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Tales of the Reincarnated Lord

– 重生之领主传奇 –

- Volume 4 -

-Author-
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[LiberSpark]

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GOLDEN COAST
ROMON EMPIRE
CREATED BY : A_MINERVA

Chapter 151
Bypass

By the time the company leader left the hut of the widow, countless twinkling stars could be seen in the night sky. Having taken a nap with the widow in his arms for the whole afternoon, enjoyed a meal she carefully prepared and being seduced into bed by her, the company leader spent quite an amount of effort during the intercourse with the catlike woman and ended up asleep from exhaustion while basking in the afterglow.

Feeling refreshed after stretching his body, the company leader checked his surroundings out and noticed that the soldiers that should have been standing guard outside his door were not there. After a while, he remembered that he had asked them to scram and thought, *so those bastards actually went to slack off after that…*

"They better not let me find them… Otherwise, I'll definitely give them a good whipping…" mumbled the company leader, before he noticed that his surroundings were abnormally quiet. While it wasn't weird for the villagers to go to sleep early, the army camp should still be generating quite a bit of buzz. Why, then, was it so quiet?

However, when he saw the silhouettes of soldiers walking about in the distance, he regained his calm and believed that he had merely overslept and that the time was probably around 3 or 4 in the morning.

Even so, there was a slight stench of blood wafting around in the air. The company leader pinched his nose and felt like scolding someone. *The mercenaries who were trying to cross the border must have been beheaded given the smell… Curses, couldn't they kill those men at the spot where the tree is outside the village?*

When he saw the extra tens of tents at one corner of the village, the company leader recalled that those belonged to the guards of the viscount who had fallen off his horse. Seeing the campsite that was illuminated by a bonfire with people going in and out of it, the company leader thought that a herbalist from Vanades City must have already been invited over to give treatment to the viscount and felt that he should go over there to pay a visit.

Before he entered the campsite, a guard came out from it and said respectfully, "Sir, the viscount invites you inside to have a chat."

Not suspecting a thing, the company leader walked inside and asked, "I see that the Lord Viscount is conscious now. He shouldn't be too badly injured, right? If he can still move, I believe you lot should go to Vanades City now. That place is far better for the Lord Viscount to recover than this small village."

The guard merely nodded in agreement as he led the company leader to the entrance of Lorist's tent.

Pushing the folds of the tent and entering it, the company leader was stunned by what he saw. The viscount whom he thought would be lying in bed and moaning in pain was actually sitting right in front of him and smiling like a fox towards him.

When he looked around, the company leader saw two people who were dressed like mercenaries wolfing down food at a corner within the tent. The one on the left was even eating as another guard helped him to remove his armor and bandaged him up.

Huh, these two look rather familiar... All of a sudden, the company leader suddenly realized that those two were the mercenaries he had captured just that afternoon.

"Tsk!" The company leader grunted as he drew his sword and generated a silver-colored blade glow and said, "You… Who the heck are you?"

"Shut up and just sit there obediently. I have something to ask you later," Lorist said as a murderous glint flashed past his eyes, causing the company leader to feel immense dread that made his arms and legs wobble and shiver as if he, a small ant, had appeared before a great dragon and could not muster the slightest will to resist.

"Continue your story, Reidy," Lorist said he he turned to his disciple who was still eating.

"Milord," Reidy said before he swallowed the piece of meat in his mouth. "The fatty is so troubled that he already ran out of ideas. The rest didn't know what to do either. That's when I suggested that I would make my way back to you for instructions. So, four days ago, I brought Jim and tens of other guards to cross Egret Lake and reached the forest nearby here by using the small path along the swamp. Yesterday, we thought we would be able to arrive at the main route to Vanades City by crossing the hilly area before traveling straight to the Northlands. However, we did not expect to encounter

a group of bandits hiding within that forest and our battle alerted the nearby patrol troops. The bandits escaped swiftly but as we were not familiar with the terrain, we ended up being captured…”

"You're really lucky to have bumped into us. Otherwise, your head would've been hung up at the tree over there already," Lorist said. After that, he waved to the company leader and beckoned him to get closer. "You, come here."

The sword-wielding company leader was shivering all over. "You… Don't you fear that I will alert the so-soldiers in the camp…? At th-that time… You wo-won't be able to escape even if you try…”

"Go ahead then. Call out to them as loudly as you can. As for all 427 soldiers within the camp, hmmm, that's roughly a company, isn't it… Well, if you can wake them, then I'll kneel and start praying to you right this instant," Lorist said.

"Pfft!" Reidy and Jim broke into laughter immediately with Jim even spitting out a whole mouthful of ale.

"Im-impossible…” The company leader quickly recalled the stench of blood within the air and experienced complete despair. If the ones he thought were decapitated were sitting there dining as if nothing happened, then who were the ones who were killed? As for the ones he saw in the distance making their patrols, he only caught a glimpse of their silhouettes and didn't get close enough to recognize who they were. Thinking back at the 100 plus men of the viscount's escort…

Clang! The sword of the company leader fell to the ground. He proceeded to ask with a voice filled with despair, "Is there a chance for me to be spared?"

"That will depend on your behavior," Lorist said as he looked at the company leader. "I'll be honest and tell you this: the convoy that is stranded at the border actually belongs to my family. My purpose is to travel there and meet up with them. So, I want to use the small path branching from the fork nearby to reach Egret Lake. If you help me arrive at my destination safely, I promise that I will let you go in the name of my family."

The company leader shook his head and said, "It's pointless. Even if you release me, I wouldn't be able to avoid certain death anyway. Losing a company of men is already punishable by death and there is no chance that the duke will spare me or my family…”

"Well, then it's even more straightforward. You can follow me across the lake and when we reach the Andinaq Kingdom, I'll give you 100 gold Fordes. You can take on a new identity and begin your life anew there. If they don't find you here, they'll think that something bad befell you to cause you to go missing in action. That way, Duke Madras will not act against your family either," Lorist advised.

After thinking for a few moments, the company leader said, "I want to bring a person with me."

Lorist smiled and asked, "Is it that young widow you were with?"

The company leader nodded.

"Alright, it's a deal. I thought that a brute like you wouldn't be so sentimental, it truly is worthy of praise. In the name of the Norton Family, I pledge that as long as you help me get across Egret Lake, I will definitely fulfill my due obligations to you."

……

As the first light of dawn seeped in from the ends of the horizon, Lorist and his men disguised themselves as the garrison soldiers of the Madras Duchy by donning their equipment and headed to the fork. When they arrived, they got into a neat formation.

The garrison squad leader stationed there walked over in a hurry and asked with a surprised tone, "Huh? Company Leader Bose, why are you here? Isn't it a little early for you to switch with us for your shift? There should be two more days left, right?"

"Gah, I don't even want to talk about it… These bastards here harmed two women within the village and caused quite the commotion. I brought them out on patrol duty as an excuse to toss them here so that the villagers don't find them for now. Quickly gather up and tell your soldiers to keep quiet about this when they get back. Just say that you were sent on patrol duty instead of being switched out for your shift," said Bose the company leader in an annoyed voice.

"Understood," said the squad leader as he rushed back excitedly to rally up his men as he thought, *hurray! Nobody would want to stay at the middle of nowhere here where we won't be able to even enjoy ourselves! That group over there actually got into trouble by messing with some women and came here to hide it out… Who knows how long they will have to stay here? Hmph, they're getting what they deserve!*

Quickly, the squad of garrison troops stationed there gathered and got into their formations. After taking the roster, the squad leader returned and said, "Reporting to the company leader: the 7th Squad of the garrison soldiers has gathered with all 104 members present!"

However, the company leader merely said, "My work here is done."

What did that mean? Before he comprehended the meaning behind those words, the squad leader heard a loud "Fire!"

Arrows fell like rain on the defenseless squad of soldiers, causing cries of agony to ring out incessantly.

"You…" cried the squad leader in shock before he felt a cold, searing pain that caused his body to shiver uncontrollably.

"Apologies, I'm merely doing this for the sake of my own life. I had no choice…" said the company leader. The savage face of the company leader would be the last thing the squad leader saw before his untimely death.

"Double check if they're really dead by giving each of them a stab. Toss the corpses into the entrenchment over there so that they won't be discovered too quickly," instructed Lorist.

"The next patrol over here is at 8 tonight and even if they discover this, they will have to report it to me back at the village. After discovering the situation there, it will be another two hours before word of this can reach the main troop. That's why, we have the whole morning for us to make our haste. However, the fork up front is stationed with a company of garrison soldiers who are in charge of patrolling the lake. I can get them to open the gates of their camp, but after that will be up to you. Also, you promised me that you will not let them discover that I helped you out on this," said the company leader as he told Lorist about the situation while using the map as reference.

Lorist nodded and said, "Don't worry, I will make sure that any garrison soldier that sees you doesn't live to tell about it."

Receiving the map the company leader handed him, Lorist told Patt and Pete, "The moment the gates are open, start killing right away when they still don't have a grasp on the situation. After conquering the campsite, use the logs of the fence of the camp and make them into rafts. Additionally, assume a defensive position at the hill between

the campsite and the lake just in case reinforcements arrive. That's all. We will depart immediately."

……

By the time they arrived at the camp near the lake, it was already the afternoon. The four guards at the gates recognized Bose and thought that he was there to deliver supplies given the five large carriages that he brought with him. Without making any report, they opened the gates only to have their throats slit by Reidy and the others.

Pete and Patt led the 100 plus mounted archers into the camp and got into position at the very middle of it before they started shooting their arrows in every direction, causing one garrison soldier after another to fall to the ground. Sounds of slaughter and demise intertwined within the camp.

To the company of garrison soldiers camped over there, their main duty was to patrol the bank of the lake as well as the small path that led to Lichtana Citadel and take care of the illegal entrants into the duchy as per the orders of the duke. They were never prepared for such a large scale assault and some of the soldiers were even unaware of what was happening even at the moment of their deaths.

Lorist led Jim and Reidy on horseback and rushed straight into the camp and began to slash at the tents with their pikes just in case they missed out any soldiers who were hiding within.

As for the company leader and the few squad leaders who were in charge of the camp, they were nailed to the ground without being able to react by Lorist's javelins the moment they emerged from their tents.

Given that the campsite wasn't that huge, it didn't take long for the sweeping operation to be completed.

Patt came over with a serious expression as he reported, "Milord, there are a total of 308 corpses of the garrison soldiers within this camp. One squad is still missing."

Lorist furrowed his brow and looked at Company Leader Bose who was standing by his side.

After giving it some thought, the company leader said, "Perhaps they went on a patrol already. However, I have no idea whether they went to the bank of the lake or the small

path heading to the citadel…”

Before he finished his sentence, Jim called out and pointed into the distance, "Over there…”

Lorist turned his head to look and saw a hill in the distance where a squad of garrison soldiers could be seen heading towards the camp. However, they stopped all of a sudden, probably because they were able to see the corpses within the camp given their higher vantage point and didn't know what to do next.

"Pete, bring your mounted archers to exterminate them quickly. Try your best to not let too many escape," Lorist ordered.

With but a whistle, the mounted archers rushed towards that hill under Pete's lead.

"I'm going too," Jim said before he and his guards mounted their horses and gave chase.

"Alright. Reidy, Patt, use these horses to uproot the logs used for the fence of the camp. We need to work fast." Lorist then instructed the remaining mounted archers to tie a rope to each wooden log and fasten the other end to a horse before prodding the horse forward to pull the log from the ground.

"Wait, milord," Company Leader Bose said as he stepped forward to stop Lorist.

"Hmm? What's wrong?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, the part of the logs that are embedded in the ground is not needed. The upper parts of the log have already long dried up but the ones beneath the ground are still moist. If you make a raft with the whole thing, it would be hard to get an even buoyancy. It's better if the moist parts of the logs are cut off first so that the rafts can be more balanced and able to sustain heavier weights…” explained the company leader.

Lorist understood immediately and said, "Cut off the lower parts of the logs as he just said."

"Milord, please give me a sword. I'd like to help out too. Also, the wooden warehouse can also be dismantled to be made into a raft," said the company leader.

"Return his sword to him," Lorist told Reidy.

Bose drew his sword and circulated his Battle Force to generate a blade glow which he used to hack at the wooden logs. By the time he cut off the 4th log, the blade glow dissipated and the longsword was stuck in the middle of the log.

"Not bad, it seems that using Battle Force for logging is rather fast," Lorist said. "Patt, have the Silver ranked troops focus on chopping off the logs. Reidy, bring some men to dismantle the warehouse."

By the time the warehouse was mostly dismantled, Jim and Pete returned.

"Milord, more than ten managed to escape into the forests and we didn't continue to pursue them," Pete reported.

"How are the casualties?"

"There are none. The moment they saw us approach, they ran immediately. Given that they were near the lake, there wasn't anywhere else to run to and more than half jumped into the lake in desperation only to be shot to death by our arrows. However, a lucky few managed to sneak into the forests. As we didn't have any way to cross the swamp, we could only watch them run from afar…"

"Sir," Company Leader Bose said as he approached while wiping off some sweat. "It will take around one hour to travel from here to Lichtana Citadel on horseback. Assuming the escaped soldiers take two hours to get there, the reinforcements will arrive here one hour after that. We have three hours of time left at most."

"Alright. Everyone, make the best use of your time. Have the horses pull the logs which have their bottoms severed straight to the lake bank and construct the rafts there. Reidy and Jim, search the camp again to find more materials we can use to make the rafts with," Lorist said as he clapped his hands a few times.

Five huge rafts were constructed in total with each being able to hold one carriage on it. The rest of the horses including those found within the camp were rushed into the lake so that they would swim across to the other side.

The 100 plus men on their respective rafts pushed against the bank with their oars and gradually paddled their way to the other side.

As the skies turned darker, a thin layer of mist blanketed the lake. Occasionally, sounds of horses neighing could be heard amidst the silent sound of the paddling oars pushing against the water of the lake.

The distance between both banks of the lake was about 500 meters. Just as the five rafts passed the midsection of the lake, sounds of soldiers and horses arriving at the bank behind them could be heard.

Well, they sure did take their time, Lorist thought as he laughed out loud. They quickly arrived on the opposite bank and were about to rejoin with their stranded comrades. The next step Lorist had to take was to figure out how to get them back home.

Chapter 152
Noble Rank Elevation

Lorist pushed open the tent's flaps and entered it.

At that moment, everyone was stunned followed by a burst of excited laughter.

"Mi-milord… Why have you come?" Charade cried out excitedly as he jumped in surprise. He was so shocked by Lorist's surprise visit that he had knocked the table in front of him over when he jumped, causing a mess of ink, pen and beastskin to manifest on the ground.

Lorist laughed before he said, "I'm here to bring you all back home."

Even though it was just a simple sentence, it caused half of the people within the tent to tear up immediately. Some of them were so moved that they even cried uncontrollably.

Dulles was one of the Dawn Academy students who had willingly followed Charade to join the northbound convoy. He was also appointed by Lorist to fill an important role and was made into the captain of the carroballista unit. He had traveled and weathered through the hardships with the rest of the convoy from the 2nd month to the 9th month, 7 whole months. Having been stuck in their current predicament, Dulles started to feel even more hopeless. However, when he heard Lorist's words, he had been so moved that tears trailed down all over his face.

Lorist gave Dulles a hug before he told the rest within the tent, "Nothing and nobody can obstruct us on our way back home. It must've been rough for you guys to have made your way here. Right now, the only thing between us and the Northlands is the Madras Duchy. I'm not bothered by a single Ironguard Army. Even if they're all iron men, we will still bash them into smithereens."

Lorist continued to hug the rest of them one after another. By the time he reached Potterfang, the man who was the first to pledge his loyalty to Lorist, Potterfang teared up and said, "Milord, it's all because of our incompetence…"

Lorist interjected and said, "No, you have all done very well."

The last one Lorist greeted was Charade. When he saw the fatty, he noticed that the pot belly he used to have had vanished and the once rounded and puffy face had become slightly more firm and chiseled. Charade's cheeks also seemed to have sunk deeper inside and he no longer looked bouncy and chubby. Wrinkles could be seen on his forehead with a few strands of white hair growing out from his bangs. It was apparent that the stress and burden he had bore had a lasting effect on him.

Lorist spread both his arms and hugged Charade tightly before he said, "Brother Charade, it must've been tough…"

Charade merely sobbed quietly without saying a single word.

After they all calmed down and returned to their seats, Lorist announced his decision that he would hold a grand banquet tomorrow to knight the officers of the convoy who have made significant contributions to officially make them the knights of the Norton Family.

Lorist smiled as he said, "Originally, I planned to award you guys after you all arrived at the Northlands. However, now that the convoy has expanded this much, it really can't be excused if I don't promote those who have done well into the ranks of our family knights. For now, I will knight a group and there will be another knighting ceremony once we return to the family dominion. I hope the rest of you can come up with a list of candidates with contributions and discuss whether they qualify with Charade. However, you must also notify them in person if they are selected. If they believe that better opportunities lie elsewhere, we won't force them to join us.

"After tomorrow, the convoy will undergo a reorganization and it will start to get really busy. However, our efforts will help ensure that our journey ahead will be a less arduous one. Everyone, I hope you can persevere for a little bit more. Even though we still have quite a number of troubling things to settle, they shall not obstruct our journey back to the Northlands, our home. I have confidence that I will be able to bring all of you back. However, I'm only a single human and not a gigantic titan nor a flame-breathing dragon. I will need all of your help and assistance to bring a convoy of this size back home. So, I am in your care."

Lorist stood up and the rest within the tent bowed towards him respectfully.

……

As night encroached upon day, the once noisy campsite gradually quieted down. Countless people fell into deep slumber while basking in the gentle light of the Silvermoon.

Only Lorist, Charade and Potterfang remained within the tent. Reidy had left once he made them some macks and stood guard outside the tent.

"Your biggest mistake was your greed which the Second Highness didn't fail to exploit. Had you refused the Second Highness's request after the battle at the Green Plains and led the convoy up north, I'm sure that no one would dare to bar your way. I know that part of the reason you agreed to it was because of my elder cousin sister. Additionally, I'm sure you have benefitted quite a bit back from the time and Geldos City and thought that the convoy can't hurt to have more resources. However, you forgot one important thing: the more resources you have, the more burden it will be on the convoy…"

Lorist was currently analyzing and criticizing Charade's mistakes.

"Our convoy is not unlike a gigantic snake. Even though it is huge, it is also quite agile. Occasionally eating a rabbit or a goat wouldn't cause it to lose its agility. However, if you force it to swallow a few bulls at one go, it will stop moving altogether. In that situation, our convoy would become the ideal prey for other predators.

"Disposition determines fate, Brother Charade. You are a talented man and I've personally witnessed it back at the Sloph Bastide. Baron Miranda was also extremely full of praise for you. However, your greedy and miserly personality has caused you to miss out on the big picture. You were only focused on getting all the benefits without being willing to give any of the opportunities up and that trait is ideal for the Second Highness to exploit you to his advantage.

"The other mistake you made was that after you cleared up the nobles of the three provinces of the Andinaq Kingdom, the Second Highness got all the benefits while you had to shoulder all the fault and blame. Did you know how surprised I was when I heard rumors about 'Charade the Demon'? Even if the nobles had obstructed the convoy and even attempted to rob it, you shouldn't have acted to emotionally. Think about it, if you hadn't hung the nobles personally and merely captured them and handed them to the Second Highness, he wouldn't have been able to lay all the fault

on the convoy and would instead have to trouble himself over how to take care of the rebellious nobles himself."

Lorist lifted his silver cup and took a sip of the macks that was slightly cooled.

Charade muttered, "It's completely my fault. I've always felt that something was off and had a hint that the Second Highness was exploiting me somehow. However, I wasn't able to see where went wrong myself and only understood after you explained it to me. Locke, you've changed quite a bit as well and you've started to see things so distant in the future from now. You're turning more lord-like by the moment."

Lorist laughed out and said, "I have no choice, people change after all. After becoming the dominion lord, I experienced the burdens and pressure firsthand that came with the position and all that forced me to adapt. Brother Charade, you don't have to feel too bad about yourself either. As the chief supervisor of the convoy, you are no doubt the best candidate I could ever hope for. However, as the leader of the convoy, you're still rather lacking because you lose sight of your goals a little too easily just like Potterfang here. While you, Potterfang, may be a great general, you wouldn't be a fitting leader. I can see that the two of you have already done your best to bring the convoy all the way here by yourselves and even expanded it into what it is today.

"Then again, I am also partly at fault for this. If I had given you guys a deadline to arrive at the Northlands, all this might not have transpired. I understand that you have gathered the vagabonds because you considered the lack of manpower the family was having. Given the current situation, as long as we are able to bring them all back, within a few years, we will be able to turn the dominion into a haven amidst the chaotic times of war where people can live without worry."

"Then, what should be our next step?" Charade asked excitedly. Lorist's arrival made him feel that burden he bore lightened up significantly. The past half a year of planning and worrying had fatigued him both mentally and physically. He was worried that If he were to go on like that for another 6 months, he would first die from the exhaustion before arriving at the dominion.

"There's no rush," Lorist said. "I've already heard about the situation of the convoy briefly from Reidy. It's fortunate that you guys are here to ensure that the convoy hasn't disintegrated in the midst of all this trouble. The reason I am going to promote a few members of the convoy is to calm their hearts and minds for now. Start working on the list tonight and ask the candidates tomorrow about what they think about

joining the family knights. 'Know yourself and your enemy, and you will never be defeated'[1], these are the words of an ancient scholar who lived a few millenia ago. I personally think that it makes a lot of sense."

……

Upon hearing that the new family leader of the Nortons had arrived at the convoy, the Second Highness left at noon the next day with Glacia to the campsite.

Lorist held his right fist to his chest with his left arm behind his back and bowed down slightly to the Second Highness. This was the traditional salute of a junior noble to a senior noble.

The Second Highness was extremely elated and he hugged Lorist after he returned the salute to express his friendliness.

After that, it was Glacia's turn. She still remembered how Lorist looked back then but she couldn't bring herself to believe that the crybaby from her childhood had grown into a fine young man with such a stellar physique who had also assumed position of the Norton Family head.

After hearing about the recent situation of the family and recalling the harsh experiences of the past, Glacia hugged Lorist and cried for a while. In the end, Lorist teased her by asking when she would marry the Second Highness and give birth to a healthy baby, causing her pout and stretch her hand to pull onto Lorist's ear, forcing him to beg for mercy.

After messing around for quite a while, they started to talk seriously about the matters at hand.

The Second Highness sounded casual and straightforward as he told Lorist about the troubles the convoy was facing and gave his opinion that the convoy would only be able to last four more months with its food supply. He also stated that the Andinaq Kingdom would not be able to sustain more vagabonds in its current state. When food runs out completely, the convoy would no doubt crumble and the chaos that resulted from so many people panicking would cause the Andinaq Kingdom that had just settled down from the recent conflict to fall into another period of instability. The Second Highness requested that Count Norton solve the problem of the convoy right away lest the worst case scenario comes to happen and cause both parties grief and

loss.

Lorist merely laughed and politely pointed out that he had only inherited the title of a baron and cannot be called a count. He even instructed Reidy to return the certificate that signified his status as a count back to the Second Highness.

At that moment, everyone within the tent was completely flabbergasted. Lorist's refusal of the elevation in rank from the Second Highness was something that no one had been able to predict. Could that be a gesture that signified the Norton Family's refusal to continue serving the Second Highness, and by extension, the Andinaq Royal Family?

After recovering from the shock, the Second Highness asked Lorist whether he had done something wrong or disrespectful or if the Norton Family had refused the promotion because it intended to dissociate itself from the Andinaq Royal Family altogether.

Lorist said with a serious face, "The Norton Family prides itself in its oath that any of its members would not bend their knees to anyone apart from those of the Krissen Imperial Family or the elders of the Norton Family. The Andinaq Royal Family is indeed the rightful heir to the legacy of the Krissen Imperial Family, and that is recognized publicly as well. So, the Norton Family will not go against its oath and will naturally continue to serve the Andinaq Royal Family. However, the Norton Family is unable to accept the elevation conferred upon us by you, the Second Highness, because that is akin to sullying the pride of a landed noble family like us with an honorary title. To us, this is not an elevation but rather an insult. That's why we humbly refuse your offer."

Charade was the first one to understand the implications of that statement and he hurriedly gave himself a harsh slap to his cheek as he had made a grave mistake in accepting the elevation in rank conferred by the Second Highness on Lorist's behalf the first time around. Had it not been for Lorist's reminder, he would have accepted the title of the count on behalf of the family and that would potentially cause the Norton Family's status to fall from that of a landed noble family to an honorary one.

Els and Terman gave Charade weird looks and wondered why he slapped himself so hard. Charade proceeded to explain his mistake to them in a low voice.

Normally speaking, a landed noble's elevation in title must be followed by either

enfeoffment of another piece of land to add to their original territory or a complete move from the original territory to another bigger one befitting of the new title with the original territory returning to the hands of the senior noble.

Currently, the conferment of the title of a count to the Norton Family would cause it to bear a count's title without having the territory to back it up. If Lorist had accepted the title, in accordance to the law of nobility, that would be equal to surrendering his original status as a landed baron back to the Second Highness in exchange for the honorary title of a count which had no real bearing and right over any dominion or land.

Sol, this fellow really is devious, Lorist thought. Apart from Charade whose impression of the Second Highness could only worsen at this point, Els, Terman and the rest within the tent gave the Second Highness looks of distrust.

The Second Highness himself on the other hand was shocked as it was not his intention to lay such an elaborate trap for the Norton Family and it was nothing more than a silly mistake on his part. He believed that if the Norton Family dominion was not so desolate, the area it actually covered could be considered to be equal to the combined areas of two whole counties. He had elevated the status of the Norton Family because he believed that given the existing territory of the Nortons, they could be considered to be ruling over a county and the Second Highness himself wouldn't need to enfeoff any additional land of the kingdom to them. He also thought that giving the Norton Family a higher title would allow them more freedom to act within the Northlands so that they would be able to aid the Second Highness to act against the Duke of the Northlands who was under the rule of the Second Prince.

The fact that such a loophole that allowed a senior noble to claim a junior noble's dominion by means of conferring a title with no substance to a landed noble existed completely eclipsed the Second Highness. That kind of elevation was nothing but an insult to landed nobles and some who reacted more strongly over something like that might even bear a furious grudge against their senior nobles for such a transgression. Lorist's behavior could already be considered rather courteous and low-key.

The Second Highness himself stood up and bowed towards Lorist as he apologized. "This is completely a mistake on my part and I wholly apologize to you for it. As a token of my misgivings, I am willing to enfeoff the whole of the Northlands to the Norton Family…"

Lorist rudely ignored the Second Highness and continued to twirl the silver cup in his hand nonstop.

Glacia, who was seated behind the Second Highness could no longer stand it and stood up as she said, "Locke, you're far too insolent. His Highness has already admitted his mistake and apologized and is even willing to give the whole of the Northlands to the family! What more do you want?"

Lorist laughed and said, "As expected of a good woman who sticks up to his man! Alright, Cousin Glacia, please ask the Second Highness whether the Northlands is under the rule of the Andinaq Kingdom."

An atmosphere of silence filled the whole of the tent and even Glacia was made completely speechless. The gazes of everyone present were currently focused on the Second Highness as they awaited his response.

At that moment, the Second Highness felt like slapping himself in the face just like Charade did as he had made yet another grave mistake. Given that he had long wanted to reunite the empire and restore the Krissen Imperial Family back to its former glory, he had unconsciously promised the Northlands to the Norton Family and forgotten that the Northlands was in fact part of the territory of the Second Prince's Iblia Kingdom and not his Andinaq Kingdom.

As he pondered over the issue frantically, cold sweat built up on his forehead. If word of him promising the land of another kingdom to a noble family spreads out, the Andinaq Kingdom would definitely become the joke of the decade. Additionally, that promise of the Second Highness would be taken as an example of how empty his words were which don't hold any real weight. More importantly, that would further push away the Norton Family which was currently of most aid to the Andinaq Kingdom.

With a flash of insight, the Second Highness suddenly came up with a solution. Slightly smiling, he said to the rest within the tent, "Of course. I intend to offer up the whole of the Northlands to the Norton Family as a token of my apology."

Everyone was surprised with Glacia even exclaiming in shock, "Your Highness… You…"

The Second Highness waved his hand before continuing. "I haven't finished what I have to say yet. That was just to make up for my mistakes and it is not an additional

enfeoffment. I have also decided to enfeoff my own principality to the Norton Family to add to their existing territory to fit the elevated title of the count. As for the Northlands, while it is still not under my rule yet, I promise that when I exterminate the Madras Duchy, if the Norton Family has already taken control of the Northlands, I will confer upon the Norton Family the title of a duke and make the Northlands the inheritable dominion of the Norton Family for generations to come."

Lorist smiled as he thought, *so this Second Highness is quite quick-witted after all. He managed to turn the whole awkward situation around with but a few words.* If the Madras Duchy truly were exterminated and taken over, then the Northlands would be able to connect directly to the Andinaq Kingdom and if the Norton Family has taken control of it by then, then the Northlands would naturally fall under the rule of the Andinaq Kingdom. That way, the promise of the Second Highness to grant the title of the duke to the Norton Family would no longer merely be an empty one.

However, Lorist was quite curious where the principality of the Second Highness was. Given that the territory might be even larger than that of a count's, why was the Second Highness willing to give it away?

Charade handed a map over to Lorist and pointed to a spot on the map while silently cursing out. "This Second Highness truly is devious. Milord, it would be wise for you to be more careful."

Lorist turned to look at the map and saw that the principality was actually a small island separate from the main continent. While the area was indeed roughly that of a county's, more than half of the island was covered by mountains and beaches and not much land could be used for agriculture. It was no wonder Charade was still mad.

Lorist laughed before he said, "Alright, since the Second Highness has already said so, then the Norton Family will accept the conferment of the title of the count by the Andinaq Royal Family."

The Second Highness proceeded to wipe off his nervous sweat and returned to his seat as the atmosphere within the tent returned to its former calm.

Chapter 153
Trivial Problems

"Your Highness, can you tell me more about the military strength of the Madras Duchy?" Lorist asked.

The Second Highness nodded and cleared his throat before he said, "Alright, let me tell you all I know about the situation of the Madras Duchy."

Lorist stood up and pushed the table in front of him aside and helped Reidy hang a large beastskin map up for everyone within the tent to see. That was an enlarged map of the Madras Duchy which Charade had hurriedly tasked somebody to copy from a smaller map the night before.

"Your Highness, here you go," Lorist said as he passed a thin wooden pointer to the Second Highness.

While this method of presentation was new to him, the Second Highness quickly understood the use of the pointer which was thin on one end and thicker on the other. He walked up to the map and started his presentation in a similar fashion as a teacher giving a lesson.

"The Madras Duchy is formed by three provinces in total. First, we have the Yungechandler Province to the south of the duchy which is directly linked to the Andinaq Kingdom. To the east of that province is the Farkel Duchy and the Shabaj Duchy. I'm sure all of you can see from the map that this province is mostly covered by mountainous areas and swamps as well as the Egret Lake. So, it doesn't have much farmland and only houses 35 landed noble families there.

"The Delamock Province is the largest province of the Madras Duchy and it is separated from the Northlands by the Metropoulos River. It is connected to the Iblia Kingdom to its south and its southern area is mostly grasslands with the exception of the Sanderson Hill Range. This province is known for being the largest food producer of the duchy and its production alone can sustain even three of the most populated provinces back during the time of the empire of about 2 million people. As long as we are able to take control of this province, we will be able to easily sustain more than

400000 vagabonds, not to say much about 100000.

"Ever since the founding of the Madras Duchy, a group of landed nobles were moved to the Delamock Province and right now there are more or less 100 plus noble families over there. Only Kobo City remains the personal territory of Duke Madras within that province.

"Lastly, we have the Sidgler Province at the east of the duchy and that is the main base of Duke Madras. The Sidgler Province is only connected to the Yungechandler Province and it has been under the personal rule of the duke ever since the moving of the landed noble families to the Delamock Province.

"The Madras Duchy is estimated to have a population of about 1700000 people and they mainly use defense troops. Most of the dominions of the landed nobles and their towns use garrison soldiers as the main defense force and if a huge battle comes, the Madras Duchy will gather up the garrison forces of multiple territories to form a temporary army to be deployed on the frontlines.

"Other than that, the Madras Duchy has also formed two general purpose armies. The first one is the Seamountain Legion which is the local defense army that was formed back in the day of the earliest ancestor of Duke Madras. The Seamountain Legion boasts a number of 24000 soldiers who are fully-equipped and they are stationed at the Sidgler Province for the whole year round and are the most trusted troops of the duke.

"The other one is the Ironguard Legion which is responsible for securing the border by guarding the Lichtana Citadel. They number about 28000 soldiers in total and have a reputation of being one of the strongest armies in terms of defensive strength."

The Second Highness smiled as he continued to speak to the rest within the tent. "Actually, the battle that brought the Ironguard Legion to fame involved my lord father. During the 4th year of the civil war in the empire, the once hesitant Duke Madras received encouragement from many and finally decided to form his own duchy. Back then, I was leading troops in the Whitelion Legion and fighting back against the troops of the First Prince while the Fiercegale Legion of the Melein Duchy continued to push back the Second Prince's forces time and again. All looked well and we thought at that time that the rebellion of the First Prince and the Second Prince would be eventually quelled.

"However, none of us expected that Duke Madras would found his own duchy back then and even chose to maintain neutrality and aid no one in particular. They also sealed off their borders and that caused the imperial capital and the four duchies of the central empire to be cut off and we were no longer able to receive any support in terms of resources from them. The food supply from the Delamock Province was also stopped and the situation at the frontlines changed all of a sudden. We could not press our attacks and could only resist defensively.

"Back then, only by breaking the blockade of the Madras Duchy could we stand a chance to reunite the empire. Thus, my lord father led more than 63000 troops of the royal family's local defense guards and managed to take over the whole of the Yungechandler Province. However, when they arrived at the Delamock Province, all 60000 plus soldiers were stopped in their tracks at Kobo City.

"Back then, the only force defending the Kobo City were garrison soldiers that were gathered from different nearby areas and they only numbered a little more than 8000. However, those garrison soldiers actually managed to stop my lord father's assaults and caused him to be unable to enter the Delamock Province even after 6 months of battles to the point that he coughed out blood in rage.

"In the end, due to my lord father's refusal to retreat despite the fact that the Second Prince had sent his forces to engage in a pincer attack with the Madras Duchy's Seamountain Legion, only less than 20000 of the original 63000 troops managed to survive.

"The garrison force that defended Kobo City was also only left with less than 1000 people. However, Duke Madras who was enthralled by their performance termed them the Ironguard Legion and reorganized them into a formal army that excelled in terms of defensive power.

"Ever since that battle, the empire's situation suffered even more and due to the lack of food and other supplies to sustain the army, we had no choice but to retreat from the frontlines, only to be surprise attacked by a division of the First Prince's forces that went around the frontlines to attack the imperial capital. While we rushed there the moment we heard of the news and eliminated that division, the imperial capital had already been devastated. The former glory and grandeur of the imperial capital was lost completely and it had turned into a desolate, lifeless mess of burning buildings and homeless vagabonds.

"From that point of view, it could be said that the true perpetrator that caused the imperial capital to head down the path of ruin was Duke Madras. However, no matter how much I loathe him, I didn't have the ability to punish him for that grave misdeed. Now, I believe he had sealed the borders because he wants the vagabonds to once more ravage the Andinaq Kingdom. After all, the worse shape we are in, the less he has to worry about.

"That's why we have to use the vagabonds to attack Lichtana Citadel while we still have enough food. Even if we're unable to take it in the end, the deaths of the vagabonds will also save us a lot of trouble.

"It's not like I want to leave the vagabonds for dead. However, it is beyond my ability to do otherwise as I cannot sacrifice the rest of the 1500000 citizens who have just recently settled down in the Andinaq Kingdom to resume their former lives."

Lorist laughed as he stood up to interject the Second Highness's long speech. "Your Highness, there's no need for us to do this nor is there a need for us to attack Lichtana Citadel. In fact, time is on our side and there are many ways to save the 100000 vagabonds without having to resort to sending them to their deaths."

A buzz of chatter resounded throughout the tent. The vagabonds were the biggest burden of the convoy currently and the amount of food they consumed was truly too enormous. Even though the Second Highness's suggestion to use them to take over the Lichtana Citadel sounded cruel, many of them also believed that there was no other way to solve the issue.

"Could you enlighten us about that method of yours?" asked the Second Highness in surprise as he looked at Lorist and wondered why he believed that he had more than enough time.

Lorist took the wooden pointer from the Second Highness and walked up to the map and started pointing to it. "Look over here. You seem to have forgotten about Egret Lake. It is the largest lake within the borders of the empire and it is also the natural border between the Madras Duchy and the Andinaq Kingdom.

"Let's talk about the first problem: the lack of food. Given that the lake has many fish, couldn't we solve it by fishing? Other than that, there are many vegetables and herbs like seaweed which we can obtain from the lake. By relying on just that, we will be able to sustain the vagabonds with minimum expense on our own food supply.

"While it was forbidden to fish there as it is the border between two nations, we don't have to give a damn about it now. I believe that Duke Madras wouldn't care about this either as long as we don't approach his side of the lake bank.

"You all should also be aware that winter is coming within two months. By the time the freezing cold descends upon us, the Egret Lake will become frozen. That way, we will be able to cross it without having to go past Lichtana Citadel and continue our journey north. That's why I mentioned that time was on our side."

After Lorist finished what he said, the whole tent turned abuzz. At that moment, many thought, *that's right, why didn't we think of crossing the lake after it has frozen up and fixated ourselves with the path through Lichtana Citadel? And if our food can only last us for three months, the Egret Lake has plenty of fish and seaweed to meet our needs. Since they've forbidden fishing over there for quite some time, there must be a healthy population of fish within the lake now! The catch will definitely be plentiful and we might be able to get enough food to last us half a year, not to say much about only a month or two!*

The Second Highness patted on Lorist's shoulder warmly and said with a brilliant smile, "As expected of Count Norton. I heard that you were a talented student back at Dawn Academy and it seems you have not failed to live up to your reputation and managed to solve two huge issues in one go. That way, we no longer have to worry about the vagabonds, haha…"

"Your Highness, I think it's better if you just called me Locke. Calling me count all the time is a little too formal," replied Lorist with a laugh.

"Alright, I'll call you Locke if you call me Aulo," the Second Highness said.

"Sure, Aulo. I'll have to rely on your help for the fishing. I will need some fishing boats and nets and I myself will also get some men to make more nets. We have to proceed as soon as possible so that we can dry the fish in time for easier preservation," Lorist said.

The Second Highness nodded and said, "Alright, that will do. You truly have the whole thing thought out well. I'll get to it right away."

Lorist pulled on the Second Highness's arm to stop him and said, "Well, it's not like I need everything done right this instant. There will be a banquet here tonight and I

hope that you can attend it. I will be knighting a few members of the convoy and I'd like you to be a witness for the ceremony."

Surprised, the Second Highness laughed out and said, "Alright, I will stay to witness the splendor of the knights of the Family of the Raging Bear."

The banquet during the night was very merry and plentiful. Apart from the people of the convoy who were all given a nice meal with meat and some alcohol; even the vagabonds could let themselves loose and eat as much as they liked.

There was a total of 48 people with contributions who were made into knights of the Norton Family. What made Charade pissed was that 26 of the original 74 candidates had refused the offer as they had already promised the Second Highness that they would join the knights of the Andinaq Royal Family and would leave after the northbound convoy completes its journey. 7 of the 26 were even the senior students of Dawn Academy.

Lorist however didn't mind that as everyone had their own goals and nothing good would come from forcing them to stay. All was fine as long as the ones he prioritized, namely, Mons Malek, Lode Wales, Chino Freiyar, Dulles and Lundmorde, didn't leave. To sum it all up, apart from one senior student, Zivos, who had perished in combat, 16 of the remaining 37 joined the Second Highness and only 21 of them became the knights of the Norton Family.

Charade, Terman, Yuriy and Els, who was still recovering from his injuries, stood beside the Second Highness and intentionally spoke in an audible volume about how the Second Highness had repaid the convoy's help by sabotaging it and poaching its members, causing the Second Highness to feel awkward beyond measure. In the end, Glacia could no longer stand it and had Lorist bring the four troublemakers away.

