbecile. He truly wondered how a person like him became a landed noble in the first place. The viscount thought that he could boss anyone around just because he was a noble without even bothering to consider the actual capability of his forces. *He even wanted to take my Molise… Good thing we didn't let him off lightly.*

At that moment, Charade was standing in front of the castle of the third noble they ran into during their journey. The dominion lord, a baron, was currently haggling over the price of a pile of weapons. When they passed through another noble's territory the day before, Charade sent a messenger to state their intent on doing business with the dominion lord. However, the lord was frightened by the military might of the convoy and had turtled up within his castle, refusing to respond to anything they said. Charade could do naught but give up on the notion of selling their goods to that noble.

Charade had learned his lesson after that and when they passed by the current baron's castle, they only bought three carriages and offered some of the stuff they took from Viscount Mestre's castle as gifts for the him. The reason the things were given away was because it was too much for the convoy to bring along on the journey.

Seeing the gifts dangling before his face, the baron appeared on the walls of his castle and asked Charade of his intentions.

Charade made a knight salute and stated that he came to represent the Norton Family's convoy and asked whether the baron would be able to offer their group with some provisions in exchange for some weapons and equipment.

Upon hearing about weapons, the baron quickly got out of his castle to take a look and picked 100 pikes, 20 chain mails, 20 round shields, 20 two-handed greatswords as well as 3 full sets of knight armor. All the items totaled up to around 500 gold Fordes, but since the baron did not have that much money at hand, he decided to offer some other resources he had for trade.

In the end. the baron spent 100 gold coins and ten carriages with two horses for each all filled up with wheat as well as 5 cows with another 50 pigs to be exchanged for the weapons. To commemorate his first sale, Charade offered the items at 80% of the original price and even treated the baron to a bottle of wine produced by Sloph's vineyard.

The baron was quite happy at having been treated to some fine wine and kindly advised that once the convoy leaves the mountain range, the convoy would no longer be in his dominion and warned for them to be on their guard as that area was rife with bandit activity. He also told them to be wary of attacks from Count Cobry's army.

Charade hastily thanked the baron for his advice and invited the baron over to the convoy's campsite near the mountain range for a banquet.

The baron thought it over and said that he would attend it and hoped that his presence would not cause too much trouble for the convoy.

Charade quickly responded that having the baron over to join them for the night was an honor and said that he would go back quickly to prepare for the banquet that night.

In the evening, the baron came over with his eldest son, a Three Star Silver Knight, and four other attendants. Upon entering the campsite, the baron expressed his wonder and praise at the Norton Family's military might.

Charade, who was seated at a table that they had took from Viscount Mestre's castle, introduced Lorist and the family knights to the baron. The baron was called Charles and his son's name was Soria. After that, they all started eating and chatting merrily.

Charade said that the main reason he invited Baron Charles over was to get an understanding of the situation of the areas where the convoy would be passing through. The baron and his son thus started telling the group everything they knew.

According to Baron Charles, the mountains where the convoy had set up camp at was the border between his and Viscount Debonar's territory. However, not only was

Viscount Debonar dead, the neighboring Baron Anlar, Count Bajri as well as Baron Omador also suffered the same fate. That was to say, Lorist's convoy would be passing through lands that were currently without rulers. He said that there would not be any place where Lorist can resupply as the cities and villages there had all been raided to ruin.

And the cause of it all was Count Cobry's private army. It was said that in his younger days, the count was a morally bereft knight who was also a serial womanizer whose favorite pastime was to travel around within his dominion to force the women he fancied into bed with him. No matter whether they were in their teens or their late forties, he didn't let even one of them out of his grasp, thus causing the women in his dominion to stay cooped up within their homes or leave it altogether.

Due to his lifestyle, the count had over 60 illegitimate children. Though, he didn't mind that fact at all and adopted all of them, thus causing the neighboring nobles to give him the moniker, 'Count Ravenous'. On one occasion when Count Cobry went to the imperial capital for some merrymaking, he got to know the First Prince and the two of them quickly became close friends. Two years later when the First Prince was exiled by the former emperor, the count returned to his dominion and stayed within his bastide to nurture all of his illegitimate sons.

After a couple of more years when the First Prince raised the flag of rebellion at Bodolger Province, the count responded by bringing his thirty other grown up illegitimate sons to pledge their allegiance to the First Prince. After the civil war, the count returned with his army and loads of loot and gold back to his dominion, but only ten of the thirty sons still survived.

At present day, even though the count was already in his sixties, his ambitions still hadn't waned. Soon after his return to the dominion, he used various excuses to start conflicts with the neighboring nobles and has successfully expanded his territory to twice its former size. The 13 noble families who had resisted him all perished. The men were culled with the women suffering fates worse than death: they were either abused to their last breath or sold to slave traders when their oppresors were done with them.

There was one noble who made complaints about the count's cruelty to the First Prince so that the fallen noble families may be avenged. However, the First Prince stated that he was unaware of the full picture and would investigate the matter further before taking any action. But no follow up was done even though the noble had waited

for more than three months. It was after that when he ran into one of the count's sons who was one the way to the Redlis Kingdom's capital to pay their taxes and tributes.

A fight erupted between the two with it ending with the noble's death at the hands of one of the servants of the illegitimate son. It was described that the servant was angered by the noble who insulted his beloved master to the point where he couldn't contain himself and started lashing out violently. This led to the servant being given the death sentence for killing a noble with the count's son remaining unscathed from the whole affair.

When word of that matter spread to the territories of the noble families near that of the count's, a chain reaction occurred. People started to accuse the First Prince of favoritism towards the count. At that moment, one of the aides of Count Cobry revealed a stunning fact when he was dead drunk at a tavern: before the count returned to his dominion, the First Prince had promised him that he would grant the count the title of 'Duke of the Northwest' if he was able to make the nearby nobles submit to him and that the lands of the nobles would become part of his dominion.

That was why Count Cobry was so fervent in looking for trouble with the nobles around the area without heeding any of the customs and traditions of nobles when it came to war. He even purged every single one of the opposition, down to every single family member, so that they wouldn't cause any problems to him in the future. The whole of the kingdom's nobles all lost faith in the First Prince upon hearing that revelation and almost 40 of those families banded together to form an alliance to curb the threat of Count Cobry, vowing to support each other should any one of them be troubled by the count. Even so, given the past grudges some of them had with others, it was not uncommon for some of them to stab another family in the back from time to time. During the past half year itself, two families have already fallen to Count Cobry's clutches. The alliance also suffered quite a number of losses in battles, causing some of the members to leave it and join the count's side instead.

Baron Charles then downed another large glass of wine before he said now that Count Cobry's army has wiped out the Debonar Family, his own would undoubtedly be the next target. Recently, other than expending his efforts on raising an army of his own, he has also sent some of his sons and daughters to Morante City to some relatives living there to minimize the damage Count Cobry would cause should he succeed in his next conquest. That was also why he purchased so much military equipment from the convoy.

The baron's eldest son, Soria, told Lorist all he knew about the count's forces. Having gotten quite a great haul from the recent conflicts. the count brought over a thousand mercenaries when he returned to his dominion. These men were all mounted and equipped with leather armor and pikes. They called themselves the Spear Cavalry. Adept at chasing down and surrounding their enemies, they were the main force of Count Cobry's army. Other than that, the count also had a local garrison that numbered around 2000 people which was led by a couple of his illegitimate sons who had joined him in his previous expeditions and also helped him manage some of his other territories' security and administration.

Whenever the count defeated an enemy, he would raze the whole territory that belonged to his fallen foe and bring the surviving citizens of the land back to his dominion to serve as slave laborers to build infrastructure for his dominion. Rumor has it that Count Cobry intended to build a city that rivaled that of the kingdom's capital as his main base as the Duke of the Northwest.

Soria also said that in the dominions of the noble families who have been eliminated, small resistance groups formed by the locals that numbered from ten to a hundred people were all over the place and they caused the count quite a bit of trouble. Due to the lack of resources and provisions, they often acted as bandits from time to time and pillaged not only the count's dominion but also the territories belonging to the other nobles as well. In an attempt to wipe out the resistance, the count had sent his forces to the lordless dominions to kill the insurgents as well as capture some strong young men for extra labor.

Among the ranks of the insurgents, there was a famous knight called Josk who was a One Star Gold rank that was famed for his superb archery skills. In one of his exploits to avenge his former master's family, he snuck into Count Cobry' dominion alone and managed to snipe two of the count's illegitimate sons as well as hurt the shoulder of the count himself, causing a large bounty to be of 100 gold coins to be placed on him. Currently, Josk leads a force of over a few hundred men and has even threatened some local nobles to provide them with weapons and equipment. Soria expressed his hopes that Lorist's convoy won't run into him as he crossed that area.

He advised that Lorist take a detour and not pass through the area that was within the count's influence. Otherwise, should the count or the insurgent groups set their sights on the convoy, no matter how strong they were, there was no doubt that they would suffer quite a huge loss. Other than that, when Soria and his father were passing through the area, they noticed a huge number of refugees which followed armies

around in hopes of being able to get some food. They would also become a potential burden to the convoy.

After sending the baron and his son off, Lorist's expression turned solemn. *Should we continue on the original path or go back the way we came?* This was indeed a matter that required extensive consideration.

Chapter 59
Kill Them All

Lorist decided to let the convoy continue on its original path as he agreed with Charade's rationalization: the convoy was only passing through the area and not intending to fight for the right to rule the place. Besides that, the convoy was being escorted by an elite military force. Based on the military might they had, Count Cobry would definitely think twice about whether he would attack them, as, if he ended up being crippled from all the casualties he would get, wouldn't that open up an opportunity for the other scheming nobles to cause him even more grief? They believed that the count wouldn't make such an irrational decision.

Charade also said that if the count didn't give them any trouble, they could also trade weapons with him so that he may be able to unify the lands under his rule more swiftly. As for the livelihood of the other nobles, it didn't have anything to do with the convoy. No matter what kind of person Count Cobry was personally, it didn't matter much to Lorist and his gang as they were only passing through the area.

That reasoning had Lorist convinced to take the original route that they had planned. Potterfang also mentioned that given the family's forces, there was no need for them to fear the insurgent groups as they were mainly concerned with fighting the count. As long as they didn't band up together to attack the convoy, Potterfang was confident that he would be able to protect its safety.

However, Lorist didn't expect that he would actually run into such an arrogant and brutal bunch that didn't even bother to communicate before they attacked, much to his anger and dismay.

The convoy was divided into three battalions, namely, the vanguard battalion, the main battalion and the rearguard battalion. The vanguard battalion had up to 100 carriages with Yuriy's scout cavalry squad and a company of pikemen traveling ahead of them. Their task was to ensure the safety of the area in front of the convoy and notify the ones behind them about the best road to take or where to set up camp as well as prepare the appropriate measures for the defense and safety of the convoy.

The main battalion had 600 four-wheeled horse carriages that transported the

convoy's provisions, weapons and equipment as well as the family members of the soldiers. It was guarded by Terman's knight brigade, a company of crossbowmen, the heavy-armored battalion, a company of pikemen as well as 160 other guards.

The rearguard battalion had up to 100 carriages with only Dulles's carroballista unit and a company of pikemen guarding it. The main reason for that was the condition of the muddy road they traveled on. To prevent any damage to the carroballistas, such as having their wheels stuck in a pit, the former two battalions served to stamp the roads flat and sturdy by traveling ahead of the rearguard battalion. The main role of the rearguard battalion was to provide support for the carriages that needed maintenance and transport some miscellaneous baggage, such as the stuff they had taken from Viscount Mestre's castle. The people from the viscount's castle were also escorted by the rearguard battalion.

Having crossed the hills that marked the border between Baron Charles's and the other nobles' territories, Lorist instructed the convoy to be on high alert. On the first day, the journey went smoothly, but there were reports from pikemen that stated that some people have been sighted inspecting the convoy's campsite from afar. Lorist ordered for the crossbowmen company to make defense preparations and kill anyone who entered the camp. Fortunately, no such incident occurred during that night.

Noon on the second day since leaving the border, Dulles who was stationed at the rearguard battalion, reported that there was a group of people who followed the convoy from behind. Lorist instructed him to ignore them if they had no hostile intentions and let them do whatever they want. On that day, the convoy traveled more than 30 kilometers.

The third day since their departure, they passed through an abandoned town along the way. The buildings were noticeably burnt with many walls broken down and stained with soot and blood. From time to time, pieces of rotten body parts and shattered bones could be spotted on the grassy ground by the roadside.

That day afternoon, when the main battalion was passing through a forest, 100 mounted men equipped with leather armor and pikes charged straight towards them.

The main battalion with its 600 carriages stretched around 1.5 kilometers from head to tail with Lorist at its front. Upon hearing about the approaching horsemen, he brought Terman along to the encounter site right away. This happened the moment they were about to travel across a small hill.

Given that the main battalion was the middle section of the convoy, its security was managed by one of the senior students of the Dawn Academy. Seeing the 100 men galloping towards them, he brought three others on horseback and signalled for them to stop so that they may engage in negotiations. To show his sincerity, he didn't even bring his sword with him and ordered his attendants to not be in defensive formation.

Usually, when one was met with such a situation, one would stop and get off one's horse and send a representative, given that the convoy wasn't their enemy and there was no need for them to engage in conflict.

The group of horsemen slowed down, much to Lorist's relief. However, when he was about to get off the horse to get closer, something unexpected happened.

The horsemen quickly arrived before the senior student and a loud whistle could be heard. Two large nets were tossed by some of the horsemen and the senior student was trapped and was pulled off his horse. The hundreds of men then continued riding forward, stamping the senior student into meat paste. The three attendants of the senior student were also caught off guard and got impaled to their deaths…

The horsemen let out a loud cheer and started killing everyone within their sights. As there were only around ten pikemen who were patrolling that section of the convoy, they were all obliterated within seconds.

The whole place was pure chaos with a few carriages that carried the family members of the soldiers banging into each other. Screams of terror and cries of agony constantly echoed in the air.

One of the horsemen grabbed onto the hair of a girl on a carriage and pulled her out savagely, before stripping her naked, pinning her on the ground and taking his pants off. He was actually about to commit such a bestial act in broad daylight.

Another horseman grabbed a baby from its mother's embrace, causing the mother to leap forward in a desperate attempt to save her child. The horseman merely laughed and tossed the baby to another one of his mates, who readied the tip of his pike and let the baby land onto it, before letting out a wild, ghastly laughter, obviously elated at his accurate 'catch'. The baby stopped crying right away and the young mother stood there unmoving, as if she couldn't believe what that which had just happened before her eyes. It was not until the horseman who took her baby grabbed her when she snapped out of it and gave his arm a huge bite. Screaming in pain, the horseman lifted

his pike and nailed the mother down to the ground with it and trampled all over her body on horseback with his mate.

Another white-haired old man could be seen desperately shielding his grandchild from harm. One of the horsemen rode over and used his pike to nail both of them to the ground before brandishing his sword and lopping off the head of the old man.

The actions of the 100-odd horsemen had managed to create what many would consider a hell-like scene within minutes…

Lorist, who was still on his way from the small hill, was so enraged that he felt like his blood was boiling as he prompted his mount to go faster, leaving Terman and his knights far behind. It was then when the rest of the convoy started to react to the attack, with Potterfang mobilizing his troops and heading to the place where the attack occurred.

As he approached, Lorist let fly several javelins, nailing down the two horsemen who were trampling around the body of the young mother and her dead infant.

Just as the savage man's member was about to penetrate the young girl's body, a javelin sent him flying for three to four meters from where he originally was and pinned him securely on the ground. That horseman desperately clutched on the javelin before gurgling out blood nonstop and writhing on the floor in pain.

Having only brought a quiver of 12 javelins with him, Lorist managed to kill 12 horsemen before they noticed his arrival and started rushing towards him.

Drawing his longsword, his first slash severed the head of the horse as well as the whole upper torso of an incoming horseman. Blood gushed out unceasingly from the neck of the headless horse with the man who was cut in half still alive and letting out screams of pain while clawing about insanely on the ground.

One of the horsemen who followed behind the first one was greatly startled by the sight in front of him. But before he could react, Lorist's longsword swiftly melded through his neck like a knife through butter, sending yet another head flying through the air.

The third horseman aimed his pike forward and charged forcefully towards Lorist, who twisted his body on horseback to an inexplicable angle in response. The pike passed through the space where Lorist's body once was hitting nothing but air. A

sword flashed as the two horses dashed past each other and the third horseman fell off his mount with a huge opening in his chest.

The fourth and fifth horsemen tossed a net towards Lorist. Seeing it land on him, the two laughed gleefully. However, as they were about to pull it in, they only heard a low grunt before feeling an irresistible force pulling them forward instead, sending them flying towards Lorist. He actually managed to use his internal energy to turn the tables and pulled his adversaries towards him.

At that moment, the pike that the third horseman had intended to pierce Lorist with was still airborne. Lorist used his right foot to hook it up and held the pike in his hand before using it to make a fine kebab out of the two horsemen who were flying towards him.

Within but an instant, five people died without being able to put up a decent fight. It was then when the rest of the horsemen noticed the fearsome adversary who had just arrived. The leader of the group whistled loudly and tens of other mounted men surrounded Lorist from a distance. Given the length of his longsword, he couldn't lash out at the horsemen who circled him and attempted to stab him with their pikes. At that moment, he was trapped from all sides.

The loud sounds of the horses' hooves thumping on the ground intensified as Terman's men approached. They split into two units with one going for the horsemen who were surrounding Lorist and the other charging at the direction of the other horsemen. Twenty of the enemy soldiers instantly fell to the lances of the charging knights, with only two of the knights suffering light injuries thanks to their excellent defensive equipment. In the midst of the chaotic battle, Lorist grabbed at a random pike that was coming at him and impaled a few more of the enemy riders with it.

The 100-men-strong horsemen group was only left with 60-odd men. Upon seeing Lorist and Terman's fierce counterassault, they banded up and started retaliating as well. Having already been enraged by the scene before them, Terman and his fully-armored knights all rushed toward their enemies with bloodshot eyes and quickly incapacitated the incoming horsemen. With a longsword in his left hand and a pike in his right, Lorist rushed towards wherever the enemy was and began slaughtering away without holding back, causing ten other horsemen to die by his hand.

The pained cries of man and beast intermingled as the attackers crumbled. Never did they expect for the convoy's forces to be that powerful. In only a few moments, only

30 of the original 100 were left. The remaining foes understood that they have run into an insurmountable wall and quickly turned to retreat. At that moment, Yuriy's scout cavalry squad came over with Reidy, Charade and Patt to offer their support.

With a dark expression on his face, Lorist got off his horse and jumped onto another one that Reidy had brought over. He instructed Charade, "I'll let you handle this place. Let Terman and his knights help you out."

"Where are you heading to?" Charade asked.

Lorist responded by pointing towards the 30 men who were escaping as he radiated a murderous killing intent. "I'm going to kill off every single one of them, even if I have to chase them till the ends of the earth!" He then rode towards the escaping men without waiting for a reply.

Charade shouted towards Reidy and Patt, "What are you guys waiting for?! Go follow him quickly and bring a few more horses and javelins with you! Also, get Yuriy and his scouts to go support him as well!"

…

The chase only lasted within half an hour before Lorist managed to catch up to the escaping horsemen as they were slowing down due to their mounts having run out of stamina. While they could still travel at a slower speed, it was far from their maximum performance when they were in their peak condition.

Having just gotten on a fresh mount which has yet to be tired out, the distance between him and his prey narrowed ever so gradually.

It was at that moment when a few of the horsemen who were lagging behind decided to turn over and face Lorist. Either they had already accepted their fate and wanted to put up a last fight, or they had not seen Lorist in action on the battlefield moments before.

Even though there were two quivers' worth of javelins hanging by his mount, Lorist didn't intend to use them as he felt that killing these fiends with those would merely be giving them a swift, painless death. Within his mind flashed the images of a head that was full of white hair flying through the air and a despairing young mother looking at her child impaled upon a pike, along with the numerous other corpses that laid unmoving back at the convoy. Lorist's eyes were currently bloodshot. Now that

the fiends were slowing down, he felt an uncanny patience as he prepared to make these humanoid demons regret that they were ever born into the world.

"Agh!" cried a horseman as both his upper limbs were sent flying through the air with his body tumbling down his mount, contorting in agony. Lorist carefully maneuvered his horse around the corpse so that he wouldn't die instantly from being stepped on.

"Ugh!" Another horseman's voice rang out as Lorist forcefully parried his pike and used his own pike to pierce through the horseman's chest. Lifting him up from his horse with the pike, Lorist carefully lowered the it so that the impaled man wouldn't slip off the tip and dragged him along the floor, causing him to continue letting out ear-piercing wails.

Another two horsemen flanked Lorist from both sides with their pikes aimed straight at his body like insidious vipers. Within an instant, Lorist's silhouette vanished from the horseback and the pikes only pierced through air. Under the impression that Lorist had already got off his horse, the two horsemen turned their heads downward to look, only to see Lorist appearing on horseback yet again like a phantom. With an explosive slash, the horseman on his left was severed into two at his waistline and screamed in sheer terror. The horseman on the right let out a more heart-wrenching shriek after both his legs parted from his body with his horse also cut into two. The blood gushing out from the stumps of the slashes dyed Lorist and his horse crimson red.

The fifth horseman let go of his pike and sat on his horse unmoving, with both his hands clasped as he begged for forgiveness and mercy. Without a change in expression, Lorist leaned downward and picked up a pike from the ground, rode forward with it in hand, and thrust it into the horseman's mouth through the back of his head. *Since you bothered to beg for mercy, I'll let you die a painless death,* Lorist thought as the horseman's lifeless body slipped from his horse.

The sixth horseman had long been scared shitless upon seeing Lorist cut the horsemen that flanked both his sides into halves and he instantly turned tail to run. But in time, his horse slowed down to a much slower pace. He quickly noticed that Lorist had started approaching him from the rear. No, it was more like Lorist was riding his horse at a leisurely speed without any rush at all. Seeing a ghastly sneer appear his bloodied face that revealed two rows of shiny-white teeth, this horseman was frightened to the point of desperation and charged forward with his pike unexpectedly.

Lorist stretched his hand out and grabbed the incoming weapon and gave it a strong pull. Using the hilt of his sword, he knocked on the back of the head of the horseman and caused him to lose all his ability to resist, lying slumped and unconscious on Lorist's horse's saddle. He then took the nets they brought with them and fastened it to the horseman's neck with the other end tied to his saddle and threw the man to the back of his horse before resuming his pursuit.

Everytime he caught up to a group of horsemen, he would use that cruel method to make these damned souls hope that they would be granted death and eternal rest, further causing the horsemen in front to want to grow ever more anxious. Some even pierced the rears of their horses, hoping to jolt them to increase their speed in the face of injury and death.

However, the horses soon collapsed from complete exhaustion with the weapon still stuck to their rear ends and no amount of beating could bring them to life again.

Lorist slowly approached the enemy with his horse dragging the long dead chunks of the corpses of the doomed horsemen. At that moment, Lorist appeared to be smiling serenely, but his mind was rapidly devising a method to cause his adversaries the most amount of pain before killing them off. He truly hated the assailants to the utmost and he had not a single iota of empathy or mercy to spare on them.

Seeing the nightmarish being gradually creeping up to them, the horsemen looked at Lorist's bloodshot eyes with a despairing expression. Knowing that no salvation would come to them, they all cursed Lorist loudly in unison before gritting their teeth and plunging their pikes into their own chests.

Sol, they even committed suicide, Lorist thought as he cut the dying enemies into half before resuming his chase.

Leaving the small forest, Lorist noticed a military encampment not far away while the remaining 8 horsemen suddenly regained their vigor and started shouting loudly towards the camp as they started stabbing their mounts from time to time with their weapons.

Not a single one of you will be able to escape, Lorist thought, after which he prompted his horse to gallop faster to continue his onslaught.

Chapter 60
Camp Intrusion and Takeover

The horseman who was lagging behind the most turned and thrust his pike wildly towards Lorist. He didn't expect for any of the thrusts to actually connect and only hoped that it would help stave off his punisher for the slightest bit longer so that reinforcements from his camp would arrive and save him in time.

Catching the wildly flailing pike with his bare hands, Lorist gave it a firm tug and swung his sword toward the despairing horseman. "Aggh!" cried that man loudly as his left leg separated from his body while he fell on the ground head-first.

Lorist caught up to another horseman who had already lost his pike midway during the chase. He could do nothing but stare at Lorist approaching and impaling him straight through the chest.

Shaking the body off the pike, Lorist saw that there were still six inhumane beasts riding in front of him. The camp not too far away had already noticed the situation and opened the main gates. Ten other similarly-equipped horsemen rushed out of the camp.

At that moment, one of the remaining escaping horsemen noticed that his mount that was slowing down. Suddenly, it lost its footing and crashed to the ground head first, rolling on the ground due to the inertia. When it came to a stop, it merely twitched a couple of times before it ceased moving entirely. The horseman, however, was pretty quick to respond to that as he had jumped off his saddle the moment his horse fell, and rolled on the ground to break his fall before recovering and standing up with his pike still held tightly in his arm. Seeing Lorist nearing him on horseback, the horseman made a savage expression, gave a war cry and rushed forward with his pike. His target wasn't Lorist himself, but rather his mount.

Giving a cool laugh, Lorist waved the pike in his right hand to meet the blow. The moment before the two pikes collided, the dismounted horseman gave a smug look and a blade glow suddenly extended out of his weapon.

Oh, so he's a Silver ranked combatant. Lorist still remembered that during the

catastrophic scene back at the convoy just now, he noticed that there were two Silver ranks among the attackers, one of which had been struck off his horse by Lorist with the other one killed by Terman. He didn't expect that there would be another one among the escaping horsemen. However, his intention of hitting Lorist's horse with his blade glow was a futile one when; Lorist gave his pike a flick, causing it to collide against the other pike and knocked it out of trajectory.

Not only did Lorist's pike not break from hitting against his blade glow, he also felt a strong wave of energy conduct through his weapon, causing him to unwittingly let go of it. Looking up with disbelief, the horseman could only see Lorist's pike dig its way through his chest at lightning-speed.

The other five horsemen used their spurs to jolt their horses even faster the moment they saw the ten other reinforcements who were approaching from their front with Lorist quickly closing in behind them. Their horses shrieked from the pain and lurched forward even more quickly like an arrow that was just fired from a bow.

Thinking that they were already in the clear upon seeing the reinforcements, the five horsemen breathed sighs of relief. Just as they were about to greet the incoming soldiers, some of them noticed the stunned expressions of those coming to aid them and turned to their backs. Much to their surprise, Lorist had already caught up to them. Drawing a large arc in the air with his pike, Lorist swung it towards one of the horsemen and caused him to fall soundlessly off his horse with the back of his skull fractured.

The shadow of the pike moving at high speeds could barely be seen as it swished around while making an audible sound in the air. Another two horsemen had their backs sliced open seven or eight times with Lorist and fell off their horses right away. The remaining two horsemen lowered their bodies to lean on their horses to avoid being hit while the reinforcement soldiers cursed and charged at Lorist upon seeing three of their comrades slain so easily.

The first one of the reinforcement soldiers who had made his way in front of Lorist, a Silver ranked combatant, raised his pike that radiated a blade glow and pointed it towards Lorist's upper torso. After swinging his own pike to misdirect that of the enemy's, Lorist traced the weapon back to the horseman's neck and decapitated him.

Raising his pike and spurring his horse, Lorist rushed towards the ten incoming horsemen. Loud booms rang out as the pikes collided, with Lorist's occasionally

finding its way into some of the horsemen's bodies, causing various shrieks to echo and mix. Within just one exchange, among 7 of the 13 horsemen reinforcements, 2 were on the ground struggling in pain with the other 5 already long dead. The remaining six of the reinforcements got back into formation, however, none of them dared to rush forward to attack.

Seeing two of the remaining horsemen that initially attacked the convoy distancing themselves from him, Lorist quickly continued his chase while the six other horsemen behind him felt insulted that they were totally ignored and started cursing loudly as they followed behind Lorist.

But, Lorist paid it no heed as if he wasn't aware of the rest approaching him gradually from behind at all. When one of them finally got near enough and prepared to stab him with his pike, Lorist suddenly twisted his body and hooked that man up with his pike and swung it towards another horseman. Before the second horseman could decide whether he should catch his incoming comrade, he noticed Lorist suddenly change direction, and within a flash, two other of his comrades had fallen off their horses.

The horseman was greatly startled and could no longer care less about his approaching ally. As he dodged the airborne body, a sudden flash of the blade of the pike could be seen enlarging before his very face, followed by the feeling of cold metal on his nose before everything turned black as he lost all awareness.

Without taking too much time, Lorist had successfully dispatched the six horsemen who were chasing him. Turning back to the direction where the other two had escaped, he noticed that they were only 100 or so meters from the main gates of the camp, with 40 plus other horsemen riding out to fight him.

Even though the encampment looks pretty big, there are only so few soldiers coming out, thought Lorist with much curiosity. By right, hundreds of soldiers should have rushed out like a horde of hornets by now given that they had seen tens of their comrades slaughtered right in front of their camp.

Once again rushing towards the enemy, Lorist laid his pike horizontally on the saddle and reached for his javelins with his right hand. Seeing 40 or so horsemen approaching, with a couple of grunts within a short period of time, he expended all 24 of his javelins, with each taking the life of one horseman with them. As the remaining 20 were still stunned at the sight and hesitating whether to continue the charge, Lorist

lifted his pike once again and dove right into their midst. With the horse maneuvering like a swimming dragon and the pike lashing out like a lightning bolt, one horseman after another fell in quick succession. After a while, the remaining 6 or 7 horsemen screamed and turned back towards their camp to escape.

The two who had a part in attacking the convoy had just made it to the gates of the camp and the guards manning the gates desperately tried to close it. If they hadn't been so desperate to close the gates, Lorist would have still remained outside to fend off the other horsemen while letting the two escape, However, the moment he took note of that, Lorist figured that the main force probably wasn't at the camp after all. Otherwise, why have only tens of people come out instead of hundreds? Even if they didn't have enough horses, there could still be infantry units.

Now that he had a hunch, Lorist stopped hesitating and followed behind the escaping horsemen and quickly arrived before the gates. The guards at the gates quickly took up their pikes that had been leaning on the walls in an attempt to block Lorist, only to end up dead by the side of the gates with holes dug deep into their chests.

After entering the camp, Lorist noticed that it was in fact quite empty. It seemed that the ones who came out to fight him just now were coincidentally near the gates at that time. Further away, the two fiends could be seen getting off their horses and entering a tent, presumably to report the encounter to their superior officers.

There was not one soldier standing guard outside the tent the two entered. Lorist got off his horse, tossed his pike aside and drew his sword before walking towards the tent.

The tent looked to be quite spacious from the outside and loud scolding voices could be heard.

Pushing the tent entrance open, Lorist could see the two escaped horsemen kneeling down to him and begging for mercy. *Wonderful. I won't have to waste so much energy now that they won't resist.* With his sword flashing, Lorist diced the two people's limbs into small parts, causing them to roll all over the ground and begging for a quick death.

Fwing! The sounds of two swords being drawn from their scabbards could be heard. It was then when Lorist lifted his head to check out the two men who stood up in the middle of the tent.

Standing in front of a bed within the tent was a plump man with dark brown hair and gray-colored eyes who had his upper body bare, wearing a fierce expression. In front of him was a stool on which stood a man half-dressed in a chain mail. The two of them currently had an expression on befuddlement with both their swords pointed to Lorist.

"You… Who are you? How did you get in here?" stammered the chain mail-wearing middle-aged man. Looking at the two limbless horsemen who were twitching in pain on the ground and turning his gaze back to Lorist, he broke out of his trance and breathed a deep breath before saying, "You actually dared to injure my men in my presence? How foolish of you!"

Without waiting for Lorist to reply, the brown-haired man regained his composure and leaped towards him like a raging storm, sending two blades of light flying towards Lorist with his two-handed sword.

Clang, clang! With but two light swings of his sword, Lorist knocked the blades of light away and said, "Hmm, a Gold rank?"

"Are you afraid now, boy? It's too late to have any regrets. I will let you understand that daring to go against us within our own camp is nothing but a death wish!"

"Ptooey!" Lorist displayed a completely unconcerned expression and said, "So what if you're a Gold rank? It's not like I've never fought one before. Since you said that these two fiends were your subordinates, then I guess you should be their leader? Then I guess I'll have to make you pay for the sins of your men who actually dared to attack my people. Even though they've already been wiped out by me, you still hold responsibility as their leader for not disciplining them well enough. How do you intend to make up for my loss?"

"What? You want me to pay you back even though you've killed my men? Let your mother roll in hell, what impudence! I will not rest until I skin you alive!" screamed the brown-haired man. With a heavy kick, he sent the brazier that was on the ground flying towards Lorist and rushed behind it with his sword readied.

Sol, Lorist cursed in his mind. Even though the man looked brutish and slow, he was in fact really quick-witted and sharp. While he looked like he was rushing towards Lorist in a fit of rage, it was actually a deviously calculated move that aimed to catch Lorist off guard by using the flaming hot brazier as a distraction. The man equipped

with a chain mail had also moved to Lorist's back and prepared to engage in a pincer attack with the brown-haired man. *So you think that by shouting, you can draw my attention to you and I wouldn't notice that guy behind me?*

As the red-hot charcoal was flying towards him, Lorist noticed a 30-centimeter-long blade glow emerge from the sword behind him. That plain-looking man was actually a peak Silver rank combatant. With the burning brazier and charcoal as well as the brown-haired man on one side and the Silver ranked chain mail-wearing man on the other, Lorist seemed like he had his escape routes sealed and had no choice but to face the full brunt of the force head on. Both the assailants revealed a sly smile as they thought that Lorist would definitely lose to them if he dared to take their strikes head on. After all, they had even successfully killed Gold ranked fighters with their plots and tricks before.

However, Lorist slumped downwards suddenly and stuck close to the floor as he moved out of the attack range of both the men before standing up again almost 2 meters away. Now that he was no longer between the two of them, their attacks headed towards each other, much to their disbelief. The brown-haired man desperately retracted his arm, but that had disrupted his circulating Battle Force and the backlash caused him to breathe heavily as a result.

On the other hand, the man with the chain mail managed to cut the brazier apart, but he wasn't able to deflect each and every one of the charcoal pieces, some of which landed on his face and hissing sounds could be heard accompanied by a smell of burnt flesh drifting in the air. Having been scalded right in the face, the man tossed his sword away and clawed at the spots where the charcoal had landed while letting out a ghastly shriek.

Flashes of the light reflecting off the blade could be seen within the tent as Lorist suddenly creeped up to the Gold ranked fighter and stood straight up. Thinking that the brown-haired man's shadow had suddenly come to life, the Silver ranked man who had been jumping around just a moment ago pointed his finger towards the Gold rank's back wordlessly with his mouth agape. Still not recovered from the backlash he received from suddenly retracting his Battle Force, the brown-haired man could only leap behind the middle-aged man in hopes that he would be able to buy himself some time to regain his composure. However, his movements couldn't match the speed of Lorist's sword.

Three sword swings flashed and both the arms of the brown-haired man fell to the

ground with another one of his legs parting from his body. With a loud thump, the man landed flat on the ground and still managed to roll behind the man with the chain mail as he had wished. But when he noticed his missing limbs, he started crying out in pain uncontrollably.

The middle-aged man stammered, "17th… 17th brother…"

However, the brown-haired man had long lost consciousness from all the blood he had lost. The middle-aged man once again picked up his sword and a blade glow quickly manifested. Under the impression that the middle-aged man would fight to his death, Lorist witnessed him swinging the sword twice before he dashed out of the tent right away.

Sol, do you think you can escape? Lorist followed the man out of the tent quickly, only to find the middle-aged man swinging his weapon towards him rapidly with a loud grunt.

Lorist lightly groaned in dismay. He had often experienced such desperate attempts when he was dueling all those competitors back at the Dawn Academy. However, now that he didn't have to hold back unlike the days when he was dueling, he raised his sword, aimed it carefully and moved into the rain of sword strikes like an agile fish swimming swiftly in a pool filled with blades…

"Ugh…" The sword pierced the man at his left chest as he voiced out his pain and slumped onto the ground with both his eyes opened wide in disbelief.

Lorist only used one sword strike. Without parrying any of the middle-aged man's strikes, he thrust towards the opening amidst the storm of swords and killed that man with only one move while only sustaining a few light scratches on his shoulder.

As he pulled his sword out and was about to head to the larger tent, Lorist detected sounds of people breathing from the tent before. Turning back and re-entering the place, he pushed the curtains around the bed aside and saw two naked young girls huddled together, shivering in fear. Trails of tear stains could be seen on their faces with numerous bruises all over the rest of their body as a result of the abuse they had received.

Lorist sighed and let go of the curtains and searched the tent for the girls' clothes, but he couldn't find them. He had no choice but to get two sets of clean men's robes and

tossed it into the curtains before leaving for the larger tent.

Upon exiting, he saw that a battle was going on: it appeared that Yuriy, Reidy and Patt had led the scout cavalry to the camp after seeing Lorist rush in recklessly without regard for his own safety. However, they were only met with up to 70 soldiers who weren't even properly dressed in their armors, with some of them even coming out half-nude or barefoot. Faced with that comical sight, Yuriy and gang started slaughtering away in delight. The scout cavalry was just like Lorist in that they used their javelins to take down nearby enemies while opting for the crossbow to shoot ones that were further away. Before Lorist left that tent, they had already managed to gain control of the whole camp.

Seeing Lorist emerge from the tent, Yuriy quickly rode over. Getting off his horse, he said, "It seems like the main force of this camp has left only a few of them to guard the place."

Lorist said, "Ask your men to leave some alive so that we can question them later."

Yuriy relayed that order to a scout near him and that scout nodded before heading off again.

At that moment, Reidy and Patt could be seen approaching. "Master, 400 people are being held prisoner at the middle section of the camp. Also, we've discovered a large amount of food and other provisions at the back as well."

"Oh," mumbled Lorist as he looked towards Yuriy. "It seems that the camp is not an ad hoc one, but rather a long term outpost. Yuriy, send some men to follow Patt to go back and inform Charade to bring the convoy here. We'll be staying here tonight. Patt, make sure you stay safe."

"Alright," Patt said as he left the camp with three other light cavalry troops.

"Reidy, release the prisoners and have them stay together at that area. Make them some food as well. We'll handle the other stuff once Charade gets here. Yuriy, have the light cavalry sweep the camp once more just in case there are any soldiers who have managed to escape our grasp. Make sure you secure the food as well just in case anyone intends to burn it."

"Yes," said Reidy and Yuriy.

Walking to and fro around the large tent, Lorist waited patiently for the rest of the convoy to arrive. Several light cavalry troops could be seen searching the tents one by one. Just as Lorist was planning to ask someone to clear out the corpses in the large tent, he saw a blade glow flash from within a tent in the distance followed by two light cavalry soldiers flying out of the tent with blood coming out of their noses and another one falling on the ground outside the tent with his head severed. A tear opened up at one part of the tent as a silhouette emerged and got on a horse of the cavalry troops and escaped from the gates of the camp.

Sol, so there was still one Silver rank hiding there, Lorist thought, before he got on a horse nearby and started his chase.

Chapter 61
Arrival of the Convoy

Two light cavalry soldiers were guarding the main gates of the camp. From afar, they could see a rider approaching quickly. Curious about what orders that rider might have received, one of the guards got closer to check it out. However, upon closer inspection, he noticed that the rider wasn't one of his comrades and quickly raised his pike to intercept him, only to have it broken by the Silver ranked rider's blade glow. Had it not been for the fact that the the enemy was in a rush to escape, the two light cavalry guards might have been killed already.

The rider on the stolen mount whooshed past the two light cavalry soldiers who had been dismounted and successfully went out of the camp. Cursing as they tried to prop themselves up from the ground, the two soldiers then got back on their horses with one readying his crossbow and the other taking out his javelin, but they could do naught but watch as the enemy galloped out of their firing range.

Lorist quickly arrived and took the javelin in the soldier's hand before continuing on the chase. At that moment, he was about 40 meters apart from that Silver ranked rider and he wasn't confident that he would be able to hit his mark from that distance. Seeing the distance between him and the enemy increase gradually, he decided to try his luck by throwing the javelin.

Suddenly, his horse staggered and started wobbling unstably as if it were about to crash. Greatly startled, Lorist quickly got both his feet out of the stirrups, jumped and somersaulted in the air before landing and rolling on the ground, escaping the fate of tumbling to his death with his mount. Seeing his horse on the ground, Lorist threw his javelin down angrily. *Sol, why is my luck so bad…* The horse he had taken at a whim in fact belonged to one of the two soldiers he was chasing to the camp before. It's no wonder the horse slowed down right after exiting the camp early on, having been exhausted beyond its limits.

Seeing the Silver ranked soldier escape from his grasps, Lorist started fuming with rage. The silhouette of the man seemed like a dot hundreds of meters away. Sounds of horses galloping could be heard from behind: they were the light cavalry troops who

had reacted to the sudden deaths of two of their comrades. However, they were far too late.

At that moment, Lorist heard the twang of a released bowstring and saw a green stream of light traveling out from the wilderness about a hundred meters away from the camp. As if he was struck by lightning, the escaping Silver rank got knocked off horseback and landed heavily onto the ground. His horse continued running for a while before stopping and turning back towards the camp.

Lorist stopped the few scouts who had just arrived from entering the forest to search for the source of the arrow and pointed towards the place where the Silver ranked soldier fell. “Go inspect that area and bring him back over here. Be careful, that Sol-damned bastard may be playing dead for all we know. I’ve already had one of my men die at his hand.”

Once again looking towards the spot in the forest from which the green ray of light originated, Lorist saw a man holding a large green bow with some leaves and twigs covering him to serve as camouflage and felt that the man was paying attention to his every move.

Waving towards the direction of that man, Lorist made a gesture of invitation. However, that man made no response and slowly retreated into the trees, eventually disappearing completely from sight.

Letting out a breath of relief, Lorist thought, *what an impressive archer… For him to be able to shoot someone from 80 meters away and also manage to knock him off his horse for about 6 meters… The strength of the bow is indeed great.* The velocity of the arrow was also incredibly fast given that Lorist could only barely see its trail through dynamic vision.

While Lorist himself wasn’t worried about that mysterious archer attacking his base, he was still concerned for the wellbeing of his light cavalry troops. That man was possibly Josk, the Gold ranked knight that Soria had mentioned a couple of days before. After all, Lorist found it hard to believe that just anybody could have such fine archery skill as that man did. It was a shame that person’s identity couldn’t be verified as he didn’t accept Lorist’s invitation.

The cavalry troops have secured the body of the Silver rank and were on their way back to the camp. When they approached, Lorist really didn’t know whether to laugh

or cry. The cavalry troops were too cautious and each of them made sure to shoot the corpse with their crossbows twice to make sure the Silver rank wasn't playing dead, effectively turning him into a huge human pincushion.

The cause of death of the Silver rank was pretty obvious: there was a long, green arrow that entered the man's right upper torso and re-emerged from his left armpit. Pulling the arrow out and ripping a piece of the corpse's clothing off, Lorist wiped the blood off the arrow and noticed a small, unclear inscription that read 'Joe'. As expected, that man who carried the green bow was in fact Josk, the Gold ranked knight.

Once again looking at the arrows embedded in the corpse, Lorist sighed and said, "Gosh, don't you guys have eyes? He's already long dead, yet you wasted so many crossbow bolts on him and even ruined his armor. Oh well, just cut his head off and display it by the road of the main camp entrance. After stripping the body of anything that's still usable, toss it in the pyre and burn it with the other corpses."

After returning to the large tent in the middle of the camp, Yuriy came over and reported that he has already swept the camp once more with his troops and discovered three more enemies who have been hiding, two of whom was captured alive with the other one killed. There were no casualties apart from two of the troops incurring light injuries. Including the one who died and the other heavily injured from being ambushed by the Silver ranked rider as well as those who got hurt from the initial assault, the whole of the light cavalry troops only have 3 casualties, 7 heavily-injured with 10 others with light injuries in total.

However, Yuriy mentioned that they also discovered quite a number of women who were badly abused during their search numbering around 30 of them in total. There were two completely nude women who had their necks snapped from the tent the Silver rank rushed out of previously.

Nodding silently, Lorist pointed towards the large tent behind him and said, "There are two others within. Ask the prisoners who are locked up in the middle of the camp about the women's origins and have someone assigned to look after them. When Charade and the rest of the convoy arrives, we'll have some herbalists take a look at them and save the ones who can still make it and end the suffering of those who are already beyond saving.

"Other than that, cut off the heads of the enemy horsemen and put them up on stakes to be displayed all over the camp outside. Strip them of their equipment and burn their

corpses after that. Make sure to note the number of people we have killed. Bring the prisoners we captured alive over here, I want to question them personally."

Lorist's interrogation method was pretty straightforward. First, he stripped them naked and had Reidy bring a hammer over. Those who refused to answer each time would have one of their toes hammered flat. After the first stubborn one was made an example of, the remaining five were so terrified that they answered whatever question they were asked with swift cooperation.

True to Lorist's hunches, the ones who attacked the convoy were indeed part of Count Cobry's troops, his elite pike cavalry troops to be exact. This time, the count had mobilized two pike cavalry companies and one garrison regiment in total, amounting to almost a third of all his forces, with the aim of completely wiping out the insurgents based within his territories as well as enslave young and strong men to work as hard laborers. The people leading this undertaking was his 11 illegitimate sons, three of which were Gold ranks with the rest being Silver ranks. However, three of the sons had already perished under Lorist's hand.

According to the prisoners, the brown-haired man and the middle-aged man with the chain mail as well as the Silver rank who stole a horse and attempted to escape were all the sons of the count.

As for the camp, the prisoners said that it was a long term encampment that served as a bridgehead[1] and was normally guarded by a company of garrison troops. It was used as a place for the main force to resupply their rations and provisions. As the main force had to cross the mountains during the most recent expedition, they had their garrison troops that were supposed to be stationed there follow along and only left a company of pike cavalry troops to guard the encampment.

On Grindia, there was a particular way in which the military was organized. The one at the top of the hierarchy were legions, which consisted of divisions of several types of troops, such as heavy-armored divisions, pike infantry divisions, etc. And each division could in turn be further subdivided into regiments, companies and squads, in decreasing order of size. Commonly, a squad numbered around 80 to 120 troops. 4 to 5 squads formed a company, and 4 to 5 companies constituted a regiment, with a division containing at least 4 to 5 regiments in total. For example, in the Whitelion Legion, one of the three main armies of the former empire which Potterfang used to serve in, the total amount of soldiers numbered up to 80000.

The forces of Count Cobry were mainly bolstered by the pike cavalry troops, which have received quite a generous amount of support and funding. In total, there were five companies of pike cavalry troops, each consisting of four squads of 120 soldiers each. For two of the companies to be sent out for the expedition was already quite a large force.

The prisoners also mentioned that the main force that had went to wipe out the insurgents would return in a day or two because they only brought 15 days' worth of supplies with them and it was already the 13th day. The brown-haired commander even sent one squad of pike cavalry to receive them when they return with the two other squads that having left to hunt due to having nothing better to do. The 'hunt' that the prisoner referred to was the patrolling of the surrounding area to capture refugees to force them into labor. The 400-odd people who were kept locked up in the middle of the camp was the result of such 'hunts'.

However, never would the pike cavalry have expected that Lorist's convoy's military might far outranked their own, leading to their total demise as well as the ones who stayed guard at the camp, resulting in the camp being captured by the convoy.

Lorist questioned them very detailedly and asked a final question, that was, why did the hunting squad not check their targets properly before deciding to attack it?

Only then did the prisoners understand the reason that prompted Lorist to come slaughtering his way in with the rest of his troops and started cursing their dead comrades unceasingly. However, one of the prisoners who looked in his thirties stayed quiet and looked at the Norton Family's flag with a meaningful gaze.

Noticing the prisoner's odd behavior, Lorist asked, "Have you seen this flag before?"

The prisoner shook his head and said, "No I didn't, but one time when I was summoned by the count to his room, I saw two boxes which had the same symbol inscribed on it. Also…"

The prisoner suddenly quieted down.

Lorist asked, "Also what? Feel free to tell me about it, I promise to spare your life if you do. As for the others…"

Lorist made a gesture to his subordinates, signalling them to give the other prisoners a swift death.

The prisoner kneeling in front of Lorist was scared out of his wits upon hearing the agonized pleading of his other comrades. He quickly mentioned that he only joined the pike cavalry troops recently and used to be a mercenary and only joined by coincidence because one acquaintance of his who was a member of the count's forces had invited him.

According to the prisoner, when he was drinking with his acquaintance and a few other pike cavalry soldiers, he heard about the count's rise to fortune and power. Back during the day before the First Prince publicly rebelled against the empire, the count was already partners in crime with the First Prince in some shady business. Word was that during the days Count Cobry was said to be cooped up in his territory and nurturing his illegitimate sons, he was actually having some of his grown up sons disguising themselves as bandits to pillage traveling merchant convoys to gather funds and resources in preparation for the First Prince's rebellion as well as amass a huge wealth for himself in the process. When the former emperor was at his sickbed, the First Prince had requested for the garrison forces of the Bodolger Province to be strengthened to keep a bandit called Redbeard at bay; Redbeard was actually the identity the count took up when he was pillaging merchant convoys. Every time before he started a raid, he would put on a large, red, fake beard to disguise himself. The hunting group that Lorist had encountered today were actually part of the forces Count Cobry led to pillage the merchant convoys as Redbeard. They probably recalled the days when they disguised themselves as bandits and decided to relive it and attacked the convoy without much giving it much consideration.

Lorist also asked the prisoner to describe the size and design of the boxes he had seen in the room of the count before making a sketch of them and showing it to the prisoner for confirmation, to which he nodded with certainty.

After that, Lorist ordered that the prisoner be locked up and started pacing around outside the large tent, seething with anger. He drew his sword and completely pulverized the bed that was within the tent.

Astonished at Lorist's sudden outburst, Yuriy waited for him to calm down before asking about the reason why he was so mad.

Lorist thought quietly for a moment before saying, "Those two boxes were ordered and made by my Third Uncle from Morante City. Originally, he had intended to use them to store the dowry he prepared for the woman he wanted to marry and bring back to the dominion. Who would have expected that the trip would be his last! I could

never forget the look my uncle had when he brought me to retrieve the boxes. I could tell that he truly loved that woman from the look he had on his face when he looked at them. That's why I'm so familiar with the design of the boxes. Count Cobry, you truly have did it this time. Just you wait…"

Lorist's voice sounded so venomous that it caused Yuriy and Reidy to shiver a little upon hearing it.

Even though Lorist had only met his Third Uncle once every three years after he found himself in the noble youth's body, the concern and care his uncle had shown him made him feel cherished and warm. It truly saddened him that the first piece of news he got of his uncle after 7 years of silence had been that of his death. Now that he was certain of the main perpetrator, there was no way that he would let that person scotch free. He decided to put the journey to the back of his head and focus his priorities on settling his grudge with Count Cobry.

At that moment, a light cavalry soldier came to report that Charade and the rest would be arriving soon as the Norton Family battle standard was visible from the camp from afar.

Yuriy and Reidy breathed a sigh of relief and led Lorist out of the large tent towards the main entrance of the encampment.

Charade came to Lorist with another piece of bad news the moment he arrived. He said that the pike infantry company of the convoy vanguard had encountered another attack from a squad of pike cavalry troops after Yuriy and Reidy had left with Lorist and the light cavalry scouts to storm the camp. It was fortunate that the senior students realized that they wouldn't be a match for the enemy if they faced them head on and got the convoy into a defensive formation by arranging the carriages into a circular defensive perimeter to buy time until Terman's knights arrive to reinforce them. Coupled with the crossbowman company under Malek's command, the convoy successfully fended off the enemies with only 30 of them managing to escape. However, the pike infantry company had lost 22 people with the remaining hundred injured.

Sounds of chatter and curses erupted from within the camp. Lorist handed the other matters for Charade to handle and instructed Reidy and Patt to boil him some water so that he may take a bath and wash off the coagulated blood on his body that was causing him much itch and discomfort.

After dinner, the large main tent was brightly illuminated with the whole main cast of the convoy present within.

"…47 of the soldiers' family members died with another 130 of them injured, all 21 of the pikemen who were in charge of the security of that part of the convoy perished as well and Chivos…" Charade's voice turned deep at the mention of that name. Chivos was one of the senior students of the academy that had been sent to communicate with the enemy's pike cavalry squad but only ended up trampled to death after the ambush.

"Including the second assault we suffered, a total of 43 infantry pikemen died with 58 others sustaining heavy injuries, 7 of which ended up handicapped and will be unable to recover fully with the remaining 86 sustaining light injuries. Yuriy reported that the light cavalry troops suffered 3 casualties, with 7 heavily-injured and another 13 lightly-injured with none of them crippled. Terman's knights on the other hand only had 6 people who got light injuries with no casualties in their unit. That concludes the report on the damages and losses of the troops."

Lorist followed up with introducing the rest at the meeting about the situation of the prisoners as well as the possibility that Count Corby was possibly the one who had caused the demise of Lorist's Third Uncle and the rest of the Norton Family's merchant convoy.

"I believe that you guys are well aware that the original plan of crossing this area without getting into huge conflicts will no longer be possible. Based on the modus operandi of the count and his troops, it can be seen that they are nothing but inhumane fiends who cannot be reasoned with and have nothing but thoughts of slaughter in their heads, as can be seen from the death of our beloved comrade, Chivos. For his sake, and those of the innocent family members and the brave soldiers of the family who perished, I have decided to avenge them! We will not rest until we stomp the Cobry Family flag under our feet!" said Lorist resolutely.

The whole tent was silent after Lorist stopped talking, but quiet chatters and murmurs gradually built up. Some of them approved of Lorist's decision while others were still a little hesitant. According to the testimony of the prisoners, Count Cobry's forces could possibly far exceed that of the convoy's. Was this truly a battle the convoy could afford to fight in?

Just as the group of people within the tent were discussing the matter, a light cavalry

soldier rushed in from outside and reported to Lorist that a knight called Josk wanted to meet him and said that he came at the invitation of the new master of the encampment.

Lorist slapped on his thighs and said, “Quick, invite him in! No, let me go out to receive him…”

Chapter 62
Offense and Defense

Marksman Josk looked to be in his thirties. With his head of blonde hair and well-defined physique, he looked exceedingly handsome and wore a resolute expression on his face. However, Lorist could detect a faint hint of grief between his eyebrows.

After receiving him from the entrance and introducing him to the rest of the family knights, Lorist gave a brief summary of the convoy's situation and told Josk about how he captured the camp out of retaliation from the attack earlier that day. He also asked Josk the main reason he decided to visit them.

Knight Josk also spoke rather frankly and said that he had come to check whether the military might of the convoy could withstand the attack from the count's regiment of garrison troops as well as another company of pike cavalry. His original intention of lurking around the area in the afternoon was to sabotage and burn the count's supplies as the security was more lax than usual and force the count's army to retreat to their main base to resupply and give the insurgents of the western mountains some time to rest and recuperate.

Now that Lorist had conquered the camp, he had unintentionally helped the insurgents out. Josk confessed that when he saw Lorist bringing less than 100 soldiers to attack the camp, he thought that Lorist's forces wasn't really trying to conquer it given the disparity of his forces and that of the camp. He also said that he was anticipating the arrival of the other company of pike cavalry to come back to defend that place before he met Charade and the rest of the convoy when he was leaving the forest and understood that the pike cavalry unit had probably clashed with the convoy already. Worried that Lorist wouldn't be able to handle the full brunt of the count's forces and incur a huge loss, Josk felt that he should warn them just in case.

According to him, Count Cobry had a total of five companies of garrison troops with each having a bowman squad, an infantry squad as well as two pike infantry squads with each squad having 120 people each. All the soldiers in the garrison troops numbered around 2400 people. Including the company of pike infantry that was patrolling the outer areas of the mountains, the count's rebel-sweeping troops had up

to 2900 people.

Charade interjected and mentioned that according to Soria, they only had 1000 pike infantry and 2000 garrison troops and wondered how the count had managed to expand his forces that quickly.

“Who’s Soria?” Josk asked. Charade proceeded to tell the knight about their encounter with Baron Charles and his son.

Curling his lips, Josk said, “I know Baron Charles and I’ve even met him a couple of times. Knight Soria’s information isn’t totally wrong, but the information only describes the count’s forces a year ago. At that time, the count had only returned to his dominion for a short while. Given that he has been fighting battles here and there and wiping out several landed nobles, he definitely would have expanded his forces by now. Other than the troops that were dispatched to wipe out the insurgents in the western mountains, Count Cobry still has around three companies of pike infantry back at his dominion as well as a regiment of garrison troops and two other newly-formed companies of garrison troops.”

In the recent times, the troops of the count have successfully wiped out a few insurgent strongholds in the mountains and obtained a substantial amount of food and other supplies. During the past two days, they had turned their attention to the largest insurgent group in the area who were based at Hiddenbull Stronghold. While the insurgents at the stronghold have managed to resist due to the advantage of terrain, they were at their breaking point due to the sheer number of casualties they had sustained. That was why Josk intended to burn the supplies of the camp to ensure that the assault will stop temporarily. However, now that Lorist had occupied the encampment, the count’s forces will definitely return to recapture the place when they get wind of it.

Josk suggested to Lorist that if their forces would not be enough to defeat that of the count’s, they should quickly leave the area and burn the whole camp down to force the count’s forces back to the dominion. Given that the western mountains was only one day of travel away from the camp, they would definitely get news about the conquered camp and return by the evening of the next day. If the convoy doesn’t hurry up, they wouldn’t be able to escape in time.

Shaking his head, Lorist said, “No, the convoy cannot leave. They’ll definitely catch up to us if we try because the convoy travels so much slower than a single military unit.

As long as the pike cavalry manages to stall the convoy, their regiment of infantry garrison troops will definitely catch up eventually. Instead of giving the enemy the advantage of attacking us head on in an open field battle, it would be wiser to secure the camp and use the terrain to our advantage to minimize our losses."

Filled with killing intent, Lorist said, "If we're going to fight, let's give it our all! I want to use this camp to wipe out all the 3000 men of their rebel-sweeping army and teach that damned count a lesson."

He also elaborated that even though the count's forces outnumbered them three to one, their actual battle prowess was far inferior to that of the convoy's forces. According to the testimonies of the prisoners, the only unit of the count that posed a threat to the convoy was the pike cavalry unit which were constituted mainly of soldiers who have had their Battle Force awakened. However, if their cavalry lost the advantage of charging and had to engage in close combat with the convoy's heavy-armored soldiers, they would definitely be wiped out without question. As for the remaining 2000 garrison troops who can't utilize Battle Force, wouldn't they just be like a herd of sheep thrown into the midst of a wolf pack that was Terman's Battle Force-trained knight brigade?

As for Yuriy and his squad of light cavalry scouts, they will ensure that not one of the count's soldiers manage to escape. Lorist also mentioned that they also had crossbowmen, pike infantry as well as a carroballista unit and he couldn't imagine how in the world the convoy would lose to the count's forces.

"As for how we would bait the enemy into our trap, that's easy. Knight Josk has mentioned that even though the sweeping troops have breached a few mountain strongholds and have gotten ahold of a batch of supplies, it would only last them for up to 6 days at most. After receiving news of their camp being conquered by us, they will only be left with two choices. Either they return to the count's dominion or come here to try to recapture the camp. I'm sure they will choose the latter, because if they choose to return to the count's dominion, they would definitely be severely punished by the count for the deaths of three of his illegitimate sons. The officer in charge will have no choice but to try to recapture this place to make up for the losses he has incurred.

"When we defend the camp, we must lure them into a false sense of security and let them feel that they have a chance at taking the camp back. After two days of stalling, we'll open the gates and let all of their forces in and use various obstacles to limit their

efficiency and deploy the heavy-armored soldiers to give them a fatal blow and wipe them out entirely."

Everyone in the tent looked as if they had been struck by enlightenment. All of them knew that there was no way to avoid this conflict and agreed with Lorist that they would fare better by defending the camp rather than being pursued on an open field. To Lorist's credit, he also came out with a rather viable plan that could potentially cause the enemy a loss of 3000 men.

Bringing the map of the area surrounding the camp over, Charade started to discuss with the rest about how they would set up their traps and contraptions to shave down the enemy's forces.

Josk seemed like he was a little envious of Lorist and his knights' solidarity. Seeing the group talking about how to set up the defensive fortifications, he turned to Lorist and offered to lend a hand in the upcoming battle.

Lorist naturally agreed to that proposition and told Josk that the Norton Family's convoy will definitely be sparing no resource in the battle to come and that if Josk was able to gather some people to ambush the enemy's rearguard, he would definitely be a huge help to the convoy.

Upon hearing the suggestion, Knight Josk agreed to it excitedly and said that he would head back to rally up the insurgents and trail the count's rebel-sweeping forces from behind their backs and launch their ambush when the forces are being lured into the camp. He then left the camp hurriedly.

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Evening on the day after, Count Cobry's forces appeared nearby the camp as expected with the pike cavalry company leading the charge. When they arrived at the camp entrance, the soldiers witnessed the display of severed heads that were impaled on stakes with the head of the brown-haired man placed at the foremost front.

The pike cavalry all started freaking out and cursed loudly towards the encampment. Some of them even tried to rush to the entrance directly, only to be shot down by the crossbowmen stationed at the walls, causing 10 casualties to their side in the opening volley.

When the garrison infantry arrived, they sent out four squads that were fully-armed

with shields to protect them from the crossbow bolts while they retrieved the heads before setting up their camp in the distance.

Standing on the walls and nodding, Lorist commented, “The officer in command seems pretty level-headed and his troops are pretty disciplined. Fatty, let’s go. Els, there won’t be any more attacks tonight. The real show starts tomorrow.”

Charade said in a worried tone, “What if they don’t use the main entrance and start attacking from the other parts of the walls of the camp? For the record, we have most of our forces stationed here at the entrance.”

“They won’t,” said Lorist as he pointed towards the walls. “Look, Count Cobry didn’t choose this place to build an outpost arbitrarily. First, the terrain around here is flat without any elevated lands around the area apart from a slight two-meter-high slope outside the camp that makes it easier for cavalry to gain momentum and charge downwards as well as make it hard for the enemy to observe the situation within the camp. Second, other than the three-meter-long road leading to the main entrance, there is no other way to enter the camp as it is surrounded by a two-meter-wide moat that has a depth of around two meters. Even if they manage to cross the moat, they will be met with a barricade that is two meters tall with a 1.5-meter-tall fence right up on the main walls. When defending the surrounding areas, one can hide behind those fences for extra protection.

“So, if they want to attack from the other sides, they will have to first fill up the moat before they remove the barricades to make some space for ladders, which in turn have to be at least 5 meters tall to overcome the fence. I’m sure they understand that attacking from the main entrance of the encampment is the optimal way as it they were originally stationed here anyway. And given the amount of time their supplies would last them, I doubt that they’ll resort to such time-consuming methods by circumventing the main entrance. To be honest, the fortifications of this camp may actually be stronger and better than that of some other castles that I’ve seen. I bet the count didn’t expect that his forces would have to siege the encampment that he had built to protect his forces from insurgent assaults. It’s like they’re digging their own graves by attacking this place.

“Apart from the main entrance, there is also a smaller one at the rear of the camp, but to get there, the drawbridge would have to be lowered so that soldiers would be able to cross the moat. I believe the most they would do would be to send a pike cavalry squad to secure that drawbridge from the other side so that we won’t be able to

escape. As for the main force, they would fare much better by attacking directly from the main entrance. I'm sure that they are under the impression that victory would be theirs the moment they breach the camp. Have some old men and children wear armor and patrol the walls tomorrow to make them think that we're short on personnel and lower their guard."

Els asked, "Then, what if they send a Gold rank expert to sneak into the camp at night?"

Lorist laughed and said, "Els, do you think everyone is a nightcrawler like you? The prisoners said that there were 11 illegitimate sons leading the sweeping operation and only 3 of them are Gold ranks with the others being Silver ranks. I've already killed 1 Gold rank and two other of the Silver ranks, so I bet that they definitely wouldn't dare to sneak inside again. Know that one-on-one fights and all out battles are different: on the battlefield, you can swarm the enemy with your subordinates if you aren't able to take out your opponent. But if anyone dares to sneak in like you mentioned, that person would not be able to bring many people with him or he will risk being discovered by us. Being all alone, the odds of the person returning alive are slim, so they definitely wouldn't bother doing that. Additionally, we have Potterfang and Loze on night duty today, so what is there to fear?"

…

The whole night passed without incident. Given that the count's forces have spent a full day rushing back to the camp, it wasn't weird for them to rest and recover their energy for the night. And Lorist's side didn't send anyone out to harass them either. Coupled with sightings of old men and children wearing armor on the walls, the enemy also came to the conclusion that Lorist's forces were severely undermanned to the point where they were even forced to conscript the children and elderly.

During noon, the count's forces sent several loud-mouthed garrison troops over and they started shouting for Lorist's group to surrender the camp or face certain death. Annoyed at their loud ramblings, Lorist ordered the crossbowmen to turn them into human porcupines and quickly ordered for the old men and children to leave the walls as the battle was about to start.

As expected, the deaths of the soldiers who had come to demand the occupants' surrender had greatly angered the rebel-sweeping troops, causing hordes of men to emerge from their camp with the swordsmen in front and the bowmen following closely behind. The crossbowmen in Lorist's camp reacted by open-firing right away.

Given the advantage of being able to take cover behind the fence and the stronger firing power of the crossbow, the efficacy of Lorist's crossbowmen far exceeded that of the enemy's bowmen who had to fire the arrows in a parabolic trajectory to be able to even shoot remotely close to the crossbowmen on the walls.

The bowmen were currently in a very awkward position; they would suffer huge casualties from the crossbowmen if they approached too closely, but if they didn't, they wouldn't be able to cause the enemy any harm. After shooting a few volleys of arrows, aside from planting a couple of arrows onto the wooden fences, they didn't manage to kill even one crossbowman.

