轉生之
加藤清高
姬本晃道 著

Tales of the Reincarnated Lord

– 重生之领主传奇 –

- Volume 3 -

-Author-
Smoke Is A Path
烟本是道

[LiberSpark]

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DWARVEN KINGDOM
TENDANENT MOUNTAIN
URUBAHA DUCHY
GOLDEN COAST
GOLDEN COAST
ROMON EMPIRE
CREATED BY : A_MINERVA

Chapter 101
Mistakes

By the time the sky brightened up, Lorist exited his tent to do some stretches. Shadekampf who was standing right beside brought over a linen cloth for Lorist to wipe his face with. When Lorist was done, Shadekampf handed him some gargling water.

“Milord, breakfast is ready,’ said Shadekampf.

Lorist waved his hand and said, “There’s no need, I only want two pieces of bread to bring with me when I go take a quick look at the wall ahead.”

As he slept quite late the day before, Lorist woke up in the late morning. When he got to the walls, he noticed Old Man Balk standing there. Upon seeing Lorist approach from afar, Balk bowed and greeted him.

As Lorist went up the walls, he saw the slave laborers working away to dig up a moat. After the laborers dug out the earth for the moat, they placed it within a rectangular wooden mold before they sprinkled some water within and covered it up with another wooden board on top. Following that, the laborers would then step on the wooden board repeatedly to compress and flatten the mixture within before dismantling the wooden mold to create a block-shaped piece of clay. After that, the slaves would stack the clay blocks together and repeat the whole process again.

“What are they doing?” Lorist asked.

Old Man Balk replied, “Milord, they are making clay bricks. After adding some green vine glue and letting them dry for a day or two, they will be nice and tough. By then, building structures is just as easy as stacking them up. As long as a proper foundation is built, the toughness of walls made with bricks like these is not one whit inferior to those made from stones. It is worth mentioning that a slave came up with this idea and he has already been selected to become Miss Telesti’s personal aide…”

Lorist nodded and said, “If one has talent that serves the family well, then they naturally should be rewarded. Telesti made a good call on this matter. Hm? What are

those people doing?"

Lorist then pointed towards the scaffolding by the walls where a couple of laborers could be seen working.

"Milord, they are evening out the surface of the walls to prevent enemies from being able to climb up and pose a threat to the defenders. This was also the idea of the aforementioned slave laborer. The rocks that are chipped off in the process can also be used to fill up the internal walls. It really is a pretty nifty idea," said Old Man Balk.

"Not bad, I see that the moat is almost done too. When does the wall construction officially start?" Lorist asked.

"In another two days. The foundation for the walls can already be laid. We already sent some laborers to start collecting the stones that we need for establishing the foundation," said Balk. He then pointed at a line drawn on the ground with limestone and said, "Look, milord. That will be where the foundation will be laid."

"Good work. That aside, doesn't Miss Telesti come to the site in the mornings?" Lorist asked.

Balk shook his head and said, "She usually doesn't come over in person as most of the workflow has already been established. I'm the one who supervises all work in this area, so unless there is any urgent matter, Miss Telesti usually wouldn't come to the site itself as it is too messy and dirty around here."

"Alright, I'll leave you to your business and go discuss something with her," said Lorist as he patted Balk's shoulders before he turned and left.

……

Lorist went up to the rear wall and headed towards the middle of the 5 buildings. Upon entering, he saw the busy scene of four laborers carving away at something delicately using small chisels. Beside the table that was placed in the middle of the room lay Telesti's maidservant, Vinny, who was currently looking intently at a model house she held within her hands.

"Little Vinny, what are you up to?" Lorist asked.

Vinny gave Lorist a look and quickly stood up. "Milord, this is a model house I made!

Look, isn't it pretty?"

Lorist gave it a quick look before he noticed that the sand table in the middle of the room had been replaced by another one which had another replica of the city layout. It seemed that Telesti had remade the model of the mode according to what she had in mind.

Lorist recalled that the main purpose of the city was to serve as a citadel, but the model seen on the table right now seemed more like a trade city than a military facility. Aside from the two walls on each side of the valley as well as the castle that was built along one side of the mountain range, Telesti had remodeled the whole replica of the valley into vast stretches of trade sectors and residential areas, which were even separated by small parks. Lorist could already imagine that if the city was built according to Telesti's plan, it would definitely be a beautiful place.

However that was not what Lorist had intended the city to be. He praised the beauty of the replica of the city before asking Vinny where Telesti was.

Vinny pointed to the door of the next room and Lorist went over to give it a knock. "Come in," Telesti's voice rang out almost instantly.

"Lorist opened the door and noticed that there were three tables within the relatively small room. The sand table that was originally placed in the room outside was at the far corner of the wall, with Telesti's workdesk placed right beside it. On the workdesk was a beastskin book and some writing materials. Beside the workdesk was a square table on which several pieces of blank canvases were placed. Telesti's Iron ranked butler and another short-haired, tanned middle-aged man were standing beside the square table.

"Milord…" said Telesti and her butler in unison as they made a deep bow and greeted Lorist. The middle-aged man beside them on the other hand looked a little panicked and didn't know what to do.

"Who's that?" asked Lorist as he looked at the middle-aged man.

"Milord, he is Zanben. He was originally one of the slave laborers who I picked to become my aide after I noticed his decent drawing skills and deep understanding in construction methods. Zanben, quickly greet the lord," explained Telesti.

Zanben hurriedly paid his respects to Lorist, who waved and said, "It's alright, you

don't have to be so courteous. I heard Old Man Balk praised you quite highly. As long as you give it your best as a loyal subject, the family will definitely reward you for your efforts."

Telesti then asked, "Milord, did you see the replica of the city and the moat outside?"

Lorist nodded and said, "Miss Telesti, I was just about to discuss that matter with you. I've already seen the replica outside and to be honest, I'm not too happy about it. The main reason for that is because you've misunderstood the purpose of this place."

"But milord, you didn't explicitly tell me what you wanted this place to serve," she interjected.

"And that is admittedly my fault. Since it's your first time doing city planning, I didn't tell you the aims I had for the city in detail and I don't blame you for getting it wrong. Let's go outside to talk more about it."

Lorist and Telesti walked outside together and he pointed to the replica and said, "Miss Telesti, look at the construction site here. This is an important opening for our dominion and it is one of the ways the people within the dominion can leave for the outside world. As long as we can take control of this place, our family will be able to control what and who goes in and out of the dominion. However, if we lose it to our enemies, we will be trapped within the Northlands for sure. Back then, Viscount Kenmays had intended for it to be a complete military installation, but that doesn't suit my needs perfectly. What I wanted it to be was a defense citadel and also a normal city, but I didn't expect you to decorate the residential and trade sectors so much to the point that it basically seems like a recreational park now. While its beauty is definitely undeniable, it doesn't do anything for the defense of the place at all, leaving our only line of defense to be the two walls. The moment an enemy captures either wall, the whole city will effectively have been occupied."

Telesti breathed a sigh and said resignedly, "Alright, milord. Tell me how you want the castle and city to be constructed. It is fortunate that it is currently still at the planning stage, so it wouldn't be too late to change it now."

Lorist then overhauled the whole layout of replicas on top of the table. "The core of this valley city will be a castle, which will serve as the final line of defense for the city. The location of construction will still remain unchanged at the mountain side, but it definitely has to be able to hold its ground against all invaders. As for how it will

achieve that, I will leave it to you, and you can even beautify it how you want as long as it doesn't compromise its defensive capabilities. In front of the castle will be the main plaza and two walls will stretch out from the left and right of the castle that will connect with the walls at the two ends of the valley. That way, should either of the walls at the valley's openings fall, we only have to lower the portcullis of the walls from the castle within the valley to cut off the enemy's route and entrap them, giving the defense force of this area ample time to resist and even retaliate.

"On either side of the castle, there should be some storehouses for supplies and weapons. There should also be some stables outside of the castle walls. And in the middle of the walls here will be the main route to pass to the other side of the city where two thirds of that spot will be used as the trade and residential sectors, the specifics of where to allocate will be left to you. I have no further specific requests, aside from by the time of completion of this valley city, it should be able to house up to 15000 people. Oh, you should also pay some attention to how you organize the underground waterways. That should be all."

Telesti's old butler has been noting down all the specifics the whole time and handed the document to his mistress. After taking a brief look, Telesti put her signature on the document after making sure it was as Lorist had instructed and gave it to Zanben as she said, "Zanben, let's change the design according to the lord's requests."

"Understood," Zanben said respectfully.

Little Vinny on the other hand was tearing up upon seeing her precious little replica city messed and moved around by Lorist to the point that it was already unrecognizable. She said in a crying voice, "Mistress, the lord is a mean person! He messed up all the models there…"

Lorist said, "I'm sorry, Vinny. I wasn't paying much attention…"

Telesti rubbed Vinny's tears off with her napkin and said, "It's okay, we can always make a new, more beautiful one. And milord, didn't you say you had something else you wanted to tell me about?"

Lorist brought Telesti back into the room she was in before.

"It's like this…" Lorist started explaining his intention to lure the forces of the Kenmayses into the construction site and try to force them to surrender and hoped

that Telesti would cooperate with him on that by changing the schedule for the construction.

“Sigh, milord, you know I hate to dabble in matters of killing and whatnot. You men are all about wars and battles. Why can’t you just sit still quietly and focus on the construction of the castle first?” said Telesti as she sighed loudly.

Lorist shrugged and said, “I don’t really have a choice. If I don’t exterminate this escort of theirs, the Kenmays Family would definitely find out that we have already occupied their construction site and will instantly send more of their forces to take it back. And given that the first defensive walls haven’t completely been constructed yet, it will be extremely difficult for us to hold our ground and we will definitely incur huge losses. Whereas if we manage to exterminate them, we will be able to keep news about this place being occupied from them a little longer. By the time they find out, we will have already completed construction on the walls and will have a much easier time defending ourselves from their soldiers.”

“Alright, milord. I will do as you wish and amend the schedule,” said Telesti.

“There’s also another matter that needs your attention. I have a supervisor from our family, Hansk, who is well-versed with inventory and supply management and he will be helping you with this construction project. I will ask him to report to you later,” Lorist said.

Telesti nodded and suddenly seemed like she has remembered something. “Milord, what will you name this castle when it is completed?”

Lorist gave it some thought and said, ‘Let’s call it Firmrock Castle. I hope it will be as stable and firm as a rock and will not shake no matter what is thrown at it.”

Telesti suddenly seemed rather unhappy and pouted.

Lorist was stunned at the sudden change in her expression, but he understood why almost immediately. He smiled as he said, “Miss Telesti, I see what you are getting at. I’m really sorry, but as this will be a really important base for the family, its naming will also be a really serious matter. If you are willing to take charge of the construction of the castle, I will allow you to name the valley city after your family name, Nico City, or even Telesti City if you prefer, what do you think about that? If you have anything else in mind, i will even leave the naming of the city to your complete discretion. Is

that okay with you?”

Chapter 102
Trap

Currently, Lorist was standing on top of the outer, less fortified wall and looking towards the plains in the far distance.

Now that they had everything in place, they only had to wait. As long as they manage to trick the escort of the shipment hired by the Kenmays Family into the valley beyond the wall, Lorist was confident that he would be able to make the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew surrender and let him take over whatever resource they brought along the way. He believed that when the resources that the Kenmays Family had painstakingly shipped over fell into his hands, Viscount Kenmays and his father, the Kenmays family head, would definitely be wearing amusing expressions.

At dawn yesterday, Patt brought over 20 of the surrendered mercenaries back to the construction site. After having their afternoon meal, the 20 mercenaries went to get some rest while Patt reported what had happened during his visit to Poplar Coast to Lorist.

According to him, when he made his way to the coast, his announcement of Lorist's intentions had caused an uproar among the mercenaries stationed there. One of the mercenary leaders, Hausky, argued that an act like that violated the basic etiquette mercenaries should have, but his men had all been swayed by the lavish pay of participating in that mission and scrambled to join in. After hours of debate, they finally settled on 19 people who had been picked by a ballot who were joined by the vice leader, Jim, before they rushed back to the site.

Lorist breathed a sigh of relief as it seemed that there would no longer be a problem on the side of the mercenaries. It's no wonder that the mercenaries would cooperate with that plan. Given that most of them were rather poor, the payment of ten gold Foredes was more than enough for them to settle down for a peaceful life. And all they had to do was to chat and wave to their fellow mercenaries to lure them beyond the walls.

The slave laborers had all stopped working outside the walls and were sent away by Telesti to collect more building materials such as sand, stones and clay. Only 200 of

the more common laborers continued to clean up trash around the site so that they may aid with moving the stuff that would come with the shipment later.

Naturally, the convoy that had come along with Lorist to the construction site as well as the people Lorist brought over from Wildnorth Town had all retreated to a camp beyond the inner walls that faced the Norton Family dominion so that they would leave no trace on the outside of the construction site where the shipment and its escort would arrive at, lest they trigger the suspicion of the leader of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew. He also had Jim doublecheck everything just in case he missed anything out.

Jim circled the area for a bit before he returned with a suggestion: Lorist should have the soldiers who wore metal armor to go into hiding as mercenaries are commonly poor folk who wouldn't be able to afford something like that. If three of such soldiers were to be discovered, Crew Leader Adams would easily notice the disparity.

The flag that was being flown at the construction site currently bore the Kenmays Family's three-ringed insignia and on the walls were 12 ballistas which were covered with a waterproof green cloth to prevent them from being discovered.

At that moment, Josk was currently standing at one of the crenels[1] of the walls equipped poorly with leather armor while chewing a dried grass stalk within his mouth. His main task for the day was to watch the area from the walls to make sure that not a single person escapes after the escort is drawn into the construction site.

Lorist was also equipped with a grey leather armor himself and he was playing the role of the personal attendant of Butler Boris. He would also be accompanying him to receive and greet the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew to complete the transaction.

"Don't be so nervous," Lorist said to Boris. "We're extremely well-prepared and they will definitely not notice anything amiss. You only have to act as you usually do. Isn't it as easy as luring them inside and having some smalltalk with the leader of the mercenary crew? After you're done, you can retreat somewhere so we can take over. Be assured that I will guarantee your safety."

Lorist's opinion of that old butler was a good one in that he was a capable person that handled most of what he was instructed without trouble and was a talent in human resource management and administration. The only flaw he had was that he was extremely fearful for his own life. If the opposite was the case, there was no way that

he would surrender to Lorist's forces so easily and work so earnestly for him in the first place.

"Butler Boris, after this operation, I will send some people to the Redriver Valley Bastide to save your family members. That is my promise to you in the name of the dominion lord," said Lorist seriously towards the butler.

"Milord, thank you… Thank you. I will definitely do my best to play my part," said Boris thankfully to the point of tears.

……

At around ten in the morning, two mercenaries of the crew came on horseback from the convoy before the rest to check on the situation. One of the horsemen was an acquaintance of Jim, thus they chatted for quite a bit before they mentioned that the convoy would take another two hours to arrive and requested the people at the construction site to prepare food and drinks for them. After refusing an offer from some of the mercenaries stationed at the walls to rest up first before the convoy arrived, the horsemen rode back to join the rest of them.

The slow and tormenting wait slowly passed as the sun gradually rose to its highest point in the skies with clouds of dust building up from the approaching convoy in the distance.

In another half an hour the Kenmays Family shipment convoy could be seen with tens of men on horseback wearing helmets decorated with white goose feathers riding over more quickly towards the gates of the walls. They stopped at a distance from the gates and got off their mounts before they all started to call out.

"Where are you guys?"

"I'm so worn out!"

"I want water…"

Reidy went forward with a few other guard squad members who were masquerading as slave laborers to quickly help the mercenaries with their mounts. Reidy pointed towards the tables and chairs which were set up beside the tents and said, "Fellow gentlemen, please head over there to enjoy some smoked and grilled meat, wheat porridge and meat and potato stew. Butler Boris even ordered us to prepare a few

barrels of ale for your enjoyment. If you are tired, you can also rest in the tents and please don't hesitate to tell us if any of you want to take a bath. We can get the hot water prepared right away…"

One of the Feathersoar mercenaries said in surprise, "Wow, your chief manager really thought this out well. I say, apart from the lack of women, you are almost like an inn already…"

Another mercenary said, "Come on, what are you still waiting for? Instead of talking idly like that, why don't you go get yourself some ale before the rest finish it before us?"

That's great, thought Lorist as he looked at the men who were led towards the tents by Reidy. So far, everything was under control and the mercenaries that had arrived early didn't notice anything suspicious and didn't know any better.

The rest of the shipment convoy finally arrived and when they were about 300 meters from the walls, a group of around 100 Feathersoar mercenaries departed from the convoy and arrived at the walls where they got into formation. A middle-aged man wearing a chain mail underneath a layer of leather armor and a cape walked towards the wall gates with two other attendants following behind him.

When the leader of the mercenaries saw Jim standing by the wall, he called out loudly, "Hehe, if it isn't Razoraxe Jim! Where's Hausky?"

"The boss is at the other wall all the way at the other side of the valley. He went there right after he heard that you were coming. You know how he feels about the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew, right?" Jim said casually. He then asked, "What are you doing? Get in! Butler Boris spared no effort in preparing the food and ale for you guys! The rest are already enjoying it as we speak! Darn it, if only it wasn't my shift today… Maybe I'll go sneak a few drinks myself…"

"Then how about if I bring a barrel up to the walls to drink with you later?" Adams asked.

Jim started laughing out loud and said, "Then you better be quick! Don't just bring ale, get me some food too…"

At that moment, the other mercenaries beside Jim were greeting some other members of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew as well.

"Oh, Jim, I heard that you suffered quite a loss at that family's bastide… Ah, the Nortons, was it?" asked Adams from beyond the wall.

"Tch, don't mention it anymore… We lost tens of people. But it was fortunate that only a few of my mercenaries were killed, mainly because we noticed the bad situation and didn't try too hard on our part. The farmer troops rallied by that viscount also lost 30 or so men. To be honest, the Norton Family bastide is really tough to take on. Why did you ask?" Jim asked.

"Hmm, us Feathersoars will later be stationed here. It's already been almost half a year since we started escorting shipment convoys, so it's about time we stopped for a while. During our shipment next month, the viscount's family's main force will also arrive and by that time, he will launch another assault on the Nortons and force them to submit," said Leader Adams as he nodded.

"The viscount's main force? It couldn't be those farmer troops, right? If that is the case, then the viscount might as well not make that attack and let them defend this place instead, lest they suffer even more losses," said Jim as he started laughing out loud.

"Nope, this time the Kenmays Family had spent quite some money at the royal capital to form a 2000 men unit over there which is mostly comprised of retired military officers and soldiers and they're also rather well-armed. By the time that army makes it back to the Northlands, the Kenmays Family will definitely be one of the top families in this area. Brother Jim, do your job properly and you may just be taken note of by the Kenmayses and be recruited into the ranks of their family knights. That way, you won't need to work as a mercenary anymore," suggested Adams.

Jim waved his hands and said, "Ptoooey! I would never want an opportunity like that. You know that I just loathe dealing with nobles like those. Nobles are all greedy bastards who take advantage of everyone that's weaker than them. To them, us mercenaries are nothing but lowly beasts who are willing to do their bidding for a little bit of their money. I, Razoraxe Jim, won't bend myself over and look at those nobles' expressions when I decide to do anything and is born for the life of a mercenary. As long as I'm able to earn some money to find a wife and raise a healthy child, I will die happy. Don't you think so, guys?"

The other mercenaries on the wall started laughing out loud and showed their fervent agreement. Some even said that one woman was not enough for Jim and suggested he find two…

Adams laughed out loud and said, "You darned bastards…”

……

Lorist and Butler Boris went down the walls to see Leader Adams.

"Crew Leader Adams, it must've been a tiring journey. There shouldn't be a problem with the cargo during the shipment, right?" Boris asked.

"Hehe, Butler Boris, good to see you. The cargo is in perfect condition, so don't worry. The reputation of my Feathersoar Mercenary Crew is nothing to laugh at and we won't secretly sneak some of the goods away like the third-rate crews out there. Here is the list of items in the shipment. Feel free to check if it's all in place," Adams said as he brought out a few beastskin documents.

"Hmm? Butler Boris, you don't look too well. Is there anything wrong?"

Lorist stepped forward and received the documents from Adams before he said, "Crew Leader Adams, Butler Boris was worried sick for the past few days about the safety of the shipment before its arrival. To be honest, we're only left with 3 to 4 days' worth of food. His worry had caused him to lose sleep and catch a cold. He's basically forcing himself to see you here. Look, he's already shivering a bit… I even asked him to take a rest before this but he wouldn't listen…”

"Oh, is that so? Butler Boris, you should really take better care of your body. Try not to get sick next time," said Adams as he stared at Lorist. "Then, who are you?"

Lorist had already been prepared for that question and saluted the mercenary leader before he said, "Crew Leader Adams, I am Locke and I used to be a mercenary myself. Butler Boris noticed my talents and picked me to be his personal attendant."

"Hmm, not bad. You must be a quick-witted person for you to be able to catch the attention of Boris. This is a great chance for you, so do your best and you will definitely have a bright future," said Adams as he nodded in praise at Lorist.

The rest of the convoy finally arrived and Boris said a little impatiently, "Leader Adams, I will go back into the walls first. You should let your men enter too. The food and tents are already prepared, so make sure to give them some proper rest."

Adams nodded and said, "Alright, I will bring them in right away…”

Boris left before Adams finished his sentence, and that matched his demeanor of not liking to deal with mercenaries perfectly, leaving Lorist behind with the list of items while Adams and his two attendants led the rest of the convoy past the walls.

At that moment, Adams and the hundreds other mercenaries had already went into the valley and the rest of the mercenaries who had dismounted were led by Reidy and his men into the tents to rest and have their meals. On the other hand, Adams and his two attendants stood by Lorist after they dismounted and chatted from time to time as they monitored the rest of the convoy as carriage after carriage flowed through the gates and lined up neatly at an empty space.

There were 400 carriages in total and it took two hours before all of them entered the valley. However, the presence of Adams and the other two attendants beside him made Lorist feel a little uncomfortable.

"Leader Adams, you should go to the tents to take a rest as well. There's no need for you to stand here personally. I'll notify you if anything happens," Lorist said as he tested the waters.

"There's no rush. The ones left outside is the rearguard comprised of my men. It won't be too late to rest when all of us are assembled," said Adams with a laugh.

Alright, then let's play the waiting game together then. Seeing the carriages filled with resources arranged neatly within the valley, Lorist gradually calmed down. There were only around 60 carriages left outside the valley and by the time all of them entered, the mercenaries would definitely all be near the tents. By then, he only had to give a single order to set the ambush in motion.

Right at that instant, a sudden ear-piercing cry rang out from within the valley. "Don't come in! You guys were tricked! They are the enemy! They are the Nortons' men!…"

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[1] Crenels are openings on defensive structures that allow for ranged attackers to fire from behind the safety of a wall.

Chapter 103
Melee Outbreak

Everyone present was stunned and unwittingly turned their heads towards the middle-aged man dressed in rags who was jumping up and down within the valley ahead.

“Isn’t that… Grandmaster Ciroba?” stammered Adams.

It was indeed Grandmaster Ciroba… But wasn’t he in confinement? Why would he appear on this hill? Would his cries and rambles cause Lorist’s plan to fail?

Grandmaster Ciroba continued to scream with all his might. “They are the enemy! The men of the Norton Family! Why aren’t you attacking? Eradicate them… Ugh…”

Ovidis who was equipped with metal armor came up behind the architect and knocked him out cold with the pommel of his sword, causing silence to return to the valley once again.

“Hehe… Hehehe…” chuckled Lorist. “Gosh… That Grandmaster Ciroba is showing symptoms of his, uh, sickness again… He never calms down if he doesn’t get to scream like that…”

Adams looked at Lorist with a gaze of a hawk and said, “Is that so… But I don’t think he looks like a sick person. Can you also explain who that man wearing the metal armor is? I don’t think mercenaries can afford something like that…”

Adams ordered his two attendants, “Capture him.”

Capture me your ass. Lorist backed away and instantly drew his sword. *Since we’ve already been exposed, let’s launch the ambush now. Most of the mercenaries have already entered the tents anyway... As for the remaining thirty or so mercenaries who are still outside the walls, given that Josk is up there on the walls watching, I doubt they would be able to escape. The people outside wouldn’t know what was happening inside here anyway.*

At that moment, most of the men of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew had dismounted and were enjoying their meals. Some of them even went into the tents to take a short nap. Apart from Lorist, Adams and his two attendants, there were only seven to eight mercenaries who had just entered the valley and were still mounted, causing Lorist to not have any worry at all as he believed that he would easily be able to handle them.

As for Adams and his attendants, Lorist felt that they wouldn't even survive more than ten bouts in a fight with him, and that was after he had taken into consideration the two shield-wielding attendants who were usually more trouble to deal with.

At the empty space at the right corner of the valley were the carriages that had been driven into the valley. The coachmen of the carriages had parked them according to their types and untied the horses before bringing them to rest and feed. Lorist knew that those coachmen were the slaves of the Kenmays Family who had received formal training on coachmanship and were put in charge of transporting the Kenmays Family's goods.

Apart from the coachmen, each carriage also ferried 2 to 3 slave laborers which the Kenmays Family had sent over to increase the speed of the construction as well as to help out just in case any carriage met with any accidents during the shipment. As each carriage only had one coachman, should the carriage be damaged in the middle of the shipment, the slave laborers would be able to help out with the goods as opposed to having the coachman abandon the cargo.

Now that the horses had mostly been brought away for feeding, the slave laborers that came with the carriages slowly gathered into small groups and sat silently on the ground while waiting for the rest to gather together, as their food would only be served after that. Some of the laborers obtained the position from their managers and brought a few waterskins to the well beside the stable to temporarily quench their thirst.

While the coachmen and laborers was on Lorist's mind, he doubted that they would pose much of a threat as they weren't armed and probably wouldn't put their own lives at risk for the Kenmays Family. That was also with the case with the slave laborers who were already at the construction site when Lorist took over it: they didn't really care about the sudden change of who was in charge and continued to do their share of work as they usually would.

Lorist drew his sword, balled his left hand into a fist and lifted it high up in the air.

That was the the signal for the beginning of the ambush.

A few of the guards on the walls noticed the signals and raised their horns to their mouth. A loud honking soon followed and resonated throughout the whole valley.

200 or so guards equipped with dual-layered metal armor appeared from deeper within the valley and surrounded the tents. Ten or so ballistas could also be seen being pushed up a hill in the distance. Combined with the ballistas that were hidden on the walls, there were around 20 of them which all had their aims trailed towards the tents with their lines of fire crossed.

Like Lorist had expected, the coachmen and slave laborers panicked for a bit before they settled down and some coachmen even continued to feed the horses like nothing was going on. However, some of them would turn their gaze over from time to time while the laborers who were sitting neatly in rows on the ground had their eyes opened wide with excitement as if a play was going to be enacted live in front of their eyes while they chatted away about the surprising developments that had just transpired and their anticipation of the battle to come.

"Just surrender and cease any futile resistance. Lay down your weapons and I will definitely treat you fairly," Lorist said as he slowly approached the two shield-bearer attendants.

"Who exactly are you?" Adams asked.

Lorist sidestepped to avoid entering the range of attack of the two shield-bearers and said, "I am Baron Norton, the Norton family head. If you surrender, on my name and title of the dominion lord, I will ensure your personal safety as well as your right to keep your belongings."

"Hahaha… Baron Norton, instead of saying that we've fallen into your trap, isn't the opposite the case with you right here at our fingertips? I really don't understand why you dared to show your face in front of me. Is it courage or just plain old idiocy? Go! Capture him so we can turn this whole situation around…" roared Adams with delight.

Wanna catch me? Think again. Since you don't want to do this the easy way, you shall pay for the consequences of your actions. Lorist dodged the shield charge of the shield-bearer on the left, swerved his body, and reappeared at the right flank of the shield-bearer, before his sword pierced towards his enemy's right lower rib like an agile

snake…

Here we go, thought Lorist. After he dispatched this shield-bearer, he would only be left with two enemies who would easily be at his mercy.

Clang! A longsword was suddenly swung in front of the right chest of the shield-bearer and intercepted Lorist's sword. That sword had belonged to the shield-bearer on the right who had appeared before Lorist before anyone noticed. At that moment, the swords of both the shield-bearers shined bright gold as their blade glows materialized.

Sol! These two are Gold ranked shield-bearers! Lorist was stunned for a moment and thought, *I didn't hear anything about the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew having any Gold ranked experts! And they're shield-bearers to boot! This will be troublesome.*

However, Lorist did not mind it too much as he had already killed a couple of Gold ranked fighters in the past, so two more shouldn't pose too much of an issue for him. Even though his opponents were shield-bearers, they were only slightly better at defense than those Lorist had faced before and should probably require just a little more time for Lorist to handle them.

However, Lorist only got to know the true obstacle those two posed to be after fighting for a while: the two shield-bearers had extreme synergy and frequently alternated the attacking and defending roles. Even though the attacks were not much of a threat to Lorist, their defense was almost impregnable and managed to fend off most, if not all, of Lorist's strikes. During that period of time, Lorist had been entangled with the two shield-bearers and it would definitely take far more time before the victor could decided.

When the horns were blown, the outer part of the gates were spurred into total chaos.

The 30 or so Feathersoar mercenaries who felt that something was amiss instantly rushed towards the valley, but they were blocked by the carriages which were still on their way inside. The coachmen driving the carriages had panicked and left the carriages for a safe place to hide at. Without the coachmen, the horses had all huddled together and even caused a carriage to be flipped over, blocking the entire entrance. None of the mercenaries were able to find their way in given the situation.

Given Josk's understanding of Lorist's tenacity, he wasn't worried at all for his safety.

Even though their trap had been partially-ruined by Grandmaster Ciroba, Josk still felt that nothing would go wrong given that Lorist was present. That's why he didn't pay any attention at all to whatever that was happening within the walls and believed that the mercenaries would surrender without much resistance. But what he didn't expect was that Lorist would be held down by the two Gold ranked shield-bearers.

Given that Lorist had not briefed Josk about the possibility of that situation happening, Josk decided to make sure that no one would be able to escape from the walls and called for the 30 or so mercenaries outside to surrender, dismount and discard their weapons.

However, none of them heeded his words with some even attempting to shoot Josk with their bows, only to be shot off their horses by Josk himself. In but a single moment, 7 mercenaries had already lost their lives, causing the remaining 20 or so to give up and surrender.

Lorist was still pestered by the two Gold ranked shield-bearers and couldn't be bothered to care about what was happening around him. On the other hand, Adams was secretly admiring Lorist's skill with a sword and believed that he had no way of besting him in single combat. He also didn't think that he would be able to help out in the battle between the three and gathered the 7 to 8 startled mercenaries who were still mounted to go aid their comrades near the tents.

The guards who were wearing double-layered metal armor had all awakened their Battle Force while those who wore only one layer had not. None of them had expected that Adams would attack them from the rear, given that the ballistas on the walls and a hill further away had the whole tent area covered and probably would've killed anyone who attempted to leave. Faced with Adams's sudden assault, the guards' formation crumbled within moments.

That was especially the case given Adams's Three Star Silver rank. As he brandished the sword in his hand which was covered with a silver blade glow, more and more enemies standing in his way were mowed down helplessly.

"Kill them all!" roared the mercenary leader.

All of a sudden, the 70-odd mercenaries within the tents armed themselves swiftly and rushed towards the guard soldiers that surrounded them.

“Fire!” shouted Ovidis from atop the hill. Ten gigantic ballista bolts were unleashed instantly, pinning down 8 mercenaries to the ground, causing most of them to die instantly with the rest writhing and crying in pain. Following that, the ballistas on the wall also fired and killed six other mercenaries near the tents.

But, the ballistas proved to be quite limited in its ability to turn the tide of battle as ally and enemy soon meshed together within the chaotic sea of people.

“To hell with this!” cursed Ovidis as he rushed down from the hill to join the fray.

Jim lifted his two-handed axe and started descending from the walls. One of the mercenaries near him noticed and asked, “What are you doing, Jim?”

Jim replied, “To help, dumbass! If the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew prevails, do you think we’ll be spared?”

With the aid of the mercenaries on Lorist’s side, the guard squad began to fare much better against the counterattack of the Feathersoar mercenaries.

Adams was forcing Patt into a defensive position when he noticed Jim join the battle. Enraged, he cursed out uncontrollably but Jim and the rest didn’t pay him any heed and merely continued to take on the Feathersoar mercenaries.

Lorist was started to feel more and more annoyed at the clingy shield-bearers who troubled him to no end. In the beginning, they underestimated Lorist and fought at a more relaxed pace. But once they started to grasp his real strength, they changed their fighting style to full-on defense and focused their efforts on keeping Lorist occupied so that he wouldn’t be able to aid his allies.

At that moment, Lorist was fighting with both his swords, but even with that, he had only managed to land a light wound on one of the shield-bearers which didn’t even hamper him. Starting to feel restless, Lorist thought, *I can’t afford to be messing with them any longer. Here goes nothing!*

Before, one of the shield-bearers rushed towards Lorist from behind while the other one slashed his sword in front of him, causing Lorist to be unable to retreat to the back and having to dodge the relentless sword strikes coming from the front. However, right now, Lorist had stopped all efforts to dodge and instead bumped into the shield behind him while unleashing his charged up internal energy, sending that shield-bearer 5 to 6 meters away into the distance. He then parried an incoming attack with

the shortsword in his left hand before he turned his body to face the attacking shield-bearer head-on.

Seeing Lorist leap at him with crazed fervor, the shield-bearer raised his shield quickly in front of his body and believed that as long as Lorist was unable to get past his defense, he would be able to hold out until his partner comes to aid him out of this predicament.

However, infused to the brim with internal energy, Lorist's longsword pierced directly through that shield and penetrated the torso of the shield-bearer.

"Little Brother!" The shield-bearer who had been knocked away screamed out in agony and discarded his shield before he rushed straight forward with both his hands brandishing his longsword at Lorist.

Like a spinning top, Lorist spun his body and barely evaded the incoming attack as he didn't have the time to draw his longsword from the body of the other shield-bearer. Seeing an opening, he swung the shortsword in his hand towards the neck of the other attacker…

The two Gold ranked shield-bearers currently laid on the ground on a pool of their own blood, which soon seeped deep into the ground and left nothing but a large crimson mark.

It was apparent that Lorist felt extremely exhausted from the way he swayed as he stood on the ground. However, he still couldn't afford to catch a breather as the battle was still going on. Expending quite an effort to retrieve his longsword from the body and shield, he headed towards the tents without delay.

Chapter 104
Bloodshed and Remorse

A mercenary wearing a goose feather-decorated helmet appeared before Lorist and snickered as the blood of his enemies dripped downwards from his hands. There were 3 bloody guard squad members beside him with one of them lying silent and unmoving while the other two's bodies twitched uncontrollably.

Seeing Lorist approach with a solemn expression, that mercenary ceased his grinning and roared when Lorist was just inches from him as he swung his flail downwards.

Clang! The flail was sent flying onto the ground with a flash, beating up a cloud of dust and making a dent on the ground.

Stunned, the mercenary looked around and thought, *where is he? Where did that young fella disappear to all of a sudden?* Before he recovered from his shock, a shadow flashed past in the corner of his eyes and a sudden pain filled his mind before he was able to turn to look, causing him to shiver uncontrollably. Opening his eyes in pain, he noticed that his stomach had been cut open with his innards slipping outwards from within.

"Uggh…" The Feathersoar mercenary's vision gradually darkened as he gradually slipped powerlessly to the ground. By the time he landed, he had already lost all signs of life.

Was that the 10th or 11th mercenary? Lorist had already lost count. When he first rushed into the horde of people, he noticed that the situation was far worse than he had predicted given the number of bodies of his troops that were on the ground. With but a quick check of the area, Lorist counted at least 30 corpses that were part of his guard squad and defense unit.

With his silhouette razing like a savage storm to the next crowd where a group of 8 Norton soldiers were struggling to hold their ground against 4 Feathersoar mercenaries who were fighting in a practiced formation, the enemy mercenaries quickly fell to the ground with their throats slit one by one. The 8 family soldiers were stunned, but upon noticing that the silhouette was Lorist, they all cheered "Norton!" in the loudest voice they could as they followed him to the next area to wipe out the

rest of the Feathersoar mercenaries.

Wherever Lorist showed himself, the guard squad and defense unit members would fight like there was no tomorrow, having had their morale raised. It was apparent that victory was gradually shifting to Lorist's side.

However, the Feathersoar mercenaries weren't going to back down that easily. Lorist even had to admit that they were far more courageous than the ex-bandit guard squad members and used a more effective fighting style as well. The crucial difference was that all of the Feathersoar mercenaries had awakened their Battle Force and one of their Bronze ranks could easily take on four non-Battle Force users from the defense unit. Had it not been for the guard squad members who also could use Battle Force taking most of the brunt, the losses for the defense unit might be even worse.

Lorist was merciless in his culling and none of the Feathersoar mercenaries who had encountered him managed to escape alive. Lorist was currently struck deeply with remorse as he never would've expected that the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew would still resist despite the threat of more than 20 ballistas. What's worse was that the ballistas ceased to be effective after a little more than ten kills. The soldiers who had surrounded the tents didn't expect that conflict would truly break out as well and were surprised that the mercenaries didn't surrender in the end.

This is all my fault… Lorist suddenly halted and made a backhand slash before pushing his sword through the back of the mercenary who had been staggered by his former strike.

I was far too careless. I really should've planned for the worst and not expect these mercenaries to surrender without putting up a fight. Lorist dashed forward yet again and decapitated a mercenary who was just about to thrust his sword down onto a guard squad soldier that was knocked to the floor. The stump of the severed neck spurted out huge volumes of blood which painted the whole of Lorist's body crimson red.

Lorist didn't bother to evade the blood and let it cover him all over. *It was definitely my fault for being so arrogant. My previous victories have made me far too careless to the point that I thought that everything would go according to my plan. I even forgot the most basic principle that anything can happen on the battlefield. I even got held back by the shield-bearers for so long without being able to do much about it.*

Back when Grandmaster Ciroba revealed their plot, Lorist was still confident that he had everything under control and since Josk would handle the mercenaries outside the gate. Given that Patt's 280 men had the tents surrounded with Ovidis's ballistas ready to attack, he believed that as long as he was able to take out Adams, he could then swiftly take care of the rest who were resting at the tents.

But what he didn't expect was the two Gold ranked shield-bearers who had stalled him for nearly 20 minutes, during which many things started to turn downhill. Josk, Patt, Ovidis, Shadekampf and Reidy had all played their parts well, but Lorist himself messed up and let Adams attack rampantly while rallying his allies to resist the entrapment of the family soldiers, causing all the previous preparations to go to waste and triggering an all-out battle.

It was the serious casualties of his own men that made Lorist so conflicted and remorseful. Before Charade and Potterfang arrive, he believed that the lack of men was one of the most serious problems the dominion faced. Wildnorth Town still hadn't been taken care off, yet he's planning to develop a city at Morgan Hills to stave off the Kenmayses. The dominion was also under the threat of the barbarians from time to time. Even though Josk went all out and chased the barbarian riders away, it was unknown when they would retaliate and cause even more trouble for Lorist.

One cause of worry for Lorist was the allocation of the workforce. It wasn't that there was insufficient people, but rather not many of them were suited for the job. For example, at Maplewoods Bastide, only 130 or so people of the 2000 plus living there had awakened their Battle Force and among them, 40 of them were aged above 38 and had retired from the family's forces due to various reasons ranging from old injuries to disabilities. The defense unit Lorist had just formed could only reach 120 people with their inclusion.

Lorist was so adamant on teaching every willing youth how to awaken their Battle Force despite the insistence of the old butler not to was because he understood that the dangers the family would have to face would only increase in the future. He had also wanted to move the main base of the family to the Morgan Hills because he had hoped that it would bring them further away from the threat that was Wildnorth Town for the moment. That was the hidden intention that Lorist had told nobody apart from Shadekampf.

During his stay at Wildnorth Town, Shadekampf's task was not like that of Supervisor Kedan to do a survey on the population there but rather befriending the garrison

soldiers and family members who had just recently been relinquished of their positions and benefits. After getting a couple of them drunk, Shadekampf obtained a rather surprising piece of intelligence: the four families had up to 600 Battle Force awakened youths at their disposal. Even though most of them were Bronze and Iron ranks, each family had at least five Silver ranks as well. How else would the four families carry out their smuggling operations without any fighters of their own? Otherwise, they would've long been swallowed up by the crooks of the black market or been wiped out by the time they encountered garrison troops of other dominions.

For the last 100 years, the commoner families of Wildnorth Town had put heavy emphasis on their children's upbringing. Even though they only had the former Krissen Empire's military Battle Force technique, which was far harder to train in than higher-ranked Battle Force techniques, given their relatively good standard of living, there was no fear of problems like malnourishment which would hinder the awakening of Battle Force, thus allowing the four families to have more and more Battle Force users over time. One of the main factors the four families managed to prevail and rule over WIldnorth Town was because they had the most number of Battle Force users among the other families there.

Lorist thought that it was fortunate that the four families' smuggling operations were only contained within the Northlands given that there was no way that they would be able to go past the natural barrier that separated the Northlands from the outside world that was Metropoulos River. If the four families somehow managed to reach Morante City and got their hands on any basic or high-ranked Battle Force manual, the Nortons would find it much harder to resist the ambitions of the four families.

By that time, the four families would have sufficient power to wipe out the already weak Nortons and let their descendants marry into the defeated Norton Family. That way, the Norton Family would legitimately be replaced by someone from the four families. Luckily, the four families didn't plan that far ahead and were nothing but short-sighted money hoarders in the end and had all their focus on the petty farmland in front of their eyes and were calculative to the last copper piece. Now that Lorist had returned to the family, the end of the four families was definitely near.

If Wildnorth Town really only had a little more than ten people who have awakened their Battle Force, then Lorist would definitely jump to the chance to wipe them out with whatever people he had that could use Battle Force to clear out all the problems in one fell swoop. However, after he received news of the true might Wildnorth Town had, Lorist thought that if he were able to recruit those men under his banner, then

the Norton Family would be able to defy even the orders of Duke Loggins in the future.

However, that was but an afterthought of his. Even though Wildnorth Town was technically under the rule of the Norton Family, they still posed quite a threat to it. Given that the disparity between the family's force and that of Wildnorth Town was rather large, Lorist could only resort to placating them for now as he awaited the arrival of the main convoy. For instance, the incident with the population survey had caused Lorist to be quite annoyed. While the four families were busy letting their own members fill out the spots for the expanded garrison force, they also stopped the garrison soldiers who were kicked out from cooperating with the survey while building their hate for the Norton Family to prevent them from potentially being used.

Among the family members of the deceased Norton soldiers Lorist brought back from WIldnorth Town, less than 10 out of the 1500 of them had awakened their battle Force. It was due to that and many other factors that Lorist decided to endure and wait for his plan to rile up the various families of Wildnorth Town of which moving the ex-garrison members and their families to construct a new town at Poplar Coast was a central part to take fruit, thus allowing Lorist the opportunity to make his move.

As Lorist slaughtered his way through the battlefield, he dwelled quite a lot on his plans. Every time he saw a blood-covered guard lying on the ground, his remorse increased even more. They had all perished because of his inadequate planning. The more he witnessed, the more he started to loathe himself and Crew Leader Adams. What made him curious was the reason Adams still choose to resist despite having been put in a disadvantageous situation. Even if they managed to wipe out the soldiers surrounding the tents, they would still have to face the brunt of the ballistas. Did they really think that they could retake the construction site by themselves?

Two streaks of green arrows flew past Lorist's vision and pinned two Feathersoar mercenaries on the ground. Having seen Josk's heroics from atop the wall, the guard squad and defense unit members cheered loudly and within moments, not a single standing Feathersoar mercenary could be seen.

Lorist shook his head and recovered from his depressed mental state. In the distance, two groups of people could be seen gathering together for some reason.

As he walked in that direction, the people beside him moved aside to make a path for him. When Lorist arrived, he saw Reidy and a Silver ranked Feathersoar mercenary fighting. Reidy had wounds on his left rib and his chest and was bloodied all over.

However, he still moved relaxedly whereas his enemy was breathing raggedly with a look of panic on his face. Even the silver blade glow on his sword was flickering from time to time: it seemed that the victor had long been decided.

Lorist left the crowd and headed for the other group. Right after he took a couple of steps away, a cry of agony rang out from behind him that was later followed by loud cheers of praise……

Chapter 105
Repercussions

The other group of people were surrounding Crew Leader Adams who was currently fighting against Patt and Jim. Patt was currently uninjured given the fact that he was a shield-bearer: while he excelled at defense, his offense was no doubt slightly lacking. However, the reason Patt was so out of breath was because he was busy providing Jim support and shielding from the incessant blows of the enraged Adams. It was clear that he loathed Jim for his betrayal.

"Stand down, you guys. Let me take him on," said Lorist as he walked among the three and parried Adams's strike towards Jim with his longsword.

Patt and Jim both felt relieved and quickly retreated. Even though it was a two-on-one battle, the Three Star Silver ranked Adams obviously held overwhelming advantage over Patt and Jim, who were One Star Silver and Two Star Silver ranked respectively. Had Patt not been a shield-bearer who had trained in dynamic vision, the two of them would have been defeated long ago.

"It's you?" said Adams as he recognized Lorist's blood-covered form. Surprised, he quickly turned to look behind him but his line of sight was obscured by the multitudes of soldiers surrounding him.

"There's no point in looking. The two Gold ranked shield-bearers have already died by my hand," said Lorist calmly. "Now that your crew has lost most of its people, you're satisfied right? My family's soldiers also suffered quite a loss. These people have all died because you stubbornly refused to surrender. It's now your turn, so I ask you. Are you satisfied?"

"Stop bullshitting. How could you have killed them? You must be lying…" said Adams in a fit of denial. The moment Lorist mentioned the death of the two shield-bearers, he had been shocked into a trance before he snapped out of it and rebutted.

"Why would I bother lying to you? Look at your surroundings and you will understand. You guys, make some way so this bastard can have a good look," ordered Lorist.

The soldiers from the two squads all retreated ten steps back, allowing Adams to see the bloodstained floor littered with corpses of the mercenaries as well as the metal armor-equipped Norton soldiers who were rummaging around the battlefield and dragging the bodies of their comrades to one side while driving a sword into other mercenaries who were on the verge of dying. From time to time, a cry of agony could be heard…

"How… How can this be?" Adams was completely baffled by the scene before him to the point that his face turned completely pale. Originally having the advantage after he started leading his men during the battle, he was reminded of Jim's betrayal when he joined the fray with his other comrades. Had it not been for Jim, he wouldn't have let his guard down so easily and allow his men to rest at the tents and fall into the trap.

At that point, Adams had already lost all notion of guiding his men and only wanted to chop Jim into a thousand tiny pieces. Thus, he gave up on fighting Patt and went to settle the score with Jim. It was fortunate that Patt didn't give up the chase and continued to pester Adams before he joined forces with Jim and held him back for the whole time. By the time Adams had snapped out of his fury, he was already facing Lorist and was once again shocked to hear the revelation.

"My brothers… My Feathersoar Mercenary Crew…" Adams had already fallen to the lowest depths of despair. Staring at Lorist, bloodlust once again filled his eyes. *This darned baby-faced Baron Norton… I'll slaughter him even at the cost of my life!*

"I will end you!" roared Adams as he speedily approached with his sword raised up high.

Lorist rushed right at him and after the instant the both of them passed each other, Adams's head could be seen flying through the air as his headless body continued taking tens of steps forward while spraying fresh blood all over the place before it plummeted to the ground with an audible thump.

It had finally ended. Lorist started to feel both physically and mentally worn out and could only support himself with his sword pushed to the ground to stop himself from collapsing.

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Shadekampf came down from the walls to Lorist's side and said, "Milord, you…"

Lorist said in a tired voice, "Shadekampf, I'm fine. I'm just a little too tired. Carry me to someplace where I can sit down…"

A chair was brought in front of Lorist without delay and after sitting down, Lorist said, "Shadekampf, I need you to get someone to call Supervisor Kedan and Butler Boris over here. I have some instructions to give out. Also, get me an estimate of our losses on the battlefield as soon as possible."

"Milord, what do you need us to do?" asked Supervisor Kedan after he came over with Butler Boris. While Kedan was not too bothered by the smell of blood and corpses of the battlefield, Boris on the other hand had his face drained pale by the spectacle and was stifling the urge to vomit.

"Supervisor Kedan, go to the camp outside the walls and rally up the youths that have come with us into a few temporary defense units with 120 people in each squad. Form as many as you can with the people you have and allocate weapons to them as needed. I need them to take charge of defending the walls as soon as possible."

"Yes, milord. I will go carry that out right away," said Kedan before he saluted and hurriedly left.

"Butler Boris, I'll be leaving the new slaves that have just arrived under your care, so help them settle down into their quarters and arrange for their meals to be served. Make sure they don't cause any trouble, alright?" Lorist instructed.

"Understood, milord. I will make sure that they stay within the camp quietly," said Boris before he bowed and headed for the place where the slaves gathered to watch the bloody fight that had just ended. However, after taking a few steps, he could no longer stand the stench of blood in the air and puked on the spot.

A sound of crying resounded not far away. Lorist lifted his head to take a look only to see Reidy supporting Ovidis, whose body was wrapped with several bandages, over to where Lorist was. Ovidis was currently grief-stricken and crying like a little child with snot and tears muddled all over his face.

When the both of them finally reached Lorist's front, Ovidis kneeled down and hugged Lorist's leg before he cried out, "Milord, they're all dead… Pete, Mark, Ankor, Wessen…"

Lorist recognized the names that Ovidis had mentioned: they were Ovidis's comrades who had deserted the army and joined the bandits together with him.

Lorist patted Ovidis's shoulder and said, "It's all my fault. I shouldn't have been so naive to think that everything would go according to plan. I was so fixated on the idea of the mercenaries surrendering that I forgot that even a desperate animal would not hesitate to jump off a cliff…

"Reidy, you did pretty good today. How are your injuries holding up?"

"I'm fine, they're just superficial scratches that will recover in a day or two. Milord, I've killed a Silver ranked mercenary just now. It's my first time defeating someone of a higher rank, so I'm incredibly happy," said Reidy, obviously satisfied with his performance during the battle.

Lorist laughed and said, "I've seen it. You did great. However, you shouldn't think too highly of this as this time, the enemy was forced into desperation and the tides of the battle had shifted to our side. It is possible that your enemy made a mistake from being forced into that desperate situation. Had he been in perfect condition both in form and mind, he might've been able to put a couple or more wounds on you. So, you still need to train hard, alright?"

"I will, milord," promised Reidy.

"Come here and help me move this guy over there and lay him on a mat. Seriously… For him to cry himself to sleep…" said Lorist as he looked at Ovidis who was snoring away with his head on his knee.

"Milord, this guy was just bragging that he had killed 7 enemies. Initially, I thought he was just bluffing, but it seems that it might've been true. There are three long wounds on his body which he had just received treatment for, and he has just consumed some medicine as well. So, it's not weird for him to fall asleep like that. Had it not been for the fact that he got to know about the death of his comrades, he would've went to get some sleep long ago," said Reidy before he asked someone to carry Ovidis into a tent so that he may get some good rest.

Josk walked over and lowered his head before he said, "Milord, I've let your expectations down and let two to three escape…"

"What's going on?" Lorist asked. He was quite confused that Josk had mentioned 'two to three' ambiguously instead of a fixed number.

According to Josk, he had forced the mercenaries outside the wall to surrender

according to the original plan. But after the sounds of battle rang out followed by Shadekampf ordering the ballistas to be fired, Josk noticed that something must have went wrong. By the time he turned back to look, the situation outside the walls had already turned chaotic. He only understood that a huge change had occurred after seeing Lorist entangled with the two shield-bearers.

Without hesitating, Josk quickly fired his arrows and managed to kill two mercenaries in the beginning before the rest managed to rush among the ranks of the Norton soldiers, causing him to be unable to aim properly without worrying about hitting his own allies. Thus, he could only focus his attention on looking for mercenaries who were not engaged in battle with any one of his own allies. Due to the sudden change and the diversion of Josk's attention, the mercenaries outside the wall who have surrendered took the chance to slip away on their horses.

However, it did not go unnoticed by Josk and he quickly fired at them in response. But due to the cunning plan of the mercenaries to split up into different directions as opposed to traveling in a group, especially some experienced mercenaries who frequently zig-zagged around the field, it became even harder for Josk to snipe all of them down.

Having shot out 32 arrows during a short span of time, only 26 mercenaries were knocked off their horses. Two of them had managed to escape from Josk's range of fire while another had been hit by an arrow but managed to get away slumped on his horse and it wasn't known whether he survived the hit or not. That's why Josk gave an uncertain count to Lorist in his report.

"It's not your fault. It's because I didn't consider the possibility of the mercenaries choosing to resist despite being under the threat of ballistas…" said Lorist as he shook his head while letting out a sigh.

"How are the casualties?" Josk asked.

"I'm still not certain of that at the moment, but I've already asked Shadekampf to conduct a rough estimate for me. We will know in a few moments. I really hope that we haven't lost too many men…" replied Lorist in a pained voice.

After a few more moments, Shadekampf returned to Lorist's side along with Patt.

"Tell me…" said Lorist.

"Milord, our forces have lost around 50 to 60 men with 89 injured, among which 17 soldiers were handicapped, with 38 others sustaining heavy injuries and are still in an unstable condition… The casualties of the guard squad number 14 men and the rest are all members of the defense units… It was fortunate that they were wearing metal armor. Otherwise, it would've been much worse," said Shadekampf as his voice got softer from his grief.

Lorist's mouth twitched as he stood there speechless. Aside from the 80 soldiers on the hill and the walls who were manning the ballistas, more than half of the 280 Norton soldiers have either died or gotten hurt. Given that a squad's worth of soldiers were incapacitated in that fight, it was no wonder Ovidis was crying so profusely.

Lorist only managed to control his emotions after a while before he asked, "How about the casualties of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew?"

"Milord, of the 172 mercenaries that were within the walls including their leader, 23 have surrendered to us as prisoners with the rest being all dead without a single survivor," replied Shadekampf.

The reason that there are no surviving injured enemy mercenaries was because all living Feathersoar mercenaries found on the battlefield regardless of the extent of their wounds were slaughtered by the hate-filled Norton soldiers who had lost so many of their comrades to them. Had it not been for the 20 mercenaries who were on the Norton Family's side stopping the soldiers, the 23 surrendered mercenaries wouldn't have been spared as well.

"What is that you have in your hand?" Lorist asked.

Shadekampf took out a few documents with the first one being the casualty report, the second one being a record of the surviving Feathersoar mercenaries and a third document that was filled to the brim with many words. Lorist had casually asked Shadekampf about it because he was curious about its contents.

"Milord, this is the kill count as recorded by Patt," explained Shadekampf.

With his curiosity piqued, Lorist asked, "What are the statistics? Tell me more about it."

Shadekampf referred to the paper and said, "Milord, you've killed the most among all of us with 41 Feathersoar mercenaries having died by your hands, including the two

shield-bearers you defeated earlier. The next on the list is Sir Josk. who single-handedly shot 15 of the enemy mercenaries dead. His kills were the easiest to determine as every corpse had an arrow on it. Ovidis killed 7, Reidy killed 5 while Patt killed the least at 2 people. However, that was because he had long been encumbered by the squad leader ever since the start of the battle. Other than that, the ballistas managed to kill 14 mercenaries and the 20 mercenaries on our side killed 7 and captured another 23."

Lorist made a quick calculation in his mind and came up with a conclusion quickly. "That means that the total number of enemies killed by us is 91. Including the 23 captured prisoners, there are 114 people in total of the 172 men of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew. The extra 58 people were killed by our guard squad and defense unit, which have both lost 130 plus men in total. Considering the fact that most of their kills have been done when they were cleaning up the battlefield after the main fight, the losses of our men to theirs is near a 3 to 1 ratio. This level of battle prowess is far too weak."

Upon hearing Lorist's words, Josk, Patt and Reidy all showed apologetic expressions. Even though the guard squad and defense units were usually equipped with metal armor and seemed rather imposing and impressive, when actually deployed on the battlefield, they weren't as effective as they seemed at all. Even though they had the support of the ballistas as well as the superior equipment compared to the Feathersoar mercenaries who only had leather armor, the outcome of their losses in relation to that of their enemy was quite disappointing, even after taking into account of the the substantially higher number of Battle Force users of the enemy.

"We should carry out more drills and tactical training runs in the future," Lorist concluded quickly so that the rest wouldn't focus too much on the setback.

Chapter 106
Reward

"Patt, please invite Jim and his fellow mercenaries to come over. Also, bring the surrendered Feathersoar mercenaries here as well. I have something I want to ask them," Lorist said.

"Understood, milord," said Patt before he turned and headed for the group of the surrendered mercenaries not far away.

Jim and the rest of his mercenaries helped Patt to escort two of the captives over. What made Lorist wonder was that the closer the mercenaries approached Lorist, the more respectful their gazes became as if they revered Lorist for some reason.

"What's with you guys?" Lorist asked Jim.

Jim pointed towards the corpses of the two Gold ranked shield-bearers not far away and licked his lips before he said, "Milord… Those two… they…"

"What's with them? Aren't they just two Gold ranked shield-bearers? Oh, that's right, why would those two be in the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew? I've never heard you guys mention them before," said Lorist with a dissatisfied tone in his voice. The presence of those shield-bearers had not once been mentioned by Jim and his crew nor Butler Boris when they first came up with the plan and the mercenaries said that the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew only had around 10 Silver ranked fighters as one of the three most famous mercenary crews in the Iblia Kingdom. Even though Butler Boris probably wouldn't know the details within the crew, news about two Gold ranked fighters within their ranks shouldn't have escaped his ears, given that they had worked together for multiple occasions.

"That's not it, milord," said Jim in a slightly frantic voice, afraid that Lorist would misunderstand their intentions. "I had no clue at all that those two had returned. It's been over a year since we last heard of them. When I was hitting the pubs, I've met Adams once or twice and he said that those two had traveled far away to become someone else's disciples without mentioning any other details. The rest of us usually wouldn't mind small matters like that and continued feasting away without

considering the two to be part of their crew."

"You mean to say that they're rather famous?" Lorist asked interestedly.

"That's right, milord. These two shield-bearers are pretty famous in the Royal Capital of Windbury City. The elder of the twin brothers has a fire Battle Force attribute while the younger has a water Battle Force attribute. It was rumored that they have some degree of telepathic communication ability with each other that was the source of their excellent synergy and teamwork. Combined with the excellent combination of their Battle Force attributes, these twins have managed to defeat two Gold ranked fighters in a team battle when they were at the Three Star Silver rank. That battle ended with only one of the Gold ranks escaping with the other being killed by the twin brothers, thus greatly boosting their reputation.

"The twins were orphans who have been discovered and adopted by Crew Leader Adams when they were around the age of 12. To raise the twins, Adams had spent lots of effort and resources. I have just heard a few Feathersoar mercenaries say that the twins had just recently broke through to the Gold rank after training in seclusion for around a year and only returned to the crew two months ago, during which they dueled with one of the Second Prince's subordinates, Blademaster Luins, for more than 300 bouts before they lost due to lack of stamina. The Second Prince was so fascinated by their abilities that he had wanted to hire them as his personal bodyguards for a high fee, but they rejected the offer in the end. This escort was their first mission ever since they returned to the crew, but who would've expect that it would also be their last and end up dying at your hands, milord…"

Jim stammered the longer he continued. Had he not been present when that happened, he definitely wouldn't believe that those two corpses belonged to the most famous twin shield-bearers of the Iblia Kingdom, who were both Gold ranked fighters. Jim and his mercenary comrades conceded without much trouble back then was because Lorist had Josk, a Gold ranked marksman, on his side. None of them had took the dominion lord, Lorist, seriously and believed that he wouldn't have been able to take over the construction site by himself given his power as an Iron rank without Josk's help.

However, these mercenaries finally understood that the seemingly mediocre Lorist was an existence on par of that of fearsome dragons. Even if they hadn't seen his battle with the twin shield-bearers, the mere sight of the speed and efficiency at which Lorist mowed down the rest of the Feathersoar mercenaries with one or two strikes each

shook their hearts to the core. That was even more so the case during his battle with Crew Leader Adams, in which Lorist had taken his head with only one strike. Even Silver ranked mercenaries like Patt and Jim were shaken by that scene: the crew leader that the both of them had so painstakingly defended against had so easily been decapitated by Lorist in one swift stroke. Witnessing all that had cemented the difference between Lorist's and the mercenary's abilities, causing them to have a newfound respect and awe for him.

"I agree, those two had held themselves quite well in battle. No wonder they were able to stop me for so long and made me use so much energy in defeating them," said Lorist as he nodded. Little did he know that his words had almost made the mercenaries around him faint in disbelief. If the twin shield-bearers merely 'held themselves quite well' during that battle with Lorist that lasted less than 30 minutes and even died at his hand, given that they were capable of fighting a Blademaster for more than 300 tiring bouts, didn't that mean that Lorist was stronger than Blademasters? That fact had caused the looks of the mercenaries to be even more fearful.

"Jim, thank you and your comrades so much for aiding us when we were under the assault of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew. I thank you on behalf on the whole Norton Family. I have decided to double your payment today as a sign of gratitude. Shadekampf, go to the warehouse and bring out a chest of gold Fordes. Give each of these fine men 20 gold Fordes each," said Lorist.

"Yes, milord," said Shadekampf before he quickly retreated. The mercenaries all let out soft cheers of delight upon hearing about the doubling of their pay as they didn't expect that Lorist would be so generous. Their initial guilt about betraying the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew had all been melted away as all of them felt that it was definitely a worthwhile job.

"Also, I'd like to ask…" Lorist said. "Jim, would you be willing to join the Norton Family as our family knight?"

The surrounding men all quieted down as they focused their attention on Jim.

With a reddened face, Jim looked back at his comrades. Some of them had eyes filled with envy as they believed that becoming a knight of a noble family was the best possible outcome for men like them. However, some felt that the current state of the Norton Family didn't seem to promise a bright future for its subjects and felt that it was far better being a free mercenary that was not held down by any obligation.

Others were even jealous and felt that it was unfair that Jim was the only one who was offered that chance even though all 20 of them also had a part in that battle.

After giving it some thought, Jim lifted his head and regained his calm before he said, "Milord, I'm only a mercenary and I have nothing in mind right now but to fulfill your tasks…"

Lorist felt disappointed with that response, but he waved his hand and said, "Don't worry about it, I understand how you feel. But since I've already given you the invitation, the doors of the Nortons will always be open for you should you ever change your mind."

"Thank you, milord…" said Jim as he bowed deeply.

"Then what about the rest of you? Would you be interested in joining the Norton Family's forces?" Lorist asked the remaining 19 mercenaries.

After a moment, six of them approached Lorist and said in unison, "Milord, we are willing to be in your service."

Delighted, Lorist said, "I appreciate your commitment. It is my wish that you rack up some achievements for yourselves so that you may one day become knights of the family."

Of the 6 mercenaries, there was 1 One Star Silver rank, 3 Iron ranks and 2 Bronze ranks. Their enlistment into the forces of the Nortons was much needed to relieve the loss of the men who were sacrificed on the battlefield.

At that moment, Shadekampf brought over a chest filled with small pouches each containing 20 gold Fordes. Satisfied with Shadekampf's considerate inclusion of the sachets, Lorist gave the approval to distribute them to the mercenaries. However, one Silver ranked mercenary who had just joined the Norton forces said that since he was already part of them, it was only natural for him to fulfil his duty and urged that he didn't require any payment.

Lorist laughed and said, "Take it, my friend. The Norton Family doesn't lack that kind of money. This is your reward for doing good work for the family, so I insist that you take it. After this, rest up well. I will ask for you guys if I need anything else."

The mercenaries all left happily with their money with some even opening their

sachets to count the coins as they admired them while they walked back to the camp before unwillingly putting them back into the sachets. Only Jim remained, seemingly having something to say to Lorist.

Upon noticing Jim's hesitation, Lorist asked, "What's wrong, Jim? Did you change your mind?"

Jim responded respectfully, "Milord, I've stayed to plead for the lives of the surrendered Feathersoar mercenaries. I know many of them and they are all my good friends who also didn't act against your men during the battle just now and only fought casually against us. They finally surrendered when you made your way there. I hope that you will show them mercy and allow them to serve you along with the rest of us mercenaries."

Lorist stroked his chin while he thought before he said straightforwardly, "Alright then. Since they didn't cause the family any loss, I am willing to spare them on your behalf. I will also hire them on the same conditions as I hired you and your crew, would that be acceptable?"

"Milord, I am grateful for your benevolence and grace. I thank you on their behalf as well," said Jim gratefully.

"You should stay for a little more. I still want to ask them some questions," said Lorist as he motioned for the two surrendered Feathersoar mercenaries to come forward.

First, he asked them why they still decided to resist even after they found out that they had been trapped and surrounded by ballistas. That wasn't the usual behavior of mercenaries, who only cared about their own lives unlike soldiers of proper armies or nobles families.

The two of the captives gave a simple answer: before they left the dominion of the Kenmayses to deliver the shipment, Viscount Kenmays had promised to make Crew Leader Adams a baron if they were able to cooperate with the Kenmays Family to make the Nortons submit as well as enfeoff him part of the territory of the Norton Family's dominion. As the Nortons' dominion spanned a large area, there was more than enough land for five baronies. Adams would then become an official vassal noble house of the Kenmays Family. He had also promised his fellow mercenaries that he would recruit them to become his family knights. That was why they were so willing to fight despite the risks involved.

Good Sol! Lorist was really struck speechless after hearing their response. The Kenmays Family were truly too devious in their plots; for them to use the territory of the Norton Family which had yet to fall into their hands to entice Crew Leader Adams… it was no surprise that the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew was so desperate during that battle! *Darn it! As expected of a family of lowly, devious merchants!*

His second question was to verify the truth about the rumor about the Kenmays Family's new army of 2000 men at the Royal Capital of Windbury that Adams had mentioned during his chat with Jim before the battle.

According to the captives, all that was said by Adams was true. The elder one even revealed some insider information: the Kenmays Family had secretly received the support and permission of the Second Prince to form their army. When the Feathersoar mercenaries got to know about that, they expressed their worries about the crew leader's future position in the Kenmays Family as they may no longer be as integral to the Kenmayses now that they had a force of their own. However, Adams said that there was no need to worry and mentioned that the reason the Second Prince supported the formation of the army was to put some pressure on Duke Loggins. Additionally, the Kenmays Family and the Second Prince were still in the process of negotiating with the duke to let the force of 2000 enter the Northlands.

Lorist's third query was about the status and defenses of the Redriver Valley Bastide.

The captives said that they had taken ten days of rest at the bastide before the shipment mission to the construction site began as they had spent the last month traveling from the royal capital to the Kenmayses' dominion. The two of them answered every single question that Lorist brought up about bastide, much to his satisfaction.

After sending Jim and the two mercenaries away, Lorist looked and Josk and Patt before he said, "Joe, Patt, do you have any energy left?"

"Milord, please don't hesitate to give us your orders," said the both of them energetically in unison.

"You've heard what the mercenaries had to say. The dominion of the Kenmays Family is very weakly defended right now, especially so at the Redriver Valley Bastide. The immigrant town they have nearby only has a garrison of 100 plus people at most with no defensive walls or fortifications. It would be extremely rude for us to not pay them

a visit after what the mercenaries they hired have done here, so I've decided to let the two of you do the honors. I give you one hour to prepare a squad of men including the ones in charge of the ballistas just now as well as some uninjured guard squad members. If they're tired, bring some carriages with you and let them rest on the way there. After occupying the Redriver Valley Bastide, send someone to notify me about it and move everything that you think we can use over here. I want to make sure that the place is burnt to the ground so that the Kenmays Family will have nothing that they will be able to use against us there," ordered Lorist.

"Your will is our command, milord."

Chapter 107
Supply Transportation

Lorist sat back down on his chair to rest for a while and by the time he recovered some energy, he circulated his internal energy according to the Aquametal Technique for one minor cycle. Feeling refreshed, he sent Josk and Patt off to their expedition with their troops before he headed for the medical area within the camp.

Around the area of the 12 large tents, the injured soldiers of the family could be seen lying and occasionally letting out moans of pain. It was quite fortunate for them that some medical supplies had been found within the construction site. Having had their injuries wrapped up and after consuming some medicinal concoctions that would hasten their recovery, the ones with light injuries fell asleep not long after. However, those who were injured more heavily had a much harder time as they couldn't embrace the peace of slumber due to the pain they were suffering from.

Lorist's herbalism knowledge that he had picked up at Dawn Academy had also been put to good use. After giving the more heavily injured soldiers another check, he had someone else slaughter a goat and used its intestines to make threads that were later used to seal up the open wounds of some soldiers. After that, he cleaned up the wounds and applied some more medicine onto it before he wrapped them up with some bandages. Lorist also came up with a few medicinal prescriptions according to each soldier's needs.

He hoped that these men who had so bravely served his family wouldn't lose their lives due to insufficient treatment. That's why he had refused to listen of the advice of his subordinates to get some rest and worked ten hours nonstop. By the time he was finished, dawn had already come.

When Lorist got up, he felt a sudden dizziness from being seated for too long a time and weakly leaned on Shadekampf to support his body. Shadekampf hurriedly said, "Milord, you really should get some rest. Otherwise, your body won't be able to take it…”

With a pale, but happy face, Lorist said, "I'm fine. I'll feel much better after getting some sleep. I've already came up with a few prescriptions for the respective patients,

so make sure they consume it so their injuries don't worsen. For now, help me to my tent so that I may rest. Oh, right, you've also only got around 4 hours of sleep, right? You shouldn't push yourself too far either and rest if you need to…"

However, after only sleeping for two hours, Lorist was awoken by a messenger that Josk sent. Even though he didn't manage to rest for long, more than half of the fatigue that had built up during the battle yesterday had vanished. After hurriedly washing his face to refresh himself, Lorist asked for the messenger.

Looking at the hourglass on the table nearby, Lorist thought, *Josk had only left for 14 hours. Considering that it takes only 6 hours to get to the Redriver Valley Bastide, didn't they return far too quickly? After all, they did bring with them tens of carriages…*

The messenger who was sent over to deliver the news was rather elated. He mentioned that the Redriver Valley Bastide and the immigrant town nearby had both been taken over successfully. According to him, Josk had left the convoy to Patt and went forward by himself with another 40 riders and spent less than 6 hours before they arrived at the bastide. After killing seven guards and taking over the Kenmayses' castle, Josk and his men rushed to the immigrant town and their garrison troop surrendered without resistance after a few of their squad leaders were killed. Following that, Josk had ordered for the messenger and two other men to return to the construction site to send the good news.

The messenger also said that various supplies and resources were in abundance at the bastide. After Josk ordered his men to conduct a rough estimate of the resources contained within the rows of warehouses, he concluded that most of the items were green vine glue and food. Additionally, the messenger also reported that the head supervisor of the Kenmays Family that attempted to set the warehouses on fire, but he had been shot dead once Josk discovered his intentions. Josk was currently awaiting Lorist's instructions on how to deal with the resources as well as the 2000 plus people of the immigrant town.

Lorist instructed some guards at the camp to fetch Miss Telesti, Supervisor Hansk, Butler Boris, Shadekampf, as well as Paulobins, a One Star Silver mercenary who had just joined the Norton Family's forces, to discuss the matter.

Within a few moments, all of the aforementioned people gathered within the tent. After they were seated, Lorist announced the news of the occupation of the Redriver Valley Bastide and the nearby immigrant town, much to Boris's surprise and delight,

as he no longer had to worry about the safety of his family members.

Lorist decided to utilize all the carriages that were available at the construction site for the transportation of the resources from the bastide, including the ones they had obtained from the shipment the day before. According to Hansk, there were around 800 carriages which were all equipped with the necessary horses. The only issue they had was the lack of reliable coachmen. Even if they were to use the members of the temporary defense units that they had just formed recently into the number, they would at most be able to mobilize 500 or so carriages and leave the construction site undefended.

SIgh, what we lack most is still personnel in the end, thought Lorist as he smirked. *Hmm, couldn't we just use the coachmen that came with the shipment convoy and pick out some slave laborers who also know how to drive to solve the problem? I don't think that I need to worry about whether the slave laborers and coachmen would take this chance to run away...* Given the immense area the Northlands covered and its sparse population, the slaves wouldn't have anywhere to run to nor will they be able to travel far as they wouldn't have enough food to last them long enough. There was also the possibility that they might be recaptured should they ever reach the dominions of other nobles and they might even be punished by the nobles of that land for escaping servitude as all the slaves of the Kenmays Family were branded with a mark behind their left ear. They might even be put to death for that offense.

Additionally, Lorist was going to announce to the slaves that he would restore their freedom after they finish transporting the goods by using a special concoction that would help heal the scars behind their ears over time. Initially, Lorist had planned to free them three years later after the construction of the wall fortifications as well as the other castle within the valley was complete. However, now that his family lacked manpower, especially youths, he chose to restore their freedom earlier and believed that they wouldn't run away if that was the case.

Lastly, Lorist also ordered Reidy to bring a group of men from the temporary defense units to participate in that operation to take the place of the soldiers who were at Redriver Valley Bastide. During the next shipment course, another group would take Reidy and his men's place to guard the bastide.

Butler Boris and Shadekampf would also join the convoy to the Redriver Valley Bastide. The reason for Boris's participation was so that he could reunite with his family and help Shadekampf out with finding the hidden storehouses throughout the

bastide so that they wouldn't miss anything out.

Shadekampf on the other hand would be in charge of prioritizing which resources to ship over first. Lorist specified that he wanted the immigrants to be the first to be transported over to make up for the severe lack of population the Norton Family's dominion had to aid the development of the dominion.

He also tasked him with burning down the immigrant town as well as the Redriver Valley Bastide following the transportation of all the resources to the construction site so that the Kenmays Family would lose a location for their troops to be stationed and also teach them a lesson for daring to mess with the Norton Family.

Lorist said that given the decimation of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew as well as the occupation of the Redriver Valley Bastide and the immigrant town, the Kenmays Family would lose all their standing within the Northlands, unless they manage to convince Duke Loggins to send his private army to retake the bastide as soon as possible. However, according to the surrendered Feathersoar mercenaries, the duke was extremely wary of the Kenmays Family and their inability to obtain permission from the duke to send in their own 2000-strong army was proof of that.

It would take at least another 3 days before the Kenmayses would be alerted to the eradication of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew. And by the time their men at Gildusk City found out, it would take another week or so before the message would be able to reach the viscount. By then, it would take another 4 days approximately before Viscount Kenmays will be able to convince the duke to send out his army, and that in itself wasn't guaranteed either as the duke might secretly delight in the setback suffered by the Kenmays Family. Even if the viscount did manage to convince the duke to help him take back his dominion, it would take at least a month and a half before his army would be able to reach the bastide as mobilizing an army involved many procedures and protocols.

In conclusion, the 50 or so days to come would be relatively safe and the transportation operation would most likely be completed without interruptions. Lorist also instructed Shadekampf to tell Josk to have his men patrol the surrounding area after transporting the immigrants over to the construction site. Ideally, they would be able to catch the scouts of the Kenmays Family to further delay the information from being spread. Should the Kenmays Family's army somehow make their way to the Northlands earlier than Lorist had predicted, he would still be able to order his men to retreat in time even if the resources were not yet fully transported

and burn the bastide and the immigrant town down.

"Milord, what do we do if the soldiers of the nobles in the area come over?" Shadekampf asked.

"Those people? Just have Josk get rid of them. They would at most have a couple of knights with the rest of the soldiers being disorganized farmer troops anyway. I believe that Josk would have no hard time showing them their place," said Lorist. He also wondered why the Kenmays Family chose to go against the Nortons instead of eradicating the nobles surrounding his dominion to claim their lands.

What Lorist didn't take into account was that before his arrival, the Norton Family was indeed one of the weakest families in the area with one of the largest dominions which also encompassed the location where the Kenmays Family intended to build their castle. Who else would they target other than the Nortons? However, Lorist's arrival had caused them a huge loss which they didn't even get to know about yet.

"Miss Telesti, I truly am sorry that we have to delay the construction process yet again," said Lorist after he finished managing the affairs of the transportation operation.

The young woman sighed and said, "Milord, I understand that you didn't have much of a choice in that matter. Now that the slaves have mostly been assigned to carry out the shipments, what would we do about the incomplete wall? If the Kenmays Family's forces come knocking a month and a half later, we would definitely have a much harder time defending the place without proper fortifications."

"I've already taken that into account. Aside from the slaves participating in the transportation operation, there should be around 800 laborers left behind here. I intend to utilize every single one of them including the women to help out with the construction. The elderly and children can also aid with the preparation of food. Supervisor Kedan and Old Man Balk, I'm afraid the days to come would be tough on you. Kedan, you will be in charge of managing the elderly, women and children and assigning tasks for them. Balk, I will leave the supervision of the construction of the walls to you. What you must remember is to prioritize the quality of the wall even if that would take a longer time," said Lorist.

"I understand, milord," replied Supervisor Kedan.

"Milord, please be assured that I will ensure that the wall will be as tough as it can be," Balk said confidently while thumping on his chest.

"Supervisor Hansk, you should also make some preparations to store and record the resources that will be shipped over."

"Yes, milord," said Hansk as he nodded.

"Um, Paulobins, since Ovidis is still recovering from his injuries and Reidy is busy escorting the shipment convoy, I am leaving you in charge of the temporary defense units, alright? You will be in charge of their training and managing the wall patrols. Are you confident you can handle that?" Lorist asked.

The young ex-mercenary jumped with a face red with excitement and exclaimed, "Milord, don't worry! I will definitely not let you down!"

Chapter 108
The Pitiful Grandmaster Ciroba

Later that day, Lorist had something at the back of his mind that he couldn't quite remember.

After the shipment convoy had been sent off to the Redriver Valley Bastide, Jim bade Lorist farewell and returned to his post at Poplar Coast with the rest of the mercenaries. However, he also asked Lorist nervously if they would be allowed to buy a few chain mail as the mercenaries were quite envious of how well-equipped the Norton soldiers were.

After asking for Hansk about the amount of armor they had, Lorist decided to sell 20 sets at 70% of the price at 6 gold Fordes each before sending the grateful mercenaries off.

With the resources at the Redriver Valley Bastide being unexpectedly plentiful, Lorist had no choice but to delay his plan to have every available person work on the walls and slow down the construction process to carry out the transportation.

The first few shipments that were sent to the construction site were mostly green vine glue because Shadekampf believed that it was one of the most important resources the dominion needed for its development. He understood that it was even more paramount given Lorist's choice to continue building a city in the valley.

Lorist had once asked Butler Boris why the Kenmays Family stockpiled so much green vine glue. The butler replied confidently that the Kenmayses had an contract with the Romon Empire to purchase 100000 buckets of green vine glue from them every year. That was why it was only natural for there to be around 30000 buckets of it at Redriver Valley Bastide, which was supposed to be the home territory of the Kenmayses.

There was one small accident during the transportation of the glue though. One carriage filled with buckets of those had its axle damaged right in front of the construction site, much to Old Man Balk's dismay as it was directly in the way of the supply route for the materials around the site. He responded by finding a few other people to attempt to push the carriage to aside, but the force and vibration had caused

one huge bucket of green vine glue to splash all over the place including Old Man Balk's face, causing him to get a good smell and taste of the material.

All of a sudden, Old Man Balk stood there with his whole body drenched with glue before he quickly went to look for Lorist and pulled him to a corner where there wasn't anybody else. Carefully checking his surroundings to make sure they were alone, he secretly told Lorist, "Milord… I think I know where this glue can be found…"

Initially weirded out by Balk's sudden erratic actions, Lorist laughed in understanding once he heard the explanation. "I also know that. It's made in the Romon Empire, isn't it? You don't have to be so secretive about that. Isn't that common knowledge?"

Balk once again looked around before he said in a low voice, "That's not it, milord. I mean to say that I know where we can find green vine glue within our dominion."

"You mean we might be able to find and produce green vine glue in our own dominion?" said Lorist in a surprised tone.

"Yes, milord. A little more than 10 years ago, when I was on my way to boil seawater to harness salt for the family, I came across some herbs. But when I started picking them, I accidentally fell into a cave somewhere around the area. I thought I was a goner for sure, but fortunately for me there were huge vines with intertwining leaves all over that cave which allowed me to climb out and somehow retain my life. Before I started climbing, I lied down on the ground for some rest and noticed a peculiar quality of those vines. For some reason, it was moister than most plants I've seen and there weren't any insects around them. Apart from some decaying leaves on the ground, I couldn't even see a single ant. I was quite hungry at that time and had nothing better to eat or drink, so I bit into those vines and sucked out some of its secretions to sustain myself, but I stopped after tasting its extreme bitterness.