The first ones to make their oath of allegiance were the Gold ranked knights, Lode Wales and Chino Freiyar, followed by Mons Malek, Dulles, Lundmorde and the remaining 19 senior students of the Dawn Academy. The 27 Silver ranked knights who have made significant contributions were next and they were mostly knights who used to serve the noble families that were wiped out by Count Cobry. They joined the convoy after being rescued and managed to distinguish themselves from the rest by making significant contributions during the rest of the journey and were selected as family knight candidates as a result.

When the last knight pledged his loyalty to Lorist and the Norton Family, Lorist turned to Jim who was standing beside Reidy with an envious face and waved towards him. Thinking that Lorist had something he needed him to do, Jim ran in front of him and saluted before he said, "Milord, what do you need me for?"

Lorist stepped forward and tapped onto Jim's shoulder as he said, "Jim, you've followed me along for quite some time now. Even though you still behave like a mercenary now and then, your loyalty, hardworking attitude and bravery definitely stands out more than the others. Are you willing to become my knight and fight under the banner of the Roaring Raging Bear?"

"Naturally," Jim replied without hesitating as he looked at Lorist with a solemn expression. "Milord, you didn't even have to ask."

Els and Potterfang burst out in laughter uncontrollably.

Reidy then came over and gave Jim a kick before he said, "Idiot, milord is going to accept you into the ranks of the family knights. What are you still doing? Kneel down and make your pledge!"

"Oh," Jim said excitedly. "Milord, can I truly, really, become a knight of the Norton Family?"

Lorist nodded with a smile.

Jim hurriedly tidied up his attire and kneeled on one knee in front of Lorist. Just as he was about to make his pledge, he saw Reidy make a facepalm as he said, "Idiot, it's not that leg. It should be the other one that kneels…"

The pledging of a knight also had certain standards to abide by. The proper way to pledge was to kneel on the ground with both hands or with one hand placed on the left knee.

Jim blushed as he changed his posture once more and recited the pledge as many knights before him did. "I, Jim, am willing to pledge my loyalty to the Norton Family and follow milord Lorist from now on. I will carry out my duties to shield the honor of the Norton Family Knights. I am willing to become the sword of Lord Lorist and fight until my last breath under the banner of the Raging Bear."

Lorist drew his sword in a formal gesture and tapped onto both shoulders of Jim twice

before he said, "Rise, my knight."

Potterfang then came over with a silver raging bear badge and put it on Jim's left chest before he gave him a tight hug and said, "I welcome your participation, my brother."

The knights who just joined the order were making merry during the banquet.

Lorist went to the Second Highness's side and toasted him with his wine cup before he noticed Glacia beside him who was silently crying.

"What's up with her?" Lorist asked.

"She's so happy for you that she started shedding tears of joy after seeing so many talented men take you as their lord. It seems that the day the Norton Family returns to its former glory is no doubt nearing," explained the Second Highness.

"Hehe, Your Highness, actually, you've deprived me of 29 fine knights from your poaching, you know," Lorist teased before he raised his cup to toast him and took a gulp of his wine. "Your Highness Aulo, you can just bring them away with you when you leave later."

"Why? Didn't you need them to escort the convoy back to the Northlands first?" asked the Second Highness.

Lorist shook his head and said, "There's no need for that. I don't wish to hinder their future careers. Your Highness, you should also be busy restoring the Andinaq Kingdom and I'm sure you could use the help of those extra hands. I'll let them join you early so that they can rack up some achievements for themselves. It will take too much of their time for them to follow the convoy. Also, I've already recruited quite a number of family knights and I'm going to reorganize the forces of the convoy soon, so there's little point in having them stay with us any longer."

The Second Highness didn't hesitate as he nodded and said, "Alright. I will bring them with me when I leave later."

Chapter 154
Lorist's Strategy

"Just a bunch of blind, cruel and inhumane wolves…" Charade muttered as he watched the Second Highness and Glacia leave with the rest of the knights who have joined their side.

Lorist laughed out loud and patted on Charade's shoulder as he said, "Let's go. We have to go back and discuss something really important. We don't have much time…"

"Huh?" Charade was stunned. He quickly caught up to Lorist and asked, "Wait, Locke, what are you planning? There's still one month from winter right now and it'll take another two or three months for the surface of Egret Lake to freeze. We have more time than we need. Why are you saying that we don't have time all of a sudden?"

Lorist stopped in his steps and turned to Charade before he whispered, "Did you think I would really let the convoy wait until the lake freezes over before we move?"

"Huh?" Seeing Lorist turn and continue walking, Charade said anxiously, "You have to explain it more clearly…"

"There are too many eyes here. Let's talk about it when we get back."

When they arrived at a tent beside the main tent, Lorist instructed Reidy, "Get Potterfang, Lode Wales, Freiyar, Malek, Els, Patt, Terman, Yuriy and Dulles to come and ask Engelich to gather the guards to patrol around."

Even though Engelich was a Gold ranked swordsman, in terms of status, he was more like Lorist's attendant and servant because he had signed a servant contract for ten years to preserve his life back then. While Lorist had wanted to promote him into a family knight, Engelich had refused and said that given his old age, he was not too fond of any more fighting. Additionally, his granddaughter Molise had already gotten pregnant with Charade's child, so he can't wait for the arrival of his great grandchild.

The elderly Engelich was pretty open-minded and he doesn't think that being Lorist's attendant despite being a Gold ranked swordsman was an embarrassing thing.

Instead, he thought that it was rather good as he was more free to do what he wanted. Additionally, Potterfang and the others treat him rather well for being Lorist's attendant and would even give him a friendly greeting when they met. When Lorist was not present, Engelich was basically a free man that was not restricted by anyone and he thought that it was also quite a decent way to live.

Of all the knights Lorist had summoned, Lode Wales seemed to have drunk quite a bit of alcohol, but he was still sober. When everyone was seated, Lorist had Reidy pour each of them a cup of tea before he announced the reason he called for another emergency meeting.

"In another 15 or 20 days, I am prepared to lead the convoy and the vagabonds into the Madras Duchy to reach the Northlands as soon as possible."

Everyone within the tent were stunned to hear that proclamation. Even Charade couldn't help but cry out, "Milord, how are we to cross the blockade? The Ironguard Legion has sealed off the border completely and if the convoy is going to attack Lichtana Citadel, there's no way we would win…"

"Who told you that I was going to attack Lichtana Citadel?" Lorist questioned back.

"But… but how would we be able to enter the duchy without first going through there?" Charade asked as all eyes within the tent gazed at Lorist with a curious look.

"Hehe…" Lorist started laughing out as he shook his head and said, "You guys… How do your brains work? What is our goal? Isn't it to bring the convoy and the vagabonds back to the Northlands? What business do we have in taking over Lichtana Citadel? To let our livestock graze over there? You guys have forgotten that our aim is not to conquer the Madras Duchy but only to pass through it. That's why we do not have to consider our supply line and taking over Lichtana Citadel is of even less importance to us."

Lorist brought over the frame with an enlarged map of the Lichtana Citadel and the area around it.

Using the wooden pointer to trace on the map, Lorist said, "Look here. Right now, army bases have been set up at Lichtana Citadel and the Bread Hills to seal off this space in the middle as well as the main highway. If we take over the Bread Hills, then how would the Ironguard Legion within the citadel react? They will definitely believe this

to be a precursor to a much larger attack by us and they definitely wouldn't act rashly and would secure the citadel even more.

"Let's say we take over the Bread Hills. If the ballistas are set up high at the citadel, they would have a firing range of roughly 300 meters and it could cover the main highway completely. But who said we have to use the main highway? We can use this 200-meter-broad path over here beside the Bread Hills. After all, we only need around 100 meters of width for our convoy and vagabonds to be able to pass through. Even though the Ironguard Legion is famed for its defensive capabilities, we're not going to engage in a siege with them. If they come out, I'd like to see how well they do in an open field battle…"

"Milord, your words ring true!" Potterfang said as he slapped his forehead in realization. "That's right, as long as the convoy and the vagabonds are able to make it through, it's enough. Only the Second Highness's troops would have to conquer the citadel to make sure that they have an established supply line that wouldn't get cut off. Since we're only passing through, there's no need to factor that in and we only have to defeat the obstacles that are ahead of us!"

"This is all the fault of the cunning Second Highness. He had already pulled us into this troublesome situation and now he's pushing the suggestion that we can only pass through the Madras Duchy by conquering the Lichtana Citadel! And we were restricted by his train of thought and didn't think of looking for any other way!" Charade exclaimed as he approached the map and gave it a close look. "Hahaha, that Madras Duchy considers us an army… So that's why they made those kinds of arrangements. If we just circle around the citadel like milord says… the rest of the journey would be swift and smooth!"

The atmosphere within the tent heated up once more as they all realized that their troubles had been for naught and that was another option for them that they weren't able to see.

Lorist waved his hands to signal to the rest to quiet down and used the wooden pointer to point at the map as he said, "The Bread Hills is the place we truly need to conquer. As long as we occupy it, then the convoy and the vagabonds can depart immediately. For now, there is a regiment of Ironguard Legion troops stationed there and there is an army camp at the Bread Hills. I heard that the camp has at least 8000 Ironguard troops and they are stationed there so that they can be switched out regularly to defend the Bread Hills.

"When it comes to the terrain, the Bread Hills is not a good place to defend because it lacks a secure water source. If we can take the main camp, we could effectively cut off the water supply of the troops stationed up the hill and within three days, they will definitely crumble without us having to even put up a fight. Either they surrender to us or they come at us in a suicide attack.

"That's why, the focus of this operation should be this army camp near the Bread Hills. Look here, if we attack from the front, we must risk being in the firing range of the ballistas that are positioned up at the hills and we must first take them out before we can reach the army camp. However, taking over the base at the Bread Hills won't be easy either because the army camp will continue to reinforce them incessantly. That's why attacking from the front is a bad idea that will cost us innumerable casualties.

"You guys remember that I proposed for us to fish for food, right? Actually, my true aim is not to fish but to use the fishing boats to establish a floating pontoon bridge so that the family's forces can cross the Egret Lake at night. After that, our forces will launch a surprise attack against the base at Bread Hills using this route and as long as we can occupy it, we will have succeeded halfway.

"After that, we will use the blockaded route from Lichtana Citadel to Vanades City to head north. Naturally, we will have to attack Vanades City on the way. However, it's alright even if we don't conquer it. The main priority is over here on the route towards the Sidgler Province, the Xith Castle. As long as we can occupy this castle, we will be able to seal the Seamountain Legion of Duke Madras within their home base and we will be free to traverse the other two provinces."

As Lorist finished his explanation, the rest within the tent got more excited. This was a strategy that had a really high success rate and as long it progressed smoothly, it would be simplicity itself to let the convoy and the vagabonds continue the northbound journey through the Madras Duchy.

"The main priority for us now is to secretly cross Egret Lake. Secondly, we have to be quick and gain battlefield superiority before the enemy even notices us so that we have the initiative to be able to decide the flow of battle," Lorist reminded.

Charade made some rough calculations and said, "Milord, we might not have enough soldiers on our side. The Ironguard Legion has around 28000 people and 18000 of them are stationed at Lichtana Citadel with the remaining 10000 stationed at the Bread Hills. Our convoy's forces only number around 20000 and even if we conquer

the Bread Hills base, we still need to protect the rest of the convoy and the vagabonds when they cross and stop the Ironguard troops from the citadel from attacking. We won't have any more forces to attack Vanades City like that."

"That won't be a problem. After this, I will be reorganizing our forces and start an enlistment drive. We can even borrow some soldiers from the Second Highness," Lorist said as he signalled for the rest to halt their discussions. "Everyone, please quiet down and I will proceed to explain the gist of the reorganization. First, the number of soldiers that constitute a squad will remain the same at 100 people and five squads will make up a company. Five companies make a regiment and five regiments in turn are collectively referred to as an army. In the future when we have five armies, we will form them into a legion.

"Currently, we have almost one regiment of light cavalry scouts. Yuriy, I'll leave it to you to see how many companies you can form it into and Jim will be helping you out on this. You will be the regiment leader of the First Light Cavalry Scouts Regiment and the extra companies will be handed to Jim. Also, pick out your men who are good at archery and send them to Pete over here so that he will be able to form a company of mounted archers."

Yuriy stood up and said, "Yes, milord. I understand."

"You will be the focal point of this strategy, Yuriy. The responsibility you have is not light and you'll have to be able to sweep the whole battlefield with your troops so that the enemy will be blinded and won't be able to communicate effectively with each other," Lorist said.

"Milord, please be assured that my light cavalry scouts will not let you down," Yuriy said as he knocked onto his chest confidently.

Lorist nodded and waved for him to sit down. Next, he said to Terman, "I hear that you already have more than a company of men in your knight brigade now, right?"

"Milord, including the attendants and stablemen, our numbers approach two whole companies," Terman replied.

Lorist fell deep in thought for a while before he said, "Your knight brigade will be organized a little differently from the rest of the family forces. You can organize it as you see fit. But the basics of one knight having two attendants, one servant and a

stableman will not change. I believe you have a whole regiment of men taking into account that a company of 500 Silver ranked knights would have 1000 attendants, 500 stablemen and 500 servants. The company of Silver ranked knights will lead the charge with their attendants while the stablemen and servants provide rearguard support."

"Yes, milord."

"Pog, your heavy-armored cavalry is already as large as 2 and a half regiments, right?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, if we exclude the logistics troops, we should have around 2 full regiments. If we're reorganizing according to the unit system you proposed just now, we would have two regiments and another two extra companies. Our original number for each squad is 128 men per squad," replied Potterfang.

"How about this… Transfer command of the heavy-armored cavalry to Loze and have the logistics troops return to the main camp. Loze, organize the troops into three regiments of 7500 people. I give you five days to accomplish this and the heavy-armored cavalry will be the main driving force of this operation."

Lode Wales stood up and saluted excitedly before he said, "Milord, please be assured that I will definitely complete my mission to your satisfaction."

"Freiyar, your pike infantry has around four regiments of 10000 plus men, right?" Lorist said as he looked at Freiyar.

"11358 men to be exact, milord," Freiyar said as he reported an extremely concise number.

Lorist nodded in admiration before he said, "The command of your pike infantry will be transferred to Pog. Pog, reform them into a heavy-armored infantry army with five regiments of 12500 people. You have 5 days to complete it."

"Yes, milord," Freiyar and Potterfang said in unison.

"That's right, don't forget to arm the troops mentioned just now with the gear of the Whitelion Legion. We don't have to ship all the good stuff back to the dominion. It's better to put them to use right now. That will also serve to lessen the casualties of our forces. As for the old equipment that will be switched out, I'll be leaving it to Freiyar

and Malek. The two of you shall recruit 25000 soldiers from the vagabonds and form a garrison legion which is split into two armies. The first army will be led by Freiyar, who will be appointed the Commander of the garrison legion and the second army will be led by Malek, the Vice Commander of the garrison legion. Make sure to finish all that within 15 days.

"The enlistment will follow usual procedures and prioritize the vagabond youths with families. The main purpose of the garrison legion is to maintain the security of the convoy during the northbound journey, understood?" Lorist said as he looked at Freiyar and Malek.

"Understood, milord."

"Roger, milord."

The two of them stood up and acknowledged their order.

Lorist then turned to Dulles and asked, "Dulles, how's the situation of your carroballista unit?"

Dulles hurriedly saluted before he said, "Milord, the carroballista unit now has 627 soldiers. Apart from the original 12 carroballistas we have, we managed to obtain 27 defense sentry ballistas and we've already modified them for use on a combat chariot. However, they are still slightly heavier than the ones we have and aren't as flexible. The firing speed is also slower and they require more people to operate as well."

"Among the gear of the Whitelion Legion there are 78 siege ballistas which we can modify for the use on war chariots. We can also expand your unit to have a full regiment of people with that."

The main advantage a siege ballista held over a defense sentry ballista was its mechanic that allowed it to be raised higher so that the bolts will be able to be fired into the defensive walls of a castle or citadel. Originally, the Whitelion Legion's carroballista regiment had up to 240 of those siege ballistas but many were ruined throughout the civil war and weren't maintained well. It was already quite fortunate for 78 of them to remain intact.

Dulles was quite happy to hear that as he was long frustrated with the lack of ballistas that caused his unit to be unable to expand. Now, that issue was solved.

"How many people within the craftsmen camp know how to construct boats?" Lorist asked Charade.

Charade said in a troubled voice, "There are around one to two thousand people who know carpentry but I don't know how many of them would actually know how to make boats."

"That shouldn't be a problem. What we need are only small boats so I believe it won't be too hard. Just have the carpenters nail wooden boards into a box like shape and fill some parts out with a thick layer of green clay so that water doesn't seep in from the seams. We will only use those makeshift boats for fishing and making the floating pontoon bridge and we don't need it to be long lasting or aesthetically pleasing. Also, Charade, you should also have the family members of the convoy troops and the womenfolk among the vagabonds start to make nets. We must act that we're only going to fish so that the enemy doesn't suspect us and strengthen their defense at the opposite bank of the lake," Lorist said as he consoled the fatty.

"I understand. I'll have the people start felling trees and making nets tomorrow," said Charade.

Chapter 155
The Citadel's Weakness

After 5 days, the Second Highness once again visited the campsite of the convoy and he brought more than 40 old and worn fishing boats and tens of small fishing nets for Lorist.

"Apologies, Brother locke, this is already all the fishing boats and nets we have within a 50 kilometer radius of this area. Perhaps we might be shipping more here in a few more days. However, that shipment will definitely be lesser than what we have now because there aren't any lakes or rivers nearby the vicinity of Egret Lake," said the Second Highness apologetically.

"It's alright, Your Highness Aulo. We're already very grateful that you were able to help us out on this. We just started fishing this afternoon, why don't you go over there to take a look while we bring the boats and nets there?" Lorist said thankfully.

It didn't take more than 30 minutes before they reached the lake and many people working away at the banks could be seen from the distance.

Tens of meters from the lake bank was an empty space where a thick reed mat was laid on which tons of fish from the lake could be seen. More than ten women in their forties could be seen picking out the fish. They placed the larger fish into a basket which would be carried away when it was filled up for others to start processing the fish by removing their scales and innards and washing them before they would be laid on a wooden rack for to be dried.

As the smell of fish was rather pungent, the Second Highness pinched his nose and sneezed.

Charade came over excitedly with his face flushing red before he said, "Locke… Oh, milord, I bet you wouldn't be able to guess how much we got… The first fishing excursion netted us thousands of kilograms and there have already only been three excursions so far. We have already caught up to 10000 kilograms of fish in total. At this rate, we would have up to 50000 kilograms by today."

Currently, only a company of reorganized heavy-armored troops who were chosen for their swimming capabilities fishing within the lake. As they stood half-naked on their 30 plus boats, they flung a huge net deep into the lake.

The boats they were using were nicknamed 'Locke Fishing Boats' after Lorist who had designed them. It was basically a wooden box with a sharp point at the front that was supported in the middle by an intersecting piece of wood. The inner side of each boat was also coated with a thick layer of green clay to waterproof the boats and when the green clay dried, a makeshift deck was nailed over the middle supporting wood. To prevent the boats from flipping over, Lorist had someone install a vertical one-meter-long wooden fin beneath each boat to better balance them.

However, those boats caused a number of experienced boat makers among the work smiths to sigh in disappointment because while the boats were able to be constructed quickly, they definitely didn't last long enough and would fall apart after only one or 2 months of use. It took at least 2 months to construct a proper small fishing boat and good wood for boats like those were hard to come by. Those boats were far superior to the makeshift boats Lorist designed.

However, Lorist insisted on the idea and instructed the 2000 plus work smiths to make 200 of those boats within only 10 days. Hence, the boats were termed Locke Fishing Boats by the work smiths. Even so, nobody knew whether it was a sincere compliment and recognition of Lorist's ingenuity or whether they were merely being sarcastic.

At that moment, Charade noticed that the Second Highness had brought over the boats and nets. He clicked his tongue before he said, "Hmm… These nets are too small and I've already had some people make bigger ones. I've noticed that the more area of the lake we cover with those nets, the more fish we can get."

"You can always stitch these nets together. That way, you can shorten the time required to make those nets. Just make sure to check if they are stitched together tightly enough," Lorist said.

Charade clapped his hands as he said, "I see, that's a fine idea," before he turned and left in a hurry after asking someone to bring the fishing boats and nets away.

At that moment, the soldiers within the lake were starting to pull back the nets that they've cast and judging by the difficulty they had when pulling the net up, the harvest this time around must've been quite substantial.

The Second Highness said in admiration, "I really didn't expect that the Egret Lake would have so much fish. I recall that there was a kind of fish within the lake called the Longtail Whitefish which is quite thin and fine-scaled with less bones and quite a lot of meat. It also tasted rather good and was a staple dish within the imperial capital. However, the price of that fish was really expensive because the supply was rather scarce. Ever since the civil war broke out within the empire, lesser and lesser fishermen fished at Egret Lake as they had either been drafted into armies or have been oppressed by dominion lords into becoming vagabonds.

"And after the formation of the Madras Duchy, this lake was chosen to serve as a border between our two nations, so fishing here was naturally prohibited, resulting in these fishing boats being used at other rivers nearby. It really surprised me quite a bit that this lake would end up becoming the very thing that could save the vagabonds from the fate of starvation and death… Hahaha…"

"Well, we can pick out a few of those fish you mentioned for a meal later tonight," Lorist said as he laughed.

"Alright, but don't take too many. Personally, I prefer eating seawater fish because freshwater fish like those in these lakes have relatively more bones that prick my tongue rather easily when I eat them. Just have your men pick the bigger fish, especially those that aren't too bony," said the Second Highness.

After that, the Second Highness turned to his back and saw the newly-constructed makeshift fishing boats that were being laid in the sun for the green clay to dry before he asked, "How many boats did you order to be made?"

Lorist replied, "Around 200 of them."

"Why would you need so many?"

"So many? Your Highness, the Egret Lake is quite immense. We can't only fish at one spot, right? If we don't have enough boats, we won't be able to venture far into the lake. We can only gain the most haul if we fish at multiple places at once," Lorist said.

The Second Highness gave it some thought before he nodded and said, "I see, you truly are thorough with your plans. Personally, I'm not too knowledgeable about matters on fishing."

……

That night, Lorist accompanied the Second Highness for dinner and the main dish was a Longtail Whitefish.

The Second Highness agilely used his fork to get hold of another large piece of meat and placed it within his mouth with his silver spoon with his eyes narrowing in satisfaction. "This truly is good stuff. I wonder how many years has it been since I last tasted this fish…"

"This time, we got quite a huge haul. I've already had a few other fish like these placed in a water bucket for you to bring back. Make sure to let my cousin sister Glacia have a taste of these fish. It's a shame she didn't come here with you today," Lorist said.

"How thoughtful of you, Locke. Thank you. Glacia was training the newly-recruited soldiers, so it wasn't convenient for her to come over today. That's right, didn't you also draft new soldiers from the ranks of the vagabonds?" asked the Second Highness.

Lorist nodded and said, "I recruited around 20000 people. Since I plan to head up north after the lake freezes up, the convoy would need a substantial force to be able to fend off threats during our passage through the Madras Duchy. These 20000 soldiers were formed so that they could maintain order of the convoy during the journey and they will be disbanded after we arrive. Given the resource-starved state of the Northlands, there's no way I can afford to feed so many soldiers. If they don't work their share, they won't get any food either."

The Second Highness sighed and said, "Darn, that Duke Madras mobilized his Ironguard Legion to defend the Lichtana Citadel, forcing our Andinaq Kingdom to have to station some soldiers at Nadegas City to watch out for them. Now that the Welbassia Province has once again returned to the hands of the royal family, it's up to us to ensure its safety from the invasion of the Ironguard Legion. Had it not been for some good news I received just now, I would have had to trouble myself over filling the void of military strength left after the departure of your convoy."

"Oh, what news did you receive?" Lorist asked.

"It's about the Fiercegale Legion. They've assisted Duke Melein in mowing down the Iblia Kingdom's forces at the southern part of the Ienord Province, which is divided into three commanderies by the Second Prince. Their forces have already arrived at the royal capital, Windbury City, forcing the Second Prince to request his father-in-law, Duke Fisablen, to send out reinforcements to defend the city. The two sides have

battled for a number of times and victory still seems undecided. Given that winter is approaching, Duke Melein decided to pull his soldiers back to his duchy and the Fiercegale Legion will also return," said the Second Highness.

Lorist raised his silver cup and said, "A toast for you, Your Highness. I believe that the Second Prince has been taught a harsh lesson by Duke Melein this time around and will have to rest and recuperate his forces for a few years. That way, there won't be able conflict between them and your kingdom so you can start building up your own forces."

The Second Highness furrowed his brow before he shook his head and said, "Originally, I was prepared to station the Fiercegale Legion at Nadegas City to defend against any attempts by the Ironguard Legion to invade. However, I received another piece of information that the Four Allied Duchies which used to attack the First Prince's Redlis Kingdom recently have signed a peace treaty with the First Prince. Even though the First Prince lost some land to them, he didn't lose too many of his forces and is still a force to be reckoned with. That is one of the larger factors that prompted him to agree with the peace talks.

"What I'm worried about is that the First Prince and the Four Allied Duchies would turn their sights on my kingdom after they cease hostilities. Before this, my kingdom was rather unstable and the First Prince was not interested with us and chose to attack the Four Allied Duchies instead because there was more for him to gain by doing that. That's also the reason my kingdom didn't prioritize the defense of the border near the Redlis Kingdom and it's also why my elder brother refused to take over the Benz Citadel back then: mainly, we didn't have any extra soldiers nor did we see a need for defending the place.

"Currently, the citadels around the border there are manned by only a few garrison forces. If the First Prince stops all conflict with the Four Allied Duchies, then I wIll have to send more men to defend that place as well. When the Fiercegale Legion returns, they can at most keep only the First Prince at bay. That way, Nadegas City will have a shortage of soldiers and we'll need to start yet another recruitment drive and that in turn requires more food supply as well. How troubling…"

Lorist smiled and said, "If you require some food, then our convoy can leave the nets behind before we leave and you can catch some fish within the lake to use for yourself."

The Second Highness toasted Lorist to thank him for the kind gesture.

"However, in the long term, I believe that if Your Highness can occupy Lichtana Citadel, you will be able to hold the initiative to act against the Madras Duchy. As long as you modify it a little bit, this citadel can be a source of worry for Duke Madras and you might even get the chance to take the whole of Yungechandler Province for yourself and add it to the kingdom," Lorist said as he looked at the Second Highness optimistically.

The Second Highness made a bitter laugh before he sighed and said, "You're right about that. However, even if I'd like for that to happen, I do not have the ability to carry it out. Even if we ignore the fact that the terrain around Lichtana Citadel makes it hard to besiege but easy to defend, the presence of the Ironguard Legion itself will be troublesome enough. Without more than 10 times their numbers and a long period of besieging, I think it will be hard for me to take the castle."

"How about this… If you can lend me 20000 soldiers, I might be able to help you conquer Lichtana Citadel and hand it straight too you," Lorist suggested during the pause after the Second Highness expressed his worries.

"What did you say? You have a way to occupy Lichtana Citadel?" said the Second Highness wide-eyed with surprise. He didn't even notice that he had dropped his silver cup onto the table unconsciously.

Lorist nodded and said, "I discovered a weak point of the citadel and I have a plan that I think will work. However, I don't have enough soldiers myself. If you can lend me 20000 men, I am rather confident that I'll be able to conquer the citadel."

"I'll lend you 30000! If you can conquer it for me, it doesn't matter even if you have to sacrifice all 30000 of them!" said the Second Highness emotionally as he started pacing around excitedly.

Lorist laughed out before he said, "The casualties won't be so bad either. I estimate that we will lose 6 thousand in the worst case."

"That's impossible. The ones defending the citadel are the Ironguard Legion. They are famed for being the best at defending against sieges! How will you be able to attack the citadel and succeed by only losing 6000 men?" asked the Second Highness as he looked at Lorist with doubt.

"Your Highness, I won't be attacking the citadel. In fact, I'll have them come out to

attack me. We will be on the defending side," Lorist said.

"Wait, what do you mean by that? The Ironguard Legion will attack while we defend? Where would we defend? Unless they've gone insane, they wouldn't abandon the castle to come and attack us…" said the Second Highness. He believed that Lorist was merely bullshitting as he thought that if he put himself into the shoes of the commander of the Ironguard Legion, he definitely wouldn't send his men out to attack Lorist's forces at the cost of leaving the citadel unguarded.

"Hehe…" Lorist started to laugh out loud before he said, "Reidy, bring the fortification blueprints of Lichtana Citadel out here."

Reidy quickly retrieved the blueprints Lorist bought from the bookstore of Vanades City and laid them on the table.

"Your Highness, come here to take a look. This is the situation of the internals of the citadel."

The Second Highness was quite surprised that Lorist was able to obtain documents like that, but Lorist didn't tell him that he got them for one imperial silver coin a piece and thought, *I better just let him imagine how I got these without telling him…*

After studying those blueprints, the Second Highness was still unable to figure out how to attack the citadel and felt that the least amount of soldiers they would need was 10 times that of the Ironguard Legion that was stationed there.

Lorist pointed at the small pond within the citadel's map and said, "Your Highness, don't you have any thoughts on this pond over here?"

The Second Highness shook his head and said, "While this pond is a little on the small side, it's still enough to sustain the water needs of the soldiers within the citadel and can even be used to extinguish any fires within. I believe that this spot wouldn't be the weakness that you just mentioned."

"Your Highness, look here. The Lichtana Citadel is constructed upon a steep slope and the pond's water is sourced by rerouting a waterfall nearby the mountain peak through the swamp. That's why the water within the pond can last them indefinitely and can even fill up the moat around the citadel. If we can find the rerouted waterway within the swamp and dam it up, we will be able to make sure that the citadel would use up all their water within ten days. Do you think the soldiers there can continue to

defend it at that time?"

Initially, Lorist's words made the Second Highness feel a tinge of excitement, but after looking at the map once more, he shook his head and said, "We won't be able to reach the waterfall from our side and must first pass through the citadel and hike the mountain from there. Now that there is also another blockade between the Bread Hills and Lichtana Citadel, we will still have to lose quite a bit of people to be able to break our way through."

Lorist said, "You don't need to worry about that and our convoy will eliminate the forces at the Bread Hills. As long as the Bread Hills fall into our hands, we will be able to dig out a trench to build mud walls just outside the firing range of the ballistas at the citadel to surround it. When we cut off their water source, it will be their turn to attack us. That's what I meant when I said that we would be defending against their attacks instead. I wonder how potent they are at attacking…"

"Alright, Locke. Your plan sounds reasonable and viable. What do you need me to do?" said the Second Highness as he agreed.

"It's simple. Your Highness only has to send your troops to the citadel and station them outside it to attract the attention of the soldiers within. When I occupy the Bread Hills, your troops will only have to dig out a trench. After that, I will leave the defense against the Ironguard Legion's attacks to you. Does that sound fine?" Lorist asked.

"Yes, of course it does. I also want to see the Ironguard Legion's offensive capabilities for myself," said the Second Highness as he knocked onto the map with his fist. "Ten days, Locke. I only need ten days to bring our Royal Local Defense Guard over here. Since the Ironguard Legion shot to fame from battling them, I will use the guards to defeat the Ironguard Legion this time around…"

Chapter 156
Kill During the Darkness of the Night

The clouds once again obscured the Silvermoon, causing the realm to be completely blanketed in darkness. The once sparkling surface of the lake returned to its former dimness and the view of the opposite bank could no longer be seen.

'Kill during the darkness of the night, burn when the winds are strong.'[1] Lorist wondered why he suddenly recalled that saying and felt that it described their current situation a little too well.

Currently, he was standing at the bank of the lake. A breeze from the lake could be felt blowing in his direction and causing the cape he wore around his armor to flap around in the air.

Standing behind him was Patt and Reidy who were both holding two horses each. Three of the horses were mounts for them while the extra one served as a reserve. To the sides of those horses hung quivers of javelins that shook from the blowing wind.

Behind the three were rows and rows of soldiers assembled neatly in their formations. They were all equipped with the same purple and brown armor which had a silver-colored insignia of a white lion on the left of the breastplate. In their right hands were long pikes of similar length and their left hands held the reins of their respective war horses. The soldiers all donned the same purple and brown cape with similarly-colored riding shields strapped to their left arm while a sword sporting the similar color scheme could be seen hanging to the left of their waists just beside the tassets near their thighs. They were also equipped with riding boots which were mounted with stirrups.

This was the elite force of the Norton Family which served as the main escort for the convoy: the heavy-armored cavalry. After switching to using the gear of the Whitelion Legion, they looked even more imposing than before.

Every soldier stood disciplined and silent as if they were nothing but iron sculptures. Their silence was only broken by a few occasional horse neighs.

A whiff of killing intent could be sensed emanating from the companies of soldiers that would send a chill down one's spine, especially so if coupled with the cold breeze of the lake.

The Silvermoon once again revealed its face, shedding a gentle moonlight that once again covered the land.

While the lake started sparkling again from the moonlight, the distant bank of the lake was still covered by a dense layer of fog which blocked the view of the opposite side.

The Locke Fishing Boats were placed within the lake one meter apart from each other, with each connected by a two-meter-broad wooden board which effectively made them into a path that stretched indefinitely into the fog amidst the lake.

Further away, two silhouettes could be seen, one running faster than the other, causing the pontoon bridge to shake slightly from their quick steps.

The two were Ruhr and Mort who stopped in front of Lorist while breathing ragged breaths. "Milord, the pontoon bridge has already connected to the opposite bank. Sir Els had us come here to report that it's already time to cross."

"You did well," Lorist said while he nodded, before he stepped onto the bridge. Ruhr and Mort helped take the mounts from Patt and Reidy before they followed behind Lorist onto the bridge.

The soldiers on the bank started to make their move as well. One soldier after another got into a line with their mounts and started boarding the bridge.

Lorist had walked for more than ten minutes on the bridge that was 400 plus meters long and he could feel it shaking slightly behind him and the resulting vibration caused waves to form in the lake beneath it.

Within moments, one heavy-armored cavalryman after another arrived at the opposite bank and gathered at a spot under the guidance of the guards. Soon, they got into their two respective companies and were all mounted.

Lode Wales got off the bridge and came to Lorist before he said, "Milord, should we depart now?"

Lorist said in a soft voice, "Yes, let's go."

The whole group proceeded to travel through a dark forest path. On the way, they would occasionally make markings on the trees that shone under the illumination of the moonlight with limestone chalks.

All the hooves of the horses were also fitted with thick leather coverings to muffle the sound, causing low and heavy thumps to ring out as they traveled.

After one hour and a half, three hoots like that of a night owl could be heard in the distance. Els who was at the very front of the group stopped his horse and caused the rest to follow suit.

Three figures emerged from the trees of the forest and the foremost figure said something to Els before he brought his two comrades back into the forest.

"Milord, the enemy camp is around 1 kilometer from here. I believe we should ride the rest of our way there. Even though we've muffled the horse hooves, the slight vibrations we are causing might alert the enemy anyway. We must be able to catch them by surprise before they can react," Els told Lorist.

To ensure the success of the surprise attack, Els had led half of the elite guards of the main camp of the convoy to secretly cross the lake and eliminate the sentries over there and successfully locked down the path from the camp to the base in the hills.

"Pass my order down. Everyone dismount and put on the bridles on the horses. Lead your horses along with the reins as you walk and make sure to not make any sound," Lorist instructed Patt.

After an hour of traveling, outside the enemy camp, some guards could be seen leaning on the walls while taking a nap with the sentries on the two tower outposts also seated and relaxing. Perhaps due to the soldiers not being stationed at the frontlines, the security of the camp was surprisingly lax.

"Milord, I will bring some men to take care of the sentries on the watchtowers and open the gates," Els said, before he disappeared into the darkness.

"Everyone, stand ready and follow the plan." After Lorist finished giving his order, he kneeled down and untied the leather cloth covering the hooves on his horse.

Within but a quick moment, a few figures suddenly reappeared near the camp gates and slain the four napping guards within a flash, causing them to slump down against

the wall powerlessly and entering their eternal slumber.

One of the figures nimbly climbed up one of the watchtowers like a tiger and quickly descended from it before he climbed the other one…

As a result, the gates of the camp quietly opened…

Raising his pike in his hand, Lorist shouted, "Kill!"

The sound of the running horses broke the former silence and tranquility of the night and the mounted troops traversed the 100 plus meters of distance towards the camp gates within seconds. Lorist was riding at the forefront of the troops and began slaughtering away at the still dormant soldiers within the camp.

Countless heavy-armored cavalrymen squeezed their way into the camp and before long, sounds of conflict, pain and despair intermingled.

One tent after another within the camp was set on fire. As the mounted cavalrymen rushed out of the smoke towards the half-awake and unarmed enemy soldiers within the camp, they began their slaughter without a shred of mercy. The metal hooves of the cavalrymen's mounts hammered onto the ground, leaving behind their wake, flames, corpses and flowing fresh blood.

Lorist on the other hand rode straight towards the largest tent within the camp. According to the Second Highness, the Madras Duchy had one Blademaster and seven Gold ranked knights. Naturally, the Blademaster served the duke by his side while four of the Gold ranked knights held posts within the Seamountain Legion. The Ironguard Legion was instead managed by three Gold ranked knights.

Lorist believed that there definitely would be at least one Gold ranked knight stationed at the Bread Hills given that there were over 10000 soldiers here. As long as he could take out the Gold ranked knight, the surprise attack would have been a complete success.

With a harsh swing of the pike, Lorist broke the central pillar of the main tent into two, causing the tent to collapse flat on the ground. Apart from the tens of guards within the tent who had died by Lorist's hand, the Gold ranked knight was nowhere to be seen.

Just as Lorist was going to ride around the tent and stab his pike downwards to check

for any people who were playing dead beneath the tent, a loud clang could be heard from a distance, which was accompanied by a bright burst of golden light. Lorist turned his head only to see the mounted Lode Wales swinging his riding lance with a golden blade of light at the tip against the longsword that sported the same golden glow of a figure standing on the ground. The clang from before had resulted from a clash between the two weapons.

"Oh, so the Gold ranked knight is over there. No wonder I couldn't find him within the tent… Good thing Loze picked up what I missed," muttered Lorist, before he rode towards the site of battle at a leisurely pace while he reached to his back and held a javelin in his hand. After that, he paid attention to the battle between Lode Wales and the Gold ranked knight just in case he would be required to give Loze a hand.

Lode Wales danced like a rampaging tiger across the battlefield, using his mounted superiority to slash down at the enemy with his riding lance, trailing a sole line of gold within the air as the blade rushed towards the Gold ranked knight.

The knight didn't hesitate either and he continually used his glowing sword to parry one strike after another. However, as he was unmounted and using a weapon with relatively short reach, he was at a disadvantage and every parry he made caused him to move a step back.

Roaring out loud, Lode Wales struck out so harshly that the enemy knight was forced a couple of more steps back.

Repositioning his horse, Lode Wales pushed his stirrup against the abdomen of his horse and caused it to neigh loudly as it rushed forward, with him shouting out, "Kill!" at the loudest volume possible as he raised and slashed his riding lance downward.

The knight had just regained his posture when he saw Lode Wales approaching and grunted as he quickly got into a stance. He quickly raised his longsword in preparation to parry the incoming blow.

The riding lance slashed downwards with lightning speed, and just as it was about to clash with the sword, it suddenly twirled slightly into a semicircular arc that went around the longsword and its motion turned from that of a slash into a stab. The golden blade of light on the riding lance shone even brighter…

The knight hadn't expected that his opponent would suddenly switch the attacking

motion like that. He suddenly detected something fishy after his sword didn't receive any feedback from the parrying motion, but it was already too late and he couldn't retrace his moves. His expression changed all of a sudden from surprise to despair before the distinct sound of blade cutting flesh resounded as the blade of the lance pierced into his chest.

"Just die," Lode Wales said as he raised the corpse of the knight into the air with his lance and flung it to the roadside, causing blood to drip down slowly from the lance.

"Well done!" Lorist praised loudly. "You're fierce as a tiger and witty and agile at the same time, allowing you to kill your enemy by landing only one strike. You shall be called Fiercetiger Loze henceforth."

Lode Wales snickered before he said, "Thank you for praising me, milord. I shall be known as Fiercetiger Loze in the future."

"That's so unfair. I've also contributed quite a bit myself, you know. Locke, give me a moniker as well," said a voice from behind Lorist.