They were subsequently ordered to retreat and the enemy tried to employ a different tactic. They sent their shield and sword infantry troops forward to attract fire from the crossbowmen in an attempt to cause them to waste their crossbow bolts. At that moment, Lorist ordered the crossbowmen to stop firing and let the enemy's infantry arrive at the main gates before he ordered for it to be opened. Terman's knight brigade that had been standing by beyond the gates instantly charged towards the enemy's infantry troops like a tiger pouncing towards its prey. Chaos ensued and blood was spilled with only 50 of the 200-odd infantry soldiers managing to return to their camp alive.

The pike cavalry units of the enemy had wanted to intercept Terman's knights, but they were fended off by the constant firing of the crossbowmen. By the time the count's forces mobilized their bowmen in response, Terman's knight brigade had already returned to the camp. That exchange alone caused the rebel-sweeping troops a loss of over 150 infantrymen whereas Terman and his knights weren't injured in the slightest.

Even though the enemy had incurred quite a loss, their commander believed that it wasn't for naught. According to the reports of the pike cavalry soldiers who had attacked the convoy while it was on its way to the camp, the convoy's forces was estimated to have around 100 crossbowmen who were currently guarding the camp from the walls, the 40-odd knights who had rushed out just now and only a few hundred other infantry pikemen. Seeing the old men and children on the walls of the camp earlier that day, the commander's belief that the convoy had lost quite an amount of soldiers when they fought against the forces that were stationed at the camp was reaffirmed once again.

In the afternoon, the enemy stopped their attacks and only sent some pike cavalry

soldiers to spy on the convoy's movement from afar. The rest of the infantry soldiers were sent to fell some trees in the forest and move the logs back to the camp. Lorist could see the soldiers working together to make large wooden shields and battering rams out of the wood they have obtained.

"It seems that the main attack will be launched tomorrow. Are the fuel jars ready?" asked Lorist to Charade who was standing beside him.

"Yeah, we have 55 of them in total. I wonder if they're enough," said Charade in a worried tone.

"That's more than enough. Tomorrow, we'll burn down their siege engines and initiate our counterattack," said Lorist as he laughed.

…

Just as Lorist was about to wipe his body of his sweat after completing his training routine in the morning of the next day, Charade ran over and said that the enemy has started their assault.

Sol, it's still so early! The sun's not even out yet! Lorist looked towards the sky and discovered that the weather was rather dark and cloudy. It seemed that there may be snowfall coming either in the afternoon or the evening. It was currently the 1st month, so a number of heavy snowfalls was to be expected. The rebel-sweeping troops might have picked up on the change in weather as well and decided to launch their attack earlier.

Looking at Charade, Lorist said, "Go check on the family members of the soldiers and make sure they have enough to wear to accommodate for the changing weather. I don't want any of them falling sick due to the cold and cause us any trouble. I'll handle the matters concerning the battle, so don't worry about it."

…

Standing on the walls, Lorist could see the enemy soldiers lining up side-by-side behind rows of wooden raft-like shields and marching forward step by step. Behind the rows of shielding were three simple battering rams that were pushed by tens of other soldiers. The whole group traveled along the road rather slowly.

Lorist, standing beside Potterfang, who had been on night guard duty during the night,

laughed out loud. “It would appear that today’s battle will turn out to be quite ferocious. They seem so desperate.”

Potterfang nodded and said, “The change in weather must have affected their plans as well. If they were to stay there for the next few days amidst the snow, they would be better of retreating right here and now. They probably have no choice other than trying to recapture the camp given that their resources wouldn’t be able to sustain them for long. They must have no other option aside from forcing their way through without regard to their casualties for the sake of taking the camp back. I believe that we will be able to launch the trap without having to wait until tomorrow.”

Lorist replied, “Alright. If they continue the assault with full force, open the gates and lure them inside. I doubt postponing it for another day would make much of a difference.With the weather looking like this, even if they want to retreat, they wouldn’t be able to go far. Reidy, notify the rest that we’ll be giving our foes there a huge surprise…”

Chapter 63
Breaching the Camp

The battering rams that Count Cobry's rebel-sweeping corps have constructed overnight were exceedingly crude and simple with only a couple of wooden tripods and a huge trunk that hanging between them. After setting it up by the main gates of the encampment, it would then be able to smash against it repeatedly like a pendulum. The platform on which the tripods stood had four wheels underneath it. Tens of garrison troops were pushing it towards the entrance with several others holding up their crudely-made rectangular wooden shields to prevent the pushing soldiers from being killed by the rain of crossbow bolts.

Naturally, the crossbowmen stationed on the walls of the camp had their attention all focused on the battering ram. Within but a moment, volley after volley of crossbow bolts rained down on the enemy, taking out numerous men and horses as well as causing shrieks and cries to echo throughout the battlefield. However, that allowed the bowmen who were hiding behind the crude wooden shields some opportunities to aim from behind the gaps of the shields towards the crossbowmen, sometimes even knocking them off the walls with several taking an arrow to the face and dying instantly.

The remaining crossbowmen refocused their attention to suppressing the enemy's bowmen. With one side using wooden shields while the other ducking and using the walls as cover, they were currently in stalemate. Now that the bowmen had managed to reduce the distance between themselves and the defensive walls, they posed quite a huge threat to the crossbowmen. Crossbows were slow but they offered much better penetrative power. On the other hand, longbows shot three times as fast as crossbows, but longbowmen had to rest for a period of time after firing 7 to 8 arrows due to the lack of the crossbows' mechanical advantage.

While the crossbowmen on the walls were occupied with suppressing the longbowmen, the soldiers pushing the battering ram gave it their utmost and quickly moved it towards the entrance. Just as they were inches away from their destination, several glass jars were tossed from beyond the walls with some landing on the floor and a couple shattering against the battering ram, releasing a sticky substance all over

the ram's body.

One of the soldiers touched the substance and suddenly freaked out and screamed, "It's fuel! Fuel!"

Subsequently, one torch after another landed onto the battering ram, causing the soldiers on the spot to stare with a despairing gaze as the flames erupted and effectively turned the construct into a glorified bonfire. Several tens of soldiers who were in charge of pushing the battering ram into place were engulfed in flames and ran around frantically and aimlessly like countless flies, with some of them who have managed to get out from the fiery mess quickly rolling on the ground at the first opportunity, only managing to have the fire on their bodies extinguished with the help of their comrades. Three soldiers with flames burning all over them jumped desperately into the river; while the flames were extinguished, they still ended up frozen and dead within the dank, watery depths of the ice-cold river. Four others who had been covered by too much fuel instantly turned into human torches, letting out ear-piercing screams in agony until some of their comrades decided to end their misery by giving them a pierce from their lances.

"Oaaghh!" Yet another crossbowman got hit by an arrow on the shoulder. A few pike infantry troops quickly pulled him from the walls. The enemy's commander finally started going all out and sent five squads of bowmen to suppress the crossbowmen. Even though hundreds of bowmen on their side had perished, the remaining 500 or so managed to pressure the crossbowmen on the walls to the point when they couldn't even raise their heads without being taken down by an arrow.

Lorist noticed that only 70 of the 100-odd crossbowmen were still alive and still being pressured by the suppression fire of the enemy bowmen. For every crossbow bolt they managed to unleash, five to six more arrows came in response. After considering his options, Lorist had Reidy bring him a large shield and intended to attract the attention of the bowmen to give his crossbowmen a chance to retaliate.

Taking in a deep breath, Lorist suddenly exited his cover. The sudden appearance of a man standing straight up exposing himself briefly stunned the enemy bowmen. Right after, ten or so arrows were sent flying in Lorist's direction, only to be intercepted by the shield in his hand before hundreds and hundreds of other arrows followed suit…

Sol, thought Lorist as he suddenly ducked behind the cover of the walls. He initially thought that it would be a rather simple affair: given his dynamic vision, he should

have been able to deflect or strike down each and every arrow heading his way. But, while ten to a hundred arrows wouldn't pose much of a problem, five hundred arrows was really no joke. He could have easily been turned into a human pincushion. *There's simply too much. Had it not been for this shield, I would've been struck long ago. I almost lost my life due to this foolish bet. How did I forget the simple fact that strength in numbers is nothing to laugh at?*

Looking at the shield that had over a hundred arrows embedded within it, Lorist could still feel his hand shaking. The combined energy of the arrows passing through the shield to his hand was hard to defend against even when he used his internal energy. He was practically dancing with death on a tightrope just now. The only thing that he could be happy about was the fact that he managed to buy some time for his troops who have just managed to take out another 40-odd enemy bowmen.

The rebel-sweeping corps sent out some infantry troops to throw some mud onto the burning battering ram and quickly pushed it aside when the fire was extinguished to make way for the second and third battering rams that were being pushed over. The second battering ram was slightly modified in that it had wooden barriers on both sides where the soldiers who pushed the battering rams were positioned. There were also a couple of soldiers who were prepared to extinguish any fires with their buckets of water and mud.

Within thirty minutes, the second battering ram was pushed to the front of the entrance, rumbling as it went along. Ten infantry troops ran over and started pulling onto the rope fastened onto the ram and let it go with a unified cry. The humongous log smashed towards the gates of the encampment, causing the walls to shake from the savage vibrations.

As Reidy was passing a fuel jar to Lorist, he was unaware of the impending strike and fell off the walls from the vibration. Had it not been for Patt who grabbed his arm in time, Reidy might have suffered severe trauma from a fall from that height.

Sol, thought Lorist as he hurriedly steadied his feet. The moment he threw the fuel jar just now, a number of bowmen noticed it and shot the fuel jar in mid-air, causing its contents to fly all over the place and covering his face. Not having expected that to happen, Lorist could only stand there stunned and wasn't able to react in time to the incoming fuel.

"Pog, I'll leave this part to you. I have to go wash up for a bit," shouted Lorist. Currently,

it was of utmost importance that he removed the fuel from his face and body, otherwise he might just end up as a human candlestick.

Lorist hastily got off the defensive walls with Reidy and Patt and sent the former to bring a basin of hot water with some soap over for him to clean his face up. He also removed his scale armor and grabbed a pile of mud to rub it on the parts that was stained by the fuel. After that, he took a piece of linen cloth and started wiping the fuel off. Patt quickly headed towards the large tent on horseback to retrieve a change of clothes for Lorist.

The sound of the camp gates being hammered at rang out at a steady rhythm. Lorist seemed to be unable to accept the incredulous situation of him practically bathing and changing into a fresh set of clothes in the midst of a siege.

“It’s on fire!” cheered Loze from the walls.

Turning his head to look, Lorist could see clouds of soot and smoke rise from outside the walls. However, the sound of the hammering continued incessantly.

Wiping his face dry and getting his new clothes on as well as donning his cleaned up armor, Lorist quickly got back to the walls and saw that the battering ram was indeed aflame, but that didn’t stop the infantry who were operating the ram from behind using the rope that was fastened to the hammering log.

“Reidy, get me two fuel jars. Patt, hold a torch ready for me,” instructed Lorist.

This time, Lorist aimed for the infantry troops at the back of the battering ram. Hurling both of the fuel jars to the midst of the soldiers and following it up with a torch, a choir of agonized cries rang out in unison as the smell of charred flesh once again wafted through the air.

The hammering sound finally stopped due to the rope of the ram having been burned away. And so, yet another glorified bonfire was created in front of the camp gates.

“Master, I think the gates won’t hold up for much longer,” said Reidy.

Lorist went down the walls and inspected the double gates only to see that it had been hammered so badly that it was bent inwards for almost half a meter. A man of slight build could probably even fit through the opening of the dented gates. The top one of the three iron bars that held the gate shut was the most malformed, having been bent

into a bow-like shape. The rod in the middle had a slight dent while the bottommost rod still looked perfectly fine.

"Let's stop defending the gates. It's not like we need it to secure the camp anyways. To be honest, I doubt that it would be easy for us to even open it ourselves… Just look at that distorted shape! I'm only worried that the enemy will stop attacking and leave us trapped within here," joked Lorist.

It was 'fortunate' that the enemy still wasn't willing to give up after that. They sent yet another group of garrison troops to extinguish the burning battering ram and moved it aside to make way for the third one this time.

The third battering ram was fortified even more meticulously; it seemed almost like a wooden longhouse given its roofing and the wooden barriers that surrounded it by the sides, offering protecting to the soldiers within. A layer of thick, moist mud was also covered all over the wooden surface to help with fire resistance.

This battering ram moved even slowlier than the former two and took almost two hours of pushing before it arrived at the gates, giving Lorist and his men enough time to rest up and have their lunch. Potterfang and Loze even managed to take a short nap during that time.

Worried about the situation with the camp gates, Charade went over to the walls with Els. Seeing its miserable state, Charade asked Lorist with a pale face, "You're just gonna let them push the battering ram all the way here without bothering to stop them at all?"

Lorist felt like laughing out loud on the spot as he thought, *Charade, based on your martial prowess at the Three Star Silver rank, you'll be a peak Silver ranked fighter soon and will break through into the Gold rank in the near future.* Even though Charade was currently swamped with all sorts of tasks and also had to accompany that pretty little maidservant of his at night, he still managed to find some time to train in his Battle Force. His dedication to his training was really something to be admired.

In terms of ability, even Potterfang himself graciously took a few steps back and let Charade take the position as the chief knight of the Norton Family, thus making him the main supervisor of the northbound convoy. The man himself also did not let anyone's expectations down and managed almost every affair, big or small, within the convoy. Back then, Baron Miranda once personally told Charade that he thought of him

really highly and was appalled at his management skills. He even said that a man of Charade's caliber was fit to be a high-ranking official in a kingdom's government. It was worth noting that Charade was injured at that time and had to be carried around by others on a chair all over the place to get things done.

Even so, while Charade spoke quite a bit of sense during the war council meetings, when he was actually on the battlefield, his weaknesses would start to flow out ceaselessly. His hands and feet sweated incessantly and his face would turn utterly pale as he pranced around the battlefield in a state of panic, frightened by every little sound. His battle prowess in that state was not even comparable to a soldier who did not know how to utilize Battle Force!

Lorist felt intrigued that the usual beast-like calm and courage of Charade would instantly vaporize in the heat of battle. It wasn't like he was not accustomed to seeing dead bodies; he had taken quite a few lives himself. Why, then, was he like that on the battlefield?

Charade could only sigh in exasperation. He said that for some reason, seeing so many people die at once and hearing the savage cries of the warriors made him feel nauseous for some reason. Potterfang and Loze, however, didn't feel that it was a weird thing and concluded that it was because of Charade's lack of exposure to large scale skirmishes such as these. One time, they said that if Charade were to use corpses as stools and dip his bread in their blood before biting into it, he would eventually stop feeling so affected by the surrounding atmosphere.

"Ueergh…" Charade quickly ran away to throw up upon hearing that comment.

Poor lil' Charade… He knows that he can't stand being in the frontlines of battle, yet he still comes over to mingle in spite of that…

Lorist patiently responded, "There's no need to do that. When it comes to defense, we must not only focus on one aspect and must look at the bigger picture. We would be able to stop the battering ram from approaching the gates, but it would come with a heavy price. It isn't wise to do so when we have a better alternative. Look at the fortifications they have made to the battering ram. You will soon be able to see how it would actually work in our favor later."

However, that did not transpire as quickly as Lorist had mentioned. With but one strike of the ram, the iron bars that held the gate shut were knocked flying, leaving

behind a large hole that revealed the surprised faces of several garrison troops.

Lorist ordered a few of his crossbowmen to shoot volley after volley of projectiles towards that hole, causing screams to echo from outside the gates. Only after a few moments were the enemy able to close that hole up with several shields. There was no activity for the later half hour as the enemy was presumably adjusting the position of the ram before the hammering started all over again.

Lorist's brows started to twitch with impatience when the hammering begun once more.

This time, it only took 20 impacts for the gates to crumble, causing its hinges to go loose.

"The gate has fallen!" The soldiers within the wooden barriers surrounding the battering ram all cried out in joy. At the same moment, Els and Lorist rushed like raging storms towards the wooden barriers that flanked the battering rams. The soldiers who were in charge of pushing the whole siege engine and operating the hammering log were truly in a pinch as they did not have even one weapon on their hands due to having been preoccupied with operating the war machine. More than 60 of the soldiers perished from Lorist's and Els's massacre with only a couple at the back of the ram somehow managing to make a run for it. Corpses were littered all over within the enclosure of the wooden barriers with a large amount of blood leaking out, forming a small, crimson stream…

The main reason why Lorist refused Potterfang's offer to go with him and brought Els instead was due to the fact that Els's dark attribute Battle Force was best suited for tight spaces like the inside of the barriers of the battering ram. The night vision his Battle Force granted him also put him at more advantage in the low light conditions within the barriers, allowing Els to efficiently chase down each and every foe without accidentally harming his allies.

While Lorist and Els were keeping themselves busy within the barrier enclosure, the people in the camp were not slacking off either. Reidy and Patt brought a few thick ropes and fastened one end of each of the ropes to the battering ram and the other ends to several stakes that were hammered flat into the ground, effectively turning that battering ram into yet another obstacle for the enemy. Upon seeing that, Charade finally understood what Lorist had meant previously.

The enemy commander was instantly enraged at seeing that happen. *This really is going too far! Why aren't they abiding by the common conventions of warfare? Don't people usually assemble their soldiers in formation while waiting for the enemy to move the battering ram away after the gates have been breached? Why did they use it to bolster their own defenses instead? This is truly beyond reason!>*

And so, the enemy's garrison troops started operating the ram again to clear out the remnants of the gates while removing the corpses of their comrades. However, the battering ram was still stuck firm on that spot.

A pike cavalry company could be seen assembling at the battering ram facing towards their own camp and tying their own ropes onto the ram. Before long, a game of tug of war had begun between the two sides.

The struggle lasted for more than 30 minutes before another squad of pike cavalry that acted as the rearguard of the enemy was roped into participating. Coupled with 1000 other horses that they had brought out of their main camp, the rebel-sweeping corps won out in the end. But it did not end well, for Lorist had waited for the ropes to be at its most tense before he cut them loose, causing the battering ram to roll towards the enemy troops unimpeded and down the road, resulting in the deaths of tens of soldiers and horses who were too late to react.

When the enemy stared flabbergasted at the situation that was unraveling before them, Lorist quickly instructed for his men to bring over a wooden cart and secured it vertically at the entrance. When the enemy broke out of their trance and attempted to rush over to stop it, the wooden cart had already been firmly planted to the ground, creating yet another obstacle for them to take down.

"The heck?! They're not done yet?!" Countless curses and complaints sounded from the group of enemy soldiers outside the gates with some even ignoring everything and ramming towards the wooden cart recklessly. The defenders of the cart weren't merciful either. There were three spear tips installed at the front of the wooden cart. The enemy soldiers, thinking that it was affixed to the cart and only served as a deterrent, believed that it wouldn't be able to harm them. As the soldiers rushed towards the wooden cart, the spears suddenly shot forward and impaled the sorry soldiers who had attempted to ram against the cart, causing the others to not act recklessly nor approach the cart.

The few illegitimate sons who were in command of this rebel-sweeping unit were

steaming with anger. It had already been almost a day ever since they launched the attack during the early dawn, but their forces still hadn't been able to breach the camp even after sustaining near 600 casualties. Now that the battering ram was gone and the makeshift wooden gate wasn't completely undefended, what would they be able to do?

"Set that wooden cart aflame."

Several garrison troops hurled a few sacks of fuel onto the cart and quickly set it on fire.

Since you're going to start a fire, I will do it too. "Come, guys. We'll be setting up a bonfire here tonight," Lorist said.

When the enemy soldiers reported seeing Lorist's men hurling wood towards the burning cart and using it as a bonfire, Count Cobry's illegitimate sons almost went insane. At that moment, flecks of snow slowly drifted downwards from the sky. The illegitimate son that led the group instantly cried out, "Aha! The weather's turning to our favor today! It's snowing! Let's see how they keep the fire up now!"

Lorist, on the other hand, sighed and said, "It seems that fate intends to reap the lives of the enemy sooner. I had planned to let them live for one more night for us to have enough time to prepare, but it seems that we wouldn't be able to avoid bloodbath tonight."

As the bonfire finally went out, tens of garrison troops rushed towards the camp and moved the pile of wood aside as the sounds of horses galloping gradually got louder outside the camp. When the pike cavalry arrived at the entrance, the garrison troops cheered loudly in unison, "Go in there and kill them all!"

Chapter 64
Winter Night Massacre

Having been taxed heavily for the whole day, the pike cavalry unit felt extremely worn out especially due to the tug of war match during the afternoon. Being the elite soldiers of Count Cobry, never once have they been assigned such a laborious task. To add salt to injury, given that the camp was on higher ground and they were pulling it off the slope, when the battering ram came crashing down, the 40 of them who couldn't react in time got ground into meat paste along with their mounts. This incident had further incited the already fervorous rage of the pike cavalry soldiers.

Now that the main gates have finally been opened up, they rushed directly into the camp filled with killing intent. A company and a squad of pike cavalry joined up together to a total of around 600 men and prepared to rush into the camp and slaughter anything in their sights to release their pent up frustration and rage, thinking that nothing could stand in their way.

After entering the main camp, the cavalry soldiers all got into a charging formation with 500 Silver ranked soldiers ready in the vanguard as they knew that the enemy had tens of knights who also have had their Battle Force awakened.

However, not a single soul or thing could be seen within the camp, save for a path that was 10 meters wide that led into the middle section of the camp. Some of them felt that something was off. The soldiers riding in front eventually slowed down to a gradual trot. They were unable to stop completely because there were six hundred more people following behind them. Gradually, the soldiers slowly filled up the 10-meter-wide 'corridor' like sardines in a can.

The pike cavalry could all feel that something weird was happening. They had imagined that they would be greeted by the familiar sight of the tents once they entered the camp and had wanted to use their enemy's blood to wash off their humiliation. However, all they could see was the 3-meter-tall walls surrounding them on both sides blanketed by a layer of snow. The pike cavalry could naught but continue onwards on the corridor path.

The skies started to darken once again as the snow gradually fell, blurring the vision

of the pike cavalry quite significantly.

“Check these walls out and tell me what they are,” someone instructed.

Two soldiers nearby poked their pikes toward the walls and said, “These are wooden walls, sir.”

“Weird, they couldn’t have possibly gotten so much wood from within the camp…” said one troubled soldier.

“Continue onwards. I refuse to believe they have enough materials to build such a long corridor.”

Not even one of the soldiers could have imagined that the ‘walls’ were actually carriages placed on both sides with their bottoms facing each other horizontally to form a corridor-like structure, an idea though of by Charade. Even though it wasn’t perfectly sealed and there were occasional openings here and there, they usually weren’t big enough for the pike cavalry soldiers to pass through.

Some of the soldiers attempted to topple the walls, but their efforts ended up in futility. Even though the walls would budge a little after being pushed, the sides of the carriages that served as a stand on the ground gave them even more stability when compared to normal wooden divider boards because of the larger base area.

As the soldiers at the front approached the end of the corridor, they could see a wooden platform in the area in front of them. Suddenly, countless torches lit up at the same moment, illuminating the whole area within.

Upon seeing the spectacle in front of them, the soldiers at the front instantly turned pale.

Finally, someone started shouting out loud. “It’s… It’s a trap! Quick… Retreat!”

On top of the wooden platform was a group of black-armored soldiers in a square formation equipped with jet-black shields and lances. It was common knowledge that cavalry troops wouldn’t stand against heavy-armored troops such as those when they lost the advantage of charging. However, that was not the main threat the pike cavalry faced. The light from the burning torches reflected off the 12 ballistas, causing them to glimmer in a chilling manner in the midst of the dark night…

The pike cavalry instantly erupted into chaos. Some wanted to go back the way they came only to find that it had been blocked off by their own comrades, who were unaware of the situation at the front. To add fuel to fire, there were 2000 or so garrison troops following behind them.

Dulles's excitement instantly soared as it was finally his turn to show off the might of his carroballista unit. Seeing the crazed pike cavalrymen, he waved his hand and shouted, "Release!"

Initially, the 6 ballistas on the second floor of the wooden platform let out a thunderous sound as their strings snapped forward to propel the ballista darts at breakneck speeds towards the enemy, instantly skewing them alive and causing a wave of blood to surge out of their impaled bodies. After that, the other 6 ballistas on the lower platform fired while the ballistas above reloaded. The cycle then repeated itself…

The 12 ballistas fired 20 volleys in total before they stopped due to their strings being overly worn out. The last volley completely paled in terms of power and accuracy of that of the first.

Standing on top of the wooden platform, Dulles himself was stunned at the effectiveness of the unit he commanded. He could smell the thick iron-like smell of blood that lingered in the air and see the corpses of the cavalrymen and their mounts clustered together. The 12 ballistas have fired 240 darts in total, wiping out the majority of men who emerged from the carriage corridor. The first darts even pierced through 5 to 6 men in one shot! Currently, only tens of the enemy were still alive and standing amidst their fallen comrades.

"Ueergh!" That was the sound of a soldier of the heavy-armored unit vomiting from witnessing the bloodbath that had just occurred in front of his eyes.

"Heavy-armored troops, onward!" ordered Potterfang. Having long been baptized by the blood and corpses battle after battle, the sight in front of Potterfang's eyes did not disturb him in the slightest.

"Ooeergh! Barf!" More soldiers of the heavy-armored unit started vomiting one after another.

"Heavy-armored troops! Charge forward!" shouted Potterfang again. He was suddenly

reminded that his current heavy-armored unit was comprised of mostly new recruits and was far inexperienced than battle-hardened soldiers that he had once commanded in the Whitelion Legion. If he allowed them to take their time, it was entirely possible that more of them would start vomiting and decrease the overall efficacy of the whole unit.

Most of the troops did end up rushing forward in the end, only leaving behind several who were still in the puking their guts out.

In actuality, there wasn't a real need to deploy the heavy-armored soldiers as the remaining cavalrymen had already lost all their will to resist. Potterfang also lost interest in the battle after ten or so of the enemy were killed and ordered that the remaining soldiers be captured alive instead and relieved them of their equipment. After that, he led his units towards the corridor where sounds of battle could be heard.

While the pike cavalrymen suffered such a huge loss from the ballistas, the garrison troops that followed behind them did not fare much better either. Initially, they were assaulted by 400 or so crossbowmen without being able to fight back as their bowmen could not grasp the location of their enemy. The convoy's crossbowmen all hid behind the carriages and fired their bolts through the small openings. Being shot at a close range, the bowmen couldn't retaliate at all.

The remaining garrison troops could only surround themselves with their shields, but that did not stop them from the incessant torrent of crossbow darts.

The ground between the carriages was littered thoroughly with corpses. The snow that fell from the skies eventually froze the blood on the ground, creating a thin layer of bloody ice.

Having nowhere else to go, one of the count's sons who commanded the garrison troops ordered them to retreat immediately. At that moment, the walls near the entrance of the camp quickly collapsed: these were made of normal wooden separators instead of carriages. Terman and his knight brigade quickly rushed in and barred the way of the garrison troops. And behind him were hundreds of pike infantry troops who brought with them many wooden barricades and quickly erected a simple defense perimeter around the area.

At that moment, Loze was already in combat with the Gold ranked commander and both of them were quite evenly matched. Terman on the other hand led his knights on

a rampage through the corridor, causing many soldiers to fall beneath his lance.

Several garrison troops soldiers attempted to escape from the spaces between the walls that could fit a person in, but shortly after they did that, their pained screams resounded throughout the area. Even one of Count Cobry's Silver ranked sons suffered the same fate. What they did not know was that two senior academy students and several pikemen had been stationed there just to take care of the soldiers who slipped through the gaps.

When Potterfang's heavy-armored troops rushed to the middle of the corridor, the already battered garrison troops finally despaired, with some dropping their weapons and kneeling down to await the inevitable and others struggling desperately to make their last stand. They were either killed by swords and spears or shot to their deaths by incoming crossbow darts.

Lorist gave the order to Reidy and Patt, "Pass down the order to spare anyone who drops their weapons and surrenders and kill the rest who resist."

Without delay, multitudes of garrison troops within the corridor quickly let go of their weapons and kneeled down in subservience. The battle was already over. Loze had managed to take the head of the Gold rank illegitimate son by countering after taking a sword blow to his shoulder. However, he was still energetic enough to wave that head around while laughing heartily. Potterfang on the other hand was worried as there should have been another Gold rank within the ranks of the enemy just now.

What he did not know was that the other illegitimate son had been pierced by one of the ballista darts at the very beginning when he was sandwiched between the soldiers to his front and back at the corridor.

At that moment, smoke could be seen rising from outside the walls of the camp, signifying the rebel-sweeping corps's camp being set on fire from the assault launched by Yuriy's light cavalry troops. Not long after, Yuriy sent a messenger back to report that the enemy camp had already been taken over and also mentioned their discovery of over 2000 prisoners who lacked food and other basic necessities. He was currently awaiting Lorist's order on how to deal with them.

How did the 2000 prisoners come about? After questioning a few of the surrendered garrison troops, Lorist came to know that the prisoners had been captured by the rebel-sweeping corps after they had taken down a mountain fort that belonged to the

rebels to be used as slave laborers.

What should I do with them, thought Lorist as he shook his head with a bitter laugh. "I guess I can only bring them here for now since they wouldn't be able to survive given the night there without resources. They might just freeze or starve tomorrow in the snow if I leave them be. Send Reidy and Patt to go look for Charade and inform him about this issue. Let Terman and his knights as well as a company of infantry pikemen escort the people here and don't forget to collect the wooden boards they used as shields on the way. They will make good firewood to warm us up during the night."

He also instructed Charade to set up a couple of more tents at the northwestern area of the camp and start a bonfire there so that the 2000 captive youths would be able to keep themselves warm throughout the night and be provided with some wheat porridge. After that, he also got them some garments to stave of the chilling winter night air.

The northwestern area of the camp was originally intended for the 400 captives they liberated within the camp and the people who came over with them from Mestre Castle as well as the vagabonds that had ended up tagging along with the convoy. There would be nowhere more appropriate for the 2000 captives to be allocated to in the camp other than there.

The mutters of the men could be heard as they entered the gates of the camp. However, they eventually quieted down with nobody daring to even take a loud breath as the first thing that had greeted them was the grim sight of the bloodstained roads. Beside the path were multitudes of bodies stacked up together. The enemy soldiers who had already surrendered were currently stripping off any usable equipment from the bodies and stacking them on top of each other after that.

The 2000 young men crossed the crimson red path without uttering a sound and only managed to regain their vigor after they arrived at the northwestern area of the camp. Lorist was satisfied with the shock the men had been given from seeing the corpses as he was worried that the prisoners would make a ruckus and cause trouble for the convoy.

The snowflakes continued to fall gently to the ground, covering it with a snow white veil of tranquility.

Within the camp, bonfires were burning bright all over. Standing in front of the large

tent, Lorist looked at the falling snow before exhaling deeply. Now that the slaughter fest was over, he wondered what other battles the convoy would have to partake in on the way to the Northlands.

Chapter 65
Conclusion and Reorganization

The snow continued to fall. However, it wasn't like the feather-sized flakes like before but rather tiny flecks of white that gradually painted the ground white.

It was as warm as spring within the tent as a large brazier had been placed in the center of it with a piece of burning charcoal within that let out wave after wave of heat. On the brazier was a large bronze kettle with steam coming out of its spout.

Shadekampf lifted the bronze kettle and filled the teacup in front of him and handed it to anyone else who needed it. When the kettle was emptied, it was refilled with water and macks and was placed back on top of the wire gauze on the brazier. In a few moments, the aroma of macks filled up the whole tent once again.

Lorist, Charade, Terman, Yuriy, Els, Potterfang, Mons Malek, Lode Wales as well as the 37 senior students of the academy were assembled together within the tent. In a corner also stood Engelich and her granddaughter, Molise. They were currently talking about the gains they had obtained following the battle yesterday.

"In terms of logistics, the gains we have obtained from the battle were outweighed by the cost. Even though we only lost 17 crossbowmen to take out all 3000 of the enemy troops, not only were our profit quite low, we also inherited a huge burden. We have killed over 1600 enemy soldiers and captured another 1200 and also saved more than 2300 youths in the process. Even though our victory was quite magnificent, we did not gain much food or other supplies from it. Therefore, it would be quite hard for us to provide all these men with the necessary amount of food and clothing to sustain them throughout the winter. I estimate that our resources will last us up to a month at most.

"Apart from losing 17 crossbowmen yesterday, we also have 48 injured men, 34 of which are crossbowmen as well. Others include 4 from Terman's knight brigade, 7 from Yuriy's light cavalry scouts as well as 3 from the infantry pikemen. While it is quite fortunate that our casualties were relatively low, it must be noted that the resources we expended during the battle yesterday is nothing to scoff at. For example, of the 20000 ballista darts we have prepared, we are only left with 8000 of them, and

that includes the ones we managed to salvage from the battlefield after they have been used once. The rest were all damaged beyond repair and must be reforged.

"Also, Dulles's carroballista unit also wore out all their ballista strings. While we do have some reserves of that, we still lack ballista darts nevertheless. If we don't procure more of those, I'm afraid the carroballista unit won't be able to contribute much in future battles. While we didn't get any consumable supplies from this skirmish, we did however obtain more than 3000 sets of weapons and armor as well as 2000 war-trained horses that used to belong to the count's pike cavalry. It is fortunate that the camp has quite a decent amount of hay. Otherwise, we will have to consider killing off some of the horses.

"Other than that, we have found almost 10000 gold Fordes' worth of money as well as approximately 1000 pikes, 300 longswords, 600-odd longbows, almost 1000 arrows as well as 500-odd bucklers. We also got 132 four-wheeled horse carts, 341 two-wheeled horse carts as well as 1252 work horses to pull those carts with. According to the prisoners, the horse carts had been left over since their latest supply shipment from the count and hasn't been sent back due to our attack on the camp. Aside from all those, we've also got a number of miscellaneous items.

"Right now, we're facing three main problems. One, what are we going to do with the 1000 plus war prisoners? Should we leave them or bring them along when we set out? Two, at least half of the captives within the camp that we have rescued wants to join our army to take revenge for their family members who have been killed at the hands of the count's forces. Having wiped out the rebel-sweeping corps, we have become their symbol of hope. Should we let them join our forces or not? The third issue is about a man who claims to be the son of a viscount and plans to bring a few hundred men away with him. He has requested that we provide him with some weapons and equipment. Should we adhere to his demands?"

After Charade finished giving his report, chatters and murmurs reverberated throughout the tent as the people present discussed the issues. When it came to the war prisoners, some were of the opinion of setting them free to avoid having to spend any resources to keep them alive while others brought up the possibility that they would once again return to the count and provide him with precious military intelligence. Given that they couldn't just kill them off, they could just bring them along on the journey and have them help out with rough labor.

As for the youths who wish to join the convoy's army to avenge their family members,

most of the people were of the opinion of letting them join for the time being. However, when it came to the man claiming to be a viscount's son, the consensus was that he had no right to demand free equipment from them no matter whether the convoy needed the surplus weapons or not.

In the midst of the discussions, Lorist clapped his hands and signalled for everyone to quiet down. He then said, "After listening to your opinions, I feel that we shouldn't free the war prisoners just yet. Even if we do, it'll have to be after we exit the area of influence of the count so that they don't add any unnecessary trouble for us. As for the youths who wish to join our army, ask them if they would like to follow us all the way to the Northlands and inform them regarding the treatment our soldiers get. Also, don't force anyone to join against their will so that we won't have any deserters in the future.

"As for the last issue, I think we can't just refuse that man's request outright. I will first go and see him and decide whether we have a good reason to fulfill his request. If it isn't a sound one, I will definitely not consent to giving the equipment to him. Alright, the next thing I'll be telling you about will be a summary of the battle yesterday, so I hope you guys pay attention. This is only the first large scale battle we have participated in since the journey started and there is no way for me to know whether things will continue to be like this for the rest of the journey. I hope that you will all learn from any mishaps from this experience and make sure not to commit them again in the future.

"We only paid a small price to win the battle yesterday and managed to wipe out an enemy force of over 3000 men. This battle could easily be one of the most impressive and perfect victories ever to be recorded in the history books. However, let's not forget that victories like this is a result of a number of unlikely coincidences that just so happened to be in our favor. First, we have the sudden snow that forced the enemies to attack us even though they were at a disadvantage because they were already running out of resources. As a commander of an army, it is extremely unwise to pour every bit of your forces into a situation with so many unknown variables like the enemy commander did yesterday. That was why they fell for our trap so easily.

"Additionally, we also had the terrain working in our favor as well as the necessary defensive fortifications that were already present at the camp, making it easy for us to defend it and extremely difficult for the enemy to besiege. Coupled with our apt response, we have managed to stall them during the day and only let them into the camp when their vision was obscured by the low light and snow. The frustration of

having been held outside of the camp also fueled their recklessness and caused them to fall for the bait. Had they managed to breached the camp during the day, what do you think they would've done when they encountered that wooden corridor? Would they have let their troops rush straight into it in that situation? I'm sure you're all aware that if that had happened instead, even if we were able to eliminate their forces, our casualties would be far worse than that. That is why luck was a huge factor when it came to our victory last night.

"Finally, the trap we devised using the carroballistas has produced an unexpected result and caused most of the pike cavalrymen of the enemy to be completely wiped out. Our victory was also mostly in part of our crossbowmen who have attacked from the gaps of the wooden walls; an action that allowed us to take control of the tide of battle that ultimately led to our victory. However, if we consider this victory along with the battle when we were occupying the camp as well as the time when our convoy was first attacked by the pike cavalry, we have lost quite a number of people including one of our cherished comrades.

"Throughout all these battles, I have discovered that our family's forces is heavily dependent on certain units. That can be seen in the fact that our heavy-armored units weren't able to shine during this battle as we have mainly relied on the light cavalry scouts, the knight brigade as well as the crossbowmen and carroballistas to secure our victory. This is not Knight Pog's fault; he has done very well to train his soldiers to make them the elite unit of our family. However, when we first set up the heavy-armored unit, we forgot one important thing: the convoy is mobile, therefore to protect the convoy effectively, that unit has to have sufficient mobility to back it up, and that is exactly what the heavy-armored unit lacks.

"The impressive performance of the light cavalry scouts and the knight brigade has been quite a surprise for me personally, however, their weaknesses also show there too. The main shortcoming of the knight brigade is that it lacks the manpower it requires to be completely able of changing the tide of battle. The scouts on the other hand can't undertake assault operations due to the same reason. For instance, when the light cavalry scouts attacked the enemy camp when they were at their weakest, seven of them were injured even though they only faced off with a squad of infantry troops. That is definitely an undesirable result. That's why, I will be reorganizing the unit structure during these two days while waiting for the frost on the roads to clear up.

"Firstly, the knight brigade needs to expand. Including the sets of armor and saddles

the knight brigade currently has, the convoy has a total of 88 sets. The knight brigade will thus be expanded to a full squad of 120 people. Each knight will be allocated 3 mounts which include 1 warhorse, 1 travel horse and another spare mount. Every knight will also be assigned a squire who will be picked from the family members of another knight of age 15 to 16 as well as an attendant that will be in charge of managing the horses and armor of the knight. Both of them will also have one mount, but they will not be required to go on the battlefield. Knight Terman, I'll leave the reorganization to you. I hope you build a stellar knight brigade for the Norton Family."

Terman quickly stood up and saluted. "Milord, I will definitely not let your expectations down."

"Other than that, Knight Yuriy, your light cavalry scouts will be expanded into a full company comprising four squads with 120 people in each one. Each scout will be assigned 2 mounts, a crossbow, javelins, a pike, a longsword, a shield as well as mail and leather armor. There will also be another squad of attendants accompanying the scouts that will be responsible for managing the mounts and equipment. You must give the scouts strict training so that they will not only be able to fight from afar, but in close range as well."

"Yes, milord," said Yuriy as he stood up and saluted.

Lorist glanced towards Potterfang and he nodded slightly in response. Lorist continued, "Next, I will talk about the reorganization of the heavy-armored units. The assault from the pike cavalry has given us a huge realization. After discussing with Potterfang and some others, I have decided to change the heavy-armored infantry into heavy-armored cavalry and intend to have two companies set up for the time being. Each company will be made up of four squads which will each also have 120 people. Each soldier will have two horses and each company will have a squad's worth of attendants. The new heavy cavalry unit will be commanded by Knight Pog and Knight Loze."

Potterfang and Lode Wales stood up and said in unison, "Your will is our command, milord."

Lorist smiled with satisfaction and gestured for them to sit down. After spending some time with the convoy, Loze seemed like he was very keen on joining the Norton Family and it is only a matter of time before he joins the ranks of the family knights. "Currently, we'll prioritize the soldiers who have already awakened their Battle Force

in the reorganization of the different units. Other than that, we will also set up a constable unit to maintain the order and security within the convoy that will be equipped with armor, axes and halberds. It is my hope that Knight Mons Malek will accept the position of the leader of the constable unit."

Mons Malek stood up and saluted before saying, "Milord, it is my pleasure to be of service to you."

"Other than that, the main camp's guards will also be expanded into a company, but they will have to be in charge of looking after the war prisoners as well as maintaining the security of the convoy. Els, I'll leave that part to you."

"Understood, milord."

"Lastly, I have decided to fuse the crossbowman unit with the pike infantry regiment. Every company will be made up of 5 squads, namely, 1 swordsmen squad, 1 crossbowmen squad, one longbowmen squad and 2 pikemen squads. Every squad will have 120 members. I will leave the command of this reorganized regiment to…"

Lorist's gaze fell on Engelich before he continued, "Engelich, it'll be your responsibility."

Engelich didn't expect that Lorist would actually nominate him to be the commander of the pike infantry regiment, which has the most amount of people when compared to the other units of the convoy. With his face flushed with surprise, he said, "Milord… I… I don't think I can…"

"Why not? Not only do you have the necessary experience, having been a commander of a city defense garrison before, you have nothing better to do around the convoy other than leaning outside of Charade's tent to eavesdrop. Don't bother denying it, I've seen that a couple of times. As a Gold rank, you can't just sit around doing nothing. As for your granddaughter, don't worry. Knight Charade has told me that he intends to marry her once we get back to our dominion. For your granddaughter's happiness and safety, you'll have to put in your part as well."

After saying that, Molise, who was standing just beside her grandfather, blushed profusely. Charade on the other hand walked up to her and pulled her in his embrace, causing the men in the tent to laugh out loud. Some of them teased Engelich while others congratulated Charade for having found his true love.

Engelich was embarrassed that his behavior had been exposed by Lorist. He was merely worried that Charade would force himself on his granddaughter. However, now that Molise truly had mutual feelings with Charade, there was nothing he could do to stop them. However, he brightened up when he heard of Charade's intention to marry her and said, "Okay, I will definitely do all I can."

Lorist faced the rest of the men in the tent and waved his hand. "Alright, meeting adjourned. We're rather pressed for time and we only have two days to carry out the reorganization. Make sure to make the best use of your time and cooperate with one another.

"Patt, ask that guy who claims to be a viscount's son to come over. I'd like to hear what he has to say."

Chapter 66
Mister Tim

The one who followed Patt into the large tent was a man who looked to be in his forties that wore a loose-fitting grey cloak that did not quite fit his physique as well as a set of brown breeches; they were obviously the clothes the convoy provided for the people to withstand the winter cold. Even though this middle-aged man wanted to present himself as a noble, his eyes that looked all over the place unnervingly gave his nervousness away.

Lorist had a bad impression of that man on first glance. Even though he seemed rather sharp, he lacked the refined air of a noble and seemed more like a merchant or a butler, as could be inferred from his eyes that kept on moving nonstop as if he was plotting something in his mind.

“I, the heir of Viscount Tebri, Tebri Tim, give you my congratulations on the victory, great sir,” said the man as he bowed deeply to Lorist, who still remained seated.

Lorist started laughing out loud right away. No descendant of nobles would address oneself as the successor when making an introduction and would only state their family name and their dominion’s location. While this might be able to fool the common folk, any noble who had received proper education for etiquette will be able to see through it right away. It seemed that the man’s identity was quite questionable.

“I am Norton Lorist of the Norton Family from the Northlands and I am the person in charge of this convoy. May I know who you really are?” Lorist didn’t bother to hide his suspicion at all.

“I, I really am Viscount Tebri’s son. If you don’t believe me, you can ask the ones whom you’ve saved. Many of them know me personally and have grown up with me together. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be willing to heed my instructions and want to leave with me at all…” said the middle-aged man with a flustered look, as if Lorist had struck his most sensitive part with his question.

“Is that so?” said Lorist indifferently.

The man slumped downwards like a ball that had lost all its air. “That is definitely true, sir. I am indeed the eldest son of the viscount. However, I’m the only one who’s still alive that bears his blood as my family members have all perished. That’s why I’m his sole successor.”

Lorist suddenly came to an understanding. That man was in fact an illegitimate son of the viscount, whose family had probably been wiped out by Count Cobry just recently. That’s why this man dared to call himself the successor of the family head.

“What kind of post did Viscount Tebri assign you?” asked Lorist.

“The Lord Viscount had me manage the business of the three orchards within his dominion. Due to spending most of my life among the common folk, I haven’t had much interaction with people of noble standing,” said the man honestly without hiding a single thing.

“Alright, how about this? Mister Tim, I’m not the least bit interested in whether you’re truly the heir of Viscount Tebri. I heard that you requested us to give you some weapons and equipment for free. Let me ask you this then: why do you think we have the obligation to fulfill that unreasonable request?” Lorist said as he stood up and stared at the middle-aged man.

“S-sir… Isn’t there an obligation between nobles to help each other? And… I-I also want to equip my men to go up against the count’s forces…” From Tim’s point of view, Lorist’s aggressive speech and gestures pressured him greatly and made him forget all the arguments and excuses he had thought up before. Flustered, he could only resort to that traditional reasoning.

“Haha, Mister Tim, first things first, you, are not yet a noble. Don’t think that just because you’re his son and heir that you will automatically become one. You must have the recognition of at least three other landed nobles to be able to officially lay claim to the position of the viscount’s heir. Only then can you go to the capital to obtain a birthright certificate from the senior noble that the Tebri Family has pledged allegiance to. The aforementioned method is the proper, more traditional route to ensure one’s noble status. The other method is to assemble a strong army and force the local lord to cede their title and the right to rule the dominion to you. I believe that second method is what you’re trying to achieve. Am I right, Mister Tim?

“It could also be possible that Viscount Tebri did not register your name in the family

registry as his eldest son. That should cause you quite a lot of trouble if you were to attempt the first method. Then again, Mister Tim, you should not forget your status as a war prisoner of Count Cobry. And we, the Norton Family has managed to defeat the count's forces, so we have the rightful claim to the spoils of the battle. In theory, we have all the right to kill you or sell you to a slave trader, unless you are able to pay a suitable ransom for your freedom like other nobles would should they be captured.

"And when it comes to the obligation between nobles to look out for each other, Mister Tim, do you really understand what that entails? That clause only applies when the neighboring nobles of a region get attacked by invaders or waves of magical beasts. And as it stands now, I am a noble from a different nation entirely. Even if you were a noble, there's completely no obligation for me to lend you a hand. Heck, I can even have your head lopped off and offer it to my senior noble for a reward because you're from a different nation. Your excuse of wanting to help us resist the count is also really pathetic, you know that?"

The middle-aged man was currently shivering and sweating all over. Back then, the moment he called himself the successor of Viscount Tebri, the citizens of the dominion would instantly bend to his will and not offer any sign of resistance. Even when he was captured, he still had some degree of influence among the other prisoners there. He did not expect that his self-proclaimed status of a heir would be instantly torn down by a true noble within moments.

Lorist merely walked around that man and examined him carefully before saying, "Mister Tim, personally, I don't care if you're trying to impersonate a noble or whether you're really the viscount's son. It's a good thing to have ambition: it helps motivate one to strive hard for one's goals. If you can offer a favor of equivalent value to me, then I will forgive your ignorant transgressions. However, if you think that you'll be able to take from me without offering anything in return, then I will really have to consider how I should punish a charlatan like you. Should I hang you or behead you? You're free to make the choice."

Tim instantly slumped limply to the ground as he recalled how his father, Viscount Tebri, so casually ordered someone to be beaten to death with a gentle and smiling expression as well as how his other brothers who were the legitimate sons of the Tebri Family caned some of the dominion's citizens to death for having startled their mounts. From a young age, he had been taught how to live his life humbly given his status as an illegitimate son and slowly gain his father's trust to become an official in the dominion by his mother who was one of the count's maidservants. He was also

instructed to take advantage of his status as the illegitimate son of the viscount to glean some advantages for himself from the dumb common folk.

But when his father and brothers were all killed by Count Cobry's forces, he was struck with the sudden revelation that he was the only person who still carried the blood of the viscount. Even though he hadn't received any etiquette lessons for nobles nor awakened his Battle Force, he had been allowed to learn how to read and write as he had gained the favor of his father. But his hardships didn't stop him from building his reputation as the sole heir of the viscount among the dominion's citizens and he capitalized on his experience and wit from his days as a traveling merchant as well as his skills as an orator to form an insurgent force by recruiting the citizens of the war-torn land and had managed to erect a stronghold within the western mountains. However, that all ended when the count's forces crushed his own and made him their captive.

Originally thinking that there would be nothing more waiting for him other than death, he was quite surprised to discover that the powerful rebel-sweeping forces would actually be defeated by a convoy's military escort, thereby liberating him from his predicament. After having his fill of food on the night of the camp's occupation, he went around to ask about the convoy and suddenly realized the potential benefits he could gain from that opportunity. He thought that the moment he introduced himself as the heir of the viscount, the master of the convoy would treat him like a person of exalted status and adhere to his every request. At that time, he had already thought up a number of proposals and even planned to use the convoy to crush Count Cobry and fantasized about his glorious return to the viscount's dominion with a large military force and become the noble that everyone admired and respected.

But when Lorist prompted him to choose the way in which he would be put to death, all those fantasies vaporized within an instant. *So this is what a real noble is like. Sociable, yet cruel, and having subordinates that would be willing to do anything for him, unlike my own who can only be swayed by fear or the promise of a reward.* To Tim, Lorist reminded him of the fearful side of his father that had the life of the common folk at his fingertips.

Shriveling up on the ground and crying out loud, Tim pleaded, "Sir, please have mercy on me… I shouldn't have ever dreamed about gaining the title for myself… Please spare this pathetic life of mine! To you, I am but an existence that only compares to that of an ant… I'm not worth your attention at all…"

Lorist took a step back and said, “Please get up, Mister Tim. If you would like to become a noble, you should at least have some degree of self-respect. No noble would ever humiliate oneself like what you just did. A proper noble would never submit to anyone, even in the face of certain death. Perhaps, you have misunderstood my intentions. I’ve mentioned that I don’t care whether you’re the viscount’s son or not. What I want to know is what status were you assuming when you made that request of me?”

Seeing the dumbfounded look on the kneeling man, Lorist gave a bitter laugh before proceeding with his explanation. “MIster Tim, if you think that you will be able to get what you came for without any reciprocation, then I can kill you for being a fraud and liar, because that act would have insulted the Norton Family name. You should know that nobles hate nothing more than petty tricks and being insulted.”

Tim felt a chill down his spine and once again had a flashback of the moment he witnessed his father ordering for a fisherman to be hanged for attempting to hide his catch in order to avoid paying his fair share of tax. That fisherman lost his life just because he dared to try to trick the viscount. He could clearly recall what his father had said back in the day, “I don’t really care about the fish you were trying to hide from me. But I can definitely not forgive those who dare to lie to my face.”

Tim nodded in agreement to Lorist’s previous statement.

“Mister Tim, if you’re not approaching me as a conman but as a noble, then I should offer you a helping hand as well. However, nobles don’t give their help without expecting anything in return. Are you prepared to pay the price for my assistance?” Lorist asked.

“I can help you form and army, take the dominion back for you and even give you the proper training and lessons necessary on the customs and traditions of nobles so that you will act and behave like one and not embarrass yourself in front of other nobles. However, this will not come cheap, Mister Tim,” Lorist said.

“I… I have some money and supplies that I can offer you for your help…” Tim was gradually getting the drift of what Lorist was hinting at and he was even more excited after Lorist said that he would provide him with the training necessary to become a proper noble, or at least, behave like one.

“That’s the spirit, Mister Tim. It’s great that you intend to cooperate with me. However, can you tell me where you would get the money and supplies from as payment for my

assistance?"

Tim then told Lorist with absolute honesty about the location of the funds and resources he had. He mentioned that when Count Cobry's initial assault began, Viscount Tebri had brought Tim along with him to bury a stash of gold coins in a secret location so that he would one day be able to use it to regain his power. He also instructed Tim to not return to the castle and head to the areas within the dominion that had yet to be taken over to move the food and supplies to a cave within the mountains which he had discovered when he went out on a hunting trip with Tim. It was an abandoned bear cave that only the two of them knew of.

Having carried out the viscount's instructions properly, he returned to the dominion only to find that the castle had already been taken over and the viscount as well as all the rest of his family had all been put to death. Tim said that there were almost tens of thousands of imperial gold coins as well as enough food to last 3000 people for up to six months.

Looking at the map, Lorist noticed that the hiding place that Tim told him about was only 1 day's worth of travel away. He then called Reidy to bring Els over and instructed him to bring Patt, Tim and several other soldiers to head to that location to bring the gold coins and supplies back to the camp.

Before they left, Lorist wished them a smooth journey and promised Tim that he would arrange for someone to start the etiquette training when he got back.

When he returned to the large tent, Reidy came up to him and reported, "Milord, Knight Josk has come over with a group of people and has requested to meet with you."

Chapter 67
Josk's Wish

Upon seeing Josk, Lorist noticed that he looked rather haggard glum. There were a large group of people behind him numbering around 400 people of ages ranging from their mid-teens to their fifties. Every one of them held held makeshift weapons or farming tools in their hands.

"Milord, I have let your expectations down…" said Josk humbly before he saluted.

Lorist laughed and said, "Don't worry about it. The tide of battle is really hard to predict, so accidents like these really can't be blamed on you. Moreover, we have troubled you so much to go all the way there and back. So let's cut the pleasantries short and enter the camp first. We'll talk after we get you something warm to eat."

The aromatic smell of cooked meat wafted around the camp. Charade had ordered to have the dead mounts of the pike cavalry to be skinned and cooked in a big cauldron into stew, providing a hearty serving of meat for all within the convoy.

Upon hearing what Lorist had just said and taking a whiff of the mouth-watering smell of food, Josk's men instantly let out a loud cheer as their stomachs growled aloud.

Embarrassed, Josk said, "Milord, to be honest, we haven't eaten for the past day. Everyone's pushed to the brink of hunger already."

The near 400 men settled down in the camp pretty quickly after thirty or so tents were set up in the northwestern section. After that, Shadekampf had someone bring over some horse meat and potato stew for them to fill their stomachs with.

Within the tent, Josk could be seen wolfing down his food: he almost instantly finished the whole bowl of horse meat stew and the tens of pieces of bread Reidy had brought for him. After having his fill, he started to recount his experience after returning to the stronghold.

Among the insurgents who fought against Count Cobry, Josk could be considered as a rather influential person with almost 700 men under his command and a total of 2000

people including the soldiers' family members. However, he didn't have the intention of setting up his own stronghold and instead chose to let the family members stay at the largest stronghold, the Hiddenbull Stronghold, while he led the soldiers to cause trouble for the count, enabling him to be one of the most active insurgent groups in the area.

The recent skirmish between the Hiddenbull Stronghold and the count's forces had caused Josk to lose nearly half of his own men and drove him to try to burn the supplies of the count in an act of desperation, resulting in him getting acquainted with Lorist. When he left the convoy to rally up the other insurgent groups, he had imagined that they would be thrilled to join the war effort.

However, when he arrived at the western mountain area, he was only met with rejection and ridicule. To the people living in the mountains, the fact that the count's rebel-sweeping corps had left the mountains was already considered a victory for them. They believed that they should take advantage of the peace that was to come to rest up instead of provoking the rebel-sweeping corps, lest they once again fall into their sights. They even suggested to Josk to let the convoy and the count's forces wipe each other out.

Some of them even suspected Josk for entering into a secret agreement with the convoy. Otherwise, why would he bother asking the rest of them to attack the count's forces? Given that they had struggled so hard just to protect their strongholds from the rebel-sweeping corps, to take the initiative to attack them was like knocking an egg against a rock.

And some others even hoped that the convoy and the count's forces would mutually obliterate one another so that they will be able to take advantage of the whole situation. Given that Josk had told them about the size of the convoy, they inferred that it would definitely own a huge amount of resources that would instantly make them filthy rich.

Toiling away for three whole days at the mountains to try to negotiate with the insurgents, Josk ended up heavily disappointed that nobody bothered to join his cause to aid the convoy in attacking the enemy's main camp. To make matters worse, the leader of the Hiddenbull Stronghold invited Josk over and told him that they would no longer be able to sustain the 2000 family members of the soldiers and Josk's men due to the losses they sustained during the recent skirmish with the count's forces and suggested that they either join the stronghold and survive on some meager amount of

rations until spring the year after or bring them away from the stronghold to find other means of survival.

Josk was angered beyond belief as that signified that the Hiddenbull Stronghold intended to take advantage of Josk to make up for their own losses without even taking into account their contributions in resisting the count's forces. In fact, the stronghold did not lack any supplies at all as they had obtained two-thirds of the supplies pillaged from the count's warehouse that was just recently conquered by Josk's forces.

The prideful Josk instantly exposed the lies of the stronghold's leader and left with his men that very night. After that, he brought them to another stronghold within the mountains that had been ravaged by the count's forces. Josk was starting to feel a headache welling up when he saw the pained and crying old people and children as well as the 100 or so injured men. The mere thought of the leaders of the western mountain insurgents caused him to grit his teeth in anger. *These short-sighted ambitionless bastards who only dare to hide in their little corner will never be able to help me avenge my family. They are completely satisfied with staying at the strongholds for the rest of their lives within the mountains.*

When he recalled his arrangement with Lorist and the way the stronghold leaders treated him, for the first time in his life, Josk felt like rushing into battle and dying to end it all. That was why he left all of his rations with the women and children at the abandoned stronghold and rushed all the way to the encampment with 300 of his able-bodied men to the camp. He thought that as long as the convoy was still fighting with the count's rebel-sweeping corps, he would sacrifice himself and do whatever damages he could to the enemy to fulfill his promise with Lorist.

However, when he arrived at the battlefield with an empty stomach, the fight had already ended for two whole days. At that moment, Josk instantly regretted that he had spent so much time to convince the stronghold leaders to no avail.

Lorist gave him a brief summary of the battle that had occurred and said that the convoy was only able to obtain victory due to a series of unlikely coincidences. After that, Lorist suggested that Josk move his men and their family members to this camp as the convoy would leaving in the next two days, citing the reason that the camp was much easier to defend and incredibly hard to besiege with ample land for farming as well. He said that as long as he occupied the camp, his days in the future would be much easier and he wouldn't have to face the likes of the mountain insurgents ever again. If Josk was willing to do as he suggested, Lorist said that he would have some of

his carriages help out with the moving and even leave enough equipment and supplies for them.

After considering it deeply, he shook his head and turned down Lorist's goodwill and gave a response that greatly shocked him. "Milord, I would like to join the convoy and follow you up to the north. However, when we arrive at your homeland and dominion, I will come back here after everything is settled down to kill the count and all his illegitimate sons before returning to serve you completely."

Lorist wondered why Josk would end up at that decision as well as his history with the count.

Josk sighed and said, "Milord, I'm truly, very tired. I really gave it a lot of thought on the way here and I realized that I may not be as good a leader as I had hoped. I even ignored the feelings of my own men to go through such lengths to resist the count due to a personal vendetta. After all this time they took me as their leader, I still can't give them and their families the care they deserve. I only realized all my mistakes when I led these men away from the Hiddenbull Stronghold. I really have wronged the warriors who have fallen in battle under my command for not being able to provide their families with a sustainable and peaceful environment to live in… I really can't do it…

"Milord, I'm really grateful that you were willing to give the camp to us. But I understand that even if we were to stay here for the time being, we wouldn't be able to avoid the inevitable conflict and battles that are to come. That's why I would like to entrust you with my men so that they can have a peaceful life when they reach the Northlands. I believe that you will definitely be able to let them have the comfortable and blissful life that they deserve."

After that, he told Lorist about why he hated the count so much. To Lorist, it all seemed like a children's tale of happiness as well as one of revenge.

Josk's father was a Gold ranked knight who had left his newlywed wife around twenty years ago to answer the call to arms of the empire to resist the invasion of the trade union, only to die on the battlefield and never return. After Josk was given birth to, his mother soon left the world from a sickness that has ailed her since she had gotten wind of her husband's death. Orphaned from young, he had only managed to survive thanks to the goodwill of his neighbors. During one fateful day when he was twelve, he managed to save Baron Omador from a raging wild boar and was brought back to

the castle of the thankful baron.

Among the landed nobles in the area, Baron Omador was considered to be an eccentric person. First, he was extremely devoted and never had any illegitimate children nor affairs with his maidservants and has remained single after his wife passed away and lived with his precious daughter ever since. Additionally, the baron also had a great relationship with the citizens of his dominion and rarely punished them for no good reason and usually laughed it off when anyone committed a simple mistake. He would even distribute food and clothing to his citizens during festivities, earning him the reputation of the most benevolent noble in the area.

After understanding Josk's family history, the baron decided to adopt him and trained him strictly in hopes that one day he would become a Gold ranked knight like his father. Josk himself also trained zealously and successfully became a One Star Gold Knight who was well-versed with the bow and arrow under the baron's tutelage at the age of 24.

During the 14 years Josk lived at the baron's castle, the baron's daughter also gradually grew up and the two of them fell in love to nobody's surprise. The baron was extremely pleased with the relationship and let his daughter get engaged with Josk and said that they would officially become husband and wife when his daughter reached 20 years old.

Up to that point, the whole story seemed like it came right out of a children's storybook. However, on the day when Josk was supposed to get married to his lover, the count sent someone to request the baron's daughter's hand in marriage for one of his illegitimate sons. During that time, the baron was incredibly furious and chased the messenger away. Who knew that right after that, Count Cobry and his army invaded the baron's dominion and surrounded the whole castle and declared war with the baron using the excuse that the act of chasing away his messenger was a grave insult to his status.

The castle that was prepared for a wedding ceremony was naturally not a match for the count's army and was breached within two short hours. Josk, who was defending the castle at the frontlines, had ended up severely injured and only managed to survive from having been rescued by his subordinates. On his trip away from the castle, he regained consciousness for a moment and witnessed a scene that he would never forget: the castle that he had lived in for the last 14 years had been set on fire with black fumes rising high up into the sky, with his betrothed plunging to her death from

the highest floor of the castle in her snow white gown.

Josk let out an inhuman shriek before falling back into the indifferent embrace of unconsciousness. It took another half a year before he completely recovered from his injuries and infiltrated the count's mansion in an attempt to kill the count and his illegitimate son. However, of the three arrows he had managed to unleash, two of them managed to take the illegitimate sons' lives while the third only hit the count's shoulder. After that incident, he was under constant pursuit of the count's forces. Due to his seething hatred for the count, he eventually formed an insurgent group that aspired to cause as much trouble to the count as possible.

In the middle of telling his story, Josk broke down into tears and suddenly knelt in front of Lorist. He said that if Lorist was willing to help him take revenge, he would definitely accept him as his lord and will be willing to serve the Norton Family for life.

Quickly helping Josk up from the floor, Lorist expressed that he had always admired Josk's skills and said that he would definitely be glad if Josk was willing to serve him. However, he said that he couldn't agree to exterminating the count lightly as the main objective of the convoy was to head to the Northlands and the whole convoy's wellbeing will be affected by that decision. However, he assured that the convoy's travel plans was still not set and he would definitely see how he can help out if it was within his abilities, as the Norton Family also had a grudge against the count for killing off their merchant convoy.

After that, Josk finally calmed down and was led by Reidy to a nearby tent for some rest. After all, even a Gold ranked knight would be exhausted after traveling such a long distance without food or sleep.

Lorist stroke his chin as he drowned himself in his thoughts. He strongly believed that Josk would be a great addition to his forces and would make a stellar subordinate. However, he had to fulfill his wish and exterminate the count and his family in order for that to happen. *Hm? I suddenly feel like I'm in an RPG game. The Gold ranked marksman Josk is like a quest reward for exterminating the count.*

Alright then, let's think hard about how I can complete this quest, mused Lorist to himself as he sat down on a desk and started analyzing the map of the area.

Chapter 68
Strategizing

When Charade, Potterfang, Terman, Yuriy and Loze hurried over, they saw Reidy bringing a few of the surrendered garrison troops out of the tent. Upon entering the large tent, they noticed several maps, large and small, were littered all over the place as well as a table that had half of its surface occupied by beastskin books that were marked with all sorts of symbols by Lorist.

"What are you doing?" asked Charade curiously as he approached. After looking at it for some time, he still couldn't understand what Lorist was trying to achieve.

On the other hand, Potterfang instantly had a hunch about what was going on. "These look like the distribution of soldiers and supply lines…"

Upon hearing what Potterfang had said, Charade looked back at the side and got a shocking realization, "Are you planning to take on Count Cobry?"

Lorist nodded and took out a small map and circled a part of it, "Look, this is the count's area of influence."

He subsequently drew a single line outside the circle and said, "This is the path that we were going to take and it just so happens to circumvent that area of influence. If we manage to travel up to 35 kilometers a day, it'll take us around 12 to 14 days to leave this area. However, we'll only be passing through the wilderness or the places where the count's forces have ravaged and that would make it hard for us to resupply and do business.

"But if we take this route…" Lorist drew another line that passed through the circle and continued, "It'll only take us 7 days and it's far more convenient for us to procure resources along the way. However, the precondition of using this route is that we have to first defeat Count Cobry."

"Then, have you thought of how you would go about achieving that?" asked Charade.

"Nope. I've just got the count's garrison troops over and questioned them about the

situation at hand. I do have some thoughts about it, but I'm not sure how the count would respond to our actions, so I'm not too confident if that's the best way," said Lorist as he shook his head. He then took out a book and placed it on the table.