"That cave was a rather large one and I couldn't find the exit after walking around, so that's when I decided to try climbing those vines and halfway up the deep cave, I cried out for help. It was fortunate that some of my friends were looking for me, so they dropped a rope for me to hold on to while they hoisted me up. Due to consuming some of the secretions of the vine, my stomach hurt for quite a long time and I only managed to recover after spending quite a sum to purchase some medicines from Master Dunbarsen of Wildnorth Town. From that day onward, i've never forgotten the taste of that liquid that caused me so much pain. And just now when I got a slight taste of the green vine glue, it was exactly the same as that liquid I drank so many years ago…"

"You mentioned that it was very moist down the cave?"

"Yes."

"And that there weren't any insects or even a single ant at all?"

Balk continued to nod earnestly.

"The vines were also rather huge relative to others you've seen elsewhere?"

The old man then stretched his arms upward, indicating that it was easily taller than he was.

Lorist stroked his chin in deep thought. *According to Old Man Balk's description, it does seem that those vines are similar to those found in the Romon Empire. If that is true, then the dominion will have one more resource to capitalize on for its development. We can also sell or trade them with others for some other resources if we have a surplus…*

"Old Man Balk, keep this secret between us for now and don't tell anyone else. When we finish construction the outer wall of this valley, I will accompany you to that cave you mentioned and verify whether those vines were indeed glue vines," Lorist said.

Balk nodded and replied, "I understand, milord. I didn't tell anyone else about it just now either and went straight to you first."

"Good, let's leave it at that. For now, we have to complete the wall first."

……

By the time Butler Boris returned with his family to the construction site along with the convoy, he also brought Lorist some good news: he and Shadekampf had discovered a hidden room back at the bastide which stored up to 100000 gold Fordes and 120000 imperial god coins. Coupled with the multitudes of silver and copper coins within, there was at least 200000 gold Fordes' worth of money over there. That report had caused Lorist immense joy as he thought, *the quickest way to wealth is indeed taking it from others… And merchant families like that should have the most amount of money…*

……

After resting for around 20 days, Ovidis had returned to his former energetic state. Given that he was sick of lying around in bed for days, he pestered Lorist endlessly to allow him to go to the Redriver Valley Bastide for some exploration and even did a few somersaults to show Lorist that he had completely recovered. Having no other choice, Lorist arranged for Ovidis to lead the next batch of carriages and soldiers to take Reidy's place.

……

After seeing Ovidis, Lorist suddenly remembered the one thing he had neglected to do: he had yet to punish Grandmaster Ciroba, who had ruined his plan before it was put into motion. After asking some guards, he got to know that before the ambush, the metal armor equipped soldiers had all forgotten about Grandmaster Ciroba after being told to find a place to hide from sight. That was why he had managed to sneak out to alert the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew on that day.

Currently, Grandmaster Ciroba was dragged in front of Lorist like a sack of dirt by two other guards. Seeing the kneeling and shivering old man, Lorist asked, "What's up with him?"

One of the guards replied, "Milord, I think he's terrified of you…"

"Me? How is that possible? I've only just thought about him earlier today, how would I have the chance to go out of my way to frighten him?"

"It's true, milord," replied the guard. "Right after the battle that day, a few of us wanted to look for this cursed old guy to give him a good beating. But when we found him, he was crouched on the ground muttering something about seeing a demon. It was not long after that we understood that he was referring to you, milord. After giving him a sound thrashing, we tossed him back into his cell. Some of my friends reported that this pile of crap of a grandmaster was having severe nightmares that caused him to spring awake screaming about demons in the middle of the night while also begging for your forgiveness so that you wouldn't eat him alive… After that, some of us used your name to frighten him when we had nothing better to do and every single time it caused him to cry nonstop. It was fun while it lasted…"

Grandmaster Ciroba's experiences had been quite unfortunate during that span of time. Initially, he was naturally elated to find out that the Norton Family was going against the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew. Being a famed architect of the Iblia Kingdom

and a citizen of Windbury City, he had long heard about the reputation of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew and had even worked with them on several occasions. He believed that the Norton Family's forces would definitely not be able to match that mercenary crew given that they had went out of their way to set up such an elaborate plot to ambush them.

He thought that if the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew was able to defeat the Nortons, then he would soon be able to regain his freedom. That was why he was willing to take the risk to reveal the ambush to the crew before he was knocked unconscious by Ovidis.

The real crux was Ovidis's relatively light strike, which caused the grandmaster to wake up before the battle had ended. As he had wished, the Nortons were in full-on conflict with the mercenary crew. Having learned not to reveal himself so easily lest he get knocked unconscious again, the old man didn't go out of his way to cheer for the mercenaries and opted to spectate the battle while hidden.

As a person who had no experience on the battlefield whatsoever, Grandmaster Ciroba had only just found out about the cruelty and bloodshed present in any conflict. The only things he knew about war was those depicted in novels about fictionalized knights and heroes who gloriously led their armies to defeat their adversaries and returned home with beauties in their arms to live out the rest of their lives in happiness and bliss. But when he heard the agonized cries and saw the blood spurting out of the slaughtered mercenaries, he puked on the spot. To avoid having to see that sight again, he turned backwards just in time to see Lorist killing the two Gold ranked shield-bearers.

After that, the grandmaster witnessed Lorist rushing into the crowd of people and killing the mercenaries without breaking a sweat. Quickly losing count of the mercenaries who had died by Lorist's sword, Grandmaster Ciroba felt a chill down his spine. Quickly, he realized that he had made a grave error in offending a fearsome being like Lorist.

By the time Lorist had decapitated Crew Leader Adams, Grandmaster Ciroba had completely despaired. The image of the blood-covered Lorist had been burned deep within his mind, causing him to constantly fear his retribution for spoiling the plot. Deep within his psyche, he had already considered Lorist to be some kind of fearsome demon…

After he was beaten up by some guards and tossed back into his cell, he never had a good night's sleep as every time he tried to close his eyes, he would start to imagine the countless soldiers without heads or limbs crawling up to him, eventually melding together to form Lorist's blood-covered silhouette that would proceed to torture him endlessly.

The first time Grandmaster Ciroba awoke from that nightmare, he quickly begged for mercy and forgiveness. But that didn't stop the dreams from continuing. Had he been by the side of his family, there was little doubt that his mental condition would recover over time.

But at that time, he was locked up alone in a cell and the guards that watched over him were mostly ex-bandits who delighted in tormenting him after they discovered the one he was so desperately begging forgiveness from was Lorist. Their mean antics included pretending to have received Lorist's orders to cut off his legs, genitals, nose or ears and even fry him in boiling oil, all of which caused the old man to be terrified to the depths of his soul. Eventually his nightmares grew to be even more fearsome, causing the state of his mind to become even more brittle to the point that he lost all will to move after being told that he was being brought to see Lorist.

Conflicted, Lorist felt that he wouldn't be able to punish Grandmaster Ciroba given that he was already in such a fearful state that his bladder and rectum had relaxed and released their contents before Lorist even said a word.

Lightly fanning the stench away from his nose, Lorist said, "Take him away and help him wash off…"

But before he finished, Grandmaster Ciroba seemed to have misunderstood and quickly hugged Lorist's leg before he begged, "Milord… Don't… Please forgive me and don't fry or grill me! I'm not tasty at all! Milord, I can be very useful to you alive… I can build… Yes, I can build castles… Houses… Anything you want! Please don't eat me……."

As his pleading got louder and louder, the people at the tents not far away scrambled over and thought that something had happened. Reidy and Paulobins even thought that Lorist was in some sort of trouble and was in need of help.

With a grimace on his face, Lorist looked at the guards and said in an exasperated voice, "Look at you guys… You've really gone too far with this…"

The guards all had an innocent look on their faces as one of them said, "Milord, this is not our fault… Who asked him to be so much of a coward…"

Tired of arguing with them, Lorist shook the groveling old man off his leg and warned, "Get up. If you don't, I'll really start grilling you alive."

"Please milord… No…" said Grandmaster Ciroba as he quickly stood up.

"I'll give you a chance to make this up to me," said Lorist. "First, go take a bath to clean yourself up and report to Miss Telesti when you're done. Help her with the construction of my castle and I'll forgive you if you do well. Otherwise…"

Lorist revealed his two rows of gleaming white teeth and said, "You know what will happen…"

With an audible thump, the old man kneeled quickly and said, "Milord, I will definitely do my best until you're satisfied…"

"Reidy, take him away for a bath and bring him to Miss Telesti. Grandmaster Ciroba will be her subordinate in the future," Lorist instructed.

Chapter 109
A Meeting with Telesti

Time flew by and one month passed fleetingly. There had already been 20 or so shipments carried out from the Redriver Valley Bastide to the construction site, but Shadekampf reported that only half of the resources within the bastide had been transported over and said that it would require at least another full month before they would be able to fully transport everything. Apart from asking his men to increase the speed of the shipment, there was nothing else Lorist could do. Not to mention that many carriages had been damaged during the course of the shipment and there were currently more than 100 or them awaiting repairs.

It was a rather pleasant day, at least to Lorist, as the first outer wall had been completed. Currently, Lorist was standing atop the new wall which was around 7.5 meters tall and 3.5 meters wide. Its length was around 86 meters with two other walls extending at right angles from both ends, effectively forming into a '|_|' shape.

The main difference between this outer wall and the one at the other end facing the Norton Family's dominion was that Lorist had borrowed elements from Ancient Chinese architecture to build blockhouses[1] on the face of the walls with each extending outwards from the wall by 2 meters and having a width of 5 meters while extending upwards to 1 meter above the wall itself, causing the whole stretch of the wall to look rather imposing.

Patting on the crenels of the wall, Lorist felt rather satisfied. Now that they had completed the construction of that essential defensive structure, there was no worry that the construction site would fall into the hands of others easily. What made Lorist curious was the fact that not a man from the Kenmayses have been detected recently according to Josk's reports, even though they had just increased the frequency of the patrols recently. It was as if the Kenmays Family had completely forgotten about the Redriver Valley Bastide. Logically speaking, upon getting to know that the viscount's bastide had been occupied, it only made sense for the Kenmayses to be wary and scout the surrounding area for any more of the Nortons' movements. The fact that Josk hadn't found anything like that was definitely a sign that something fishy was going on.

That shouldn't be possible… Unless… The Kenmays Family still haven't received news about the occupation of the bastide. Was that even possible? Lorist thought as he laughed. *That would be too good to be true… Oh well, I shouldn't ponder upon it too much. We'll cross the bridge when we come to it. It's already fortunate that I managed to get so many benefits from their bastide, so it would be going too far to hope for such an ideal scenario.*

"Old Man Balk, have you finished planning the arrangements of the construction of the second wall with Miss Telesti?"

Balk who was standing beside him replied, "Miss Telesti had tasked me to first lay the foundations for the wall but stopped me from doing anything else as the details of its design still hasn't been confirmed yet."

"I see. Then I guess I should go pay her a visit," Lorist said.

Telesti was within the center of the 5 buildings on the wall as usual. When Lorist went inside, he bumped into Grandmaster Ciroba. Letting out a frightened cry, the old man ran to the corner of the room and curled up into a ball as sounds of dripping water could be heard. It seemed that his bladder had loosened from his terror once again.

Annoyed and feeling a little awkward, Lorist thought, *how many times has it been? Every time I come to visit Miss Telesti, Grandmaster Ciroba would become like that. And then there's Little Vinny…*

As he had expected, Lorist heard Vinny's startled gasp. "Mistress… Not good! The man-eating demon is here again…"

A snicker rang out within the room…

Lorist walked into the room with a gloomy expression without giving Grandmaster Ciroba any heed. Ever since that old man started working under Telesti, he would keep repeating that Lorist was a man-eating demon, and the others all knew that the old man behaved as such because he was completely terrified of Lorist. However, Telesti's young maidservant, Vinny, thought it was funny and even secretly went up to ask Lorist whether human flesh was delicious. At that time, he was in a rather playful mood and opened his mouth wide to pretend to bite Vinny, only to send her scurrying away in terror. Ever since that time, Lorist had properly cemented himself as a demon in Vinny's mind.

"Ouch!" Vinny's pained cry rang out from within the room. "Mistress, why did you hit me?"

Telesti said, "Why else would I hit you? How can you believe in something as ridiculous as that? You even ran inside my room and messed up all my models!"

"Mistress, I'm really not kidding. At that time, he almost ate me alive… Oh no, he's coming in…" said Vinny before she crawled under Telesti's chair to hide.

While Telesti was initially seriously trying to reprimand her maidservant, upon seeing Lorist's defeated expression, she gradually let muffled chuckles until she could no longer hold back and laughed out loud.

"Am I really that funny?" Lorist said, dissatisfied.

"Haha… Hahaha… Man-eating demon… Hahaha…"

Lorist could see Vinny poking her head around from underneath the chair and suddenly felt in the mood to make a scary face while raising both his hands clawed, as if he was about to leap straight at her…

"Eeep!" Vinny squaeled in a terrified voice. Feeling unsafe despite being behind her mistress, the young maidservant took the risk and ran straight out of the room and closed the door tight behind her.

Seeing that, Telesti's laughter got even more severe to the point that she was banging on the table involuntarily.

"Hey, have you laughed enough now?" Lorist asked Telesti who was laughing so hard that tears were coming out of her eyes.

"Enough… Hoho… I want to stop… too… Pffft! But… Every time I look at you… I can't… Stop laughing!" stammered Telesti as she tried her best to catch her breath.

Annoyed and slightly pissed, Lorist started thinking of what he could do to make her stop.

Circling the table and pulling Telesti up suddenly, Lorist planted a kiss onto her luscious lips before she managed to react.

Her laughter finally stopped, but she was equally stunned as well. With both her eyes opened wide, she continued to stand there in a daze and only managed to react when Lorist teased her tongue with his own.

"Ouch!" exclaimed Lorist in pain. "What did you bite me for?"

Telesti pushed Lorist aside and breathed raggedly with her cheeks flushed red and said, "Milord, that's far too rude of you."

"Just call me Locke," he said. "Well, at least I managed to get you to stop laughing…"

"Locke, you should give up on any notion on courting me…" said Telesti with an embarrassed expression. "I've already taken an oath in the name of Siminglyde that I would continue my mother's research and will stay single for the rest of my life. I want to become an impressive scholar…"

Siminglyde was Grindia's God of Knowledge and Wisdom and his shrine was rather special even among the other deities worshipped by the people of the continent. It was shaped like a circular tower that was rumored to be based after the Magi's towers in the ancient times.

"Alright," Lorist said. "Then I give my best wishes that you will fulfill your dream one day and become the most influential scholar that you want to be so much. Can we now talk about the serious matters?"

Telesti sat down with her face still blushing and said without looking directly at Lorist, "Milord, what have you come here to talk about?"

"I've heard Old Man Balk that you still haven't decided on the design of the second wall. Why is that so?"

Upon hearing Lorist's serious tone, Telesti forgot about what had happened previously and said, "It's like this. The main reason is that Grandmaster Ciroba feels that if we continue to build the second wall as we have planned, the protruding part of the blockhouses would be a little troubling. Let me bring you to the models so the grandmaster can explain it to you."

"Forget it, he has already wet himself after seeing me once. I don't wish for him to have to change into another pair of pants again," Lorist said.

Telesti giggled as if she had thought of something and rolled her eyes at Lorist before she stifled her laughter and reached out for her tea cup, only to notice that it was already empty.

"Locke, please ask Vinny to pour me some tea." Telesti had used Lorist's nickname without much thought, but after she noticed it, her face flushed red again and she avoided looking directly at him.

"Alright," said Lorist as he opened the door to do as she said.

But right after he pushed the door open, Vinny's head almost bumped straight into Lorist's chest.

"What's wrong, Little Vinny?" said Lorist as he caught her to stop her from falling.

But this time, Vinny wasn't afraid of him anymore. After seeing Telesti safely sitting behind her desk, Vinny let out a breath of relief and said, "Sniff… Mistress… Vinny shouldn't have forgotten about you and left you alone in the room with him… Thank goodness you weren't eaten! Oh no! Vinny is caught by that monster! Mistress… save me…"

Upon noticing that she had been 'captured', the maidservant started making quite a ruckus.

"Stop fooling around, Vinny. Pour me some tea and bring me a basin of water for me to wash my face. After that, call Zanben to bring the model of the wall over here," Telesti said.

Seeing Vinny carefully circling around Lorist as she brought the tea, Telesti almost broke out into laughter again. Lorist on the other hand was suppressing his desire to tease Vinny once more and stayed seated without messing around.

"Oh, mistress, why is your face all red? It looks rather pretty this way…" said Vinny.

"It's all your fault for closing the door. The heat that caused my face to flush up…" said Telesti in an attempt to cover it up.

Lorist shook and chuckled upon hearing that while Telesti rolled her eyes to Lorist again in a fit of embarrassed rage.

……

After Zanben brought the model over, Lorist came to understand that his plan for the blockhouses had caused them quite some trouble. Castles in Grindia usually didn't have blockhouses that protruded from the walls itself but rather ones built atop the walls. Most city walls had blockhouses built on the front and back of the top part the walls to increase the their defensive capabilities.

The blockhouses protruding out of the wall that Lorist had asked to build wouldn't be a problem if it was only one wall, but they would definitely impede the construction of the second outer wall. The fact that the second wall had to be three meters taller than the first wall was even more of a problem.

The model Zanben brought over was modified to accommodate for that structure by giving a slight slant to the stairs that connected the blockhouses to the walls. While it did not impact its defensive capabilities much, it did look less aesthetically appealing.

Telesti said, "Look, milord. This design looks rather ugly. That's why Grandmaster Ciroba was very against it and believed that the blockhouses should be built individually instead of having them connected to the walls. But that would significantly lessen the defense…"

Lorist pointed at the model and said, "Then just build it like that. What I want is strong defense and not looks. If the second outer wall gets breached, we can easily close the main gates of the blockhouses of the first wall and effectively lock the enemy out. That way, we will also have more time to retaliate against those who have made their way beyond the second wall. If we separate the blockhouses, once they get conquered, the first inner wall wouldn't be able to hold out for long."

Telesti furrowed her brows and said, "But milord, it does look far less appealing like that."

"That's alright, just build it according to this model as I say. I will allow you to decorate the valley city as you please when we start working on it, but this wall only needs to be practical and tough. I will look forward to how beautiful you can make the city in the future," Lorist said.

"Okay, milord. Then we will begin construction according to this model," said Telesti while looking a little crestfallen as she waved for Zanben to put the model back.

"Milord, do you have anything else you need me for?" Telesti asked.

"Of course I do," Lorist said. "Vinny, you don't have to be so scared of me you know. Why don't you leave the room for a bit?"

"Nope, Little Vinny can stay here," said Telesti as she denied Lorist's suggestion without waiting for Vinny's response.

"But mistress, Vinny is really scared…" said Vinny.

Telesti held her arm and said quietly, "Um, Little Vinny… I am a little scared myself. So, I need you to accompany me…"

"Alright, mistress. Vinny will stay by your side…" said Vinny bravely before she gave Lorist a look and scrambled behind Telesti's back.

"Milord, if you have anything to say, don't hold back," said Telesti while lightly thumping the table to stifle her laughter after she looked at Lorist who was squeezing his eyes in an attempt to frighten Vinny.

"Oh, I was thinking whether you could spare some manpower to build two taverns in the area planned for the business sector," Lorist said.

Telesti widened her eyes in curiosity while awaiting Lorist's explanation.

"It's like this. didn't I say that I would give the slave laborers their freedom after the shipment operation is completed? That means I will need to pay them a salary when the time comes. But how would they spend the money at the construction site? That's why I think building some taverns and gradually developing the business sector would be important for the laborers to have a taste of true freedom," Lorist said.

"Milord, even though freedom doesn't only include being able to spend the money you earn, I will seriously consider your proposition. But at the moment, the immigrants forced by you to move from the Redriver Valley Bastide are currently staying there. Where do you think we should move them?"

Lorist pointed at the map on top of the table and said, "Over here right behind this first inner wall. Set up a camp site over here. Apart from the defense unit soldiers, have the rest of the people move outside the walls to camp during the night and have them move back into the wall when the construction begins during the day. This way, not

only can we continue the construction without interruption, you will also be able to start developing the business sector. That will also increase the security by preventing any thefts during the night as it is getting harder to monitor the resources that are being shipped over as they increase day by day."

Telesti nodded and said, "Milord, even though it will still increase our workload, you've finally come up with a reliable plan. Good for you."

Lorist was completely speechless at that remark.

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[1] A defensive fortification with holes to allow defending troops to fire at enemies from cover.

Chapter 110
Intermission

"Milord, the transportation of supplies from the Redriver Valley Bastide has been completed and that place has been burned to the ground. Here is the list of things we brought over from there," said Shadekampf while holding a thick stack of beastskin documents.

Lorist however was speechlessly staring at the carriages of the last convoy that was slowly entering from the gates at the walls that seemed to be carrying broken metal pots, dirty clay apparatus as well as some worn out old rugs, dismantled windowsills and broken mops…

"What are you collecting all these junk for?" Lorist asked

"Milord, even those worn out and old things can still be used as cleaning supplies…" said Shadekampf.

"Then what are those carriages over there carrying? The stuff looks rather heavy…" Lorist said as he pointed to a few carriages in the distance.

The last few carriages seemed to be far slower than the rest and appeared to be carrying things of substantial weight.

"Those, are tiles milord… I removed them from the main hall of the manor and thought that we could use them for our own castle when it is completed," said Shadekampf.

Lorist made a thumbs up and said, "I say, the next time you see Charade, you can proudly tell him that you've learned everything he has to teach and has graduated from being his disciple!!"

Seeing Lorist turn and leave, Shadekampf got hold of Reidy and asked, "What did milord mean by that? It's not like I took Sir Charade as my master… What did he mean by graduating?"

Reidy burst out in laughter instantly. Having been by Lorist's side for quite a long time,

he wasn't a stranger to his complaints about Charade's petty and stingy attitude and understood Charade's personality very well. After giving it some thought, Reidy said seriously, "That is milord's way of praising you for being as calculative as Sir Charade and being a great supervisor…"

……

Lorist and Josk were currently within a large tent enjoying some steaming-hot macks. That was also something they had in abundance as the Redriver Valley Bastide had quite a huge supply of it. Apart from giving Telesti two large jars of it, Lorist claimed the rest for himself.

"During the past month, the 7 people I've caught nearby the Redriver Valley Bastide were all ambassadors of noble families from the surrounding area ranging from those who were interested in starting friendly relationships, those who wanted to engage in trade and some who came to request for help. there were even a couple of them who were there to request marriage alliances with the Kenmays Family. I locked them up and only released them before we set fire to the bastide," reported Josk.

"Weird, why hasn't the Kenmays Family sent any scouts yet? That really boggles my mind. Don't tell me that they still haven't received news of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew's demise and still doesn't know that we've occupied the bastide? That can't be…" Lorist said as he scratched his head in confusion.

……

In actuality, Lorist was correct. The Kenmays Family did indeed not know about the bastide's occupation. Of the three unfortunate mercenaries that managed to get away, the one who got shot by Josk's arrow died moments later while the other two split up during their escape. One of those unlucky fellows actually somehow made his way into a warzone between two noble families. The soldiers who were hiding and preparing for an ambush thought that the mercenary was one of the enemy's men and ordered for the archers to turn him into swiss cheese.

The other mercenary traveled for a day and found a village where he could rest for a bit. It didn't take long for him to notice that there were only women, the elderly and children among the inhabitants of the village as most of the youths and men were forcefully conscripted into war. Taking advantage of the absence of men, the mercenary coerced the villagers to provide him with delicacies and women for his

pleasure. To the Iron ranked mercenary, the people of the village were not his match and there wasn't anything he had to worry about.

What he did not know were the customs of the people of the Northlands. Northlanders were usually friendly and welcoming to guests and would offer them decent hospitality. But people who were less than welcome usually wouldn't be able to leave alive. While the mercenary thought that he was completely in control of the village and was flirting with two women after the hearty meal he had, one of the women got up and poured him a tea. Feeling quite burned from all the alcohol he had consumed but still not letting his guard down, he only drank the tea after seeing the woman drink some herself.

However, right after he finished his drink, he could see two cold smiles from the women's faces. Even though he understood that something was wrong, his arms and legs suddenly felt numb and wasn't able to exert much force. In the end, that mercenary was buried alive by the seemingly defenseless people of the village who even managed to profit a little from the weapons, armor, mount and other belongings he left behind.

That was how the famed Feathersoar Mercenary Crew of the Iblia Kingdom vanished without a trace. Under the impression that the crew was guarding the bastide, the viscount didn't feel worried at all about its safety and only focused his efforts on negotiating with Duke Loggins in hopes that his force of 2000 would be allowed into the Northlands.

If they split the force up into multiple smaller parts, they would've been able to enter the Northlands discreetly long ago. However, the Kenmays Family didn't do that because of the Second Prince's suggestion to use the presence of the force as a warning and obstacle to the duke's unification of the Northlands. The Kenmays Family also wanted their army to arrive at the Northlands glamorously to impress upon the other nobles the rise of the family so that they would no longer set their sights on taking advantage of the Kenmayses.

The greatest flaw of Duke Loggins was his indecisiveness. However, for some reason, this time he had stood firm on not letting the Kenmays Family's 2000-strong force enter the Northlands. Even though the duke's very own Northland Army had about 20000 soldiers and was easily ten times more numerous than that of the Kenmays Family, and not to mention that the Kenmays Family had always been on rather respectful terms with the duke given that the cousin sister of Viscount Kenmays was

the duke's mistress, he was quite unyielding of his decision and the two parties had already been negotiating for more than three months.

Given that Viscount Kenmays was a busy man, he didn't have the time to pay any attention to the happenings within his own domain. For the past three months, he had been busy gifting valuables and women to the duke's subordinates so that they may help put in a good word for him. During his stay at the duke's mansion, he had also humbled himself to butter the duke up by doing menial chores such as pouring his tea. In the end, due to the pressure from the Second Prince and the Kenmays Family's efforts, the duke had finally signed the agreement to allow the Kenmayses' army to enter, with the condition that the army would listen to the duke's every command.

After receiving the permit, Viscount Kenmays sent it to his father who was residing in Windbury City so that their army may proceed to the Northlands as soon as possible. On the other hand, he instructed his attendants to send a message to his dominion to notify the head supervisor of Redriver Valley Bastide to make preparations to receive the force and its deployment to the Norton Family dominion to make them submit to him once and for all.

By the time the three of Viscount Kenmays's attendants arrived, all of them were stunned speechless upon seeing the burnt remains of what used to be the Kenmays Family's headquarters. Not a soul could be seen: even the immigrants living at the town nearby had all vanished. The attendants looked at each other before the eldest and most senior of them decided for one of the attendants to return and notify the viscount of the bad news and the other to check on the construction site to see if it was still under the control of the Kenmays Family while he himself would go investigate the surrounding area to find out who the perpetrator was.

……

"Milord, you no longer have to worry so much about the Kenmays Family. After all, we've already taken everything they have. Since news doesn't travel fast in the Northlands, it's far better to sit tight and wait to see how things turn out. What will come, will come. And if it doesn't, it's not like we have nothing better to do than wait aimlessly for it, right?" said Josk before he took a sip from his cup.

Lorist tapped on his thigh and said, "You're right, Joe. I'm just not used to this. Back in Morante City, I was able to know what happened around the continent clearly by reading the papers. But after returning to the dominion, it's like I've suddenly turned

blind: other than the small piece of land around the area, I am not informed of anything going on outside it at all. It really isn't pleasant to sit and wait for the enemy to arrive. I really dislike this feeling of leaving everything to fate."

Josk placed the cup in his hand down and said, "Why don't we talk about something else? Milord, I've heard rumors that you've been courting Miss Telesti. Is that true?"

Seeming a little down upon hearing that, Lorist said, "Yes, but I failed. Telesti's dream is to be a venerable scholar and she has decided to remain single for the rest of her life to stay focused and doesn't want to have any children to take time away from her work…"

For the past month, Lorist had visited Telesti on multiple occasions in an effort to woo her. But Telesti was far from defenseless: she would always be with either her butler or her maidservant Vinny. Once when they were both alone, before Lorist was able to try anything, Telesti called Zanben into the room with them, much to Lorist's frustration. During that visit, Lorist brought the two jars of macks to Telesti's place. Determined to wait for Zanben to leave the room, he started making some macks for himself. In the end, after consuming so many cups that he had lost count, Lorist gave up and left because he could no longer hold his bladder. It was from that day onwards that the rumor of the dominion lord courting Telesti started to spread.

"Being single, huh… It sounds rather good. I want to be single for life as well…" mused Josk.

"Forget it, you better find a wife and form a family to pass down your legacy. I don't want the Divine Marksman to be history during the generation of my heir. Also, after I announce the freedom of the slave laborers, I want you to pick out a company's worth of men to be trained into longbowmen and crossbowmen. Currently, one of the most glaring weaknesses of our force is our underwhelming ranged attack capability. While many of our soldiers know some degree of archery, it is far from reliable to be employed on the battlefield. If we had a squad of longbowmen or crossbowmen back when we faced the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew, we would have had far fewer casualties," said Lorist in a serious tone.

Josk nodded and said, "Milord, I understand. However, most of the slave laborers are common folk who haven't awakened their Battle Force. I'm not sure my training regiment would suit them…"

"This is no issue. I will still stay here at Firmrock Castle for around 20 days. Even though the situation at Maplewoods Bastide is a little urgent, I can still afford to delay my return for a bit. I will use this time to teach the slave laborers to awaken their Battle Force. As they have been working rough labor for long periods of time, most of them have strong and healthy bodies. WIth a little more physical training, there is a good chance that a huge number of them will be able to awaken their Battle Force. You can then pick a couple of them from the ones who succeed to train. As for longbows and crossbows, I've already asked the father-son arbalists[1] to prepare some. They promised to make me some simplified crossbows that can be used in training within a month. Proper crossbows would require more time to make and won't be ready until next year," Lorist said.

"Alright, simplified ones will do. Even though the range, power, durability and accuracy are considerably lower, it would be more than enough for its intended purpose. Milord, it's a shame that the main convoy still hasn't arrived yet. Otherwise we would have as many weapons as we need," Josk said as he sighed.

"That's right. I kind of miss them too. Darned fatty, I haven't received any news about the convoy for more than three months already. You'd think they would send someone to notify us about their status…" complained Lorist.

……

"Achoo! Achoo! Achoo!" Elsewhere, Charade let out three loud sneezes.

"Hehe, and you just said that fat people don't feel cold. You should wear some more clothing just in case you get sick," teased Els.

"I'm not cold at all. It's just that somehow my nose started to itch. Someone must be talking bad about me behind my back," said Charade as he took the blanket Els handed him to wipe off his snot.

"Good Sol! Fatty! Don't be so gross!" said Els as he snatched the blanket back from him and handed it to a guard who was passing by and said, "It's a reward for your hard work."

"We only have enough for one each person. Don't you go take one more after giving it away," said Charade while eyeing Els.

"I'll see if you dare to stop me. If you don't give me another one to replace the one you

dirtied, I will even take your wife's," Els replied.

"…" Charade was troubled as he knew Els was definitely capable of doing what he just said. "Gosh, I give up. Go take another one then by the time we set up camp."

"But still… Those sneezes of mine were definitely not normal. Somebody must have been cursing me," said Charade, not willing to let the subject go.

Els laughed and said, "Why would you think that people wouldn't? During the three months we were at Geldos City, do you know the moniker the nobles gave you? Charade the Skinner. You won't believe how many of them were cursing you day and night for taking so much of their stuff that you're practically skinning their family alive. Do you recall the nobles who gathered up to send us off on that day that even hired drummers to make a grand spectacle? They weren't cheering for our safe journey but rather their salvation from a miserly demon like you…"

"Those nobles can say whatever they want. It's not like what they say or think will actually hurt me in any way. I am a knight of the Norton Family, it's only natural for me to put the family's interests first," Charade said righteously.

"Hey, do you think that the person who's talking behind your back might be Locke? It's already been three months and we're still wandering around the Redlis Kingdom. We've really took too much time to depart. Even though it's been a month since Potterfang conquered Benz Citadel[2] with our army, it would still take us at least 20 days before the convoy will be able to reach there," Els complained.

Upon hearing Lorist being mentioned, Charade went silent for a while before saying, "We had no choice in that matter. After occupying Geldos City, the amount of supplies we have to manage has only increased. There was also the training of the newly-formed combat units and the reorganization of the convoy as well as the collaboration with Viscount Tim and the Peterson Merchant Guild to handle. We also had to deal with the conflicts between the various nobles…"

"That's right. And you managed to weasel some more stuff from them, right? Right now, apart from weapons and equipment, they are already on the brink of running out of food. I bet they were itching to fight each other for it the moment we left…" said Els sarcastically in an effort to ridicule Charade's methods.

"But if we didn't do that, would we have been able to sustain all 50000 people of the

convoy? I'm sure that Locke would understand this as well as the delayed date of departure for the convoy considering its huge scale of over 4000 carriages," Charade said.

"Fatty, I miss Locke. I wonder if he's doing well right now. If we arrive at the Andinaq Kingdom without issues, do you think I can leave first and head to where Locke is?" asked Els.

Charade nodded and said, "I guess that would be fine. It is about time we sent someone to tell him that we're fine and the journey is progressing without problems…"

Chapter 111
Breakthrough

It has been three months since Lorist had left the Maplewoods Bastide. It was already the sixth month and the weather was getting warmer gradually, thus relinquishing the need for winter clothing.

The first thing Lorist did after arriving was to go see Butler Gleis to give him a brief on the situation at Firmrock Castle. After the completion of the wall, Lorist had a few stonemasons carve out large characters of the castle's name onto it, hence officially setting the name of the place in stone quite literally.

To the old butler, it was already a great shame for the Norton Family bastide to have been under siege by the Kenmays Family that one time. After hearing about the resources they had taken and the state of the burnt down Redriver Valley Bastide, the old guy couldn't help but drag Lorist to the family's forbidden area to let the Norton Family ancestors know that the current heir did not let their hopes down and had successfully wiped clean the humiliation they had been forced to endure.

Slightly regretting informing the butler of the good news, Lorist could only push the butler's wheelchair into the cavern hesitantly and tried his best to not breathe the stench in. After listening to the old butler's ramblings for a whole hour, Lorist was finally allowed to leave.

Arriving at the building he usually stayed in, Lorist noticed that Supervisor Spiel was standing at his door and waiting for his return with a big stack of beastskin documents in his hands, obviously eager to report to him about the happenings within Maplewoods Bastide during the past three months of his absence.

Waving his hands in annoyance, Lorist said, "Don't you see that I'm quite worn out after my travels? Tell me about that tomorrow. Also, Supervisor Spiel, I've brought back lots of supplies on this trip so you should go see Shadekampf and make an inventory of those first. Additionally, don't interrupt my rest for tonight. Notify Knight Pajik and Supervisor Kedan to come here tomorrow as we will need to meet up to discuss something. I also want to be briefed on the status of the defense squads as well. Oh, and if Supervisor Kedan is at Poplar Coast, I want you to ask him to return to

tell me about the situation there."

"Um, milord, would you want to ask Lady Pesha to come over as well?" Spiel stammered.

"Why would I call her over? She has given me nothing but trouble so far…" said Lorist as his gaze sharpened. "Did she cause any more trouble during the three months I wasn't here?"

"She didn't…" said Spiel in a panic. "That's definitely not the case. Ever since she was taught a lesson by you, Lady Pesha has been cooped up within her quarters. Apart from accompanying the illegitimate son of the late First Young Master, she has been practicing her swordsmanship day and night. Well, I only mentioned her because she is technically a knight of the family. It wouldn't be good if… Um… If she were to miss an important meeting like this…"

"Supervisor Spiel, I hope you understand that the child you mentioned is the bona fide descendant of my elder brother and not just some illegitimate child. Also, it's not that I'm leaving Pesha out of the important matters of the family; raising my brother's son is definitely a great contribution. As for her swordsmanship practice, I am pretty satisfied with that. At least she is not ignorant of her shortcomings and understands that she has still room to improve. Do you have anything else you want to say?" Lorist asked with a solemn expression.

"That's all, milord. Your subordinate shall leave now," said the supervisor as he bowed and left.

……

Pushing open the door to the guest room, Lorist saw Belnick, who was previously reading a book by the window, getting up hurriedly and paying his respects.

Lorist said, "It's alright, cut the pleasantries. Sit down. Let me see how much you've recovered."

Belnick sat down once again and placed his right hand on the table. Having been acquainted with how his lord checked for ailments and illnesses, he was quite curious with the technique Lorist used. However, he was under the impression that pulse-reading was a new medical technique that was being commonly used in Morante City, so apart from some fascination, he didn't think too much about its eccentric approach.

Lorist took a glance at the book Belnick was previously reading; titled 'The Journey of the Sage', the book was about one of the many legends that were passed down from the age of the Magic Civilization. It was part of the collection Lorist had brought back when he first arrived at the Northlands.

"Milord, I apologize for borrowing this book without permission. Recuperating alone in this room is really far too boring, so I couldn't help myself when I saw Irina dry some of the books under the sun," said Belnick.

"It's alright, you can read it as you please. Just make sure you don't lose it," Lorist said as he took the book and used it to prop up Belnick's outstretched arm before he proceeded to read his pulse.

"Your condition has gotten far better than before. Have you started training your Battle Force already?" Lorist asked.

"That's right, milord," said Belnick. "When I felt my energy returning last month, I tried to give Battle Force training a try and was surprised to notice that it has already returned to normal. I've been doing that daily ever since."

"It's better if you stop training in the standard military Battle Force technique. Right now, your body is still a little weak, and the Battle Force technique taught in the military taps into one's innate potential. Your current condition is less than ideal for it. You have a wood attribute Battle Force, right?" Lorist asked.

"Yes…" said Belnick as he nodded.

Lorist placed a high-ranked Battle Force manual on the table and said, "In the future, train in this technique. I trust that you'll be able to break through to the Gold rank within a year."

Surprised and elated, Belnick looked at the Battle Force manual on the table that was titled 'Viridian Battle Force' and said, "Milord… I… I…"

"What? Touched? Take it and train hard in that technique. I heard that the wood attribute Viridan Battle Force has a great healing property and will definitely be ideal for your condition. You can start serving me well when you reach the Gold rank."

"Yes, milord. I will definitely not let your expectations down," Belnick said with a resolute expression as he made a knight's chest salute.

……

After going upstairs, Lorist saw the maidservant Irina bow to greet him. "Milord, welcome back."

"Thanks, Irina. Prepare some bath water for me and notify the staff at the small kitchen to get some food prepared," Lorist said as he placed his two swords onto the table. Ever since Pesha attempted to snatch his swords away, Lorist had refrained from putting them onto the blade rack and carried both with him everywhere he went, not letting them out of his sight.

"Yes, milord," said Irina before she went into the mini bathroom in the bedroom to bring out a huge maple wood bathtub and ignited the fireplace before placing a kettle on top of the metal rack to start boiling some water.

Seeing Irina's busy form, Lorist started to wonder if he could try to build a solar-powered water heater. The principle was simple: he only had to get his hands on a large metal water tank and paint it black so that it absorbs the heat from sunlight more easily. The only problem is that he did not have access to any iron or copper plates. It wasn't possible with this world's current technology to make thin metal sheets, so the water tank he had envisioned would definitely be nothing short of a super heavy steel slab if he really commissioned one from the local smith. *Forget it,* he thought. Given that he had his own personal maidservant, there was no need for him to personally prepare all those things and go out of his way to make a new invention.

Within a few short moments, the bath water was prepared and as Lorist comfortably squeezed and settled into the bathtub, he saw Irina cleaning up the clothes he removed.

"Irina, come here," Lorist said.

Irina started shivering and caused two of Lorist's garments fell out from her arms.

"Come help me scrub my back," Lorist instructed.

With a flushed face, the maidservant gingerly approached as her petite body shivered ever so faintly.

Arriving by the side of the tub, Irina carefully took a bar of soap made from soap pod and started rubbing Lorist's back with it.

Soap pod[1] was a kind of plant that was commonly available on the Grindia Continent. It was said that the plant had been used to make soap bars since ancient times. Soap made from that plant had a kind of fragrance that also helped to refresh the body and mind after using it in a bath.

After applying some soap, Irina used a fine linen cloth and started cleaning away…

"Irina, it's about time you cleaned the front…" Lorist said.

The maidservant did not make a single sound.

Lorist turned himself around only to see Irina shivering by the side of the tub.

With a sly smile, Lorist pulled Irina straight into the tub with him.

"Oh no, my clothes…" said Irina as she shivered.

"Oh, now that your clothes are dirty, I think they need some cleaning too," said Lorist as he stripped the wet garments off her body.

Closing her eyes and biting her lips, Irina allowed Lorist to continue working her clothes off without a sound. When she was completely stripped, she continued to shiver on in Lorist's embrace.

As Lorist's hands started caressing her body all over, the young maidservant laid her head on Lorist's shoulder and felt her body getting hotter by the moment. Every time her master's hands passed her sensitive spots, she would let out soft moaning sounds.

Finally unable to hold it back, Lorist stepped out of the tub stark naked and carried Irina towards the bed.

With her face flushed and eyes closed, Irina reminded Lorist, "Mi-milord… You still haven't had anything to eat yet…"

"Hmm, I've decided to have you first…" Lorist said.

……

By the time Lorist awoke, the sky had already gone dark with the silver moonlight passing through the window and illuminating Irina's sleeping form on the bed, making

her seem like a serene jade sculpture masterpiece. Already fast asleep on the bed, remnants of her tears could still be seen on her fair face.

Putting a blanket on her and wiping her tears clean, Lorist started to reflect on his previous actions. The girl wasn't like him and didn't have her Battle Force awakened, so there was no way she would be able to endure intense intercourse with him. Even though she teared up as she neared her physical limits, Irina still had to accept Lorist's lust that was pent up for 3 whole months before she fainted out of exhaustion.

I really can't be so reckless anymore in the future in case she starts developing a trauma towards intercourse. Even though this should've been a pleasurable thing for both parties, there wouldn't be a point if it always ends up like this… However, Lorist wondered why he somehow felt an urge to bring Irina into bed every time he saw her shivering look and found her reluctance rather stimulating.

Gosh, I gotta stop thinking about that. It must be all those mature movies I've seen in my previous life. Otherwise, why would thoughts about bondage, whips and dripping candles pop up in my head, thought Lorist as he slapped his forehead twice while chanting 'I'm not a pervert' a couple of times to calm down. Putting on a sleeping gown and going to the windowsill, Lorist stared outwards into the distance.

Further away, Whitedeer Mound could be seen blanketed with a veil of silver. A number of white deers could be seen hopping around in joy while displaying their grace and beauty, as if they were acting out a silent play. As Lorist continued to witness the breathtaking scene, he felt his emotions calm down and his restlessness seep away into nothing. Almost subconsciously, he got into the horse stance and started training in the Aquametal Technique.

When Lorist was still at the Dawn Academy, he took advantage of the life-and-death battles during the expedition to the Relic Islands and finally broke through from the Bright Stage to enter the Dark Stage. However, Lorist had no clue how to progress his training from the Dark Stage onwards as he had not reached that level even in his past life nor had he received any instruction from anyone who had. Without a single clue, he could only fumble in the dark and find the way to train for himself. Lorist believed that it might take a couple of years, maybe even more than ten, to reach the latter part of the Dark Stage. There was not much Lorist could do except for training with his usual routine as often as he could to hope for some improvement. As for reaching the legendary Transformative Stage, Lorist didn't hold much hope for it.

But at that night, as Lorist started training and circulating his ki according to the Aquametal Technique, it was as if he had been transported the bank of a limitless azure lake. The water within the lake was tranquil without a single ripple to the point that it even seemed reflective like a mirror which caused Lorist to feel boundless freedom. From the mirror-like lake surface, Lorist could view from a third-person perspective his battles with the Silver ranked instructors on top of the dueling platform. Gradually, the mirror kept on dividing and each one of them showed scenes of Lorist's battles which eventually displayed the scene where Lorist killed the two Gold ranked assailants back in Morante City and gradually shifting to the battles he had experienced during his journey north.

As he silently watched the battles, Lorist started gaining new insights. Never had he been able to so clearly seek out every weakness he had displayed from his past battles and improve upon his own mistakes. The scenes even included those of the defeat of the twin Gold ranked shield-bearers and the decapitation of Crew Leader Adams.

A loud sound of breaking glass could be 'heard' by Lorist from the core of his being, and following that, he felt a sudden wave of bliss and relaxation as if his body had been rejuvenated after shedding its old husk. He could hear the whispers of the wind around him and upon opening his eyes, he could see every detail of Whitedeer Mound in the distance with perfect clarity.

Gradually standing up, he noticed that his whole body was covered with sweat with a slight stench emanating from his drenched sleeping gown.

Seeing Irina sleeping soundly in bed, Lorist took a couple of new clothes and silently went downstairs to the well in the yard to give himself some good wiping down to clean himself up.

Just as he was returning upstairs, Lorist bumped into Patt, who was just about to exit his room. "Milord, it's you. I was wondering who just went outside. Huh? Milord, you look a little different…"

Lorist smiled and asked, "How so?"

Patt furrowed his brow and gave it some thought before he said, "Well, somehow you look far more invigorated than usual. That's right, invigorated and energetic are the best words to describe how you seem right now."

Chapter 112
Blissful Night Life

Within the main hall, Lorist was listening to the reports of Supervisor Spiel. "This year's wheat seem to be growing rather well. After collecting the harvest during the seventh month, we will have our men plant some asparagus which can be harvested during the tenth month. Right after that, we can plant winter wheat after the harvest at that time. It was fortunate that milord had brought back the carriages you borrowed. Otherwise, the harvest will prove to be quite troublesome."

Feeling bored, Lorist resisted the urge to yawn. He wasn't too interested in the details about the farms.

"Milord, the warehouse has an abundance of food, fine and rough textiles as well as furs…"

As Spiel's voice echoed throughout the room while he read out the whole ledger, Lorist sighed inwardly and thought that it would probably be lunch time by the time he finished hearing all of Spiel's reports. Looking to his side, he saw Patt letting out a huge yawn and thought, *that darned fellow…*

At another corner, Pajik could be seen toying with the tea cup within his hand and seemed as if he wasn't focused on what Spiel had to say. Supervisor Kedan on the other hand was looking at the wall opposite them as if there were a blooming flower growing out of it. *What about Reidy? Huh? Where did that kid disappear to? Gosh it sure is easy to get away when you're sitting by the door… Whatever.* Out of everyone present, only Shadekampf seemed to be paying attention and even mumbled as his fingers flicked nonstop like he was taking into account what Spiel had reported.

After Lorist finished his third cup of tea, just as he was about to go to the lavatory to relieve himself and slack off for a bit, Supervisor Spiel finally finished reporting everything he needed to from the thick pile of beastskin documents. Letting out a relieved breath, Lorist was disappointed to see Spiel take out another pile of beastskin documents out of nowhere.

Ugh, will this ever end? Lorist finally stopped the supervisor and said, "Ahem,

Supervisor Spiel, as the dominion lord, I am very satisfied and appreciative of your efforts. After that, you can report the rest of the inventory to Shadekampf and only give me a summary of that when you're done.

"Knight Pajik, tell me about the status of the defense units."

Regaining his focus and sitting straight, Pajik said excitedly, "Milord, the basic Battle Force technique that you taught is far too convenient for helping others awaken their Battle Force, so much more so than the Krissen Empire's military Battle Force technique. During the past three months, aside from the men who followed you out of the bastide to serve as coachmen, 173 out of the 300-odd men who remained have successfully awakened their Battle Force. However, the way to practice the technique you taught is a little different from that of the military Battle Force, so I hope you can show us what to do next to progress forward."

"I understand, I will personally go and teach them the rest every afternoon starting three days later. Even though the basic Battle Force technique is simple, it can only be trained to the peak of the Iron rank. They must train in the military Battle Force if they want to progress further. After all, the Krissen Empire's military Battle Force allows one to train up to the Silver rank. Knight Pajik, I need you to pick out some men from those who have awakened their Battle Force to form a unit for longbow and crossbow training. The local defense company must have at least one ranged attacking squad. We will use the crossbows we have within the bastide for them to start some preliminary training before we send them off to Knight Josk at Firmrock Castle for some further instruction," Lorist said.

"Yes, milord. I will do as you instruct," acknowledged Pajik.

Turning to Supervisor Kedan, Lorist asked, "what's the current situation at Poplar Coast?"

During his stay at Firmrock Castle for a little more than a month, Lorist received some news about the coast from a messenger. According to the man, Wildnorth Town had already sent out somebody to the bastide to prompt Lorist to begin the construction of the new town as soon as possible and mentioned that the people of the town had prepared lots of resources and manpower to contribute to that undertaking. Supervisor Spiel told the people of the town that the lord was overseeing the construction of the fortifications at Morgan Hills to resist the Kenmays Family and said that it would take some more time before a decision could be made.

As a result of that, half a month later, a messenger from Wildnorth Town visited Lorist at Firmrock Castle to request the construction of the new town to begin. Lorist thus sent Supervisor Kedan to start gathering construction materials at the site of the new town in preparation for the construction.

Supervisor Kedan laughed and said, "Milord, it was just as you had expected. Poplar Coast is currently as chaotic as it can be and the four great families of Wildnorth Town have started antagonizing the smaller families to the point that diplomacy and negotiation would no longer help. That is especially so with the garrison force members who have been kicked out. Most of them feel strongly that they have been cheated by the four great families and hate them with a passion. Just as you had instructed, I didn't bother to settle any of the conflict as I managed the preparation work so that the four great families can handle it themselves. There was even a small riot two days ago which ended with a couple of people getting injured…"

"What of the mercenaries?" Lorist asked.

"The mercenaries are doing quite well themselves. Apart from defending the spot they are stationed at, they didn't mingle much with the people of Wildnorth Town. Aside from some trouble from flirting with the town's womenfolk, there isn't anything to worry about. After Jim and the rest returned, they started scouting the area to familiarize themselves with the terrain," Kedan reported.

"After a few more days, I will also head to Poplar Coast. Supervisor Kedan, you can put the issue of WIldnorth Town aside for now and tell the mercenaries to finish scouting the terrain as soon as possible to pick out a suitable place to build the military base. Only after we finish constructing the base can we further divide and conquer the smaller families of Wildnorth Town to be able to use them in our favor," Lorist said while stroking his chin.

"Yes milord. I understand what I have to do," Kedan nodded and said.

"That settles it. Let us have lunch before we adjourn the meeting."

……

"Reidy, where were you all this time? Help me carry that box on the carriage into my room," Lorist instructed when he saw Reidy walking into the yard of the building.

"Yes, milord."

When Lorist reached his room upstairs, he noticed that Irina had awoken and was currently scrubbing the floor. Upon seeing him, she hurriedly got up and lowered her head to greet him. "Milord… How are you…"

"I'm fine, Irina. But you don't look too good yourself…" Lorist said as he took the cleaning cloth from Irina's hand and tossed it into the wooden bucket nearby.

"Mi-milord… Did… Did I… Do something wrong again?" asked the girl as she started shaking in fear.

Using the bridal carry to hoist the young maidservant up, Lorist got to the chair beside the windowsill and sat down. "Irina, I don't think that you did anything wrong. In fact, I like how you always try so hard, and that's fine. But remember, you're my woman, so you should leave rough chores like these to other servants. It'll be enough for you to dust off the study table and make the bed. If you have nothing better to do, you can take a nap or try doing some makeup. Or if you're bored, you can even learn to make some desserts…"

"But mi-milord…" stammered the young maidservant who was still in Lorist's embrace. "I… I'm just a maidservant… and doing these i-is perfectly normal… The things you s-said just now are things no-noblewomen do…"

"Even though you're my personal maidservant, to others, you're not that much different from a noblewoman, understand? I will find another two maidservants who will do what you tell them to."

"But mi-milord… We ca-can't house two more pe-people within this room… And… The bed is a little too s-small for three people…"

"Hehe…" Lorist started to chuckle out loud before he flicked Irina's nose and said, "I wonder what goes on in that head of yours. Do you think that I'm some kind of sex demon? I won't go to bed with just any maidservant. I lay with you only because I like you and you're special. The two maidservants I will find can sleep in the guest room. I think there are two empty guests rooms on the second floor, so we can use one of them for their lodging. In the future, let them handle the cleaning work. You only have to supervise them."

After seeing the girl's ears turn red from his laughter, Lorist playfully gave one of them a little bite, causing the maidservant to stiffen completely within his embrace before

she started to shiver again.

Irina's meek state caused Lorist's urge to rise, but after recalling how rough he treated her the day before, he tried his best to suppress it and said, "Irina, I'm really sorry about yesterday. You must have had it rough. In the future, please tell me if you're at your limits and don't endure it silently. I feel like a beast every time I see the tears on your face. Once again, I apologize."

The maidservant stared at Lorist frozen at that sudden, unexpected apology. "N-no… It's my bad for being so useless… There's no need for milord to apologize…"

"It's only right for me to apologize for my mistakes. Irina, I will no longer treat you that roughly. I really don't want to see you cry anymore…"

The young girl didn't say anything more and only snuggled herself tight against Lorist's chest…

"Ahem, milord. I've brought the box upstairs."

Lorist had actually long noticed the sounds of Reidy coming upstairs, but he was too lazy to move and thought that hugging Irina felt rather nice. The girl on the other hand was like a frightened rabbit who squeezed out of Lorist's arms and stood beside him, not knowing what to do in that awkward situation.

"Put the box onto the table. Irina, give that kid the chain mail I removed yesterday. Reidy, go downstairs and polish the mail for me before bringing it back up and accompany me to check on the defense unit later," Lorist said.

"Hehe, milord… How long do you want me to polish it? I'm afraid that I'll be too quick and bother you two once again…" Reidy teased.

Lorist gave him a stare and said, "You've interrupted us already. We'll be leaving as soon as possible. Go do your thing and mind your own business, sheesh…"

Opening the box and bringing out an intricate jewelry case, Lorist said, "Irina, this is a gift for you. Put it on and let me have a look."

That was one of the spoils they looted from the Redriver Valley Bastide. There were quite a number of chests filled with women's clothes and jewelry that seemed to be erroneously delivered to the bastide. It was meant to be used as gifts for some of

Viscount Kenmays's noblewomen guests during his parties to win their affection, but it had been accidentally shipped to the Redriver Valley Bastide by the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew. WIth the viscount being so busy obtaining permission from Duke Loggins for his army to enter the Northlands for the past couple of months, he didn't have time to host any parties or banquets and left the items at the bastide, causing them to be shipped back by Shadekampf after the bastide's occupation.

Lorist opened the box and took out a necklace and motioned for Irina to take it.

With her glazing eyes filled with yearning transfixed at the sapphire necklace in Lorist's hands, Irina still said unwillingly, "Mi-milord… That… that is far too precious for me to own… I… I can't take it…"

"Something like this is nothing precious. Remember, you're my woman, so it's just natural for you to dress up to impress. The clothes within the larger box over there mostly contain clothes that I've picked according to your figure. Try them out. You can give them away if they don't fit you. Also, these jewelry are yours as well so take care of them," Lorist said as he smiled.

"O-okay… Thank you…… Milord…"

"Then I'll be leaving now. Oh, don't forget to look for two other maidservants to help you out. If you don't know who to pick, you can ask Supervisor Spiel to do it." As Lorist headed downstairs, he could hear the maidservant's surprised cheers of joy that she tried her best not to let out in his presence.

……

Irina seemed in a pretty good mood for the whole day and it was still evident from her expression after Lorist returned that night.

After helping out Lorist with his bath, the girl wrapped herself up in a towel before she snuggled into Lorist's chest on her own accord.

A little surprised, Lorist asked, "What's going on? Aren't you usually pretty hesitant about this? Why so proactive all of a sudden?"

Still snuggled against Lorist's chest, the maidservant muffled, "Thank you… milord…"

Taking the towel off her with a smile, Lorist gently put his member into her body and

moved slowly as he teased her little ear…

The girl gradually let out soft moans of pleasure…

And their joyful cries resounded throughout the whole room…

……

Awakening from the chirps of the birds from outside the window during dawn the next day, Lorist noticed a weird feeling on his lower body. Opening his eyes slightly, he saw Irina inspecting his erected member and lightly poking it with her finger once in a while as if she was wondering how something like that managed to send her to heaven and back the night before. Probably reminded of how the whole thing could enter her body, she measured the length with her fingers and placed it against her crotch only to widen her eyes in surprise and disbelief that something that huge could fit wholly into her body.

Unable to hold it in, Lorist exploded with laughter.

Noticing that Lorist was awake, the maidservant blushed and tried to leave the bed only to be stopped by Lorist. "Don't go, let me teach you how to make me happy…"

"Open your mouth and go closer… Yes, wrap your tongue around it like you would a sausage… Move up and down…

"Ouch, don't bite it with your teeth, idiot… It hurts… Do it like before, yes, that's good. go on…

"Tired? Alright, let me continue…"

Lorist put the girl on the bed and once again entered her…

……

Bringing his two swords with him downstairs as he head to the yard, he saw Patt and Reidy busy training the guards.

"Alright, time for my *second* morning exercise…" Lorist said in a good mood before he looked at the sky and thought, *the weather's great today…*

Chapter 113
The Chosen Location and the Duel

Lorist walked into the campsite of the mercenaries together with Patt and Reidy.

Stopping his horse, he saw Supervisor Kedan and the two mercenary leaders, Hausky and Jim, heading his way.

The reason Lorist had visited the place was to decide on the location of the construction of the military base near the intersection point of the two mountain ranges so that they can start building it immediately. According to Kedan, the mercenaries have already picked a spot and were waiting for Lorist's agreement.

Upon entering the tent, Hausky brought out a beastskin map to show Lorist where they picked to have the base built. However, the maps the mercenaries used which they made themselves and were rather nonstandard, causing Lorist to take quite a while before he was able to figure out that it depicted the terrain of the mountains.

"Let's go check it out on site," Lorist said.

It took 3 hours of travel on horseback to arrive at the intersection point from Poplar Coast. Unlike the terrain of the opening at Morgan Hills, one of the mountain ranges stretched over the other from the front with the opening sandwiched between the two overlapping sides. Beyond the opening was a small river and a dense forest which stretched all the way into the area of the Magical Dragon Mountains.

The place the mercenaries picked was a cliff which was nearby the small stream. However, Lorist shook his head and revoked that decision entirely and said, "Hausky, did you think that I would pay you mercenaries so much just to have you guard a surveillance outpost all the way here? Did you think your job would be finished after lighting a signal fire upon noticing the barbarians? What I want you to do here is to form the first line of defense. If you detect a small number of barbarians, you should take the initiative to eliminate them, hence the reason for the reward bonus I offered. While the spot you chose is no doubt good for defense, you would lose all ability for the first strike since the barbarians would have run off far away by the time you descend from the cliff."

With a slightly flushed face, Hausky argued, "Milord, our numbers are few and it will definitely be an insurmountable task to defend against large scale barbarian invasions. Surely you wouldn't wish for us to all die over here… If we're up there, even though we wouldn't be able to mobilize that easily after discovering signs of the mountain barbarians, at least we will have a better chance at survival."

Lorist laughed out lightly and said, "Wrong. The true danger only presents itself if you are stationed on top of that cliff. Let me ask you a simple question. Where do you intend to obtain water from up there?"

"Milord, isn't there a small stream not far away from the spot? That was the main factor which prompted me to choose that place in the first place. If we get besieged by the mountain barbarians, we will be able to retrieve water from the stream to hold out longer periods of time…"

"Don't think that your enemies are idiots. Even though the mountain barbarians are savages, that doesn't mean that they can't think. Where would you get your water if they block or redirect the stream?"

Hausky only listened without being able to offer a counter argument.

While they would still be able to tough out a food shortage by killing and feeding on their horses, they wouldn't be able to last more than three days without water. Lorist's point instantly pointed out the fatal flaw in the mercenaries' choice.

"Check out that spot," Lorist said as he pointed at the couple of small hills that were in the distance.

The largest of the hills still seemed to have some signs of habitation from some time ago. Supervisor Kedan explained that for the past hundred or so years, the Norton Family had wanted to build a military base and an alert outpost at the intersection point just like Lorist had wanted so that they would be better prepared to face the barbarian threat. However, they had failed for three times in total and the signs on the largest hill was what was left of one such attempt to set up a base roughly 60 years ago in which only 4 out of the 20-odd family soldiers returned alive.

"Then, we'll pick that spot. It's not more than 80 meters from the stream and it would be quite easy to secure a water source by building a well nearby. Thus, the largest problem is solved," Lorist said as he made his decision.

"Milord, what would we do about the defense then?" asked Hausky whose expression had turned dark after hearing what Kedan told Lorist just moments ago.

"Hehe, don't you worry. I won't have you defending a poorly-built base. I'm prepared to build two towers over here and surround them with a wall roughly 8 meters tall. You also don't have to worry about the manpower and materials required to build it and only have to be in charge of the security during the construction. Within a month, you will have a strongly-fortified base at your disposal," Lorist said.

Even though Hausky wanted to say something else, Jim thumped his chest in a salute and said, "Milord, as long as you build a base here, we will definitely defend it to the best of our ability and not let the barbarians invade your dominion."

……

After deciding on the location to build the base, everyone took some time off to relax. Lorist was prepared to rest up for 2 hours before returning. As expected, the mercenaries were skilled in surviving in the wilderness as shown by their hunting and fishing prowess. It didn't take long before they returned with quite a huge haul and started grilling food by the stream.

With an impatient expression, Jim dragged Hausky and brought the other mercenaries to Lorist.

Jim said agitatedly, "Milord, I've told them that you managed to defeat Crew Leader Adams with a single move but they didn't believe me and even said that you probably caught him off-guard and exhausted after the long battle he had fought. They also wouldn't believe that you were able to kill so many Feathersoar mercenaries because you aren't even a Silver rank and dared to challenge you to a duel…"

Lorist tossed the chicken bone from his hand and stood up before he laughed and said, "They can believe what they want. Why should I care?"

"But milord…"

Hausky stopped Jim from saying anything else and bowed to Lorist before he said, "Milord, please don't fault Jim for this. That happened because he kept praising you for days after his return and nobody else was willing to believe him. Adams was a very formidable and famous mercenary within our circle and his two adopted sons have an even more fearsome reputation than he does as the twin shield-bearers. It's only

natural for the rest to find it hard to believe that you have defeated the two of them together in combat according to Jim. That's why, if you don't mind, could you show us lowly mercenaries your swordsmanship that is so highly praised…”

"You guys…” Patt was already enraged and ready to reprimand the mercenaries harshly.

"Patt!" Lorist shouted for him to stop and waved his hand. "Alright, I happen to have extra time on my hands after all. Let's have a duel. Leader Hausky, mercenaries are not lowly at all, I hope you remember that. Back in Morante City, I also worked as a mercenary for around 6 years. How about this? I want you to pick out ten men whom you think have the best swordsmanship to duel with me. It's okay if they are Silver ranks as well."

Under the impression that Lorist would face them off one-by-one, Hausky and the rest of the mercenaries started picking the participants and felt that even if Jim had exaggerated the facts, Lorist must have some sort of ability after all for him to dare to accept the challenge.

Given that they understood the abilities of their comrades well, it did not take long for nine mercenaries to be picked out to stand together with Hausky. The rest of the mercenaries surrounded the group and started betting on how many Lorist could defeat with Jim as the dealer. The rest of the mercenaries who participated in the operation at the construction site alongside Jim had all bet on Lorist's complete victory.

"Reidy, lend me your sword," Lorist said.

Given Reidy's above average strength, Lorist had fashioned a heavy sword for him. As it was only a friendly duel with some of them being Iron ranks who still weren't able to infuse their Battle Force into their weapons, Lorist didn't intend to break their weapons with his more durable swords lest any of them have hard feelings left over after the duel. Using Reidy's heavy sword which was far less durable than his own would prevent any damage to the mercenaries' weapons.

After giving the heavy sword a few swings, Lorist said with a satisfied tone, "Come at me all at once."

"Huh?" The mercenaries were all stunned to find out that Lorist hadn't challenged

them to one-on-one duels but instead wanted to fight them all at once.

"Since milord has requested it, we will act accordingly. Everyone, don't get distracted and show milord the best of your abilities lest we disappoint him…" said Hausky while feeling rather pissed. *He's underestimating us too much, isn't he? He chose to fight the ten of us all at once and even went out of his way to not use his own weapons… He probably doesn't even consider us to be a threat at all…*

As their leader, Hausky took command during this duel. He first sent a few of the mercenaries to test Lorist out so that he would be able to gauge his true abilities to be able to formulate a proper strategy to use against him.

However, with but a few moves, the four mercenaries who were sent to engage with Lorist had all slumped to the ground. It happened so quickly within sheer moments that Hausky wasn't able to clearly see what Lorist did.

Right after that, Lorist rushed over to the six remaining mercenaries and the two in front hurriedly slashed at his silhouette. This time, Hausky managed to get a close look at the scene: Lorist parried the two of their strikes and moved in between the two mercenaries right after that. The mercenary in front fainted and wobbled to the ground after Lorist struck the back of his head with a backhand flick using the flat of his blade.

The mercenary behind suddenly noticed that Lorist was too close for comfort and quickly attempted to retreat backwards to regain some distance. Unexpectedly, after the mercenary stepped a few inches back, the sword which Lorist had previously retracted flashed past the chin of that mercenary, causing him to fall face-first towards the ground unconscious.

Surprised, Hausky thought, *that's way too fast!* Within moments, six of the ten mercenaries had already collapsed with only four including Hausky still standing. Hausky quickly commanded the Silver rank and the two other Iron ranks to quickly get into a defensive formation to face Lorist's assault head-on.

The formation was diamond-shaped with the two Silver ranks lined up front and back and the two Iron ranks flanking the two of them. If the one at the front of the formation got attacked, he could retreat backwards to allow the two diagonally behind him to flank the attacker and switch places with the one directly behind him and take turns to hold off the enemy. That formation was only normally used when fighting against

magical beasts.

But being a human being and not a magical beast, Lorist definitely wouldn't attack only one target at a time. He circled around the formation quickly in an unpredictable manner and lashed out against the two Iron ranked mercenaries instead. As a result, Hausky and the other Silver rank were put in an awkward position of trying to help the Iron ranks defend against the strikes, thus rendering the formation useless. It ended up becoming a battle between Lorist and the three mercenaries with the other one not being able to do anything due to being blocked off by the rest.

As Lorist fought, he started to move to his right faster and faster and one of the Silver ranked mercenaries could no longer hold up against his incessant strikes and took a mistaken step backward, causing the whole formation to reveal a fatal weak spot which Lorist didn't hesitate to budge into.

Sensing that something was off, Hausky intended to strike with his sword but was obstructed by his comrades. The moment he hastily moved aside to get into a better position, he saw the three of his comrades falling to the ground with the only one left standing in front of him being Lorist.

Looking to his left and right, Hausky dropped the sword in his hand and said bitterly, "It's our loss…”

During that duel, Lorist didn't use an ounce of internal energy and relied mainly on footwork and swordsmanship to gain victory. He could have used his internal energy to completely crush the mercenaries head-on, but that would be causing them to lose to much face. Lorist wasn't too keen on hurting their confidence and pride as it was merely a friendly duel and not a life-and-death battle.

……

After witnessing that amazing battle, the mercenaries who were watching with amazement disbanded. However, Hausky remained and asked, "Milord… I have a question…”

"Go ahead and ask away," Lorist said as he tapped on the rock beside him, signalling for the mercenary leader to sit down.

Without giving it much thought, Hausky took his seat and said, "Milord, I understand that the Norton Family is rather formidable right now and the Kenmays Family really

poked their noses in the wrong spot this time. I am really thankful that my crew managed to get out of that hellhole early so that we didn't have to face off against you. What I don't understand is why the formidable Norton Family want to hire a crew like us? I've always been wondering if your true intention is to send us to our deaths…"

"Was that why you picked that spot on the cliff to build the base? Tell me the reason you think the Norton Family is formidable. The reason I decided to hire your crew is precisely because I have nobody else who are better suited for this purpose," Lorist said.

"No other people? That can't be the case. Milord, among the laborers building the town at Poplar Coast, over 200 of them have awakened their Battle Force, not to mention the garrison squad of 200 men which have a few Silver ranks among them as well…" Hausky said agitatedly, obviously doubting what Lorist had just said.

Letting out a bitter laugh, Lorist said, "Leader Hausky, no wonder you suspected me. But didn't you notice how weirdly those men you mentioned behaved towards the Norton Family? I can tell you the real reason, but I need you to promise that you won't spread it around as it's quite embarrassing for the family."

After hearing Lorist explain the nature of the relationship of the Nortons with the people at Wildnorth Town, Hausky seemed to have understood it all. "Mi-milord… I really don't know what to say. I've never heard of anything remotely similar to this situation… Your ancestor was far too gracious and benevolent to those people. It was truly their fortune for having met a dominion lord like him. Conversely, it's precisely because he was a dominion lord like that which allowed a garrison force as audacious as that to be formed."

"I, on the other hand, can understand the intentions of my ancestor for making that concession. Surely you know that the Northlands lack people the most among many other things. Even if they were the lowest dredges of society ranging from thieves, bandits and murderers, they were one of the most precious resources in the Northlands. What my ancestor intended was for them to settle down and lead a stable and peaceful life under his rule while serving the family. That was why he set those favorable conditions. Nobody back then expected a loophole like that to cause a problem that would exacerbate generation after generation into what we have today…" Lorist sighed.

"But I'm sure that with your power, you can wipe out the garrison force of Wildnorth

Town, right? Knight Josk can hold off their Silver ranked fighters and we will be able to help out as well…" Hausky said.

"If I rally up all the soldiers of the family and have your cooperation, there's little doubt that I'll be able to wipe the garrison force out. However, I feel that the price of doing so will be too high for us to bear. Don't look at me like that. No matter how strong I am, do you think I can take on more than a thousand people solo? There's also the fact that many people of Wildnorth Town is quite close to some of the members of my family. Many of those living within Maplewoods Bastide have relatives among the residents of Wildnorth Town. I'm worried that a forceful approach would cause even more strife among those within the family. Even though the garrison force is rather impudent, they're still subjects of the Norton Family in name and we can't justify wiping them out if we have no concrete evidence on their treason. That's why I can only endure and cross the bridge when the time comes. I for one can't wait for them to rebel so I can have an excuse to wipe that cancerous tumor once and for all.

"Then, I'm sure that you have a plan in mind, right? I understand. A couple of days ago, a number of youths with awakened Battle Force asked to join our crew to become mercenaries. I was worried that it would cause some conflict so I declined their request," Hausky said.

"It's alright. If they're willing to live the tough lives of mercenaries, you can allow them to join. After a certain amount of time, the family will also pick a number of them to form a new defense unit. Letting them build the military base here is but a test for them…" Lorist said.

"Okay. Thank you, milord. Please be assured that we will definitely stay firmly nailed on this spot to become the first line of defense against the barbarians for the Norton Family," pledged Crew Leader Hausky.

Chapter 114
News of the Mountain Barbarians

The base that Lorist had intended to build for the mercenaries basically comprised two firing turrets each with 4 floors extending up to a height of 13 meters. The two turrets would be built 5 meters apart with a gate house in between and a wall branching off from each to surround an area with facilities such as the horse stable, warehouses, and other necessary infrastructure to allow for long term stay. If the wall was somehow breached by the enemy, the mercenaries can still retreat to the turrets and guard it until reinforcements arrive.

The construction of the base proceeded rather quickly. First, huge logs that were used to construct the framework of the turrets and wall before three moats were dug at the foot of the mound which was in turn connected to the small stream nearby. Lorist tasked his men to use the mud that was dug out to make mud bricks using the technique he had seen back at Firmrock Castle. The finished bricks were then lined up around the wooden framework before a thick layer of green clay was slabbed onto the surface to further strengthen and solidify the structures. Even though the wall was only 5 meters in height, Lorist had made the angle of the small mound around the wall to be slanted at a 45 degree angle, causing the total height of the mound and wall to be around 9 meters, further adding to the difficulty of besieging the place.

The busy days passed quickly and one month elapsed within the blink of an eye. The primary sections of the base including the main wall, the three moats, the two layers of wooden barricades, the drawbridge, and the turrets had already been constructed. What remained was fine-tuning the smaller details. Lorist even ordered his men to transport 4 ballistas over from Firmrock Castle for them to be installed at the top floor of the turrets.

Back when he was at Firmrock Castle, Lorist went to visit the father and son arbalists once. After listening to the father, Grandmaster Fellin's explanation, Lorist came to understand that the tens of ballistas used at the castle were merely simplified versions and not proper defense ballistas. Proper defense ballistas had a firing range of 150 to 200 meters whereas the simplified ones at Firmrock Castle could only shoot 80 to 100 meters away, which is easily half of what proper ballistas could achieve. The accuracy

of the simplified ones is also vastly inferior and it would already be considered good if it could hit a target 3 out of 10 times.

According to Grandmaster Fellin, it takes a lot of time to make a proper ballista. Choosing materials for the ballista frame and setting its shape will take two years at least. The ballistas the grandmaster were currently making were merely simplified ones which would break or malfunction after firing more than ten times and their frames had to be replaced frequently to keep performance up to par. Thankfully, wood was abundant in the Northlands, which allowed the grandmaster to construct a few extra frames for each ballista he made.

Apart from the construction, the simplified ballista bowstring was usually made of cow sinew and horsehair and would loosen after approximately 8 shots. However, that disadvantage is compensated by its swift construction and easily-obtainable materials which also cost far less to procure. And while the shooting range is far less than that of proper ballistas, the momentum and force of the simplified ballistas were still enough to threaten Gold ranked fighters who were within range.

That was already more than enough for Lorist. During that visit, he also made a suggestion to Grandmaster Fellin to add a wheel-like component to the back of each ballista for it to act as a pulley so that it would take much less force to load them. It would also decrease the number of people required to operate it by two, prompting the grandmaster to gasp in admiration at that innovative upgrade.

Actually, the ideal ballistas within Lorist's mind were the ones he saw in the movie titled 'Rise of the Werewolves'[1] in his past life that were used at the vampires' castle. Each ballista could fire up to three arrows and was also equipped with a pulley system, a base rotator as well as some sights, which increased its overall flexibility, ease of loading and accuracy. The werewolves seen in the movie that were the size of bulls were easily nailed to the ground with the bolts fired from those ballistas and they only required one person to operate.

He recalled that he once tried to replicate a ballista like that in his workshop and sell it to collectors to earn some extra cash, only to have it confiscated by the local authorities and fined 5000 bucks for possessing what was basically a lethal weapon. He still remembered the warning given to him by the officer of the police: without a proper order request and permit, he wasn't allowed to manufacture ballistas like that. Had he broken those regulations regularly, he definitely wouldn't have been let off with a simple fine.

Even though that plan to make some quick cash from back then had failed before he even started, Lorist could distinctly remember the parts he used as well as their relative sizes. The only problem now was that he did not have any materials to make those parts nor did he know where to procure any and could only make a mental note to do more research into that matter when he had more time.

……

What made Lorist wonder was that during the past month of the construction of the base, the border of the intersection point was relatively peaceful and there wasn't even a single instance of barbarian assault. So, the mercenaries gradually widened their patrolling area over time and finally managed to catch a barbarian old man and a child who were collecting herbs not far away. Even though they were obviously non-combatants, they were still living barbarian captives, so Lorist still had to pay the mercenaries a bonus of 2 imperial gold coins.

After seeing the restless barbarian child calming down from being given a maple candy, the old man showed a relaxed expression. He used a variant dialect of the Grindian common language to tell Lorist that the current year was the year of the Kubawesson Festival and all of the tribe chiefs of the mountain barbarians had brought their Ulays to Smormilgen Mountain to participate in the ceremony and attend the Bywessi Conference.

I see, so that was the case. It was a fortunate coincidence for him to have picked that time frame for the construction of the military base. Lorist understood that the Kubawesson Festival was a year-long celebration which was celebrated once every 12 years that commemorated the birth of the barbarian's most worshipped mountain deity, Kubawesson. During the festivities, the barbarians would sacrifice livestock to the god once every month.

'Ulay' and its related terms were titles created in the barbarians' own dialect to honor the warriors of their society. Smormilgen Mountain was considered to be a holy mountain by the savages and was also the birthplace of the deity Kubawesson according to their legends and myths. The ceremonies that were conducted during the Kubawesson Festival involved blood sacrifices at the peak of the mountain as an offering to the mountain deity. And the Bywessi Conference was a meeting between the tribe chiefs to pick the next overlord, otherwise known as the Themussen in the dialect of the barbarians. The selected Themussen would then proceed to allocate domains for the various tribes to prevent large scale conflict among themselves and

determine the general goals of the united tribes such as focusing their efforts on invading the other Grindian people, or flatlanders as they called them. The other tribes must also make their fair contribution to the current Themussen.

There was a famous book in Grindian literature titled 'Adventures of the Knight' that documented much about the culture and practices of the mountain barbarians. The book was written by a knight who had accidentally ventured into the territory of the mountain barbarians when he traveled to the Magical Dragon Mountains approximately 100 years ago and was held captive for more than 30 years. He had experienced two Kubowesson Festivals during his captivity and managed to escape from the Magical Dragon Mountains in the end with his barbarian wife and children and made his way back to his hometown. The book was later written by him which also served as his debut thesis as one of the most reputable mountain barbarian scholars.

During his years studying at Dawn Academy, Lorist had read quite a number of books written by that knight and 'Adventures of the Knight' was one of his most coveted books. The description of the culture of the mountain barbarians was detailed and thorough: according to it, during the Bywessi Conference, other activities such as fighting competitions, unarmed combat and hunting events would be carried out.

From the map of the whole Grindia Continent, one could see that the Magical Dragon Mountains stretched more than 50000 meters across the center of the continent and covered a huge amount of area. Two of the three greatest rivers on the continent which were the cradles of life of Grindian life have their headwaters located on the mountain range itself. According to the legends, that mountain range was also the home to the ancient dragon race.

In present time, however, dragons were no longer anywhere to be found and the Magical Dragon Mountains was mainly inhabited by mountain barbarians. Other than the Norton Family dominion, other dominions near the mountain range also suffered from the same fate of being pestered by the mountain barbarians.

The old barbarian told Lorist that the tribe that was in power near the dominion of the Nortons was called the Habibaba. That tribe had a strong force of more than 1000 Ulays and had an iron rule over the seven smaller tribes in the area as well.

The tribe the old man belonged to was one such small tribe which only had around 400 members. He mentioned that when the tribe chief of the Habibaba tribe returns

after the festival, he might very well become the Jambassen, or the regional chief, of the nearby area, which means that the other minor tribes there would become subordinates to the Habibaba by force as in the case of the tribe of the old man and child.

Whether the Habibaba Tribe would consume the tribe of his two barbarian captives didn't matter to Lorist, nor did he intend to interfere with it. To him, he couldn't care less about whether the barbarians harm other nations or kingdoms at all as long as they didn't cause trouble in his dominion. However, he definitely wouldn't tolerate them should they ever dare to poke their hands into his lands and would definitely reciprocate in kind if that ever happens.

The intersection point between the two mountain ranges was the precise route that the mountain barbarians took to invade the Norton Family dominion. Hence, setting up a base here would allow the Nortons to have ample time to react and retaliate to any future attempts. Small scale barbarian expeditions would be handled by the mercenaries who will in turn depend on them for the extra income while the mercenaries only had to stay put and stall for time for the reinforcements of the Norton Family to arrive if a large scale invasion was imminent.

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The construction of the military base went on mostly without a hitch, apart from a small issue that surfaced while building the well: even though the stream was only 80 meters away from the mound on which the military base was built, when the hole for the well that was dug to reach the groundwater beneath reached a depth of 14 meters, a huge spring burst all the way out with high pressure. The whole situation was rectified after a waterway was made to connect the spring site to the moat, saving the interior of the base from the fate of being turned into a swamp.

On that day, Lorist was discussing whether to build a hidden passage with Hausky, Jim and Supervisor Kedan. He proposed the idea to have a hidden passage dug underground to connect the two turrets. Even though the two turrets were connected by a wooden log bridge above the surface, there was a risk that the barbarians would burn it down using fire arrows and cause the two turrets to lose all connection if the wall is occupied as well. Being stuck in two separate towers would definitely be greatly disadvantageous to the mercenaries, so that was why having a hidden passage would allow them to continue aiding each other to hold their stations while waiting for the support of the Norton Family troops.