Lorist turned his head only to see Els appear out of nowhere beside him.

"Alright, your moniker will be… Darkshadow Els," Lorist said.

"Darkshadow Els? Not bad, I like it," Els said happily, apparently quite satisfied with his new sobriquet.

"Oh, that's right. I came here for something else. Milord, look up there," Els said as he pointed his finger upward.

Lorist raised his head to look and saw that the Ironguard Legion troops defending the base at Bread Hills have been alerted by the attack at the camp below and were grouping up and heading down the mountains as was seen from the moving torches. They have already descended halfway down the slope.

"Judging by the number of torches, there should be more than 1000 people. Our guards only have tens of people sealing off the pass nearby… I'm worried they won't be able to resist," Els reported.

"They're merely seeking their deaths. I thought that they would surrender after we surround their base for two or three days. Now that they've come out, we might as

well slaughter our way up to the stronghold at the hills and occupy it," Lorist said as he looked at the torches at the distant hills.

"Blow the horn and notify the Second Highness on the opposite side to launch a diversionary attack. Loze, the aftermath of this camp over here will be left to you. Rally a regiment of soldiers to dismount and follow me up the mountains for a fight on foot. Els, let's go," Lorist said as he rode his horse to the back of the army camp followed by Els who quickly grabbed a horse and rode towards Lorist.

Loud blares of horn signals proceeded to echo through the air…

The Second Highness who was pacing around incessantly at the army base stopped and listened intently before he said, "Did you hear that signal, Glacia?"

The blonde female knight replied excitedly, "Yes! It's definitely the horn signal!"

"Locke and the others succeeded!" exclaimed the Second Highness. "Men, blow the horn to send a reply. Get ready and head towards the border…"

Not too far from the barricades of the Madras Duchy at the border, countless torches were lit like the countless stars in the sky. The soldiers all shouted their war cries and the loud sound shook even the large expanse of land.

Torches around the Lichtana Citadel were also being lit by the moment, causing most of the citadel to be illuminated brightly. One leather-armored soldier after another appeared before the walls of the citadel and stared nervously towards the countless torches in the distance and thought, *as long as they cross the wooden barricades, we will fire at them with our ballistas…*

The route downward from the Bread Hills passed through a sparse forest. Roughly 50 meters from the soldier camp near the forest were a few tower outposts, but they had been taken care of by Els and his guards when they secured the area.

The mountain route was not wide with a breadth of only 2 meters at most. Lorist could tell that the reinforcements from the base up at the hills were about to arrive as he could already hear their curses and chattering when he neared the area.

Given that the downward route was curved in an 'S' shape, Lorist still wasn't able to get a view on the enemy forces. However, he rushed up the route with his sword drawn without saying anything else and encountered into the torch-holding Ironguard

Legion soldiers at the first corner. Upon seeing Lorist, they thought that he was a messenger of their own and one of them even asked, "Stop! What happened there at the camp below?"

Lorist didn't make a sound and as he approached, he cried out "Kill!" all of a sudden.

As he swooped into the group of soldiers, he swung his longsword in quick flashes, causing one enemy after another to fall and roll down the slope.

Lorist's killing spree continued against the flow of people uphill…

Not long after, the enemies further uphill shouted, "It's the enemy! It's an enemy attack!"

At that moment, the soldiers at the lower section of the slope had broken down into a complete mess. They had to watch their feet for any fallen comrades as well as be on guard for the attacks of their enemy and were unable to pose any meaningful resistance to Lorist's assaults. In fact, their futile attempt to resist only served to further expose them to Lorist's assaults.

The enemy at the upper section of the slope quickly began their retreat while those below couldn't even if they wanted to. Lorist's moved at a quick pace and he was already halfway up the slope within moments. With nothing but enemy soldiers filling his line of sight, he killed to his heart's content.

Those Ironguard Legion soldiers were completely outclassed by Lorist alone. Their inability to work as a unit opened up even more opportunities for him to mow their numbers down one strike after another. The most depressing part was that the mess of soldiers he left in his wake still had to deal with the attack of Els, Reidy, Patt and the rest, causing some of them to even toss the bodies of their fallen comrades off the slope in desperation so that they could get some proper foothold.

As he fought his way through his foes uphill, Lorist prioritized acting against those who held torches. Without any illumination, the Ironguard Legion soldiers weren't aware of how many enemies there were and could only run all over the place in a fit of panic. Occasionally, screams of some unlucky few could be heard as they stumbled their way off the edge of the hill.

The clouds once again blocked off the light of the Silvermoon, causing the hills to once again be shrouded by the former darkness.

A little bit later, a familiar voice rang out from behind Lorist. "Milord, milord… Where are you?"

Following that, a few torches were lit at the slope and Patt and the rest could be seen ascending the hills.

Just as Lorist was going to reply, he suddenly felt an ominous, bone-chilling sensation, which caused him to lie flat on the ground instantly as he shouted, "Careful! Get on the ground right now!"

Chapter 157
Burn When the Winds Are Strong

Whoosh!

Six loud thunderous twangs ran out simultaneously as numerous razor sharp bolts whooshed past Lorist's body, causing a few cries of pain to ring out nearby him.

The Silvermoon once again revealed her face from beyond the clouds.

Lorist's mind was thrown into turmoil: he didn't know who behind him had gotten hit. Using the dim moonlight, he saw that roughly 20 meters away was a stone gap about 3 meters wide on the ground beyond which rows of tents were placed. Ironguard Legion troops crouching behind sandbags and rocks near the tents could be seen. Further away at the foot of the hills were countless torch fires gathered together: those were probably the men of the Second Highness who had come to aid them after receiving the signal.

Beyond the gap, a row of torches were lit and the illumination allowed Lorist to see the six sentry ballistas that were operated by a few nervous soldiers. Lorist could also see that one bow-wielding enemy soldier after another approached the gap with some orders being shouted out for the bowmen to engage in suppression fire against the soldiers of the convoy to prevent them from advancing.

"Gaaargh!" With a loud roar, Lorist leaped up from the ground and covered the distance of 20 or so meters within a blink of an eye, crossing the gap and slaughtering away at the bowmen.

Among the chaotic crowd or people, Lorist bathed in blood from head to toe as his longsword culled one enemy after another like a knife cutting through butter all around him, causing the surviving bowmen to run away in all directions with their tails behind their legs.

"Die!" A flash of silver light emanated from a pike that was thrust towards Lorist's back like a vile and devious snake. However, it was almost as if Lorist had eyes behind his back as he moved his left leg slightly and turned backward, parrying the strike with

his longsword. Following that, he jumped into the air and slashed his longsword downward as he fell.

The pike-wielding Silver ranked knight didn't space out either. With but a flick of his hand, he moved his pike to intercept Lorist's strike.

As the sword collided with the pike, a loud clang rang out before the pike broke into two. With a lightning-fast slash, the sword streaked across the knight's body from his left shoulder to his right.

As if the knight had gotten struck by lightning, he slumped to the ground immediately with his body split into two before blood spurted out everywhere.

"Kill… Kill this demon… Demon…" said a stuttering voice from behind Lorist.

At that moment, blood that was not his dripped all over from Lorist's body. He currently seemed like a demonic god of slaughter that had walked out of a sea of blood in the eyes of the enemy.

Blade glows manifested on two pikes as two other Silver ranked knights rushed at Lorist at once from both of his flanks with the pikes aimed towards Lorist's two hands.

"Let's… Let's attack together… Kill him…" As the stuttering soldier said that, a blade glow manifested on his longsword before he raised it up high and rushed towards Lorist, making a vertical downward slash when he closed the distance…

Just as all that was happening, a silhouette appeared by Lorist's side holding a sword with a silver blade glow and thrusting it towards Lorist's heart.

Even though it was four men on one, Lorist didn't feel anxious at all. From his point of view with his dynamic vision, he could see the attacks and predict the trajectory of each and every one even though they were really fast in actuality. The slightest opening during those attacks revealed a huge opportunity for him to strike back at his foes.

The first attack that was about to connect was the pike headed for his left arm. Lorist stepped back slightly and angled his body from the waist up backward slightly as if he hadn't moved at all, causing the pike to miss his body by a hair's breadth. Subsequently, Lorist grabbed onto the handle of the pike and pulled it towards the other pike coming from his right, intercepting the incoming attack.

As the two pikes collided, Lorist pushed the pike in his hand upward, causing it to knock the other pike upward as well, forming a cross-shaped guard that blocked the incoming sword strike from the top with a loud clang.

Having released the pike in his hand, he jumped forward and flicked the longsword in his right hand, knocking the glowing sword of the silhouette beside him, and with another twist of his hand, the longsword headed towards the chest of Lorist's sneaky assailant.

The silhouette had jumped forward with all the force he could muster and had intended to strike when Lorist was occupied with the two other attackers. However, he didn't expect that Lorist would start retaliating by targeting him first. With his sword knocked away, his chest was exposed completely.

The silhouette attempted to stop only to find that his momentum continued to propel him forward as he cried out, "Ahh… No, don't! Ugh!"

Not much had to be said; Lorist's longsword pierced straight through the chest of the assailant and emerged from his back.

Within a short moment of two eye blinks, Lorist had already killed one of his attackers.

The other three Silver ranked knights still had their weapons entangled together and were frantically trying to pull themselves apart. To save time, Lorist didn't pull his sword out from the body of the first one he killed and merely swung it with full force, causing the sword to rip apart the former assailant's body and travel towards the other longsword user.

The sword-wielding Silver ranked knight hurriedly pulled his sword away and positioned himself to intercept Lorist's strike. However, Lorist suddenly changed his slash into a thrust, causing the knight to react by swaying his sword around in a panicked attempt to knock Lorist's sword away. Just before the two swords crossed, Lorist's longsword stopped just ever so slightly, causing the Silver ranked knight's sword to not hit anything, creating an opening for Lorist to push the longsword into his foe's throat.

"Agghhh!" As the Silver ranked knight was dying from the blood flowing out of him, the blade of a pike suddenly emerged from his body and headed towards Lorist. It was the first pike-wielding Silver ranked knight that had pierced his pike through his

comrade's body without any regard the moment he saw him dying from the wound at his throat in an attempt to catch Lorist off-guard.

Naturally, an attack like that didn't pose a significant threat to Lorist. However, he was shocked that the Silver ranked knight would be so cruel as to use his fallen comrade's body as a shield. In a fit of rage, Lorist's body jerked and avoided the blade of the lance before he drew his longsword with his right hand and swung it forward. The blade of his sword flashed like lightning as it decapitated the pike-wielding knight with one blow.

The other pike wielding knight was already shivering non stop. Even though it had only been a short while, he noticed that the rest of his comrades had died off the moment he awoke from his stupor.

Seeing the knight holding the pike with shaky hands, Lorist said in a deep voice, "Discard your weapon and kneel if you want to be spared!"

That Silver ranked knight crumbled mentally completely before he tossed the pike at Lorist and ran off immediately.

Lorist's body swerved to avoid the airborne pike and he grabbed onto its handle before throwing it back in the direction it came from.

That escaping Silver ranked knight's body shook as the pike pierced his body and emerged on the other side before he landed flat on his face on the ground and let out his final breath.

After the soldiers nearby witnessed the deaths of the four Silver ranked knights, they ran towards the barricaded area frantically while letting out panicked cries. In their haste, they had cast away their helmets, armor and even their torches, pikes and shields.

"Milord! Milord!" Patt's shouting voice could be heard coming from behind.

Lorist was glad that Patt hadn't been hurt. He called out, "I'm here. Watch out for the gap on the ground."

After taking a few steps, he picked up a still-lit torch that was on the ground.

A huge group of people followed behind Patt as he jumped over the stone gap. The

next person to do so after Patt was Reidy.

"Are you guys alright?" Lorist asked excitedly, before he turned and pointed to the enemies that were running away behind him and said, "Patt, bring some men with you and don't let them get into formation to resist."

Patt waved his hand and called out, "Kill them! Go!"

The group of people rushed forward and headed towards the area of the tents before they cursed out loudly. It seemed that there was yet another stone gap over there and the first few heavy-armored pikemen didn't notice it and fell into it. It was fortunate that the gap wasn't too deep and the soldiers who fell were merely injured but managed to retain their lives.

"Reidy, go and light up the tents over there, both to illuminate the area and to signal for the Second Highness's reinforcements. We will take this base with a pincer attack!" Lorist instructed Reidy before he called out to the guards nearby and said, "Hey, turn the sentry ballistas around and push them over there…"

One tent after another was set aflame, sending thick waves of smoke up into the air. The fire burned ever more brightly with the strong winds, sending out a wave of light that dispelled the darkness around Bread Hills.

Reidy didn't set all the tents on fire as Lorist had instructed but instead asked some men to dismantle the other tents and toss them into the fires that were already burning. Without delay, ten bonfires could be seen at the Bread Hills.

"There's a wooden bridge here!" With the illumination of the burning fires, some soldiers discovered that a few wooden planks were placed over the gaping stone gap on the ground. They quickly crossed it and resumed their pursuit towards the enemy who were trying their best to assemble in a fit of panic.

It was only now that Lorist was able to get a clear view of the Bread Hills. The terrain was truly true to its name: there was not a single tree nor grass on the hills and the whole hill area seemed like a round, long bun that was placed on the ground. It was estimated to be around the size of two soccer stadiums and its most striking feature was the two large stone gaps that made the hills look like scored buns.

At that moment, Lorist was standing near one of the largest bonfires. That spot was the tallest part of the Bread Hills and the Ironguard Legion had probably set up their

base there where rainwater didn't gather up.

At a barricade not far away, there was still an estimated 1000 soldiers, around 800 of which whom were getting into a line formation and preparing to intercept the incoming heavy-armored pikemen. So far, less than 200 of the pikeman had crossed the stone gap with the wooden bridges and they were assembling into a square formation under the orders of their commanding officers to march towards the enemy. However, as more soldiers crossed the bridge, the square formation eventually turned into a line formation. The distance between the two groups of soldiers was around 60 meters now and they would clash within the first moments of a charge.

Some soldiers at the enemy lines could be seen moving the tens of sentry ballistas from their original positions. However, it took much effort and time for them to do so and just as they were halfway done, they noticed more soldiers coming from the bottom of the hills when a horn tune was blown for them to begin their charge uphill, causing the Ironguard Legion soldiers who were moving the ballistas to argue on whether they should put the ballistas back where they were to fend off the enemies coming from below the hill or continue to move it forward to aim it against Lorist's troops who were about to begin their charge at any moment.

Lorist saw Patt step out from the formation in an attempt to give the enemy a final ultimatum as the soldiers behind him cried out, "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Gradually, the soldiers standing at the front of the Ironguard Legion's formation dropped their weapons, causing the rest to follow suit. In the end, all of the enemy soldiers cast away their weapons and surrendered completely.

The heavy-armored pikemen let out booming cheers as Patt led them forward to apprehend the enemy soldiers, thus occupying the main base area.

"Well done!" Lorist exclaimed. He continued to give an order, "Blow the horn to indicate that we've conquered the Bread Hills and hang the Raging Bear Flag of our family up at the base."

The tune of victory blasted throughout the night sky as the flag of the Raging Bear flapped proudly at the base, illuminated brightly by the burning fires.

A blonde female knight quickly rushed up the slope and dismounted before she sprinted towards the barricade that was constructed from stacked up rocks and

vaulted over it, landing beside a ballista nearby. Just as she drew her sword and readied herself for battle, she was greeted only with the sight of the heavy-armored pikemen who wore the equipment of the Whitelion Legion.

Seeing the blonde-haired knight arrive, Lorist stepped forward and greeted her. "Cousin Glacia, why have you come?"

Glacia, noticing the blood all over Lorist's body, cried out in surprise. "Why do you look so bloody? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Hehe, I'm fine. This blood is not mine. I'm not hurt in the slightest," Lorist said, before he noticed a crestfallen Reidy walking towards him.

"What's wrong, Reidy? Did something happen?" Lorist asked.

"Milord… Just now, when we reached the peak of the hills, Brother Els fell off it…" Reidy reported the shocking news to Lorist.

"What did you say? What happened to Els?" Lorist said as he started in surprise. At that moment, he recalled the ballista bolts that whooshed past him back at the first stone gap…

"When we first arrived at the peak and were calling out to you, we heard your warning and Patt and I got on the ground right away. However, the rest that followed behind us didn't manage to react in time and many got knocked off the peak by the ballista bolts. Ruhr also got hit by one bolt and as he was sent flying back, he banged into Brother Els and the both of them fell down from the peak. At that time, Patt and I were so shocked from the ballista bolts that came flying that we were unable to get up. However, we managed to get ourselves together after we thought of your safety and didn't yet know that Els had fallen off the hill. We only got to know this after two guards that followed behind Els before he fell told us about it when we were setting the tents on fire," said Reidy with an almost crying expression.

"Send a search party out immediately! If he's alive, we have to find him! Even if he's dead, we must find his corpse! If anything happens to Els… I will definitely bury the Ironguard Legion alongside him!" Lorist shouted his orders with a solemn face. At that moment, his mind was only fraught with worry for Els's well being and he no longer felt any of the joy from conquering the base.

"Yes, milord," Reidy said before he gathered some men to begin his search, only to stop

when he heard sounds of battle and a horn blowing the tune of charge.

"What's going on over there?" Glacia asked as she looked towards the distant, dark army camp.

One torch after another in the distant valley lit up and allowed the rest on the Bread Hills to observe the situation. From Lorist's vantage point, Terman could be seen leading his knight brigade in a charge straight up the slope of the other mountain valley with no one being able to obstruct them whatsoever.

The Silver ranked knights at the front of the charge manifested their silver blade glows on their riding lances and cut through their enemy relentlessly. Within moments, the enemies that gathered at the middle of that valley got completely smashed apart as cries of pain and despair resounded throughout the battlefield.

"The enemy is finished," Lorist said without much emotion.

Seeing Glacia's confused expression, Lorist explained, "We have already made arrangements for an ambush at the valley over there for the reinforcements of the troops from Lichtana Citadel. First, we had our mounted archers release some volleys of arrows to thin down their numbers before we had the knight brigade charge in and break their formation with the mounted archers securing the other side of the valley. That's why, cousin, you don't have to worry about any of the reinforcement troops escaping."

"Locke, I really didn't think that you would be able to form a knight brigade like this… Can you…" Glacia said as she stared at Lorist with a pleading look.

"Cousin, if there is a request that will leave the both of us with hard feelings, please refrain yourself from bringing it up. I formed this knight brigade through the best of my efforts with the benefits of the family in mind. In the future, I would even expand it into a Silver ranked knight brigade. However, if you are willing to leave the Second Highness and return to the family, I will let you lead and command this knight brigade," Lorist said, diminishing the hopes of Glacia.

"Stingy fellow…" Glacia mused before she stopped saying anything else.

Within an hour, another horn tune could be heard coming from the valley.

"The enemy has been eradicated," Lorist said as he released a breath of relief. "The sky

is already brightening up. Cousin, you can have your men start to form a defense line right now. I'll leave the sentry ballistas to you. Aim them in the direction of the citadel so that we have something to fall back on just in case. I need to go now."

Chapter 158
Worriless Journey North

Lorist felt really worn out as he had firstly killed his way up to the base on the hill and eliminated the Ironguard Legion soldiers who were guarding the base with ballistas. In the end, he even eliminated five Silver ranked knights and he was completely drained after that. That's why he later ordered Patt to lead the heavy-armored pikemen who had just arrived to help out in the efforts of conquering the base.

But even so, Lorist had no choice but to wait within the main tent as he still had some matters to settle, especially given that Els had fallen off the hill and was yet to be found, causing Lorist immense worry.

Lorist's whole body was still covered in blood that was half-dried up from the mountain breeze, resulting in an itchy and sticky mess which caused him much discomfort. The moment he returned to the newly erected main tent at the army camp at the foot of the hills, Lorist stripped his bloodstained clothes off and donned only a loose robe as he waited for the news.

At that moment, Yuriy, Terman and Potterfang walked into the tent.

"Milord, the enemy's 5000 troops were eliminated and we managed to catch up to 3000 of them alive. Potterfang already killed the Gold ranked knight commander," Yuriy reported.

"Good work, Pog," Lorist praised.

Potterfang said as he smiled and shook his head, "Well, it wasn't completely due to me. Had the Gold ranked knight not suffered three arrow shots already, I'm afraid I might get tangled up with him much longer."

Lorist nodded and asked, "How are the casualties?"

Terman stepped forward and said, "We lost 7 Silver ranked knights and hundreds of other soldiers."

A shroud of silence descended onto the tent after that report.

After some time, Lorist sighed and said, "Collect their bodies and cremate them so that we can bring them back to give them a proper burial at the Martyrs' Graveyard back at the dominion. That place is where brave warriors who have sacrificed themselves for the sake of the family are enshrined."

"Yes, milord," Terman replied solemnly.

Yuriy then asked hesitantly, "Milord, I heard Els is…"

"He fell down from the hill and I've sent a search party to look for him. It's already nearing dawn and I believe we should be receiving word of it now. Well, the Bread Hills isn't that high up compared to other mountains… Don't worry, I'm sure Els will be fine," Lorist said in an attempt to console both Yuriy and himself.

"And Yuriy, your role in the next battle is an important one. Head to the route towards Vanades City and make sure to seal off the entire road. We must not let news of this incident tonight spread out. Remember what I said before: we must make the enemy blind and deaf to all that is happening. We'll have to depend on the performance of your light cavalry scouts this time around," Lorist said as he patted on Yuriy's shoulder. "Don't worry, I will definitely tell you all the moment I receive any news about Els. Trust me, he'll be fine."

"I understand, milord. Please be assured that my light cavalry scouts will definitely carry out the mission properly," Yuriy replied in a serious tone as he stood straight up.

"Pog, the next phase of the plan will be up to you. I'd like you to try to impersonate the men of the Ironguard Legion to attack Vanades City. If we are successful and manage to occupy it, seal off the city and head towards Xith Castle immediately. As long as we can take that castle, we will be able to keep the Seamountain Legion of the Madras Duchy within the Sidgler Province. That way, our convoy won't have to worry about being obstructed by them when we cross the duchy.

"If it fails…" Lorist paused as he furrowed his brow before continuing, "We must at least keep Vanades City within our control. That way, we can prevent our convoy and the vagabonds from being stranded at the Yungechandler Province. Yuriy and his light cavalry scouts will surround the Vanades City and Pog, you shall lead the heavy-armored cavalrymen and the mounted archers to engage in stalling warfare. When the

heavy-armored infantry and the carroballista unit arrive, we can attack it with full force to conquer it.

"If surprise attacking Vanades City doesn't work, Loze will have to bring his two regiments of heavy-armored cavalrymen to face off against the castle. I believe that even if the Seamountain Legion comes, they wouldn't dare to engage in an all out battle with us. If it's the contrary, I'd like to see how their soldiers perform against our heavy-armored cavalry…"

In Lorist's original plan, after taking the base at Bread Hills, he would have his men to attack Vanades City and Xith Castle immediately to ensure that the convoy would have nothing to worry about during the rest of the journey.

The first group to depart was Yuriy's light cavalry scouts, Pete's mounted archer company and Lode Wales's three regiment of heavy-armored cavalrymen with Potterfang as the chief commander of all those units. As for Potterfang's newly-formed heavy-armored infantry army, they would leave with Dulles's carroballista unit.

Hence, Lorist would only have Terman's knight brigade and the main camp's guards by his side. He still had to stay behind to assist the Second Highness with cutting off the water source of the Lichtana Citadel and Charade would be busy leading the convoy's members and the vagabonds to the space beneath the Bread Hills with the aid of Freiyar and Malek's garrison legion to prepare for the continuation of the northbound journey.

"That's what we'll do. Be careful and godspeed to you," Lorist said.

"Thank you, milord," said Potterfang and Yuriy before they saluted and left to prepare for departure.

"Let's go and check out on any news of Els. Why haven't they reported anything yet?" Lorist told Terman in a worrying tone.

After exiting the tent and walking for a while, Lorist saw a guard rushing over hurriedly. "Milord, we found him… Sir Els is still alive…"

Ruhr however was dead. There was still a huge ballista bolt sticking out of his body.

Els was quite fortunate that he wasn't struck by a bolt and was instead knocked off the hill by Ruhr. At that time, he still wasn't aware of the danger and just as he was two

steps away from arriving at the top, Ruhr suddenly flew backwards towards him. He even tried to catch Ruhr but was instead knocked flying along with him. As he was falling from the height of around 50 meters, he hurriedly circulated his Battle Force to shield his body and fell towards a huge tree branch that broke his fall before he landed to the ground. He was severely injured with many of his organs injured by the fall, but he still managed to cling onto his life and would require no less than four months to recover.

When Lorist met Els, he was still conscious. With a pale face, Els made a bitter laugh and said, "Why am I so unlucky… I had only recovered from resting three months after the battle at Green Plains… Now I'll have to sit tight for four more months… Sigh…"

Letting out a relieved breath, Lorist smiled and said, "Maybe it's just your fate to be injured greatly during every large scale battle. Hehe, alright, you better go get some proper rest. Don't worry about the rest of the stuff here, I'll handle it."

Els's main injuries stemmed from his damaged organs, so he had to rest and was forbidden to ride on a carriage nor a horse. Lorist had no choice and could only have someone carry Els back to Nadegas City where he would live within a rented house to recover. He also instructed some guards to stay back there to watch over Els and bring him to the Northlands when he's better.

After settling the matter of Els, Lorist returned to the camp and instructed Reidy to get him some bath water with which he could wash off the dried up blood on his hair and body.

After that, Lorist fell asleep half-leaning on the bath tub.

He slept soundly and only awakened noon on the next day.

Noticing that he was currently in bed, he believed that Reidy must have moved him there during his sleep. After stretching and yawning, Reidy entered the tent and said, "Milord, you're awake. The Second Highness visited during the afternoon yesterday and waited until the night. After seeing that you were still asleep, he left without wanting to bother you. I believe he'll be coming back later today."

Just as Lorist was having his meal a little while later, the Second Highness did in fact come. Seeing Lorist awake and well, he was incredibly happy. However, he declined the offer to dine with Lorist and settled with a cup of wine and waited patiently for

Lorist to finish his meal.

In actuality, the Second Highness didn't have anything important to say during his visit to Lorist. He came over mainly because he heard about how Lorist rushed into the base of the enemy alone and started slaughtering away at the troops, something which, even the Second Highness himself, a Two Star Gold fighter, felt that it was an impressive feat. Given his Battle Force prowess, the Second Highness could feel that Lorist only radiated an aura of an Iron rank and he originally thought that Lorist was only good for his strategizing and planning and didn't take note of Lorist's Battle Force ability at all.

Even though he was quite envious of Lorist's many Gold and Silver ranked subordinates, he believed that Lorist had won them over only with his charisma and understanding of the human heart alone. Now that he reconfirmed that Lorist's Battle Force was really at the Iron rank, he thought that it was indeed possible for Lorist to have led his men at the very front but refused to accept that Lorist had personally went up there before the rest of his men arrived and thought that the rumor was possibly fabricated so that Lorist, the new family leader of the Norton Family, would have a legendary and heroic image.

After finishing his breakfast, Lorist went up to the Bread Hills again with the Second Highness and witnessed the busy scene below. Countless noncombatants were currently digging out trenches outside the firing range of the ballistas at Lichtana Citadel to build a mud wall that would circle and surround the citadel.

"Tomorrow… Tomorrow, we will cut off their water source up at the mountains," said the Second Highness excitedly.

"Didn't the Ironguard Legion send out anyone to harass the crowd down there?" Lorist asked.

"They did once yesterday but they were driven off by our ballista and longbow fire and even lost 300 of their men. Seeing that we were prepared, they also decided to begin their preparations for a siege. I'll see how they react when they notice their water supply has been cut off," said the Second Highness as he laughed.

When the night came, Lorist received Potterfang's report that Vanades City had already been occupied and sealed off by them. Entry was allowed into the city but nobody was permitted to leave. Right now, he was about to bring his men to launch a

surprise attack on Xith Castle and was making preparations to disguise themselves as a merchant convoy to take the castle gates. Potterfang believed that the company of garrison troops at Xith Castle wouldn't be able to resist the fearsome assault of two regiments of heavy-armored cavalrymen.

After asking around, Lorist discovered that the heavy-armored infantry and the carroballista unit had departed during the afternoon hours ago and had headed towards Vanades City. They were estimated to arrive at the city by tomorrow evening and after helping Potterfang's forces take the castle, there was no longer anything to worry about for the journey back to the Northlands for the convoy and the vagabonds.

Afternoon the next day, the Second Highness brought two Gold ranked knights and tens of other Silver ranked knights as well as a company of longbowmen up to the Liden Mountains. After circling around it, the waterfall that served as the main source of water for the Lichtana Citadel could be seen near a slope halfway up the mountain. With a Battle Force enveloped sword, the Second Highness easily made an opening at the pool of the waterfall to redirect the water. He also found a hidden pipe under the water and blocked it up before he left the mountain with only one Gold ranked knight, leaving the rest of his men camped there to deal with the citadel soldiers that would no doubt come up to investigate the cause of their exhausted water supply.

On the third day, Charade led the convoy's people and the vagabonds towards the border to begin the journey towards the Northlands. When the soldiers at Lichtana Citadel saw all the people using the route along Bread Hills to head to the main route to Vanades City, they noticed that their plans to keep them out of the border had failed. But they still didn't realize the true magnitude of their predicament.

On the fourth day, the soldiers at Lichtana Citadel finally noticed that their water supply was cut off and when they sent someone up to the mountains to investigate the cause, their men were fended off by the attacks of the longbowmen stationed uphill. It was at that moment when they knew that their backup plan had failed completely and there was no way for them to defend the citadel in the long term.

On the fifth day, the Ironguard Legion soldiers at Lichtana Citadel sent out two regiments of 5000 plus people to launch three test attacks against the mud wall defense lines that surrounded the citadel only to be beaten back into hiding by the Andinaq Kingdom's Royal Defense Guard.

Afternoon that day, Lorist once again received a report from Potterfang that stated

that the Xith Castle had been successfully conquered and the three regiments of heavy-armored cavalrymen and the mounted archers had entered the castle, hence sealing off the route to Sidgler Province completely.

Lorist was extremely delighted as he thought, *now, we finally have nothing to worry about on the journey north…*

At night during the sixth day, Lichtana Citadel mobilized all its forces and launched a night assault. Their main focus was attacking the northern part of the defense lines and hopefully being able to break through it.

The ones that manned the defense lines were two regiments of the Second Highness's newly-formed Royal Defense Guard. They didn't expect that the Ironguard Legion would go all out and engage in a near-suicidal attack. With the Ironguard Legion frantically attacking without regard to casualties, the two regiments of the Royal Defense Guard also fended horribly. With every squad leader and company leader of the Royal Defense Guard units there dead, their soldiers quickly crumbled and the Ironguard Legion's forces managed to find an opening outwards.

Just when the Ironguard Legion soldiers thought that they had hope of escaping, Terman, who had just been instructed by Lorist to come over, brought his knight brigade along and gave the Ironguard Legion's forces a full-frontal attack. With them being on flat terrain without any cover nor ranged weapons whatsoever, the Ironguard Legion soldiers stood no chance against the mounted knights. It was basically a massacre and only less than 3000 of the original 10000 plus soldiers from the citadel managed to retreat inside again with more than half of them injured in some way.

On the seventh day of the encirclement of Lichtana Citadel, the citadel had a desolate and dark atmosphere. Apart from that, Lorist and the Second Highness were busy cleaning up the battlefield and helping to rescue the wounded. During the era of cold arms, night assaults like that were extremely cruel and terrifying. Of the 10000 Ironguard Legion soldiers that left the citadel to attack, more than 5000 of them turned into corpses with hundreds more so badly injured that they weren't able to return to the citadel.

Only less than 1000 out of the 5000 Royal Defense Guard soldiers survived with all of the military officers dead, some of whom were the former students of the Dawn Academy. Terman was the one who cried the most as two of the students were the elite members of the Swordsmanship Society of the academy and used to be his close

friends and subordinates.

On the eighth day, the remaining 3000 plus soldiers within the Lichtana Citadel opened the gates wide and sent a messenger out who held and waved a white flag. That messenger stood before the Second Highness as he shivered and said, "Water… water…" with his dried out mouth.

The Second Highness's men proceeded to occupy the Lichtana Citadel without any resistance. However, the funny part was that the men that went to occupy the citadel arrived with wooden buckets filled with water from the Egret Lake instead of weapons in their hands.

……

On the 24th day of the 10th month of Year 1767 of the Grindian Calendar, the Ironguard Legion that was known to be the strongest in terms of defensive capability raised the white flag to surrender to the Second Highness of the Andinaq Kingdom, Auguslo. The battle for Lichtana Citadel ended within ten short days with the decimation of the Ironguard Legion with the citadel ending up in the control of the Second Highness.

Even though it was one of the shortest battles to ever happen which concluded within only 12 or so days in total, the casualties on both sides were huge with the defending side being almost entirely wiped out. The casualties of the attackers that numbered fewer than 5000 men caused many other nations much shock and awe, rocketing the reputation of the Second Highness to fame overnight as a rising star on Grindia in terms of military exploits.

The battle began as a result of a convoy belonging to one of the nobles subordinate to the Second Highness that was refused passage through the Madras Duchy on their journey back to their homeland. The blockade created by Duke Madras using the Ironguard Legion to restrict access to the people of the convoy and the vagabonds spurred the Second Highness to mobilize his troops to eliminate the Ironguard Legion to remove the obstacle faced by the convoy and the vagabonds.

Here is a recounting of the events with respect to their chronological order: The Second Highness first stationed the 30000 men of his Royal Defense Guard at the Lichtana Citadel while secretly constructing a bridge at the Egret Lake with the newly-formed Whitelion Legion. The soldiers of the Whitelion Legion then proceeded to

attack the army camp at the Bread Hills, allowing the Royal Defense Guard to set up a defense line around Lichtana Citadel. The Second Highness then cut off the water supply of the citadel and forced the Ironguard Legion to emerge from the citadel to try to penetrate the defense line in a desperate attempt, which ended ultimately in their defeat.

At the same time, the Second Highness also ordered the Whitelion Legion to continue their advance and attack Vanades City and Xith Castle, causing the Seamountain Legion of Duke Madras to be sealed within Sidgler Province, establishing the foundation which the Andinaq Kingdom used to absorb the Yungechandler Province of the Madras Duchy.

The various military chroniclers and historians of the continent called this battle 'The Miracle of Egret Lake'.

Author's note: Due to Lorist's forces using the equipment of the Whitelion Legion, his men were seen as the soldiers of the Whitelion Legion by the chroniclers and historians. That's why the historical records of the continent described them as the newly-formed Whitelion Legion.

Chapter 159
Assault During a Snowy Night

By the time the snowflakes started falling to the ground, Lorist suddenly recalled that he had forgotten something really important, that was, the arrival of winter.

It was the 11th day of the 11th month. In his previous life, that day was celebrated as Singles' Day in his country. However, on Grindia, it was just another normal day like any other. For him, it was also the day the last batches of vagabonds arrived at Vanades City.

Lorist's face was incredibly glum as the coming of winter foiled his plans for the convoy to continue its journey back to the family dominion. His current priority was to secure a safe place for the convoy and the vagabonds for them to weather through the winter season for now.

"We took 25 whole days to get to here from the border… A short distance of 70 plus kilometers took us so long to travel… How much longer would it take us to reach the dominion? One year? Or two? How much food would we consume within a single day with more than 100000 people? I'm sure that after you make some calculations, you'll find that it's something that we can't afford to bear…" Lorist said with a stern look.

"It's all the fault of the vagabonds for slowing our journey down. If we traveled with only our convoy, we can travel up to 30 kilometers each day," Yuriy complained. As the leader of the light cavalry scouts who could travel more than 100 kilometers in a day, he was the one who couldn't bear the slow speed of the convoy the most.

"Look here, there is still around 500 kilometers of distance from Vanades City to Metropoulos River and at our rate, it will take us another 200 plus days to arrive and that definitely won't do. A round of snow has already fallen. Eve though Vanades City is the largest trading city of the Madras Duchy and we have obtained a bunch of food and supplies after occupying it, it's still rather tough for us to be able to sustain 100000 people comfortably through the winter. Thus, we must take certain measures to travel to Kobo City before the snow blocks off the road completely!"

Lorist pointed at Kobo City on the map and said, "This city is under the control of Duke

Madras himself and it is the largest food storage location within the Delamock Province where most of the duke's produce is stored. We can see from the administrative documents we got in Vanades City that the food trade that goes on here is fully supplied by Kobo City, and last year, the duke even lent the Second Prince 40 million kilograms of food which was shipped over from Kobo City.

"Another document here that shouldn't have been announced officially yet states the estimated amount of food the duke currently owns as well as another agreement between him and the Second Prince to lend him 75 million kilograms of food with the condition that the Second Prince first pay back what he owed him. It seems that the Second Prince is pretty drained as well," Lorist said as he tossed a stack of beastskin documents on the table.

"We've got a huge burden of 100000 vagabonds on ourselves and winter is already at our doorstep. However, we're still unable to procure the necessary clothes, food and shelter for them to survive through the winter. It's already the 11th day of the 11 month and we must occupy Kobo City before the 12th month when the snowfall begins to intensify. After that, we will be able to move all the people of the convoy and the vagabonds over to spend winter there," Lorist said.

"Milord, taking Kobo City will be rather difficult. Back then, the Third Prince led 60000 plus soldiers of the Royal Defense Guard to attack that place but still had to return due to their complete defeat at the hands of the Ironguard Legion. The news of our occupation of Vanades City and Xith Castle must've spread all over Delamock Province by now and I'm sure the soldiers there must've began to make their preparations. We will no longer be able to rely on the element of surprise and a long term attack on the city might wear down the numbers of our convoy even faster," Potterfang expressed his worries.

"To allow the 100000 plus people to survive, we have no choice but to occupy Kobo City. That was then and this is now. We are not the Third Prince's Royal Defense Guard, and neither are the ones who are currently defending Kobo City the Ironguard Legion. According to the captive officers, there is only one regiment of garrison troops defending Kobo City right now, and that's why I'm confident that we'll be able to take it without problems. However, I'm still worried that even if we manage to conquer Kobo City, the 100000 vagabonds will travel too slowly to arrive there. We must find a way to transport them there as soon as possible and not let them delay us any further," Lorist said worryingly as he tapped onto the table with his fingertip repeatedly.

"I believe we can use military discipline to manage the vagabonds like the family members of our soldiers who are now within the garrison legion. We can also give them the same treatment as the relatives of our convoy's forces and allocate some carriages for them. That way, at least 60000 of them will be able to travel at the same speed as our convoy," suggested Freiyar as he stood up. As the new commander of the garrison legion of the convoy, he was well aware that his men were quite envious of the treatment received by the relatives of the formal soldiers of the convoy escort.

"That's a pretty decent idea," Lorist said as he nodded.

"But milord, we don't have enough carriages for that. We only found around 2000 carriages within Vanades City itself," Charade said with a troubled tone.

"How about this… Charade, do your best to gather vehicles within the city but leave the things of the merchants untouched. We can't afford to be transporting any supplies here and there because our priority now is to travel as quick as we can. During the expedition to conquer Kobo City, I'll leave you in charge over here. Make sure to instruct the work smiths to construct as many carriages as they can and if we don't have enough horses, use one horse for one carriage. I don't expect the vagabonds to be able to travel 30 kilometers per day like the convoy, but they must at least be able to cover 15 kilometers of distance a day."

Lorist understood Charade's behavior rather well. He noticed that the moment Charade arrived at Vanades City, his old ways began to surface and he was prepared to expropriate one third of the goods of the merchants at Vanades City to bring it back to the dominion. That's why Lorist warned him sternly to not neglect the convoy and the vagabonds for the sake of acquiring those resources.

"Pog, has the Second Highness's Royal Defense Guard been stationed at Xith Castle yet?" Lorist asked.

Potterfang replied, "They've already arrived, around 10000 of them. After I completed my mission, I handed the castle to him and returned. Loze left a little bit later with our heavy-armored cavalry regiment and mounted archers and will be arriving here by tomorrow afternoon."

"Weird, Duke Madras's reaction to this seems a little slow. Hasn't he noticed that we've stopped all traffic outward from Sidgler Province?" thought Lorist as he stroked his chin.