"You guys should join me in planning this too. After all, I can only consider so many scenarios by myself. Reidy, get me the Kirov War Chess set," Lorist said.

Kirov War Chess was a war game created by the General Kirov from the Romon Empire about a hundred years ago. Lorist felt that it was quite similar to the modern chess back in his world. However, the chessboard was more similar to that of monopoly board game rather than the traditional checkerboard.

"Count Cobry has a new city in development that is modeled after the capital called Geldos City," said Lorist as he pointed towards the book he placed on the table before he put two cavalry chess pieces and four infantry chess pieces atop the book. "Currently, Geldos City has two cavalry companies and one garrison regiment defending it. It is worth noting that one of the pike cavalry companies as well as two companies within the garrison regiment were only recently formed and don't have any real battle prowess. According to the surrendered troops, the count only has one personal guard made up of a squad with members that are at least at the Iron rank equipped with heavy armor to look out for his safety."

After that, Lorist placed a plate onto the table and put a cavalry and infantry chess piece each onto the plate. "Williamiles Castle is defended by a cavalry company and another garrison company and the soldiers number almost 1000 in total. Even though the allied noble armies that are currently in a conflict with the count have around 4000 men, they're still gradually being pushed into a corner by the count's forces and are currently passively defending themselves. What a useless bunch."

Casually commenting on the allied noble armies, Lorist put down another cup on the table and placed an infantry chess piece within. "Over here is Burdock Bastide, which is situated within the count's original territory and there is a company of garrison troops stationed there. Now, pay attention to Geldos City, Williamiles Castle and Burdock Bastide. If you connect all three points to each other, you get a triangular shape. So, if one side is attacked, the other two will be able to go back it up as quickly as possible. Unless our forces far outnumber that of the count's, we will not be able to take down the forces stationed at Williamiles Castle and Burdock Bastide to reach Geldos City.

“Fortunately for us, the pike cavalry company and garrison regiment that were supposed to be stationed at Burdock Bastide has already been annihilated by us and they only have one company of garrison troops sent there from Williamiles Castle stationed there. Taking into account that the pike cavalry from the rebel-sweeping forces have also been wiped out by us, their forces have weakened quite a lot and no longer pose much of a threat to us. What I have in mind is we take the opportunity when Burdock Bastide is only weakly defended by a single garrison company and disguise ourselves as insurgent forces and start causing trouble in the dominion of the count to lure him to deploy his soldiers from Geldos City so that we can occupy the city posthaste. As long as we manage to get Geldos City and Burdock Bastide within our control, the count’s foundation will have crumbled and there will be no way he can rise up to power again.”

“Milord, your plan sounds really viable. Why, then, are you hesitating to do so?” asked Potterfang.

“It’s mainly because we still don’t exactly have enough soldiers to gain a victory without incurring a heavy loss at the same time. If that were the case, not only would we lose the control over the situation, we might also get attacked by others who are preying on the convoy. That is why I’m currently trying to come out with some way to minimize the losses our forces will incur. If only we can somehow get rid of another pike cavalry company…” said Lorist with a bitter laugh.

“But milord, I think that our forces are more than enough to handle the count’s army. Why do you say otherwise?” asked Loze curiously.

“We have to consider the security of the convoy as well and cannot send all our forces without leaving some behind. After doing some calculations, I found that we can only afford to dispatch three pike infantry companies, one heavy-armored cavalry company and the carroballista squad as well as the knight brigade. We have to leave behind one heavy-armored cavalry company and two pike infantry companies to be able to ensure the convoy’s safety. With the constable squad having to remain to regulate the convoy and the camp guard company being in charge of watching the war prisoners, even if we were to draw some forces from those units, we would only have 2000 extra men give or take. And Yuriy’s light cavalry scouts will have to leave a squad behind to patrol the surrounding area and can only spare three squads to join our main attacking force and two more squads for the group that will ambush Geldos City.

“We also have to consider how the count will respond to our movements. If he hears

that insurgents have come to attack his dominion, then he might possibly deploy all his forces, meaning that he will send two companies of pike cavalry and the garrison regiment of Geldos City, a staggering number of 3000 people, to exterminate the 'insurgents'. If we include the nobles that have allied with him, he can easily raise an army of around 5000 people. That's why I'm worried that we will suffer heavy losses if we fight head on with his main force," explained Lorist patiently.

Lorist gave a long sigh and said, "Actually, I was considering using the opportunity provided to us by the defeat of the count's pike cavalry to prompt the insurgents to cause trouble in the count's dominion when Josk said that he would rally them from the western mountains to attack the enemy's main camp and give the count no choice but to deploy his troops. That way, we can focus our forces to deal with the disorganized enemy and use the insurgents as our scapegoat to lessen our casualties as well.

"Who would have expected that the insurgents would be so cowardly and not dare to take any risks. That's why Knight Josk felt disillusioned and came over with his men to join our side."

Lorist then briefly told the rest about the history between Knight Josk and Count Corby. "I would really appreciate a Gold ranked talent like Josk and would definitely love to have him join the ranks of the Norton Family Knights. That's why I'm so eager to wipe out the count to avenge the family's merchant convoy while fulfilling Josk's wish at the same time. That's also the main reason why I'm sitting here going through the maps and trying to formulate a plan that will entrap the count's forces and avoid going into direct confrontation with them."

"Knight Josk really is a devoted man! It's nothing but good news if he intends to join us, We should definitely help him out," said Charade sympathetically after hearing about Josk's experience. "But Lord Locke, you seem to have missed out on an important piece of information."

"What is that about?" asked Lorist.

"Yesterday when Els was questioning the surrendered garrison troops, I overheard one of the soldiers saying that when they received news at the western mountains about the occupation of the camp, the illegitimate son that was in command sent some pike cavalrymen back to Count Cobry to report that incident before ordering for them to go take the camp back, bringing along the captive youths with them. Given that it

takes four days to travel from the western mountains to Burdock Bastide, Count Cobry will only receive the report of the camp's occupation by today and will still think that the rebel-sweeping corps is in the process of recapturing the camp. Lord Locke, what you missed was how the count would behave given that he had only received the news of the occupation today," said Charade.

"Huh?" Lorist's eyes instantly brightened. "If I were Count Corby, upon receiving the report and taking into account the less than ideal snowy weather for the past two days, I will definitely worry about the rebel-sweeping corps. I will send them some reinforcements straight away and the fastest unit that is available to me is the pike cavalry company. It will take them around 4 days to travel to this camp by horse from Geldos City, which is to say, the count's reinforcements will arrive within 3 to 4 days. We still have a chance to take out their pike cavalry."

"That's correct. Also, didn't Knight Josk mention that some of his men's family members are still at the abandoned stronghold? We should go there openly to escort them back and spread the news of the pike cavalry's demise while we're at it. Even if they don't believe us, they will definitely send someone to check out the situation for themselves. We can then invite the people they send to witness us defeating the incoming pike cavalry company and tell them that without the pike cavalry, the count's might will effectively be halved and there is no better opportunity to raid the count's dominion like now. I believe that the insurgents will definitely spare no expense and send out all the forces they can muster to the count's dominion. When the insurgents throw the dominion into chaos, we can then sneak our way to conquer Burdock Bastide. Or, if the count decides to send his main force over there, we can have the insurgents' forces keep them busy and secretly send our elites to ambush Geldos City," added Charade.

"Good, that is exactly what we'll do," said Lorist excitedly with both his fists clasped. "Reidy, we have no time to waste. Quickly invite Knight Josk over."

After giving Reidy that order, Lorist looked at Charade, Yuriy, Terman, Potterfang and Loze and suddenly felt that something was off. "Oh, you all came together at the same time. Is there something I should know?"

The gang suddenly remembered why they came to Lorist in the first place. Charade laughed bitterly and said, "Milord, the reorganization plans that you have drafted were mostly carried out smoothly. The only issue is the lack of war horses. The various units have already started quarreling over the remaining war horses we have right now."

According to Charade, the convoy originally only had more than 700 war horses. They obtained a few dozen after raiding Viscount Mestre's castle as well. Coupled with the 2000 war horses obtained after eliminating the rebel-sweeping corps, the total number of war horses they had was still less than 3000. Based on Lorist's reorganization plan, a total of 4000 horses would be needed and that did not include the mounts needed by the camp guard and the constable unit. Currently, Terman, Yuriy, Potterfang and Loze had already argued day and night over it and finally settled to go to Lorist for a solution.

Lorist laughed out loud before continuing, "There isn't a need to quarrel over something like that! Just endure it for the moment. Don't we have some people sending horses to our doorstep in another four to five days? How shameless for you to be arguing over something so trivial like this. When we defeat Count Cobry's forces, we will have all the horses we want."

What Lorist was referring to was the reinforcements sent by the count. Given that each cavalryman had two mounts, the convoy would definitely not be short on those by the time they defeat the reinforcements.

After that, Josk entered the tent with Reidy and overheard about the lack of horses. He said, "Milord, if you are willing to trade weapons and equipment with the insurgents in the western mountains, I estimate that you will be able to get around 600 war horses."

Lorist nodded and said, "That's good. I'll be counting on you for that."

After that, he briefed Josk on the plans they had gone through just now.

Surprised and delighted, Josk said, "Milord, are you really going to exterminate Count Cobry?"

"That's right," said Lorist. "Since we have already destroyed so many of his troops, we might as well finish the job thoroughly and uproot the foundation of his power, lest he cause more trouble for us in the future."

"Milord, it is my pleasure to be in your service," said Josk as he deeply bowed to Lorist.

Chapter 69
The Battle Begins

“Milord, we’ve returned,” said Patt as he entered the large tent with Els and Tim.

“Oh, you’re back. Reidy, ask Charade and Shadekampf to come over. Oh, don’t forget Dulles as well,” said Lorist as he rubbed his face to refresh himself. He did not have any sleep last night as he was planning hard on how to minimize his losses in the upcoming fight against the count’s pike cavalry company that was en route to reinforce the rebel-sweeping corps.

“Sit down. Was the journey smooth? Patt, get Mister Tim some macks; I’ve been smelling its fragrant smell since this morning when Reidy was making it,” said Lorist.

Charade and Shadekampf came over quickly and Lorist had them do an inventory check and record on the food and money that has just been brought over.

Without delay, Charade came back into the tent with a cheerful expression and said, “Milord, there are 100000 kilograms’ worth of refined flour.”

“Huh? Mister Tim, why does Viscount Tebri have so much of that?” asked Lorist.

Tim stood up and bowed before he said, “MIlord, the 100000 kilograms of refined flour is made from two years’ worth of produce from the viscount’s land. The crop has been converted to flour for ease of trading. Every two years, there will be a merchant convoy that goes to the viscount’s dominion to purchase that flour for a price of around 1000 gold Fordes. I have been in charge of dealing with the merchants all this time.”

“Oh, so that was the case. With this stock of refined flour, we can loosen up the rationing of the supplies of the convoy by quite a bit. Mister Tim, thank you for this. Rest assured that I won’t take your things for free and will purchase them according to market price,” said Lorist as he nodded in satisfaction.

Dulles then entered the tent and saluted to Lorist. Lorist asked him to wait for a while because he had something he needed Dulles to do later.

Subsequently, Shadekampf came into the tent with a large book and reported to Lorist, "Milord, within those seven large chests, there is a total of 17000 gold Fordes as well as 11000 imperial gold coins."

"Mister Tim, as the heir of Viscount Tebri, I believe that 1000 gold Fordes will be quite suitable as the ransom for your freedom given your status as a prisoner of war. The remaining gold coins will be taken care of by our convoy for the time being until you officially inherit your title and your expenses will be deducted from the figure. We will definitely return what remains of that sum to you when the time comes. Are you okay with that arrangement?" asked Lorist towards Tim.

Tim deeply bowed and said, "Milord, let's handle everything at your discretion."

"Good, that's a wise decision. Mister Tim, how many men do you have in your command at the moment?" asked Lorist.

"Um, I'm not too sure about this myself. There should be around 600 people. I should probably ask Knight Gemors about the exact number…" said Tim without confidence.

"Knight Gemors? Who's that?"

Tim quickly explained to Lorist that Knight Gemors was a Two Star Silver ranked knight that had served the viscount. Only, his age was rather high at 53 years old and he had a carefree personality and frequently commented on the viscount's way of handling things without holding back, thus making him not favored by the viscount. Had it not been for the fact that his family was a long line of knights that served the Tebri Family, the viscount would have sacked him long ago.

Consequently, he was sent to guard the refined flour business with Tim and was also the one that helped Tim to move the stock of refined flour to a secret location. When he realized that the viscount and his family had all been wiped out upon returning to the castle, he quickly took Tim as his lord and made an oath to secure the Tebri Family line throughout the generations. He also played a large part in rallying the citizens of the viscount's dominion to join Tim's insurgent force.

Given that Tim had passed the order to surrender when the rebel-sweeping corps broke through their stronghold, the force of the stronghold had not diminished by much. After being saved as a result of the convoy's occupation of the camp, the people under Tim's stronghold gathered together with several others from neighboring

insurgent forces and quickly formed a group of 600 men. However, Tim said that he wasn't well-versed when it came to military matters and left it all to Knight Gemors's jurisdiction.

"How about this, Mister Tim, I will find your men later and provide them with some equipment. You can then go over to the camp of the rebel-sweeping corps that we have just taken to set up your own camp. I will allow you to use the flag of the Tebri Family. After that, send some people who are good with words to the western mountains to spread the news of our victory over the count's forces and encourage the insurgents to join the war effort. Tell them that they will not only be able to cripple the count forever but also make a good haul by raiding his dominion and that the things they manage to obtain will remain in their possession. After your unit receives the weapons, have Knight Gemors start their training before you return to start your noble etiquette lessons.

"Dulles, let me introduce Mister Tim to you. He is Viscount Tebri's heir. Due to certain reasons, he wasn't given training for noble customs and etiquette. I understand that you have been a temporary instructor for the etiquette course for the Dawn Academy when we were still at Morante City. I am now entrusting Mister Tim's training to you. Make sure to turn him to a prim and proper noble within the shortest time possible, understand?" instructed Lorist to Dulles.

"Yes, milord," acknowledged Dules. He then turned to Tim and said, "Come on, Mister Tim. I will observe your behavior and start correcting you when you carry out the assignments given to you by our lord. The training has already begun."

When Dulles left with Tim, Lorist said to Charade and Potterfang, "Make a new account for Tim's gold coins as well as the food he brought back and give him a copy of that as well. Tell him that if he needs anything, he can claim it from the main camp and the expenses will be deducted from his account. When allocating equipment to his men, use the ones obtained from the garrison troops that surrendered to us and sell it to him at a rate of 70% of the market price. As for the resources he will require to set up a new camp, sell it at a normal market rate. You two, while it's okay to sell it to him at a slight profit, don't go overboard."

Charade started laughing out loud and said, "I was just considering whether I should raise the price by a few times, but it was shot down by you immediately. Oh well. Shadekampf, we'll do as your young master says and sell the weapons and equipment with a 30% discount and charge a normal price for the supplies Tim will need. I'll leave

it to you."

"Yes," said Shadekampf as he hurriedly left the tent.

The only ones who currently remained within the large tent was Lorist, Charade, Els, Patt and Reidy. Patt couldn't withhold his curiosity anymore and decided to ask Lorist, "Milord, why were you so lenient with Mister Tim and even bothered to help him become a noble? Isn't it a little too much to assist a con like him? If this were the Northlands, he would have his head lobbed off and displayed to the public for attempting to impersonate a noble."

Lorist laughed and said, "Patt, whether Mister Tim is a conman or not is not up to us to decide. It is not completely unprecedented for a family to be inherited by an illegitimate child. If we were at the Northlands, I would definitely kill him and swallow up his dominion just as most other nobles would. However, we are now in the Redlis Kingdom and the Northlands are thousands of kilometers away. Why would I bother to take something that I won't be able to benefit from? Killing Mister Tim does not profit us in any way. On the other hand, if we give him the appropriate nurturing and let him become a bona fide noble with an army to be commended within the area, then he would owe us a favor. In the future, whenever we have anything we need help with, we know who to look for. Understand now?"

Charade also offered his opinion on the matter. "Also, helping Mister Tim form his own army will also serve as a reminder to the insurgent forces as to whether they should become our friend or foe. If they ally with us like Mister Tim did, we will provide them with weapons and equipment and help them gain their dominions back. If they go against us, then we will not show them a shred of mercy and wipe them all out. The important thing is that we don't lack funds nor equipment but rather people who would be willing to purchase the gear from us. That's why we didn't prey on Mister Tim's gold and food. As long as we show ourselves to be fair and trustworthy, we will naturally be able to attract some of the insurgent forces to do business with us."

…

Just as Charade has stated, ever since Tim brought his men to set up camp under the banner of the Tebri Family and after Josk brought the family members of his subordinates back from the mountains in a grand and public fashion, coupled with the men Tim sent to spread the news about the count's rebel-sweeping corps's demise, the insurgent forces have started sending people to the convoy to trade for weapons

and equipment. Charade has managed to exchange many unused items for war horses in a short period of time due to the fair prices and quantity of the weapons offered, temporarily alleviating the desperate lack of mounts the convoy faced.

As for the ones who came to trade their war horses for food, they were rejected by Charade with the reason that the convoy themselves were also lacking in that resource. However, Charade invited the insurgent forces to plunder the count's dominion after the the defeat of the count's reinforcements that were on their way. Even though the representatives of the insurgents were rather dubious of the invitation, they still left some of their people to monitor the situation to ascertain whether the convoy was really going to take out the count's reinforcements.

After another two days, Yuriy sent someone to report that Count Cobry's reinforcements have finally been spotted. As expected, they were a company of pike cavalrymen that were escorting tens of other carriages that seemed to be transporting some supplies. It seemed that the reinforcements had traveled at a rather slow pace for the past 6 days and it would take another day for them to reach the camp. Lorist had originally expected for them to arrive within four to five days.

The process of surrounding and ambushing the count's forces proceeded without much difficulty: when the pike cavalry company noticed that they had been surrounded from all sides, Knight Josk went all out and showed off his divine marksmanship in front of everyone by taking down three of the Silver rank commanders of the company with only three arrows. After the battle, it was discovered that two of the commanders were the illegitimate children of Count Cobry; Knight Josk had managed to inch ever so closer to his goal of revenge.

After that, Terman's newly-formed knight squad and the heavy-armored cavalry company led by Potterfang and Loze started their assault. The pike cavalrymen who had been traveling in the snowy weather for up to six days had no way to resist such a ferocious attack, especially given that their leader had already fallen in the beginning of the battle. It didn't take long before they ceased all resistance and surrendered.

After the battle, Lorist and his knights got to know that while their forces only sustained light injuries, the only casualty had been accidentally knocked off his horse by one of their own and stomped to death by a horse in his chest. The other soldiers' injuries were also due to accidental friendly fire while the ones actually hurt by the enemy numbered less than ten. After that report was concluded, Terman, Potterfang and Loze all had faces as red as a baboon's rear and were completely speechless.

However, the insurgents who were monitoring the battle did not notice that discrepancy and were completely enthralled by the fearsome manner in which the convoy's forces obliterated that of the count's. They all came to the realization that the count had actually lost three of his pike cavalry companies as well as one regiment and one company of garrison troops to the convoy. That meant that the count only had half of his military might left. Currently, the count's dominion was akin to a scantily-clad and defenseless girl who practically couldn't resist anybody's forced advances.

Without much delay, several of the insurgent forces of the western mountains quickly sent their troops to gather at the camp, effectively filling it up to the brim. Lorist and Charade called for their leaders and discussed for a whole day, promising that the convoy would support them with their own forces to give the 3000-strong insurgents a chance to pillage the count's dominion within the coming days.

The first place to fall was the count's original territory, Burdock Bastide. Within a single day, the bastide administration had received tens of reports of their citizens or warehouses being plundered by bandits and was thrown into severe disarray. The Gold ranked illegitimate son that was stationed at the bastide angrily rallied three squads of garrison troops in an attempt to squash the impudent 'bandits' who dared to ravage their dominion. When they broke through the ranks of two of the insurgent groups, Potterfang and Loze led a company of heavy-armored cavalrymen to the forefront of the battle and completely vaporized the three squads of garrison troops, with the head of the Gold ranked illegitimate son severed and paraded around on a pike.

Upon seeing the severed head, the last squad that was defending the bastide chose to surrender and the control of Burdock Bastide was officially transferred to Lorist.

"Onward!" shouted Charade on top of a huge and majestic Zeno horse as he waved his horsewhip valiantly.

Near a thousand horse carriages lined up into four columns headed out of the camp. Within it, the flag that bore the insignia of the raging bear was lowered and a flag that depicted a horseshoe belonging to the Tebri Family was raised.

After receiving Lorist's report of the bastide's capture, Charade ordered the convoy to set out for it. Before they left, Charade even transferred the ownership of the camp to Tim for 1000 gold Fordes. Tim agreed to that transaction happily as he felt that the strong defensive fortifications of the camp was far better than the ravaged dominion

of Viscount Tebri.

Having received days of training in noble customs and etiquette, Tim seemed to have a slight air of nobility emanating from him and has started to dress more presentably. With the support of the convoy, he has managed to rally 1000 young and strong soldiers as well as 2000 non-combatants under the banner of the Tebri Family and had become a force on par to the other insurgents. However, there was one thing that still caused Tim quite a bit of worry: the amount of the money he had entrusted to the convoy was depleting rather quickly. As of now, he was only left with around 10000 gold Fordes.

This wasn't due to the convoy taking advantage of Tim's funds. In fact, he was extremely grateful for the convoy's help and support as well as the reasonable prices they charged for the items sold to him. His financial issues mainly stemmed from the upkeep required to sustain the thousands of people under him, causing him to eagerly look forward to the day when he can go get a big haul from the count's dominion. During the latest expedition, he brought eight hundred of his men to join the convoy's forces and even gave each of them a large bag to take as many valuables as they can.

Chapter 70
Troop Deployment

Count Cobry was fuming with rage as he squeezed yet another golden cup in his hand into a crumpled up chunk. All his servants didn't dare to take loud breaths lest they end up like that unfortunate sob the day before, who had returned to the embrace of the Earth Mother Goddess having been struck on the head with a similar chunk that used to be a metal cup that was thrown by the count after he had accidentally made a loud noise when the count was irritated from hearing about the bad news.

The count unconsciously squeezed his fist and turned the cup into a plethora of different shapes. He only noticed that the cup had been squeezed into a small golden ball of metal when the jewel inlaid on the cup fell out of his palm. Placing the golden ball on the table, the count stood up and paced around in frustration before going to the veranda, causing all the servants to let out a breath of relief as nobody was hurt in his presence.

Count Cobry was already 63 years old that year, but he still looked like a strong and healthy middle-aged man. Even though he had been criticized for his bad character among the noble circle, his talent in Battle Force training was definitely top-notch. Not only was he a Two Star Gold rank, he had managed to bring up 17 Gold ranks and 38 Silver ranks out of all his illegitimate sons. If the count were at the Morante City's academy sector, he could use those results to earn himself a Gold ranked Battle Force instructor badge without much difficulty.

Relying heavily on his illegitimate sons, Count Cobry has managed to expand his territory by quite a huge margin and solidified the Cobry Family's position as the hegemon of the northwestern area of the Redlis Kingdom. However, just when the rank of a duke was within his reach, his plans had been overturned all of a sudden. How could he not be pissed?

Since he first became good friends with the First Prince ten years ago at the capital, the count has always served him well by disguising his troops as bandits to raid merchant convoys. The count had sacrificed over 6 Gold ranked and 13 Silver ranked sons in hopes of being granted the title of the Duke of the Northwest by the First Price.

But that could only be achieved if he manages to make the former nobles of the Krissen Empire submit to the First Prince.

The northwestern area of the Redlis Kingdom was the place where nobles who had military achievements were enfeoffed land. While the nobles there were loyal to the First Prince in name, none of them actually took him seriously. When the First Prince first raised the flag of rebellion, only a few of them actually joined the war effort enthusiastically. And when it came to taxes and administration, all of the First Prince's attempts to raise the taxation rate has been suppressed either openly or secretly by the nobles.

The count understood that his reputation in the northwest was not that impressive. Back in the day, having a less than ideal reputation as a branch family spawned from a birth outside of wedlock, not a single noble family wanted to form marriage alliances with the Cobry Family. The First Prince had wanted the nobles of the northwestern area to give 20% of their earnings as tax, but the count understood that they would definitely not agree to that proposition. Thus, he resorted to using military force to subdue the nobles since he believed that the northwestern area would one day become his dominion and the lesser nobles there area there, the better he would fare.

How, then, did everything start to go haywire? Count Cobry stood at the veranda and looked towards the site where the new city was being built that was blanketed by a cloud of dust. The layout of the city before his eyes had been inspired largely by the design of the capital and he planned to have it be his headquarters when he becomes a duke in the future and use it as the center of administration for the northwestern area.

In the past, the count frequently felt proud and full of himself when he witnessed the city's construction from the veranda. Even though life was fleeting, his name and legacy would forever live on in the form of the city and weather through the indifferent passage of time. He had even planned to erect a large statue of him when the main construction of the city was completed and hold the ceremony of his ascension to the title of the duke there.

His dream would only require two more years to come true! The count grasped both of his fists and steeled his resolve to not allow anyone stop him in his tracks of realizing his long-held desire. The current situation was looking pretty good for the count as the allied noble armies had been forced into a corner and had no way to resist him whatsoever, as could be seen from the fact that many of the nobles had started

writing private letters to him stating that they would be willing to switch sides and obey his orders. And with the gradual increase of the count's power, he had managed to wipe out many of the neighboring nobles and had turned their dominions to uninhabited wastelands that housed no one apart from some insurgent forces or bandits who probably had death wishes.

When the count thought about the insurgent forces, he was once again reminded about the merchant convoy that his rebel-sweeping corps had attacked out of habit from the old days when they masqueraded as bandits. Until now, they were still entangled with the convoy and seemed to have forgotten his order to capture people from the mountainous strongholds to be used as laborers.

The count could never even imagine that the forces he had sent out had been all wiped out. He truly believed that his force that consisted of two companies of pike cavalry and five companies of garrison troops was completely invincible in the northwestern area of the Redlis Kingdom. He reasoned that his men probably didn't dare to send reports back to him because they were worried that he would be further angered by the fact that they were having a hard time taking back the camp as the convoy's forces had a defensive advantage. Then again, he had sent yet another company of pike cavalry along with a sizeable amount of food and supplies as reinforcements, so he believed that he would receive the good news in a couple more days.

He was angry yet curious at the same time about the convoy that spread so far that one couldn't see the end of it from the other end, as reported to him by one of his men who had participated in the second assault on the convoy. Which merchant guild could the convoy belong to? It was glaringly apparent that they did not put the count in any regard from the manner in which they decided to cross his lands unannounced.

What he didn't expect was that the entanglement between his rebel-sweeping corps and the convoy's forces had given the pests from the western mountains a chance to occupy the Burdock Bastide when his forces were spread thin. That place was the original dominion of the Cobry Family! Had it not been for the reports of the citizens who had evacuated the area, he probably would've been unaware that the bastide was being ravaged by the insurgent bandits for five whole days already.

At first, the count didn't believe the report of the citizens at all and even gave them a savage round of caning. However, even under the painful strokes of the cane, the citizens' testaments still stood firm and they even swore that all of what they said were true. Half-believing the reports, the count sent a squad of pike cavalrymen to check

the situation out. According to their reports, they had encountered Divine Marksman Josk and many other bandits that numbered around a company's worth of men. After engaging in a brutal skirmish with the enemy, only a few of the pike cavalrymen managed to make it back alive.

Upon the mention of Josk, the count felt a chilling sensation on his shoulder where Josk's arrow had once pierced. Given Josk's participation, it wasn't hard to guess that the illegitimate sons stationed at Burdock Bastide had met their demise. Based on what the citizens' and his cavalrymen's reports, he estimated there to be around 3000 rioters, which was about the number of the insurgent forces that hid themselves in the mountains. It seemed that they were going all out for that attack.

Alright, I guess it's time I made my move. Don't think that just because I'm 63, I would be easy to mess with. However old a lion is, it would always retain its savagery and majesty and will retaliate when it is threatened. If I don't quell these rioters as soon as possible and word about this gets out, others would think the Cobry Family is on the way to its downfall to the point where it couldn't even handle some petty rioters. The count made an oath to himself that he would teach the insurgent pests a severe lesson and will not rest until every single one of them pays for their transgressions.

The count could afford to deploy a regiment of garrison troops numbering around 2000 people as well as one company of pike cavalrymen from Geldos City given that he had one newly-formed squad of pike cavalrymen and two squads of garrison troops which was more than enough to defend the city with. Coupled with the other pike cavalrymen he had stationed at Williamiles Castle and the soldiers of the nobles who were on his side, he easily rallied a force of 5000 people that was powerful enough to completely crush the insurgents of the western mountains, not to say much about a disorganized bunch of rowdy bandits. *I guess this arrangement is fine. I'll deploy my soldiers within three days.*

After finishing his thought, Count Cobry called out loudly, "Heed my orders…"

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Lorist started pointing all over the map and said, "Here, here and here. Yuriy, send some people to be stationed there. These are the ideal places to monitor the road that connects Burdock Bastide to Geldos City. The count will definitely have his men use that road if he starts mobilizing his troops and we will be able to make our preparations the moment we see something going on. Josk, you did pretty well

yesterday and managed to eliminate half of the squad of pike cavalrymen they sent over without relying on the forces of the convoy. However, the insurgents have lost quite a bit of men too, right?"

"That's correct. They have lost around 200 men. If I didn't happen to pass through that area with a squad of light cavalry scouts, they would probably have been wiped out entirely. However, I left the equipment and weapons of the defeated soldiers of the count to them and they were quite thankful and pleased with that arrangement despite their losses," reported Josk.

"That's the main reason why I praised you. Now that news of his soldiers' defeat has gone out, he would definitely mobilize the rest of his troops. We are prepared to face off against him at this spot. If we didn't have the insurgents fleshing out our numbers, we will not be able to stave off the full-force, head-on assault of the count and might even incur huge losses even if we emerge victorious.

"Where is the convoy led by Knight Charade located at now?" Lorist asked.

Potterfang pointed to a point on the map and said, "They're already here and will arrive at Burdock Bastide by tomorrow afternoon. I've already sent Knight Loze and a company of heavy-armored cavalry to receive and escort him along the way so I believe that the convoy would not have any problems reaching the bastide unharmed. Pleased rest assured, milord."

"How can I not be worried when the convoy hasn't arrived yet? I'm afraid that everyone will have to be quite busy within the next two days. Yuriy, make sure your scouts increase the patrols in the surrounding area, but try to shut an eye to what the insurgent forces are doing to minimize the conflict we have with them. Don't get into fights just because of their despicable behavior, alright?" said Lorist.

"Yes, milord. I will make sure to inform my subordinates to be careful," replied Yuriy.

"Just hold it in for now. When the convoy arrives, we will be able to send Malek to gather up the insurgents that are causing trouble and enforce military discipline on them. If they don't obey, then we will kill a few to make an example out of them for the others to follow suit. We have no choice but to endure for the first few days as we don't have enough manpower right now," said Lorist as he shook his head while laughing bitterly.

In actuality, the actions of some of the insurgents were even lowlier and more detestable than things common bandits would carry out. Incidents like robbery, murder and rape was rather common within the count's dominion at the moment, but it was an understandable consequence. Given that the insurgents have been fighting against the count for so long, they would naturally desire to cause as much havoc as they can within the count's dominion as a form of payback. However, it would be too extreme to allow them to vent all their hatred for the count onto his innocent citizens. As Knight Josk had put it, some of the insurgents used to run away on the mere sight of the count's soldiers. Currently, they were laying their hands on the defenseless citizens of the dominion and that had caused several fights to break out between the convoy's soldiers and the insurgents'.

"Josk, how fares the formation of your mounted cavalry unit?"

"Milord, the people who fit the criteria of that unit is exceedingly hard to find. Not only do they have to be good at riding, they must also have a talent for marksmanship as well as have some mastery in Battle Force. So far, I've only managed to find tens of men who fit that bill," said Josk in a downcast manner.

"It's alright, take your time. I believe when the unit is properly formed, it will definitely take the battlefield by storm," consoled Lorist with a smile.

…

On the next day, Charade arrived at Burdock Bastide with the rest of the convoy, causing everyone to be in a cheerful mood.

That night within a large hall, Lorist looked at the map and announced, "Today, Knight Yuriy brought us some news that the nobles who are allied with the count were leading their armies to gather at Geldos City. That means that Count Cobry is already rallying his forces and will possibly deploy his troops in one or two days to take the bastide back. Since we don't have much time, we'll rest up for the whole day for tomorrow and I'll have Potterfang lead a heavy-armored cavalry squad and three pike infantry companies over here to set up camp. Terman's knight squad and Dulles's carroballista squad will also leave at the same time.

"We'll leave two companies of pike infantry to defend the bastide with Charade being in charge of them. Knight Malek, you will be tasked with patrolling the surrounding area and gathering up the insurgents who have been exploiting the citizens of the

dominion quite excessively. Make sure the insurgents obey our orders and ask them to gather up at Potterfang's camp. If there's anyone who refuses to comply…"

Lorist suddenly radiated a killing intent at that moment. "Knight Loze, you should know what to do…"

Lode Wales's face showed a sinister snicker. "I understand. I'll let them have a taste of my heavy-armored cavalry company if they dare to break their word…"

"Great. Mister Tim, you don't have to worry. As a true friend and ally of the Norton Family, you only have to let your men rest up and recuperate. When our forces start confronting Count Cobry's army, I will let you lead the ambush on Geldos City," said Lorist.

Chapter 71
Success

Geldos City was situated not far from Burdock Bastide and a pike cavalry unit would be able to travel from one place to the other within one day and one night. However, when it came to infantry garrison troops, they required at least three days and two nights of travel. The presence of the disorganized farmer militia of the other vassal noble families of the count only served to slow down the whole process even further. Currently, the count was regretting his decision on bringing them along and ordered for the two of his cavalry companies to leave for the bastide sooner.

Just as the army was setting up camp after one day of travel, Count Cobry received news that two of his illegitimate sons had perished yet again, one of whom was Gold ranked with the other being a Silver rank. The soldier who made the report stammered in fear when facing the count as he had drawn the losing lot to be the one to make the report.

Just that afternoon, the two companies of pike cavalry noticed an enemy stronghold at the Motz Hills that just so happened to be on the path to Burdock Bastide. The leader of the pike cavalry that was reassigned from Williamiles Castle was also a Gold ranked son of the count. When he observed the enemy's stronghold, he noticed that while they had advantage being on higher terrain, being the common bandits they were, their fortifications were full of holes. It was crude and far from perfect.

As a result, the Gold ranked commander believed that he only required a company of pike cavalrymen to break through the stronghold to massacre the bandits within. And so he did just that only to notice that the defensive fortifications up front were merely a facade and the true line of defense was deeper within. Not only that, the bandits had also set up a trap and ambushed the pike cavalry company from all sides with concentrated volleys of arrows, crossbow bolts as well as huge ballista darts.

The messenger then handed the count a long javelin-like ballista dart that was retrieved from the illegitimate son commander's corpse. Even though he was at the Gold rank, there was no way he would be able to deflect all 12 ballista darts aimed directly at him, resulting in his death as well as another Silver rank stepbrother of his

who was also standing nearby.

The pike cavalry company that rushed straight into the stronghold had suffered heavy losses and only two squads' worth of soldiers returned, among which more than ten were even injured. Fortunately, the bandits only stayed put and defended their stronghold without giving chase, causing yet another Gold ranked illegitimate son to regroup the soldiers and set up camp outside the stronghold without taking any rash actions and await reinforcements.

"This is a ballista dart…" Given Count Cobry's vast experience on the battlefield, he quickly recognized what the spear-like object was. However, what made him frustrated was how the bandits had managed to acquire a weapon of such caliber.

While ballistas were definitely powerful, they were also heavy and immobile and cost a lot of gold to maintain. For example, even if a ballista wasn't used, every two years, its arms had to be switched so that the durability of the wood wouldn't decrease its performance. When it came to the string, it had to be switched out after firing ten darts, and also cost quite a lot to be order-made. Apart from proper armies of kingdoms or garrisons defending large cities, no armed force, especially that of landed nobles, would choose to utilize ballistas as the upkeep was too high and it was troublesome to maintain.

As if one troubling incident occurred one after another, a few other reports caused the baron to lose sleep for the whole night. Before the sky had started to brighten from the first rays of the sun, the count left the farmer militia behind and mobilized his garrison regiment to hurry onward to rendezvous with the pike cavalry at the camp they had set up and managed to arrive there by noon.

After getting two hours of rest, the count ordered the sword and shield soldiers of the garrison regiment as well as the longbowmen to cooperate with the pike cavalry company to test the strength of the bandits' stronghold. He later discovered that while breaching the first line of defense of the stronghold was relatively easy, they ended up on a vast flat field that allowed them to be easily targeted by the bandits who used projectile weapons from the far side, raining down volley after volley of projectiles towards their forces. Count Cobry's men hurriedly retreated, leaving another hundred or so corpses behind as they left the stronghold.

This time, however, the count didn't notice any sign of ballistas being used. It seemed that his inference that bandits couldn't afford to maintain ballistas was correct and

that the ballistas used yesterday must've been out of commission. That was music to the count's ears. Even though he had lost hundreds of men during the test battle that noon, it had allowed him to understand how the stronghold was defended. *So they only have the terrain and projectile weapons to their advantage. When the farmer militia from the vassal noble families arrive in the afternoon, I can use them as enemy fodder to take the projectiles for my troops and easily crush the stronghold.*

During that night, the count had the farmers help him construct near a hundred carts with simple wooden shielding. On the next day, the count had them push the wooden carts to block of the arrows while his units quickly made their way to the back of the stronghold. Seeing that the situation had turned against their favor, the bandits quickly shot out another volley towards the cavalrymen before fleeing the place quickly.

This time, the operation to capture the stronghold went well with only minimal casualties. However, the count noticed that around 100 meters along the path, there was another stronghold waiting for them.

Motz Hills was a collective name for a group of more than ten small hills around the area. Nobody knew why it was named as such, so the people merely called it according to what the maps that was passed down since ancient times stated. The path that connected Geldos City and Burdock Bastide passed through the middle of these nondescript hills was craftily utilized by the bandits to set up many simple strongholds that managed to effectively hinder the passage of the count's army.

To the count's dismay, he discovered that there were easily over ten more of those strongholds blocking his way on the path to Burdock Bastide, causing his face to contort badly with rage. Unable to directly stop the count's vanguard, the bandits had wittily set up various strongholds that allowed them to shoot at the count's forces from afar and retreat to the next when their defenses were about to be broken through. Not only would the count lose quite an amount of his forces along the way, it would also cost him a lot of time.

Even though he desperately wanted to flatten the strongholds with his forces, the traveling speed of the makeshift wooden shield carts was so slow that it took a few hours to move even a few hundred meters. Given that the farmers didn't have any sleep whatsoever the day before, the prior attack had completely drained them of their energy. On the other hand, the count was unwilling to let his own soldiers sustain casualties to attack the stronghold and was forced to rest for the night.

On the second day, tempted by the promises of riches, the farmers once again toiled away and enabled the count to conquer three strongholds within one day. Even though about 200 of the farmers perished during the attacks, the count did not care much for them and only tried to minimize the casualties of his own troops.

However, on the third day, the farmers started to dawdle around and refused to obey their orders as the count's pledge that each of them would be awarded one imperial silver for each stronghold conquered was left unfulfilled. The count had no choice but to promise to give them the money when he returns to his castle as he did not have that much coins on hand. However, the farmers only felt that they were being cheated and only managed to conquer one stronghold on that day due to their low morale. Even though the losses on that day was far lesser compared to that of the day before, the count was still pissed as there were still seven to eight strongholds left to be conquered. If they progressed at this rate, it would take them at least five to six days before they leave the Motz Hills.

Thus, the count wrote an order and sent a pike cavalry squad back to Geldos City to ask for more supplies to be sent over as he had only brought seven to eight days' worth of supplies given that he didn't expect the presence of so many strongholds along the path. The other reason he did not bring much supplies with him initially was that he was afraid that he would end up a laughingstock by preparing so thoroughly just to deal with a rowdy bunch of bandits.

What weighed the most heavily on the count's mind was that if his supplies were exhausted by the time he conquers the final stronghold, he would have no choice but to lead his army back to the city and truly become the joke of the century. To prepare for the worst, the count had ordered for around 15 days' worth of supplies to be transported over.

His second order was a request for some coins to be brought over so that the farmers would once again be convinced and motivated to become arrow fodder willingly. Naturally, Count Cobry planned to 'pay back' the farmers by the time he makes his way out of the Motz Hills and show them that his money would not be so easily taken.

In his third order, he planned to have his Gold ranked illegitimate son that was stationed at Geldos City recruit more soldiers within the dominion as he had a sense of foreboding that a big conflict was about to break out, as if the current situation was only the calm before the storm. That was partly due to the fact that the bandits who mainly relied on guerrilla hit-and-run tactics had learned how to resist his forces in a

head-on battle all of a sudden. What had transpired for them to be able to change their tactics in such a short time?

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It turned out that the squad of cavalrymen sent back by the count with the letter had been surrounded by Lorist's forces. The first few vanguards of the company that rushed out had their horses caught by a rope trap that caused them to tumble like there was no tomorrow. They were further greeted by the assault of Terman's knight squad along with thirty or so javelins that had been thrown by Lorist. The few of those cavalrymen who were fortunate enough to escape from the encirclement of the several hundred men ended up being shot to death by Josk, who was circling the area from a higher vantage point. The twenty or so riders only managed to survive after getting off their horses and surrendering.

Looking at the letter written by the count with satisfaction, Lorist laughed and said, "With this letter, Geldos City is already our possession."

Tim, wearing a suit of armor, congratulated Lorist and said, "Baron Norton, you truly are very thorough with your plans. You even guessed that the count would send a letter for extra supplies and planned for us to ambush his forces here. I had thought that we would be attacking Geldos City right away after circumventing his forces."

"Hehe, it isn't that difficult to figure out. Given that he didn't bring much supplies with him when he first set out and the fact that we managed to defer his forces at the Motz Hills for a couple of days, he was bound to run out of supplies at some point. It is only logical for him to send someone out to request for more. With this letter, we will be able to casually walk up to the city and have them open the gates without any trouble.

"Alright, you guys, change out into the clothes of the count's troops. We're going to head to Geldos City. Els, I'll leave the prisoners on your watch. Kill any who attempts to escape," instructed Lorist.

This time, Lorist formed the ambush unit with only Josk, Els and two squads of camp guards, Terman's knight squad, Yuriy and his two light cavalry squads as well as Tim and his 800 men who were carrying a large sack each.

When Count Cobry was still held back at the first stronghold, Lorist spent two days carefully circumventing the count's forces and hiding themselves in the area to

prepare for the ambush.

In the evening, a squad of pike cavalrymen and a company of garrison troops arrived at the gates of Geldos City. The garrison squad in charge of guarding the city did have any suspicion whatsoever of their presence and lowered the drawbridge and opened the gates to the city without hesitation after receiving the count's letter. The 'squad leader' of the pike cavalrymen who had just arrived then asked the guards of Geldos City where the son of the count was located. Immediately after the guard answered, the garrison troops walking in from behind hastily rushed in and tied up the rest of the guards and even stuffed their mouths with bloody cloths that caused the guards to feel irresistible urges to puke.

Lorist instructed, "Yuriy, Els, quickly go and take control of the other three city gates and leave a squad of people behind to guard each gate. Terman, bring your knight squad with me to the duke manor in the middle of the city. Josk, you should come along too. Mister Tim, make sure you withhold your men and make sure they don't start raiding before we successfully take over the city, understand? Don't let their impatience ruin the whole plan."

"Milord, please be assured that I will not let you down," Tim replied.

Probably due to the absence of the usually strict count, the Gold ranked illegitimate son was irresponsibly not carrying out his duties and was instead busy hosting a nude party within a hall of the duke manor. Upon hearing the report of a manor guard about the count's letter, the drunk son stood up stark-naked and ordered for it to be delivered to him as he chugged away at his wine.

Lorist and Josk subsequently entered the hall as the one guarding the door had his neck snapped by Terman.

The two of them felt a chill down their spine as they witnessed the stark naked men and women within the hall engaging in indecent acts and debauchery with reckless abandon without a care in the world.

The stark-naked man before them lifted his wine cup and laughed in a drunk manner before he mumbled, "Enough looking around… Give… give me my father's letter… You should strip down as well… and… have fun with us… It's alright… You can… have all the women… you want… Or men, if… if that's your thing…"

Lorist and Josk gave each other a glance before they both wordlessly drew their swords…

Chapter 72
Freiyar

Fresh blood flowed all over the ground as a thick, nauseating, iron-like stench permeated the hall. The tens of people who were just fornicating before had already become cold, pale corpses.

Lorist let out a big sigh and patted on Josk's shoulder to wake him up from his trance. Just now, Lorist had only killed the men within but Josk went out of control and lashed out towards every person without regard to their gender. When Lorist came to notice it, everyone within the hall had been killed by Josk.

Exiting the hall while emitting a murderous air, Lorist walked around at a casual pace within the newly-built duke manor. After a while, Terman came to him to report that the manor had already fallen under their control and everyone within from guards to servants had all surrendered and were kept in captivity.

"Let Yuriy send a squad of light cavalry scouts to guard the four city gates and have another squad ready on standby. Order Mister Tim to send out four squads of his soldiers to help out with guarding the city gates as well and have him send the remaining men over here. Have Els bring his two guard squads to the duke manor to defend the place and order your knight squad gather up over here. We still have lots to do," instructed Lorist.

Terman hurriedly sent some men to pass out the orders as Josk approached Lorist and said with an embarrassed voice, "I'm sorry… I was being far too rash just now."

Lorist looked at him and said, "Joe, don't forget that you're a stellar marksman. A marksman must always keep his cool in any situation. Don't let hatred cloud your eyes."

"I understand… I will definitely take that to heart," said Josk as he nodded.

When Els made his way to the duke manor with his men, Lorist had already asked a few of the captured supervisors of the manor about the situation of Geldos City. He had Els leave one squad of his men behind to take over the defense of the duke manor

and had a supervisor guide the other squad to take control of the city's food warehouses and stables. After that, Lorist brought Josk, Terman and his knight squad to the army camp to dispatch the remaining squad of garrison troops as well as tens pike cavalry that remained within the city before rushing over to the laborer camp.

The main issue Lorist now had was the lack of manpower. The citizens of Geldos City was filled with hostility and enmity towards his forces as the count had arranged for the family members of his men to live within the two newly-built street sectors to solidify his standing there. Even though Lorist was currently using stealthy ambush tactics to slowly wrestle the control of the city to him, he was worried that the moment he was discovered, the civilians there would instantly break out into chaos and cause his plan to fail. That's why Lorist had his hopes placed on the laborers that were forced to help out with the construction of the city.

After removing tens of guards, Lorist easily conquered the slave laborer camp. The next step was to utilize the hundreds of men Tim had sent to gather up slaves that were acquainted with them. They ended up with 2000 or so men.

Terman picked a thousand or so strong youths and brought them to the armory that they had just taken over to give each of them a pike and picked a few senior soldiers from Els's men and had them form two companies of pikemen. One of the companies was sent to the gates to replace the men that had been sent over by Tim and Yuriy while the other company was allocated to defend the warehouses and armories under Els's leadership.

Lorist finally breathed a sigh of relief now that he had two more companies of men. However, he knew that the laborer pikemen were only good for looks as it was hard to say whether they were trained sufficiently for battle or not. Even so, now that the city gates were staffed with the laborer pikemen, it allowed for two of Yuriy's units to be reallocated to form a subjugation force with Terman's knight squad, effectively relinquishing Lorist's worry of a civilian revolt.

At the moment, the slave laborer camp was under watch by 800 of Tim's men with another thousand or so laborers who were tasked by Tim to move food from the warehouses and start cooking up a big pot of meat porridge for the rest of the men in the laborer camp. This was done to placate them and fill up their growling stomachs.

Els subsequently sent someone to report that after a rough inventory check, he noticed that there was equipment enough for two companies of pike cavalry and one

regiment of garrison troops. After asking the supervisor about that, he found that those equipment was gathered up by the count to prepare for the expansion of his troops. Els had already let the laborer pikemen company change into the complete sets of equipment from the armory and had the guard captains allocated suitable weapons for them. Aside from a few laborers who were allocated pikes as they didn't know how to wield anything else, the rest of the laborers were given the standard loadout of garrison troops and were split into squads of longbowmen and sword and shield users.

Els needed Lorist to send him someone well-versed in making inventories for the rest of the armory and more people to help the laborers that were stationed at the gates to change into the new equipment as well as some men to carry out miscellaneous tasks like making food for the soldiers who had been working throughout the day on nothing other than dried rations.

Lorist facepalmed as he had completely forgotten to let his men rest and recuperate while he was busy managing the affairs of the laborers. Had it not been for Els's reminder, he would've been unaware of that situation until the next morning. It made him feel even more impressed with how Charade could always seem to handle so much without missing out on any small detail. He understood that he wasn't as capable as Charade when it came to management given his tendency to gloss over the less significant but nevertheless important details even though he was quite adept at planning a long-term general strategies.

Lorist asked for Tim to come over and instructed him to pick several men who could do accounts and three hundred others from the laborers who were busy making meat porridge to report to Els and also had one of Els's light cavalry squads escort them there. The laborers who were picked parted unwillingly with the pots of meat porridge and looked towards the food wistfully.

Tim angrily pushed and rebuked them, "Why are you still here? Don't you know that I've just done you a favor? While the amount of food you get here will be rationed, you can eat all you can over there! What are you still waiting for?"

Tim's outburst caused Lorist to laugh out loud. At that moment, Josk suddenly appeared out of nowhere. "Milord, please come over, there's something that needs your attention."

Josk brought Lorist to a corner of the laborer camp that was surrounded by a wall that

seemed to be used for defensive fortifications of cities. There was a building that was even more sturdily-built from a combination of rocks and metal bars than the wooden housing that was used to accommodate the laborers outside.

“What is this facility for?” Lorist asked.

Josk responded, “Milord, this is the hard labor camp whose main purpose is to keep the slaves who have already awakened their Battle Force captive with their family members. Most of these slaves are soldiers who had been captured on the battlefield. The reason the count kept them locked up with their family was because he wanted them to change sides and serve under him. Most of the members of the count’s new pike cavalry company are people who have been picked from the slaves locked up in this area. As long as they agree to serve the count, their family members will be allowed to move out to the new street sectors and live there without having to experience any hardships.”

“How do you know about this?” Lorist asked.

“Milord, the guards that were in charge of watching the area told me about it,” said Josk as he pointed towards the stone building where two people in uniform could be seen standing. These men carried out their instructions faithfully under the watch of Tim’s men.

“How many people are locked up in there?” asked Lorist as he walked towards the building.

A chubby man walked over and bowed before looking at a thick book in his hand and saying, “Milord, there are 734 captive soldiers within this facility with 3151 others who are their family members, totaling up to a number of 3885 people.”

“Why is there so many?”

“Milord, this number is already considered pretty low. The record number of soldiers being held captive here was above 2000 with more than 7000 other family members. Currently, the men who had been locked up the longest was captured sometime a year ago with the most recent prisoners being captured about a month ago. According to the regulations here, those who submit to the count have to work three months of physical labor as the count reasoned that the people would not be completely loyal to him without experiencing some form of punishment,” replied the chubby man.

“I see,” said Lorist as he rubbed his chin in thought. The count really had his own way of messing with people. If they wanted their families to have better lives, they have no choice but to work for three months before they were allowed to serve the count! No wonder Count Cobry had managed to gather soldiers so quickly and easily.

At the same time, Josk asked the guards about the slaves who still had yet to submit to the count. The guard then flipped the book to the last page and showed it to Josk, to which he exclaimed in surprise, “So, it’s him… No wonder he still hasn’t submitted yet.”

With his curiosity piqued, Lorist went over to take a look.

Josk said, “Milord, you should definitely go see this person. His name is Chino Freiyar and he’s a 31-year-old Gold ranked mercenary who has quite a reputation in the northwestern parts of the Redlis Kingdom. It is rumored that he was orphaned from a young age and was raised by a kind female neighbor. When he grew up, he eventually got married to the neighbor’s daughter who gave birth to a pair of twins soon after. It was said that when the count’s pike cavalrymen raided his town, they broke into his home and ended up killing the woman who had raised him. In a fit of rage, he killed almost 20 of the pike cavalrymen but was later subdued by two Gold ranked illegitimate sons of the count who took his wife and kids hostage. Ever since, Count Cobry has been waiting for Freiyar to submit and serve him but he still hasn’t accepted the offer and has remained locked up here.”

“Alright, I’ll go meet this Freiyar. Hey you, bring me there. Tell me your name,” said Lorist towards that chubby man.

“Milord, I am called Tarkel,” he replied.

As Tarkel led Josk and Lorist around, he started talking about his woes. “Milord, even though he’s our prisoner, Freiyar is even more arrogant and bossy than the warden himself. He’s the true leader within the prison camp and there’s no way an Iron rank like me would dare to boss him around. Even when a few of the guards were beaten up quite severely by him, the warden didn’t bother to take any action; he was satisfied as long as he didn’t attempt to escape. To be honest, if it were not for his blind wife and his twins, he would’ve killed his way to the count for revenge long ago. Even though the count admired his abilities, doesn’t he know that there’s no way Freiyar would serve him given the grudge he held for his adopted mother’s death?

“Oh, Freiyar’s cell is just right ahead. Please be careful, there’s a ditch on the road,” said

Tarkel as he led the way with a torch in hand.

The light illuminated the depths of the cell and revealed a tall, big-built man who was cautiously looking at the three who were approaching.

“Freiyar, it’s me, Josk. I believe it’s been two years since we last met during the martial arts competition at Kessads Castle,” greeted Josk.

“Josk?” said Freiyar in a surprised voice. “Marksman Josk? It’s you…”

After that, his expression returned to normal as he spoke in a low voice, “Are you serving the count now?”

“Ptooey! I can’t wait to feast on his flesh and drink his blood! Why would I ever serve that bastard?! You must be crazy,” said Josk with bloodshot eyes. The grudge he had with the count was so deep that it caused it to freak out at the mere mention of him serving the count.

“Oh, then why are you here?” asked Freiyar curiously. He inferred that Josk wasn’t brought here as his prisoner given the way the torch-holding guard treated him.

“Tarkel, open the door,” instructed Lorist.

“Freiyar, this is the man whom I serve now. He is my lord, Norton Lorist of the Norton Family of the Northlands. Geldos City has already been conquered by us under his lordship’s leadership,” introduced Josk.

“The Norton Family of the Northlands? The Roaring Raging Bear? I’ve heard of that family a few years ago when I visited the Northlands. However, why is he all the way here conquering Geldos City?” asked Freiyar suspiciously.

“I think it’s better if you let me explain,” said Lorist before he greeted Freiyar. He then told Freiyar about his journey to his homeland to inherit his title and position as well as the reason why they were in conflict with Count Cobry as well as the current status of the occupation of Geldos City.

“That pretty much sums it up. Even though the city is under our control, we don’t have enough manpower to manage it effectively. When Josk saw your name on the prisoner records, he brought me here right away. To be honest, I also hope that you, Mister Freiyar, will be able to lend me a hand in this matter,” said Lorist sincerely.

Chapter 73
Trust

Maybe it was because he felt Lorist's sincerity, Freiyar accepted the invitation without thinking for too long. "Lord Norton, I can agree to temporarily serve you, but it's only limited to the conflict with Count Cobry to avenge the death of my adopted mother. However, I hope that you can agree to let my family and I leave if I wish to."

Lorist laughed out loud and said, "Of course. Even if you don't help me out, you are still free to leave with your family. I can promise you that on the Norton Family's name."

"Thank you for your magnanimity, Lord Norton," said Freiyar as he bowed to indicate his respect.

Lorist stretched out his hand to shake Freiyar's and said, "Please call me Locke. That's what all my friends call me."

Now that he had agreed to help Lorist for the moment, Freiyar didn't hold back at all. "Lord Locke, you said that you lacked manpower, right? Can you tell me about the status of your troops?"

Lorist then briefly described the number of troops he brought to ambush the city and also told him about the two new companies of pikemen that were formed from some of the laborer prisoners. "And that pretty much sums it up. Right now, we're still holding up well. But I'm worried that once the count finds out that the city has been conquered, he will have his soldiers come back here right away to retake the place. Given the size of Geldos City, as long as the count manages to gather one pike cavalry company and one garrison regiment led by his Gold ranked sons, they will easily be able to take the city back in one go. After all, the two laborer companies are only good for show and don't have any real combat ability."

Freiyar understood what Lorist had meant and turned back to look at the prison facility. "Lord Locke, do you intend to rally them up?"

Lorist laughed out and said, "I've heard Josk mention that the people locked up here are all either veteran soldiers or garrison troops that have awakened their Battle

Force. That's why I intend to rely on them to form a temporary unit. I don't need them to be the vanguard and take the full brunt of the count's forces. Instead, I only require them to defend against a few waves of the count's attacks to allow my family's armed forces to arrive."

"Lord Locke, I understand. Please be assured. I, Freiyar, understands best what the people who are locked up there want. Had it not been for the damned count, they wouldn't have to be imprisoned for so long. Even those who went to serve him did so only to let their families live better lives and are not truly loyal to the count. Now that they know Count Cobry is on the verge of falling, I'm sure they'll be happier than most and try their best to add as much oil to the fire as they can. Trust me, I will gather them up right away. Um, you, hand me the keys. Lord Locke, I will send good news your way in a short while," said Freiyar as he took away the keys hanging from Tarkel's waist and set out to free the prisoners.

Having had his keys taken, Tarkel felt a little dissatisfied and was mumbling something softly.

Lorist looked at him and said, "Do you have anything you'd like to say? I can't hear you that well, Tarkel."

Tarkel turned to look at Lorist hesitantly before saying out loud, "Act-actually… You can defend Geldos City without using these people. Milord, if the prisoners don't obey their orders when they are let out, it'll cause even more trouble for you…"

"Oh, Tarkel, tell me then about the plan you have in mind to defend the city," said Lorist curiously.

"Milord, half of the garrison regiment and the pike cavalry company that had set out with the count are fresh recruits that haven't been in service for more than two months. Their names are recorded in a listing at the duke manor. You only have to hold their families hostage according to the list and bring them to the city gates when the count arrives. I'm sure the soldiers will definitely panic and might even fight back against the count on the spot. Then, you can easily obtain your victory…" said Tarkel.

"Erm…" Lorist really didn't expect that the chubby man in front of him could really come up with an effective plan. "Tarkel, tell me more about your family and your experiences."

Lorist suddenly felt interested in the man whose face was filled with flabby meat.

“Milord, I have a family of four that consists of me, my wife, my dumb daughter-in-law as well as my son. Other than that, I have a brother who’s a blacksmith and he lives in the city as well and is in charge of making the count’s weapons and equipment. Our family used to be serfs during the days of my grandfather and we were only granted the status of free men when my father joined the count’s garrison troop. After that, my father had passed away during one of the count’s excursions to eliminate mountain bandits and I have been chosen to fill his position. After the count’s return to the city, he had suddenly started to expand his military forces. Not wanting to be enlisted, I spent quite a sum to bribe my way to become a prison guard and have been doing this job ever since and got promoted to the position of a warden,” said Tarkel honestly.

“Then, do you understand the big and small matters of this city?” asked Lorist.

“That’s a given, milord. I don’t want to sound too arrogant, but there isn’t a corner of the city that I’m not familiar with,” boasted Tarkel.

Lorist naturally didn’t take it at face value and started questioning Tarkel about the area. To his surprise, Tarkel really could describe almost every place he named with great detail. He was even familiar with the rough number of resources that were stored in the various warehouses.

“Tarkel, you have truly surprised me today. While the method you proposed earlier is indeed effective, but there are some things that you can do but I cannot. If I obtain victory using the method you mentioned, I will effectively taint the reputation of nobles and lose the honor of knights. No noble would ever use the enemy forces’ family members as hostages to win a war. That would constitute to shame and humiliation for the family that chooses to do so. That’s why, I can only thank you for trying to suggest an alternative for me,” said Lorist.

“Milord, it’s my fault for not considering your status well enough. I’m just an uneducated man after all. I didn’t consider the honor and reputation of nobles at all,” Tarkel said in a horrified manner.

“How about this? Follow me around in the future. Naturally, I will want you to go to the Northlands with us when the matters here are concluded. I also want your blacksmith brother to tag along when the time comes,” said Lorist.

“This… Milord, can I refuse?” said Tarkel with an agonized face. He didn’t expect that his showing off would cause Lorist to start to fancy him.

“Of course you can. I won’t agree to it though,” Lorist said while laughing.

At that moment, the laborer camp was illuminated by various bonfires with groups of people gathering around the plaza and making merry like a sudden flash mob. Sounds of laughter and chatter could be heard throughout the night.

Lorist brought Tarkel to the plaza and saw Josk leading a group of men approaching from the front.

Josk said excitedly with a flushed face, “Milord, this is the garrison captain of the territory of Baron Omador, Nors. Over here is the knight of the baron’s family, Lind. And these over here are guards Hawk, Marius, Eite and Saibert. I thought they were all dead. I didn’t expect for them to be imprisoned here for the past half year…”

Lorist looked towards them and nodded in greeting. At that moment, Freiyar squeezed into the group and said, “Lord Locke, I have already briefed them about the situation and they are all happy to serve you. Oh, before I forget, many people within the laborer camp are their subordinates. As long as you provide them with arms and equipment, a regiment’s worth of soldiers can instantly be formed.”

“Good work, Freiyar. How about this, let’s form a company of pike cavalrymen and three companies of garrison troops first. Freiyar, you will be the commander of these companies with Joe as your second in command. Start allocating the laborers into their respective companies as you see fit. I want them to be battle-ready as soon as possible. After forming all four companies, leave one garrison company to defend the laborer camp as the family members of some of the prisoners here are still at risk. The other three companies will be stationed at the city’s army camp and begin training right away,” said Lorist as he made his decision.

Freiyar and Josk stood straight up and made a salute. “Milord, we will do as you wish.”

“I will ensure that the necessary equipment be delivered as soon as possible. Freiyar, Josk, I am counting on you two. Don’t hesitate to report to me if anything urgent comes up.”

“Yes, milord.”

…

Lorist brought Tarkel back to the duke manor, only to cause him to puke uncontrollably after he witnessed the bloody scene, causing Reidy and Patt to look at him with curious eyes. It wasn't only Tarkel; ten other laborers who were also present had thrown up their meals cleanly.

"Sol, how can anyone eat with this smell in the air?!" Lorist was incredibly pissed as the group of people had puked while he was just about to have his meal.

"Reidy, please close the doors and windows. Remember to have them clean up after they finish puking," said Lorist.

…

The busy night was over and Geldos City still remained the same with the count's flag that depicted a bull's head flying up high. To the citizens, there was no other change apart from the increased presence of soldiers on the streets as well as the curfew order they were given the laborers' halting of the city's construction with the official reason being that an assassin was on the loose in the city. Nobody knew that the control of the city had already changed hands overnight.

The next day was pretty uneventful as well.

During the night, the duke manor's main hall was brightly illuminated by candlelight.

Lorist, Josk, Freiyar, Terman, Els, Yuriy, Tim as well as the several officers from the newly-formed laborer companies all sat at a round table on which a large beastskin map was placed and were listening to the pale-faced Tarkel who was revealing the secrets of the Cobry Family.

"…Count Cobry has 67 illegitimate sons in total and under his training and nurture, 17 of them became Gold ranked and 38 others managed to get to the Silver rank. That was the situation ten years ago. After that, the count brought 38 of his illegitimate sons to serve the First Prince and 6 Gold ranks and 13 Silver ranks died in the process. However, two years after his return, there was 1 son who had just broke through to the Gold rank with 4 others making their way to the Silver rank. However, this wasn't publicized so nobody outside the family knows about it.

"Ever since the count began launching his attacks on the neighboring nobles that

didn't submit to him, 2 Gold ranked sons as well as 5 Silver ranked sons have perished. These include the two sons Josk had assassinated when he infiltrated Geldos City once. When the count sent the rebel-sweeping corps to the western mountains, he still had 10 Gold ranked sons and 24 Silver ranked sons. The remaining nine are either not at the Silver rank yet or have not awakened their Battle Force altogether and held administrative posts in Geldos City.

"The rebel-sweeping corps that the count had sent out was led by 3 Gold ranked sons and 8 Silver ranked sons. However, I heard that milord's convoy has completely wiped them out. The reinforcement sent by the count to recapture the camp that was led by 2 Silver ranked sons was also decimated. The Gold ranked son that was stationed there when the count set out for Burdock Bastide was also killed as well.

"After the count set out, he was entrapped at Motz Hills by our lord and I heard that one of the captive pike cavalrymen who were on their way to deliver the letter said that when they first started to attack a stronghold. one Gold ranked and another Silver ranked had fallen. After that, during the operation to conquer Geldos City, 1 Gold ranked and 2 Silver ranked illegitimate sons perished. Among 9 of the illegitimate sons who were not even Silver ranks, 7 were killed within the hall of the duke manor and only two remains by the count's side with his army currently.

"Other than the 1 Gold ranked and 2 Silver ranked illegitimate sons stationed at Williamiles Castle, the count only has 3 Gold ranked and 9 Silver ranked sons remaining. If we include the count himself, they only have 4 Gold ranks on their side. Given that our lord has already prepared the city appropriately for defense, there is no need to worry that they will be able to recapture it based on their forces," said Tarkel as he concluded the report on the count's forces, calming down the restless minds of the ones present.

Lorist laughed out loud and said, "I'm not worried about his forces though. I believe that by the time the count comes back to attack the city, his soldiers would have to deal with the desperate lack of resources as well as the allies that are closing in on them from behind. I'm sure their morale would be extremely low. I am however considering whether I should take the chance to conquer Williamiles Castle as well now that news of Geldos City being conquered still hasn't spread out yet," said Lorist as he pointed to a spot on the map where Williamiles Castle was located.