Hausky and Jim thanked Lorist for being considerate for their safety but believed that building another hidden passage would be too cumbersome for it to be worth the effort. Supervisor Kedan on the other hand thought that they must build it as he felt that the barbarians would come in numbers of thousands when they invade instead of the hundreds he had initially thought after he had heard what the barbarian captive had to say. Given that the Habibaba tribe alone had more than 1000 Ulays, it would definitely be able to easily overwhelm the 80 or so mercenaries stationed there.

Lorist also added that the hidden passage had to connect to the well as well so the mercenaries would not lose access to their water source if they really end up having to retreat into the turrets. Additionally, he also suggested that the secret passage be extended to where the nearby stream was so that the mercenaries would be able to escape during the most dire of circumstances. However, the passage had to be secretly dug by the mercenaries themselves lest its existence gets leaked by any of the laborers.

Lorist's insistence on the passage was due to the fact that the base only had one main entry. The mercenaries would be completely stuck at the base should the enemy ever breach the main wall. Even though Hausky and Jim said that they would definitely fight to the last man, Lorist said that he definitely wouldn't want them to do that and mentioned that he did not station them there to sacrifice them. According to Lorist, it was more than enough for the mercenaries to be able to signal the Norton Family about any attacks so that they would have enough time to react to the situation and also said that he wouldn't blame the mercenaries for abandoning the base if they ended up being overwhelmed by their foes.

Just as the discussion was getting more heated, a mercenary standing guard outside reported that Squad Leader Mollin of the Wildnorth Town garrison had come to meet the dominion lord.

Chapter 115
An Unwelcome Guest

What does the squad leader of the Mollin Family want from visiting me? Lorist wondered that as he went to see the man who requested for him.

The reason for the squad leader's visit was to make his objection to Lorist heard. He had come with several other people from the smaller families of Wildnorth Town who had been chased out of the town by the four great families.

The reason for the objection was that during the time the base was being constructed, Supervisor Kedan had quietly recruited more than 150 laborers who have awakened their Battle Force to join the Norton Family's forces and also brought the family members of the new recruits back to the Maplewoods Bastide.

In actuality, Lorist had personally come out with a new set of benefits for soldiers of the Norton Family. Apart from receiving a generous salary, recruits would also receive many chances to be trained. As long as a soldier was hardworking enough to raise his Battle Force rank, he would be able to receive a status promotion and might one day even become a knight of the Norton Family.

The new conditions also instituted a new change in policy regarding the remuneration paid to the families of dead soldiers. Family members of soldiers who sacrifice themselves for the Norton Family would not only be able to receive tax cuts, their direct descendants would also be able to receive education and training from the Norton Family until they reach adulthood. As for soldiers handicapped from battle, they would also receive pension and training opportunities for administrative positions to help the Nortons govern the dominion, thus ensuring their future livelihoods.

Other than that, it was specified that the benefits would only apply to the direct family members of the soldiers, namely, their parents, spouse, and children. Any siblings of the soldiers who have yet to reach adulthood would be allowed to live together with the family, but they would not receive any of the benefits. The siblings of the dead or handicapped soldiers will also be required to move out of the house to establish their own families three years after they reach adulthood. As for the children of said

soldiers, apart from their eldest son, the rest of the children will also have to move out of the household three years after they become adults.

These conditions had caused many of the people who were forced out of the town by the four great families to have a great argument. Many leaders of the minor families had either taken over their respective families by their own abilities or had inherited the position from the previous family leader. Ever since they were chased out of Wildnorth Town, they had hoped that they would be able to continue their previous way of life after the completion of the new town with some of them even dreaming of becoming among the ranks of the new 'great families' of the town. However, Lorist's new policies had effectively caused a huge number of their men to flock to the Norton Family instead.

Even though these commoner families have existed for more than 100 years like certain noble families, their foundations were not as firm and the youths within those families usually didn't have much of a choice but to obey the instructions of the family elders as they were the military cornerstone of those families and usually didn't have a chance to strive for their own success.

That was why the benefits offered by the Norton Family was so well-received among many of those youths from the minor families. Human nature is one of greed and self-interest after all. To the youths, the distant relatives within their family didn't matter as much as their direct family members and being in such a large family meant that they would share their gains with the rest of their relatives and also bear their burdens since they were part of the family. That policy left many of the youths deeply frustrated and caused them to jump at the chance for the better opportunity offered by the Nortons almost instantly.

As a result, the initial 2000 plus workers had decreased by about 600 people and many of the smaller families of WIldnorth Town had already broken apart to the point that there was no turning back. The protesters cited that their reason for objection was Lorist's breach of the agreement and violation of the traditional benefits and conditions set by the Norton Family's ancestor. Squad Leader Mollin represented the four great families of Wildnorth Town as well as the many minor families at Poplar Coast to demand Lorist to revoke the policies that he had set and restore it to the previous ones used throughout the rule of the Norton Family and promise them that he will form a similar garrison at Poplar Coast upon the town's completion.

Lorist made a cold smile and thought, *you think I'd let you make another Wildnorth*

Town? Well, you can continue to dream on.

He refuted the protesters' arguments and said that the conditions he offered for potential recruits of the family soldiers had nothing to do with the benefits given to the WIldnorth Town garrison. And as the subjects of the Norton Family, the people of Wildnorth Town only had to obey the dominion lord and had no right whatsoever to question the lord's decision. Lorist also stressed that it was already very benevolent of him to let the Wildnorth Town keep their former traditions.

He also added that the reason the recruitment was launched was precisely due to the refusal of the Wildnorth Town garrison to obey the orders of the family. And during such a bleak time of conflict against a foe like the Kenmays Family, the garrison still hadn't agreed to Lorist's proposition for them to act as supply troops to support the family's forces from the sidelines against the barbarians to this date, prompting him to have no choice but to try to recruit more soldiers himself. Lorist angrily rebuked the Wildnorth Town garrison soldiers for being no more than cowardly rats that only knew how to cower in fear within Wildnorth Town and said that it was a waste for the family to continue funding such a useless force, indirectly threatening to disband them.

After hearing Lorist's enraged outburst, the squad leader and the rest of the minor family leaders no longer said anything else and walked away. Thinking that he had managed to put an end to the troubles caused by those people who didn't know what was good for them, Lorist felt rather delighted at himself. However, three days later, he received news that the garrison troops at Poplar Coast had brought a number of the minor families back to Wildnorth Town and didn't respond to any of the family's orders.

Just as he was getting madder the more he thought about the incident, another piece of news arrived stating that the Wildnorth Town representatives who were in charge of paying the taxes to the Norton Family merely left their crops at the entrance of the Maplewoods Bastide and departed without so much as a single notification. Accompanying the crops was a letter that stated that the reason they still paid the crop tax was because they did not want to rebel against the dominion lord and only merely wanted to protest the new policies that disrespected the age old traditions of the arrangement between the residents of Wildnorth Town and the former Norton Family lords and stated that they would not obey any of the family's orders until the previous policies are restored.

The more lenient I'm on them, the more they dare to oppose me, thought Lorist with much hate in his heart as he made an estimation of the family's forces and considered wiping Wildnorth Town out in one fell swoop to release his pent-up frustration. It was a relatively peaceful time at the Norton Family dominion at that point as the mountain barbarians were busy celebrating their festival while the Kenmays Family's forces still haven't attacked Firmrock Castle yet. It was indeed a pretty good opportunity for the family to strike at Wildnorth Town.

What was troubling was how careful and cunning the leaders of the four great families were, for them to have sensed that something was wrong not long after he changed the recruitment benefits of the family's forces. Their instant withdrawal back to their town had caused many of Lorist's plans to be unable to play out properly, further making it harder for him to solve the problem of the town.

So, you think you can protect yourself if you turtle up in your little town? Lorist grinned as he thought of the 500 new recruits that the family had just got from the laborers at Firmrock Castle recently which was almost enough to form a company of troops. Coupled with the existing three guard and defense squads which numbered around 600 plus troops with the company of guard troops at Maplewoods Bastide as well as the 150 plus laborers at Poplar Coast who had just joined the family's forces, he had around 1200 soldiers at his disposal. And that figure didn't even include the 80 plus mercenaries stationed at the coast as well as Lorist, Josk, Patt, Reidy and the rest. It should be more than enough for him to crush the Wildnorth Town garrison once and for all.

I didn't expect that I would have so many soldiers in such a short amount of time. The only other thing I have to consider is the amount of casualties we will incur since it's the first siege I will be conducting. Unlike Lorist's previous battles in which he relied on surprise attacks to render the moat of his enemies' forts useless, this time, he had no other choice but to attack head-on. The wall surrounding Wildnorth Town was at least 9 meters tall and there were up to 600 Battle Force-awakened troops defending the place. The garrison also had the upper hand in terms of terrain advantage. *Sigh, this battle will be rather tough. I might lose at least half of my 1000 plus troops…*

What Lorist was most worried about was that his attack would force the four great families into desperation and send their elderly and womenfolk to defend the place as well. Even if he was extremely skillful in combat, how many of those defenseless noncombatants could he kill? Josk himself had said that he only had enough stamina to shoot a couple of hundred of arrows before he would become totally wasted. And if

the battle caused both sides to suffer huge losses, how would he proceed to face the impending threat of the 2000-strong Kenmays Family forces?

The only way to get out of that situation without losing too many men was to employ a long term besiegement tactic but what Lorist lacked most currently was time. And Wildnorth Town had also finished their crop harvests only recently. Coupled with the food they already have in their stores, how long would they be able to last without venturing out of their town? Three years? Or maybe five? It definitely wasn't practical to besiege them for that long. And there was no doubt that the mountain barbarians would begin their attack during the next year after their celebration ends. *Sigh,* thought Lorist as he felt that it would really be a waste to expend all of his forces on a small threat like Wildnorth Town even though he did have a reasonably large force at the moment.

As he pondered on, Lorist thought, *darn it... Just give me a few more months...* All of a sudden, a man on horseback sped into the military camp and the rider quickly dismounted and reported, "Milord, the ambassador of the Duke of the Northlands is at the Maplewoods Bastide. The old butler has requested for your immediate presence…"

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Weird, doesn't that dipshit of a duke only come to collect his taxes during the 10th month? It's only the beginning of the 8th month. What business does he have so long before the tax collection date? While he was on the way back to the bastide, Lorist asked his messenger whether the duke's ambassador had stated a reason for the visit.

The messenger shook his head and said that he didn't hear anything about the reason and mentioned that he saw quite a substantial number of people arriving at Firmrock Castle not long ago and that Josk had led a fully-armed squad of guards to serve as an escort for the visitors before he was tasked to send the message to Lorist by the old butler.

That's odd. Why would Josk do the escorting with a fully-armed squad? Upon thinking back at the huge number of people the messenger had mentioned, Lorist believed that the duke must have heard rumors about the Norton Family's looting of the Redriver Valley Bastide and had sent his men to threaten his family for a cut of the profit. It seemed that Josk believed the family would have a hard time handling the issue and decided to bring his men to keep an eye on the people of the duke in the name of

escorting them. Otherwise, he could have simply sent somebody else to handle it without having to lead a fully-armed squad personally.

After a whole day of speedy travel on horseback, Lorist arrived at the bastide by the evening and a small camp had already been set up outside the castle of the Maplewoods Bastide. The messenger mentioned that the camp was where approximately 200 of the soldiers of the Northland Army which accompanied the duke's ambassador resided. Since the family had refused to let them into the castle, they had no choice but to set up camp outside.

Seeing the castle being completely fortified, Lorist understood that the old butler also found the timing of the ambassador's visit to be weird and suspected that they didn't come with good intentions, and raised the alert level of the troops stationed at the castle.

Supervisor Spiel hurriedly came out to greet him and said, "Milord, they are all currently within the great dining hall and have feasted for the whole afternoon already. The duke sent a baron over and he brought along one Gold ranked knight and twenty other Silver ranked knights with him. Old Butler Gleis is accompanying them there along with Sir Pajik and Sir Josk."

Lorist stopped and asked, "Did they say why they made a visit during this time?"

Spiel shook his head and replied, "They didn't say anything about that. I only remember hearing them ask the old butler about the date of your return and they sounded rather impatient about it too. Lady Pesha was there originally, but she left after the men said some rather disrespectful things to her. That Gold ranked knight even asked her to accompany him for the night. Had it not been for Sir Josk's presence, they might've laid their hands on her already…"

Lorist sighed and said, "Does she even know what's good for herself? Why did she even go to a place like that? With her Silver rank power, she will only be taken advantage by others…"

Lorist took huge strides with Reidy and Patt into the grand dining hall and the chatter within it instantly quieted down upon their entry.

In the middle of the hall were two long tables at which 20 or so soldiers with flushed faces wearing grey leather armor could be seen. It was evident that these knights Spiel

had mentioned have had quite a huge amount of alcohol. At the far corner of the wooden table was a light blonde-haired, skinny middle-aged man dressed in formal robes and beside him was a huge man equipped with chain mail. *That should be the Gold ranked knight.* On the other side of the table was Old Butler Gleis sitting on a wooden wheel chair with Pajik standing beside him and Josk sitting next to him.

Upon seeing Lorist enter the hall, Josk hastily stood up and bowed with Pajik before they both made a respectful salute.

Old Butler Gleis looked towards the skinny man and the burly knight and said, "This is our newly-appointed dominion lord, Baron Norton Lorist."

According to the tradition and customs of nobles, the skinny middle-aged man and the burly Gold ranked knight should stand up and announce their identities before returning a salute. However, both of them merely sat there quietly with the skinny man even sarcastically saying, "It seems that the dominion lord is so busy that he had to make us wait for so long. However, without the permission of our Lord Duke, your title as the baron will not be recognized by us simply because you say so…"

As if he didn't hear any of the vitriolic words the skinny man had just uttered, Lorist walked up to Gleis and said, "Grandpa Gleis, you must be tired. Why don't you go get some rest and let me handle this?"

The old butler waved his hand and said, "It's okay, I'm not tired at all. Just do your thing, I will just sit here and watch."

Having been ignored by Lorist, the skinny man lost his temper and banged the table before he roared angrily, "Hey! I was talking to you! You deaf?!"

Lorist turned around instantly and looked at him with a berating gaze before he said, "Which alley did you crawl out from? You dare behave so impudently in the presence of the family of the Roaring Raging Bear?"

Lorist's seething killing intent that radiated from his gaze caused the skinny man to feel a chill down his spine. He was stunned to the point of speechlessness before he was once again awoken by a tap on the shoulder from the Gold ranked knight that stood beside him. With a face flush with embarrassment, the skinny man stood up so quickly with a humph so forceful that it caused his wig to slant. As he adjusted the wig on his head, he gritted his teeth and said, "I'm Baron Camorra. You better show me the

respect nobles deserve…”

"Hehehe… You, a noble? You're nothing but an impostor. I've never met a noble that's so unrefined and ill-behaved like you. The way you dress even makes you look kind of like a clown…” Lorist ridiculed, causing Reidy, Patt and the rest to laugh out loud.

"Show me the certificate of your nobility to prove your authenticity. Otherwise, I'll have an impostor like you hanged at the gates of the bastide as a warning for anyone else who dares to pretend to be nobility!" Lorist suddenly raised his voice so loud and caused everyone within the hall to start in surprise and focus their attention on the situation.

Lorist's sudden change in tone and expression had frightened the man so much that his face instantly turned pale. He quickly stuck his hand into his robe and said, "It's… It's here… My certificate of nobility is here…” The panicking man quickly took out a bunch of documents and placed it onto the table.

At that moment, the burly knight said, "I can also testify to the authenticity of his nobility. Even though it has only been three months since he was entitled by the Lord Duke himself, he is indeed a noble…”

"Oh, so you were just recently entitled by the duke… No wonder you look so much like a clown. What an embarrassment to us nobles… Since you are sent here by the Lord Duke, tell me why you brought so many soldiers to the dominion of the Norton Family," said Lorist unconcernedly as he gave the skinny man a contemptuous gaze.

Chapter 116
Baron Camorra

Baron Camorra quickly noticed that he had just made a grave mistake. He never should've treated the family of the Roaring Raging Bear of the Northlands as the common noble families that he had been dealing with. In terms of history and heritage, the Norton Family far exceeded even that of the duke's Loggins Family. Families that have 200 to 300 years of history like that had their own pride and stubbornness unlike most other dominion lords that would easily lower their heads and butter up the ambassador of the duke by giving him expensive gifts and women in fear that they would offend him for some reason.

Thinking that the Norton Family was completely different from what he had heard before, Baron Camorra thought that there was a high chance that he wouldn't be able to fulfill his mission this time around. *Didn't Viscount Kenmays tell me that the Nortons had already become weak and incompetent? I heard that he had brought hundreds of farmer soldiers to attack the Norton Family bastide and even besieged them for three whole months and only had to stop because they ran out of food… I believed that if it were possible, he would've liked to continue the siege longer…*

Even though Viscount Kenmays sounded rather casual when he said that at that time, within a short six months, the Norton Family managed to plunder the Redriver Valley Bastide all of a sudden and left it burning to ashes after everything was taken. Baron Camorra still recalled the scene when Viscount Kenmays went to see the duke about the issue: the usually elegant and refined viscount's face was purple with rage and he even fainted after spitting out mouthfuls of blood as he muttered, "My gold coins… my gold coins…"

Most people thought that the viscount was agonizing over the gold coins that he had used to purchase all the goods that were taken at the bastide. The massive amounts of shipment that the viscount brought into the Northlands some time ago had caused so many people to be green-eyed with jealousy. It was then when the people of the Northlands wondered whether the wealth of the Kenmays Family could actually rival that of a kingdom, as they could manage to bring in so much resources all at once.

Right after the incident of the bastide burning down, while others were secretly delighting in the viscount's loss, Baron Camorra had been spending money to bribe one of the personal attendants of Viscount Kenmays and got to know that the viscount had fainted on that day because of the loss of his secret stash of money that he had stored at the bastide. It had already become the loot of the Nortons.

According to that attendant, there were exactly 100000 gold Fordes stored at the bastide and he was certain of that figure because he had filled up those chests himself within the secret room at the bastide. He remembered clearly that there were 5 chests that each stored 20000 gold Fordes stacked neatly together.

That sum of money was actually the result of the efforts and methods the viscount had meticulously employed over the years ever since he first joined the family's trading group at the age of 16. Aside from the three of his personal attendants, nobody else including his own father knew about the money. Now that it had been taken by the Norton Family, the viscount could only despair: even if he could eradicate the Norton Family by the time his 2000 soldiers arrive, the existence of the money had already been revealed and it would no longer be his personal cash as it would have to be handed to the family itself. It would never make its way back into the viscount's hands.

Baron Camorra was shocked to hear the figure of the private savings of the viscount: that amount was easily six times the annual income of the duke's dominion. He was really familiar with the duke's income and expenses and the formation of the duke's Northland Army of at least 20000 people would add another 40000 imperial gold coins to the duke's upkeep. The duke's annual income was just around 60000 imperial gold coins which was roughly equivalent to around 16000 gold Fordes. That was the main factor that limited the duke's ability to further expand that army.

To most other people, Baron Camorra was merely someone who had lucked out to gain his position today. Looking like a monkey-faced clown, most people felt that he had managed to gain the duke's favor by mere coincidence. What they didn't take into account was that while the duke had many weaknesses and shortcomings, he wasn't a ruler that could easily be swayed around like that. The reason he trusted Camorra and even granted him the title of a baron was because of the achievements he had gained by his own ability.

Baron Camorra was originally a commoner born in Gildusk City and he had spent most of his life in the slums among the lowest dredges of society. He did everything he could to survive including being a liar, a thief and a gangster. However, he was finally caught

for stealing at the age of 16 and just as he was about to have his hand amputated as punishment, the local dominion lord intervened out of nowhere and forgave Camorra of his crimes and even gave him a small fortune and some clothes.

That benevolent dominion lord said to him, "I can't have a young boy like you dying from having your hands cut off on the day my son is born. That will forever taint this auspicious day of mine. That's why I forgave you and even graced you with this little gift. You don't have to thank me, this is the fortune that my little angel has brought to you. I can only advise you to change your way of life and find a proper job so that you can secure your own happiness and livelihood with your own efforts. If you don't listen to what I have to say, you will definitely be captured again and die a dog's death from having your hands amputated. However, at that moment, your death will no longer have anything to do with my precious son."

As if he had gained a sudden revelation, Camorra went to the Shrine of Singwa and carried out all sorts of chores there during the day to earn his share of two pieces of black bread. During his free time, he also spent his time learning as much as he could from the priests of the shrine and after three years, he had gained the trust and admiration of the priests of the shrine and one of the senior priests promoted him to become a warden. From a position at the jail, Camorra spent 10 short years to be promoted to the level of a security captain and spent another 10 years to become the chief tax officer of Gildusk City and caught Duke Loggins's eye.

If one were to pick the poorest duke out within those of the Krissen Empire, the Duke of the Northlands would definitely fit the bill. One of the duke's ancestors had once took the post as the prime minister during the time of Krissen III and had a reputation in the history books as the virtuous prime minister. Back then, the Krissen Empire was fraught with natural disasters as well as internal and external conflict and it was the leader of the Loggins family at that time that had used every method at his disposal to unify the empire and grant it peace and stability. In the end, he died from overwork at his work desk and that prompted the emperor of that time to elevate the title of the Loggins Family from a viscount to a duke and grant the southern part of the Northlands to their family as a hereditary dominion.

However, the Loggins Family could not have hated Krissen III more. Even though their dukedom was 10 times larger than their previous viscounty, the profit the family made had decreased more than 10 times. Krissen III had actually claimed the profitable viscounty for himself and ceded the desolate northern lands to their family as their dominion instead. To the Loggins Family, that was a stab in the back that they didn't

deserve considering the contributions the family had made to the empire. Perhaps it was the emperor's way of punishing the family for hogging so much power within the empire for so long and making the emperor feel like he's nothing more than a figurehead.

During the reign of the former Krissen Empire, the revenue of the Duke of the Northlands was merely around 100000 imperial gold coins. That amount was akin to the profit that a common baron earned in the most prosperous areas of the empire. The previous leaders of the Loggins Family had tried to develop their lands before, but none of the leaders were as talented as the former viscount and they were mostly plagued by their limited funds and the natural hazards of the Northlands. Surprisingly, the Loggins Family had produced a number of family leaders that excelled in the military, causing them to be known by some as the family that had relinquished their scholarly brilliance to become military brutes.

When compared to many of his predecessors, the current Duke Loggins was not accomplished in both academic and martial prowess and was only average at whatever he did. He also had lots of shortcomings like lust, greed, indecisiveness and a fond liking for spending on unnecessary luxuries. However, one redeeming factor that he had was his ability to judge people. He had picked Camorra to manage the taxes of his dukedom and organize the formation of the Northland Army as well as manage the logistics and supply of the army.

Camorra, not letting the duke's expectations down, had spent three whole years revamping the taxation system of the dukedom and helped the chaotic dominion recover its revenue by up to six times like it used to be in the old days, thus allowing the duke to no longer have to save up just to make ends meet as well as allowing for the original 3000-strong garrison of the dukedom to be expanded into a staggering 20000-strong Northland Army. The income of the dukedom also ensured that the army would be able to sustain itself in terms of equipment and supplies.

After merely three years, the duke was extremely satisfied with Camorra's performance and fulfilled his promise to make him a baron. Naturally, it was merely an honorary title that didn't come with a dominion. That meant that Baron Camorra was only an honorary noble.

The night he was given the title, Camorra locked himself in his room and cried himself to sleep. He knew that most of the people around him treated him like a joke and didn't know how much effort he had put in to get to where he was. Even though he wasn't

even 45 years old, he had lost half of the original volume of his hair over the years of stressful toiling. He was extremely thankful for the duke's favor towards him and he continued to believe that as long as he served the duke well, he would one day gain a dominion for himself and become a proper landed noble.

After receiving the report from Viscount Kenmays's attendant, Baron Camorra secretly told the duke about it. The duke was absolutely staggered by the sum of 100000 gold Fordes and was even considering sending out the entire Northland Army to get the whole amount for himself. However, Baron Camorra said that he shouldn't make such large movements lest he attracts the attention of others. Duke Loggins understood that Camorra was referring to the Second Prince and that man was even greedier than the infamous duke himself.

On the other hand, it would be easy to come out with an excuse to pester the Norton Family: ever since the Second Prince's Iblia Kingdom had decreed for all landed nobles of the Northlands to be under the jurisdiction of the Duke of the Northlands, the Norton Family had not made a visit to the duke himself for a single time even though they paid their taxes regularly. They could also argue that the Norton Family's lack of notification to the duke when they selected a new family leader was a disrespectful act to the duke as he was their senior noble and not reporting the fact meant that they were treating him as if he didn't exist. It could also be said that among the old noble families of the Northlands, the Norton Family had become a rogue family that did not have any associations to a senior noble.

After deciding on the excuse with his trusted subordinate, the duke decided to send none other than Baron Camorra himself to the Norton Family as his ambassador. To pressure the Nortons to submit, the duke had also sent one of the five Gold ranked knights he had to accompany the baron on his journey as well as an escort of 20 Silver ranked knights and two small squads of elite soldiers of the Northland Army.

The duke also instructed Baron Camorra that if the Norton Family knew what was good for them, not only did they have to hand over the 100000 gold Fordes, they also had to give two thirds of the resources they had plundered to the duke to gain his forgiveness for the Norton Family leader's disregard. And if the Norton Family refuses to abide to those conditions, the escort that the baron brought with him would be more than enough to wipe the family out.

Ever since the First Young Master and the previous family leader of the Norton Family died, the Nortons no longer had any Gold ranked fighters. One Gold ranked knight,

twenty Silver ranked knights and another two squads of Iron ranked elite troops should be more than enough to frighten the wits out of the Nortons already. What other choice did they have but to obey the will of the duke? At the time, that was what Duke Loggins and Baron Camorra believed. The duke even joked that the real reason the escort of that might was sent was to ensure that the 100000 gold Fordes would be transferred back to the duke's dominion safely.

Not knowing the true situation of the Norton Family, the duke and the baron even laughed about the conflict between the Kenmays Family and the Nortons because there wasn't even much of a point to fight for lands as desolate as their dominions' as most of the more developed places of the Northlands was at the south where the duke's dominion was located.

If the duke knew about the decimation of the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew, then he definitely wouldn't have underestimated the might of the Nortons. Had he known that Lorist managed to single-handedly defeat the twin Gold ranked shield-bearers, the duke might have considered sending all five of his Gold ranked knights along with the baron as well as another 6000 of his troops. However, if he truly did that, then everyone would know that he was going to rob the Nortons of their gold.

During all his time in service to Duke Loggins, Baron Camorra had seen many nobles who would endure any and every kind of insult he threw at them and try their best to please him. As the duke's ambassador, Baron Camorra had been to many dominions of other noble families to provoke, to mediate, to threaten, to extort, and most often to collect taxes. Before he was even given the title of an honorary baron, the landed nobles were already extremely respectful to him. Camorra had even met some nobles who were willing to send their wives and daughters to accompany him in bed for some extra perks like a small tax cuts.

Before he arrived at the Maplewoods Bastide, Baron Camorra had assumed that the Nortons were just like the usual noble families he dealt with. But nobody would've expected for him to run into trouble the moment he arrived at Firmrock Castle. At the foot of the newly-constructed defensive wall, the Gold ranked Knight Tabik who had accompanied him shouted for everyone within the Norton Family to show up and receive them. But a young knight merely peeked over the wall and bluntly asked the arrogant Tabik to shut up.

The Nortons' construction of a castle at Morgan Hills was news to the baron and he didn't expect that they would have a Gold ranked marksman among their ranks as

well. When he was making his way through Firmrock Castle, the baron had also noticed the ballistas which were set up on the wall as well as the metal-armored soldiers who were manning them and felt that he had neglected to investigate the true military prowess of the Norton Family and started to worry whether he would be able to successfully complete his mission,

By the time he arrived at Maplewoods Bastide, he noticed something different about the place when compared to Firmrock Castle. The people of Firmrock Castle, no matter whether they were soldiers or workers, weren't remotely bothered by the presence of the men sent by the duke: apart from a few curious looks, most of the people didn't even show the slightest interest in the duke's men. However, at Maplewoods Bastide, the moment the duke's name was uttered, everyone there either panicked or showed their deepest respects. Even though the entry of the 200 or so soldiers into the bastide's castle was denied, Baron Camorra noticed that they were being served the best food the bastide had during the reception feast.

The one who was present at the feast was the old and cunning Butler Gleis, whom Baron Camorra didn't manage to glean the slightest information about the family from despite his incessant questioning. The baron decided to test them out by secretly asking Knight Tabik to flirt with the female knight of the family and noticed that even though the other members of the Norton Family were mad at that act, they did not dare to take any action. At least, that was the case until the Gold ranked marksman who escorted them humphed in annoyance, causing Tabik to cease whatever he was doing.

The baron was also keenly observing the situation when the Norton Family's new leader entered the hall and he saw that the Gold ranked marksman and the Silver ranked knight that was beside him were extremely respectful to that young family leader from the very bottom of their hearts. Thus, Baron Camorra decided to test the young leader's reaction with his usual arrogant and rude act: most other nobles usually attended to him more respectfully after the commotion he caused and the baron expected the family leader of the Nortons to react the same as well.

But he was extremely taken aback by the huge reaction the young man exhibited which involved his questioning of the baron's legitimacy as a noble. The baron could also feel the seething killing intent which radiated from the eyes of the young man when he turned his gaze to him. *What deep, black eyes... They seem like an unending abyss of darkness...* After he was gazed at, the baron felt like he was being eyed by a high-ranked magical beast as if he were its prey and found himself frozen and unable

to move before his train of thought got disrupted entirely as he awaited his impending doom.

That kind of desolation and helplessness had caused the baron to lose his usual cool and rationality to the point that he even hurriedly took out his nobility certificates when Lorist demanded him to prove his legitimacy. Having one's legitimacy as a noble questioned was the paramount insult one could experience no matter whether one was a landed or honorary noble.

By the time Tabik was calmly attesting to the baron's identity, Baron Camorra only felt a pang of humiliation. He understood that he would definitely become a laughing-stock among the noble circles and that would only serve to reinforce his reputation as the clown who merely got lucky.

Baron Camorra silently kept the certificates and documents he had placed on the table and readjusted his robes and removed the light blonde wig from his head to reveal his bald, shiny scalp. With a pale face, he performed a standard noble greeting towards Lorist and said with a serious tone, "With utmost respect, Lord Norton, I represent my liege, Duke Loggins, to ask the Norton Family a question and to discuss two other matters…"

Chapter 117
Tabik's Demand

A look of surprise flashed through Lorist's eyes as he didn't expect that clown-like skinny man to recover his calm so quickly and even managed to carry out his job as an ambassador properly despite having just been humiliated. *It seems that this guy is rather strong-willed and is definitely more than meets the eye…*

Once again wearing a solemn expression, Lorist stood up straight and said in a strict fashion, "I welcome your arrival. As the head of the Norton Family, I, Norton Lorist, represent the family to receive the greetings of the duke."

Baron Camorra observed Lorist carefully and no longer dared to look down on that young man. Lorist was different from the other nobles he had encountered in a way that even though he sounded rather polite, there was not a shred of respect towards the duke that could be picked out from what he had just said. In fact, the tone of speech Lorist used seemed to suggest that he considered the duke to be on the same level as he was. Instead of the much detested arrogant pride nobles usually had, it was self-confidence that was oozing out of Lorist's being.

"Lord Norton, as the overlord and Duke of the Northlands, Duke Loggins would like to know why the Norton Family haven't paid a single visit to him even though it has already been three years since the Second Prince designated all the nobles of the Northlands to be under his rule. Isn't that against the common conventions of nobility? And after the passing of the previous baron, why didn't the new family head pay a visit to the duke to gain his permission to succeed the title? The Lord Duke has already waited patiently for three years and could no longer withstand an insult like that. That's why he would like to know if the Norton Family considers him as an enemy." Since Baron Camorra didn't recognize Lorist's claim to the title of a baron, he addressed him as Lord Norton instead.

Lorist laughed slightly and said, "The Norton Family has never once considered Duke Loggins and his family as an enemy, and also acknowledges his rule over the Northlands. Otherwise, the we wouldn't have bothered to pay the taxes on time in the first place. However, we do not acknowledge the duke to be our senior noble as it is

publicly known that the Norton Family has been entitled by the Krissen Royal Family themselves. Let me ask you, Lord Baron, since when has Duke Loggins been a member of the royal family?"

"Didn't the Second Prince already order all the nobles of the Northlands to take the duke as their senior noble?" Baron Camorra asked.

"Lord Baron, can the Second Prince be considered a representative of the royal family? I think not, as all the nobles know that the only one who can do so is the Third Prince of the Andinaq Kingdom who has been nominated as a successor by the emperor himself. So since when did the Second Prince have any authority to will the Nortons to become a subordinate noble family of the Loggins Family? What he did was just as laughable as a neighbor selling your house without gaining your permission. Naturally, if Duke Loggins is able to gain the agreement from the Third Prince, then we will immediately pay our due respects to the duke. But right now, just as you have mentioned, I have many things to settle as the new dominion lord and I can only hope that I will have some free time to visit the duke in the future," Lorist said.

"Ugh…" Baron Camorra didn't expect Lorist's answer to be that reasonable. "That means that the Norton Family is intent on going against the Lord Duke?"

"Whether I am going against him will depend on his own judgment. If he thinks that my reasoning is fair, he should go see the Third Prince and gain his approval to govern our family. If he thinks that the Norton Family is antagonizing him, he can simply send his Northland Army to force us to submit. Even though the Norton Family's might is pretty small in comparison to the duke's Northland Army, we are still the Roaring Raging Bear of the North and we will still have the ability to cause the duke a substantial loss," said Lorist as he casually threatened the baron.

It seems that the issue with the Norton Family's allegiance will be a troublesome one. The Nortons are really different from other nobles, they are not even bothered by the threat of the duke's army. Having no other choice, Baron Camorra decided to skip the issue and move on to something else. His true goal that day was not to force the Nortons to submit to the duke but rather to get the 100000 gold Fordes from them.

"Lord Norton, I think it's best if we solve that issue at a later date. I will definitely tell the duke your words exactly. We will just have to wait and see what he decides," said Baron Camorra. "Can we move on to talk about the other two issues?"

"Naturally. Sit down, I'm all ears." Since it was a negotiation, there was no need to be so formal. Lorist heartily asked the baron to take a seat before talking about the issue.

Lorist's impression of the baron had took a huge turn after the short conversation they had. He observed that the baron had quickly changed the subject upon noticing he was at a disadvantage since he wasn't able to force the Norton Family to submit.

"I need to first ask you to not spread this issue out. The duke wishes that the Second Prince doesn't find out about it as the Second Prince has been secretly suppressing his plans to build the Northland Army by setting up a huge number of obstacles. That was why the duke had secretly gathered a huge amount of gold and gave it to the Kenmays Family so that they may help him to secretly purchase a bunch of military supplies. However, he didn't expect that the Kenmays Family would store the gold at the Redriver Valley Bastide. Following the result of the conflict between your family and the Kenmayses, which ended with the bastide being set on fire, the gold must have come into your possession. The duke hopes that you would return the gold to him and also offers his heartfelt thanks for your cooperation.

"The sum of gold coins that were taken is 100000 gold Fordes exactly and they were stored within five huge iron chests," said Baron Camorra as he instilled some truth to his lie to make it more palatable. The might of the Norton Family had far exceeded his expectations, so he dropped his approach to threaten them and tried to test the waters first.

Lorist really wanted to applaud at what the baron had just said. *What a talent he is! He could actually spin such a convincing lie that would definitely sound perfect to those who don't know better. He even knows about the sum of the gold, and that fact reinforces that the money could have belonged to the duke.* Too bad the duke doesn't know that Butler Boris had already joined the Nortons and he knew almost everyone at the Redriver Valley Bastide, allowing him to easily pinpoint Viscount Kenmays's personal attendant who was in charge of watching the money as well as his family members. After only 50 canes, the attendant had obediently revealed the location where the gold was stored.

I don't know where the duke got the information and sum of the gold… But for him to stretch out his claws of greed so quickly and even send such a powerful escort along with his ambassador… He definitely doesn't have any good intentions. It's too bad that he had underestimated us. Right now, he's stuck in a difficult position.

Lorist looked at Baron Camorra with a weird look on his face that basically said, 'come on, keep on spinning more stories for me to hear'.

Baron Camorra's face flushed slightly from being stared at so intensely and he asked gingerly, "Lord Norton… What do you think about the matter…"

Lorist hummed a few times before he said, "Let's put that aside first and talk about the other issue. What does the duke want to negotiate with us about?"

"Oh, due to the years of internal conflict within the former territories of the empire, the duke's manor is in a really bad state and the Gildusk City's fortifications have not been maintained for quite a while: the walls have even started to crack up. As the duke is a little short on funds, there is no way for him to commission for any repairs to be done. I heard that the your family had won a huge victory against the Kenmays Family and got all the construction materials they have stored at the bastide. That's why the duke hopes that you will be able to provide half of the loot to him so that he may renovate his manor as well as begin the repair works…" said Baron Camorra as he decided on his own accord to reduce the original amount of two thirds to only a half.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that was all," the baron said as he nodded.

"Hehe, only those two requests?" Lorist asked as he laughed.

Baron Camorra once again nodded and said, "Yes, only two requests."

"I haven't mentioned it yet, but I have a request as well…" said Tabik, who was angered that Lorist had completely neglected his presence before he decided to interject between Lorist and Camorra's conversation.

Lorist looked at the Gold ranked knight with surprise and said, "Then, oh-so-admirable and respectable knight, please tell me about your request…"

"I see that your family has a rather abundant supply of metal armor. Even the most common soldiers you have are equipped with those. However, our Northland Army has 20000 soldiers but we have less than 100 sets of armor for ourselves. That's why I want your soldiers to remove their sets of armor and let us bring them back…"

Tabik had always looked down on Baron Camorra and he didn't understand why the

duke was so fond of a mere baron who did not even have a dominion like him. This time, Tabik only reluctantly joined the expedition to the Norton Family dominion as he felt that it was very embarrassing for him to be seen together with that clown of a baron and the baron's earlier flustered reaction only served to prove his point. It was fortunate the baron managed to pretend that nothing had happened before and conversed with Lorist normally. Secondly, Tabik felt that he didn't need to be there as he doubted that the Norton Family would resist the orders of the duke given the looming threat of the Northland Army.

However, after seeing the lightning bolt-like green arrow nail his mount to the ground back at Firmrock Castle, he understood that there was a Gold ranked marksman that he couldn't afford to offend, causing him to stop his overbearing behavior and do his best to not cause any trouble. When he was teasing the female Silver ranked knight earlier, he stopped immediately after hearing the marksman grunt with dissatisfaction.

Given that Tabik managed to make it to the Gold rank, he was definitely no idiot. However, the moment he saw the Norton Family's young leader enter the room, he thought that an opportunity had showed up before him. Firstly, the Gold ranked marksman within the room had let down his guard by laying back in his chair and staring towards the roof. Secondly, the Norton Family leader was sitting right in front of him and it was almost too easy for him to lash out if he needed to. From Tabik's observation, he could tell that the Norton Family head was not even a Silver rank. Otherwise, the Battle Force flowing within his bloodstream would definitely be detected by a Gold ranked fighter like Tabik. At most, the youth could only be an Iron rank.

As Baron Camorra carefully negotiated with the Norton youth, Tabik grew even more impatient and thought, *why does the duke's ambassador have to talk so respectfully to a mere commoner? Shouldn't he be spouting orders instead? Even if the Nortons have a Gold ranked marksman, what could they do against the Northland Army? If everyone in the army spat out a mouthful of saliva, the Nortons would easily be drowned alive already…*

The reason Tabik was being in his best behavior was because he feared that the Gold ranked marksman would intervene and challenge him to a duel. While he wouldn't necessarily die from a conflict with the marksman, it would still be rather embarrassing to be pummeled for no good reason. The last thing Tabik wanted was to become a huge joke after his return to the duke's dominion with the clown.

However, due to some kind of luck, the young Norton Family leader who didn't know what was good for him was seated right in front of him. As long as he held him hostage, the Norton Family would have no other choice but to yield. Even the Gold ranked marksman would have no choice but to submit unless he wanted his lord to die, and that was hardly possible. Taking into account of the 20 other Silver ranked knights he brought along with him, Tabik planned to force the people in charge to open the castle gates to allow his 200 or so soldiers enter the castle to set the situation in his favor.

As long as I can hold that Norton kid hostage, then the duke's demands will definitely be satisfied and I would take most of the credit while that clown over there will remain nothing but a joke. Maybe the duke might even strip him of his title and let him return to being a dirty commoner and I might stand a chance to receive a title and dominion myself and my status will ascend to that of landed nobility…

Even though Tabik was busy fantasizing, he was also very wary of his surroundings. However, his worries quickly evaporated as the Gold ranked marksman had actually fallen asleep within the room. *I really don't get how he's able to sleep so calmly in a situation like this. The guards of the Norton kid are also not paying attention and are whispering about something among themselves. I just need an excuse to act right now.*

Even though Tabik had considered lashing out to catch them off-guard, that would be far too unrefined and undignified of him given his status as a Gold ranked knight. He would definitely not be able to feel proud for his own success if he had to rely on ambushing to deal with a puny Iron rank and that act would forever taint his reputation for the rest of his life. The best solution was for Tabik to cause the Norton Family head to argue with him so that he would have a perfectly reasonable excuse to take him down.

Having thought through his plan, Tabik told Lorist of his unreasonable request.

As expected, Lorist started laughing, but his laughter got softer as time went on.

"What are you laughing at?" Tabik asked, dissatisfied.

"Do you see the door over there?" Loirst asked as he pointed at the door of the grand hall.

"What about it?"

"You will find the gates of the castle after exiting the hall and taking a right turn…"

"Why would I do that?"

"Are you an idiot? Don't you understand that I'm asking you to fuck off? I really don't get how a bird-brain like you managed to become a Gold ranked knight. I guess idiots have their own kind of luck too…" Lorist said.

Even though Tabik expected a backlash from his suggestion, he really didn't expect the young master of the Nortons to manage to enrage him to the core of his being. Lorist's brutally honest insults were something a Gold ranked knight like Tabik had never needed to endure ever in his life.

"You will pay for your words today…" said Tabik with a hoarse voice before he thumped on the long table and broke it into half. As the bowls, wine glasses and wine barrels flew all over the place, Tabik leaped over to Lorist with both his hands outstretched…

Chapter 118
The Issue of Compensation

Tabik took one last look at his surroundings just before he leaped forward. *It seems that the Gold ranked marksman is awake… But he's just looking over here and haven't manage to react yet.* The Josk was still actually seated as if he didn't care about protecting his lord and unexpectedly laughed out loud when he noticed what was going on…

The two guards behind the Norton Family leader was also laughing out and weren't inclined on protecting their dominion lord either. *What if this guy isn't the real family leader of the Nortons?* No matter what Tabik suspected, he felt that since he had taken action, he might as well hold that person hostage first and see what would happen next. Since the youth had insulted him, Tabik was intent on making him pay and teaching him a lesson that a Gold ranked knight should not be so easily provoked.

One more step, and I'll be able to get hold of that kid's shoulder. There's nothing much an Iron rank like him can do once I restrain him. Let's see if he dares to insult another Gold ranked knight like me in the future once this matter is settled… However, Tabik noticed that the Norton Family leader didn't even make any moves and merely stood there like a log. *Shouldn't he be trying his best to flee now? Wait, he's actually smiling. Has he turned silly from the fear?*

Tabik lashed his hands out to grab at the man, only to notice that he had grasped nothing but air. That kid's shoulder was previously right in front of him! Thinking that he probably saw mistakenly, Tabik reassured himself that the youth would no longer be able to escape his grasp the next time.

Right after Tabik swung his hands forward once more, somebody was caught. But Tabik's expression was that of surprise and terror: he had not actually caught Lorist by the shoulder. Instead, his right arm was clasped tightly in Lorist's hand. A sudden pain burst forth from Tabik's arm, causing him to scream out loud in pain. He could clearly hear the crisp sound of the bone within his arm cracking. After the jolt of pain, Tabik could no longer feel his right arm.

Having discarded the notion of taking Lorist hostage, Tabik pushed his left hand

outwards and tried his best to get away from him, only to have his left arm held again…

"Aaagh!" Another cry of pain louder than the former rang out as Tabik witnessed Lorist somersault a few times in the air before his left hand lost all feeling as well.

At that moment, the Gold ranked knight's mind was completely blank and he couldn't feel either of his arms and was only barely standing. However, Lorist didn't spare him just yet and rammed his knee against Tabik's stomach and all of the stuff he had eaten just before were expelled with a loud barf, staining one side of Lorist's pants in the process.

Within the next few moments, Tabik's chin, left cheek and right cheek turned numb all of a sudden before he spat out a mouthful of teeth. As Lorist continued kicking, he roared, "Gosh, why did an idiot like you have to ruin my pants…"

Tabik currently felt like he had become a piece of metal on an anvil that was being hammered nonstop. Right before he lost all consciousness, he finally understood why the Gold ranked marksman and the two other guards were laughing. They were mocking him for jumping straight into boiling water without knowing any better.

Baron Camorra witnessed with fear the scene of the Gold ranked knight Tabik being pummeled by Lorist like a sandbag looking as helpless as a damsel who had run into a group of ruffians whose cries were unheard by anyone else. That was something the baron had not dared to conjecture even within his wildest dreams. While he knew that Tabik hand a fond distaste for him and frequently called him a clown, there was nothing the baron himself could do about it as he was merely an honorary noble while Tabik was one of the five Gold ranked knights working for the duke. He had no other choice but to endure Tabik's harsh treatment.

But currently, Knight Tabik was completely powerless against Lorist. Back when Tabik launched himself towards Lorist, the baron secretly praised that act as once the family head was captured, the Norton Family would definitely cooperate with whatever demands they had. But the scene following that had quickly extinguished the baron's previous excitement, causing him to see Lorist as a being that was even more fearsome than the fiercest high-ranked magical beasts.

Even though the baron felt some sort of pleasure from seeing the knight who had so often berated him being beaten so badly, as the ambassador of the duke, he still had to do something to stop the current commotion lest all negotiations break down into

full-blown conflict. But by the time he finally decided to take action, Tabik had already turned into a lump of mud beneath Lorist's feet and was blissfully out cold, no longer having to feel the pain Lorist was causing him.

Baron Camorra then watched Lorist bend down to his knees and search the fainted knight in a practiced manner. Taking out a heavy beastskin coin pouch, Lorist opened it before he tossed it to one of the guards behind him and said, "Take it and give it to Supervisor Spiel for him to log it into the accounts later. Let's consider it compensation for the table and the cutlery he broke."

Feeling a chill run down his whole body, Baron Camorra noticed that his knees were shaking uncontrollably. *This... What kind of upbringing did this family leader have? He robbed Tabik like it was the most natural thing to do in the world and even seemed to be able to justify his banditry with perfect conscience!* The baron knew well about Tabik's beastskin pouch as he had heard the knight brag about it once before that it stored the 60 plus gold Fordes that he had managed to earn over the years. *He took all that as compensation? With that kind of money, he could fill the whole castle full of tables like the one Tabik broke!*

Loud clanging sounds suddenly filled the hall as the 20 Silver ranked knights who had accompanied the baron and Tabik flipped their tables and kicked away the benches before they drew their swords and prepared to engage…

The battle before had happened too quickly for the Silver ranked knights to react in time. By the time they turned their heads over, the scene of their boss, a Gold ranked knight, being pummeled like that had shocked them completely as they had never seen a Gold ranked knight looking that pathetic all their lives. By the time all of them snapped out of their trance, Tabik was already slumped at Lorist's feet completely out cold. The 20 Silver ranked knights all had a joint thought that if word of their boss's defeat and their inability to do anything about it got out, they would definitely turn into laughing-stocks when they return. So they decided to avenge their boss in front of everyone present within the hall so that someone would witness them correcting the wrong.

"No, you guys,,, Stop…" said Baron Camorra hastily. But nobody paid him any heed. The knights had all heard their boss Tabik call the baron a clown too often and naturally didn't even bother to listen or even consider what the baron had to say.

"Reidy," Lorist called out.

Reidy removed the quiver of javelins that was slung on his back and put it in front of Lorist.

Following that, six javelins were launched flying through the air in a mere moment before they landed in a neat row all spaced out evenly in front of the 20 knights to form a barricade.

"Anyone who walks past the javelins will be killed without a doubt. I have with me 18 javelins and your lot has 20 people. Let's see which two of you will be fortunate enough to survive and return to report this incident to your duke…"

While Lorist wasn't the least bit loud when he said that, his voice resounded clearly through the ears of everyone that was within the dining hall.

Everybody present within the hall all quieted down and only Baron Camorra's ragged breaths could be heard. Even he couldn't do anything about this indifferent subordinates of his.

The few knights who were standing behind the javelins had a change in their expressions as the blade glows on their blades flickered unstably while they hesitated on whether to cross that barricade of javelins. After that, a hoarse voice sounded from behind them and broke the silence of the hall. "Why should we be afraid?! Come on, all of you! Let's cut that twerp into pieces!"

"Kill!" The Silver ranked knights at the forefront raised their longswords and no longer hesitated to cross the barricade of javelins.

The javelins shot out like lightning bolts and struck the knights who had just went beyond the barricades. Within moments, agonized cries filled the whole hall…

One Silver ranked knight quickly retreated two steps back and went behind the barricade once again. 7 of his comrades had already fallen in front of him with all of them having a huge javelin pierced through their chests and nailing them to the ground. 4 of those men were still alive and spitting out mouthfuls of blood as they struggled in pain.

The knight who stepped back suddenly noticed that his teeth were chattering uncontrollably as his whole body shivered from immense fear. It had all happened too quickly: the knights who went beyond the javelin barricade were less than ten steps away from Lorist, and yet that small distance was the difference between life and

death. The fastest of his comrades just now had only taken four steps before he was nailed to the ground and the shivering knight would have become the 8th person to share the same fate had he not hurriedly stepped backwards after witnessing the death of one of his comrades directly in front of him.

It was extremely fortunate for him to have dodged backwards without a moment's hesitation the moment he saw his comrade dying. The knight who had barely escaped the clutches of death felt all the energy seep out from his body before he noticed a distinct stench wafting through the air and heard a sound of trickling water. Taking a slight glance to his side, he noticed that the knight beside him had been so terrified that his bladder let loose involuntarily.

"Who was the one who shouted just now? Step out this instant." Even though Lorist said that in a casual tone, the javelin he held in his hand seemed to indicate his intention on taking care of the guy who instigated the knights' charge.

The Silver ranked knights were all very clear on the identity of the one who shouted out loud in the beginning as they were all quite acquainted with the voices of their own comrades. A few of the Silver ranked knights standing at the front backed away and revealed a large, man with a goatee and moustache who was holding a longsword in his hand.

That burly man didn't expect that his own comrades would back away to reveal him like that. Faced with Lorist and the javelin in his hand, the burly man screamed before he dropped his longsword and dashed in the other direction.

Just before Lorist threw the javelin, a green arrow whooshed past him and sent the burly man flying through the air and nailed him to the wall, causing him to struggle and expel his last breath within moments.

Josk said, "You want to escape? I'm afraid you'll need the permission of my bow…"

It was at that moment when the knights remembered the presence of the Gold ranked marksman. Now that their own Gold ranked ally, Tabik, had been utterly defeated, the remaining 12 Silver ranked knights didn't dare to make a single sound lest they drew the attention of the two fearsome beings within the room.

"Joe you bastard, taking my spotlight again…" Lorist complained before he looked at the remaining 12 knights who instantly lowered their heads the moment Lorist's gaze

fell on them.

"Alright, I can spare you guys and forgive you for your rude transgressions. However, you must compensate for the trouble you have caused. I want you to cast your weapons down on the floor and line up over there. Reidy, Patt, collect their weapons as well as their money pouches…" Lorist said.

"You! This is pure banditry! I'm going to complain about the shameless acts of the Norton Family in front of all the nobles if you do this!" Baron Camorra could no longer stand it and accused Lorist in a fit of rage.

"Banditry? Shameless acts? Lord Baron, don't compare us Nortons to your Lord Duke. I'm ashamed to be praised so highly by an ambassador of the duke, the incarnate of banditry and shamelessness himself. Did you come here with the holiest of intentions in mind? Even though I treated you as guests with the finest food I had, you didn't give the host, me, any amount of due respect at all. Not only did your men attack first, the guy just now even shouted his intentions to chop me into pieces! Don't tell me that we have to let ourselves be killed just because you're our guests?" Lorist said.

The pitiful Baron Camorra instantly got 12 glares of hate from the surviving knights.

Reidy came over and said, "Milord, here are the 12 money pouches."

"Have you turned into an idiot too?" said Lorist as he slapped on the back on Reidy's head. "There are 7 more on the ground and another nailed onto the wall! Go clean those up. Since they're all dead, they won't be needing their stuff anymore, so strip them clean…"

"You! Lord Norton! They are already dead, show them some respect! They are after all courageous warriors…" Baron Camorra could no longer hold back. If the flames of anger in his eyes were real, Lorist would have been burned to ashes already.

"So you're implying that the ones who died are heroes while those who survived are cowards?" Lorist asked as he pointed at the 12 surviving knights.

The baron once again got hated stares from the knights.

"I… did not… mean it like that…" stammered Baron Camorra.

"I understand what you're trying to say. They are courageous alright, but more than

that, they are idiotic. Their deaths are one thing, but they also broke so many things and dirtied the floors of my hall. I need to pay somebody to clean it all up you know; manpower is pretty expensive after all. If I don't clean it up properly, I'll be reminded of their corpses every time I smell the stench of blood and that would definitely affect my appetite when I eat. Should that happen, then I would fall sick and need to spend even more money to get medicine. And you know that medicine isn't cheap in the Northlands. That's why I have decided to take all their belongings as compensation for my loss…" Lorist reasoned.

As Baron Camorra reached into his robes, Lorist stared at him curiously and thought, *if you manage to take out an AK47, I'll kneel down in front of you and surrender immediately…*

However, the item the baron had retrieved was his own money pouch which he tossed forcefully to Lorist, who caught it with relative ease.

"I'll pay you back with my own money! Now everyone of us who are still alive have given you our money pouches! So, as a noble, can you show the dead the least bit of respect they deserve?" pleaded the baron as he bowed deeply.

"Alright, sheesh. Why am I such a soft person?" Lorist said before he turned to face Reidy who was searching the bodies of the dead knights. "Alright, just take their weapons and money pouches. Why would we need their smelly socks anyway… It's better to just buy new ones than to let our workers wash them clean. Put it back onto their feet. Same goes for the shoes, we don't need it."

Baron Camorra sat back down on his chair powerlessly and thought, *Lord Duke… You've finally met your match…*

Chapter 119
The Decision to Deploy

As Duke Loggins's trusted aide, Baron Camorra understood him very well. Beneath the duke's facade of a person of average ability who had many vices hid a heart filled to the brim with ambition. Being a devious person, even though the duke might forgive one's errors on the surface, he might secretly take several methods to ensure one's demise and won't stop until one's life has been broken apart.

If the Second Prince was a hungry wolf, then the baron could be said to be a jackal. While wolves were ferocious and savage, jackals were cunning and suspicious. Even though almost everybody knew about the duke's desire to form his own Loggins Duchy, Baron Camorra understood that the real reason the duke wasn't able to accomplish it was due to his untrusting and indecisive personality.

The original reason for the formation of the Northland Army was so that the duke could defend himself against the Second Prince's father-in-law, Duke Fisablen and his Frontier Legion as well as to be the foundation of the main military force for his duchy in the future. However, the Northland Army had now become nothing more than a tool Duke Loggins used to threaten the landed nobles of the Northlands. Even though the duke's dominion's revenue did not exceed 60000 imperial gold coins, the wealth he had pilfered from the other landed nobles was enough for him to build three more armies the scale of the Northland Army. However, the duke did not do that and instead used the wealth to indulge in a life of luxury and debauchery.

One of the duke's current favorite pastimes was to use his imposing Northland Army to force the landed nobles of the Northlands to obey his orders and instructions as well as supply him with various provisions. However, being the person who played a huge part in the formation of the army, Baron Camorra understood that the biggest weakness of the army was its lack of actual experience on the battlefield. During the past two years since the army's formation, not once has it been deployed in actual battle.

It was further exemplified by the incident that happened earlier from the reckless behavior of the Silver ranked knights of the Northland Army at the Norton Family's

bastide. Some of them were literally scared shitless from seeing their comrades die in front of them. All that time, the nobles of the Northlands had feared the terrifying reputation and the numbers of the Northland Army. But on that day, the army finally ran into somebody who wasn't afraid of their empty provocations. Not only did Lorist beat up the duke's Gold ranked knight severely, he even killed 8 Silver ranked knights belonging to the army and robbed the remaining survivors. That was a huge act of humiliation to the army as well as the duke himself.

Baron Camorra sighed and raised his head before he said to Lorist, "Lord Norton, aren't you afraid that the Lord Duke will lead his army straight to the Norton Family dominion? Aren't you afraid of the Northland Army tearing your bastide apart? I can only say that what you are doing now will cause serious consequences for the Norton Family. As the leader of the family, you really should be more considerate of your family's future and not ruin it in a rush of reckless behavior. If you're willing to hand the 100000 gold Fordes you got from the Kenmays Family to the Lord Duke, then I believe that I can convince him to restrain his anger temporarily and forgive you for your offensive behavior…"

Lorist snickered and said, "Oh-so-respectable Lord Baron, you really are a talent to be cherished. I really admire the way you can tell a lie like that as if you yourself believed it earnestly. In actuality, both of us already know the true origin of the 100000 gold Fordes, isn't that so? Since you say that the gold is given to the Kenmays Family by the duke for them to help him purchase military equipment and supplies, then he is no longer responsible for taking care of the money. Instead, it's the Kenmays Family's responsibility. Shouldn't the duke go to the Kenmays Family and prompt them to deliver the resources they promised in exchange for the sum of money he paid? Why would you come over to the dominion to ask us to return the money we took instead? That kind of practice doesn't abide to the rules and norms of us nobles, you know?"

"Then can I take that as an indication that the Norton Family is intent on opposing the Lord Duke?" Baron Camorra asked as he stared hard at Lorist.

"Hehehe, isn't the Norton Family not at fault here? Lord Baron, perhaps you have heard of a teaching that is passed down through the generations within the Norton Family. Aside from the Krissen Royal Family and the seniors of the Norton Family, every single member of the family will never kneel and submit to another person. The duke should have already expected this the moment he decided to stretch his greedy hands towards us. As for the Northland Army, if their ability is nothing more than those good-for-nothing knights over there…" Lorist said as he pointed at the 12

knights, "Then please, I sincerely welcome the army's arrival. Don't forget to tell them to stuff their money pouches with more coins the next time as well. Trust me, those coins will definitely be really useful for the preservation of their lives."

Baron Camorra stood up angrily and roared, "I will definitely tell the duke about your attitude and the exact words you said today! Lord Norton, since you insist on being so stubborn like this, you better pray that you have enough luck to bail you out from the consequences!"

"Hehe, Lord Baron, thank you so much for your kind wishes. I also think that I'm a rather lucky person myself. For instance, didn't I earn a small fortune from your visit today? Many thanks to you for that. It seems that it's getting rather late, so I would advise you to stay within the bastide for the night. Tomorrow, I'll send an escort to accompany you for your departure," Lorist said with a smiling face as if he wasn't the least bit bothered by the baron's threats.

Baron Camorra was already so exasperated that he could no longer even muster the energy to be angry. The leader of the Norton Family before him was even more ridiculous than Duke Loggins himself and was far more arrogant. The baron merely nodded with a cold expression and said, "I will take my leave now," before he exited the hall.

Lorist then looked at the 12 knights who were standing there obediently and told them, "What? Do you think that you'll be served dinner if you stay? Quickly drag this idiot on the ground and the corpses of your comrades out and buzz off! Did that dogshit duke think that we, the Norton Family, wouldn't dare retaliate at his greedy claws?"

……

"Sigh, Little Locke, that's far too reckless of you. Since Duke Loggins had already stated his conditions, we could've tried our best to negotiate to pay to a lower price… There's no need to completely turn them down and piss them off to a point like that…"

The one who said that was Old Butler Gleis. Even though he didn't say a single word when Lorist was arguing with Baron Camorra, he felt that Lorist shouldn't have picked the worst possible choice from the get go. He felt that the best course of action was to use money and other material goods to placate the duke and his ambassador.

Lorist smiled and started pushing the butler's wheelchair before he said, "Grandpa Gleis, I've already thought through it. If we don't give all of the 100000 gold Fordes to the dogshit duke, he will never let us off that easily. And if we yield even once, he will take that as a sign of weakness and come even more often in the future to make his demands until we are completely sucked dry. Since we would eventually become enemies anyway, I don't see why we shouldn't give him a much needed wake up call and remind him that his Northland Army is not as fearsome and invincible as he thinks it is."

"Even if all the soldiers of the army were as useless as the Silver ranked knights that showed up today, there are still 20000 of them. The forces of our family are still far from being able to resist them…" said the old butler in a worried tone.

"Hehe, it will be fine. With the Firmrock Castle completed, they will never be able to enter our family dominion. No matter how many people they have, if they all run straight towards the castle walls, they will only crash flat into their deaths without being able to hinder us in the least," Lorist said as he expressed his confidence in the defensive capability of the newly-completed wall of the castle. That was also one of the main reasons he dared to go all out to turn against the duke.

"Oh, and, Grandpa Gleis, now that everyone is here, I'd like to discuss something important. I've decided to ready our troops to attack Wildnorth Town," Lorist said.

"Are you sure you'll succeed?" said the old butler in a surprised tone.

"I'm reasonably sure that I will, but I can't say that the casualties that we will incur will be small…"

Lorist then gathered everyone within the room and started briefing them on his plan to attack Wildnorth Town.

After hearing Lorist's explanation, Josk opined, "It'll be a tough battle. We are too short on time. Unless we attack without any regard to our casualties and reduce the fighting power of Wildnorth Town, there is no way that we will be able to take over it within a short period of time."

Lorist believed that by the time Baron Camorra returns to the duke's dominion, it would not take more than 15 days before the duke's army arrives at Firmrock Castle. He had proposed to occupy Wildnorth Town within that time frame to remove the

tumor that was causing so much trouble for the family.

Lorist was prepared to mobilize one company and one squad of soldiers from Firmrock Castle and leave two squads of defensive unit soldiers to guard the place. Including the company of soldiers at the Maplewoods Bastide and the mercenaries at the base at Poplar Coast, they would have around 1000 men to attack the Wildnorth Town with.

Pajik expressed his objection to the plan and said that it was best if the family waited for another 6 months before attacking the town. He mentioned that Lorist had forgotten the most crucial factor that would cause their failure: the 1000 men he had wanted to mobilize were all new recruits who had little to no battle experience and military training and was not that much stronger than average farmer troops. On the other hand, the enemy had a huge fortified wall to hide behind and also knew the terrain well. They also had an advantage in numbers as the scenario of the women and elderly helping out with the defense that Lorist once mentioned was extremely possible.

Lorist laughed bitterly and said, "We don't have that much time. Even if the duke doesn't deploy his troops after hearing Baron Camorra's report, he will be more than happy to let the 2000-strong force of the Kenmays Family attack us first. Since we can only train elite soldiers by letting them fight actual battles, the casualties we will get is a price we have to pay. When compared to Duke Loggins, the people of Wildnorth Town are relatively easier to handle, so it's better to tackle that problem first. And we should also take into account that the conflict with the Northland Army will not end that swiftly, so we must also make preparations for a long, drawn-out battle."

"Is there no chance for us to take the gates of Wildnorth Town by way of a surprise assault and catch them off-guard?" Patt asked with a hint of dissatisfaction.

Lorist merely shook his head.

Old Butler Gleis explained to his grandson, "Deploying our troops to attack the Wildnorth Town will not happen instantly. We have to rally the soldiers and prepare the supplies we need during the expedition which will take at least two to three days to get done. Given how close the family bastide is to Wildnorth Town, any such movements we make will definitely be taken notice by them in no time. There are also many of the servants within the bastide who have familial relations with those of Wildnorth Town and it is entirely possible for them to notify the enemy in advance of

our mobilization. By the time we arrive, they will have made their preparations long ago. That's why there isn't much we can plan for this assault; there is only one way and that is attacking head-on with full force."

Lorist announced, "Alright, it's decided. Pajik, you will be in charge of rallying and training soldiers here in the Maplewoods Bastide. Joe, when you escort Baron Camorra to Firmrock Castle tomorrow, lead the company of troops formed from the slave laborers as well as one of the defensive squad troops we have stationed over there back here and leave Ovidis in charge of defending that place. Paulobins will accompany you on your trip. Reidy, I need you to make a trip to the military base tomorrow and tell Hausky and Jim to bring their mercenaries over here and let Supervisor Kedan take charge of the construction work."

After making a few final thoughts, Lorist said, "All is set. We will mobilize our troops three days from now to attack Wildnorth Town."

……

When Lorist and the rest were discussing the plan of attacking Wildnorth Town, the atmosphere outside the Maplewoods Bastide castle was extremely merry and hectic. About 40 bored Northland Army soldiers started shouting at the guards on the walls of the castle and made many demands such as wanting more meat and alcohol as well as some allowance from the Norton Family for making them travel so far. They also demanded for women to be provided to serve them and to console their lonely hearts through the stillness of the night.

The soldiers gradually shouted their demands rhythmically as protesters would their slogans. "Give us money! Give us meat and wine! Give us women!…"

As their shouting got louder and louder, the gates to the castle opened and the ambassador and the knights that had went in earlier that morning emerged looking crestfallen and down. They didn't even leave with the mounts they had rode into the castle and some of them were even carrying corpses on their backs. The Gold ranked knight, Tabik, was being carefully carried by four knights who were using their capes as a stretcher.

The soldiers of the Northland Army were all dumbstruck at that sight before they were awoken by one of the Silver ranked knights who ordered them to quickly take care of the corpses as well as the unconscious Tabik. It didn't take long before the men

realized that they had messed with the wrong people and the merry atmosphere within the camp returned to its former seriousness as they started to wonder whether the Norton Family would allow them to return unscathed.

After eating a simple meal, Baron Camorra paced around within his tent impatiently. He wasn't worried at being attacked in the middle of the night by the Nortons as traditional noble families like them had their own brand of pride and they usually wouldn't resort to underhanded methods like that.

Since that Norton Family leader is even more arrogant than the duke himself, he definitely would disdain doing something as devious as that.

Before the baron left for this expedition, he had never expected that he would actually fail. Given that the Norton Family had turned against the duke completely and had become his enemy, it was a given that the duke would mobilize his army in response.

Even though it was already rather late into the night, the baron still didn't feel like sleeping. He was troubled because he still didn't understand the true might of the Norton Family given that they had dared to choose to become the enemy of the duke. No matter how good the Norton soldiers' equipment were, it would only have limited efficacy against the 20000-strong Northland Army. *Aren't the Nortons afraid that they will be attacked? What in the world are they planning?*

At that moment, a soldier of the Northland Army peeked into the tent. Baron Camorra asked, "What's wrong?"

The soldier replied, "Milord, a few people have arrived outside the camp and they said that they would like to meet you. They are respectively the squad leader of the Wildnorth Town garrison force and one of the elders of Wildnorth Town, which is located within the Norton Family dominion…"

Chapter 120
The Days of the Expedition

Three days later, Lorist brought a force of around 1000 men on an expedition to attack Wildnorth Town.

The distance that would have taken 1 hour to traverse on horseback had taken the whole troupe 3 hours to travel before they arrived at their destination, causing Lorist to laugh out bitterly while shaking his head.

Just as he had expected before he launched the operation, Wildnorth Town was already ready to defend against the siege. On the walls of the town, blades glinting from the light of the sun and rows of people could be seen. It seemed that the four great families had prepared themselves for the incoming assault and a few of the garrison soldiers even cursed at Lorist and his men from the walls.

Lorist sent Patt to the walls of the town to send a final warning to them: he would request for the garrison force of Wildnorth Town to discard their weapons and open the gates to surrender and if they do that, Lorist would take into account the 100 plus years of relation that the Norton Family had with Wildnorth Town and forgive their act of treason and will only request the townsfolk to obey the new regulations that were set up. He would also promise not to punish even a single person for this incident.

However, before Patt even reached the walls, a volley of arrows had been set flying in his direction, causing his mount to be turned into an arrow pincushion. It was fortunate that Patt responded quickly enough and jumped off his mount before he returned to the rest of the group on foot.

Lorist and the rest were enraged at that action as it represented that the people of Wildnorth Town did not even bother to take the Norton Family into consideration and wasn't even willing to even communicate. The act of attempting to attack a messenger was far worse than normal treason.

Resisting his seething rage, Lorist refused his subordinates' request to attack the town right away and ordered them to guide the men to set up camp and start making food.

Wildnorth Town had two gates with one being at the front and the other at the back. Logically speaking, Lorist should have set up two camp sites to surround the town's exits. But as he only had 1000 men, the troops would be spread too thin if he decided to split them up. That was why Lorist had his men set up camp and sent another troupe of scouts to monitor the rear gate. If the people of the town attempt to send a bunch of troops to attack the Nortons from the back gate, then Lorist would be able to take that opportunity to wipe their forces out.

Lorist couldn't help but wish for the soldiers of the garrison force to do just that. He hoped that he could wipe out all his enemy's forces in an open field battle. Not only would that be a great blow to the town, it would also increase the morale of his troops and lessen the number of enemies defending the town, thus making it much easier for the siege to succeed. It was too bad that the garrison force of Wildnorth Town were famed for their cowardice: they only seemed to be shouting out curses at the Nortons' men who were setting up the campsite without any sign or intention of attacking.

By the time everything was completely readied, the sky had already turned dark. Lorist checked the arrangement of the patrols and lookouts before he went to rest so that he would have enough energy for the siege the day after. Thus, the first day of the expedition concluded just like that.

On the next day, after having his breakfast, Lorist rallied his men and assembled them into formation. The plan for the morning was to have Josk lead a group of mounted archers to circle the walls while releasing volleys of arrows to expose a weak point in the enemy's defense so that Lorist may take the opportunity to attack the spot to take over a part of the walls, thus paving the way for the rest of his forces to eventually overwhelm the town's defense and take over it.

Having circled the walls twice, Josk only lost four of his men and that was a rather fortunate outcome. Upon his return, Josk reported, "It won't work. When I was on the other side, I noticed that they had broadened and deepened the moat, so there is no way we can attack from there if we don't fill it up first. Other than that, I tried firing an arrow towards their rear gate and noticed they have it clogged shut from the inside, indicating that they have no intention whatsoever to launch a surprise attack by sending their troops out from the back. We have no other choice but to attack up front. Just now, I also noticed that they were mostly using hunting bows which will not pose too much a threat to us."

Lorist was feeling rather annoyed. The last time he visited the town, the moat was

shallower than Josk had described. Who would've expected for them to deepen and broaden it all of a sudden. According to Josk, it was approximately two meters deep and roughly three meters wide. Due to the terrain, the depth of the moat wouldn't be visible from afar and could only be determined up close.

Lorist personally rode his horse around the walls of the town and wondered, *where did they take the mud and dirt that they dug out from the moat? Then again, the depth of the moat is just as Josk had mentioned. There's no way that we can attack from here unless we fill it up first.*

On one hand, he instructed Reidy to return to the Maplewoods Bastide and have Supervisor Spiel send over some grass sacks and digging tools. On the other, he ordered his subordinates to lead their soldiers to fell some trees which he would then use to make some large wooden shields and a transport cart which he would need to move the dirt required to fill the moat.

On the third day of the expedition, the plan was to fill up the moat which stretched tens of meters to the left from the main town gates. Lorist planned to launch a strong attack from that spot. Josk commanded a company of soldiers to plant the large wooden shields used defend against arrows onto the ground within 50 meters from the town walls. After that, he ordered his longbowmen squad to fire at the walls from the cover of the wooden shields to suppress enemy fire.

The squad of longbowmen used bows of the simplest design. These training longbows were made from firm and flexible yew wood and its construction method was relatively simple. A yew branch with sufficient thickness could easily be made into a longbow by carving the shape out and drying it. This kind simplified of longbow was slightly longer than proper longbows, however its firing range was inferior to that of a proper longbow by 30 or so meters, being only at approximately 70 meters. Not to mention its power and accuracy was also vastly inferior. The bowstring of a simplified longbow also had to be switched out after 180 or more arrows were fired and the bow itself had to be checked whether it was still in proper shape for continued use. While it was effective when used in training, simplified longbows like these wouldn't do much actual damage to the garrison soldiers on the walls.

Proper longbows on the other hand were made out of a kind of wood that was even more firm than yew. The wood had to be dried in the sun for a period of time before it would then be submerged in a special kind of oil for up to three months before it must once again be dried at a place out of reach of sunlight. During the submersion process,

the wood also had to be shaped and strung before it could be adjusted, fixed and sanded. Lastly, the bow had to be painted a few times over before a layer of leather would be affixed to the bow's body. A proper longbow like that would require at least one and a half to two years of time to make. The firing range of such bows could go up to 100 meters easily and pose a serious threat to even Gold ranked fighters.

The construction of the cart was also rather simple. Its basic form was nothing more than putting together two large wooden planks to form an A-frame roof with four wheels fixed to its bottom and coating the roof with a layer of wet mud to prevent it from being set aflame by fire arrows. As the soldiers push the carts towards the moat behind the cover of the wooden panels, they can easily fill up the moat by opening the hatch located at the front of the enclosed cart and toss grass bags filled with soil into the moat.

The operation during the morning went on without a hitch: under the leadership of the Divine Marksman Josk, the squad of longbowmen were successful in their attempt to suppress the garrison soldiers on the wall to the point that they were unable to even stand up to take proper aim and could only fire from the small crenels on the walls. Needless to say, their firing accuracy was rather bad and it was unable to cause Lorist's side much damage and the garrison soldiers ended up with more casualties than the attackers. Currently, the moat was already half-filled and the operation would be complete by noon.

Lorist was rather relieved and believed that taking the town would not be as difficult as he had previously imagined given the lackluster intensity of the garrison force's counterattack. His troops might even emerge from this conflict with relatively few casualties.

However, after the lunch break, the soldiers of Wildnorth Town had also erected wooden barriers upon their town walls, which allowed them to mount a proper resistance. Additionally, after noticing that the fire arrows were ineffective against the transport cart, the soldiers of Wildnorth Town poured a huge amount of flammable oil onto the cart when it was near the wall and finally managed to set it aflame.

Josk finally showed his prowess by knocking down a few of the wooden barriers on the walls with his arrows in successive order. However, it was to no avail as the destroyed wooden boards were quickly replaced by new ones.

"6 of the longbowmen have died with 21 others injured. Also, more than half of their

longbows are worn out to the point that it's already useless. Fortunately, we brought along another 100 plus extra ones which we can use as replacements. 8 soldiers among those who were sent to fill the moat have died and more than 26 of them returned injured. Should we construct another transport cart to replace the destroyed one?" Shadekampf asked Lorist after he reported the number of casualties from the failed attempt to fill out the moat.

"Send another company of family soldiers to fell some trees. Make sure that the soldiers of Wildnorth Town will be able to see us constructing the carts so that they will think that the soonest time for our next attack is tomorrow and let their guard down. Tonight, we will make our preparations for the time when the clouds obscure the moonlight to have our men bring the sacks to the moat by hand to fill it overnight," instructed Lorist.

Lorist's arrangements far exceeded the expectations of the Wildnorth Town garrison as by the time they noticed the movements beneath the walls, the moat had already been almost completely filled. Seeing the startled garrison soldiers drop their torches from the wall, Lorist smiled and said, "Come, let's go back. We're already almost done. When we attack tomorrow, we just have to bring a couple of more sacks of soil to fill the rest up. I hope that we will be able to take the town all in one go after that."

On the fourth day of the expedition, the weather was sunny with clear skies stretching to the far horizon.

Lorist organized all his soldiers into seven squads of troops with each bringing a siege ladder with them as they rushed towards the walls of Wildnorth Town.

Accompanied by Patt and Reidy, Lorist approached the walls gradually as he followed the tracks of the charging soldiers. As long as one of the ladders was placed on the walls successfully, Lorist believed that he could rush up the walls and massacre away to occupy part of the walls. If his reinforcements also manage to make their way up there, then their victory would almost be assured.

The distance slowly shrunk from 100 meters, to 80 meters, 60 meters… By the time the walls were right in front of their eyes, the wooden barriers on the walls were suddenly lowered in unison to reveal a row of bowmen and longbowmen in firing positions…

"Fire!" The moment the order was made, arrows and crossbow bolts rained down

from the walls in a manner similar to that of a humongous tidal wave, obliterating many of the soldiers at the front within seconds…

As one soldier after another fell, Lorist neared his limit and he shouted, "Retreat! Quick, retreat!"

The green longbow in Josk's hands let out a thundering roar as it sent one green arrow after another flying straight towards the walls of the town which sent one soldier after another flying off into the air. The situation on the walls broke into a chaotic mess within moments. In response, a group of soldiers who were in formation moved sideways to make way for four ballistas that were pushed towards the edge of the walls from behind.

With four deafening booms, four gigantic ballista bolts soared in Josk's direction.

The moment Josk saw the four ballistas appear on the walls, he knew that something went wrong and jumped off his mount without a hint of hesitation. With a loud whoosh, a huge ballista bolt scraped past his back, ripping off the armor and undergarments he wore and tearing a huge, deep wound on his back from which blood oozed out profusely. Within an instant, Josk was covered wholly with his own blood.

Josk's mount on the other hand had already been split into a number of chunks as a result of being struck by three of the bolts.

Rolling on the ground twice and standing up quickly, Josk resisted the pain in his back and once again drew his green longbow. With a flash, a green arrow was shot towards one of the black ballistas on the walls, causing it to break and splinter into many pieces. Some of the soldiers standing near that ballista were hurt from the flying shrapnel. The remaining soldiers on the walls quickly pulled the 3 ballistas back from the walls in response.

After releasing that last arrow, Josk's whole body slumped to the ground. Lorist quickly rushed to him and carried him back to the camp on his back.

Bam! Lorist hatefully pounded on the makeshift wooden table made from a split log and left a deep indentation of his fist on its surface.

Damn! Damn it all! Nobody had saw it coming. Not one of them had expected that the garrison force would be so cunning and devious. During the past two days, they used hunting bows to attack the Norton soldiers and allowed them to fill out the moat,

causing Lorist to have a mistaken impression that they didn't have much ability to retaliate. They only revealed their trump cards today when Lorist planned to take the town in one go and successfully caused huge losses to the Nortons.

A couple of beastskin documents were placed on the table. Those were name lists of the dead and injured soldiers which was compiled by Shadekampf. Within a short 15 minutes, more than 300 of their forces have been put out of commission with 83 of them dead and more than 200 injured. Even Reidy got hit by an arrow when he was rushing to help out. Had it not been for the fact that the soldiers at the front were wearing chain mails, the casualty count would have been far larger.

Josk on the other hand wasn't injured too badly. The cut on his back from the passing ballista bolt was easily treated with some medicine and bandaging. However, the final shot he took to destroy one of the ballistas damaged the blood vessels at his back and caused the wound to rupture and he would require more than ten days of rest before he would completely recover.

"Milord, the morale of the soldiers is really low. I think that we will be unable to continue the attack tomorrow. Today's battle really surprised me. How did the people of Wildnorth Town get their hands on so many longbows and crossbows as well as the four ballistas?" Patt said.

"I might know where the crossbows came from," said Pajik. "Four years ago when the First Young Master led the family's armored cavalry to war under the orders of the Second Prince, there were around 100 garrison soldiers of the Wildnorth Town who tagged along with him. They were in charge of the supply line for the First Young Master's armored cavalry as well as foraging the battlefield after each skirmish. During the battle I was captured by the First Young Master, I noticed that the garrison force soldiers were really focused on collecting weapons and equipment, including even the broken ones. I know that they have handed the metal armor and money to the family, but I didn't expect that they would smuggle and hide all the bows, crossbows as well as the ballistas they found…"

"What a deeply thought out plan… It seems that they have been preparing to rebel since four years ago. No wonder their attitude towards us had gotten worse in recent years. Do they think they will be able to protect the town just because they have ranged weapons? I will not stop until I successfully remove this tumor from the dominion," said Lorist as he grinded his teeth.