Potterfang laughed and said, "Milord, Duke Madras must have long known about the Xith Castle's occupation because when the light cavalry scouts entered Sidgler Province to do some probing, they noticed that the bastides there were more fortified that usual. I believe that the duke is merely unclear on whether we would attack the province or only defend the Xith Castle for the moment. That's why he didn't send out the Seamountain Legion to attack us, fearing that we will take the whole province by surprise if he leaves it undefended."

"That sounds about right," Lorist said as he nodded. "Well, since the Xith Castle is already under the Second Highness's control, we would have to hand Vanades City to him as well. That way, he can reconstruct this place into a citadel city as a main base for him to swallow up the Yungechandler Province. Right now, the Second Highness only lacks an excuse for us to give this place to him earlier. I believe that all he is wishing for right now is for us to get out of the way as soon as possible before we suck this place dry, resulting in him being unable to benefit from any resources or recruit any manpower from here.

"I want to move us to the Kobo City mainly because there is a huge stockpile of food there and it is much closer to the Northlands than Vanades City. That way, we can return to the dominion quickly when spring time comes next year. Also, I don't wish to stay over here for long because this place would no doubt become a battlefield when spring comes. I'm worried that we will be involved in the battles if we stay here for too long."

"Then, when should we depart to attack Kobo City?" Potterfang asked.

"Tomorrow morning. We will leave with Yuriy's light cavalry scouts and Terman will bring the knight brigade and follow us from behind. Loze shall also lead the three regiments of heavy-armored cavalrymen towards Kobo City. We must move quick as the time we have is limited. We will gather again when we arrive," Lorist said.

……

Six days later, Lorist was riding on a carriage with ten plus guards and arrived at a castle at the heart of Kobo City. The carriage he was in was flying the flag of the Tebri Family.

The one who received Lorist was a white-haired officer in his sixties.

"Lord Viscount, I am Chief Officer Bloom. I truly apologize because even though Kobo City is under the direct control of Duke Madras, it is both a military base as well as a warehouse area and usually doesn't allow guests within it. Lord Viscount, if you'd like to find a place of residence, you will have to travel around 5 kilometers from here where Count Kelock's bastide is located. The count is a friendly man who's extremely welcoming towards guests and I'm sure, Lord Viscount, you, will receive the best hospitality and treatment over there. As for your request to purchase some food, I'm sorry to say that I can't make the decision to approve or deny it. Usually, we are not allowed to provide any food without the authorization of the duke," said the officer as he respectfully declined Lorist's request.

"Oh, I see. It's my fault for not knowing better of the situation. Chief Officer Bloom, I also have to apologize for making such a request as this is my first visit to the duchy. I only heard that Kobo City was the central area for food trade within the duchy so I thought that it would be like the other mercantile cities where trade is usually carried out on the spot," Lorist said sadly, fully putting on an act of a disappointed noble who had traveled all the way for nothing.

"It truly pains us as well for your wasted trip. In actuality, we usually conduct our trade at Vanades City. We would only ship the required amount of food according to the orders made there. However, I've heard that the city is occupied by vagabonds now, so we can only allow the purchase if the duke himself permits it," said the old officer as he bowed down deeply.

"Oh. Then I have no other choice but to find a way to meet with the duke or wait for a little longer until the situation changes. I really thank you for your guidance, Chief Officer Bloom. I shall take my leave now," Lorist said as he nodded to the officer before he reboarded his carriage and left Kobo City.

As he looked at Lorist's carriage depart, the old officer muttered curiously, "Why would a noble from the Redlis Kingdom come all the way here to buy food? Would he be able to transport it back even if he was allowed to buy some? The Second Prince will definitely expropriate more than half of it anyway when he returns… It'll be fortunate if he's even left with a third of it…"

Lorist's carriage continued towards the east and left the range of Kobo City's security force. Within 30 minutes, they arrived at a thick, lush forest. Past the forest was a huge army outpost.

Lorist entered the tent with a gloomy face. Potterfang, who was looking at some maps, asked curiously, "Milord, why are you back here?"

"The plan didn't work. I was prepared to get a residence there so our main force can have a conspirator within the city before the attack, but I didn't expect that they didn't allow visitors to stay, even if they're nobles," Lorist said with a deep voice.

Taking a blank beastskin and an ink pen, Lorist started drawing while he talked. "Kobo City has two walls. The first one is as described according to the intelligence we gathered. It's around 10 meters high while the second wall is roughly 20 meters from the first wall and standing at a height of 12 meters. There are a few sentry towers on the two walls, but I didn't see any defensive machines of any kind. Those are probably protected within the towers. At the middle of the city is a 5-storey castle too. Even if the walls outside were breached, the soldiers can still retreat into the castle to put up resistance. As expected of Kobo City, the City of Forged Iron! What a befitting name!"

Potterfang shook his head as he watched Lorist draw the layouts of the defenses as he couldn't think of a good way to attack the place either. He turned his attention towards the outside of the tent and exclaimed, "Milord, look! It's snowing again. This is the second snowfall of the year. If we don't have a way to attack Kobo City, we'll have to move our troops back to Vanades City…"

The snow fell from the darkened skies ever so gently, before wetting the ground outside the tent.

Lorist's eyes suddenly gleamed with excitement as he thumped onto the map and said, "Gather all the Silver ranks among our troops! I will bring them on a night assault against Kobo City!"

Lorist's plan was simple: during snowfall at night, the moon wouldn't be visible in the sky and the darkness made it difficult for one to even see one meter ahead of oneself. The defending troops at Kobo City would also be more laid back than usual given the weather, as, in Grindian history, battles conducted during snowing nights was without precedent.

Having gathered the Silver ranked soldiers, they rushed to Kobo City while the skies were still dark and Lorist himself scaled the walls before he let down a rope ladder, which allowed the rest of his men to climb up the walls. After they took control of the four sentry towers, they were able to open the gates of the city and lower the

drawbridge to let the rest of the troops into the city.

The second inner wall was also taken over rather quickly. As a group of men were opening up the main gates of the inner wall, the other group began their assault on the castle within the middle of the city. As long as they were able to control both of the gates, by the time dawn arrived, the regiment of soldiers would have ample time to take care of the rest of the defending enemy troops on the walls and the sentry towers who were still unaware of the situation.

Even so, attacking during the night was not without its difficulties. Mainly, one couldn't see one's own five fingers clearly as the snowfall limited the visibility of each individual to only one meter ahead. Secondly, Kobo City had a 6-meter-broad moat. How would they be able to cross it? It wasn't like they could just get a 10-meter-long wooden plank out of nowhere. It was doubtful that a board of that length even existed anyway. However, they were still able to utilize the long siege ladders, but that would increase the risk of some soldiers missing their foothold and falling through the holes of the ladder, shaking off the rest who were also on the same ladder.

Lorist's solution to that was relatively simple: the soldiers would use ropes to tie them up together like a daisy chain. Even though they would move slower as a result, it wasn't much of a problem as the enemy troops weren't able to see them either. Using that method, they managed to to reach the walls of Kobo City without any soldiers losing their way in the darkness.

"As for crossing the moat, we'll use goat skin rafts; the rafts are used by the local fishing folk to cross the river. Given their relatively light weight, they're easy to transport and there are quite a number of them within the bastide we had conquered yesterday which were used as makeshift roofs by the residents. We only need one of those rafts for this operation. After ferrying the first group of people to the opposite bank of the moat, we'll use a rope to pull the raft back from the other side for the next batch of people to cross. We'll be able to move our men across the moat quickly that way.

"When our night assault troops take the two gates and let down the drawbridges, they will blow the horn two times long and one time short. That's the cue for the regiment to light their torches and advance towards Kobo City.

"And, we're done!" Lorist said as he concluded the briefing confidently. "This is a risk that we have to take. Everyone, go make your preparations!"

Before he left, Lorist thought of Els, who was currently resting up for his injuries to heal at Vanades City. *That guy has extremely good night vision and he's actually the best pick for operations like these. It's a shame that he was hurt and won't be able to join us on this operation…*

Chief Officer Bloom, who was residing within Kobo City, wasn't able to sleep well given his old age; he only slept for three hours during the night before he woke up and couldn't go back to sleep no matter what. That's why he decided to wake up and light a candle to read a book to pass time until dawn. Seeing the snowflakes falling down from the dark sky above through his window, the old officer muttered to himself, "Yet another year passed just like that…"

At that time, he thought he heard three horn blaring sounds. "Those patrolling soldiers must be drunk and fooling around again… They'll be in for a beating tomorrow morning."

After that, sounds of thunder rang out repeatedly without pause.

The old officer was quite surprised that there would be thunder during a snowing night. *A storm might be brewing for tomorrow… I better go to check the warehouses and see if there are any leaks that need to be fixed… Sigh…*

Hearing some ruckus going on at the floor below his room, the old officer was quite mad and thought, *what's going on tonight? Why is it so noisy? If the servants aren't sleeping right now, how would they work effectively tomorrow?*

The old officer then put on his robe and prepared himself to head downstairs to give his servants a stern scolding. However, just as he opened the door, he saw three to four people rush up from beyond the castle walls with a ladder. They appeared before him not long after.

With the light of the candle, the old officer could see that one of them was the young noble 'Viscount Tebri' from the Redlis Kingdom that had visited just yesterday. However, that man was covered in mud and blood and he even seemed quite oblivious about it. The young man revealed his two rows of teeth and let out a standard noble's smile before he said, "I'm really glad I got to meet you again, Chief Officer Bloom…"

Chapter 160
Strategies and Plans

After receiving the report on the successful occupation of Kobo City, Charade spent 29 days to lead the convoy and the 100000 plus vagabonds from Vanades City over to Kobo City. That level of efficiency truly surprised Lorist as they had managed to traverse a distance of over 340 kilometers within a month with more than 100000 people.

Charade's method was simple: apart from the resources they transported as well as the elderly and children who rode carriages straight to the destination, he had 7 temporary campsites set up along the 340 kilometer route from Vanades City to Kobo City with each camp having 1000 transport carriages. Each camp would then focus on shipping the people from one camp to the next camp and the carriages would return to the camp to fetch the next batch, allowing everyone to travel using carriages by taking turns, shortening the length of transport as a whole by magnitudes.

The Second Highness's near 10000 Royal Defense Guard soldiers occupied Vanades City after that and headed for Kobo City with the aim of procuring some food.

Lorist on the other hand didn't mind that request at all since the city had more than what they needed. After making an inventory of the warehouses within the city, they found roughly 150 million kilograms worth of food, much to the awe of the rest. The Delamock Province did indeed live up to its name as the largest warehouse for food of the former empire. With that amount of food, there was no longer any worry for the harsh season that was to come and the people of the convoy and the vagabonds would spend it within Kobo City.

However, the Second Highness's plan to borrow some food was stopped by Charade, who said, "While lending you some food is fine and dandy, you should at least have some kind of mortgage, right? Even if you're of the royal family of the Andinaq Kingdom and have the status to rule the country, you must still act according to the nobles' traditions and customs. Surely you aren't going to think that we'll just hand out whatever amount you specify, right?"

In actuality, the Second Highness was currently even poorer than the convoy and

Charade's actions were made on purpose to cause him some trouble. Even so, the Second Highness did not get mad over it and merely returned to Vanades City with a smile. Ten days later, he came back to Kobo City and shipped a large bunch of resources to them. Upon seeing those resources, Charade wanted to cry, but he didn't have any tears to shed.

Those resources were in fact the stuff of the merchants at Vanades City that Charade himself had wanted to acquire for a third of the market price. However, the Second Highness was even worse as he had taken the resources in the name of 'confiscating enemy goods' and used them as a mortgage for the food he was about to borrow. In the end, the Second Highness left Kobo City with 50 million kilograms of food and continued to have people transport the food out of the province despite the harsh winter weather.

Curious about why the Second Highness was in such a rush to ship the food, Charade went to ask Lorist privately about the matter.

Lorist's explanation was simple: the Second Highness wanted to recruit more soldiers to prepare for war.

Taking a beastskin map of the Andinaq Kingdom out, Lorist explained that when spring comes next year, the Second Highness would face two huge battles. Naturally, one of them would be the retaliation of the Madras Duchy. Lorist then pointed at the border between the Redlis Kingdom and the Andinaq Kingdom and mentioned that he had heard about the First Prince's signing of a peace treaty with the Four Allied Duchies and that the First Prince still had quite a huge military force at his disposal. With his insatiable personality, he would definitely turn to the Andinaq Kingdom as his next unlucky prey.

"Thanks to you," Lorist said as he looked at Charade and laughed, "the Second Highness managed to resolve the issue of the problematic nobles within his kingdom and stabilized the kingdom's situation and began production and development. If they can be left at peace for two to three more years, the Andinaq Kingdom will definitely rise to be a local hegemon. If we give them another 10 years to develop, the Second Highness's dream of reuniting the empire might even be possible.

"What the Second Highness lacks most now is time. So far, he's employing the strategy to conquer more land step by step in the north and defend his territory in the south. As for the First Prince's Redlis Kingdom, the Second Highness will leave the borders

of the two kingdoms under the care of the Fiercegale Legion. However, given that the Fiercegale Legion has been mobilized for many battles over the years and given that they've had to weather the Second Prince's attacks, they've incurred quite a huge loss themselves. The Second Highness must replenish the soldiers of the Fiercegale Legion so that they can continue to defend the border in the long term, hence the need for more food supplies as well as equipment.

"As for the Madras Duchy, the Second Highness would definitely love it if he could conquer it. However, even though he has the will to do it, he's far from having enough military strength to take it. His plan right now is to first take the Yungechandler Province so that he can contact the Four Allied Duchies to hopefully gain some support while he suppresses the forces of Duke Madras over here. That way, he can take over the whole duchy after two years of preparation."

Charade looked at the map in deep thought before he suggested, "Milord, why don't we stay here and don't leave and have the Second Highness give Delamock Province to our family? In exchange, we can help the Second Highness take over the Madras Duchy. It's a win-win solution that I believe the Second Highness would be happy to agree to."

Flabbergasted, Lorist stared at Charade for a while before he asked, "Are you the only one who has this notion or does the rest think so as well?"

Charade gave it some thought before he said, "Two days back when I was on the walls to check out the condition of the defensive fortifications of the walls, I saw a bunch of vagabonds gathered up near the moat of the castle, so I went down to see what was going on. They were actually telling stories and folklore about the Delamock Province and Kobo City. The moment I heard that the province has tons of farmland and that was the reason it was the greatest producer of food in the former empire, I was moved. If we can take over this province, it would definitely be a great help to the family!"

Lorist laughed bitterly as he shook his head before he said, "Don't daydream so much in the future. Good things like this don't really happen."

"Why? Even if the Second Highness refuses to give the province to us, we can at least ask for the area around Kobo City since it was taken by our forces. That way, we can have the 100000 vagabonds begin farming and make a firm footing for our family within the Delamock Province," Charade said, still not satisfied without an explanation.

"Sigh…" Lorist said after he took a deep breath, "Brother Charade, your vision of things to come is too optimistic. The Second Highness will definitely not give us Delamock Province nor Kobo City, even if we help him take over the entire province. Even if we forcefully occupy a place, it would not be recognized by the Second Highness.

"Had the Second Highness been a king that was content with what he had and didn't yearn for anything else, then what you think might have a possibility of coming true. However, it can be seen that he's a person who's full of ambition given that he wants to reunite the former empire one day. That's why, even though he's willing to give the whole of the Northlands to our family, he definitely won't let us touch Delamock Province.

"If you study the map properly, you'll start to understand the strategy of the Second Highness. Why did he leave so many nobles alive within the two provinces of the Andinaq Kingdom? The reason is simple: the two provinces are to be buffers to resist the First Prince's attacks and he wouldn't bat an eye even if they are ravaged from the battles that go on there. However, when you sweeped the Welbassia Province, the Second Highness didn't say a single word and let you hang all the nobles over there. That's because he wants to take the whole of the Welbassia Province into the direct control of the Andinaq Royal Family and use that as the basis for the restoration of his family's power. He will definitely not enfeoff any part of that land to any landed noble.

"Now, take a look at the map of the Madras Duchy. Essentially, the Yungechandler Province is already under the Second Highness's control. Even though the province is desolate and barren right now, the Second Highness has already eliminated the 20 plus noble families here using treason as an excuse for their punishment and left only 7 dominion lords who were earnest and willing to follow the orders of the Second Highness and serve him.

"Why would the Second Highness kill off so many nobles in the Yungechandler Province all of a sudden then? That doesn't fit his usual way of doing things. That's mainly because he wishes to also take the whole province into the territory of the royal family. Next, he will have to face Duke Madras and the Seamountain Legion which is currently at Sidgler Province. Given that the Sidgler Province is under total control of the duke without any other landed noble based there, as long as the Second Highness can take this province, he will start to deal with the other landed nobles at Delamock Province.

"Food is the most important resource for war to a kingdom after all. Without food, a

kingdom wouldn't be stable at all. The Second Highness had once got the short end of the stick in the past because he lacked exactly that resource. As the province that produces the most amount of food in the former empire, there's no way that the Second Highness will let it fall into the hands of any other noble and he'll also wipe out the noble families within this province while he's at it. Either that, or he'll move the nobles that join his side to the Sidgler Province. Now, take a look at this again. If these provinces all fall into the hands of the royal family, what do you think will happen?"

Lorist took out a map of the former Krissen Empire which was divided into three kingdoms and seven duchies and drew a line across the Welbassia Province within the Andinaq Kingdom, the Madras Duchy's Yungechandler Province and the Delamock Province before he drew a circle on the Northlands.

Charade was confused as he pointed to the Northlands and asked, "What's with that circle?"

"Did you forget what the Second Highness said? When he eliminates the Madras Duchy and takes over the land up to the border of the Northlands, if us, the Norton Family, manages to take over the whole of the Northlands, he will grant me the title of the Duke of the Northlands in the name of the Andinaq Royal Family. That circle represents our family," Lorist replied.

"Under such circumstances, where do you think the Second Highness will turn his soldiers to next?" Lorist asked Charade.

Charade pointed to the Iblia Kingdom and said, "The Second Prince."

Lorist nodded and continued, "Right. This is also the other reason why the Second Highness definitely won't give the Delamock Province to us or any other noble. Only when the province is under the direct control of the royal family would he be able to move manpower and resources to the frontlines effectively. The Delamock Province and the Iblia Kingdom is split by the Sanderson Hill Range. As long as the Second Highness mobilizes his troops, he'll be able to easily breach into the territory of the Iblia Kingdom and there's no way the Second Prince will be able to hold out for long.

"We all know that the Second Prince mainly relied on his father-in-law, Duke Fisablen who commands the Frontier Legion of the former empire to establish the kingdom. If the Second Highness launches an expedition against the Iblia Kingdom, there's no

doubt that Duke Fisablen will mobilize the Frontier Legion in response. That is when the Second Highness can rely on us, the Norton Family. If we deploy our soldiers from the Northlands, and coupled with the assistance of Duke Melein, Duke Fisablen will be assaulted from three fronts and be forced to order his men to retreat and sit still as he watches the Second Highness sweep past the Iblia Kingdom without being able to do a thing."

Understanding what Lorist was going to say next, Charade recited the inevitable moves the Second Highness would take. "If the Second Highness really manages to defeat the Iblia Kingdom, then the plan to reform the empire will take form and he will definitely order us to face off against Duke Fisablen while he would force the Four Allied Duchies to return to the empire. After that, he'll rally up forces to eliminate the Redlis Kingdom of the First Prince and nobody would be able to stop him. The Second Highness will thus be able to complete his ambition to reunite the empire and take the throne as the next emperor and be remembered as a heroic legend in the history books…

"The Second Highness is really playing a big game here. He has already made up his mind to use us to face off against the Frontier Legion of Duke Fisablen so that we wouldn't be able to play a bigger part in the reunification of the empire so that he doesn't have to reimburse or reward us for our troubles… He's really calculated that far ahead in his plans…" finished Charade before he sighed.

Lorist smiled and said, "This is his master plan. With everything being done so openly, he's made it so that others can have nothing to say about it."

"Then, don't we have any way to glean more benefits for ourselves in this situation?" Charade asked, dissatisfied.

Lorist shook his head and explained, "From the Second Highness's request to borrow food from us, you should be able to understand this. The Second Highness could have taken all the wealth within the radius of Kobo City to trade them with us for food. However, he chose to use the stuff he took from the merchants as mortgage instead. Even if we are able to conquer the Delamock Province, by the time the Second Highness defeats Duke Madras, what would we do if he orders us to leave the Delamock Province and hand it back to him?

"Should we disobey? Or rebel? Does that sound realistic? Don't forget that the 100000 plus vagabonds we have were originally citizens of the Andinaq Kingdom. If you have

them start working away here, the Second Highness can take them back into his kingdom with but one order and no one will give so much as a damn to us because we are not the rightful rulers of this place. Only if we bring them back to our dominion can they truly become the subjects of the Norton Family.

"The Norton Family doesn't lack land at all. Don't forget that the principality the Second Highness gave us is currently unmanaged and unutilized as well. The highest priority for us now is to bring the vagabonds back to our dominion. Don't think that our convoy's escort is that mighty; in actuality, it's still far from the truly elite armies out there. The main reason they were willing to join the convoy and follow us in the first place was because they wanted a chance to allow their families to live peaceful lives in the Northlands. If we lead them into battle for the sake of land that doesn't rightfully belong to us, would they be satisfied? And how would we reimburse these brave warriors for the casualties they sustain? No one is truly an idiot, you know.

"In fact, I think that the Second Highness would be more than eager to have us stay behind at Delamock Province. That way, he can clean up the nobles in this area without staining his reputation like you did back in Welbassia Province. He'll also be able to force us away after that using all sorts of reasons and excuses. What's worse is that he can legitimately order us to support him in battle against Duke Madras.

"I don't wish for the forces of the Norton Family to become fodder for the enemy for the sake of the Second Highness's ambitions. In actuality, many others will be able to figure out his moves just like we did based on the placement of his soldiers and manpower. If he wants to succeed, he'll have to see if the other powers will give him a chance. I bet that during summer next year, the Madras Duchy will definitely turn into a chaotic battlefield. If our convoy doesn't leave by spring, we'll definitely be dragged into the conflict as well."

Lorist then stretched out his finger and pointed at the location of the Iblia Kingdom on the map.

"You're saying that the Second Prince will mobilize his forces to attack the Delamock Province?" Charade asked.

"It's not just an assault. He'll definitely want to occupy the whole place," Lorist replied. "I just said that no one's really an idiot, and neither is the Second Prince. Anyone can see what the Second Highness is planning with his obvious movements. Even if the Second Prince can't, Delamock Province is still akin to a juicy piece of meat. Do you

think that with his greedy personality, the Second Prince wouldn't want to give that meat a huge bite? Even if it isn't him, I'm sure someone else will be thinking the same thing.

"Before this, the Madras Duchy had managed to keep the Andinaq Kingdom out of the province. However, now that the duchy had suffered quite a loss, someone will definitely persuade the Second Prince to join in the fray. Think about it, before this, the Second Prince was planning to borrow some food from the duke. Now that he can get the food as well as the land that produces it, do you think he wouldn't jump for the opportunity?"

"Locke, who is the someone you keep referring to?"

"Those who don't wish for the Krissen Empire to be restored as well as those who don't want the Second Highness to come into power."

"Didn't the Second Prince just incur a loss not long ago? Where would he find enough soldiers to attack the Delamock Province with?"

"He can just borrow them. Don't forget that his father-in-law, Duke Fisablen, owns the Frontier Legion which has not seen battle and has had quite a lot of time to recuperate and prepare themselves. The Second Prince just has to borrow 30000 of the 78000 soldiers to be able to conquer the Delamock Province."

"How are you so sure that the battle here will break out next summer instead of spring?"

"The Second Prince still won't be able to get enough food for his army during spring. After harvesting the wheat during summer, he'll definitely mobilize his forces right away."

"It truly is a shame to give this place up… Such a big food-producing province…" Charade said before he sighed.

"This place is kind of overrated if you ask me. Aside from being able to produce food, what else is it good for? There's no horse-breeding going on here nor are there any ore mines. The biggest disadvantage of this province is that it's completely sealed off from the rest of the world," Lorist said as he shook his head in disagreement.

"Sealed off? How so? This place is directly connected to the Northlands and the Iblia

Kingdom. And past Vanades City, it is connected to the Sidgler Province and the Andinaq Kingdom. Other than that, the Four Allied Duchies can be reached through the route through Yungechandler Province. It seems pretty connected to me," Charade said curiously.

"What I meant by that was that the Delamock Province is only accessible from the territories within the former empire. Look at our family dominion over here," Lorist said as he brought out a map of the Northlands, "If we can find a bay where we can build a harbor somewhere at the Bladedge Mountains and develop our marine corps, we will have access to the sea routes and be able to reach our other dominion, the island principality that used to belong to the Second Highness. From that island, we'll be able to travel to the port at Tim's dominion as well as Morante City. From Morante City, we can travel to the Relic Islands and the Romon Empire. The degree of connectivity is quite high and we can go many places from there. Now, you understand why I'm so fixated on bringing the convoy and the vagabonds back to the family dominion, right? Over there awaits our lands which we will develop into a haven for ourselves and our people!"

"Locke, you're far more far-sighted than any of us can aspire to be…"

"Naturally. Haha, now you know why I'm the dominion lord and you all are my knights."

"Locke, don't get too full of yourself. I was just trying to butter you up with some flattery. To think that you'd actually take it all seriously…"

Chapter 161
The Long Wintery Night

Lorist put the ink-dipped pen down and looked at the crystal sandglass on his table. It was already around five at dawn, but the sky outside the windows still seemed rather dark. Past the green glass windows, he could see dense amounts of snow, each probably the size of a goose's feather, falling gently down to the ground. It has already been snowing for three continuous days and a huge pile of snow had gathered outside.

On Lorist's table were stacks of wordy beastskin documents which were mostly written by him throughout the night. When he was talking to Charade recently, it suddenly occurred to him that he still didn't have a comprehensive plan to develop the family dominion. His dominion was located at a rather desolate piece of land; while that allowed the advantage of having to defend only the Firmrock Castle to prevent the rest of the dominion from being embroiled within the flames of war, it cost them isolation and impermanence in the minds of others, both of which stemmed from not having a proper method to communicate with the outside world.

The Northern Highlands was wide with a very sparse population and spanned an area of roughly three to four times that of the Delamock Province with only less than a million inhabitants. Even the southern area of the Northlands which was the most prosperous and under the control of Duke Loggins only had around 40000 citizens at most. The main factors that had held back the development of the Northlands were the inconvenience of travel and transport as well as the lack of manpower.

From the map, it could be seen that the Northern Highlands is not situated to the north most point of the Grindia Continent. Instead, it was located at the mid-upper part of the continent. The center of the continent was considered by its inhabitants to be the Magical Dragon Mountains, which incidentally, happened to be the intersection point for three mountain ranges.

The reasoning behind the place being called the Northlands was because it represented the furthest north humans have ever developed and settled themselves in. If they wanted to go even further northward, they would have to cross the Magical Dragon Mountains and according to the maps, beyond that was the long-stretching

wilderness which humans have yet to set foot on.

However, the word 'highlands' in the 'Northern Highlands' was used in a slightly different sense from the conventional meaning. Even though the Northlands is also considered a highland area, the elevation of that place relative to the rest of the flatlands of Grindia was only around 100 meters with little difference in terms of climate and weather. In actuality, in the Grindian Basic Language, 'highlands' didn't refer to the elevated terrain of the Northlands but rather its ruralness and wildness relative to the other civilizations on the Grindia Continent and it was used in a derogatory sense.

According to Lorist's plan, as long as he was able to bring the 70000 plus members of the convoy as well as the 100000 plus vagabonds back to his homeland, he would be able to alleviate the manpower crisis of his dominion and bring in huge waves of development and progress. If he was able to accomplish that, as long as he guarded Firmrock Castle tightly, he would be able to develop his dominion amidst a time of chaos without having to worry about the conflict and battle going on outside.

Personally, Lorist approved of the Second Highness's ambition of reuniting the empire. However, he wasn't inclined in the slightest to join in the effort and he didn't really care for the title of the Duke of the Northlands the Second Highness had promised him either. To him, there wasn't a point even if he managed to conquer more land as he would still be locked within the Northlands as long as the upstream and downstream passes at Metropoulos River were blockaded.

In the end, Lorist was forced to place his hopes with the western coast of his family dominion where the Bladedge Mountains was located. He refused to believe that he wouldn't be able to find a single place where a seaport could be built. If he does find one, the family would be able to establish diplomatic and trade relations with the other powers from the sea routes which were far more convenient to traverse than the land routes. He could even have his armada ship more vagabonds to his dominion for more manpower and citizens instead of using the convoy method which still hadn't completed its first run after one whole year of traveling.

Lorist noted down the stuff he intended to implement on those beastskin documents, among which included research into making proper glass, improving metallurgy, foraging for more mines, constructing cities, preparing farmland, establishing transportation routes, training elite troops and so on. Right now, the forces of the convoy and the dominion combined had around 70000 men. Lorist was prepared to

lay off many youths from his forces so that they can become the main source of manpower for the development of the dominion's many infrastructures.

For the sake of ensuring the safety of the convoy and the vagabonds on their journey to the dominion, many youths were enlisted into the escort force. Lorist believed that he only had to retain a fraction of that force and reform them into an elite fighting force. With every soldier having at least Iron ranked Battle Force capabilities, even if he had only 20000 soldiers, it would be more than enough to ensure that the Norton Family dominion can be kept untouched from the conflict in the outside world.

Lorist made a mental note to himself that In another few years, when the family dominion has established a proper foundation, he would then think of expanding his influence to cover the whole of the Northlands. He recalled that he read some book in his past life that had a saying that went like this: 'without a stable foundation, no matter how magnificent the building constructed on gravel, it wouldn't to be able to weather a gust of strong wind and would collapse without question', much like the Yongle Emperor who strengthened the defense of his nation and expanded the growth of crops.

He then raised his pen and started writing down a few other things that he'd like to try to make when he returns to the dominion, namely, gunpowder and catapults. With castles being all over Grindia, using only ballistas for sieges was not the ideal solution. With armaments like gunpowder-powered weapons and catapults, however, he would have a much easier time attacking traditional castle fortification structures around the continent.

For example, Charade was only capable of conquering over 100 castles within the Welbassia Province because he had the support of the carroballista unit and the longbowmen troops. He also had the captives he caught along the way serve as troops to take most of the brunt of the enemy's retaliation. Lastly, the landed nobles within the province were not that strong in the first place, resulting in only a little more than 10000 of the captive troops ending up as casualties along the way.

Lorist himself also had a few experiences in siege warfare, but mainly, he relied on surprise attack tactics and night attacks to succeed. The only time when those tactics failed him was during the battle against Wildnorth Town. If he succeeds in developing those weapons, when the dominion is built up to a point for him to start stretching his claws out from the Northlands, tightly-fortified structures like the Lichtana Citadel would no longer prove to be an obstacle.

Ever since he returned to the dominion during the 3rd month and inherited the title of the dominion lord, Lorist had been going to and fro settling various matters without having the opportunity to sit down and quietly ponder on the future developments of the dominion. Only when he was cooped up within his residence waiting for winter to pass did he have any time to properly draft out his plans.

After looking through some of the beastskin documents within his hands, Lorist gave it some thought before he appended a few more rows of words on one document: cultural education, basic Battle Force training and papermaking.

Cultural education was rather straightforward as it only involved teaching the general populace to read and count. Even though many people knew how to speak the Grindian Basic Language, most of them couldn't read as they did not recognize the characters. As most of the inhabitants of Grindia were of the peasant class who only had to work physical labor to ensure that they were able to sustain their families, they didn't have the ability nor awareness to let their children receive good education, and that situation continued within families for generations to come.

As for basic Battle Force training, while the dominion of the Norton Family was rather huge, it was constantly under threat from magical beasts and the mountain barbarians from the Magical Dragon Mountains. Only when the citizens of the dominion awaken their Battle Force at the basic level would they have a means to defend themselves. Other than that, people with awakened Battle Force tend to have better health and vigor with higher life expectancy. To the Norton Family, it was a rather fast method to develop the dominion.

On Grindia, the common paper that Lorist was so accustomed to seeing in his past life was nonexistent and the only thing they had to serve the same purpose were beastskins, which were used ever since the days of the magical civilization. According to the legends, the magi used beastskins to make magic scrolls to record their arcane texts and grimoires. That was because only beastskins could contain the magical power that were embedded within the words of the magi. That's why the magi did not consider developing a cheaper and easier to produce material to write on for the common people.

Making beastskins was a simple and widespread process. However, large numbers could not be made as it was also incredibly tedious. Firstly, the skin of an animal had to be cut into a rectangular shape before being dipped into water for a whole day before it could be cleaned and dipped into a kind of limestone solution for more than

ten days, with it needing to be beaten and stirred in the solution three times a day. That process had to be repeated three times and after 30 days, the skin would be brought out to be dried and the blood vessels and other unnecessary parts on the skin had to be scraped off manually with a small knife, leaving behind only a thin membrane which had to be immersed into a liquid grass mixture for another two days. After that, it had to be dried but not under direct sunlight before it would be smoothened and fastened to a wooden rack for three more days to be firmed. Lastly, it had to be cut into a document form factor.

This was also the reason why books on Grindia were so expensive. If Lorist intended to improve the cultural education of the citizens within his dominion, he had to first find a way to make writing material that was easier and cheaper to produce. The family would never have enough funds to let everyone use beastskin for their studies after all. In Morante City, the daily newspaper they had would be returned to the publishers so that the beastskin may be washed and cleaned for new content to be printed upon it. They would be reused until the beastskin itself spoiled from wear.

If he could make the kind of paper that was widely available in his past life, not only would he be able to further the education level of the citizens within his dominion, he could also sell the paper to the rest of the continent as the staple product of his dominion.

It was Lorist's long held belief that there was no empire nor family that would last thousands of years undefeated. The common folk of Grindia normally distinguished themselves by the place they came from instead of their nations. For instance, Lorist was from the Northlands while Charade was from the Teribo Kingdom. Lorist felt that if he could let the people of the convoy feel a pride in being the subjects of the Norton Family, he believes that the glory of the Norton Family will be able to be passed down for generations to come.

Lorist's plan for that was to use long term propaganda and indoctrination to make the hearts of the convoy members and the vagabonds stay loyal to the Norton Family. The Han Dynasty of ancient China was able to achieve such a feat, resulting in the Chinese people also being known as the Han. Lorist wanted to try to emulate them so that the folk within his dominion would be proud of their rulers and call themselves Nortons instead of Northlanders.

However, that would only take form after a very long time. Lorist thought that maybe he could even dramatize and immortalize the journey of the convoy in the history

books so that the generations to come would be able to empathize with the hardships their ancestors had to weather to arrive at the Norton Family dominion. Even though Lorist had many plans to go about that, he still required easily-produced paper to be able to jump start this operation. That's why, researching how to produce paper was a rather high priority for Lorist.

As he was the owner of a small workshop back in his past life, Lorist was well-trained in many crafts such as glass working, designing and even making collecter ship replicas. However, Lorist had no proper idea on how to make paper and only knew the basic principle and materials required to do it without understanding the exact process. Thinking of the difficulty of the task he was about to undertake, Lorist sighed and thought, *I guess I'll have some craftsmen work on it by trial and error when we arrive at the dominion… I'm sure they'll succeed one day…*

The door of his room was knocked on lightly, prompting Lorist to say, "Come in."

Reidy pushed open the door and came in with a basin of warm water and said, "Milord, you got up quite early today. Even though it's already six in the morning, the sky outside is still as dark as it was during midnight."

Lorist washed his face and said, "Reidy, even though the weather is like this outside, you must not slack off on your training and continue working hard indoors. Training one's fighting skill requires constant practice and intense dedication. You're already at the Two Star Iron rank this year. I hope that you'll be able to break through to the Silver rank in another two years."

"Yes, milord. I understand," Reidy said.

"Alright. Do I have anything else scheduled for today?" Lorist asked.

After giving it some thought, Reidy replied, "Yesterday, Knight Charade said that you wanted to join him to patrol the residential area of the vagabonds."

"Oh, then bring me my breakfast at seven thirty. After finishing my meal, I'll go meet up with Charade," Loirst said.

"Yes, milord," Reidy said before he left.

Usually, from six to seven thirty, it was Lorist's morning training session. After training in the Aquametal Technique for one Major Cycle and moving his body for a bit, his time

was up.

To Lorist, the most difficult part for his training right now was the fact that he wasn't able to grasp the progress of his own cultivation. In his past life, he didn't even reach the Dark Stage of the Aquametal Technique. Given that he didn't understand what laid beyond and didn't hear much about it from others either, he could only rely on himself to slowly find the proper way to progress in his training. Right now, even though he understood that he was in the Dark Stage, he had no clue at which point of the stage he was at. For example, back when he was at Maplewoods Bastide after he laid with Irina, he suddenly felt a rush of power that made his body feel light and refreshed. While he did not completely understand what had happened back then, he reasoned that he must've progressed a little further in the Dark Stage.

Sometimes, Lorist also felt that using Battle Force to train in his ancestral technique was a little ludicrous. However, he hasn't noticed any glaring disadvantages with that; in fact, the rate at which he progressed in the Aquametal Technique felt a little too fast. Lorist was quite confident in his current abilities and most Gold ranked fighters could no longer match up to him. However, he still didn't have the opportunity to spar against a Blademaster properly. Lorist was eagerly anticipating the chance to find out how he would hold up against a Blademaster in a proper fight.

Given that the Kobo City wasn't big, it was filled to the brim by the people of the convoy and the vagabonds. Fortunately, the Second Highness had transported a third of the food away, emptying near a hundred warehouses in the process. Coupled with the broad drying fields for the food within the city, it was just barely enough to accommodate the whole group of people.

It was still snowing and Lorist and Charade both wore a black leather mantle as they walked along the road that the patrolling soldiers had cleared up to the camp of the vagabonds.

"Locke, how did you get the idea of setting up the tents within the snow houses? Not only is it quite warm inside, that method of yours solved the problem of the vagabonds' housing almost right away. The snow houses are also cheap and easy to build, it's far too convenient," Charade said as he walked. "Did you know that if we used logs to build temporary houses, the gathered snow on the roofs would eventually collapse the whole structure? That would also require us to have people periodically clean the snow off. I didn't expect that the snow houses didn't have that sort of problem and if we pat the snow tight, it will further reinforce the structure as well."

Lorist replied, "Don't you remember that I bought lots of books during my time at the Dawn Academy? When you were busy looking for people to fine, I was reading. I learned this method from the journal of an adventurer who had lost his way in the wilderness and he used this way to survive the harsh winters. I didn't know whether that account was real or not nor did I know how effective it would actually turn out, but I drew a design anyway and you really managed to implement it…"

"You…" Charade was struck speechless. "How could you simply draft out something like that?! Good thing you were lucky this time. If the designs didn't work, it might've cost us some lives…"

Lorist laughed and said, "I was just messing with you. It's your fault for looking down on books like these and saying that the authors made the stories up to make a quick buck and refuse to even give the authors a chance. Let me tell you, that book was a proper biography and it was the work of the most prestigious adventurer around one hundred years ago, Carmen Pride. The designs I gave you were copied from that book. Some time after that book was published, some experts even tried experimenting with snow houses according to the design he provided and found that they indeed did have an insulating effect."

"……"

After a while, Charade asked, "Locke, in another few days, it will be the 36th day of the 12th month, which is the day of celebration for the new year. Do you have anything planned for that?"

Lorist thought for a few moments in silence before he said, "Sigh, on that day last year, we spent the whole night at the Red Grace Inn with the rest of our buddies, but right now we're so far away from them at Kobo City. Fate truly is unpredictable. Do you have any good ideas for the celebration?"

"You're right, none of us last year would have even imagined that we would be here today, leading so many others towards the north… I'm thinking that since we have an abundance of food now, it's better if we give them something extra to eat for the festive celebration. Also, let's throw in 500 grams of meat per person with another cup of ale while the kids can have some sweets and cookies instead. What do you think?" Charade asked.

Lorist nodded and said, "It's really thorough of you. Let's do it your way. If the snow

stops falling, we can even organize some physical activities for them and let them spend the new year in happiness."

Raising his head and looking at the dark, gloomy skies, Lorist muttered, "After another month of waiting, we can finally resume our journey home."