His plan was rather simple: he would first bring a company's worth of soldiers wearing the count's equipment and request access into the city in the name of helping

out with the city's defense and sneak into the castle. As long as he manages to kill the three illegitimate sons that are stationed there, Lorist's group would be able to absorb the garrison forces by telling them that Geldos City, where many of their family members are living in, was under their control. He believed that there would not be much resistance on that front.

Els gave an alternate opinion in that there wasn't enough time. Given that Williamiles Castle was around 1 day of travel on horseback away from Geldos City, a journey to and fro would easily take two days. And the coming two days was the most crucial moment as the count might run out of resources and retreat to the city during that timeframe. If Lorist wasn't able to make his way back at that time, the situation might very possibly turn for the worse.

Lorist disagreed and explained that if he let Williamiles Castle be, the count would still have a place to escape to and be able to recover his forces, causing Lorist's group to be delayed there even further. "That's why I believe the best way to settle the matter quickly is to remove all of the count's foundations and cause him to have nowhere to fall back to. After that, we can swoop in and finish him off to end this conflict. Currently, the defense at Williamiles Castle is at its weakest. When would we attack if not now?"

Lorist then instructed Yuriy, Terman and Josk to get a light cavalry squad, a knight squad as well as the two newly-formed pike cavalry squads to change into the count's pike cavalry equipment and each bring two horses along to prepare for departure within an hour. Lorist will also take Tarkel along the way. As for the defense of Geldos City, he entrusted it to Els, Freiyar and Tim.

Freiyar hesitated in agreeing to that order as he believed that Josk would be a better choice for defending the castle and said that he would instead prefer to follow Lorist to conquer the castle.

Lorist laughed and said, "It cannot be you, Freiyar, as the illegitimate sons of the count will recognize you. Given that they know that you definitely won't submit to the count that easily, your presence would only serve to bring their guards up. That's why I picked Joe instead. The reason I left you behind to defend the place is precisely because I trust you, as should any lord or leader. Els and Tim, Freiyar will be the first in command during my absence, alright?"

"Yes, milord," Els responded.

“Please be assured, milord. This one will definitely not disappoint you,” said Tim as he bowed.

Lorist patted on Freiyar’s shoulder and said, “I’ll be counting on you during these two days. Once I take WIlliamiles Castle, I’ll definitely rush back immediately.”

Freiyar stood straight up and saluted Lorist. “Milord, as long as I am here, the city will remain ours.”

Chapter 74
Surprise Attack Successful

Afternoon on the next day, Lorist stood within the great hall on the first floor of Williamiles Castle. Sitting in front of him was a hawk-nosed, eagle-eyed man in fully-armored]knight attire, wearing a breastplate that depicted a black bull's head. This man was one of the Gold ranked illegitimate sons of the count that was stationed at WIlliamiles Castle. Sitting further away from him was four Silver ranked men in armor. The two at the front were Silver ranked illegitimate sons of the count with other two being garrison squad captains of the castle.

"You mentioned that this pike cavalry company you brought over has only been formed 3 days ago, and that you were sent here by my 21st brother?" said the hawk-nosed man as he stared hard at Lorist.

Lorist made a confused face and said, "That's correct. I don't know the reason myself, but the order I received clearly stated that our company was to make our way to Williamiles Castle to bolster its defense. I myself thought that there was some sort of battle going on here. It seems that our journey here was a complete waste. Oh, and, will you be letting my men into the castle? If not, we'll have to go back to the city."

"Go back? Yeah, right. Now that you're here, you better stay put. What's your name and Battle Force rank?" snorted the man.

Lorist nodded and said, "Milord, this one is called Lorist and I'm at the Three Star Iron rank."

"Pffft!" A man with a receding hairline started to laugh out loud. "Soldiers nowadays really have no standards… For a puny Iron rank like you to be able to become a pike cavalry company captain… It's a little too unreasonable for us Three Star Silver ranks to only be squad captains of garrison troops… It truly is ridiculous."

"14th brother, I think that 21st brother is just trying to mess with us. Otherwise, there's no way he would appoint a Three Star Iron ranked captain. We still have to face the allied noble armies on our front. Even though the recent situation has been quite stable, we might be more prone to enemy attacks if there is no pike cavalry stationed

here at the castle. That must be why our lord father sent us this newly-formed company to make sure we'll be well-defended from any potential threat," said another man who wore a mail armor.

"Right, 19th brother's words make sense. Heed my orders, let the pike cavalrymen outside into the castle and order them to gather at the plaza in front. You… Lok-something, you're unfit to be the captain of the company, so train hard till you're a Silver rank first. I will reorganize the pike cavalry in the afternoon, so you will be assigned to be a captain of a garrison troop squad instead," said that hawk-nosed man.

Lorist stood there without making a sound as if he was dissatisfied with having his position taken away from him. The hawk-nosed man didn't bother with it and started discussing with the other men beside him. "Which one of you will go command the pike cavalry company? Pick two among yourselves and mix some of our own troops into the cavalry company so that we'll be able to better control the unit…"

At that moment, the hawk-nosed man once again looked towards the shivering Tarkel. "Oh, aren't you Tarkel? What's a coward like you doing in the pike cavalry company? Are you sick of being a prison guard?"

"8-8th master, thi-this one does not dare to disobey the 21st ma-master… And he said that an Iron rank li-like me should j-join the cavalry company… So I got al-allocated here," stammered Tarkel.

Tarkel was currently regretting his previous actions a lot. How did he manage to make Lorist take a fancy on him? He wasn't that much of a talented person and only loved to pay attention to gossip and analyze the situations surrounding them. Now that he had been picked to be Lorist's personal attendant, he was even brought along to Williamiles Castle to participate in the surprise attack operation.

The one guarding Williamiles Castle was the 8th illegitimate son of the count, a Two Star Gold rank who not only excelled at combat, but was also a devious and attentive person who was not so easily dealt with. This could be seen from how only a small group including Lorist had been allowed into the castle for verification while the other soldiers they brought had been denied entry and were left outside.

Of all the people available, you had to pick me to follow you inside! Marksman Josk would've been so much more helpful for this purpose! Tarkel really didn't understand why he was asked to come along. Was it because he had greeted some of his former

colleagues outside the castle? Those were his acquaintances and it would only be more suspicious if he didn't greet them. *Lord Norton is also a really careless person. Even though he's only an Iron rank, he actually came inside the castle with an Iron rank like me! It's basically suicide for 2 Iron ranks to go up against 1 Gold rank and 4 Silver ranks!*

The more Tarkel thought about it, the more afraid he got. At the moment when the 8th master instructed for Lorist's men to be allowed into the castle, he feared that they would attack right away and cause their intentions to be discovered and set his demise in stone. When he first entered the great hall, Tarkel tried his best to not utter a voice nor attract any attention to himself. But, just because he coughed once, he was discovered by the 8th master. It was fortunate that he was witty enough to come out with an excuse on the spot.

"Hmm, 21st brother must've been drinking a little too much. Then again, Tarkel you coward, are you really *that* afraid of fighting? If you're this nervous now, I wonder if you'll faint when you're on the battlefield! Hahaha…" laughed the hawk-nosed man out loud.

Lorist turned his body sideways slightly and looked outside the window of the great hall of the first floor from the corner of his eyes and saw that his men were already making their way into the castle. *Good, the gates are already under our control. Right now, Terman is making his way to the two side gates with Yuriy's light cavalry scout squad making their preparations at the plaza. Josk is also making his way here already.*

The garrison troops of Williamiles Castle were not fully-armed for some reason and only gathered together to watch the spectacle. Maybe they had just finished their lunch and were still slacking off. Some of them were even sunbathing on the side of the walls. This was the perfect opportunity to launch the attack…

Lorist drew his sword and said, "He's afraid because you are all about to die. He's allergic to corpses, you see…"

The hawk-nosed man was surprised and enraged at the same time. "How dare you go against a superior officer? Your ambitions must have turned you crazy. For you to actually dare to draw your sword in front of me… Settle him, make an example of him for the other pike cavalrymen to see…"

Even though the 8th master was sharp, he actually misunderstood the situation. He

thought that Lorist was rebelling because he wasn't satisfied with being demoted from his position as a company captain.

Two of the Silver ranked garrison troops rushed over immediately without bothering to draw their swords. One of them thought, *hmph, a mere Iron rank... My hands are enough to subdue him...*

Tarkel instantly crouched on the ground and thought, *it's over. Is Lord Norton insane? Why did an Iron rank like him even draw his sword in front of 1 Gold rank and 4 Silver ranks? It's like saying, 'Please come and kill me!' He even boasted that they were about to die... I think the first ones to die will be Iron ranks like me and Lord Norton... Why couldn't you wait for your men to arrive first before lashing out? Now you even dragged me into it as well... Oh my poor wife and precious son... What would he do without me, his father, beside him?*

Tarkel shut his eyes in despair, only to hear two instances of agonized cries. The first cry slowed into a moan while the other was swift and short. *Eh? That didn't sound right. Why was it two cries instead of one?*He then opened his eyes only to be surprised by the scene of Lorist standing unscathed with the first Silver rank that leaped towards him rolling on the ground in pain with both his arms severed and asking for a quick death. He also found that Lorist's sword had been embedded in the throat of the second Silver ranked squad captain that came after the first.

The hawk-nosed man and his two brothers jumped up in befuddlement. Nobody would have expected an Iron rank to be able to dispatch two Silver ranked garrison squad captains with only three strikes of the sword.

"Who the heck are you?" asked the hawk-nosed man as he stared at Lorist intensely while slowly drawing his sword.

Lorist laughed in a light tone and said, "My identity doesn't matter. You only have to know that I've come for your lives..."

"19th, go sound the alarm! The pike cavalrymen are not on our side! They're enemies!" shouted the hawk-nosed man to the one dressed in mail armor immediately after his realization.

"Okay..." he answered as he drew his sword and paced carefully towards the exit and broke into a run.

An arrow flew over in a flash and pierced through his chest, sending the man flying for three whole meters before he fell back down on the ground and spit out large mouthfuls of blood with both his hands clasped tightly onto the arrow in his chest as if he was trying to pull it out, before he let out his final breath and stopped struggling altogether.

At that moment, Josk showed up at the door of the great hall with a green longbow in his hand.

“Marksman Josk…” said the hawk-nosed man in stupor.

“Long time no see, 8th master…” said Josk with his bloodshot eyes. The hawk-nosed man, Count Corby’s Gold ranked 8th illegitimate son, also referred by others as the ‘8th master’, was the very person that had attacked Baron Omador’s castle during the wedding and was one of the main perpetrators that had caused the demise of Josk’s loved ones.

“Hold him down!” shouted the hawk-nosed man to the man with a receding hairline as he rushed towards Lorist while drawing an arc in the air with his sword.

“Just what I needed!” exclaimed Lorist as he raised his sword to meet the incoming blade. The moment the two collided, sharp sounds of metal clashing echoed rapidly throughout the great hall.

The 8th master had intended to let the half-bald man hold Josk back while he took care of Lorist before moving onto suppressing Josk together with his partner. That way, they would have a better chance to turn the tide of the battle, since Lorist was only an Iron rank. He thought that no matter how good Lorist’s swordsmanship was, it would only allow him to take on Silver ranks at most. Given the 8th master’s Gold ranked Battle Force, he would be able to easily defeat Lorist by brute force alone regardless of the level of swordsmanship given the disparity of raw power between their ranks.

That was the 8th master’s first mistake. Never in his wildest dreams would he expect that the moment he first crossed blades with Lorist, his Battle Force felt like it didn’t have any effect at all, causing a Gold rank like him to stagger backwards against a supposed Iron rank and even almost getting slashed. Even the half-bald man who was busy with Josk stared dumbstruck at the result of the first clash.

Tarkel was looking at the fight with his mouth wide agape with saliva leaking out of it, making him seem like a dumb idiot. *So Lord Norton wasn't insane and was confident in his abilities all along! This swordsmanship is truly godly… So much so that he is able to hold back a Two Star Gold Swordsman like the 8th master to the point where he had no choice but to be on the defensive!*

The half-bald man snapped out of his stupor and noticed that Josk was still entranced by the battle between Lorist and his stepbrother. Extremely delighted, he carefully inched backwards and intended to escape. This was the 8th master's second mistake: he overestimated his subordinates' loyalty to him.

As a stellar marksman, Josk had noticed the half-bald man's slight movement immediately. He quickly held his green bow up, stretched it wide like a full moon and unleashed three arrows in quick succession.

The first arrow had been blocked by that man, but it took him a lot of effort to do so and he had retreated 3 steps backward as a result. The second arrow broke that man's sword into two and caused the man to cough out some blood. By the time the third and final arrow arrived, the baldy had already lost all his power to resist and could only stare at the arrow expand within his field of view until it inevitably entered his mouth and lifted him into the air, nailing him onto the wall nearby behind.

Having witnessed the death of the middle-aged man, the 8th master started to panic. He already had his hands full with fighting Lorist. Now that Josk had taken care of that half-bald man and had started aiming his bow towards him, the 8th master started to feel even more nervous. In his disturbed mental state, his hands missed a beat and allowed Lorist the opportunity to inflict the final blow. With a flash of a blade, the savage looking 8th master let out a pained grunt before his head separated from his body and flew through the air. Lorist backed off quickly to avoid the fountain of blood that had erupted from the stump of the man's neck.

"How long are you going to stay flat on the ground like that, Tarkel? Quickly get up and hang these heads on the veranda and announce to the soldiers that Geldos City is already under our control," instructed Lorist.

By the time the five heads were put on display at the first floor veranda, the whole castle broke into a panic that was quickly suppressed. That was especially the case after 7 or 8 soldiers who were dead loyal to the count started to fight back against the pike cavalrymen entering the castle, only to be shot to death with one arrow each by

Josk, further accelerating the surrender of the castle's garrison troops. By the time evening came, Lorist's men had already taken full control of Williamiles Castle.

"Yuriy, after resting for one hour after dinner, I'm going to bring Terman's knight squad and Knight Josk back to Geldos City. I will leave Williamiles Castle in your care. Make sure you let your light cavalry scouts patrol the surrounding area from time to time, but don't attack the surrounding allied noble armies unless they initiate the attack, in which case you may retaliate. Tarkel, stay here and placate the garrison troops' mental state and tell them that by the time the soldiers that are coming to take their place to guard the castle arrives, they will be allowed to go back to Geldos City to check on their family members. Don't worry, it won't take too long. I'm confident that I'll be able to send a messenger over within ten days," said Lorist as he bit into a piece of bread in his hand.

"Milord, I understand. Please leave the place to me," said Yuriy before he continued his meal.

Tarkel placed the piece of bone in his hand onto his plate, rubbed his mouth with his sleeve and said, "Milord, as long as I'm here, I'll ensure that the garrison troops don't cause any trouble."

Chapter 75
The Final Assault

Count Cobry was currently raging nonstop outside Geldos City…

Ever since he sent out the pike cavalry squad to deliver his request for more supplies, he had been experiencing an inexplicable feeling of worry from the depths of his heart as if it was foretelling the misfortune that was to come.

The situation of the battle he was in wasn't ideal either: of the 2000-odd farmer soldiers rallied by his vassal noble families, almost 500, a quarter of the total number, had already perished. On the other hand, his five pike cavalry companies and garrison troop regiment had only sustained tens of casualties for the past two days and still maintained their battle power.

During the past two days, he had conquered three more strongholds and only five still stood in their way. The farmers he relied mainly on to conquer the strongholds were already on the verge of revolt as their numbers diminished quite quickly and the money just wasn't worth that sacrifice. Whenever they received orders to mobilize, they would loiter around and waste as much time as they could until they were pressured and forced to act by the pike cavalrymen.

Count Cobry knew that he couldn't keep this up, given that the knights from the vassal noble families were giving him odd looks, as if they believed that the count was only using this opportunity to try to diminish the strength of the noble families that served him.

With the remaining supplies in their camp only able to last them for three more days, the count started to worry about the absence of any communication from Geldos City after he sent his troops back there two days ago. *This shouldn't be the case! Geldos City is not that far away from the Motz Hills and it would take 8 hours at most to get there on horseback! My pike cavalry squad should have been able to make it back here with the response from Geldos City about when the resources and supplies would arrive! Something must be going on.*

Unable to continue waiting, the count decided to return to the city after giving it some

thought. He left the remaining supplies to his garrison regiment and gathered the knights from the other families for a pep talk to encourage them to continue guarding the camp until his return.

Count Coby then brought his five and a half companies of pike cavalrymen to Geldos City with the intention of replenishing their numbers over there. At the same time, Lorist had just completed his matters at Williamiles Castle and was on the way back to Geldos City with Josk and Terman's knight squad.

During daybreak, the count arrived at the gates of Geldos City with his soldiers and breathed a sigh of relief after seeing his family flag still flying on the flagpole. He then instructed some people to go request for the gates to be opened so that his exhausted men may rest after a long day of traveling.

Little did he know that no matter how loudly the soldiers announced the return of the count and requested for the drawbridge to be lowered and the gates to be opened, the garrison troops on the walls of the city made no indication of doing so at all and instead started cursing back towards the soldiers below and even armed themselves with their bows as if they were going to defend the city from invaders.

At first, Count Cobry was quite satisfied with how alert and careful the soldiers who guarded the city was being. But after half an hour, he noticed that something was off and saw a large group of people showing up at the city walls led by Freiyar, whom he had imprisoned for being unwilling to serve him.

When Freiyar announced to the count that the city was under his control, Count Cobry thought that this was all just a bad dream. Nowhere in his wildest imaginations would he think that a prisoner like Freiyar would be able to take over the city. The raging count then pointed towards the flag and asked why it wasn't taken down if the city was truly under his control.

Laughing in an embarrassed manner, Freiyar told the count that he had forgotten to use the flag to wipe his ass after going to the lavatory as he had way too much things requiring his attention. He then apologized for neglecting the flag and assured the count that he would have someone take it down to be used at the lavatories.

In response, the count was enraged to the point where his veins were almost going to pop. One Gold ranked son who stood by his side started cursing back at Freiyar and said that despite how well the count had treated him, he still dared to go against the

count when he was away from the city like a savage who doesn't know how to repay other people's favors.

Losing his temper, Freiyar instantly cursed out loud. "You call killing my adopted mother and imprisoning my family and I a favor? You're so sick and deluded!" Not wanting to continue the conversation, Freiyar ordered the bowmen to fire and the Gold ranked son got wounded by three arrows as a result. Had it not been for the pike cavalrymen who protected him fervently, the count would have lost his life there and then.

Leaving tens of corpses of the pike cavalrymen near the city gates, the count managed to make it out of the bows' firing range unharmed. He quickly ordered his soldiers to log and construct siege ladders in preparation for attacking the city.

However, the count had forgotten an important fact, that was the pike cavalrymen companies that he had brought with him were formed only recently from the people at laborer camp and wasn't the ones who had accompanied him during the years he masqueraded as a bandit. The moment some of them recognized their comrades at the city walls, they started to chat with them and got to know that their families members were in safe hands.

On one side, there was the count who was preparing to attack the city in a fit of rage. On another, the soldiers felt relieved when they got to know that their family members were alright. That's why the count's men came to a tacit understanding to resist the count's orders as best they could and took a whole afternoon to construct only 3 siege ladders at an excruciatingly slow place.

The fuming count angrily caned a few of the men that he thought were slacking off and appointed tens of other soldiers who resisted orders to be the first ones to attack the city.

The result ended up almost knocking the count out form vomiting too much blood. The soldiers he had punished to participate in the first wave of attacks used the ladders they brought to climb up the walls without any resistance from the city walls' defending troops. The moment they got on the walls, they tossed their weapons to the ground and hugged their comrades before starting to curse at the count.

Within a flash, the pike cavalrymen that had made their way up the walls surrendered to the enemy and even helped to pull the siege ladders they brought with them up the

walls. The count who had just witnessed such a scene spat out a mouthful of blood with his face red with rage.

At that moment, the count's other Gold ranked son started cursing towards the city walls in an even more vulgar manner when compared to the former son who had been injured by three arrows. Seeing the count faint from bloodloss, and the pike cavalrymen seeming too tired to be able to accomplish anything, the Silver ranked illegitimate sons ordered for the mounts of the soldiers who had surrendered to the enemy to be killed and butchered to make some meat dishes to fill the rest of the men's stomachs for the moment. Having been traveling at a rapid pace without rest for the whole night, the men were all hungry and spent.

After that, the brothers discussed how they should placate the pike cavalrymen. Among the 600 soldiers they had, the ones actually loyal to the count numbered below 50 and were mostly old soldiers who had followed the count for years.

By the time the count regained consciousness, he was faced with two choices. Attacking the city was no longer an option as he couldn't predict how his pike cavalrymen, who were on their verge of changing sides, would react. The first choice he had was to return to the camp at Motz Hills to rejoin his garrison regiment and bring the whole army back to retake the city. The only drawback to this plan was that his garrison regiment would probably run out of food by the time they made their way back to the city. The last thing he wanted was for his desperate soldiers to turn their backs on him.

The other choice he had was to retreat to Williamiles Castle where he could temporarily stay to rebuild his army and regain his power. However, that amounted to giving up on the garrison regiment he left at the Motz Hills as well as Geldos City. But, he believed that as long as he could get into contact with the rebel-sweeping forces who were at the western mountains, he would be able to take everything that he had lost back.

When the count was pondering on which path to take, sounds of horses galloping from afar could be heard. It seemed that a group of soldiers was incoming from the path that led to Williamiles Castle. The return of Lorist and Josk with Terman's knight squad only served to entrap the count at Geldos City.

Josk approached the count's men at a distance of 30 to 40 meters away and tossed over three heads that landed at the feet of Count Cobry. Upon seeing the three heads

of his illegitimate sons who were stationed at Williamiles Castle, the count felt that he had been struck by lightning. The deaths of his sons could only mean that Williamiles Castle had already fallen under the control of the enemy.

Seeing Marksman Josk turn away to head back to Lorist's side, the count stood up and headed towards them before stopping ten meters away. Staring at Josk with a savage look, he turned his gaze to Lorist and said, "Who are you and why are you going against me?"

Sitting on horseback, Lorist looked at the well-built 60-year-old man with strands of white hair on his head, who had taken the northwestern area by storm, and said coldly, "I wonder if I should address you as Count Cobry, or Redbeard, the bandit whose infamous name and savagery is well-known throughout the Bodolger Province?"

The count shivered uncontrollably and revealed a shocked expression on his face. He then calmed down without refuting Lorist's accusations and continued as he pointed to Geldos City and then to the three heads that were on the ground, "Who the heck are you? Is this the result of you plotting against me? You've managed to cause my Cobry Family to sink into such depths…"

"Plotting against you? Who do you think you are? Don't tell me you've forgotten your sins already. When you were masquerading as Redbeard, the people of the merchant convoys you raided were all killed without mercy; women and children were no exception either. Did you think you would be able to live out the rest of your life in peace just because you disguised yourself when you did all that? Today, my arrival signals your end. I will uproot the whole Cobry Family just like the way you did to the other nobles in the area, and kill all your male descendants…"

Seething hatred could be felt from Lorist's words. He signalled for Terman to come over and pointed towards the raging bear badge on his chest and said, "I'm sure you've seen this insignia before on the two red wooden boxes in your chambers. My Third Uncle had intended to present those boxes to the girl that he loved. However, the convoy he led had met with the bandit Redbeard and not a single one of them survived. All these years, my family has been searching high and low for this bandit. Who would've expected that the attack on my convoy by your troops would finally lead me to you…

"Oh Lord Count, you must be surprised to find out that the rebel-sweeping corps that had intended to prey on our convoy had been wiped out entirely and some of the

troops that had surrendered to us revealed that Redbeard had been you all along. One of them even mentioned that he recognized our family insignia from the two boxes you have in your room… That's why I have come for you."

"You are from the Norton Family of the Northlands…" stammered the count. He could recognize the insignia from the time when he raided their merchant convoy. He even remembered that he had lost one Gold ranked and one Silver ranked illegitimate son from that incident. The people of the merchant convoy who went all out to fight until their last breath had left quite an impression on him. That was also the reason why he kept those two boxes as a memento.

Now that the evidence had been presented in front of him, there was no point for him to deny the allegations any longer. Staring hard at Lorist, he smiled and said, "So what if I was the one who did it? I've raided far too many convoys in my time. Now that you've come for retribution, I'll definitely entertain you. Let's see who will emerge out of this alive."

The count then turned away to walk back to his soldiers with Lorist not bothering to stop him at all. Count Cobry then donned his armor and got onto his horse before he pointed his lance towards Lorist's forces. Behind him, his illegitimate sons and the senior soldiers who were still loyal to him got on their mounts and arranged themselves into a charging formation.

Lorist waved and ordered calmly, "Anyone who's not at the Silver rank may fall back. For those who are, follow behind me and get into a charging formation."

Josk and Terman rode to Lorist's back and subsequently, Terman handed Lorist a pike for his use. The various Silver ranked knights also lined up neatly behind Josk and Terman.

Including Lorist who was at the very front, there were 27 knights in total, who were lined up in a triangular formation. On the opposite side, there were 58 cavalrymen including the count.

During that moment, everyone outside the city stopped whatever they were doing jointly paid attention to the spectacle that was unfolding before them. The atmosphere was heavy and grim with nobody daring to utter the slightest sound.

At the same instant, Lorist and Count Cobry began their charge and the two groups of

mounted men rushed towards each other at breakneck speeds.

Lorist's pike let out no blade glow while Josk, who was behind him, had a golden blade of light emanating from the point of his pike. The rest of the knights including Terman all had silver blade glows shining out from the point of their riding lances.

Only seeing one golden blade of light from the ranks of his foes, the count felt elated and trailed his lance that was also letting out a golden blade of light towards Lorist. *It seems that the twerp over there is not even a Silver rank… As long as I manage to take him down, I will definitely be able to turn the tables of the whole situation…*

In the blink of an eye, the two groups collided and chaos soon ensued…

Count Cobry brutally thrusted his golden lance towards Lorist's left arm with the intention of knocking him off his mount before finishing him off.

In response, Lorist flicked his pike upward and caused it to collide with the lance. The golden lance was knocked horribly out of trajectory and Lorist's pike swiped in quick succession towards the count's upper torso, causing him to fall off his mount with a dumbstruck look on his face. With but a swipe, the count who had not yet fallen to the ground was once again knocked flying into the group of frantic soldiers before he landed ten or so meters away. Two stab wounds could be seen on the count's shoulders as he lay on the ground squirming and screaming, unable to get up.

Lorist then rejoined the chaotic battlefield while thrusting and slashing with abandon. In but a few moments, tens of cavalrymen had lost their lives to his pike.

After Lorist went to and fro the battlefield three times, not a single cavalryman remained on their horses. However, only 10 of the 26 men who had followed him were still mounted.

Terman waved for the Iron ranked knights who had retreated further away before the charge to come and help out his dismounted men. As for the enemy soldiers who had yet to die, they were graced with a swift, merciful slash that spared them from having to experience further pain in the face of death.

Terman soon came over with a bandaged left arm to report their status. There were 8 heavily-injured soldiers with 14 others lightly-injured including himself. That was partly thanks to the armor they had been equipped with that provided excellent defense. As for Count Cobry's side, the men who had followed his lead had all but

perished, including his 6 Silver ranked illegitimate sons. The other Gold ranked son had fought with Josk until the last moment only to die as well. The only person who was still alive after all that was Count Cobry himself.

Seeing the count who was groaning and groveling on the ground in pain, Lorist said, “Have a cross constructed. I want to nail him to death on top of it…”

Chapter 76
Rounding

Count Cobry ended up being pinned to the cross that Lorist had ordered to be made and died after half a day of moaning and wailing. Before his death, he also witnessed the beheading of his illegitimate son who had been struck with three arrows back at the city gates. That son of his died without any suffering as he had been out cold the moment he was injured.

After the beheading, Lorist had the heads of all the illegitimate sons of the count that had died by his hands stacked up before the cross. He also requested for an artisan to craft a fitting stone tablet that described the count's deeds and sins, including the ones he had committed during his time as Redbeard the bandit, and how the untimely discovery of his identity had caused his downfall. Perhaps in the far future, the tale of Count Cobry and his 67 illegitimate sons would become a folk tale of the Grindia Continent much like the story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves in Lorist's previous world.

After resting for the night, Josk took the initiative to lead the two newly-formed garrison troop companies with members recruited from the laborer camp to the Motz Hills to sweep up the remaining troops of the count. There were still 1 Gold rank, 3 Silver ranks and 2 other illegitimate sons whose Battle Force has not yet been awakened there and Josk did not intend to let any one of them slip away from his grasps.

Lorist himself didn't mind as the pike cavalrymen who had surrendered to him had mentioned that the soldiers there only had three days' worth of supplies with them and would crumble eventually even without any outside intervention. What Josk was going to do was no more than speeding up the process.

After three days, Charade and Josk returned to Geldos City.

Josk brought six heads back with him which were also placed in front of the cross. He said that the moment he was spotted by the enemy when he was blocking off the road to Motz Hills, the first ones to panic were the farmers. They instantly broke down and started crying and shouting out loud while running all over the place, effectively

turning their whole camp into a huge mess. After that, Potterfang and Loze brought two of their heavy-armored cavalry companies into the camp and slaughtered the enemy, securing their victory.

After the Gold ranked illegitimate son died in the hands of Loze, the remaining ones attempted to run away, only to be sniped one by one by Josk with his bow and arrows. Currently, all of the illegitimate sons of the count had reunited with him at the stone tablet and not one of them was spared.

Charade said that Potterfang would only arrive in the afternoon on the next day as he had to escort the prisoner soldiers who had surrendered to them during the battle. He also mentioned that for the next three days, the family convoy would make its way to Geldos City. Charade then asked Lorist about what to do with Burdock Bastide after the convoy's departure.

Lorist replied, "Hand it to Tim then. For the past few days, I've been thinking about the preparations we need to make before the convoy leaves this place and already have a general idea on how to go about it. You're here just in time to discuss the finer details with me."

What Lorist lacked right now was time. When the convoy first left Armatrin Harbor, there was a distance of 2500 kilometers to travel before they reach the Northlands. Their original plan was for them to travel 1000 or so kilometers through the lands of the Redlis Kingdom to reach the borders of the Andinaq Kingdom. However, it had been postponed when the convoy was prompted to retaliate and wipe the count and his family after the attack of Count Cobry's rebel-sweeping forces. It was already the 23rd day of the 1st month, but the convoy had only traveled a little more than 300 kilometers so far.

After taking control of Geldos City, the riches and supplies that the count had accumulated over the years from wiping out the defiant nobles had all ended up in Lorist's hands. He understood from Charade's ecstatic and gleeful look when he looked at the inventory that the convoy's departure would have to be delayed yet again until the resources were properly managed and sorted out. Otherwise, there was no way Charade would agree to leave the place.

That was why Lorist had decided to head for the Northlands first at the end of the month with only a handful of people with him and leave the convoy behind so that he would arrive at the family dominion before the 3rd month to be in time for the

inheritance ceremony. After that, he would wait for the arrival of the convoy at a later date while he settled some more pressing matters of the family. He also appointed Charade and Potterfang to be in charge of the convoy during his absence.

However, there were still quite a number of things that he needed to handle personally before he would be able to leave with a peace of mind.

He first instructed Potterfang to lead a heavy-armored cavalry company to Williamiles Castle to guard it in place of the reorganized garrison troop that used to be the count's and also had Yuriy send some representatives to the allied noble armies to tell them the news of the count's demise and to request them to send some representatives to Geldos City to discuss certain matters on trade.

When the garrison company came back to Geldos City, Lorist gave a cold and cruel order. He instructed the soldiers who had surrendered to him to bring their family members to another street and imprisoned the remaining family members of the soldiers who have resisted him and died in battle in the slave laborer camp.

Looking at the now empty streets, Lorist said, "Mister Tim, this street belongs to you now. You can finally put the sacks your soldiers were carrying to good use."

Tim was incredibly grateful at Lorist's proposition. Ever since he knew that Lorist was going to give the Burdock Bastide to him unconditionally, he quickly met up with a few stronghold leaders and sold 1300 gold Fordes' worth of weapons to them which he had obtained from Charade for only 1000 gold Fordes. After that, he sent somebody to instruct Knight Gemors to move the people and resources under him to the bastide before returning to Lorist's side after all of that was accomplished. He understood that the longer he spent time with Lorist, the more benefits he would get. As expected, before he could finish processing the fact that he got the bastide for no cost, Lorist presented him with yet another huge boon.

Seeing Tim who excitedly went to pillage the empty houses and stores lining the streets, Lorist couldn't help but laugh out loud. He had decided to aid Tim the best he could so that he would have someone to reach out to should he need anything done in the Redlis Kingdom.

When Tim returned, Lorist said, "Tim, I also got you a wife."

Unrolling a beastskin map of the area, Lorist continued, "Look here. This is Viscount

Tebri's territory and Burdock Bastide is over here. Between the two locations is Baron Anlar's territory. Even though all the male descendants of the Anlar Family had all been killed off by the count, we have managed to rescue his only daughter from the duke manor. I have decided to let you take her as your wife so that you will be able to absorb Baron Anlar's territory and unite it with that of Viscount Tebri as well as Burdock Bastide."

Lorist then tossed a few documents onto the table and said, "Look, these are the deeds for the lands of Viscount Tebri, Baron Anlar and the bastide. I found them all in the duke manor. With these documents, I will also be able to have the neighboring nobles recognize you as the legitimate successor of Viscount Tebri so that you will have no problems ascending into the noble peerage. What do you think?"

Tim bowed deeply and responded, "Lord Norton, as long as it is your arrangement, I will definitely go by it. You can have me marry a few more wives if you please."

"Sol, only in your wildest dreams. You must have sufficient power to back up your greed and ambition. The bare minimum for defending the lands you hold right now is a garrison regiment. And given the desolate state of Viscount Tebri's and Baron Anlar's dominions as a result of the conflict, you will also need quite a bit of resource to redevelop them," rebuked Lorist jokingly.

Upon hearing that, Tim suddenly turned downcast and looked to Lorist with pleading eyes. "Milord, I don't have so much money… I'm already finding it hard to sustain the 1800 men under me, not to say much about rebuilding the dominion. The money spent on maintaining an army is truly too large."

Charade who was standing nearby laughed and said, "Tim, come over here. After seeing the map, I have an idea for you. I know you are quite adept at doing business from your past experience. Now that you have this large piece of land, if you manage it carefully, you'll definitely be able to sustain three whole regiments of garrison troops.

"There is a corner of the viscount's dominion near the shores and I believe that it would be a good place for a port to be built there. And the eastern part of the viscount's dominion that is near Baron Anlar's dominion has flat lands and forests which are ideal for agricultural development. Given that you used to manage the viscount's farms, you should have a good idea on what to do with these places. With the port built, you will be able to stimulate the dominion's economy. Coupled with the yearly

harvest from the farms, you will also be able to sustain your own dominion's food demand and hold firm to your citizens' support by providing them with peaceful, sustainable lives."

Charade continued pointing around the map and said, "Now, look here again at Baron Anlar's dominion. The many hills and forests there will allow you to make quite a bit of money from the lumber and building material as these resources are rather highly demanded on the market. Coupled with the port at the viscount's territory, you no longer have to worry about not having enough funds to run or develop the dominion. If you have a large seafaring ship, you will also be able to transport these raw materials to Morante City for them to be sold there. However, you can already contact a merchant guild over there right now to establish a maritime trade route so that their ships can come over to your dominion to do business. Even after considering the commission you have to pay them, you'll still make quite a bit from the exchange. You can also have someone forage the baron's dominion to see if there are any other natural resources that can be exploited.

"As for Burdock Bastide, I'm sure you don't need me to mention that. This used to be Count Cobry's dominion and it is well-developed with a substantial population living there, so you don't need to use too much resources on that place to profit from it. The economy of the bastide will make you enough money to sustain a garrison regiment. Your only focus would be to rebuild and develop the baron's and the viscount's territories. Naturally, you have to be wary of other threats during times of war like these. You can construct five citadels at these places and station each of them with a squad of garrison troops. That will be more than sufficient to ensure the safety of your combined territories.

"The key to successfully developing your land is manpower and finances. You don't have to worry too much about manpower as I have just discussed with Lord Locke that apart from the prisoners of the laborer camp, we will have the rest of the people who are not willing to go to the Northlands with us settle down in your territory. Given that the number of people isn't a small one, I'm sure that as long as you utilize them properly, you'll be able to quickly make your dominion prosper. Other than that, you can also start looking for people to serve as your family knights so that the elites of the disbanded pike cavalrymen and garrison soldiers don't leave your dominion to join other nobles," said Charade.

Tim felt a little stunned and said, "Milord, you're truly going to leave this place? Are you going to give up Geldos City?"

Lorist laughed and said, “Yes. While this is a great place to be, it is too far away from my family’s dominion. If I were to forcibly occupy it, I would be nothing more than those despicable bandits. The last thing I’d want is to take over a place unrightfully and become an eyesore for the local nobles, nor do I want to stay put obstinately and face the First Prince’s army one day. Even though I can still leave should that ever happen, the First Prince will definitely use this as an excuse to swallow the local nobles in the area whole and take over the whole territory by himself.”

“Milord, couldn’t you just use a marriage alliance to have a claim over this land? If the First Prince really comes over, I’m sure that we can rally the nobles to resist him with an allied army,” said Tim.

Lorist shook his head and replied, “Tim, you don’t understand. The First Prince can be considered to be one of the enemies of the Norton Family because our merchant convoy had been wiped out as a result of him ordering Count Cobry to masquerade as Redbeard for him to raise funds for his rebellion. From a certain perspective, the First Prince can be said to be the true perpetrator of the Norton Family merchant convoy’s demise whereas the count is only a means to an end. Now, we have only managed to relinquish the prince of his tool, Count Cobry, and we still hope to be able to settle the grudge with him one day. If I were to become the dominion lord of this place, I would have to kneel down and swear my allegiance to him as my senior noble, and that is far from what I want. That is why I have decided to leave Geldos City and head back to my family’s dominion.”

Charade said, “Tim, don’t worry. Even if we are going to the Northlands, we will make sure that your three dominions will be properly stabilized first so that you will be an influential noble in the lands of the Redlis Kingdom and the Norton Family would definitely be able to benefit from having a powerful ally here. As long as it concerns your dominion, we will not brush it off lightly. Just now, I have told you how to manage your manpower. Right now, let’s discuss your finances and resources. I have a suggestion that you may want to consider.”

Charade gave him four suggestions in total. First, he should set the tax rate for the produce to 70% for normal citizens and give farmland to the family members of the garrison troops for free and only collect 40% from them to encourage people to enlist without needing to spend too much money on their salary. He believed that it would easily be enough for TIm to form two garrison regiments with that plan given the amount of undeveloped or ravaged land he had at Baron Anlar and Viscount Tebri’s dominions.

Second, Charade promised that when the convoy departs for the Northlands, the supplies they wouldn't be able to bring with them would be left at Geldos City and given to Tim for him to use to develop his dominion.

Third, Charade would be willing to sell the weapons and equipment he had at a very low profit to help lessen Tim's financial burden of having to arm his garrison troops.

Lastly, Charade said that he could help Tim get into contact with the Peterson Merchant Guild to start a collaboration between them to develop Tim's dominion to make up for Tim's lack of funds.

Thankful to the point of tears with snot leaking out of his nostrils, Tim accepted every one of Charade's suggestions and pledged that he would never forget the grace the Norton Family had bestowed upon him and that he would never refuse any request for help from the Nortons in the future.

After Tim left, Josk came and announced that he had decided to serve Lorist and become a Norton Family knight and also said that several of his friends wished to bring their families along to leave the area and head for the Northlands.

Elated at Josk's decision to join their ranks, Charade asked him to encourage the other members of the now disbanded pike cavalry and the garrison troops as well as the liberated slave laborers to join the convoy as manpower was a crucial resource for the development of the Northlands.

Lorist furrowed his brow at that point because he felt that the more people the convoy had, the longer its journey to the Northlands would take.

Charade however was confident that as long as he formed another pikeman infantry regiment from the people of Geldos City and expand Potterfang's heavy-armored cavalry to four companies, even if the convoy traveled slowly, their journey would no doubt be a safe one with such a huge force escorting them. After all, they did have a little too much extra equipment. And if any fool dares to bar their way, they would no doubt be decimated and their resources would only help nourish the convoy's own supply.

Chapter 77
Conference of the Nobles

Yuriy escorted seven representatives of the allied noble armies to Geldos City with his squad of light cavalry scouts.

Respectfully and politely receiving them, Lorist and Charade invited the representatives into the duke manor to start the discussion.

However, Lorist quickly noticed that something was off as the representatives did not seem to be too happy about Count Cobry's demise and had instead put the convoy in a bad light. They believed that the convoy had overstepped its boundaries by attacking and conquering the count's domain and it wasn't something the allied noble were willing to tolerate.

The representatives then demanded that the convoy leave Geldos City at once and surrender Burdock Bastide, Williamiles Castle and Geldos City as well as all the resources within to the noble alliance. One old representative who sported a long goatee even said that Lorist's act of crucifying the count was a huge insult on the dignity of all nobles and could be considered an act of aggression towards the whole of the Redlis Kingdom's nobles. He even said that no noble would allow for any of their own to be killed and publicly displayed on the cross like a lowly bandit.

"Who do you think you are?" said Lorist angrily as he glared at the flailing old man who was so passionate in his accusations that he spat out saliva with every word he uttered.

"I am Viscount Snaff and as a noble, I demand you, the person in charge of this merchant convoy, to give me the due respect. What authority do you have to be able to punish a person of noble birth?" responded the old man proudly.

"Very well, Viscount Snaff," said Lorist as he stood straight up. "I will take that as an insult to the Norton Family. And that, is something I can never forgive. I hereby declare war on behalf of the Norton Family against the Snaff Family. May the stronger prevail and the weaker perish."

“Knight Loze…”

“Milord, I’m awaiting your orders!” said Lode Wales as he stepped forward.

Looking at the map, Lorist smiled and said, “Viscount Snaff’s territory is not far from Williamiles Castle. I give you 3 days to lead your heavy-armored cavalry company and the soldiers stationed at Williamiles Castle to flatten the viscount’s dominion. Don’t let anyone in his family escape. I won’t mind completing what Count Cobry left unfinished.”

“Yes, milord. I will definitely carry out your orders without fail!” said Loze as he gave the 7 noble representatives a harsh glare before taking wide steps and leaving the room immediately. Without much delay, the loud sounds of soldiers gathering and horses galloping away from the manor could be heard from the outside, gradually fading away.

Only silence remained within the hall as the arrogant Viscount Snaff slumped to the ground with a pale expression without being able to utter a single word.

The remaining 6 representatives looked at each other with weird expressions as if they had noticed that they had neglected something important.

Finally, a white-haired old man broke the silence and asked, “Sir, may I ask if you’re a m-merchant convoy or not?”

“Hehe, I’m glad someone noticed this point. Didn’t you guys bother to find that out when you came into the manor? We are not just some merchant convoy. I am Baron Norton Lorist, the head of the Norton Family of the Northlands. This convoy is led by me on the way back to our homeland,” said Lorist.

“But sir, as a noble yourself, it’s still not appropriate for you to nail the count on the cross. I believe that Viscount Snaff was not mistaken on that part,” said the white-haired old man bravely.

“You have a point. However, I was not punishing him as a noble. The reason he was nailed on the cross is because he had disguised himself and masqueraded as the infamous bandit Redbeard and raided countless merchant convoys in the Bodolger Province years back. If you people don’t believe it, please look at this journal over here. This is the count’s personal journal during his days of raiding merchant convoys. There are a few others like this as well. Reidy, let these representatives see the rest of

the entries," said Lorist.

With stone-cold evidence presented to them, the six representatives were at a loss of words.

"May I ask if your family is the one that had been enfeoffed territory in the Northlands during the founding days of the Krissen Empire, the family of the Raging Roaring Bear? And, how has the count wronged you?" asked another representative who had a chubby body.

Lorist nodded and said, "That's right, our family is the Raging Roaring Bear of the Northlands. I formed the convoy after receiving a letter of summons from my family to return to the dominion to inherit the position of the family head after 10 years of studying at Morante City. However, as I was passing through the area, my convoy was attacked by the forces of the count out of nowhere. Fortunately, the force I had assembled to escort the convoy was strong enough and managed to wipe the attackers out and even allowed me to catch a few prisoners alive.

"It was some of the prisoners who told me that they had been involved in serving the count during his days of raising merchant convoys as the bandit, Redbeard. If you may be so inclined, please refer to the records of the exploits of Redbeard in the Bodolger Province 7 years ago. That was the time when the merchant convoy of the Norton Family perished by the hands of the count. After all these years, my family has been searching for the bandit and we have finally found him only recently. It was precisely because of that the Norton Family declared war against the count and successfully eliminated him and his 67 illegitimate sons."

"Sir, it is our fault for misunderstanding the situation and thinking that your convoy was just a normal merchant convoy. The ignorant commit no sin, please forgive Viscount Snaff. He will definitely be willing to make up for his rude behavior towards your family."

"Hehe, it is not me the viscount has to apologize to, but you guys instead," said Lorist with a laugh as he took out a few letters from the box on the table.

"Please check these letters out. After conquering Geldos City, we have discovered them within the study of Count Cobry and they actually contain intelligence reports of the allied noble armies' military movements sent by Viscount Snaff to the count. He also mentioned in these letters that he would try his best to disrupt the unity of the various

nobles in the alliance and cause as much trouble as he can. I had originally intended to give these letters to you so that you can take care of him yourself. I really didn't expect him to hand himself up on a platter to me. He must have a death wish."

The six nobles held the letters in their shivering hands as they read through the contents…

All of a sudden, the white-haired noble tossed the letter away and leaped towards Viscount Snaff to give him a sound pummeling and even savagely bit the viscount's ear off, causing Viscount Snaff to scream out in agony.

The rest of the nobles quickly stopped the white-haired man from continuing his beating with much difficulty. But, that did not stop him from swallowing the ear of the viscount whole into his stomach. With blood trailing out of his mouth, he sat down and started crying out loud. "My poor son… Benny… You're death was completely in vain!"

The chubby noble started explaining, "Baron Douglas is far too pained from the death of his son, Knight Benny, from an enemy ambush during an operation he led to ransack the count's warehouse. Just now, the letter he read was the one the viscount sent to notify Count Cobry about the plans on that day."

Sympathizing with Baron Douglas, Lorist said, "Having one's most beloved sacrificed as a result of an ally's betrayal is one of the hardest things for a person to accept. Please pass my condolences to Baron Douglas when he calms down. As for Viscount Snaff, I will hand over his territory to your alliance. Since so many unexpected developments had happened today, let's adjourn this meeting and continue two days later."

The chubby noble bowed to Lorist and said, "Respected Lord Norton, forgive me for asking, but, what kind of business did you intend to discuss with us?"

Lorist nodded back in response and asked, "May I know your name?"

The chubby noble patted on his belly and introduced himself. "I am Baron Henderson and my family crest is that of the razor-sharp spearhead."

"Respectful greetings, Lord Baron. I wish to discuss with the army about the handling of the count's dominion. Because the Norton Family convoy has to continue the journey to the north, I don't wish to leave any loose ends for the nobles here to clear up. Also, I've also rescued 7 noble ladies whose families have been decimated. As a

noble myself, I would definitely help another fellow noble out in times of trouble. After finishing arranging these matters, we will leave Geldos City," said Lorist.

"Hmmm…" The baron was a little stunned as according to the customs of nobles, the victor in a fight between two noble families had the right to all the properties of the loser. Given Lorist's status as a noble, it was only right for him to be the one to manage the properties of the count as he saw fit. Lorist's decision to invite the representatives over for discussion was quite unlike the behavior of normal nobles. That's why they had mistaken the convoy for being a merchant convoy and behaved so arrogantly given their higher status to the point when they thought that the raging bear flag was only an insignia of a merchant guild.

"Lord Norton, you're saying that you're willing to give up Geldos City and leave the area?" Even though Baron Henderson was a chubby fellow, he had quite the sharp mind and recovered from his astonishment quite quickly.

"That's correct. My family's dominion is in the desolate Northlands and we have never forgotten the oath our ancestor had sworn to protect the northern borders of the empire. Even though the Krissen Empire is no longer present, we still have to return to the Northlands. We only wiped out Count Cobry because of an old grudge we had with him as well as the despicable way in which he was treating the other landed nobles in the area. Now that the Cobry Family is already no more, we should discuss about what to do with the 13 territories the count had conquered as well as Williamiles Castle, Burdock Bastide and Geldos City. After all, the allied noble armies did play their part in resisting the count as well."

To the noble representatives, Lorist's statement was akin to having gold coins fall right out of the sky. Even Baron Douglas who was crying his eyes out before stopped and stared at Lorist with his mouth agape.

Charade came over from the side, made a knight salute, and lifted the baron up before asking for a servant to bring over a basin and a towel for him. After that he instructed the guards to lock up Viscount Snaff who was moaning in pain on the ground from having his ear bitten off.

Baron Henderson was the first one to snap out of it and he deeply bowed again before saying, "Respected Lord Baron Norton, your generosity has truly captivated us and truly outshines both the sun and the moon. I wonder if the allied noble armies can assist you with anything? Please don't hesitate to request anything of us."

At that moment, Baron Henderson had completely forgotten the fact that Lorist had yet to formally inherit the title and called him Lord Baron right away. He also understood that there was no free lunch in this world and offered any assistance he could give for the benefits the alliance was about to receive.

Looking at Baron Henderson with a gaze of admiration, Lorist said, "Actually, I only have a small request. First, Viscount Tebri is an ally of the Norton Family, but his family has almost been wiped out entirely due to an unfortunate turn of events. With Mister Tim as the sole person alive that inherits the viscount's blood, and the fact that he had been a huge help to our fight against the count this time around, I have decided to acknowledge him as the formal heir of Viscount Tebri to perpetuate the Tebri Family line. I hope that the noble alliance would recognize Mister Tim's birthright so that he has a smooth transition to nobility."

"There will be no problem. Many of us know Mister Tim. Since he is the only one alive with the blood of the Terbris, we will naturally accept him as the heir to the late viscount's dominion and title," agreed Baron Henderson.

"Second, the Anlar Family, whose dominion is beside Viscount Tebri's dominion, has also been wiped out due to the count with only the daughter of the late Baron Anlar surviving the whole ordeal. Having rescued the Lady Anlar, I have decided for her to form a marriage alliance with Mister Tim and I hope that their union will receive your blessings."

"That is a given. We will definitely congratulate them on their marriage and send them fitting wedding gifts," said the six representatives unanimously.

"Third, as both Baron Anlar's and Viscount Terbi's dominions have been ravaged as a result of the count's attacks, I will be giving the control of Burdock Bastide to Tim and his wife so that they would have something to rely on to redevelop their dominions. I hope that the noble alliance will accept that proposition and promise to not violate this arrangement and disrupt the lives of this couple. Naturally, to make up for that, I intend to hand over Williamiles Castle and Geldos City to the noble alliance as well as the deeds for the lands lost by the 13 noble families to the count as well as the six noble ladies that were kept in captivity by the count. Oh, and the treatment of the family members of the count's dead soldiers will also be handed to the alliance."

Baron Henderson felt his throat run dry and found himself to be unable to utter even a word in response. He gave the rest of the representatives a glance and said, "Lord

Norton, please state any other requests you have so that I will be able to relay it to the rest of the members of the noble alliance as this is no longer a matter that us seven can decide on our own. I will invite them over here to further talk about this matter, is that alright with you?"

"Of course, my final request is for our convoy to be allowed to stay at Geldos City for a while longer, about another month. Due to the scale and size of the convoy, we need to prepare for some time before we can leave and continue on our journey. I hope that you will be able to understand that. That aside, our convoy has brought along with us quite a large amount of weapons and equipment. So, if any of you wish to purchase some, we can offer them to you at a discounted price."

…

After Baron Henderson and the rest of the representatives sent word about the issue back to the alliance, various nobles have been pouring into Geldos City nonstop to purchase weapons. Potterfang and Loze had also successfully destroyed Viscount Snaff's territory in one fell swoop and demonstrated the military might of the convoy to the allied noble armies.

Seven days later, the noble alliance meeting finally began. On the first day, all the nobles agreed to Lorist's requests. Lorist had also handed half of the administration rights of Williamiles Castle and Geldos City to the alliance and also returned the 13 land deeds, the six noble ladies that they have rescued, as well as the family members of the dead soldiers who had served the count, including the family members of Viscount Snaff.

Ever since that day, the nobles of the alliance kept arguing over the things that have just gained. The only thing they managed to agree on was the labeling of Viscount Snaff as a traitor and the execution of him and his family members. However, that in itself sparked yet another dispute among the nobles on how to divide the viscount's territory.

Charade, on the other hand, spent the following days in absolute bliss. He hoped that the relations between the nobles would be as bad as possible, as the increased tension between the members of the alliance had increased the sales of the weapons, mounts as well as supplies. The current state of affairs had already spurred countless nobles to come to the convoy to make large amounts of purchases.

As of now, Lorist had 4 heavy-armored cavalry companies and 2 pike infantry regiments under his command. Even the Gold ranked mercenary, Chino Freiyar, had been persuaded by Josk to follow Lorist to the Northlands. Thus, Lorist named him the colonel of the newly-formed garrison regiment. As Charade had mentioned before, given the convoy's military might, no normal noble family would be able to pose a threat to them. And any fool of a noble that dared to provoke them was not even worth putting into consideration.

The coming of the 2nd month signalled Lorist's departure from the convoy to head to the Northlands accompanied only by Shadekampf, Patt, Reidy and the relentless Josk who wanted to tag along no matter what. They departed after saying their goodbyes to Charade, Potterfang, Els and the other family knights.

Chapter 78
On the Road

The clattering sound of the wheels of the four-wheeled carriages repeated on and on as the carriage traversed the muddy mountain path.

Reidy, who was driving the carriage, shouted out, “Milord, I think we should find somewhere to rest. It’s really hard to travel on this road right now. Even if we could hold on, I doubt the horses can continue for long. We also have to maintain the carriage for a bit, I think the axle might have been damaged as the carriage is getting quite difficult to control.”

Lorist got off his horse and approached the carriage before shouting out, “Please hold on for another half an hour. After passing through the Plate Mountain Pass, we will arrive at a small hill city where we can rest for two days.”

Lorist and the other four had traveled for almost seven days straight. With 12 strong and endurant Zeno Horses as well as a carriage suited for long distance travel that they had obtained back in Geldos City, the group only rested for an hour for every 20 kilometers they traveled and switched the horses that pulled the carriage between the breaks. Easily moving a distance of up to 150 kilometers in a day, they had traveled for around 1000 kilometers so far, causing the whole group to feel rather worn out.

Whoosh! Suddenly, a crude, long arrow scratched the side of the carriage and landed onto the ground nearby.

“Sol…” cursed Lorist as he got off his saddle and agilely climbed onto the carriage beside the coachman’s seat while he withdrew a javelin from the roof of the carriage and prepared to cover Reidy, who was occupied with controlling the carriage.

Was this the 16th or 17th time they had encountered bandits after they departed from Geldos City? Lorist had already lost count as they ran into two to three groups of bandits each day. At first, the bandits that had attempted to rob them looked to be extremely impoverished and famished and didn’t seem like they intended to harm Lorist and his men for its own sake, so he simply gave them light punishments before leaving some food behind. However, as the encounters got more frequent, Lorist

decided to simply outrun their unmounted pursuers.

The interesting thing was that the bandits they had encountered within the Redlis Kingdom were mostly old and hungry refugees who demanded food and money and were equipped with only farming tools used as makeshift weapons. However, when Lorist and gang entered the Andinaq Kingdom, the bandit encounters grew less frequent. But those that had showed up usually were much better trained and equipped and behaved in a cruel and heartless manner. Lorist didn't bother showing these bandits who raided for a living any mercy at all.

A few agonized cries rang out from afar as a result of Josk's sniping. Poking his head out of the carriage, Shadekampf asked, "Young master, what's going on?"

Lorist replied with a low voice, "Don't poke your head out. We've just encountered another group of bandits. Prepare your crossbow just in case."

With a swing of his hand, the javelin shot out like a bolt of lightning into the trees by the side of the path and pierced a bandit bowman who was aiming at the carriage squarely in the chest.

Within the trees by the side of the road, a loud angry group of voices could be heard as 30 or so bandits rushed out with various weapons in hand.

The javelins shot out one after another in response, causing ten or so bandits who were rushing at the forefront to be nailed flat to the ground within moments.

The remaining twenty plus bandits were so frightened by the sudden death of their comrades and instantly retreated. However, Lorist's javelins had just run out at that exact moment.

"KIll him!" shouted a bearded bandit who was pointing angrily towards Lorist. Upon seeing Lorist run out of javelins, the attackers steeled their resolves and rushed over once again.

"Sol! There were 200 javelins when we left, but it all ran out within only a few days!" exclaimed Lorist as he got off the carriage. "Reidy, be as quick as possible in dispatching them so we can start traveling again within the shortest time."

Following that, one bandit after another fell in front of Reidy with crossbow bolts stuck to their foreheads that had been fired by Shadekampf from within the carriage.

“Hey, don’t take my prey!” shouted Reidy in a dissatisfied manner towards the passenger’s compartment.

With another flash of the blade in Lorist’s hands, four bandits fell to the ground with blood spluttered out of the slits on their throats.

It was then when the bandits finally realized that they had ran head on into an iron wall. With only two exchanges, only 5 to 6 of the 20 remaining bandits were still alive. As the survivors attempted to escape, they were hunted down and slayed by Lorist and the bloodthirsty Reidy.

“Agh!” shouted a bandit who had played dead and attempted to escape into the trees only to end up shot in the back by Shadekampf. It did not take long for him to let out his last breath.

The result of this encounter ended with the bandits’ complete decimation. Shadekampf got off the carriage and started looting the bodies of the bandits while Reidy stayed by the carriage to inspect the conditions of its wheels. Lorist on the other hand was checking if any of the javelins he had thrown were still in usable condition. It was a shame that javelins were mostly one-use items that either lost their sharpness or had their handles broken after Lorist uses them, often rendering them unusable.

Patt quickly returned from further up the path on horseback and reported that the bandits had dug up a large pit ahead that the carriage was unable to pass through. GIven that Josk had shot the other four bandits to death, Patt had no choice but to return to get a shovel to fill up the pit.

“What’s wrong with the wheels?” asked Lorist as he approached Reidy.

“Milord, look. One of the bolts over here had fallen off. It’s no wonder I felt that the wheels were slightly misaligned as it was quite difficult for me to control the carriage when I was making turns. I guess I’ll make a temporary bolt out of some wood for now and get it properly repaired when we reach town at a blacksmith’s,” said Reidy as he pointed towards the hole in the wheel.

“Very well, we’ll do just that,” said Lorist as he turned back, only to see Shadekampf coming over with a couple of things in his hands.

“Young master, look. These bandits are quite well-off. Normal garrisons of common nobles won’t be able to afford mail and scale armor like these. There are three of them

here with another 6 sets left on the ground back there. Each of these bandits also carried two to three imperial gold coins with them and half of their weapons are standard military issues. Young master, if we can find their stronghold, then we will definitely gain even more…" said Shadekampf excitedly.

Lorist looked at the armor Shadekampf brought over and was nothing short of impressed. It was fortunate that when Lorist was killing the bandits, he primarily relied on slitting their throats, so the armor sets were mostly undamaged.

Seeing Shadekampf carry the armor sets into the carriage, Lorist cleared his throat before asking,"Um, Shadekampf, we need to rush to the dominion as fast and possible and have to travel light. Are you sure you want to bring these back?"

Shadekampf said in a troubled manner, "Young master, our family lacks decent sets of armor like these. In the Northlands, people mostly rely on leather armor instead of metal armor. I'm sure a mere few sets wouldn't set us back that much."

Sigh, fine. If you really want to bring it back, then go ahead. Lorist didn't say anything else as he felt that after Shadekampf spent more than a month by Charade's side, he had adopted most of the greedy and stingy habits Charade had. Even though the Northlands lacked metal armor, Shadekampf didn't consider that it would no longer be the case by the time the convoy made its way there. Though, he couldn't be bothered to lecture Shadekampf on that as worrying for the family's future was a commendable behavior.

The rest of their journey was rather uneventful. After half an hour, the walls of Fenyata Town that was stacked up from stones was within their sights.

The guards by the gates of Fenyata Town looked towards Lorist's group of 5 men, 12 horses and a carriage with curious eyes as it was quite uncommon for a party that small to be traveling long distances. However, right after Lorist showed the badge of the Norton Family to the guards, they stopped worrying instantly and even let them into the town without collecting any fees.

Lorist then asked the guards where the smithy was in Fenyata Town before tipping them with one imperial old head gold coin each, causing them to thank him reverently.

Fenyata Town was a rather small place that housed only five to six hundred households with a population of around 2000 people. A long street split the small

town into two from the middle. On one side, the neat-looking multi-storey buildings that were constructed out of stone could be seen with shopfronts mostly occupying their lower floors. On another, residences constructed from both wood and stone could be spotted, but the lack of organizational planning made that part of town look like the slums.

Lorist's group stopped at an inn called the Wine and Weary Birds and reserved three rooms on the third floor. After having a decent meal, Reidy brought the carriage to go look for a blacksmith whereas Patt went to the stable of the inn to instruct the horse caretakers on how to manage the 12 Zeno Horses they had brought. Shadekampf moved the nine sets of armor to the room he and Patt shared and even got some sand, cloth and butter in preparation for polishing the armor. Lorist and Josk on the other hand returned to their respective rooms after instructing the servants of the inn to prepare some warm bathwater, after which they took their baths and went into deep sleep.

On the second day, Lorist didn't feel like he wanted to get out of bed and told Patt to instruct the food server to leave his breakfast on the table before returning to sleep. Shortly after that however, the town bell started ringing incessantly.

"Sol, what the hell is wrong? It's not even the new year's festival yet…" mumbled Lorist as he tucked his head under his pillow in an attempt to drown out the sound of the bell.

"MIlord, I think this is an alarm bell…" said Patt.

Quickly feeling more energized already, Lorist got off the bed and went to look out the window, only to see the townsfolk panicking and running around frantically on the streets with looks of terror on their faces.

"Oh, it really is the alarm bell. The last I heard, there wasn't any wars going on in the Andinaq Kingdom. What's really happening here?" Lorist muttered as he got dressed.

Giving the map a glance, he saw that Fenyata Town was still 250 kilometers from the Madras Duchy. *Don't tell me the Madras Duchy has declared war against the Andinaq Kingdom and the conflict had spread over here? That doesn't sound plausible… The Madras Duchy is more than capable of protecting itself, but attacking others is another matter altogether. Even though it was considered part of the Iblia Kingdom in name, the Duke of Madras had never paid the Second Prince much heed. Perhaps he's already*

unable to bear the political pressure and started sending his troops to fight the Third Prince's Andinaq Kingdom?

The more Lorist looked at the map when he was eating, the more confused he got with his theories. Subsequently, knocks could be heard on the door of the room. Looking at Patt, Lorist gestured for him to go open the door.

Reidy came in and said, "Milord, the garrison captain of Fenyata Town wishes to meet you."

"Oh," said Lorist as he placed the map down and said after giving some thought, "Please let him in."

Well, might as well ask him about the alarm while he's here.

The captain of the Fenyata Town Garrison was a grim-looking, middle-aged man who looked to be in his forties. The way his hands fidgeted around as if he didn't know where to place them while he stood in front of Lorist only served to show his anxiety. Even though Lorist asked him to take a seat, he said that there wasn't a need and that he was perfectly fine with standing.

Alright, keep standing if you like it so much, Lorist thought. He had never liked to force others to do what they were not uncomfortable with. After leisurely taking a gulp of tea, he asked the captain what business he had for him to request a personal meeting. The middle-aged captain stammered, "Milord, may I ask if you used the Plate Mountain Pass to arrive at our town?"

"That's right," said Lorist as he nodded.

"Then, were you the ones who met with a group of bandits and killed them all?"

"We were. What's wrong?" Lorist asked. He felt a little wary that the captain asked such a question as killing bandits wasn't something that uncommon.

"Milord, misfortune has really descended upon us. Just this morning, the bandits have barred the town gates and said that if we don't hand you over by noon, he would massacre all the people in the town…" said the captain with a pained expression.

"Bandits? You're saying that the alarm bell just now was sounded because of a bandit attack?" asked Lorist.

The garrison captain merely nodded.

“Then tell me what sort of bandit actually dares to be that audacious to even dare to threaten to kill all the residents of Fenyata Town. Doesn’t the local lord care about the situation?” asked Lorist curiously.

“Milord, it’s not that the local dominion lord doesn’t care, but he just isn’t able to. He’s tried to take action against the bandits twice, but it only ended with his loss on both occasions with heavy casualties on his side. The lord even got injured himself during the second attempt. That’s why the bandits dare to be so arrogant. For the past few years, the area has been affected by the ravages of war and many deserters, vagabonds as well as bandit groups gathered over time at the mountain forests about 50 kilometers from the pass. Around three years ago, a Gold Swordsman who called himself the Wolf of Plate Mountain brought a group of people and started ruling over the bandits and set up a stronghold within the Blackrock Mountains nearby to collect toll and rob the people who pass through that pass.”

“Oh, so the head of the bandits is a Gold ranked swordsman… This is interesting. It’s the first time I’ve heard of a person who’s capable of reaching the Gold rank becoming a bandit,” said Lorist as he laughed.

The garrison captain started to seem even more anxious as he said, “Milord, I truly am speaking the truth. The local lord has lost 3 Silver ranked knights to him. You can easily verify this by asking around, almost everyone knows about this. The Wolf of the Plate Mountains is cruel and lustful. Three villages near the mountain pass have already been wiped out as a result of his whims. That’s why our dominion lord decided to act against him in the first place but has failed in both attempts.”

Looking at the middle-aged man, Lorist asked, “Since the bandits have blocked off the entrance of the gates, then what is your intention as a garrison captain to come see me? Are you going to hand me over so that they don’t start massacring the townsfolk?”