"But we're still unable to enter the town!" Patt exclaimed.

"We'll attack during the night. As long as I manage to get up on the walls, we will be able to occupy Wildnorth Town!" Lorist said as he looked towards the walls of the town.

Chapter 121
Duke Loggins's Plot

The obese Duke Loggins rammed around and busted up his study with a semblance of a savage wild boar, causing a pile of mess to gather on the ground. The only things within the study that survived were the ones that were too heavy for him to move, for instance, the furniture.

"Deploy! Deploy the Northland Army to the Norton Family dominion immediately! I want the Nortons to be vaporized and that family leader kid to beg for mercy while prostrating in front of me like an insignificant bug! After that I will hang him publicly for all the nobles in the Northlands to see the ending of someone who dares to resist me!" roared the count with bloodshot eyes as he breathed ragged breaths.

When Baron Camorra returned and reported the Norton Family's refusal to hand over the 100000 gold Fordes, the duke's anger gradually built up. Upon hearing that they do not acknowledge him as their senior noble, he became even more furious and started thrashing around, enraged. By the time Baron Camorra informed Duke Loggins about how the Norton Family leader incapacitated Knight Tabik and killed 8 of their Silver ranked knights, and even took all their money pouches and withheld their mounts, the duke completely lost it and flipped the desk he was sitting behind while muttering nonstop, "How dare they do this… How dare a puny bug like him resist my will…"

Standing beside the entrance to the study were three people. They chose that spot because the objects flying about in the room wouldn't easily reach there and they would also get a clear look into the study, so if something were really to fly out, it wouldn't be too hard for them to dodge and not become collateral damage of the duke's fit of rage.

Apart from the expressionless Baron Camorra, the other two were armored knights with huge physiques. The one with the beard was Duke Loggins's chief family knight, Wesson Chevany who also served as the chief commander of the Northland Army. The younger Gold ranked knight beside him was Hennard.

Hennard looked with an expression of excitement and envy at Duke Loggins who was

sitting amidst broken chairs and messed up books while breathing raggedly. He said, "I really wish I could afford to smash a study up like that… It must feel so liberating…"

"Stop talking crap…" said Chevany with a humph. He turned to Baron Camorra and said, "Milord seems to be losing his temper more easily recently… That doesn't seem to be a good sign."

Baron Camorra replied quietly, "It has been like that since he met with the Second Prince the last time. I heard that he had been provoked and humiliated by one of the Blademasters serving the Second Prince. Oh well, at least milord will return to normal after he lets off some steam…"

Chevany sighed and said in a self-blaming tone, "It's all my fault for being unable to grasp the intricate insights required to break through to the Blademaster level and caused our lord to be humiliated in front of the Second Prince like that…"

"That can't be blamed on you. You've already tried your best and did pretty well. If only the Second Prince did not have two Blademasters serving him, then he would have come groveling to our lord for help long ago…" consoled Baron Camorra.

By the time Duke Loggins raised his head, his expression had already cleared up. Looking at the mess he made, he laughed out and said in a self-ridiculing fashion, "Gosh, it really is hard to control my anger at this age of mine. Come on, let's go to the small meeting room. Camorra, tell me the details of the happenings once again from the top and let's discuss how we should handle the Norton Family."

Following that, with Baron Camorra's excellent memory, he described the happenings without missing a single detail to the duke down to the attitude, intonation and expression of Lorist when he spoke.

"How are Tabik's injuries?" Duke Loggins asked.

"They shouldn't be anything serious. Mainly, his two arms which were rather severely twisted. The herbalist said that it would require around 1 year of rest for him to be able to recover," said Knight Chevany.

"Then, do you think that the Norton Family leader is strong? What rank is he at? How was Tabik unable to hold his ground against him?" asked the duke.

The two knights looked at each other before Chevany replied, "Milord, after receiving

a notification from the guards, I went to visit Tabik. According to him, the twerp of the Norton Family should only be at the Iron rank. That was the reason why Tabik dared to act in the first place. But what he didn't expect was that the twerp excelled in unarmed combat. Tabik said that his loss was probably due to him having underestimated the Norton Family leader and let down his guard and lost the advantage during the first exchange. When he was aware of the situation, he was no longer able to fight back and that's how he ended up so severely injured."

"What a load of crap… I guess Tabik still isn't that honest of a chap yet. How is it possible for an Iron rank to injure him so badly? If he lost, he should just admit it and not come out with so many excuses…" Duke Loggins said as he knocked onto the tea table with his fist angrily.

"No, milord. That is indeed within the realm of possibility. The ancient legends from the Magical Civilization spoke of a profession called the combat monk. They were devout believers of the gods and also cultivated amazing fighting skills that could even take down dragons. However, they eventually died out during the war between the magi and the gods. Hundreds of years ago, some combat monk techniques were also excavated from some ruins and they were all cherished by the shrines like precious treasures. In present day, some of the shrines have practitioners who train in the revamped techniques of the combat monks from the days of old which also frequently allowed them to defeat opponents of a higher rank. I suspect that the Norton Family twerp had managed to get his hands on one such technique that specializes in unarmed combat. If that were really the case, then it isn't weird for Tabik to have lost at all," explained Knight Chevany.

"However, please be assured, milord. Even though techniques like these are extremely effective in one-on-one battles, in a battlefield scenario, the Norton kid will never be able to defeat a fully-armored Tabik charging at him from his mount," added Hennard.

"I see. Then I suppose this will serve as a good lesson for Tabik. I've heard that he's been getting more and more out of control lately. Hopefully this will change how he behaves in the future so that he doesn't get on the bad side of others and cause all sorts of unnecessary trouble," said the duke as he breathed out loudly twice from his nose.

"Chevany, can you defeat the Norton Family's forces if I let you command a regiment of troops?" the duke asked.

Chevany shook his head and said, "It won't be possible, milord. I've already checked the map and according to Sir Camorra, the Norton Family has built a new castle at the Morgan Hills. The fortifications at the castle according to Sir Camorra seems to indicate that a 2000-strong regiment wouldn't be enough to occupy it."

Baron Camorra took out a beastskin map from the pouch beside him and said, "Milord, please take a look over here. The route at Morgan Hills is the only one that leads into the Norton Family dominion. On my way back, I've came to a conclusion that the reason the Norton Family was daring enough to go against milord was because they believed that if they can defend the castle at Morgan Hills, even the Northland Army wouldn't be able to force their way into the dominion. I also have a few other drawings depicting the fortifications of the main defensive wall of the castle which Sir Chevany has also seen. He thinks that we can only conquer it if we continuously exhaust our soldiers in successive waves of attacks. However, the casualties will no doubt be huge and is estimated to be around 6000 people."

Duke Loggins looked at the map passed over by the baron carefully and could not help but admit that the terrain was severely disadvantageous to them in that it was easy to defend but extremely hard to attack. Just as Chevany had mentioned, a 2000-strong regiment was definitely not enough to conquer the castle.

"Then do we have no choice but to let the Norton Family off scot-free?" Duke Loggins was severely bothered by that notion. The fact that the Norton Family had managed to resist the duke's will was a bad example for the rest of the nobles in the Northlands and it would definitely affect his control and influence over the area negatively. He had to make the Nortons pay and use them as a warning for the other nobles who were unsatisfied with his rule so that they would not even think of rebelling.

"Milord, there is actually another route that leads to the internal part of the Norton Family dominion which will enable us to circumvent the pass at Morgan Hills," said Baron Camorra.

"Oh? Then where is that route you mentioned?" asked the baron as he looked intently on the map but failing to see anything of note. He thought that the Norton Family dominion was truly placed at a strategic location. The Blackmud Marsh at the north of the dominion sealed it off from any attempt at entry from there. At the dominion's west was the Bladedge Mountains and the open seas, at its south was the Morgan Hills and the Black Forests and to its east was the Magical Dragon Mountains. Apart from the pass at Morgan Hills which the Norton Family had constructed their castle to seal

off, the duke couldn't find any other place where he could allow his soldiers to enter the Norton dominion.

"To be honest, I don't know where it is myself," said the baron. "However, the night I left the Norton Family's headquarters, I met with some visitors. They were the elders and the squad leader of the garrison of Wildnorth Town, the only town within the Norton Family dominion. The reason they came to me was that they wanted to complain about how the Norton Family leader changed the governing policy his ancestor first instilled to cause unfair treatment to the people of Wildnorth Town. That was why they came to me to offer help and said that they would stand at our side to aid in the defeat of the Norton Family when milord's forces come to punish them.

"According to them, the new Norton Family leader has always been a cruel person even from the days of his childhood. In one instance, he even pushed his 7-year-old younger brother into a well and almost killed him. In the end, someone from the family could no longer stand it and exiled him for ten years and he had only returned a few months ago to succeed as the dominion lord. After becoming the family leader, his behavior worsened and he went all over the place to instill conflict and tortured the poor citizens of Wildnorth Town. As a result, the citizens of the town who have had enough of the harsh treatment started planning to rebel in secret. They said that if the Lord Duke is willing to punish the Norton Family to right the wrongs they have done towards the citizens of the town,they will definitely be more than happy to help guide our forces into the Norton Family dominion through that secret route to catch them off guard…"

"Oh. I see…" said the duke as he breathed a long sigh. "Then did he say how the Norton Family kid changed the policies of his ancestor to oppress the people of the town?"

Duke Loggins had always been rather interested with how other nobles reaped benefits at the expense of their own subjects. He believed that learning more methods from others would enhance his own way of squeezing the last copper coin from the hands of his poor subjects.

Baron Camorra's face contorted in response to the weird situation. "It's like this…"

Baron Camorra was an intelligent individual and he had seen all too often how the nobles outsmarted each other for the slightest additional gain. The methods he learned was also put to good use by him. That night when he received the visitors from Wildnorth Town, he put on a friendly smile and personally served his guests to ease

them up. Coupled with his expertly subtle questioning, it didn't take long for him to make the visitors reveal the truth completely and unknowingly.

By the time Baron Camorra finished describing the relationship between Wildnorth Town and the Norton Family, he was faced with three men who looked at him with expressions of bewilderment.

"That kind of situation actually happened? So there are nobles who are like that as well…" mused Knight Hennard.

Knight Chevany thumped on the table and said, "Ridiculous! Those heartless ingrates deserve death! Were the ancestors of the Norton Family idiots? They should've slaughtered people like that long ago! Why have they let them propagate until now?"

"Oh, so the taxes the Nortons paid to us actually came right out of their own pockets instead of their subjects… It seems that the Nortons are rather wealthy. After all, they have near 300 years of history and their foundation should be rather steep…" The duke was instead focused on the financial aspect the situation that was just revealed. To him, morals and righteousness were merely secondary to monetary profits.

"Did the people from the town request anything in exchange for their guidance?" asked the duke calmly.

"This…… Um…" Baron Camorra started to hesitate.

"Tell me. I want to hear what kind of ridiculous request they made," prompted the duke.

"They… They said that since the Norton Family dominion was rather large and they weren't that greedy, they hope that after you exterminate the Norton Family, you will assign four baronies to them from a small part of the Norton Family's territory…" Baron Camorra was embarrassed to even recite the request of the four great families of Wildnorth Town. They were thinking too far ahead of themselves.

"They dare to request that in exchange of merely being a guide?" said Knight Hennard in with his jaw agape after hearing that.

"They said that the four great families combined have more than 600 Battle Force-awakened people and up to 10 of them are Silver ranked. Other than that, they also have more than 2000 youths. According to them, if they side with the Norton Family,

milord will never even stand a chance. Other than that, the secret route leading into the Norton Family dominion is also a something that was kept untold for hundreds of years among the leaders of the great families which they also use to smuggle their goods. They said that if they reveal it to milord, it will be exposed and they desire compensation for that…" explained Baron Camorra.

"Hehe, a smuggling operation that has been going on for hundreds of years… And they only had to pay the Nortons 10% of their harvest. It seems that the town is pretty wealthy after all. Promise them that after we enter the Norton Family dominion, we will agree to their conditions if they can conquer the castle of the Nortons. Let them be at the frontlines so that they will decrease the casualties of the Northland Army," decided the duke.

"But milord, are you really going to make them barons after they manage to take over the main castle of the Norton Family?" asked Knight Hennard with displeasure in his voice.

"Do you really think that a noble title is that easy to obtain? We are not as… *kind…* as the Norton Family. By the time the Wildnorth Town troops successfully conquer the Norton Family's castle, that is when we will strike…" said Duke Loggins as he let out a sly smile.

"What if they refuse to attack the Nortons?" asked Knight Chevany.

"Refuse? Hehe, then invite them to our main army camp and tell them that we are going to carry out the entitlement ceremony to grant them their baronies. That is when we will strike and grab all the wealth of Wildnorth Town for ourselves. As for the citizens… Kill all the elderly, the youths and the children. Leaving them alive will only spawn trouble in the future. Spare the young women and don't lay a hand on the virgins. I've heard that prices for female slaves have risen recently, just in time for us to make a killing," said the duke.

"Then how many troops are we going to mobilize? And, do we have to lockdown the pass at Morgan Hills where the other castle is located so that nobody gets out?" Knight Chevany asked.

Duke Loggins gave some thought before he said, "We'll send out two regiments of 4000 troops. That should be enough. The regiments will be led by Hennard and you. Don't forget to pay attention to that Gold ranked Divine Marksman. If he's willing to defect

to our side, bring him back here. As for the castle at Morgan Hills, there's no need to pay attention to that. Viscount Kenmays has just departed with his 2000-strong force yesterday to take back the gold that was stolen from them. Hehe, let's just sit here and wait for them to wear their own numbers down by attacking the castle at Morgan Hills."

"Oh, before I forget, Camorra, contact the representatives of Wildnorth Town and tell them to supply us with the necessary provisions and food for the expedition. After all, they won't believe that we've accepted their proposal that easily if we don't even attempt to negotiate the conditions in our favor a little."

"Yes, milord," said Baron Camorra as he bowed deeply.

Chapter 122
Return in Futility

The Silvermoon shined its light down towards the realm of man, indifferent of all the ongoing conflict in the world as usual.

At that particular night during the 8th month, the cool night breeze took away the scorching heat of the day, causing most to feel exceedingly refreshed.

It had already been eight days since Baron Camorra's departure and it was currently the fifth day of Lorist's expedition to defeat Wildnorth Town.

Within a small forest roughly 200 meters away from the town, Lorist could be seen leaning against a thick yew tree looking towards the moon with a long wooden stick placed beside him.

Hausky and Jim arrived at Lorist's side and looked at the distant town before they focused their gazes on the wooden stick.

"Milord, can you really get up the wall using this wooden stick?" Jim asked with a whisper, already unable to restrain his curiosity.

Lorist nodded and said, "I can. You guys should start moving as well after I get up on the walls. Are you all ready?"

Hausky patted on his metal breastplate and said, "Don't worry milord, we won't disappoint you."

"Why can't we act together? Isn't it better that way?" Jim asked.

"The more people at one time, the easier it is for them to discover us. Just wait for me to get up the walls and cause some trouble first. By then, the guards will have their attentions focused on me, which means you guys will have a much better chance getting up there alive instead of being struck down midway."

"Milord, thank you…" Hausky said in a touched voice.

"Hey, why is a big guy like you crying? How shameful…" said Lorist as he laughed.

"It's not shameful at all. Milord, we're willing to do anything for you. Seriously, not only do you not look down on us mercenaries, you've always treated us fairly. If it were the other nobles, they would've asked us to be the first to attack the town and fill the moat while they remain in safety and enjoy the spectacle…"

"To be honest, I've never given it much thought…" said Lorist as he shook his head. "I believe that mercenaries like you are definitely very experienced and far stronger than the soldiers of my newly-formed units. That was why I had planned to use your crew as shock troops to rush into the battlefield and seize a sudden victory by the time my forces are at their limits. I've never expected that the garrison force would be so cunning and cause so many casualties among our men though, so I have no choice but to use you guys right now."

"Milord, we're doing this of our own wills. Not only have you prepared double-layered metal armor for us, you're even going into battle yourself. It's an honor for us mercenaries to go into battle with someone like you…" exclaimed Hausky passionately while Jim nodded nonstop beside him.

"Milord, look at the sky…" Patt reminded.

A large dark cloud gradually moved into place and obscured the light coming from the moon, blanketing the ground below with a veil of near complete darkness.

"Let's get ready, Patt," said Lorist as he grabbed one end of the wooden stick.

"Yes," said Patt as he grabbed the other end of the stick.

By the time the Silvermoon was completely blocked off by the cloud, Lorist and Patt ran forward with one at the front and the other at the back out of the forest. They passed through the plains, crossed the main path and quickly made their way to the bottom of the walls of Wildnorth Town.

Lorist didn't slow down at all and when he saw the wall right in front of his eyes, he suddenly leaped upwards and stepped quickly with his feet firmly planted onto the surface of the wall. Borrowing Patt's forward charge momentum, he held on to the stick tightly as it was gradually pushed vertically upwards and seemed like he was running up the walls in a gravity-defying manner all the way up there.

On the corridor of the wall, a few of the garrison guards were chatting. "The moonlight was just blocked by that huge cloud. Can someone toss a few torches down there to see if there are any movements? We must be careful to not let the enemy get up here…"

"Oh, come on… Their casualties yesterday was so huge that I doubt they'd even dare to mount another surprise attack…"

"I'm just afraid that they don't know when to quit. Come on, don't be so lazy. How much effort does it take to toss a torch down there anyway…"

At that moment, Lorist descended from mid-air and landed on the side of the wall just as he had planned. With a few flashes of his sword, the five garrison soldiers instantly had their throats slit with some of them even wearing expressions of disbelief.

"Enemy attack! An enemy is on the wall!" A loud cracked voice called out loudly and broke the silence of the night.

Torches were rapidly lit within the town and slowly turned it into a shining beacon of light. Children were frightened awake from the commotion and their cries could be heard from afar as the sounds of the gong signalling for the people to gather reverberated around the area before a numerous swords and spears meshed into a chaotic mess of screams and shouts.

"Over there!" Someone quickly saw Lorist standing on the corridor.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Countless arrows flew in the darkness towards Lorist…

After ducking, Lorist moved a couple of steps to his side while laying low onto the floor while the spot where he originally stood become laden with passing arrows. However, the stream of arrows did not last long as right after that, Lorist had already rushed straight towards the attacking garrison soldiers and started slaughtering away.

"Kill!" Four spears lashed out towards Lorist in a fashion similar to that of attacking poisonous snakes.

"Ah…" Two garrison soldiers fell to the ground while holding their injuries while Lorist's sword found its way to the left shoulder of another one and emerged from his right rib. By the time Lorist pulled out his sword, that soldier's innards leaked out from the gaping hole that just created, causing him to cry out in agony before he stopped breathing altogether.

One other soldier was stabbed in the chest by Lorist and writhed in pain on the ground. However, his comrades behind him merely pushed forward and trampled him all over, causing him to promptly lose his life.

Bending backwards all of a sudden, Lorist managed to dodge the four pikes that barely passed by above him.

Clang! With the passing of Lorist's sword, the four pikes broke and the soldiers holding them felt a shudder from their hands. Stunned, they looked at their broken pikes and before they could react, they noticed the silhouette rush towards them followed by a glint from a blade in the corner of their eyes. Everything turned black for the soldiers before they felt a wound open up in their bodies. A stream of intense pain assailed their minds before they all lost consciousness.

"Kill" This time, the attacker was a Silver ranked knight who rushed at Lorist with a bright blade glow radiating from his sword. As Lorist spun around, he thrusted out his longsword into the left eye of the Silver ranked knight.

"Get into the wave charging formation!" shouted a person from not far away.

"That voice is familiar…" mumbled Lorist as he blocked an incoming pike with his sword and slit two garrison soldiers' throats right after.

"Kill…" This time, eight pikes were headed Lorist's way with four coming from above and the other below, not allowing Lorist any way to dodge by jumping or ducking.

However, Lorist merely stepped back and used his right leg to kick a pike on the ground towards the soldiers in front of him. The airborne pike found its way into the chest of one of the soldiers and caused him to drop his pike and fall to the ground as he clutched the one that had just pierced his abdomen tightly while crying out in pain. Lorist moved like an agile fish swimming in the ocean and entered the opening created by the soldier who had dropped his pike…

The remaining seven soldiers all fell onto the ground one by one.

"Attack from his front and back! Pay attention to the distance of the two groups! Get closer…" said that voice again.

"That is Malte's voice… It's that damned squad captain of the Mollin Family…" mused Lorist the moment he recognized who that voice had belonged to. Enraged, he scooped

up the pikes on the ground and tossed them in the direction of the voice, causing pained shrieks to surface once again.

"Kill…" This time, another group of garrison soldiers rushed towards Lorist from one direction with another group rushing towards him in the other.

At that moment, a shadow jumped off the walls. Jim's voice rang out. "Milord, we managed to get up…"

Another two silhouettes could be seen getting atop the walls as well.

"You guys take care of that side. Let me handle this spot," instructed Lorist before he sheathed his longsword in the scabbard on his back. Following that, he took one of the pikes on the ground and rushed towards the garrison soldiers in front of him. The distinct sounds of slaughter continued to resound through the night…

"There's people down there! They're coming up!" A panicked garrison soldier said as he noticed the mercenaries who were currently climbing up the walls.

"Don't panic! Throw some oil jars and have the bowmen shoot some fire arrows downwards!" roared Malte once again. "Brothers, this is our home! Our ancestors have toiled for 200 years to build up Wildnorth Town! Our parents, our wives and our children live here! For them, we will fight!"

"Kill!"

"Fight!"

More and more garrison soldiers rushed up the walls…

"Sol, now I'm the bad guy…" Lorist said in a pissed voice as he lashed out without mercy with his pike in quick succession, causing one garrison soldier after another to collapse into the river of blood that was beneath them. But, after one was killed, two more soldiers rushed forward to replace the fallen one. There was no end to their numbers.

An injured garrison soldier slowly crawled his way to Lorist's feet and tightly clasped on Lorist's left leg. Pulling his pike back, Lorist stabbed harshly towards that soldier's head and instantly shattered his skull and spilled his brains. However, the soldier's death grip didn't loosen at all.

"Sol…" Lorist kicked his left leg out twice, but he wasn't able to shake the body off. The rest of the garrison soldiers present no longer cared about escaping alive and only wanted to give Lorist at least one stab before they would die satisfied. Some of the soldiers even held hard onto the pike that Lorist had pierced them with so that their comrades could avenge their deaths. The remaining ones who rushed towards Lorist were all willing to perish alongside him.

Lorist could only drag the body that was caught onto his left leg with him as he retreated. Hausky's voice rang out from behind him, "Milord, we're at our limits…"

Lorist stabbed two garrison soldiers before he took a peek to his back. Surprised, he noticed that that only 4 to 5 of the original 10 plus mercenaries that he thought had come up to the walls remained after only a short time of fighting. Jim was fully drenched in blood and breathing raggedly while Hausky was holding an unconscious bleeding mercenary. In front of him were two other mercenaries who were fending off the attacks of the garrison soldiers.

"What happened to the rest? Why are they not up there?" Lorist asked.

"They couldn't get up. One of the siege ladders had already been set aflame and there are bowmen guarding some other sides of the wall. Anyone we send up die before he reaches the top…" said Jim while breathing harshly.

Just as Lorist was about to say something, he suddenly noticed that the skies were getting brighter. The Silvermoon had once again returned to its full brilliance and shed its light onto the ground below.

Given that he had killed so many garrison soldiers, bodies could be seen scattered all over the ground and the blood that had pooled up submerged part of his feet. The incoming garrison soldiers were also stunned at the number of bodies on the ground. Given that the moonlight had been blocked out just now, most of the soldiers just realized the true terror of the scene before them as well as the fact that many of them had been stepping on the corpses of their comrades.

Lorist stepped hard on the body that was stuck to his leg to break its arm before he finally managed to free himself from its grasp. Looking at the distant archers, Lorist said, "Please hold on for a little more. I will go kill the archers over there so that the people beneath the walls can make their way up here…"

Before he finished saying what he wanted, Lorist felt a chill down his spine as he flattened himself onto the ground to duck. Feeling the three gusts of air whoosh past above him, Lorist heard the delayed echoes of the three bowstrings followed by a loud crash as a crenel on the wall near him got smashed into smithereens, causing the debris of stones and rocks to shower all over him.

"Agh!" The gigantic ballista bolt struck the two mercenaries who were holding up their shields to defend against the garrison troops and sent them falling down from the walls.

Three ballista bolts were fired in total with the first passing by Lorist's head by a hair's breadth, another shattering one of the crenels of the wall, and the last one killing the two mercenaries who were standing behind Lorist. Had Lorist been later in the slightest to duck, he would've been killed as well.

"Kill!" The morale of the garrison troops who were fighting the mercenaries soared as they continued to rush over.

Lorist sprung back up from the ground and brandished his pike as he charged into the midst of battle, resulting in even more terrified moans of pain as the mercenaries gradually fell dead one after another.

After eliminating that group of garrison soldiers, Lorist turned to face the direction where the ballista bolts came from, only to see an 80-meter-tall platform in the middle of the town that wasn't there before. On top of it were the three ballistas as well as tens of other men who were busy loading it.

"You guys, retreat! Fast!" shouted Lorist.

Jim was the first to descend the wall by sliding down the siege ladder, followed by Hausky and the hurt comrade he was carrying.

"Shoot him…" Malte's voice once again rang out.

Whoosh!

With a somersault, Lorist clasped the wooden stick that was laid against the walls with both of his legs and slid downwards with his back to the ground before he let go when he was about 2 meters in the air and landed safely. Patt quickly rushed over and used a large shield to cover Lorist and grabbed the wooden stick with his other hand before

he ran. Just after the both of them ran tens of meters from the walls, the shield that Patt held up had already been struck with numerous arrows.

In the end, 13 mercenaries died with 21 others injured from the battle, effectively halving the battle prowess of their crew. Lorist grinded his teeth with rage from his depressing failure to occupy the walls. He didn't even fathom that the town had set up three ballistas on a platform so far away from the walls which posed such a huge threat for him and his forces, allowing the Wildnorth Town garrison to be able to successfully fend off the attackers and successfully defending the town.

After a night of bloodshed, Lorist felt more tired than ever and went to rest right away.

……

During the 7th day of the expedition, Lorist once again attacked the walls on Wildnorth Town. On that day, the fog thick fog in the area managed to reduce the line of sight of the garrison soldiers and provided cover for Lorist and Patt to once again use the wooden stick method to ascend the walls.

This time, Lorist attacked alone with no one else following him apart from Patt who was standing by beneath the walls. Lorist's aim was to rampage and kill as much as he could to terrify the soldiers of the town. He believed that after he did that a couple of more times, their forces would eventually crumble and weaken and allow all his forces to easily take over the town later.

After massacring away on the walls, Lorist was once again forced to escape after the ballistas were loaded. However, he wasn't disappointed with the results as he had managed to kill up to 200 soldiers on that run while he remained completely uninjured. *After a few more runs, victory will be ours.*

However, something had happened up on the walls at that time which Lorist didn't pay too much heed to. An old white-haired man leaped towards Lorist barehanded and screamed for him to pay for the death of his son. Lorist didn't kill him because he couldn't bear to. The old man had coincidentally been on his way to bring some food for his precious son who was on duty, just in time with Lorist's assault. In the end, the son of that man died from fulfilling his duty, causing the old man to enter a maddened frenzy and lashing out at Lorist with everything he had in his disposal including his teeth. Lorist had no choice but to knock him unconscious.

.....

On the 9th day of the expedition, Lorist once again attacked the walls. But what surprised Patt was that Lorist had went down from the walls the moment he reached the top. Enraged, Lorist cursed at how shameless the people of Wildnorth Town were for letting the defenseless old people, womenfolk and children offer their lives on the wall.

Before Patt could react to what Lorist just said, he noticed many white-haired old people, women and children looking downwards from the edge of the walls while cursing out harshly at Lorist and shouting for him to pay for the lives of their family members that he had taken.

Lorist could only escape without any results along with Patt.

Perplexed, Patt asked, "Milord, these are all family members of traitors. Why didn't you just kill them off?"

"Sol, if it were you, could you do it?" Lorist said as he looked at Patt. "Why don't I send you up there then to kill them off in my place? We are warriors, not murderers or executioners. Warriors are all prepared for the possibility of death the moment they step onto the battlefield. However, if I were to kill these defenseless people, I would definitely find it hard to sleep when the night comes. Even if they are family members of traitors, we must also have a line we must not cross. They are people after all, not livestock!"

"Then, how would we attack the walls again?"

"Let's go back first. There must be a way if we think hard enough."

Chapter 123
Urgent Reinforcement Request

"They rushed right at me barehanded. All of them were old men and women. There were even a couple of mothers with tens of children under ten years old and all of them were clamoring for me to return their sons, husbands, grandsons and fathers. I really couldn't bear to kill them and could only return without doing anything…" said Lorist when he returned to the tent and explained his early departure.

Everyone looked at each other with confused gazes, not knowing what to make of the situation.

"That's far too shameless of them, milord. In the 30 years I've been a mercenary, I've experienced more than 100 siege battles but I've never heard of anything as atrocious as that. This…" said Hausky as he didn't know how to continue the conversation. He was currently wrapped up in many bandages; the injuries were the ones he sustained during that night when they had to retreat from the walls. At that time, the injured comrade he was carrying got showered with arrows and died while Hausky himself got hit by a couple as well. Had it not been for the fact that the metal armor he was wearing stopped the arrows from penetrating too deeply, he might've been beyond saving.

"The family leaders of the four great families of Wildnorth Town are all cunning old bastards. I suspect that they came up with this method after that one time when I didn't kill the old guy on the walls. The most laughable part is that they treat Wildnorth Town as their own territory and label us as the horrible invaders. That was why the civilians were so willing to give their own lives up to protect their town. Even those old people were willing to die if it meant they could take me with them…" said Lorist as he sighed.

"That's not right, milord. Didn't you say that they were unarmed? How did they plan to die with you?" Patt asked.

Lorist pointed to Patt and said, "Are you really asking that or are you playing dumb? Those old people wanted to hold tight onto me and stop me from moving or dodging so that the three ballistas can fire and obliterate me along with them. The moment I

saw the ballistas aimed in my general direction and the old people who were scrambling to hold me down, I understood their ploy. That was why I got down so quickly."

"Milord, even though the defenseless citizens of Wildnorth Town are the family members of traitors and deserve nothing less than death, and that their relatives soldiers died because they resisted us directly, I think that what you did was right. If it were me, I would also be unable to lash out at those defenseless people," Pajik said.

"Then, how would we be able to continue the siege? Should we close one eye just because the scum family leaders are using the elderly, women and children as their shields?" said Paulobins in annoyance. Even though he was merely a squad captain, he was currently serving as a temporary company captain and he had hoped that he would be able to get Lorist's recognition by raking in some achievements during this expedition and be promoted to become a family knight.

"On my way back, I thought of a method we can use. From today onwards, every two hours. I'll go take a stroll on the walls of the town and unsettle the soldiers of the garrison force as well as the civilians up there. You guys can also bring a squad of family soldiers nearby during the night to make some noise. Stand beneath their walls and strike at your drums while screaming that you're going to attack the town or something so that the people up on the walls won't be able to get a good night's sleep. I am pretty sure that within two days, when I get up on the walls again, those civilians will definitely be so soundly asleep that even if you play a drum beside their ears, they wouldn't wake up," Lorist said.

"Haha, I knew that milord will have a way. That method sounds rather good. I will be the first to harass them tonight," said Jim excitedly. He had been pretty lucky during the night of the retreat. After he slid down from the siege ladder, he ran like an agile rabbit and didn't incur any injuries much to the surprise of others.

"Milord, must we attack only from the front wall? Right now, the forces of their garrison are mostly concentrated there. If we attack from the back wall without warning, then surely they would struggle to respond and send reinforcements there in time…" The one who said that was Reidy and he suggested for the location of the attack points to be switched.

Patt smiled happily and said, "Reidy, you little idiot… If we change the point of attack, wouldn't we have to fill up the moat like before? By then, the soldiers of the town

would definitely know that we are going to attack from there. When we finish our preparations, they will already be ready to receive us. That's why changing a location is quite a futile exercise…”

"Why do we need to fill out the moat?" said Reidy in a dissatisfied tone.

"How would you be able to cross it if we don't? It is 3 meters wide you know. Can you jump over there in one go?" Patt was thinking to himself of how stupid Reidy had sounded.

"Can't we just lay a few wooden boards on the moat when we attack? That way we can easily cross it," Reidy said.

Stunned, Patt mumbled, "This… um…”

Nobody present had a clue that there would be an easier way to overcome the moat and were all stunned by Reidy's suggestion.

Lorist clapped his hands and said, "That's right. Reidy, good job coming up with this idea. This way, we will definitely be able to catch them off-guard. And given how their ballistas are positioned to face the front wall, it would definitely take them some time to reorient it. Alright, the next time we launch an attack, we'll mobilize all our troops and finish this in one go."

"Then, do we still have to harass them during the night?" Jim asked.

"Of course we have to. We need to let them think that we're still going to attack from the front so that they will focus their attention and distribution of their forces there. For these two days, we'll bother them nonstop to tire them out and secretly move our forces to the other side. We'll also send a squad to frighten them from the front wall so that they will congregate their forces there in preparation to receive the 'attack' while we launch the true assault from the back wall. I will be the first to go up and kill off the remaining troops who stay behind at the back wall and subsequently destroy the three ballistas on the platform. The key focus of this plan is speed. By the time they get an understanding of the situation, we should already have victory within our grasps."

Lorist effectively combined his and Reidy's plans into a cohesive whole that would be perfect for conquering Wildnorth Town's walls and was met with the unanimous applause from everyone within the tent. Within another two days, the town would be

conquered.

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On the 12th day of the expedition, the dinner served was more plentiful than usual. Everyone knew that they were going to have a sleepless night that would determine whether they would triumph over Wildnorth Town.

During the past two days, the soldiers of Wildnorth Town had already been tired out severely. Not only were they unable to rest well during the night, they had to deal with Lorist's surprise visits during the day as well. Lorist would occasionally use the same wooden stick method to scale the walls and kill a number of soldiers and escape before the civilians made their way to him, causing the garrison soldiers to be unable to anything about it. They have already seen Lorist's abilities for themselves and understood that there was no way to force this new dominion lord of theirs to leave their walls apart from using human wave tactics after some of them witnessed a few of their Silver ranked fighters getting killed within one exchange with Lorist who seemed so relaxed as if he were merely slaughtering chickens.

Had they not discovered that Lorist wouldn't harm their elderly, womenfolk and children and used them to hold Lorist back, the garrison troops' morale would have crumbled and they might have surrendered after Lorist's continued solo rampages. Nowadays, the four great families of Wildnorth Town could only use the propaganda of protecting their homeland and relatives to motivate their troops. On one hand, they fanned the flames among the civilians to invite them to avenge their loved ones who had died from Lorist's hands. On the other hand, they were hoping that Duke Loggins's forces would arrive as soon as possible to reinforce them.

Even though they understood that the enemy was harassing them on purpose, the garrison force couldn't afford to slacken their defense just in case the attack was real. After only two days, the garrison soldiers were mostly tired out. A few of the leaders noticed that it wasn't faring well and wanted to have a part of the troops take tests rests in shifts, but they were worried that they wouldn't have enough forces to push Lorist back when he attacked again and had no choice but to continue as they had. L

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Pajik, Paulobins, the both of you will lead squads to the hill near the town's back wall by circling from behind our camp. Make sure to reach there by ten o'clock at night and

ensure that the troops are disciplined and quiet at all times so that the soldiers of the town don't discover us, understand?" said Lorist as he finalized the plan.

"Yes, milord. We understand."

"Jim, are you clear on your role?"

"I am, milord. I will bring the mercenaries to hide the wooden boards and siege ladder in the nearby forest and set it up after you get up the wall so that Pajik and the rest can lead their forces to ascend the wall," Jim replied.

"Reidy, you will be in charge of leading the lightly injured troops to carry out the usual harassment."

"Yes, milord."

"Shadekampf, please watch the main camp. Hausky, tonight's camp patrols will be up to you. Be alert, I'm worried that the people of Wildnorth Town will be forced to desperation and take the initiative to attack us instead."

"Don't worry, milord. Even though I'm all bandaged up, my movements are not affected in the least. I will definitely not spare a single one of them if they come," replied Hausky.

"Good. Tonight, we occupy Wildnorth Town. We…" Before Lorist finished what he had to say, sounds of a horse galloping towards the camp could be heard. The rider stopped his horse and the mount neighed in response.

A guard rushed into the tent all covered up in dust while breathing raggedly. Before he recovered his breath, he saluted and reported, "Re-reporting to milord… Ken-Kenmays Family's 2000 plus force has arrived at the Firmrock Castle today and started their assault. Our forces have sustained huge casualties defending it and Sir Ovidis has asked me to request for reinforcements."

The people in the tent instantly broke into a chatter. Everyone knew that Firmrock Castle was the most important citadel that sealed off the Norton Family dominion from the rest of the Northlands. That is also where Lorist intended to build the main city of the dominion in the future.

Lorist recognized the guard who had came to make the report as he had seen him

hanging around Ovidis a number of times and was confident he wasn't an impostor to deliver a false report. "Calm down and speak slowly. Did Ovidis only send you alone?" asked Lorist as he passed a cup over.

The guard received the cup gratefully and drank huge gulps of water before he rubbed his mouth dry and said, "Yes, we are far too short on people. The enemy has launched two attacks that we successfully fended off. About a squad of people were injured or killed in the process and Sir Ovidis could only send me to come as we were too short on men. When I arrived at Maplewoods Bastide, they said that you were still here so I rushed over immediately."

"What's going on? Firmrock Castle should be quite well fortified. Why are the casualties so high? How is Ovidis commanding his troops?" Lorist was very troubled as he thought, *don't tell me Ovidis went outside the castle to receive their attack in an open field battle? That can't be, he's not that stupid…*

"No, milord. The Kenmays Family forces have two squads of properly trained longbowmen. The 200 or so bows are really too fearsome and they can shoot much further than the ballistas of the castle. We couldn't defend the outer wall at all and most of the casualties came from their longbowmen units. However, not everything is going well for the enemy either as they have failed twice in their attempts to take the inner wall due to the ballistas we have hidden within the turrets on that wall. It is estimated that their casualties are at least double of ours," said the guard, finally reporting a piece of good news.

"Sol!" Lorist smashed his fist onto the table and flipped the cup over. *What horrible timing! If the Kenmays didn't attack now, I would've been able to conquer Wildnorth Town! What should I do now?*

Lorist paced around within the tent as the rest stared at him and awaited his decision. Even though the occupation of Wildnorth Town was within sight, the urgent call for reinforcements from the messenger had worried all of them.

"I have decided…" said Lorist after he finally made his choice, "… to call off tonight's operation and recall all troops to the Maplewoods Bastide. Paulobins, when we return to the bastide, pick a company of the family troops for deployment. Shadekampf, have Supervisor Spiel ready some carriages when we get back for the troops Paulobins pick to use to travel to Firmrock Castle, alright?"

"Yes, milord."

"Understood, milord."

"Pajik, let the injured soldiers rest when we arrive at the bastide and increase the training of the remaining ones. I will leave the defense of the bastide to you."

"Please be assured that the bastide will be fine with me there," promised Pajik.

"Reidy, pay a visit to the military base and ask Supervisor Kedan to move the laborers back to the Maplewoods Bastide so that they won't get attacked by the forces of Wildnorth Town."

"Yes, milord." Reidy's shoulder was still bandaged. That was the wound he had incurred when he saved a number of family soldiers during the first attempt to take the town.

"Hausky, Jim, I want to give you and your mercenaries a task."

"Milord, please instruct us," said Hausky.

"Go back to Maplewoods Bastide ahead of us and make sure to have someone pay attention to the movements of the Wildnorth Town garrison. If you are confident that you can eliminate the scouts of the town, please do so as often as possible so that the town will be blind to the affairs outside. The reward is similar with the one for the mountain barbarians. Do you think you can do it?"

"Milord, we will definitely give it our best."

"Milord, are we going to leave Wildnorth Town just like that?" Jim asked while seeming a little reluctant.

"Wildnorth Town will remain here and it's not like it will suddenly grow legs and run away, right? When we fend off the troops of the Kenmays Family, we will come back to get rid of them once and for all," Lorist said. "Patt, make your preparations. We will depart straight for Firmrock Castle."

"Milord, can I follow you as well?" Jim asked in a worried tone.

Lorist smiled and said, "Naturally. Jim, do come along with us."

Chapter 124
Warzone Merchants

By the time Lorist arrived at Firmrock Castle with Jim and Patt, it was already around 5 in the morning.

A huge camp outside Firmrock Castle was lit brightly with torches and loud chatters could be heard from afar.

Upon receiving the notification of the guards, Butler Boris and Old Man Balk rushed out to receive the trio.

"What's the situation of the walls like?" Lorist asked.

Balk replied, "Milord, currently it's still fine. Ever since the Kenmays Family attacked twice and failed yesterday, they've stopped attempting and set up their camp roughly 1 kilokemeter from the walls which they completed by yesterday evening. Last night was rather peaceful as well as there weren't any warnings from our lookouts at the walls."

A kilokemeter was a unit of length used in the Grindia Continent. In the old legends, the fairies were said to have used a unit of length called a 'marke', which denoted the distance between two horsemen in a fairy light cavalry unit. But when the Magic Civilization rose, marke was changed to be called kemeter by the magi and 1000 kemeters was equal to 1 kilokemeter. After 2000 years however, even though the units of measurement from that time still remained in use, the contraction of the unit names, meter and kilometer, have gotten more popular overtime and are used in most cases.

Lorist sighed in relief and asked, "Why does it look so busy within the camp?"

Boris said, "Milord, we're making wooden sheds."

"Wooden sheds?"

"Yesterday, the longbowmen of the Kenmays Family had caused a lot of casualties on

the forces stationed at the outer wall. So, Grandmaster Ciroba came up with a plan to build a shed on top of the walls that will shield our forces from the long distance parabolic shots of the bowmen. If they attempt to wreck our sheds by shooting straight, their firing range will be far shorter and they will have to enter our firing range, which means we will be able to retaliate with our ballistas as well as use our walls as cover since we won't have to worry about arrows falling from above us," said Old Man Balk.

"Grandmaster Ciroba? Can his plan be trusted?" Lorist asked suspiciously.

The two other men laughed out loud before Boris said, "Milord, we only chose to use it after we discussed it with the rest and found no problems with the plan."

"Then, what if the enemy uses fire arrows to set the wooden sheds on fire? How would we retaliate if the smoke clouds our vision?" Lorist asked.

"That won't be an issue. After we finish the sheds, we will cover them with a layer of green clay to make them resistant to fire arrows. Another benefit of that is that our forces will still be able to fight under the shelter of the sheds when snow starts to fall," explained Balk.

"Then that's fine. Resume your work. I'll go check out the outer walls for myself," said Lorist as he continued to ride his horse towards the walls.

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Ovidis was currently leaning on the walls of his room sound asleep while equipped with full armor. Nevertheless, he remained on alert and opened his eyes wide the moment Lorist entered.

"Feel free to rest up, you don't have to pay me any heed," said Lorist as he patted twice on Ovidis's shoulder. "It must've been tiring."

"Milord, I'm fine. I already slept for two hours just now. I only came back to take a slight nap after patrolling for a while and finding nothing wrong…" said Ovidis as he forcefully opened wide his bloodshot eyes.

Lorist didn't press the issue and asked, "What's the rough estimate of the casualties?"

"Milord, the Kenmays Family's two longbowmen squads are too powerful. They

attacked the troops we stationed at the outer wall from 300 meters away, causing the arrows to practically fall like raindrops. Our soldiers had nowhere to hide at all and cover was useless against arrows falling from above. Within only 15 minutes, 1 whole squad was wiped out. Only 27 died from being shot at their vitals while the others were out of commission. That was when I sent another squad equipped with shields to save the rest and 30 more got hurt as a result. It was fortunate that we were equipped with metal armor. Otherwise, the casualties would have been worse…"

Ovidis continued to describe the situation of the battle yesterday. "After we retreated to the inner wall, the Kenmays Family's forces took the opportunity to occupy the outer one and were flabbergasted by the metal gates beyond it and could do naught but slash at it with their swords. From the turrets, we used the ballistas to retaliate. Given the density of enemies at the outer wall, one ballista bolt easily killed up to three enemies and within moments, they crumbled and made their retreat.

"But, that Viscount Kenmays acted both stupidly and cruelly at the same time. He actually beheaded a few of the soldiers who retreated and forced the rest to mount a second attack. That time, they brought their siege ladders to the outer wall and were prepared to use them to climb up to the second one. However, I brought tens of other soldiers to guard it and killed every enemy that managed to make their way up while mowing down their numbers with our ballistas at the same time. Even though the second attack lasted longer than the first, they retreated in the end nonetheless. There were around 260 corpses at the outer wall. Including the injured soldiers who managed to retreat, I estimate their casualties to be around 4 to 5 hundred people.

"Despite that, the viscount was still intent on having them continue the assault yesterday, causing some of his own men to grow desperate and draw their swords towards their own allies. The situation only managed to settle down after they argued for a long while before the viscount yielded and ordered his men to set up camp. I have asked Old Man Balk to bring the laborers to collect the corpses of their dead soldiers. Originally, I was going to bury it somewhere, but the messenger that came later that night requested for us to return their bodies. So I had some men strip them clean before I gave the bodies back to save us the trouble of burying them…"

Lorist was completely speechless. As expected of the former bandit Ovidis. Stripping corpses of all their belongings was already second nature to him.

"How did the defense unit fare during the two attacks?" Lorist asked.

Ovidis smiled and said, "They were fine for the most part. During the first attack. we were all within the turrets so they couldn't reach us. On the second attack the defense unit soldiers I brought with me had the protection of the wall and were wearing metal armor while we attacked enemies who were climbing upwards towards us. As the enemy soldiers had to watch out for ballista fire, they didn't pose much of a threat for us. The two longbowmen squads only fired back at us after their own men retreated from their line of fire, but we were already prepared for that. Everyone of us brought our own shields before we set out and laid them on the walls to block the incoming arrows; apart from an idiot who got shot by exposing his leg, most of us were unhurt."

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Old Man Balk had led his laborers up to the walls. The wooden sheds he had wanted to build were rather simple. First, a wooden pillar had to be built every three meters on the wall with a rectangular support structure installed on top of it. Following that, a wooden board was laid in a downward-slanting angle. Finally, the laborers had to use safety ropes to ensure that they don't fall when they apply the thick layer of green clay onto every one of the wooden boards.

Lorist went to take a look at the sheds from one of the turrets and noticed that they did not obscure the aim of the ballistas at all. After that, he went to the roof of the turret, which was at the higher part of the wall and noticed that the were laborers building sheds which were more slanted on the higher inner wall than the ones below. Balk said, "The upper sheds have to be able to withstand snowfall during winter, so we have to make them slant more steeply to allow the piled up snow to slide off more easily. While the lower sheds would be easy to clean, the ones up here is much harder to reach, hence the steeper slant."

Lorist nodded and headed for the direction of the father-son arbalists.

A few arrows were stuck on the ballista the two were working on. They were most probably fired by the Kenmays Family's longbowmen squads during the second assault when their comrades retreated.

"What's wrong with this ballista?" Lorist asked.

"Oh, milord. This unit is almost completely ruined. Look, these arrows were manufactured during the time of the former empire and they are used to specifically wreck defense machinery like these. The arrowheads are all squared like a little shovel

and are much heavier than normal ones. When these arrows are fired in an arc, their heavier weight allows them to gain more momentum as they land. Look at this ballista: after being hit by only four of these arrows, cracks can already be seen all over it. While it may still be able to fire a few more bolts, every shot represents a risk of it exploding apart splintering apart in small fragments that would harm the operators…" replied Grandmaster Fellin.

"Oh…" Lorist said as he sighed. All 14 ballistas on the outer wall had been ruined without even having the chance to fire a single bolt. Even though they were merely simplified versions, it was still a rather substantial loss.

The 1000 or so laborers worked at fast speeds to construct the sheds and managed to finish up by the time the morning sun was at its brightest. The reason for the quick completion was that the outer wall was only around 80 meters long and the materials that only had to be assembled had already been gathered at the camp outside the walls.

The forces of the Kenmays Family also noticed the situation and sent out their longbowmen squads hurriedly. When they were around 300 meters away from the walls, the longbowmen shot their arrows up high which curved and fell towards the walls from above. The first and second volleys of arrows all landed very densely on the wooden sheds. On the third volley, they started to employ fire arrows. However, given the thick layer of green clay on the wooden sheds, the fire on the arrows were extinguished the moment they penetrated the clay.

Not long after, a person wearing extremely intricate armor brought more than 10 of his attendants to approach the castle walls. After taking a good look, he went back and said something to the longbowmen squads before he returned to the camp without being able to do much.

Lorist thought, *that must be Viscount Kenmays himself.*

Given that their shots weren't effective, the two longbowmen squads returned with Viscount Kenmays to their camp. Old Man Balk instructed the laborers to also apply a layer of green clay onto the wooden pillars and supports that held the sheds up before asking them to collect the arrows that were stuck onto the sheds and re-applying green clay to cover up the holes the arrows made.

That whole day, Viscount Kenmays didn't order any attack at all while their camp

seemed to be rather busy and chaotic.

During the evening, Paulobins and Shadekampf arrived at Firmrock Castle with a company of family soldiers. Lorist finally relaxed and believed that the castle would definitely be strong enough to resist the enemies now.

That night, the Kenmays Family showed no signs of attacking either.

Noon on the next day, three groups of soldiers numbering hundreds of troops arrived at the front of Firmrock Castle and set up camp near the Kenmays Family's army camp. Balk recognize one of the insignias which was used by one of the groups and said that it belonged to an old landed noble family of the Northlands, Count Spenseid. Before the Second Prince entitled the new landed noble families in the Northlands, the Spenseid Family could be considered as the nearest neighbors of the Nortons.

Butler Boris recognized the other two insignias on the flags of the other two groups. Those families were just like the Kenmays Family which were given a dominion at the Northlands by the Second Prince. One of the insignias that depicted a pegasus was rumored to belong to a traveling knight who had sided with the Second Prince during the power struggle within the empire. He was said to have performed really well during his days of the conflict when he led his knight brigade and had even saved the Second Prince's life once. After the internal struggle ended, he presented the riches he had earned to the Second Prince and got enfeoffed a barony by the him.

The other insignia depicted a golden three-petaled flower. Butler Boris laughed out as he saw it as the head of that family used to be an honorary noble whose beautiful wife ended up having an affair with the Second Prince. To 'repay' him for his 'contribution', the Second Prince gave him a piece of land in the Northlands but requested for his wife to remain at the Royal Capital.

Everyone laughed out loud that instant. According to Boris, that story was quite well-known in the capital and many even thought that trading a wife for a hereditary noble title and dominion was quite a good deal. That was when a sudden surge of nobles brought their female siblings, daughters and wives to meet the Second Prince, causing the atmosphere of the royal palace to be a total mess.

During noon on the next day, another four families brought hundreds of soldiers to the battlefield. Among them, three were hereditary nobles of the Northlands with the other remaining one being a new landed noble.

Lorist was quite troubled as he thought, *does the Kenmays Family intend to form an alliance to go against my family? Given that the soldiers the 7 families brought are less than 2000 people, what good would that do? Don't tell me that they intend to use the nobles' troops as fodder to take the brunt of our retaliation?*

While Lorist was still brainstorming about the situation, he saw another large convoy with many carriages and roughly 2000 people. However, he wasn't able to clearly see their flag.

What was surprising was that the convoy did not set up camp near the Kenmayses and instead chose another spot further away. The three camps looked like vertices of a triangle on the map.

Even though Lorist found the presence of the third group of people to be odd, Jim instead said happily, "Alright! Now we can finally have some fun!"

"What do you mean, Jim?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, those people are the Warzone Merchants. They are a neutral force that doesn't participate in conflicts and only appear near battlefields to sell products like food, provisions and equipment. Naturally, the price will be higher than the usual market rate. They also purchase loot from the winner's side as well. The camp they set up also provide numerous services in the form of food establishments, brothels as well as casinos. No matter which side one belongs to, as long as one abides by their rules, one can go enjoy their offerings without worry. Also, look at that Bloodmoon flag. It belongs to one of the three most famous mercenaries in the Iblia Kingdom, the Bloodmoon Mercenary Crew and they are on par with the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew. Then again, now that the Feathersoars are no more, there are only two famous mercenary crews left in the kingdom.

"Milord, you might have noticed that the Bloodmoon flag is being flown the highest. That indicates that the safety and security of the Warzone Merchants camp is being managed by the Bloodmoon Mercenary Crew and any side that attacks the camp will incur their wrath and retribution. The Bloodmoon Mercenary Crew also conducts a lot of business there and I've heard that they own a huge share of the Warzone Merchants organization. Four other flags of other mercenary crews can be seen beneath the Bloodmoon flag and those represent mercenary crews that can be hired by either side to fight in battles. Let me see, there's the Razorpike Mercenary Crew, the Nightbat Mercenary Crew, the Cromwell Mercenary Crew and the Pentasword

Mercenary Crew. Ah, many of my acquaintances are there," said Jim excitedly.

"Are those mercenary crews powerful?" Lorist asked.

"They're about the same as us, just with more numbers among their ranks. The four crews combined have around 700 people. If Hausky and I had more than 100 people under us, we could've formed a crew ourselves as well. It's too bad that Hausky only wants to recruit trustworthy and dependable comrades, so we could only form a mercenary squad with 60 plus people," Jim replied.

Lorist gave it some thought and asked, "Do you think that Viscount Kenmays will hire them to attack our castle?"

Jim shook his head and said, "Even if he wanted to, the crews would definitely not agree to it. Attacking this castle is akin to committing suicide and not one of the leaders of the crews are idiotic enough to let their men sacrifice themselves for naught. The most he can do is to employ the crews to manage their supply lines or monitor our movements."

"Alright then, you should go there and see if you can get any information on what the Kenmays Family was planning during the past few days when they didn't attack us. I believe that some of their men will be there to relax as well, so I'm sure you can get them to spill their beans by treating them to a few glasses of alcohol," instructed Lorist.

"Yes, milord."

Chapter 125
Battles of Nobles

Jim returned the next day during the morning and he couldn't even walk straight properly. Looking drunk and woozy while his face was still unwashed, lip marks could be seen all over his forehead, cheeks as well as throat, causing heads to turn and laughter to sound wherever he passed by. Not the least bit bothered by it, he rushed into Lorist's room excitedly without even bothering to knock and said loudly, "Milord, milord… I've heard the true reason…"

Patt looked at Jim and struggled to stifle his laughter. Lorist laughed as well and asked, "Did you just climb out from under a pile of women?"

Stunned, Jim said, "Milord, how did you know? Were you there yesterday as well?"

Lorist looked around only to notice that there wasn't a silver mirror in the room, so he took out his dagger and let Jim see his own reflection on the blade. "Look at your face…"

Jim hurriedly wiped his face with his hands and said, "Apologies, I was in too much of a hurry and forgot to wash my face…"

"Tell me, what did you hear?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, the reason the Kenmays Family no longer continued their attacks was because their soldiers refused to listen to the orders of the viscount and almost defected. Yesterday night when I was treating some of my mercenary acquaintances to some drinks, I happened to run into the people Viscount Kenmays sent to negotiate with the mercenary crews. According to them, the viscount wanted to hire the crews for a huge sum to attack our castle. However, the four cunning mercenary crew leaders, only said that they would consider it and didn't agree immediately.

"At that time, a huge group of Kenmays Family soldiers came to drink and upon their noticing of the men sent by the viscount to negotiate with the mercenaries, they started to curse out loud and proclaimed that the viscount should attack the castle himself and not send them to commit suicide. They also mentioned that had the

viscount not made all the decisions himself, their 200 plus comrades wouldn't have died and the other 200 plus wouldn't be injured either. The soldiers spouted many other horrible stuff including how they originally thought that they would be able to enjoy life after joining the Kenmays Family's forces only to be sent to their deaths at the Northlands.

"After listening to what the soldiers said, the four mercenary crew leaders instantly refused the offer of the viscount and treated the soldiers to some alcohol. After that, the soldiers recounted that the viscount had wanted to attack the walls the day before yesterday and even wanted to kill some of the soldiers who had retreated, causing many of them to straight up choose to quit and prepare to go against the viscount himself if they had to rather than being sent to their deaths at the practically impregnable wall. In the end, the viscount had no choice but to have them set up camp and rest before he paid the soldiers some bonus salary to calm them down.

"I also heard that the 7 dominion lords were invited over by Viscount Kenmays to help out with conquering Firmrock Castle, but they are still having their negotiations. One of the soldiers who was standing guard outside the tent of the viscount said that the 7 nobles wanted the viscount to be the first to send his forces to attack the walls before their own forces tag along from behind. However, the viscount's own soldiers didn't want to follow that order, and that was what prompted him to attempt to hire the mercenary crews. Consequently the viscount's own soldiers warned the mercenaries so that they would not fall into that trap," said Jim as he finally finished his long report.

"Oh, if I knew that, we wouldn't have rushed back all this way and should've taken care of Wildnorth Town first…" said Patt in frustration.

Lorist said, "When I received the report, I also didn't know that it would come to this. At that time, the situation seemed pretty urgent. Half of the 3 defense unit squads had been wiped out in one go. How else would I gauge the situation?"

At that moment, loud sounds of a blaring horn could be heard coming from outside the walls.

"It seems that there is a challenger? Let's go and see…" Lorist led the rest out to the outer wall.

In front of the walls of the castle were three riders with one in the middle being a knight who wore a black bullhorn helmet and a black chain mail. On his chest was a

silver insignia of a pegasus which was spreading its wings in flight. The knight was mounted on a chestnut green Northlander Horse and his hand held a riding lance.

To the left of the knight was an attendant with a large build who was equipped in greyish-white leather armor and held a swallow-tailed flag depicting the same pegasus insignia of the knight in one hand and a blow horn in the other. It seemed that the tune of challenge had been blown by that man.

To the right of the knight was a middle-aged man dressed in dark blue robes. He was currently loudly praising the knight and telling everyone present of his previous exploits and achievements.

"My master, Knight Lamboway, has obtained victory for three consecutive Weiss Cup tournaments and has been given the moniker of the Lion Cub Knight by Duke Pupadra himself. Master has also attended the Minasevic Battle and more than ten famous knights have fallen to defeat before the mighty hooves of my master's mount… Today, he has come to this impressive, gigantic castle wall to challenge the famous family of the Roaring Raging Bear, the Norton Family, to a duel… Knights of the Norton Family, do you dare to accept my master's challenge? My master Knight Lamboway will let you all know what a true chivalrous hero should look like and he will dedicate his victory and glory to the utmost fair Lady Stephanie, incarnation of all that is perfect and flawless…"

When the middle-aged man finished up, the leather armor equipped attendant once again blew the tune of challenge with his horn.

"Milord, look…" said Patt as he pointed towards the distance.

Lorist raised his head to take a look and saw that many people had emerged from the camps of the 7 noble families and the Kenmays Family. However, they did not seem to be marching into battle; instead, they were coming out to witness the duel. Some servants even quickly set up a number of bright-colored cloth shades and proceeded to bring the lavishly-dressed noble ladies to their seats.

"Mi-milord… What are they doing?" asked Jim, confused.

"Attacking. They are making a knight's challenge to our family," Lorist said.

The middle-aged man dressed in robes was once again repeating the things he had said before loudly.

Many mercenaries and women also exited the Warzone Merchants campsite to watch the commotion. When the people who gathered around increased in number, the middle-aged attendant once again repeated the things he had said with a higher volume.

"Why is that man repeating what he said? Wasn't he clear enough the first time?" Jim asked.

"The horn has to be blown followed by the introduction and the whole process must repeat thrice. If we don't accept the challenge, that knight can proudly proclaim to others that his reputation had made the Norton Family knights cower in fear and rather shiver behind our walls than face his overwhelming courage," Lorist said.

"Then let me see if he dares to be so arrogant after I put a bolt into him…" said Jim as he was just about to head to the ballista nearby.

"Are you crazy? Do you want to make us the laughing stock of everyone out there? If you really fire that bolt, all the reputation the Norton Family has built up for the past 200 plus years will have been for naught. We will be ridiculed as cowards and forever be targets of the humiliation of others," said Patt as he held Jim tight.

"Jim, this is a battle between nobles and this has been the traditional way it has been conducted since long ago. Every knight will be taught this first and foremost during the earliest days of their training. To a knight, this method of battle is sacred and glorious. If you interrupt this battle, then you would have become public enemy number one of all the knights in Grindia," explained Lorist.

"Ovidis, do you want to accept the challenge?" Lorist asked as he turned towards the silent bearded man.

"Ah, milord… But I'm just a commoner…" Ovidis replied as he lowered his head.

"Apologies, I should've given this to you long ago. I just kept forgetting," Lorist said as he held out a badge depicting an insignia of a raging bear which Patt had just tossed over.

Technically speaking, Ovidis could still be considered to be Lorist's prisoner and 'property' and he didn't have any personal freedom. The captives also included the former bandits who were currently serving within the guard squad.

"Ever since you started following me, you have won my trust with your efforts and sincerity. You have also performed rather well, recently in particular. Ovidis, are you willing to become my knight and fight under the banner of the Raging Bear?" asked Lorist solemnly.

With tears of gratitude filling his eyes, Ovidis kneeled on one knee in front of Lorist and held his chest with his right arm. "I, Zelan Ovidis, am willing to pledge my loyalty to my lord. Let the God of War witness me oath in the name of my life. I will forever walk under the banner of the Norton Family and fight at the beckoning of the Roaring Raging Bear until the moment I breathe my last breath…"

Lorist took out his sword and tapped it twice on Ovidis's shoulder. "Rise, my knight."

He then pinned the badge of the raging bear to an indentation on Ovidis's breastplate. Patt hugged Ovidis dearly and said, "I welcome your participation, brother."

After the knighting ceremony, Ovidis rushed down from the walls after saluting Lorist. Lorist shouted, "Let Shadekampf accompany you! He knows about the necessary proceedings!"

By the time the horn blew for the third time, the drawbridge of Firmrock Castle was lowered and the gates were opened. Ovidis brought Shadekampf and another guard who held the battle standard of the Norton Family out from the castle. At that moment, the crowd broke into a thunderous cheer and anticipated the upcoming battle greatly.

Old Man Balk, Butler Boris and Sueprvisor Hansk all went up the walls and jointly looked at Shadekampf as he negotiated the terms with the man dressed in robes. The two of them then explained the terms to Lamboway and Ovidis respectively and an agreement was formed quickly. Shadekampf and the guard who held the battle standard retreated backwards as the two attendants of Knight Lamboway did the same.

"Milord, what were they doing just now?" Even though Jim didn't make a noise when the knighting ceremony was carried out, his envy and admiration showed on his face nonetheless. Ever since Lorist agreed to let him follow him to Firmrock Castle a few days ago, he understood that as long as he performed well and gain enough achievements, he would be knighted in the same fashion as Ovidis had.

"They were discussing on how the challenge would be carried out whether it be on

horseback or on foot as well as the kind of weapons they would be allowed to use. Since they are the ones who requested the challenge, we can request for battles that are in our advantage. For example, if Josk were the one accepting the challenge, he can request for an archery competition. That's why the challenger must ensure that they understand their own capabilities well in case their opponent requests a mode of competition that they are not familiar with and lose as a result.

"For some truly great knights, the types of challenge wouldn't matter as they are confident enough in their own abilities. However, the guy Ovidis is going to face off against is obviously overestimating himself. If Ovidis requests for an unmounted battle, he will definitely be struck dumb," Lorist said.

Going against everyone's expectations, Ovidis didn't pick to battle on foot. Instead, he had chosen to duel on horseback; perhaps it was due to his excitement of having just been made a knight of the Norton Family. The two contestants both retreated backwards until they were 30 meters apart. After Knight Lamboway lowered his helmet visor and Ovidis readied his riding lance, the both of them raised their left hands to indicate that they have completed their preparations and were waiting for Shadekampf to drop his handkerchief on the ground to signal the start of the battle, after which the both of them would begin charging towards each other at full speed.

However, a small slip up happened as the moment Shadekampf tossed his handkerchief out, it had been blown up by a fleeting gust just as it was about to land. Everyone watched the handkerchief as it twirled and danced in the air…

Lorist struggled so hard to stifle his laughter that his stomach was hurting. Jim didn't care about his surroundings at all and banged his head against the wall as he laughed out loud. Patt and the rest were also laughing, but they weren't acting as crazily as Jim was. What was originally a sacred and glorious battle had turned into a joke because of a handkerchief.

After a while, the audience once again focused their attention on the handkerchief as it gently landed onto the ground…

"Kill!" roared Ovidis as he clasped both his legs and prompted the horse to charge forward. He would not allow his enemy to win against him on the first day he was knighted.

Lamboway's lance glowed bright silver as he rode; he was a Two Star Silver ranked

knight just like Ovidis.

When the two blade glows clashed against each other, a thunderous ear-piercing sound rang out before the two mounts circled around continuously while the knights ferociously struck out at one another.

That jousting match was a little different from the ones Lorist remembered seeing in his previous life where the two knights rushed towards each other wielding lances made from applewood with the intent on ending the match in one strike. In a world with Battle Force, a jousting match between two knights was more similar to the one-on-one battles between generals Lorist had read about in the 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms' which were far more exciting as well as heated and usually garnered more cheers from the surrounding audience.

In terms of technique, Knight Lamboway was far more practiced than Ovidis and his years of arduous training showed during the battle. However, Ovidis had more real world fighting experience on the battlefield and he attacked in a more savage way. Sometimes, he would even be willing to take Lamboway's strikes just so he could land a square hit onto him. That self-harming way of fighting quickly put Lamboway at a disadvantage as he had to withdraw his hands and feet as he parried Ovidis's strikes. Lamboway was eventually forced into a defensive position.

Ovidis shouted loudly all of a sudden and suddenly raised his lance up and swung it down like a stick towards the helmet of Knight Lamboway multiple times in quick succession. Unable to parry the flurry of strikes, Knight Lamboway fell from his horse. When he raised his head, Ovidis's blade glow had already been held by his throat.

Knight Lamboway shrugged and waved his hands helplessly as he sat on the ground before Ovidis withdrew his weapon. Subsequently, Lamboway's attendant placed the flag on the back of his horse as he blew a depressing tune with his horn to indicate the loss of his liege and their eventual departure from the battlefield.

Shadekampf quickly talked in a low voice to the loud-mouthed attendant before he saluted and left. Knight Lamboway on the other hand had stood up from the ground and saluted towards the mounted Ovidis, who in turn knocked his fist onto his left breastplate. That was a knight's salute that indicated the acknowledgement and admiration of the courage displayed by one's opponent.

"Milord, is that it? Why didn't Ovidis kill his opponent?" Jim asked.

"Normally, battles between nobles like that have no casualties unless any accidents happen. In most cases, the winning side would stay their hand and not carelessly harm their opponent who was also a knight like them. In exchange, however, the losing side would have to offer up a ransom that was equal to his worth and status. The ransom given will be the akin to the self-valuation of the status of the knight himself. If the losing knight cannot afford to pay the ransom, he has to offer up his armor, weapons and mount. The ransom was agreed upon when Shadekampf talked to that attendant just now. If there are no issues, the knight's attendant will come again later to pay it," explained Lorist.

Jim shook his head and said, "Milord, why does it seem to me that battles between nobles seem like the pretend war games played by children?"

Lorist responded with an unexpectedly philosophical answer. "That's because life itself is also pretty similar to a game…"

Chapter 126
Knight Carnival

It was currently the 5th day since Lorist returned to Firmrock Castle after receiving the news of the initial setbacks suffered by the forces there.

The horns outside the city once again sounded: another knight had come for a challenge.

Yesterday afternoon, three challenges were carried out with Ovidis winning two of the matches and gaining a total of more than 30 gold Fordes from the ransom money. However, he was unable to continue after the second match as he had sustained a light injury to his arm. The one who replaced him was Patt who had picked to fight on foot and used his shield-bearer skills to his advantage to wear down his Two Star Silver ranked opponent who gave up in frustration after one hour of not being able to defeat Patt.

During dawn just now, when Lorist was patrolling the walls, he noticed that there were tents set up by the other noble families near the empty space in front of the castle walls and felt that his side would definitely receive a few more challenges from them. As expected, at 9 in the morning, a knight showed up and blew the tune of challenge.

Patt once again headed out and fought on horseback. However, given Patt's acquired dynamic vision, he was able to strike a One Star Silver knight which was of the same rank as him off his horse within a little more than ten minutes.

Normally, a knight would be allowed rest for an hour before accepting another challenge to ensure fairness. However, when Patt was on his way back to the castle, a wandering knight emerged from the campsite of the Warzone Merchants and issued a challenge to the knights belonging to the side of the various noble families. That was when many other lordless, wandering knights showed up all of a sudden to compete with each other in front of the castle walls, effectively turning the battlefield into a carnival for knights, causing the knights of the Norton Family to be pushed aside and forgotten.

As the wandering knights, the lordless freelance knights and the knights of the noble

families faced off against each other, the whole situation became confusing rather quickly. During the afternoon, a few other noble families arrived at the place. They were not requested to come over by Viscount Kenmays to help him defeat the Nortons; the real reason they came was because they heard rumors of a knight challenge carnival being held nearby. The family knights of the newly-arrived nobles didn't even bother to set up camp and joined the fray of challenges instantly.

"Ugh… We've been forgotten," said Ovidis as he sighed and looked at the chaotic scene before the castle walls with his left arm all bandaged up.

Currently, three pairs of knights were fighting each other in front of the walls.

"Milord, I really don't understand why so many wandering knights and freelance knights came over to participate in matches over here. Usually, they would only join fighting tournaments organized by other nobles, right? This scenario, however, unfolded on the battlefield. The knights have effectively occupied the place for themselves," said Butler Boris a look of fascination on his face.

"This…" Lorist paused in thought before he continued, "As the Northlands are relatively poor compared to other territories, dominion lords here usually wouldn't organize tournaments like that because that would cost quite a bit of money. Given the chaotic situation of the Northlands for the past two years as well as the countless conflicts that broke out here, many of the lords have lost their riches or their lands, so many knights no longer continued to serve them as they had lost their means of securing a stable life.

"You should know that knight challenges like these are a lucrative source of income. If they win, the ransom they would gain was almost equal to the salary a family knight would receive for three years combined. That was why most of them scrambled right over the moment they heard that a challenge bonanza was being held here and couldn't care less about whether this was a battlefield or not since the challenges would be conducted according to very stringent rules. If they perform well during the competitions, they might also be noticed by the nobles present and gain employment. Why would they miss out on a chance like that?"

"Erm, during noon just now, Jim came and told me that there were 4 knights who had lost all their belongings and had no choice but to join his mercenary squad," Patt interjected.

"That's right, where has Jim gone?" Lorist just remembered that he hadn't seen Jim even once ever since the morning.

"Look, he's over there at the Warzone Merchants campsite and running a gambling pool for the competitions. It seems like he's earned quite a bit," Patt said.

"Sol, that bastard still can't change his old habits. While it wouldn't be a problem if they were betting on small stuff, betting on the honor of knights is a huge taboo. When he comes back, I need to find someone to teach him the proper etiquette and customs of knights," Lorist said.

"Milord, do you want to see if you want to recruit any of the wandering or freelance knights into our family?" said Old Man Balk, expressing his thoughts on the situation.

"Well, I can definitely consider that. But I still haven't seen any knight that managed to pique my interest ever since the morning and most of them seem rather plain and have only normal fighting skills. Look at the three pairs of knights who are fighting down there: none of them would be able to best Ovidis in a fight. Well, the freelance knight Waxima who fought earlier this morning still seemed okay… Patt, go with Shadekampf to visit him later tonight and see if he's willing to spend some time with us as a probationary knight," Lorist instructed.

"Yes, milord," replied Patt.

A freelance or wandering knight didn't have to accept or reject outright the recruitment of a noble family. Instead, the noble family was merely a party who was offering those knights an opportunity and choice to change their lives in the future. To both the noble family and the knight being recruited, that was a huge choice to make. Once a dominion lord gives an offer of recruitment to a knight, the knight can choose to follow the lord for a period of time ranging from one month to half a year to see if their goals and values aligned with each other before a proper decision is made. During that time, the probationary knight would receive the same treatment like the other knights serving the noble family. As a saying that Lorist had heard in his past life went, 'A ruler can pick his subordinates. However, the same is true for a talented individual in that they can pick the ones they pledge allegiance to'. Similarly, if the dominion lord is not satisfied with the knight, he can also ask him to leave the family.

Old Man Balk shook his head and said, "Milord, that Waxima might be hard for us to recruit. He is a freelance knight that is unlike wandering knights who have nothing

better to do than to travel the land. Waxima is quite famous in the Northlands and he also has a rather extensive family background: his father was a Gold ranked knight who had perished in the final battle between the empire and the Forde Trade Union. At that time, he was only 7 years old and he had inherited the manor and land of his late father. However, he was known to be 'Waxima the Slow' as many people believed that he was unfit for combat and slow in his wits. But Waxima was the tenacious sort and managed to awaken his Battle Force in the end at the age of 23 using the Battle Force manual his father left for him. Currently, he's 29 years old now and he has already reached the Three Star Silver rank and it is even rumored that he had once refused an offer by Duke Loggins before. I don't think that he would even consider the Norton Family…"

"No wonder I felt that he was far more stable than the other contestants of the duels. After hearing your explanation, I now know that he is a person who has very firm foundations that came as a result of hard work and preservation. Nevertheless, we should still try to recruit him. How would we know if he will refuse or not before we even ask?" Lorist said as he nodded.

"Hehe, I'm trying to imagine the look on Viscount Kenmays face right now. At first, he wanted to attack our castle. But it ended up turning into a knight carnival. His anger must be off the roof by now," said Patt as he suddenly laughed.

Lorist said, "Those nobles are not idiots either. If we had taken over the Redriver Valley Bastide of the Kenmayses, then the noble families the viscount invited might have gave it their best to drive us away. However, now that we've burned that place to the ground and returned to our own dominion, what do you think the other nobles would choose? They can't say that they are fighting to liberate the Kenmays Family dominion from us as we don't even have a single soul on their lands. Given that they have absolutely no chance of conquering our walls with only their family knights, a number of guards and farmer soldiers, they have chosen to only make knight challenges. With that, not only would they be able to stall the viscount, they also managed to avoid thoroughly offending us. What a perfect way to resolve the situation.

"However, I bet that even those nobles didn't expect that this would blow up to become a full-fledged carnival beyond their control. Look, another group of people have arrived. It must be another noble family that has come to join the party," Lorist said as he pointed in the direction of the newly-arrived group.

……

Viscount Kenmays was so enraged that he felt like he was going to explode. Currently, he was thrashing and smashing everything he could get his hands on within his tent.

Not only did he reject the invitations of other dominion lords to watch the knight challenges, he felt that the invitations were insults to his family. The main reason he invited the other noble families over was that he wanted them to help conquer the Norton Family and not organize a knight carnival. Though, the other nobles knew that the Kenmays Family did not have any family knights which meant that they could not issue any knight challenges either. *Is that their way of ridiculing my family for having a merchant background instead of a traditional noble background?*

Naturally, Viscount Kenmays was also a Two Star Silver ranked fighter and he could go into battle himself. However, he understood his own temperament and abilities as the reason he so painstakingly raised his Battle Force rank was not because he wanted to compete against others but rather to put on airs to seduce women into bed with him. While he could still command his troops on the battlefield, there was no way he would be willing to lead a charge.

What Viscount Kenmays didn't expect was that the 2000 or so soldiers the family had tried so hard to recruit almost rebelled against him after two failed attacks on the castle and were still unwilling to follow his orders while accusing him of not knowing how to properly lead an army. The viscount's efforts to invite the other 7 noble families were also for naught as they had turned the war into a 'battle between nobles', letting his enemy, the Norton Family, sit back and relax as they watched the proceedings from their castle. Other than that, the sudden influx of wandering and freelance knights had further fueled the viscount's anger. If he could, he would kill all the soldiers who refused to listen to his orders as well as the knights who had disrupted the battle.

"I see you're doing quite well as a dominion lord smashing things around alone in your tent," said a cold voice from outside the tent.

Viscount Kenmays seemed like he was struck by lightning as he hurriedly stood up straight and said, "Father… You're here."

"If I don't come right away, did you think I would just sit back and watch you ruin the future of our family?" Three people entered the tent with the person at the forefront being a well-built elderly man with a benevolent expression. However, his face was rather stiff with a savage aura leaking out from his eyes. He was the true family leader of the Kenmays Family, the chairman of the largest construction merchant guild in the

former empire, Viscount Kenmays's father.

The Kenmays Family leader went before his son and gave him two slaps on the face before he said anything else.

Even though the viscount was a Two Star Silver rank, he felt a chill down his spine when he faced his Iron rank father. He didn't dare to move and obediently took the slaps without resisting.

"Do you know why I'm hitting you?" asked the family leader.

"I don't…" replied the viscount.

Slap! Slap! Another two harsh strikes on the face caused Viscount Kenmays's lip to crack and blood to flow from his mouth.

"Let me ask you… Why did you force our soldiers to attack the Norton Family's castle?" the Kenmays Family leader asked in a loud voice.

"Di-didn't they burn down our bastide and take all our resources? They also conquered our construction site… I-I just wanted to take it all back for the family…" stammered the viscount in response.

"Is that so?" Slap! Slap! Six more slaps landed on the viscount's face.

"You still dare to talk back! Did you think that I wouldn't know about your personal little fund of 100000 gold Fordes that you lost to them? I'll tell you what: that money has already entered Duke Loggins's sights and he had already sent someone to the Norton Family to demand them to hand over the money and resources to him. In the end, they were chased out of the dominion and that arrogant Knight Tabik had also had both his hands crippled, not to mention all the other injuries he suffered that would take him at least one year to recover from." The Kenmays Family leader just revealed a shocking piece of news to his son.

The viscount instantly said happily, "Then… Then we should take this chance to conquer them and take back the gold before the duke gets it…"

"Idiocy! On what grounds do you think you'll be able to defeat them? They don't even put the duke in their eyes and even managed to cripple Tabik! How do you think you'll go about getting all that back?"

"But… But I've already reached their main castle during my previous attempt and even managed to besiege them for three months…" said the viscount, dissatisfied.

"Then do you know why the Nortons were so stubborn towards the duke this time? Do you know why we lost contact with the Feathersoar Mercenary Crew? Do you know why our bastide fell to them in the first place? I bet you don't. That's because the Second Young Master of the Norton Family has returned and brought a group of people with him within which includes a Gold ranked marksman! To top it off, Tabik was personally injured by the Second Young Master himself! *Now* do you still have the confidence to be able to fight your way to their main bastide?" said the Kenmays Family leader before he drew a deep breath and sat down on a chair near him.

"This… Is the news reliable?" the viscount asked suspiciously.

"Duke Loggins's butler told me all that personally. I even spent quite a sum to bribe the Silver ranked knights of the Northland Army who had been there as well and they told me that they had witnessed it all with their own eyes. By the time I was rushing back here, the duke was already preparing a large force to punish the Norton Family," said the Kenmays Family leader.

"Then that's great, we can attack the Nortons along with the duke," said the viscount.

"Imbecile!" roared the family leader loudly. "Do you have a pig's brain in that head of yours? Are you seriously that fixated on beating the Norton Family or are you just trying desperately to get your 100000 gold Fordes back? By the time the duke's army comes, our forces will officially be used as projectile fodder. Do you intend to end the last hope for our family? Right now, the first thing we need to do is to avoid the army of the duke and find other targets. We must abandon our original plans."

"But our losses are so huge and the Nortons took so much of our stuff…" said the viscount weakly.

"Then consider that a lesson you paid a huge sum to learn! If we run out of slaves, we can buy new ones with money. If we lose our resources, we can gather more in time. If our goals far exceed our current ability and we strive towards it desperately past the point of no return, that would spell our true downfall. Now that we've lost, we should accept it. We just picked the wrong people to mess with. The Norton Family is a family with 300 years of heritage after all. I thought at first that they have depreciated over the years, but who would've expected their Second Young Master to

turn the whole family around all of a sudden? This situation is not all that bad for us either. With the Norton Family occupying the duke's attention, I believe he would not be able to find out about our other movements. I am looking forward to them tearing themselves apart…" said the family leader.

"Then, what should our family's next course of action be?" the viscount asked.