Chapter 162
Gentle Spring Rain

"No, Uncle Locke… I took a wrong step just now… Let me redo it…" The one who said that was Pog's beloved daughter, Alisa. She was currently playing a game of magical beast chess with Lorist.

Magical beast chess was a game on Grindia that was similar to monopoly. The chessboard depicted a confusing maze where several hundred magical beast-shaped pieces were placed. The boss of the dungeon was represented by a red dragon piece in the middle of the maze. The players on the other hand were knights whose movements were restricted to the number of the dice roll during each player's turn.

It differed from monopoly in that players required good arithmetic ability to play the game because each piece had a 'score'. For instance, if a knight with a score of 10 encountered a magical goat piece which had the number 5 carved underneath it, then the knight would kill the goat without taking any damage and the knight's score would become 15 as a result. Consequently, if a knight with a score of 10 encountered a magical wolf that had a score of 9, the knight would be able to defeat the wolf but its score won't be the sum of those of the two pieces. Only when the score of the knight is double that of the beast would the knight be able to absorb the complete score of the piece it defeated. Instead, when the battle scores of both pieces were close, the knight would only get to add the difference of the knight's score and the enemy piece's score. In the case of the knight with score 10 and the wolf with score 9, the knight would end up with score 11 after defeating the wolf.

There were many junctions in the maze, each of which were guarded by various magical beasts. Hence, every choice had to be made based on evaluating the battle potential of one's piece so that it would survive and arrive at the middle of the maze to defeat the red dragon. That was why magical beast chess was also known as the dragon-slaying game.

Just now, Alisa had picked the wrong direction and encountered a magical tiger. Given that her knight's score was 37 while the tiger's score was at 42, that meant that the young girl's knight had become the prey of the ferocious tiger, resulting in Alisa having

to start all over from the beginning of the maze and return all the monster pieces her knight had defeated back to their original positions. However, she wasn't satisfied with the result and wanted to roll her move back.

Lorist pinched on Alisa's face lovingly and allowed her to take back her move.

Sitting on a chair near the window was the girl's elder brother, Howard. At that moment, he was intently reading a book he had took from the bookshelf nearby. In the middle of that room sat the Gold ranked mercenary Freiyar's two twin sons who were stacking up blocks in an attempt to build a castle while chewing on some snacks.

Right now, Lorist was being hogged by Alisa as the both of them hadn't met for more than six months ever since Lorist left the convoy to travel to the dominion. During all that time, Alisa had missed her kind uncle that would spoil her from time to time. Other than that, given that it was snowing rather heavily and she wasn't able to go out to play within Kobo City, the girl brought her two playmates, Freiyar's twin boys, to play within Lorist's wide room which was located at the top floor of the castle every single day.

Initially, Potterfang and Freiyar were worried that their children would bother Lorist and wanted to stop them. However, Lorist halted their attempt as there wasn't much to do during winter and having a few children play around in his room helped liven the atmosphere. Given that he had others working on most of the tasks of managing the convoy and the vagabonds, Lorist didn't have much to do other than showing his face to the people from time to time.

He also took the opportunity to test if Howard had neglected his studies during the northbound journey. To prevent the other children from feeling bored, Lorist even had some craftsmen make a few toys based on those he saw in his past life so that the children would be kept humored and busy, indirectly converting his room into a children's playground.

A few knocks could be heard on the door to Lorist's room. The one who came in was Patt.

"Milord, Knight Yuriy has just returned and Sir Charade requests for your presence for a meeting at the great hall," Patt said.

"Uncle Locke, since you're busy, let's stop playing for now," said Alisa before she stood

up and tossed her chess pieces and scorecards back onto the chessboard before Lorist even said a word.

"You feisty girl, I would've won in another two moves. You're sneaking your way out again…" Lorist complained.

However, Alisa paid him no heed and cheerfully went to the corner where the twin brothers were and shook her head as she commented on how crude-looking the castle they were building looked.

"Let's build a garden instead," said Alisa before she started taking the castle apart.

The two brothers were pissed at her actions and started quarreling with Alisa.

After exiting the noisy room and walking downstairs with Patt, Lorist asked, "What did Yuriy say about it?"

"Yuriy said that the road is still in bad condition for traveling as it is still very wet and muddy. The mud would reach all the way up to one's shin. Well, that much is a given since the snow's just starting to melt and the spring rain isn't helping the mud dry either. There's no way that we will be able to cross with our carriages. Without ten or more days of blazing sunlight, the road will not dry up quickly enough for travel," Patt replied. "Also, Yuriy said that he went to the river nearby and asked an old boatman there who said that there is no way to cross the river before the 25th day of the 2nd month because a lot of ice pieces will be flowing down from upstream and blocking that part of the river. It won't be able to clear up until the end of the 2nd month."

"Sigh, I guess there's still another month of waiting… If I have to stay here any longer than that, moss and rust will start to form on my body. Since we're not able to continue our journey yet, why did Knight Charade ask for me?" Lorist said.

"I'm not too clear about it myself. He said that he had something he needed to discuss with you…"

……

In stark contrast to Lorist's lax schedule, Charade was incredibly busy most of the time. The management of the 70000 plus convoy members and the 100000 vagabonds were all rested on his shoulders and he would be troubled by even the smallest squabbles and conflicts day after day. Even though he had more than 50 officers he

picked during the course of the journey helping him out with the matters, he was still bothered by many other things that required his personal attention, causing him much frustration.

"He's not willing to hand it over? On what grounds? Send the patrol guard over there. I don't care if he used to be the town mayor. Give him ten harsh canes! I don't care if he's older than 80! If he goes against our regulations, he has to be punished! And it's his fault if he dies from it! Whoever sympathizes with him can buzz off along with that old guy! We don't need to feed a useless parasite like him! Quick! Ten canes, that's an order!"

Lorist and Patt could hear Charade's roaring as they descended the stairs to the third floor and wondered what could possibly make him so furious.

When they arrived at the hall, they saw the officer Charade had chased out of the hall run out in terror with Charade fuming with rage.

"What's going on?" Lorist asked.

"It's nothing big… An old guy past his seventies old insisted that he used to be a town mayor in the past and picked two females from the vagabonds to become his maidservants and even took ten percent of the supplies we handed them from those who used to be his townsfolk! Didn't we just carry out a cleanup and check of the camps recently? It was then we noticed that he had stockpiled huge amounts of resources which he took from others. Just when we were about to confiscate them, he started an outburst because he thought that we would let him have his way given his age. That's why I ordered him to be caned ten strokes so that he would remember this lesson. He thinks he still has any status over others despite being a vagabond, how ridiculous," Charade said.

"Wouldn't it be easier for us if we just hanged him? I mean, given his age, he's nothing but a burden and will only consume our supplies without contributing. What say you, milord?" said the seated Yuriy as he sipped on some hot tea.

Lorist thought for a bit before he said, "Forget it. Since Charade has already handed down his punishment, there's no longer a need for that. However, make sure to kick out these sneaky and cunning parasites who only take and don't give by the time we leave lest they spoil the community spirit we have. Just leave them here to fend for themselves when we depart."

The reason Charade asked for the meeting was to discuss the matter of the departure with Lorist. Unlike Lorist who wanted to return to the dominion as soon as possible, Charade was relieved to hear that they had to wait at least another month before they could start their journey again. Given that there was much to prepare for the journey including repairing the carriages, letting the horses warm up and preparing the clothing and food supplies for more than 100000 people, the convoy and the vagabonds couldn't just leave on short notice.

The other important factor was that Charade intended to transport the remaining 85 million kilograms of food back to the dominion, which would undoubtedly displace some people who were originally traveling on carriage, resulting in a slower traveling speed overall.

Lorist was quite troubled by that as he preferred to return to the dominion earlier rather than spending more time to bring the food with them. However, the figure that Charade told him instantly convinced him.

Charade said that during the two and a half month stay at Kobo City which numbered roughly 80 days, the 170000 or so people at Kobo City had already consumed more than 15 million kilograms of the food stored there. If they didn't bring the food back with them to the dominion, a food shortage would no doubt occur within three months of their arrival. Charade believed that the food reserves back at the dominion would definitely not be able to accommodate the huge influx of people.

Lorist felt that Charade's reasoning was rather sound as well. He recalled that Supervisor Spiel had reported to him that the food reserves at the dominion amounted to roughly 30 million kilograms and the laborers at the construction site also relied on the food there as well. Now that the Wildnorth Town had been abandoned, the yearly food produce of Maplewoods Bastide only amounted to about 4 million kilograms of food. If they did not bring the food in Kobo City back, the convoy members and the vagabonds would no doubt have to starve within six months of arriving at the dominion.

"Let's bring the food along," Lorist said helplessly. Suddenly recalling something else, he said, "Don't forget that it will be quite troublesome when we attempt to cross the river. Since we still have to wait for a month, have the work smiths make some small boats and planks which we can use to make a floating bridge for the crossing."

"Are you referring to the Locke Fishing Boats?"

"Well, something like those. However, since we need to transport the carriages across as well, the floating bridge has to be around 5 meters wide and each boat has to be filled with two layers of green clay. Also, the distance from one bank to another of the river is roughly 300 meters, so make enough boats so that the bridge can stretch long enough to the other side," instructed Lorist.

……

On the 10th day of the 2nd month, the Second Highness once again rushed to Kobo City despite the rainy weather. He came for two reasons: to borrow more food and to request Lorist to delay his departure until the 5th month after the harvest of the winter wheat.

The Second Highness's reason for his request was so that Lorist would be able to guard Kobo City as he brought his troops to suppress the landed nobles of Delamock Province so that they wouldn't give him trouble during his battle with Duke Madras. He was confident that he would be able to completely take over Delamock Province and have Duke Madras bow down before him.

Lorist refused it immediately and said that he hadn't contacted his family since the 9th month of last year and couldn't bear to stay any longer. Ever since the winter passed and the spring rain started falling, he was already rather impatient about leaving for his dominion. He apologized for not being able to accept the request of the Second Highness.

Lorist then mentioned that when the convoy departed, he could hand control of Kobo City to the Second Highness who only had to have around 10000 of his Royal Defense Guard soldiers stationed to protect it. Lorist also insisted that he believed that the nobles of Delamock Province definitely wouldn't act recklessly. As for the matter of food, Lorist was willing to hand 10 million more kilograms of it to the Second Highness as an early celebratory gift for his defeat of Duke Madras.

However, no matter what Lorist said, the Second Highness merely furrowed his brow and said that if he had to use 10000 soldiers to guard at Kobo City, he wouldn't be able to muster enough military strength to face the Seamountain Legion and that the best method to overcome that was to have Lorist leave at least half of the convoy's force there while he leads the rest of the convoy back to the dominion.

Lorist still refused nevertheless and insisted that he had promised every person of the

convoy to lead them home and that he wouldn't leave a single one behind. He was obligated to fulfill his oath and there was no reason for him to leave his soldiers there either as the city was not part of his family's dominion anyway and he had no obligation to guard it.

In the end, the both of them parted on bad terms.

Seeing the silhouette of the Second Highness leaving in the distance, Lorist nudged Charade with his elbow and said, "Now, you understand, right? If he doesn't give Kobo City to our family, any other benefits he promises will merely be shallow ones. You can already see how hard he tried to convince us to stay without mentioning anything about that."

Charade laughed bitterly before he said, "I think we have to hasten our preparation work and leave as soon as we can. I suspect that the Second Highness came to ask us to stay because he received word of the Second Prince's eventual campaign on the Delamock Province. That's why he hopes that we will be here to block the Second Prince so that he has enough time to rally his forces. Perhaps, the Second Highness might even be hoping that our forces and the Second Prince's soldiers would wipe ourselves out so that he can reap all the benefits."

"Your analysis is correct," Lorist said as he nodded. "I also think the same. That's why he's unwilling to station his own Royal Defense Guard soldiers here. I refuse to believe that having 10000 men here would affect his battle against the duke anyway. Didn't you read the letter Els sent to us?

"During winter, the Second Highness didn't sit idly at all. With the 50 million kilograms of food he got from us, not only did he replenish the numbers of the Fiercegale Legion to 56000 people, he also managed to expand his Royal Defense Guard into a 83000-strong force. Other than that, he also renovated the Lichtana Citadel and formed a 20000-strong garrison army there. Only idiots would believe his claim of not having enough soldiers. Even if he can't send his Royal Defense Guard out, what about his garrison army? Does he take us for fools?"

"I feel that the Second Highness is a little too ambitious. Even though we've helped him out so many times, he was willing to give us the short end of the stick without batting a single eye. Does he think that we wouldn't be able to grasp his true intentions?" Charade said emotionally. "Compared to him, you are too soft, Locke. Sometimes, I really don't understand why you're so kind to the point of being taken

advantage by others. You should know that you're a dominion lord now and no longer just an instructor of the Dawn Academy. You should act with pride and dignity."

Lorist laughed out loud and recited a saying that Charade found to be very weird. "Being cold and calculative doesn't necessarily make one a hero; being kind and considerate doesn't make one any less of a ruler…"

Lorist then turned and started walking towards the castle as he asked, "Do you feel that following a dominion lord like me or a hero like the Second Highness is better?"

"Oh, you must've read that saying from some obscure book again. It does sound pretty insightful though," Charade said as he hurriedly started walking to keep up. "Needless to say, of course I'd follow you! You're my little brother Locke, so I have to make sure you don't screw up and become a joke of a dominion lord! Also, I'd never join the Second Highness no matter what. Otherwise, I might end up helping him count the money he got from selling me out without the slightest clue! How bad for me would that be?!

"I only feel sympathy for the former students from our academy and some other Silver ranked knights that decided to join his side… Even though our convoy didn't suffer any major losses for more than half a year of traveling, within ten days of joining the Second Highness, so many of them had died… Also, Locke, I think you should remind your cousin sister Glacia that she definitely wouldn't stand a chance to become the queen or empress given the Second Highness's ambition and personality…" muttered Charade nonstop.

Lorist sighed and said, "Fatty, you have so much to say, don't you? It's alright. Everyone has their own path and even if we try, it would be incredibly hard to change the paths they've set their minds on. I'll definitely remind my cousin sister of that. As for whether she'll take my advice to heart, that's up to her."

Chapter 163
River Crossing

On the 18th day of the 2nd month of Year 1768 of the Grindian calendar, the vanguard of the northbound convoy led by Fiercetiger Loze and the light cavalry scouts led by Yuriy started leaving for the Metropoulos River ahead of the rest towards Baron Silas's dominion where the crossing point was located at. They planned to build the floating bridge there and set up their camp before receiving the rest of the convoy and vagabonds and help them with crossing the river.

Els also rushed to Kobo City to report to Lorist on that exact day. He had just recovered completely after resting for the whole winter at Vanades City and rushed there impatiently the moment he was fit enough to move with his four other guards. Els brought two pieces of intel for Lorist, the first being his sighting of the Second Highness's Royal Defense Guard unit that he encountered on the way back numbering around 10000 people that would arrive at Kobo City within two more days.

The second piece of information was about the Second Highness's mobilization of around 5000 laborers to begin construction of a citadel at the steep mountain path towards Lichtana Citadel which was within 5 kilometers of Vanades City.

Lorist took a look at the map and felt that something was up.

Charade, Potterfang and Terman proceeded to debate about the issue. Charade felt that the 10000 plus soldiers that were heading to Kobo City must be waiting to receive control of it from the convoy. Given that Kobo City was the central location of Delamock Province and is also a fortified city which was easily defended and difficult to take over, the Second Highness definitely wouldn't leave the city unattended. With the 10000 plus Royal Defense Guard troops, he should be able to hold off the forces of the Iblia Kingdom's Second Prince for a period of time.

However, not one of them understood the intent behind the Second Highness's citadel construction project near Vanades City. Practically speaking, he should reinforce and fortify the defensive faculties of Vanades City instead and renovate it into a fortified city. As long as they occupied Vanades City, they would be able to control the transportation route there and maintain the attacking initiative on the battlefield,

allowing them to advance or retreat as they pleased.

In the end, they settled on Potterfang's guess. He believed that the Second Highness's construction of another citadel was to ensure that he had another place to retreat to. Other than that, the additional citadel could aid in restricting the enemy offense in that they would be able to prevent Vanades City from being completely surrounded. Another advantage that citadel offered them was that even if their forces weren't able to hold Vanades City, they would be able to retreat to that citadel. It also ensured that the Yungechandler Province which had just entered the control of the Andinaq Kingdom would be kept safe from enemy attacks.

Lorist could understand why Potterfang came to those conclusions. However, as the convoy and the vagabonds were about to leave Kobo City for the family dominion, Lorist no longer cared about what would transpire over there and felt that they should be more worried about the journey ahead of them.

Two days later, the troops the Second Highness sent arrived at Kobo City and Charade passed the defense of the city to them as well as the 10 million kilograms of food there.

Out of Lorist's expectations however was how the troops didn't increase the fortifications of the city; on the contrary, they proceeded to dismantle the fortifications. They spent around ten days to completely remove the defensive walls and ruin the tens of sentry towers before taking the food and leaving.

"Good Sol…" Charade cursed. "What a devious move… He's practically using our convoy as bait now…"

With a gloomy face, Lorist said, "We have to increase our traveling and transportation speed. It's fortunate that we sent some of us off a few days ahead of schedule. If we only started our departure now, it would've been too late. Order the light cavalry scouts to scan the area and watch out for the movements of the noble families within Delamock Province, especially the ones near the southern border next to the Iblia Kingdom. Transport the rest of the people and goods to the river crossing point…"

Nobody would've expected that the Second Highness would actually send his troops to render the strongly-fortified Kobo City useless. The road from Kobo City to the crossing point was around 150 kilometers long. Given the scale and size of the convoy which was hindered by the additional 100000 plus vagabonds, they would have to spend at least three months to travel that far under normal circumstances. With the

crossing of Metropoulos River further bottlenecking their progress, it would take them even longer to arrive at the family dominion.

It was already near the end of the 2nd month and even if the Second Prince led his troops to attack Delamock Province one month later, it would take only 15 days for his troops to make their way from the border to Kobo City. When they notice that the city's defensive capability had been crippled, they would be faced with only two options: to advance towards Vanades City or to tail the convoy and attack them while they're stuck crossing the Metropoulos River.

Given the amount of resources the convoy had and the Second Prince's insatiable greed, it was easy to guess which choice he would make.

Lorist was currently filled with rage. He had been willing to unconditionally hand Kobo City to the Second Highness and even provide 10 million kilograms of food in hopes that he would defend the city and face off against the troops of the Second Prince, thus allowing the convoy more time to cross the river and arrive at the Northlands. However, he didn't think that the Second Highness would be that savage and sabotage Kobo City intentionally to put the convoy in further danger.

"Good Sol!" Lorist cursed towards the skies. In actuality, he wasn't afraid of the Second Prince's forces given the current military strength of the convoy. While it wouldn't be impossible for them to be able to completely fend off their assaults, if they were able to wipe out 3000 enemies, how would that justify their own losses of around 800 because of the Second Highness's actions? Even if they defeated the Second Prince, what benefits would they get? Nothing! They might even anger the father-in-law of the Second Prince, the mighty Duke Fisablen, as a result.

In truth, none of them were fools; Lorist wasn't one and neither was the Second Highness. The reason Lorist wanted to make his way out of the Madras Duchy was so that he wouldn't be taken advantage of by the Second Highness in the first place. He could also head to his dominion and start developing it as soon as possible. However, the Second Highness insisted on involving Lorist in this conflict in hopes that the convoy's forces would be able to buy him some time to prepare for battle and even hoped that the two clashing forces of the convoy and the Second Prince would result in heavy losses on both sides so that he could reap all the benefits easily.

As expected of a person who would do anything to realize his ambition! Lorist was forced to accept that he had miscalculated gravely and shouldn't have placed his hopes

on the Second Highness in the first place. Now that the Second Highness had pulled a move like this, all the convoy stood to gain from it was losses.

"Heed my orders…" Lorist said after thinking solemnly for quite some time.

"Potterfang is to lead his heavy-armored infantry to reach the river crossing point as soon as possible and begin setting up camp as well as have some men start building some defensive fortifications.

"Loze, Terman and Pete will each lead the heavy-armored cavalry, knight brigade and mounted archers respectively to expropriate the carriages of the landed nobles of Delamock Province as well as some goat skin rafts and fishing boats. Try to get as many as possible. If anyone dares to put up any resistance…" Lorist paused, before coldly saying, "Kill them without question!

"After Malek leaves with part of the garrison legion, Freiyar will maintain the security and order of the convoy members and the vagabonds. If anyone dares to cause trouble, kill them off!

"Also, the work smiths must use whatever method they can to construct enough boats for us to make at least four floating bridges across the river. If we lack materials and tools for that, have Loze and his men be in charge of expropriating them."

Reidy recorded every order Lorist barked out on a piece of thick beastskin before handing it to Lorist to be signed. Patt dripped some hot red wax onto the location of the signature for Lorist to seal with his ring. After that, Patt rolled up the beastskin and put it into a silver tube and sealed it with more wax before stamping on the seal of the raging bear and handing the tube to the guards to be passed on.

"We have to hasten our plans as well. By the end of this month, no matter what, we have to finish moving the food within Kobo City and leave this place," Lorist said as he turned towards Charade.

Charade merely nodded.

……

By the time Lorist made his way to the crossing point within Baron Silas's territory, it was already the 6th day of the 3rd month. Apart from roughly a thousand troublemakers who were excommunicated from the convoy and the vagabond group,

the rest of the people were traveling to the crossing point at that very moment.

Three floating bridges had already been built across the Metropoulos River with the fourth one being halfway done. On the opposite shore, a convoy camp could be seen and the convoy members who had arrived were already crossing the river using two of the floating bridges. The third floating bridge was being used to transport the resource-carrying carriages to the other side. The coachmen carefully led their horses and carriages across the river from the bridge.

"Milord, you should go rest at the bastide nearby," Potterfang said as he approached Lorist.

Lorist looked at the direction Potterfang was pointing in and understood that he was referring to Baron Silas's bastide. He then asked, "Where's Baron Silas?"

"Who?" Potterfang asked curiously.

"I was talking about the local dominion lord," Lorist replied.

Potterfang revealed a surprised look and pointed towards the port as he said, "He's over there…"

Lorist turned his head to look only to see a high wooden frame where four to five corpses could be seen hanging in mid air.

"Whose work is that?"

"Yuriy and Loze," replied Potterfang.

"Why?"

"That dominion lord didn't allow us to build the floating bridges and said that a hundred kilometers within the range of the crossing point was his territory and that we had to pay if we wanted to cross the river. Angered, Yuriy and Loze hung him up right away and occupied his bastide in the meantime."

Lorist was speechless as he thought, *yet another fellow who has a death wish… Is he blind? Did he not notice the number of soldiers we had? He still thinks that it is peacetime within the empire and that nobody dared to offend nobles… To think that he insisted on collecting toll instead of withdrawing back into his bastide to defend it… It's his own*

fault for being so money-minded to the point of being willing to risk his own life for it.

Yuriy and Loze were not the most diplomatic if Lorist's men. One was among the earliest followers of Lorist since the days of Dawn Academy and the other was a person who had just been given the moniker of 'Fiercetiger' by Lorist. Given that they had hung more than 100 nobles as they traveled through the Andinaq Kingdom, they had long lost all respect they had for nobility. Since Baron Silas was considered to be a subordinate of Duke Madras, he was considered to be an enemy and Yuriy and Loze didn't have the slightest reservation about sending him to the gallows.

"Whatever… Get him down from there and bury him. Since we knew each other, it wouldn't be right to leave him hanging so unsightly like that."

"Yes, milord."

After another ten days, Loze, Terman and Pete returned. It was already their third expropriation run and they had long taken whatever they could from the nearby territories. So, they had to venture further this time around and brought back around 1000 huge carriages as well as more than 100 goat skin rafts and tens of small fishing boats along with 200 or so resource-filled carriages. These were all the loot they obtained from wiping out three noble families that dared to resist.

Lorist noticed that the rafts and boats they got as well as the ones the work smiths constructed were sufficient for six floating bridges, so he stopped the passionate Loze and gang from any further expropriation attempts. He also allocated more carriages to Charade so that he could increase the rate of sending the rest of the people to the other side while also letting the soldiers rest for two days. After that, they only had to make the wooden planks to quicken the construction of the floating bridge.

On the 18th day of the 3rd month, Yuriy rushed to the port and told Lorist something surprising. On the 12th day of the 3rd month, the king of the Iblia Kingdom, also known as the Second Prince of the former empire, Krissen Iblia, proclaimed that on the grounds of sending reinforcements to the Madras Duchy to defend them from the Andinaq Kingdom's invasion, he would send his 70000-strong force to attack the Andinaq Kingdom's forces through the land of the Madras Duchy.

This time, the Second Prince borrowed three armies from his father-in-law, Duke Fisablen. Combined with his own garrison army as well as the subordinate nobles' soldiers, he managed to rally up 70000 men and led them into the Delamock Province.

"Sol, where did he get so much food to sustain an army like that? Aren't they only beginning to harvest the winter wheat?" Lorist asked curiously, before he came to an instant realization. "Darn! They're getting more cunning one after another! He's planning to rob the food of his enemies' forces to sustain his own army!"

However, Lorist wasn't too concerned about the Second Prince's army because the construction of the five floating bridges had already been completed with the 6th already in the works. The convoy members and the vagabonds that were still on their way no longer had to wait and could cross over to the camp on the opposite bank to rest right away.

The only thing that troubled Lorist was the 60 million kilograms of food. If each four-wheeled carriage carried 1000 kilograms of food, then 10000 of those carriages could only transport 10 million kilograms of food each round, meaning that they had to make six trips to and fro the river to completely ship everything to the other side.

Lorist called for Potterfang and had him lead the heavy-armored infantry soldiers to the opposite bank first so that they could guard the camp over there. As the people and supplies they had increased, it was already beyond the ability of Terman's knight brigade and one company of light cavalry scouts to maintain security over there.

Potterfang however expressed his worries on how he wouldn't be able to defend against the Second Prince's forces' attacks after he moved the heavy-armored infantry to the other side of the river.

Lorist merely laughed out loud and said that there was currently no need to worry about the Second Prince's forces as the Second Prince was planning to get more food to sustain his own army, so there's no way he would be able to catch up to the convoy at the river so quickly. Even if he did send some forces over, it would only be a small squad at most. With Loze's three regiments of heavy-armored cavalry guarding the place, the small group of cavalrymen the Second Prince would hypothetically send posed no threat whatsoever.

"Also, when you cross the river, conquer the town on that side as well. Get that viscount… Erm, what was he called again… Something-wof… Well, just hang him in front of his town," instructed Lorist.

"If I may ask, milord, why? It's just a shabby old town," Potterfang said curiously. Ever since the convoy arrived and started building the floating bridges and transported

their supplies across, the people of that town merely stayed cooped up within without even bothering to send someone over to ask about the situation, causing Terman's knight brigade to not even bother to go check that town out.

"The messengers you guys sent from the convoy were accused of being bandits and most of them were killed by the garrison soldiers of that town with only five of the messengers managing to escape. Back when I crossed the river to seek out the convoy the last time, I've already hung the garrison soldiers that were collecting toll at the customs point nearby. Today, I feel like pulling out the roots of that damned place once and for all," Lorist explained.

"Your will is my command, milord."

The moment Potterfang and his troops crossed over to the other side, they launched into a full-on charge and managed to conquer the town without a single casualty. After half an hour, Potterfang grabbed a horse and rushed back without delay.

"Milord, that shabby town didn't have many people there at all. I heard that Viscount Darwof brought the men of his town to join up with Duke Loggins's forces to attack the Norton Family… I believe that transpired more than a month ago…"

"What did you say?" Lorist was so shocked by the news he almost jumped in response. *Was the duke unable to accept his loss? Did he start plotting against us again?*

"Order Yuriy to mobilize the light cavalry scouts to gather some information about the situation within the Northlands. Also, have Jim bring a squad of men there to check out on the family dominion. Since he used to be a mercenary, he should be rather well-versed with the terrain of the Northlands. Patt, you should follow him there as well," said Lorist as he calmed down and realized that there wasn't a need to be so disturbed at all.

Lorist himself understood how well-defended the Firmrock Castle was. Additionally, with Divine Marksman Josk guarding the place, he felt that he didn't have to worry much about their safety. Additionally, the route heading towards the middle of the dominion that the duke's men used previously had already been destroyed, so there was no way for them to attack the Norton Family dominion without first going through Firmrock Castle. *Is the duke seriously going to challenge Firmrock Castle with the farmer soldiers of his junior nobles? Hehe, what a joke…*

Lorist felt that he should first get a better understanding of the situation and come to a decision when the rest of the people and supplies get sent over to the other side. *I definitely have to give that dogshit of a duke a serious slap in the face. For him to dare to provoke me again… Does he think that I would only defend without taking the initiative to attack?*

This time, Charade employed the same method he used to send the people from Vanades City to Kobo City. He set up multiple convoy camps spread out 50 kilometers from each other along the route to Metropoulos River from Kobo City that acted as interchange stations and the carriages only had to travel to and fro between their stations to transport the people and resources to the next stop. Before long, they were able to begin crossing the river right away.

On the 3rd day of the 4th month, the light cavalry scouts sent to check out on the Second Prince's troops had returned with the news that the Second Prince's forces were busy harvesting the winter wheat while suppressing the resistance of the nobles within Delamock Province. So far, only a fraction of the nobles in that province still survived. Most others had already been hanged by the Second Prince on the basis of collaborating with the Andinaq Kingdom and refusing to send reinforcements to aid Duke Madras's ally, the Second Prince himself.

On the 5th day of the 4th month of Year 1768 of the Grindian calendar, Lorist himself was one of the last people to cross the river and he ordered for the six floating bridges to be destroyed. Thus, the convoy and the vagabonds finally made their way to the Northern Highlands.

Chapter 164
Conditions and Request

Within the wide tent, everyone present was listening to Lorist speak as he pointed towards the beastskin map of the Northern Highlands.

"So far this is the situation of the Northlands. Given that Duke Loggins covets the riches of our family but lacks the military force to take it, he has rallied up the various nobles of the land and managed to gather a force of 50000 plus men to attack Firmrock Castle. So far, the soldiers have been there for about one month and has attacked our castle three times, sustaining heavy losses without any substantial gains in the process. The nobles who lost much of their soldiers are already quite frustrated and it seems that they're even trying to avoid attacking the castle by using a ballot method to decide which one would be the next to send their forces ahead…"

Everyone within the tent laughed out heartily at that comment.

Lorist stopped laughing as he continued, "We have already contacted Knight Josk who is defending Firmrock Castle and he said that we shouldn't need to worry about those shambled and disgruntled nobles and that even if they had another 100 years to prepare, they wouldn't be able to take down Firmrock Castle. He's also really glad that our convoy has already arrived at the Northlands and expressed his anticipation finally meet the rest of us.

"Right now, we are at the western part of the Northlands and it will take us 5 days to travel to the family dominion on horseback. If we're traveling on foot, I believe the time required will be longer than that and given the scale of the convoy and the supplies it is transporting, it will still take us more or less one month to arrive. On the way, I've decided to conquer this place over here…" Lorist said as he pointed to a point on the map. "Count Spenseid's dominion. It is half a day of travel on horseback from Firmrock Castle and it's a great transit point for the convoy members, vagabonds and supplies.

"What troubles me is how erratically Count Spenseid has been behaving. To be honest, they've been rather good neighbors to our family. Even though our relationship was not too amiable, our two families have always maintained an unspoken mutual

respect. I don't understand why this time the count has so passionately responded to the duke's call to arms and was even the first one to lead his forces to attack our castle. This really just came out of the blue…"

Lorist scratched his head and continued, "Well, we don't really need to know the reason anyway. Since he's willing to become the enemy of the Norton Family, then he must be prepared to receive our retribution as well. I have already ordered Yuriy to attack his bastide and start scouting the land around it. Pog…"

Potterfang stood up and said, "Milord, I'm awaiting your orders."

"Set out later with your heavy-armored infantry and head to Count Spenseid's dominion to take charge of the castle and start setting up a camp there. The supplies of the convoy and the vagabonds will head there later and you are tasked to maintain order and security there."

"Yes, milord."

"Freiyar, Malek, your garrison legion shall ensure the safety of the convoy and the vagabonds as they travel towards the count's dominion. Terman's knight brigade will also be there to be the main force to respond to any emergency situations. If anything happens, Freiyar will be in charge with Terman and Malek being his aides, understood?"

"Yes, milord. We understand," said the three of them in unison as they stood up and saluted.

Lorist continued to give his orders. "The camp over here and the transportation of the people and supplies will be managed chiefly by Charade with their safety being put in the care of the guard division. Dulles's carroballista unit, Pete's mounted archers and Loze's three heavy-armored cavalry regiments will be led by me personally. We will sweep the whole of the southern area of the Northlands and suck the rich lands of the duke dry. I want to let him understand the consequences of offending the Norton Family. Finally, we will gather up at Count Spenseid's dominion before we give the idiots attacking Firmrock Castle a huge surprise and taste of our family's military might.

"Pete, you shall lead the mounted archers to blockade the area from Bing Mountain to Somm River so that word of our attack against the southern area of the Northlands

doesn't spread to the soldiers that have gathered up before Firmrock Castle. I will order Yuriy's light cavalry scouts to cooperate with you on that matter as well."

"Yes, milord."

"Loze, you will bring two of the heavy-armored cavalry regiments over to the Hendliff Suspension Bridge's crossing point where Freist Castle is located and force the soldiers defending it to turtle up within the castle. Originally, that area is defended by four regiments of the Northland Army numbering around 10000 soldiers. However, the duke has mobilized around two regiments of 5000 men with him to attack Firmrock Castle, leaving only 5000 plus men facing off against two regiments of our own heavy-armored cavalrymen. You can try to bait them out and eliminate them, but do not besiege the castle under any circumstances. I don't want our soldiers to be sacrificed for no good reason, understood?"

"Your will is my command, milord. I won't disappoint you," Fiercetiger Loze said as he stood up straight.

"The remaining heavy-armored cavalry regiment and the carroballista unit will be commanded by me personally. Coupled with another squad of guards, we will begin our attack against the dominion of the duke himself. I want to move everything from riches, food, weapons and equipment, carriages, Northlander Horses and various kinds of livestock to farmers, work smiths and artisans to our own dominion. Confiscate the riches of the nobles and we will also expropriate all the goods of merchants for half of the market price. Charade, you will also need to prepare a small convoy to ship all our loot from there," Lorist said as he made the decision to deprive the duke's dominion of every resource he could get his hands on.

"Milord, please wait. You seem to have forgotten that there is a unit of the duke's army stationed there. I'm a little curious why all 5000 soldiers of the Northland Army would be stationed at the manor at the duke's dominion's border? The two other bastides and seven towns within the dominion are each only defended by a squad of Northland Army soldiers. Even the duke's own manor is policed by a mere company of men. Could it be that there is a trap waiting for us there instead?" Potterfang asked.

Lorist laughed out and tapped on the spot Potterfang mentioned before saying, "It's my fault for not explaining it properly to you. In actuality, this unit here no longer obeys the duke's orders. The leader of this unit is Knight Hennard. You guys should know that he has been captured by me before. Due to the duke's insane outburst and

accusation of Hennard for not shipping the riches they obtained after the massacre of Wildnorth Town back, he attributed the fault of the loss to the two knights. Even though knight Chevany died in battle, Duke Loggins still resorted to exiling the knight's family members and tossed his corpse into the wilderness. This action caused some soldiers of the Northland army to revolt.

"Additionally, the duke even wanted to get Hennard back by paying a reward fee for a convict instead of the full price of a knight's ransom. I couldn't stand the obscenity of the duke's actions, so I released Knight Hennard and the other Silver ranked knights. According to some reports, when Knight Hennard returned to the dominion, he relied on the other Silver ranked knights to contact the subordinates of Knight Chevany who were not happy with how their dead leader was treated and proceeded to take over two regiments of soldiers on his own and conquered this manor for themselves and began to ignore the orders of the duke completely. The duke couldn't do anything about that situation either and was forced to accept the status quo.

Even though they're still technically part of the Northland Army, Duke Loggins no longer holds any power over them. Otherwise, he wouldn't use the soldiers he stationed at the Hendliff Suspension Bridge and Freist Castle to attack Firmrock Castle. I plan to visit this conquered bastide tomorrow and meet Knight Hennard to try to convince him to just sit by and allow our forces to roam through the dominion without resistance. If he doesn't know what's good for him, I'm pretty sure our forces will be able to wipe his men out completely in an open field battle."

Potterfang nodded and said, "Alright, if that's the case, I no longer have anything to worry about. I pray that your plan will run smoothly."

"Okay, that will be all. Let's all make our respective preparations to make the flag of the Norton Family known across the Northlands and show the Northlanders how the Roaring Raging Bear vents its anger…"

"Yes, milord!" shouted the rest within the tent energetically before they left.

……

Cherry Blossom Ridge was the name of a manor which was located at a place of impeccable scenery. It was said that the third Duke of the Northlands had built the manor there to be used as a vacation house because he loved the view of the cherry blossom trees. However, at this moment, two groups of soldiers were in confrontation

with each other at that location.

Upon seeing Lorist emerge from the midst of his force, Knight Hennard said in a surprised voice, "Why have you come over here? Isn't the duke attacking Firmrock Castle?"

Lorist laughed and said, "I'm here to see you, my old friend. Well, the other reason is that I'm here to attack the duke's dominion. However, I'm a little concerned by your troops which are stationed here. If you can pretend that you don't know what is going on outside your territory, then I will be relieved. Tell me, Knight Hennard, what conditions do you have so that you will not interfere with my forces?"

Without answering Lorist's question, Knight Hennard said, "Lord Baron Norton, you should refer to me as Baron Shazin. Last year, I inherited the barony of my father and he has already retired from the position as well."

Using his finger to point at another direction, he said, "That is where my dominion is at."

Surprised, Lorist said, "Oh, congratulations, Lord Baron Shazin."

"Well, you can call me Hennard like usual. That's what I like my friends to call me."

"Hehe, then please call me Locke as well, friend."

Lorist gave it some thought before he asked, "Why didn't you bring your troops back to your dominion?"

"I can't, the dominion is too barren to be able to support all 5000 of my men. In actuality, this place used to be within the territory of my family as well. However, the third Duke of the Northlands liked the scenery of the cherry blossoms here and forcefully took half of my family's dominion, forcing us to become a vassal family for them. Now that I have my men stationed here, isn't that the same as having taken my family dominion back?" Hennard said.

"Then what do you think of my proposal just now, Hennard?" Lorist asked.

Revealing a sly smile, Hennard said, "Locke, you've brought up a tough call for me to make. After all, no matter what, I'm still a retainer of the Lord Duke. The men I have under me are also the soldiers of the duke's Northland Army. If I sit still and allow you

to ravage the duke's dominion, how would I uphold my honor as a knight?"

Lorist furrowed his brow and said, "Are you saying you want to engage in a battle with me?"

Shaking his head, Hennard said, "I'm not stupid. Look at your men's equipment and the leather armor my soldiers are wearing. I'm not a big fan of smashing an egg against a rock. How about this, I'm sure you wouldn't want to fight against us either, right? Just accept three conditions of mine and we'll think of a way to prevent conflict between us."

"Tell me those conditions of yours then."

"First, don't touch this manor as well as Evanson Town nearby here. My men rely on these two places for sustenance."

"Agreed," Lorist said as he nodded.

"Second, I want to send some of my men along with you on your operation. They want to move their family members back to my dominion so that my soldiers can truly become part of the Shazin Family's forces."

Lorist pondered for a bit and said, "You're saying that the duke is threatening you with the lives of the family members of your soldiers?"

Hennard nodded and replied, "After I inherited the land and title of my father, I wrote the duke a letter to inform him that I was no longer his family knight but a vassal noble of his now. However, the duke didn't want to recognize the legitimacy of my birthright and didn't want to give me a certificate of verification and said that if the soldiers 'leap' to my side, he would punish their family members. That's why we're currently at a stalemate."

If a family knight of another family was granted a title by his own family, then he would no longer remain a family knight and his status would change into that of a vassal noble instead. In Hennard's situation, as he had inherited the noble title and land of his father, he no longer had to unconditionally obey the orders of the duke. Hennard's father actually made the decision to pass down his title to his son so that he wouldn't be labeled a rebellious knight by the duke, allowing Hennard to resign himself and become a vassal noble instead.