“N-no, milord, it never even occurred to me to send you out…” said the middle-aged captain with a panicked look on his face. “Milord, the reason I’ve come to inform you about this is so that you can make preparations to escape. This town only has one garrison squad and we don’t even number 80 people. Of all the soldiers in the garrison, only I, the captain, has reached the Silver rank. On the other hand, the bandits have at least 500 members. Apart from the Wolf of Plate Mountain who’s a Gold rank, they also have up to 70 Silver ranked experts. The disparity in our strength is far too much

and we won't be able to hold them back for long. I only hope that you will take the opportunity to leave the town sooner and notify the authorities of the kingdom so that they will send some soldiers over to wipe the bandits out. This way, I'll be able to rest well even if I perish in the midst of battle."

"That's not right, if the bandits are so much more powerful than the town garrison, then why haven't they attacked the town long before and only decided to take action after we killed some of their own?" asked Lorist coldly with a solemn look on his face.

"Oh, milord, to be honest with you, our dominion lord has come to a compromise with the bandits," said the captain embarrassedly. "After the two attempts at erasing the bandits ended up in failure, the lord was worried that they would come over to occupy the town right away and cause his reputation to fall to the point where his title would be revoked. That's why he had a large merchant guild show up to sign an agreement with the bandits stating that in exchange for Fenyata Town to be open to bandits for them to purchase supplies and use the facilities in the town, the bandits would sell the items they pillaged to the merchant guild. And as long as the merchant guild pays the toll, they would not be touched by the bandits. As for other people who use the Plate Mountain Pass, even though it was unfortunate that they would be robbed, the dominion lord would turn a blind eye to those matters. And as long as the bandits don't carry any weapons into the town, they would be allowed entrance to feast and have fun here. If they don't cause any trouble, the garrison troops would close one eye towards their presence…

"The main reason the bandits are blocking the town gates is due to one of the bandits you have killed yesterday being the younger brother of the Wolf of Plate Mountain. That's why he's completely lost it and came to attack the city despite the agreement with the lord and the merchant guild. Milord, I'm sure that when the bandits attack, they'll start pillaging anything they can find and chaos a lot of chaos. That's when you can take your chance to escape."

"Hehe, it's only a group of 400 to 500 bandits with a Gold ranked fighter as the leader. I believe it's a good opportunity to broaden my horizons," said Lorist as he picked up his longsword by the table. He then looked towards Reidy and Patt and said, "Let's go meet these bandits for a bit. Reidy, have Joe bring a few extra quivers of arrows. It's best if we don't let a single bandit escape today."

Chapter 79
A Withered Tree Crumbles Easily

When Lorist picked up his sword and said that he would go confront the bandits, the gloomy garrison captain brightened up for a moment, but started worrying right away after that. He believed that even though it was quite impressive that Lorist would exit the town to prevent the massacre of the townsfolk, he felt that the young noble youth didn't understand how serious of a situation this was and the few people in his party was far from enough to take on the bandits who numbered approximately 500.

Not wanting to see Lorist give his life away, he really wanted to stop him from going out. However, thinking of the threat the bandits posed, he couldn't bring himself to do so on the account of the citizens' lives, lest Lorist changed his mind about confronting the bandits. It was, after all, the lives of more than 2000 people.

Seeing the garrison captain's conflicted state of mind, he smiled and consoled him that it wasn't a big deal, and since this incident was partly caused by him in the first place, and given his status as a noble, he wasn't going to back out of this and cause the innocent townsfolk of Fenyata Town to die as a result of his actions.

After a while, Lorist walked over to the town walls with the garrison captain and took a look outside. Much to Lorist's relief, clusters of disorganized bandits could be spotted loitering all over the place wearing armor or beastskin robes. There were even some who wore women's skirts on their shoulders as if they were some kind of cape.

Perhaps due to the fact that there was still some amount of time before the deadline, the messy-haired, savage bandits were still acting relaxed as if they were on a field trip. With three to five of them gathered around different bonfires, some boiled water to make drinks with others could be spotted roasting some food. Some bandits could even be seen lazily staring at the mountains and chatting, occasionally letting out loud bursts of laughter. A few of the more bored bandits even approached the town walls and started cursing while making funny faces towards the town guards, threatening to break into the town once they received their orders.

…

“What a bunch of rowdy fools…” said Lorist as he sighed. He really wondered how the dominion lord couldn’t even handle a useless bunch like this after two attempts, causing him to overestimate the bandits for a moment, thinking that they probably knew an army formation or two that would give him quite a bit of trouble. Their unprepared and lax manner was really a pleasant surprise for Lorist.

“Where’s the Wolf of Plate Mountain that you’ve mentioned? What does he look like?” asked Lorist.

“Milord, look at the group in the middle that has the most people where a goat can be seen being roasted on a bonfire. The one with a bearded, scarred face wearing a silver mail with a blue gown is the Wolf of Plate Mountain. The tens of people by his side are the vice leaders of the bandit group and most of them are at least of the Silver rank,” said the garrison captain as he pointed them out to Lorist.

“Reidy, prepare the mounts. Joe, follow behind me later and clear a path for me with your arrows to the bonfire in the middle; we’re gonna go for the beast’s head first. As long as we can wipe out the Wolf of Plate Mountain and his vice leaders, the remaining bandits will definitely crumble and cease to be a threat. Patt, lead Reidy and Shadekampf to circle the surroundings of the bandit group and take out as many as you can with your crossbows. When we wipe out the leaders, shout out loudly that you will spare anyone who ceases to resist and kill anyone who dares to bar our way!” said Lorist.

The garrison captain almost fainted upon hearing that. *There are up to 500 bandits outside! WIth only five people, you actually plan to take out their leaders and even have the audacity to ask the bandits to surrender? Aren’t you overestimating yourselves? They’re bandits, not sitting ducks…*

As the captain was pondering on whether he should give Lorist another warning to discourage him from acting, Lorist turned towards him and asked if he had any javelins that he could use.

Thinking that he probably had some lying around, the garrison captain hastily left and returned with 20 or so of them, all packed up in a sack and given to Lorist. During that time, Lorist and the rest had already finished their preparations and were already on their horses waiting for the town gates to be opened.

Fenyata Town didn’t have a moat around the walls nor did it require a drawbridge to

cross; the gates of the town opened directly to an open field. Spurring his horse along, Lorist rode straight towards the bandit group with a pike placed on his saddle.

Josk followed slightly behind Lorist and started shooting his arrows from horseback successively, taking out the two bandits who blocked Lorist's path and sending them flying. Within moments, a bloody path lined with corpses seemed to have been paved with Lorist at its forefront heading for the center bonfire.

With the bandit leaders being more than 300 meters from the town gates, they only spotted Lorist and Josk after they had traveled half that distance with thirty to forty bandits dead in their wake from the flurry of arrows. Suddenly startled to alertness, they stood up in preparation for the two incoming attackers.

The scar-faced Wolf of Plate Mountain shouted out in rage as he pointed towards Lorist and Josk, "Onward, my men! Turn these good for nothing twerps into mincemeat right away!"

Apart from a few idiotic bandit leaders who rushed forward with their weapons, the others quickly scrambled for their shields. The threat that Josk and his bow posed to them was very real.

As expected, the few bandit leaders who attacked without a thought had been spotted by Josk. With a flash in his eyes, the green longbow in Josk's hands let out successive thunderous twangs as five green-colored arrow trails appeared in the air with breakneck speeds. The five bandits merely stopped in their tracks and collapsed to the ground in orderly unison.

"Gold ranked…" mumbled the Wolf of Plate Mountain as he quickly drew his sword and awaited his adversaries.

Lorist had already reached within 50 meters of the bonfire with two waves of bandits blocking his way ahead. After he spurred his horse with his boots, his mount let out a loud neigh and rushed forward as if its life depended on it. The pike in Lorist's hands transformed into hundreds of afterimages that surrounded the space around his mount. By the time Lorist rode past the cluster of bandits, 30 or so of them spun around, revealing the numerous blood-spurting cuts and wounds on their throats and torso and fell to their deaths without being able to let out so much as a cry of pain.

Four other bandit leaders ran towards Lorist with their swords in hand that emanated

Silver blade glows. Two shield-bearing bandits thrusted their swords towards his mount while protecting their bodies with the other two standing ready in front of him. One of them raised his two-handed sword and jumped upwards with a loud roar while the other leaping over the horse with the tip of his longsword aimed towards Lorist's chest…

Making a light humph, Lorist let the pike in his hands dance left and right and two gut-wrenching sounds of flesh being pierced resounded. The two shield-bearing bandits had their shields pierced right through by Lorist's pike and were crying out in agony as blood gushed out of their bodies. Subsequently, the pike was lifted to meet the two-handed sword, causing it to be parried upward and creating an opening for the pike to find its way to the sword user's body. The bandit who was turned into a kebab and held high in the air grunted and let out his last breath as his eyes turned cloudy.

Lorist then swung the pike down forcefully, causing the body of the dead bandit that was hanging from the tip to be thrown towards the bandit with the longsword. Surprised, the incoming bandit rapidly changed his trajectory only to find the pike digging itself into his throat like a agile python hunting for its prey…

Within such a short time, Lorist had dispatched four bandit leaders before he made his way in front of the Wolf of Plate Mountain.

"How dare you!" screamed the bearded man who had just witnessed four of his own subordinates killed by Lorist. Seething with rage, his hand trembled and three crescent-shaped blades of golden light were unleashed in Lorist's direction.

Without bothering to respond, Lorist waved his pike lightly and knocked away the blades of light and quickly dashed and thrust his pike towards the chest of the Wolf of Plate Mountain. With a smile on his scarred face, the man said with a sly smile, "Just in time…"

Turning his body slightly, he evaded the incoming pike before manifesting a golden blade of light on his sword and swinging it towards the pike's handle. "Little boy… Do you have a death wish?"

Lorist quickly withdrew his pike but it was too late as it had already been cut into two by the bandit leader's sword. The Wolf of Plate Mountain let out a smile and said, "Kiddo, surrender and… What's this?"

The Wolf of Plate mountain was shocked to notice that Lorist was already so close to him and with a sword flash, his head was sent flying through the air. Lorist had taken the opportunity to ride closer to the bandit whose attention had been focused onto the pike and decapitated him with his sword.

"You talk too much…" Lorist finally said.

The surrounding bandits who saw Lorist sweep past and eliminate the five bandit leaders including the Wolf of Plate Mountain within moments all stared wide-eyed in disbelief and stupor.

The sound of the bowstring rang out again followed by the deathly grunts of the three shocked bandits as they fell while clutching the parts where they were hit. The remaining seven to eight bandits snapped out from their astonishment and turned tail to escape.

It was at that moment when Lorist took out the javelin quiver he slung onto the horse's back and tossed them out like spears of lightning, nailing six of the escaping bandits flat to the ground. One of them managed to get onto a horse only to be shot off it by Josk within moments. The last remaining one was a bearded bandit who threw his longsword away and kneeled down to beg for mercy upon seeing Lorist arrive in front of him.

Sigh, we have another Engelich over here… With a swing of his hand, the javelin flew right above the head of the kneeling bandit and nailed another one not far away to the ground who was rushing over and waving his axe just in a raging frenzy. The kneeling bandit breathed out in relief and thought that it was fortunate that he took the chance to prostrate himself before his indomitable foe.

Lorist stopped his horse in front of the kneeling bandit and said coldly, "Get up and quickly get your other comrades to drop their weapons and kneel down to surrender! Otherwise, they will not be spared!"

A seething killing intent could be felt emanating from Lorist at that moment, causing the kneeling bandit to jump in fear and shout towards his comrades. "Drop your weapons! Quick, everyone kneel!"

Another bandit asked curiously, "Brother Oss, why do we have to drop our weapons?"

The bearded bandit walked up to his subordinate and gave him a heavy slap before

taking the pike from his hands and throwing it to the ground before he said, “Quick, kneel and drop your weapons! I’m trying to save your sorry lives…”

Another wave of bandits rushed up from behind with the leader screaming out loud, “Ovidis, what the hell are you doing? Have you turned traitor and surrendered to the enemy? My brothers, don’t listen to him! Otherwise the boss will never forgive you all… Ah!”

The leader of the group stopped talking and instead made an ear-piercing grunt after being nailed to the ground by Lorist’s javelin. Lorist then rushed into the rowdy group with his longsword ready and within but two bouts, almost all of the bandits had been killed with only five to six who were quick to drop their weapons and surrender.

The bearded man said towards the kneeling men, “Didn’t I tell you? He truly is a god of slaughter to have killed more than 30 men out of the 40 plus that rushed at him. The boss didn’t even last a few bouts against him before dying by his hand. Had I not asked you guys to discard your weapons, you would’ve ended up like them…”

Lorist rode up to that bearded man and said, “Hey you, take up your weapon and ask someone to collect the head of the Wolf of Plate Mountain and parade it around. Make sure you tell them that anyone who doesn’t surrender will be killed without exception.”

Having been frightened out of his wits by Lorist, the bearded man nodded respectfully and said, “Yes milord. Your will is my command.”

…

Even though Lorist and Josk started killing off multitudes of bandits incredibly swiftly, the ones that were gathered further away from the central bonfire were unaware of the sorry situation of their comrades and gathered towards where the commotion was being caused. When the bearded bandit put the head of the Wolf of Plate Mountain atop a pike and held it up high to warn the rest of the bandits and ask them to surrender, many of them thought that the boss’s death was caused by infighting within the bandit group and even said swayed some of their comrades to avenge their boss.

These blind fools soon became corpses beneath the hooves of Lorist’s horse with the remaining ones who managed to escape Lorist’s massacre shot to death by Josk. It did not take long until the rest of the bandits were put into perspective, causing almost

half of them to discard their weapons and kneel on the ground with a small minority scattering and running away in all directions.

Coming over from afar, Patt, having just broken through to the Silver rank recently, rode on top of his Zeno Horse into the crowd of bandits holding a pike that emanated a silver blade glow and managed to cut the few escaping ones into two halves. Reidy and Shadekampf who were following behind took care of the rest with their crossbows. In the end, only twenty to thirty of them managed to escape into the woods.

At that moment, the gates of Fenyata Town opened up with the garrison captain bringing tens of other garrison soldiers outside to assist in finishing the remaining bandits off after seeing the situation that was far less dangerous than before.

With almost 300 bandits kneeling without making a move on the ground, the bearded bandit leader walked towards Lorist to express his felicitations and asked if he should tie the surrendered bandits up and confiscate their weapons.

Lorist agreed because he felt that it would save him far more trouble should any of the bandits attempt to escape. Upon hearing the response, the bearded bandit called out to ten people from within the crowd to ask them to help out with tying the rest of the bandits up.

Lorist felt that the bearded bandit leader was a pretty interesting fellow and even considered him to be one of his loyal subordinates already. That man also tied up the other bandits in a peculiar way: He first removed the bandits' belts and used them to tie their hands behind their backs so that their pants would fall off should they attempt to run away.

However, some of the bandits were enraged at the bearded man and attempted to resist him, only to be beaten savagely by his subordinates to the point of calling out in vain to their moms. Lorist and Josk felt something was off and asked one of the bandits about it. "What's going on over there? Aren't you a unified group?"

The bandit nervously replied that the men over there weren't his comrades and gave a more comprehensive explanation. Lorist and Josk then understood that while the bandits considered the Wolf of Plate Mountain as their leader, there were actually different factions beneath him. The bearded bandit was called Ovidis and he was the leader of thirty other men. Not wanting to serve the Second Prince during the civil war

in the empire, Ovidis led some of his other fellow soldiers to desert the army and secretly made his way to his homeland nearby.

However, he did not get to live in peace for long as the Wolf of Plate Mountain later showed up in the area after a few years and coerced him into serving him through martial prowess and force. Even though several other bandit groups have been united under his leadership, conflicts still existed between the different factions within. Given that the people Ovidis had selected to help him tie up the rest were part of his faction, the bandits from the other factions were naturally not satisfied and even tried to fight back at the risk of their lives.

Patt and the rest brought the tens of other bandits who attempted to escape back and Ovidis quickly had his subordinates tie them up as well. After finishing his tasks, Ovidis asked Lorist if he would like him to lead them to the stronghold of the bandits and mentioned that there was no one else there apart from the elderly, women and children. He also said that the riches the Wolf of Plate Mountain had acquired over the years were accumulated there and that if Lorist didn't take advantage of that, it would only benefit somebody else.

Giving Josk a glance, to which he nodded in response, Lorist said, "Alright then, I'll be troubling you to check that place out for me, Joe. Um, big beard, bring several other men with you as well. Patt, you can tag along if you want to."

Ovidis brought three others with him and instructed the rest of his subordinates to listen to Lorist's orders during his absence before he mounted and went to look for Josk, Patt and Shadekampf before departing for the stronghold. Lorist then ordered Reidy and Ovidis's subordinates to look after the captives while he went over to where the garrison troops of Fenyata Town was.

Chapter 80
Forming yet Another Convoy

Lorist just noticed that a new problem had arisen; he had up to 300 captives from the defeated bandit group. Even though they participated in the barring of the town gates, they haven't actually killed any townsfolk yet nor did they clash with the town garrison's soldiers as their forces had been crumbled thoroughly by Lorist's group. All the leaders were killed except for Ovidis, who had surrendered to him and became one of his loyal subordinates before he left for the bandit stronghold with Josk and the others.

That all resulted in the 300 or so surrendered bandit captives becoming Lorist's personal property. That meant that before he could decide what he wanted to do with them, he would have to be responsible for their food and shelter.

The garrison captain who was despairing just moments before was now full of smiles, causing Lorist to grimace in disgust. He circled around Lorist and made sure he had everything he needed as if he owed him hundreds of gold coins.

Currently, Lorist was seated on a sofa that the garrison captain had brought over and was drinking a cup of fragrant tea that he had been served. Beside him, the garrison captain was rinsing a cloth with warm water for Lorist to use to wipe the grime and sweat off his face…

Had that all happened on the veranda of the inn they were staying in, Lorist would no doubt feel incredibly pleasant with the hospitality and care he had been shown. However, in front of him at that moment sat the 300 captive bandits, causing him to feel more like a circus freak instead from the bandits' awkward stares.

"Are you sure you can't take the bandits into your hands?" asked Lorist once again.

"That's a given, milord. These are your captives and they're your property. I wouldn't dare to have any designs for a noble's property…" exclaimed the garrison captain solemnly.

Lorist waved his hand in frustration and continued, "Then what the heck do I do with

them? If you don't take them captive, would I have to spend my money to feed them? Wouldn't it be better for me to simply release them?"

"Milord, whether you release them or not is up to you. However, I must remind you that these are bandits. If you release them, they'll only be of harm to the people. I'm sure your reputation would be impacted if word of this got out…" said the garrison captain with a feigned expression of concern for Lorist.

"Sol, if I had known that earlier, I would've killed them all instead of having them cause trouble for me while alive…" Lorist complained.

The garrison captain was merely taking a gamble. He knew that the noble youth before him was not a person to mess with. However, he did not doubt that Lorist would really have killed the bandits if he knew that it was going to end up like this after seeing Lorist's group wipe out the 500-strong bandit group, especially that Gold ranked Wolf of Plate Mountain that had caused the local dominion lord huge losses for two separate instances along with the several Silver ranked bandit leaders.

Including him, the whole of the garrison soldiers respected Lorist like he was some sort of war god. The demise of the Plate Mountain Bandits within a single morning was nothing short of a pipe dream for them before Lorist's arrival.

The garrison captain walked up to him and said, "Milord, you don't have to be in such a rush. I've already informed the local lord on the matter when the town gates were first surrounded. I'm sure that the lord would arrive at this town within two days. At that time, you can hand the bandits to him and I'm sure he would provide you with some remuneration for your contributions here. To me, the bandit captives are actually sacks of gold coins."

"I don't lack any gold now. I just don't want any more trouble. Tell me, where would I keep these captives? Maybe you could lend me your garrison camp for that purpose at least?"

"Oh, that won't do, milord. The garrison camp is actually really small and it definitely wouldn't be able to hold that many people. If a small incident breaks out, chaos would definitely ensue. I think the best option we have now is to set up a separate camp," explained the garrison captain.

While setting up another prisoner camp would be a comparatively better idea, it did

cost quite a substantial amount of money. Aside from the materials required to set up camp, a management fee had to be paid to the local lord for the consumables they needed to sustain the prisoners like firewood and clean water. This was another person's dominion after all; even the smallest rock was the property of the local lord and it definitely couldn't be used without an appropriate fee payment or remuneration. Even though that wouldn't cost him much, Lorist hated to deal with the paperwork that usually followed.

"Sol…" mumbled Lorist as he stood up and took a pouch of coins out of his pockets and handed it to the garrison captain. "I've never heard of a person having to feed the bandits he captured after defeating them… Whatever, I don't care anymore. I'll be going back to take a rest. Here's 20-odd gold coins that should be enough to cover whatever is needed for the camp. If there's any left over after all that, split it among your men as bonus for looking after the prisoners."

The garrison captain bowed respectfully and said, "Milord, please be assured that I will handle this properly."

"Reidy…" Lorist called out. "I'll leave this place to you, so be careful. Also, don't forget to clean up the weapons on the ground as well as the Wolf of Plate Mountain's head which we will need to claim the bounty."

"Yes, milord," said Reidy casually.

"Freaking hell… If only I can kill a couple of them to cut my costs…" mumbled Lorist.

…

After returning to Wine and Weary Birds, Lorist ordered a large feast that included a bottle of the famous local wine. Even though the skirmish in the morning didn't take long, he felt very worn out after that especially having to care for his mount after riding it around all day. Lorist slept for the whole night soundly after finishing his meal.

He woke up the next morning feeling refreshed and free of the fatigue from seven days of travel and the battle the day before. Halfway finishing breakfast in his room, he suddenly recalled that Shadekampf came by in the middle of the night to inform him of something, but he went straight back to sleep after telling Shadekampf to do whatever he saw fit.

And so he headed to the room shared by Shadekampf and Patt, but those two were not

there. After going to check on Reidy's and Josk's rooms, he noticed that Reidy wasn't not present as well with Josk sound asleep in his own room.

Lorist understood that Josk was probably worn out like him after the battle and closed the door carefully without bothering him. He then decided to go check on the situation of the bandit captives.

The moment he exited the city gates, he saw the full-bearded Ovidis leading 100-odd fully-equipped men doing military drills…

Huh? What the heck is going on?

Looking at the surroundings, he noticed tens of other garrison soldiers observing the training.

Upon noticing Lorist's arrival, Ovidis hastily ordered his men to stand at rest and quickly ran over to Lorist and bowed respectfully. "Milord, the guard squad is currently undergoing training. Please give us your orders!"

Since when did we have a guard squad? Why don't I know about this? Without revealing his inner thoughts, Lorist pointed at the hundreds of men looking in his direction and asked, "Where did you rally the people from?"

Ovidis puffed out his chest and replied loudly, "Reporting to milord, 38 of those men are my own subordinates. When we went to the stronghold yesterday to plunder the goods, Shadekampf also managed to get thirty other people to join us. After we returned, Patt suggested that we form a guard squad with the people that had joined us so that milord will look far more impressive upon your return to your homeland escorted by one. That's why he picked another 30 men from the bandit captives to fill up the numbers required for a full squad and appointed me to be the captain of these men. I believe Shadekampf had already notified you about this the night before."

"Yes…" said Lorist as he nodded. *What the hell did Shadekampf say to me when I was half-asleep?* Pointing towards the equipment Ovidis was wearing, Lorist asked, "Are the men loyal and reliable? Also, I know a Silver ranked like you won't have problems with wearing mail underneath a layer of scale armor, but will your men be able to endure the burden?"

"Milord, there is no such problem. I know these men really well: they had been forced into banditry to survive the harsh days after the war and didn't do much evil across

the years. I'm sure they're more than happy to cast away their status as bandits to be in your service, especially after you've shown them your true abilities on the battlefield yesterday. I guarantee that they will definitely be loyal to you at all times. As for the equipment, those have been issued on the orders of Shadekampf. Given that the men have all awakened their Battle Force, two sets of armor isn't too much of a burden. Patt also said that the better armored they are, the less likely they are to die, thus being able to better protect you, milord."

"Sol, you people should worry about yourselves first. I don't need your protection…" humphed Lorist in a dissatisfied tone.

"Where is Shadekampf right now?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, Shadekampf has left with Reidy to town to do some shopping. Patt is within the army camp," replied Ovidis.

It was at that moment when Lorist discovered that the camp in front of him was separated into two sections, one large and one small. The large section was where the captives were kept and it was secured by the garrison troops while the smaller camp was where the guard squad stayed.

"Alright, since you're willing to serve me, I consider you as one of us now. So, don't be so polite all the time. Tell me, why are there women and children within the camp?" Lorist asked.

"This… MIlord, the ones within the army camp are the family members of some of the soldiers in the guard squad. The ones who are within the large camp are the family members of the captives. Sir Josk acted really benevolent yesterday as he allowed the family members to reunite with the captives the moment we returned to town. The family members of the killed bandits and the several wives of the Wolf of Plate Mountain are also staying there. Some of them are really beautiful, if you're interested, I can have my subordinates escort them over here to serve you…" said Ovidis with a serious look.

Whap! Lorist gave Ovidis a strike with his horse whip and said, "Mind your own business! I don't need you to look out for me on that front!"

"Yes, milord!"

…

Riding his horse into the army camp, Lorist saw Patt bringing an old man respectfully out of the tent.

Seeing Lorist come over, Patt hurriedly introduced the man to Lorist, "Grandmaster Sid, this is Lord Locke that I have mentioned to you…"

The old man did not even turn to look and passed by Lorist with his head held high.

Getting off his horse, Lorist looked at the man who had walked far away and asked Patt, "Who's that old guy? He's so rude."

Patt shrugged and said, "It can't be helped, he's a grandmaster after all. It's only natural for him to be pissed for being brought here against his will…"

"What kind of grandmaster is he? Did you have to bring him here by force?" Lorist asked curiously. Did Patt and the others go too far when they brought the bandits over?

"Milord, that old guy truly is a gem! He's a grandmaster armorer. The 100 plus armor sets we managed to retrieve from the defeated bandits were actually made by him over the past three years! He's also well-versed with looking for metal ore veins. The iron mine near the bandit stronghold is said to have been found by that old guy. He uses the materials gathered there primarily for making weapons and armor for the bandits."

"That's why you forced him to come with you?:"

"Ugh… About that… Shadekampf said that the family would desperately need someone like Grandmaster Sid, so we brought him and 10 others within his family all the way here," said Patt in an embarrassed fashion.

"Oh well, there's no point thinking too much about it now that he's here. After all, he can be considered to be part of our spoils since he was serving the bandits and is subject to whatever we have in mind for him. On another note, what did Shadekampf go to buy with Reidy?"

"Milord, we need to transport the resources we've obtained from the stronghold back to the dominion. Along with the new guard squad and their family members as well as Grandmaster Sid's family, we will need several other long-distance horse carriages and more horses. That's why Shadekampf went to town to search for some more," Patt

replied.

Gosh… It's another convoy all over again…

Lorist looked at Patt with an exasperated look and said, "Patt, we have to rush back to the dominion as quickly as possible. What you're doing down isn't quite suited to that as the arrangements that are required might end up delaying us."

"That's not the case, milord. I've already discussed this with Shadekampf. During the past 7 days, we managed to travel up to 1000 kilometers and there's only around 1000 plus kilometers left before we reach the Northlands. However, we have more than 20 days of time before the inheritance ceremony. If we manage this carefully, and travel 75 kilometers per day, we will definitely be able to arrive at the dominion before the 3rd month. Due to leaving the convoy in a rush the last time, we didn't bring enough supplies with us to be transported to the dominion. Now that we have gained so much from the bandit stronghold, we might as well bring it back to there to fulfill the family's desperate need for them!" Patt beckoned.

"But aren't we bringing back lots of gold coins?" asked Lorist.

Patt gave a bitter laugh and said, "Milord, you'll soon come to learn that in the Northlands, even if you have money, you might not be able to get what you want due to stock availability. Even if there was stock, the price would easily be double that of the market's, and that could already be considered cheap in the Northlands. In normal circumstances, you should already be thankful for being able to purchase an item you want for three times the market value."

"Oh well, do whatever you want," said Lorist. From Patt's description of the situation, he now knew the severity of the lack of resources that plagued the Northlands and his family's urgent need for them. He really wondered if Charade would be disappointed to return to a dominion that was in that state…

Lorist decided to leave those matters to Shadekampf and Patt since they were so enthusiastic about it. When lunchtime came, he recalled the wine he had at the inn yesterday that tasted pretty good when coupled with the roasted goat and decided to go back to there to check on Josk before having his meal.

However, Josk was still fast asleep, so Lorist could only enjoy the meal by himself.

Just as he was tasting the wine, a feminine young woman clad in a waistcoat worn over

a tight-fitting black gown came over to his table and made a lady's curtsy before she said, "Milord, may I have some of your time?"

Lorist nodded in response to the greeting and pulled over a chair for her to sit. "Excuse me, young lady, how may I help you?"

"I'm really sorry for interrupting your meal like this. I heard that you have been looking for carriages to transport things to the Northlands. Can I request to come along on the journey? We would like to go there as well, however we haven't been able to find a suitable person to travel with and were left stranded here. I wonder if you, milord, can grant me this small little boon?" The young woman's voice carried a hint of magnetic charm that made one feel pleasant upon hearing it.

"Oh, you're heading to the Northlands as well? That place is rather large, you know. Which part of it is your destination? I wonder we would pass through the area on the way," Lorist replied.

"We would like to head to the Norton Family's dominion, the family of the famous Raging Roaring Bear. I wonder if you've heard of them before?" asked that black-clad young woman.

Chapter 81
Telesti

Lorist froze up the moment he heard that just as he was reaching for his bottle of wine. Snapping his fingers, he gestured for the waitress to come over and smiled towards the black-clad woman. “I wonder if you had lunch already? Would you like some mutton steak? The steak tastes magnificent when accompanied with the red wine they serve. Do I have the honor of dining with you?”

The black-clad woman’s surprised look could be seen from the semi-see-through black veil she wore on her face, as if she was wondering what Lorist was plotting for suddenly offering to treat her to lunch the moment she mentioned the dominion of the Norton Family. But when Lorist spoke of the deliciousness of the food, she could be seen swallowing twice in anticipation.

However, she resisted the temptation of food and nodded slightly in apology. “If it wouldn’t be convenient for you to let us travel along with your convoy, then so be it. It’s my fault for interrupting your meal, please forgive my transgression.”

“Wait a second…” said Lorist as he stretched his hand out to stop her. “Please wait a moment, miss. Let me introduce myself. I am Norton Lorist of the Norton Family of the Northlands. My men are looking for more horse carriages to form a convoy to return to my family dominion. Here is my family badge.”

Lorist then placed a golden badge onto the table that had an engraving of the insignia of the Roaring Raging Bear on top of it with a complicated laurel pattern on its back surrounding Lorist’s name. This was the proof of Lorist’s identity: any noble who had received formal education and training as one would be able to tell whether it was genuine or not at first glance.

The woman uttered in surprise and clasped her mouth from behind the black veil. She didn’t expect that she would meet a person from the family of the dominion she wished to head to and didn’t know how to react.

“Miss, are you okay?”

“Miss…”

A butler who looked to be in his fifties and a maidservant looking to be in her mid-teens stood up and came over from a table nearby.

Quickly hugging the black-clad woman, the maidservant glared at Lorist with a fierce expression as if he had committed some unforgivable sin.

That butler on the other hand stood in front of the two girls.

“Hehehe…” Lorist started to laugh as he thought, *this old man’s aura… Hmm, he’s of the Iron rank. What a loyal person, not bad…*

The woman hurriedly snapped out of her stupor and said, “I’m sorry, milord, they’re only worried for my safety…”

Lorist waved casually and said, “It’s alright, I understand. Now, can you sit down and tell me what business you have at my family’s dominion?”

The maidservant narrowed her eyes and looked at the badge Lorist had placed on the table. “Is this badge really made of gold?”

After that, she took it up and gave it a huge bite.

“Don’t…” said Lorist with much urgency, but it was too late.

As expected, the moment the maidservant’s teeth collided with the badge, she tossed it away and started groaning in pain.

“Milady, this man is a fraud! His badge is not made of gold at all…” accused the maidservant in a pained voice.

The woman in black facepalmed as if she didn’t know what to do with her rowdy maidservant…

Resisting the urge to laugh, Lorist picked up the badge the maidservant had dropped and circulated his Battle Force before saying to the maidservant, “Young lady, no family badge will be fully made from pure gold only. There are two proper ways to distinguish real badges from fake ones. First, look at the patterns and engravings at the back of the badge. The second way is this…”

Lorist allowed the Battle Force that flowed within his veins to slowly enter the badge. After a while, a thick black mist gradually formed above the badge and morphed into a shape of a bear roaring towards the skies.

"How mysterious…" said the young maidservant as if she had forgotten the pain in her teeth as she stared wide-eyed at the smoke projection of the bear within the air.

"This happens because a special material that allows for Battle Force to circulate is present within the badge. Coupled with the intricate patterns carved onto the surface, this phenomenon occurs easily when Battle Force is input into the badge. Every noble family badge can be differentiated using this method as each family has their own unique combination of materials and carvings that is kept secret from everyone else to prevent fraud from being easily committed. That's why, impersonating a noble is definitely no easy task," explained Lorist with a smile as the smoke projection of the raging bear floating atop the badge slowly dissipated.

"I'm really sorry, milord. Little Vinny was really too rude…" said the woman while she removed the black veil that covered her face, revealing her long maroon hair, delicate and pretty face, her large, intelligent-looking eyes, small, thin lips as well as her smooth, rounded chin. However, her skin tone was slightly paler than most.

"It's no big deal, she's a cute little maidservant. So, beautiful lady, do I have the honor now to treat you to lunch?" asked Lorist politely once again.

"Food? Count me in! I want some roasted chicken drumsticks, some beef steak, bacon and some egg tarts with pudding…" Before the black-clad woman could reply, the little handmaiden by her side had already started ordering what she wanted excitedly.

"Vinny…" said the woman as she gave her maidservant a glare.

"But mistress… Vinny has been eating nothing but potatoes for half a month! Vinny wants to eat meat…" said the little maidservant as she looked at her mistress with her large and pained puppy-dog eyes.

The woman's face instantly flushed red with embarrassment.

"Little Vinny, go sit down with the butler at that table and order whatever you like, okay? Don't worry, I'll pay for it," said Lorist as he motioned for the waitress nearby to come over. "Please get this lady here a set of roasted mutton steak, some fruit salad with buttered mushrooms and a bottle of red wine. Also, please satisfy the demands

of that little girl over there as well, okay?"

"Yes, milord. It will be done promptly, please wait for a bit." The change in the waitress's attitude was quite apparent after she got to know Lorist's status as a noble.

"Oh, I haven't asked your name yet, young lady."

The black-clad woman had already returned to her previous calm and said, "It's my fault for not introducing myself first. I'm Nico Telesti, adopted daughter of Nico Albess. I'm also her student…"

"Nico Albess? That name sounds familiar, let me think…" Lorist sunk into deep thought for a moment and said, "She's a famous scholar back in the days of the former empire who specialized in ruin exploration. Being an influential professor, she is also awarded an honorary title of nobility as a dame and has written many research publications concerning the relics of the Age of Magic…"

"Ah, why are you so informed about her, milord?" said Telesti with an astonished expression.

Lorist laughed and said, "That's simple. When I was studying at Dawn Academy back in Morante City, ruin exploration was also one of the courses I had picked up. Most of the material we used in the course were written by your mother. To pass the course, I had to memorize so many of the books your mother wrote by the word! Thinking back, the days of book-memorizing were rather painful ones…"

"Hehe…" Telesti laughed out. "That's because you only did that to pass your course. If you were truly interested in the subject, there would be no need to memorize the books by way of rote at all. The books my mother wrote were incredibly well-structured in a way that would allow you to understand most of the concepts by deriving them from the foundational ones. The fact that you had such a hard time memorizing them meant that you were not properly interested in learning about that field at all."

"You have a point. After I passed the exams, I forgot almost everything that I had memorized. Oh, how is Dame Albess doing by the way?" asked Lorist.

Telesti's expression suddenly turned sullen as she started tearing up. "My mother is no longer of this world. Three years ago during the First Prince's ambush and the Third Prince's retaliation, the imperial capital had been totally decimated. During that

conflict, my mother had encountered some raiding soldiers and died in an effort to protect the results of her research. After that, I collected the manuscripts of my mother and some other research documents and left with Vinny and my butler to the War God Shrine's nunnery and managed to evade the effects of the war. When the war ended, I went back to my residence only to notice that it had been completely pillaged with nothing left. The situation has been quite terrible in the imperial capital during those two years and there was no way I would be able to survive there as a scholar. That's why I decided to heed my good friend's advice to head to the Northlands."

Lorist said solemnly, "Please accept my condolences."

"It's okay…" Perhaps it was due to the hardships she had experienced, the pale-faced scholar managed to acquire a strength of perseverance that not everybody had. "Actually, the other reason I decided to go to the Norton Family's dominion apart from my friend's advice is to continue my mother's research. My friend is called Norton Glacia. According to her, despite the relative ruralness of the Norton Family dominion, there is no need to worry about the flames of war encroaching that place and that it would be safe for me to continue my mother's research over there."

"Norton Glacia? My cousin sister?" At that moment, an image of a chubby little girl showed up in Lorist's mind. However, it wasn't a pleasant memory as at that moment, that girl was grabbing at his cheeks and twisting it to make different weird faces. In his memories, he was crying really hard at being played around by that girl.

Back then, Lorist's mother was still alive and he was only 5 years old. That chubby girl was the daughter of his Second Uncle and she had come along with her mother to visit the family. That was when Lorist ended up being her beloved toy.

What a terrible memory! Lorist shook his head and shoved those memories back to the depths of his mind and said, "Do you have any news about my Second Uncle's family? Can you tell me how they are doing right now?"

Telesti shook her head and said, "It's been two years since I split up with them, so I have no idea how they're doing right now. However, milord, I can tell you that your Second Uncle has already passed away. 7 years ago when the First Prince started his rebellion, the royal guard knight legion your Second Uncle had served in as its vice captain was ambushed by the rebellion army and had been completely wiped out. Your Second Uncle wasn't exempt from that either. When the news got to your aunt, she cried herself to sleep for quite a number of times."

Lorist clenched his hands so hard that veins started showing up on his arms. “It’s that damned First Prince again. I’ll definitely remember this and settle it with him one day…”

“Glacia is a genius in Battle Force training and she had already reached the Two Star Silver rank at a young age of 20. My family was a neighbor of your Second Uncle and Glacia came over to my house frequently to play. She was like an elder sister to me. After the death of your uncle, Glacia joined the army and said that she wished to avenge her father. However, she came back within a year and angrily complained that the Third Prince only wished to retain his position as the king of the Andinaq Kingdom and didn’t take any real action against the First Prince’s forces. She felt that a person like that wasn’t worthy of her service. But after a while, she got quite close to the second son of the Third Prince, the Second Highness, and formed a small squad with him whose only purpose was to cause trouble for the First Prince.

“The last time I met her was two years ago when the civil war was about to end and the Third Prince was already having peace talks with the other dukes. When she returned to the capital, Glacia came over to my house and told me that the Third Prince had disbanded the Whitelion Legion that the Second Highness commanded to prevent further conflict between the Second Highness and his elder brother, the First Highness, and also exiled the Second Highness to his own dominion. Glacia said that she was going to follow the Second Highness back to his dominion together with her two brothers and her mother,” explained Telesti.

“Why didn’t she invite you to go along?” Lorist asked, curious at how his elder cousin sister had asked her scholar friend to travel to the Northlands instead of following her along to the Second Highness’s dominion when the risks of traveling to the Northlands were far higher.

“She did, but I refused,” Telesti said. “Two years ago after the peace treaty was signed, the citizens of the imperial capital thought that the days after the conflict would be much better and peaceful. But in actuality, it was much worse as the price of food and other fundamental supplies had risen to unimaginable heights due to a huge shortage. The security of the capital also got progressively worse as many people gradually started to make a living as bandits or thieves. And even though the war had ended, the conflict between the dominion lords didn’t stop at all but rather increased instead. That’s why I decided to seek refuge from the Norton Family given the terrible state of affairs at the capital.

“One huge factor for my decision to go to the Northlands was its benefit to my mother’s research. There is a place called the Black Swamps within your family’s dominion, right?” Telesti asked.

“Are you talking about the Blackmud Marsh?”

“Yes, the Blackmud Marsh. After many years of research, my mother theorized that the Blackmud Marsh could have some remains or relics from the end days of the Age of Magic. However, she couldn’t pinpoint exactly where they were. I hope to be able to go there to see that place for myself and also restart her research too. If I manage to find the relics she had mentioned to be there one day, I’m sure I would’ve fulfilled the hopes she left to me before she departed to the afterlife.” Telesti’s eyes let out a completely different aura the moment she started talking about her mother’s research.

Upon hearing that, Lorist pursed his lips in doubt.

“It’s true, I’m not kidding you! I also believe my mother’s hypothesis about there being relics at the Blackmud Marsh that has yet to be discovered by anyone. Glacia knows about my mother’s works as well, that’s why she wrote this letter of recommendation for me,” said Telesti in an annoyed tone as if she was about to cry from Lorist’s doubt towards her mother’s findings.

“Oh, it wasn’t that I doubted your mother’s findings,” said Lorist hastily to console the young female scholar. “I only think that the Blackmud Marsh might not be as accessible as you may imagine it to be. It is one of the most dangerous places in the Northlands as it is the main habitat of thousands of Ironspine Crocodiles. I recall that someone back in my family had reported a sighting of one that was easily over 40 meters in length. There is no way that you’ll be able to approach the Blackmud Marsh without having at least a Silver rank in Battle Force training.”

“Is that so…” said Telesti with a stunned look after hearing what Lorist had to say.

Did you think that you would be able to enter the Blackmud Marsh as you please to search for ancient relics? If it were that easy, wouldn’t someone else have found the relics long ago? What a naive young girl…

“How about this, Miss Telesti, as the family head of the Nortons, I welcome your joining us on our journey to the Northlands with our convoy and consider you a guest of my family. You will be allowed to stay for as long as you please in the family dominion to

work on your research however you please and we will provide for everything you may need during your stay as best as we can to your satisfaction," said Lorist.

At that moment, Lorist saw the bitter-faced garrison captain rush into the inn hurriedly. Upon seeing Lorist, the captain made a respectful greeting and said, "Milord, the local dominion lord, Viscount Kermas has just arrived. He wishes to have a meeting with you."

Lorist gestured for the garrison captain to wait and said, "Miss Telesti, the convoy will be leaving within two days. Because of some reasons, we might need to travel far without resting. If you have anything you need help with, please don't hesitate to tell us about it to avoid slowing down the journey, okay?"

The young female scholar's face turned flush-red again as if she was unaccustomed to asking help from others. After hesitating for a while, she finally said that her party of three had two horse carriages, but they still required 3 work horses to pull them.

Lorist nodded and said, "Please don't worry, Miss Telesti, I will definitely arrange that for you. You just have to wait for news of the convoy's departure. Please forgive me from excusing myself as I have to go meet the local dominion lord right now. Oh, your meal is here. Please enjoy it. If you need anything else, please don't hesitate to tell it to the waitress over there. Don't hold back, the bill's on me."

Lorist then stood up and made a gesture of apology before informing the inn owner to take special care of his three guests and leaving with the garrison captain.

Chapter 82
Viscount Kermas

Viscount Kermas was a tall, thin man. He was directing his farmer soldiers to set up camp outside the town walls when Lorist went to see him.

Lorist came to a realization why the baron had failed for both attempts in taking out the bandits.

Having received word that Fenyata Town was being threatened by the bandits at the gates, Viscount Kermas couldn't just sit and wait things out as he was the lord of that area. Thus, he brought his men with him with the possibility of there being a battle in mind. However, his soldiers looked pretty poorly-equipped and trained with most only wearing rags and tatters that wouldn't even keep one warm throughout the night. Given that they did not even have proper weapons, armors and shields were definitely out of the question. Most of them were either holding a long stick or some farming tool and using them as makeshift weapons. Some of them improvised by using metal cooking pans instead of shields.

This... this is the force Viscount Kermas used to fight against the bandits? Lorist was completely taken off guard by that group of men who he would believe to be vagabonds had he not known better. It's fortunate that the bandits had already been long taken care of by Lorist. Otherwise, the viscount's third defeat would no doubt come to happen.

The viscount was a rather cheerful person who was extremely grateful to Lorist's efforts as could be seen from the way he shook Lorist's hand heartily and reluctance to let it go, despite multiple of Lorist's own efforts to pull his hand from the viscount's grasps.

Viscount Kermas then started to praise Lorist for almost half an hour. In his words, Lorist was an incarnation of a magnificent and just war god and the savior of the troubled from the hands of evil.

To Lorist's surprise, during that half an hour of praising, not once did the viscount repeat what he said. Lorist believed that the viscount would've made an excellent bard

with his way of words.

After that, Viscount Kermas, possibly worn out from saying all the good stuff about Lorist, or maybe even running out of good things to say, finally took a sip of tea to curb his thirst. Lorist finally managed to pull his right hand back and used it to wipe his face that was full of the saliva of the viscount.

Afraid that the viscount would launch into yet another long-winded conversation, Lorist quickly asked him what the reward bounty was for the extermination of the bandits.

However, Viscount Kermas only responded to the question with a weird look, as if Lorist had asked something that was unfit for a war god like him, causing Lorist to feel a little weirded out.

"Cough, cough…" After clearing his throat, the viscount apologized deeply for the lack of a reward for the bandits' extermination and said that the bounty had been lifted ever since the day he signed the agreement with the merchant guild as a witness.

Then does that mean all my efforts had been in vain?! Lorist gave the awkward-looking garrison captain a glance and looked back to the smiling viscount and came to a realization. *So this viscount is only good for his way with words but is actually a freaking stingy bastard! I guess I should've realized this from the gloomy expressions of his farmer soldiers. I'm sure they aren't having a good life under the rule of this stingy dominion lord.*

However, when Viscount Kermas heard from the garrison captain about Lorist being on his way to the Northlands to inherit his position as the family head, he quickly paid his respects to the well-known family of the Roaring Raging Bear and apologized even further about how the incident with the bandits had delayed his journey. He also mentioned that on account of the principle of mutual assistance between nobles, he would receive the prisoners of war from Lorist at no cost at all to relieve him of his troubles.

Other than that, the viscount asked for people to take the head of the Wolf of Plate Mountain down from being displayed, citing that the hot weather would cause it to rot and stink and attract disease-spreading insects to the area and prove detrimental to the health of the nearby residents. Even though he said that, Viscount Kermas tightened the bear fur jacket he wore around his body as a cold gust had just blown by

which caused him to sneeze in response.

Hehe, this viscount is really too shameless. He actually has his eyes set on the prisoners and even wanted to get the head of the leader of the bandits for free. Even though Lorist was currently smiling, his eyes were radiating a cold light.

He first thanked the viscount for his kind intentions and expressed his admiration for the viscount's altruistic offer. But he then mentioned that he already had a way of dealing with the prisoners so that he wouldn't have to cause the viscount any trouble on that front.

As for the head of the bandit leader, Lorist said that he has decided for it to be made into a decoration to commemorate his victory over the bandits at Fenyata Town. He added that he wanted to show the people that the bandit who had caused Viscount Kermas so much trouble now ended up in his hands as a tool that would help to spread his fame and solidify his reputation as the magnificent and just war god who is the savior of the troubled from the hands of evil that the viscount said he was.

Lorist also mentioned that an iron ore mine was found near the bandits' lair and that it would also become his as he had defeated the menacing bandits and owned the right to the spoils. Lorist said that he planned to have the prisoners work at the mine for him and maybe even build him a castle at Plate Mountain Stronghold so that he would be able to live there after inheriting his position at the Northlands as this place was far better than his desolate dominion there. Also, he would then be able to collect toll from the people who used Plate Mountain Pass as he had to keep it safe from bandits in the future.

"I really like the scenery of Fenyata Town, especially that of the difference between your forces and mine." Lorist then pointed to his guard squad that was training not far away and said, "I believe this town will soon prosper in the future. Maybe the Norton Family will be able to gain another dominion…"

Upon hearing all that, the viscount struggled bitterly to maintain the smile on his face. He swallowed in anxiety after taking a look at his own soldiers and Lorist's and realized that he had made a wrong call. He had imagined that Lorist would happily agree to leave everything in his hands after some flattering given his young age and urgent need to return to his dominion to inherit the position. That way, the viscount would be able to trade empty praises for actual gains.

What he didn't expect was that Lorist was unlike those young and inexperienced nobles that would be too full of themselves and lose sight of everything after being praised a time or two and would be willing to give up on material benefits for the sake of petty reputation. The thought of Lorist making the head of the bandit leader into an ornament and telling everyone of his exploits made the viscount fear for his own reputation as well. What would people think of him if they knew that he had been defeated twice by the bandits that only took Lorist one attempt to exterminate?

The mention of the iron ore was nothing to scoff at either. That equated to a huge amount of wealth! If he allowed the young noble to take over the mine and build a castle there, what influence would he still have at his own dominion in the future? While Viscount Kermas wasn't worried about the bandits, Lorist was different. He had already hinted to the viscount that he had some plans on the viscount's territory and that he would have no problem defeating the viscount with his superior forces should there be a need for it.

I can definitely not let Lorist stabilize his influence in my dominion, no matter the cost. Viscount Kermas then pulled at Lorist, who was already preparing to leave, and requested with a smile on his face for the ownership of the mines to be handed to him, arguing that his citizens were suffering because they lacked access to iron ore and added that if he had the mine, he would definitely be able to improve the standard of living of his citizens and be able to better defend his dominion and not let the same bandit problem manifest again. He expressed his hopes that Lorist would reach out to his sense of justice and fairness to help him on this matter…

Lorist stopped the viscount's ramblings and said, "Lord Viscount, are you saying that you'll redeem that mine?"

Redemption was a non-conventional transaction that could be carried out among nobles. Should a noble's dominion be taken over as a result of a hostile invasion and be unable to take it back by his own abilities, he can request another noble for military help to reclaim his land and offer a fitting and proportional price as a remuneration to redeem it.

VIscount Kermas wanted to weasel his way out of it, but was unable to find a reasonable argument and hesitantly admitted that he wanted to carry out redemption. Given that it was a huge transaction of its own right, there would naturally be necessary procedures and protocols. Thus, Lorist asked Shadekampf to represent him while the viscount asked his personal accounting supervisor to estimate the value of

the mines as well as the area around the bandits' stronghold. After some period of bargaining, both sides finally came to a price they could agree on.

However, Viscount Kermas started complaining again and said that he wasn't able to pay such a huge sum given the poor state of his dominion. But he did mention that he would be able to make up for that with the resources he had.

What other resources or supplies do we need? Lorist looked at Shadekampf and he stated that the convoy needed more work horses, carriages, mounts, food and textiles.

And so Lorist started to negotiate once again with the viscount and he finally agreed to provide 350 work horses and mounts, 50 four-wheeled long distance carriages, seven carriages' worth of food and three carriages' worth of textiles to trade for the ownership of the iron mine and the area around the stronghold. Lorist will also hand the jurisdiction of the prisoners as well as the bandit leader's head to the viscount as part of the trade.

Thus, the viscount joyfully stated that the resources would be prepared by noon tomorrow and Lorist would have to pass the prisoners and the decapitated head over by then.

In Lorist and Shadekampf's presence, Viscount Kermas ordered the garrison captain to gather the horses and carriages of Fenyata Town as well as the resources he had promised. He mentioned that the stores within a 50 kilometer radius of Fenyata Town would definitely have the necessary amount.

The garrison captain looked at the viscount hesitantly and asked how he would pay back the owners of the stores for the resources they were about to take for themselves, to which the viscount replied, "What payment? We just have to promise them tax exemptions worth the value of the resources they give to us!"

Lorist sighed in admiration at the viscount's method of gaining resources for himself without paying a single coin out of his own pocket and made a mental note to learn it from him. After saying his goodbyes, Lorist returned to the army camp and asked Ovidis and Patt to pick some people among the prisoner bandits who did not do too much wrong to join the convoy as coachmen for the carriages before turning in the remaining ones to the viscount the day after. He also instructed that the wives of the dead bandit leader and the younger women to be allowed to mingle and form families with the rest of his men to prevent a mismatch of numbers between men and women

in his dominion and cause a disparity between Yin and Yang.

Even though they did not understand what Lorist meant by Yin and Yang, they hurriedly went to carry out his orders anyway.

…

That night at the Wine and Weary Birds Inn, Shadekampf was making his report to Lorist. “We’ve managed to obtain 13 carriages from the bandit stronghold and purchased 11 more around the town. Coupled with the ones we brought ourselves and Telesti’s, we will have 76 of them in total.

“Originally, we brought over 12 Zeno Horses and we purchased 53 more in town and got another 48 from defeating the bandits. The trade with the viscount will also add another 350 horses to that number and total up to 463 horses. That is more than enough for each carriage to have 4 horses pulling it and the remaining ones will be given to the guard squad as mounts.

“Just now, Patt and Ovidis have also selected 111 youths from the prisoners to serve as coachmen with 23 of them having family members of their own, among which include 39 young women. The guard squad consists of 120 men with 46 of them having families of their own as well. The young women and the other family members total up to 274 people. If we factor in Grandmaster Sid and his family, we will need a total of 30 carriages for them.

“The things we got from the bandit stronghold also occupy quite a lot of space. Just talking about the coins, there are 12742 gold Fordes, 34261 imperial old head gold coins, more than 70000 imperial silvers, around 18000 imperial coppers as well as five chests’ worth of silver and copper coins issued by the Trade Union. There are also two additional chests filled to the brim with other jewelry and ornaments. All of that will require 5 carriages to transport.

“We’ve also got 3 carriages’ worth of silk, six carriages’ worth of linen as well as 11 carriages’ worth of food from the Plate Mountain Stronghold. Miscellaneous goods also take up another eight carriages, four of which have been used to store the equipment Grandmaster Sid uses in his craft. There are also 5 carriages’ worth of iron ingots with another 3 carriages’ worth of assorted weapons. If we include the other resources the viscount will be bringing over tomorrow, we will require 81 carriages in total to transport them all. However, we only have 73 right now…

“Milord, I’ve decided to go to town again tomorrow to see if I can buy a few more carriages and ask the shops around the area if we can exchange the 18000 imperial copper coins for silver or gold coins to save more space. If it still doesn’t work out, we can let the family members squeeze into a smaller number of carriages and have some resources carried by the work horses to make enough space so that we can start traveling again as soon as possible.”

Lorist shook his head and thought, *this Shadekampf actually considers resources to be more important than his own life! Even though we could’ve solved the lack of carriages by leaving some resources behind, he wants to transport them all back. He’s really looking for trouble where there isn’t any to be found.*

“Have you heard about Miss Telesti’s matter?” Loirst asked.

“I got a rough idea about it. She came to Fenyata Town roughly three months ago with her maidservant, butler and two other coachmen with two carriages and 4 work horses. I heard that they had split up with a merchant convoy after traveling with them to the border of the Madras Duchy and stopped here for a month to look for another convoy that is heading to the Northlands before the incident with the bandits happened. After their coachmen found new jobs and left, they have been living at the inn and barely making a living by selling their work horses and occasionally helping others to copy books. Currently, they are left with only one work horse with one of the two carriages filled up with nothing but books,” said Shadekampf.

Lorist nodded and said, “Prepare some horses and coachmen for them tomorrow and notify them to start preparing for the departure. We have already been delayed here for two extra days and must leave by tomorrow no matter what. Make a final check after the transaction tomorrow and ensure that we will be able to leave by the afternoon.”

“Yes, milord,” said Shadekampf as he turned and left.

“Wait, one more thing. Tell the inn owner to make three people’s worth of food during these two days and send it to Miss Telesti,” said Lorist.

“Alright, I’ll do just that.”

Chapter 83
River-Crossing and Arrival

Probably because he wanted Lorist to leave his dominion as soon as possible, Viscount Kermas didn't cut any corners on the items he promised to deliver, much to Shadekampf's delight. The 7 carriages of food and 3 carriages of textiles had all been brought over in one go and the 10 carriages that came along was also given to them as a gift, causing Shadekampf to be relieved as he didn't manage to procure as many carriages as he had hoped.

Now with 10 extra carriages in hand, Shadekampf wouldn't have to worry about not having enough to transport all the goods. After another night of checking and finalizing, Lorist's group finally departed Fenyata Town on the 11th day of the 2nd month.

Three days later, Lorist's convoy arrived at the border between the Andinaq Kingdom and the Madras Duchy and rested for one day at the Nadegas City around the area before entering the duchy a day later.

Compared to the Andinaq Kingdom, the Madras Duchy seemed to fare much better after the conflict in terms of both civilian standard of living as well as order and security. This was much in part of Duke Madras's efforts who had taken a defensive stance during the civil war within the empire and only defended himself against invaders without lashing out at anyone else, allowing for his duchy to be in better shape in comparison to the lands of other powers. He paid meticulous attention to the borders as well, earning him the title of 'The Hedgehog Duke'.

Lorist's convoy traveled along the duchy's border from the south to the north for a distance of around 650 kilometers and only encountered two groups of mountain bandits and another cavalry bandit group within 7 days. Naturally, these ignorant fools soon regretted their decision to prey on the convoy and by the time it arrived at the border between the Madras Duchy and the Northern Highlands, the Metropoulos River, the number of carriages filled with resources and loot had already increased by 6 with another 70 or so prisoners.

"Milord, after crossing Metropoulos River, we will arrive at the outer regions of the

Northlands and will only have around 350 kilometers left to travel. We no longer have to travel at night anymore as we will be able to reach the family dominion well before the third month if we travel for 50 kilometers a day," said Shadekampf as he breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that his decision to bring along so much resources had not delayed Lorist's arrival at the dominion before the inheritance ceremony.

The Metropoulos River was calm and tranquil as the clear water quietly flowed downstream.

Beyond that river, elevated lands could be seen in the far distance with a number of lush-green mountains filling out their field of view.

This was the Northlands, the homeland of the original owner of Lorist's body.

Lorist looked towards the distance and thought, *so this is my homeland…*

"I recall that ten years ago when I left the dominion with the merchant convoy, there was a bridge somewhere here and the stream under it was rather turbulent unlike how calm it is now."

"Milord, I believe the bridge you are talking about is the Hendliff Suspension Bridge which is located upstream the Metropoulos River around 50 kilometers from where we are. The Freist Castle, which is one of the territories of the Duke of the Northlands, Duke Loggins, is just beyond that bridge. Because you said that you didn't wish to deal with the duke before we embarked on our journey, I have decided to cross the river over here instead. This place is one of the two crossings to the Northlands from the Metropoulos River. After we cross it, we will arrive at the dominion after passing through 7 territories of other nobles," explained Shadekampf.

"Where is the crossing then?" Lorist asked.

"It's just a little further up ahead. That is the territory of Baron Silas. I'm sure he would earn quite a bit from the toll we have to pay given the size of our convoy," said Shadekampf.

"Well, we have to pay what we ought to. Let's go. After we cross the river, we'll set up camp to rest for another day," said Lorist.

…

As a noble, one would normally be entitled to cross another noble's territory at no cost whatsoever. In normal circumstances, Lorist only had to use his badge to demonstrate that his convoy wasn't a merchant convoy to be allowed to cross the territories of other nobles without having to pay a fee. However, when it came to crossing rivers, it was different as the fees for the ferry service had to be paid regardless.

Baron Silas's harbor wasn't large and only held two boats. A plaque was erected near the harbor that indicated the pricing for crossing the river: it would cost 1 imperial silver for a person, 10 imperial silvers for a horse, 1 imperial old head gold coin for a carriage filled with goods, etc. Even if one was a noble, the price would still remain the same with the only benefit of being allowed to cross ahead in line should there be others waiting to use the ferries as well.

What's the point of being allowed to cross earlier? It's not like there's anyone else waiting here… According to that old guy who's repairing the oars, the boatmen are also away as well…

The arrival of the convoy had turned the once serene surroundings to be filled with merry chattering that even caused the baron to personally bring a squad of garrison troops over to calculate the total cost for all the people, horses and carriages of the convoy. When he received the bag full of gold coins from Lorist as payment, he smiled so hard he couldn't shut his mouth for quite a while. The baron who was in a cheerful mood even especially asked his servants to bring some bottles of wine from his precious collection back at the castle and treated Lorist to a drink.

However, Lorist felt quite troubled at that moment as one boat could only ferry 4 carriages and a few people at once and each trip across the river easily took up to one hour. His convoy had near 100 carriages, 600 horses and many more people. How much time would he need for the convoy to be completely brought over to the other side of the river? There were only 8 boatmen after all and they needed to eat and sleep as well. Lorist estimated that it would probably take seven or eight more days before it could all be completed.

Baron Silas apologized deeply for the inconvenience given the amount of payment he had received for the convoy's crossing and said that it couldn't be helped as he only had two boats with eight boatmen.

Lorist then asked, "Do you happen to have any rope?"

Baron Silas nodded and said, “Yes, of course we do. Due to the fact that my dominion is near the river, we are easily able to harvest the reed that grows at the banks which we will then make into ropes. This can be considered one of the unique local products my dominion has to offer.”

Lorist then asked Baron Silas to procure a lot of rope for him which he connected one end to another and linked them to the front and back of each boat. He then tasked his men on both sides on the river to make large pulleys which can be used to guide and pull the boats to and fro the riverbanks. That way, not only could the boatmen save much more energy for each trip, the stability of the boats when it neared the shores could be better managed, thus shortening the time for each trip from one hour to only thirty minutes.

Even with the increased efficiency, it was already evening of the second day when Lorist got onto the last boat. Looking at Baron Silas who was seeing Lorist away and waving nonstop from the other side of the bank, Shadekampf said in a dissatisfied tone, “That baron actually got 150 imperial gold coins from us as toll… It’s no wonder he’s so eager to come over to see you off even though it’s already getting this late.”

Lorist waved back to the baron on the riverbank and recalled the night before when he brought Ovidis along with him to the baron’s castle after having been invited there as a guest, much to the full-bearded former bandit’s surprise. The reason Lorist brought him along was because Josk and Patt were busy managing the matters of the camp on the other side of the river, leaving only Reidy and Ovidis together with Lorist. After receiving the invitation, he instructed Reidy to monitor the proceedings of the crossing and was only left with Ovidis to bring along to the banquet.

At that night, Lorist presented Baron Silas with an upper body plate armor that was decorated with golden engravings which was part of the loot he got from the bandits they encountered along the way. Lorist didn’t know which unfortunate noble the bandit stole it from, but due to it being too eye-catching on the battlefield, the bandit leader who was wearing it got shot in the throat by Josk at the start of the battle.

As it had no noble family insignia on it, it was the perfect gift to present to someone. Lorist reasoned that the armor was probably order-made by someone as a gift for some young noble’s ceremony of coming of age. Lorist himself didn’t take a fancy for that flashy armor as wearing it was just like saying to one’s enemies, ‘Hey, I’m here, quick, shoot me!’ That kind of suicidal thing was definitely not what Lorist wanted to do.

However, the baron absolutely loved Lorist's gift to the point that he wasn't willing to let it go. After the banquet, the full-bearded Ovidis excused himself and returned to help Reidy organize the crossing as he felt a little out of place. Baron Silas on the other hand invited Lorist to go sample even more well-aged wines from his precious collection.

When they were in his study, the baron thanked Lorist once again and said that even though there were many merchant convoys of the northern nobles wishing to cross the river, due to the lack of manpower and boats, the convoys usually didn't want to wait and went straight to the Hendliff Suspension Bridge to make their crossing, causing him to lose quite a bit of potential revenue. Now that Lorist had improved the system they had at his crossing and greatly increased its efficiency, he believed that it would spur many of the convoys to choose to cross the river at his dominion instead.

Lorist felt weird at the fact there were convoys that would even think of crossing the river at Baron Silas's dominion to begin with. In the first place, Lorist's convoy only traveled to the baron's territory because he wanted to avoid dealing with Duke Loggins. But, why would the other convoys go out of their way to try to avoid using the Hendliff Suspension Bridge?

"Isn't the toll for crossing the Hendliff Suspension Bridge half as cheap as using your ferry service? Why would the convoys even want to cross the river at your dominion?" Lorist asked.

Baron Silas laughed out and said, "Duke Loggins of the Northlands is quite famed for his immense greed. Even though the fees paid to cross Hendliff Bridge is half of what I charge here, they would end up at Freist Castle the moment they cross the river. The duke has set up a strict customs in that area. Even though nobles would usually be allowed to pass without paying a fee, if the duke discovered anything he liked in any of their convoys, he would forcefully purchase it at half of the market price. If one is fortunate, one would only lose one or two carriages to the duke. The ones who have it worse could lose up to half of their convoy. That caused the nobles of the Northlands to complain to no end and choose to cross at my place instead."

…

Lorist stood atop the boat and felt refreshed by the chilling gust that just blew by. Thinking back at what the baron had said the day before, even though the Northlands was huge and had the Metropoulos River as a natural border, there were only two

places where one could enter or leave it. The first place was the Hendliff Suspension Bridge, however, that place was under the duke's control. The second place would be Baron Silas's ferry crossing, but due to the large width of the river at that part, it was difficult to construct a bridge there and crossing with boats took far too much time.

The main reason why the Metropoulos River was considered a border for the Northlands was this: aside from Baron Silas's crossing, the river mainly flowed through high cliffs or rugged terrain where the current was far too turbulent to allow for any crossing with boats to be done.

Lorist suspected that the population of the Northlands was so sparse because the main locations of entering and leaving it was under private control of people like Duke Loggins and Baron Silas and served as their main source of income.

Even if Charade and the rest of the convoy managed to make their way back to the Northlands, with the entrances being under the control of others, the family could easily be locked at the Northlands without being able to do anything about it thus limiting its development. There was a saying Lorist had heard of in his past life, 'Building the road is the first step to becoming rich'. But with the main paths of entry to the Northlands beyond his control, how would he be able to bring his dominion to prosperity?