The Kenmays Family leader took out a beastskin map of the Northlands and thumped his fist on one spot. "Over here. That is where we will attack next…"

Chapter 127
The Plot of the Kenmays Family Head

Viscount Kenmays stared at the spot his father's fist landed on while breaking a cold sweat.

"Fa-father… Are you crazy? That is Count Lopez's dominion and he is one of the most prized subjects of the king… Have you forgotten the king's words? He wants our family to work well with Count Lopez… We're supposed to distract Duke Loggins on the surface while the count works in the dark and sends the duke a critical strike with his elite troops, right? Even if we were to decide to attack him, what would we use against him? Our disobedient soldiers? Also, Count Lopez has quite a number of Silver ranked knights…"

"The king? Are you talking about that idiotic Second Prince? Right now, he already has his hands full with other stuff, so there's no way he would have time to care about the happenings in the Northlands. Before I departed towards here, I received a piece of news that the army of the Second Prince suffered huge losses at the Melein Duchy and has almost crumbled completely. Duke Melein led his army on a counterattack at the borders of the Iblia Kingdom and he is currently sweeping three districts within the royal capital with his forces. I think that the Second Prince will have to prostrate himself in front of his father-in-law, Duke Fisablen, to save his arse this time. Otherwise, he might even lose the royal capital…" said the Kenmays Family leader as he snickered.

"As for Count Lopez, do you think he is truly loyal to the Second Prince? Even though the Second Prince asked the two of our families to work together, has the count done his part? After he got his dominion from the Second Prince, he has been doing nothing but flattering him. The count only knows how to demand our family to help him out with something, but never once has he reciprocated the favor on the occasions when we requested for some additional forces from him and used the barbarians in his dominion as an excuse. Ironically, the barbarian threat he kept musing about actually dealt him a rather fatal injury and a few of his Silver ranked knights even perished in battle. Look at this," said the family head as he took out a letter.

"This is the letter requesting reinforcements sent by the count himself. With this, we can even bring all our troops in the open into his dominion and castle without the slightest resistance! When we arrive, the count will simply 'die on his sickbed' from the injuries he got. After that, we can swallow up his dominion and men and attack the surrounding nobles until we conquer the whole of the eastern part of the Northlands."

"But father, that area is quite close to the Magical Dragon Mountains… The barbarians are bound to be a threat to us… Didn't we give up on taking over the eastern Northlands so that the count can resist the barbarians for us?" asked the viscount.

"The current situation has changed completely from that time. After the return of their Second Young Master, the Norton Family's strength has increased by leaps and bounds and their land is no longer something we can aspire to take for ourselves. The plan to develop Morgan Hills will also have to be scrapped. While our losses are still minimal, let's head east and let the Nortons face off against Duke Loggins while we wipe out the rest of the nobles in the eastern Northlands and take their dominions instead."

"Father, even if we unite the eastern Northlands, the mountain barbarians will still remain a problem. The barbarians there are far more active than those of other places and they would be quite the obstacle for the family's plans for the eastern Northlands…" said the viscount, unconvinced by his father's reasoning.

"Hehe, did you forget the barbarian slaves I bought some time ago? Weren't you curious why I treated them like important people and gave them whatever they wanted? This is where they finally come into play. I can start relations with the mountain barbarians of the Magical Dragon Mountains and trade with them. I could even hire some of their troops for our own ends as well. I promised the barbarian slaves that as long as they can satisfy my requests, they will be able to continue to live their lives in luxury. With their aid, I believe the barbarians of the Magical Dragon Mountains will become a new source of wealth for our family," said the Kenmays Family head as he pointed on the map.

"Look closely at the map. If we continue our plan to force the Norton Family to submit and develop the Morgan Hills, then our route outside the Northlands will be within the grasps of Duke Loggins and he'll continue to suck out the blood and wealth of our family like a damned leech. However, if we take over and develop the eastern Northlands instead, we will be able to construct a new metal bridge across Metropoulos River to link the eastern Northlands to the outside world. As a result, our

family will no longer have to rely on that duke's Hendliff Suspension Bridge and hand a part of our profits to him. Based on these reasons, I believe that focusing our efforts on the eastern Northlands will be the most optimal route for our family to take…"

"But the forces we have is not enough to carry out your plan. The soldiers are still against following any of my orders…" said the viscount while he looked rather crestfallen.

"That's because you ordered them to march forward to their deaths!" said the Kenmays Family leader angrily. "I, on the other hand, am glad that they didn't follow your orders. Apart from women and your personal fund of 100000 gold Fordes, what else do you have in your head? Did you think that you would be able to conquer those extremely well-fortified walls with only 2000 soldiers? If that were the case, the Second Prince would have reigned supreme long ago. I already thought that we were rather lucky for our forces to have arrived at the Northlands before the Second Prince suffered his recent losses. Otherwise, they would've been ordered by the Second Prince to become fodder for the forces of the Melein Duchy! I didn't expect that the first thing I heard when I came over would be bad news… 500 people! A quarter of our forces have already been wiped out within one afternoon… I… I really want to pummel you to death…"

The family leader took some deep breaths to calm down and retained his calm. "From now on, these soldiers will no longer be under your command. Muribad…"

"Sir!" One of the men who entered the tent with the Kenmays Family head stepped forward and replied out loud. He was a big-built man with a military air about him and looked to be over his thirties.

"Muribad, I hereby appoint you as the Regiment Commander of the Kenmays Family forces. Take command of that unit from now on."

"Yes, Old Master. I will not let your expectations down."

The Kenmays Family head nodded and said to the viscount, "Muribad was originally the Regiment Commander of the Local Defense Army of the Romon Empire and is a Three Star Silver rank. However, his whole family had suffered as a result of offending the nobles of his nation. I brought him and his family over and he has agreed to serve the Kenmays Family as our knight."

"Sully, come over."

The other man stepped forward. He was a dark-skinned man who was at least one head taller than Viscount Kenmays at a height of 2.2 meters. His bulging muscles seemed to give of a metallic sheen and made him look exceedingly tough.

"He is called Suleimos and he used to be a gladiator of the Hanayabarta Kingdom. A Two Star Silver rank, he was forced to fight countless death battles for the entertainment of the people. I spent a huge sum and used some favors to purchase him and had someone else teach him the ways and practices of a knight. He is also willing to serve our family as a knight. Now, you will perform the knighting ceremony on the two of them," instructed the Kenmays Family leader.

After the ceremony, the family leader asked Viscount Kenmays why he was smashing everything within the tent with abandon when he entered the tent.

Viscount Kenmays proceeded to explain the issue of the knight carnival to his father.

The Kenmays Family leader shook his head and said, "You really need to use your head more. You could have participated in the carnival without necessarily having to fight yourself and used the chance to see if any wandering or freelance knights were willing to join our family. To the Northlanders, we are outsiders who are not familiar with the land. That's why we will be able to better integrate ourselves here with the help of the knights who are willing to serve us and assimilate into the ranks of the Northland nobility…"

"Father, I think that these wandering knights are nothing more than savage dogs with poor upbringing who will leap at the slightest chance to grab a piece of meat. They are not so different from mercenaries and don't have better fighting prowess than them either. I think we should not recruit them into the family." The viscount voiced his full objection to his father's suggestion.

"You're wrong. While one or two dogs won't amount to much, if we have a whole pack of them, even ferocious wolves will have to retreat and be on their guard. Our family can't only rely on our soldiers. Even a person will need two legs to walk stably. While these wandering knights are not excellent if you consider them individually, they are perfect candidates for a knight brigade. Afterwards, bring Suleimos with you to participate in the carnival and let him pick some candidates to join our family. Other than that, spread the word that the Kenmays Family is intent on forming a small knight

brigade and that we welcome wandering knights to join us."

"Do we accept everyone who applies?" the viscount asked.

"No, we will only recruit Silver ranked knights. When we begin our plan to unite the eastern Northlands, a Silver ranked knight brigade will make sure that the mountain barbarians think twice of offending us. Let any knight who comes to join us stay within the camp. I will bring Muribad and Suleimos with me to the dominion of Count Lopez tomorrow afternoon while you will mingle around here with the other nobles and focus on recruiting the wandering knights. If anyone asks, tell them that we have mobilized our forces to answer the count's plea for reinforcements," said the Kenmays Family head.

"Alright, father. I understand. You mean to say that we're not recruiting the wandering knights to become our family knights, but rather only to join our knight brigade, right?"

"Yes. You can also tell them that anyone who performs well will be promoted to a family knight one day," said the family leader as he nodded.

……

Lorist was currently watching the battles of the knights from the walls while Telesti accompanied him.

"Milord, I really don't like to witness violent acts like that…" complained Telesti. She had unwillingly accepted Lorist's invitation to watch the carnival battles moments ago. On the other hand, Vinny looked at the battles with an expression of excitement and fascination.

"My dear Telesti, you can't stay cooped up in your room all day only to analyze the construction models. That will affect your health you know. There are lots of benefits to taking a walk now and then in the sun. Don't tell me it's a waste of time. If you fall sick and can do nothing but rest in your bed, you would waste even more time as a result," Lorist said.

"Sigh…" Telesti looked at the battles with a furrowed brow. "Why do men love to fight and compete like this? Isn't it much better to sit down and chat while drinking tea?"

"That is a good idea. I have some fine tea leaves within my room. Should I invite my

beautiful Miss Telesti for a lengthy chat on life while we enjoy some drinks?" said Lorist with a brilliant smile on his face.

Telesti rolled her eyes and said, "It's just another one of your tricks again… I will not be tempted by it…"

Ah, it truly is wonderful being able to flirt with a beautiful woman… Just as Lorist was about to resume his advances, Patt rushed over hurriedly with a solemn look and said, "Milord, a messenger has arrived."

Sigh, I guess I have no choice. Urgent matters come first. Lorist could only bid Telesti goodbye and head to his room with Patt.

The messenger was a mercenary who was sweating profusely. Anyone who traveled 7 hours straight switching between 3 different mounts would no doubt look like that. Lorist recognized that mercenary as one of the guys who had dueled with him back at the construction site of the military base near Poplar Coast.

Upon seeing Lorist, the messenger revealed a startling piece of information which shocked him deeply. "Milord, a military unit flying the flag of Duke Loggins appeared outside Wildnorth Town this morning. The people of the town opened their gates to receive them and there is an estimated number of 3000 to 5000 soldiers within the unit that had set up their camps outside the town. Boss Hausky has already led some scouts to try to find the route the duke's men took after he ordered me to come to report the news to you…"

"What did you say?!" Lorist refused to believe what he had just heard. He was not unfamiliar with the terrain of his dominion. Given the presence of the Bladedge Mountains, the Blackmud Marsh, the Magical Dragon Mountains, the Black Forests as well as the Morgan Hills, there was no route through which an army could enter the Norton Family dominion without passing through Firmrock Castle. He really couldn't fathom how a unit that huge could have made its way undetected into his territory.

Thinking that Lorist had not heard him clearly enough the first time, the messenger repeated what he said once more.

"Patt, bring me the map of the family dominion."

Lorist turned to the mercenary and said, "Have you notified the people at Maplewoods Bastide?"

"I have when I was on the way here. I shouted the news to the guards of the walls without going inside and traveled here right away," replied the mercenary.

"Shadekampf, bring this comrade of ours to get some rest. Make sure he has a good meal before he sleeps. It's best if he takes a quick hot-water bath as well," said Lorist as he tossed a small money pouch to the mercenary.

Patt then placed the beastskin map on top of a table.

The two of them looked closely at the map and didn't spot a single route which could allow for thousands of men and horses to cross. However, Lorist did not discount the possibility of one such route existing.

"Milord, when I was a child, I heard that Wildnorth Town had a smuggling merchant convoy but I've never seen a trace of them all my life. I think the people of the town must have used that secret route. Otherwise, they would've had to pass through Maplewoods Bastide if they wanted to reach the outside world. Unless the soldiers of the duke somehow flown their way into our territory, they must've taken that secret route," said Patt angrily.

Lorist nodded and said, "We already know that Wildnorth Town has been preparing to rebel for some time now, but since when have they got in touch with Duke Loggins? Also, the messenger must have taken at least 7 hours to get from the Maplewoods Bastide to this place and we still don't know the status of the bastide. Is that army heading for Firmrock Castle right now? Patt, get Paulobins to immediately to lead some scouts for some reconnaissance and make sure to monitor the duke's army from afar. I will also have to ask someone to let the soldiers who are camped outside of the walls into the castle before I do anything else."

Chapter 128
Request for Peace

Lorist stood on top of the inner wall and looked at the group of people who gradually entered through the castle gates.

Butler Boris and Supervisor Hansk came to Lorist's side. Hansk asked, "Milord, why did you suddenly order the people within the camp to enter the castle and stop all the construction work outside?"

"A group of soldiers of Duke Loggins's has made its way into the inner part of our dominion. There is a huge possibility that the people of Wildnorth Town were the one who guided their entry," Lorist replied.

"What?! Is that true?!" Both the butler and the supervisor revealed faces of shock and surprise.

"That's right. Even I wouldn't dare to joke about this. Ovidis, when everyone enters the castle, recruit another group of soldiers from the ranks of the laborers and form a defense unit company," Lorist said.

"Yes, milord. I'll be on it right away," Ovidis said as he rushed away.

Hansk took out a beastskin account book from his sack and flipped it as he asked, "Milord, what are you going to arm the new soldiers with?"

"What's wrong?" Lorist asked.

"While we have a lot of leather armor within the storehouses, we only have around 10 chain mails remaining. During the past four months, Grandmaster Sid, his son and his other laborers who had been recruited because of their smithing experience had produced around 1200 sets of chain mails using the 'assembly line method' that you suggested. The two companies stationed here at Firmrock Castle and over at Maplewoods Bastide respectively have all been armed with chain mails. However, we're running out of iron ingots and only have a total of around 5000 kilograms left as an emergency resource…" reported Supervisor Hansk.

Understanding the supervisor's concern, Lorist said, "How about this? We'll arm the new soldier company with leather armor, pikes, wooden shields and shortswords. Will there be a problem that way?"

"No, milord. We have more than enough of those within our storehouses," replied Hansk.

"Also, Hansk, reward Grandmaster Sid with 10 gold Fordes on my behalf and don't forget to give his other smiths one gold Forde each. Let them take a short break in the meantime. I will need them to forage the area for mining resources after we defeat the soldiers of the duke," Lorist said.

"Understood, milord."

"Butler Boris, you will be in charge of the people I've asked Old Man Balk to bring inside the castle construction site, alright? When they finish moving, bring a group of laborers and Old Man Balk outside to sweep the surrounding area clean of any stone and wood construction material. After letting them rest for another two days, begin construction on the residential area inside the castle, understood?"

"Milord, please be assured that I will carry that out flawlessly," said Boris before he left.

"Shadekampf," Lorist called out.

"Milord, what are your instructions?"

"I want you to join the other nobles over there at the Kenmays Family's camp and tell them that after seeing the hectic battles from the walls, I would like to organize a proper knighthood contest and am ready to use some equipment and prize money as rewards for the victors. Tell the Kenmayses that if they are still intent on attacking us, wait until the contest is over since they won't be able to do anything given the current situation anyway," Lorist said.

"Ah, milord… You mean to do…"

"I want you to stall the Kenmayses and the other nobles so that they don't know about the presence of the duke's army within our territory to prevent them from launching a pincer attack from both inside and out. Currently, the enemies within our dominion is the priority and I'm prepared to gather all our forces to face them first."

"Milord, I understand. I will be going there shortly," Shadekampf replied.

"Patt, escort Shadekampf on his mission later. Also, send someone to bring Jim over here. I have something I need him to do," Lorist said.

……

Ever since he received the news from the mercenary messenger, Lorist moved his place of residence from the outer wall to the inner wall at Telesti's room. Telesti on the other hand moved down from the wall and picked two newly-built houses in the planned business sector with the larger one being the main headquarters for the construction operations and the smaller one which was situated at a quieter area as her residence.

Shadekampf and Patt entered the room only to see Lorist comparing large and small maps, seemingly in an effort to find the route that allowed the duke's regiment to make their way into the Norton Family dominion.

"Milord…"

"Oh, you're back," Lorist said as he tossed the map in his hand onto the table in futility. "It can't be possible… There isn't a road they could've used at all. While two or three people could've crossed the mountains without too much trouble, how did they bring thousands of them over? Oh, and Shadekampf, what was their reaction when you went there?"

Shadekampf thought for a while and replied, "Milord, when we arrived, Viscount Kenmays was holding a welcoming feast for the nobles who had just arrived. When I announced our plans right there and then, many nobles agreed to the proposition. However, the viscount made an unpleasant look and the 7 nobles which the viscount had personally invited over didn't make a single sound. After that, the viscount said he had to excuse himself for a while and by the time he returned, he announced that the Kenmays Family was willing to make up with the Norton Family and organize the knighthood contest jointly with us…"

"Make up? What does that mean? I burned his bastide down as well as his immigrant town and took all their resources and citizens. They should be hating us to the bone… But now they're willing to let go of all that for a knighthood contest? How is that possible? What is the Kenmays Family leader planning… Don't tell me that he's

planning on attacking our castle during the knighthood competition?" Lorist asked as he stood up and paced around in thought.

"Milord, I believe they are indeed sincere about their request. That's because I've met with Viscount Kenmays's father, the family leader of the Kenmays Family," Shadekampf said.

"Oh?" mused Lorist as he looked towards Shadekampf.

"Milord, after the viscount announced his decision, he invited us to the tent nearby to discuss the details of organizing the knighthood contest and quickly made a draft of the plans for the nobles to see. Suspecting that something was amiss, I went to the next tent only to see the Kenmays Family leader waiting for us within," Shadekampf said.

Lorist looked towards Patt and saw him nod, indicating that what Shadekampf just said was true.

"Then what did the family leader say?" Lorist asked.

"He looked really angry and said that the actions of the Kenmays Family against the Nortons were purely his arrogant son's fault. Originally, the Kenmays Family had a mercantile background and they had just become a noble family recently, so he said that they weren't too familiar with the traditions and customs of nobles yet. He mentioned that as someone who ascended into nobility after the Norton Family which had hundreds of years of history behind it, their family should have treated us with respect. But due to his son's aloof ambitions and short temper, they have mistakenly wronged the us and have learned their lesson ever since.

"The family leader also said that the Kenmays Family did not wish to make an enemy out of the Norton Family, citing that during the three-month-siege by the viscount's forces on the Maplewoods Bastide, they have suffered huge losses as well. He stated that as fellow neighbors, our two families should help each other out instead of becoming arch-enemies. He wishes that our families would put our past grievances behind us and look towards a better future of cooperation in the long term. He added that the Kenmays Family was willing to forfeit and concede all their territorial arguments with the Nortons so that there would be no more room for conflict.

"Milord, the Kenmays Family also revealed two important pieces of information,"

Shadekampf said.

"What are they?"

Shadekampf said, "First, they said that they would bring their forces to heed Count Lopez's call for reinforcements first thing tomorrow afternoon as the count's dominion had come under serious assault from the mountain barbarians. I think that's the main reason for their sudden proposal for peace."

Lorist nodded and thought, *that's right. There was no way in hell the Kenmays Family would be so gracious and let us go for nothing. The reason they made that action was because they would profit from it somehow. No merchant family would do anything unless the profits involved were high enough.* However, Lorist still did not understand the overall situation of the Northlands as he was almost blind to any happenings outside his own dominion.

Lorist asked suspiciously, "What is the second piece of information?"

Shadekampf said, "The Kenmays Family leader said that when he passed through the duke's territory to arrive at Firmrock Castle, he noticed that the Northland Army was being mobilized and heard that they were coming for you, milord, the new family leader of the Nortons who had chased away the ambassadors the duke sent to threaten us and even hurt their arrogant Gold ranked knight Tabik severely, causing the duke to enter a terrible fit of rage as a result. The Kenmays Family leader mentioned that since he was able to travel faster with few people, he was able to make it in time to warn us a few days in advance of the arrival of the duke's army so that we may make our preparations."

"Hmmm…" Lorist was currently in deep thought. *Why would the Kenmays Family leader bother to warn us? Originally, they were the ones that wanted to take over Firmrock Castle in the first place. I think that also indicates that they still don't know that they duke's army is already within our territory. Then again, he did mention that he was going to help Count Lopez out and bring his forces away… Is he trying to avoid the duke's army? And if so, why?*

If I were the Kenmays Family leader, the duke would be someone whose good side I have to get to no matter what. That means… that the Kenmays Family's forces would become enemy fodder for the duke's army when they arrive! Lorist's eyes gleamed as he came to the realization. *That's right. When the duke's army arrives, Viscount Kenmays would*

have to heed his orders, and if I take into account the difficulty the Kenmayses experienced to get authorization for their army to enter the Northlands… There's no reason why the duke wouldn't want the 2000 soldiers to become the vanguard of his attacks! Given the duke's personality, that much is a given…

The more Lorist pondered on that issue, the more he felt it was possible. The main reason the Kenmays Family wanted peace at a time like this was so that they could escape the worse fate that lay ahead as well as stand at the sidelines while the duke's army and the Nortons ripped each other apart. On the other hand, it would also save the remainder of their forces. That was why they chose to use helping the count out as an excuse to have their army leave the area so that their soldiers wouldn't get caught up in the crossfire. *Gosh, they're all old, cunning foxes… Despite his losses, he told us about the duke's arrival and retreated his forces to not cause us any worry so that we would be able to cause as much damage to the duke as possible, which would also become beneficial for him…*

"Milord, these are the rules of the knighthood contest which the Kenmays Family leader provided. He said that their family had organized quite a number of such competitions before and had lots of experience with them. As long as we are willing to supply the rewards, the Kenmays Family will be sponsoring all the costs involved to run the event. He wants the function to be called the 'Amity Cup' to commemorate the renewed good relations between the Kenmayses and Nortons. The family leader also mentioned that the longer the contest could be carried out, the better and that anyone who dares to interrupt the proceedings will become the public enemy of all knights. That's why, even if the duke's forces arrive, they would have to wait until the whole thing is over…" said Shadekampf as he passed a stack of beastskin documents to Lorist.

Lorist smiled. The Kenmays Family leader was doing his best to put Duke Loggins in as tough a position as he could and decided to organize the contest despite thinking that the duke's troops were on their way. How would the soldiers have any morale or motivation remaining to attack the castle after the contest? It was a shame that the Kenmays Family leader was unaware that the duke wouldn't be showing up at Firmrock Castle as they were already at Wildnorth Town.

Lorist took out a feather pen and dipped it into some ink and started writing as he said, "I agree to most of the stuff in the regulations, but I want to split up the category of the Silver ranked knight competitions into three according to the star rank so that there will be winners for the One Star Silver rank, Two Star Silver rank and the Three Star Silver rank respectively. Also, only competing in foot battles and mounted battles

is far too plain. Let's add another archery competition for each rank. Shadekampf, pay them a visit tomorrow morning and tell them that the Norton Family is willing to forget the grievances of the past and be at peace with the Kenmays Family and mention that we absolutely cannot let them bear the whole cost of organizing the contest. Since it's a collaboration, we will split and bear half of the organizing cost and sponsor the prize money for the knighthood competition while the Kenmayses only have to pay for half of the labor cost."

"Yes, milord."

Patt stepped up and said, "Milord, when Shadekampf was discussing the details of the contest, I loitered around the area and discovered two things."

"Oh?"

"First, the Kenmays Family already have to family knights. One of them looked to be someone who had been in the military with an air that's similar to Potterfang's. The other was extremely tall and huge with a sturdy look and emitted a heavy killing intent that would intimidate anyone at first sight. Other than that, the Kenmays Family is preparing to form a small knight brigade by recruiting the wandering knights. I found out about that because I saw 20 wandering knights within the camp and had a short chat with them," Patt reported.

"Oh, it seems that they have other stuff up their sleeves as well. I really wonder what they'll be up to next. Patt, find two guards tomorrow to spy on the forces of the Kenmays Family. Let's see what they intend to achieve by using 'aiding Count Lopez' as an excuse," Lorist said.

"Also, I will not show up during the knighthood contest and it will mainly be organized by you and Shadekampf. Make sure to pay attention to the knights who get the first few places in their categories and recruit them if you can. However, I want you to focus on the archery competition specifically. It's okay if the knights there are lacking in other respects. As long as they're good at archery, ask the participants whether they want to serve in our military force and tell them that there will be opportunities for promotion if they perform well."

Commonly speaking, knights seldom cared about the art of archery as they believed that true knights would face each other off in a bloody melee battle as attacking from afar was often considered an act of cowardice. However, Lorist understood that his

forces' ranged units suffered as he wasn't able to effectively train them. That was why he had no choice but to secretly place his hopes on the knighthood contest's archery competition to find him a few good archers. Also, the Kenmays Family might think that the additional competition segment was merely the Norton Family's attempt at showing off their Gold ranked marksman, so there really was nothing to lose.

"Yes, milord. we will do as you have instructed," said Shadekampf and Patt in unison.

Chapter 129
Knight Waxima

"Milord, I've brought Knight Waxima here," Patt said.

"Who?" Lorist asked, having not clearly heard him.

Shadekampf explained, "Milord, when we left the camp of the Kenmayses, Patt said he wanted to recruit Knight Waxima as a family knight as he had won three straight challenges in a row in the morning. That was why we headed to his tent to pay him a visit. But when we were there, the men sent by the Family of the Pegasus and the Kenmays Family were already there to make their invitations."

"Oh…" The more Lorist heard, the more interested he got. However, he had never heard of a 'pegasus' family. "Wait, what noble family bears the moniker of the Family of the Pegasus? Why haven't I heard of it before?"

"Milord, did you forget? Yesterday, the first knight who challenged our family, Lamboway, wore a silver pegasus crest did he not? He was a knight of the Family of the Pegasus. Milord, do you know about the Newmoon War and the Felim Family?"

"I know about those. Hundreds of years ago, an artifact was excavated from one of the ancient ruins. It was a Silvermoon-shaped stone that was said to be filled with magical power. That stone had caused Krissen IV to go to war for it against 7 other noble families and it was termed the Newmoon War or the Newmoon Chaos. In the end, Krissen IV won a hard-fought victory and eradicated the other 7 families. However, the magical stone had disappeared and was never seen by anyone else ever since. Having ruined half of his empire and gaining nothing, Krissen IV was often ridiculed for expending so much effort on something he did not get his hands on in the end. I recall that the Felim Family was one of the 7 families that rebelled, right?" Lorist asked as he recalled.

Shadekampf said, "Milord, your memory is indeed great. The insignia of the Felim Family does indeed depict a silver pegasus. Like how we are called the Family of the Roaring Raging Bear, they are colloquially known as the Family of the Pegasus. One of the wandering knights who paid the Second Prince a huge sum to be made into a noble

is Baron Felim Chalvode. According to the ambassador of the Felim Family that was sent to recruit Knight Waxima, the baron is one of the descendants from the Family of the Pegasus and he wishes to one day return his family to its previous glorious position. As long as Knight Waxima joins the Felim Family, they might actually stand a chance in the future…"

"Also, the ambassador of the Kenmays Family said that they were willing to offer Knight Waxima two times the yearly salary other families paid their knights as well as giving Waxima his own personal manor which will be complete with all the necessary infrastructure if he made it to the Gold rank," Patt added.

"Oh, then why did Knight Waxima come back with you guys? What kind of conditions did you make?" Lorist asked curiously.

"This…" Shadekampf said as he shook his head in a troubled manner.

Patt scratched his head and said, "To be honest, we don't know why he followed us here either. We didn't even make any conditions. Milord, when we went there, the other two ambassadors from the other families were already there. When we met Knight Waxima, we went straight to the point and asked if he was willing to come to our family. After we said that, the ambassadors of the Family of the Pegasus and the Kenmays Family tried to convince him otherwise and made better conditions of their own. Thinking that we didn't have a chance, we bid our farewells and left. Who knew that after hearing the offers of the two ambassadors, Knight Waxima merely shook his head and refused them before he brought his sword and mount and followed us back…"

"Then where is he now?"

"Milord, Knight Waxima is waiting right outside. I had wanted him to come inside with us, but he said that it would be impolite to enter milord's room without first being invited and that it was against the code of chivalry practiced by knights. That was why we had no choice but to allow him to wait outside…" Patt said.

"Sol, you should've said that first when you came in. It really is quite rude for me to have made him wait for so long…" Lorist complained as he hurriedly rushed outside.

……

Waxima was a tall and slender guy who acted with utmost politeness. His almost

ceremonial behavior instantly revealed his traditional knight family upbringing, given that he was a little uncomfortable with how friendly Lorist treated him and even hesitated to receive the cup of tea that Lorist poured him.

"Knight Waxima, please forgive my prying, but why did you refuse the invitations of the Family of the Pegasus and the Kenmays Family? Their conditions were not bad at all from what I've heard…" Lorist paid attention to the knight as he was quite interested in him. After witnessing Waxima fight with other knights with his practiced and stable fighting style that allowed him to aptly receive and parry any strike headed towards him, Lorist felt that the knight gave of a dependable and reliable aura, similar to that of Mt. Tai. For some reason. Lorist chuckled at somehow remembering the famous saying about a mountain from his previous life.

Knight Waxima continued to stay silent before he brought out a small golden badge bearing the insignia of the Raging Bear and put it on the table. "I have come because of this."

The badge of the Raging Bear? Lorist picked out the badge and flipped it around and saw the characters spelling out 'Abelyde' engraved upon its back.

"Big brother?" Lorist looked at Knight Waxima and thought, *how did the badge of my elder brother end up in his hands?*

"Seven years ago, Sir Abelyde was a One Star Gold ranked knight and he traveled the Northlands to challenge all the famous knights within with none of them being his match. When he was on his way back to his own dominion, he passed through my manor. At that time, I was trying the third time to awaken my Battle Force. If I had failed back then, I would have nowhere else to go and would have no choice to leave the manor that was left to me by my father. It was because I had Sir Abelyde's guidance that I was able to awaken my Battle Force successfully in the end. Before he left, when I asked if I would be able to meet him again, he left this badge behind and smiled as he said that I could go find him with this badge when I reach the Silver rank and he would make me his knight. But when i finally broke through, I received the news that he had perished on the battlefield…

"Not knowing what I should do, I decided to visit the Norton Family anyway when I reach the Two Star Silver rank even if Sir Abelyde was already no more. However, my mother passed away by coincidence at that time and my wife also birthed me my son, causing me to be unable to leave as I had planned. Just last year, I broke through to the

Three Star Silver rank and my father's liege's descendant, Viscount Beseth, went under the attack of two other new noble families, so I had no other choice but to help resist the attacks and we only managed to defeat those dominion lords earlier this year.

"I then spent three months to settle the issues within my manor like laying-off my servants before I returned it to the viscount and brought my wife and son along with my attendants over here. I only just arrived yesterday and planned to visit you this morning, but the other wandering knights in the area thought that I was planning to challenge them, so I had no choice but to defeat those two challengers. Then I thought that if I showed up at the castle walls, I might be mistaken to be challenging your family, so I returned once again to think things over. I didn't expect that just now during the evening, you would've sent your men to find me… So I followed them back here right away…" explained Waxima in a rather calm tone as if he was talking about his past like the most common things of everyday life.

Lorist, Shadekampf and Patt, however, were rather moved by his experiences…

"You've returned the manor your father left you back to the dominion lord?" Lorist asked in a surprised voice.

"That's right, milord," replied Knight Waxima calmly. "The lord my father pledged himself to is the grandfather of the current dominion lord. When I failed on my second attempt to awaken my Battle Force, the current Viscount Beseth even asked me to leave the manor and said that their family cannot afford to support a piece of useless crap like me. That's why I've decided not to follow the Beseth Family like my father did when I broke through to the Silver rank, considering that I also promised Sir Abelyde that I would become a knight of the Norton Family. This time, the reason I fought off the two noble families that attacked Viscount Beseth's dominion was to return the favors my family owes Viscount Beseth's grandfather. After returning the manor, we no longer owe each other anymore and I can leave without any lingering attachments."

"Knight Waxima, I'm really touched by the behavior that you have shown which is exemplary of a most respectable and glorious knight. Your firm belief on fulfilling promises is the best reciprocation the Norton Family can hope for. However, you should know that our family is currently in a rather dire situation. To be completely honest with you, a group of Duke Loggins's soldiers have already managed to invade our dominion. If you join us, you will have to face his men on the battlefield and

nobody can guarantee your safety. Your child is also still young, so I hope you can think it over by taking your family into consideration. Joining the Norton Family now is not the most optimal choice you can make," Lorist said as he made a bitter smile.

"Milord, the path of knights is supposed to be fraught with dangers. My only regret is that I couldn't come here earlier and I do not wish to have the same regrets for the remainder of my life. If I shirk out now, my son will probably be ashamed for having a father like me…" said Waxima as he stepped in front of Lorist and kneeled down on one knee. "Milord, if you are willing to take me as a knight of the Norton Family, then can you allow me to join your forces as a regular foot soldier so that we may resist the enemy together?"

"This is the most touching pledge I have ever heard. Rise, my knight," said Lorist as he tapped onto Knight Waxima's shoulder twice with his sword. "Patt…"

Patt brought out a Silver Raging Bear badge and gave it to Lorist before he hugged Waxima heartily and said, "I welcome your participation, comrade and brother of mine. Your arrival is the best honor the Norton Family could ever receive."

……

Waxima, who had just become the knight of the Norton Family, excitedly went to fetch his wife, son and attendants while accompanied by Shadekampf. As Lorist was playing around with his elder brother's badge, Patt entered and reported, "Milord, Jim is back."

"Oh, let him in quick."

"Jim, what did the four mercenary leaders say?" asked Lorist impatiently before Jim even managed to catch his breath.

Jim wiped the sweat off his face before he replied as he panted, "Milord, the price you gave them is more than enough and all of them are willing to accept your employment. However, they have a small request…"

"What is it?" Lorist asked.

"They want you to provide them with some weapons and equipment…"

Lorist's expression darkened as he said, "Do they want metal armor as well?"

"No, not metal armor…" clarified Jim hurriedly. "Milord, if they did, I would've scolded them furiously when I was there myself. What they've requested is to be allowed to masquerade as the forces of our family while they work on the mission you gave them. That way, if anything goes wrong, they will be treated as soldiers of the Norton Family and not mercenaries from their crews. Milord, you should understand that if they were captured as mercenaries by the duke's men, they would be beheaded right away and the duke would know which mercenary crew helped us out. If they pretend to be our men on the other hand, even though they might have to endure some torture, they have a better chance to retain their lives and their crews wouldn't offend the duke on the surface either…"

Lorist's expression calmed down and softened before he nodded and said, "Alright, I can give them a couple of leather armor and weapons that have our family's insignia engraved on them. However, they have to prepare their own mounts. Also, after they sign the agreement, let them lead their men into the castle in small groups to collect their equipment before they head outside the castle once again to set up camp there. Once we receive news from Paulobins, that will be when I will depart with them."

"Alright, milord. I will go back there to get them to sign the agreement and have them collect their equipment tomorrow night," said Jim as he hurriedly rushed back.

"Milord, can we really count on those mercenary crews?" Patt asked.

"Regardless of whether we can or not, having their men on our side is still better than nothing. In terms of individual battle prowess, the mercenaries should be better than the soldiers of the Northland Army. However, if an all-out battle breaks out, there is little doubt that their coordination will be worse when compared to properly-trained armies. Other than that, we don't have enough men on our side to resist the forces of the duke with the aid of Wildnorth Town head on. In terms of numbers, they beat us hands down and we have no choice but to resist them defensively. Then again, we can't coop ourselves out in a castle for the whole time and we have to retaliate once in a while so that our forces can push the enemy back slightly and last longer. When using the mercenaries, we have to let them do what they are best at: using hit-and-run tactics from the sidelines to wipe out the enemy's scouts, ambushing their rearguard, and intercepting their attacking troops so that they will be distracted and not be able to effectively besiege the castle," said Lorist as he explained the tactics he was going to employ using the mercenaries he hired.

"But the cost of hiring one crew is far too high at 100 gold Fordes. And you will also

have to pay them one imperial gold coin for every enemy they kill as well as provide them with leather armor, weapons and food supplies. Milord, I feel that it's not worth spending so much money on the mercenaries," said Patt, worried about the huge payment involved.

"If we don't at least spend that much, then the mercenaries will not fight with all they have. After collecting around 200000 gold Fordes' worth of wealth from the Kenmays Family, gold coins is not something we currently lack. If we can squash Duke Loggins's army with money, then that would've been money well spent," Lorist said.

Chapter 130
Troop Deployment

While using money to wipe out the duke's men sounded rather wasteful, to Lorist, he didn't have much of a choice due to the disparity between his own troops and that of the duke. Additionally, the enemy had the aid of the rebels from Wildnorth Town and it could be said that a disastrous storm was about to descend on the Norton Family.

What Lorist could do now was to muster all his forces to resist the duke's army. For instance, the reason he hired the mercenary crews was so that they could help him wipe out the scouts of the enemy and withhold part of their battle strength by way of ambushes and harassment attacks so that they wouldn't be able to effectively besiege the bastide of the Norton Family.

What Lorist was most worried about currently was whether the duke had already launched his attack against Maplewoods Bastide. Even though it was defended by a company's worth of family soldiers, they only numbered around 600 people and up to 200 of them were injured to some degree. Even if the family had ten times the amount of troops stationed there, it would still find it rather hard to resist the duke's force that numbered among the thousands. The only fact that Lorist could find relief in was that Josk was at the bastide. With a Gold ranked marksman like him there, Lorist was confident that the bastide wouldn't fall to enemy attack just yet.

As the sky gradually brightened during the dawn, Lorist awoke in a rather drowsy state as he had slept rather late the night before.

"Milord, Paulobins has sent someone back…" Ovidis's voice rang out from outside Lorist's room. He had been on night patrol duty since yesterday.

Lorist got out of bed and said, "Ovidis, get someone to bring me a basin full of water that I can use to wash my face with…"

The one who was sent back to make the report was one of the former bandits that had joined the guard squad. Having traveled for the whole night, he looked rather worn out as he said, "Milord, Squad Leader Paulobins ordered me to report to you that the enemy have yet to make their move and they stayed within their camp for one whole

day. Yesterday, we also eradicated a group of ten plus enemy troops who were felling trees and caught some of them alive as well. The captives told us that the duke mobilized around two regiments with up to 4000 soldiers to 'punish the Norton Family for their rebellion' with the Gold ranked knight Chevany taking the lead as their commander…"

"Did the prisoners say how they entered our dominion?" Lorist asked.

The guard nodded and said, "Sir Josk questioned them already and I was among the men he brought along with him. The captives said they were not too clear about it as the whole army had been guided by someone else and that they merely followed along. However, they mentioned seeing a white beach as they traveled by the coast and passing through a few caverns with the last one taking them one whole day to traverse. Also, they also said that they crossed a very long suspension bridge. After the journey that took them four days, the worn out soldiers were allowed to rest for two days after they set up their camp…"

"Was Knight Josk with you as well?"

"Yes, milord. When were sneaking around Wildnorth Town, we met with Sir Josk who led his men to spy on the enemy camp, so we simply joined up with him," replied the guard.

"Alright, you should go take some rest. You did good," said Lorist as he tapped on the guard's shoulder in a good mood.

Lorist exhaled and relaxed as he thought, *even though what we lack most right now is time, I didn't expect that the duke would allow his troops to rest for two days. This is the best case scenario I can hope for.*

"Ovidis, have you finished picking the men for the company I asked you to form yesterday?" Lorist asked.

Ovidis nodded and said, "Milord, the company has already been formed and equipped. I had them finish building the training ground behind the business sector and they can start their basic training drills first thing today."

"Good. During their breaks, don't forget to teach them about how to awaken their Battle Force. Since you have been in the empire's army before, I'm sure you can easily teach them the basic Battle Force technique to help them awaken their Battle Force

quickly. I'll be leaving this company to you."

"Yes, milord," replied Ovidis as he straightened his body.

"Alright, that's all. Good work working the night shift since yesterday. You better go get some rest for now," Lorist said.

……

After having breakfast, Shadekampf, Patt, Jim and Waxima arrived at Lorist's room.

"Jim, later during the morning, let the mercenaries enter the castle in small groups to equip themselves before they return to the camp outside. I will be bringing them with me tomorrow morning, understood?"

"Yes, milord. I will start working on it immediately," Jim said before he left.

"Shadekampf, I will leave the matter of the communication with the Kenmays Family about the knighthood competition to you. Supervisor Hansk will also help you out with this. You're clear on what I want you to pay attention to, right?" Lorist asked.

Shadekampf replied, "Milord, don't worry. I will make sure to satisfy your demands."

"Patt, pick one squad from the guard company and two squads of family soldiers later today for Knight Waxima to command. They should meet a few criteria like having awakened their Battle Force as well as knowing riding and archery."

"Understood, milord."

"Also, after I bring the three squads away, the castle will only have two squads of guards and two squads of family soldiers remaining. I will leave these men under your command, Patt. As for Ovidis's newly-formed company, you won't be able to use them as of yet, so let Ovidis train them up first. Four squads' worth of soldiers should be enough to defend Firmrock Castle. However, make sure to be vigilant even during the duration of the knighthood competition lest we get attacked by surprise," Lorist instructed Patt.

"Milord, don't worry. I will definitely keep my eyes wide open," Patt promised.

Lorist patted on his shoulder twice and said, "Alright, I'll leave it all to you. Waxima…"

"Milord, please give me your instructions," said the knight as he stepped forward.

Lorist turned to him and said, "I'm really sorry that you have to accompany me to the battlefield the moment you joined us…"

Waxima interjected, "Milord, the battlefield is the second home of the knight. It is my honor to be able to serve the family. Please don't hesitate to give me my orders."

"Alright, Waxima. Go with Patt to pick the men you will bring to battle. You will be in charge of overseeing the preparations and equipment of the soldiers. For the guards, let them take double-layered metal armor, pikes, riding shields, a quiver of javelins as well as one sidearm of their choosing. For the family soldiers, they will be allocated chain mail, pikes, bucklers, training longbows, a quiver of arrows and a longsword. Every man will have a pair of mounts, three days' worth of food as well as a wool blanket. Begin the preparations today for our departure tomorrow."

"Yes, milord," said Waxima as he clenched his fist and knocked onto his left breastplate in a knight salute.

"Alright, you guys go work on your tasks. Notify the guards at the door to call Butler Boris, Old Man Balk and Supervisor Hansk over."

"Yes, milord."

……

"Locke… You're far too shameless…" said Telesti with a flushed face while wearing an annoyed expression with hints of embarrassment and anger.

When Lorist went to bid her goodbye, he hugged her the moment he entered the room and gave her a French kiss, causing Telesti to gasp softly as she slumped down powerlessly in surprise.

"My dear Telesti, I will be going on the battlefield soon. This time, the enemy I face is really formidable and I truly feel that this might be the last time we meet. That's why I've decided to bid my farewells in hopes that your kiss will grant me the courage I need to defeat my fearsome foe. When and *if* I return, I will definitely present my spoils of battle to you…" said Lorist as he read out a classic line from one of the chivalric tales he read.

"Alright, alright. There you go again plagiarizing the lines you read in some knighthood novel. I don't know about the others, but I'm pretty sure that sooner or later you'll appear before me without a single scratch on you. I can only hope to pray for your enemy who have used up all their luck for them to have met you," said Telesti as she interjected in the middle of Lorist's recital.

"As expected, my dear Miss Telesti understands me best. But even though you hold so much confidence for me, this expedition will no doubt be a rather dangerous one as the men of Duke Loggins outnumber ours by two to three times. I have already ordered Patt to notify you to move if the worst comes to happen," Lorist said with a solemn expression.

Telesti fell silent for a while before she raised her head and said, "I believe that nobody will be able to defeat you and that you will return swiftly. You should go now, after all, you've hugged and kissed me already and said all you wanted to, right? What are you waiting for?"

Lorist smiled and said, "I was thinking if I should kiss you once more…"

"You…" said Telesti angrily as she looked around to look for something to pummel Lorist with.

Lorist dashed swiftly out of the doorway and gave Vinny an imperial gold coin when he passed her by. "You did well, this is for you."

Telesti sat down powerlessly on her chair and said, "You darned…"

Upon thinking back on the kiss moments before, she felt her face heat up as her vision blurred for a bit.

"Mistress, look! Lord Locke gave me a gold coin!" said Vinny happily.

Looking at Vinny's genuine smile, Telesti couldn't even get mad at her even is she tried. "Little Vinny, you sold me out for a single gold coin?"

"I didn't, aren't you sitting here just fine right now?" said Vinny with an innocent expression.

"Then why did you close the door just now?"

Vinny replied with a touch of naivete, "Lord Locke said that he wanted to give you a surprise and didn't want anybody else to see it. I thought it made sense so I closed the door and got rewarded by him with one gold coin! Oh, what was the surprise Lord Locke gave you just now? Can you show me?"

Telesti shrugged and buried her head within her arms as she laid flat on the table. Frustrated, she said, "Nothing…"

"Sheesh. Mistress, you're so stingy…" said Vinny.

……

"Milord, it's about time we departed," said Waxima as he showed up in front of Lorist.

Patt brought over a huge Northlander Horse which Lorist subsequently mounted.

"Milord, are you fine like that?" said Waxima in surprise as he looked at the simple chain mail Lorist wore.

"Well, Waxima, even though I'm a knight myself, the techniques I trained in is different from yours and the others. Wearing heavy armor will only serve to limit my abilities instead," Lorist explained.

With an expression of understanding, Waxima got onto his own horse and followed behind his lord.

One guard squad and two family soldier squads were already standing by. All of them numbered to more than 360 fully-equipped men in metal armor who were lined up in three long rows. Beside them were mounts without riders which they could switch to when their current ones tired out. Even though it was a relatively small group, the troops gave off an indomitable feeling, especially when compared to the unorganized mercenaries standing beside them not far away.

"Have the scouts been sent out?" Lorist asked.

"Yes. All 30 plus of them left early this morning. They were split into groups of three with several groups sent in front, to the left and to the right respectively," replied Waxima.

"Alright, let's depart. You'll be leading the march."

"Yes, milord."

"Jim, come here," Lorist said.

"We're going to leave now. Tell the four mercenary crew leaders to follow our troops from behind and organize themselves. When they are ready, bring the four crew leaders to me. I'd like to meet them," Lorist said.

"Okay, milord. I will head there right now."

Among the four mercenary crews, the one with the most members was without a doubt the Nightbat Mercenary Crew. They were the last crew who signed the agreement with Jim as they believed that given that their numbers were the highest, they deserved a pay of at least 150 to 200 gold Fordes. In the end, Jim ridiculed them for ranking only number three among the four crews even though they had so many members and said that they didn't have the right to ask for a raise and were free to not sign the agreement if they so pleased. In the end, the crew leader caved and signed it anyway.

The 260 plus Nightbat Mercenaries didn't seem to have any discipline at all and moved at their own pace. When Jim brought the Nightbat Crew Leader to meet Lorist, he was ordered to reorganize his own men who didn't look the least bit like the rest of the Norton Family soldiers and instead resembled a motley crew of rascals.

The leader of the Nightbat Mercenary Crew, Ulampmaxin, was an old, slick and cunning Two Star Silver ranked mercenary. Having been rebuked by Lorist, he looked at the soldiers of the Norton Family as well as the other three mercenary crews before he returned to his own group in embarrassment and started scolding away. It didn't take long for his men to behave and look more like proper soldiers.

The Cromwell Mercenary Crew was the strongest among the rest due to their leader, Cromwell Richard, being a One Star Gold ranked swordsman. It was rumored that his grandfather used to be a knight who had been stripped of his status for having angered his lord and was chased out of the family to become a lowly mercenary. Even so, he managed to have some fortuitous encounters during his life as one and managed to earn quite a fortune, which he used to form his own mercenary crew which he often employed to explore ancient ruins in search of artifacts. In the end, the grandfather of the current Cromwell leader left behind a will that stated that his descendants had to inherit the crew he had formed. Even if one was a commoner, as long as one was strong

enough, one would be able to live the free and unchained life of a mercenary without worries.

The group that ranked number two in terms of strength was the Razorpike Mercenary Crew which numbered more than 170 people. Lorist paid the most attention to that crew as they were formed from retired commoner military officers and soldiers who adhered to standard military discipline and regulations as was seen in the way they marched. Their leader was a Three Star Silver ranked mercenary called Sandro who used to be a garrison officer for a town which had been eradicated during the civil war within the empire. For the survival of his family and comrades, he had formed his own mercenary crew so that they would be able to support themselves financially while not being oppressed by nobles at the same time.

The weakest mercenary crew was the Pentasword Mercenary Crew. As the name implied, the crew was formed jointly by five Silver ranked swordsmen. Even though their numbers were the least at only 132 people, they still looked more disciplined and united than the messy Nightbat mercenaries.

Lorist remained behind his own troops and chatted heartily with the mercenary leaders. Given that he had been a mercenary for up to 6 years back at Morante City, he didn't run out of topics to talk about with the rest of the mercenaries. Lorist also didn't put up any arrogant airs nobles usually did and occasionally even mocked himself just to cause the rest of them to laugh out loud without restraint.

Just when the conversation was getting heated, a mounted soldier rode over from further ahead and said, "Milord, Knight Waxima requests for your presence at the vanguard. Squad Leader Paulobins has returned."

Chapter 131
The Massacre and the Suspension Bridge

Why did Paulobins return at a time like this? Shouldn't he be spying on the duke's army with Josk? Don't tell me something else happened over there? Lorist had tons of questions as he headed to the front of the troops.

"Milord, I don't know if this is good or bad news. After that incident, Sir Josk didn't know what to do next either and could only order me to come back to make a report and await your decision," Paulobins said with a pale face.

"What in the world happened?" Lorist asked.

"It's like this. Yesterday evening at around 7 o'clock, Wildnorth Town was bustling with noise and many soldiers wearing the attire of the duke's army went inside the town from their camp. Sir Josk secretly sent some men to sneak near the town and after a while, they came back and reported that the people of the town were having a celebratory feast for the entitlement of the four great families as barons. We were all really mad and wanted to cause some trouble so that they wouldn't be able to successfully carry out their ceremony…"

Paulobins looked to the sky as he reminisced and said, "After that, Sir Josk once again brought a few of us to sneak to the enemy's camp. However, the lax security there greatly surprised us as even the soldiers stationed up at the tower outposts focused their attention on what was happening within the town, allowing us to swiftly make our way to the barricade surrounding the camp without too much trouble. Originally, we wanted to set their tents on fire, but Sir Josk stopped us and said that he felt that something was off. So, he ordered us to be patient until we could ascertain what was going on…

"After we passed through the gap in the barricades, we saw that in the middle of the empty space were the people of Wildnorth Town gathered around a huge bonfire while consuming wine and meats. After a while, two metal-armored knights showed up and some citizens of the town dressed in luxurious robes went to greet him. The knight with the long goatee said something as he smiled, which caused the people of the town to all kneel down. After that, the knight said something so terrifying that

caused the townsfolk to stand there stunned and unable to move. Another knight who was nearby drew his sword and instantly pierced it into the chest of an old man from the town…

"As we witnessed that from afar, we also stood there completely flabbergasted. We heard a blaring of a horn before fully-armed soldiers emerged from the tents nearby and started slaughtering the citizens of the town. It was a complete massacre and the unarmed townsfolk could do nothing to retaliate at all; even those who had kneeled down to beg for mercy were not spared. Sir Josk said that there were at least 2000 or so townsfolk who had participated in the ceremony and all of them were male. However, not a single one of them were spared, even the elderly and the children were killed off. There was so much blood that it even flowed out of the camp. In the end, around 600 of them gathered up and started fighting back with some flaming sticks that they got from the bonfire. But they only managed to set a few of the tents in the army camp on fire before they were all culled by the Silver ranked knights…

"Quickly following that, the men of Duke Loggins split up into two groups and one of them to launched an attack on Wildnorth Town. It didn't take long for them to bust open the town gates and rush inside to kill, causing cries of terror and agony to resound from within the town. At that time, we were all stunned beyond recognition and didn't know how it came to end like that… In the end, Sir Josk snapped us out of our stupor and led us away from the enemy camp. The next morning, we went back and saw that some of the duke's soldiers had dug a huge pit to toss the bodies of the townsfolk into which they set on fire before they packed up their camp and moved into the town. A little while later, a few other soldiers emerged from the town and started digging another huge pit for even more bodies that were to be burned. Sir Josk with his good eyesight recognized that most of the bodies were that of the elderly and children of the town…

"Milord, right now, the soldiers of the duke have occupied WIldnorth Town completely and Sir Josk doesn't know what he should do next, so he sent me back here to seek your advice," said Paulobins as he finished reporting the incident that happened a few days prior. Perhaps he still hadn't snapped out of the shock from witnessing the massacre firsthand as he had shivered all the while he recalled the incident.

Lorist placed his cape on Paulobins, who didn't know what to say to express his gratitude and merely clasped tightly on the cape.

Raising his head, Lorist looked at the direction of Wildnorth Town and saw two

greyish-white pillars of smoke rise up into the sky. Even though hearing about the massacre of the town has greatly shocked Lorist, he couldn't help but feel a trace of happiness from the depths of his heart. Betraying the Norton Family, openly resisting with an army, conspiring with Duke Loggins and allowing the enemy to enter the dominion of the family; the Wildnorth Town had already went beyond all lines of tolerance for any noble family and their untimely demise could be said to be well deserved and not worth anyone's sympathy.

Even though Lorist wanted to laugh out loud in happiness, he resisted that urge. While the list of problems he had decreased by one and even though he hated every one of the Wildnorth Town folk to the bone, given that he had grown up in a relatively peaceful era in his previous life, he would never have been able to kill the elderly and the children of the town even though they were relatives of the enemy.

The family leaders of the four great families were truly spoiled under Norton rule. Did they think that other nobles would be so easy to negotiate with like the Norton Family? The great families of Wildnorth Town had aided the duke so that they would be able to become landed nobles. But they must've forgotten that it was extremely rare for commoners to be elevated to the status of nobility. Having not seen the truth of the outside world, the people of the town actually believed in the false promises of the duke and didn't know that rebelling against one's dominion lord was a huge taboo in the eyes of nobles. The massacre could only be blamed on their own foolishness and were the consequence of their rebellion.

To Lorist, Paulobins's report on the massacre of the town was indeed a piece of good news and the duke's men had actually helped him solve one of his problems. Otherwise, Lorist would still have to wonder how to deal with the town who exploited their own noncombatants for defense; he couldn't kill them outright as that would affect his reputation given that many people at the Maplewoods Bastide had familial relations with the folk at Wildnorth Town. Then again, he couldn't just let them be as they would propagate their hatred for the Norton Family in the following generations to come and allow the town to become a hidden landmine within the Norton Family dominion that would become a huge source of uncertainty that could severely undermine the security of the dominion.

Even though Lorist felt that half his burdens had lifted, he still didn't understand why the men of the duke did something that irrational like massacring the folk of Wildnorth Town. Not only did they remove a formidable ally, that also put themselves in a precarious situation in the dominion of the Norton Family. Lorist had already

intuited numerous methods he could use to overcome the men of Duke Loggins now that Wildnorth Town was out of the picture.

Don't tell me that the duke's men thought that their victory was secured the moment they made their way into our dominion? Otherwise, why would they decide to wipe out the people of Wildnorth Town who had conspired with them in the first place? If that were really the case, Lorist couldn't wait to give Duke Loggins a lesson he would never forget.

From Lorist's point of view, that massacre brought the Norton Family many advantages. If that hadn't happened, the rebellious soldiers of Wildnorth Town would be able to act as a firm supporting force for the duke's men and manage their supply lines and even guide the duke's soldiers to attack the more weakly defended places of the Norton Family. For example, Lorist was worried that the security of the Maplewoods Bastide would be compromised from within due to the people who were related to the Wildnorth Town residents causing sabotage.

After the massacre, there was little doubt that the rest within Maplewoods Bastide would hate the duke without question and resist his forces all the way. Also, given the things that happened to Wildnorth Town, they would understand that rebelling against the Nortons would only lead to their demise anyway. Given all that, there was little possibility that the duke would be able to take over the bastide within a short period of time. And the longer Lorist would be able to resist the enemy, the more chances he had to secure his victory.

From a military standpoint, the duke would actually disadvantage himself if he killed all the townsfolk who were originally willing to help him. That was the most frustrating part that Lorist didn't understand. Why didn't the duke placate the people of Wildnorth Town temporarily? The least the townsfolk could do with their 1000 or so men would be to defend Wildnorth Town itself and manage the logistics and supplies of the duke's army, allowing all 4000 men of the duke to attack the Norton Family without having to worry about their rearguard. Now that the townsfolk had been completely eliminated, at least 1000 of the duke's soldiers would have to be stationed at the town just to protect it, leaving only 3000 plus to attack the Norton Family. And if the assault on the Maplewoods Bastide span a long period of time, more men would have to be allocated to handle the logistics. At that time, Lorist would definitely jump at the chance to wipe out the defenseless supply transporters.

The more Lorist continued to think about it, the more excited he got. At that time, he

felt rather confident that he would be able to beat the duke's army as opposed to the 'cross the bridge when he came to it' mentality he held earlier in the morning. He looked forward to his arrival at the bastide dearly.

……

It has already been 3 days since Lorist arrived at the bastide, but he didn't receive any news from Josk about any attacks breaking out. Lorist didn't understand what the duke's men were delaying for. *Don't tell me that they plan to secure the place and wait for more reinforcements to come? That way, the family will be in real trouble and we must be prepared to face long days of war and conflict.*

Just as he was about to head to Wildnorth Town himself to take a look, a guard came in from outside and reported, "Milord, Hausky has returned."

The busy-looking Hausky was dressed rather shabbily as he came in with a tired look. After saluting Lorist, he brought out a beastskin map and said, "Milord, I found the route the enemy used to enter the dominion…"

Opening the map, Lorist saw a curvy line drawn by Hausky using a charcoal block.

"It's here…" said Hausky as he pointed at the Bladedge Mountains. "We followed the trail left by the enemy's forces and arrived at the mountains where we found a cave through which we discovered a valley. After another half a day's travel, we discovered another dark tunnel which took us around one day to pass through. Beyond that, we found ourselves at the edge of the cliff that had multitudes of vines growing downwards and to the opposite of it was another cliff. The people of Wildnorth Town had managed to use the vines to make a suspension bridge that was around 200 meters in length and 1 meter in width. However, it was exceedingly stable and it could even allow passage for four-wheeled carriages.

"After crossing the bridge to the cliff on the other side, we found a path that lead to a huge beach where we rested. However, we were attacked during our rest but we managed to fend off our enemy while taking two of them alive. After questioning the prisoners, we found that they were the men of a nearby dominion lord, Maillard, who noticed Duke Loggins's men using this path and also wanted a piece of profit for themselves. Maillard sent up to 300 men to follow the duke's troops from a safe distance and the ones we defeated back then were part of their scouts. Thinking that we were only 2 to 3 mercenaries, they wanted to kill us for our spoils, but little did

they know we had another 20 plus people resting at the beach not far away and ended up being wiped out by us instead."

As Hausky reported, he started to snicker. "Then again, we didn't fare too well either. After the scouts went back to make their report, the remainder of the 300 men came forward to seek vengeance for their dead comrades and among them included 3 Silver ranked knights. We could only retreat hurriedly while the enemy chased us frantically, causing us to lose 4 men of our own in the process. By the time we reached the suspension bridge, I opened a few oil jars and poured their contents all over the bridge as I crossed and set it on fire when all of us made it to the other side, burning it down completely. Fortunately for the enemy, half of their men managed to run back to their side of the cliff before the bridge collapsed completely, but only 1 Silver ranked knight among the 3 managed to escape the fate of falling to certain death. However, even he was set on fire and even if he didn't die from the burns, he would be severely injured. It truly is unfortunate for him to have been among the ones who were chasing us at the very front."

Lorist said delightedly, "So you're saying that the bridge is already burned down and the route is no longer usable?"

Hausky gave it some thought and replied, "That should be the case. The bridge was up to 200 meters long and there is virtually no way for anyone to cross the cliff other than using it. Well, unless they wait for another 4 years for the vines to grow back and make another bridge to cross with…"

"That's wonderful. Hausky, you have truly did a great deed for the Norton Family. Now, I no longer have to worry about Duke Loggins sending more reinforcements into our family dominion. As for his troops at Wildnorth Town, they have nowhere else they can escape to. Hahaha…" Lorist said as he patted on Hausky's shoulders heartily.

"Oh, Hausky, do you want anything as a reward for your accomplishment? If you want, I can even make you a family knight of our family and promote you immediately," Lorist said.

Hausky made a forced smile and said, "Milord, I think you should forget that thought. This achievement wasn't accomplished through my personal effort alone; my 24 other comrades also played a huge part with 4 of them even dying in the process. If I become your knight now, it would be like I've betrayed them instead. Another reason for my refusal is my age. I'm already 45 now and am far too old to be your knight. Having been

a mercenary for 20 years already, I also feel rather worn out from all my ventures and feel like retiring sooner or later. Before, I dreamed of forming a mercenary crew which I will pass to Jim when I reach the age of 50. However, now that he has decided to follow you instead, I think I should forget that and start working for my retirement."

Lorist nodded and said, "Alright, Hausky. Even though I think you're young enough, I respect your decision on this matter. I will present every person who accompanied you with a reward of 10 gold Fordes and the families of your dead comrades will receive 20 gold Fordes each. What do you think?"

"Milord, thank you for your generosity and understanding," Hausky said as he bowed deeply.

"Also, after this conflict, I plan to build a few towns in the family dominion. If you're willing, you can bring your family members to live within the dominion and I will even let you be a garrison captain at one of the towns. As for your other mercenary comrades, if they want, they can join the forces of my family as well. I believe they will have bright futures there with us," Lorist said.

"Thank you for your kind intentions, milord. I will relay your offer to the rest," Hausky replied.

Chapter 132
Josk's Fire Arrows

Another two days had passed and the soldiers of the duke that occupied Wildnorth Town started making their move. The town gates were opened wide and about a hundred light cavalry scouts poured out of it and split into groups of ten before they spread out in all directions. Following, that, 500 or so leather armored riders arranged in four neat rows rode out of the town gradually and behind them were three companies of foot soldiers with the first company being sword and shield infantry, the second being pike infantry and the third being longbowmen.

After the three companies left the town gates, they were followed by about 50 four-wheeled horse carriages which carried various goods like tents and some other supplies. The group of carriages also seemed to be ferrying a company's worth of soldiers. Apart from two soldiers driving each carriage, around 8 more could be seen seated within them.

After the convoy exited the gates, a company of pike cavalry troops followed behind. What made Lorist wonder, however, was that the company of pike cavalry troops didn't seem as disciplined and orderly as the leather armor-wearing cavalry company that came before. The soldiers were not in proper formation and they were even chatting and laughing out loud on their mounts.

The town gates finally closed up after the cavalry company exited the town. A row of soldiers carrying blow horns showed up at the walls of the town and started blowing the tune of deployment. A few men within the last pike cavalry company seemed to turn back and curse at the soldiers at the walls before they followed the troops that were marching in front of them.

About an hour after the deployment of the troops, the town gates of Wildnorth Town remained tightly shut and the security on the walls seemed rather thorough. Lorist lightly leaped off the tree he had been on and said to Reidy, who was holding the horses and waiting for him further ahead, "Let's go back to our camp."

The two of them only mounted their horses after they left the forest grounds. Before they traveled far, they saw 6 riders rushing in their direction from a mound nearby.

Upon seeing Lorist and Reidy, the riders raised their pikes and shouted, "Slay them!"

At that moment, tens of other riders revealed themselves from beyond the mound. At the sight of those new riders, Lorist smiled: the 6 riders were actually running away from the mercenaries he had hired. However, Lorist didn't expect that the mercenaries would be so aggressive and would start hunting down the duke's men at an area that is not even 500 meters away from Wildnorth Town.

Six javelins flew through the air and slaughtered the 6 bloodthirsty light cavalry scouts in cold blood. The mercenaries who chased them from behind got off their horses and saluted Lorist before they returned to staring at the dead scouts with a yearning gaze.

"Reidy, go and check what the corpses have on them…" Lorist was a little bothered why the mercenaries stared at the corpses with such hungry gazes.

Reidy returned quickly while holding the reins of 6 horses and retrieved 6 longswords and a few throwing axes and flails as well as 6 money pouches that seemed to be filled to the brim.

Upon opening up one of the money pouches, tens of silver coins as well as more than 10 imperial gold coins could be seen within. There were 2 to 3 gold Fordes within each pouch. After a moment of thought, Lorist finally came to a realization: the folk of Wildnorth Town were actually rather wealthy, but had nowhere better to spend their money on. That was why their money only piled up within their households. Now that the duke had massacred all the citizens within the town and took control of it, the soldiers naturally ransacked every building they could find and each of them earned quite a bit from the spoils. No wonder the soldiers that left in the morning didn't look too enthusiastic about being sent to battle as they were hoping they would be able to spend their newfound wealth as soon as possible. It was quite possible that after being deployed, they might not survive long enough to be able to enjoy their spoils.

That also explained why the mercenaries were so persistent on chasing down those scouts. Perhaps in the eyes of those poor mercenaries, each of the duke's soldiers was nothing more than a moving coin chest. Lorist smiled and felt quite confident that he would be able to defeat the duke's troops this time around.

"Which mercenary crew are you lot from?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, we are from the Nightbat Mercenary Crew," replied the leader of the group.

Given that he recognized Lorist as the rich person that hired their crew as well as having witnessed the scene of him killing off the six soldiers with the javelins, the mercenary had no choice but to admit that even he wouldn't necessarily be able to take that javelin head-on given the force at which it was thrown.

"You did rather well. I'll leave the corpses here for you to handle," Lorist said as he continued to ride away with Reidy.

Even though Reidy took the money pouches, mounts and weapons of the dead soldiers, the mercenaries were still rather happy as the armor, boots and other accessories on the bodies were still untouched and they were worth quite a good sum. Other than that, the bodies might also be hiding other surprises waiting to be discovered such as rings or necklaces. The heads of the six bodies could also be exchanged for one imperial gold coin each as per Lorist's promise.

Lorist was currently heading towards the camp at a small hill within the forest. That was the location where he was ambushed after his first visit to Wildnorth Town during which he retrieved Belnick. The reason he chose that place was so that he could isolate the troops that were just deployed from the town with the rest that were guarding it.

That place was also the midway point between Wildnorth Town and Maplewoods Bastide and it was well hidden thanks to the small forest around it as well as the hills in the area. Even if Lorist were to intercept the messengers that passed through the area and be discovered in the process, it would take well over 20 minutes for reinforcements to be sent over and that was more than enough time for Lorist and his men to make it to safety.

Waxima came over as Lorist got off his horse. Upon seeing the relatively empty camp of the mercenaries, he asked, "Where is everybody?"

"Well, milord…" Waxima replied, "Early this morning, the Pentasword Mercenary Crew set out on their patrols and happened to bump into tens of the duke's scouts. They managed to take them all down with 7 of them getting injured in the process and discovered that the scouts all carried huge sums of money on their persons. When they came back and told the rest about it, the mercenaries all went out on a hunt for more enemy scouts."

"Sigh, nothing moves the hearts of people more efficiently than money. If I were to order them to rush at the vanguard of a charge, they would all scramble to be placed

at the back of the formation. However, now that money is in the equation, they rushed forward without even thinking twice," Lorist said as he sighed.

"Milord, mercenaries are fickle people who can't be trusted: they only care about their own lives and interests and don't hold loyalty and honor in high regard. We shouldn't have hired them in the first place," Waxima said. As a knight, he was naturally quite prejudiced against mercenaries.

Lorist shooked his head and said, "The disparity between our forces and the duke's is truly too large. With these mercenaries, we can at least make up for the staggering difference in numbers. Even though they're a rowdy and unorganized bunch, they are still pretty useful against the reconnaissance troops of the enemy. Also, the experience and ability each of their men far exceeds that of our own soldiers. For now, we have not choice but to rely on their help to be able to stand a chance against the duke's army. By the way, did Paulobins leave as well?"

"Yes, milord. He is currently monitoring the soldiers the duke deployed and he will return after they finish setting up their camp," replied Waxima.

"The duke's men finally emerged from the town. It has already been five days since they occupied it. Now that they've shown themselves, we just have to find the right chance to strike. I really don't know how much longer this conflict will last though," Lorist said as he sat down within his tent.

"Milord, we will definitely be victorious over the duke's army," Waxima assured.

……

The attack the duke's men launched on Maplewoods Bastide went on with a fair share of trouble.

On the first day, the soldiers left Wildnorth Town at nine in the morning and only arrived at the bastide after two hours of marching before they began to set up their camp after having their afternoon meals. One Silver ranked knight who was sent to the bastide to shout for the Nortons to surrender. However, he was killed on horseback near the drawbridge from an arrow fired by Josk who was standing atop the castle walls, thus painting the duke's campaign with an ominous start. Now that the enemy soldiers knew that the Gold ranked marksman was within the bastide they were about to besiege, all of them prayed to the war god so that they wouldn't be the ones to die

from the marksman's terrifying arrow.

During the night, only 14 of the scouts returned and they reported to their commander, Knight Chevany, that the other scouts have all fallen under the attacks of the Norton Family's light cavalry troops. Chevany furrowed his brow and wondered how the Nortons managed to get so many light cavalry troops to the point that they were able to cause more than 80 of his scouts to be wiped out. It was not until one of the scouts reported that even though the light cavalry troops were wearing leather armor bearing the insignia of the Norton Family, their behavior somewhat resembled that of mercenaries, that Chevany understood the situation and conjectured that the young family leader of the Nortons must have hired mercenaries to do battle for him. That theory wasn't too far fetched either since he had also gained the hidden personal sum of gold belonging to Viscount Kenmays.

On the second day, Chevany split his soldiers into two divisions: one company of leather armored cavalrymen led by ten Silver ranked knights was sent to sweep the surrounding area for enemy troops, especially the mercenaries that the Nortons hired. The other division was to be commanded by him to attack Maplewoods Bastide.

However, even after one whole afternoon of searching, the leather armored company didn't find a trace of the mercenaries. That was due to the fact that they traveled in a huge unit: no mercenary would be stupid enough to run straight into the group and most would sneak around and observe them from afar. In the end, the company rested by a stream for two hours only to discover when they were regrouping that tens of their own comrades have vanished. Judging from the trail, they appeared to have been forcefully abducted by the enemy. The Silver ranked knight who led the group was infuriated and he rallied his men to follow the trail, only to stop when they noticed that they had almost been lured into the Blackmud Marsh. Had the other Silver ranked knights not noticed that fact, the consequences of venturing into the marsh would have been unimaginable.

On the other hand, the group that attacked the bastide didn't fare too well either. Back then, Knight Chevany had ordered for the three ballistas to be brought out. Even he didn't expect that the town would've been able to procure three of those war machines which he found convenient to use during the siege as an added support to their assault. Little did he know that before the ballistas even fired a bolt, one of them was destroyed by an arrow shot by Josk from the walls of the castle. Fortunately for Chevany, the other two ballistas were retrieved rather swiftly and didn't suffer the same fate of destruction.

Greatly enraged, the knight commander ordered his longbowmen company to rain arrows on the castle. Naturally, the Norton troops were ready for that and they brought out their wooden boards and quickly set up a few parapets. Josk also took the chance to shoot from the cover of the parapets at the soldiers beyond the wall. After a long while, he managed to take out 53 foes while he didn't even get so much as a scratch.

Having had five days to prepare from the safety of Wildnorth Town, Chevany had already tasked someone to prepare some siege engines for his perusal, such as two mobile bridges and one mini battering ram, all of which were disassembled and shipped over the night before with their assembly being completed just that morning. The mobile bridges we actually flat pushcarts with a long wooden gangplank installed on it which could be extended outwards. Upon being pushed to the edge of the moat, the gangplanks could be extended to reach the other end of it so that soldiers could cross it and start attacking the main gates.

However, the terrain around the Maplewoods Bastide was rather hazardous as most of the land around the bastide aside from the two main walls were sloped and there was no way to launch a full-on attack from those sloped sides. Knight Chevany commanded his men to attack the main gates of the bastide three times already and lost up to 200 soldiers without achieving any significant results. The two mobile drawbridges and mini battering ram have also been set aflame with the help of incendiaries used by the Norton Family soldiers.

On the third day, Chevany did not continue his assaults on the bastide and instead sent a huge group of soldiers to fell some trees to start constructing more siege engines. In the afternoon, he received a report that the woodcutting soldiers were attacked and the casualties numbered below the hundreds. Having no other choice, Knight Chevany led a company of leather armored cavalrymen to guard the woodcutting soldiers and escorted them back to the camp when they were done.

After a whole day of work, just when the duke's soldiers were about to get a good night's rest, they were greeted by a surprise attack and lost another 100 or so of their own. That was mainly due to the separated attacks that were spread out throughout the night. The worst part of the attacks was that the wood that they had cut down during the day had been set aflame and rendered useless.

Knight Chevany was a resolute knight who followed his orders down to the last letter and he had promised his lord, Duke Loggins, that he would make the Norton Family

submit and surrender. That was why he definitely wouldn't give up just because he suffered some initial setbacks. He believed that the fact that the Norton Family had to resort to guerilla tactics was due to them having been forced to their wits' ends and it represented their fears of being severely outmatched in terms of numbers to the point that they had to resort to underhanded methods like that to extend their numbered days.

That's why on the fourth day, Knight Chevany brought another group of soldiers to fell more trees and fortified the defenses of his camp when he returned before he was comfortable enough to relax and rest up.

However, not long after he laid down, he heard voices outside his tent calling out 'enemy attack' or something along those lines. Getting up from his bed and opening his tent, Knight Chevany thought, *can you call this an enemy attack?* He could see a flash from the distant walls of the bastide before a flaming arrow landed straight on the ground with an audible thump with the soldiers looking expectantly in the night sky while wondering where the next arrow would land.

This all stemmed from Josk's boredom which was in turn a result of the lack of attacks from the duke's men, causing him to have tons of unexpended energy which he didn't know how to use. Yesterday night when Lorist set the timber on fire, Josk was reminded that using his Battle Force and his specialized longbow, he could fire an arrow up to thousands of meters away. Naturally, the arrows were far from accurate and Josk himself wasn't aware of how much force the shots would possess. However, given that the camp of the duke's army was located around 1 kilometer from the bastide, Josk only needed to know the general location of the camp to be able to shoot some fire arrows there and if he was lucky, he might be able to set a couple of tents on fire as well. It was also quite a good idea to cause the enemy to be unable to rest well during the night, so Josk decided that he would fire ten fire arrows every night and see the extent of the damage he could cause.

By the time Josk finished firing, Knight Chevany could no longer go back to sleep peacefully as he had been left with a dull feeling of hopelessness that stemmed from things not going well for his expedition.

On the fifth day, the duke's men didn't attack the bastide either. Despite having dark eye circles from lack of rest, Knight Chevany mainly watched over the soldiers who were busy constructing siege engines.

On the sixth day, the construction of the siege engines continued. Due to the fact that the Northland Army was a proper army unit, the soldiers within weren't willing to use simple and improvised siege ladders. The siege engines they were trying to construct were basically siege towers that were equipped with gangplanks which could easily be laid onto castle walls to allow their men passage when the tower was close enough to the walls. Usually, soldiers would have to be stationed on top of the towers to defend it from enemy fire as it was pushed towards the walls before the gangplank could be lowered.

Knight Chevany was prepared to have four of those siege towers constructed as the castle walls had enough space for four of those at once. He believed that at least one of those towers would be able to successfully reach the walls and he would definitely be the first one to rush up to take care of that darned Gold ranked marksman that gave him so much trouble all this time.

That night, Josk fired 10 arrows at the same time to the enemy camp as usual.

On the 7th day, the construction of the siege towers were complete and the soldiers only went to rest after seeing all 10 of the arrows fall within their camps, feeling assured that there would be no more heading their way.

On the eighth day, Chevany decided to let his men take a good day's rest before tomorrow's full-scale attack on the bastide.

At the same time during the night, all the soldiers looked towards the sky and started counting.

"One arrow… two arrows… three arrows… four arrows… five arrows… six arrows… Here comes the seventh…"

Suddenly, Josk felt bored for no apparent reason. Seeing that the enemy had mostly finished the construction of their siege towers, he reasoned that they would be attacking the day after and thought that it was better for him to stop firing any more arrows and get some good rest for the ordeal that was to come the next day without bothering to complete his usual routine.

The soldiers in the enemy camp, however, continued to look up at the sky in stupor as they mumbled, "What about the 3 remaining arrows? Why hasn't he fired it yet? When are they going to come?" They continued to wait like that for two more hours…

Chapter 133
Rolling Boulders

Knight Chevany was feeling incredibly frustrated as he thought, *how infuriating! How could he be like that? As a knight, especially a Gold ranked one, how can he stop doing something halfway without finishing it? He's been shooting ten arrows every time during the past few nights. He should've shot ten yesterday as well! Why did he stop at seven? That even caused the men in the camp to stupidly wait for two whole hours before I had to order them to get some sleep… and even then, they were worried that the shots would continue on later…*

Had it not been for his position of authority as the commander of the army, Knight Chevany would have went to the bastide walls and challenged the Gold ranked marksman to a one-on-one death battle. Even though he had participated in many battles before, he had never once encountered something so extraordinary like three unshot arrows causing a whole army to lose sleep for the night. It truly was exceedingly humiliating for him. *What can I do now…* thought the knight as he looked at the tired soldiers and felt that they weren't in good shape to attack the bastide that day either.

After giving it some thought, Knight Chevany finally made up his mind to move the camp 200 meters away where the marksman of the Norton Family would not be able to fire his arrows. It was also better that way as it would allow the soldiers to rest unworried. They might as well do some work to move the camp away since they were not attacking and make the Nortons pay after they were properly rested up.

Josk, Belnick and Pajik were currently standing atop the castle walls and looking towards the camp of the duke's army. They expected a bloody battle to commence on that day given that the enemy had finished constructing their siege engines and already had a whole day of rest.

It could be said that the Maplewoods Bastide was situated at a rather advantageous location. The whole bastide was built upon a hard rock mound and the area surrounding it was mostly flat and level. Aside from using a 200 or so meter long slope which was only tens of meters wide, there was no other way the enemy could attack

the bastide because the cliffs of the mound was easily near 20 meters in height which couldn't be reached even with the aid of siege ladders.

Apart from the main drawbridge, the walls of the castle do not have any large openings or windows. However, they were laden with firing holes which could be used by defenders to shoot at enemies from the safety within. The first assault of the duke's army failed because of that: the jars of oil that caused the siege engines to burn them were also thrown from the firing holes.

"That's weird, it's already ten but they aren't making any indication to attack… They really like the dawdle, don't they?" Pajik said.

"That's right. Are they planning to come in the afternoon?" Josk also felt that something was off. Even though they have finished making their defense preparations, the enemy was still lumbering about slowly without a hint of urgency.

Belnick looked at the enemy camp and said, "Don't tell me they're doing this on purpose? Are they planning to make us let our guard down before they attack us? That shouldn't be the case though, pushing the tall siege towers should take quite some time and we would've finished our preparations by then."

"Who cares? No matter how many comes, we'll just kill them all. We only have to focus on the four siege towers. Also, those towers would block the line of sight of their bowmen, so that would work to our advantage as well," Josk said. As a person who specialized in longbows and archery, he knew the extent of the capabilities of the longbowmen unit of the duke. Even though he managed to kill 50 or so of the longbowmen during the last skirmish, he was left completely tired out by the end of it.

"The enemy commander really has a good eye: he managed to discover the weakness of our defenses after just one attack. The top of the castle is indeed our weak point. That's where they plan to aim using their four siege towers that would allow them to evade any damage from the firing holes that are only at the lower section of our walls; firing arrows at their towers are pointless with the huge wooden boards they have in place. We won't be able to toss our oil jars over the moat either as the tower wouldn't need to approach the walls that much to lower their bridges for their soldiers to cross. Currently, they have around 3000 men which is five to six times that of ours. Even if we manage to kill three for every one we lose, we still won't be their match. I only hope that the morale of their soldiers right now is not high so that they don't try so hard

during the actual attack. Otherwise, we might find it exceedingly hard to overcome this obstacle today," Belnick said.

"The only opportunity we have to retaliate is the moment the siege towers lower their gangplanks. If we manage to toss one of our oil jars into the opening and have Sir Josk shoot a flaming arrow into it, then the whole siege tower would be rendered useless. If we manage to do that to two towers, we will be able to severely lessen the burden on our men as well. With that, 400 or so family soldiers might be enough for us to defend the top part of the castle," said Pajik as he looked at the bundle of oil jars beside him.