'Leaping' was a term for a knight who left his dominion lord to become a wandering or freelance knight due to disagreements in policy. Becoming a vassal noble to leave the position of a family knight could also be considered leaping.

"Then, didn't the duke ever think of sending his soldiers to attack you?" Lorist asked curiously.

"Of course he did, but he couldn't do it. My men are still technically part of the Northland Army and nobody would be able to fight against their own. Even if Duke Loggins gave that order, nobody in his army would bother to obey it. That's why he diverted his attention against your Norton Family. Why aren't you worried about the situation at Firmrock Castle and came here to attack the duke's dominion instead?" Hennard asked Lorist.

"Hehe, I'm sure you've seen the defensive fortifications at Firmrock Castle yourself. Do you seriously think that the duke's soldiers and the personal forces and farmer soldiers of the noble families he rallied up would be able to pose so much as a threat to us?"

"You do have a point. So, do you accept that condition of mine?"

"Sure thing. You can send your men to escort their family members back," Lorist said. "What's your third condition?"

"I want to send a regiment of soldiers to join your men and disguise themselves as soldiers of the same unit so that I can launch a joint assault on the dominion as well. I want half of the loot we get," Hennard requested audaciously.

"Buzz of. You'll get ten percent at most," Lorist bargained.

"Come on, don't be so stingy. The 5000 plus men of mine who defend this place only have their bare necessities satisfied and don't have any additional benefits at all. No matter what, I have to consider the future of my subordinates, right? You can't swallow up all the benefits for yourself you know. If you consider me a friend, you should leave some for me," Hennard reasoned.

"I have more than ten times the number of subordinates you have. At most, I'll give you 20 percent of the cut. If you're not satisfied with that, it's better if we just fight it out," Lorist said.

Hennard revealed a look of surprise and said, "You're just bluffing… I don't believe you have so many men…"

However, as he noticed Lorist's gloomy expression, he agreed reluctantly and said, "Fine, 20 percent it is. I agree. However, I have one final request."

Angered, Lorist said, "Is there even an end to your requests? I'm sure it'll be much simpler if we just fought it out."

Hennard hurriedly waved his hands and said, "This is a personal request of mine. It's fine if you don't agree to it…"

"Fine, let's hear it," Lorist said in annoyance, before he saw Hennard fidgeting around in an embarrassed manner.

"Um, ahem… Locke… I was wondering if you'll be okay with sending Mina, Honey, Glise and Molina back to me… I've been missing them for the past half year…"

"Wait, who are those people you just mentioned? How would I know who they are? I don't recognize any of those names…" Lorist said in confusion.

"Well… Back during that night when I was caught by you at Wildnorth Town, they were the four women who were in the room with me. I really fancy them a lot… You must've kept them for yourself to warm your bed, right? Can you return them to me?" Hennard explained.

Thinking hard to recall that moment, Lorist did in fact remember seeing a few women during the night of Hennard's capture. Shaking his head, he said, "I didn't take them as my concubines. They must be with the other women we rescued from Wildnorth Town. I even ensured that they wouldn't be bothered by anyone else. However, I am quite curious how you're able to take fancy to them even though you killed their fathers and brothers. Aren't you afraid that they would kill you in your sleep for revenge?"

Hennard clicked his tongue and said, "I wasn't the one who wanted to kill their family members. It's the duke's orders and it has nothing to do with me. In fact, it was me who protected them from being ravaged by the other soldiers and it was them who wanted to thank me for my benevolence with their own bodies. I'm quite glad that you didn't lay a hand on them, Locke. You're really the best brother one could ever ask for. So, when can you send them back to me?"

"You can go pick them up yourself as long as they're willing to follow you back. If they don't consent, you can't forcefully bring them back either. I'm sure you understand that nothing good will come from doing everything by force. Also, if you don't resist my forces as a vassal noble of the duke, aren't you worried about what others might think about this?" Lorist asked.

"That's a small issue. Just watch and learn," said Hennard as he turned his horse around and rode back to his camp before blowing the horn signal for battle preparation. He then drew his sword, pointed it at Lorist and announced loudly that he was going to declare war on them for the sake of the duke's honor.

However, when Hennard was charging forward on horseback, his mount fell head first and 'injured' its rider, causing Hennard to be brought back into his manor by his subordinates to defend it and 'recover'.

Lorist and the soldiers of his heavy-armored cavalry merely stared in stupor as Hennard played out the battle scene he wrote and directed himself, including his glorious fall in battle and retreat into the manor.

"Is this really okay?! What the heck was that?!" Lorist exclaimed.

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An excerpt from the War Chronicles of the Continent, Northlands chapter:

On the 11th day of the 4th month on Year 1768 of the Grindian Calendar, the new lord and leader of the Norton Family, Norton Lorist, led his men to attack the dominion of the Duke of the Northlands. The leader of the 5000 Northland Army troops, Gold ranked Knight Hennard, charged into battle gloriously to resist the enemy attack. In the midst of battle, Knight Hennard's mount lost control and caused him to fall off it. Despite being badly injured from the fall, the brave knight persisted and continued to fight until he was forcefully dragged back into the manor by his own subordinates, causing him to have no other choice but to defend the manor without being able to continue resisting the enemy forces. As a result, the Norton forces swept past the dominion of Duke Loggins and demolished the prosperous lands that the Loggins Family had spent so long to build up and nurture. That event would eventually be known to historians as 'The Plundering of the Southern Northlands'.

Chapter 165
Plunder, Move, and Destroy

"Kill anyone who resist! Kill anyone who resists!" roared the heavy-armored soldiers loudly all over the village. One poor farmer after another brought their meager belongings, farming tools and livestock with them as they squeezed into the small carriages which brought them to an empty space within the village. After that, they were assigned to three different groups by a middle-aged man holding a beastskin name list.

The group at the southernmost area of the village had the fewest number of people, among which included the village chief, the security officer, the tax officer, the mill owner and some other managerial officers who were the basis of Duke Loggins's government of the southern Northlands. However, that group looked to be the worst among the three as their assets were all confiscated and they were only allowed to bring their families with them along with some dried food to head towards the manor of Duke Loggins in Gildusk City.

The group of people facing the west also had a relatively small number of people. Most of them were the family members of the soldiers of the Northland Army soldiers and they were to be brought to Cherry Blossom Ridge per Hennard's agreement with Lorist.

The group facing the north was the largest of the three. Their destination was a camp roughly 50 kilometers away where they would be divided into smaller groups to be sent to a refugee camp at Count Spenseid's dominion before finally being brought to the Norton Family dominion to begin their lives anew.

"You can start setting the fires…" ordered a heavy-armored officer before his ten subordinates tossed flaming torches towards the straw huts within the village. The whole village soon became immersed in a sea of flames, from which a thick pillar of smoke emerged skyward.

Some of the farmers began to cry. Those were the huts that had sheltered their family from the harsh rain and wind throughout the years.

A fearsome escort soldier rushed to the crowd and shouted in a loud voice, "What's there to cry about? 'If the old doesn't go, the new won't come'. We've already told you that after we arrive at the family dominion, everyone will receive new farmland and houses which are much better than your pathetic straw huts!"

Countless pillars of smoke continued to rise from the dominion of Duke Loggins which was considered to be the most prosperous area of the Northlands. Under the instructions of Lorist, they spent only 16 days to sweep through the duke's dominion. The two manors of the duke, the six towns and Gildusk City had already fallen into Lorist's hands.

Within the whole of the duke's dominion, apart from Hennard's soldiers who were defending Cherry Blossom Ridge and the nearby Evanson Town, only a around 5000 soldiers of the Northland Army were guarding the Hendliff Suspension Bridge customs point and Freist Castle.

The duke's Gold ranked knight, Aordem, who led the troops, mobilized around 2500 men to mount an attack against the Norton forces which were forcing the villagers to move away. However, they were met with an ambush by Fiercetiger Loze and his two regiments of heavy-armored cavalry. Aordem himself fought Loze on the battlefield and got gravely injured. However, he managed to escape with roughly 600 soldiers and abandoned the customs point at the bridge and retreated into Freist Castle with the rest of the soldiers with the intent of turtling inside it and defending it.

After eliminating most of the remnant Northland Army forces, the Norton Family's soldiers no longer had anything to worry about and focused on ransacking the duke's treasury, food warehouses, and armories as well as confiscating the wealth of the duke's vassal nobles and expropriating the goods and carriages of the merchants who had arrived at the duke's dominion. Following the order to migrate by Lorist, the Norton Family forces then turned their attention to the villages within the duke's dominion.

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Below is an excerpt of a book titled 'Northlands Journal' which was written by a merchant who had been conducting business in the Northlands during that time. The journal caused quite some commotion a few hundred years after it was written as it described 'The Plundering of the Southern Northlands' from a different perspective in great detail, eventually becoming the primary subject of study for the rise of the

Norton Family.

"This was an unprecedentedly huge, organized and carefully planned maneuver. The forces of the Norton Family were known to be even more fearsome than the worst of bandits. They emptied the city's warehouses completely, confiscated all the property of the nobles and didn't even leave behind a single piece of crude pottery.

"My merchant convoy toiled for an extremely long time to transport our goods to the Northlands, only to be robbed when we were about to check in to the inn within the capital of the southern Northlands, Gildusk City. They forced us to sell our goods for half the market price. Even though I personally didn't incur any losses from that exchange, the profit gained is incredibly miniscule compared to what I had envisioned. Poor little Tini… my heart pains at the thought of my incompetence for not being able to buy you that beautiful dress so that you can show up at the ball like a princess to grab the limelight…

"Originally, my merchant convoy planned to sell our goods at the Northlands and buy some local goods there to be sold back at home as well. However, given the chaotic situation there as well as our suppliers who had suffered our fate at the hands of the Norton Family's forces, I couldn't get my hands on any local goods. Given the situation, I decided to escape the area. Unfortunately for us, my convoy's carriages required maintenance and our horses needed new horseshoes before we could leave.

"And so, I tried to find a blacksmith. However, I didn't expect that there wasn't even one among the 100000 people of Gildusk City. After spending some money to get some information, I got to know that the Norton Family's forces had forcefully moved all blacksmiths and their family members away from the city. They didn't even spare the common peasants or servants and only left behind the elderly and merchants within the city. Other than that, they also brought many other village chiefs and officers to the city…

"When I returned to the inn, I realized that I no longer had to worry about my carriages as the Norton Family's soldiers once again showed up before me and were here to expropriate them. I didn't bother to resist or object and let them have their way. But they were much better this time around as they paid for the carriages and horses according to the full market price using gold Fordes as currency.

"That day afternoon, we left Gildusk City and began our journey back home on foot. It was only after we left the city that we noticed the villages of the friendly Northlanders

had been set on fire with smoke forming everywhere. The villagers who were hefting their belongings and protecting their wife and children were tearing up as they were escorted away by the forces of the Norton Family.

"Along both sides of the road we took were numerous tall crucifixes where the nobles within the villages or the brave men who resisted the Norton soldiers' violence were hung. We didn't dare to collect their corpses as there were mounted Norton patrol troops passing us by from time to time. When we left the city, we already obtained a permit to travel, so the soldiers didn't pay us any heed. However, the regular checks we received caused us much trouble and frustration.

"As we no longer owned any carriages, we could only travel on foot while carrying our luggage on our backs. We even used some wood to make a sledge which we stored our camping gear on and pulled it along with us, resulting in an even slower traveling speed. If we were on horseback, we would be able to arrive at the Hendliff Suspension Bridge within a day of travel. However, it seemed that we wouldn't be able to arrive there within three days at this rate…

"When we halted to camp at night, a group of patrolling soldiers stopped by and borrowed our campsite for some rest. I noticed that there was an insignia of a white lion on each of the soldiers' breastplate. A mercenary leader traveling with us secretly told me that those were the equipment that belonged to the famed Whitelion Legion of the former Krissen Empire.

"And so, I brought out a few bottles of fruit wine and treated those soldiers to some drinks and pretended be surprised and asked them whether they were the soldiers of the Whitelion Legion. Those soldiers merely shook their heads and said that they were the soldiers of Count Norton. I exclaimed that I thought that the head of the Norton Family was only a baron and not a count.

"The soldiers then told me proudly that along the way on their journey to the Northlands, the Norton Family's convoy helped the Second Highness of the Andinaq Kingdom to wrestle control of his kingdom, hence stabilizing the state of the kingdom. That's why the Andinaq Royal Family, being the recognized heirs of the legacy of the Krissen Imperial Family, elevated the rank of the Norton Family from that of a baron to a count. The Second Highness even enfeoffed his own principality to the Norton Family. The equipment of the Whitelion Legion was also offered as a reward for their efforts.

"I then asked the soldiers why they were forcing the poor villagers to leave and even burned their villages, to which they replied angrily that it was to teach the greedy Duke of the Northlands a lesson so that he doesn't cause any trouble for the Norton Family again. Due to wanting to develop the Norton Family dominion into a haven during chaotic times so that its people would be able to live blissful and stable lives, the Norton Family leader ordered that everything and everyone within those villages to be moved to the Norton Family dominion as well as the destruction of infrastructure within the duke's dominion so that the duke would no longer be able to recover his power to once again cause the Norton Family and their citizens any more trouble.

"Perhaps because they were grateful for my fruit wine treat, the soldiers left an old horse for me before they departed and even wrote a document for our group to signify that we were merchants who had treated the Norton forces well. That document later saved us lots of trouble during the rest of the journey. Before he left, the squad leader even informed me of a business opportunity: after crossing to the other side of the river from the Hendliff Suspension Bridge, we could get our hands on some carriages which we could resell to the Norton soldiers at the campsite near Freist Castle for a high price.

"That was indeed a good idea. Originally, I was planning to purchase more carriages when I crossed the Hendliff Suspension Bridge to make my way home. However, I thought that the squad leader's idea made sense and decided to try to see if I could make up for the losses my convoy sustained during this trip. And so, I instructed the rest of my men within the group to leave immediately to head for the Hendliff Suspension Bridge…"

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"That felt great!" exclaimed Knight Hennard delightedly as he put down the wrecked chair within his hand and looked at the mess within Duke Loggins's study which was created by him during the last half hour.

Raising his head, he saw Lorist looking at him like he was a madman.

A little embarrassed and mad, Knight Hennard said, "What kind of gaze is that? Why are you looking at me like that? Let me tell you something… Wrecking the duke's study has always been something I wanted to do very badly. In the past, when we reported to the duke and said something that angered him, he would start smashing this room up in front of us in a fit of rage, causing us to have to wait nervously until he calms

himself down. That's how I eventually started imagining how good it would feel for me to smash this room up myself. Today, my wish has finally been fulfilled."

Lorist snorted from his nostrils and said, "I didn't know you had this side to you. Being by the side of the duke must've caused some sort of trauma or complex to develop within your mind… That's why you feel so fulfilled after smashing up the room like a kid…"

Hennard jumped and said, "I'm not afraid of him at all. It's only because he was my lord and as his knight, I couldn't disobey his orders. Now that I'm Baron Shazin, I can ignore the unreasonable orders of the duke openly as a dominion lord…"

Lorist said in an annoyed voice, "Alright, did you have your fun? Let's go if you're done. I have many other things to handle."

"Fine, fine… What's so important that you have to attend to them personally? Can't you just let your subordinates do it? You don't look like a dominion lord at all being almost as busy as a lapdog…" Hennard said as he put a grey-colored linen scarf around his face. "Wait, I need to cover my face up so that others don't recognize me…"

As Hennard was the rumored 'heroic knight who had attempted to resist the forces of the Norton Family before he was injured and forced to retreat', he had to disguise himself when walking beside Lorist. The night before, he showed up at Lorist's tent and said that he wanted to follow Lorist back to the dominion to look for his four concubines, when in fact, he was to act as a guide through the dominion of the duke for the Norton Family forces.

Lorist also treated him rather well. Seeing that there was an opportunity to be taken advantage of, Hennard didn't hold back and brought a whole regiment of troops to collect their metal armor, leaving behind only less than 300 men defending Cherry Blossom Ridge. By the time Hennard's men emerged from the campsite of the convoy, they had already donned a set of metal armor which was previously used by the convoy's forces.

After donning the guise of the Norton Family soldiers, Hennard's men behaved even more savagely and made sure to plunder the dominion of the duke thoroughly and were especially cruel to the nobles and officers within the villages. With the 5000 men who were familiar with the area, Lorist led his men to sweep through the duke's dominion without much resistance.

The only downside was that Hennard's Silver ranked knights went to recruit another 2000 soldiers of the Northland Army from various areas and went to Lorist's convoy's campsite and shamelessly asked to be allowed to switch their gear for metal armor.

The company of Northland Army soldiers that defended Gildusk City had also surrendered because of Hennard, who had tasked his Silver ranked knight to inform the company leader to not put up any futile resistance and make pointless sacrifices. He advised the company leader to surrender first so that they would be able to retain enough strength and retreat to the Cherry Blossom Ridge for now and unite under the leadership of Hennard himself to reestablish the glory of the Northland Army.

With only that, Gildusk City fell into Lorist's hands, followed by Hennard's pestering of Lorist to go to the duke's manor because he had a dream that he absolutely wanted to fulfill. Lorist only just realized that smashing up the duke's study was that dream…

At that moment, Reidy approached them and said, "Milord, we discovered someone within the water dungeon of the duke's manor…"

After hesitating for a while, Reidy said, "It's Baron Camorra…"

Stunned, Lorist exclaimed, "Who? Did you just say Baron Camorra?"

Hennard who had his face covered started as well. "Why would he be locked up in the water dungeon? No wonder I couldn't get hold of him no matter how many messengers I sent… Bring him here, quick…"

Naturally, Reidy also knew who that masked knight was and he nodded to Lorist before heading off into the distance.

Chapter 166
Battle Preparations at Firmrock Castle

Baron Camorra was quickly brought over. According to the guard who was tasked to watch him, he had been placed in the water dungeon for more than a month. Had it not been for the guards' secret care of the baron, that is, allowing him to rest somewhere dry during the night, the baron's legs might have long been wrinkled to the point of rotting by the constant submersion in water.

Currently, Baron Camorra was still unconscious. After reading his pulse, Lorist noticed that even though the baron was currently very weak, he only needed some time to recover and let out a breath of relief. He then instructed Reidy to let the baron rest and recover for two days while he himself would find some time to concoct some medicines to help boost the baron's recovery.

After finding the butler and servants of the duke and asking for some information, they got to know the real reason behind Baron Camorra's incarceration in the water dungeon. It all began from the mistake made by Knight Chevany. When the duke first decided to send Knight Chevany and Knight Hennard to go on an expedition against the Norton Family, he told a slave trader acquaintance of his that he would be getting a group of young female slaves sometime in the near future to be sold to him.

In the end, that expedition of his ended up with more than 4000 casualties with one Gold ranked knight dead and another captured. Angered beyond belief, the duke decided to exile the family members of Knight Chevany so that they would live their lives as beggars. After that, he sent Baron Camorra to the Norton Family dominion to pay a fee to bring Knight Hennard and the other Silver ranked knights back as criminals because he intended to punish them, only to be refused by Lorist who instead was unable to accept the fact that the duke had so casually humiliated the knights that served him and released Hennard and the rest without demanding anything in return.

When Baron Camorra returned to the duke's dominion, he was harshly scolded by Duke Loggins who thought that the baron had failed because of incompetence on his part. Hennard and the other Silver ranked knights instead rallied up two regiments of

roughly 5000 soldiers of the Northland Army and took over the Cherry Blossom Ridge to protect themselves. That act caused the duke to be even more infuriated, but he was unable to do much about it, so he vented his anger on Baron Camorra instead.

At that moment, the slave trader acquaintance of the duke rushed over excitedly for his purchase, but the duke didn't have any slaves on hand because of the failed expedition. In the end, Duke Loggins ordered that the beggars, the farmers who had lost their farmland as well as the unemployed people in his city to be captured and made into slaves. He even made sure to specify for the family members of Knight Chevany to be among those people as well.

In the end, the duke's guards were unable to locate the family members of Knight Chevany and upon seeking out some information, they got to know that they had been evacuated from the Northlands by Baron Camorra. And so, they made their report to the duke much to the misfortune of Baron Camorra, who was in a rush to the duke's manor to stop him from carrying out such a ridiculous order as catching his own citizens and selling them to a slave trader as he believed that an act like that would definitely tarnish the reputation of the duke and cause the rest of the citizens to lose all their loyalty towards him.

In the end, the angered duke who had just heard about the evacuation of the family members of Knight Chevany saw Baron Camorra, who dared to rush into his manor to stop him from making slaves out of his own citizens. Not only did Duke Loggins rescind the honorary title he had given Baron Camorra, he even tossed him into the water dungeon for him to starve and rot to his death.

After waving for the butler and servants to leave, Lorist shook his head and sighed before he said, "Duke Loggins really has gone insane this time. However, the guards of the water dungeon weren't lying about secretly taking care of Baron Camorra all this time. Otherwise, he would have starved to death already. Reidy, give each of those guards 5 gold Fordes as a reward for taking care of the baron. Also, give them an invitation to bring their family members to follow us if they're willing so that they won't be punished by Duke Loggins by the time he comes back."

"Yes, milord," Reidy said before he left.

Hennard who was standing beside Lorist said hurriedly, "Locke, you aren't planning to take in Baron Camorra, right? I was about to bring him back to the Cherry Blossom Ridge's castle…"

"Forget it," Lorist said as he glared at Hennard. "If he follows you, his talent and potential will be limited. Think about it yourself, would Camorra have a bright future with you? He will at best be used as a butler or manager. As for me, I appreciate his talent and will definitely allow him to reach his full potential; heck, maybe I'll even be able to make him a landed noble one day."

Hennard was rendered speechless as he understood that Lorist was already a count and not a baron like him. As the aide of the general of the Northland Army, Knight Chevany, Hennard understood Camorra's talents well and knew that without Camorra's support in management and logistics, there was no way that the Northland Army would be able to maintain a scale of over 20000 people. That's why, unlike the Gold ranked knight Tabik, Hennard didn't look down on Camorra one bit.

However, now that Lorist had set his sights on Camorra and has further plans for him, Hennard believed that it was best for him to back down for now as there was no need to offend his benefactor for Camorra alone.

"Alright, you can have Camorra. However, I want some compensation for that," Hennard said with a dissatisfied tone.

"Buzz off… You still want more compensation? Tell me how much benefits you have received from me so far. You even managed to get 2000 more subordinates and had my force equip them with metal armor…" Lorist said as he ignored Hennard's request.

"Hehe, we're friends, right? Good friends shouldn't be so calculative… I just want one person… Is one woman okay with you?" Hennard said with a smile.

"A woman? Who else have you fallen for now?" Lorist asked curiously.

Hennard looked around his surroundings and just as he was about to lean on Lorist's shoulder to whisper to him…

"Hey, don't get too close. If you have something to say, be more candid about it. You're a grown man, so don't be so creepy like the way you're behaving now. Sheesh, I really don't know how a secretive person like you managed to become a proud and glorious knight…" Lorist said as he pushed Hennard away.

"Fine. The one I want is the Lord Duke's most coveted mistress. However, I need you to help me out and send some men to 'kidnap' her before I rescue her heroically as she passes through the Cherry Blossom Ridge…" said Hennard shyly as he shamelessly

recited his plan for him to be the hero that would save the beauty and be thanked with her love and affection for his deed.

"Sol, I bet you will one day die because of a woman. When Reidy returns, you can discuss with him how you want that little act of yours to play out. However, I must advise you to wait for a while for now. Don't forget that you're still 'injured' and resting up within the Cherry Blossom Ridge. There's no way you can be both an injured knight and a hero at the same time…" warned Lorist even though he agreed.

Elated, Hennard rushed away to look for Reidy instantly.

Two days later within one of the guest rooms of the duke's manor, Baron Camorra awoke on his bed and looked at Lorist with surprise. "Why are you here?"

Lorist smiled tranquilly and said, "Why wouldn't I be? The duke personally rallied up the various nobles within the Northlands to attack my family. Naturally, I noticed how scarcely guarded his dominion was, so I took the opportunity to make a visit…"

Baron Camorra laid back on his bed exasperatedly and said, "The Lord Duke is far too stubborn… I have warned him time and again to not disturb the Norton Family… Why wouldn't he listen to me…"

"You shouldn't bother worrying about that duke of yours anymore. The sane can never reason with the insane. He even revoked your honorary title and tossed you into the water dungeon… Had it not been for the few guards who pitied you and fed you enough to keep you alive, I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you right now. Don't think too much about it. Just rest up and recover. In two days, I will gather my soldiers to meet that duke of yours. I will also be bringing you along," Lorist said.

"Wa-wait… Lord Norton… You have already conquered the duke's dominion. Why would you leave now? This land is the most prosperous area within the Northlands. Are you really willing to give it up?" Camorra asked.

"Hehe…" Lorist laughed before he continued, "Given the distance between here and my dominion, it would take 5 days for a messenger to be able to get from one place to another. In essence, occupying the duke's dominion would be akin to splitting the might of the Norton Family into two. I am not that irrational. Before the Norton Family builds up a stable foundation, there's no way that I will set my eyes on the rest of the Northlands. As for how this area is the most prosperous area of the Northlands…

Hehe… That's already a thing of the past."

"Milord, Knight Freiyar has arrived," reported Reidy.

"Alright. Camorra, rest well and recover. When we return to the family dominion, there's quite a number of things that I would require you to help out with. If you have anything you need, just tell the guards and don't hold back," Lorist said before he waved goodbye and left.

Within the lounge of the duke's manor, Lorist asked, "Freiyar, how are the workers and villagers that we have moved feeling? Are they causing you any trouble?" Lorist asked.

Freiyar shook his head and said, "Milord, the situation of the villagers are still fine. Instead, the skilled workers from the city are causing more problems relatively."

"Is there a reason for that?"

"Milord, I believe you are unaware of this, but, Duke Loggins collects 60% of the harvest of the farmers within his dominion. To the farming folk, the remaining 40% of their income is not enough to raise their family, so they usually have only two meals a day. To add to that, half of their livestock produce automatically belong to the duke and the other half will be sold to pay the rest of the taxes with the meager remains of that money being used to purchase other living necessities; they are definitely no stranger to hardship. However, this time we appeared and purchased their livestock with cash and even provided them with three meals each day during the migration process. That's why the farmers are the first to believe our sincerity and were the most cooperative of the bunch."

Freiyar sipped some tea before he continued, "After receiving your orders for us to form another garrison squad to maintain order, Malek and I decided to recruit the men for the squad from the migrating villagers. Those villagers were also really eager to join and we already have enough men for the new squad and we have equipped each of them with a pike and leather armor, which will be more than enough to maintain security and order during the migration process."

Lorist nodded and said, "You and Malek have done well, I am incredibly happy with the results. My intention for you to lead your 5000 mounted garrison soldiers here was so that you can replace Loze and his soldiers who are stationed near Freist Castle. For now, Freist Castle still houses around 3000 Northland Army soldiers who are still

defending it from within. Knight Loze and his two regiments of heavy-armored cavalrymen are stationed outside to suppress them.

"After this, we will be attacking the enemy soldiers who are attempting to take over Firmrock Castle. That's why I need Knight Loze and his two regiments of heavy-armored cavalrymen to be my main force for that operation. Your task is to make sure that the enemy within Freist Castle don't come out and harass our men who are busy with the migration process. Even though Knight Aordem, the leader of the Northland Army soldiers within Freist Castle, has already been injured, you shouldn't be careless, understood?"

"Milord, please be assured that I will carry out my task properly," Knight Freiyar said as he saluted.

Three days later, Fiercetiger Loze brought his two regiments of soldiers and headed back to Gildusk City.

"Let's go into the last battle prior to our arrival home," Lorist said to Els, Loze, Reidy and the rest as he mounted his horse.

The disguised Hennard looked at the empty duke's manor behind him and said, "Locke, why didn't you just set fire on that building like you did the rest?"

"There's no need for that. When the duke moves back and fills that place up with valuables again, I'll be able to loot it when I return. If I burn that place down, the duke will no doubt move and it'll be troublesome for me," Lorist said as he laughed.

Today was the day they retreated from Gildusk City. Lorist pointed with his horse whip towards the distance and said to Knight Hennard, "On our way there, we will pass through the dominions of seven noble families. Since they have decided to side with the duke to declare war with the Norton Family, we don't have to spare them either. We will sweep past their lands as usual. Hennard, I will leave the bastides and towns of these nobles for your men to occupy and I will also have Dulles's carroballista unit provide support for your men."

Knight Hennard merely nodded. For this operation, Lorist would lead three regiments of heavy-armored cavalry himself, Dulles would lead the carroballista unit and Els would lead a company of guards. Compared to Hennard's one regiment of men who were pretending to be the forces of the Norton Family, they were definitely not ideal

for the task of taking over the towns and bastides.

Seven days later, Lorist brought his troops and arrived at Somm River.

The Somm River was a small river within the Northlands which connected to the Metropoulos River at the south with its origin being the Bing Mountain.

After crossing Somm River, one would arrive at Firmrock Castle within one day of travel.

Yuriy and Pete stepped forward to deliver their reports.

"During the past month, you have done really well and managed to stop the enemy from noticing our recent exploits. What is the situation of the enemy camp right now?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, we didn't do as well as you said we did… Before the end of the 4th month, many of the letters of the 37 messengers we captured were love letters of some knight with only a small fraction of them being official documents. The duke did write a few letters himself to reprimand some nobles who did not send any troops to join him on his expedition against our family and demanded for them to come right away. However, we managed to intercept these messengers without issue.

"During the 5th month, however, the enemies seemed to have begun suspecting something. During the past few days, some of our scouts encountered ten plus enemy scouts whom they battled but weren't able to stop completely. Four of them managed to escape in the end and I believe the enemy is now aware of our presence," Yuriy said with his face facing the ground.

"It's fine," Lorist replied as he patted on Yuriy's shoulder. "With our victory already at the horizon, it would make no difference even if they discover the truth. Don't worry, they are no longer able to turn the tables on us. What of Potterfang's side?"

Yuriy replied, "Milord, Sir Potterfang already left with the heavy-armored infantry army yesterday. Following him are Terman's knight brigade and Malek's second division of the garrison legion. They will rendezvous at noon tomorrow at Firmrock Castle. Also, Sir Potterfang sent a message saying that he had captured Count Spenseid and his hundred plus men who were attempting to return to their dominion."

"Count Spenseid? Wasn't he the first to join the duke to attack our castle? Why is he

heading back now? Whatever, have him apprehended for now. I'll settle this issue after the battle."

Lorist then looked at the map and said, "Have the soldiers rest earlier tonight. We will have breakfast at five tomorrow and set out at six so that we will arrive at Firmrock Castle by noon."

"Yes, milord."

……

On the 9th day of the 5th month of Year 1768 of the Grindian Calendar, the great battle at Firmrock Castle that shocked the whole of the Northlands commenced.

During noon at Morgan Hills where the Firmrock Castle stood, the Norton Family's forces that were at the southwest of the area began their assault. The heavy-armored infantry legion led by Potterfang got into five square formations, one for each regiment, and began their march towards the camp of the allied nobles at the east.

The allied noble army of roughly 46000 people led by Duke Loggins was evenly matched in number against the Norton Family's forces which had roughly 43000 men.

In the early moments of battle, the Northland Army's thousand plus longbowmen fired their arrows towards the heavy-armored soldiers of the Norton Family. However, after three volleys, they realized that their arrows weren't able to pierce the Whitelion Legion armor and cause any harm to the Norton forces, plummeting the allied noble army into distraught and confusion.

Immediately following that, Lorist ordered Pete and his company of mounted archers to dismount and begin their suppression fire along with Hennard's thousand plus longbowmen. After three volleys of arrows, the allied noble army sustained huge casualties.

Terman's knight brigade and Fiercetiger Loze's three regiments of heavy-armored cavalrymen began their charge, causing the remnants of the allied noble army to disband before both sides even clashed.

Baron Felim Chalvode was the first one to escape with the rest of his men, followed by one noble after another. Within moments, the head-on clash transformed into a pursuit instead.

The whole battle at Firmrock Castle lasted for three days, that was to say, the forces of the Nortons pursued their retreating enemies for three days. However, most of the nobles managed to escape in the end. This time, the number of nobles who answered Duke Loggins's call to arms was above 60, which included roughly two thirds of all the nobles within the Northlands. After the battle, 11 nobles perished in the midst of their escape with 16 others being taken captive by the Norton Family forces, with the rest of the nobles managed to make their escape.

The Duke of the Northlands, Duke Loggins, managed to escape to the territory of Count Lopez which was ruled over by the Kenmays Family thanks to his Gold ranked knight and second in command of the Northland Army, Bitson. Knight Bitson himself was turned into a pincushion by the arrow rain of Pete's company of mounted archers and sacrificed himself on the battlefield.

The battle of Firmrock Castle resulted in roughly 8000 casualties for the allied noble army with another 30000 plus men captured with less than 50 nobles and knights dying in battle. The Norton Family on the other hand suffered miniscule losses and triumphed completely, much to the shock and awe of the rest of the Northlanders.

The migration had lasted from the 5th day of the 4th month to the 27th day of the 8th month. Countless resources and food were brought to the Norton Family dominion. Other than that, more than 300000 people were moved into Firmrock Castle.

After receiving news about the Nortons who had returned to their dominion and ceased all aggression during the 8th month, Duke Loggins who had been hiding at the Kenmays Family's castle was finally willing to return to his own dominion.

Upon arrival at his dominion, the duke's face paled instantly as only the burnt remnants and ashes of the buildings that once lined the streets of his land remained with not a single soul to be seen. Other than that, the fact that all the valuables within the duke's manor being taken as well as the nobles and officers who demanded compensation for their losses caused the duke to be so enraged that he vomited blood on the spot and fell sick without being able to recover.

Viscount Kenmays sighed and muttered, "It's the end of the road for Duke Loggins."

After that, he left the duke alone and the Kenmays Family no longer had to obey the orders of the duke in the future.

Author's note that was included in the chapter text:

A great big thank you to all my readers of your support, praise as well as recommendations to others. I deeply appreciate all your fervent love for my story. To be honest, I'd like to post more chapters myself as well but one can only write so many words within 9 hours. If I sat there for two straight hours, I can indeed write another 1000 characters to split this chapter into two. (*Ryogawa: In case you didn't notice, this chapter was super long.*) However, you, my readers, have paid to read this VIP novel, so I personally can't find it in my conscience to screw you up. That's why I believed that it was better for me to compact the story into one chapter with roughly 5000 characters. Once again, I apologize for not being able to churn out more chapters as my hand is quite sore and that impedes my typing quite a bit, so I hope you all will understand.

My writing process doesn't finish right after I complete the typing of the chapter either. After I finish typing, I have to check the chapter with my draft to make sure that there are no errors or anything that I have missed out. These corrections require quite a lot of rewrites as well.

As for the map, I won't be posting it. Given that my computer is relatively old, I only have the map drawn roughly on paper for my own reference so that I don't make any mistakes. If anyone is interested in making one, please tell me your QQ email so that I can tell you more about the map…

Once again, thank you very much.

Chapter 167
Auguslo's Counterattack

After the convoy forces led by Lorist that had crossed Metropoulos River towards the duke's dominion to pillage it and subsequently defeated the allied noble army, when they were moving all the wealth and people of the duke's dominion towards the Norton Family dominion in the Northlands, various new developments occurred in the Andinaq Kingdom.

On the 25th day of the 4th month of Year 1768 of the Grindian Calendar, the king of the Redlis Kingdom, the First Prince of the former Krissen Empire, Krissen Redlis, announced that the Crown Prince of the Andinaq Kingdom, Second Highness Auguslo, was a vile person who had went against his own brother and made his father a puppet leader and said that he would punish the Second Highness on the grounds of tarnishing the name of the Krissen Imperial Family.

After the First Prince's declaration, many people laughed cynically at it and felt that it somehow sounded familiar. After someone did some research and checking, they found that that the Third Prince of the Krissen Empire, then the regent ruler of the empire, had used the exact same reasoning as justification to act against the First Prince at that time. This time around, the First Prince merely changed a few words before throwing it back it to the Andinaq Kingdom.

Even though that declaration was treated as something of a joke, the First Prince's 70000 soldiers were not fooling around. Within but ten days, the Andinaq Kingdom lost up to 7 citadels situated near the border of the Andinaq Kingdom and the Redlis Kingdom and the Fiercegale Legion could only retreat one defeat after another from their heavy casualties and rely on the bastides owned by the landed nobles to resist the First Prince's army.

On the 32nd day of the 4th month that year, the Madras Duchy's Seamountain Legion incurred more than 5000 casualties to take over the Xith Castle that was defended by two regiments of the Royal Defense Guard of the Andinaq Kingdom, thus opening up the route from Sidgler Province towards the outside world once again. The duke eventually received help from the Second Prince, the ruler of the Iblia Kingdom, and

managed to retake Vanades City.

At that time, the Royal Defense Guard that had roughly 5000 men retreated from the Xith Castle back to Vanades City right away after losing around 1000 men during the siege. With the soldiers stationed within Vanades City numbering more than 5000 men and the enhanced fortifications of the city, the Second Highness believed that he would be able to resist the joint attack of the Seamountain Legion of Duke Madras and the Second Prince's forces.

However, nobody would've been able to predict that just before the soldiers of the Second Prince and Duke Madras finished constructing their siege engines, the soldiers of the Andinaq Kingdom abandoned the moat of the city and headed for the highway towards the newly-built citadel in the mountains.

When Duke Madras and the Second Prince realized that Vanades City was undefended, tension built up between the two forces as they scrambled to occupy the city. In the end, the Seamountain Legion took two-thirds of the city with the remaining parts of it going to the Iblia Kingdom's troops.

After that, the Madras Duchy and the Iblia Kingdom entered a period of dispute, completely ignoring the forces of the Andinaq Kingdom which were at the citadel not far from Vanades City as they fought over control of the city.

In the end, after some mediation between the two parties, Duke Madras and the Second Prince came to an agreement. After being paid a huge sum as compensation, the Iblia Kingdom's forces left the city, leaving behind the remaining ravaged territory that they occupied for Duke Madras's forces to take over.

Immediately following that, Duke Madras and the Second Prince both led their forces towards the new citadel built by the Second Highness and were prepared to press on until they conquer the whole of the Yungechandler Province. Under the leadership of Duke Madras, the soldiers launched two attacks against the citadel, after which the Second Highness wrote a personal letter to Duke Madras himself.

In the letter, the Second Highness to reminded the duke that the Second Prince is constantly on the watch for an opportunity like a hungry wolf. The Second Highness said that if the duke was hell bent on resisting him, he would withdraw the forces of the Andinaq Kingdom and even give up Lichtana Citadel. If that were to happen, by the time Duke Madras decides to bring the Seamountain Legion into the Yungechandler

Province, the Second Prince might just conquer the citadel on the mountain path which he will use to seal off the duke and his forces within Yungechandler Province.

After reading the letter, Duke Madras began to worry and understood why the Second Highness had constructed a new citadel merely a few kilometers away from Vanades City. The Second Highness had intended to swallow up Yungechandler Province and establish the new citadel and Vanades City as the new border between the Andinaq Kingdom and the Madras Duchy.

It was then when the duke began to hesitate. Of the three provinces within the duchy, the Yungechandler Province was easily the most impoverished and undeveloped one with not much farmland available as most of the province was covered by mountainous terrain and swampy forests. If he gave the whole province to the Andinaq Kingdom as remuneration, he believed that he would have given the Second Highness face and cause him to cease the hostilities happily. To Duke Madras, he could even shed a burden that did not benefit him much. The cost of stationing his soldiers to defend both borders of that province was also tremendously high given that he would require the logistic and resource support from the other two provinces within the duchy. That was no small spending to the duke.

While the duke would lose some face and pride by presenting the Andinaq Kingdom with the Yungechandler Province, he would gain peace. To the duchy, the most important thing was the production of food within Delamock Province as well as Vanades City, which was the commercial center of the duchy. Even though he had completely recovered Vanades City, a large part of the Delamock Province was still under the control of the Second Prince. While there was little possibility that the Second Prince would actually forcefully take over the whole of Delamock Province, Duke Madras didn't really trust the Second Prince given his understanding of the latter's personality. Additionally, every day some landed noble within the province would send messengers to the duke to complain about the troublesome actions of the soldiers of the Second Prince. Given that the Second Prince didn't make any indication to stop despite the complaints, it was obvious that he didn't consider the duke in any serious light.