I guess one of the first things on my agenda once I return to the dominion is to find a way to pave a new entry point so that I won't have to be at the whims of others. Sigh, I guess the day we will be able to do as we please is still far off. Lorist looked at the distant mountains and once again fell into deep thought.

Having been delayed for yet another day due to crossing the river, Lorist's convoy continued their journey on the 25th day of the 2nd month. He decided to cross the remaining 300-odd kilometers of distance during the next five days to reach his dominion by the 30th day of the 2nd month.

After setting his foot on the Northlands, Lorist noticed the reality of its war-torn state that was first brought up by Charade during the meeting they had some time ago.

After only passing through three dominions of other nobles, they have already witnessed 5 conflicts between the landed nobles in the area. Some older noble families acted against new ones while others called for their neighboring families to invade the territories of their enemies. There were even some who invaded others to settle old

grudges with many others engaging in conflict over a myriad of reasons. Fights broke out everywhere and the sounds of killing and slaughter could be heard at every corner.

But perhaps due to the low population of the Northlands, the conflicts between the various nobles were only on the scale of skirmishes between different small villages. Usually, the forces of those nobles only numbered around hundreds of farmer soldiers with tens of garrison troops and less than five knights. The largest force Lorist had seen only consisted of four to five hundred farmers in tattered clothing.

The most laughable part was that one of the nobles actually had his eyes set on Lorist's convoy and demanded for half of everything they had to be given up as a toll. Given that an act like that violated the sacred right of nobles of being allowed to pass through each other's territories without any cost, Lorist mobilized his guard squad and completely crippled the opposing army without a single casualty, causing the ignorant and arrogant noble to prostrate before Lorist and pleading for his freedom while crying profusely. Lorist released him after receiving 50 Northlander Horses and 4 carriages' worth of food as ransom.

To prevent further incidents like that from happening again, Lorist instructed his guard squad to be fully-equipped at all times to escort the convoy in as high a profile as possible. As expected, nobody dared to cause the convoy any trouble in the following days with two warring nobles even stopping all activity to make way for the convoy to pass.

On the fifth day, the convoy arrived before an ancient, ever-reaching forest and a long-stretching mountain range.

Shadekampf and Patt cheered out loud before explaining, "Milord, we have arrived at the dominion of the family. That over there is the Black Forests and the mountains in the distance are known as the Magical Dragon Mountains. Beyond all that is where the Morgan Hills is located. From there, it would only take another day of traveling before we will be able to arrive at the family's bastide."

After another half day of travel, the convoy circled around the sides of the Black Forests and arrived at the Morgan Hills.

However, Shadekampf and Patt were stunned by the walls that could be seen blocking the pass through Morgan Hills. On top of it was a flag that didn't belong to the Norton Family but instead depicted three all-encompassing golden rings…

Chapter 84
Takeover

The fortified walls that had appeared before them caused Patt and Shadekampf great surprise.

“Three gold rings… This is the Kenmays Family’s insignia… Don’t tell me that our family…” said Patt as his expression turned exceedingly gloomy.

“Huh? Shadekampf, why didn’t you tell me that there’s a barrier wall over here?” asked Lorist as he rode over.

“Milord, this is indeed the dominion of our family. How-however, the barrier isn’t constructed by us… When Patt and I were first sent to seek you out at Morante City, this fort wasn’t here. Also, there’s no way the family has enough resources to build something like this,” stammered Shadekampf.

“Oh, so you’re saying that this fort was built within our lands but not by us?” Lorist felt a bad omen as this was a situation he had not conjectured even once when he was thinking about the family’s current situation.

Commonly speaking, something like this happening would signify that the Norton Family had already been defeated by a foe and had their lands conquered by them. From the sturdy and slightly rugged look of the fort, it seemed to have been completed months ago. Right now, there were two options Lorist could choose from. Either he stealthily leaves the area, or start an all out war to take back the family dominion.

The guards on the walls have already noticed the group below that was flying the flag of the Norton Family. One leather-armored man pointed towards the convoy and started to call out loudly for battle preparations.

“One, two, three. Huh, they really did put quite a lot of money in their fortifications. They’ve actually equipped a simple barrier wall like that with three ballistas, how unexpected…” mumbled Lorist as he checked out the defensive infrastructure the barrier wall had.

“Which family uses that three-ringed insignia?” Lorist asked.

“Milord, that would be the Kenmays Family with whom we’ve had conflict back when they attacked us for the copper mines in our dominion…” said Shadekampf.

“Then does this mean that the Norton Family has been defeated by the Kenmayses? Otherwise, there would be no way for them to build this fort here,” said Lorist with a wry smile as if he was about to leap into battle at any moment.

“No, I don’t think so, milord,” said Patt as if he had thought of something else.

“Hmm? What’s on your mind?” Lorist asked.

“Milord, if your family had lost to the Kenmayses in an all out battle and lost control of the dominion, then there wouldn’t be a need for the Kenmayses to build a barrier here as the dominion would already be theirs. I haven’t heard of anyone who would make a barrier in their dominion. Isn’t that just causing more trouble for themselves?

“Also, back then when the former family head led our family’s forces against that of the Kenmays’, they mainly relied on hired mercenaries which don’t have much battle prowess. Even if the family army is decimated, there is no way that the Kenmays would be able to take our our family’s bastide. Additionally, the Wildnorth Town isn’t that far off from the family bastide, so no matter how shitty their garrison is, they wouldn’t shrink out on a matter like this that their survival depended on. Should the family truly fall, they will definitely follow as well. That’s why they would definitely not sit back and watch the Kenmays Family take over the castle.

“I think that Viscount Kenmays built this wall here to cut off the family’s communication with the outside world for some reason. They must be planning to lock us in the desolate Northlands and force us to one day lower our heads to them,” inferred Patt.

“What you said makes sense. When we take this fort, we will know the truth right away,” said Lorist as he nodded.

“Milord, you’re going to launch your attack now?” said Shadekampf, astonished. “But we haven’t made any preparations yet. Without siege ladders, how would you be able to conquer the fort? There are three ballistas on the walls you know…”

“Siege ladders? I don’t need any. Look, the walls are only 4 meters tall and there are

only roughly 30 small fries guarding it. It would be giving them too much credit to even bother constructing siege ladders. While the three ballistas are certainly powerful and would definitely prove to be a threat to large groups of people, it would be far too slow to operate for it to be able to hit me, as I can easily avoid the bolts. Patt, tell Ovidis to ready the guard squad and ask them to follow suit right after I make my way up the walls," said Lorist.

"Yes, milord," Patt replied, before he said, "Milord, you should be careful. Why don't I accompany you up there as well?"

"Hehe…" Lorist started laughing out loud. "You should know my abilities better than anyone and getting up this wall shouldn't be much of a problem to me. However, you're in full armor, so the weight should give you quite some trouble when you try to get up. Additionally, if I go alone, the ballistas will have fewer targets to shoot at. Don't worry, the guards up there are nothing to me."

After that, Lorist rode alone straight towards the walls. When he was within 70 meters of it, a loud twanging sound rang out as one of the ballistas on the wall fired. Lorist quickly pulled his horse to the side and avoided the bolt that flew past his flank and buried itself a few inches into the ground.

Within but a short moment, Lorist had already gotten so close that the ballista wasn't able to aim at him anymore, at which point he took out a javelin from his quiver.

Whoosh! Three javelins were thrown by him towards the wall and all of them embedded themselves firmly onto the surface, causing the guards on top of it to laugh out loud, thinking that Lorist had failed miserably in an attempt to shoot them.

What they did not expect was that when Lorist arrived at the wall, he started to travel along its sides, causing a few of the guards above to try to shoot him down with their longbows to no avail as the walls had blocked off the ideal firing angle entirely.

Lorist then turned in the other direction and started removing his boots from the stirrups and knelt on top of his mount. When he saw the javelins that he had embedded into the walls, he jumped and grabbed the lowest javelin with both his hands like an agile monkey and used the momentum to perform a spin to launch himself up to the top of the walls.

Upon witnessing the crazy circus stunt, the guards by the walls were all thrown into

stupor with their mouths agape. By the time they had snapped out of it, Lorist had already steadied his footing and started to draw out the longsword on his back.

After the officer in command cursed and called out a few names, the few guards beside Lorist lifted their pikes and shields and leapt towards him, thinking that they would be able to defeat him with sheer numbers.

With a few sword flashes, the five guards who had rushed over all had their throats cut open as they fell towards the ground with blood spurting out of their necks. Swiftly leaping over the dead bodies on the ground, Lorist rushed towards the leather-armor-wearing commanding officer.

Cursing in disbelief at the sight of the five fallen guards and seeing Lorist coming in his direction, the commanding officer quickly drew his sword and picked up a shield from the ground as he retreated backwards gradually while shouting for the other guards to fight Lorist together with him.

Two other pike-wielding guards stealthily approached Lorist from behind and thrusted towards him at the same moment. Delighted that an opportunity like that had shown up, the commanding officer manifested his blade glow and just before he was about to attack, he saw Lorist suddenly fall back like a gust of wind and circle between the two thrusting guards. His sword flashed once again and both the guards dropped their pikes and fell as croaking sounds resounded when they tried to scream with their slit throats from which blood was gushing out.

Panicked beyond reason, the commanding officer turned tail and ran. *You think you can escape?* Quickening his steps, Lorist quickly caught up to the the officer, who suddenly turned his body while shielding himself as he swung his right sword-wielding arm diagonally downward.

Where's he, thought the guard in surprise after discovering that his sword slashed nothing but thin air. He took two steps to recover from his stance and just as he was about to look for Lorist, he felt a cold blade pressed to his neck as a raspy voice sounded from behind him, "Drop your sword and surrender and you'll be spared."

With a clanging sound, the frozen officer dropped only his shield and slowly turned towards Lorist.

With a press of the blade to his neck, Lorist indicated for him to drop his sword as

well. The officer gradually lifted his longsword into a throwing position and tried to draw Lorist's attention to it away from him. All of a sudden, he jerked backward and freed himself from Lorist's hold and quickly tried to escape.

However, he didn't know that he wasn't as quick as Lorist's reaction and the longsword eventually found its way through his neck.

"You truly have a death wish…" cursed Lorist.

He only wanted to ask that officer about the fort, but he didn't expect that he would resist even though his life was clearly at stake. Lorist didn't have the time to deal with fools who didn't know what was good for them and decided to kill him to save himself some trouble. Turning back to the corridor of the walls, he saw eight bodies littered around the ground with the remaining tens of guards having long escaped from the walls.

Looking at the direction the guards were running towards, Lorist cursed, "Sol…" He noticed that the Kenmayses didn't intend to build just a border fort here, but rather a whole city. 300 meters away from the walls he stood on was another even taller and better fortified wall.

Hearing Ovidis and some of the guard squad members shouting from the outer side of the walls, Lorist said, "Wait a second."

He then got down to the inner side and opened the gates. The first one to enter was Josk.

"Milord, that was far too reckless of you. You should've at least waited for me to disable those ballistas, you know," said Josk as he came over while carrying a ballista bolt in his hands.

"Am I not in perfect condition now? Don't worry, you'll have your chance later. Look ahead, there is another wall there," said Lorist as he pointed in the far direction.

"No problem, leave it to me! Hiyah!" Josk gave his mount a kick and subsequently sped towards the direction of the wall with Ovidis and the guard squad following behind.

"Sheesh, Joe… I didn't ask you to attack it now! Sol, he's pretending not to hear me again and is even increasing his speed…" said Lorist in an irritated tone.

The walls further ahead was far taller than the previous one and it looked far better fortified as well. It was quite worrying for Josk to just bring a squad of men and rush in like that as they may incur heavy losses from attacking recklessly.

Intending to go out of the walls to retrieve his mount, he discovered that it had already returned to where the convoy was. At that moment, it was being pulled by Patt as he slowly approached the walls with Shadekampf and Reidy, who was currently driving a carriage.

Lorist waved for them to hasten their speed, but Patt, Reidy and Shadekampf thought that he was cheering for his solo victory at the walls instead. So, they cheered and waved back cheerfully.

Pissed beyond reason, Lorist thought, *normally these fellows are quite witty, but all of a sudden they turn into idiots when you really need them. I really wonder how those geniuses manage to confuse my beckoning for a victory cheer…*

When they were finally within shouting distance, the three only realized their mistake after they heard Lorist's enraged roar. Patt quickly brought the horse over and Lorist gave him a deathly stare. Just as he got onto his mount and prepared to rush to the second wall, an excited guard approached him from the direction he was about to head to and said, "Milord, milord! We've successfully taken over that wall!"

"Wha–" mumbled Lorist as he almost slipped off his mount.

"What are the casualties?" asked Lorist anxiously.

"Casualties? There are none, milord," said the guard before he hesitated and continued, "There are no casualties among the enemy too."

Lorist was confused. *The heck does that mean? If both sides have no casualties at all, then how have we managed to occupy the walls? Is this a children's game or what?*

With a wall as tall as that, the defenders only have to keep shooting from above to chase the attackers away. Even if Josk's marksmanship was unparalleled, with him being on flat ground, he would still be quite disadvantageous when facing off guards who are stationed up high. Also, with only one bow, it wouldn't be hard for the defenders to suppress Josk and pressure him away with pure numbers.

Even though Lorist managed to take over the former wall by himself, that was actually

due to his bet that the enemy would be caught off-guard by his solo assault. The other factor was the element of surprise that he had employed by swinging himself up onto the walls that was only 4 meters tall.

“How did Knight Josk pull that off?” Lorist asked curiously.

“Oh, milord, Sir Josk only shot three arrows. The first one broke their flag pole, the second one destroyed one of their ballistas and the third shot through the mercenary captain’s two-handed axe. The moment the mercenaries discovered that Josk was a Gold rank, they surrendered right away,” said the messenger.

It was absolutely ludicrous: Lorist could imagine the face of the mercenaries that were stationed there as they discovered that Josk was a Gold ranked archer who was leading a troop of fully-armored soldiers heading their way. It was no surprise that the mere Silver and Iron ranked mercenaries knelt down to surrender without bothering to resist.

But back when Lorist first killed off the 5 guards that rushed at him, the commanding officer thought that he was merely an Iron rank with excellent swordsmanship and didn’t even try to launch a sneak attack and resisted him head-on. Even when the Silver ranked officer was at knifepoint, he would rather take his chances to escape than die an embarrassing death in the hands of an Iron rank.

Upon realizing the reason why the officer had not chosen to surrender, Lorist wore a brilliant smile on his face while actually trying really hard to restrain the frustration in his mind. *Thank goodness I didn’t attack the second wall, otherwise the mercenaries wouldn’t surrender until almost all of them are killed. Josk on the other hand only had to show his abilities as a Gold rank to make the enemies surrender. He only had to relaxedly unleash three arrows to cause them to stop all resistance…*

“Cursed Battle Force… Cursed Blazing Battle Force… Stupid hereditary Battle Force technique of my family…” mumbled Lorist in annoyance.

“Oh, milord, Sir Josk asked for your presence over there. It seems like he has discovered something important,” said the messenger as he recalled the other matter he was tasked to report.

“Okay, I’ll be on my way now,” said Lorist as he calmed himself. He turned to Shadekampf, Patt, and Reidy and said, “Let the convoy settle down. We’ll set up camp

over here today. Make sure to shut the gates and have someone be stationed on the walls, alright?"

"Yes, milord, we understand."

Chapter 85
The Plan of the Kenmays Family

Lorist felt that the second wall was on a totally different league than the first one he managed to takeover himself. The latter was merely a simple 4-meter-tall pile of rocks whereas the one before him right now was double-layered with a 7-meter-tall outer wall and another inner wall that was easily above 10 meters in height. The surface of the walls was even covered by a layer of green clay, making it smooth and sturdy.

Upon getting up onto the walls, Lorist discovered that the 10-meter-wall he saw from the outside was actually a building that was erected on the walls that had its roof linked to the outer wall which was augmented to a saw-like pattern to match it. Within that building were some military equipment, living quarters for soldiers as well a room in which a broken ballista was kept; that was probably the one that Josk had destroyed previously.

Josk had already been waiting for Lorist for quite a while on top of the walls and greeted him when he saw him approaching.

Lorist said with dissatisfaction, “You were just lucky this time that the defenders were unmotivated mercenaries who only worries for their own lives. Had a proper garrison unit been stationed here, you wouldn’t have been able to take this place without a single casualty.”

Josk laughed and said, “You are right, milord…”

“Also, next time, don’t even dare to pretend that you didn’t hear me. You have to give me some face too, you know?” Lorist continued to complain.

Josk merely snickered in response.

“That aside, I heard that you discovered something important?” said Lorist after he remembered the main reason he rushed over in the first place.

Josk pointed further ahead and said, “It’s all in that room over there. You’ll know what I’m talking about once you see it for yourself, milord.”

Josk was pointing at the five buildings that were built by the side of the walls where a few guard squad members could be seen watching over a few prisoners.

The building in the middle of the five was the largest among the rest. It was about 6 meters in length with a width similar to the buildings beside it at 3 meters. Several large wooden gears and a huge winch could be seen within the room.

“Is this the mechanism used to open and close the portcullis[1][1]?” Lorist asked.

Josk nodded.

Usually, in large cities or cities ruled by a rich lord, a heavy iron portcullis would be installed beyond the main gates. Normally, they will be lifted up and left as is and only be lowered whenever the main gates are breached to serve as a secondary defense.

“Sol, is Viscount Kenmays showing off his wealth? To spend so much money to construct such an expensive fort… It doesn’t sound too practical to do this just to lock the Norton Family within the Northlands… What in the world is he up to?”

“Milord, look behind you. The answer to your question is right there,” Josk replied.

Turning to his back, Lorist could see a small room to his right within which several maps could be seen hanging on the walls. In the middle of the =room was a large sand table on which several castle replicas were placed.

On the sand table, a hill city beside a waterway could be seen surrounded by large spans of farmland. Further away was a mine and beside it was a model of a large factory facility. And at the end of the hill where the city was located was a heavily fortified citadel base.

“This sand table is pretty well-made. Where is that hill city?” Lorist asked.

Josk shook his head and said, “Milord, I don’t know about that. What I wanted you to see was not the whole sand table but rather that castle replica over there. I think the fort we are in right now is a castle in construction.”

Beside the sand table was a semi-complete model of a castle. But upon closer inspection, Lorist noticed from its double walls that was the exact replica of the one he was standing on.

“Heh, Viscount Kenmays really spent quite a lot of money on this project…” said Lorist as he stomped his foot. “Look, the floors and the walls outside are all covered with green clay! If he really intends to complete the construction of this castle, just based on the cost of the green clay required, it would go up to tens of thousands of gold Fordes! Wait, where is that big-bearded fella?”

Green clay was one of the main materials used for construction in the Grindia Continent. It is a lot like cement that was used in Lorist’s previous world and its compositions are quite similar too: both of the materials required lime, sand and clay to be mixed and heated at high temperatures. The main difference was that cement was cheap but green clay cost far more. Cement was usually mixed with water whereas green clay required a special type of glue to be added to the mixture.

Lorist’s attendant, Reidy, had come from the Romon Empire. Within it was a mountainous area where most people were forbidden from entry and trespassers were killed without a question because that was the place where the glue vines were planted. It was said that glue vines were originally not native plants of the Grindia Continent and was actually brought over by the magi from another planar world thousands of years prior. These vines only grew in dark, damp conditions and each one was as thick as a large barrel. When a cut was made on its stem, a light-green liquid would flow out.

While that liquid seemed to be almost as clear as water, when it was heated up, it would turn really viscous and sticky and become exceedingly hard once solidified. That liquid would usually first be diluted with ten times the amount of water and heated before it was mixed with clay, lime and sand to form green clay, the best and most expensive building material on the whole of Grindia. Each bucket of glue would sold for 1 gold Forde and the Romon Empire reaped a yearly profit of up to 1 million gold Fordes from the sales of that green glue.

On the Grindia Continent, the less wealthy would purchase glue that was produced by boiling the skin of a Ground Wyrms to construct their homes (see chapter 25). However, the completed house would have a faint smell of the earth that would easily attract insects and insecticide must be sprayed once in a while to keep it infestation free. Another method was to cook a kind of black glutinous rice and mix it with lime, clay and fine sand to make it into a paste for building. However, buildings made with that allowed for moss to easily grow on it during the rainy season, so it had to be cleaned very often.

The ideal building material one could find was thus green clay that was hard as rock when it solidified and had a slight fragrance that aided to repel insects. Having lived in Morante City where green clay was frequently traded and sold, Lorist wasn't a stranger to the properties of the material. He was really impressed with the ability of Viscount Kenmays to be able to afford using green clay for a castle in the Northlands.

"Milord, Ovidis has left with half of the guard squad to go capture some people," said Josk.

"Capturing people?"

"That's correct. According to the surrendered mercenaries, due to a lack of materials to make green clay, the main construction supervisor of this castle had sent early a thousand slave laborers to go collect lime, clay and sand. Ovidis has left to apprehend these laborers," explained Josk.

Lorist then recalled that he did in fact not see any workers on the construction site when he came in earlier as they had been away for the aforementioned reason.

"Are the prisoners outside mercenaries? Get their leader to come in here, I want to ask him something," said Lorist.

The leader of the surrendered mercenaries was quickly brought before Lorist.

What Lorist wanted to know from him was the current situation of the Norton Family.

The mercenary gave it some thought before he answered, "Milord, we have only been hired by Viscount Kenmays less than two months ago. However, I've heard that around half a year ago, Viscount Kenmays's men had taken over the mines and went to attack the bastide of the Norton Family. However, they've lost tens of people and failed to conquer the bastide after besieging for up to half a month. After that, the viscount withdrew his troops and started the construction of this fort. By the time I made my way here, it had just been completed. For almost two months I've been stationed here, I've never seen a person from the Norton Family come by, nor did the scouts patrolling the area detect any of their spies. But, when I was on an assignment to send some supplies to the people at the mines, I heard a mercenary there say that he's seen someone from the Norton Family back when the viscount was withdrawing his troops. After they discovered that their mines had been taken, there was no other news nor sightings of them."

“Then do you know how the people who were managing the mines for the Norton Family are doing?” Lorist asked.

The mercenary leader shook his head and said, “I’m not too informed about that, but I believe they are probably forced to mine for the viscount. I remember there being a delivery of half a tonne of iron ore from the mines to the storehouse over here last month.”

At that moment, distant chatters could be heard outside the room before a guard came in to report that Ovidis had returned with the slave laborers.

Lorist and Josk went back out to the walls and could see a long line of slave laborers traveling towards the castle gates flanked by the guard squad troops on both sides with Ovidis leading at the front.

Letting almost 1000 slave laborers settle down took a number of hours, and that was after they had been escorted over obediently. It was fortunate that the camp that they had lived in before they set out to collect building materials was not dismantled yet.

Lorist gathered Josk, Shadekampf, Patt, Reidy and Ovidis and prepared to discuss what to do next.

When Shadekampf and Patt entered the room and saw the sand table, they both let out a gasp of exclamation. They said that it showed part of the dominion of the family and the area that the sand table was modeled after was the terrain of the Morgan Hills.

“Milord, look. That’s our copper mine! And here…” said Shadekampf as he pointed towards the citadel replica that was placed at a corner of the table. “That is where we are at right now. However, there isn’t a city on the hills here. The farmland they have on the table is nothing but forests at the moment. And that waterway on the sand table isn’t anywhere to be seen either…”

Upon hearing Shadekampf’s comments, Lorist’s curiosity piqued and he instructed Ovidis to bring the grand architect and the supervisor of the construction site to him.

The grand architect was a man in his forties and he claimed credit for the design of the castle without even being asked. However, he refused to answer some of Lorist’s question about the castle and even cursed Lorist for cowardly assaulting and taking over the construction site when their side was unprepared. He demanded for Lorist to leave the area or face the consequences.

Lorist and his men all stared wide-eyed at the architect as if he had a screw or two loose in his head. In the end, Lorist was furious at the constant bickering of the middle-aged man and said, "You guys came to my backyard to build your own little building. Don't you think that I, the master of this land, should be pissed instead? Men, tie this fool up on the flagpole and give him 50 canes to make sure he knows his place."

After that, the elderly head supervisor of the construction work who sported a goatee, Boris, was recognized by Shadekampf to be the head butler of Viscount Kenmays. He had met that old butler a couple of times during the negotiations between the Nortons and the Kenmayses about the issue of the right to ownership of the copper mine. He had unexpectedly been tasked to serve as the main supervisor of this construction site by the viscount.

The goatee-sporting Boris was actually quite a coward. The moment the pained cries of the architect outside entered his ears, he quickly answered every question that was asked of him without hesitation, swiftly revealing the reason the castle was chosen to be built here as well as many other information about the Kenmays Family.

Viscount Kenmays's family actually had a merchant background. His father was the chairman of the largest construction merchant guild in the Krissen Empire. During the civil war, he had joined the Second Prince's side and donated huge sums of money to fund his war efforts. When the Iblia Kingdom was first founded, the viscount's father had managed to urge the Second Prince to grant his son the hereditary title of a viscount and a dominion in the Northlands in exchange for 200000 gold Fordes.

With the dominion in their hands, the Kenmays Family invested huge amounts of money into building a bastide at Redriver Valley. Being the chairman of the largest construction merchant guild in the empire, the father of Viscount Kenmays had an incredibly profound insight on the current situation. He believed that given the raving ambitions of Duke Loggins and his casual granting of titles to new noble families, the Northlands would definitely be in a long period of chaos before everything settles down. Even though the Kenmays Family had their bastide at Redriver Valley, it didn't have a terrain that was advantageous to them and would easily fall to enemy attack. That was why the Kenmays Family sent lots of people to survey the area and finally discovered the Morgan Hills, which was near the Kenmays Family's territory and within the dominion of the Norton Family. It was the ideal place to build a castle given the beneficial terrain. So, the Kenmays Family spent another huge sum to bribe the official that was in charge of drawing the borders between dominions to include the copper mine of the Norton Family into their own and used that as an excuse to start a

war with them to force them away from the Morgan Hills so that they could start building the new settlement there.

According to Boris, even though the model of the castle is not yet finished, its blueprints were already completed and was beneath the sand table. When the construction finishes, the castle could house at least 10000 residents and the Kenmays Family intended to make it their main base of operations. As long as they station it with 3000 garrison soldiers, there was no way an enemy would be able to take the castle even if they had a force that was ten times that of the defending side…

As for the hill city that was depicted on the sand table, that was where the Kenmays Family intended to have their citizens live in. WIth it being able to house up to 60000 people and the ease of access to copper ore and timber from areas nearby, it would able to build an industry and economy around those resources. By the time the logging activities free up more land around the area, the waste area could be converted into farmlands. By that time, they could set up farming villages around the city and open up new irrigation channels to be able to sustain the demand for food in their dominion just from their yearly harvests.

To fulfill their grand development plan, the Kenmays Family had invested up to 300000 gold Fordes for the next five years of development to solidify its foundations in the Northlands. However, little did they know that only four months after the plan was started, Lorist had arrived.

“Do you know what the Kenmays Family intends to do with the Norton Family?” Lorist asked.

Boris replied, “I’ve heard the old master discuss it with the young master before. He said that he wouldn’t totally annihilate the Norton Family as they would make a good target for the barbarians of the mountains so that the Kenmays Family’s development will be unimpeded. The old master even said that he would offer the Norton Family help and support to withstand the barbarian attacks if necessary. He has mentioned that he is impressed with the martial prowess of the Norton Family and might consider making them a vassal noble house of the Kenmays Family.”

“If that’s so, then why did they attack the family bastide half a year ago?”

“Half a year after the former head of the Norton Family passed away, the young master sent someone over to negotiate if the Nortons would sell the Morgan Hills to the

Kenmayses and end the conflict between the two families. However, the messenger that the young master had sent was insulted by the Nortons, and according to him, the Nortons have torn the young master's letter apart and said to the messenger that they wouldn't consider selling the smallest rock on Norton soil to the Kenmayses before chasing him away. That was why the young master besieged the bastide in a fit of rage, but he didn't succeed anyway. After that incident, he decided to carry out the development plan early and seal the Norton Family off from the rest of the world so that they will one day come out begging him to be forgiven," said Boris.

"Okay, then what's with the grand architect?" asked Lorist as he thought of the middle-aged man who must've been insane.

"Milord, Grandmaster Ciroba is the most accomplished architect in the Iblia Kingdom! Two years ago, the Rose Palace which he designed had received critical acclaim and that project had caused the grandmaster's name to soar to fame. He's a treasured talent of the Second Prince. The old master has spent quite a lot of money to hire Grandmaster Ciroba to come over here to plan the construction of the young master's city. Now that the main blueprints are complete, he should've been preparing to leave for the royal capital. Sigh, given his arrogant temperament, he even dares to not show any respect to dukes and marquises of the Second Prince's royal court. I believe milord's decision to punish him like that will definitely cause a lot of uproar," said Boris awkwardly.

"Hehe…" Lorist laughed lightly and thought, *so that grand architect does indeed have a couple of screws loose in his head. The dukes and marquises he dared to disrespect are merely honorary nobles that have no real power. But he is truly looking for trouble for being brave enough to act like that in front of a landed noble like me…*

Chapter 86
Construction Staff Appointment

During morning the next day, Josk, Shadekampf and Patt brought fifty guards and 24 carriages with them to the copper mine. The main reason for that excursion was to rescue the members of the Norton Family as well as eliminate the thirty or so mercenaries hired by the Kenmayses to be stationed over there.

Ovidis and Reidy on the other hand repurposed the coachmen into a garrison squad which was tasked with maintaining the security of the two walls of the castle in construction. The remaining 70 or so guard squad members were subsequently assigned to watch over the thousands of slave laborers and the surrendered mercenaries.

The plan had been drafted out the night before. Originally, Lorist wanted to go to the mines himself, but that idea spawned unanimous disapproval from his subordinates. Josk said that they couldn't let Lorist, their leader, do all the heavy-lifting and said that his frequent handling of every matter, large or small, caused a family knight like him to feel pathetic and useless. Lorist thus agreed to allow Josk to bring Shadekampf and Patt with him to the mines while he stayed put at the construction site.

After sending Josk and the rest off, Lorist patrolled the surroundings for a bit before returning to the building atop the inner walls. The more he stared at the sand table, the more questions surfaced within his mind. Having only obtained their dominion for less than two years, the Kenmays Family was able to carry out their expansion plan within such a short time. However, even though the Nortons have been enfeoffed their dominion for two hundred or so years and have had 7 generations of family heads, not only were they unable to successfully develop their land, they even ended up being sealed in the Northlands. Given the dire state of the family, they could only turtle up and hide in their bastide without being able to retaliate.

Lorist really troubled himself over the fact that his own family had allowed the Kenmayses to do as they pleased within their dominion without taking any action. Given that the Nortons have successfully repelled the assault on their bastide by the viscount half a year ago, and taking into account that the viscount himself had lost

tens of men during that assault, it showed that the Norton Family still had quite a bit of military power. Logically speaking, the moment Viscount Kenmays started to retreat, the Norton Family would've sent some scouts to monitor the situation of the enemy's soldiers. However, not even one scout has been sighted during that span of time. What, then, had happened to the family?

It could be that the family had sent out scouts already on another target other than the Kenmays Family, but according to the leader of the mercenaries, one such scout had quickly left after discovering that the copper mine had been taken over. *Sigh, I really shouldn't be thinking about the potential income the mine would bring during a situation like this.* Additionally, even if the mine was being occupied, they should at least worry about the wellbeing of the Norton Family members who were working there. However, not even a single messenger was sent to the Kenmays Family to negotiate their release. It was truly too weird.

Even though Lorist was only 1 day of traveling away from the family bastide, he couldn't just leave everything here and depart without the others. He would still have to consider how he would manage the 1000 or so slave laborers as well as the 40-odd surrendered mercenaries as well as what to do with the semi-complete castle that he had just conquered. Lorist really missed Charade's presence; if he were there, Lorist would be able to leave everything to him without any worries.

Upon thinking of Charade, Lorist's thoughts drifted onto his fellow knights and friends, Potterfang, Loze, Els, Terman and Yuriy. *I wonder if they've started the journey again with the convoy and how long they will take before they arrive at the Northlands. Gosh, there's the trouble of making the preparations for the arrival of the convoy as well…*

Lorist's head started to hurt when he recalled the large group of people that was traveling to the Northlands. Given Charade's temper, how many of them would still remain by the time they reach the dominion? 20000? Or 30000? Thinking of how to let the people of the convoy settle down after they arrive was also quite a huge undertaking.

Looking back at the sand table, Lorist's gaze suddenly brightened up as he thought, *isn't this the perfect place for them to settle down? I only have to take the plan of the Kenmays Family and implement it myself! If I choose to continue the construction of the castle here, the slave laborers would also have retain their jobs and I won't have to trouble myself to think about what to do with them. And when the castle is complete,*

I can have them go work on the hill city, after which they will be granted freedom and allowed to become citizens of the family's dominion.

Lorist wasn't worried about the costs involved to build the castle, as he wasn't lacking in money. There were only two things that he had to carefully consider. First, was the staff he would appoint to supervise and manage the construction project. Second, he would have to find a way to procure the materials required for the construction. Being the founder of one of the largest construction merchant guild of the former empire, the Kenmays Family naturally would have their own ways of finding materials and workers for their project. However, Lorist didn't have that ability and the Kenmayses may even prove to be an obstacle to the project's continuation.

"Men, get that old man with a goatee, what's his name… Ah, I remember. Get Boris to come here," instructed Lorist to the guards outside.

Butler Boris was quickly brought over and Lorist started to ask him about further details on the blueprints of the castle as well as some more information on the Kenmays Family.

According to Boris, Viscount Kenmays wasn't living at the Redriver Valley Bastide but rather the most developed city in the Northlands that was within the dominion of Duke Loggins, Gildusk City, where he owned a large viscount manor. Ever since Viscount Kenmays's cousin sister had become a mistress of the duke, the relationship of the Kenmays Family and Duke Loggins had gotten pretty close. The Kenmayses has also helped out quite a lot with the formation of the duke's Northland Army.

Viscount Kenmays preferred to stay in Gildusk City because he was a man who revelled in the parties and social gatherings of the nobles there and loved the company of the other noble ladies which his rural bastide castle was completely devoid of. The other reason was to maintain his good relationship with the duke. His presence during the return of his family's convoys when it entered the customs of the duke's dominion also made it harder for the duke to brazenly purchase too many items for half the market price.

The Redriver Valley Bastide of the Kenmays Family was currently only serving as a transfer point for the resources and supplies they transported around. And the butler also revealed that there would be a large shipment of around 3000 buckets of green vine glue, construction tools, an estimated 250000 kilograms of food as well as some other necessities like clothes to the construction site on the 10th of the next month.

There might even be around 1000 extra slave laborers with another 200 or so female slaves.

"Are the female slaves the family members of the slave laborers?" asked Lorist curiously.

"Um, they aren't, milord. The slave laborers are mostly strong and virile youths. So, to stop them from causing trouble, we must placate and reward them once in a while. These female slaves are for that specific purpose. If the laborers perform well in their work, they would be allowed to spend a night with a female slave. This is a tried and true method the Kenmays Family has used to manage their slaves over the years," said Butler Boris.

Sol, that means that the women are there only to serve as sex slaves. Shaking his head, Lorist asked, "Are the Kenmayses that rich? I heard that they got their dominion by donating 200000 gold Fordes to the Second Prince. They should've spent quite a bit on the construction of Redriver Valley Bastide during the last two years. And now, they are prepared to allocate another 300000 gold Fordes for the development of the Morgan Hills. They must have at least millions of gold Fordes in hand to be able to accomplish all that." Lorist then pointed to the sand table.

Butler Boris explained, "Milord, from my experience of working at the Kenmays Family for 40 plus years, they are actually doing worse than before. I've always believed that the old master had decided to develop the Morgan Hills as a final lifeline for the Kenmays Family. They haven't made much money after the civil war broke out in the empire a few years prior. And ever since the founding of the Second Prince's Iblia Kingdom, they have been using their reserve funds. Even though the budget for the development of Morgan Hills is 300000 gold Fordes, 100000 of that is allocated to the construction of the castle and the city while the rest will be used to help the citizens settle down after the completion of the construction."

"100000? That shouldn't be possible. Based on my estimations, the construction of the castle should cost at least seventy to eighty thousand gold Fordes. There's no way that 100000 gold Fordes would be enough for both the castle and the hill city," said Lorist.

"Milord, in actuality, the cost for the construction of the castle is only 30000 gold Fordes, with most of the money being used to purchase the 12000 buckets of green vine glue and the rest to be spent on the resources and food required by the workers. Given that the main labor force of this construction project will be the slaves of the

family, it wouldn't cost them anything. And, some of the building materials can be foraged from the surrounding area. For example, the completion of this wall only used up 2000 buckets of green vine glue: the other materials used to make green clay were mostly gathered from the surroundings."

Oh, so according to Boris, apart from the green vine glue, the rest of the building materials can be harnessed elsewhere. This is good news indeed.

"Then, Butler Boris, you should understand how much supplies is left over here right?" Lorist asked.

Given that they had just conquered the castle the day before and Josk having just set out during the morning to the copper mine, Lorist's group still hadn't made an inventory of the supplies at the construction site.

"Milord, during the past four months, there have been 3 shipments of resources to the construction site that mostly comprised of green vine glue and food. With every shipment having 3000 buckets of green vine glue and given that 2000 buckets have been used to construct the walls, there are currently 7000 buckets remaining. By the time the next shipment on the 10th of the next month arrives, the 12000 buckets required for the construction of the castle will have all have been delivered and the following shipments after that will mainly concern food. If there are no changes, the shipment should come as planned. Nowadays, the food we have in the warehouse is running low with around 20000 kilograms left. The next order for food is supposed to be carried out after the following shipment, but now that you've conquered the site, there is a chance that it wouldn't come anymore. So, you will have to provide food for these laborers."

Boris looked at Lorist for a while before he continued, "Milord, The food available to the slave laborers is really limited. Given the tiresome nature of their work, each person requires 1.5 kilograms of food that will be split up into three meals a day. That means that the 1000 slave laborers would consume more than 50000 kilograms each month[1]. Milord, if you intend to use the slave laborers, you must make sure they have enough food to sustain them."

Lorist stood up, went beside Boris and gave his shoulder a pat before saying, "Butler Boris, you're pretty good at what you do. If you continue to give it your best, the Norton Family will definitely not mistreat you. Alright, you may go back for now."

“Yes, milord,” said Boris as he bowed and started to leave. Just before he exited the room, Lorist suddenly thought of something else.

“Oh, wait, Butler Boris, where did the Kenmays Family buy so many of these ballistas?”

Boris replied, “Milord, these ballistas were order-made and not purchased. Three years ago when the Kenmays Family went to purchase slaves, they bought a father and son who used to be famed ballista craftsmen of the Teribo Kingdom who was sold into slavery as a result of offending a noble. Even though the Kenmays Family was a landed noble family, they did not have good family knights nor did they have a proper garrison, so they could only hire mercenaries to defend their territories. To strengthen their castle’s defense, they sent the father and son over here to craft some ballistas to be installed here.”

“Where are the two that you’ve mentioned right now?”

“They’re together with the slave laborers,” said Boris.

“How about this, Boris, please make sure the father and son have everything they need. They will be of good use to me in the future. And you, accompany Butler Boris on this errand and make sure to cooperate with him in completing it,” said Lorist to a guard standing nearby.

“Yes, milord.”

…

As Lorist circled around the sand table within the room, he thought about what Boris had said. The issue with the food wouldn’t be a problem as the smaller convoy he had returned with had more than 50000 kilograms of food which would definitely be able to last the workers a whole month. By the time he returns to the dominion, he would then be able to send more food over to the construction site. Or, he could try to take the food shipment that will be coming the next month, though that was still some time away so there wasn’t a need to worry.

It was currently the 32nd day of the 2nd month and Josk and the others would be returning the next day. The day after that would be the 34th day of the 2nd month and Lorist had to depart for the family bastide no matter what on that day. However, who would be in charge of the construction of the castle after his departure? There was no way Josk could, as he was a lone ranger who wasn’t that good at working with others

and hated troublesome matters like this, as exemplified from his previous performance when Lorist once asked him to form a mounted cavalry unit only to have Josk quit after a few days due to lack of interest after sending the men back to Yuriy's light cavalry scouts.

Shadekampf must also return together with him as Lorist would need him as a guide given that he had not been there in person even once before as he had transmigrated when the original owner of the body was studying at Morante City. He could have Josk, Reidy and Ovidis stationed here to watch the place and he believed that the guard squad would be more than sufficient for the castle's defense. However, Lorist needed someone to be in charge as he didn't know how long he would spend at the family bastide before he would be able to return to the castle here.

"Bring the grand architect over here," instructed Lorist.

The architect who had been given 50 canes had been brought before him. The once arrogant looking man currently looked incredibly haggard with his hair tousled all over his face and his garments torn and stained with blood. With a body full of cane marks, he slowly limped into the room.

"Grandmaster Ciroba? It was pretty rude of me the day before. I am the dominion lord of this land, Norton Lorist and I intend to have the construction of this castle continue as planned. I wonder if you would be willing to oversee the construction for me? I will definitely give you the appropriate remuneration for your efforts," said Lorist sincerely.

Grandmaster Ciroba merely gave Lorist a venomous glare without saying a word, having learned his lesson the day before. But he still spit on the floor and looked high up to the roof, indicating that he did not intend to give Lorist any heed.

Bursting out in laughter, Lorist told the guard, "Since he dirtied my room, should I have him lick his own spit clean?"

"Milord, that sounds like a good idea," replied the guard with a serious look.

Grandmaster Ciroba's face tensed up as he shivered at that moment…

"Oh well, let's not give him a hard time. For someone of his age to still behave so uncouthly… Just bring him back to his quarters," said Lorist.

Chapter 87
Homecoming

Lorist went out of the room and looked downward from the side of the wall.

The surrounding terrain was actually a valley. The distance between the two walls at either end of the valley was easily over 300 meters. The first wall that sealed off the entry of the valley into the Northlands was 70 to 80 meters long. Beyond that wall was a large empty meadow spanning 800 meters surrounded by mountains on each side, with another opening on the other end that was around 200 meters wide. Now that the walls were completed, the two valleys were effectively shut off.

This truly is a great place to build a city. The lands within the valley was flat and even, making it an ideal spot for a mountain fort. Even though there was nothing but hills on one side, the mountainous terrain that stretched deep into the Black Forests had formed a natural barrier that prevented entry to the valley from anywhere other than the two openings where the walls were constructed.

Within the valley, the slave laborers gathered together under the sun and chatted in their respective groups with the occasional brawl breaking out. To them, days like these when they didn't have to work were exceedingly rare opportunities to rest. The tens of guards who were standing guard even gave the slaves looks of envy from time to time.

At another corner of the valley were rows of decrepit wooden buildings that were surrounded by a wall constructed from tree trunks lined up side by side. That was the warehouse that Butler Boris had referred to where the 7000 buckets of green vine glue, food and other construction materials were stored.

A little further away from the warehouse was a large camp where many carriages could be seen. That was the camp that the convoy Lorist brought over had set up. A few of the family members of the guard squad soldiers could be seen bringing buckets of clean water from a nearby lake to wash their clothes with.

At that moment, a little girl could be seen capturing bugs within the bushes near the convoy's camp as her ponytail swayed like a pendulum from her running around.

Isn't that Miss Telesti's maidservant, Vinny? Lorist started to think of Telesti upon seeing that young maidservant and slapped his forehead. *I now have my construction manager.*

"Go invite Miss Telesti over here and tell her that I have something I need to talk to her about," instructed Lorist to a guard nearby.

After a while, Telesti brought Vinny and her Iron ranked butler to the 200-meter-long wall at the other end of the valley and Lorist brought them into the room with the sand table and subsequently told her about his plans to continue the construction of the hill city and sincerely requested for Telesti to become the person in charge of the project.

"Why was I picked to be the person in charge for this undertaking?" asked Telesti curiously.

Lorist shrugged and said, "Sigh, I don't have a choice. None of my men are suited for this task. The fortunate thing is that the blueprints have already been completed with the replica model of the castle being finished halfway. Apart from some details that may need to be ironed out, there is no need to redesign everything from scratch. And you, Miss Telesti, the adopted daughter and student of the famed scholar Nico Albess, must have inherited the knowledge and intelligence of your mother and have become an accomplished scholar yourself. Since you can understand the complicated routes of the ancient ruins, there's no one more suitable to work with these blueprints than you, right?"

Telesti still appeared hesitant. Lorist said that he would naturally assign some subordinates under her to work on the project together. And given his absence, Josk and Ovidis would be in charge of the defense of the area. He said that Telesti only had to focus on the construction of the city and that he would let her manage Boris, Reidy and the 1000 slave laborers as she saw fit.

Now that the Northlands was in turmoil, Lorist had no choice but to return to his dominion to quickly settle things. He promised Telesti that if she were to help out, after he stabilizes the family's situation in the Northlands, he would definitely bring her to the Blackmud Marsh for a trip. And after the completion of the city in the valley, he would allow her to pick her own villa where she would be able to continue her research for the rest of her life with the funding provided by the family.

It was not known which of the conditions had caused Telesti to change her mind, but

she accepted the position as the manager of the project right away.

Letting out a relieved breath, Lorist instructed someone to bring Boris and Reidy over and ordered them to cooperate with Telesti with regards to the construction project. After that, he said that he would let her use the five buildings on the inner wall as her main office for the construction work.

Morning on the next day, Lorist noticed the 1000 or so slave laborers leave the valley in a neat line escorted by Reidy and Telesti's Iron ranked butler and another 40 plus guards to collect more building materials.

Upon entering the main construction office, he saw Telesti talking to Boris with the latter nodding fervently.

Seeing Lorist enter, Telesti asked him what business he had there.

Lorist mentioned that there were a few parts of the design that he'd like to augment and started showing the both of them by using the model of the castle.

The Kenmays Family had intended to develop the valley into a military stronghold that housed only the members of the Kenmayses, the garrison soldiers as well as their respective family members. That was the point that frustrated Lorist the most.

Pointing to the model, he said, "Look, they even prepared to erect another castle in the middle of the valley. Given that we already have the two walls at both ends, there would be no need for the castle in the middle, so we can do without it. Using the mountainside castle walls as the main base of the city will be more than enough. Now that the castle in the middle is removed, we can use the empty space for a plaza and build residential areas and marketplaces around it."

Telesti agreed wholeheartedly to the change as she personally hated the design of the city where another castle was placed flat in the middle and thoroughly destroying the landscape of the valley. Now that the plan to build castle had been abolished, not only would the difficulty in constructing the city decrease, it would also save them a lot of work.

The second thing Lorist wished to change was the four-meter-tall rock wall. The Kenmays Family had spent three months to construct that taller wall that faced the dominion of the Nortons and simply slapped together the 4 meter one with a couple of rocks at the entrance of the valley that bordered their own dominion.

Now that Lorist had already taken over this valley, he decided to revamp the shorter rock wall into a first line of defense for his dominion. Before Lorist entered the room, Telesti and Boris were discussing how to strengthen the fortifications of that wall.

What Lorist had in mind was not to have a common flat wall. He took out a blank beastskin and started drawing an arc with a protrusion in the middle of it and requested for the wall to be built like that. If the wall spanned more than 200 meters like the one they were standing on, it would take a long time to complete the changes. However, the shorter wall on the other side was only around 80 meters long and it would only take up to one month of intensive work to completely change it according to Lorist's design.

Seeing Telesti write his requirements down, Lorist bade farewell and left.

In the evening, Josk, Patt and Shadekampf returned from the copper mine after the successful completion of their mission. They brought back tens of mercenary captives and saved over 70 members of the Norton Family who had been put in charge of the mining operations.

Shadekampf brought over a white-haired man who was in his sixties and said, "Milord, this is Old Man Balk, the supervisor of the family's copper mine."

Balk greeted Lorist in an elaborate manner as his eyes teared up and said, "Milord, thank you for remembering and rescuing us from there…"

Lorist helped Balk up and said that he would never forget about the people of his family and that it was his obligation to look out for them, so there wasn't a need to be that polite. Now that the toughest times had passed, the family still had to develop in the future and he mentioned that he would require people like Balk to give their best efforts to ensure that happened quickly. However, he told Balk to rest up for a period of time as he had just been saved from forced labor within the mine.

Balk was extremely moved when he heard that. "I know that many things haven't gone too well for the family during the last two years, especially after the Third Young Master passed away. This time, our copper mine has also been forcibly occupied by the Kenmays Family and we were thrown into the it to work as captives. I never expected for anyone from the family to come rescue us and thought that I would be mining there for the rest of my life. I really didn't expect that Master Lorist, you would delay your return to the bastide to inherit your title for the sake of rescuing us…

“That’s why, don’t worry about me! My body is in great condition, so please give me some work to do as I can’t just sit around doing nothing!” Lorist subsequently gathered the rest of the group and made his arrangements and also sent Old Man Balk to help Telesti out with her work.

On the 34th day of the 2nd month, Lorist left for the family bastide along with Shadekampf and Patt on a carriage after bidding their farewells.

In Lorist’s memories, he recalled that there were a lot of maple trees around Norton Family bastide and every autumn, the leaves would turn fiery-red and paint the whole landscape in a beautiful, nostalgic red. Within the midst of the maple tree forest was a grand, white hill where the Norton Family bastide was located.

The young Lorist’s memories contained a brief impression of the bastide. It was a really large place with vineyards, livestock farms as well as a large crescent-shaped lake where children would have fun in during the summer. Opposite the lake was the stable of the family that housed the handsome horses that the young Lorist used to admire so often in a daze. At that time, his mother was still alive and lovingly referred to him as little horse lover…

Seven hours after they departed, Shadekampf stopped the carriage and knocked on the door of the passenger compartment. “Milord, we’ve arrived.”

Lorist stepped out of the carriage and discovered that he was standing in front of a greyish-white castle. The drawbridge has yet to be let down for them.

“What’s wrong, Patt? Shouldn’t the drawbridge be lowered by now?” Lorist asked.

Patt said, “Milord, there’s nobody standing guard outside at all. I think that the people within still don’t know that we’re here…”

Shadekampf went back into the carriage and reemerged with a horn in his hand before he gave it two loud blows.

“Who goes there?” said a voice as two people appeared on the walls of the castle and looked at the ground below.

“It’s me, Shadekampf! And there’s Patt! We’ve brought the Second Young Master back!” shouted Shadekampf.

“What? The Second Young Master is back? Wait, let me report it to Butler Gleis and Milady Pesha…” said the voice before the two silhouettes on the walls disappeared. After a while, Lorist heard another sound of a horn from the top of the walls before the drawbridge was steadily lowered. The moment the main gates opened wide, a red-haired female knight carrying a horse whip walked outside with wide steps.

“Shadekampf, so you’ve returned after all. I thought that you’ve died in some corner of nowhere,” said the female knight as she gave Shadekampf, who was standing at the side respectfully, a whip with a laugh.

Shadekampf lowered his head and said, “Thanks to your blessings, we’ve successfully found the Second Young Master and brought him back, as per our orders.”

The female knight replied, “You two are pretty lucky…”

After that, she turned to Patt and said, “Huh, you’ve changed so much after returning from this excursion. I can barely even recognize you anymore…”

Patt didn’t answer and merely nodded towards the female knight.

She didn’t mind his silence and walked up to Lorist before staring hard at him. “Second Young Master?”

Within Lorist’s memories, apart from his father, the one he most hated was that red-haired girl who frequently took his elder brother away from him and followed him around all day. Once, he curiously tugged on that girl’s red ponytail and ended up getting pummeled very harshly as a result…

Now that the girl from back then had grown up, she turned into a tall, bright-looking female knight.

Lorist broke the silence and said, “Si-sister Pesha…”

Seeing that Lorist still remembered the respectful way he addressed her as a child, the red-haired female knight nodded in satisfaction. “Not bad. Little Locke, you’ve grown up so much and have become so tall. It’s great to have you back. You must’ve suffered quite a bit on the way here, huh. Come in, Old Butler Gleis is already waiting for you.”

Gleis was already at a very senior age; back when Lorist left his homeland, he was already 63. Now that ten years had passed, he had aged even more quickly and already

lost his ability to walk. However, his Battle Force training still lingered and even though he wasn't as strong and capable as he formerly was, his gaze was still cool and sharp.

Holding onto Lorist's hand and not willing to let go at his sickbed, the old butler made a happy, yet melancholic expression and said, "Child, I don't know if I should be happy that you've returned or not. The current state of the Norton Family is like a sinking ship. We might just be sending you to your doom by pulling you into the same boat as us…"

Lorist laughed and said, "Grandpa Gleis, as a descendant of the Norton Family, it is my duty to come back and help out during times of trouble. I will definitely not let our family that has weathered through the last 200 years fade into the ashes of time just like that. The Norton name will one day become one that fills the whole continent with awe."

Gleis looked at him admirably and smiled. "Child, it is good to have some ambition. However, we should always take things step by step. Go have something to eat and rest up. We'll prepare you for the inheritance ceremony tomorrow. The family has been squabbling over this issue of inheritance for quite some time. I'm sure the matter will be put to rest now that you'll be inheriting the position of the family head."

Lorist stood up from the butler's bed and bade him goodnight before he left with Patt and Shadekampf to the dining hall.

Chapter 88
Power Struggle Rumors

Within Lorist's recollections, the dining hall should be the largest place within the castle of the Nortons. Every time his father hosted a banquet, the hall would always be filled to the brim with people enjoying delicious food and big mugs of ale. The partygoers that made merry throughout the banquets would always leave the floors in a terrible mess.

Lorist realized that the dining hall Shadekampf and Patt were leading him to wasn't the one within his memories after they took a different turn. He asked curiously, "Isn't the dining hall over there? Why are we heading here instead?"

Shadekampf asked, "Young Master, you still remember where the dining hall is at?"

"Naturally, I've only been away for ten years you know. I can still recall bits of my childhood," said Lorist.

"Young Master, we're not heading to the main dining hall. After the Old Master passed away, it hasn't been used ever since. We're heading to the smaller one," said Shadekampf.

The smaller dining hall Shadekampf was referring to was a small wooden hut that was built outside the kitchen. With the walls and flooring all constructed from wood and a large wooden long table within, it could house around ten people. Beyond the long wooden table was a bricked fireplace that was currently lit with several pieces of meat on metal sticks sizzling above the brazier that was right next to it.

A chubby cooking lady brought a large basin on the table within which a large, steaming bread was placed. On it was a saw-toothed knife. Taking the knife out, Shadekampf cut off three smaller pieces from the bread and handed them to Lorist. "Young Master, eat them while they're hot. It tastes pretty good, especially with some salt and honey that you can find on the table."

The cooking lady then brought another large bowl of potato and rib stew before she served the meat that was being grilled atop the brazier. Lastly, she put a bowl of baked

apples onto the table and sprinkled it with some maple syrup.

“Dinner is served,” said the cooking lady coldly before she left with a gloomy expression.

“What’s up with her? Did I wrong her in some way?” said Shadekampf in a surprised tone as he looked towards Patt.

Patt merely shook his head.

“You didn’t wrong her in any way. But she’s unhappy that you brought back the Second Young Master,” said Pesha as she entered the room.

“Why would that piss her off?” Shadekampf continued to question.

“She used to be one of the Old Master’s personal maidservants and she bore him a son. Even though he was merely an illegitimate one, the blood of the Nortons still flows within his veins. If the Second Young Master didn’t make his way back, the next family head would naturally be chosen among the other illegitimate sons,” explained the red-haired female knight as she pulled out the knife that was stuck within the bread and used it to cut a maple syrup-covered apple she took out from the bowl into several small pieces.

“That’s only a pipe dream of hers,” Patt commented.

“LIttle Locke, what is your Battle Force rank?” asked the female knight casually as she stuffed a piece of the apple into her mouth.

“Iron,” Lorist replied.

“You’re still an Iron rank after spending ten years at Morante City? Sigh, I guess you truly are the most useless one among you three brothers. Little Locke, let me put this out first, it’s not that I am against you being the family leader, since there is nobody other than you have the most rightful claim to the position. However, you should remember this. First, don’t even dare to mess with my affairs as you have no right! Second, the Norton Family is in a bad state, so we can’t afford to have you messing around with it. That’s why you should stay in the castle obediently after you inherit the position, understand?” said the female knight as she glared at Lorist.

“Mistress, you don’t understand… The Young Master is…” uttered Shadekampf.

“Shut up! Know your place!” Pesha roared.

Lorist merely nodded.

As if she had won the argument, the woman humphed in satisfaction and took wide steps out of the room with her chest puffed out.

“The mistress thinks too much of herself,” said Shadekampf.

“She’s merely a frog at the bottom of the well who can’t even fathom the existence of the world outside it,” said Patt.

Lorist said, “Shadekampf, Patt, after you’ve finished your meals, go gather some information about the situation here in the castle. I feel that something is off and that the people here isn’t too fond of my return.”

…

“Young Master, we’re here,” said Patt as he took out the key Gleis had given him and unlocked the door to the study.

Having been closed off for quite a period of time, the air in the study smelled stuffy and stale. Patt quickly opened the windows to let some fresh air into the room.

After that, Patt said, “Young Master, I’ll be leaving now. If you have anything you need, I’ll be waiting by the stairwell.”

Lorist nodded and headed for the desk at the back of the study.

He recalled that his late father, Baron Norton, used to give out orders while sitting behind that exact desk.

Opening the drawer of the desk, he found some old account books and notes as well as another iron box. He remembered that within the box was the Battle Force manual that was passed down within the family. After opening the iron box, a thick beastskin book was revealed before his eyes and on its cover were four large words with an ancient air: ‘Crimsonblood Battle Force’.

Lorist was stunned. *Wasn’t the hereditary family Battle Force the Blazing Battle Force? Since when has it become the Crimsonblood Battle Force?*

As his mind sifted through the memories of the young Lorist, he recalled a peculiar scene. As the young Lorist was copying the Battle Force manual, he asked his elder brother, “What are you doing?”

His brother replied, “I’m making a new book jacket for Pesha. The one she had is already in quite a sorry state, so I’m making another for her.”

The young Lorist then said, “I want one too, brother. You must be fair to both Pesha and me.”

“Alright, good thing I have two over here. I’ll give the smaller one to you,” his brother replied. He then handed Lorist a beastskin book jacket with the words ‘Blazing Battle Force’ on it for Lorist to cover his hand copy of the first two stages of his Battle Force technique with.

What the heck! That stupid child and his stupid brother! Lorist didn’t know whether he should laugh or cry at the blunder that had caused him to think that his Battle Force was of the fire attribute and made him waste so much time researching other Battle Force manuals, only to end up with him deciding to train in the Aquametal Technique that was passed down to him in his previous life.

Had he known that the technique he trained in was called the Crimsonblood Battle Force, Lorist would have purchased the Burning Blood Battle Force manual that was put up on sale at the mercenary guild of Morante City. Given that it was a blood attribute high-ranked Battle Force technique, it was considered a rare treasure by the mercenary guild and was priced at a staggering 15000 gold Fordes.

The main difference between blood attribute techniques and that of other attributes was that no matter what attribute one’s original awakened Battle Force was, upon training in a blood attribute technique, one’s Battle Force attribute would irreversibly change into the blood type as well. That was also why Lorist didn’t bother to buy a blood attribute Battle Force technique in Morante City during his days of research, as apart from the one one sale at the mercenary guild, there wasn’t any other place where he could find a blood attribute technique.

Flipping the manual open, he saw the first two chapters that detailed the basic hexagonal blood circulation map that he was familiar with. After that was the chapter for the Silver ranked stage of the technique. Reading the main points and memorizing the differences between nodes of the Iron rank circulation path and that of the Silver

rank, Lorist circulated his Battle Force and moved it according to the Silver ranked path…

He then drew his sword and a blade glow emanated from it after he injected the sword with his Battle Force. Giving a bitter laugh, he thought, *I've finally broke through the Silver rank. However, my blade glow won't be able to hold for long as my Battle Force still dissipates into my meridians and dantian region. Without the Battle Force circulating in my bloodstream, I won't be able to sustain the blade glow for long. Oh well, I guess I'll still pass myself off as an Iron rank to catch people off guard with my Dark Stage power.*

A few knocks rang out at the door of the study.

"Enter," said Lorist.

A girl dressed in a white gown entered the study and gave Lorist a quick glance before lowering her head. "Second Young Master, your bedroom is already prepared. Just take a turn when you get up the stairs and you'll reach it. Oh, your bedsheets have also been switched as well. When you want to take a bath, please ring the bell with the blue rope beside your bed and I'll start preparing the bathwater quickly…"

The girl's voice gradually grew softer and softer until she was less audible than a mosquito.

Lorist felt that it was funny how the girl was so afraid of himself. He waved his hand and said, "You may leave now. I will call for you when necessary."

As if she was granted amnesty, the girl bowed her head another time before she left hastily and almost bumped into Shadekampf who had just entered from the door.

Shadekampf looked at the girl and said, "Irina, it's you?!"

When Shadekampf closed the door to the study, Lorist asked him, "Do you know the girl from before?"

"Yes, she's called Irina and she was originally the Third Young Master's personal maidservant and she's older than him by one year. She's the one who grieved the most at the passing of the Third Young Master and cried day and night," Shadekampf replied.

"Do you have any news for me?" Lorist asked.

“Yes, Young Master. You wouldn’t be able to imagine how heated the quarrel for the position of the family head has been among the various factions in the family. However, the moment you returned, the fight suddenly died down as they had no more hope for it,” said Shadekampf with a smile, as if something funny had happened.

“What’s so funny about that? Tell me.”

“Young Master, despite dating the First Young Master for a couple of years now, not only did Mistress Pesha not bear any children for him, he even found another maidservant which he had a son with immediately after merely two encounters. Mistress Pesha had intended to make that son inherit the position of the family head, but that notion had been struck down by the rest of the family. Being put in an awkward position, your return has made it easier for Mistress Pesha to step down.”

“Why would the others be against the son of my brother being the next family head?” Lorist asked.

“Young Master, that child is only 4 years old and can be considered your junior by a whole generation. That’s why the mistress’s claim was disapproved by many.”

“Who are the ones who didn’t agree with her?”

“Well, you should be wary of Molocinque, who’s the first illegitimate son of your father and is the eldest of the bunch. I heard that he has obtained the support of the families of the garrison of Wildnorth Town, which was the main reason why he wasn’t approved as a candidate for the next family head. Also, half a year back when the Kenmays Family surrounded our castle with their troops, the 7th illegitimate son of your father, Wellickson, has shown his bravery and performed very well in fending off the enemy. He has quite a lot of support from the elderly within the castle. The last one is the son of the cooking lady from before. She had tried to get the rest of the servants to support his son to become the next family head. Two other of your father’s other personal maidservants also felt that their sons would be fit for the family head, however, causing the servants to split into three factions which argued all the time.”

“Stop… Shadekampf, how many illegitimate sons and daughters does my father have?” Lorist’s head started to hurt. The situation he was in was not much different from the dramas in his previous life that depicted the squabbles of rich families. He didn’t expect that even his illegitimate brothers were also gunning for the position of the family head.

“There are 17 illegitimate children. If we include you and your two brothers, the Old Master had 20 children in total,” replied Shadekampf hesitantly. “Including you, there are only 11 that are still alive.”

“Are they all males?”

“No, milord. There are four illegitimate daughters, two of which are already married with the other two still only in their teens.”

“Then does that mean all the living illegitimate sons are part of the power struggle?”

“Yes, milord.”

“I understand now,” Lorist said. “I’ve been wondering why the family hasn’t taken any action and allowed the Kenmays Family to do as they please. So the bastards have all decided to pretend to not notice these matters until the family head is decided and even ignored the wellbeing of those working in the mine… How ridiculous.”

Shadekampf felt curious and asked, “Why did Old Butler Gleis leave them to squabble among themselves without doing anything about it?”

“It’s simple. Gleis himself wasn’t sure if I would come back to the dominion to inherit the position. What if Patt and you couldn’t find me or something bad happened to us along the journey? That’s why he let them do as they pleased so that the tallest among the dwarves will be picked just in case I wasn’t able to make my way back so that the family bloodline can still continue,” explained Lorist.

“It’s fortunate that you’ve returned. Now, they no longer have a reason to continue that squabble,” said Shadekampf with joy.

“So that’s why the people here aren’t too happy of my return at all. I was the one who caused all the drama to cease. Oh well, it’s getting late. Where will you and Patt be sleeping tonight?” Lorist asked.

“We’ll be using the guest room by the stairs. I’ll be alternating with Patt for patrolling during the night, so please rest well, milord.”

Chapter 89
Inheritance Ceremony

Even though that maidservant called Irina seemed really timid and shy around Lorist, she was very hardworking and helpful. After preparing a comfortable hot water bath for him, she silently carried the wooden bathing tub as well as the bath water away and even tidied out the room right after Lorist went to bed.

Probably because of the relief of his journey's completion, Lorist managed to get a real good night's rest.

The clear chirps of the birds prompted Lorist awake during the morning. He got out of bed, went to the window and saw two birds perched onto a branch on a tree not far away, fervently singing without a single worry in the world. A slight fog could be seen blanketing the bastide and the whole of the maple forest in the distance, causing the buildings within the bastide to give out a strange, astral-like feeling.

A brand new robe was placed at his bedside: it was probably brought over by Irina. After he put the robe on, he noticed that the young maidservant was lying curled up on the floor mat beside the couch using a rough rag as a blanket, seemingly sound asleep. *I wonder what she's dreaming about,* thought Lorist as he looked at the satisfied smile on her fair little face.

After standing there and observing her for a moment, Lorist took a clean blanket and lightly put it onto Irina's body before quietly leaving the room.

Down the flight of stairs was the living room and the study. Lorist had placed his sword on the table in the living room the night before. After retrieving it, he walked to the end of the corridor and just as he was about to go down one more floor, the door right beside the stairwell opened. Patt poked his head out and said, "Milord, good morning. Are you going to train? I want to join too."

Lorist nodded and went downstairs with Patt to start their morning training.