Supervisor Spiel and Pesha got out of the stairwell while breathing raggedly at that moment.

Pesha asked, "The enemy still hasn't attacked?"

"That is the case, mistress," said Pajik as he saluted Pesha. He had no choice but to do so as his wife who had birthed him a son had been 'given' to him by Pesha.

Belnick merely nodded to Pesha as he was only acquaintances with her. On one hand, he knew that Pesha was the fiancee of the late First Young Master. On the other, he understood that Lorist didn't like her that much.

Josk, however, didn't pay her any heed and pretended he didn't notice her arrival at all. After hearing about how Pesha had taken Lorist's weapons without his permission to melt them down to fashion a weapon for herself from Reidy, he grew to have a really bad impression of her.

"Mistress, why have you come here?" Pajik asked.

"Is there anything wrong with me being here? I'm a knight of the Norton Family as well. It's all Little Locke's fault for angering the Duke of the Northlands. Just look at this, the duke can easily send thousands of people over here without breaking a sweat. Is that a foe that our family can afford to anger? They even managed to kill off the people of WIldnorth Town. I was right all along when I told Grandpa Gleis that he shouldn't have let Little Locke return here. He's not fit at all to become a dominion lord," said Pesha as she started complaining about Lorist in front of everyone present.

"What did you say?!" roared Josk as he turned around to glare at Pesha with a furious expression.

"Did I say anything wrong?! Didn't all this start to happen after he returned to the dominion? If he didn't go and rob the Kenmays Family of their gold, would the duke have come to our doorstep? Had he not changed the regulations to anger the people of Wildnorth Town, would they have bothered to guide the men of the duke into the dominion? If Little Locke didn't become the dominion lord, then we wouldn't have to dip our hands in conflict either and the folk of WIldnorth Town will be respectful to us as always like the old times… And they wouldn't have been massacred either…" argued Pesha, obviously satisfied with her own reasoning.

Caught off-guard by the inane statements Pesha had just uttered, Josk was so angered that he was left completely speechless.

Belnick shook his head and thought, *I've heard that the mistress was a stubborn person, but I didn't know that she would actually say something that ridiculous. Then again, she's been spoiled by the old butler ever since her childhood, so I think we know who to thank for her haughty behavior...* Belnick didn't feel like debating her either as he believed that Lorist's eventual victory would make it even harder for the mistress to retract the statements she just made.

"Don't bother with her. She's just letting her mouth run even though she knows little about the whole situation. I'm sure that milord will teach her a lesson when he gets back," advised Belnick as he held onto Josk's arm to stop him.

"She really doesn't know what's good for her… I don't understand why milord didn't punish her for her transgressions back then. She should've lost her status as a family knight from that so that she wouldn't cause trouble for anyone else in the future… I really wanted to beat her up for talking bad of milord behind his back…" said Josk angrily.

Pajik on the other hand was put into an awkward position. He didn't expect that Pesha would actually dare to say something like that. Beside them, Supervisor Spiel made a bitter smile and said, "Mistress, how can you say things like that when our enemy is just about to attack? Milord will definitely not be happy to hear about it when he gets back…"

Upon the mention of Lorist, Pesha humphed with dissatisfaction before she quieted down and headed for another spot on the walls to continue to look towards the enemy camp.

"Supervisor Spiel, why have you come here?" Belnick asked.

"Oh, it's about this… Old Butler Gleis heard that the enemy had built four bridged siege towers and wanted me to remind the three of you that you can use the rolling boulder tactic as a countermeasure for that," Spiel replied.

"Rolling boulders? Are you talking about the 8 huge spherical boulders that are placed within the garden of the bastide?" Belnick asked. Right after, he jumped with realization and continued, "Darn, why did I forget about this…"

"Rolling boulder tactic? What is it?" asked Josk and Pajik curiously in unison.

"Haha, Brother Joe, Pajik, come over here and take a look. It's those 8 boulder balls that are placed over there," said Belnick with a smile after he headed to the other side of the castle walls and pointed downwards.

Beyond the main gates of the castle were a few flower beds where 8 huge boulders could be seen.

The moment he laid his sight on them, Josk understood and said, "So those 8 boulders can be used like that as well… I thought that they were just decorations at first. I even wondered once why they weren't sculpted into some other shape and believed that you guys were simply unable to find a good sculptor within the dominion."

Still confused, Pajik asked, "What would we do with those boulders?"

Belnick smiled and said, "Those 8 boulders each weigh over thousands of kilograms and they have all been carved to be able to fit through the castle gates so that they can roll straight down the drawbridge. Think about how the spectacle would look like the moment we push the boulders down after the enemy has pushed the siege towers halfway up the slope!"

Pajik stood there stunned the moment he heard it, but he recovered rather quickly and said, "Haha! To think that the family would still have this up their sleeves! I can't wait to see how the siege towers will fall… With this, we will be able to teach the duke an unforgettable lesson! We are definitely going to win the battle…"

"You may not know it, but the boulders have been there for at least two to three hundred years…" Belnick told Josk. "After the first ancestor of the Norton Family built the family bastide, it was frequently attacked by the mountain barbarians. The longest

siege even lasted for half a year, but the barbarians incurred quite huge casualties themselves. That was when the rolling boulder tactic was thought up and one huge boulder was carved into a spherical shape. During the last siege the barbarians laid on the bastide, the result of the tactic was absolutely devastating. According to the family records, the slope outside the main gates was full of flattened corpses. There was so many that one would bloody one's whole leg the moment one stepped onto it.

"After that, the family spent tens of years to carve up the rest of the boulders in case we would need them once more. It would be the second time we use it since almost 300 years ago. We can finally behold the might of this tactic with our own eyes."

Josk thought for a bit before he said, "I hope that these rolling boulders don't frighten the enemy all the way back to Wildnorth Town. That way, milord's plan might have to be changed entirely again."

"The enemy has started to move…" said Supervisor Spiel from not too far away. The three knights ran over there immediately only to be flabbergasted by what they saw.

"What's going on? The enemy looks like they're moving their camp further away. What happened?"

The three knights looked at each other but they couldn't figure out the reason for the sudden move of the duke's army.

……

Knight Chevany's eyes were completely bloodshot as he stared at Maplewoods Bastide. If stares could set things on fire, then the bastide would be completely consumed by raging flames of hatred by now…

On the slope leading to the main entrance of the bastide were countless flattened bodies of the duke's soldiers who had toiled incredibly hard to push the siege towers halfway above the slope only to have two of them knocked off the slope with the other two lying flat on the slope itself. Between the two toppled towers was where the bloody spherical boulder lay.

It was the 10th day of the expedition led by Knight Chevany to conquer Maplewoods Bastide. After getting a good rest the day before, the soldiers were all energized and ready to attack to take over the bastide in one fell swoop. Chevany had also resolved that he would continue the assault and force the Nortons to submit no matter the

casualties as long as the siege towers manage to reach the walls of the bastide.

After finishing breakfast, the soldiers got into their lines orderly behind the four siege towers and were led into battle by Knight Chevany. By the time the siege towers were pushed halfway up the slope, one hour and a half had already passed and it seemed that the attack would not truly begin until late in the afternoon. However, the knight thought that he would continue the assault throughout the night if it was necessary.

Having rested for half an hour, the soldiers began pushing the siege towers up again. However, after only advancing tens of meters, a few loud cries could be heard. "Milord, the city gates are open! The drawbridge is being lowered!"

That was something that Chevany had predicted all along. He thought that the Nortons would have no choice but to send their men on a suicide mission to stop the siege towers. He was confident that the Norton Family's soldiers understood that all would be lost if they allowed the siege towers to reach the walls.

Knight Chevany raised his hand calmly and said, "Have the longbowmen aim forward. Sword and shield infantry, enter a defensive formation. Pike infantry, be ready to receive the assault."

The well-trained soldiers of the duke's army entered their stations orderly. The moment the soldiers rushed out of the gates, they would definitely be in for a harsh treat.

However, not a single one of their enemy emerged from the castle gates. Instead, Chevany and the surviving soldiers were presented with a scene that they would never forget for the rest of their lives: a huge boulder rolled out from the castle gates down through the drawbridge and headed for the slope as it accelerated more and more…

Everyone there were completely terrified and stood there motionless as the boulders rolled closer and closer in their direction…

Finally, someone shouted, "Run!"

The formation instantly crumbled into smithereens with soldiers running all over the place into and over each other, especially with the four siege towers blocking their way. Some more clear-headed soldiers no longer gave a damn and jumped straight off the slope despite the risk of falling and injuring themselves while the rest could do nothing but scream as they stared at the giant boulder that encroached them by the

moment…

Boom! The rolling boulder rammed straight into the two siege towers at the front, causing wooden splinters and body parts to fly everywhere while the bloodied boulder continued to push the siege towers down the slope.

Before Knight Chevany regained his composure, he heard another soldier cry out, "There's one more…"

Raising his head, the knight saw another boulder rolling down in his way…

With his quick wit, Knight Chevany ordered, "Topple the siege towers to block the boulder!"

Miraculously, the siege towers managed to be pushed down before the boulder reached them. While it smashed its way through the first toppled tower, the boulder stopped when it reached the second tower as it had lost all its momentum.

As the soldiers that narrowly escaped death let out a cheer of relief, Knight Chevany was dripping cold sweat atop his mount. He could only stare at the bastide atop the slope as he thought, *as long as they have more of those boulders, I will never be able to attack them from the front…*

Chapter 134
Surprise Takeover

Knight Chevany put down the beastskin map he held in his hand and paced around in circles within his tent. He didn't expect that he would lose up to a company's worth of men, 500 people out of the original 3000, after 10 short days of the expedition since they left Wildnorth Town. The Northland Army was organized in a 5 to 5 system; a regiment had 5 companies, a company had 5 squads while each squad numbered around 100 or more people.

The beastskin was a report submitted to him by a logistics officer. According to it, the light cavalry scouts had 83 casualties, 120 patrol troops were missing and more than 40 soldiers who were felling trees were killed. The casualties for the first attack on the bastide numbered at 74 people and 103 of them got killed during the night assaults on their camps by the Nortons. Combined with the 131 soldiers who died from being crushed by that huge boulder. the total number of casualties had soared above 550 people.

"What other things do you have to tell me?" Knight Chevany asked the logistics officer.

"Um, sir, the soldiers who were injured today number more than 200, among which tens of them might be handicapped for life. Combined with the heavily-injured soldiers, the casualties are at around 300 people. I think that letting them stay within the camp will negatively affect the morale of the soldiers… Sir, you might want to consider sending them to Wildnorth Town to rest up and heal from their injuries…" said the logistics officer.

"Hmmm…" Chevany mused as he stopped pacing around. "You're right, the Norton Family is indeed a family with more than 300 years of history and they are by no means easy to deal with. Our war with them might be drawn out for a long time and it is indeed not good to let the injured continue to stay within the camp. Send them back to Wildnorth Town tomorrow then. Right now, Wildnorth Town might become an extremely important base for us to recover and regain resources. The supplies we got from taking over the town will also last us long enough for a one-and-a-half-year-long siege against Maplewoods Bastide."

The logistics officer said, "Milord, if we're planning a long term siege, we should transport some more supplies back here after we send the injured soldiers to the town. We only brought 15 days' worth of supplies when we first set out and what remains can only last us for 6 days at most."

Knight Chevany nodded and said, "It's better to be prepared. After all, it won't hurt us to have too much supplies. As for whether we will besiege them for the long term, it's still not final until I go over all the strategies we can use first."

……

"Is what you told me true?" Lorist said with a surprised look.

"Yes, milord. It would take them around 20 minutes to get from there to here. There are 40 horse carriages filled with injured soldiers and which are escorted by three pike cavalrymen squads. Combined with the coachmen, they have a total of 350 plus people. We've been monitoring their camp for the whole time and we received the information the moment they departed."

Lorist made his decision and said, "It's finally time for us to swallow them up. We've been camped out here for 8 days straight and it's finally time to move. Paulobins, notify the four mercenary crews that if they are willing to follow me, they should take the rear so that they don't startle the enemy.

"Waxima, have the rest get ready within ten minutes to set out with me."

"Yes, milord."

To the soldiers of the Northland Army who were returning to Wildnorth Town, it was merely a short journey that would only take them around 90 minutes. They were looking forward to their return as there were quite a number of women within the town. Even though around 400 of them were virgins and were not to be touched as they were to be sold for a high price by the duke, the rest of the 600 or so married women were free for their picking. After being deployed for 10 days, they felt that it was due time for them to enjoy their share of women that their enviable comrades who stayed back at the town have no doubt relished in.

Seeing the defenseless soldiers of the duke approaching, Lorist tugged on the reins and clamped his legs to dig his heels into the abdomen of the horse to spur it forward.

"Kill!" He was the first one who rushed out of the forest.

Javelins flew out like lightning bolts and in the time he traveled the 60 plus meters of distance between the forest and the path, Lorist had killed off more than 20 of the pike cavalrymen escorts before he held up his own pike and started slaughtering away at the rest.

Following closely behind him was Waxima and Paulobins and the three guard squads and family soldiers that they led. The guards were equipped with javelins while the family soldiers were using training longbows. Under the command of Paulobins, they did not rush into the scene of battle and merely attacked from a distance with their arrows and javelins.

The situation around the duke's soldier's convoy descended into chaos almost immediately as the armed escorts struggled to fend off the assault. Hundreds of pike cavalrymen surrounded Lorist while the other hundred plus headed in the direction of the guards and family soldiers that were attacking them from afar.

Sounds of killing, horses neighing and people crying out in agony reverberated throughout the battlefield.

Lorist swung his pike in circles up in the air, covering a circular area around him with a radius of three meters as he rushed forward. Wherever he went, cavalrymen would fall from their mounts with injuries all over them.

Waxima brandished his riding lance which was emanating a brilliant silver blade glow as he rode to Lorist and protected his right flank. The two of them circled around each other like a wheel as they proceeded forward to crush any semblance of resistance the duke's men showed.

One could see a distinct path that was carved straight through from the beginning to the end of the convoy. Apart from the ten or so escaping cavalrymen, no other resisting enemy could be seen across the area. Lorist turned his horse back only to see that less than 100 cavalrymen were still desperately fighting for their lives with the others either lying on the ground or trying to flee in all directions from the rowdy mercenaries that chased them from behind.

The moment one cavalryman fell from his mount, four to five mercenaries leaped towards him right away. By the time they dispersed, only a headless, naked corpse

remained on the ground.

The rest of the resisting pikemen were soon killed off by the mercenaries. Having no more enemy to fight, they rushed straight at the injured soldiers within the carriages and caused even more cries of pain and terror to ring out.

Lorist looked at Waxima who was trying his best to keep quiet.

"I thought that you would stop them from harming the injured soldiers," Lorist said.

Waxima shook his head and said, "Well, normally I would, but not this time."

"Why?" Lorist asked curiously.

Waxima sighed and said, "Even though they are injured and defenseless, they are still the ones who have preyed on and killed the citizens of Wildnorth Town who were equally as defenseless as they are now. It is only retribution for them to be killed by the mercenaries…"

"…" Lorist had nothing else to say about the matter.

At that moment, Paulobins brought a number of guards and family soldiers over.

"How are our casualties?" Lorist asked.

Paulobins replied, "Milord, apart from three idiots who were injured by the pikes that were thrown by the enemy, the rest of us didn't even get so much as a scratch as we were attacking from a safe distance without engaging in melee combat."

Lorist was quite satisfied with the results. While eliminating the enemy forces was one thing, ensuring that one's own soldiers survived was also important. Given that the family was situated at the Desolate Northlands, manpower was the thing it lacked the most.

"More than 10 of the enemy have escaped and it would take them around 20 minutes to return to their camp from here. The reinforcements would take another 20 minutes at least to arrive. I give you all 10 minutes to clear up the battlefield. At least the mercenaries seem to be obeying the regulations and not touching our spoils. We only want the mounts, the money pouches and the weapons," Lorist said.

"Yes, milord," replied Paulobins before he ordered his men to start collecting the spoils.

With bodies lying all over the path after the battle, the guards and the family soldiers could be seen busy picking up the javelins and arrowheads that were stuck onto the enemies. The projectiles that they used to attack served as clear markers to indicate to the mercenaries that the soldiers were killed by the family troops and the right to claim the spoils belonged to the family. The bodies that had Lorist's javelins pierced through them were also left untouched. Only the tens of corpses that were killed by him and Waxima which didn't have a clear marking were stripped naked by a few greedy mercenaries.

……

By the time Knight Chevany led his 50 plus leather armored cavalrymen to the scene, one hour had already passed by. All he could see were naked, headless bodies and severely damaged carriages. All of the coachmen, injured soldiers and the 3 squads of pike cavalrymen were stripped naked and decapitated.

All 700 of them! Apart from tens of pikemen who managed to escape, the rest were all lying there. Knight Chevany was so enraged that he felt like he was about to explode. The soldiers he brought over also looked onto the scene with bloodshot eyes. Resisting his angst and dread, Knight Chevany ordered his men to get off their horses to dig a pit to bury the bodies in before they themselves headed to Wildnorth Town.

After telling the Gold ranked Knight Hennard who was stationed to protect Wildnorth Town about the situation of the battle, Knight Chevany departed after staying for one hour and left behind 200 leather armored troops that would send the supplies from Wildnorth Town over to his camp.

On the afternoon of the next day, the gates of Wildnorth Town opened and more than 20 four-wheeled carriages exited the town. The carriages each carried huge piles of supplies which would be able to last Chevany's troops for 20 additional days. On the flanks of the small convoy, the 200 plus leather armored cavalrymen could be seen. Due to the incident that happened the day before, Knight Hennard also sent along 300 longbowmen along with the convoy to ensure its safety.

Lorist, Waxima and Paulobins were mounted and looking at the group of soldiers from a distant hill.

Paulobins could no longer hold it in and asked, "Milord, aren't we attacking them? They're transporting food and supplies! If we leave now, we might be able to ambush them in time…"

Lorist shook his head and said, "We will not ambush them. That's because our true aim is Wildnorth Town itself."

"Wildnorth Town?"

"That's right. Do you know why I ordered you and the other four mercenary crews to not approach the town and merely observe it from afar?" Lorist asked, before he answered, "That's because I was afraid that you would alert them. The citizens of Wildnorth Town could already defend itself well against us the last time with only 1000 men. And taking into the fact that the mercenaries only fight for money and aren't willing to put their own lives at risk, even if we have up to 1200 people on our side, if the mercenaries aren't willing to give it their all, I'm worried that the burden of facing off against the troops defending Wildnorth Town would fall onto us instead. Even if we manage to take over the town, we wouldn't be able to withstand the counterattack of the enemy outside the town and end up being chased out of it in the end."

Pointing at the supply transport troop of the enemy, Lorist smiled and said, "Right now, our provocation on the enemy worked and they sent 300 of their longbowmen out to accompany the transport convoy. That way, there will be only roughly 700 troops left within the town for defense. If we attack at night, even if the mercenaries aren't willing to fight at the frontlines, we can still take the town with 300 of our own men and the casualties won't be huge either. As long as we manage to reach the walls, the mercenaries will definitely follow along as well if they see that the battle is progressing in our favor. Given that they have already made quite a sum from the duke's army before, I'm sure they wouldn't mind making some more."

Even though the troops of the duke that were escorting the supply convoy arrived at the camp near Maplewoods Bastide safely, Knight Chevany still felt rather troubled. He had brought the 300 of his leather armored cavalrymen to camp within the forests for an ambush before dawn. In the end, the Norton Family troops didn't show up to pillage their convoy. So, they could only follow their convoy back to the camp.

……

"You all know the rules, right? If any of the members of your crew breaks them, you must punish them yourselves, okay? Don't make me dirty my hands," said Lorist candidly.

The four crew leaders that stood in front of him nodded jointly. Richard, the Gold ranked mercenary from the Cromwell Mercenary Crew said, "Milord, please don't worry. All of us understand the rules. The loot on the enemies we kill will belong to us but the other spoils within the town all belong to you. We will definitely not lay our hands on them."

Lorist nodded and continued, "Our family troops will follow me to take over the walls and open the gates. You guys will only have to rush in and attack. Do pay attention to our signals. Paulobins, it's time to make our move."

The moment the silvermoon was obscured by a passing cloud, Lorist rushed out of the forest with Paulobins following behind him with the both of them holding a long wooden stick on both ends as they rushed towards the town with speed and silence.

Lorist resembled a huge black bird as he scaled the walls. Two of the guards who were dozing off on the walls were startled awake, but the moment they wanted to report the enemy presence, they felt their throats running out of air before they were assailed by a sudden pain. Losing consciousness, both the guards slumped to the ground powerlessly.

Lorist stepped forward and held both the shoulders of the guards whose throats had just been slit by him as he laid their bodies gently onto the sides of the walls to make it seem like they were merely slacking off and taking a nap.

The soldier distribution on the walls of the town was sparser than Lorist had expected given that he only killed 14 guards after traveling near 80 meters from the spot he ascended the walls to the gates of the town. To top that off, most of the soldiers were half asleep and were not aware of their surroundings in the least. Beside the drawbridge mechanism above the gates stood six guards who had all unknowingly had their throats slit by Lorist before they were able to make any noise.

As he raised a torch and swung it thrice high up in the air in a circular motion, Lorist sighed and thought back at the density of the soldiers back when he first attacked the town walls which ended up with tons of heads rolling all over the ground, much unlike the current situation where the walls were hardly defended and attacking it was

merely a walk in the park.

Six patrolling soldiers came over from the other side of the wall and seemed to be complaining about something. Lorist silently sneaked near them and in a quick explosion of movement, the six soldiers fell to the ground one by one.

With audible 'thunks', three siege ladders were laid on the walls and Waxima was the first one to climb up, followed by Paulobins, the double metal armored guards and lastly, the family soldiers.

Seeing the tens of people get up the walls, Lorist whispered, "Paulobins and I will bring some guards to open up the town gates. Waxima, be alert and lower the drawbridge."

Waxima knocked onto his left chest lightly and said, "Yes, milord."

Within the tunnel leading to the gates, ten or so guards could be seen sleeping rather soundly. Lorist actually accidentally stepped on one of the soldiers who was lying on the ground when his eyes had yet to adjust to the darkness. The soldier got up and grumbled, "You blind…" before he was stabbed to death by Lorist while Paulobins and the rest of the guards rushed in and killed off the rest.

However, two soldiers managed to cry out loud during the whole commotion.

Lorist said hurriedly, "Quick, open the town gates and let the mercenaries in…"

The gates were opened wide and the drawbridge was subsequently lowered, causing the mercenaries who were hiding in the forest to rush towards the town en masse.

However, their movements managed to attract the attention of some enemy troops as one of them shouted, "Who opened the gates?!"

It was soon followed by a loud, panicked cry. "E-enemy attack! The enemy has entered the town!"

Sounds of horns blaring to signal an enemy attack could be heard immediately while the mercenaries let out their war cries as they rushed towards the enemy soldiers who hastily arrived at the town gates.

Complete chaos broke out in Wildnorth Town as Lorist smirked and thought, *Wildnorth Town is finally in our hands…*

Chapter 135
Completion

With the battles mainly focused at the area surrounding the main gates, the initial discrete units of soldiers were nothing in the face of the might of the mercenaries. However, after 15 minutes the warning horn was blown, a squad of Northland Army soldiers had already rushed over to reinforce the gates. Given the number of mercenaries who fought in no orderly fashion, the squad of Northland Army soldiers didn't last long and many of them were assaulted by the mercenaries and had no choice but to resist defensively until more of their comrades came.

Sounds of killing and blades clanging rang out on top of the walls as well, signifying the purge of the defenders of the walls by the guards and family soldiers who were led by Waxima. The mission that was given to him by Lorist was to eliminate all enemies that were stationed at the wall to take control of and defend the other gates within the town so that not a single enemy could escape. As long as nobody ran out of the town to report to their main force which was attacking Maplewoods Bastide, Lorist would have more than enough time to finish dealing with the soldiers within the town.

After another 30 or so minutes, sounds of well-coordinated steps could be heard as three squads of fully-armed Northland Army soldiers marched to the town gates in three neat rows. A few Silver ranked knights at the front looked at the wide-open town gates from a distance as well as the two wooden sheds beside it that were set aflame. Around 300 leather armored troops of the Norton Family could be seen suppressing the rest of the Northland Army soldiers who were desperately fending for their own lives. By the time the enemy reinforcements arrived, about 100 leather armored Norton troops split off and headed their way…

The few Silver ranked knights let out breaths of relief as they thought that the number of enemies heading for them were not numerous. Taking into account the three squads they brought with them, they would have no problem dispatching the group that was headed for them. The Silver ranked knights rode to the side of the street on their mounts and one of them raised his riding lance towards the leather armored soldiers and ordered, "Longbowmen, prepare… Ugh…”

One javelin had nailed the knight and his mount onto the ground out of nowhere.

"Fire!" A voice resounded in front of the three Northland Army squads all of a sudden as soldiers appeared above the two buildings by the roadside with their bows fully drawn. Arrows hailed down densely from above with numerous javelins between their barrage towards the three squads of the duke's soldiers, causing their formation to disintegrate completely. The longbowmen formation was hit the worst: having been attacked without having enough time to react and retaliate, half of them perished instantly from the rain of projectiles while the lucky survivors balled up in fear on the ground.

The rain of projectiles continued for three volleys and it was followed by a voice screaming out, "Kill!"

Near 100 silhouettes jumped down from the buildings and joined the mercenaries who were on their way from the gates in a bloody massacre.

It was indeed a massacre as the soldiers of the Northland Army who survived the volleys of arrows and javelins had lost all their will to fight. They didn't regroup after the initial attack at all as the Silver ranked knights that were leading them had all died from Lorist's javelins. Coupled with the terror they experienced from being suddenly ambushed by the soldiers who showed up on the buildings all of a sudden, all they could think of was defending themselves individually and running away as soon as possible to preserve their lives.

The mercenaries who leaped down from the rooftops sealed off all the escape routes and engaged in a pincer attack with the mercenaries who were rushing over from the gates against the Northland Army soldiers that were sandwiched between them. Regardless of whether they kneeled down and begged for mercy or resisted, they were killed by the bloodthirsty mercenaries who regarded them as nothing more than small, mobile chests of gold coins for them to claim.

A few torches from the walls could be seen gradually being lit and the sounds of killing gradually subsided. The torches twirled multiple times in the air to signify that the gates have already been secured and that the enemy guards were completely eliminated.

Lorist looked at the twirling torches from afar and started counting in his mind; *there were more than 100 guards on the walls. Including the 20 plus I personally killed, it*

would total up to around 150 people. The guards within the gate corridor that were killed also numbered more than 10, and more than 150 soldiers rushed at the mercenaries when they saw them approaching. Taking into account the three squads that later arrived as reinforcements, there should only be around 100 enemy soldiers remaining within the town out of the original 700 or so as well as the Gold ranked knight stationed here to protect the place. Weird, why hasn't he shown up yet? Did something go wrong?

"Reidy, let's go," Lorist said as he jumped lightly down from the second floor of a building and landed on the ground as lightly as a leaf.

Reidy, however, took a roundabout route and jumped onto a lower rooftop nearby as he was carrying two quivers of javelins on his back. He even got some blood and mud splattered onto him as he hit the ground.

Paulobins appeared out of nowhere, bringing over tens of war horses with him. He said on horseback, "Milord, I found a stable nearby…"

Lorist and Reidy picked one horse each and mounted them. Reidy also called for a few double metal armored guards to follow Lorist and him.

"Paulobins, send someone to give Waxima a message. Tell him to lead two squads of family soldiers to guard each of the town gates respectively. Also, have him bring some guards to regroup with me. You will be leading two squads of family soldiers to collect the weapons and spoils and switch out the training longbows of our men for the proper ones you find," Lorist said.

"Yes, milord."

……

Knight Hennard could feel nothing but a severe headache after having consumed huge amounts of alcohol on that night.

During the tens of days he was at Wildnorth Town, he had experienced the time of his life. Never had he dreamed that in the rural corner of the Northlands, there would be a small paradise like Wildnorth Town. The citizens of the town were all rather wealthy with every one of their households having meat and wine, not to mention being fully-furnished. Aside from the gold and silver ware the soldiers pillaged from the houses, he even found some silk clothing that belonged to the citizens he massacred there:

most poorer dominion lords didn't even have the opportunity to enjoy such luxuries.

They really are far too wealthy. Even that dogshit herbalist's family has a secret room that kept over three chests filled with imperial gold coins to the brim! Each of them had 50000 gold coins! Based on only that, my guess is that the four great families combined together have up to 200000 gold Fordes in currency only, and that doesn't include the gold and silver ware they have which number among the hundreds. Needless to say, their house decorations were worth quite a lot as well and the amount they have is enough to fill up three large rooms…

The Lord Duke really made a huge profit this time… That was what Hennard kept saying all the while he was at the town. Even so, he also got his share of the riches as well. Apart from Knight Chevany, who Knight Hennard thought was a stubborn old fool who refused to glean the slightest riches for himself, Hennard and the other Silver ranked knights intentionally recorded a slightly lesser amount of items and swiped them for themselves. The Gold ranked knight himself got around 30000 gold Fordes while each of the Silver ranked knights had around 10000. Those transactions were all kept secret from their leader Chevany, because they thought that he would definitely hand all the things they took to the duke as he believed that the duke would reward them for their efforts in the end.

Tch, everybody knows that the duke wouldn't give us much anyway. It would already be considered extremely generous for him if he gave us 1% of all the things we took. That was the main reason Hennard was willing to let the issue of swiping the wealth for themselves slide and also didn't force the soldiers to hand up the gold and valuables they took from the other households, so long as they also gave a part of their loot to the Silver ranked knights that led them. After all, things were better if they were shared and that would encourage the soldiers to better follow their orders after all.

It sometimes occurred to Knight Hennard that the Norton Family were a bunch of idiots. *They think that everybody would fear their reputation as the Family of the Raging Bear just because they have a bear on their insignia? I really don't understand why they would allow their own subjects at Wildnorth Town to act so freely like this… Other dominion lords would levy a tax simply because their subjects used the leaves of the trees within the dominion as fuel, whereas the Nortons only asked for 10% of the harvest from the citizens of this town and didn't bother to tax their other income-generating practices like fishing, hunting and trading… This truly is quite appalling…*

The ones who are dumber than the Nortons would be these folk at Wildnorth Town…

Even though they have such a benevolent and generous dominion lord, not only did they not pledge their undying loyalty to him, they even drove him into a corner and refused to listen to the lord's orders. To think that they would rebel and conspire with another power just because of their over-ambitious plans of wanting to receive a noble title… To Hennard, while the Nortons were the enemies of the duke, the citizens of Wildnorth Town who betrayed their dominion lord were even more dastardly, causing him to be feel justified in killing them off without even batting an eye. He even believed that it was only right for a Gold ranked knight like him to punish traitorous citizens like that even if they were women and children and that it didn't go against the chivalric code at all.

After killing off all the men, elderly and infants of the town, all that remained of its folk were three types of women. The first category were girls aged from 10 to 15 which were extremely popular in the slave market. Some nobles with girl-raising fetish would spend a huge sum to purchase young girls like that so they can train them into their personal maidservants. The second category were for virgin women of age 15 to 20 which, needless to say, fetched a tremendously high price as well. The third category were the married young women and they were the favorite of the soldiers who would use them to release their pent up feelings and stress and were free for the soldiers to toy around with however they liked. Even if they caused one of them to die, they only had to pay a small penalty fee as those women didn't sell well on the slave market and the duke didn't want anything to do with things that won't bring him any significant profit.

After getting a huge haul from occupying Wildnorth Town, Knight Hennard and Knight Chevany got into an argument. Hennard believed that it was best to send the loot back to the duke to placate him for the moment and take their time to settle the Norton Family. However, Knight Chevany was dead against it and said that since the duke's orders were to eliminate the Norton Family specifically, the loot they got from the town was only a second priority and that the duke would only be satisfied if they were sent back after the Norton Family was defeated.

Since Knight Chevany was the main commander of the expedition, Knight Hennard could do naught but follow his instructions and let him lead 3000 troops to attack the Norton Family while he stayed behind at the town to enjoy himself without even bothering to take note of Chevany's battles. To him, if Chevany's attacks succeeded, he could claim half the credit for guarding the town. If it didn't, that might cause Chevany to retreat to Wildnorth Town and once again reconsider Hennard's advice to send the loot back to the duke before continuing on with the conquest. In the end, Hennard

believed that the stubborn old Chevany would be rebuked by the duke for not sending all the riches back in the first place while he would be credited for securing the loot and making sure that they ended up in the duke's hands.

The day before, Knight Chevany went back to the town and told him about the unfruitful battles as well as the casualties they incurred from being ambushed. He also warned Hennard to raise the defences of the town. While Hennard appeared to agree on the surface, he didn't take any of Chevany's words to heart because he thought that the Nortons were already being really defensive and the 300 or so mercenaries they hired were not that fearsome in the first place. To him, as long as the Norton Family's men were carefully kept within their bastide, the mercenaries they hired to do the surprise attacks outside wouldn't be able to continue their ambushes for long. Without the mercenaries' support, how could the Nortons even cause any trouble? As for the construction site at Morgan Hills, it was even simpler to deal with: as long as they conquer Maplewoods Bastide, the men over there would naturally surrender and the duke's forces didn't even need to send a single man to attack it.

Hennard also thought that Chevany's plan to use the supply convoy to bait for the Norton Family's forces into attacking them was nothing but a joke. *Even if you are going to ambush them, do you think that you'll be more familiar with the terrain than the mercenaries? If they discover your men when they are in hiding, then they simply just won't attack the supply convoy. That way, all your plans will be for naught.* However, Hennard did not mind lending Chevany the 300 longbowmen as he believed that a few hundred mercenaries would never have the guts to attack Wildnorth Town.

Currently, Knight Hennard took residence in the most luxurious mansion within the town that he had heard belonged to the leader of the Mollin Family. *It's so laughable… For commoners like them to even mimic nobles and form families of their own without even considering whether they're worthy of being called as such…* Having slaughtered all the people within, Hennard occupied the mansion without hesitation. Given his status as a Gold ranked knight, he was allowed to bring his personal attendants and servants along with him into battle. That was why he didn't require any of the original servants within the mansion. Apart from that, he picked four great beauties from the younger women within the town to wait on him.

The eldest of the four beauties was a maidservant that one of the garrison squad leaders had purchased for a high price while the other three were descendants of the four great families. With the four women as his companions, Hennard spent his days in Wildnorth Town with ultimate bliss and joy. Just that night, he drunk himself into

stupor and rolled around in bed with the four naked beauties.

All of a sudden, the door to his room was hammered onto urgently as a man called out loudly, "Sir… Sir! Wake up!"

Hennard snapped out of his drunken daze and curled his arms around the four women who were startled awake from the knocking while copping a feel in the meantime. Annoyed, he grumbled, "What are you doing screaming out loud like that? What's going on?"

The knocking finally stopped as the man outside said, "Sir! There's an enemy attack! They're already within the town!"

"What did you say?" The slightly hungover knight pushed the beauties away and got out of his bed. Without caring about the fact that he was nude, he opened the door and said, "Did you say that the enemy infiltrated the city?"

……

Looking at the grand mansion, Lorist thought, *we're finally here at the spot where the last enemy is located.* He knew that the house used to belong to the old fellow of the Mollin Family as Supervisor Kedan had personally told him about the it in detail. Thinking back, Lorist had wanted to send someone to infiltrate the town before. However, within a few short months, everything had changed so much. *I'm willing to bet that the old Mollin fellow didn't expect that his own family would have this kind of ending.*

The doors to the mansion opened and a metal-armored knight walked out with a group of other knights. The knight had a sword which radiated a golden blade glow while the other Silver ranked knights behind him held out their swords which emanated a silvery glow.

"I am Knight Hennard! Who dares to challenge me to a duel?"

Lorist dismounted and drew the longsword he had slung on his back as he walked forward.

"Milord…" Waxima said worriedly. Given that he didn't know about Lorist's battles in the past, he was really concerned as his lord was about to face off against a Gold ranked knight.

"Don't worry, milord will kill him like a chicken in no time," said Reidy as he stopped Waxima who was about to rush in and fight in Lorist's stead.

"That is the new family leader of the Norton Family," said one knight who had met Lorist once before when he accompanied Baron Camorra to Maplewoods Bastide.

"Oh…" mused Hennard as he started to look more energized. If he were able to take down the family leader of the Nortons, then he might have a chance at rectifying the whole fiasco which he had allowed to happen. Looking at the Norton Family soldiers that surrounded them, it was the only path he had left.

"Kill!" roared the Gold ranked knight as he waved his sword and sent three semilunar golden blades of light in Lorist's direction before he stepped forward speedily.

With a flick, a swipe and a flash of his sword, Lorist disintegrated the three light blades before he paid attention to the incoming knight and identifying the countless openings he had. *Given his shoddy footwork, it seems that he is still under the influence of alcohol and is unable to grasp his center of gravity properly. Sigh, there's no honor in defeating an alcoholic like him…*

Lorist casually dodged Knight Hennard's strike and planted his knee firm into the abdomen of the knight.

"Urk!" Hennard instantly collapsed onto his knees as he started vomiting nonstop without being able to catch his breath. With his sword cast aside and him wriggling on the ground as he vomited, the knight looked quite pathetic like a curled up shrimp.

"Tie him up," Lorist ordered, before he turned his gaze to the men who came with the knight.

With a loud clang, the knight who had met Lorist before dropped his sword and said bitterly, "I surrender…"

Chapter 136
Out of Options

Lorist pushed open the door to the room lightly and saw a bunch of huge wooden chests put together neatly with each of them having labels that denoted the type and quantity of coins contained within. After a rough count, he found that there were around 16 of those huge boxes within the room.

Leaving the room and closing the door, Lorist thought to himself, *the citizens of Wildnorth Town were actually saving up their wealth for the past 200 or so years within these four rooms… The hearts of people are truly difficult to fathom. To protect their hard-earned wealth, they were actually willing to conspire with the Duke of the Northlands to rebel against us, their own rulers, only to be sent to their deaths as a result of their own actions…*

"Seal these rooms. Make sure to assign some guards to overlook this place," Lorist told Reidy.

Reidy nodded and said, "Understood, milord."

"Waxima, how's it going over at your side?" Lorist asked.

Waxima replied, "After some checking, 631 young and virgin girls had been discovered to be kept within the yard nearby. The surrendered Silver ranked knight told me that the duke had ordered for those girls to be sold to slave traders for a huge sum. Other than that, there are up to 800 young women within the army camp and they look to be in a rather bad state from the treatment they received from the enemy soldiers… I also found quite a number of women within the houses of the Silver ranked knights which they have claimed for themselves. How should we deal with this?"

Lorist patted his forehead and said, "Bring the young women out of the camp and let them live with the girls. Given that the town is quite huge, I'm sure that many of them are relatives and it would probably be easier on them if they received consolation from each other. Give them some space to live in and supply them with food and water and let them take care of themselves. After this battle, we will bring them away. Given that there are so many youths at Firmrock Castle, it wouldn't hurt to add some women to

the population there to balance things out. I hope that when these women form new families in the future, they will be able to forget about the nightmare that is Wildnorth Town and start their new lives afresh…”

"Yes, milord. However, there were four other women within the mansion who were serving the Gold ranked knight. They're quite beautiful too, do you want…”

"Just send them away. I have no intention of doing that. As for the loot you guys find, pass them to Reidy so that he can process them after the whole conflict ends. Also, make sure the security at the place where the women will be staying at is tight. Don't let the mercenaries do any harm to them…” Lorist instructed.

"Yes, milord. I will pay extra attention to that," Waxima replied as he stood straight up.

"Milord, Jim has returned," reported Paulobins.

Surprised, Lorist said, "Why hasn't he entered yet? Doesn't he usually rush in without a second thought?"

Paulobins laughed before he said, "Jim said that after learning the etiquette of knights from Waxima, he would also act like one in the future…”

Lorist joined in the laughing and said, "Let him in. It sure is quite surprising that a guy like him would go out of his way to learn etiquette… And to think that I was planning on getting him a tutor for that after the conflict… It seems that it's no longer necessary."

Even though he still looked a little rough around the edges, Jim's accurate standing posture that was unlike his former relaxed slump impressed Lorist greatly.

"Milord, we have made sure that the secret route taken by the duke's men is no longer usable. This is a detailed map that we have drawn according to the terrain over there," Jim said as he passed a beastskin map to Lorist.

A few days back when they were camping within the forest, Jim complained that he was bored and had nothing to do and kept on bugging Lorist to be allowed to once again attack the enemy's main camp. Lorist then gave him a mission to investigate whether the path that Hausky had discovered is rendered completely unusable and survey the surrounding terrain in the meantime to construct a map.

Jim brought a few guards with him and returned within 6 days.

"Milord, you really attacked far too soon. You didn't bother to wait for me at all. I only just discovered that we've conquered the town after seeing the family flag flying at the walls," Jim complained.

"Hehe, opportunities like that don't come often you know. When the time comes to attack, there can be no hesitation. Who asked you to complain about boredom a few days back when we were at the forest? Then again, your survey of the area is quite a big accomplishment as well and the next step we have to take is to deal with the soldiers that are besieging Maplewoods Bastide. I want ensure that they won't get to depart from the route they came from. While entering the dominion was easy for them, I definitely will make it as hard as possible for them to leave. Jim, go take some rest and return to Maplewoods Bastide later tonight. Tell Knight Josk and Knight Pajik to bring two squads of family soldiers to tail the enemy from a distance if they decide to move their camp. If the enemy comes back to attack Wildnorth Town, have our forces from the bastide attack their camp from behind, understood?" Lorist asked.

Jim straightened his back and said, "Yes, milord."

"Paulobins, bring the surrendered Silver ranked knights over here. I have something I want to ask them," Lorist said.

The knights were rather honest and they replied to every question that was asked of them. They even revealed the arguments between Knight Hennard and Knight Chevany without missing out on the slightest detail.

"Then again, you said that the duke ordered Hennard and Chevany to bring two regiments of soldiers here, right? Then why are there only 4000 plus men in total? What about the other two companies?" Lorist asked.

One Silver ranked knight said, "Sir, each regiment left a company behind to watch over their main camp, so, only 4000 plus people were deployed for the expedition."

"I see," said Lorist as he nodded. "Why were the citizens of Wildnorth Town massacred? Weren't they the ones that led you lot into the dominion in the first place?"

"Sir, that was the Lord Duke's order," replied the knight. "The duke thought that traitorous and untrustworthy people like them were better off dead. He also believed that the people of the town have been stockpiling their wealth given that they've had

access to the smuggling route for up to 100 years, so, he wanted to take it all for himself. Even though Knight Hennard and Knight Chevany didn't wish to kill them that soon and planned to use them to help attack your family bastide, they were extremely uncooperative and came up with multitudes of excuses like being attacked by your forces and weren't willing to send any soldiers out. That's why Knight Chevany felt that it was better to wipe untrustworthy people like them out as soon as possible in one go by tricking all of them to gather in one place using the entitlement ceremony as an excuse."

Oh, so the townsfolk have themselves to blame for their untimely deaths as well, Lorist thought as he sighed inwardly. "Alright, you may go back. I will instruct the guards to treat you well."

"Wa-wait, sir. Can I pay a ransom to reacquire my freedom? I still have some savings left on myself and at home…" asked the knight hurriedly.

Lorist gave it some thought before he said, "Let's talk about this after the battle. I will consider your proposition."

"Then… Thank you, sir…"

……

Two days had already passed by the time Knight Chevany received news of Wildnorth Town's fall. Hilariously, they only found out about it because a few patrolling leather armored cavalrymen wanted to sneak off to the town to have fun with some women only to discover the Norton Family flag being flown at the walls of the town, causing them to rush back as quickly as they could to make the report.

At that time, Knight Chevany was in the middle of drinking some water and when he heard of the news, he dropped his cup in stupor. Within moments, he reasoned that the true reason they didn't receive any attacks for the past two days was due to that. The mercenaries who had been attacking their troops with guerilla tactics were all gathered at Wildnorth Town.

Whether Knight Hennard was okay at Wildnorth Town was none of Chevany's concern. He was instead considering whether there was a chance he could take the town back. Otherwise, the wealth gained from the massacred citizens of Wildnorth Town would never end up in the hands of the duke. While he would definitely be

rebuked if he failed to punish the Norton Family, his fate might end up being worse than that if the duke found that all the riches that he could've had ended up in another party's hands. The enraged duke might even strip him of his status as a knight and exile him from the Loggins Family. To Chevany, that was a humiliation he couldn't afford to bear for the rest of his life.

"Wrap up and get ready to move. Pack up all the camping gear and be prepared to attack Wildnorth Town," Knight Chevany ordered.

After keeping all their stuff, the whole group of soldiers headed towards the town and by the time they arrived, it was already the evening. Ignoring the cries of fatigue of his soldiers, the anxious knight commander ordered his men to fell more trees to construct siege ladders during the night so that they could besiege the town on the next morning.

After having breakfast the next day, Knight Chevany rallied his men into formation and marched towards the town with 20 siege ladders. From his estimates, even if the Norton Family took over the town with the aid of mercenaries, they must have lost quite a number of their own men considering that over 700 soldiers of the Northland Army, one Gold ranked knight and a few other Silver ranked knights were stationed there. No matter whether the Nortons used a surprise attack or some other tactic to occupy the town, it was hard to imagine the few men they have left would be able to defend it effectively. That way, Chevany felt that the 2000 plus soldiers led by him would be enough to put pressure and break through the defense of the Nortons and allow him to take the town during the first wave of attacks.

Lorist stood on the walls and stared coldly at the enemy that was approaching gradually from a distance. Further away near a small hill, a green smoke signal could be seen spiraling towards the sky. That was the signal they had agreed on and it signified that Josk and the others were already near the enemy camp and were ready to attack at any time.

"Hehe, they really plan to take back the town in one fell swoop? They only have a measly 2000 plus people… I really don't know where Knight Chevany got the confidence for that…" Lorist mused before he turned back to the four mercenary leaders and said, "Have your men come back up here. I no longer need him to stay hidden. Back when we took the town, our victory has already been set. Tell your crew members that I will reward one gold Forde for each enemy killed during the first wave of attacks."

The four mercenary leaders were rather satisfied with that arrangement as they had earned quite a huge sum of money from working for the Norton Family this time around. Other payments aside, the loot that the mercenaries collected were enough to make them smile with joy uncontrollably. The soldiers of the duke were nothing but moving crates of money to them and each of their money pouches contained at least 4 to 5 gold Fordes. To mercenaries like them who fought with their lives on the line for a living, that was already one or two year's worth of income.

Even though the riches were gained from the massacred folk of the town, according to the original agreement, the loot of dead soldiers belonged to anyone who killed them. That's why the mercenaries did not fear the superior number of enemies at all and were delighting in the thought of the extra money they could make.

Upon seeing more and more troops equipped with grey leather armor appear on the walls, Knight Chevany's confidence sunk and he thought that the situation had far surpassed his expectations. *Are these really the mercenaries the Norton Family hired? No way, given how desolate the dominion of the Norton Family is, how did they find so many mercenaries to employ? There's almost a thousand of them… However, if they really are the family soldiers of the Nortons, then the duke really has made a huge mistake this time and has severely underestimated their true might…*

"Stop advancing!" ordered Chevany as he raised his hand. "Longbowmen, march forward and suppress the enemies who are defending the walls. Sword and shield infantry, ready your defenses…"

As the longbowmen shot their arrows in parabolic arcs at the walls, the guards defending it raised their shields and wooden boards. Another 100 or so soldiers on the walls counterattacked with their own longbows.

While the duke's longbowmen were suppressing the soldiers on the walls, other soldiers holding long siege ladders quickly approached it. As they placed their wooden boards and used them to cross the moat, their allied longbowmen stopped firing and rushed forward along with the sword and shield infantry. The guards on the walls then shot their arrows directly downwards at the sword and shield infantry and the pikemen of the enemies.

Having lost the defensive support of the sword and shield infantry, the casualties beneath the walls soared all of a sudden, however that was still worth it in Knight Chevany's eye as 10 plus of the 20 siege ladders have already been laid with soldiers

ascending upwards to the walls.

Contrary to his expectations, however, the guards on the walls cheered as each soldier of the Northland Army reached them. Normal guards would fight for their lives to make sure that none reached the top of the walls instead, causing Chevany to feel both confused and intrigued at the same time.

The situation on the walls seem to already be set. The four mercenary crews each took a side of the wall where five or six of siege ladders were placed. Every time an enemy soldier got up, there would be up to 5 mercenaries waiting for him. Given their superior combat abilities, it didn't take long for the Northland Army soldiers to perish under the blade and pike of the mercenaries. After killing off the invading soldiers, the mercenaries stacked the bodies together for loot collection after end of the battle.

"Sol, are they treating the ladders like a monster spawners?" Lorist stared at the whole situation, dumbfounded. Currently, Waxima, Jim, and tens of other guards were completely unharmed despite the enemy rushing up onto the walls so relentlessly.

Knight Chevany was getting even more confused. *Why does it seem like chaos is not breaking out on the walls even though so many soldiers have went up? Even the Silver ranked knights I sent up seemed to have disappeared completely…*

The more he waited, the more anxious he got. The bad omen he felt got worse the longer he waited. Just as he was unsure of whether the battle was going well for him or not, loud, savage cries rang out from behind him. Turning to his back, the knight saw a group of soldiers slaughtering away at his camp and setting fire to the tents. The single squad of pike infantry soldiers were so terrified that they were running desperately away from their enemies within the sea of flames like cowardly rats.

"Blow the horn! Retreat! Everyone, retreat and save the main camp!" shouted Knight Chevany who was at his wit's end.

……

The casualties were far too huge. The original 2300 plus soldiers were only left with 1700 and the first attack took the lives of more than 500 of their men whose bodies were nowhere to be found. The Silver ranked knights that served Knight Chevany were also mowed down to fewer than ten people.

"More than half of the supplies in the camp have been destroyed within the fires and

the remaining ones that we managed to salvage can last us at most 5 more days at two meals per day. Sir, if we don't turn this around by taking the town, we are going to be completely crushed…" reported the logistics officer.

Knight Chevany let out a long sigh before he said, "You may go back. I need some time to think…"

After sitting in deep thought for a long time, Knight Chevany took out a blank beastskin and started writing a letter. He described every detail about the expedition from the massacre of the Wildnorth Town citizens and the riches he found there as well as the fortifications of the walls of Maplewoods Bastide and the trap which he fell for that caused him to lose control of the town. The whole letter was so lengthy that it took up a number of beastskins. After that, he rolled them all up and put them into a silver tube which he then sealed with candle wax before he called for his two other attendants.

"I will bring the army back tomorrow. The two of you should hide yourselves well and when nobody is scouting around this area after our departure, try to sneak out from the entry at Morgan Hills. Make sure the contents within this silver tube reach the hands of our Lord Duke, understood?"

One of the attendants asked curiously, "Sir, why do we need to do it this roundabout way?"

Knight Chevany sighed again as he said, "I suspect that we will no longer be able to return. The Norton Family has already forced us into this predicament and they'll definitely not let us off so easily. I myself am not sure of what would happen during our trip back, so I have decided to send you two to return to the duke using the route through Morgan Hills as insurance. Make sure to be extra careful; this letter must definitely reach the hands of the duke so that he will be informed of the true strength of the Norton Family…"

……

When Lorist saw the enemy pack up and leave for the direction of the hidden path they used to enter the dominion, he was elated. *They're heading the way of their deaths. It appears that the enemy is still unaware that the route had already been destroyed.* Lorist brought Josk and the mercenaries from the four crews and two squads of family soldiers to tail the duke's men from their rear.

When the enemy entered the long caverns, Lorist had his men seal off the entrance and awaited their eventual return.

After two days, a huge battle seemed to have erupted within the caverns and during the afternoon, a Silver ranked knight holding up a white flag could be seen walking towards Lorist.

Chapter 137
Aftermath Matters

Pierce! The longsword entered his chest and emerged from his back.

Knight Chevany froze up as his hand lost all its grip and released his sword, letting it fall to the ground…

Lorist looked at him with a sympathetic gazed and said, "What was the point in doing this?"

As blood started flowing out of his mouth, Chevany said, "A fai-failure of a commander like me… Doesn't de-deserve any sympathy. I-it's all because of my impotence th-that caused the expedition to f-fail and the whole army t-to be decimated… Only… only with my death c-can I atone for my mistakes for the d-duke…"

"It's not your fault," Lorist consoled. "The real mistake was the duke's decision to stretch out his claws to the Norton Family after his eyes were clouded by his greed. Actually, you've already done pretty well and even caused me to be unable to find any opportunities to deal with your main camp. If it wasn't for the lax soldiers within the town that allowed us to conquer it, I don't know how long this battle would have lasted…"

"Is… is that so…" said Knight Chevany as his speech started to slow. After that, he spread both his arms as he fell to the ground with his face looking skyward while wearing a tranquil, smiling expression on his face.

Lorist looked at the knight who had collapsed solemnly before he said softly, "I wish you a pleasant journey…"

……

On the 29th day of the 8th month in Year 1767 of the Grindian Calendar, of the 4000 men sent by Duke Loggins of the Northlands to eliminate the Norton Family, only 1279 survived after they surrendered to the Nortons at a nameless cavern within the Bladedge Mountains. The expedition of the duke ended with his complete loss.

The commander of the Northland Army, the head of the family knights of the duke and the head of that expedition, Three Star Gold ranked Knight Chevany, was forced into a corner by the forces of the Norton Family and requested for an honorable duel to the death from the newly-appointed head of the Norton Family, Norton Lorist, and passed away at the age of 53.

……

Back then, the Silver ranked knight who held the white flag told Lorist that Knight Chevany was willing to order his men to surrender to the Norton Family without any resistance on the condition that he be allowed a chance to challenge Lorist to a life-and-death duel. Despite the objection of Josk, Waxima and the others, Lorist accepted that condition.

To Lorist, it wasn't difficult for him to face off against a Three Star Gold ranked knight like Chevany. His aim was to force the knight to give up and admit defeat. However, Chevany fought with the intention of dying in the first place and didn't care about his own safety. Taking risky moves that put himself in harm's way to attack Lorist incessantly, he gave Lorist quite a bit of trouble.

It was also the first time the other people present there witnessed Lorist's skill with the sword and his tenacity. Waxima and the other four mercenary leaders were flabbergasted by Lorist's performance; nobody could have imagined that the Iron ranked Lorist who couldn't even manifest a blade glow would be able to match up against a Three Star Gold Knight and even take the upper hand, as was shown with his constant suppressing of the knight's attacks. Had it not been for the fact that he had shown mercy as he was unwilling to take the knight's life, Knight Chevany would have been crushed in the beginning seconds of the duel.

The longer he fought, the more hopelessness Chevany felt. He understood that he wasn't Lorist's match and he felt that being shown mercy by the enemy was a humiliating thing. That's why when Lorist stabbed forward with the intention of forcing Chevany to duck backwards, Chevany chose not to and rushed straight into the sword. Lorist, unable to retract his blade in time, watched as his sword pierced through the abdomen of the knight.

……

The 1000 plus men of the Northland Army who surrendered were disarmed and

swept of their belongings completely before they were placed under the supervision of the family soldiers and were ordered to set up their camp. The surrendered Silver ranked knight told Lorist that many of the soldiers went nuts and started killing each other within the dark cavern when they noticed that their only escape route had been destroyed, resulting in the deaths of more than 400 of their own. That was why Chevany had decided to surrender for the sake of allowing his men to live while he resolved to die himself. Even if he had managed to defeat Lorist, Chevany had planned to end his own life.

Lorist on the other hand stayed near the nameless cavern for three more days and he ordered the surrendered soldiers to once again enter it and retrieve the bodies of their comrades and bury them within the cavern and had the surrendered logistics officer make markings of their names on makeshift gravestones so that their family members could one day pay them tribute. He also had a marker stone erected with the new name of the cavern, 'Chevany Cave', carved into it as a memorial to remember Knight Chevany by.

To Lorist, the battle itself was fairly straightforward; the troublesome part was the aftermath. That was especially the case given the massacre of the folk of Wildnorth Town which had led to numerous problems which he had to settle. The moment he returned to Wildnorth Town, he met with a messenger sent over from Firmrock Castle bearing Shadekampf's letter that reported that the knighthood competition would end in another three days and according to tradition, the organizers, Viscount Kenmays and Lorist, had to show up at the closing banquet to show their respect for the victors of the competition. Shadekampf hoped that Lorist would attend even if the battle was still ongoing so that they wouldn't be accused of being disrespectful.

It was fortunate that the battle had ended within 20 or so days. Lorist instructed Josk and Paulobins to bring two squads of family soldiers to escort the surrendered troops back to Firmrock Castle while he stayed at Wildnorth Town for another two days so that he could settle some more matters before he returns to the bastide. He also sent a few orders to the supervisors at Firmrock Castle: he ordered Butler Boris to move the laborers and their family members who were within the castle back outside the camp as the battle was over and there were no longer under threat outside. Their moving out would also allow for the construction work to continue.

He ordered Old Man Balk to bring someone to accompany Grandmaster Sid to forage the nearby mountains for iron veins and other construction materials. Supervisor Kedan's task was to manage and delegate work for the surrendered soldiers when Josk

and Paulobins bring them over. Lastly, Lorist sent a letter to Telesti to inform her that the threat is already no more along with some cringey flirtatious statements. He also stated that she could start designing the valley city after she finished making arrangements for the construction work.

Lorist honestly felt that Telesti was a great candidate for being the wife of him, the baron of the Norton Family. While she wasn't among the ranks of the most stunning beauties in Grindia, she definitely looked quite pleasant with her decent figure and fair skin. The most important point of hers that Lorist admired was her wise and knowledgeable aura that fit Lorist's tastes. Moreover, Telesti was unlike most other noble ladies who only knew how to dress up and demand to be spoiled; she was also a scholar. Just like a certain saying in Lorist's previous life, while Telesti could definitely progress far in her life by relying on her looks, she didn't do that and instead focused on her studies and research. Her independent and headstrong personality was what attracted Lorist the most.

As he spent time with her, Lorist knew that she felt some attraction for him, given that she tolerates his insolent acts like hugging and kissing her once in a while. Even though it always ended with her being mad, it was more of a kneejerk reaction due to her being too ashamed to admit her hidden desires. She wasn't willing to renounce the oath she made to stay single and strive only for truth and knowledge. That was also a rather troublesome issue for Lorist. He was quite frustrated that she would take that kind of inhumane oath out of all other oaths that could be made.

Having received his order, Supervisor Spiel rushed over as soon as possible to take charge of making an inventory of the supplies and wealth gained from Wildnorth Town. Lorist was prepared to move everything that he could use to Maplewoods Bastide and abandon Wildnorth Town altogether. What he had to focus on was constructing a proper valley city at Morgan Hills. As for the acres of farmland that was cultivated at Wildnorth Town, while it was a waste to not utilize it, there was nothing much he could do about it but think of it as giving the land a period of time to recover. He would make a proper decision when Charade and the rest of the convoy arrives.

The four mercenary crews were also paid in full. All the crew leaders felt that working for the Nortons was an extremely worthwhile effort as they got paid quite highly and didn't lose many men throughout the battles. Compared to some other dominion lords who only used mercenaries as enemy fodder to take the brunt of battle, the young Norton Family leader himself frequently rushed into battle with the mercenaries following tightly behind him. Taking the last battle at Wildnorth Town for example,

even though the mercenaries were utilized as the main defense for the town, they had done so willingly because the money pouches of the enemy soldiers were filled to the brim with coins.

Waxima and Jim on the other hand escorted the surviving womenfolk of Wildnorth Town back to Maplewoods Bastide. No matter their past, they were still relatives to many of the people within the bastide. Lorist planned to let them rest up for a bit before sending them to Firmrock Castle where they will be free to form new relationships and families with the youths over there and start their life afresh, effectively leaving their torturous past behind.

There was still one remaining problem to be solved, and that was the disbandment of Hausky's mercenary squad. 20 or so of them were willing to join the forces of the Norton Family while 30 plus others and some injured mercenaries were not willing to leave their life of freedom and joined the four mercenary crews within the past few days. However, that caused the intersection point at the Magical Dragon Mountains to be unguarded. If the Norton Family sent a squad of soldiers to defend it, that would affect Lorist's future plans. After giving it some thought, Lorist decided to pick one from the four mercenary crews and contract them for the defense of that area.

The crew that Lorist favored the most was the Razorpike Mercenary Crew as they were formed by retired military officers and commoners and were the most disciplined among the rest. It could be seen from the results of the battle that they have the lowest number of casualties while also being the ones who raked in the most gains. However, their leader Sandro refused the offer as he had already agreed to take up two other missions and had to go fulfill them.

The second person Lorist seeked out was Crew Leader Richard of the Cromwell Mercenary Crew. Similarly, he refused to accept the contract as he was worried that his crew would lose quite a bit of men from fighting the barbarians. Lorist then offered the same contract to the Nightbat Mercenary Crew Leader Ulampmaxin. As the oldest of the mercenaries, he didn't refuse Lorist's offer outright, but he stated that the pay offered was too low and demanded for 100 gold Fordes every month as well as an increase in the bonus for the number of barbarians killed.

That demand was so laughable that Lorist couldn't even get angry even if he wanted to. The price at which he paid Hausky's Silver ranked squad members in the past was 1 imperial gold coin per month while Iron and Bronze ranked members got 50 imperial silver coins each month. The total would only amount to a little more than

100 gold Fordes per year. It was quite ridiculous for the Nightbat Mercenary Crew to request for 10 times the price even though they only have twice the members of Hausky's squad.

The Pentasword Mercenary Crew on the other hand accepted Lorist's offer without a second thought but they also brought out a condition of their own. The leaders hoped that the family members of the crew members would be allowed to move into the Norton Family dominion and become subjects of the Nortons, which caused Lorist to be quite surprised.

The leaders of the crew said that there was no other choice. They mentioned that the crew was originally formed from members from a few different villages with the aim of earning enough to pay off their oppressive dominion lord that demanded huge amounts of tax. Recently, the taxation got even worse and the citizens of the villages could no longer hold out. While the mercenary crew could defend the citizens from military oppression, taxation was not something they could avoid. To add to that, their villages were near Windbury City and they frequently got harassed by the soldiers of the kingdom.

After participating in the operation with Lorist, the five leaders of the crew made up their minds as they found the way the Norton Family treated their own subjects to be exceedingly benevolent. After seeing the abandoned farmlands of Wildnorth Town, they felt that it was a good opportunity for them to move over.

Lorist was elated at the proposition as the dominion lacked people the most. He expressed his welcome to not only the family members of the crew but also the rest of the citizens of the villages to move into his dominion with the promise that they would be granted farmland as long as they move over and that he would only tax them 30% of their harvests as well as 10% of other miscellaneous economic activities such as fishing, hunting, firewood gathering, etc. If any household had members serving in the Norton Family's military, they would also receive many tax exemptions.

One of the leaders, Doboff, was extremely excited to hear that as his village had to pay a tax of 70% of their harvest and 50% in other categories as well, causing his family and friends to be unable to live comfortable lives and being unable to sustain themselves for the long run. Lorist threw in another offer and said that all the mercenary crew members would receive the same benefits that the family soldiers did in that there would be a regular pension should any member of the crew perish from facing off against the mountain barbarians.

With that settled, it was time to consider how to free the villages from the grasps of their dominion lord. Doboff said he was quite confident that he could pull that off and Lorist gave him two months' time and 50 gold Fordes as a deposit, causing Doboff to rush to begin his plan excitedly.

After handling all those matters, Lorist let out a breath of relief and handed the task of moving the supplies and riches at Wildnorth Town to Waxima, Spiel and Pajik while he returned to Maplewoods Bastide with Reidy. After greeting the old butler and checking on Belnick's health condition as well as spending a steamy night with Irina, he left for Firmrock Castle with Reidy and Jim on the next day.

Chapter 138
News of the Kenmays Family

Lorist felt that he had failed quite horribly as a dominion lord. Recalling the days when he was first transported to Grindia, he had endeavored to read as many books as he could to understand the new, foreign world he found himself in, including even novels about knights that were rather popular reads. However, all such novels depicted nobles and dominion lords to be people who spent all day enjoying luxuries and fine wine while being surrounded by beauties. They were either busy organizing dance parties or flirting with other noble ladies and if they were bored, they would hunt and organize knight competitions. Even if war broke out, nobles would sit behind their armies as there were more than enough heroic knights who were willing to do their bidding and fighting in their steads on the frontlines. Some nobles were even depicted to have epic romantic encounters on the battlefield.

Looking back at himself, he had been running all over the place to complete his tasks like a dog and there was still so much to do. Even though he had many subordinates, most of the things had to be settled by him personally as they involved decisions that only he, the lord, could make. In the case of battles, he also participated in them personally and rushed at the very front. *According to the books, I'm no dominion lord. I'm just a coolie!*

Besides that, before he even rested after he arrived at Firmrock Castle, a huge group of people were lined up outside his room waiting to make their reports.

The first group was Telesti and her Iron ranked butler, who stated her intentions after giving a respectful bow: Telesti hoped that Lorist would see her in one or two days to solve the problem of the wells and the castle's water supply.

Curious about the issue, Lorist asked about it and understood after hearing the explanation. The new residential area had two solutions for their water supply. The first was to make a well at every household, which would mean that the workload would be huge. The second was to have a well for each street district. But that might cause some congestion when the residents line up to get water. There was also the fact that wells were hard to construct given that the castle was built right beside the

mountain. Telesti hoped that Lorist could make his decision as soon as possible.

Sigh, they're even asking me about matters like this… My head hurts! The next person who entered was Supervisor Kedan who had seen the captives Josk and gang brought over. He had no idea what to let the captives do.

Lorist said tiredly, "What do you have to hesitate about? Just let them gather building materials since they're energetic soldiers. The hardworking ones will get better food while the lazy ones will get the whip. If some try to escape, just hang them. Let the laborers who were originally doing all that be their managers to monitor and correct their work. After that, have Ovidis send some family soldiers there daily to do surveillance on the captives."

After that was Butler Boris. He reported many trivial matters like how the liquor stores of the castle were nearly empty. Ever since the business sector was completed, two taverns started operating and the laborers who had recently gained freedom and payment would go there to drink a cup or two to pass time. Similarly, the family soldiers and the immigrants also did the same, causing the two taverns to boom with business. However, given that the alcohol sold there had been taken from the Redriver Valley Bastide, it was bound to run out sooner or later. Coupled with the knighthood competition organized jointly by the Nortons and the Kenmayses which required them to provide a huge amount of free alcohol, the remaining stock within the warehouses could only last for five days at most.

"Gosh, if we're running out, then start producing some. Common ale is the easiest to make. Just go check if any of the immigrants or laborers have any experience in producing ale and the problem will be solved," Lorist said.

"But, milord, last time you mentioned that food supply was the most important resource in a battle and put Supervisor Hansk in charge of it. Now that we are still constructing the city, no agricultural work has been done and there wasn't any harvest for the past two years. The food we took from Redriver Valley Bastide would only last us for one year or two at the most and given the increasing population within the castle, consumption would increase as well. How can we spare any more of that to make ale with?" asked Butler Boris.

Wow, he even quoted my words… Lorist held his forehead and said, "That's no longer an issue. Let Hansk make more ale with the food we have. I'm sure you've heard that the duke slaughtered the folks at Wildnorth Town and after defeating them, we

discovered enough food within the town to last us for 5 years. Thus, the food problem is solved and I will have Maplewoods Bastide send some over after a period of time.

"Oh? You haven't left yet? Is there anything else?" Lorist asked.

"Um, it's about this…" Butler Boris said hesitantly. "We've arrested a few women who were working as prostitutes within the camp…"

"Huh…" Lorist mused as he focused his attention on this topic as any man would. "Where are these women from? Why would they work as prostitutes within the camp?"

"Two of them are new immigrants who came over from the Kenmays Family's dominion and they started seducing men after they were brought over here. Another five were originally slaves who felt that the work delegated to them was too tiring after regaining their freedom and returned to their old jobs."

Lorist had heard Butler Boris mention once that the 200 or so female slaves were originally meant to be 'rewards' for the laborers of the Kenmays Family in that the workers that performed well could spend a night with one of the women.

"Milord, according to their testimony, there are tens more women who are like them that fortunately weren't arrested by us. How should we deal with this? I need your advice…" the butler asked.

"Sigh…" Lorist crept back to his table and said, "Why the heck would we punish them? If they are willing to do it, let them continue. Men need women and the opposite is true as well. We need each other. Given that the men far outnumber the women at Firmrock Castle, and most of them are healthy and virile youths, they require an outlet for their sexual needs. How about this, Butler Boris, go build a brothel so that the prostitutes can be managed by us more easily. We will offer them protection from harm and a safe environment for their work in exchange of 30% of their earnings."

"Milord, other dominion lords would collect 70% of it…"

"Forget it. They work hard to earn their money and it's already enough for us to take 30% of it. Also, issue a notice that private prostitutes who are found to be operating without permission will be punished for one year of unpaid labor in the brothel if they are captured."

Sheesh! What's wrong with this world... A dominion lord like me is actually managing prostitutes like a pimp, how agonizing... After Butler Boris left, Lorist started to sigh again. However, he had no choice but to meet the rest of the people outside.

This time, two people entered the room at once. Lorist seemed to recognize the two.

The elder one stepped forward, stood straight and reported, "Milord, the both of us have been sent by Sir Patt to check on the forces of the Kenmays Family. We only just returned yesterday."

Lorist finally recalled that they were the members of his personal guard who used to be bandits and understood why their faces seemed so familiar to him. However, Lorist still couldn't remember their names.

"Ah, yeah. Don't just stand there, grab a seat. There're chairs right there. Your mission must have been tiring. Fortunately, you were careful enough to not be detected and returned here safely. Sit down and tell me about your findings."

"Thanks, milord," said the two guards. The first thing that came out of their mouths startled Lorist quite a bit. "Milord, the Kenmays Family forces have successfully conquered the dominion of Count Lopez."

"What? Count Lopez's dominion? Where is it?" Lorist said as he searched frantically around the beastskin map of the Northlands but was ultimately unable to find it.

"Get Butler Boris, Shadekampf and Old Man Balk here. Oh, Balk has gone with Grandmaster Sid to search for resources… Oh well, just get Boris and Shadekampf here first."

……

"I recall that there was a map at the Redriver Valley Bastide that depicted the locations of the new noble families that were just recently entitled by the Second Prince. It should be somewhere around here, go look for it," said Boris to Shadekampf who didn't know who Count Lopez was.

Seemingly recalling something about a map thanks to the reminder, Shadekampf searched around and found it in the end.

"Look, milord. The small hill over here is on the border of Viscount Kenmays's

dominion and Count Lopez's dominion. It's only ten or so meters tall without any water source and is quite barren. After the forces of the Kenmays Family entered the bastide of Count Lopez, we mingled with the civilians by disguising ourselves as a group of mercenaries who were tasked to collect medicinal herbs near the Magical Dragon Mountains and infiltrated the bastide. We heard that the count did indeed request Viscount Kenmays for help to resist the barbarian invasion. It seems that the count fought a battle with them and incurred huge casualties while he himself got injured pretty badly. The citizens within the bastide were all afraid that the barbarians would succeed in their invasion as well," the elder guard said.

"Hm? That's weird, isn't this year the Kubawesson Festival? The mountain barbarians shouldn't be invading Count Lopez's dominion at all," said Lorist, wondering curiously about the situation.

"Milord, it was said that Count Lopez attacked them first. One day, the troops he led encountered a group of barbarian farmers and they launched an attack to steal all their livestock. In the end, they were attacked by a lot of barbarian cavalrymen when they were on their way back and that hard fought battle caused the count to be injured and many of his men to be sacrificed. The barbarians didn't continue their chase and merely said that they would settle the debt once the festival is over, so Count Lopez called Viscount Kenmays to send some troops over to prepare him for the upcoming invasion."

Oh my, even if you had a death wish, this doesn't seem like a nice way to go… Can it be that the count doesn't know that it's the Kubawesson Festival this year? Those livestock were sacrifices to their god for their ceremony at Smormilgen Mountain. Uncultured people like the count sure are scary… For him to even dare to violate their sacred traditions and steal their sacrifice without knowing… Lorist really didn't know whether he should praise the count for his bravery or be awed with his greed.

"Back then, I also thought that the viscount was truly going to help the count out, so I had prepared to return on the second day," said the younger guard. "But as I had drunk quite a bit of alcohol on the first night, I got up rather late the next day and discovered that a curfew has been enacted by the forces of the viscount and while entry to the bastide was allowed, nobody could leave. Also, the bastide of the count was also flying the three-ringed flag of the Kenmays Family…"

"Up until the night before, we received some news at the tavern that Count Lopez had passed away from his serious injuries. Before he died, it was said that the count had

willed for the dominion to be passed on to the hands of Viscount Kenmays as the count didn't have a son of his own and his two daughters were far away at the royal capital. The viscount even managed to inherit the noble title of Count Lopez. Ever since, the Kenmays Family has sent some people to officially apologize to the mountain barbarians and compensate for the count's mistakes. Rumors said that the compensation even included Count Lopez's head…

"The non-citizens within the bastide were only let out after three days of curfew and the Kenmays Family also announced that they wanted to recruit new soldiers and would offer a tax exemption for those who sign up. They seemed intent on having all the youths within the bastide join them and the both of us were even held and questioned for two whole days. However, using our cover as mercenaries who were sent on a mission, they didn't do anything to us.

"When we left, we noticed that the guards within the castle were no longer the soldiers the viscount brought over at first. After searching around, we found a trail left by a huge band of people heading in another direction. We followed it and spent a day to reach this spot here and it seemed to be a dominion of another noble. However, it has also been conquered by the Kenmayses as the castle was also flying the flag of the Kenmays Family."

"Viscount Sartre…" Lorist mused as he looked at the marked location on the beastskin map.

"I know Viscount Sartre. He was a noble back during the days of the former empire and all his family members died during the years of civil war. His dominion had also been laid to waste during the chaos. After the formation of the Second Prince's kingdom, his original dominion was occupied by the Second Prince. To avoid being criticized by other nobles, the Second Prince gave the viscount another dominion somewhere in the Northlands as a replacement. He was simply an old and lonely noble," said Butler Boris.

The elder guard hurriedly continued his report, "We no longer dared to enter the bastide again and we stayed in the wilderness to keep watch from afar. Three days later, the Kenmays Family's forces set out and headed east. Tailing them from behind, we ended up at Baron Ankaport's dominion where the Kenmayses set up camp outside the castle. We saw a group of people who seemed to be the leaders of the army entering the town for a visit, so we remained near them. All of a sudden during midnight, sounds of killing and fighting broke out from within the castle, followed by

the opening of the gates and the lowering of the drawbridge. The forces of the Kenmayses subsequently rushed in and during daybreak, the flag of the Kenmays Family replaced the original one of the castle.

"So we stayed outside the town for another 5 more days and discovered that the Kenmays Family's forces have left a company of guards at the castle of the baron and headed back to the dominion of Viscount Sartre and left another company of men there too. The remaining forces then returned to the dominion of the Kenmayses and we followed them back here."

Lorist opened his drawers and took out two grey-colored money pouches which were made from goat leather. Those were actually prepared by Shadekampf for Lorist to use as rewards and each of them contained five imperial gold coins.

Lorist handed the pouches to the two guards as he said, "Thank you for your hard work. This is your reward, take it. Make sure to rest up and relax when you go back."

"Thank you, milord," said the two guards before they left.

Sol, the Kenmays Family really did make a great move… Lorist finally understood the real reason why the Kenmays Family wanted to make up with the Norton Family despite the losses they had suffered. Given that the Norton Family had antagonized the duke and were occupied with him, they used the opportunity to solve their other problems while the duke had his attention focused on the Norton Family. *So they targeted the dominion lords of the Eastern Northlands… What a wise move they have taken…*

"Milord, I still don't understand why the Kenmays Family did what they did. Viscount Sartre and Count Lopez are both newly-entitled nobles of the Northlands like them, and Count Lopez is also favored by the Second Prince. Doesn't the Kenmays Family fear the backlash of swallowing up the count's dominion?" asked Butler Boris.

"Hehe, they definitely have their own reasons for daring to do so," Lorist said as he smiled coldly. "Their plot was definitely well-executed. Knowing that Duke Loggins had his attention on us, they used the opportunity to conquer the eastern area. Look at the map here, the dominion of Viscount Kenmays, Count Lopez, Viscount Sartre, Baron Ankaport already make up the most of the Eastern Northlands. I'm sure that the smaller nobles there will also fall to the Kenmayses as well…

"When the Kenmays Family take over the whole of the Eastern Northlands, they will be free to reign and even Duke Loggins wouldn't be able to do anything to them. I'm sure that the Northlands will once again descend into a period of chaos."

"Then, milord, should we also cause some trouble for the Kenmays Family so that they don't complete their conquest of the Eastern Northlands so quickly?" Shadekampf asked.

Lorist lowered his head and made some quick calculations before he said, "It's already too late, and we don't have the manpower and resources for that either. Don't forget that after Duke Loggins hears about the decimation of his 4000-strong army, he will be completely enraged and send more men over here as payback. What we have to focus on now is to complete the construction of Firmrock Castle as soon as possible and train our family forces while also making some other preparations for the invasion of the Northland Army."

Chapter 139
Celebratory Banquet

Outside the walls of Firmrock Castle, large grandiose tents could be seen with colorful bunting flags strung all over. The spot where the knights originally fought had a huge red carpet placed all over it and rows of long wooden tables and benches were placed upon it. On the tables, various dishes could be seen including smoked beef, baked apples, fist-sized white bread, huge pieces of grilled mutton, etc. Other than that, a huge basket filled with blue strawberries, a specialty of the Northlands, were free for the taking as well.

It was the closing ceremony of the knighthood competition that the Norton Family and the Kenmays Family jointly organized. Wandering knights, freelance knights and family knights were all seated at the tables regardless of status, heartily munching away at the food and enjoying the alcohol. Some of them were even offering food to the commoners that were serving them.

All of the wandering and freelance knights were wearing a knight badge made of iron while the family knights mostly wore a silver knight badge. In the Battle Force-driven world of Grindia, that was an invisible wall that clearly differentiated the statuses of the various knights.

It was also rather difficult for one to obtain the certification required for a knight badge. In most cases, only landed noble families, huge armies, Gold ranked knights and academies that had the qualification for knight training could issue such badges given the authority and status it provided to the bearer. If wandering or freelance knights passed on their skills to their successors, they could also pass on their knight badges as well. Lorist himself owned a knight badge as he had completed the knight training course back in his days at the Dawn Academy.

Once one reached the Iron rank, received training for the skills and etiquette of a knight as well as having a bit of family background and paying some fees, one would receive a knight badge and become a squire. If one reached the Silver rank, one would become a proper knight and be able to choose the path of wandering and freelance knights or pledge oneself in service of a lord. Naturally, most poorer commoners could

choose to become attendants to a knight and slowly rise to the ranks of a proper knight as well.

For example, the leader of the Cromwell Mercenary Crew, Richard, was a One Star Gold fighter but he didn't have a knight badge. That would mean that he didn't have the right to join the other knights at the table. However, as a One Star Gold Mercenary, he naturally received invites to the banquet from other dominion lords and didn't have to sit together with the knights anyway.

As for poor old Jim, he was merely a Silver ranked mercenary and given that he didn't own a proper knight badge, not even that of the Norton Family, he could only pout and lie on the walls of the castle as he looked at the ex-bandit Ovidis and Patt bring their badges to enjoy the food that was served there. Given his merrymaking-loving personality, Jim hated that he couldn't join in the festivities and was nagging and cursing bitterly at the other two to spoil their teeth and hurt their stomachs from overeating.

Lorist on the other hand was dressed in formal garments. The formal attire for nobles of the Krissen Empire had a rather simple design: it was a large white robe with a straight collar which was worn with a V-shaped sash which was draped over the head. The sash was rather wide and it extended down from each shoulder all the way to the knees. An intricate belt was then wrapped around the waist to fasten the sash with the robe.

The sky-blue sash looked really grand as its sides had laurel leaves that were embroidered with golden thread with a blooming jasmine flowers amidst them. That was the insignia of the Krissen Royal Family which identified that the Norton Family was under the jurisdiction of no one but their members. In the middle of the sash was a golden roaring, raging bear and a small golden sword. The bear was the insignia of the Norton Family while the golden sword represented the status of the Norton Family as one that became landed nobles due to military achievements.

Shadekampf said, "Milord, you look extremely good in this attire, very noble and exalted…"

This was actually Lorist's first time wearing those clothes and he felt quite uncomfortable in them. Even so, he had no choice as he had to attend the banquet of the nobles later and he had to be in formal attire for the function.