Duke Madras pondered on his decision while holding the letter of the Second Highness in his hand. If he were to rely on himself to take back the Yungechandler Province, then the Second Highness would retreat from the new citadel on the mountain path to the Lichtana Citadel. If that were to happen, then the Second Prince's forces would be able to conquer the citadel on the mountain path when the duke's men besiege the

Lichtana Citadel, the result of which would spell the end of the Madras Duchy.

That's why on the next day, Duke Madras requested an audience with the Second Prince, during which he requested the prince to help him recover Yungechandler Province with the reason that even though the Second Prince claimed to send his troops over to aid the Madras Duchy, they have never once actually went into combat with the forces of the Andinaq Kingdom and were merely following behind and providing superficial support.

The Second Prince was not an idiot either as he had come to 'help' the duke out because he merely wanted to glean as many benefits as he could. By helping out, he would no longer have to pay the debt he owed the duchy for the food he bought. He might also attend to gain the gratitude of the duke along with some other rewards. Also, there was a chance that he would be able to take control of Delamock Province in the midst all the chaos. However, he was quite unhappy with how the Second Highness didn't defend Xith Castle properly and allowed the duke's forces to leave Sidgler Province, causing the Second Prince to only be able to conquer half the area of province as a result of the duke's timely intervention.

If both the Delamock Province and Vanades City fell into the Second Prince's control, Duke Madras would have lost his standing as there was no way that he would be able to pay the appropriate ransom to regain control of the conquered areas, thus allowing the income generated from those areas to fill the Second Prince's pockets.

That was also why the Second Prince was pissed to hear Duke Madras's request for him to attack the mountain citadel to retake the Yungechandler Province. He instantly refused the duke's request and pointed out that he merely brought over a support army and not a vanguard force. He mentioned that his turn would only come if the forces of Duke Madras were completely defeated.

After hearing that, Duke Madras felt an immense urge to cull the shameless and thick-skinned Second Prince with a stroke of his sword. Even though the Second Prince was obviously trying to take advantage of his predicament, he worded it in a way that it made it seem legitimate. However, after remembering the fact that he was currently within the army camp of the Second Prince's forces, he resisted that urge and took his leave. "Haha, there's no way that I would fall for that guy's sly trap," said the Second Prince to his general audibly for the duke to hear.

After that, the Second Prince truly got the full brunt of the duke's rage. Nobody

would've expected that Duke Madras would lead his soldiers on an assault against the army camp of the Second Prince, completely crushing the 30000-strong force of the prince in the process. Apart from a few nobles and the Second Prince as well as some knights who managed to escape, the rest of the forces of the Iblia Kingdom was wiped out completely.

That event was known as the 'Daybreak Assault'. On the 7th day of the 5th month during seven in the morning, Duke Madras annihilated all 30000 troops of the Second Prince that had been sent to reinforce his own. Fortunately, the Second Prince managed to escape under the protection of a few of his personal guards.

This sudden incident flabbergasted everyone who was paying attention to the ongoing developments as they didn't understand why the duke had suddenly turned against the Second Prince. However, Duke Madras later claimed at a later date that the Second Prince had conspired to entrap him and swallow up the duchy for himself as a justification for his turning against the Second Prince.

The Second Prince who had escaped to the Delamock Province fumed with rage. He had never suffered such heavy losses and humiliation before. Apart from the complete defeat his own 20000 soldiers that he gathered from his various vassal noble families, a division of the Frontier Legion that his father-in-law Duke Fisablen had lent him was wiped out as well. And before he could even say anything, Duke Madras had painted the Second Prince in a wrongful light and accused him of many other transgressions as well.

In the end, it could only be blamed on the Second Prince's personality that didn't inspire any others to trust him. On one hand, he appeared to be helping out Duke Madras while in actuality, he was always ready to take advantage of the duke should an opportunity have presented itself.

Enraged that the duke had shaken him off so blatantly, the Second Prince announced that he would not let Duke Madras off scot-free and said that he would summon more soldiers from his kingdom and allow the men he had left stationed within Delamock Province to start pillaging and destroying the surrounding settlements.

At the same time, Duke Madras strengthened the defenses of Vanades City and Xith Castle while also rallying the other nobles within his duchy together to form an alliance whose purpose is to chase the ravenous Second Prince and his bandit-soldiers out of the duchy as soon as possible. It didn't take long for those two sides to

completely neglect the forces of the Andinaq Kingdom that were stationed at the citadel of the mountain route during all the conflict that ensued.

At the same time when Duke Madras was about to turn the tables to his advantage, however, the Andinaq Kingdom's Bolimo Citadel which was at the border near the borders got conquered by the troops of the Redlis Kingdom led by the First Prince. The Fiercegale Legion's Gold ranked knight commander, Knight Nedram, and 5000 other Fiercegale Legion soldiers died heroically on the battlefield, taking almost 20000 casualties among the First Prince's forces with them before their deaths.

Nevertheless, upon conquering the citadel, the rest of the expedition of the First Prince would sail smoothly without obstruction. The First Prince led his 30000 soldiers gleefully towards the imperial capital.

Little did he know that just when his forces were around 50 kilometers away from the imperial capital at Flowater Creek, the First Prince and his 30000 troops fell into the trap set by the Second Highness who had long been anticipating their movements. Near 70000 warriors of the Royal Defense Guard circled the soldiers of the First Prince. While they managed to surround and entrap the First Prince and his forces, they didn't launch any attacks and merely took a defensive approach using the terrain to their advantage with the aim of waiting for the supplies and resources of the First Prince's men to run out which would no doubt lead to the eventual starvation of all 30000 men.

In ended with the Second Highness's complete victory at Flowater Creek after he commanded his recently-expanded 70000-strong Royal Defense Guard using a passive-aggressive approach by exploiting the terrain to defeat the 30000 soldiers of the First Prince within a month with only a casualty count of roughly 20000 men. The First Prince on the other hand managed to escape by casting away his armor and helmet and donning an old, torn farmer outfit as a disguise to sneak away through the mountain paths with his two attendants.

On the 3rd day of the 7th month, the Redlis Kingdom's 70000 soldiers had been completely decimated, followed immediately by the Second Highness leading 40000 Royal Defense Guard soldiers straight to the Redlis Kingdom to fight against the landed nobles there. Under the leadership of the Second Highness, the Andinaq Kingdom's forces managed to rush unabated all the way to the capital of the Redlis Kingdom, the Royal Capital of Frederika.

On the 15th day of the 8th month at the Royal Capital of Frederika, the Redlis Kingdom and the Andinaq Kingdom signed a peace treaty with the First Prince handing the two southwestern provinces of his kingdom to the Andinaq Kingdom as compensation for being the side to take up arms first. With hostilities ceased on both sides, the Second Highness brought his soldiers back to his kingdom.

On the 21st day of the 8th month, the Battle of Kobo saw its end. That battle had occurred within the Delamock Province at Kobo City, involving the 50000 allied noble army led by Duke Madras and the Second Prince's 40000 soldiers that had invaded the duchy. The Second Prince was forced to retreat from the duchy with his forces in utter shambles.

Against the wishes and objections of his vassal nobles, however, Duke Madras signed a peace treaty with the Andinaq Kingdom after recovering Delamock Province and allowed the Yungechandler Province to become under the jurisdiction of the Andinaq Kingdom in exchange for the tolerance of the Andinaq Kingdom and 5 years of peace.

Immediately following that, Duke Madras began to construct defensive fortifications within his two provinces on a large scale. Not only did he construct multiple citadels at the border of the duchy and the Iblia Kingdom, he even erected a long barricade roughly 50 kilometers away from the deceased Baron Silas's ferry port near Metropoulos River, thus sealing off the Northlands from the Madras Duchy completely.

In the historical records of the Grindia Continent, the conflict that had began with the assault of the Andinaq Kingdom's Royal Defense Guard and the Whitelion Legion (which were in fact the forces of Lorist's convoy unbeknownst to many on the continent) during the 10th month of Year 1767 lasted up to the 8th month of Year 1768 which was the month when the peace treaty between the Madras Duchy and the Andinaq Kingdom was signed. The events that spanned that year would be henceforth known as 'Auguslo's Counterattack'.

The series of battles have shown the military and strategizing prowess of the Second Highness Auguslo. Not only did he manage to stabilize the Andinaq Kingdom from within, he also managed to cause strife between Duke Madras and the Second Prince and force the Redlis Kingdom and the Madras Duchy to cede some land to the Andinaq Kingdom for reconciliation, effectively doubling the territory of the Andinaq Kingdom and allowing it to become a local superpower.

The reputation of the Second Highness instantly skyrocketed, causing him to be

known throughout the continent as one of the most brilliant military minds of the new generation.

Chapter 168
Female Unit

Lorist currently felt that he was the biggest idiot in the world and was trying his best to resist the urge to give himself two harsh slaps on the face.

When he made that order back then, he couldn't care less about anything else and didn't consider the consequences. Only now did he understand that having too many people with him did not directly translate to more power; in fact, they became a huge burden for the moment.

When Lorist ordered the people of the duke's dominion to be moved to his own dominion, he only thought about how taking them all was soon to giving a slap to the duke in the face so that he would know the true power of the Norton Family while also turning the so-called 'most prosperous area of the Northlands' into nothing but a wasteland so that Duke Loggins wouldn't forget the lesson Lorist wanted to teach him.

What Lorist didn't expect was that his soldiers completed their mission in perfect fashion. Coupled with the support of Hennard's Northland Army soldiers that were disguised as Norton Family soldiers, the total number of people moved from the duke's dominion was more than 280000.

By the time Lorist got to know the actual figure, he was shocked into a daze. He has neglected to consider the scale of number people he was moving when he said, 'I want to deny that dogshit duke from finding even a single smith to make his weapons, a coachman to drive his carriages, a farmer to plant his crops, a tailor to mend his clothes and a servant to pour his drink. Apart from his old vassal nobles and officials as well as the merchants, I want every else to be brought away from his dominion so that he wouldn't have anyone serving him… '

The northbound convoy had around 70000 members and the vagabonds from the Andinaq Kingdom added up to around 100000. Combined with the 280000 people moved from the duke's dominion as well as the 30000 plus captive soldiers as well as the citizens within the dominion, there was an estimated population of more than 500000 people.

It wasn't that space would be a problem for them either. The area of the Norton Family's dominion could easily accommodate another one million people if needed. However, the problem was that most of the dominion were mostly rural wastelands which had not been developed much at all. It wasn't quite possible for the dominion to suddenly be able to support such a large population and that was the root of Lorist's problems.

Right now, what Lorist regretted was that he shouldn't have given up on occupying the duke's dominion. Even if he occupied it, as long as he had sufficient military force on hand, who, if anyone at all, could challenge his rule? He only knew that he didn't consider these factors much back when he made the decision to take what he could and destroy what he couldn't bring with him with a single-minded focus on returning to the family dominion. If he had known that this was the result earlier, he wouldn't have gone through all the trouble of moving everyone and everything to the dominion. *Now that they're already on their way, I can't really have them travel back there, can I…* thought Lorist as he let out a long sigh.

Charade reminded Lorist sternly, "Locke, we still have around 350 million kilograms of food that we got along the way from the various nobles because the harvest for the winter wheat was just over recently. Coupled with the food we already have, we have a total of 400 million kilograms of food. While that number seems huge, feeding more than 500000 people each month will cost more or less 20 million kilograms of food. That's why right now we must arrange for some farmland reclamation to be done. Otherwise, we will run out of food within 20 months' time, which is to say that we don't have much time at all. We won't be able to accomplish that within this year, so we will have to focus on it next year. If we don't develop enough farmland to sustain us until the winter wheat harvest of the year after, then we really will have to starve."

"Do you have any ideas?" Lorist asked.

Charade took out a map of the Norton Family dominion and pointed at a spot for Lorist to see. "From Firmrock Castle to Maplewoods Bastide along the Bladedge Mountain Range is a huge piece of wasteland. It is enough for around 100 land development villages to be built with each village housing up to 500 households. allowing us to settle down more than 200000 self-sustaining farmers to decrease our burden.

"It's already going to be the 6th month soon, so we only have one month's time to measure the wasteland and decide on where the villages are to be built as well as arrange for the transport of the villagers there. After that, we have three months to

build them some living quarters to develop the farmland there. If we can plant the winter wheat during the 11th month, we will be able to harvest them next year. These 200000 farmers should be able to sustain themselves so that we don't have to bear the burden of feeding them."

"Then what about the other 300000 plus people?" Lorist mused.

"I've already checked on Firmrock Castle and the valley city in construction and I believe that if we can find some right spots for three or four towns to be built, it'll be enough to accommodate all the people. The construction will only take one to two years," Charade said as he revealed his well thought out plan without hesitation.

Lorist nodded and said, "Then I'll leave the construction of the reclamation villages and the development of the dominion to you. Please try to come up with a proposal within a month and I will have it passed so that everyone can help you out with it immediately."

At that moment, Shadekampf walked inside and said, "Milord…"

"What's going on?"

"Milord, Irina is pregnant and she's about to deliver…"

"What? Irina?"

"Her pregnancy was discovered around the 10th month last year. However, milord has already went to search for the convoy at that time and we weren't able to contact you. It seems that she's going to give birth within another few days," explained Shadekampf.

Lorist fell into deep thought and realized that Irina might have gotten pregnant during the two days when he laid with her back at the Maplewoods Bastide after he had defeated the 4000 plus soldiers of the Northland Army the duke sent.

Lorist was starting to get a little restless. Since the 9th month of the previous year, he had went on a journey to seek out the northbound convoy and only returned during the 5th month of this year. After more or less nine months of absence, his first child in this world was going to be born.

"Charade, I'll be leaving you in charge of everything and heading back to Maplewoods

Bastide right away. If there's anything urgent, just send someone to notify me about it," Lorist said as he prepared to mount his horse and rush back.

"Yes, milord. Also, congratulations!" shouted Charade as he watched Lorist ride off.

Irina was only Lorist's maidservant and her child would only be Lorist's illegitimate son or daughter. Even so, regardless of status, the child would still be the first offspring of Lorist.

On the way to the Maplewoods Bastide, Lorist encountered a messenger that was on his way to send some good news. Irina had birthed a healthy boy after nine months of pregnancy during dawn that day and both the mother and child were in stable condition.

Why is it only nine months? Shouldn't it be ten? After pondering it for a while, Lorist realized that in Grindia, each month had 35 days and Irina's pregnancy of nine Grindian months was already slightly on the long side.

The moment Lorist returned to the bastide, he rushed to check on Irina and the newborn. However, the two of them were fast asleep from fatigue. Not wanting to interrupt their sleep, Lorist left the room on light steps after taking a hurried look at the child.

In the courtyard nearby, Belnick was waiting for Lorist. As he approached, Belnick saluted and said, "Milord, your knight awaits your commands."

Surprised, Lorist hugged Belnick and said, "Brother Beck, you're already a Gold ranked knight?"

Belnick nodded and said, "Yes, milord. I broke through to the Gold rank during the 2nd month this year and have already been waiting to serve you for three whole months."

Back when Lorist first returned to the dominion, one of the first things he did was to check on the injured Belnick who had been recovering within Wildnorth Town, he realized that Belnick had been secretly poisoned over time by the town herbalist, Master Dunbarsen, causing his injuries to take far longer than needed to recover. The reason the four great families had chosen to do something like that was so that the Norton Family would lose their only Three Star Silver ranked knight. But Lorist had foiled their plans and brought Belnick back to his quarters at Maplewoods Bastide. Not only did he treat his injuries and detoxify Belnick, he even gave him a high-ranked

wood attribute Battle Force for him to practice and break through to the Gold rank to serve the family when he recovers.

Roughly one year had passed since then and Belnick was already a Gold ranked knight, meaning that Lorist had yet another high-ranked fighter under his command.

"There's no rush at the moment. The family dominion will enter a development stage and there will be more than enough opportunities for you to serve the family," Lorist said.

Before he finished, however, Supervisor Spiel rushed over and said, "Milord, the old butler wants to see you…"

After the passage of one year, the old butler had aged yet again. He stopped Lorist and nagged him for quite some time. However, he wasn't concerned with how Lorist defeated the Duke of the Northlands or the amount of resources and people he had brought into the dominion. Instead, the old butler was worried about Lorist's marriage affairs as he urged Lorist to quickly get wedded to a lady of decent standing so that the Norton Family could have a successor as soon as possible.

Only managing to shake away the old butler after much difficulty, Lorist sought out Spiel and asked, "What's up with Grandpa Gleis?"

"Milord, after the first round of snowfall during winter last year, the old butler said that he wanted to visit the family's forbidden area and didn't allow me to follow him along. However, he didn't return even during the night, so we hurriedly sent someone to search for him only to find that he had slipped from the snow and his wheelchair ended up in a ditch nearby. The old butler himself on the other hand had passed out in the snow for quite some time and when we brought him back indoors, he started having a bad fever. It was fortunate that milord had left enough medicines and herbs behind that we used to treat the old butler. However, after recovering, the old butler's memory seemed to have deteriorated and he often recognizes people wrongly or forgets what he's doing all of a sudden," explained Spiel.

"Sigh, it can't be helped. In the future, don't bother him if there's nothing urgent and let him have the time he needs to rest," Lorist said with a heavy heart. Just last year, the old butler was still quite witty and cunning like an old fox. However, right now, his mental state seemed to have regressed to that of a child and he would forget anything he said himself rather quickly, causing him to often repeat himself. Before they

finished the conversation, the old butler even asked Lorist to wed Pesha and said that they had been engaged for a long time already.

It was apparent that the old butler had mistakenly thought that Lorist was the deceased First Young Master, Norton Abelyde. Troubled by what the old butler was saying, Lorist tried to explain that he wasn't the First Young Master only to cause the old butler to be even more confused. In the end, Lorist merely excused himself to stop the painful conversation.

It's all because of that cursed family's forbidden area, Lorist thought. *If that stupid corpse cave didn't exist, the Grandpa Gleis wouldn't have visited it alone and fall into the snow like that…* It was obvious to Lorist that the old butler had suffered a stroke that was mentally crippling. Lorist finally resolved himself to abolish the practice of sealing the bodies of the Norton Family leaders in that cavern as he wasn't willing to have his corpse placed there to rot after he died either.

After leaving the old butler's residence, Knight Hennard showed up before Lorist with bruised eyes and a swelling nose.

"Huh? Why are you here?" Lorist asked curiously.

Three days ago when Hennard went to Maplewoods Bastide to pick up his lovers excitedly, Lorist thought that he would have left right after that. It truly surprised him when Hennard showed up before him looking so haggard and beaten.

"Locke, didn't you say that if they're willing to follow me back, I can take them with me?" Hennard said angrily.

Nodding, Lorist said, "I did. What happened?"

"I've already met with them and it appeared that they've been suffering over here for quite some time as they were almost too elated to see me. I've already asked them whether they were willing to go to the Cherry Blossom Ridge with me and they all agreed. However, your people didn't want to let them leave and even began to hit me. I gave it my all to resist the urge to retaliate out of my respect to you, hence my injuries," Knight Hennard complained.

"Who was it that didn't allow them to leave?" Lorist asked as his expression turned gloomy. He had explicitly ordered for the surviving women of Wildnorth Town to not be bothered and allowed to rest so that they could hopefully recover from their

physical or mental wounds. After that, he would bring them to Firmrock Castle so that they may find partners they like and form new families to start their lives over.

"Supervisor Spiel, tell me what's going on. Also, what did Knight Hennard mean by his lovers' suffering? Did you not regard my instructions seriously? Tell me, who was it that caused them to suffer and even refused to let them go?" Lorist asked Spiel with a solemn expression.

"Mi-milord… It's not my fault. it's Mistress Pesha…" stammered the supervisor under Lorist's angry threats.

"Pesha?" Lorist said, stunned. "What did that woman do this time?"

Turning to Hennard, Lorist asked, "Was it a red-haired woman that refused to let them follow you home?"

"Yes, yes!" said Hennard as he nodded furiously. "That woman was extremely short-tempered! Even if she didn't like what I was saying, she shouldn't have lashed out at me just like that! While I'm a Gold ranked knight, I would never allow myself to hit a woman. Additionally, there were other women who joined her in beating me, so I could only leave as fast as I could…"

Lorist wanted to laugh after hearing about Hennard's hardships. *I bet it must've been your frivolous mouth… Haha, you deserve it…*

At the same time, Lorist was relieved that the men within the bastide weren't giving the women any trouble.

"Tell me, Supervisor Spiel, what did Pesha do to cause those women to suffer?" Lorist asked in a cold voice.

"Milord, it's like this… Even though Mistress Pesha is a Silver ranked knight, she's never given any assignments and she isn't associated with the garrison force of the family as well. After the women arrived at the bastide, Mistress Pesha managed to get permission from the old butler to be in charge of taking care of them. She then had some basic Battle Force technique diagrams copied and sent to the women and told them to not forget how badly they were treated and encouraged them to start training in Battle Force to become independent and be able to stand up for themselves should they experience the same hardships in the future…" Spiel explained.

Lorist and Hennard listened with much wonder.

"During the past half year, more than 100 women managed to awaken their Battle Force and Mistress Pesha grouped them together to form a female-only garrison force unit and had them train with blades and pikes all day long. There was even once when the mistress wanted to train the courage of his force members by forcing them to kill some livestock at the compound over there, causing some of the animals to go wild and run all over the bastide. Some of the family's garrison force soldiers even had to put the poor animals out of their misery…

"Even though the old butler is a little dazed after recovering from his sickness, he agreed with pretty much anything Mistress Pesha wanted. And given that milord wasn't here, we didn't think that it would be in our place to tell the mistress off. Right now, the women who have awakened their Battle Force are getting more and more furious and some men were even pummeled to the brink of death for simply teasing and flirting with them. Knight Pajik even went to see Mistress Pesha for that incident only to be beaten all the way back, so right now, none of us dares to mess with the women anymore…

"As for the suffering you mentioned, I believe that it's because Mistress Pesha forced the women to train in Battle Force and help out with the farming and livestock raising. Some of the women who were born in families of higher social standings naturally couldn't bear to work in the field all day…" Spiel theorized.

"That's exactly it. My beauties all complained to me that their work was really tiring and that they even had to wash clothes and cook during the winter, causing blisters to form on their hands. I was so pained by their hardships and wanted them to follow me back, only to have the red-haired woman with her other fanatic followers come to stop me. They even started hitting me when all I did was try to communicate with them," Hennard said furiously.

"Sigh, let me bring you there to fetch your beauties," Lorist said as he laughed bitterly. It seemed that he had to settle the issue personally.

'People are all unique and different; for every type of grain there would be 100 more types of people.' Lorist thought that this saying from his past life made a lot of sense. Not every person would be able to handle the pains of training oneself just because they have experienced some hardships. For instance, the lovers of Hennard had all been brought up in relative comfort and they had never needed to work hard for their

own livelihoods. It was merely a pipe dream of Pesha's to convert them into independent people overnight.

The female survivors of Wildnorth Town were situated at a courtyard at the northern part of the bastide. There was a wide open space in front of it which the women used as a training ground. Led by Spiel, Lorist arrived at the courtyard and instructed the women who were standing guard to gather everyone together and said that he had something he wanted to announce.

Pesha was the first one to rush out only to be stunned at the sight of Lorist.

"Stand aside, Pesha. I will see you after I settle the issue here," Lorist said coldly.

In response, Pesha bitterly stepped to the side.

It didn't take long for all the women to gather within the courtyard. While Lorist didn't speak in a loud voice, all the women were able to hear everything he said clearly.

"As some of you may recognize, I am Count Norton Lorist. From my point of view, you are all relatives of the traitorous people of Wildnorth Town and I have all the right to sell you off to the slave traders and treat you how I will. However, considering that your husbands and fathers have banded together and let the wolf that was Duke Loggins into the dominion and ultimately caused their own demise and your suffering, I am extremely sympathetic of your experiences and decided to forgive you for your mistakes. From today onwards, you are free people.

"As for your future, you are free to choose from the following choices. You may rely on your relatives within the Maplewoods Bastides or try to make a living for yourself here. Alternatively, you may choose to follow me to Firmrock Castle and find a partner there to start a family and begin your lives anew or choose to become maidservants of the knights of my family or find some other kind of work. As for the third option, I have decided to officially form a female garrison unit for those who have awakened their Battle Force to join if they want to. Their treatment and benefits will be the same as that received by the garrison force soldiers of our family. Naturally, even those who haven't awakened their Battle Force will be welcome to join that unit. However, they will only be given food and living quarters and won't receive the full benefits of being a garrison force member unless they manage to awaken their Battle Force one day to qualify as a formal member of the unit.

"I will give you all three days to decide which path you want to take and have Supervisor Spiel record your choices. You can also ask him should you have any further questions. Alright, that's all I have to say. You may disband."

"Hennard, you can bring your lovers with you now. Spiel, don't forget to ask the women if they are willing to follow Hennard back. If they are not, then forget it," Lorist said.

After Hennard left with Spiel, Lorist turned to Pesha and said, "I will also give you two choices. You can choose to be the leader of the female unit. However, I will take charge of raising and caring for my elder brother's illegitimate son. Alternatively, you can raise the son however you see fit and not interfere with the matters of the family."

"Why can't I lead the unit and raise him at the same time?" Pesha asked, dissatisfied.

Shaking his head, Lorist said, "Given your personality, you're not a real good fit to be a mother. You also haven't given birth before, so you wouldn't understand the pains of bearing a child and wouldn't be able to truly give the child the motherly love and care he deserves. What I'm saying is, either you become a great general or a caring mother. You're free to pick either choice."

"I can find him a caretaker…" Pesha said.

Sighing, Lorist said, "I understand your choice. The female unit will be left in your charge from now on and I will have the regulations and other documents sent to you in a few days. I will bring the child with me tonight and you will have to get my permission if you wish to see him in the future. If you cause any more trouble, I will even revoke your status as a family knight, so think well before you act. That's all."

Chapter 169
Felicitas Settlement

The flickering candlelight illuminated Lorist's furrowed brow. Before him stood Belnick, Pajik and a voluptuous young woman who held a two-year-old boy in her bosom. The child had just awoken and was looking around with his two wide, round eyes.

That woman and child was in fact Pajik's wife and son. The couple were also quite curious about the reason they had been summoned by Lorist to have dinner together along with their child. Not only was Belnick there, in front of them stood also Molocinque, Eidelwoke and Wellickson, all of whom were Lorist's half-brothers and the illegitimate sons of his late father.

The door to the hall opened and four middle-aged maidservants brought four adolescent boys and girls into the room. At that moment, the curiosity of Pajik and his wife were roused as they recognized the four children. All four of them were in fact the illegitimate children of the late Baron Norton like Molocinque, Eidelwoke and Wellickson. In other words, all of them were the half-siblings of Lorist.

After a few moments, the door to the hall opened again and this time, the ones who came in were Supervisor Spiel and Reidy. In Reidy's arms was a 6-year-old child and behind him was Pesha.

"Wonderful, everyone is here," Lorist said, before he waved to Reidy and instructed, "Carry the child over here."

Not intimidated at all, the child questioned, "Who… who are you?"

Lorist laughed out loud and kissed the boy's cheeks before he said, "I'm your uncle, and you better remember that. Now, tell your uncle your name and age."

The child thought before he said, "I-I am He-Helias and I'm five and a half this year."

"Good boy," Lorist said as he stroked the boy's face. Raising his head, he looked at Pajik and his wife who was clasping her mouth with surprise and said, "Pajik, madam, can

you please come over here?"

Lorist placed Helias on the ground and stood up before he bowed to Pajik's wife and said, "I apologize, madam, for your painful experiences. Today, I shall return your child to you."

Pajik's wife passed the child in her arms to Pajik before hugging Helias tightly and saying, "Child… Oh, my child…"

Pajik on the other hand hugged his own son as he stared at the situation with confusion.

"Knight Pajik, may I request you to be the stepfather of Helias?" Lorist said towards Pajik solemnly.

"Milord, this is…" Pajik didn't know how to respond. He knew that his wife was previously the maidservant of the First Young Master and had birthed him a son whom Pesha took to be raised as her own son, forcing Helias to be parted from Pajik's wife. Pesha was also the one who established their marriage. This was why Pajik usually didn't dare to act against Pesha.

In the beginning, his wife missed her son dearly and often cried herself to sleep in the middle of the night. However, she gradually recovered after giving birth to her and Pajik's son. Even so, her first child was still Helias and no mother would ever forget their firstborn.

"Knight Pajik, in my eyes, you have always been an upright person who upholds his oaths. Helias is the sole offspring my elder brother left behind and I hope that he can obtain the love and care of a father and mother that a child like him deserves as well as siblings for him to grow up with. The reason I want you to be his guardian is because I hope that you will be able to raise him into a trustworthy and noble person. When he reaches 12 years old, I will fetch him back and begin training him into a magnificent knight like his father," Lorist said.

Pajik passed the child that was in his arms back to his wife and saluted towards Lorist. "Milord, I will gladly become the adopted father of Helias. Since my wife is her mother and the First Young Master had also treated me well, I will definitely raise him as I would my own son and won't let milord down."

"Thank you, my knight," Lorist said as he bowed towards Pajik gratefully.

Pajik and his wife stepped aside with the two children and Lorist returned to his seat before he said, "Molocinque, Wellickson and Eidelwoke…"

The three of them stepped forward and bowed towards Lorist to show their respect.

"Honestly speaking, I don't really mind your statuses. To me, the blood of the Nortons also flow in your veins and you are my brothers by blood. However, due to the customs and traditions of the family, I am unable to let you train in the hereditary Crimsonblood Battle Force technique. However, I've gotten you these…" Lorist said as he took out three high-ranked Battle Force manuals.

"Molocinque, your Battle Force is of the earth attribute, right? This is for you. Wellickson, since your Battle Force is of the metal attribute, this one is for you. As for Eidelwoke, I believe that you are quite talented in Battle Force training. Within only one year, you managed to train up to the Two Star Bronze rank. I hope that you will continue to strive hard. This fire attribute Battle Force manual is for you. Other than that, all three of you will also be receiving training in noble and knight etiquette.

"This is the least I can do for you as your brother. I hope that all of you will continue to train hard and break into the Silver rank to become knights of the family, after which you will be allowed to bear the Norton family name. When you rake in enough achievements for the family, I will also make you all landed nobles so that you can form branch families for the Nortons. I look forward to the arrival of that day," Lorist said.

The three of them once again saluted Lorist as they said in unison, "Thank you, milord."

Lorist then waved to the four middle-aged maidservants to bring the children forward.

He said to the maidservants, "You all used to be the personal maidservants of my father and have graced me with four other siblings. Since you've been taking care of my siblings rather well even after you have formed your own families, I will allow them to continue staying with you so that they may experience the joy of being raised in a normal family. However, when they reach the age of 12, they must begin receiving training for noble etiquette and knighthood. As long as they are hard working enough, they will definitely have the same prospects of their three brothers here. You will also be receiving a yearly sum to improve the quality of life within your families so that my half-siblings will be able to live better lives."

The four maidservants paid their respects and said, "Thank you, milord."

"You may return for now," Lorist said.

When the maidservants left with his half-siblings, Lorist said, "Pesha…"

Pesha stepped forward without any fuss. She felt that Lorist behaved rather differently tonight and got the same vibe she received when she looked at the late Baron Norton in the past: strict, confident and dominating.

"Pesha, since you have chosen to become the leader of the female garrison unit, I hope that you will give it your best to fulfill that role and obey the regulations of the family and become a fine female knight. However, you must remember that without my permission, you are not allowed to act as you please and change the organization or regulations of your unit, understand?" Lorist said as he stared at Pesha.

She merely nodded painstakingly.

"Today, with Brother Beck, Knight Pajik and Supervisor Spiel as witnesses, I will entrust you with the responsibility of being the leader of the female unit. Similarly, you must uphold the promise you have made to me. Otherwise, don't blame me for being ruthless. Also, if you receive an invitation, you may go to Pajik's home as a guest to visit Helias. However, I forbid you from going there on your own accord to disturb the calm and harmony of their lives. Remember my words well. You may leave now."

……

"Irina, thank you for birthing this wonderful child. He's so cute…" Lorist said as he hugged his son gently as the child narrowed his eyes quietly, wanting to go back to sleep after being breast-fed.

At that moment, Irina was leaning on the bed and looking at Lorist hug the child lovingly with the warm smile of a new mother on her face.

Reidy silently opened the door and whispered from the outside, "Milord…"

"What's up?"

"The Pentasword Mercenary Crew leader is here to collect the rewards. He heard that you were back so he wanted to pay you a visit."

Lorist nodded and placed the child back into Irina's bosom. "Shhh, be careful. He's asleep…"

Irina rolled her eyes at Lorist jokingly and said, "I know, just go."

The Pentasword Mercenary Crew had brought their family members and friends from their village over to Firmrock Castle during the first round of snow on the 11th month of the previous year and they were settled down at Wildnorth Town by Supervisor Kedan. The tale of their migration was rather dramatic: they used the opportunity during the celebration of the 36th day of the 9th month when everyone else was heading to Windbury City to participate in the harvest festival and traveled by river and carriage to the Northlands. Using the cover as immigrants which the Kenmays Family were bringing into the Northlands to develop their dominion, they managed to pass the customs point at Hendliff Suspension Bridge within the duke's dominion and headed for the Norton Family's dominion right away.

The crew leader Doboff respectfully greeted Lorist before he was invited to have some tea together.

This time around, Doboff and his various subordinates brought more than 50 heads of the mountain barbarians to claim the bonus from Supervisor Spiel and also requested for some support in terms of weapons and other equipment.

Doboff reported the developments of the past few months starting from the 3rd month to Lorist. During the time the Pentasword Mercenary Crew defended the intersection point at the two mountain ranges near the border of the Norton Family dominion and the Magical Dragon Mountains, they have encountered the cavalry of the barbarians a number of times. In the beginning, the mountain barbarian cavalry units numbered less than ten and eventually grew in number to a few hundred. Doboff expressed his suspicion that they would be facing a large-scale barbarian attack some time in the future.

Lorist agreed to Doboff's request for weapon and equipment support right away and also promised that each mercenary of the crew would receive one metal armor to increase their defensive capabilities.

Incredibly grateful, Doboff thanked Lorist three whole times before bidding his leave.

Lorist then spent another month of bliss with his child before receiving an urgent

letter from Charade that called for his presence at Firmrock Castle.

……

Currently, Lorist, his family knights and other administrative officers were gathered within the wide hall within Firmrock Castle, which was only used for the first time since the completion of the castle. Even Belnick, Pajik, Supervisor Spiel and Pesha who were usually stationed at Maplewoods Bastide came over to the castle to attend the meeting.

This time around, Pesha was finally able to come to terms with the true might of Lorist, causing her to develop a sense of respect and fear towards him. As the only female knight within the family, she also received curious stares from the other family knights and when some knights came over to introduce themselves, Pesha instantly hid behind Belnick shyly.

Lorist and Charade then entered the hall, followed behind by Reidy and Patt who were booth holding a wooden rack and a huge beastskin scroll in their arms.

The chatters in the hall gradually quieted down as everyone understood that the fate of the Norton Family's 500000 plus subjects would be discussed during the meeting.

Patt and Reidy placed the rack firmly on the ground and hung up the beastskin scroll, which was in actuality an enlarged version of the map of the Norton Family dominion.

After Charade saluted Lorist, he proceeded to tell everyone within the hall about the problems the family was facing that had to be solved as soon as possible. Holding a wooden stick, he started pointing it towards the map.

"This plan involves the area from the valley city all the way to Wildnorth Town. The family is in favor of developing these wastelands into the main food producing area of the dominion. As everyone may have noticed, the wasteland is divided into seven sectors which are painted in different colors. Within each sector, one town will be constructed and each town will be surrounded by around 10 villages with each town housing roughly 1000 to 1500 households and each village housing from 300 to 500 households. This way, the seven sectors can hold up to 500000 people and roughly 12000 square kilometers of farmland will be cultivated.

"This map was brought to you by the painstaking month-long effort of the light cavalry scout regiment and the sacrifice of tens of family soldiers. Right now, on these lands

are huge groups of magical beasts which have crossed over from the Magical Dragon Mountains into the family dominion last winter that haven't yet returned to their habitat. If we are to develop these lands, we will first have to deal with these magical beasts.

"We plan to use three years to develop this wasteland so that we may be able to establish a haven for our loved ones, unaffected by the perils of war going on outside. This year, our plan is to first clear out the magical beasts within the dominion and settle the folk down into the seven sectors to start sowing the seeds for the winter wheat as well as construct temporary living quarters and build roads and other infrastructure. We will also be readying the supplies the folk will be needing to survive the winter and all the preparations must be finished before winter comes in the 11th month.

"Next year, we will widen the roads and improve the transportation infrastructure as well as launch a large-scale irrigation project for the farmlands and distribute farmland to the folk. Each household will receive up to 30000 square meters of land and we will also provide farming tools and one horse for each household. In the future, our lord will fulfill his promise and construct new stone houses for each household so that all the people who have followed us back to the dominion will be able to live in warm, safe homes.

"The three years of development is estimated to cost millions of gold Fordes. After distributing the farmland, our lord also promises to give a discounted tax rate for three years. During the first year, the commoners will only have to pay 10% of their harvest. During the second year, they have to pay 20% and during the third year, 30%. After that, the tax rate will stay at 40% and that is the highest it will go. As for the family members of our soldiers, they will even get a discount of 10% in their taxes. We believe that after three years, we will be able to convert this wasteland into an earthly paradise for all."

Charade then turned to Lorist and said, "Milord, you should name this piece of wasteland."

"Alright," Lorist said as he stood up. "In hopes for the plentiful harvests produced by the land and the bliss of those who settle within, I will name this place the Felicitas Settlement.

"I'm sure all of you have heard Knight Charade's description of the plan. It's already

the 7th month now and there's only 4 months remaining before the 11th month, so we don't have much time. I hope all of you will cooperate and give this effort your all," said Lorist as he made a knight salute towards the rest.

Everyone within the hall stood up and said in unison, "Milord, we pledge to give nothing but our best efforts!"

"Knight Josk…"

"Milord, I am awaiting your instructions," Josk said as he stepped forward.

"Where is my Fiercetiger Knight?"

"Milord, your Fiercetiger Knight awaits your orders!" exclaimed Lode Wales passionately as he stood beside Josk.

"Where's my knight brigade?"

Terman stepped forward and said, "Milord, your knight brigade will always serve as your sword loyally."

"Where are my eyes and ears, Knight Yuriy?"

"Milord, the direction in which you point will be where we head!" Yuriy said as he stood up.

"Good. The mounted archers, knight brigade and light cavalry scouts… I order you all to clean up the magical beasts that are still roaming the wasteland before the coming of the 9th month!"

"Yes, milord!"

"Knight Waxima…"

"Yes, milord," Waxima said as he stepped forward.

"Your heavy-armored cavalry company will be fused with Loze's heavy-armored cavalry unit with you becoming his second-in-command. You shall join him in this mission as well."

"Yes, milord."

Lorist then looked at the rest within the hall and said, "Knight Potterfang's heavy-armored infantry unit will be in charge of policing the immigrant camp. Ovidis's guard company will be stationed at Firmrock Castle as usual and Pajik's guard company shall defend Maplewoods Bastide and reinforce the two army bases of the Pentasword Mercenary Crew should they need any help. Freiyar's three garrison legions will escort the immigrants to their settlements and each village shall be defended by a company of troops with each town also being defended by a regiment. Els, you shall bring your guards to oversee the captive laborers who will be constructing the roads. The rest of the units will be managed by Knight Charade."

"Yes, milord."

"Knight Malek, please step forward," Lorist said.

"Milord," Malek said as he stepped in front of Lorist.

"Knight Malek, as your dominion lord, I order you to take a break from your duties until you break through to the Gold rank," Lorist said with a smile.

"But milord, the family will be quite busy and I have to work my share as well…"

"Nonono, you have already been held back far too long during the journey with the northbound convoy. I have already ordered Knight Belnick to replace you as the second-in-command of Knight Freiyar and take over your garrison legion. You shouldn't worry too much and go on your vacation. It won't be late for you to contribute when you reach the Gold rank. Not only is this my personal request to you, it's also an instruction by me as your dominion lord, so there is no room for negotiation."

"So be it. Thank you, milord," said Malek as his ever-stoic face revealed a touched expression while he made a knight salute to Lorist.