A well-built man stared at Lorist and Patt as they executed the eight basic swordsmanship moves until he got bored and yawned before taking up another

wooden plank and started sawing away at it.

“Milord, that’s the son of the cooking lady,” said Patt as he looked towards that man.

Lorist turned his head to look. Seeing the man who was diligently sawing at the wood, he nodded towards Patt, signalling his understanding.

Shadekampf also made his way outside and gave that man a greeting before he went to the yard to wash his face at the well. After a while, a servant went up to him and said something to him for a few moments before Shadekampf nodded and sent the servant away.

After Lorist and Patt finished their session, Shadekampf came over to report that Butler Gleis had sent someone to notify him that there will be a feast at the main dining hall that night during which Lorist will formally inherit the position of the family head. He also told Lorist that he could only look around nearby the bastide without traveling too far away because of the event that night.

Lorist nodded and after he had his breakfast, he brought Patt and Shadekampf as well as three Zeno Horses before the three of them rode at a leisurely pace around the bastide.

The Norton Family bastide was built on a large, white-colored stone hill. Aside from the main road leading from the family’s castle, the elevation of the ground on which the castle was built was around ten or so meters, making it easy to defend but hard to attack. It’s no wonder that Viscount Kenmays had failed to breach the castle during the attack half a year ago and had to leave empty-handed following the death of tens of his subordinates.

Shadekampf led his way up a small hill and pointed to the east before saying, “Milord, look. That is Wildnorth Town.”

Wildnorth Town was located not too far away from the Norton Family castle and it was built upon a small rocky hill. The weird thing about the hill was that it had a blowhole in the middle of it. The earlier citizens of the town had probably settled on that hill for that exact reason.

“How many people are there in that town?” asked Lorist as he looked at it from afar.

Shadekampf shook his head and couldn’t even answer a simple question like that.

“Milord, I myself am not too sure about it as a population check has not been conducted in the town for years.”

Normally, a large town like that should be able to support the bastide with manpower and resources. However, the founding ancestor of the Norton Family had left quite a huge problem for the future generations given the Wildnorth Town’s questionable loyalty. As Lorist stroke his chin, he thought, *sigh, how should I handle the garrison of Wildnorth Town…*

“Huh? Isn’t that Wellickson? What’s he doing there?” Shadekampf asked curiously.

Lorist turned his head in that direction and saw Wellickson and another servant placing several baskets over the edge of a short cliff. The contents of the baskets couldn’t be seen from where Lorist was.

“Let’s go and check it out,” said Lorist.

The three of them rode down the hill they were on, circled a few vineyards and ended up at the edge of the cliff where Wellickson was.

“Where the heck is this? I didn’t know there was a place like this within the bastide,” exclaimed Shadekampf with both his arms covering his mouth as he gasped.

Lorist was also surprised to see that as well. However, he thought that it was only natural for them to miss out on that place given that it had been hidden beyond the cliff. From their current vantage point, a low-lying terrain that was really close to the white hill where the castle was built could be seen. Having been shielded from view by the trees in the forest, not many knew of that place’s existence.

Over there, row after row of wooden houses could be seen where several women and children wearing old and torn clothing could be seen collecting the baskets that had been passed down. Within those baskets were bread that were distributed among the people there.

The ten baskets which they brought over each contained a 30-centimeter-long black bread. Wellickson was talking to someone below the cliff at that moment. “That is the food ration for the next two days. We will send you more in the future. I will be quite busy at the bastide for a while, so I won’t be coming over. What am I busy with? Oh, it’s just that the Second Young Master of my family has returned to the dominion to inherit the position of the family head. Everyone in the castle is feeling rather finicky…”

At that moment, Lorist showed up beside Wellickson and caused him to jump in surprise. However, Lorist merely ignored him and looked at the people beyond the cliff for a bit before asking, “Who are you and how did you get here? Why are you hiding at this spot?”

The man who was being stared at by Lorist had stopped distributing the bread and handed the basket to a person beside him before he looked up the cliff.

“He’s… He’s called Pajik. You… why are you asking him that question instead of me?” said Wellickson timidly.

That man called Pajik quickly climbed up from below the short cliff and clapped the dust off his body before he said, “Wellickson, he has a better eye than you and knows that I’m at the Silver rank. That’s why he asked me instead of you.”

Wellickson said curiously, “Even I know that you’re a Silver rank. How is that significant?”

Shadekampf came over and said, “But milord hasn’t met Pajik before. Milord, I know this person. Technically, he used to be a captive of the First Young Master; The First Young Master admired his talent and said that he wanted to ask him to become a knight of the family before he set out for battle. However, he never did come back alive. We wanted to give him his freedom, but Pajik said that he wanted to uphold the promise he had with the First Young Master, that was to stay at the family dominion for three whole years unless the First Young Master comes back to make him a family knight.”

After introducing Pajik to Lorist, Shadekampf asked, “Pajik, hasn’t it already been three years? Why are you still here?”

With a bitter look on his face, Pajik replied, “It’s all because of Mistress Pesha…”

Being informed about his situation as well, Wellickson started to explain it to Lorist.

Half a year before the date he would regain his freedom two years ago, Pesha gave that man a personal maidservant, much to his delight. However, three months right after that, the maidservant’s belly started to swell, revealing that she was in fact pregnant. After doing some digging around, Pajik only found out that the maidservant used to serve the First Young Master personally and Pesha intended to adopt the child the maidservant had with the First Young Master as her own stepson. That was why she

felt distressed that the maidservant, who was the child's biological mother, to continue staying at the castle and decided to give her to Pajik so that he would bring her away when he leaves after his term as a captive is over.

However, that particular maidservant had been impregnated by Pajik. Given that he wasn't some sort of noble, there wouldn't be any problems for him to have an illegitimate child or two. In fact, he was quite elated that she was willing to bear him a child. That's how he suddenly become a loyal 'slave' of the mother-to-be and her unborn child and did his best to take care of the maidservant.

Now that the child had been delivered, Pajik had properly become a 24-year-old father whose every action seeks the best for his child. To make more money for a better living, he went to see Butler Gleis and took over the management of the slave camp. Last time when Viscount Kenmays attacked the bastide, Pajik was the one who had defended quite a number of attacks from several Silver ranked mercenaries and even killed two of the viscount's knights who were stronger than Pesha in the process.

Lorist nodded and said to Pajik, "Knight Pajik, if you're willing to become my family's knight, then please attend my inheritance ceremony tonight. It will definitely be an honor of the Norton Family for someone of your abilities join our ranks.

…

That night within the candle-lit dining hall, a flag bearing the emblem of the former Krissen Royal Family that was shaped like a rose could be seen hanging on one wall of the hall. To the left of the flag was the Norton Family flag with the Raging Bear depicted on it and to the right of the Krissen Royal Family flag was a large map which detailed the range of the Norton Family's dominion, as enfeoffed by the founding emperor. In front of the flag was the longsword which the founding emperor had used to grant the title of a baron to the founding ancestor of the Norton Family around two hundred years ago.

The inheritance ceremony was far simpler than Lorist had imagined.

At Butler Gleis's beckoning, Lorist walked to the front, knelt before the longsword and recited, "Under the witness of the myriad divinities, I, the eighth generation descendant of the Norton Family, Norton Lorist, shall once again recite the oath of the founding ancestor before the banner of the Krissen Royal Family. I shall defend the northern borders in the name of the empire and will always silently await the

summons from the royal family. I will bring the family back to the olden days of glory as it used to be during the days of the founding ancestor, and the Norton Family will never submit to anyone's will other than that of the members of the royal family and the elders of the Norton Family."

Lorist stood up, took the longsword that was placed on the table in front of him and raised it up high, before he turned and faced the rest of the people within the hall.

The sounds of applause gradually increased in volume until everyone within the hall was clapping and cheering. From that moment on, Lorist would be the new family head and is officially a baron.

Pesha was rather mad as Pajik and Patt had stolen her spotlight and got knighted by Lorist before she was. She merely made a rushed salute when it was her turn and became the third family knight to be knighted.

After that, Lorist announced three things. First, the castle defense unit of the bastide will undergo a reorganization. The current members of the unit are mostly veteran family soldiers who were in their late thirties to forties. Some of them had even returned to service after their retirement as the Nortons had lost quite a lot of their men during the stormy years that have passed.

Lorist said that he wished to recruit around 120 people from the bastide aged between 16 to 25 and promised that he would help them awaken their Battle Force within a time span of three months to six months.

However, Pesha was the first one to speak out against that plan. "It's impossible! The cost of forming a castle defense unit of 120 people is not something the family can afford."

Lorist laughed out and said, "Even though I might not have much, money is definitely something I don't lack!"

It was at that moment when Shadekampf and a few other servants carried two large chests into the room. After they were opened, the gleaming golden light that emanated from within filled the eyes of everyone present. Both the chests contained 10000 gold Fordes that Lorist had brought along in the carriage and it was time to put it to good use.

After seeing the money in front of her, Pesha was speechless. Lorist then ordered Patt

to be in charge of the recruitment and training of the new unit.

Before Lorist made his second announcement, he gathered the illegitimate sons and daughters that the Old Master had fathered as it was something that concerned them.

“As the illegitimate children who shares the same father as me, you can still be considered descendants of the Norton Family. The least I can do for you is to provide you with the proper education and training for nobles. If anyone of you can also reach the Silver rank in Battle Force training, you may choose to roam the world or serve the family. Should you choose the latter, you will be allowed to use the Norton name and even form a branch family for the Nortons in the future.

“The last announcement I have is, Pajik, the newly-appointed family knight, will be in charge of the slaves in the camp to build a citadel at another location. The location of the building site will be kept secret for now, but I encourage anyone within the bastide who is interested in helping out to follow along as well.”

After announcing everything he had to say, Lorist sent Butler Gleis back to his room, much to the immense dismay of Pesha, who had wanted to complain about Lorist’s actions to him after the ceremony.

Chapter 90
Three Chief Supervisors and Irina

As Lorist was pushing the butler on his wooden wheelchair back to his room, he noticed Patt standing outside it. Within the room was Shadekampf and three other middle-aged men.

The men all saluted towards Lorist to show their respect to the family leader.

Butler Gleis patted on Lorist's hand and introduced the three chief supervisors of the family to him. Without them, the family bastide couldn't be effectively controlled and managed.

The first one who swore his loyalty to Lorist was a middle-aged man with a receding hairline. His name was Hansk and he was the finance supervisor of the family and was in charge of the accounts and budget planning of the family's spending.

The second person was called Spiel and he was mainly in charge of the warehouses within the bastide and was well-versed with the amount of supplies the family had.

The last middle-aged man, Kedan, looked a little chubby, but he had really good social and conversational skills and managed the human resources within the bastide. Gleis secretly hinted at Lorist to pay more attention to that man, because the words he used to swear his loyalty felt really roundabout and insincere.

Lorist didn't mind that, however, as he believed that the hearts of people will eventually be revealed by time. What he needed now was subordinates that would aid in his development of the dominion. He would naturally weed out the less loyal ones as he went along. Lorist had the three supervisors brief him on the various issues in the dominion so that he would get a rough grasp on the situation.

Just as Lorist had expected, the state of the family seemed rather grim. According to Hansk, the family only had a meager amount of money left. Half a year back, one of the Gold ranked knights sent over by Duke Loggins had collected a sum of over 3000 imperial gold coins as tax and almost sucked the family treasury dry, leaving less than 100 imperial gold coins within it.

Lorist waved his hand to signal Shadekampf to give the two chests of gold Fordes to Hansk for safekeeping in the treasury. However, Hansk also frankly mentioned that gold coins wouldn't do much good to the family in its current state as what it truly needed were connections and trades with the outside world. Given that the entry and exit from the Northlands of the family was within the hands of other dominion lords, the taxes levied on the trades the family conducts will be too much for the effort to be worth it.

After Hansk's turn to speak was Spiel's. According to his report, the family still had quite a lot of food. Even though crops were only harvested once a year in the Northlands, the Norton Family could already more than sustain itself based on the stretches of farmland it had. Additionally, the garrison of Wildnorth Town sent 10% of their yield as tax. That's why the family had a huge surplus of food amounting to more than 5000 kilograms. Without trade, it would only continue to pile up as its consumption in the bastide wasn't that high.

Aside from food, the second most abundant resource the family had was copper ingots. Given that the family used to have control over the copper mine, the copper ores that were mined there were refined into ingots and stored at the bastide. As money was something the family had lacked before Lorist's return, Spiel had intended to arrange for more imperial copper coins to be minted using that resource to temporary relieve the financial burden.

The other thing the family had in a fair amount was various types of furs which were mostly collected during the past few years. Given the deteriorated state of the family's fighting force, there was no way an expedition to hunt magical beasts could be organized. Other than that, the warehouse had quite a number of ropes, wooden buckets and some other production tools. The family was in a dire need of iron, weapons, armor, mounts as well as seasoning and spices.

Kedan was the last to speak out and he announced something that everyone was surprised to hear: the family members of the fallen soldiers within the bastide already numbered up to 1000, and that was taking into account of the fact that three to four hundred of them had already left the bastide for Wildnorth Town. The ones who remained within the bastide were mainly those whose children had already grown up and those who were still able to live quite comfortably with their relatives and work as paid laborers. The ones who went to Wildnorth Town had it even worse. They weren't able to count on their relatives to sustain their livelihoods and could only rely on the occasional provisions of the bastide.

The death of hundreds of people during the elimination of the family's merchant convoy a few years back and the First Young Master's participation and death in the Second Prince's military campaign where only tens of the 200 family soldiers returned alive from, as well as the Old Master's death from the ambush of the mountain barbarians due to the absence of the Wildnorth Town garrison reinforcements, the family members of the deceased soldiers in the bastide started nearing 1000. These people put the family under a great burden. While the family was still able to give them enough food, it was still unable to pay them the pensions for the deaths of their relatives.

Other than that, Belnick, a Three Star Silver ranked family knight who had incurred serious injuries during his attempt to save the Third Young Master from a magical beast, was absent from the inheritance ceremony as his wounds had worsened all of a sudden. Kedan hoped that Lorist would pay that knight a visit at Wildnorth Town tomorrow as it was his obligation as the new family leader, to which Lorist agreed.

Old Butler Gleis had the group take a seat before he told Lorist that he was stunned to have heard about the happenings during the journey on the way to the Northlands from Shadekampf. He hoped that Lorist would once again tell it to everyone present.

Lorist started his story right from Morante City when his close friends had pledged themselves as family knights, to their eradication of the Sloph Slavers and their conflict with Count Corby and how he had decided to avenge his Third Uncle and the rest of the merchant convoy after he had found out the truth about the count's involvement in the incident years prior.

After describing the killing of the count and all his illegitimate sons at Geldos City, he recounted his departure from the main convoy with Shadekampf, Patt and several others to make it in time for the inheritance ceremony, which led to their extermination of a group of bandits at the border of the Andinaq Kingdom and the formation of another convoy followed by their return to the dominion, during which they discovered the construction site at the valley in Morgan Hills as well as his occupation of it. He also told them of the rescue mission of the captured family members who were being forced to work at the mines by the Kenmayses.

Unrolling a map of the Northlands, Lorist told the rest about the plans Viscount Kenmays had for the valley at Morgan Hills and his intention to take it for himself to build a strong defense for the Norton Family.

The people present wore expressions of wonder as if they had just been told of a magnificent legend. Not one of them expected that the return of the Second Young Master during such troubling times would allow the family to be able to go into a new phase.

Lorist also agreed to Hansk's request and told the three supervisors that he would personally head to the construction site at Morgan Hills and bring the 500 or so slaves who had been loitering at the hidden camp within the bastide with him there and said that he would grant them freedom upon the completion of the development project. He also mentioned the need for a shipment of food to be made to the site and that he would notify the rest of the convoy over there to be ready to receive it and also told the three supervisors that they would be free to check that place out at their leisure.

Also, he requested the supervisors to keep the development project at Morgan Hills a secret for now, to which they promised and left excitedly. Butler Gleis started making his thoughts known to Lorist after the three left about how he believed that the development project at Morgan Hills was a waste of manpower and resources. He thought that Lorist should bring the rest of the convoy back to the bastide and build a settlement nearby instead.

Lorist wondered why the old butler would have an opinion like this. Gleis explained that the founding ancestor's oath was to defend the northern borders and the Morgan Hills could hardly count as part of it!

However, Lorist merely laughed it off and consoled Gleis and said that he had no intention of forsaking the bastide. As the saying went, one must first retract one's fist before it can be launched out again. Lorist said that the Morgan Hills would become the fist of the family upon its completion and also mentioned that he had further plans to use it against others in the future.

By the time he left the butler's quarters, it had already become rather late.

Lorist made his way to the veranda above his bedroom that was located at the main building of the castle and took in the nighttime view of the bastide from his vantage point.

This place is really quite decent. The founding ancestor must have spent quite some effort to select this place to be the headquarters of the family 200 years ago and used another tens of years to build the bastide I see today. It's no wonder that the old butler is so

protective of this place and even suspected whether I was going to abandon it for Morgan Hills, thought Lorist as he recalled the look the butler had that seemed like he was staring at a hideous sinner just before.

"Master, your bathwater is ready…" said a timid voice that broke Lorist's train of thought. He turned back and nodded to Irina before he went down the stairs to where his bedroom was.

After taking a comfortable bath, Lorist half-leaned on his bed and looked at the hard-working Irina pour away the bathwater within the wooden tub before carrying it out of the room and returning to clean the floor. After that, she put on her greyish-white sleeping gown and took out a leather sleeping pad which she placed behind the couch. Just as she took out a rug and prepared to lie down…

"Irina, please come over here," said Lorist as he licked his lips.

The young maidservant's body stiffened. As she made her way in front of Lorist, she didn't utter a single sound, silently shivering away…

"Are you really that afraid of me? Why is that so?" Lorist asked as he stretched out his hand to stroke her chin before he raised her head up to look her in the eye.

Her face had a look of panic, but part of her expression revealed her resignation and acceptance of the situation.

"Do you know what maidservants do with their masters?" Lorist asked.

The young girl started shivering even more, but she silently nodded to signal her understanding.

Lorist then traced his fingers around the girl's cheeks before it passed her nose, lips, chin and then to the knot on her gown…

The greyish-white gown fell to the ground and revealed the slender and fair body of the nervously shivering girl.

Lorist hugged her in his chest and started stroking the two protrusions on her breasts. "Irinia, I won't have you sleeping on the floor in the future. Half of the space on this bed is reserved for you, understand?"

Irina didn't respond and could only continue to shiver in place as her body slowly warmed up from Lorist's careful caressing. Gradually, she started to let out involuntary moans.

Positioning the girl on his bed, Lorist lowered himself and allowed his blazing-hot member to enter the depths of the warmth between the girl's legs…

The girl struggled and flailed as she shivered vigorously and clawed away at Lorist's back while tears flowed down her face, all the while crying out, "It hurts… so much…"

Lorist halted and stopped all movement and waited until the girl stopped uttering any sound before he wiped some of the tears off her face and said, "I'm sorry, I thought you've done it before. I didn't expect that this would be your first…"

The girl cried and mumbled, "The… the Third Young Master was only… seventeen… The Old Master said that he could only touch me when he reaches the age of 18, or his Battle Force won't be able to be awakened…"

It's my fault, I shouldn't have pushed him into the well and caused him to have a frail constitution for the rest of his life, thought Lorist as he heard about his younger brother. He then said to the girl beneath him, "It will hurt a little during your first time, but it'll gradually fade away when the pleasure comes in… You'll understand later…

"Don't keep shivering like that, otherwise I won't be able to restrain myself from moving… Stop, or I'll really lose it…"

…

Sounds of carnal pleasure echoed throughout the peaceful and tranquil moonlit night.

Chapter 91
Sword Crisis

Lorist awoke the next day from the ear-piercing sound of wood being sawed. As he opened his eyes, he saw the young girl lying asleep beside him, grunting and furrowing her brows occasionally with the trails of her tears from the night before still visible on her face.

Carefully drawing his arm out from beneath the girl's head, he put a blanket over her and got out of bed naked. After putting on his sleep robe, he went to the window and saw the cooking lady's son sawing away at the logs. *Hmmm, this guy is pretty hard-working. It's pretty decent of him to start working that hard this early in the morning.*

He had completely released the tension he had from inheriting the title and the family dominion on the young maidservant, Irina, the night before. Currently, Lorist felt a mystical clarity and eagerness within his mind.

He silently stepped into the washroom to take a short shower and freshened himself up. After he dried himself, Lorist got into his garments and went to take his sword for his training.

However, when he arrived downstairs at the living room, Lorist was baffled by the sight before him. *Where are my swords? They're not here!*

Lorist had discovered that the two swords he had placed on the blade rack was no longer there. Only the ornamental sword that was used during the inheritance ceremony yesterday was in place. *This is weird, who would take both of my swords away?*

He went to the end of the corridor and knocked on the door of the guest room. Shadekampf yawned as he opened the door as he had slept rather late after drinking with the three chief supervisors last night. Knowing that he was the confidant of the new family head, the three supervisors tried their best to get on his good side. Shadekampf on the other hand talked about Lorist's likes and dislikes and couldn't help but drink to his content, causing him to wake up relatively late due to a hangover.

Upon knowing that Lorist's swords went missing, Shadekampf was stunned awake from his hangover and quickly aided in the search.

Lorist asked, "Where's Patt?"

Shadekampf said, "He's been gone since dawn because you just announced the formation of a new defense unit for the family…"

Patt shouldn't have taken my swords, he has his own after all. What would he do with mine? Just as Lorist was thinking, the sound of sawing resounded near him again.

Oh, I should go ask that sawing guy. Lorist and Shadekampf went to the yard and Shadekampf asked, "Eidelwoke, have you seen anyone else who've entered our building?"

Eidelwoke thought for quite a while before he stopped sawing and said, "I think Mistress Pesha did…"

Pesha? What did she come here for? Lorist hurriedly asked, "Then, did you see her take anything away?"

Eidelwoke nodded and said, "Yes, she took both of your swords with her. I could recognize the scabbards…"

Now, why would Pesha take my swords? Just as he was wondering, Eidelwoke said, "Mistress Pesha has been wanting to have a personal weapon crafted for her use, however she was unable to procure any good materials and there wasn't any weapon in the family armory that suited her needs. I think she took your swords to Old Smith Alba…"

Upon hearing that, Lorist punched the wall in anger as he thought, *what's the meaning of this, Pesha actually dares to take the swords of me, the new family head, and have them used as materials for her own weapon? She's clearly looking down on me.* The reason Lorist called her 'Sister Pesha' respectfully was because that was what the original owner of the body remembered her as. But that didn't mean that the current Lorist, a transmigrator, was afraid of her. If he let this incident slide, then would anyone still take him seriously as a family leader?

"Bring me to see Old Smith Alba," said Lorist to Shadekampf in a cold tone.

Lorist was very clear about how much money and precious materials he had used to make his two swords. For example, each Metal-eater Rat teeth that was among the materials of the swords cost one small silver each. Lorist had spent almost ten gold Fordes on nearly a thousand of them and used them to increase the hardness of his swords so that it would be strong enough to be able to withstand strikes from blade glows without prior infusion of any Battle Force. His friends all knew that even though his swords didn't look fancy or amazing, the cost involved in their making greatly exceeded that of most other priceless weapons.

Back in the days when he had just gotten used to his new life in Grindia, he was very confused about the Battle Force ranks of this world. According to his common sense, the ranking of precious metals should start from gold being the most precious, followed by silver, bronze and lastly, iron. However, why was the Iron rank placed above Bronze rank instead? Shouldn't it be the least rare metal of them all?

That bewildering question Lorist had was left unanswered until he attended the knight training course offered by the Dawn Academy. Even though the civilization of Grindia was very similar to that of the Middle Ages on Earth, the main difference was the existence of Battle Force. The lances of the knights in Grindia were also not made of applewood like they were on Earth; the situation of lances shattering into many pieces upon collision as seen on Earth by Lorist from a movie was not possible in this world. Due to Battle Force, the lances in Grindia were more similar to those often seen in video games with the blade in front easily longer than 30 centimeters in length, with some even going up to 60. Upon reaching the Silver rank, a knight would be able to manifest a blade glow and use it to cull weaker enemies easily on the battlefield.

It was when he attended the course that he learned that after the magi invented Battle Force, they discovered a problem. Battle Force practitioners usually didn't have any issues during the first two stages, however when they reached the third stage, they were heavily reliant on weapons. The magi at the time found that common metals were rather bad conductors of Battle Force as they crumbled too quickly after light usage.

Thus, the magi found three types of materials that were suited for Battle Force conduction, namely, Jadebronze, Raresilver and Darkgold. However, the blade glow formed after Jadebronze was infused with Battle Force was rather chaotic whereas Raresilver and Darkgold were exceedingly precious magical materials. Given that the magi themselves didn't have enough of those to experiment with, how would they be able to mass produce weapons for Battle Force practitioners?

That's why the magi started yet another round of experiments and finally found that an alloy of tungsten and Damascus steel was able to withstand infused Battle Force and produce a stable blade glow. The magi thus named that alloy Blackiron and derived the four Battle Force ranks as Jadebronze, Blackiron, Raresilver and Darkgold. Following the end of the magical civilization, materials like Raresilver and Darkgold have faded into obscurity and were nothing but myths of the past. That's why the following generation of people eventually came to know the four simplified ranks as Bronze, Iron, Silver and Gold.

Even though what was known of the magical civilization was often considered mythical, the records on Battle Force research somehow managed to survive the erosion of time and smiths knew that adding tungsten into weapons would allow for blade glows to be stably manifested. As more and more other materials that can efficiently conduct Battle Force were discovered, the craft of forging began to branch off into many varieties. Forging a stellar weapon was no longer as easy as just adding tungsten to the mix.

Sometimes, Lorist felt quite melancholic at the fact that even though the Norton Family dominion was large and vast, there were little to no mineable resource there at all. For the past 200 years, the only place that was discovered to have a copper deposit was the Morgan Hills. However, Charade has once mentioned that given the size of the dominion, there should be more mines just lying in wait to be discovered, since the family has been plagued with problems from the mountain barbarians and the yearly magical beast horde and couldn't spare as much manpower and expense on the forage for resources. Even now, the family didn't even have sufficient materials to craft a single decent weapon.

Pesha's eye for weapons was not bad however, as she had noticed the peculiarity of Lorist's two swords. However, her actions basically amounted to thievery and Lorist was definitely not going to let her off the hook for what she did, especially on his second day as the family leader. This was a form of provocation, and it would set a precedent for her future transgressions against Lorist, who was hierarchically superior to her. It was akin to slapping Lorist straight in his face.

Shadekampf led Lorist to the northwestern corner of the bastide where the smithy was located. A white-haired old man was currently checking out Lorist's swords while shaking his head from time to time. It was obvious that the smith, Alba, was far better at evaluating the quality of weapons than Pesha and understood that it definitely wouldn't be easy for him to melt the weapons down given the equipment he had in his

smithy. Pesha was clearly getting more disappointed the more Alba shook his head.

Without saying a word, Lorist took the swords from the smith's hand with a solemn look on his face. Upon seeing the new family leader, Alba quickly paid his respects. Pesha on the other hand gave him a furious glare and shouted, "What the heck are you doing? An Iron rank like you wouldn't need weapons made from quality materials like those. Quickly have it melted down and fashioned into a suitable weapon for me so that I can better protect the family."

Giving the stuck-up young lady a look, Lorist started to feel really annoyed. "On behalf of my late elder brother, I will forgive this error of yours, Mistress Pesha. Also, before the men of the Norton Family all die out, there will be no place for you to defend the family, so you better remember that."

"What are you saying? How dare a trashy Iron rank like you talk to me in that tone? Give the swords to me. Also, the reason I went to see you in the morning was to tell you to let me lead the new defense unit that you just formed. Patt isn't qualified for that position as he has only just broke through to the Silver rank not long ago…" commanded Pesha in a really obnoxious manner.

"Fuck off to whence you came! Don't just stand there and block everyone's way!" shouted Lorist, full of rage.

"Alright, you think you can simply do as you please because you're the family leader? Let me teach a shitty Iron rank like you the power of a Silver rank. I will make sure you remember it," roared Pesha unyieldingly as she drew her sword.

Shadekampf hastily attempted to stop her and said, "Mistress, don't do it. Milord is…"

Wham! A crisp sound rang out as Pesha gave Shadekampf a harsh slap on the face. "Buzz off! Know your place!"

As a saying went, before hitting a dog, one must first gain the agreement of its master. Despite knowing that Shadekampf was Lorist's personal attendant, her act of giving him a slap signified a huge disregard for the authority of the family leader. *It seems that she is used to behaving as she likes in the family,* thought Lorist, enraged, as he decided that he would definitely put her into place and see if she would dare to piss him off in the future as a mere Two Star Silver rank.

Even though the smithy was at the northwestern part of the bastide, Lorist and Pesha's

argument had attracted a lot of attention from surrounding passers-by as numerous servants and soldiers had started to gather around the area. Lorist understood that if he didn't harshly reprimand her for her actions today, his authority as the family leader would definitely fall apart in no time.

Lorist slowly drew his sword and said, "Come, as long as you can take three of my strikes, you will be the one who calls the shots in the bastide in the future."

"Three strikes? You really think too highly of yourself. Let's see how I rough you up…" scoffed Pesha as a blade glow manifested on her sword before she waved it as she rushed over.

Clang! The sword in Pesha's hand instantly broke into two while Lorist had his longsword pressed onto her neck.

"You… You're just relying on your superior blade!" said Pesha as she fervently tried to deny the results of the duel by using that as an excuse.

"Fine, I won't even use a sword. Come," said Lorist as he sheathed his longsword back into its scabbard and tossed both his swords to Shadekampf before he found himself a 1-meter-long wooden stick which he wielded in place of a sword.

Pesha then rushed into the smithy, rummaged around for a large two-handed sword and once again manifested her blade glow and swung it in Lorist's direction.

Pang! The wooden stick clashed into the two-handed sword mid-air and knocked the latter flying off into the distance before it was once again pressed against Pesha's neck.

"Aaah!" Pesha let out a sharp scream which started Lorist. During his bewilderment, she took the opportunity to go back into the smithy before coming back out with a pike and had its point aimed for Lorist…

With but a slight movement of his body, Lorist evaded the pike and swung his wooden stick and knocked the pike out of Pesha's hand. However, she scrambled around for an axe once again…

Losing his patience, Lorist evaded the axe swing and used his stick to strike Pesha in the neck. The axe-holding, red-haired demoness gradually lost her balance and fell towards the ground face-first…

When she regained consciousness, she noticed that she was sitting on the floor with her back against the wall. Alba, who was in the middle of his work, said, “Mistress, even though I’m also an Iron rank trash, even I can tell that the family leader’s swordsmanship is superior to yours by several magnitudes. You are far from being his match. According to Shadekampf, the family leader had challenged over 3000 Silver ranked swordsmen without a single loss at Morante City and is known as Iron Locke, the Silver Undefeated…”

…

After giving Pesha the lesson she deserved, Lorist started to make his way back with Shadekampf. Just as they turned at a corner, they saw Supervisor Kedan, who hurriedly paid his respects and said, “Milord, are you heading to Wildnorth Town now?”

Chapter 92
Knight Belnick

“Why would Knight Belnick spend three whole years just to recover from his injuries?” Lorist asked.

He was currently within a roofed, two-wheeled horse carriage with Shadekampf. Supervisor Kedan was personally driving and guiding the two Northlander Horses in the direction of Wildnorth Town.

“Milord, that’s because our family bastide doesn’t have a herbalist. The only herbalist within our dominion is the family head of the Dunbarsen Family of Wildnorth Town. He is mainly responsible for Sir Belnick’s treatment,” replied Kedan.

“The Dunbarsen Family? Tell me about their background,” said Lorist.

Kedan started explaining as he drove. “Milord, when the Norton Family first started recruiting for the garrison force, the first generation family leader of the Dunbarsens, an apprentice herbalist, was one of the first people who joined. When the standard of living of his family started to get better, he sent his son to his former herbalist teacher to learn the craft. Ten years later, his son returned as a rank 1 herbalist to the town and followed in his father’s footsteps to join the garrison. After that, it had become a family tradition for the descendants of the Dunbarsen Family to become herbalists or apprentice herbalists.

“The Norton Family has tried several times to recruit the people from the Dunbarsen Family, but all of those attempts have been refused. The Nortons couldn’t force them either because they were the only herbalist family in the whole of the dominion. However, we made an agreement so that they would help treat our injured family soldiers. The relationship between the Dunbarsens and the Nortons have been like that for the past 200 years or so. That’s why Knight Belnick was sent to Wildnorth Town to recuperate from his injuries.”

“What is the situation of WIldnorth Town right now?” Lorist asked.

“Milord, it is currently being controlled by the four great families of the garrison force.

For the past 200 or so years, the garrison force have weathered over the years and it was common to see different families' being in charge of it. Currently, Wildnorth Town's garrison is jointly controlled by the Dunbarsen Family, the Mollin Family, the Hassen Family and the Qubim Family. The first illegitimate son of the Old Master, Molocinque, was born of a woman of the Mollin Family. This is why the Mollins and the other three families are supporting Molocinque to become the next family head with the precondition that after he gains power, he would take in the four families as vassal nobles and grant them the title of knights and officially enfeoff the land of Wildnorth Town to them as their dominion so that the town will be able to lawfully escape the control of the Norton Family."

On the Grindia Continent, noble families usually didn't grant their knights their own pieces of land, but rather a bastide and a yearly salary. That was also dependent on the knight's Battle Force rank. Silver ranked family knights were usually paid a yearly bonus and only those who have served a family for ten years would be able to obtain a bastide for themselves, which can be inherited by their descendants along with the noble title of a knight. That was why on Grindia, becoming a family knight of a landed noble was akin to being granted quasi-nobility.

When a noble family recruits a Gold ranked knight, or when one of their Silver ranked knights break through to the Gold rank, the family will have to start considering granting them with one such bastide. Normally, a knight's bastide included a castle, more than 600000 square meters of farmland as well as large lands for livestock grazing or mountains or lakes. Some knight bastides even had small villages or towns.

Even though that Lorist had recruited many good friends as his family knights, he would definitely have to start planning for their bastides to be built the moment they reach the Northlands and start settling down. However, he wasn't too worried about it as he believed that Charade would be able to take care of that matter for him flawlessly.

However, noble families granting their knights proper dominions were not without precedent. But it was usually only restricted to knights who have entered the realm of Blademasters or those who have made great achievements during their service. For example, the two Blademasters working for the Second Prince each have a small city or town that they were given total control of. The other reason for granting a proper dominion was due to the large size of the noble's own dominion. Usually, nobles with high ranks would grant their knights with lower-ranked noble titles and smaller dominions to make them their vassal noble families.

The families of the garrison of the Wildnorth Town actually had their eyes on knight dominions. Their explicit ambitions and intentions could be seen as a challenge to the authority of the Nortons. Should their plan actually work out, they would be able to leave the status of peasants and step into the realm of nobility. Even if they were still vassal nobles of the Norton Family, they had near-complete autonomy over their lands and could even ignore the orders of the Norton Family.

"Their ambitions are but a pipe dream," commented Lorist coldly. Given how well-informed Supervisor Kedan seemed to be about the situation of Wildnorth Town as well as their plans and intentions, he should've been quite wary of them for some time now.

Even though the walls of Wildnorth Town was within sight from the family bastide, it took up to 40 minutes of travel by a horse-pulled carriage to arrive at the area. Currently, the gates of the town were wide open and four unenthusiastic pike-wielding garrison soldiers could be seen chatting away. Seeing the carriage approach, they intended to stop it from passing. However, upon seeing Kedan at the coachman's seat, they merely waved and let them into the town without question.

"Milord, not one of the garrison soldiers were present during your inheritance ceremony yesterday. During your visit to Knight Belnick, if you see any of those garrison troops, please restrain yourself and endure it as we are currently in their territory…" reminded Supervisor Kedan earnestly.

Lorist lightly humphed to indicate that he had his own plans as he looked at the scenery of the town from within the carriage.

Like most small towns, Wildnorth Town only had two main gates, one at the north and the other at the south. A large road connected the two gates and effectively split the town into two halves. In the middle of the large road was a small plaza and at its south was a large mansion usually for the use of the Norton Family members built from wood and stone which gave off a bold and rugged look. However, during the years when the Nortons did not make their way into the town, it had started to deteriorate due to lack of maintenance.

At the northern part of the plaza was a small, grey-colored hill where the blowhole, which served as the town's main water source, was located. Deep waterways were made along the hill so that the water from the blowhole could be transported to various parts of the town for the use of its citizens.

Lorist noticed that many of the buildings atop the hill were made of stone and the roads there were far cleaner than the rest. There were even a couple of shops opened there. However, at the south of the plaza where the dominion lord's mansion was located, the houses were mostly constructed from miscellaneous materials with some being mere shacks rather than proper buildings.

"Milord, most of the residents of the stone houses of the northern part of the plaza are the family members of the garrison soldiers whereas those at the south are family members of deceased soldiers of our family. Even though many of them have familial relations with the garrison soldiers of Wildnorth Town, they didn't receive any aid or care from them and are instead treated like second-rate citizens of the town. Apart from them, the descendants of the previous ruling families of Wildnorth Town are also there. Their treatment within the town was the worst, causing many of them to join our family force during the past few recruitment drives," explained Kedan.

"Right now, what is the population of the town?" Lorist asked.

"The last population survey that the family had conducted was around 100 years ago, and the town had 3459 residents at that time. On the other hand, the people of the town who worked and lived in the family bastide numbered around 1842 people, making the total population of Wildnorth Town around 5000. In present day, there are more than 2700 people of Wildnorth Town living within the bastide, and the residents of the town itself is estimated to be around 5000 people. However, according to my observations, there should be a total of 7000 residents of WIldnorth Town. Just the four great families of the town alone have around 400 people each. Other than the official garrison soldiers, they can still rally more than 100 private soldiers. That's the main reason why the four families are able to reign over Wildnorth Town."

"Where did the four families get all that funding?" Lorist wondered.

"Milord, they've occupied half of the farmable land of the town, given that 80 out of the 200 members of the garrison troop are from the four great families. The families who have lost their right to be in the garrison either faded into obscurity or became serfs of the four great families to manage their farms for them. Also, they've been conducting a smuggling operation because the family refused to give them a proper permit to form a merchant convoy. The main commodities they smuggle are the salt they produce as well as the fur and pelts they get from hunting. Milord, we're here. Sir Belnick resides within the dominion lord's mansion," said Kedan as he stopped the carriage and helped open the doors.

After Lorist and Shadekampf got off, Supervisor Kedan went up to the closed door of the mansion and called out to the people within, prompting a young man to come out to receive them.

“Casey, move the carriage to the backyard. I’ve brought the lord to meet Sir Belnick,” said Kedan to the young fellow.

“The lord?” The young man was stunned and he took a look at Lorist, before he quietly went to tend to the carriage without asking any more questions.

“Milord, this way,” guided Kedan. They went into the mansion from a side entrance and passed through a corridor and a courtyard before they arrived at a small hut to the left of the mansion.

“Sir Belnick is staying here to recover from his injuries, milord,” said the supervisor.

Lorist pushed the door to the hut open and saw a white-haired youth struggling to stand up.

“It’s you… Big brother tough guy…” Lorist’s memories of that man during his childhood suddenly flashed past his eyes. The white-haired young knight repeatedly tossed and caught the 8-year-old Lorist up and down in the air, causing him to laugh out ceaselessly. That knight was one of the most favored squires of Lorist’s father and was also the person who Lorist loved the most to spend time with. The young Lorist frequently called him big brother tough guy because he thought that being able to toss him high up was a great display of strength…

Belnick tried hard to stand up, but later discovered that he was unable to get off the chair no matter how hard he tried. “Little Locke, it’s been long since we last met. I didn’t expect that during our first reunion in so long, you have already become the dominion lord. I should address you as milord now.”

“Yeah, it’s been more than ten years. Back when I was 10, you’ve already vanished. I cried so hard back then,” said Lorist as he got to the side of the chair and sat down on a stool.

“That’s right, I was young back then and wanted to venture to all sorts of places. That’s why I left the dominion for my travels. However, I didn’t know that you’ve been exiled to Morante City until after I returned 5 years later,” said Belnick as he laughed.

“Big brother tough guy, what’s going on with your body?” Lorist asked.

“Milord, just call me Beck. You’ve already grown up into a magnificent dominion lord, the way you call me will make you a laughing stock,” said Belnick seriously.

“As for my body, it’s already ruined. Didn’t you see it yourself just now? I didn’t even have enough energy to stand up. Ooof…” said the white-haired young knight with an extremely melancholic expression.

“But, big brothe– Alright, Brother Beck, I’ve never heard of anyone who still couldn’t recover after three years. Can you tell me about your injuries back then?” Lorist hurriedly asked.

“Back then, I was riding tens of meters behind the Third Young Master. Nobody would’ve imagined that a Northlander Bear, a ferocious magical beast, would show up at a forest nearby the livestock farm of the dominion. That bear was easily over four meters tall and it suddenly rushed over to our group, greatly stunning all of us. The Third Young Master’s horse was so startled it stood right up and shook him off its back. However, one of the young master’s feet was still in the stirrups, causing him to be dragged along as the horse ran around rampantly in fear. I quickly tossed my pike and nailed the horse onto the ground to stop it.

“However, the scent of blood from the dead horse stimulated the Northlander Bear and it rushed towards it instantly. The Third Young Master’s feet at that moment was still caught in the stirrup and his whole body was also pressed to the ground by the dead horse. The garrison soldiers around us all fled in fear and I had no choice but to throw my only sword over to stop the bear. That sword dug into the bear’s lower rib and enraged it even further and caused it to change its target to me instead. After being chased around by it for quite a while, I was knocked flying with only one hit from its paw. As I laid on the ground and looked at the incoming bear, I picked up a pike that was dropped by one of the garrison soldiers that escaped and infused the last of my Battle Force into the blade and managed to give the Northlander Bear a finishing stab before I lost consciousness.”

Even though Belnick sounded very casual when he recounted the events of that day, Lorist could already imagine the danger and terror that he must have been in. Northlander Bears were the most fearsome beasts in the Northlands. Normally, the best move a Silver rank could make was to escape the moment one was encountered. Otherwise, he would most probably not be able to return alive.

“By the time I awoke, I got to know that three days had already passed. Master Dunbarsen said that it was practically a miracle that I managed to survive at all. Due to getting a hit from that magical beast, all of my ribs on the right side broke and many of my internals were pulverized. The Lord Baron had ordered for me to be sent to Wildnorth Town to recover and my condition only managed to stabilize after a year. Even so, during the past two years, my injuries kept acting up and caused me to be unable to continue training in Battle Force. Even though I wanted to attend your inheritance ceremony last night, I spat out black blood after only a little movement. Milord, sometimes I wonder why I didn’t die along with that bear… That’s far more straightforward. To be alive in this state is to some degree, torturous…”

Lorist furrowed his brow and said, “What did Master Dunbarsen say about this?”

Belnick lied back down onto his chair and said helplessly, “Master Dunbarsen also said that there was nothing he could do to help me because most of my injuries are internal and many of my organs are already ruptured. That’s why even though my bones recovered rather quickly, the internal organs didn’t and I’m not able to do any exercise at all, not even jogging. To prevent the recovery of my organs from being affected, I can’t even eat bread or beef and can only have two bowls of oatmeal with salt every day with one small bowl of meat soup every three days. Milord, I’ve really had enough of days like these…”

Lorist expressed his sympathy and lifted up Belnick’s hand before he lightly patted it as a gesture of consolation while he secretly tried to read his pulse.

Suddenly, Lorist’s face flushed red from anger and a seething killing intent oozed out of his being. His voice suddenly turned deathly cold, causing the hairs of the people present to stand up as he said, “That cursed bastard…”

Chapter 93
Enticement

Lorist had already been rather suspicious of the situation even before he arrived at the town. What kind of injury could cause a Three Star Silver knight of the family to be unable to recover even after three whole years?

Given that he had taken the herbalist course at Dawn Academy before, even though he didn't have proper certification as a rank 1 herbalist because that would require one year of practical training in the field and Lorist didn't have the time for that, the fact that he had been able to complete the course meant that he was already a qualified apprentice herbalist. Combined with the ancestral medical techniques of his former life, Lorist wasn't a stranger to the inner workings of the body.

During his herbalist training, Lorist understood that in this world where Battle Force exists, no matter how serious the injury sustained, with proper treatment and the use of Battle Force, most injuries to the body would be able to recover. Even if one's arm or leg were to be cut off, as long as it wasn't missing, it could be reconnected. Even if the whole of the body's bones were broken, it wouldn't leave a permanent trauma on the body after recovery. There was a case where two Blademasters engaged in battle with the loser sustaining serious injuries to the point where his body was almost completely pulverized with him barely able to breathe. But after a year and a half's time of treatment, the loser could once again move freely without issue and was able to retrain his Battle Force to its previous level before the injury.

When Lorist was reading Belnick's pulse just before, he noticed that his physical injuries had long recovered and the reason he was so weak and frail was because he was being poisoned for the long term with force-dispersing toxin!

Thinking back at the food that was served to Belnick, Lorist didn't have to be a genius to figure out that Master Dunbarsen was behind all this. *Even though he's only a rank 1 herbalist, he dares to call himself a master… Ptooey! How shameless. After regularly feeding Belnick with force-dispersing toxin, he caused him to be completely unable to recover his Battle Force. The meager meals he's been having has also made him extremely feeble! Just by blaming all the symptoms on Belnick's 'ruptured internal*

organs', he's managed to trick a Three Star Silver ranked knight like him for this long a time!

Three years ago, Belnick, one of the Norton Family's most important military backbones, had been put out of commission just like that. Had he recovered quickly enough, father might have survived the battle with the barbarians! And if he were still protecting the family, then the Kenmayses wouldn't have dared to set their sights on us.

And just because we didn't have a Three Star Silver ranked knight to rely on, the garrison forces dared to not heed the orders for reinforcements of the family during father's expedition to repel the barbarians and even started to dream of breaking free from their status as peasants… At that moment, Lorist started to get angrier and angrier as the air around him turned cold from the killing intent he emanated.

"Curses…" Lorist really felt like killing Master Dunbarsen and culling the rest of his family in one fell swoop. He solemnly swore that he would definitely not let any one of the Dunbarsen Family off unscathed.

Even though Belnick was currently very weak, given his experience during his travels, while he was startled at Lorist's sudden change, he still thought that it was because Lorist was grieving at his body's current state. He smiled and patted the back of Lorist's hands before he said, "Don't feel too down, milord. I'm already used to this. One day, all this suffering will come to an end…"

"Brother Beck, you can no longer stay over here. I will bring you back to the family bastide and find a way to cure you," said Lorist.

Belnick looked at him in a confused manner before he took a deep breath and said, "Alright, milord. I've also gotten sick of staying here. For the past three years, I feel like I've been imprisoned within this small hut. I've always dreamed of going back to the bastide…"

"Without my permission, you won't be going anywhere…" said a rough voice which sounded from behind Lorist and Belnick.

"Oh, Master Dunbarsen, you're here," said Belnick softly.

Lorist turned exceedingly slowly to his back and saw a proud, arrogant old man with eyes as deep as the abyss itself wearing a black long gown with a grey leather vest over it.

“So you’re the herbalist they call Dunbarsen?” said Lorist as he carefully enunciated each syllable of his question.

The old man gave Lorist a glance and didn’t pay him any heed as if he didn’t even acknowledge his existence before he circled around Belnick and said with his unsettling, crow-like caw, “Beck, your body is in a real terrible state now. Yesterday when you wanted to go back to the bastide to attend the inheritance ceremony, due to your unstable emotional state, the positions of your internal organs have once again shifted, rendering months of treatment and effort wasted. For your own sake, you’d be better off staying here without going anywhere.”

“Dogshit!” Lorist roared. “Old man, why don’t you just admit that it’s your treatment’s inefficacy that’s at fault?! Three years ago when Brother Beck was injured from his encounter with the Northlander Bear, he could still travel to the bastide and to Wildnorth Town for treatment with some help. However, after your years of ‘treatment’, why would he be unable to take a single step on his own? Isn’t his current state worse than before he came here at all? I think it’s because of the incompetence of a self-proclaimed herbalist master like you that Brother Beck is in his current state. Brother Beck, I am bringing you back. At most, I’ll be spending a couple of gold coins to hire a proper high-ranked herbalist to treat you. Don’t worry, money is not something I lack.”

The moment Lorist let out his outburst, the old man started to look disturbed. “Who are you? What are you doing here? Who allowed you to enter this hut?”

“Hahaha… Who am I? Brother Beck, introduce me to that old geezer,” said Lorist.

“Master Dunbarsen, he’s the new dominion lord and this town is within his dominion. It would do you good to pay him your respects…” said Belnick.

“This… this one gives his respects to the dominion lord,” said the old man in a forced manner.

“Good thing you understand your place, old man. Otherwise, I would’ve ended you personally with my sword. Considering the effort that you must’ve made to help Brother Beck, even though he didn’t get better at all, I’ll forgive your transgression. Now, you shouldn’t be against me bringing him back to the bastide, right?” announced Lorist with his hand on the handle of his sword.

The old man's started sweating more profusely as he said hesitantly, "Since milord believes it is the best course of action, I have no further comments. Please allow me to excuse myself to prepare the necessary medicines that Beck will need to consume back at the bastide so that his injuries don't worsen…"

"Alright, I give you one hour to prepare it," Lorist said.

Seeing the old man quickly exit the hut, Lorist looked at Belnick, who was currently wearing an extremely confused expression. He lightly squatted down and whispered, "Brother Beck, from this moment onwards, do not consume any food or drink unless I say you can, understand?"

Belnick's body shook with realization as he said, "You're saying… I understand."

One hour quickly passed, but Dunbarsen still hadn't returned with the medicine.

Supervisor Kedan then came to report, "Milord, a few of the squad leaders of the Wildnorth Town garrison and the other family heads of the four great families have come to pay their respects. Please be wary as they probably didn't come with the best of intentions."

…

"These here are, the Mollin, Hassen and Qubim family heads as well as garrison squad leaders, Mollin, Hassen and Qubim. Oh, please watch out for that pothole on the ground. This one is Squad Leader Dunbarsen, and Master Dunbarsen, which you have just met previously," said Kedan as he introduced the people present one by one to Lorist.

Every one of them greeted Lorist respectfully with Lorist returning their greetings by nodding subtly.

When the last one came over, Lorist laughed and said, "Master Dunbarsen, did you bring the medicines? Oh, it must be in this bag. Shadekampf, take it and don't forget to ask the master on how it should be consumed. What? You'll demonstrate right now? Hehe, there's no rush. Come on, master. Sit over here. We'll get to that after we discuss some stuff."

When everyone was seated, Lorist looked at each one of them before he began, "Given that you have all assembled here, there must be something that you want to tell me.

I'll be returning soon to settle some other matters, so please get straight to the point."

A fat old man stood up. According to Kedan's introductions, he was the family head of the Mollins. The fat man made a greeting and explained their intentions.

The Mollin family head first apologized for their absence during Lorist's inheritance ceremony and cited the reason that they didn't have the face to show up as they had not managed to prepare a congratulatory gift in time. That's why the moment they heard that the dominion lord had come over to visit, they all rushed over to offer their respects and mentioned that they would once again send someone to the bastide to deliver their gifts at a later date.

Lorist magnanimously said, "I don't really mind things like that, but I thank you for your kind intentions. I will naturally be glad to receive your gift by the time it arrives."

After the pleasantries, they started talking about the core issues. The Mollin family head represented the garrison force to voice an objection to the Norton Family for their lack of communication during the last two years and the salary they owed the garrison force during that timeframe. Even though one garrison soldier's payment is only 1 imperial silver coin per month, 200 of their salaries over 2 years amounted to 48 imperial gold coins and that was not a small sum.

The second issue concerned the promise of the founding Norton Family ancestor with the garrison force of Wildnorth Town on the granting of roughly 7000 square meters of farmland per family member of a garrison soldier. Now that most of the farmable land around Wildnorth Town had been allocated, many family members of garrison soldiers did not obtain their fair share of farmland. They hoped that Lorist would rectify the issue as the new dominion lord so that the promise of the first ancestor doesn't get violated.

The third issue was about the relative size of the population and the amount of land they had. According to the Mollin family head, many of the family members of the garrison soldiers did not have much to do within the town. He requested Lorist to give them a few permits so that the citizens of the town who have nothing better to do can form their own merchant convoys to conduct trade. Naturally, the merchant convoys would still pay 10% of their profit to the dominion lord as per the agreed upon tax rates.

Lorist kept smiling and nodding throughout the proposals as if he agreed

wholeheartedly to the points made by the Mollin family head. But within his mind, a cold resolve was slowly building up. *So they're actually treating me as a complete idiot. You really think I don't know the true reason you lot of trash have come to see me? The real thing you want are the trade permits so that you can use the Norton Family name to form your own merchant convoy. Without the permit, no other merchant convoy would agree to trade with you and you can only secretly smuggle and profit on a much smaller scale.*

Also, the 'agreed upon tax rates' of 10% is complete bull. While it is not unprecedented for dominion lords to give their subjects trade permits, the tax rates are usually around 30 to 50 percent. Some greedier dominion lords even charge up to 70%, which is not that uncommon. Did they think that the tax rates for trading would be the same as that of being a citizen of the dominion?

When the family head of the Mollins finished up, Lorist expressed his apologies on the issue of the delayed salary and explained that he only got to know about it just now given that he had just inherited the position. He promised that he would definitely look into the matter once he returns and make the appropriate reimbursements. Lorist also mentioned that he brought 10000 gold Fordes on his trip back to the dominion, and, according to the exchange rates, 48 imperial gold coins were only worth 12 gold Fordes. He assured them that a small figure like that was no issue and that it would definitely be paid out.

As for the second matter, Lorist said that the main problem was with the flawed system his ancestor had established. However, he said that he was confident that he would be able to solve it and asked them to listen to and consider his proposal.

"Supervisor Kedan, how much farmland does Wildnorth Town have?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, there are around 18 million square meters of farmland, or around 18 square kilometers, in the whole of Wildnorth Town," replied Supervisor Kedan.

"Here's what I think…" Lorist said. "I plan to expand the garrison force of Wildnorth Town to 400 people."

"What?!" The several family leaders and squad leaders jointly let out a cry of surprise. The past few Norton family leaders had tried their very best to limit the scale of the garrison force, or even outright disband them altogether. Why, then, did Lorist make a proposition like that?

“Milord, how do you plan to make up for the lack of farmland?” the Hassen family head stood up and asked.

“Farmland? Farmland is everywhere,” laughed Lorist as he said, “Using Wildnorth Town as an example, say that there are 18 million square meters of farmland at Wildnorth Town. For a garrison force of 400 men, let’s assume every one of them and their direct family members include their parents, two wives, and two children, and that each person is given around 7000 square meters of farmland, each family would only need a little more than 40000 square meters of farmland, right? So 400 garrison soldiers only require approximately 16 million square meters.”

“But… But milord, those garrison soldiers have other family members as well, like their siblings…” shouted the Mollin family head.

“There’s no need to shout, I have a solution for that. Supervisor Kedan, bring me the map of the dominion,” instructed Lorist.

The map was quickly unraveled on the table for everyone to see.

“Look here, the land around this area is relatively flat and is not too far away from Wildnorth Town. I plan to have a new town built here. When it is complete, the area of the land around the town is more or less equal to that of Wildnorth Town’s. So, if I set up another garrison unit there, then I can distribute the land just like we did at Wildnorth Town, right?” said Lorist casually.

“But, milord… That place occasionally gets attacked by mountain barbarians…”

“So what? I’ve hired a well-known mercenary group over here just for that purpose. It’s fine and dandy if the barbarians don’t attack. But if they do, we can catch and enslave them to aid with the construction of the new town! Nobody complains about free labor! Also, just because there are barbarians there, you plan to turtle up in Wildnorth Town for the rest of your lives? Look at this vast land. There is so much potential for development! Also, the expanded garrison force must also be stationed at the town construction site for the long term. Given that the remaining 2 million square meters at Wildnorth Town that are still without owner, I plan to split it into three parts of 666 thousand square meters each and enfeoff them to three honorary knights respectively and let the citizens of the town pick one from the three to be the mayor of Wildnorth Town with the other two being the vice mayors,” said Lorist as he dangled his bait before the eyes of the family heads and the squad leaders.

“Mi–milord… Is what you’re saying… true?” Quite a number of them started to get excited about the proposition.

“Of course, I’m sure you guys know that I’ve been studying at Morante City for the past ten years. This method of government is quite popular over there as it is one of the most democratic ones to ever exist. I plan to slowly implement that in the dominion as well. Supervisor Kedan, for the next few days, stay at Wildnorth Town and make a registry of the family members of the deceased family soldiers as well as the citizens who don’t have any farmland. I plan to have them help out with the construction of the new town. What do you think, gentlemen?” Lorist said.

“This… This sounds pretty good. We definitely agree to that proposition…”

It’s a given that you do. Heck, maybe you can’t even wait for those people I asked Kedan to check on to leave Wildnorth Town for good, thought Lorist. With a calm look on his face, he said, “That’s great. I’ll leave the expansion of the garrison force to you. It’s best if you start allocating farmland to the candidates for the new garrison force. As for those who don’t have farmland allocated to them, let them help out with the construction effort of the new town as well. This way, there will no longer be any problems. I’m counting on you guys and will definitely remember your efforts.”

“Milord, what about the trade permit?” said Master Dunbarsen with his rough, unpleasant voice.

“About that, I apologize but due to being in conflict with the Kenmays Family, Viscount Kenmays has sealed off all our routes to exit the Northlands. Let’s discuss it again after we defeat the Kenmayses and gain control of the pathway to the outside world,” Lorist said.

Chapter 94
Midway Skirmish

“Milord, what are you being so careful about?” asked Belnick, who was currently leaning against the walls of the horse carriage.

Having bid the four family heads and the garrison squad leaders farewell, right after the horse carriage exited the range of vision from the town, Lorist ordered Shadekampf to slow down and gave him a shield before instructing him to be careful. After that, he took another shield and covered Belnick’s body with it before he took out a few javelins and placed them within hand’s reach and patiently waited.

“Sigh, if Patt were here with me, it would’ve been so much easier. Shadekampf, even though I’ve been forcing you to train your Battle Force, you’ve only just made it to the Iron rank not long ago. You’re not of much use on the battlefield at all,” complained Lorist.

Shadekampf responded, “But milord, you’ve just said not long ago that I was better suited at management tasks rather than battles. Why are you calling me useless now?!”

Lorist said, “Even so, you should learn from Charade’s example. He’s definitely up to par with you when it comes to management, but he’s a Three Star Silver rank nevertheless. In another two years, I believe he’ll be able to make another breakthrough.”

“Milord, how can you compare me to Sir Charade? He’s someone who’s fit to become a prime minister! I can only manage a bastide at best,” said Shadekampf, obviously understanding the extent of his skills relative to Charade’s.

Seeing the two arguing casually as they made their preparations, Belnick, who was bandaged all over and even covered with a shield, couldn’t help but ask what was going on.

Lorist replied, “Hmmm, Brother Beck, don’t you think something’s fishy? Even though I didn’t let you drink Master Dunbarsen’s medicine, your condition is still stable as it

was just now. What was that about not being able to move your body in fear of unsettling your organs? That's nothing but bullcrap. You've been hoodwinked by that so-called master for two whole years. He's been feeding you force-dispersing toxin for the whole time, causing you to be unable to circulate your Battle Force to restore your body. It's like you were being imprisoned at Wildnorth Town for three whole years."

"Cough… Cough cough…" After Belnick listened to what Lorist had said, before he managed to say anything in reply, the cold breeze outside had caused him to cough rather severely.

Lorist helped to readjust Belnick's coverings and patted on his back to soothe the coughing. "Don't talk, Brother Beck. I know what you're trying to say. Why would they do this to you, right? Shadekampf, tell him about the current situation of the family from the moment Brother Beck left the bastide three years ago to Wildnorth Town."

Shadekampf started from how the Old Master died from the refusal of the garrison to heed their orders and the attack of the Kenmays Family as well as his journey to Morante City to find Lorist to return to the Northlands to inherit the dominion. Just as he was about to get to the part about the convoy, several people appeared within their field of vision.

6 riders with black cloths veiled around their faces emerged from the forest further up ahead. Armed with their crossbows, they started aiming at Lorist's group as they diverged and attempted to flank them.

"Shadekampf, disperse the horses and secure the carriage to the ground. After that, get back in here to make sure Brother Beck is protected," instructed Lorist.

Shadekampf quickly stopped the horses and pushed the sharp-tipped rod that acted as a handbrake for the carriage deep into the ground to secure it. After that, he quickly untied the harnesses around the horses so that they don't destabilize the carriage should they get startled and run around frantically. Following that, he jumped back to the passenger seat and lifted his shield up to protect himself and Belnick.

Lorist had already gotten on horseback after Shadekampf untied the harnesses and prodded the horse's abdomen by tightening both his legs and rushed forward to one of the riders at his right. With one hand holding tight to the horse's reins, he used his free hand to grab a javelin and managed to knock away an incoming crossbow bolt.

Aside from the rider who was rushing at Lorist, the other 5 had their attention on the carriage and within but a short moment, the shields set up around the carriage had taken more than 10 hits from the crossbow bolts.

Having deflected two arrows heading his way, Lorist neared his enemy as time went on. Noticing that his crossbow was not having any effect, the opposing rider humphed coldly as he put it away and drew his sword in preparation for the collision. A blade glow manifested around his sword: the enemy was actually a Silver ranked combatant. However, Lorist was curious about the unstable blade glow of the assailant which flickered from time to time unpredictably.

As the two were but meters from each other, the enemy raised his sword high and aimed for Lorist's head. On the other hand, Lorist used his javelin as he would a lance and successfully parried the incoming slash. Just as the enemy was wondering why the javelin had not broken into two from being struck by his blade glow, it had already found its way deep into his throat…

With a kick, Lorist knocked the dead rider off his horse and jumped onto it, effectively switching from an ill-equipped workhorse to a properly saddled mount.

Having noted that their crossbows were not able to pierce the shields set up around the carriage, the frontmost rider drew his sword as he approached. At that moment, a javelin soared through the air and pierced that rider before it knocked him off his horse with its momentum. Having had his chest punctured, the rider on the ground took his last breath after struggling for a moment in pain.

The remaining four riders were greatly surprised and turned to the direction where the javelin came from, only to see Lorist approaching at high velocity. The leader pointed to Lorist and roared, "Let's take care of him first!"

Even though three of the four riders' swords had blade glows, Lorist charged among their ranks fearlessly…

In an instant, the five of them crossed swords and thunderous sounds rang throughout the battlefield.

Lorist turned his horse in the other direction as he witnessed three of the four riders wobble and fall from their horses. The lucky surviving one had a pale look on his face as he stared at his fallen comrades before he snapped out of it and attempted to escape

while screaming at the top of his lungs upon seeing Lorist catching up to him.

Lorist let out a cold smile and said, “Do you think you can run?” He took out the crossbow that was slung from the saddle, loaded it, aimed and pulled the trigger. The crossbow bolt pierced squarely through the back of the escaping rider and with a loud grunt, he fell off his horse.

He then returned to the carriage and knocked onto the shield with his sword. “Shadekampf, come out and go clean up the battlefield.”

The shield moved apart and revealed Shadekampf’s face. “Milord, is it over?”

“Yup, none of the 6 who attacked us escaped.”

“Alright. Milord, I’ll be on it right away,” said Shadekampf before he climbed up and excitedly headed towards the corpses.

Lorist got back onto the carriage and helped Belnick sit up, only to notice the streams of tears that were streaking down his face.

“Brother Beck, what’s wrong?”

“How… How can they do this?! This is rebellion! Without the Norton Family, they wouldn’t be able to enjoy their current lives! How can they have no gratitude at all?!” mumbled Belnick.

“Gratitude? Haha…” Lorist started laughing out loud before he continued, “Brother Beck, you think far too well of them. 200 years ago when the ancestor of our family accepted them as citizens of the dominion, most of them were con men, vagabonds, criminals, thieves, gamblers and debtors. It was precisely because those people had nowhere better to go that they accepted the ancestor’s invitation to live in the desolate Northlands. The founding Norton ancestor took them in as folks of his dominion and even aided in the construction of their town so that they could settle down. However, have they ever showed any sign of appreciation for his efforts? No. In fact, they even exploited the loopholes in the flawed conditions my ancestor offered to take advantage of my family. Had it not been for the benevolence of my ancestor, something like that would never have been allowed to continue. From their point of view, the absence of the Norton Family might even give them more freedom.

“It’s a shame that the society here on the Grindia Continent is dominated by nobles,

and there are no rewards for people who don't put in any effort. Their ancestors have effectively sealed off any chance of the people of Wildnorth Town to be able to work their way up the ladder of society, as they prioritized the short-term benefits too heavily to the point that our family doesn't treat them as our own and even put up our guard towards them as we would our enemies. For example, even though they were able to train in Battle Force, nobody from our family gave them any proper training and instruction about it. They couldn't even acquire a merchant's permit. However, given their peasant status, they should be thankful that the Norton Family doesn't exploit them like most other nobles would their own citizens. That's why they are so desperate for a quasi-noble title from our family."

"But didn't you just allow them to expand their forces and even said that you were prepared to grant them three honorary knight titles?" Belnick asked after recalling the proposition Lorist had made to the four families of Wildnorth Town.

"That's right, I've mention that I would *prepare* to do that, but I didn't say when. If they really want that title, they must carry out my orders without question until I am satisfied. And to satisfy me can take up to tens of years. Maybe their family wouldn't exist anymore by then," said Lorist.

Well, their extermination is a given. When Charade and the rest of the convoy arrives, the first thing I on my to-do-list would be the extermination of Wildnorth Town, thought Lorist hatefully.

"Milord, you will definitely make a great dominion lord," said Belnick.

"Naturally. That's what I think too," said Lorist narcissistically as he nodded with full seriousness.