"How is Miss Telesti's health?" Lorist asked.

Shadekampf shook his head and said, "She's still down. I've asked Vinny but she said that the young miss was unwilling to get up from her bed."

Lorist originally wanted to invite Telesti to attend the banquet with him. The night before, he went to her room to brainstorm a solution for the matter of the wells as well as make his invitation. Unfortunately, Telesti was experiencing her period. Upon noticing that she was still suffering from contractions, Lorist 'sincerely' thought of telling her about a method that would 'help' her…

"Cough, cough… Ahem. Um, it has been said that after having intercourse for the first time, the contractions would go away eventually…" The moment he uttered that, Lorist was chased out of the room by the embarrassed and angered young lady who was tossing everything she could get her hands on in his direction.

Sheesh, as the proverbs say, 'the dog bites Lu Dongbin and was unable to recognize his goodwill', instead of appreciating my suggestion, she chased me out of her room like that![1] It's not like I was lying about it. In my past life, I had a secretary who had problems with her husband because of this… Back in his past life, Lorist's secretary who had unbearable menstrual cramps during her university days went to the doctor for some help. But no matter what medicine she consumed, the pain was still unbearable for her. In the end, the doctor gave her that exact suggestion and the secretary casually gave her first time to a guy that was wooing her and her problems ended. Naturally, she broke up with that man after graduating university, but her relationship with her husband back then was always rather awkward as she was no longer a virgin when they married.

When the secretary told him that story, she was naked in Lorist's embrace, basking in the afterglow of interourse. However, back then Lorist wasn't interested in her relationship problems with her husband but rather how she solved the problem of the cramps in the first place. The secretary merely said that her symptoms faded after her first experience and gradually, her periods didn't hurt anymore. Back then, Lorist thought that the secretary couldn't be lying as there was not a real reason to, given their casual, yet intimate relationship.

Since Telesti didn't believe in that method at all, Lorist couldn't do anything about it either as there was no way he could use an example from his past life to prove his point. Having been shut out of the room, Lorist returned to his own residence,

crestfallen.

Josk stood at the castle gates and awaited Lorist's arrival. Waxima was still at Maplewoods Bastide, so among the rest at Firmrock Castle, only Josk, Patt and Ovidis were qualified to attend the banquet as family knights. Paulobins and Jim were still not yet knights of the family, so one of them took Ovidis's place to train the new recruits while the other was pouting and nagging on guard duty atop the walls.

Lorist, Shadekampf and Reidy got down the walls. Upon seeing Josk, Lorist wanted to curse out loudly. *This guy actually looks far better than me, his lord!* Lorist wore the formal attire of nobles while Josk was equipped with a shiny, silver knight armor that was immensely attention-grabbing. Coupled with his handsome features and slightly woeful gaze, Lorist understood that there was no way the attention of the other noble ladies would be focused on him.

Reidy bore the banner of the Norton Family with Shadekampf leading the group in front. Lorist and Josk on the other hand were mounted and they rode towards the camp grounds at a leisurely pace. Along the way, jesters could be seen performing comedy sketches, servants ran around busily with various dishes in their hands and the dancers gave a stunning performance as they were immersed in the festive music. Some bards even climbed up to high platforms and sung of ancient legends whereas certain magicians staged fire-breathing shows. Upon seeing Lorist passing through, all of them halted their performances and bowed to pay their respects.

From time to time, some knights would stand up from their benches and salute Lorist by patting their hands on their chest. As Lorist gave nods of acknowledgements to the saluting knights, he asked Shadekampf, "Who are they? I don't know them, so why are they saluting me?"

Frustrated that his lord was such an absent-minded person, Shadekampf said, "Milord, did you forget the report I made to you yesterday? 29 wandering knights were willing to serve our military force and hope to be promoted to become our family knights one day after they gain some achievement."

"Oh, my apologies. I really did forget," Lorist said. "Are they all Silver ranked?"

"Sigh… Milord, if you didn't add the criteria for them to be good at archery, we wouldn't have accepted so many of them in the first place. In actuality, there are 17 of them who are still Iron ranked and they've just received their knight badges not long

ago. Originally, they just wanted to watch the competitions, but upon discovering that the archery competition didn't have a Battle Force requirement, they joined immediately. Patt said that they were quite good with the bow and arrow and recruited them right away."

"Hehe," Lorist chuckled happily. "Patt did the right thing. While they are Iron ranks now, they will soon break through to the Silver rank. Hopefully, we might have another Gold ranked marksman like Josk in the family one day…"

"Impossible," Josk interjected. "Not one of them will have the talent at archery like I do. And there is only one Green Benny, so they will only be 'good' archers at best."

'Green Benny' was what Josk called his green longbow. It was rumored that the longbow was originally made from a bone of a magnificent dragon that had been excavated from an ancient ruin which took the grandmaster up to 10 years to craft. One fateful day, it was acquired by Baron Omador who later gifted it to Josk as an engagement gift between Josk and his daughter.

"Shut up, Josk. I will have someone make a bow that's better than your Green Benny. You better bet on that," said Lorist in a dissatisfied tone.

"Oh, didn't Viscount Kenmays say that he was recruiting knights for a knight brigade as well? How many did he get?" Lorist asked as the thought occurred to him.

"Milord, there were 89 wandering knights who joined the side of Viscount Kenmays and entered his brigade," said Shadekampf with a solemn expression. "Aside from the Kenmays Family, the Felim Family, also known as the Family of the Pegasus, recruited around 50 wandering knights. Some other dominion lords also recruited one or two knights themselves while the remaining knights didn't pique any of the other nobles' interest and weren't recruited."

"Then, how many knights have participated in the competition?" Lorist asked as he looked at the tens of long wooden tables and benches that were lined up and seated to the brim with a rough estimated headcount of 1800 people.

"Milord, the knighthood competition was ongoing for 27 whole days and over 37 dominion lords came over due to the fast and strong rumors. It was said that two dominion lords who were at war halted their battles and led their knights here just to join in. Around 600 wandering and freelance knights came over as well. The noble

families should have also brought roughly 800 knights of their own."

37 noble families was roughly half the total number of all the nobles within the Northlands. News of the competition really did spread far and wide. However, Lorist didn't expect that there were actually that many wandering and freelance knights within the Northlands. 600 was a bit too many.

It didn't take long for the group to reach the tent where the banquet for the nobles was being held. The Kenmays Family did live up to their reputation as the owner of the largest construction merchant guild within the former empire given the size of the tent they prepared which could easily accommodate hundreds of people within for a grand ball.

After their arrival was reported, Lorist, Josk and Shadekampf headed inside the tent while Reidy stood guard outside and looked after the horses with the banner of the Norton Family in his hand.

Shadekampf reminded, "Milord, the person who is coming forward to greet us is Viscount Kenmays himself…"

It was Lorist's first meeting with Viscount Kenmays: he was a person of slightly shorter height that Lorist and the length of his blonde hair reached his shoulders. He looked rather handsome and his face was cleanly-shaven with a rather pointy chin. His face bore a bright and graceful smile which gave him an elegant bearing which fit his image of a good-looking guy well.

Lorist turned to his back and looked and Josk as he thought, *only that fellow can compare with the viscount's looks…*

Josk on the other hand was quite confused and asked, "What's wrong? Do I have something on my face?"

Lorist didn't answer him.

The viscount was also dressed in the same noble robes as Lorist, with the only difference being that his blue sash had silver embroidery of the stonecrop plant that enveloped the three-ring-insignia of the Kenmays Family and the rose which symbolized the royal family of the Iblia Kingdom.

Viscount Kenmays laughed out and greeted them. WIth both his hands opened wide,

he said, "I finally get to meet the Lord Baron. I've long heard about your reputation and it's about time I get to meet you in the flesh. It truly is my honor."

Lorist on the other hand observed carefully and could detect the flash of seething anger from the viscount's eyes. Smiling, he thought, *this guy is still holding a grudge about the 100000 gold Fordes I've taken.* Similarly, Lorist opened his hands to give the viscount a passionate hug and said, "Haha, I myself have also been anticipating our meeting. However, I've been rather busy recently and couldn't find any time. Fortunately, I got to see you here today as I have long wished."

After the two exchanged false pleasantries, the viscount brought Lorist around and introduced him to the nobles that attended the banquet as well as the many noble ladies there. Lorist admired the viscount's ability to perfectly memorize and recite the family backgrounds and history of all the nobles there. He could even recall the heroic tales each family had. *No wonder that guy can mix well in situations like these so freely and get the attention and liking of those noblewomen.*

When Lorist felt a little fatigued from keeping his smile up, the introductions finally ended and everyone got to their respective seats to enjoy the delicacies prepared by the cooks hired by the Kenmays Family.

Among the dominion lords that attended the banquet, Lorist paid attention to two in particular: one was the viscount who was pretending to be friendly and amicable with him even though Lorist detected the hint of hatred from his eyes. The other was Baron Felim Chalvode, the head of the Family of the Pegasus. While the baron seemed harmless and friendly enough on the surface, Lorist could feel a ferocious savagery from the baron who was also a One Star Gold ranked knight.

Chapter 140
Shock

The large tent was quickly filled with the tables that were brought within it by the servants. The difference between these tables and those which the knights sat by outside was that these were far more intricate and the servants even laid a fine, white linen table cloth onto them before they placed vibrant flowers and baskets of assorted fruits upon them.

In total, there were 20 long tables lined up into two rows. On either side of each table were 12 chairs in total. Lorist took a few looks before Viscount Kenmays told him that since the knight competition was organized by their two families, there was no master seat. It was possible that he merely didn't want the Nortons to use the opportunity to steal the spotlight. Even so, Lorist felt that this arrangement was apt as it symbolized the equal standing between the two families.

The few tables in the middle were reserved specifically for dominion lords. Apart from Lorist and Viscount Kenmays who were seated face to face at the first table given their status as the organizers of the competition, the rest of the seats were arranged according to the relative titles of the attendees with some noble ladies sandwiched in between. The side-most tables were prepared for the guests or Gold ranked knights who were invited to the banquet by the dominion lords. Lorist noticed that apart from Josk, only two other Gold ranked knights were brought over by their lords. Shadekampf on the other hand had a seat for himself over there as he had played a large part in the committee of the competition.

Given that it was Lorist's first time attending a formal nobles' banquet, he tried his best to behave cordially and seriously. That aside, Viscount Kenmays who was seated directly opposite him was chattering away, impressing his listeners with the vast knowledge he had. They were especially enraptured with his unique interpretations of the major events that had happened during the course of Grindian history.

As he cut the steak with his silver utensils and brought them to his mouth while listening to the incessant tales of Viscount Kenmays, Lorist heard a mention of Morante City. All of a sudden, Viscount Kenmays turned to Lorist and said, "I've heard

that Baron Norton had left the Northlands and studied at Morante City for more than 10 years. Something quite major happened over there last year, didn't it?"

Last year? I don't remember anything particularly significant. I don't think anything noteworthy happened before I left. Lorist shook his head and said, "Last year, after I received the summons from my family, I began my journey back immediately, so I'm afraid I'm not informed about what you are referring to."

"Oh, then you must've made your move too early. Back at the Dawn Academy within Morante City, there was an Iron ranked instructor called Locke who dueled all the Silver ranked instructors within the academy sector. Up to 30 Silver ranked instructors were defeated by him during that time. After that, the Iron ranked instructor Locke stepped down from the dueling platform and has gained a fearsome moniker of Iron Locke the Silver Undefeated for beating all his challengers without losing even a single duel. It's a shame that I had something else on my hands back then and wasn't able to make my way to the city to witness the wonder myself, what a shame…" said the viscount with utmost regret.

No worries, this one is sitting right in front of you. You can open your eyes wide and observe to your heart's content.

"Oh, I know about that. Instructor Locke's swordsmanship truly is profound. He is really deserving of that moniker," said Lorist without the slightest hint of embarrassment nor shame.

Viscount Kenmays changed the subject quickly and said with a smiling face as he raised his silver cup, "This knighthood competition lasted 27 whole days and Baron Norton, you only showed up today on the closing banquet. Don't tell me that you got bored of seeing fights like these back in the city and can't be bothered to witness the competitions between the knights? Baron Norton, shouldn't you at least try to explain the reason for your absence?"

Lorist raised the silver cup in his hand in a similar fashion and said, "Haha, I really didn't have a choice as there were really too many matters I had to settle within my dominion. I'm sure all of you here know that I've just succeeded the dominion and the title recently and I hope you can tolerate my absence because of that. Even so, Lord Viscount, no, I should address you as Lord Count now… I've heard that Count Lopez has passed his title and dominion to you. I really have to congratulate you for this. Here's a toast to your amazing achievement."

Even though Lorist didn't say it that loudly, every person within the tent didn't miss a single word and chatters resounded throughout the tent. By the time it finally quieted down, the gazes of everyone within the tent were focused on Viscount Kenmays. A few dominion lords even seemed rather restless on their seats as if they wanted to return to their dominions right away. Baron Felim of the Family of the Pegasus even seemed like he was in deep thought.

Viscount Kenmays's face froze up with a smile, but he quickly recovered and made a pained expression as he said, "Sigh, I'm sure that most of you know that I've been here for the most part of the competition, so I really didn't expect that something of that magnitude would happen. All of you know about the close and intimate relationship between Count Lopez and my father. It truly is a tragedy for the count to have been injured during an encounter with the mountain barbarians. Didn't he write me a request for help some time ago? After I received it, I brought my family's forces to his dominion right away so that he may command it to defeat the barbarian threat. Not in my wildest imaginations would I have thought that the count would entrust his title and dominion to me on his deathbed and request that I take care of his two sisters from the threat of the mountain barbarians. While taking care of his family is something is definitely an obligation I intend to fulfil, I still have the issue of the barbarians to worry about. How troublesome."

Lorist tried to console him and said, "The Kenmays Family is indeed one with a rich mercantile background. I'm sure that you will manage to find a way to make up and coexist with the mountain barbarians. As long as they don't launch any assaults, then I'm sure that you'll be able to bring the dominion the count left you to prosperity within no time."

"Thank you for your kind words, Lord Baron. Then again, I've heard that you refused the demand of Duke Loggins not long ago and even hurt his Gold ranked knight who was sent there as an ambassador and incited the duke's rage in the process, causing him to announce his deployment of the Northland Army to punish your family. I wonder if you need our help to console the duke and put in some good words for you… Perhaps he may consider sparing the Norton Family…" Viscount Kenmays retorted.

"There is no longer a need for that," Lorist said in a dissatisfied tone as he chugged a few gulps of wine. He continued, "That dogshit Duke Loggins has sent two regiments of the Northland Army numbering around 4000 people led by Gold ranked knights Chevany and Hennard to invade the dominion of my family. After they entered the dominion, they massacred all the folk of Wildnorth Town right away…"

Lorist paused and could clearly see the look of perturbation and delight that flashed past quickly on the face of Viscount Kenmays.

"A massacre… of the whole town?" Viscount Kenmays muttered stammeringly.

The part of the announcement that made the viscount feel delight was the fact that the duke's men had already entered the Norton Family dominion using a new, yet undiscovered route. The part that made him perturbed was the massacre of the townsfolk; given the scarce population within the Northlands, even if two lords were to start an all-out war with one another, they wouldn't lay their hands on the non-combatants and would at most pillage them for their goods. Duke Loggins on the other hand massacred a whole town at the Northlands and news of that would definitely incite strong animosity and objection from the other nobles in the Northlands. Nobody liked to deal with a greedy and cruel superior noble.

Soft chatters once again filled the tent as the various nobles discussed with one another the things Lorist had just said. Knowing that Josk was a knight of the Norton Family, the noble ladies gathered around him and offered their condolences, causing Josk to feel awkwardly uncomfortable and struggle to respond while sweating out in anxiety.

Many nobles looked at Lorist with sympathetic gazes as the two regiments numbered around 4000 men and the Gold ranked knights of the duke would definitely give the Norton Family a hard time. Even though Lorist was attending the banquet like nothing was happening, in the eyes of the other nobles, he might probably have to surrender and be stripped of all his belongings to be able to escape the predicament he was in. They believed that the only reason Lorist was there was so that he doesn't lose any face as most of them knew the temperament of the duke quite well.

However, Baron Felim was the only one who looked at Lorist with suspicion as he found that Lorist's face didn't have the slightest indication of worry at all as well as the audacity Lorist showed when he insulted the duke in front of all the nobles. A person who was getting ready to surrender to the duke's forces would definitely not be able to utter something like that.

"That's right. The males, the elderly and the infants were all killed with only 1000 or so women and young girls remaining to be sold to slave traders. That son of a bitch of a duke can't be human, for him to even be willing to do something so heartless. The reason I wasn't able to be present during the competition was because I had to deal

with all that. I only managed to settle all of it during the past few days, just in time for today's banquet," Lorist said as he used his fork to stuff yet another piece of steak into his mouth and accidentally smearing some oil on his cheeks. "Wow, your family's chefs are really great. This taste is wonderful."

"Urk… Sold to slave traders… How terrifying…"

Lorist turned his head and saw one lady beside Josk who pretended to faint sickly into his embrace, perfectly emulating what a model benevolent noblewoman would do once she heard about the cruel and indifferent nature of reality. Poor old Josk didn't know what to do as he couldn't hold her tightly nor let her fall to the ground and had no choice but to gaze at Lorist and signal for help.

Hah, it's your own fault for looking so good and dressing up so flashily like a peacock, Lorist thought as he pretended to not see anything.

"If Lord Baron, you, are enjoying the steak, why don't I order another serving for you?" said the viscount as he twirled the silver cup in his hand nonstop. After arduously waiting for Lorist to have another gulp of meat and wine, he asked impatiently, "What happened next?"

"Huh? What about it?" Lorist asked while he seriously considered whether he should get another steak.

"Well, didn't you say that the duke sent 4000 men into your family's dominion and massacred the citizens of Wildnorth Town? What happened after that?" Viscount Kenmays had the sudden urge to smash his silver cup into Lorist's face as he thought, *can't you finish your story before you take another bite? How long has it been since you had any steak? Don't tell me the forces of the duke sweeped your dominion clean to the point that you can't even get some yourself?*

"Oh, you were talking about the duke's force of 4000. Hehe, they're completely decimated. While they entered the dominion quite easily, there's no way I would just sit back and let them waltz out," Lorist said candidly.

Clang! The cup Viscount Kenmays was holding fell straight to the floor. Directly following that, a few other clangs could be heard as the nobles stared blankly at Lorist.

"You… What did you say? What was that about decimation?" Viscount Kenmays couldn't care less about the cup he had dropped and pestered Lorist for a more

detailed explanation.

"Come on, what's so surprising of the duke's men being completely wiped out? You're already this old and yet you couldn't hold a cup properly, how uncouth… And to think that I was planning to have you do me a favor… It seems that I have to seriously reconsider it," Lorist said slowly and calmly.

"How can that be…" Viscount Kenmays cried out loud.

Back then when the new nobles that were just entitled by the Second Prince, the one who had the most military might was one of the Second Prince's Gold ranked guards. Due to being entangled in an affair with the queen of the Iblia Kingdom, the guard was exiled to the Northlands and demoted to a baron. Probably due to the sponsorship of the queen, the Gold ranked guard managed to bring around 1000 soldiers into the Northlands and wasn't willing to submit to the duke. In the end, the duke sent 2000 Northland Army soldiers led by Knight Chevany and conquered the new baron's castle within a mere three days. The head of the Gold ranked guard could still be seen hanging from a wall within the duke's mansion in Gildusk City. Viscount Kenmays could recall the times he saw the head for himself during his visits to the duke.

That was the reason why all of the nobles within the Northlands feared the duke so much and didn't dare to antagonize him lest they had to face the brunt of the Northland Army, causing the duke to grow ever more arrogant and dare to reap more profits from the nobles. Now that Lorist mentioned that he had defeated over 4000 soldiers of the Northland Army, the nobles were all filled with shock and doubt.

"Oh, that's right, what about Knight Chevany and Knight Hennard?" asked Viscount Kenmays hurriedly. Even though Lorist said that he had wiped the duke's men out, if he said that the Gold ranked knights leading the soldiers managed to escape, then there was a huge possibility that Lorist was lying. *Hennard might have managed to run away...* Given that Viscount Kenmays was an acquaintance of Knight Chevany, he understood that the knight definitely wouldn't leave his men behind given his stubborn and old-fashioned personality.

"The favor I was about to ask of you is in part related to that," Lorist said. He asked the viscount in a steady tone, "I heard that you have quite a close relationship with the dogshit of a duke?"

"It's… it's passable. What did you mean by the involvement of the favor with the

knights?" asked Viscount Kenmays as he once again felt the unbearable urge to tear Lorist's mouth open. *Can you not dally around when talking about something so serious?!*

"It's like this: Knight Chevany had sacrificed himself heroically on the battlefield. I have his body and I hope that you can help me transport it to his family. Other than that, we have captured Knight Hennard and ten plus other Silver ranked knights. They hope that they will be able to pay a ransom for their freedom, so I will pass the name list to you later. Tell their family members or friends within the army to come here and pay the ransom," Lorist said.

"Sho-shouldn't you be giving the name list to the duke?" Viscount Kenmays asked curiously.

"Well, I've thought about it before," Lorist said. "Those Silver ranked knights think that the duke wouldn't bother to pay their ransom. So, they'd rather pass the word to their family members and friends for their help."

Viscount Kenmays listened in shock before he thought in realization, *what a great, calculative move... If rumor of that spreads within the Northland Army, who would still be willing to serve the duke?* His marvel aside, the viscount was more than willing to help out with that task as causing the duke trouble would be good for the formidable reputation he was trying to build up for his family.

"Very well, I'm more than happy to help you out with that," said Viscount Kenmays. He looked at Lorist and asked sincerely, "Given that you've wiped the men of the duke out, I'm sure that you've sustained quite some amount of casualties. Don't hesitate to come to me should you need any help."

Lorist looked at the viscount and thought, *hehe, are you still pining for the return of the 100000 gold Fordes? Are you trying to see if you're able to launch an attack if my family is weak from weathering the duke's assaults?*

"Oh, the casualties truly are horrible…" Lorist said as he sighed deeply. "We actually lost up to 30 brave men with almost 100 injured soldiers… It truly is horrible…"

Viscount Kenmays turned and left immediately as he had better things to do than listening to Lorist's bullcrap.

"Hey, don't go just yet! Didn't you say you want to help out?" Lorist called out from

behind him.

Chapter 141
The Whereabouts of the Convoy

Within the main tent, Josk, Waxima, Ovidis, Pajik, Patt, Jim, Paulobins, Reidy, Supervisors Hansk, Kedan and Spiel, Butler Boris, and Shadekampf were seated neatly in two rows as they listened to Lorist speak. Apart from Belnick, who was preparing to break through to the Gold rank, and Old Man Balk who accompanied Grandmaster Sid to forage the dominion for resources and Pesha, whom Lorist didn't like too much, all of the Norton Family knights and officers were gathered there.

"Yesterday, Shadekampf has already transported the remains of Knight Chevany to Viscount Kenmays and the freedom of the Silver ranked knights and Knight Hennard will have to be negotiated with the duke. I believe that we will have about three months to rest and recuperate, since it will take some time before the duke finds out about the defeat of his troops. He'll definitely be unable to launch an attack on us right after that since he has to both consider how many soldiers he has to send over lest they get wiped out by us once again. If the number is large, I doubt that the duke would be willing to spend so much funds on the expedition," Lorist said.

The people within the tent instantly broke into laughter.

"It can be seen that Viscount Kenmays is not on the same side as the duke. Given that the Kenmays Family is focusing their attention on the eastern Northlands, they need us to keep the duke's hands tied and also hope that us and the duke will wipe each other out. That's why they will definitely try to stir something up after we hand them the name list. Even if the duke is willing to pay the ransom for the Silver ranked knights, I believe that he definitely won't bother about the 1000 plus surviving soldiers that we have captured. I know that the Kenmays Family will definitely take this opportunity to spread that around to affect the morale and loyalty of the duke's soldiers.

"Even if the duke sends his soldiers to attack us, he will have to wait until the issue of the captives, which we can even intentionally delay, to be settled first. However, that doesn't mean that we fear the attack of the duke. As long as he dares to come, we will make him run away with his tail between his legs. I, on the other hand, would like to

see if the duke will be able to weather through the loss sustained through the defeat of his army this time around. If the Northland Army has to be downsized, I wonder if he can still act so brashly in the Northlands. I believe that by then he should be unable to control the other landed nobles and will find it tough to even protect himself," Lorist said with a cold smile.

"Next, I would like to use this period of temporary peace to reorganize our forces and give them proper training to increase their combat efficacy to prepare for the tough times to come. Shadekampf, do read out the plan you drafted for the reorganization of the family's forces to everyone," Lorist said as he nodded towards Shadekampf.

Shadekampf stood up and took out a beastskin document and said, "The guard squad will be reorganized to include 120 people who fit the criteria of having Iron ranked Battle Force. They will be equipped with a riding shield, a pike, hauberks and chain mails, a side arm of their choosing, a quiver of javelins and two mounts. The squad leader will be Patt and the vice squad leader will be Paulobins.

"A squad of mounted archers will be formed with the leader and trainer being Josk. During the recent knight competition, we have recruited 29 wandering knights and 22 of them have shown themselves to be quite capable in archery. They will be added to the 120 man squad and the requirements for other recruits will be having Battle Force of Iron rank and above, good archery skill and good horse handling. They will be equipped with hauberks, leather armor, longbows, three quivers of arrows, a longsword, an arm shield and two mounts."

Lorist then turned to Josk and said, "Joe, I will leave the mounted archers squad to you. This will be the main offensive unit of our forces, so you must train them well…"

Josk knocked his fist onto his left chest and said, "Milrod, I promise to make the mounted archers squad the sharpest blade we have in our arsenal."

Shadekampf continued, "A company of cavalrymen will also be formed. The company will contain four main squads with another supply squad with the total number of men being a full 600 people. The commander of the company will be Waxima and the only requirement for recruits would be having Battle Force at the Bronze rank and above. They will each be equipped with a hauberk, a chain mail, a riding shield, a riding lance, two mounts, and one side arm of their choice.

"The guards will also be reorganized into two companies. The commander of the first

company is Pajik and the commander of the second is Ovidis. Similarly, each company will have four main squads and one supply squad at a total of 600 people. Each company consists of one sword and shield infantry squad, one longbowmen squad, two pike infantry squads and one supply squad. They will be equipped with hauberks, square shields, bucklers, pikes, longbows, longswords, throwing axes, javelins, etc.

"Additionally, two more defense units will be formed and the members will be recruited from those who don't make the criteria of the aforementioned units. Each squad will have from 100 to 120 members and they will be equipped with grey-colored leather armor, pikes, longswords, longbows and various types of shields."

Shadekampf then placed the beastskin document down before he bowed to Lorist and went back to his seat.

Lorist looked at his seated subordinates and said, "Did you all understand that? I hope that you all can come up with your own methods to carry out the training and reorganization and show them to me for approval. Other than that, I will be stationing one of the defense units at Maplewoods Bastide with Pajik being the sub-leader for now. This unit will be responsible for the defense of the bastide. As for the defense unit here at Firmrock Castle, it will be in charge of regulating order, ensuring security, patrolling, and guarding the warehouses. Ovidis will be the sub-leader of this unit. Given that we don't have enough soldiers for now, begin the training even if the units are not yet filled up.

"I will set up another camp for new recruits at Firmrock Castle which will be left to Shadekampf, Patt, and Paulobins. I will be the chief instructor over there. The recruits will learn to awaken their Battle Force within the camp as well as basic military regulations. After they receive basic training, they will then be sent to different units depending on their own individual capabilities until the space for the units are filled up.

"Other than that, Supervisor Hansk will be the chief finance and resource officer of the family and will be in charge of our supplies and finances and its distribution. Butler Boris will take charge of civil and business matters, Shadekampf will manage the arsenal of the family's forces and Supervisor Kedan will manage the camp of the captives. When Old Man Balk returns, he will take over production and manufacturing while Supervisor Spiel will work on agriculture. I will be leaving the food supply and the family's sustenance to you.

"By the time we defeat Duke Loggins, the Northlands will no doubt fall into another period of chaos. Without the iron grip of the Northland Army, the ambitious dominion lords will start to act. We can't do much apart from preparing for the worst so that we will be able to survive during the troubled times to come and lay a firm foundation for our family's strength. This will have to depend on you all," Lorist said as he rose to his feet and bowed to his men.

The rest of them got up and returned the bow as they said in unison, "Milord, we will definitely do our best to serve you."

Lorist clapped his hands and said, "Alright, go do your stuff. Jim and Reidy, stay back for a while."

Everyone left the tent with the exception of the two. Jim said in a troubled fashion, "Milord, why didn't you give me any assignments?"

Lorist laughed and said, "Haha, you must have been quite impatient just now. The reason I didn't give you any task is because I have a mission for both you and Reidy. Reidy, when we left the convoy, it was the 2nd month. And now, it's almost the 9th month already but the convoy still hasn't arrived yet. That's why I will leave the task to locate the convoy to Jim and you. Find out the why they have been delayed for so long. Jim, bring a few of the mercenaries that joined our forces over with you as well and pretend to be a group of mercenaries on a mission. Do be careful on your journey and get anything you need from Shadekampf. I've also written a few letters for Charade, Potterfang, Els, Terman and Yuriy. Tell them I miss them. Oh, and these letters are for Alisa and Howard."

"Yes, milord. We will definitely carry out the task successfully," said the two of them as they saluted in unison.

……

"The castle is down! We have entered the gates!"

"It's our victory!"

"We have won!"

"……”

As they let out their excited cheers, the guards tossed their sun hats high up in the air.

The banners at the foot of the hill were waved frantically as the soldiers cheered for yet another one of their victories. Charade who was mounted looked from his vantage point at the top of the hill towards the flag of the dominion lord in the distant castle get lowered and replaced by that of the Norton Family. However, the expression he wore was a displeased one as he solemnly said to the guard beside him, "Come, let's go back to the tent."

Within the tent, Els was lying down on a soft couch and reading a knight novel. His left leg was wrapped up by a huge and thick bandage: he had gotten hurt two months ago when he was impaled on the leg by a Silver ranked knight with his riding lance. It would take at least half a year to recover from an injury of that degree.

Charade went into the tent with a gloomy face, prompting Els to ask out of curiosity, "What's wrong? Didn't we succeed in taking the castle? Why the long face?"

"Sigh…" Charade let out a long tired breath. "I'm not happy about this at all. Even though I know this is a pithole, we had no choice but to jump straight into it. It really feels super bad to be used by others like this."

Els also quieted down at that statement. Originally, they thought that the journey through the Andinaq Kingdom would be a mere walk in the park. However, it actually turned out to be a road filled with countless thorns and the northbound convoy had to carve a bloody passage out with their own hands.

Three months prior, they had already arrived at Benz Citadel that was located at the border between the Redlis Kingdom and the Andinaq Kingdom which Potterfang had conquered with his heavy-armored cavalry. However, they received a piece of bad news during their stay.

Charade had planned to give up Benz Citadel to the soldiers of the Andinaq Kingdom as that would relieve the convoy of any baggage before they resume their journey up north through the Andinaq Kingdom quickly. However, Potterfang, who arrived one step earlier at the former imperial capital, now the royal capital of the Andinaq Kingdom, didn't manage to meet the Third Prince, Andinaq I. After asking around, he found that the Third Prince had fallen sick and the matters of the kingdom were currently managed by his son, the First Highness.

That was why Potterfang decided to visit the First Highness, Delwick, but Delwick refused to send any soldiers to be stationed at Benz Citadel and told Potterfang that currently, the influence of the royal family was only limited to the royal capital as many nobles of the kingdom had formed an alliance to resist and grapple with the royal family and he had no other choice and couldn't spare any help to the convoy even if he wanted to.

Potterfang subsequently went to contact his acquaintances from the Whitelion Legion and the news he got shocked him deeply. The Andinaq Kingdom was truly in a dire state: given that the Third Prince had been at his sickbed for more than a year, the First Highness who had relied so much on the stronger nobles within the kingdom had become their plaything. Among the three most reputable armies within the empire, the Whitelion Legion had been disbanded, the Fiercegale Legion had joined the Melein Duchy and the royal family's local defense guards only had one regiment of troops remaining and were barely able to defend the royal family with the meager amount of taxes collected from the capital.

The former population of 500000 of the capital had declined to a mere 50000 with the once merry business districts turning into abandoned slums. Back when the empire got divided into many powers, the Third Prince faced the most brunt of the Forde Trade Union as he was the one who was officially named by the emperor as the true heir of the imperial family. Even though the Andinaq Kingdom was founded on three of the most prosperous provinces of the empire, without any trade and business going on, and given the fact that the agricultural produce wasn't enough to sustain its own population, the kingdom began its steady journey to decline. Following that, the dominion lords tightened their choking grip on their citizens to squeeze more out of them and even fought each other to expand their territory.

The Third Prince's Andinaq Kingdom was merely an afterthought after that. The First Highness's claim that the royal family didn't have power outside the capital was also true. Having received that information, Potterfang quickly returned to Benz Citadel to discuss the state of affairs with Charade. He didn't expect that information about the resources and wealth the convoy had would actually be leaked by one of the First Highness's retainers to the alliance of dominion lords who turned their gazes to the convoy.

Charade decided right away to leave Benz Citadel unguarded and departed with the whole convoy. On the 5th day of their departure, however, the convoy encountered the forces of the alliance at the Green Plains.

The alliance that was formed by 37 different noble families had around 30000 troops and they had come to rob the convoy. But after their first few defeats, they changed their approach and demanded that the convoy give up two-thirds of everything they had in exchange for safe passage.

Charade refused the unreasonable demand outright and the two parties were at a stalemate. Back then, the noble alliance had 30000 soldiers. Even though the convoy was made up of more than 50000 people, only 15000 of them were combatants and they were severely outnumbered.

After 20 days, conflict broke out once again. The alliance launched their attacks first followed by counterattacks from Charade and Potterfang. What was surprising was that the soldiers of the alliance broke formation almost instantly when the convoy's soldiers charged and given their far inferior gear, the first battle was completely dominated by the northbound convoy. With minimal casualties, they even managed to capture 17000 enemy soldiers.

Upon discovering the true might of their own troops, Charade and Potterfang were elated. Charade instantly ordered his men to pay the noble alliance back for the trouble they have caused and as the convoy passed through the dominions of each noble, they took the castle of those dominion lords and hung the nobles who joined the alliance publicly and took everything they had to replenish the supply of the convoy.

The attacks the convoy launched didn't deplete its forces in the least. Of the 17000 captive soldiers, Charade had the ones who knew useful skills such as smithing, crafting, cobbling and tailoring assimilated into the members of the convoy and had the remaining 14000 or so men split into four different suicide units which were given simple equipment and sent to attack the castles of the other dominion lords with the promise that they would regain their freedom if they were victorious. They would also be offered the chance to join the convoy on the journey to the Northlands to start their lives anew.

At first, things progressed smoothly and the castles of two dominion lords were successfully conquered. But it did not take long for something troubling to occur: a group of vagabonds started tagging along the convoy from behind in hopes that they would be able to receive protection as well as going to the Northlands to live the peaceful and blissful life there that Charade had so loudly proclaimed.

When Charade was busy brainstorming a solution for that issue, a group of people arrived at the main camp of the convoy's forces and their leader was the second son of the Third Prince, the Second Highness, Auguslo. Accompanying him was the Gold ranked female knight, Norton Glacia.

Chapter 142
Charade the Demon

"My apologies, Second Highness. Even though the Norton Family is under the jurisdiction of the Krissen Royal Family and you are one of its members, currently, you represent the royal family of the Andinaq Kingdom. Also, our lord has willed that we lead the convoy all the way to the family's dominion and didn't say anything about helping the Andinaq Royal Family solve the issue of rebellious dominion lords within your kingdom," Charade said as he refused Auguslo's request.

The aim of the Second Highness in coming over with his group of 20 was to try to mediate between the convoy and the alliance of nobles so that they could come to a truce and stop battling. After all, that was the request of his most intimate and loyal subordinate, Norton Glacia. Secondly, he wanted to see if he could purchase some food supplies as the kingdom had been struck with a severe lack of resources due to the trade embargo of the Forde Trade Union.

The Second Highness believed that the alliance would give him some face as he was the one who led the Whitelion Legion and the Fiercegale Legion during the times of the civil war and kept the First and Second Princes in check so that they didn't reach the imperial capital. Many of the dominion lords within the alliance had received help from him before and thus owed him some form of favor.

However, as he was on his way to the convoy, he heard that the convoy's forces managed to utterly crush the soldiers of the alliance. This news filled the Second Highness with shock as he didn't expect that the convoy's escort troops would actually be that powerful. Upon seeing Glacia's elated and excited reaction, Second Highness Auguslo started contemplating his next move.

While the Second Highness had gained some stellar achievements in the military, he wasn't favored by the other nobles within the Andinaq Kingdom. To them, having great achievements translated to being willing to achieve anything regardless of the cost. While the Third Prince did rely on the Second Highness to lead the two armies to resist the assaults of the First and Second Princes, it had drained the kingdom of its much needed resources and caused it to become a desolate husk of what it used to be.

Additionally, the Second Highness was a rather stubborn person and nobody liked an impulsive and forceful king. That was why the nobles gave their support to the First Highness and caused the Second Highness to be exiled back to his own principality at an island near the western coast of the kingdom by the Third Prince, Andinaq I.

Being drained of resources and vitality from the constant battles of the civil war, the Andinaq Kingdom could no longer sustain three large armies, resulting in the Whitelion Legion being disbanded and the Fiercegale Legion joining the Melein Duchy to resist the Second Prince with their aid. The royal family's local defense guards had also been downsized quite substantially given the state of finances of the kingdom to the point that they were left with only one regiment of troops.

Having lost the military power necessary to control the kingdom, the nobles no longer took the Andinaq Royal Family seriously. Coupled with the Third Prince falling sick due to an unknown disease, the weak-willed First Highness got pushed around by the nobles when he took over and that allowed the pride and arrogance of the nobles to inflate even more. They began to blatantly ignore the laws of the kingdom and oppressed the citizens all the while forming their own private armies and dividing the territory of the royal family among themselves, which eventually resulted in the formation of the alliance for the sole purpose of putting pressure on the Andinaq Royal Family.

Having witnessed the state of the kingdom, the Second Highness resolved himself to one day unify the Krissen Empire and restore the imperial family back to its former glory. It was too bad that he didn't have a reliable force of his own at the moment and even his personal guard and the garrison soldiers within his territory numbered to only 300 people. And while his elder brother the First Highness wasn't the best at resisting external threats, it was the opposite when it came to internal threats given the almost paranoid awareness he had towards his own younger brother which he deemed a potential hazard to his own regime to the point that he stopped giving any subsidies to the Second Highness using the excuse that the kingdom was running severely low on funds.

Even if he had the will, the Second Highness couldn't do much without any soldiers and power of his own. But when he saw the might of the convoy of the Norton Family, he started having his own plans. The sole reason he went to the convoy was to borrow food and troops to restore stability to the Andinaq Kingdom by way of eliminating the noble alliance and forcing the First Highness to abdicate and grabbing the throne for himself. But Charade saw through his intentions right away and refused his request

immediately.

"Is Abelyde the family head right now?" Glacia asked.

"Abelyde? Who's that?" Charade asked the beautiful female knight with a curious look on his face.

Glacia's expression suddenly changed as she shouted, "Who the heck are you? Why are you impersonating the people of the Norton Family?" She already had her hand to the hilt of her sword.

"We are no doubt knights of the Norton Family. Our lord is indeed Baron Norton. Oh, the current Baron Norton is Norton Lorist," Charade said as he brought out his knight badge and infused his Battle Force into it to manifest the misty form of the roaring raging bear.

Stunned, Glacia asked after she hesitated for a moment, "Lorist? Are you talking about Little Locke? That crybaby? The one who has snot all over his face? Wasn't he exiled to Morante City?"

"Pfft…" Everyone within the tent burst out in laughter at hearing the childhood nicknames of their lord.

Resisting the urge to laugh, Charade replied, "Yes, milady. Locke was indeed exiled to Morante City but he received summons from the family a year ago. Currently, he is the only person left within the direct line of succession and he had no choice to return to the dominion to inherit the dominion and his title. Many of us here are friends of his back at Morante City and we were accepted into the family as knights by him and are on a mission back to the dominion with this convoy. May I ask who you are and what relationship you have with the Norton Family?"

"What did you say? Little Locke is the only one left that can succeed the Norton Family? Then what happened to Abelyde and Norwesk?" Glacia asked hurriedly, before she regained her calm and realized her abrupt behavior. "Apologies, I am Norton Glacia, Lorist's elder cousin sister. My father is Lorist's Second Uncle and he used to be the vice captain of the knight brigade of the empire's local defense force."

"I offer you my greetings…" Charade said as everyone within the tent saluted Glacia.

"The names you mentioned just now referred to the First and Third Young Masters,

right?" Charade asked. "It's like this…"

Charade told Glacia everything he knew about the state of the Norton Family, causing Glacia to burst into tears. The Second Highness hugged her as he tried to comfort her.

"I thought that losing my father was one of the worst things that could have happened to me… But to think that the family had gotten even worse over the years…" Glacia mumbled.

"Mistress Glacia, please calm your feelings and trust that the Norton Family will once again return to glory under the leadership of Locke. The journey of the convoy will be an important cornerstone to restore the family, so I am afraid that I cannot accept Your Highness's request as I have to ensure that the people and resources within the convoy arrive at the Northlands safely," Charade said.

"If that's the case, there's even more reason to accept His Highness's request. With the military might of the convoy, you'll be able to easily wipe out the forces of the nobles who are going against him. Just capture their bastides and take their resources so that you'll have enough to last the whole journey back. I've been to the family dominion before and I know that it is a desolate place deprived of every kind of resource. That's why the more you bring back to the dominion, the more beneficial it will be to the family," Glacia argued.

"If you agree to help me out, when I take control of the imperial capital, I will instantly raise the rank of the Norton Family from a Baron to a Count," promised the Second Highness. "I also won't take your supplies for free. I can offer you the equipment and gear of the Whitelion Legion that was disbanded long ago in exchange for your help and supplies. I believe the Norton Family will stand to benefit quite a bit from gaining these equipment."

Charade started to hesitate as he couldn't think of a reason to refute the offer. While a rise in rank was nothing of note, the equipment of the Whitelion Legion was a different story altogether. Being the main offensive force of the Krissen Empire, the Whitelion Legion used quality equipment which boasted excellent offense and defense that were crafted by the best smiths of the empire. They were easily two times better than usual equipment and the armor Charade wore was garbage in comparison. Other than that, the Whitelion Legion had 89000 members which were fully equipped and divided into four regiments. Including the stuff of the supply units, Charade estimated that there would easily be 100000 sets of gear in total.

If they could obtain all the gear of the Whitelion Legion, then the Norton Family would not have to worry about weapons and gear for more than ten years. As long as they were able to form an army and provide it with those equipment, the family would unquestionably be able to reign supreme within the Northlands and develop the dominion with the peace and security that came with it without the slightest worry about the chaos and turmoil of the lands.

The Second Highness didn't have much of a choice either as the Whitelion Legion had been disbanded and all that remained was their equipment. Even so, many sets had been used and worn out over the course of the conflict within the empire and the sets in good and bad condition combined only numbered around 70000 instead of the 100000 Charade believed it to be. Originally, the Third Prince, Andinaq I, had planned to sell those gear for a high price to purchase the much needed food and other resources to stabilize the kingdom. However, the Forde Trade Union was only willing to offer less than a tenth of the cost required to manufacture the gear to take advantage of the Andinaq Kingdom's desperation. In a fit of rage, the Third Prince stopped all negotiations immediately and even cut off trade ties with the Forde Trade Union.

The people of the trade union were also infuriated by that response as during the past 100 or so years, the Whitelion Legion was involved in all the invasions the empire made on the Falik Plains and they were even the biggest contributor to the empire's successes! To them, it was already very generous of them to offer to purchase the equipment at that price. They had intended to have the equipment melted down and made into a monument to commemorate the dissolution of the Krissen Empire with the insignia of the Whitelion Legion placed at the very bottom to symbolize the complete triumph of the trade union. Since the Third Prince wasn't willing to sell the gear, they gave up and didn't bother to convince him otherwise anyway.

Without trade, the once lively imperial capital started to regress as the quality of life gradually worsened. The embargo also caused the nobles of the Andinaq Kingdom much distress and some of them even lusted after the gear that was left unused in the warehouses of the empire.

The Second Highness himself didn't have any other choice either as the Andinaq Kingdom's finances are in the red and he had to offer an appealing proposition for the Norton Family for them to be willing to help out. After brainstorming, he came up with two methods, the first of which being granting the family more territory and land as well as a higher-ranking title. That was something the Second Highness was extremely unwilling to do as the Andinaq Kingdom only encompassed three of the provinces of

the former empire with the already limited land split between many noble families. Given that there were more than 100 noble families within the kingdom, even the royal family's territory had to be reduced. That was why he planned to eliminate the nobles that were causing trouble and only spare the ones who were loyal to the kingdom to lay the foundation for the restoration of the Krissen Empire.

Giving the Norton Family a higher title and part of the territory taken from the purged nobles was akin to luring in yet another tiger after chasing away a pack of wolves. As the Second Highness was still unsure of the loyalty of the Norton Family, he refrained from that thought to save himself some trouble. The second method he could use was to offer the equipment of the Whitelion Legion as he observed that the convoy took their defense and security very seriously with even the most basic foot soldier being equipped with metal armor. He thought that the gear of the mighty Whitelion Legion would prove very alluring to the convoy, and he was right.

Even though Charade was able to keep his calm when he heard that offer, the three within the tent that had relatively high positions in the convoy stared straight at him. Those three were Potterfang, Lode Wales and Mons Malek respectively. As they were former members of the Whitelion Legion and were all commoner officers, the Second Highness couldn't recall their faces even though they have met before. Upon hearing that the Second Highness was willing to give them the equipment of the Whitelion Legion, the three felt completely ecstatic, but they couldn't reveal their thoughts openly and could only stare hard at Charade in hopes that he would accept the offer.

In the end, Charade nodded.

The results of the negotiation were as follows: the convoy would use 100000 gold Fordes to help fund the formation of a 20000-strong army for the Second Highness and supply them with equipment and food. The new army would accompany the northbound convoy and cooperate with them to defeat the nobles of the alliance and the spoils of war would be split evenly among the two parties for the whole period until the Second Highness ascends to the throne. The Second Highness on the other hand would agree to raise the rank of the Norton Family to that of a count when he goes into power with no change or addition to the size of the dominion. Additionally, the gear of the Whitelion Legion would be completely handed to the Norton Family and it was promised that there were no less than 70000 sets in total and any additional sets would be given to the convoy for free.

Even though the convoy was biting the short end of the stick given that they had to go

to battle almost immediately and the Second Highness only had to make promises without actually putting anything up front, Charade agreed to the deal in consideration for Glacia's standing. Other than that, he also had plans of his own that would ensure that the convoy wouldn't suffer much losses either. Also, he felt that it was a good opportunity to get on the good side of the Second Highness and pave a way for the family's influence into the Andinaq Kingdom, allowing the family's trade convoys to one day be allowed passage through the territory of the Andinaq Kingdom to Viscount Tim's dominion at the Redlis Kingdom.

Charade's plan was simple: he would use the convoy's main force in the open field battles and scouting missions as he was confident that the armored cavalry unit of the Norton Family would be able to utterly crush any enemy resistance without trouble. He also considered it to be a good chance for the soldiers to gain experience. The battles which would cause the most casualties were the sieges and he planned to have the convoy's ranged units aid in the effort. That way, he could minimize the casualties of the convoy's forces and also resupply the convoy with the loot they took. What was there for them to lose?

After the expedition began for two or so months, the forces of the convoy swept past the Hanstmost Province and the Central Province of the Andinaq Kingdom under Charade's leadership, forcing 35 dominion lords to submit and swear their allegiance to the Second Highness in the process and earning him the moniker of 'Charade the Demon'. He also used the youths among the captives and vagabonds to form a 20000-strong army for the Second Highness as per the agreement which was used to encircle the imperial capital, giving the First Highness no choice but to abdicate and pass the throne to the Second Highness.

The Second Highness also fulfilled his side of the bargain and gave all 73645 sets of gear of the Whitelion Legion to the convoy and also signed the certificate of the entitlement that was testament to the elevation of status of the Norton family leader from a baron to a count, complete with the official imperial seal. On a side note, the Second Highness also hoped that the convoy would continue to fight for him and help him restore the empire.

Charade refused the request without hesitating and the Second Highness merely laughed it off without stirring up any fuss. But when Charade announced that they would be departing immediately to resume their journey back to the Northlands, the Second Highness asked for a favor: since the convoy was headed for the final province of the Andinaq Kingdom, the Welbassia Province, which was also the main stronghold

of the noble alliance which the Second Highness couldn't reach his hands into no matter how hard he tried, the Second Highness made an optimistic request for the convoy's troops to clean up the rebellious nobles as they had done during their passage through the previous two provinces.

Charade shook his head and said, "My apologies, Your Highness, the convoy has already been delayed for too many times and we have to head for the Northlands immediately. As long as the nobles don't stop us on our tracks, we won't act against them for no reason."

The Second Highness laughed and said, "But there is a lot of food within that province… Well, no matter if you can't help it."

In the end, the convoy parted with the Second Highness on friendly terms and Glacia had even written a couple of letters meant for Lorist and entrusted them to Charade.

And so the convoy continued its journey north, but Charade and the rest quickly felt that something was not right. By the time the convoy reached the Welbassia Province, the vagabonds that followed behind them numbered more than 100000.

After making some inquiries, Charade found that he had been duped. As the population within the Andinaq Kingdom was quite dense, the food shortage that plagued it caused the citizens to wander around to forage for food for their survival. And somehow, rumors that the northbound convoy was handing out food and bringing people to settle down within the Northlands spread and caused many of the vagabonds to seek it out.

Enraged, Charade wrote a letter to the Second Highness about the issue to which the Second Highness responded, writing, 'The Andinaq Kingdom has roughly 400000 vagabonds. Due to the efforts of the convoy which freed up more land in the Hanstmost Province and the Central Province, I have only managed to settle 100000 of them down despite the best of my efforts. I cannot do much about the rest who chose to follow the convoy. However, if the convoy is willing to clean up the Welbassia Province, the extra land might be enough for another 100000 or so people to settle down…"

It was at that moment when everyone's face froze up. There was no way that they would be able to travel quick with so many vagabonds slowing them down! However, they couldn't just leave them be and ignore them as they might be prompted into

attacking and robbing the convoy out of desperation. 100000 desperate and hungry people was no small threat. On the other hand, if Charade chose to feed the vagabonds, the food source that would last 60000 people for three months might run out within only one month. The only solution was to attack the bastides and castles of the dominion lords within the province to attain more food to feed the vagabonds as well as help the Second Highness settle some of them down within the province.

That was the main issue that plagued the convoy which caused Charade much grief and frustration as he had no option but to jump into the abyss despite knowing what lay below.

Chapter 143
The Experiences of the Messengers

Looking at the 200 plus new recruits training within the camp, Lorist shook his head in disappointment. They were mostly recruited from the citizens who moved over from the Kenmays Family's immigrant town. Compared to the slave laborers of the Kenmays Family, their physical capabilities were far inferior as most of them were malnourished.

That was because the slave laborers were integral to the profits of the Kenmays Family, so it's understandable that they were well fed. These immigrants are different in that it's already considered for them to have infrequent meals that allowed them to barely survive. After being brought to the Northlands by the Kenmays Family, the immigrants were given some farmland and small amounts of supplies before they were left to fend for themselves and they would also be required to pay a tax after two years, so it wasn't weird that they couldn't even afford regular meals.

It'll take at least 6 months before they can be put to good use, Lorist thought as he stroked his chin. After that, he saw the Iron ranked butler of Telesti entering the new recruit camp and hurriedly rushing towards him.

The butler greeted him and said, "Milord, my mistress had requested that you go over to the construction site's base of operations. She has something she needs to discuss with you."

The reason Telesti asked Lorist to go over was to talk about the construction of the residential areas. Given that the main castle was constructed next to the mountain range, it was as high as six storeys and that allowed it to be defended easily and be exceedingly hard to attack. Three out of six storeys of the castle was already completed.

However, there were two large expanses at both the mountain ranges beside the castle and residential areas for the knights and the staff of the castle were planned to be built over there. Currently, the blueprints for the residential areas had been completed and it was awaiting Lorist's approval.

The slope of the mountain range to the north of the castle was larger and had relatively more level terrain and Telesti had come up with two plans with the aid of Grandmaster Ciroba. The first was to construct larger houses which the land could only fit 38 of. The second was to make the houses smaller so the area could fit 58 of them, 20 more than the former plan.

The slope of the mountain range to the south of the castle was steeper in comparison and it could only fit 11 such houses at most. Lorist had to decide which housing arrangement they were going to use.

Looking at the completed replica for some time, Lorist felt that he wasn't too satisfied with it. After giving it some thought, he told Telesti, "How about this? The slope to the northern side of the castle can be split into four levels, so construct larger houses atop the first two levels and build smaller ones at the lower levels. As for the southern slope, I recommend constructing multi-storied buildings, maybe about three floors each. I hope that the base area of these buildings can be larger and each room shouldn't be as small as the ones within academy dorms, maybe around 4 to 5 rooms the size of the small houses in each building would do."

Just as he left the base of operations, he saw Paulobins approach him. Paulobins said, "Milord, two beggars showed up and they claim to be the messengers of the convoy and requested to meet you…"

Messengers of the convoy? Delighted, Lorist asked, "Where are they?"

"They are waiting outside your room," said Paulobins as he handed over the reins of the horse to Lorist.

Even though it hasn't even been ten days since Reidy and Jim left, news of the convoy is already here. It seems that they'll be here soon, thought Lorist happily as he rode quickly to the southern walls of the castle.

Upon getting into the building, he saw two haggardly-dressed men whose faces were completely smudged in grime and one of them was even wrapped in a dirty bandage. No wonder Paulobins thought they were beggars.

Seeing Lorist come over, the two beggars burst out in tears as they kneeled down and cried, "Milord, we're finally able to meet you again…"

Lorist said, "You are…?"

"Milord, I am Ruhr and he is Mort and we are part of the guards for the convoy. Have you forgotten us?" said the uninjured guard as he sobbed.

Ruhr and Mort, hmm, they are Els's subordinates. Then again, their current form looks horrible…

Lorist squatted down beside a busybody guard who was doing nothing but snickering and said, "You blind fool, what are you doing sitting there and laughing like that? Go get your brothers some water for them to wash themselves. Get Shadekampf to come here as well."

After washing their faces and changing their clothes, the two messengers looked more familiar in Lorist's eyes. Shadekampf who just rushed into the room recognized them right away as he was the one who used to bring the guards around to make an inventory of the things the convoy obtained. "Ruhr, Mort, why have you come here?"

"Sir Shadekampf, we're here to pass a message…" Upon the mention of their mission, the two started to cry again.

The letter was given to Lorist and there were five pages in total. Charade mentioned in the letter that the battle on the Green Plains was a huge success and that Els had injured himself. The letter also described the meeting of the convoy with the Second Highness and Glacia and their agreement in much detail as well as Charade's intention to gain the equipment of the Whitelion Legion.

After reading the letter, Lorist felt both happy and perplexed. He was glad because his elder cousin sister who was quite fat back in the day and bullied him frequently had become a Gold ranked knight. However, he was troubled that the convoy was still caught up within the Andinaq Kingdom and it didn't seem that they would be arriving anytime soon. It was possible that snow would start to fall after Charade and gang cleaned up the rebellious dominion lords of the kingdom. Given that it was already the 9th day of the 9th month, winter was coming and the snowfall would definitely make it much harder for the convoy to travel.

Looking at the date of the letter, Lorist was shocked to see that it had been signed on the 28th day of the 6th month.

"You guys took two whole months to travel here?" Lorist felt weird at that time frame as he had only taken one month to travel from Geldos City to the Northlands. Why did

it take so long for the messengers to arrive?

The two messengers continued their sobbing as one said, "Milord, when we left, there were 12 of us. But now, only the two of us remain…"

Lorist asked concernedly, "What happened?"

"Milord, the 12 of us were fully-armed and had two mounts each. When we passed through the Andinaq Kingdom, we came under frequent bandit attacks and by the time we reached the Madras Duchy, there were only 7 of us left. Within the duchy, things mostly went on fine until we arrived at Whitestone Town which was near the Hendliff Suspension Bridge. Just as we were about to cross the river, we heard some merchants who came from the other side mention that Duke Loggins intended to send his troops to punish the Norton Family who have disrespected him, so we didn't dare to use that route and headed for the ferry port downstream.

"After we crossed the river there, just as we were about to get some food and rest within a town, the garrison force of the town labeled us bandits and wanted to arrest us. As a result, only five of us emerged alive and we lost all our luggage and mounts. Those garrison soldiers were also frightened by our tenacity and no longer dared to chase us. Having no choice but to travel on foot, we traveled for another 5 days to the dominion of Baron Farad. Initially thinking that we could get some help from him, we didn't expect him to treat us as vagabonds and capture us while also taking all our armor, weapons and money.

"After working a month of forced labor under the baron, we were enlisted by him into his forces because he had gone into conflict with some other viscount. We were shoved to the battlefield with nothing more than a pike. After two days of fighting, Waylin and Azk perished and I, Mort and Gilson managed to escape in the midst of chaos. However, Gilson had gotten hit by three arrows and didn't make it. Ever since, Mort and I didn't dare to enter anymore towns and wandered in the wilderness for six days before we finally arrived here…" said Ruhr as he delivered his experiences while sobbing all the way.

Lorist thumped on the table in anger and said, "Unbelievable… What did you say that baron was called? And what's the name of that town?"

Needless to say, the baron was one of the new nobles that had just been entitled by the Second Prince. Northlanders were usually very amicable to guests, and travelers

to towns would usually get aid from the townsfolk. For messengers like them, Northlander nobles would treat them to dinner like honored guests apart from providing the basic necessities like accommodation and supplies. Naturally, they stood to benefit from getting news from outside the Northlands from visitors and some more generous nobles might even give some money to reward them for the information.

Ever since the entitlement of the new nobles at the Northlands, the atmosphere and culture there had degraded. When they lacked resources, the new nobles would impersonate bandits to pillage others and if they didn't have enough citizens, they would kidnap people from nearby villages. Many old landed nobles of the Northlands were currently in conflict with the new nobles because of those issues. During the knighthood competition, one noble who participated was recognized by some to be one of the bandit leaders who robbed another noble family's merchant convoy.

So, Baron Farad, huh, Lorist thought as he looked at the map and found the dominion of the new dominion lord which was only two days of travel away from the Firmrock Castle and next to Count Spenseid's dominion. As for the town that Ruhr mentioned, it was under the jurisdiction of Viscount Darwof and that town may be an immigrant town that was constructed only recently given that the members of their garrison were merely ruffians that dared to prey on messengers. That town was slightly further away and it would take 5 days to travel there by horse, so Lorist made a mental note to settle them at a later date.

"Ask the guards outside to get Knight Josk and Knight Waxima to come here," Lorist instructed Shadekampf.

"What's the status of the convoy right now? Is Els recovering from his injuries well?" Lorist asked Ruhr and Mort.

Ruhr replied, "During the battle of the Green Plains, our forces' losses were low and less than 1000 of the soldiers were killed or injured. Had Sir Els been fine, he would have led us back on our mission to deliver the letter. Back then when we were at Benz Citadel and preparing to send some information here the first time, Sir Els had volunteered to be part of the messenger team but he later changed his mind when Sir Potterfang returned…"

"Wait a second, you said that a message was sent back when the convoy was still at Benz Citadel?"

"That's right…" Ruhr replied, before he recalled something and asked, "Don't tell me… That you didn't receive the first message and didn't see any of our messengers?"

Lorist merely shook his head.

Ruhr and Mort looked at each other with expressions of surprise.

Ruhr continued, "Milord, they left one month before our departure and Sir Charade's message contained a report on the status of the convoy as well as the news Sir Potterfang received at the imperial capital. The leader of the 12 messengers was Krimor and he's one of the guards that milord may remember. However, if they haven't arrived yet, then based on our experience, they might have got into some trouble…"

"If they're alive, we'll find them. Even if they're dead, we'll locate their corpses. Nobody will be able to get away scot-free for harming the messengers of the Norton Family. I will definitely make sure you lot have a satisfactory answer to this," Lorist said as he ground his teeth. No wonder he felt that Charade's letter seemed to not be extensive enough given that the rest of the information had been in the previous letter he sent which had disappeared along with the first group of messengers.

"Brief me on how the convoy is doing. It isn't mentioned in these letters," Lorist said.

Ruhr and Mort began to explain what happened with the convoy after Lorist had left.

"What? The convoy now has more than 4000 carriages and 50000 people? And the escort force has grown to 15000-strong?" Lorist was so surprised that he almost jumped in shock. No wonder the convoy was able to take out more than 30000 soldiers of the noble alliance and even received a request from the Second Highness to help him root out the rebellious nobles of the kingdom.

Lorist now understood why Charade was so confident in accepting the request of the Second Highness. The convoy's strength had actually grown so much that they could play a pivotal role in deciding the future of a whole kingdom. It seemed that Lorist did not have to worry about the safety of the convoy. Given that it had already been more than 2 months since the letter was written, the convoy had probably completed the assignment given to them by the Second Highness.

At that moment, Josk and Waxima reported their arrival before they entered the room.

Lorist pointed to the dominion of Baron Farad on the beastskin map and had Ruhr and

Mort tell the knights about their experiences, causing both of them to fume with rage.

"This noble is truly shameless…" Waxima said.

"Milord, we must give Baron Farad the retribution he deserves. Nobody should ever be allowed to treat our messengers like that," Josk proclaimed.

"Heed my orders. Bring the mounted archers squad and a cavalrymen company to that dominion and hang this Baron Farad at the entrance of his bastide. Burn his castle down and make a huge wooden plaque to explain why we did all that. Perhaps the new nobles would stand to learn something about the traditions and customs of the Northlands as well as the regulations between nobles from the baron's mistake," Lorist instructed.

"Your will is our command, milord. We will exercise it with utmost precision," said Josk and Waxima in unison as they saluted.

"Don't leave just yet. This time, you will have to make your passage through the dominion of Count Spenseid. I will write him a letter so he doesn't misunderstand the reason our forces are approaching his dominion. Also, Ruhr and Mort said that there was a group of messengers before them that never managed to arrive here. Make sure to ask around to see if you can also get some information about them…"

"Understood, milord," Josk and Waxima replied.

Ruhr and Mort then stood up.

Mort said, "Milord, please allow us to accompany them. We want to bring the bodies of our comrades home."

"You've just arrived after a long journey. Are you sure you can handle it?" Lorist couldn't force them to stay either as their reason was extremely compelling.

"We can handle it, milord," Ruhr said.

"How about this… Rest for a day and depart tomorrow. I will also check Mort's health for a bit and if you're fine, I'll allow the two of you to go together and even let you be the ones to personally hang Baron Farad. I'm sure you'd be happy to do that. Shadekampf. bring 20 guards with you and tag along to help them find the bodies of their heroic comrades. We will have a funeral for them and bury them at the Martyrs'

Graveyard at Firmrock Castle when their bodies are sent back," Lorist said.

"Yes, milord," replied Shadekampf.

The Martyrs' Graveyard was built on a hill opposite the Firmrock Castle's main building. All family soldiers and guards would be buried there when they pass on so that future generations can easily honor them and pay their respects there.

"Thank you, milord…" mumbled Ruhr and Mort emotionally.

Chapter 144
Hennard's Ransom

By the time Josk and Waxima brought their men back, six days of the expedition had already passed.

Lorist was currently taking a walk on the walls with Baron Camorra who had hurriedly rushed over from far away. The reason for his visit was to negotiate the release and ransom of the captured Gold ranked knight Hennard and the other ten plus of Silver ranked knights.

"Camorra, is my hearing getting worse or did you mistakenly tell me a wrong number? I really can't fathom that a Gold ranked knight's ransom would only be 100 imperial gold coins. That's not a ransom, that's just humiliation to the Gold ranked knight in question as well as an insult to the Norton Family. There's no way I will accept the price offered by the duke."

Lorist was also quite shocked as he had even prepared to negotiate for a higher price. But never would he have thought that the duke would offer such a ridiculous figure. If word of that laughably low sum truly spread out, then Knight Hennard would have no other choice left to him but to commit suicide.

As an example, during the knighthood competition, defeated knights had to offer up their mounts, armor, and weapons to the victors or pay an equivalent ransom. Normally, those were worth somewhere from 30 to 40 gold Fordes which was equal to 100 to 150 imperial gold coins. However, the case with the duke's knights was that they were captured as enemies on the battlefield as opposed to being defeated in a friendly competition.

If a Silver ranked knight was taken captive on the battlefield, all the belongings he carried with him would belong to the victor by default and if he wanted to regain his freedom, he had to first buy his equipment, mount and attendants back. If the price of all that was 50 gold Fordes, it would be multiplied by 2 and the resulting 100 gold Fordes would be the ransom that had to be paid separately for the knight's freedom itself.

In conclusion, a Silver ranked knight would have to pay around 150 gold Fordes in total to regain his freedom, attendants, mounts and gear to be allowed to leave. The one who captured the knight might even host a banquet to get to know the knight better before sending him off.

Additionally, if a captured knight had a noble title, he would have to pay another ransom that is fitting of the status of the title as true nobles were worth far more than quasi-nobles like normal knights. This was an agreed upon convention on the battlefield and no noble would dare to violate it. But the main point was that it only applied to Silver ranked knights.

Few Gold ranked knights would actually end up being captured on the battlefield due to their far superior battle prowess. In terms of Battle Force, Gold ranked Battle Force would last longer on the battlefield and had superior attack, defense and endurance. It wasn't possible to subdue a Gold ranked knight unless a huge sacrifice of troops was made or the knight was caught off-guard by surprise.

The best method to deal with a Gold ranked knight was to use another Gold ranked knight. Battles between two Gold ranked knights would always become the focal point of the battlefield and unless one was far superior than another in terms of technique, the loser would usually end up dead with the victor heavily injured and not faring much better.

Then again, Gold ranked knights being held captive was not without precedent: the Forund Duchy's Gold ranked knight Bisya was a prime example of this as he had collapsed unconscious after sustaining injuries from fighting against the forces of the Redlis Kingdom and became the captive of the First Prince. Duke Forund had to offer 3000 gold Fordes as well as a precious treasure sword to be able to sway the First Prince to release the knight and that incident was frequently mentioned among the nobility for some time.

Duke Loggins's offer of 100 imperial gold coins only converted to roughly 30 plus gold Fordes and that made Lorist very troubled. Even though Hennard wasn't captured on the battlefield and was instead apprehended while he was drunk, it wasn't like Lorist asked for 1000 gold Fordes in exchange for his freedom. But at least 500 to 600 gold Fordes would be fair, right? After all, the ransom was in a sense the measure of worth of the Gold ranked knight.

This 'wonder' of a duke really has no brains… Offering a price like that is really just an

act of digging his own grave. If word of this got out, who would still be willing to serve him? What the heck is going on? The more Lorist wondered, the more curious he got.

"Camorra, please don't joke around with me, alright? This is crucial to the pride and dignity of the knight and it isn't something that should be treated lightly. I don't believe that Duke Loggins is that uninformed to be able to make that laughable offer…" Lorist told Baron Camorra solemnly.

Apart from showing a bitter smile, there was nothing Baron Camorra could say in response.

Ten days prior, Viscount Kenmays made a visit to the mansion of the duke at Gildusk City. He brought with him the corpse of Knight Chevany as well as news of Knight Hennard's and the other Silver ranked knights' capture and the loss of contact of the duke's 4000-strong army, which shocked the entirety of the citizens of the duke's dominion, causing the word to spread all over the Northlands. In a fit of rage, Duke Loggins once again smashed up his just-cleaned-up study and shouted maniacally that he wanted retribution and cursed loudly at the Norton Family. He even swore to kill off everyone who was related to the Norton Family.

Baron Camorra and another Gold ranked knight, the vice leader of the Northland Army, Bitson, expended great effort to calm the duke's rage and got him to start plotting another expedition against the Nortons.

By the time the duke calmed down and started to plan, all three of them were dumbstruck as they found that they no longer had enough soldiers they could mobilize to mount an attack. It was quite shocking that the once 20000-strong Northland Army which had been reduced to only have 16700 plus people left could only mobilize 5000 plus men of two regiments. Given that the 4000-strong troops were already completely defeated, there was no way another 5000 could make that big of a difference, was there?

There were many reasons for the inability of the duke to deploy more troops. The main one was that the Northland Army could be considered to be a relatively small army in that there were only 21000 members that were split into 2 divisions. Additionally, the Northland Army wasn't optimized for full scale open field battles and was instead modeled after a defense army. The southern part of Duke Loggins's duchy had a capital city, a citadel, three bastides and seven towns as well as the entry at the suspension bridge. These places had to be defended to ensure the security of the duchy, especially

the capital city, the Hendliff Suspension Bridge as well as Freist Castle near the bridge. Those three locations were crucial points of defense against the forces of the Second Prince and every one of them only had a regiment of troops which was just enough to keep those places secure.

The other factor was due to the duke wanting to save his military costs. After the formation of the Northland Army, he had disbanded the various garrison forces all over his dominion because he felt that the Northland Army was more than enough to keep the dominion in check and could be used to fill the place of the garrison forces of the towns and bastides, thus saving him more money. Additionally, he believed that no dominion lord in the Northlands that caused him trouble would ever require him to mobilize the entire army. Usually, he only needed to send 2000 soldiers to take care of such minor insurrections.

Now that over 4000 of his soldiers were wiped out, it was like he had gotten a waking slap straight to his face as he realized that he didn't have any means to retaliate against the Norton Family. The other problem was that of the five Gold ranked knights that served the duke, Knight Tabik had been injured by Lorist and needed over one year of rest to recover, the most accomplished Knight Chevany had died on the battlefield, Knight Hennard had been taken captive and only two Gold ranked knights remained. Knight Aordem was tasked with defending the Hendliff Suspension Bridge and the Freist Castle. The vice commander of the Northland army, Bitson, was busy defending the capital of the dominion. Even if the duke deployed his troops, there was nobody suitable to lead them.

As he pinched his nose to stop the blood from flowing out, the duke instructed Baron Camorra to negotiate for the release of Knight Hennard and painfully took out 400 gold Fordes for the ransom. As for the Silver ranked knights and the captured soldiers of the Northland Army, he felt that they could wait until his troops defeat the Nortons and free them later.

Knight Bitson however felt that 400 gold Fordes was far too less and the Nortons definitely wouldn't release Hennard for that kind of sum and requested the duke to raise the ransom so that they may get Hennard back as soon as possible and have him report what he had witnessed from the battles within the Norton Family's dominion so that they may be able to better prepare themselves.

But the duke insisted that 400 gold Fordes was already the most he was willing to pay. As the three of them continued to discuss the matter, the butler of the mansion

reported that one of the attendants of Knight Chevany had returned with a report about the happenings throughout the expedition.

The attendant of Knight Chevany looked really haggard. He explained that he had experienced much trouble while crossing the Morgan Hills with his comrade due to having met a magical beast, a Blackback Iron-toothed Leopard, during their travels. His comrade had sacrificed himself to kill the beast while he managed to escape the mountain range after many other life-threatening encounters and made it back to Gildusk City in one piece. Even though he was injured and worn out, he still fulfilled the task given to him by his master out of loyalty and made his way to the duke's mansion immediately to pass the silver tube which contained the letter to the duke immediately.

Duke Loggins took out a stack of rolled up beastskin documents from the tube and started reading. Knight Bitson and Baron Camorra were both rather interested with the contents of the letter, but since it was in the duke's hands, they had no choice but to wait patiently. As for the attendant who delivered it, he was sobbing in a corner after hearing about his master's death.

The things that happened next would forever be ingrained within the psyche of Baron Camorra: he saw the duke's face redden with rage as both his eyes seemed to be about to fall out of their sockets with steam seemingly gushing out of his nostrils. All of a sudden, the duke totally lost it and started rampaging about. This wasn't like his usual fits. This time, he was stomping all over and hurling anything he could get his hands on including the tables within the meeting room as he cursed at both Knight Chevany and Knight Hennard. "Those two bastards! I want to kill them so badly! I want to tear their corpses into a thousand pieces! How did the two of them manage to lose all that gold?! My 300000 gold Fordes! My gold coins! Chevany, it's all their fault! Why didn't they send my gold coins back first?! Hennard! Why did he fuck up his job in protecting the gold?! My money! My money…"

Baron Camorra was completely dumbstruck. Seeing the beastskin documents fall to the ground, he picked them up and hid at a corner where he would be safe from the airborne objects hurled by the duke and started reading. Knight Bitson also joined him to take a look.

They quickly came to understand why their lord reacted the way he did. *It's all your fault, Chevany! If you had merely reported the decimation of the army, then that would be the end of that. Why did you have to tell the duke about the massacre of the Wildnorth*

Town citizens and the amount of wealth they had there? You even specified that it amounted to roughly 300000 gold Fordes! For that kind of wealth to have fallen into the duke's hands only to be taken away again… How else would he react but freak out completely?!

Perhaps because he was not able to resist hearing his master being berated by the duke so senselessly, the attendant spoke out and said, "Lord Duke, Knight Chevany has already sacrificed himself heroically on the battlefield…"

The duke whose bloodshot eyes had been completely clouded by the wealth that had escaped his grasps turned to look at the attendant as he started rambling unintelligibly, causing everyone within the room to feel a chill down their spine.

"Died on the battlefield? He thinks that his mistakes will all be rectified with his death? Even if he's dead, I won't spare him! He lost all my money, my 300000 gold Fordes! He has erred greatly! He must pay for his mistakes! Men… Men!" roared the duke loudly as his voice echoed throughout the halls of his mansion.

"Destroy Chevany's family completely right now! Confiscate all their goods, exile his family members and feed his corpse to wild dogs! He actually dared to lose my 300000 gold Fordes!"

"Milord, you can't do that…" Knight Bitson and Baron Camorra said in shock and unison as they hurriedly attempted to stop the duke's order.

"I can't? Why not? It's Chevany's fault. Why didn't he transport the gold back first and insisted on attacking the Norton Family's castle? Why did he bring the 300 longbowmen with him away from Wildnorth Town and caused the town's defenses to weaken, thus allowing for the ambush to succeed and causing my gold to fall into the hands of the enemy?! Why did he give up after only one failed attack at Wildnorth Town after it was captured and and retreated even though he had 1700 soldiers under him? He actually sat on his arse and witnessed the gold being taken away by the enemy! How could he have done that? Tell me, if he wasn't at fault, then who is?" shouted the duke back to the two of his subordinates, causing the both of them to be completely speechless.

"And you…" said the duke as he turned his attention back to the poor attendant. "You are a shameful deserter and a coward just like your master. You have betrayed my trust and lost my gold… My men… Hang him right away! Hang him this instant!"

The attendant who had labored tirelessly to complete his mission was completely shocked by the loss of the duke's temper and didn't even make a sound as he was dragged outside. Baron Camorra could only feel his heart shudder as his whole body shivered from the sheer terror. He suddenly realized that the duke before his eyes now looked more foreign than ever.

When a guard entered the mansion again to report that the attendant had been hanged at the flagpole outside the mansion, the duke started to calm down.

"Camorra, go to the Norton dominion tomorrow and tell them that I intend to pay the price for Hennard's and the Silver ranked knights' ransom. Remember, Hennard's ransom will be only 100 imperial gold coins and the Silver ranked knights' would be 10 imperial gold coins each…" said the duke while his eyes remained bloodshot with rage.

Baron Camorra's expression changed as he said, "Mi-milord… That's still far from enough…"

Duke Loggins said in an eerily calm voice that caused Knight Bitson and Baron Camorra to shiver in fear, "Tell the Norton Family that I won't be spending a single copper coin more for those sinners' release. The reason I want to pay their ransom is not because I want to help them regain their freedom but rather because I want them back here so I can punish them thoroughly. They shouldn't have lost my gold coins…"

After that, Baron Camorra stepped out of the duke's mansion in a daze and saw the corpse of the attendant that was still hung up high. As he turned back and exchanged his gaze with Knight Bitson, the two of them stood there without uttering a single word.

Finally, Knight Bitson broke the silence and whispered ever so quietly, "The Lord Duke has truly gone insane this time… You better look out for yourself… And you might want to tell Hennard that staying as a captive of the Norton Family is far better than coming back here…"

Chapter 145
Release

Atop the castle, Baron Camorra looked at the distant group of people approaching with the knight leading it holding up the banner of the Norton Family.

"Is that the army of your family?" asked Baron Camorra.

Lorist merely nodded.

"What have they set out for?" he asked again.

Lorist laughed and said, "They went to teach the newcomer nobles of the Northlands a lesson on the customs of the people here. One noble actually dared to capture and give trouble to the messengers of the family, so I had my soldiers hang that guy in front of his own castle."

"And who may that be?"

"Some guy called Baron Farad."

Baron Camorra furrowed his brow in thought before he said, "I know that guy and he's very good at horse-breeding. Originally, he was the breeder of the Second Prince and he even saved his life once during their second attack against the Melein Duchy. After that, he was made a baron and sent to the Northlands. That guy is rather stubborn and the moment he arrived, he attacked the nearby Baron Slaydor and even killed all his family members before taking over the dominion."

Lorist gave a surprised look at Baron Camorra before he asked, "Why did Duke Loggins leave him be without doing anything about it? Isn't he supposed to be in charge of the dominion lords of the Northlands?"

"Well, Baron Farad was a noble entitled by the Second Prince so it wouldn't do the duke any good to antagonize him," said the baron as he shook his head. "The duke said that since the old noble of the Northlands don't really treat him with respect, he'll lord over the new ones. As long as they pay their taxes to him, he wouldn't give them any

trouble. That way, the Second Prince won't have anything to pick with the duke as well."

"So the duke does fear the Second Prince after all…" Lorist said as he chuckled. "No wonder even though everyone in the Northlands know the duke's ambition of forming his own duchy, he hasn't made any concrete moves just yet. So that was the reason. With that small, little gut of his, there's no way he's gonna achieve anything great."

Baron Camorra no longer continued to speak. He regretted running his mouth too much and allowed Lorist to guess the truth of the situation without too much trouble.

"Camorra, forgive me for being candid about this, but as nobles, we have to have the behavior and pride befitting of one. I'm sure you understand as well that the values the duke holds is considered a violation against the traditions of nobility and I really find it hard to understand the duke's intentions. Can you enlighten me about them?" Lorist asked as he once again changed the subject to the ransom of the knights.

"Sigh… Actually, the duke isn't planning to pay the sum as a ransom for their freedom but rather as a reward for apprehending criminals…"

If a criminal who escaped from Count A's territory was captured at Viscount B's territory, Count A can send someone to Viscount B's dominion to bring the criminal back for punishment. At the same time, Count A had to pay Viscount B a fitting bounty as a sign of gratitude and that was an unspoken convention among the nobles.

"Wait, what did you say? A reward for handing back the criminals? What does that even mean? Don't tell me Duke Loggins thinks that Knight Hennard is a criminal?" Lorist cried out in surprise.

Baron Camorra merely nodded bitterly.

Lorist widened his eyes as he said, "That's far too ridiculous, right? Isn't this just the duke trying to save himself some money on the ransom by exploiting this tradition? I've long heard that the duke was quite the miser, but he actually used this method to free his Gold ranked knight? Does he think that others are idiots? Nobody in their right mind would label someone a criminal just because they lost in the war…"

"It's true. The duke truly thinks of Knight Hennard and the other Silver ranked knights as criminals and the reason he sent me here was to bring them back for their punishment," said Baron Camorra as he stared to the ground, seemingly wanting to

bore a hole in it and jump inside to hide his embarrassment.

"I can't believe this…" Lorist said as he shook his head. "Unless, your duke has truly gone insane. It's just not right for anyone to be labeled as a criminal just because they lost in a war."

Sigh, I guess I better make it clear. It's only a matter of time before word of the duke's actions spread across the Northlands anyway. I was bound to be humiliated the moment I was sent here. I only hope that this young lord of the Norton Family will refuse to release Knight Hennard for it will be far worse for him to return to the dominion as a criminal than to stay here as a captive, thought Baron Camorra. The duke's actions against the family members of Knight Chevany had completely stoned the hearts of his men to the point that even the baron himself lost all confidence and hope.