…

"Milord, it's done," said Shadekampf as he brought five other mounts back to the carriage. On the saddles of the mounts were the armor and weapons as well as other miscellaneous supplies of the attackers. Not far away, 6 buck naked corpses could be seen completely stripped of all their belongings. Shadekampf hurriedly tied two of the horses to pull the carriage.

By the time Shadekampf was almost finished, Belnick said, "Shadekampf, drive the carriage over there and let me see if there is anyone I recognize."

Shadekampf agreed and fastened the harnesses of the other 5 horses to the back of the carriage before he drove it to the pile of bodies.

Lorist helped prop up Belnick so he could look at the faces of the six corpses.

"I know two of them. The one to the farmost left is Master Dunbarsen's nephew. Two years ago while I was still recovering, Casey and him helped me with my baths. He frequently asked me about Silver ranked Battle Force training as well. In the beginning, I answered quite a number of his questions. However, after I noticed something was amiss, I stopped entertaining him completely. Thinking back, it was from that point onwards when he stopped visiting and my 'injuries' started to worsen, which Master Dunbarsen blamed on the damage of my internal organs," said Belnick.

"And that bearded guy in the middle is some relative of Master Dunbarsen. He came to the hut quite a number of times and even brought me fruits. He was the one who told me about the death of the Old Master, however, he didn't mention anything about the outside world other than that. I really don't understand why they didn't do anything when the Kenmays Family attacked. They definitely had the ability to defeat the viscount's forces… Don't tell me they don't understand that without the Norton Family, they would lose their only backbone for survival?"

After Lorist helped Belnick back into his sitting position, he pointed towards the arrow-filled shield and said, "Didn't you see that? Their target was you. They want to wipe you out so nobody will be able to find out that you've been poisoned by Master Dunbarsen once you recover from not consuming the toxin. I'm sure they've been plotting to kill you for the past two years to deal a fatal blow to the forces of our family. The people of Wildnorth Town don't even consider themselves as the citizens of the Norton Family dominion and never had any intention to weather the good and bad times with us from the very beginning. The moment they noticed that they weren't punished for their first betrayal, they took the benevolence and forgiveness of our family as a sign of weakness and began to go even further to the point that they consider an act of ambushing us like this to be the most natural thing to do without batting an eye.

"Brother Beck, surely by now you understand why I had your squire Casey and Supervisor Kedan stay back at Wildnorth Town. I can no longer trust anybody there. Apart from Shadekampf, I don't even trust Supervisor Kedan fully. Given your state, you can even be fatally injured by an eight-year-old child. Even though Casey is your squire, given the time he had spent at the town, there's no guarantee that he hasn't

been bought over by the people there already. For your safety, I've decided to return to the bastide with only the three of us.

"And to my expectations, Master Dunbarsen had no choice but to resort to an ambush like this. However, I bet he wouldn't dare to imagine in his wildest dreams that the six he sent out would be killed by me so easily. Hehe, there's a saying that goes, 'swallowing one's teeth after having them punched loose by another'. They won't even be able to mourn for their losses publicly. Sometimes, I feel like a bully for even bothering to plot against those of Wildnorth Town. Their intentions and ambitions were practically written all over their faces for me to read! There's no challenge in that at all! Shadekampf, what are you still standing there for? Let's get back home as soon as possible."

Chapter 95
Family's Forbidden Area

By the time the carriage returned to the bastide, it was already past two o'clock in the afternoon and lunch hour was already over.

Lorist personally carried Belnick on his back to a guest room on the floor where Shadekampf and Patt stayed and went downstairs after helping him settle down.

The young maidservant Irina was currently mending a white gown with a sewing set. Upon seeing Lorist get up the stairs, she started shivering all over again as if she had been standing for hours outdoors during a cold, rainy night.

Lorist sighed in his heart and used the kindest voice he could muster to avoid startling the maidservant to say, "Irina, please go downstairs with me. I have something I need your help with."

He brought Irina to Belnick's room on the second floor and said, "Irina, I will leave the care of Brother Beck to you. Later, please go look for Butler Gleis and ask him to assign another maidservant for you to help out with his care. Also, set up a small kitchen downstairs and make Brother Beck's meals according to the recipes that I will give you. In fact, I think I will have my meals cooked at the small kitchen as well. If you don't have enough people helping you out, you can find a cooking lady or another maidservant to help out. But remember to look for only the most loyal ones who have no ties to Wildnorth Town whatsoever. Also, make sure to let the maidservants taste everything that will be fed to Brother Beck just to make sure there's nothing wrong, understand?"

Irina carefully glanced and Lorist before she nodded.

Lorist continued, "If there's anything that you need, please make a list and hand it to Supervisor Spiel so that he can prepare it for you. You can also leave the setting up of the new kitchen to him."

Shadekampf entered the room at that moment and said, "Milord, Butler Gleis has sent for me to get you. He seemed to be in a really urgent mood."

“Alright. Irina, I’ll leave the matters I mentioned to you. Tell me about any problems you have at night, okay?”

Irina bit her lip before she nodded.

“Okay. Shadekampf, go look for Patt. Get him to send a few guards over and have them follow Irina’s arrangements. Brother Beck, please get some rest first. I’ll go see the old butler now,” said Lorist.

…

Butler Gleis was in a furious mood for two reasons. The first was the fact that Lorist had went to Wildnorth Town without any guards. The old butler kept nagging on about the consequences that would befall the Norton Family should Lorist come to any harm. He mentioned that given that he was already in his final years, a shock like this would be very bad for his heart and pleaded that Lorist pay more heed to his own safety in the future.

Lorist understood the old butler’s worries for his own good and recounted the events that had happened at Wildnorth Town to him as he pushed the butler’s wheelchair along. The old butler was especially enraged at what had happened to Belnick. Had Lorist not had any knowledge in the field of herbalism, the injured knight of the family might have had to suffer for far longer than two years from being fed force-dispersing toxin without anyone knowing better.

However, the old butler made an objection to the expansion of the garrison force and believed that they couldn’t be allowed to further strengthen themselves. Lorist shook his head and thought, *perhaps stubbornness is just innate in old people. Though, given that he’s been on his guard against them for such a long time, it wouldn’t be weird for him to be unable to accept this sudden change.* Lorist chose to not comment on the butler’s words as he thought it would be hard to explain that his move was made in an effort to lower the enemy’s guard.

Currently, Lorist was pushing the old butler towards the forbidden area of the family. This was the other reason why he was so mad at Lorist. Ever since the day after the inheritance ceremony, the old butler had been nagging nonstop that during Lorist’s first day as the family head, he had to go to the forbidden area to pay his respects to the heroic souls of his ancestors. But Lorist had ended up returning at night after visiting Wildnorth Town instead, causing Gleis much grief and disappointment.

As Lorist pushed the wheelchair forward while listening to the ramblings of the old man, he wondered, *what is the forbidden area like? I can't seem to remember anything like this from the young Lorist's memories and only heard of the place for the first time when Gleis mentioned it to me yesterday. What is inside? Don't tell me it's like the mysterious caves often shown in fairy tales or TV shows where treasures and riches, high-ranked technique manuals and godly weapons are kept? Would there be a spirit of an old sage there as well?*

That train of thought only left Lorist disappointed when he arrived at a derelict cliff behind the mountain where the castle was built. Looking around, Lorist thought, *the forbidden areas depicted in novels usually have high-ranked experts secretly guarding them right? Why don't I see even half a soul around here? Is the Norton Family's forbidden ground really left unguarded?*

After fumbling around on the wheel chair for quite some time, Butler Gleis finally brought up an old bronze key which he gave to Lorist and indicated for him to use it on the small keyhole on the wall of the cliff. After turning it twice as per the instruction of the butler, a clack rang out from beyond the wall.

"Push that huge rock away to the right…" said the old butler.

After the rock was pushed aside, a hole could be seen from the wall of the cliff. A slight smell of rotten flesh drifted into Lorist's nostrils, causing him to sneeze involuntarily a couple of times.

As if he didn't smell anything weird at all, the old butler rolled the wheels of his wheelchair on his own and entered the dark cave. Lorist hurriedly caught up to him and continued pushing the wheelchair.

After that, the old butler instructed Lorist to light up all the torches on the walls the cavern.

With the torches lit, Lorist was finally able to get a good look at the interior of the cave.

Good Sol… So this is the forbidden area? It's practically a cemetery! Within the cave were several platforms which were stacked up from stone on which corpses were placed.

A strong stench wafted all over the area, which Lorist soon realized to be coming from three of the corpses that were still in the early stages of rotting.

Thoroughly grossed out, Lorist could barely take it anymore and felt an urge to vomit. The scene before him was like something that came straight out of a movie he had seen that was about a person who went to Italy in search of a treasure that had been hidden by the Nazi and somehow found his way into an underground graveyard where skeletons and groups of rats could be seen all over the place…

Phew, good thing there aren't any rats in here, thought Lorist.

Further away, Gleis was waving for Lorist to come over to a platform where a large, intricately-patterned metal box was placed. Following its opening, a thick beastskin book was brought out by the old butler who then passed it to Lorist.

"Little Locke, this book holds the records of the heroic exploits of the 327 seniors of the Norton Family throughout the 248 years of the our reign at this land. Now, the seniors are all at eternal rest within this cave. This book also has their respective numbers which indicate which body on the labeled stones belong to who. I will now pass the ownership of this record of the glorious history of the Nortons to you and hope that under the blessings of your ancestors, you will be able to become a magnificent dominion lord that will not put the family's name to shame and lead it to a brighter future."

Lorist stretched out his hand with a serious look and accepted the thick book, effectively completing the task he had come to the cavern to do. *Finally, I can leave the cave now.* The moment Lorist thought that, however, the old butler had him push him around the cave and excitedly recited the stories of each ancestor that was enshrined within the cave.

At that moment, Lorist suspected whether the old butler had spent most of his free time loitering around the cave, as he could casually tell the story of each ancestor within it just by memory! After enduring an arduous one hour plus storytelling session, Lorist was delighted when the butler finally said that he was tired before he instructed him to push the stone back and lock the place up before returning to the castle.

"Grandpa Gleis, why are the ancestors of the Nortons' bodies placed within that cave instead of being buried in the ground like that of most other people?" Lorist asked.

"Well, this goes all the way back to 200 or so years ago when the first Baron Norton was enfeoffed this land and picked this location to build his bastide. Just when the

bastide was nearing its completion, the mountain barbarians attacked, causing the first ancestor and two of his sons to die a heroic warrior's death. His eldest son naturally succeeded the title and the land and led the family's warriors to resist the barbarians. It was around winter during that time, so the frozen earth was hard as steel. Due to the difficulty of digging into the ground and the fear that the magical beast migration would cause the animals to dig up and mutilate the corpses of his father and two brothers, the second Baron Norton decided to place their bodies within a cave that was behind the family's castle, with the intention of giving them a proper burial when spring came along. Later, he felt that the cave was not so bad after all and decided to change it into a mausoleum for the descendants of the Norton family and it soon became tradition for anyone of Norton descent to be given eternal rest within. You will not be exception to that as well, Little Locke," said the old butler.

Lorist suddenly felt that having his body placed within the stuffy cave and allowing it to slowly rot inside was a very scary and disgusting thought. *I don't want to be buried like that!* He then made a mental note to think of a way to change the family's traditions. Nevertheless, the visit to the mausoleum had upset his appetite, causing him to feel rather unenergetic.

Upon returning to the main building of the castle, Lorist noticed that Patt had sent over eight guards who have already awakened their Battle Force. Even though they were only of the Bronze rank, they could be considered to be elite soldiers of the family given the state of its military force.

He went upstairs to check on Belnick only to see him sound asleep with Irina not being in the room. Lorist got down and asked two of the guards to inform Shadekampf, Patt and Supervisors Spiel and Hansk to meet up at the night for a meeting.

After a while, Lorist saw Shadekampf, Irina and three other girls pushing a trolley over. It seemed that Shadekampf had decided to allocate the eight rooms downstairs for the new guards who had just arrived and renovated another two into a kitchen and small dining hall. One other room was to be used as living quarters for the two new maidservants with the last one being converted into a pantry for the small kitchen. Among the three maidservants, the taller one of the bunch was apparently Belnick's new personal maidservant.

Lorist nodded in satisfaction with Shadekampf's considerate arrangements that he would have neglected.

That night, Patt reported that among the 2245 people within the bastide, aside from the women and the elderly, there were only about 400-odd youths who were fit to join the family's forces. With Supervisor Hansk's help, he had temporarily recruited 248 of them, 8 of whom were the ones who were just now sent to Lorist with the remaining 240 divided into two squads. However, among the 240, fewer than 20 had awakened their Battle Force. In actuality, it was akin to only having two squads of farmer soldiers as both of the squads did not have much combat ability given their lack of proper armor and weapons. They couldn't even obtain a pike and had to settle for only one wooden stick each.

Lorist told them that the meeting that was scheduled for the night would mainly concern Wildnorth Town and instructed Shadekampf to bring a few men with him there to conduct a population survey. He also stressed that the family members of the deceased family soldiers who have lost their farmland to be sent to the construction site at Morgan Hills and also reminded that the garrison soldiers who have been expelled by the four great families to be registered separately to be sent to build the new town to appease the four great families as their allegiance was still not yet certain.

Supervisor Hansk on the other hand was given two tasks. The troops currently protecting the bastide were mostly retired soldiers in their forties. Lorist instructed him to not disband them and instead select ten from the bunch to become trainers for the newly-formed squads. As for matters relating to Battle Force, Lorist said that he would personally take charge for their classes.

The second task Supervisor Hansk was handed was similar to Shadekampf's: he was to do a survey on the number of family members of dead soldiers within the bastide as well as any others who were available for labor and prepare to send them to the construction site at Morgan Hills.

Lorist also instructed Patt to look for Knight Josk the next day to tell him to send over some unused armor and weapons as well as the 60-odd captive mercenaries to the bastide before the 4th day of the 3rd month.

Lastly, Lorist gave Supervisor Spiel a beastskin that contained recipes for meals and tasked him to prepare food for the new squad recruits according to his instructions. Additionally, Lorist also reminded him to help Irina with anything she needed for taking care of Belnick.

With all that said, he clapped twice and adjourned the meeting before telling his men

to get some rest for the busy day ahead.

Chapter 96
Whitedeer Mound, Bread and the Slave Camp

Lorist went upstairs and noticed that his maidservant, Irina, was staring listlessly to the distance from the window.

Approaching her quietly from behind, he looked in the direction in which she was staring. Lorist let out a slight voice of surprise as he saw the small mound not far away in the distance which was illuminated by the light of the silvermoon. Upon the mound stood several long blades of grass which swayed with the gentle night breeze and several white-colored deers could be seen jumping and playing around in the night; the whole scene was like witnessing a group of magical white fairies having fun.

Irina noticed his presence and tried to pretend that she was still unaware. However, her body started to shiver uncontrollably again.

Lorist wrapped his hands around the girl and took her into his embrace. He laughed lightly as he said, "Am I that scary? I won't eat you, you know? Why are you shivering? Oh, why are there white deers on that mound? What a weird sight."

After hearing his calming voice, the maidservant gradually calmed down and started to lean deeper into Lorist's chest. Upon hearing his question, she meekly replied, "That… That is Whitedeer Mound. Every time when the silvermoon hangs high in the sky, white deers will appear there. In… In the past, some people within the family had wanted to hunt those deers down, but they couldn't find them no matter how long they camped. Right after they left, however, the deers magically reappeared. That's why the people within the family believe that the white deers are the of Daphlyn, the Silvermoon Goddess herself. It's already fortunate for mortals like us to be able to see them from afar, much less touch them."

Giving Irina a light kiss on her cheeks, Lorist said, "Irina, you did pretty well during the afternoon. Keep this up tomorrow as well. Go ahead and sleep first tonight. I still have other matters to attend to."

…

Lorist was once again awoken by the ear-piercing sound of wood being sawed. He stretched his hand to his side only to notice that Irina had already long awoken and went downstairs before him. Sitting up on the bed and dressing himself, he looked out of the window and saw the illegitimate son of his father and the cooking lady, Eidelwoke, sawing away. However, Lorist noticed that he was currently sawing a tree stump now instead of a wooden plank like he did yesterday.

The first thing Lorist did after leaving his room was to visit Belnick. Seeing that he was in good spirits, he read his pulse while the both of them chatted. After telling the tall maidservant to take good care of his knight, he left the room and went downstairs to retrieve his swords. At the yard outside, four guards could be seen training hard: the Iron ranked squad leader, Moss, was showing the other three Bronze ranked guards the basics of sword and shield combat.

Lorist nodded towards Moss and went to the well nearby to wash his face with the bucket of water he had retrieved. Just as he was about to start his training, he noticed Eidelwoke watching the guards' training enviously as he continued with his task.

Lorist went up to him and asked as he pointed towards Moss, "Do you want to train like them?"

Eidelwoke gave him a look without making a sound and merely sped up the rate of his sawing.

"Oh, I've been wanting to ask you what you wanted to achieve by sawing every day," said Lorist.

"Nothing in particular. I only need the sawdust," he replied.

"Sawdust? What would you do with it?" asked Lorist curiously.

"For food. It can be mixed into flour and made into bread," Eidelwoke said.

"Mixing sawdust into bread?" Lorist almost fainted upon hearing that. *What's the meaning of this? Is sawdust supposed to be edible? Whose idea is it? Also, does the bread I eat have sawdust in it?*

"Wait, stop sawing. Tell the one who instructed you to gather sawdust to meet me," Lorist said.

At that moment, Supervisor Spiel appeared before Lorist and said, “Milord, this is a tradition of the family. Roughly a hundred years ago when the barbarians laid siege to our bastide, the family was short on food. The Lord Baron of that era ordered for sawdust to be added to the bread of the soldiers defending the bastide so that their hunger will be sated for a longer period of time. In the end, the family’s forces managed to outlast the barbarian army as they had run out of supplies and had no choice but to retreat. It was then when the Lord Baron gave chase and managed to cause the enemy’s forces to be largely annihilated, thus earning himself a magnificent victory. Ever since then, the mountain barbarians could no longer muster an army of more than 1000 people to face the Norton Family’s forces. To commemorate that glorious event, the Lord Baron ordered that the ratio of flour to sawdust when making bread to be 9 to 1. It is also a great method to save supplies.

“That’s why, ever since then, the post of a sawdust collector whose only purpose is to collect them for bread-making was created,” explained Spiel.

“Does the bread I eat have sawdust in it too?” Lorist asked.

“Milord, your bread naturally doesn’t contain any. Bread with sawdust is only handed to the guards and servants,” answered the supervisor.

“Sol, they only did that out of desperation because the family was short on food back then. Now that the family has so much excess food in store, only the insane would continue that practice to save food. Supervisor Spiel, heed my orders. From today onwards, I forbid the addition of sawdust into the bread of our troops and servants so that they can have a proper and wholesome meal. Also, Eidelwoke, your position as the sawdust collector is now revoked. You don’t have to saw wood anymore,” said Lorist as he made his decision.

“Milord… This is… This is against the tradition of the family…” said Supervisor Spiel hesitantly.

Lorist gave him a cold stare and said, “Supervisor Spiel, what I’m doing now will also be tradition for the future generations of the family. Do you have any other questions?”

“No… No, milord. I have no questions at all and will carry it out as you say,” said the supervisor respectfully with his head lowered.

Lorist touched his chin and continued, “Even so, we cannot forget the glory of our

ancestors. How about this, Supervisor Spiel, go check on the date my ancestor attained that huge victory. Every year, we'll celebrate that event on that day itself by eating sawdust bread. This way, we won't forget the glorious victory of our family, right?"

"Milord, that was a very wise decision," he said as he bowed down deeply.

"Then, what about me?" asked Eidelwoke, who had just lost his job.

"Go report to the new defense unit. You have a rather good physique and it's a shame if you don't become a soldier of our family. I will personally be in charge of the Battle Force training of the unit too. Eidelwoke, when you break through to the Silver rank, I will allow you to bear the Norton family name and let you form a branch family. What do you think?" Lorist asked.

Eidelwoke scratched his head and thought before he said, "Then… Alright. I will do my best."

…

That afternoon, Lorist went to the camp of the two newly-formed defense units which was located at a plaza near the vineyard behind the castle. Hansk had already been waiting over there and had picked 12 retired soldiers of the family to carry out simple drills for the new recruits.

Pajik walked over at that moment and saluted Lorist before he said, "Milord, the slave camp is already prepared to leave at any time."

Lorist nodded and said, "Knight Pajik, tell me more about the slave camp."

"Milord, there are 382 people in the slave camp with 67 soldiers who have had their Battle Force awakened and 244 non-combatants, most of which are family members of the soldiers. They're already geared up for travel. Where are we headed for, milord?" Pajik asked.

"Don't worry, we're in no rush. We'll set out in another two days," Lorist responded. "Also, Supervisor Hansk, I recall that our family didn't practice slavery. Where did these slaves come from?"

Hansk gave a bitter laugh and said, "Milord, in actuality, nobody in the bastide treats them as slaves. These slaves were mostly gathered up during the military campaigns

of the First Young Master. Like Pajik, many of them are surrendered soldiers who have been brought to the bastide after they were taken captive."

Pajik nodded and added, "That's correct. These 'slaves' are mostly prisoners during the civil war years ago like me. After I was captured, the First Young Master had once told me that he intended to use the people within the slave camp to construct a new town where they can live in and become free citizens of the Nortons. That's why the First Young Master paid so much attention to them and even bought over many slaves from other nobles as well. He once said that once the slaves form their own families, they can settle down in the dominion. The First Young Master had originally planned to start the town construction project once the slave count reached 3000. But, he passed away far too soon…"

Supervisor Hansk said, "Milord, after the passing of the First Young Master, nobody knew what to do with the slave camp. These past few years, we've had them help out with some farming and grape-plucking at the vineyard. Other than that, they mostly have their free time to themselves. As long as they remain within the dominion and not cause any trouble, we won't intervene in their activities and even provide them with food and clothing. It was later that Butler Gleis felt that leaving them without supervision was not ideal. That's when he allowed Pajik to manage the camp."

"Since that's the case, let's not call them slaves from now on. Treat them as the citizens of our dominion and provide them with more food and better shelter," said Lorist.

"Also, I've just noticed that there are some flaws in the arrangements that I've handed you yesterday. I was too rushed when I planned them and only considered the formation of the new defense units while neglecting the staffing of various other activities within the bastide. It was entirely my fault. Supervisor Spiel, I shall trouble you to come up with a new estimate that details the manpower needed to effectively run the bastide. This time, include Pajik and the people managed by him into your calculations as well as the youths who have joined the defense units including their family members. This way, we can get a rough grasp of the population within the bastide and can send the extra people to the construction site at Morgan Hills. That will definitely be an important place to the family in the future.

"Knight Pajik, help Supervisor Hansk out with his task and combine the original retired soldiers of the current defense unit with the new recruits who have awakened their Battle Force to form a new defense squad of 120 people which you will lead. Other than that, let the retired soldiers who are above the age of 40 to be instructors

for the newly-formed defense units. From tomorrow onwards, I will personally supervise the Battle Force awakening of the new recruits of the defense unit as well as anyone from the guard squad who wishes to participate as well. Don't stop them from joining, they'll reintegrate into the guard squad once their training is done. Understood?"

"Yes, milord," said Pajik as he stood straight and saluted.

On the other hand, Supervisor Hansk thought for a bit before he nodded in agreement.

The next couple of days saw Lorist working up and down without rest as he read the pulses of anyone who wished to awaken their Battle Force within the bastide and organized the 400 or so people who did come to participate into more than 20 groups which he allocated to the elderly instructors to be trained. Lorist also designed meals according to the needs of the different groups and also had Pajik monitor the progress of the trainees intensely. By the time Lorist was finished for the day, Josk and Patt had already arrived at the bastide with their convoy escort.

This time, Josk brought over 124 four-wheeled carriages and 67 surrendered mercenary captives to Lorist as well as 20000 imperial silvers, 100 buckets of green vine glue, more than 700 assorted leather armor sets, 170 chain mails and more than 1000 weapons.

Lorist and Josk hugged passionately before he asked him about the situation at the construction site. Josk said that everything was going fine and that Telesti had already started having the slaves dig the moat for the castle and started the construction of the castle walls and told him not to worry too much about it.

He then asked Lorist why he was requested to come over to the bastide. Lorist said that he wanted Josk to escort a couple of people to the construction site after two days of rest. He also mentioned that he would be going along, but only after he settled the matters of the family bastide and the mercenary captives.

Chapter 97
Mercenaries and Metal Armor

The 67 surrendered mercenaries were currently having their meals at an open space within the bastide. They were each given only two pieces of black bread, but there was another huge pot of meat soup which could be refilled as they pleased.

When Lorist and Josk went over, two mercenaries greeted their arrival.

Josk introduced them and said, “The older one is Hausky and the one with the blonde beard is called Jim. They are the leaders of this mercenary group.”

Hausky and Jim approached and saluted Lorist and Josk, to which Lorist waved and said, “Alright, the two of you, follow me into the castle. I’ll tell you what I’ve decided for your mercenary group.”

Upon entering the castle, Lorist picked a room and brought the two mercenaries inside. After all of them were seated, Lorist said straightforwardly, “Even though your mercenary group surrendered to us without resistance, you still gave me quite some trouble when it came to deciding your fates. Killing you would defeat the point of accepting your surrender in the first place, but to not do so would be wasting resources and manpower on keeping you fed and under supervision, given that most of your men have already awakened their Battle Force and are at least of the Iron rank. Even if you want to join our side, we wouldn’t be able to trust you either since your lot has surrendered to us so easily. What’s to say the same won’t happen again?”

The two mercenaries started blushing as they looked downwards in shame speechlessly because Lorist had just told them the cold, hard truth.

“I can’t kill you, nor can I let you go scotch-free. There is always the possibility of you joining the enemies and giving us more trouble after all. And locking you guys up would waste too much of my resources. After giving it some thought, I’ve decided to… hire you with money,” Lorist said.

The two of them lifted their heads up in great surprise. “Mi… Milord, you’re going to hire us?”

“That’s correct,” said Lorist as he nodded. “However, don’t worry. I’m not hiring you to go fight against your previous employer. I believe that your pride wouldn’t allow it, and there’s no point in forcing you to do so since you’ll probably not make any effort in it anyway. I even have to worry if you would backstab me for making that arrangement.”

The two mercenary leaders nodded in an embarrassed manner as Lorist had read their intentions perfectly. Hausky, who was the elder and more experienced one, asked, “Milord, what are you hiring us for then?”

“Someone, get me the map of the dominion,” shouted Lorist.

After retrieving it from a servant, Lorist spread the map out on the table and motioned for the mercenary leaders to take a look. “This is the family’s bastide and over there is Wildnorth Town. I’m prepared to build a new town over there at Poplar Coast which is situated right next to a river. I believe that you know that the Northlands is plagued by the mountain barbarians who love to come over here to plunder and pillage. To prevent the construction project from being interrupted, I have decided to set up a military base at the entrance of the valley over here.

“I’m hiring you so that you can defend this military base. Naturally, I won’t ask you to do the impossible. If there are too many barbarians, just hold your position and start a smoke signal and the Norton Family will send out necessary reinforcements. If the barbarian troops are low in number, just wipe them out. Given that your men are mostly Iron or Silver ranks, it shouldn’t be too much trouble. Naturally, I won’t be asking you to do this for free. For every mountain barbarian you capture alive, I will reward your group with one imperial gold coin. And for every barbarian killed, you will get 50 imperial silvers.”

The two mercenaries looked at each other before Hausky asked, “Can we survey the terrain over there first? Also, what kind of military base do you wish to construct?”

“Of course, go check out the terrain as you please. You can even pick where the base will be constructed. I will definitely not do his half-heartedly; if we’re going to build a base, we’ll make sure it lasts. The 100 buckets of green vine glue that I’ve just received will be used for the construction of the base,” Lorist said.

“Okay, we’ll accept your request,” said Hausky. “However, how will we come to an agreement of our fees?”

Lorist laughed and said, “Don’t worry. I’m far more generous than Viscount Kenmays. Every Silver ranked mercenary will receive 1 imperial gold coin each month whereas each Iron rank will receive 50 imperial silvers. The reward for catching or killing barbarians will be given out as an additional bonus. The term of employment will be 1 year, and after that, you’re free to either continue working for us or leave. Other than that, the construction of the base is not that urgent and we can start planning for that in the coming 10 days. After all, I have to get the materials ready as well. However, if you sign the agreement with us today, we’ll start paying you from this month onwards.”

Hausky and Jim stood up from their chairs and said, “Milord, we’re honored to be in your service.”

“Good. Then, I’ll ask for someone to draft out the contract and after signing, you can bring your men to Poplar Coast and start setting up camp there. I will have someone lead you there and send the necessary supplies over as well,” Lorist said.

“But, milord, we’ll be needing weapons and other equipment, as well as horses…” mumbled Hausky in a stuttering voice.

Lorist slapped his forehead and thought, *how can I forget something this basic? After surrendering as captives, they’ve already handed every piece of their equipment to us…”*How about this? After signing the contract, you can let your men collect the weapons they are most proficient with. I will also be providing you guys with 30 sets of chain mail, 50 sets of leather armor, 50 mounts and 4 large carriages. These items will only be loans, but you can claim them with the reward money you get. Also, I’ll be giving you clothing, bedding, tents and other miscellaneous supplies for free. Is that acceptable?”

Hausky revealed an ecstatic expression before he bowed deeply to Lorist. “Milord, your grace and generosity is akin to that of the great sun in the sky, giving warmth to the hearts and souls of us lowly mercenaries…”

“Buzz off! If you don’t know how to flatter, don’t. Did you think I wouldn’t know that you plagiarized the words of the Song of Singwa to praise me? Supervisor Hansk, send these two fellas away and I’ll be leaving the contract signing to you. After that, ask Supervisor Spiel to provide them with the equipment.”

After the two mercenaries left, Lorist let out a breath of relief and said, “It’s finally

settled. Josk, let's go. I'll bring you to see Old Butler Gleis."

…

That night in the study, Lorist was chatting with Josk about the matters of the dominion while savoring some fine wine. Lorist mainly complained about how the methods he used that was perfectly fine at Morante City was frowned upon in his own dominion, which caused him to feel uncomfortable and restrained sometimes.

"I really don't understand why the family holds the traditions spo close even though they're already in this state. Didn't you notice when we went to see Gleis just now? He was even lecturing me to not let the servants learn to awaken their Battle Force. According to him, it was supposed to be some kind of reward for loyal servants when they are promoted and the way I'm freely teaching them the basics is against tradition. If it were me, I would even not hesitate to help all the maidservants awaken their Battle Force right away. Otherwise, how else would the family regain its power? Only 2 to 3 servants get taught how to awaken their Battle Force per year according to the old ways. And whether they succeed in doing so or not is a completely different story altogether. What would that even accomplish?"

It was apparent that Lorist had drunk quite a bit from his crass speech pattern.

Knocks sounded on the door at that moment and Lorist responded with, "Come in."

Patt entered the room and said, "Milord, Supervisors Spiel and Hansk are here."

Lorist rubbed his face to freshen himself and said, "Let them in."

What Lorist didn't expect was that both the supervisors have come to raise an objection because Lorist had agreed to give the mercenaries thirty sets of chain mails.

"Milord, metal armor is far too expensive in the Northlands. Many families even treat them as treasured assets and refuse to use them! Even though we only have 170 with us, you gave the mercenaries 30 sets all at once! That's too wasteful! Milord, do you think there would be a way to get them back?" said Supervisor Spiel without holding back.

Lorist and Josk gave him a stare before the both of them laughed out loud uncontrollably. Lorist laughed so hard that he was arching his back in pain, causing the two supervisors to feel rather befuddled at that response.

After struggling to keep his laughter in check, Lorist said, “Let’s put that matter to rest and not ever mention it again in the future. Supervisor Spiel, you should understand that metal armor is only a very basic and common piece of equipment. If you go to the construction site at Morgan Hills, you will see that most of our troops there are equipped with a chain mail inside and another scale armor on the outside. To our family, the most important thing is the lives of our soldiers and not the armor themselves.

“I should also mention that the armor were all produced by a Grandmaster Armorer we picked up along the way. My only worry now is that the family dominion still doesn’t have an iron mine, Otherwise, we can definitely produce armor and other equipment nonstop and will be able to fill up our warehouses within a short year. Should that happen, your main worry would definitely be the lack of soldiers to use the armor we have stocked up.”

The two supervisors gave themselves another look of confusion. They would never have dreamed that the armor had been produced by the family itself. And the fact that Lorist got a Grandmaster Armorer to work for him was even further out of expectations. This was extremely good news to their ears.

“I forgot to ask, Supervisor Hansk. How many sets of armor did our family use to have?” Lorist asked.

“Milord, the warehouse currently has 17 sets of armor. Among them include 2 full body armors for knights which belonged to the Old Master and the First Young Master, 12 chain mails, 2 scale armor sets, and 1 plate armor,” reported Hansk from the back of his mind without referring to any written record.

“Tomorrow, bring 6 chain mails and 2 scale armor over for the eight of my personal guards. The six Bronze ranks will be given chain mails as well as leather armor to wear on top of it. The Iron ranks, Moss and Yajj will be given scale armor instead. Other than that, notify Knight Pajik to pick one set of armor for himself from the warehouse. Oh, and don’t forget to tell Patt the same as well. After giving the mercenaries 30 sets, the 170 sets of chain mail included within today’s shipment should be left with around 140. I plan to use them for the new 120-man-strong defense squad, so distribute the armor to them tomorrow. As for the remaining 20, keep them in the warehouse for now. I will have some more armor sent back from the construction site at Morgan Hills and will reward each of the soldiers above 40 with one set for staying with our family during such difficult times,” Lorist said as he stood up and paced about the study.

Supervisor Spiel nodded and said, “Alright, milord. I will do as you wish.”

“Also, didn’t we also have a shipment of around 700 sets of leather armor? Pick out 400 sets that have a similar design and prepare 400 pikes and also pack 4800 imperial silvers into a chest before loading them all onto carriages. Joe, I need you to accompany me to Wildnorth Town tomorrow to urge the garrison force for the new recruits soon so that no ‘accidents’ will transpire if they drag on for too long,” said Lorist as he touched his chin.

“Milord, aren’t you giving Wildnorth Town too many benefits by presenting all these equipment to them?” Hansk asked.

“If we don’t do this, they wouldn’t let their guard down. It’s just like fishing. To catch a fish, you must first use some bait. These weapons and equipment are exactly that. When they take the bait, we will have a way to wipe them out. For now, we can only wait and endure. Worry not, when the time comes, I will make sure we get everything back with interest. Additionally, our family soldiers are already equipped with metal armor, so keeping these leather ones around is kind of pointless. It’s better to use it to placate the garrison force,” Lorist explained.

“Alright, as you will, milord.”

Chapter 98
Lorist's Plan

Lorist and Josk stopped their horses on top of a small hill and looked towards Wildnorth Town from afar.

The gates of the town were currently open and streams of carriages could be seen moving out of the town as cries and chattering resounded throughout the open fields.

"Milord, I've never seen such an arrogant and disrespectful garrison force that even dares to be so calculative while negotiating with its overlord. No wonder you said that they were a troublesome one. However, I don't understand how you were able to tolerate their existence and didn't wipe them out for treason long ago when you first arrived at the dominion," said Josk.

Lorist laughed and said, "So now you see it for yourself. It's been 200 years and the Norton Family would never have dreamt that the loophole in the regulations made in the past to benefit the citizens would be exploited to the point that it would cause the descendants of the family so much trouble. Even so, our excursion this morning was not for naught. Look, aren't they sending those people out already? As for their punishment, that will have to wait for now. When Charade and Potterfang gets here with the convoy, we will have the necessary force to wipe them out."

…

The first thing that morning, Lorist and Josk went to Wildnorth Town with 5 carriages carrying the pikes and leather armors as well as the imperial silvers. However, the Dunbarsen family head was not present at their reception. According to the Mollin family head, he has been struck with a cold and has to rest and recuperate since two days ago and could not be present.

But when the Mollin family head handed over the name list for the garrison force members, Lorist noticed that part of his plot had failed. Most of the names on the list were people from the Mollin, Hassen and Qubim families with not one of them being Dunbarsen family members. Even the previous vice captain from the Dunbrasen family had left the garrison force.

Pretending to be concerned, Lorist asked why the vice captain had left the force. The Mollin family head's reply was that the Dunbarsen Family had decided to move over to the new town and that the Dunbarsen squad leader would serve over there as the leader of the garrison there.

Lorist greatly praised the Dunbarsen Family for its generosity and grace to allow the other families' members a chance to join the garrison force. And after many pointless pleasantries, Lorist handed the equipment to the Mollin family head and told him that it was meant to be used for the formation of the new garrison force. He also mentioned that he brought the salary the family owed the force as well before showing him the chest filled with imperial silver coins. However, he also said that the garrison force's pay would be given once every three months from now on because he had too many matters on his hands and couldn't be bothered to make a trip to Wildnorth Town once a month to pay that small sum of money and hoped that the people of Wildnorth Town would understand his troubles.

After that, Lorist asked Supervisor Kedan whether the population survey was completed. Kedan reported that the records for the family members of the fallen family soldiers as well as the citizens who had lost their land had all been accounted for: approximately 1400 people can leave the tonw right away. However, he mentioned that due to the reshuffling of garrison members, many people of the town related to the people who were kicked out of the force had been emotionally affected by the change and were not willing to cooperate with the survey and he could only estimate their numbers to be around 2000 people.

It was at that moment when the Mollin family head asked Lorist to empathize with those who had been deemed unfit to continue their service in the garrison and tolerate their unwillingness to cooperate and suggested him to build a new garrison force at the new town so that those people who had been kicked out would be able to serve there. By then, he said, the people would definitely be placated and will cooperate with the population survey.

Lorist gave a cold laugh and thought, *they actually do have a pretty good plan up their sleeves. They must be aiming to let their family members sneak into the new town and prompt me to form a new garrison so that they can enjoy the same benefits they already do in Wildnorth Town. Hmph, don't think you'll be able to hit the jackpot without putting in any effort.*

Lorist responded by shaking his head in futility and said to the three family heads that

due to the current situation the Norton Family was in with Viscount Kenmays's forces, the family has decided to build a border wall at Morgan Hills to keep the Kenmayses out of the family dominion. That's why the family needed a lot of manpower and the people to be sent out of Wildnorth Town will be helping out with the construction at Morgan Hills instead and that the workforce for the construction of the new town will have to be sourced from the people of Wildnorth Town who are not members of the garrison force nor their family members.

Lorist continued that the reason the family decided to allow the garrison force to expand was not so that they could stay cooped up like cowardly turtles at Wildnorth Town but instead help out at several other areas where they are needed. However, he assured the family heads that he would not ask the garrison to face the forces of Viscount Kenmays because he knew that the garrison force would definitely not be willing nor have enough strength to overcome the viscount's forces anyway.

His insult had caused the three family heads to redden with anger. However, the cunning, thick-skinned Mollin family head pretended that he didn't hear anything and instead asked where the garrison force members would be asked to serve.

Pointing at the map of the dominion which was laid out on the table, Lorist said that he has already hired a mercenary group to defend Poplar Coast, where the new town would be constructed. As long as Wildnorth Town was able to send out 200 garrison troops, they will be able to setup a new military base at a valley there. The mercenaries will mainly be responsible for defending the base while the garrison force members only had to help supply them once every ten days and watch over the construction of the town at Poplar Coast.

Naturally, Lorist said that the Norton Family will definitely reward the people of Wildnorth Town for their efforts and increase the salary of the garrison members who go to Poplar Coast to 10 imperial silvers per month, which is easily ten times their normal pay. Other than that, the bonus which the mercenaries had for capturing barbarians alive or killing them would also be applicable to the garrison force members.

That declaration caused the three family heads to argue for quite an amount of time without giving Lorist a clear answer. In the end, Lorist got annoyed and said that he would give the three family heads one month's time to consider the issue and mentioned that the family would not force them to do that if they weren't willing. But he added that the construction of the new town will have nothing to do with Wildnorth

Town anymore should that happen and stressed that the family did not care about what the townsfolk had to say about that matter.

Lastly, Lorist requested that he be allowed to borrow some carriages to help move the people who were leaving Wildnorth Town to the bastide, but he didn't expect that it would be met with the joint refusal of all three family heads. This caused Lorist to fume with rage and question whether the three family heads were intent on committing treason against the family. If that was the case, he said that the family was willing to surround Wildnorth Town with their forces and wipe them out regardless of the cost.

His sudden aggressive attitude deeply shocked the three family heads to the point that they quickly begged for mercy as they stammered to explain why they had refused to sell the carriages: they were worried that once the carriages were used to transport the people back to the bastide, they wouldn't be returned and cause the town to incur heavy losses.

Lorist didn't expect that the reason would be something as trivial as that. It was extremely ludicrous that the three family heads had dared to risk offending their dominion lord for the sake of tens of carriages and Lorist didn't know if that was a sign of bravery or merely a foolish focus on short-term gains and losses.

"Alright," Lorist said. "Then I won't force you to lend me any. But you'll be fine if I rent them, right? It's only a short trip of one hour and I will pay a rent of one imperial silver for each carriage per trip made to the empty fields outside the bastide. Other than that, I promise on the name of the Nortons that I will definitely return your carriages after transporting the people to the bastide."

Upon hearing Lorist say that, the three family heads started arguing again. However, this time, it was about how many carriages each family would provide so that they would not miss out on this chance to make extra money. After a couple more moments, the family heads finally agreed on the carriage arrangements and proceeded to order their men to organize the transport of the 1400 or so people.

…

"Milord, I still have something I don't understand. I feel that with our current forces, we'll definitely be able to destroy the garrison force of Wildnorth Town. There's no need for you to placate them like that. The more you let them be, the more they will

take you for granted," said Josk as he looked towards the town.

Lorist nodded and said, "You're right about that, Joe. If I wasn't troubled with Viscount Kenmays's forces and the construction at Morgan Hills, the soldiers I brought back to the dominion would definitely be enough to wipe out Wildnorth Town. However, we can't afford to do that now as the garrison over there is unlike those within other dominions. They have a history of over 200 years. The 200 garrison force members is only the official number; they may be able to rally up more than 2000 fighters should we actually decide to take them out. And all of those people will definitely not surrender easily and fight to the death as their family members and livelihood depend on it. Even if we manage to wipe them out, our losses would definitely be huge and we will not be able to spare any more soldiers to defend the construction site at Morgan Hills.

"As the Wildnorth Town is the only problem in the dominion, we can afford to delay their demise and compromise with them for now. My decision to expand the garrison force of Wildnorth Town so that we can make the population of the town decrease as people leave it and cause strife within their own ranks. The true aim of my decision to construct a new town at Poplar Coast was to tempt the ruling families to send out the dissidents within the town so that the ruling families will be able to take complete control over Wildnorth Town. That way, I can effectively halve their fighting force as well.

"And providing with the pikes and leather armor as well as paying the salary we owe them is mainly to placate them as well as to let them think that we're not prepared to antagonize them so that they won't cause trouble for me in the dominion. What we need most now instead is time, especially with the case of the construction of the castle at Morgan Hills, the issue with Viscount Kenmays, the training of the new defense unit within the bastide as well as waiting for the main convoy led by Charade to arrive. What I'm trying to do now is to stabilize the situation within the dominion first."

"Milord, are you really serious about building the new town at Poplar Coast?" Josk asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Lorist said as he laughed. "My father and brother had long had a plan to build a new town within the dominion so that we can build the foundations to one day shake off the burdensome Wildnorth Town. It's a shame that they weren't able to complete the plan when they were still alive, and the place they had decided to build

the town at before they passed away was at that very spot. Building a new town there is akin to expanding the area of influence of the family within the dominion by two times. The main problem with that place is the occasional attack from mountain barbarians and that is exactly why I hired the mercenaries to be stationed at the military base there.

“But I have to admit that until very recently, the construction of the new town was merely an afterthought of mine that was also a very convenient to use as an excuse to cause the people of Wildnorth Town to turn against each other. For now, I will still be prioritizing the construction of the castle at Morgan Hills and following that, the mountain city within the valleys there according to the Kenmayses’ original plan. After the completion of the castle, I plan to use that as my headquarters and proceed with the construction of the city, defeating the Kenmays Family, and finding a way to connect the Northlands to the outside world so that we can start trading as well as await the arrival of the main convoy. Those will be the main goals I plan to accomplish in the near future.

“As for the construction of the town at Poplar Coast, if the people at Wildnorth Town are willing to fork out some manpower, we will be able to start the preliminary work such as gathering stones, wood, green clay and other building materials which will take at least two years. Within that time period, the people from the town who had been sent out to work will definitely have some conflicts with the garrison soldiers watching over them. After that, Wildnorth Town will definitely be in chaos and much easier for us to deal with.”

“Milord, you’re a devious one, aren’t you?” Josk said.

“Oh my, you truly flatter me,” replied Lorist.

Chapter 99
Maplewoods Bastide

At that moment, Supervisor Kedan and Shadekampf arrived at the top of the small hill and approached Lorist.

Lorist asked, “Do you know why the Dunbarsen Family left the garrison force?”

“Milord, last time when you brought Knight Belnick away from their town, something seemed to have happened within the Dunbarsen Family. However, we were unable to find out what as they had tried rather meticulously to keep it secret. However, I do remember that back then, the Mollin, Qubim and Hassen family heads had visited Master Dunbarsen to discuss something. It was after that when the members of the Dunbarsen Family left the garrison force,” replied Kedan.

“What about you? Did you notice anything of interest?” Lorist asked as he turned to Shadekampf.

Shadekampf shook his head and said, “Yesterday night, I had invited an ex-member of the garrison force who had just left it recently to have some drinks together and after he downed quite a few cups, he told me that the four families were actually hiding their true military might and that each of them had several Silver ranked members as well. That is also the reason why they had the galls to test our family’s patience. However, their Silver ranks did not have any access to proper Battle Force training methods above the Silver rank and had no choice but to rely on themselves to research it. That man even told me that this time, the Dunbarsen Family had incurred a rather heavy loss as for some reason, they had lost 4 out of 5 of all their Silver ranks all of a sudden as well as two other Three Star Iron ranks, causing them to fall from the second most powerful family to the last overnight. I believe that they had left the garrison force because of pressure from the other three great families.”

Lorist laughed out loud and thought back at the six who had come to assault him when he was on the way back to the bastide with Belnick and Shadekampf. Originally, he had thought that all four families had been involved in that attack as Belnick had only recognized two of them who belonged to the Dunbarsen Family. Little did he know that the other four were members of the Dunbarsen Family as well, causing them to

instantly suffer a huge loss as if they had been crippled from having their spine broken. He even thought that the four families would scramble for the three knight titles that he was going to give out and didn't expect that one of them would be out of the race so quickly as a result of his own actions of killing off every single attacker at once back then.

"Then, is there reason enough to suspect Belnick's squire, Casey?" Lorist asked once again.

Shadekampf replied, "I've asked a couple of people and most of them only knew him but never really interacted much with him. I also talked to a few of the former garrison soldiers and all of them said that they weren't close with Casey nor did they know which family he was aligned with. According to them, Casey only spends his time taking care of Belnick at the dominion lord's mansion. Other than Master Dunbarsen, he has never met the other family heads either, so I believe he should be clear."

Lorist mumbled in a low voice, "What I'm curious about is during the two years Knight Belnick was poisoned by Master Dunbarsen to the point where he couldn't leave the dominion lord's mansion, didn't Casey suspect anything was going on? That's the main reason I can't be certain of his loyalty. However, since both of you didn't notice anything strange, when we return to the bastide, I'll have Casey join the squire unit and teach him how to awaken his Battle Force as a reward for his two years of care for Knight Belnick."

"Milord, this time, you were really too generous with Wildnorth Town's garrison force. Not only did you pay them the salary, you even gave them weapons and armor. What I'm worried of is that they won't do according to what you have told them," said Supervisor Kedan.

"They will, because they have no other choice. Did you forget that I changed the regulation for the allocation of farmland?" Lorist said.

"Do you mean the one that states that each garrison force member's family will be allocated around 40000 square meters of farmland?"

"That's right. 400 garrison force members will need around 16 million square meters of farmland, which is the area of most of the farmable land of Wildnorth Town. The Mollin, Hassen and Qubim families already occupy all the garrison force positions, so do you think they will not jump at the chance to claim the farmland? That way, the

garrison soldiers which were kicked out would also be deprived of their share of the land as well. What do you think would be their response?"

"To cause trouble?"

"That's a given. The three great families had originally intended to send those they kicked out to the new garrison force that they expected to be formed with the construction of the new town to placate them while spreading their own influence there as well. However, what they did not foresee was that I won't be forming a new garrison force for that town right away and told them that I would only do so after the completion of the town. That way, these people would lose their hopes of getting back their positions as garrison soldiers. Given that they had lost their previous benefits, do you think they would sit still and take it silently?"

Lorist gave a cold laugh and continued, "The reason I gave the three families 3 months to decide was because I hoped that this would cause the people who were kicked out to turn against the three families, which will in turn result in the three families sending their garrison soldiers to force the people who cause trouble to go to Poplar Coast to participate in the construction of the new town so they don't continue to cause trouble within Wildnorth Town, effectively halving their population there. I expect that all that's left of the three families within Wildnorth Town would be only three to four thousand people. Take the women and elderly out of the equation and they will at most have a fighting force of 1000-odd people. By then, the family only has to face a force of over 1000 instead of the original 7000 people."

Supervisor Kedan was stunned at that revelation.

Lorist looked back at Wildnorth Town and saw that the last carriage had already exited the gates. "Let's go. Supervisor Kedan, you will be put in charge of settling these people down at the empty field outside the bastide. Shadekampf, inform the family members of the dead soldiers of our forces about our new pension policy and ask them not to worry as the family will definitely not abandon those who are loyal to us, understand?"

"Yes, milord. I understand," replied Shadekampf.

…

Currently, the fields outside the bastide was packed with people with Supervisor

Kedan making arrangements for tents to be set up and Supervisor Hansk calculating the cost of renting the carriages from Wildnorth Town whereas Supervisor Spiel was reporting something to Lorist.

“Milord, Sir Josk has brought over 124 carriages to the bastide. The bastide on the other hand has 87 carriages available to use which were mostly utilized by the family merchant convoy and military force in the past. However, the family also has a lot of two-wheeled carriages which were mainly used to transport supplies in short distances or workers to the farms. If milord needs them, we can provide up to 135 units.”

“Supervisor Spiel, how much extra manpower does the bastide have?” Lorist asked.

“Milord, Supervisor Hansk’s survey reports around 748 people.”

“That means that including the 1427 people who have just arrived from Wildnorth Town, we can send 2175 people to the site at Morgan Hills, which mean we will require around 200 four-wheeled carriages. How much food and supplies can the remaining carriages transport?”

“Milord, the supplies you need to transport there are mostly food and textiles. While we do have food in abundance in the warehouses, the opposite is true for textiles. However, we can still use them to make some clothing to be sent over. If we use the two-wheeled carriages as well, we will be able to transport 5000 kilograms of food and a bunch of clothes,” replied Spiel.

Lorist turned his head to look and saw that Josk, who was beside him, was spacing out as if he was thinking of something.

“Hey, Joe, what do you have in mind?”

“Oh, milord, I was just wondering about something. I remember seeing a large plaque with ‘Wildnorth Town’ engraved on it at the gates of the town when we visited this morning, but I don’t remember seeing something similar at the bastide. Why doesn’t this place have a name?”

That’s right! Lorist suddenly recalled that most people only referred to this place as the ‘family bastide’ as if it didn’t have a name of its own. *That’s weird, the family has been around for more than 200 years, why didn’t anybody name this place?*

“Supervisor Spiel, do you know the reason for this?”

Spiel shook his head. At that moment, Supervisor Hansk was just walking by them after completing his task and Lorist asked him the same question.

“I recall that someone else asked the same question before. At that time, the Old Master’s response was there was no need to go through so much trouble to name the place as the family only had one bastide within the dominion. He believed that calling this place the family bastide would be more affectionate,” explained the supervisor.

Lorist shook his head and said, “That won’t do. The family will have many more territories in the future, so this one needs a name to avoid confusion. Let me think of one then. Since the surrounding mountains are filled with maple trees, let’s call this place Maplewoods Bastide from now on. Seek out a stonemason immediately to have that name carved on the castle.”

“Milord, what an apt name for the place! It is definitely fitting of the landscape around here. I will instantly ask for someone to start carving the name up,” replied Supervisor Hansk.

Lorist then called out to Spiel, who was just about to leave. “Hey, I’m afraid I’ll have to trouble you to prepare the supplies and carriages as soon as possible during these two days. It’s already the 5th day of the 3rd month, and I hope to be able to depart on the 7th. That way, we’ll be able to arrive at the construction site by the 8th day of the month.”

“Milord, please be assured that it will definitely be ready by the 7th,” said Supervisor Spiel before he left in a hurry.

“Milord, there’s plenty of time for you to prepare, you don’t have to be in such a rush you know,” said Josk.

“No, Joe, did you forget what we had talked about with Butler Boris back there? Around the 10th day of the 3rd month, there will be a shipment from the Kenmays Family to the construction site as well as an escort of many more slave laborers there. I plan to arrive by the 8th and see if we’ll be able to swallow up all that for ourselves,” Lorist said.

…

On the 7th day of the 3rd month during 9 o'clock in the morning, a supply convoy formed from 211 four-wheeled carriages and 135 two-wheeled carriages left Maplewoods Bastide for the construction site at Morgan Hills.

This time, Lorist was accompanied by Supervisors Hansk and Kedan. Hansk also picked the 200 or so youths who were previously preparing to awaken their Battle Force from the bastide to be coachmen for the moment. After the trip, they will once again return to the bastide to resume their training.

Patt on the other hand brought 60 soldiers from the newly-formed defense unit that had all awakened their Battle Force along with them while Josk returned with the 60 guard squad members that came with him and served as a scout unit for the return trip.

Lorist was currently complaining to Shadekampf, "Why do I feel that I've been entangled with nothing but convoys recently? You see, I formed a convoy back at Morante City to head to the dominion. After leaving it behind at Geldos City to travel lightly and quickly, Patt managed to get another formed for me at Fenyata Town. And now, after only spending a couple of days at the dominion, I'm leaving it with yet another convoy. I'm so sick of convoys, you know?"

Shadekampf knew that Lorist was only joking around and merely laughed it off without bothering to continue the conversation.

Josk however laughed out loud and said, "Milord, you know you could always depart a day later. I can lead the convoy and wait for you to catch up tomorrow."

Lorist waved his hand and said, "No way, I've noticed that I'm a workaholic who can't leave anything unattended. I wouldn't be able to sleep soundly at night if I'm not here with you on an important occasion as this."

The trip Lorist had taken with Patt and Shadekampf back then with only one carriage from Morgan Hills to Maplewoods Bastide had taken up to 7 hours. Given the size of their convoy, it would take up twice as much time for them to complete their journey.

After traveling for six hours, it was already two in the afternoon. Josk who was at the front of the convoy sent someone to the back to ask Lorist whether they should stop the convoy to rest at a small lake up ahead.

Just as Lorist was about to head to the front to check that lake out for himself, he

suddenly noticed smoke signals coming from the mountains around them as ten riders emerged from the mountains while brandishing the weapons in their hands and screaming out an eerie war cry as they approached…

Chapter 100
Barbarians, Gold Mine and Plotting

“Barbarians!” screamed some at the front of the convoy. The convoy instantly broke into a huge chaotic mess…

“Shadekampf, help restore order to the convoy. There’s nothing to fear about 50 or so barbarian riders. Guard squad, march forward on my lead!” roared Lorist.

Just when the 120 mounted guards scattered throughout the convoy gathered into a line formation near Lorist, a chestnut brown horse rode out from the group towards the barbarian riders with its rider holding a great green longbow. When he was around 150 meters from the barbarians. the thunderous sound of the bowstring rang out repeatedly…

One barbarian rider after another was struck down by the emerald-colored arrow-bolts. After both parties traveled for another 30 meters towards each other, more than 20 barbarians had fallen from their mounts…

The remaining 30 or so barbarian riders stopped their mounts in terror. All of a sudden, another savage cry sounded from far away, causing the riders to turn back and retreat…

Josk breathed in a huge gulp of air while lightly shaking his hand which was slightly numb from all that firing before he once again lifted his longbow and circulated his Battle Force. But this time, he didn’t shoot rapidly and instead relaxedly shot at the 3 barbarian riders who were at the back of their retreating group, swiftly ending their lives. Seeing the rest of the barbarians escape into the trees, he kept his longbow and stopped his assault.

However, one of the riders turned around and started cursing and gesturing. Even though Josk didn’t hear that barbarian from far away, he figured that the savage was probably saying something derogatory to him and shot out another arrow in rage.

That barbarian immediately tried to evade the incoming projectile and successfully did so, with Josk’s arrow taking the barbarian’s feather-decorated helmet off and

pinning it onto a tree not far away. The tree shook so hard from the force of that arrow that it actually snapped into half and gradually fell towards the ground.

After seeing Josk's arrow snap a huge tree's trunk, the barbarian who had managed to evade certain death looked up and locks of long golden hair could be seen falling over that person's shoulder now that the helmet was absent. It appeared that the barbarian rider was a woman. Even though that female barbarian rider had escaped with her life, she fainted from sheer terror of almost losing her life and laid unconscious below the shade of the tree. However, a few other barbarians helped to carry her to safety and led her mount deeper into the forest.

The slowly falling tree eventually crashed onto the ground, causing a cloud of dust to obscure the area from sight. When the dust settled, there was no longer any trace of the barbarians at the edge of the forest.

Apart from the 20 or so barbarian corpses and their riderless mounts, the scene from before seemed to have been nothing but a dream.

Josk turned his horse and returned to the convoy, only to be received by a sudden loud cheer, "Divine marksman! Divine marksman!"

Lorist went up to Josk to receive him. He patted his shoulder and said, "You did great!"

Then he raised Josk's right hand and cheered towards the convoy, "Josk! Josk!…"

The people of the convoy responded with great fervor. "Josk! Josk! Divine Marksman Josk!…"

Josk rubbed his nose and said embarrassedly. "Milord, this is a little too much…"

Lorist said, "Joe, you deserve it."

…

Due to encountering the patrolling barbarian cavalrymen, Lorist decided to not rest at the lake up ahead and continue their travels just in case the escaped barbarians called for more reinforcements.

Shadekampf brought a few guard squad soldiers to rally up the dead barbarians' mounts and loot their corpses. Lorist on the other hand called Supervisors Hansk and

Kedan over and asked them whether barbarians were commonly sighted in that area.

Hansk shook his head and said, “Milord, I’ve never heard of any barbarian sightings here and there is no such instance stated in the family records either. Commonly speaking, barbarians are usually seen around the Magical Dragon Mountains. This place is quite far from there and is actually closer to the Black Forests and the Desolate Hills and the family troops have never noticed the presence of barbarians here for the past 100 years even though not many from the family ventured much to this area. I believe it must’ve been a rare coincidence for us to have encountered those barbarian cavalrymen.”

After cleaning up the battlefield, Shadekampf let the guard squad members continue collecting the mounts and rode over to where Lorist was.

“Milord, take a look at this,” said Shadekampf as he handed over a small leather pouch.

After opening it, Lorist reached his hand inside and took out a handful of golden dust.

“Gold dust!” cried out Supervisors Kedan and Hansk.

“Milord, the barbarians that were killed by Sir Josk mostly had a pouch on them that was filled with gold dust like this, I even noticed this on one of them,” said Shadekampf as he took out yet another piece of gold that was about the size of a thumb.

“A gold nugget!” exclaimed Lorist as his eyes brightened.

“Milord, I suspect that there are some gold deposits around the forest or the hills which is also the reason for the presence of the barbarians. I suggest we send some people here to conduct a survey of the land. If we really do discover a gold mine, then the family will definitely not lack any funds to develop the dominion in the future,” said Supervisor Kedan passionately.

Lorist took the gold nugget from Shadekampf, weighed it in his hand, before he gave it a closer look. He then looked towards the mountains in the distance and then to the forests where the rest of the barbarians had escaped to and shook his head. “At this point, we still don’t have enough military prowess nor manpower to start developing this area. Even if there is a gold mine, there is no guarantee that we will be able to sustain the mining operations and may even cause the family to be entangled with the barbarians because of this. There is a possibility that the price we pay for the gold mine will far exceed what we actually get from it, so let’s put that idea to rest for now.

It's not like that mine will one day leave the place anyway, so it won't hurt to wait for a while until the northbound convoy arrives. By then, we should have more than enough manpower and resources to do so."

…

Lorist's convoy only managed to reach the construction site at around 10 in the night. Having been given an early notification, Telesti had already instructed the laborers to set up a camp and also prepared some food to receive the people who had traveled for almost a day straight.

As Lorist was biting into a piece of bread, he asked Reidy, "Where's Miss Telesti?"

"Milord, she has already gone to sleep at 10 o'clock and left me in charge of the place. Do you need me to wake her up?" Reidy asked.

"It's alright, I only wanted to ask about the progress of the construction. I'll be able to see it tomorrow anyway, so there's no need to bother her right now. Oh, and, ask for Butler Boris to come over. I have something I want to ask him about," Lorist said.

Butler Boris was brought over to Lorist without much delay with a sour look on his face.

"Huh, Butler Boris, what's with you? You look like you're about to cry. What's going on?" Lorist asked curiously.

The butler instantly kneeled before Lorist and said, "Milord, please save my family members. If Viscount Kenmays knows that I surrendered and started working for you, he'll definitely prey on my family."

Shocked, Lorist said, "Please stand up, Butler Boris. Tell me where your family is and I'll see if I can help reunite you with them."

But the butler refused to stand up and continued to kneel. "Milord, my family are all living at the Redriver Valley Bastide within the viscount's dominion and the shipment convoy will be coming over within two days. If they notice that this place has already been occupied and send word back there, it will be the end for my family. They will definitely be punished in my stead by the viscount! Given that I've failed my responsibilities as the chief manager of this place, he'll definitely release his anger onto my family regardless of whether I'm still alive! That's just how his temperament

is! I've already lost sleep for the past couple of days because of this… Milord, I beg you…"

"Please get up first, Butler Boris. The reason I asked for you was to get some information about the incoming shipment convoy. How many carriages would they have and how powerful is their escort? I need that information in order to know if I can swallow them whole. After that, you can tell me more about the bastide so that I can see if there's some way I can save your family," consoled Lorist.

Now that his family members' lives were at risk, Butler Boris revealed every detail he could about the shipment convoy. According to him, the convoy that would arrive on the 10th would have around 400 carriages and based on their previous shipments, 200 of them will be carrying 3000 buckets of green vine glue with each carriage holding 15 buckets and each bucket weighing around 50 kilograms, so each carriage would weigh around 1000 kilograms including the weight of the wooden buckets. The remaining 200 carriages would mostly transport food ranging from smoked meat to alcohol and other supplies like clothes and building tools.

The escort that was in charge of the shipment was the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew. They were considered to be one of the more active mercenary crews during the time of the civil war and had around 200 members in total with their insignia bearing a white goose feather. The crew leader Adams was an old Three Star Silver veteran with tens of other members of the crew being Silver ranks as well with the rest being at the Iron or Bronze rank. They had been paid quite a huge sum by the Kenmays Family to serve as their main fighting force.

The Redriver Valley Bastide of the Kenmayses was approximately 1 day of travel away from the construction site at Morgan Hills and it would take around 6 to 7 hours on horseback to cover the distance. Now that the bastide had become a central supply distribution point, a huge amount of resources were stored within and was managed entirely by the head butler of the Kenmays Family, Pelador, who was aided by tens of other guards of their family.

Not far away from the bastide was the immigrant town the Kenmayses had paid a huge price to recruit vagabonds to build, which had a population of around 2000 people that was defended by a garrison squad of 100 soldiers. However, if the Kenmays Family intended to send the 1000 slave laborers along with the shipment to the construction site, the garrison soldiers would join the escort as well.

After Butler Boris told Lorist all that information, he was asked if there was a possibility of baiting the escort of the shipment convoy into the area of the construction site and force the mercenary crew to surrender so that the Norton Family can obtain all the resources of the shipment.

The butler replied that it would definitely be difficult as Crew Leader Adams was a cunning and careful man. Given that he knew many of the mercenaries who were previously stationed at the construction site, if Adams noticed their absence when he approached, there was a huge possibility that he wouldn't enter the site.

Lorist looked at Josk who was chomping down at a bone and asked, "How about it? Are you confident with being able to trick them?"

Josk placed the bone down, wiped his mouth, and said, "Milord, there's no need to do so much plotting like that. Just give me a squad of guards and I will be able to eradicate the whole mercenary crew in an open field battle and take the whole shipment for ourselves."

Lorist laughed out loud and said, "No way, I worry that our losses would be huge if we were to engage in an open field battle. Think about it, most of the guard squad members used to be common bandits who have never received any formal military training or drills and know nothing about strategic formations other than rushing straight at the enemy like how most bandits fight. If we were up against weaklings, then there wouldn't be a problem. But our enemy is an experienced mercenary crew which has weathered many battles, so it is almost guaranteed for the guard squad to be at a severe disadvantage given their lack of understanding of military tactics."

Ovidis, who was just sitting beside Josk, exclaimed in a dissatisfied tone. "Milord, we're your family's soldiers, not a band of lowly bandits."

Lorist waved towards him and said, "Come on, don't be sour about that. I was just making an example."

Lorist continued, "If we manage to trick the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew to enter the construction site, it would be akin to us locking up a rabid dog before beating it. We could even use the ballistas on the walls to pressure them into surrendering. Doesn't the leader of that crew recognize some of the mercenaries who have yielded to us? It wouldn't be too hard to carry this out. Patt…"

Patt stood up in response and awaited his orders.

“Rush to Poplar Coast tonight itself and ask the mercenaries there if they want to make some quick money. As long as they manage to lure the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew into the construction site, each one of them will receive 10 gold Fordes. I only need twenty people, and no matter if they accept it or not, I want you to make it back here by the morning of the 9th, which is tomorrow, understood?” Lorist instructed.

“Yes, milord. I will set out right away.”

“Good, I’m counting on you. Please be careful on your way there.”

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