"It's not because he was defeated. He is going to be punished for losing the money of the duke," Baron Camorra said.

"Huh? They lost his money? What does that mean?" Lorist asked as he got even more puzzled.

Baron Camorra snickered cynically before he continued, "Didn't they take over Wildnorth Town already and gathered up the 300000 gold Fordes' worth of wealth only to lose it to you? The duke was extremely mad at that fact and he thinks that the 300000 gold Fordes' of wealth already belonged to him and losing it was tantamount to causing him to lose his money. That to him was unforgivable. That's why the duke sent me here to bring buy them back to punish them…"

Good Sol! What kind of reasoning is that?! Lorist finally came to a realization. He asked, "How did Duke Loggins know about that sum?"

"It's all Knight Chevany's fault. After failing to take back Wildnorth Town, he was worried that he wouldn't be able to make it back to the dominion and decided to write a letter about the details of the battles in your dominion and sent his two attendants back to deliver it. Only one of the attendants survived the trip and managed to pass the letter to the duke. Chevany really shouldn't have written about the gains they got in Wildnorth Town. The duke was enraged upon seeing it and started to blame Knight Chevany and Knight Hennard for losing the gold that could have been his because they didn't focus on sending it back first. Not only did the duke hang the attendant by labeling him a deserter, he also exiled the family members of Knight Chevany and left

them to starve on the streets without any belongings whatsoever."

"That's…" Lorist was completely flabbergasted at what he had heard. He did not have a single doubt that the duke had gone completely insane.

Understanding what Lorist was about to say, Baron Camorra continued, "The duke even ordered the corpse of Knight Chevany to be tossed into the wilderness to be fed to wild dogs. However, Knight Bitson had already secretly sent someone to sneak the body away and give it a proper burial. We will also secretly take care of Chevany's family members and help them leave the Northlands when the duke forgets the matter and is no longer paying any attention to it…"

"Your duke is truly the incarnation of greed itself. Given his almost maniacal fixation on wealth, he'll definitely want to vent his frustrations on the family members of Knight Chevany. While he isn't doing it now, one day he might think of selling them to the slave traders. You had best help them move away from the Northlands as soon as possible," Lorist said.

That was indeed within the realm of possibility. The duke who had lost it no longer cared about the opinions of others and if he truly did that, the Northland Army was bound to crumble from the chaos. Fortunately for the duke, the presence of Knight Bitson still managed to hold the army together. However, it was only hanging by a thin thread that could snap at any moment given the rumors that were spreading around which caused the army's morale to drop significantly. As the commander of the army, Knight Chevany had always acted rather righteously and he was beloved by his subordinates. Many soldiers felt that the duke's treatment of Knight Chevany was ridiculous and were already at their boiling point. If the family members of the knight were really sold to slave traders, then it was possible for the soldiers to even revolt.

Oh Lord Duke, do you have anything in your sights other than money? Without the Northland Army, no matter how much money you have, you won't be able to keep it safe! Baron Camorra nodded towards Lorist gratefully for the warning and decided that he should head back to the dominion quickly so that he can help the family members of Knight Chevany move as soon as possible.

"I think what happened to Knight Chevany was truly a shame. He was a magnificent leader. Even though we were enemies, I have to agree that he is a stellar Gold ranked knight. He had already did all he could. The true irreversible mistake was made when the duke sent his soldiers against us and gave Chevany an enemy he could not defeat.

Originally, he didn't have to die, but for the sake of asking me to spare his subordinates and atoning for his failure to the duke, he decided to put himself in harm's way when he dueled me and upheld the pride of a knight till the very end. I deeply respect him for doing that and he is a true, chivalrous knight," Lorist said.

"If anything, the only mistake Knight Chevany made was pledging his allegiance to a madman like the duke. Sane people can never reason or converse with the insane, especially the paranoid ones. Duke Loggins is an embarrassment to all the nobles of the Northlands and he had dug his own grave this time. I believe that even now, he is still obsessed with the 300000 gold Fordes that were never his in the first place and is dreaming of getting it from my hands…" Lorist laughed as he pointed at the soldiers who were entering the castle and told Baron Camorra, "These are the forces of my family. If the duke wants the money, he will have to ask them for permission first…"

Looking at the soldiers from the walls, Baron Camorra felt conflicting emotions assailing him and didn't say a word.

After receiving news that 4000 plus Northland Army soldiers had lost, they thought that the Norton Family forces must have sustained heavy casualties as well. However, Baron Camorra discovered that the Nortons' forces seemed to have increased even more after visiting Firmrock Castle. From the walls that were fully-staffed by patrolling guards and the sight of the new recruits who were practicing military drills, all of them were fully-equipped and armed with metal armor. The most surprising part was that the Norton Family was still able to send out soldiers to deal with the noble that had did ill to their messengers. Baron Camorra could only laugh cynically as he was forced to admit that the Norton Family's power was going to be a huge hurdle even for someone like Duke Loggins.

Josk, Waxima and Shadekampf ascended the walls followed behind by Ruhr and Mort.

"Milord, we have completed your assignment and hung Baron Farad at the front of his own castle," reported Josk after he saluted.

"How are the casualties?"

Josk shook his head as Waxima started to laugh out loud. The two of them looked rather delighted.

"Milord, we didn't have any casualties…" Shadekampf stepped to the front as he

reported. "Well, apart from a few soldiers who injured themselves when they fell from horseback because they still weren't used to being mounted. Sir Josk said that they would only get used to riding after falling a couple more times, so it's nothing to worry about. Everything went perfectly well."

"Tell me what happened in detail," Lorist instructed.

"Milord, when we arrived, Baron Farad was leading a few hundred men to fight against a nearby noble, Viscount Skim. Josk and Waxima ordered the soldiers to intercept the baron's forces immediately and crushed them within an instant. As Baron Farad attempted to escape, Josk used an arrow to kill his mount from afar and managed to capture him. He was quite the feisty guy and even said that he was a favored subordinate of the Second Prince and warned us to watch our backs. We ignored him and took over his castle before Ruhr and Mort personally hung him from a wooden rack. Sir Waxima also erected a wooden plaque beside it and stated the reason he was put to death," Shadekampf concluded.

Lorist nodded with satisfaction as the mission was completed without any casualties with the best possible outcome.

"Milord, that Baron Farad was actually quite a poor guy. We ransacked his whole castle and only found 300 imperial gold coins. On the other hand, his stable was rather plentiful and there were more than 400 fine horses there as well as two herds of goat and tens of cows. An interesting fact is Baron Farad had constructed his own castle at another noble's dominion because his own dominion was in fact a desolate place devoid of any resource. It was only later that Viscount Skim told us that Baron Farad had occupied the dominion of Baron Slaydor and everything within the dominion belonged to the Slaydor Family in the past.

"Viscount Skim also said that Baron Farad also kidnapped his subjects from their villages to force them into labor for the construction of his castle, so we returned the citizens of the viscount back to him. The rest who remained were the former subjects of Baron Slaydor, but we weren't able to find the baron himself and we heard that his whole family had been eradicated by Baron Farad. That's why we brought the citizens back here along with their livestock and left the castle and its inhabitants to the discretion of Viscount Skim," Shadekampf said.

"Good, you did very well. Have you found the bodies of the messengers of our family?" Lorist asked.

"Yes, we have. We brought them back after we cremated them and put their remains into urns," Shadekampf replied.

"Alright. We'll have a burial for them at the Martyrs' Graveyard tomorrow morning. Ruhr and Mort, you two should really get some rest now that your task is complete."

"Thank you, milord," said the two messengers gratefully.

"Also, Shadekampf, get Patt to escort Knight Hennard and the other ten plus Silver ranked knights over here. Baron Camorra, let's settle the issue today. We'll wait within the room for now. After you," Lorist said.

After that, Patt brought the knights to the walls and entered Lorist's reception room, filling it to the brim.

Knight Hennard was delighted to see Baron Camorra as he quickly called out, "Sir Camorra, did the duke ask you to come to pay our ransom?"

Baron Camorra responded by making a forced smile.

Lorist clapped his hands to call for the attention of the others before he said, "I apologize, but I have to tell you all some bad news. I believe that the ransom offered by Duke Loggins is completely unacceptable, so I refused Baron Camorra's request."

The whole room erupted into chatters right away and a Silver ranked knight could even be heard saying, "You see? I knew the duke would be stingy and offer a low price for our ransom."

Some even said, "Lord Norton, tell us how much you want. If it's okay with you, we'll make up the difference for ourselves…"

Some of them made a wild guess and said, "I think the Norton Family must have asked for a ridiculous price…"

Knight Hennard approached Baron Camorra and asked him in a low voice how much the ransom offered by the duke was. But the baron merely stayed quiet.

"Please quiet down, everyone…" Lorist said.

The room returned to its former tranquility with everyone's eyes trailed on Lorist.

"To clarify, the reason I refused the duke's request is because the price offered is a complete insult to knights like you as well as our family."

"Can I ask how much the duke offered?" Knight Hennard interjected.

Lorist looked at him before he pointed directly at him and said, "Yours is 100 imperial gold coins and theirs are 10 imperial gold coins each."

"What did you say?!" Knight Hennard was so shocked that he almost jumped with the rest of the knights being stupefied as they thought, *nobody would accept that kind of price…*

"I'd also like to mention that the money offered was not as a ransom for your freedom but a gratitude fee for sending you lot back to him as criminals," Lorist said.

Knight Hennard's eyes turned bloodshot as he turned to Baron Camorra and asked, "Is what he said true?"

Baron Camorra nodded with much reluctance.

"Why? What crimes did we commit? Are we considered criminals just because we became captives?" Knight Hennard bellowed as his voice turned hoarse with rage.

"Becoming a captive is not a crime. But the duke believes that you are at fault for losing the wealth at Wildnorth Town to us which was worth about 300000 gold Fordes and cannot forgive you no matter what. He thinks that the 300000 gold Fordes' worth of wealth already belongs to him. Baron Camorra, should I continue or do you want to say it yourself?" Lorist said as he turned to the baron and feigned a smile.

Baron Camorra looked at Lorist with a complicated expression as he replied exasperatedly, "Let me tell them the rest."

He understood that if Lorist was allowed to continue, he might intentionally infuse some provocative statements as he explained away. It was better for the baron himself to tell it as it was and let the others understand that the duke had only made those rushed decisions because of his anger. *Sigh, I really didn't want to make this visit, but the duke forced me to come here so I had no choice…*

……

"… and so Knight Bitson thought that it was better for you guys to stay with the Norton Family as captives instead of returning to the dominion. When the duke regains his calm, we will once again come to negotiate for your release." That was the only way the baron could have consoled the knights.

"There's no need to negotiate anymore. I plan to restore their freedom without collecting a random as an act of opposition to the despicable actions of the duke. He only wants money and is willing to throw away even his pride and standing as a noble for it. But the Norton Family believes that a knight's pride and dignity is not something that can be infringed upon so lightly and I don't want to receive any more insulting offers from the duke. That's why I hereby proclaim that you are all free to go. You can collect your mounts and belongings later and if you have any attendants, you can also tell us about them for their release. It's already getting late, so I request that you gentlemen stay for one more night before leaving tomorrow."

Lorist then took out a sack filled with coins and said, "Baron Camorra, here is 100 gold Fordes. Please pass this to the family members of Knight Chevany. This is my way of showing respect to a true knight like him. I hope you can help me out with this."

Baron Camorra looked at Lorist before he finally let out a long sigh as he received the sack and said, "Lord Norton, you've won completely and thoroughly. I will definitely pass this on to his family members on your behalf."

Chapter 146
Departure

The coming of fall during the 9th month blanketed the Morgan Hills and Black Forests with a new coat of gold.

Lorist stood at the southern gates as he sent off Baron Camorra. Occasionally, the freed Silver ranked knights would show up before Lorist to pay their respects before following their attendant to the side to wait for the rest of their comrades before leaving.

Baron Camorra looked at the Silver ranked knights that gathered in the distance with a solemn expression. Eventually, he could no longer resist and said, "Your move was truly a stroke of genius. Even though I already know that the knights would stir up a storm for the Northland Army when they return, I was unable to come up with a suitable contingency plan even after pondering over it for the whole night. Sigh, the Lord Duke has truly made a huge mistake this time. Without the suppression of the Northland Army, I'm afraid the Northlands would fall into another period of instability and chaos…"

Lorist laughed lightly as he said, "The time of peril has long descended upon the land, and it's only a matter of time before the Northlands become embroiled within it. On my journey back from Morante City to the family's dominion, I've seen much of the artifacts of war from hungry peasants, rising bandit groups and homeless vagabonds. I initially thought that with the natural borders the Northlands has, it would remain the haven for the people in chaotic times like these and would be able to stay unified throughout. But I was wrong. After arriving here, I discovered that the Northlands was faring even worse that the outside world and is rife with conflict and wars. You can even seemingly hear the cries of and sufferings of the people carried by the distant winds that blow by…"

Lorist stopped smiling and continued, "As the Duke of the Northlands who has formed the Northland Army, Duke Loggins had the responsibility to pacify the Northlands and restore peace to it by unifying the nobles here and make this place to be the exemplar for the other nations across the continent. But what did the duke do? He used the

Northland Army as the instrument of his reign of terror and even waged wars with it to expand his wealth. Even though he took so much resources from other dominion lords, what did he use them on? All of it was used to fund his luxurious and wasteful life of debauchery without even benefitting the Northlands in the slightest…

"Sometimes, I feel that it truly is laughable that the duke even has ambitions to form his own duchy. While having grand ambitions is a commendable thing, his fault was in his lack of courage and self-awareness. Who would ever truly support him in his endeavors? Even if the nobles of the Northlands are currently loyal to the duke, it's only because they fear the Northland Army. Nobody likes an incompetent, self-centered and morally-bankrupt person lording them around. Now that your duke has truly run into our family and crippled his own army as a result, he should've been trying his best to console his troops and buy back the freedom of the captives and learn from this lesson…

"But what did he do instead? His heart and mind is filled with thoughts of nothing but gold coins to the point that he angered even the knights who had sworn fealty to him. Did he really think the money was his? What an unreasonable, heartless, stubborn and unrighteous fellow. Baron Camorra, is such a person really worthy of your loyalty and service? I believe that if he were given a choice between a bag of gold coins and your survival, he'll definitely choose the former without hesitating even a bit and leave you for dead. I really feel that you're worth more than that, Baron Camorra. You are a talented person. While the duke has definitely given you your current position and privilege, it's only because you're of use to him and not because he appreciates your true capabilities and potential.

"Also, you are right in that I have benefitted from releasing Hennard and the other knights so that they can mess with the Northland Army and cause the duke to be unable to pose any threat to the Norton Family in the future. Without the Northland Army, I'd like to see how that duke of yours plans to get the money he craves so much from my hands. You should know that the funds are the spoils my family got rightfully from the result of the conflict, so I will definitely use it on developing my dominion. While the outside world is filled with chaos and strife, I will make the Norton Family's dominion a haven on this land of suffering."

"Developing a dominion requires more than just money: talented people and resources are equally as important," interjected Baron Camorra. Having been listening to Lorist's lecture for so long and being unable to counter any of his points, he had to find some way to vent his frustrations. "You only have money, but you don't have the

ability to convert that money into resources that you can use. What you need most right now is a way to establish a trade route with the outside world and a peaceful environment that will allow you to foster your dominion. Otherwise, no wonder how resolute you may be, your words will remain as only empty promises."

Lorist nodded and smiled before he said, "You're right. I am currently trying my best to build that safe environment that my dominion requires to flourish."

He turned to his back and pointed to Firmrock Castle before he continued, "You can already see it for yourself. This is the fruit of our recent efforts. Even though we were at war, I've never stopped the construction of the cornerstone of my dominion's safety. Gold coins are useless if I can't convert them into resources and the family does lack an established trade route. But don't forget that merchants are beings who are inherently drawn to profit. When word of the family requiring goods and having more than enough money to pay for it spreads out, the merchants will naturally come knocking at our doors to make trade. I believe that as long as we continue to work hard, we will definitely be rewarded for our efforts."

At that moment, Knight Henard with his two attendants and four servants left the southern gates of Firmrock Castle and arrived before Lorist and nodded to Baron Camorra. He saluted Lorist and turned around before he lightly prodded his horse with his boots, causing it to let out a soft neigh before it rode towards the path in the distance. The rest of the Silver ranked knights also started to follow behind with their respective attendants and servants…

Baron Camorra let out a sigh before he said, "I should take my leave now. I only hope that they won't cause too much trouble when they return…"

Lorist laughed out once again and said, "The Northlands is like a dam at its breaking point. Duke Loggins who had been serving as the dam wall thought that he could go on standing without any worries. The hole I just made on that dam is only a small defect; as for when it will collapse into rubble, even I don't know the answer to that. Since we're going to part here, let me give you some advice: if things don't go well for you, prioritize your own safety. The doors of the Norton Family will always be open to you."

Having received such a frank invitation, Baron Camorra was shocked. Feeling the urge to say something, he resisted it and got back up on his horse and waved to the four guards who had escorted him to Firmrock Castle and rode towards them quickly.

As Lorist ascended the castle walls slowly, he saw Josk leaning on the crenels of the walls as he looked at the cloud of dust rising in the distance as a result of the mounts of the people who were traveling away.

"Aren't you going to train your troops today?" Lorist asked.

"Nope, I let Pete handle it," Josk replied.

Pete was one of the knights who had joined the Norton Family after the knighthood competition. His full name was Peake Pulliste and he was one of the more famous wandering knights of the Northlands. Being only 25 years old, he had already reached the Two Star Silver rank in Battle Force training and was also the winner of the archery section of the knighthood competition. Shadekampf only managed to successfully recruit him after telling him of the presence of Josk, a Gold ranked marksman, who was serving the family.

Josk had once praised Pete in front of Lorist, saying that Pete was the second most talented person in archery only inferior to himself, to which Lorist said sarcastically, "Sol, are you really praising him or are you just praising yourself?"

Josk sighed as he passed over a thick beastskin document.

"What's this?"

"Knight Hennard handed it to me before he left without saying anything else."

Lorist opened that document and saw a hand-drawn map with details like bridges, castles, bastides, cities and towns with rows of other text at the side of the map.

The longer Lorist studied it, the wider his eyes got before he finally laughed out loud.

"Isn't it merely a military planning map? What are you so happy about?" Josk asked.

"No…" Lorist said with a tone full of admiration. "Joe, look. We no longer have to worry about the duke sending more troops to attack us. The suspension bridge, the citadel and the capital of the Northlands, Gildusk City, all require three regiments of troops in total to defend while the three bastides and seven towns require at least ten companies. Hehe, I didn't think that the duke would also use the Northland Army as a makeshift garrison force for his territories… I really have to hand it for him for thinking of such a method…

"Of the 20000 soldiers of the army, more than 4000 have been wiped out by us. Now that he only has around 16000 left, deducting the 12500 soldiers he needs for the defense of his territory, he can only send around 5000 soldiers at most. Could the 5000 soldiers really accomplish what the previous 4000 couldn't? Even though I bet that the duke would definitely not be satisfied with this turn of events, even if he were to decide on sending out more soldiers, he would still need someone to lead them. I don't have to worry about Hennard going back to serve the duke now that he has done this. Heck, he might even backstab him for a change. Tabik would still need another year at least to recover and the other two Gold ranked knights of his won't be able to leave their posts either. Haha, the duke couldn't touch our family even if he wanted to…" Lorist said.

"Then we won't have to be going into battle anytime soon, right?" Josk asked.

"Perhaps. The Kenmays Family have already turned their attention to the eastern Northlands and have also expressed their desire for peace with us. You also know that the duke's situation looks quite dim as Hennard and the other knights will definitely try to rile up as much trouble as they can when they get back. The Northland Army might even revolt with all the recent incidents and the duke will definitely have lots of stuff to settle. Before restoring the situation of the Northland Army soldiers, he definitely wouldn't be able to start more expeditions against us.

"If nothing out of my expectations happens, we should have a period of peace in the near future. But that doesn't mean that we can relax and Viscount Kenmays must still be holding a grudge at the fact that his money had been taken by us, so he definitely wouldn't let a chance to cause us some trouble slip by. As for Duke Loggins, being a madman, there's no telling what he would do based on our common sense. Perhaps he might even rally up the whole of the army without caring about his own dominion to launch another expedition against us for the sake of mere gold coins.

"That's why we have to always be alert and prepared just in case something goes wrong. Also, Joe, I am thinking of leaving Firmrock Castle for some time. I can only be at peace if you're in charge of this place," Lorist said as he looked at Josk.

"Where are you planning to head to?" Josk asked.

"I was thinking of going to seek out the convoy. Ever since I read the letter delivered by Ruhr and Mort, I've been rather worried that something else has happened to the convoy after they sent the letter and have been losing sleep at night because of that. I

can't help but feel unsettled by all that, so I plan to use this period of peace to seek them out…" Lorist said as he looked into the distance.

"Then who are you going to bring with you?" Josk asked again.

Lorist gave it some thought before he said, "I guess I'll have Patt come along with me. Everyone else is busy with their own tasks. I can only have Patt come after having Paulobins take over his duties at the new recruit camp."

"That won't do…" Josk said as he shook his head. "With only Patt and you, there are only two people. That's far too dangerous. Think about it: Ruhr and Mort initially traveled in a group of 12 and only 2 of them survived the journey. How about this? I'll agree to your request to stay here to guard the place, but you must bring the mounted archers squad with you. Only with Pete leading them will I be able to rest assured. If you refuse, I will start packing my luggage right away to tag along with you."

Lorist said frustratedly, "Alright, alright. I will bring the mounted archers squad. Well, you should understand that with my skills, I shouldn't run into any trouble anyway. Don't you think that bringing the whole squad along is a little too high profile?"

Josk said solemnly, "Milord, the outside world is rife with dangers and if you travel in a pair, you'll definitely attract a lot of unwanted attention. However, if you bring the mounted archers squad with you, then trouble will actively try to move out of your way. Only with that will you be able to make a swift and uninterrupted journey and find the convoy quickly enough."

Lorist nodded and said, "Fine, you've convinced me thoroughly. Instruct the guards to notify the mounted archers squad to make preparations for departure tomorrow."

……

Outside Nadegas City which was located at the border of the Andinaq Kingdom and the Madras Duchy were tightly packed tents and the main camp of the northbound convoy was in the middle of those tents.

Everyone within the large tent looked crestfallen and sullen.

"Why did the Madras Duchy refuse our request for passage? They even sent the Ironguard Legion to secure the border to prevent every single person from entering…" Charade said to the rest of his comrades within the tent.

Potterfang gave it some thought before he replied, "I don't understand it myself. Nadegas City is only 50 or so kilometers from the border of the Madras Duchy and we should have been able to cross the border after passing through Lichtana Citadel. But when our vanguard arrived there, we noticed that the forces stationed at Lichtana Citadel were on high alert as if an enemy invasion was about to happen. The defense troops at the citadel forbade our entry and a few days after that, the Ironguard Legion was mobilized to secure the border. When we sent someone to inquire about the matter, the Ironguard Legion's commander sent an officer who said that the convoy will not be allowed to enter the Madras Duchy under any circumstances."

Charade was incredibly troubled by that matter. In actuality, everyone knew the reason why the convoy was refused entry into the duchy, but they didn't mention it to save Charade some face. The reputation of Charade the Demon had long spread far and wide ever since the convoy's voyage through the Andinaq Kingdom which resulted in the deaths of more than 80 dominion lords followed by the eradication of their families. It was only natural that the Madras Duchy would reinforce the border the moment they heard about Charade's approach. Other than that, the 100000 plus vagabonds that followed behind the convoy were akin to locusts that would sweep everything clean in their wake.

"We can't even enter if we pay a toll fee?" Charade asked as he clung onto the slightest glimmer of hope left.

Potterfang looked back at him and shook his head.

"What if we only send a few across? Can't we form a merchant convoy in the name of the royal family of the Andinaq Kingdom to send in tens of carriages?"

"It's pointless. The officer from the Ironguard Legion already mentioned that they are planning to seal the border off completely for no less than a year and a half. Don't mention merchant convoys, even smaller groups of people won't be allowed entry," Terman interjected.

"Sigh…" Charade turned to an accountant he had recently promoted and asked, "How much food do we have left?"

"Sir, after sweeping the whole of the Welbassia Province clean, the food we have will be able to last the convoy and the vagabonds for three months at most. However, it's already the 9th month and winter is coming in another one month or so. Many of the

vagabonds lack the necessary clothing to survive the winter and if we don't make preparations to weather through the season, the old and weak will freeze to death en masse when the snow starts to fall…" replied the accountant respectfully.

"Pass these instructions down that the family soldiers' treatment will not change and every member of the convoy will receive three meals a day, but the amount will have to be rationed. As for the vagabonds, they are allowed only 2 meals a day with each person getting one bowl of porridge per meal. It's fine as long as they don't starve to death. When the convoy is able to move, we will feed them just enough so that they have sufficient energy to travel along with us. Potterfang, increase the surveillance of the vagabonds and instantly quell any trouble the moment you see it. Also, have the vagabonds collect some firewood and dig pits in the ground to start preparing for winter. Additionally, we will have to send some men out to purchase more food and clothing just in case."

Charade's hatred for the vagabonds that followed the convoy was deep-seated. Had it not been for them, the convoy would have never fell into such a predicament. Perhaps they might even have arrived at the Northlands by now and met up with Lorist. Originally, he thought that bringing the vagabonds to the Northlands as human resource would be a good thing, but now Charade hated himself for his greed and tendency to overthink things. Couldn't he have waited for the convoy to reach the Northlands first before sending people out to bring the vagabonds in? It was primarily his fault that the convoy ended up in so much trouble.

"It's not good, Sir Charade!" Dulles of the carroballista unit cried as he entered the tent. Taking ragged breaths, he continued, "Edma and Wamp both went to join the Second Highness and brought two companies of family soldiers with them…"

Edma and Wamp were both the old students of the Dawn Academy and were acquaintances with Lorist, Terman and Charade. They currently held the positions as company leaders within the forces of the convoy.

Ever since the convoy's forces started eradicating the nobles of the Welbassia Province, the Second Highness followed behind them with his own force of 5000 to help some of the vagabonds settle down. Had it not been for him cleaning up all the trouble, the convoy would have far more than 100000 vagabonds following behind them now.

However, after the Second Highness found that Potterfang and several others used to

be ex-officers of the Whitelion Legion, he had frequently visited them at the convoy to try to recruit them, but Potterfang and the rest refused his advances. On the other hand, Charade's father-in-law was moved by the offer and privately asked Charade himself to join the Second Highness's side, only to end up being severely reprimanded. In the end, Charade only had to say 'If milord Lorist finds out about this… ' to cause Engelich to shiver in fear and kneel down to plead for forgiveness immediately.

Since the Second Highness wasn't able to recruit the higher-ranking officers of the convoy, he proceeded to turn his efforts to the former students of the Dawn Academy and within but a month, 7 of them had already defected to his side. However, this instance today was going too far as the two members left with the two companies of soldiers which were placed under their command.

"What kind of bullshit is this… Deploy our forces and have them surround Nadegas City! If the Second Highness isn't willing to return the soldiers of our convoy, we will declare war with him immediately and turn back to the imperial capital and fuck up the entirety of the Andinaq Kingdom!" roared Charade as he smashed his fist onto the table.

Chapter 147
Dilemma

Charade was truly enraged, but no one within the tent took his words seriously. The act of surrounding Nadegas City to threaten the Second Highness could be considered an act of treason and was not something that can be joked around with. Everyone understood that the Andinaq Kingdom's ruler was the true heir of the imperial family, so the Second Highness could be considered a superior noble of the Norton Family. Unless Charade was willing to forsake his status as a knight of the Norton Family and attack Nadegas City as a common aggressor or bandit, he wouldn't be able to deploy any soldiers for that purpose.

"Terman, write a letter to the Second Highness and request him to send our family soldiers back. Otherwise, if word of this gets out, I believe that the reputation of the Andinaq Royal Family will definitely suffer," Potterfang told Terman.

"Alright, I'll be on it now," Terman said as he got up and left the tent.

"Alright, it's settled. This is nothing too serious and there's no need to get *that* mad over it. I suspect that it's merely Edma and Wamp's fault for being over eager and the Second Highness doesn't know about this matter either, since this incident will damage the reputation of the Andinaq Royal Family more than it will ours," Potterfang told Charade.

Potterfang was correct. As a superior noble, the Second Highness can instruct the Norton Family to some degree and things like borrowing soldiers or resources were always within the realm of negotiation. Even if he did poach the ex-students of the Dawn Academy, it wouldn't be much of a problem either as they weren't sworn knights of the Norton Family. In the first place, they only agreed to head to the Northlands with the convoy and whether they wanted to pledge their allegiance to the Norton would come after their arrival. That's why the Second Highness had all the right to recruit those men and they can't be blamed either for joining him for the better incentive.

However, the troops they brought with them were the soldiers of the Norton Family and the Second Highness must have some screw loose if he chose not to return them. On the Grindia Continent, revolt is one of the biggest taboos among nobles. A junior

noble who directly went against a senior noble without just cause would automatically be ostracized by other fellow nobles whether he was punished or not. And should that really come to pass, there was no way that the noble family would ever rise back into power.

For example, the Family of the Pegasus, the Felim Family, had joined an alliance of 7 families to go against Krissen IV for the sake of the Silvermoon-shaped stone, but they weren't considered to have revolted and the descendant of the Felim Family, Baron Felim Chalvode, was even praised and encouraged to restore his family. The reason for that was simple: what the Felim Family did was not considered revolt because the reason they were at war with Krissen IV was because they refused to offer up the Silvermoon-shaped magic stone to the Krissen Imperial Family and Krissen IV was the one who waged the war to try to forcefully obtain it in the first place. The alliance of the 7 noble families were just fighting in self defense. Even though they were defeated in the end, Krissen IV did not announce them as traitors because in the eyes of the other nobles, the Newmoon War was merely an act of bullying by Krissen IV against the few unlucky noble families.

When a senior noble was powerful enough, the junior nobles had no choice but to do the very minimum required of the senior noble's instructions. However, when the power of junior nobles exceed that of the senior nobles, they could outright ignore the instructions of the senior nobles because of a simple clause: if the junior noble felt that the senior noble's actions or instructions harmed the interests of his own family, he could refuse to carry out the instructions of his senior noble. That was the sacred right of every noble and senior nobles couldn't infringe upon it no matter what. However, Charade's near-declaration of war would be exempt from the clause and be considered an act of treason.

Similarly, it was a huge taboo for a senior noble to obtain the resources or men of a junior noble without the latter's agreement and that action itself would cause incite the scorn of the other junior nobles and cause them to leave the senior noble en masse. Now that the strength of the northbound convoy surpassed that of the Second Highness, the Norton Family could turn their backs on him and join the side of the First or Second Prince without any repercussion. If that were to happen, it would already be too late for the Second Highness to show any regret.

In conclusion, antagonizing the convoy was an act that only an imbecile would dare to dream of doing. Additionally, the Second Highness did not lack troops at the moment as he could simply recruit more vagabonds into his army, given that the kingdom's

arsenal had quite a substantial amount of gear left. It truly was far from worth it to antagonize the convoy over two small companies of soldiers.

Terman raised the tent flap from outside and said, "The Second Highness is here."

Charade said in an annoyed voice, "Ask him to buzz off. I don't feel like seeing him."

Even if he didn't, Charade still had to meet the Second Highness. Even though Charade was the chief of the northbound convoy, he was still a family knight of the Nortons and the Second Highness was the senior noble of the Norton Family. Unless Lorist was here, nobody could stop the Second Highness from entering the tent, especially when he had Norton Glacia following beside him.

The Second Highness had come to apologize for the issue regarding the two companies of soldiers and even graciously returned them. However. the more Charade looked at the Second Highness, the more disgruntled he became as he thought that most of the troubles the convoy now faced was thanks to the him. Even though Charade was usually a calm and rational man, he was toyed around by the Second Highness's ploys and only noticed it after he was exploited.

Potterfang on the other hand made an open objection to the Second Highness's act of poaching the members of the convoy at perilous time like that. Even though the members who were recruited were not the family knights of the Norton Family, they held important positions within the convoy. Their departure would create a lot of trouble for the convoy. While Potterfang was not against the Second Highness recruiting talented people from the convoy, the least he could do was to tie up loose ends first and allow them to accompany the convoy back to the Norton Family dominion before asking them to serve him.

The Second Highness also expressed his apologies for that matter and said that he was too rash because talented men were truly hard to find and the Norton Family's convoy had an unexpected number of them. To restore the glory of the Krissen Imperial Family, he said, he had to recruit as many talented people as possible. That was why the people within the convoy was too tempting for him to resist. However, he promised that he won't allow the troops of the convoy to join his side and also agreed with Potterfang's suggestion to let the ones he recruit accompany the convoy back to the Northlands first before allowing them to start serving him.

In the end, there was not much Potterfang could do as only a few including him,

Terman, Charade, the injured Els, and the patrolling Yuriy had been accepted by Lorist as the knights of the Norton Family. The likes of his old acquaintances from the Whitelion Legion like the Gold ranked Lode Wales, the Three Star Silver Mons Malek, who was in charge of the vagabond camp, and the Gold ranked mercenary, Chino Freiyar, the Gold Swordsman Engelich who filled in for Els temporarily, the captain of the carroballista unit, Dulles, the captain of the herbalist unit, Lundmorde as well as the rest of the former students of the Dawn Academy who formed the backbone of the convoy's forces were not yet Norton Family knights. So, there was nothing that could be done if they were recruited by the Second Highness.

To the ambitious former students of the Dawn Academy, the status of a knight of the royal family was far more alluring than that of a family knight. Even though the state of the Andinaq Kingdom despite all the work the convoy has done under Charade's leadership was still rather indeterminate given that apart from the sea to the west of the kingdom, it was surrounded by enemies on all sides and the embargo the Forde Trade Union placed on it was also quite problematic. However, with greater risk comes greater reward, and joining the Second Highness now represented a chance for them to gain achievements for themselves and hopefully be elevated to the status of nobility by way of those achievements. Should that ever happen, they would be able to stand on equal grounds as Lorist and have higher status than most normal people.

Fortunately, most of the men who were poached by the Second Highness were only average at best. For instance, Edma and Wamp were merely company captains and the more accomplished former students had already been promoted to become regiment captains, thanks to Charade's keen oversight on the staffing of the convoy. With more than 20000 soldiers, 5000 carriages and more than 60000 members in total, coupled with the 100000 plus vagabonds that were following behind, it was plain to see that the rather desperate circumstances of the convoy had forced many to adapt and improve themselves till they were fit to be appointed for a higher post in the convoy.

The Second Highness also came for another reason: he wanted to know when the convoy would start traveling north again.

Charade told the Second Highness without a shred of hesitance that the convoy had been forced to stop as the Madras Duchy forbade its entry by securing its border with the Ironguard Legion. It was possible that the convoy would have to weather through winter at the Andinaq Kingdom and find another way to pass when spring comes next year. That's why Charade hoped that the Second Highness could supply them with more food and clothing so that the vagabonds tagging behind the convoy would be

able to survive the winter.

However, the Second Highness refused that request and frankly told the rest of them that the Andinaq Kingdom cannot afford to bear the burden of sustaining more than 100000 vagabonds. Even though he had collected half of the spoils the convoy got from wiping out all those noble families from the former two provinces, the recruitment drive for the Second Highness's forces had sapped much of his resources dry. As for the spoils the convoy obtained from the Welbassia Province, Charade didn't offer any of it to the Second Highness and most of it went to the sustenance of the vagabonds instead. Currently, the convoy had only one choice and that was to attack the Madras Duchy to get enough resources to sustain its livelihood.

According to the Second Highness, if there really wasn't a way, the convoy could engage in a path of slaughter and perhaps even fan the vagabonds' rage and use them to attack Lichtana Citadel. Even if 100000 vagabonds couldn't take over the citadel by themselves, they would be able to at least wear the soldiers of the Ironguard Legion down to their breaking point. By that time, the convoy only had to give the Madras Duchy a little shove with its own forces to be able to conquer the citadel and allow the convoy to continue their journey towards the Northlands unimpeded.

Upon hearing that, everyone within the tent felt their hairs rise. While the Second Highness said that with a casual tone, the moment any of them thought about sending the 100000 vagabonds to face off against the Ironguard Legion, they couldn't help but imagine a mountain of bloody corpses that would surface as a result. With the obviously phenomenal death count that the vagabonds would suffer, even an abyss wouldn't be able to fit all the corpses of the vagabonds that would die from the conflict. Even 'Charade the Demon' felt a chill run down his spine when he imagined the fearsome possibility.

"No, there's no way we can do that," Potterfang said as the first one who made his objection heard. Even the ruler of the Redlis Kingdom, the First Prince, who was known for his mercilessness and brutality, only conscripted vagabond youths to become enemy fodder. If the convoy were to force even the women and children into a siege, the name of the Norton Family would forever be tarnished across the whole of the Grindia Continent. Not only would they be stigmatized by the other nobles, they would also be scorned by the commoners. 200 years of proud family history would spiral to ruin just like that.

The Second Highness waved his hands in futility and said, "Well, I don't have any better

solution that that. You can either try to besiege Lichtana Citadel or starve to death while waiting for winter to pass. If you really don't intend to utilize the vagabonds, the least I can do is to offer 10000 of my men to aid your convoy in taking the citadel. However, this battle won't be an easy one as the Ironguard Legion is famed for their defensive tactics. Back then VM, they managed to hold out against my lord father's 60000 soldiers for more than half a year with only 8000 troops. Now that their numbers have been expanded to 28000 people by Duke Madras and given the fortifications of Lichtana Citadel, occupying it with only 20000 from the convoy and my 10000 soldiers is practically an impossible task…"

It was true that if things continued like this, the convoy would be stranded there and be unable to head up north and the supplies they had could only last them and the vagabonds for three to four months at most. By then, the convoy would no doubt implode and disintegrate. On the other hand, if they picked another route, they would have to enter the Iblia Kingdom. With the vagabonds being a huge burden on the convoy, there is no doubt that they'd be sitting ducks on for the Second Prince's ambitions. Additionally, the Iblia Kingdom's state was even more chaotic and the Second Prince's plundering had deprived most territory within the kingdom of food and other resources, causing the convoy's future to be even more uncertain. The 3 months of additional travel during which they wouldn't be able to resupply as well as having to defend against the attacks of the Second Prince was nothing short of a one way road to death. So, changing routes was out of the question.

The best route to head to the Northlands was still the route through the Madras Duchy which had a distance of around 650 kilometers. If the convoy traveled 15 kilometers per day, then it would only take them 40 to 50 days to reach the Northlands. The only issue was the securing of the Madras Duchy's border which stopped the convoy and the vagabonds from crossing it entirely. If they did not use the method the Second HIghness suggested, even with the support of his 10000 troops, they weren't confident that they would be able to occupy Lichtana Citadel which was defended by the famed Ironguard Legion.

As the realization settled upon those present within the tent, the atmosphere within turned solemn and heavy.

At that moment, the flaps of the tent were pushed apart as Yuriy rushed inside with an excited expression as he said, "Guys, guess who's here?"

Following behind Yuriy were Reidy and Jim. The moment Charade saw Reidy, he was

utterly delighted and asked, "Rei-reidy… You're here? Where's milord?"

"Our lord misses you all very much and has instructed me to bring you a couple of letters while also checking on your status. Oh, and this is Jim, a former Silver ranked mercenary who has been recruited into our ranks by our lord. Come, Jim, let me introduce you to the others…" Reidy brought Jim around and introduced him to everyone within the tent. However, when he saw the Second Highness Auguslo and Glacia, Reidy was confused as he didn't recognize the two of them.

Terman hurriedly informed Reidy of the identities of the two, one being the Second Highness of the Andinaq Kingdom and the other being Lorist's elder cousin sister, causing Reidy and Jim to hurriedly bow and salute them.

"Reidy, and, um, Jim, save the pleasantries for later. Wasn't the border of the Madras Duchy sealed up? How did the two of you make your way here?" Charade asked impatiently.

"Oh, it's all thanks to Jim. We heard that 'Charade the Demon' caused the border of the duchy to be sealed up. However, Jim knew some folk at the fishing village near Egret Lake who helped the seven of us cross the lake with their fishing boats," replied Reidy with a face full of smiles.

Charade blushed in response as he didn't expect that his reputation had already spread so far. "You came in a group of seven?"

"That's right. The other five are guards of the family who used to be mercenaries. That's why we traveled under the pretense of traveling mercenaries and made our way here without much incident. Right after crossing the lake, we bumped into the light cavalry scouts of Sir Yuriy who brought us back here," Reidy replied.

"Reidy, is milord doing well these days? What about the situation of the family dominion?" Potterfang asked.

"Milord is doing great. As for the situation of the dominion, well, it's a long story. Ever since we followed milord back to the family dominion, all sorts of developments unfolded… It all began like this…"

Chapter 148
The Mounted Archers Unit

After 5 days of traveling with the mounted archers squad, just before Lorist arrived at the ferry port near Metropoulos River, he arrived at a field where two dominion lords were facing off against each other in a battle with around 200 troops on both sides in total.

Well, using battle to describe this situation is indeed a little too much… At most, it's only a village-scale skirmish… Only four to five men were mounted and the troops they led were mostly farmer soldiers who were dressed rather raggedly and only equipped with farming tools.

As the neutral side, Lorist was prepared to enjoy the show from the sidelines. But it was a shame that the two dominion lords didn't share the same sentiment as they merely trashed talked each other instead of going straight into battle.

Getting more impatient, Lorist thought, *just start fighting already and make way for us to pass. What's the point of sitting there and doing nothing and being in the way like that? Isn't that like going to the lavatory and occupying it so that others can't use it?*

"Patt, go ask them if they're going to start fighting or not. Otherwise, demand them to make way for us to pass."

Had it not been for the five carriages full of supplies he brought along with him, Lorist would have chosen to cross the wilderness instead of taking the main path. But it just couldn't be helped as the mounted archers' arrows and the rest of the food and camping gear for the 100 plus people as well as the hay for their mounts had to be brought along. It was only thanks to Shadekampf that they were able to stuff all that into five carriages. Lorist couldn't help but lament that he only needed two rucksacks and mounts if he traveled with only Patt and regretted agreeing to Josk's proposition to bring the mounted archers squad with him.

The squad that was led by Pete only had 97 people instead of the usual 120 of a full squad. However, due to the rest of the supply carriages, Lorist had to bring along another 20 guards. Since Ruhr and Mort were so willing to tag along, he appointed

them to be the captains of the guards to manage the security of the supply carriages.

Patt came back with a troubled look and said, "Milord, they want us to continue to sit here and even said that they would come to collect a toll fee from us after they settle their differences…"

"Huh?" Lorist looked back at the five supply carriages and realized that the two idiotic dominion lords had mistaken his group to be a guard escort for a merchant convoy.

"Sol… They want to collect toll from me? Lorist said as he smiled.

"Pete, bring the mounted archers with you. I'll give you ten minutes to chase them away. Capture two of them and ask them what they're fighting over," ordered Lorist calmly.

"Yes, milord," said Pete, before he whistled to signal for the mounted archers behind him to get into two neat formations and led them to begin the charge.

As they approached the spot where the two dominion lords and their men were, the mounted archers stopped their horses and drew their longbows wide. Without delay, Pete gave the order to fire and sent out a volley of arrows towards the two factions.

The two dominion lords were completely befuddled as merchant convoys usually didn't interfere with battles like that. As the volley of arrows blanketed their troops, all hell broke loose with cries of pain and agony resounding throughout the battlefield.

Patt had ordered his men to fire three volleys in total and whistled once more to instruct them to put away their bows. Subsequently, they drew their swords and split into two groups that charged towards both factions. As expected, the soldiers of the two factions crumbled instantly and the two dominion lords were the first to ride away as they saw the mounted archers approaching. The soldiers they left behind fared even worse as they melted into an undisciplined mess.

"Our mounted archers are truly quite formidable. They managed to defeat a few hundred people without even incurring a single casualty. No wonder milord requested for their formation at that time…" Patt praised.

Before he finished, an audible thump could be heard. Turning his head back, Patt saw that Lorist had actually fallen from his mount. Surprised, Patt asked, "Milord, what's going on?"

Lorist wiped the dust off his face as he stood back up from the ground. Waving his hands, he said, "I'm fine. I slipped off the horse cause my legs weren't in the stirrups…
:

By the gods, that isn't the 'mounted archers' I had in mind! When he saw the troops in action, he was so shocked that he actually fell off his horse. *Those are not mounted archers… They're just bowmen on horses! How did that idiot Josk train his men?*

Pete brought a few captives over and reported, "Milord, according to them, this path is frequently used by merchant convoys and Viscount Darwof set up a customs point nearby to collect toll. The two dominion lords near here also wanted a part of the profit and decided to set up another customs on this path for themselves. However, this path is at the border of the dominions of those two nobles and both of them insisted that the area belonged to them. The battle that was supposed to occur back then was to be used to decide which family would own that area."

Well, it's too bad that their settlement had to be disrupted. Then again, it's their fault for picking the wrong place and barring my way.

"When was the customs point further ahead formed? How many guards are there and what is their estimated battle strength?" Lorist asked the captive that seemed to be a squad captain given his wearing a half-body leather armor that most of the other captives weren't equipped with.

"Since half a month ago, milord," replied the captive quickly. "There is a squad of garrison soldiers stationed there and they were originally part of the garrison of Viscount Darwof's newly-built town. Just recently, they were also appointed to guard the customs point and collect toll. I really don't know how formidable they are, but they're quite well equipped with some of them even having metal armor…"

Metal armor, recalled Lorist suddenly, before he called out, "Ruhr, Mort, come over here for a bit."

"Ah, milord, when we passed by this place and were about to enter the town next to the customs point to get some rest, the garrison soldiers came to apprehend us and even called us bandits…" Ruhr said.

"Pete, bring your mounted archers squad and capture all of the garrison soldiers there. Patt, accompany Ruhr and Mort over there to see if they are indeed the garrison

soldiers that attacked them. If they are, hang them at the customs point on the spot," Lorist instructed Pete and Patt. He was not prepared to witness another performance of the so-called 'mounted archers'.

"Alright, milord. We'll head out now," Pete said. "Um, what do we do with these captives?"

After hearing that question, the captives all started to shiver. The moment they heard Lorist instruct for the garrison soldiers to be hung, they felt that their fates had been set in stone.

"Milord, please have mercy…" said the captives as they kneeled and cried for Lorist's forgiveness in front of his mount.

"Just release these guys. Um, you there, go to the carriages and get some bandages and medicine for them so that they can help fix up the injured ones over there. Let's go," Lorist said.

Just as they were a few kilometers away from the customs point, Lorist and the rest of the carriages were greeted by a scene of the corpse-filled ground with a few other captives who were clutching the back of their heads with their hands and kneeling on the ground. Ruhr and Mort were currently constructing wooden frames with the help of a few other mounted archer troops.

Lorist noticed that a few of the archers were bandaged up. Seeing Pete and Patt coming over, Lorist asked, "What's wrong? Are there any casualties?"

"Just 6 lightly-injured men. It won't be a problem and they'll recover in another ten days. It was mainly due to some of the enemy guards who had been hiding within the building. They got hurt when we were trying to flush them out," Pete replied.

"Milord, we finally managed to get the ferries on the other side of the shore to come over…" Patt said.

Lorist took a look around the area that he had once traveled by during his initial journey back to the Northlands and noticed many changes. The main thing that caught his attention was the ferry port which had two additional ferries. Over there, a group of half-naked boatmen were giving their best at cranking the windlasses to help the ferries dock at the bank of the river. *Hmm, it seems that Baron Silas had earned quite a bit of money from the service and even added two new ferries to accommodate the*

increased demand.

"Just now when we were fighting off the garrison soldiers, the boatmen all jumped into the river in fear and we spent quite a bit of effort to call them back. I promised to give them one imperial silver coin each…" Patt said.

Lorist nodded and thought that the boatmen did indeed deserve a tip given how hard they worked.

Back then, the place was but a piece of desolate land. But after only half a year, a town had already been built on a hill in the distance. However, the town seemed rather tightly fortified and numerous people could be seen wielding weapons and pointing towards the customs point. It was apparent that the battle at the point had alerted the garrison troops within the town of the presence of Lorist's forces whom they believed to be enemies. They were currently doing their best to prepare for the imminent attack.

Ruhr and Mort had already erected tens of tall wooden frames and were hanging the captives by force. After only a few were hung, the rest of the captives frantically begged to be spared and some of them even started running in the direction of the town in desperation. However, Pete had long been prepared for such a possibility and ordered his dismounted archers to fire a volley of arrows in the direction of those who tried to escape and turned them into human porcupines.

The soldiers on the walls of the distant town started shouting and screaming out loud at what they had just witnessed. Lorist however ignored all the fuss and was currently lecturing Ruhr and Mort. "Are you guys idiots? Not only did you not tie them up, you didn't keep the rest at a spot where they couldn't see the wooden frames and hanged their comrades in front of them! Even pigs would try to escape after seeing that! What do we now given that they're all dead? Whatever, just hang their corpses up anyway. They actually dared to rob my messengers, I wonder how they got the guts to do that… Pete, make a plaque and carve the reason why we put these men to death on it!"

"Understood, milord."

On the opposite bank of the river, another squad of armed guards showed up. Given that they had just witnessed the spectacle over at the other side, it was only natural that they would be on alert.

"Patt, bring some men across the river first and tell Baron Silas that an old friend has come to visit to calm him down for a bit. I will pay him a visit later after I cross the river."

"Milord, I think you should just cross the river now," Patt said.

"There's no need," Lorist said as he pointed at the town in the distance. "Those people over there seem to be up to something. I'm prepared to go teach them a lesson."

The 100 plus men and the 5 carriages took more than 3 hours to be ferried across the river. Lorist was one of the last people to be transported across. Just as the ferry was approaching from the other side for the last remaining 8, more than 100 soldiers within the town on this side of the bank exited the town gates and rushed towards them as they brandished their blades and spears with the intent to kill.

Lorist's javelins and the arrows of Pete and his men instantly skewered more than 20 of the bravest soldiers of the town who rushed at the front. Following that, Lorist and Pete got mounted and raised their riding lances as they charged into the remaining group. After a the flurry of thrusting spears and slashing swords, only 30 lucky men of the original group managed to survive and ran towards the town again with their tails between their legs before shutting the gates entirely. It seemed that they wouldn't come out anymore no matter what.

"That was refreshing!" Pete said as he waved his lance around to shake off the fresh blood that coated it.

"Let's go. The ferry is approaching," Lorist said.

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"Pete, back when I was at Morante City, I read a book that mentioned that during the dark ages that followed the fall of the magical civilization, a type of mounted archer unit emerged. Those archers were able to fire their arrows from horseback and could even shoot backwards while their horses rushed forward to eliminate any enemies that dared to give them chase. Anyone that fell into their sights would never be able to escape and they never engaged the enemy up front. Instead, they were skirmishers who rode their horses near their enemy's flank and used hit and run tactics to harass them until the enemy formations crumbled…"

Lorist was using this opportunity during their time on the ferry to impart upon Pete

what he believed mounted archers should be, just like the Mongol mounted archers he had read about in his past life. "They could regroup and disperse at will and their mobility allowed them to show up on the battlefield or vanish within moments. In one instance of those legends, they even managed to obtain victory over an enemy which had ten times their own numbers after four months and didn't have many casualties. Every time their enemy sent out a group of soldiers to pursue them, they would entrap them and lead their enemies along as they shot from afar until they wore the enemy numbers down. According to the books, that tactic was called kiting because it was much like how a person would pull a kite along and never getting close to it."

"Milord, I understanding what you're trying to say. You want a mounted archer unit that can do all that, right?" Pete asked.

Lorist nodded happily at Pete's quick understanding.

"However, it's a shame that it is not possible with our troops. The mounted archer unit that you described can only exist in legends and it's not possible to pull off in real life," Pete said regrettably.

"Why?" Lorist asked with a surprised tone.

"Milord, firstly, we don't have suitable bows for that purpose. While the bows that some nobles use when they hunt can be shot from horseback, the firing distance is not far and can only reach around 40 meters ahead because they're relatively weak don't fire with much force. While that is sufficient for hunting animals like turkeys and rabbits, it's completely useless against magical beasts or soldier formations. Of all the bows available to us, the one with the strongest force and the farthest firing distance is the longbow. It can fire arrows that hit targets 100 meters away and even pose a threat to Gold ranked knights. Even though the bow itself has weaker tension than a hunting bow, hunting bows can only shoot as far because of the heavy arrowheads that are used to hunt magical beasts."

Pete continued to educate Lorist about archery, "The longbow is recognized by most, if not all, as a bow that is able to fire the fastest and deadliest arrows which makes it one of the most crucial ranged attacking methods for offense and defense alike. However, it's not suited to be used on horseback even if the horse is not moving because it's exceedingly hard to draw it and maintain balance on the horse at the same time. Sir Josk had spent huge amounts of effort to even make sure that our men can fire when their horses are stationary. Of all of us, only Sir Josk can continually fire

arrows on horseback without falling off while the rest of us would lose balance after only three shots.

"Additionally, if we don't use longbows, we won't be able to match the enemy's firing distance, and if we approach them too much, we would be attacked instead and be unable to retaliate. That's why, to form the ideal mounted archer unit that milord had described just now, the first problem that has to be solved is creating a type of bow that can be used on horseback that can also rival the firing distance and strength of a longbow. Other than that, we also lack the horses that can perform like those used by the mounted archers you described. Of all the horse breeds on the Grindia Continent, none of them would be able to fit those criterias," Pete explained.

"… Hmm?" Lorist mumbled in puzzlement.

Pete continued, "Milord, the mounts of the mounted archers you read about must be robust and have excellent endurance and stamina. They must also be able to recover their energy quickly to be able to run long distances as well as being agile and reactive enough to be able to travel on both flat and mountainous terrain to be able to escape enemy pursuit. They must also be hardy enough to be able to resist cold and hot weather as well as having high resistance to diseases. Perhaps the most important requirement they must have is to be able to consume huge amounts of feed and also digest them at a quick speed. No horse on all of Grindia is capable of that."

Is this guy talking about the Mongol horse?[1] The horses the Mongols used were quite common across the Eurasian Continent, but to think that Grindia doesn't have this kind of breed… That's just a real shame, thought Lorist with much frustration.

Pete further dulled Lorist's hopes as he said, "Milord, look at our mounts. These Northlander Horses are different from other breeds and they can be considered to be the more balanced type among their kind. While they are easy to raise and take care of, they are far from being able to serve the role of those horses used by the mounted archers you talked about. Also, the reason three out of five of our carriages are filled to the brim with grain and oats is because we are worried that we won't be able to find enough feed during our journey. If we don't have enough, the horses would lose weight and when coupled with a long distance journey, these Northlander Horses would end up completely useless.

"If the mounted archers that you mentioned rode Northlander Horses, each rider would have to bring at least 7 to 8 mounts with him so that he would always have a

fresh mount to switch to and loads of horse feed to be able to maintain the horses' physical condition. Using the battle you mentioned as an example, two regiments consisting of 2000 riders would require at least 10000 Northlander Horses. While Zeno Horses and Baligali Horses are better for long distance trips and have great endurance, the way to feed and maintain them is even more complicated than that of Northlander Horses."

Lorist had no choice but to admit that Pete made quite a few good points. Lorist wanted to form mounted archer units after all, not horse-breeders. Even if each rider could take care of 8 horses on his own, there was also the problem of them being mistaken as a horse merchant.

Stroking his nose, Lorist suddenly felt rather embarrassed as he had made the decision to form a mounted archer unit without even understanding the basics of archery and horsemanship. Had it not been for Pete's explanation, he might have blamed Josk for not trying hard enough to make the unit of his dreams. It was primarily the fault of the knight training course instructors back in the Dawn Academy who always said that knights should be brave and courageous during a charge and that using a bow is an act of cowardice. That had caused Lorist to neglect archery training almost entirely to the point that he could only use javelins to attack enemies at a distance.

Oh well, I guess after I settle most of the pressing matters and have enough time, I can go find some people to start research on whether we can make bows that are shorter than longbows that they can be used on horseback. I'm only worried about whether its firing range and strength can compare to that of a longbow though, pondered Lorist during the rest of the journey.

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[1] A special breed of horses native to Mongolia.

Chapter 149
Blockade

When Lorist arrived at the western bank of the Metropoulos River, he noticed Baron Silas standing at the port wearing the golden-threaded extravagant plate armor that he had gifted him the last time they met. The insignia of Baron Silas's family had already been engraved upon it: a rhombus-shaped icon of a gemstone could be seen in the center of the armor.

The moment the baron saw Lorist, he broke into a smile. Having not met him for more than half a year, Lorist noticed that the baron had gotten a little fatter: originally, the plate armor was a little too big for the baron. However, some fatty meat could be seen protruding from the opening at his waist. On the other hand, the baron had quite a bad memory as he had forgotten what Lorist's name was.

Naturally, Lorist didn't take any offense as he understood that it wasn't easy to remember the name of someone whom one didn't get to meet often.

"I'm called Norton Lorist. As an old friend, feel free to call me Locke," Lorist said.

"Ah, that's right, you're Baron Norton. I recall that you've gifted me with a nice carton of wine before…" Baron Silas said with delight.

Lorist was completely speechless.

Pointing at Baron Silas's armor with his horsewhip, Lorist reminded in an unsatisfactory tone, "Baron, that armor you're wearing is given to you by me. Don't tell me you forgot…"

Blushing with embarrassment, the baron seemed to finally recall who Lorist was and said, "Hehe, old brother of mine, I'm really sorry about that. It's because far too many nobles come to visit and this one is always busy receiving them as guests… I'm also getting a little old and you know what that does to one's memory, so I hope you bear with me. Back then you brought a convoy through here to get to your dominion to inherit your title, right? You look far better than you were back then. I'm sure that things have been going well for you?"

"Hehe, it's alright. Your business also looks like it's flourishing. You even got two new ferries. As they always say, money will come knocking if you're at the right place and at the right time…" Lorist said as he laughed.

The baron shrugged and said, "Those two boats weren't purchased by me… Oh, right. Just now I saw you and the rest fight on the opposite bank. Did you get into trouble with the garrison soldiers of Viscount Darwof's customs point?"

"It's nothing serious. The soldiers at the custom point dared to rob my messengers because they took a fancy to their metal armor. It's fortunate that two of them managed to get back to report what happened. On the way here, I figured I might as well clean up scum like them by hanging them all to death," Lorist said candidly without batting an eye.

Baron Silas clapped his hands in admiration and said, "Great. It's only right that those fools who don't know what's best for them to be taught a lesson. A few months back, Viscount Darwof even sent his men here to demand me to share half of the transport fee for the ferries to him and threatened that he would seal off the banks from the other side if I didn't. Did he think I was an idiot? That Viscount only occupies half the area of the opposite bank and I can easily move my port to another spot. Naturally, I refused his demand and changed where my ferries docked. It would only take the passengers a little more time to reach the main road anyway."

"Then why was it switched back here?" Lorist asked as the current port was the same one he used back then.

Baron Silas pointed at the two new boats and said, "You've noticed the new additions to my inventory, right? After noticing that I ignored his demands, the viscount commissioned for someone to build him two new boats to set up a new ferry port to compete with my business. However, when the ships were complete, he realized that more than 50 kilometers along the western bank of the river was within my dominion and he had no place to dock his ferries. In the end, he sent someone to negotiate for him to have a share in the profits of the dock in exchange for investing the two ferries with me. Even so, I didn't give him the slightest damn and in the end, he had no choice but to gift the ferries to me so that I would move the port back to the original location. That way, he can also profit a little from collecting a toll at his newly-formed customs point over there.

"Old friend, you should know that I am quite lacking in academic and martial

disciplines… My only redeeming point is my generosity and eagerness to help to others. Hearing his plight, I decided to accept his ferries and move my port back to the old spot. However, many merchant convoys came to complain to me that the viscount is getting more overboard with the toll as of late. I've been long worried about something like that happening as it would deter merchants from using my ferry service. How would I survive then? Just as I was about to send someone to warn them, you came over and taught them a lesson. How fortunate…"

To show his welcome and accentuate his friendship with Lorist, Baron Silas gave him a 'hugely generous' discount of 5% off for the ferry service.

However, he wasn't able to invite Lorist back to his bastide for a meal as he had no choice but to stay put at the port. That was because many merchant convoys would use his ferry service to cross the river for a rather huge sum of money and he was willing to sit there and collect the sum himself rather than let his subordinates handle it in fear of them embezzling his money.

Since that was the case, Lorist decided to set up camp on the spot and depart the next day. He also invited the baron to have dinner with him, to which the baron gleefully accepted; he even had his servants bring a few bottles of fine wine over.

With the tables and chairs were laid alongside the riverbank, 'scales' of sparkling silver could be seen blinking within the river due to the light of the Silvermoon, giving the scenery an almost ethereal quality. Lorist felt that enjoying his meal there was an extremely soothing and tranquil experience. It's no wonder that Baron Silas mentioned that he was satisfied even though he only had normal bread every night at the port.

The cool breeze from the river washed away the heat and drought brought upon the land during the day. Even though it was already autumn and cool breezes blew rather often, the heat of the sun was not one whit inferior to that of summer. After bathing by the river and refreshing himself, Lorist donned nothing more than a loose robe and dined together with Baron Silas.

Since it wasn't a formal banquet, the baron didn't mind Lorist's casual appearance. Instead, he expressed his envy for Lorist's healthy and lean physique.

"Back when I was studying at the imperial capital, I also had a figure like yours… Those days were good… We would leave the academy after class and mess around all over

the place to hook up with beauties…" Baron Silas rambled nonstop as he started to recall the good old days of his youth and misadventures.

"I apologize for letting you see such an embarrassing side of me. When one gets old, one can't help but reminisce the days of one's youth…" said the baron apologetically. After all, it was only his second time meeting Lorist, so he felt that it was slightly inappropriate for him to be talking about himself on such friendly and informal terms.

"It's fine. Your stories were rather interesting as well. Everyone has a tale or two of their rowdy youth that they'd love to share," Lorist said as he raised his silver cup to toast the baron,

Baron Silas downed half the cup before he asked, "By the way, why have you brought so many men with you this time? Would you mind telling me about it?"

"Well, Viscount Tebri Tim is a good friend of mine whose dominion is in the northwestern part of the Redlis Kingdom. His family has always had business relations with ours and we have been trading with him using the produce from the Northlands for other resources that we need," Lorist recited out an answer he had long prepared beforehand.

"The Redlis Kingdom? Where is it? I feel like I'm forgetting something…" said the baron as he scratched on his head. Still unable to figure out what was on the tip of his tongue, he ordered one of his attendants to bring him a beastskin map.

Upon seeing it, he recalled the thing he was struggling to remember. "Aha, brother, I think you have to take a detour around here. Look, the route starting from Vanades City all the way to the Lichtana Citadel at the border of the Andinaq Kingdom has already been completely sealed off. Apart from army supply convoys, other merchants or people are forbidden to use this route."

Lorist took a look at the map and there was indeed a red line along the path from Vanades City to Lichtana Citadel. The border between the Andinaq Kingdom and the Madras Duchy was also colored red.

"What's going on? Did the duchy go to war with the Andinaq Kingdom? Why has the border been sealed off as well?" Lorist asked.

"No, it's something more fearsome than war. Brother, have you heard of a man called Charade the Demon and his misdeeds within the Andinaq Kingdom?" Baron Silas

asked as he lowered his voice mysteriously.

"No, I haven't. You should know that my dominion is located within the Northlands that has always been rather isolated. News of the outside world hardly travel all the way there within a short period of time," Lorist said as he shook his head curiously. Feeling troubled, he thought, *Charade the Demon couldn't possibly be referring to that fatty, right? What did he do to cause such a big stir to the point that he was labeled a 'demon'?*

"Charade led an armed convoy and even gathered more than 100000 vagabonds as he rampaged through the Andinaq Kingdom while spreading his poison throughout all three provinces within the kingdom and paving out a path of blood in his wake. Like locusts, the people of the convoy killed wherever they went as well as pillaged and devoured whatever they set their sights on, leaving behind only a piece of desolate wasteland. Of the 130 plus noble families within the Andinaq Kingdom, less than 50 of them remain thanks to the effort put in by the Second Highness. The other nobles have all been sent to the gallows by Charade the Demon.

"Right now, the Andinaq Kingdom is practically completely sapped dry. That's why the demon turned his sights on our Madras Duchy. It's fortunate that Lord Duke Madras noticed the threat early on and sent out the Ironguard Legion to secure the borders to stop Charade the Demon from entering our duchy. If he does get in, it'll be over for all of us. Thinking back at the fate suffered by the Andinaq Kingdom, it truly would be a fearsome nightmare if the same were to happen here!"

Baron Silas continued his embellished account of the rumors he had heard from the merchant convoys that crossed the river, which painted Charade as a green-faced, fanged demon boasting a huge size of 3 meters in height and breadth, complete with horns on his head and a demonic tail sprouting from his hind. The worst part was that Baron Silas actually believed that Charade had to consume at least 99 human hearts during every single one of his meals coupled with hot sauce made from fresh human blood.

Resisting the urge to laugh out loud at hearing the baron's description of Charade, Lorist thought that even if Charade morphed into a demon like that, he still wouldn't lose all rationality and go on a rampage. However, as it was the first time Lorist heard of news of his convoy from another party, he looked at the red line on the map with worry as it meant that the convoy was prevented from advancing towards the Northlands. The more he thought about his friends a tthe convoy, the lesser he smiled.

"How long has the blockade been enacted?" Lorist asked.

Unhappy that Lorist had interrupted his imaginative story, Baron Silas replied, "It should have been around 1 month already. 30 days more or less."

"Then is there word on when it will be lifted?" Lorist asked again.

"I don't really have much of a clue about that. The merchant convoy that came along yesterday was originally on its route to trade within the Andinaq Kingdom and they stayed at Vanades City for more than 10 days. After hearing that the blockade would be around for at least a year and a half, the merchants decided to turn back and return. I say, brother, if you're heading to the Redlis Kingdom, you'll have to take another route. First, get to Vanades City and head to the Farkel Duchy from there. After that, travel through the Handra Duchy to arrive at the Forund Duchy and you can enter the Redlis Kingdom from there. However, that route is more than twice the original distance you have to travel and you will be passing through war-ravaged lands, so there are many variables to look out for," Baron Silas said as he looked at his map.

"That's right. That was why I was worried that the blockade would be upheld for a long time. This is the route that we've always used; if we use another, we won't be familiar with it and our safety would also be put at risk. That's far too much trouble," Lorist agreed as he nodded.

"Actually, I believe that staying within your own dominion is much safer. In times like these, it's quite dangerous to bring your merchant convoy outside even if your family soldiers are capable. Things can still go wrong one way or another," Baron Silas said as he sighed.

Lorist shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, unlike you, I don't have such a profitable service which allows you to earn money just by sitting still and collecting transportation fee. My dominion is in the Northlands and without making trading trips like these, I wouldn't have any income at all. I'm not in the position to sit still and do nothing, am I?"

Baron Silas raised his wine cup again and said, "Then, here's a toast to your safe journey and the profits you will make from it."

The two of them continued to make merry before they parted.

Upon returning to his tent, Lorist asked Patt, "Hey, do you remember the flag and

family insignia Tim gave us? Did you bring it along?"

Surprised, Patt said, "We should have brought it… I remember Shadekampf putting those two items in a chest somewhere. He said that with those two items we will be able to pretend to be Mister Tim's men when we need to do something that is inconvenient for our family."

Lorist nodded and said, "Spread the word to everyone to not refer to themselves as soldiers the Norton Family but rather escorts for the merchant convoy of the Tebri Family. Also, hang up the flag Tim gave us on the horse carriage."

"What's going on, milord?" Patt asked.

"Charade and the northbound convoy have gotten into some trouble. The Madras Duchy actually blockaded their borders to stop them from entering. I have a feeling that they already know that the convoy belongs to us, the Norton Family and I worry that trouble will find us if we travel so openly without hiding our identities," explained Lorist.

Chapter 150
Small Mountain Village

Vanades City was the largest city of the Madras Duchy and was also the main business hub with the largest collection of goods and resources available for purchase. The main reason for its prosperity was its incredibly strategic location between the main highways from various locations. To its south was the Andinaq Kingdom, to the north was the Northlands, to the east was the Farkel Duchy and the Shabaj Duchy and to the west was the capital and center of administration of the Madras Duchy, Shaliske City. Being conveniently located at the center of all those places, Vanades City flourished as the trading hub of the Madras Duchy.

Lorist and his mounted archers squad had traveled for 5 days straight and covered around 500 kilometers of ground to arrive at the city.

Right now, they had no choice but to stay within the city for a day for two to gather some news and information as well as let the horses rest, since they had worked hard to travel up to 100 kilometers of distance every day for five days straight and were already reaching their limits.

After renting a campsite at the southern suburbs and settling the mounted archers down, Lorist left Pete in charge and brought Patt and 5 other guards to enter the city and look for an inn.

The last time when Lorist brought Ovidis and his smaller convoy to the Northlands, he had stayed outside Vanades City for only one day and left in a hurry after Shadekampf bought the necessary supplies. This was Lorist's first time entering the city. Compared to Morante City, where he had stayed for ten years of his life, Vanades City wasn't all that big. However, the mercantile atmosphere there was not one whit inferior to that of Morante City as evidenced by the narrow streets that were filled up with stalls on the side with crowds so dense that brushing against others while walking through the streets was but a common occurrence. The incessant bargain calls of the stall owners made Lorist feel that he had returned to the familiar Morante City.

Perfume Beauty Inn was located at the southern district of the city along with many

other high class inns. It was also a favored gathering spot for nobles and big merchants. Even though the cost of the services provided was rather high, it was still able to attract a healthy number of customers.

Lorist reserved four rooms within the side building of the inn. After taking a bath, he sent two of the guards to inform Pete of his place of residence within the city and brought Patt and the four other guards downstairs for a meal. They occupied two huge tables and listened to the conversations around them as they enjoyed their food.

After listening for a while, Lorist was rather disappointed because even though the merchants were talking about how the road to the Andinaq Kingdom was sealed off, it was mostly filled with complaints and guesses of when the blockade will be lifted. The rest of the conversations were mostly about the goods they were trading and whether to return the way they came.

Lorist continued to eat and raised his head occasionally. After a while, he noticed that Patt was looking at the spot behind him. Surprised, Lorist turned back to look before breaking into a smile.

Behind him was a small lounge where many elaborately dressed women sat. From time to time, the guests of the inn would pick the ones of their fancy and negotiate a price for their services before they brought them into their rooms.

"Hehe, you're feeling the urge? If you'd like to do it, you can go pick one. It'll be fine as long as we leave by 11 tonight," Lorist said as he looked at the sandglass on the counter and continued, "It's only 7 right now, and 4 hours is plenty of time…"

With a blushing face, Patt said, "I wasn't… I was just curious so I looked…"

"You really don't want to?"

"No, I have to protect milord by staying by your side," Patt said as he shook his head resolutely.

"It's really safe here and we're just a 'merchant convoy'. Nobody here recognizes me and as merchants, if you don't pick a woman when you're at an inn, you'll stand out even more. Look at those other four. The moment they saw the women, they fell into a daze. If you really don't want to have some fun with them, you can accompany me out on the street for a stroll. I was thinking of getting a few more detailed maps for our travels. Give the guards one gold Forde each to pay for the services of the women so

that we look and behave like normal merchants," Lorist said.

Patt handed the four guards one gold Forde each, causing their faces to redden with excitement. Patt reminded them to not expose their cover and told them to leave the inn by 11 at night, to which the four guards nodded fervently. Had Lorist not been there, they wouldn't have held back and would be rushing to pick one woman to accompany them for the remainder of the night.

Lorist then left the inn along with Patt and visited two night markets and bought a few maps and travel journals when he reached the bookstore. What surprised Lorist was that the bookstore actually had the blueprints of the fortifications of Lichtana Citadel for sale. The owner of the bookshop said casually that after the blockade was put in place to restrict entry for people outside, Lichtana Citadel became a hot topic for many and some who liked to theorize about battles would buy one of those blueprints and discuss how the citadel would be defended or attacked.

"This fortification blueprint is replicated directly from the one within the archives and it's a bestseller. Mister, would you like one yourself?" asked the owner of the bookshop.

"Alright, I'll have one too so that I can think of the best way to attack the citadel when I have nothing better to do," Lorist said.

"Well, the citadel is only an inanimate structure. The real defenses are managed by the guards who are alive and adaptive. As long as the Ironguard Legion is there, the Lichtana Citadel will not be conquered," said the bookshop owner proudly and confidently as he rolled up the blueprints along with the maps and handed them to Lorist.

Lorist merely nodded at the owner's remarks.

When he returned to the inn, Lorist holed himself in his room for two whole days as he analyzed the terrain and maps of the path from Vanades City all the way to Lichtana Citadel. He also instructed the server of the inn to find him a guide who was familiar with the route to the Farkel Duchy so that he may better understand the situation over there. On the other hand, he had the guards visit the many inns within the city to gather more information about the situation of the blockade without drawing too much attention.

To the servers of the inn and the other merchants staying there, Lorist was merely a noble of the Redlis Kingdom who was worried about how he would return home.

On the third day, Lorist checked out of the room and returned to the southern suburbs where the camp of the mounted archers was located.

At night within the tent, Lorist gathered Pete and Patt to plan for the journey to come.

"We will be leaving tomorrow morning and will be heading west along this road towards the Farkel Duchy. This is a mountainous area with rather complicated terrain and I've heard that bandits would show up near that area. However, ever since the border was closed off, this route has been seeing quite a lot of traffic from mainly merchant convoys and the Madras Duchy also stationed a regiment of garrison soldiers there to police the area and maintain its security. So, there has been no news about bandit encounters for a month or so.

"It will take us about half a day to arrive at the small mountain village here. According to the information I've gathered, a company of garrison soldiers is stationed there because there is a path near the village that stretches through the forest to a hilly area. Over there, the path forks into two new roads, one of which leads directly to Lichtana Citadel and the other to Egret Lake.

"We have two choices at the moment. First, we can choose to cross Egret Lake to reach the Andinaq Kingdom. I'm just worried that we won't be able to find a ferry when we reach there and our numbers, horses and carriages would definitely pose a problem. Fortunately, the paths along the way is wide enough for all of us to travel on. The other choice is to use the path heading to the citadel and make our exit through there.

"Lichtana Citadel is constructed upon the Liden Mountains that stretch all the way to the coast at the west and that is a route we won't be able to use. At the eastern slope of the mountain on which the citadel stands is the route connecting the two nations. That path is sandwiched between a few small hills and it is around 500 meters away from the citadel. The hills are called the Bread Hills by the locals because they resembles small pieces of puffy round bread right out of the stove of an oven. There are reports that a military base is built there with a regiment of Ironguard Legion soldiers stationed to guard it from both sides of the path.

"Further ahead the Bread Hills is the Egret Lake which is around 50 kilometers wide. That is the natural border between the Andinaq Kingdom and the Madras Duchy.

However, apart from the route through the hills, the rest of the place is covered by a huge forest. I didn't hear anything about a second path leading to the lake.

"Currently, quite a number of tower outposts have also been erected at the 500-meter stretch between the Liden Mountains and the Bread Hills to completely secure the border. Patt told me that the base at the Bread Hills is also equipped with ten proper ballistas just like those at Lichtana Citadel which have a firing distance of up to 300 meters. Even if the tower outposts are destroyed, the citadel and the base can still cover that path with their ballista fire.

"That's why, we will not use this path unless worst comes to worst. If we do, we will definitely be paying a huge price at our own expense. When we arrive at the village in the mountains tomorrow, we have to make sure to inspect the security of the patrolling guards and check whether we can slip by the place without being noticed. If we truly can't, then we have no choice but to cross it by force and abandon our mounts and carriages to cross the lake."

……

During noon, Lorist brought his men to the village and was allowed entry after showing the badge of the Tebri Family to the garrison soldiers there. Outside the village, three merchant convoys could be seen parked there as their men had their lunch.

After finding an empty spot, Pete instructed the mounted archers to start cooking. The villagers also brought out their homemade liquor and food and offered them up for sale. It seemed that the blockade had unexpectedly given the village a huge boom in business as the villagers had profited quite a bit from the merchants who were willing to purchase their hunted or picked goods, thus putting smiles on all the villagers' faces.

After having lunch and resting for about an hour, Lorist instructed his men to pack up and prepare to depart. That was actually a secret signal to make battle preparations as there was no way they would be able to slip by the path that was defended by a squad of garrison soldiers unnoticed. They were about to barge their way through.

As they were packing up, loud noises poured out from the gates of the village as a squad of proud garrison soldiers marched out with 8 captives who were dressed like mercenaries.

Patt went over to look and his expression stiffened all of a sudden. Heading back to Lorist, he said, "Milord, bad news. The captives are actually Reidy, Jim and the rest…"

"Huh? What did you say?" Lorist asked, shocked. He turned to look and saw that the captives who were restrained and tied up were indeed Reidy and Jim. Jim's shoulder was even bleeding. It seemed that they were not apprehended without a fight as the rest of the men who dressed like mercenaries seemed injured as well.

The company leader of the garrison soldiers emerged from a wooden hut with unkempt clothing as he muttered and complained. Two crimson-red kiss marks could still be seen on his exposed chest and it was obvious that the apprehension of the captives had disrupted his pleasant time.

The company leader looked at the crowd of people who were taking interest and told the squad leader something before ordering Reidy, Jim and the other captives to be locked into a nearby stone building.

Lorist walked up to them and asked with a curious voice, "Hey, captain, what's up with these captives? Are you catching slaves?"

"Slaves your ass…" cursed the company leader, before he suddenly recalled that he was talking to a noble. Even though Lorist wasn't a noble of the duchy, he was, after all, a 'viscount', and his status far exceeded that of the company leader. Quickly adjusting his clothes, the man said, "I pay you my greetings, Lord Viscount. These men have actually attempted to sneak past the border by crossing the Egret Lake. They were captured as per the Lord Duke's orders."

"How do you plan to deal with them? Sell them to slave traders? They look like healthy young men and I think they would fetch quite a good price," Lorist said.

Darned noble, to think that you're also a part time slave trader, thought the company leader before he said, "We don't engage in slave trade. People who sneak through the border like that will be given a trial during the night and beheaded in front of a crowd. Look, milord. The tree to the east is where the heads of such people are hung."

Lorist only just noticed a huge tree at the east of the village where no less than 30 heads were hung.

"It's such a shame, and to think I was going to offer a good price for them…" Lorist said as he made a disappointed expression.

"Please forgive me, Lord Viscount. We can do naught but obey the orders of the Lord Duke. I'll have to take my leave now and I wish you a swift journey as well," said the company leader as he saluted before he left.

Lorist walked back with a dark expression and told Pete and Patt, "Think of an excuse for us to stay here until the night. Inspect the defenses of the village during the afternoon and we will act at night to wipe them out and rescue Reidy, Jim and the others."

Pete said, "Milord, why don't we just attack now?"

Lorist shook his head as he said, "We can't, there's too many people right now. There are already about six merchant convoys nearby and we will not be able to prevent news of our assault from spreading out if that's the case. The guards near this area will be able to react instantly the moment they hear about our attack and surround us completely. We only have a squad of men while this place is defended by a whole regiment of soldiers. I don't wish to sacrifice the lives of hundreds just for saving the lives of a few men.

"However, during the night, the convoys will have left because there's only half a day's worth of travel from here to Vanades City. Most of the people coming to this village wouldn't be staying for the night. That way, we won't have to worry about alerting the rest of the soldiers in the area when we wipe out the enemies here."

Within the hut the company leader entered was the most beautiful woman of the village who was a young widow. Usually, many young men of the village would flock around her, but they stopped doing so after the arrival of the company leader.

Just as he was about to resume his quality time with the woman, he heard his door being banged on loudly once again.

"What the heck is going on this time?!" roared the company leader in rage. His formerly erected member had been startled into limpness from the sudden banging on his door.

"Captain, the Lord Viscount who was talking to you just now fell off his horse just as he was about to leave and seemed to have broken a few bones. Now, they can't leave because the viscount is out cold. His men have already sent someone to Vanades City to look for a herbalist and the rest want to set up their camp within the village,"

reported the guard outside.

"Haha, that's great news. That cursed slave trader viscount got what was coming for him," said the company leader happily. "Make sure to inform the men to behave within the village. I will visit the viscount myself during the night. If there's nothing else, stop interrupting me and scram!"

After that, he lowered his head and said to the lustful widow beneath him, "Now, precious… Help me up again with that wonderful mouth of yours…"

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