Chapter 170
Ridden with Matters

Charade was laid down on the bed and according to the herbalist Lundmorde, he had collapsed from overworking for a few nights straight. Even though Charade had Battle Force of the Three Star Silver rank, he still couldn't take that kind of fatigue and had to rest for three days before he would be able to recover.

Lorist was incredibly regretful, especially when he witnessed the sight of Molise carrying Charade's son, Charade Libert, as she stared at her husband worryingly. He realized that he had put too heavy a burden on Charade to the point that he did not have enough time to be with his own wife and child.

Molise's pregnancy had been discovered during the 6th month of the previous year and Charade was ecstatic when he was notified of it. When the convoy was going through the Andinaq Kingdom just before it reached the imperial capital, he had Potterfang, Terman, Yuriy and the other Dawn Academy students bring Molise and her grandfather, Engelich, to the War God's Shrine and he got officially married to Molise with the blessings of a priest there.

During the snowy night of the 8th day of the 2nd month at Kobo City, Molise delivered a healthy son for Charade.

Lorist recalled that moment when he suggested for Charade's son to be named Snobby with a devious smile on his face. The others who were unaware of what it really meant praised that it was a good name. However, even though Charade didn't understand the word either, he rejected that name right away as he understood that Lorist was never up to any good when he revealed a smile like that, much to Lorist's dismay.

At that moment, Charade was still worrying about the management of manpower and resources for the wasteland development even though he was bedridden. Lorist patted on his hand and asked him not to worry about the other matters and rest well and told him that he would take over the work so that Charade could have a month of vacation to rest and accompany his family.

While Lorist did promise to take over the work, it was easier said than done. Only after

he started did he realize the true complexity of the work handled by Charade. He had to deal with tons of reports even to the most trivial ones and had to come up with a solution for every one of them. Busy to the point of exploding, Lorist could only catch a breath of rest after burning the midnight oil for three whole days.

No… Charade's breakdown is my own fault. He's basically a living Zhuge Liang who can handle all matters, big and small. While he had no choice but to be in charge during the convoy's journey, I can't let him continue without rest anymore.

Lorist understood Charade's frustration. Given that they only just arrived at the dominion and were short on time, Charade couldn't afford to familiarize himself with the officers within the family dominion and could only make do with the ones he had worked with during the northbound journey, which was a very limited number of people, causing him to eventually collapse from fatigue.

As the dominion lord himself, Lorist wasn't as attentive and adept at working long hours as Charade and his eyes were already bloodshot from working for three days straight. Right now, the only thought on his mind was how he could lighten his burden. He notified Supervisor Hansk, Supervisor Kedan, Supervisor Spiel, Butler Boris, Shadekampf and a few other officers that used to work for Charade within the convoy to gather for a meeting.

During the meeting, Lorist got to the point straight away and said that he would form a development committee for the Felicitas Settlement comprising everyone present. The committee would be made up of multiple departments with Hansk being the manager of the allocation department which would approve requests for resource and manpower.

Spiel would be the manager of the finance and resources department and would be in charge of managing and distributing said resources.

Kedan would take the role as the human resource department's manager and everyone within the development villages would fall under his jurisdiction. Additionally, he was also tasked with setting up a comprehensive registry for the citizens of the settlement.

Butler Boris on the other hand would take charge of the main development projects of the seven sectors and manage where the manpower and resource be distributed and the various farmland development tasks. In other words, he was the main lead of

the project.

Shadekampf would represent Lorist in checking on the three supervisors and the development of the seven sectors. Additionally, he had complete authority regarding the handing out of punishment for any transgressions in regulations. Apart from having to report anything he deemed deserving of a death penalty to Lorist, he was free to hand out any other punishment or solution he pleased.

As for the other officers who worked for Charade during the days of the convoy, they would be allocated to the various departments according to their respective capabilities. Lorist gave them three days to set the departments up, after which they would begin the development according to Charade's plan.

In the end, Lorist clapped his hands and encouraged for them to work hard and said that he awaited the completion of the settlement which would be only the first of the many good things that would come. He told them that the settlement would be divided into seven administrative districts according to the seven sectors and that the district chief would be recommended by the managers of the various departments before being appointed officially by Lorist. He also said that as administrative officers, they would be given an honorary noble title if they performed their duties well so that they may enter the ranks of nobility. Also, there would be a yearly bonus which would be given according to what Lorist thought about their work performance.

Faced with the 'encouragement' Lorist had just given, every officer present felt incredibly excited. They quickly bowed and pledged that they would give it their all for the family and the successful development of the Felicitas Settlement and assured Lorist that they wouldn't give up regardless of the difficulties involved and asked him to be assured and wait for their success.

Lorist then returned to his quarters and slept for a day and night straight. After waking from his long sleep, he leisurely sipped on some tea as he read some books before he entered his office during noon only to find that a stack of beastskin documents had piled up on his desk.

What's going on? Why are there be so many documents? Didn't I allocate the workload already? Which department are these reports from? Lorist thought as he picked up a few documents in annoyance.

The first beastskin document was actually submitted by Supervisor Kedan and

according to him, there wouldn't be enough beastskins within the whole family dominion to make a registry for more than 500000 citizens and also noted the extreme costs involved. That's why, one of the subordinates of Kedan suggested that thin wooden sheets be used temporarily instead until the beastskin requirements could be fulfilled.

Kedan suggested in his letter for that subordinate of his to be awarded five gold Fordes and also submitted an estimate of the cost of making the thin wooden sheets which included the building of a factory and the cost of paying the woodworkers. It would amount to roughly 100 gold Fordes a year and the proposal had already been submitted to Supervisor Hansk.

Hansk was of a similar opinion that the solution was a good one. However, he didn't dare to make the decision himself and waited for Lorist's approval.

What's there to hesitate about? I can only have 5000 beastskins made within a year for 100 gold Fordes whereas I can have 15000 wooden sheets made each month with that money. That's obviously the better choice! Lorist then signed the document, indicating his approval before stamping it with his seal, thus resolving the problem of the registry.

Lorist felt that the remaining few documents were mostly trivial matters. Some of them were merely reports of things that had already been settled while others were decisions that the departments hesitated to make which was sent to Lorist for the final say. Even though the number of documents was easily half there previously was, Lorist still felt rather frustrated for having to deal with all that paperwork.

"Sol, why is such an important matter stuffed all the way down here?" Lorist exclaimed angrily.

That was a report about Loze who was cleaning up magical beasts in the wasteland. Josk and the rest submitted that report that stated that they had already swept their way to the third sector and killed many magical beasts in the process with near 10000 carcasses already piled up. However, most of the beasts were herbivores like magical bulls and goats and they submitted the report because they wanted a solution to manage the animal carcasses so that they don't rot to waste from the harsh tempering of the natural elements.

To Lorist, the so-called magical beasts were not much different from animals. While

they had some amazing powers according to the legends, with the end of the magical civilization, the magical beasts had also lost many of their amazing magical abilities. The surviving ones to this day only retained their bestial ferocity along with their tough hide and stunningly aggressive physical features.

The reason they were still distinguished from normal animals was because of their aggressive tendencies. Putting the carnivores aside, even herbivore magical beasts would attack right away the moment their territory was infringed upon.

"Reidy, call the three supervisors to come over," Lorist said angrily.

The three of them soon arrived at Lorist's office. Lorist tossed the report to them and asked, "Tell me what's going on with this. Why hasn't a report as important as this been seen to already?"

"Milord, we haven't even seen this report before either," replied the three supervisors in unison.

"Huh?" Lorist mused, before he took up the report and checked the date once again only to notice that he had made a mistake. The report was submitted only three days ago when the departments had yet to be formed and it wasn't weird that they didn't get to know about its existence. Lorist had missed the report because he was too worn out from three straight days of work previously.

"Fine. Then, do you have a solution in mind?" Lorist said hurriedly to change the subject.

"Milord, we should mobilize any workers with butchering skills to deal with the carcasses right away. We might also have to allocate some female leather workers as well as those well-versed in meat preservation to handle them as the beasts can also be a good source of food for us," suggested Hansk.

"Not bad. The three of you should prioritize dealing with this for now, especially with the mobilization of resources and workforce to the three sectors. Have Shadekampf guide you along with this process," Lorist said as he nodded.

"Milord, we might not be able to mobilize any of our family's forces as escorts," noted Kedan worryingly.

"There should be no problem. The three sectors have already been mostly cleared up

and there shouldn't be any magical beasts left," Spiel said.

"What if there's one or two that managed to escape? These workers don't have the ability nor courage to face off against those beasts. If we really did encounter any, chaos would break out."

"Alright… Send my orders to Pesha for her to lead the female garrison unit to escort these people to the third sector. Right now, only her female garrison unit is not occupied with anything else. Additionally, she is already at the Two Star Silver rank, so she shouldn't have any problem handling those magical beasts. After settling this matter of the three sectors, there are four more that still have lots of magical beasts roaming around that must be dealt with," Lorist said.

"Yes, milord."

During the next morning, just a while after Lorist entered his office and looked at a few documents, Potterfang entered the room.

"Milord," said Potterfang as he made a knight salute.

"Oh, Pog. How's the transport of the resources going at your side?" Lorist asked as he raised his head cheerfully.

Lorist was actually referring to the various goods left at the transit point at Count Spenseid's dominion. The important resources and immigrants had already long been moved into the family dominion through Firmrock Castle.

While they were of lesser importance relative to the things that had been moved first, the value of those goods were not to be underestimated. For example, among the furniture plundered from the duke's manor was a huge bed which was enough for six people to sleep in that was crafted intricately by an experienced artisan. It was left behind to be transported last because it wasn't convenient to ship it first.

"Milord, it should be done in another month or so. Currently, only two companies numbering around 1000 men and near 1000 carriages are left there. At the rate of one shipment per two days, we would still require tens of more shipments to ship everything over," Potterfang replied.

It was currently the 26th day of the 7th month and Potterfang had stated that the transportation of the items would only be complete by the end of the 8th month.

Potterfang's forces were also stretched rather thin as well. Currently, most of his available men from the heavy-armored infantry unit were stationed at the immigrant camp near Firmrock Castle to maintain order there. Even though near 100000 of his men had been sent to develop the wasteland, the 400000 plus immigrants placed an immense burden on the 10000 or less men Potterfang had left.

"Is there anything you need since you came all the way here?" Lorist asked.

"Oh, it's not that, milord. The transportation of the goods and the immigrant camp is posing no problem. I just wanted to know how we should deal with the nobles and knights that we have captured during the last battle," Potterfang said as he placed a huge stack of documents on Lorist's desk.

"Gosh… Yet another huge pile of documents," Lorist complained, before he flipped the first page open only to see a familiar name on top of it: Count Spensied.

"Oh, Pog, did you find out what this old fellow's problem was? Why did he suddenly choose to antagonize our family? Did you interrogate him yet?" Lorist asked.

"I've already asked him. Milord, this old count said that he had answered the call to arms of the duke for justice and to defend the honor of nobles. That was also the reason he was the first to lead the charge towards Firmrock Castle. After incurring 400 casualties with only a company of men, he became akin to a toothless tiger and got oppressed by the other nobles to a point that he returned to his own dominion after being unable to stand the disgraceful treatment he was receiving. In the end, he fell straight into our hands," Potterfang replied.

"For justice and the honor of nobles?! Bullshit!" Lorist exclaimed.

Potterfang laughed and said, "In the end, his subordinate revealed the truth. Milord, didn't you hang a person called Baron Farad for harming our messengers?"

Lorist nodded and said, "Oh, come to think of it, I did."

"The butler of the count said that Baron Farad had always been really respectful to the count and he even wanted to wed his daughter to the baron. However, the baron was hanged by you, milord. Angered beyond his wits, Count Spenseid believed that you didn't have the right to punish another fellow noble for the sake of a few messengers. Had it not been for the troops you brought with you at that time, the old count would've launched his assault on you long ago.

"That's why he was the first to heed Duke Loggins's call and ended up losing his forces at Firmrock Castle. Milord, how should we deal with this count? We've already imprisoned him for two whole months and given how busy we all are, no one else can really afford to spend any time on him. Now that the transportation of the goods is almost done, it's about time you made a decision," Potterfang said.

"How many people are there among the nobles we have in captivity?" Lorist asked as he ran his finger through the stack of beastskin documents like they were poker cards.

"There are 16 nobles and 123 knights in total."

"Where are the family members of Count Spenseid currently?"

"They're imprisoned together with him. The old count has two wives, one daughter and one son. His 25-year-old daughter is a widow and his 14-year-old son was birthed by his second wife. He also had a family knight who perished during the charge towards Firmrock Castle," explained Potterfang in great detail.

"How are you so familiar with his situation?" Lorist asked curiously.

Potterfang blushed and said, "That daughter of his is really thoughtful and she tries her best to take care of her father and younger brother even though she's a prisoner just like them. I've seen her myself when I went over there…"

"Oh…" Lorist said with realization as a smile surfaced on his face.

Stretching his hand out to the bell rope beside him, Lorist called for Reidy to come in.

"Reidy, get Supervisor Kedan to come over here. I have something I want him to do."

Kedan quickly appeared before Lorist after being summoned.

"Supervisor Kedan, I'll leave this matter to you," Lorist said as he handed a stack of beastskin documents to him. After that, he took out Count Spenseid's file and said, "Go ask this old guy's daughter if she's willing to become the maidservant of our very own Knight Potterfang. If she's willing, we'll let her parents and brother return home."

Kedan revealed a smile and said, "Congratulations, Knight Potterfang."

Sweating with embarrassment, Potterfang thanked Lorist shyly. "Thank you, milord.

However, the count won't be able to return home as their castle and town walls have already been taken apart by us with everything of value taken, including their citizens…”

"What? Why would we take apart their castle and town walls? Who made that call?" Lorist said as he thought, *I would understand if they took the valuables, but I really don't get the point of taking down even their town walls.*

"It was Shadekampf. He said that the construction of the seven towns within the wasteland will definitely require a lot of rectangular-shaped rocks. Seeing that the soldiers stationed at the count's dominion had nothing to do, he ordered them to dismantle the castle and town walls for the stones to be shipped back to be used as building material. Right now, almost nothing is left but a piece of flat, empty land," Potterfang said in a troubled fashion. He personally felt that the matter was going too far as well.

Sol! Shadekampf is even better at being a miser than Charade now!

"Oh well… Supervisor Kedan, tell the count's daughter that if she agrees, we will provide them with a residence within Firmrock Castle and pay them 100 gold Fordes yearly as reparation. If we are able in the future, we will once again construct a new castle at their dominion or move his dominion to another more prosperous area. That will be it for now," Lorist said.

"Milord, a few other nobles' dominions have also been ruined by the passing of our convoy," Potterfang reminded.

"Have those poor misers buzz off. Why would we waste food on feeding them? As for the rest, if they are willing to pay a ransom, let them go. If they don't have money, they can trade some resources instead as well. Settle this matter as soon as possible. Pog, you should follow Kedan there lest he gets the wrong person," Lorist said as he laughed.

"Milord…” said Potterfang with a flushed face.

"Understood, milord," Kedan said as he saluted respectfully before he left.

Chapter 171
Female Secretary

"Milord, Old Man Balk is here," Reidy said as he pushed open the door.

"Oh, have him come in," Lorist said. Currently, he was busy organizing the various documents on his table.

Old Man Balk entered with a beastskin scroll clasped by his side.

"Milord, good morning," he said as he saluted to Lorist.

"Drop the formalities," Lorist said as he waved his hand. "Old Man Balk, did you bring the things I asked for?"

"They're all here," Balk said as he rolled the scroll open and laid it on the table. It was a detailed map of the area around Morgan Hills.

"I rushed over the moment I received your order. Milord, we started the first stages of surveying the area around Morgan Hills. Under the guidance of Grandmaster Sid, we discovered a silver deposit, a tin deposit, a clay pit, a limestone quarry and three granite deposits. This year, the production of copper within the dominion have already recovered to its previous amount and we have started to begin early work on silver mining. So far, around 60 kilograms of silver is mined every month," reported Balk.

"You did well," Lorist praised. "Oh, and what is Grandmaster Sid up to now?"

"Milord, Grandmaster Sid is currently researching the equipment of the Whitelion Legion like crazy. It's a shame we didn't discover any iron deposits near Morgan Hills. That is what the family lacks the most right now," Balk said.

Nodding, Lorist said, "Originally we had two factories, one for armor making and another for ballistas. However, I've already ordered them to stop all manufacturing, mainly because we don't lack any good equipment ever since the return of the convoy and the rest of the iron we have left are to be made into farming tools. We will expand our farmland greatly next year so we will need a lot of those tools.

"Since the equipment we make cannot rival that of the Whitelion Legion in quality, I don't plan to have them continue manufacturing either. I have already tasked Grandmaster Fellin to start research into new types of ballistas and longbows. Notify Grandmaster Sid that I am also willing to sponsor his research effort so that we may one day be able to make armor of better quality than the Whitelion Legion ones we have now.

"The reason I asked you to come here today was to tell you that I intend to reorganize all the factories and mines within the dominion by setting up an industrial and mining department with you as its chief manager. You will be in charge of everything pertaining to mining as well as starting new factories within the dominion. Take a look at this first," Lorist said as he passed a thick beastskin document to Balk.

"This is a list of personnel picked from our 500000 plus citizens who have prior experience starting and managing mines and you should pick some of them to become supervisors of our mines. After introducing them to the general matters they have to pay attention to, have them report to you regularly on the development efforts."

Lorist then gave another beastskin document to Balk and said, "In here is a similar list with those experienced in running factories as well as the ones I intend to have built within the dominion. I have already readied the manpower, resources and funds required for the construction, so you will only have to pick them from the list to get things going."

Balk took the document and mused, "A pottery workshop, a leather factory, a clothes factory, a wooden writing sheet factory, a beastskin processing factory, a furniture factory and a blanket factory…"

Raising his head in confusion, Balk asked, "Milord, why do you want to start so many factories and workshops to produce daily use products?"

Lorist smiled bitterly and shrugged. "This year, we have to solve the issue of having our citizens spend the winter in the new development villages. Since Loze and Josk led their men to kill off lots of magical beasts, we've ended up with quite an amount of fur that we can use to make leather outfits and blankets which we must distribute before the coming of winter. Additionally, when most of the new citizens settle down next year, apart from supplying them with products for daily use, we have to also consider their increasing consumption of the products as well."

Lorist patted the thick documents held by Balk and said, "Many among the list are merchants and factory owners who have gone bankrupt for various reasons which caused their eventual fall into the ranks of the vagabonds. I've decided to give them another chance to pick up their former careers again. Tell them that if they manage these factories well, they will be able to borrow a sum from our family to gain personal ownership of those factories and are free to manage them however they please provided they adhere to our regulations. Tell them to be bold and do their job well and that the Norton Family will definitely support their efforts."

Balk nodded and said, "Milord, I understand what you're trying to say. I'll do my best to fulfill it."

Lorist then pointed on the calendar on the wall and said, "It's already the end of the 7th month right now. You have around 1 month to get things ready. After that, we'll head to the Bladedge Mountains to visit the valley that you mentioned before to see if there's really green clay vines over there. Oh, and we'll have Grandmaster Sid follow us along as well to check if there are any minable resources over there."

"Acknowledged, milord."

……

Lorist noticed that his work increased once again with the formation of Balk's new department, causing him to look at the calendar on the walls as each day while he waited for Charade's return from his vacation to take over the mountain of work seemed as long as a year to him.

I feel so stupid! Lorist thought. *Why did I give Charade 1 whole month of vacation even though Lundmorde said that he only needed ten or so days of rest… Had it not been for what I said, I would've been able to return to Maplewoods Bastide to see my darling son…*

Once again taking a glance at the calendar, he thought, *Sol, there's still 15 days before Charade's vacation ends… How agonizing…*

Lorist could no longer sit still, so he stood up and walked towards the map detailing the seven sectors. The migration of people to the first three sectors had already been completed and construction of the temporary villages and towns were under way. The fourth and fifth sectors were in the migration process with the sixth and seventh still being cleared of magical beasts. The seventh area was where Wildnorth Town was and

the sixth was the most troublesome with its high magical beast count as it was more mountainous than the other sectors. However, Lorist was confident that the culling could be completed by the 8th month.

Bam! The door to the office was slammed open by Telesti who rushed within with an angered, flushed expression and both her eyes wide open.

"Locke, how can you go back on your promise like that?!" shouted Telesti incredibly angrily.

Lorist merely patted on his forehead as yet another headache began to manifest.

Lorist gestured for Reidy to close the door to the office.

"My beloved Telesti, sit down first and let's talk about this civilly."

"Locke, you've promised me that the construction of the valley city will go according to my plan and supervision. This, however, isn't what I wanted," Telesti said with anger still filling her voice.

Sigh, this is because of Charade, thought Lorist as he laughed bitterly.

He remembered promising Telesti that she would have full control of the planning and building of the valley city, causing her to give it her best for her work. After brainstorming for days and nights, she designed an almost fairytale-like garden city and even drew quite a number of pictures of its completed form.

From an aesthetic standpoint, Lorist couldn't help but admit that it was definitely one of the best he has seen. However, when Charade checked the designs, he almost fainted.

"There isn't even a city wall! In the mountainous area of Morgan Hills, any carnivorous magical beast can just jump into the city to hunt for prey! Also, the roads of the city should be constructed with practicality in mind so that things can be transported to their destination as quickly as possible. This road layout is so complicated and winding that 9 out of 10 people will definitely lose their way in it! Also, with the huge windows these buildings have, did she even consider the problem of retaining heat during winter?"

Charade critiqued the design for a whole half hour before abandoning the

crystallization of Telesti's hard work altogether.

As for the already completed Firmrock Castle, Charade laughed at how it looked rather run down for a castle.

"Locke, my brother, you must understand that you now have around 500000 people under your rule and you're not like most other smaller nobles which only have thousands of subjects. You should convert Firmrock Castle into the Firmrock City Fortress so that it will be able to match the prestige of the Norton Family name," Charade said.

"However, there's only so much space within the valley. We can't just expand it because we want to," said Lorist in a troubled manner.

"That won't be a problem," Charade said as he took a map of the Firmrock Castle and drew rectangles outside each of the two walls. "We only have to build two more sectors here with the first one being the army base and business sector that deals with transactions outside the walls. The sector inside here will be the residence of the family members of the soldiers. Right now, it's used for the camp of the immigrants. However, we can always reclaim the land around that area after building the sectors. This way, the valley city in the middle will become the central city sector for the administration of our family as well as the central base for military operations. By the time these changes are made, we can proudly call it the Firmrock City Fortress."

Lorist had to admit that Charade made quite a lot of sense and he allowed him to redesign the layout of the city and reallocated all the personnel of Telesti to him.

Telesti was more of an introvert that disliked crowded places. That's why after she finished the design of Firmrock Castle, she returned to her hermit-like lifestyle and stayed within her home all day to analyze the materials her mother left her. She didn't mind the fact that her personnel had been allocated to Charade. However, she eagerly awaited the beginning of the construction and deeply hoped that she could name the city after her mother.

As for Charade, he couldn't care less about Lorist's personal promise to the young lady as the family's priority was to first settle down the 500000 plus subjects by developing the reclamation villages and new towns.

The first of the seven sectors of Felicitas Settlement had the planned valley city as the

main town at its center. Charade abandoned the design Telesti made and found someone else to remake a simple, yet pragmatic layout and the construction had already begun only recently. That's when Telesti noticed the changes and stormed to Lorist's place for an explanation.

Recalling that Charade had tossed Telesti's design up to the top of the nearby shelf, Lorist got a stool and used it to reach out to the dust-covered plans.

Seeing her painstakingly drawn design thrown in a corner doing nothing but gathering dust, Telesti started to cry with droplets of tears streaking down her face.

"Sigh, don't cry. I was just about to tell you the reason we didn't use your design," said Lorist hurriedly in an attempt to console her.

Lorist repeated every one of Charade's reasonings that he could remember, only to be refuted by a single line of Telesti's. "But, Grandmaster Ciroba himself said that my design was brimming with spirit and genius and even said that he looked forward to its completion… He also thought that my reputation as a designer of the city would skyrocket after its completion…"

"Sigh, Miss Telesti, Grandmaster Ciroba was praising you from an artistic standpoint. While it is definitely a beautiful piece of work, the family has to first settle down 500000 of its subjects. Do you think that we can afford to appreciate your artistic talent? What we need now is to settle them down as soon as possible. Simple and quick is what this city needs to be. I'm really sorry about this, Miss Telesti… As the dominion lord, I have not been able to fulfill my promise to you. However, I didn't have a choice in that matter as well."

Lorist pointed at the documents stacked up in his rooms and said, "Look around. Knight Charade had already collapsed from the burden of his duties and it's up to me now as the dominion lord to make the decisions based on the torrents of documents coming in every single day. I'm really worn out as well, but I have to endure it so that we can pass this hurdle for the sake of the future of the Norton Family. I truly apologize for my inability to fulfill my promise and hope that I can make it up to you when the situation of the family dominion is stabilized…"

Telesti wiped her tears and looked around the office before she said, "I can see that you're quite busy… Then, how do you plan to make it up to me?"

Lorist stepped towards the map of Felicitas Settlement and pointed towards the seven sectors. "Look. These seven towns will be completed in three years. By then, I plan to build a basic school within each of these towns to train people to read and write. I also plan to have an academy built within the dominion. If you are willing, we can name the academy after your mother. That will be my compensation to you, is that alright?"

Telesti's face flushed with excitement once again. "My mother was a scholar and to her, using her name for an academy is the most honorable thing she can dream of… Thank you, Locke."

Telesti then propped her feet up to kiss Lorist on the cheek slightly to express her gratitude.

Lorist quickly turned his face around and planted his lips onto Telesti's before using his tongue to push open her mouth and began sucking. At the same time, he ran his hands all over her body, causing her to slump powerlessly in his embrace.

They were currently within Lorist's personal office and not Telesti's operating headquarters. Ever since he impregnated Irina some time during the 9th month of the previous year, he hadn't had the chance to release his pent up lust and right now, he was already at his tipping point. With a flip of his arms and a tearing sound, he stripped Telesti naked like a shaven sheep.

WIth her clothes torn open, Telesti snapped back from her daze and attempted to push Lorist away, only to have her body once again twitch involuntarily as Lorist lowered his head to suck on her pink, ripe 'strawberries', sending her into stupor from Lorist's fervent teasing.

Lorist then hoisted Telesti onto his work desk. With a sweep, the thick stack of beastskin documents fell to the ground before he placed Telesti onto the table and pushed her two fair legs apart. He then inserted his member deep into her forbidden zone gently.

With a slightly pained moan, a crimson red flower bloomed on Lorist's work desk as Telesti finally parted with her pristine, maiden state…

When their bodies parted, Lorist breathed heavily with Telesti reprimanding him in a worn out manner, "Locke, you're taking advantage of the situation…"

Lorist merely continued to lick on the two peaks on Telesti's chest before the humping

resumed.

"Locke… You're… you're so despicable…" muttered Telesti who was currently sweating all over.

Lorist once again engaged in another round of intercourse…

Having given up with a teary look on her face, Telesti said, "Locke… My lower body feels a little numb… Help me out…"

Lorist embraced her and massaged her gently with his internal energy.

"Telesti, since we're already like this, will you marry me?" Lorist asked.

"I can't…" Telesti said as she shook her head resolutely. "I've taken an oath to remain single for the rest of my life… I won't marry anyone."

"But you're already mine…"

"I can only consider you a lover. Locke, it's not that I don't like you, but I really can't go against my vows…" Telesti said as she continued to shake her head.

"Locke, you've completely ruined my clothes…"

"I'll give you another chest full of new ones."

"Did you mean it when you said that you'll let me name the academy after my mother?"

"Yes, I did. However, it'll take three years for the development to complete. Why don't you help me out as my secretary? That way, you can remind me constantly about my promise to you."

"Alright, I'll help you out and keep an eye on whatever you're doing this time…"

Chapter 172
Messenger and Alliance

The Bladedge Mountains was like a huge wall that blocked off the Norton Family dominion from the open seas.

Lorist was currently standing atop a cliff and looking towards the incoming waves bashing onto the black-colored, razor-sharp bedrock with a solemn expression.

"Are the shores of the Bladedge Mountains all so reefy?" Lorist asked.

"They are, milord," replied Balk. "The coast around the family dominion is mostly like this. The only way we can reach the coast is through the three ways I brought you past just now. The other sides are so steep that there is virtually no way for us to get down the mountains to the coast. We've always headed through the three ways with some firewood and cauldrons to procure some salt from the seawater and each trip would take us tens of days to complete…

"Milord, I think I know what you're thinking. You're planning to find a place to build a port, aren't you?" asked Balk.

Lorist nodded.

"Milord, please follow me," Balk said as he traveled with Lorist across the mountains to another cliff further away.

"Look, milord…"

In the distance, part of the mountain could be seen sloping into the seas. What piqued Lorist's curiosity was the presence of a few wooden structures that were left over there.

"Milord, in the past, the four great families of Wildnorth Town had once attempted to contact the outside world through the sea and spent around one year to construct a very long floating bridge that stretched all the way into the sea over the reef near the shores. At that time, the lord of the family was your grandfather and he attempted to

discuss this with the four families of Wildnorth Town and requested for half of the rights to use the bridge. However, before the negotiations were completed, a huge storm tore the bridge apart, causing the four families immense losses as the money they had invested into the project had all gone to waste. All that remains is that over there…" explained Old Man Balk, who knew many things within the distant pass in the that Lorist had no idea about.

"Are these storms common?" Lorist asked.

"Not really. Huge twisters usually appear in the sea only during the 4th and 5th months. During other times, there would be huge winds and waves, but storms are far rarer," replied Balk.

"Oh well. Let's go back now. We've already visiting the Bladedge Mountains for two months, so it's about time we headed back," Lorist said.

After Charade ended his vacation and resumed his work, he really couldn't stand Lorist's attitude; when he had work, he would let his secretary do it. But when he didn't, he would 'do' his secretary. So, he forced Lorist to form a group of people to head towards the Bladedge Mountains to search for potential resources they could use to solve the resource crisis.

One of the things Charade found that they lacked was salt. In the past, the population within the dominion wasn't high and whenever salt ran out, they would bring some cauldrons and firewood to the coast near Bladedge Mountains to make some like Balk had described and that would be enough. However, there were now about 500000 people within the Norton Family dominion and if each person consumed 500 grams of salt per year, each year would cost the family 250000 kilograms of salt. Additionally, the production of furs and preservation of meat required huge amounts of it as well.

Charade also received a report from Spiel that stated that the salt stored up within the warehouses would run out by the 7th month of next year, prompting him to rush to Lorist and ask him to go to the Bladedge Mountains to conduct a survey as soon as possible to find a way to mass produce salt instead of humping with Telesti all day long within the office.

To Lorist, the two months he spent at Bladedge Mountains was quite beneficial. Mainly, he managed to confirm the presence of green vines within the cavern that Balk once found himself in. Even though the amount wouldn't be able to allow them to

produce more than 1 million buckets of green vine glue yearly like the Romon Empire, they would still yield around 100000 buckets and that was more than enough for the developmental plans of the family.

Other than that, Grandmaster Sid discovered a black iron mountain which has huge deposits of black iron. Additionally, tungsten and chrome silver deposits were also found nearby, causing Sid to dance in joy and even proclaim, "As long as I have time to do my research, I will definitely be able to make a set of armor that is even better than that of the Whitelion Legion!"

Lorist also felt quite surprised by the discovery as the three minable resource deposits seemed pretty unlikely to occur near each other naturally. Even so, given the infinite vastness of the universe, it wasn't weird for something as outstanding as that to occur, so he put that thought aside for now.

As for the salt crisis Charade was so troubled about, Lorist already had a method to resolve it, that was to use the solar evaporation method. Boiling seawater to gain salt was far too troublesome. Before this, Charade allocated 3000 personnel to boil seawater and managed to gather up to 1 million kilograms of salt within the span of two months. However, they didn't continue to do so after that.

While Lorist didn't personally work in salt production before, he understood the basic procedures and concepts and chose a wide valley and designed a layout for salt evaporation pools to be handed for Balk to manage. While the cost of setting up the infrastructure for the first time was rather high, it didn't require too much manpower at only 100 or so people. However, this method would allow them to produce an estimated 50000 kilograms of salt monthly, solving the shortage of salt within the dominion considerably.

"Also, the salt evaporation pools must first be pressed tightly with mud before applying a layer of green clay to flatten them. When the tide rises, open the valves to allow for the seawater to flow into the pools. After letting the seawater to evaporate for roughly three days, transfer the thick salt water to be cleansed with spring water and allow for the impurities to settle at the bottom. After that, filter the solution for impurities and empty it into the evaporation pools on the next level and allow them to continue to dry. What remains will be edible salt," Lorist explained to Balk one last time.

Balk had asked quite a number of questions as for the past thousands of years, no such

method for salt production was ever used. This method also allowed for huge savings as no firewood had to be brought to the coast to boil seawater and the problem of transporting the wood there didn't have to be considered either.

The Bladedge Mountains was not an easy terrain to tread and only smaller plants and grass grew without any trees within the vicinity. Even if there were, they would've long been cut down to be used as firewood for seawater boiling. After descending from the gentler slopes, people would be greeted with one tall cliff after another and had no choice but to circle around them to leave the Bladedge Mountains.

Currently, Telesti and her young maidservant Vinny were at a slope picking flowers to make a flower crown. They jumped around joyfully as if they were innocent, young children.

Since Lorist had intercourse with Telesti for the first time, she began to shed her introverted lifestyle and showed more interest in the matters between men and women. That was especially the case after she discovered that her cramps no longer hurt as much as they did before. She even began to seduce Lorist of her own accord and did it within the confines of their office.

One thing that troubled Lorist was that no matter how many times they make love or try out new and exciting stuff, Telesti wouldn't agree to marry him no matter how hard he tried to convince her. While she wouldn't mind being his lover, becoming his wife was out of the question.

Originally, Telesti wasn't so keen on going along with this trip to the Bladedge Mountains. However, Lorist told her that walking thousands of kilometers was always more enlightening than reading hundreds of books. He then supported his argument by reminding her that her mother frequently visited ruins and ancient forests in person and didn't stay at home all day long merely doing some reading, thus convincing her to come along on the trip.

Seeing Lorist's sullen expression, Telesti understood that Lorist was disappointed. That spot was the end of the stretch of the Bladedge Mountains and beyond that was the Blackmud Marsh. Lorist still wasn't able to find a suitable location to build a port.

Lightly kissing Telesti on the face, Lorist said gently, "Darling, we should head back. To be honest, I was surprised you were able to last two whole months during this trip here. You must've gained quite a bit from the experience."

As opposed to finding a port location like Lorist, Telesti was busy checking out the flora and fauna within the area as well as the geography and herbs of the Bladedge Mountains.

Humphing proudly, Telesti said, "I'm not just another soft, weak, girl you know. I can do whatever my mother could."

Holding Lorist's arm as they descended the slope, Telesti continued, "Locke, to be honest, after two months of research over here, I formed a hypothesis that I'm quite confident about. The terrain of the Bladedge Mountains couldn't have been formed naturally. It was as if the gods used their divine power to build a dam facing the sea to stop the stormy weather and the other dangers they may come with. It is nothing short of miraculous…"

Lorist smiled and merely listened quietly as he thought that his lover had quite the imagination from all the reading she did.

……

By the time they returned to Firmrock Castle, it was already the 28th day of the 10th month. Lorist had considered stopping by Maplewoods Bastide for a day or two to check out on his son. However, he didn't expect that a few messengers were there waiting for Lorist's return and notified him to go to Firmrock Castle as soon as possible.

The last trip Lorist made to the Bladedge Mountains lasted up to 10 days and within that period of time, various messengers had gathered up within the bastide. The gist of their news was that many ambassadors from various noble families were at Firmrock Castle, among the more noteworthy ones included the ambassadors of the First and Second Princes. On another note, Viscount Kenmays also paid a visit to the castle and had already waited there for half a month.

The first person Lorist met with after his return was Viscount Kenmays. After all, among the people who were there at Firmrock Castle, he was considered a guest and thus had the highest priority. However, the viscount himself advised that Lorist meet up with the ambassadors of the two princes first as his matter wasn't urgent and said that it could be left for later.

The ambassador sent there by the Second Prince was a middle-aged noble who

radiated charisma from the core of his being. He introduced himself as Viscount Zinderson and mentioned that he had arrived on the Second Prince's behalf to send Lorist a letter and requested Lorist to draft a personal reply without saying anything else.

Lorist opened the letter curiously and noted its length which spanned a few beastskins. The first two beastskins described the intimate camaraderie between the Second Prince and he Norton Family and contained the his condolences for the death of Lorist's elder brother on the battlefield. However, the last beastskin revealed the Second Prince's true ravenous intentions.

The Second Prince said that the conflict between Duke Loggins and the Norton Family was something that pained him deeply. He argued that the conflicts between nobles like that was the main reason why the Iblia Kingdom wasn't able to gather the forces of all nobles to reform the glorious Krissen Empire. The Second Prince stressed that he has punished Duke Loggins for instigating conflict but also mentioned that he intended to punish the Norton Family for pillaging the dominion of the duke dry.

First, the Norton Family was to hand in the near 300000 gold Fordes' worth of property obtained from the duke's personal treasury to the Second Prince as reparation for ravaging the duke's dominion. In exchange, the Second Prince would forgo the penalty for moving all the citizens of the duke's dominion to the Norton Family's dominion.

Second, as the new leader of the Norton Family, Lorist must head to Gildusk City where the duke's dominion was located to pledge allegiance to the Second Prince and said that he would consider elevating the noble rank of the Norton Family as well.

Third, the Norton Family must also supply the Second Prince with two fully-equipped armies so that he can stabilize the chaotic situation of the Northlands. He said that the Norton Family must launch an attack against the Madras Duchy under his lead before the 7th month of next year to contribute towards the reformation of the Krissen Empire.

Lorist laughed out loud after seeing the conditions the Second Prince made. He had to admit that the Second Prince was far more despicable than the dogshit duke. While the three conditions seemed really loose and didn't harm the Norton Family's foundations on first sight, once he agreed to them, they would become a leash with which the Second Prince would use to drag the Norton Family into the abyss.

Lorist didn't even bother to think too much about the devious snake that was the Second Prince. Ever since his elder brother died on the battlefield in service to the prince, the Second Prince stopped caring about the Norton Family and merely watched as they clashed with the Kenmays Family and didn't even settle the territorial disputes between the Nortons and the Kenmayses. Lorist would rather believe that pigs would one day fly than the words of the Second Prince.

Right now, Lorist's main priority was the development of his dominion and he didn't have any intention of conquering more of the Northlands or restoring the former glory of the Krissen Empire. Taking out a blank beastskin, he wrote only a few short symbols and after some deliberating, used his stamp as a count to seal the letter. After that, he rolled the letter up, sealed it in an envelope and handed it to Viscount Zinderson, who bid his farewell right after receiving it. He had already stayed at Firmrock Castle for more than ten days and was raring to return as soon as possible.

After that, Lorist received the 8 ambassadors of various nobles. The ambassador of the Felim Family represented them to express their similar intentions: to purchase some weapons and equipments like ballistas and metal armor from the Norton Family.

Lorist agreed to the requests almost instantly and even said that if they didn't have enough money, they could trade for the equipment with food and other resources before asking them to discuss the matter of price with Charade.

Finally, he invited Viscount Kenmays over and asked him why the nobles of the Northlands were so keen on purchasing weapons and other war equipment.

The first thing he said to Lorist was, 'the time of chaos of the Northlands has come.'

After that, the viscount briefed Lorist on the current situation of the Northlands. Ever since Duke Loggins returned to his dominion, he fell sick. After Knight Hennard had taken control of most of the soldiers of the Northland Army, he stopped at nothing to tempt the remaining soldiers of the duke who were holed up within Freist Castle to join his side. In the end, more than 3000 men joined Hennard with less than 1000 defending the castle and the customs point at the suspension bridge. When faced with the soldiers of the Second Prince, they were scattered almost instantly, allowing for the Second Prince to take full control of the two strategic locations.

The Second Prince who was actually heading back after his defeat at the Madras Kingdom had actually heard about the situation of the Northlands from the merchants

who were traveling away from it. Seeing an opportunity he could take advantage of, the Second Prince sent a group of troops belonging to the Frontier Legion that incurred relatively few losses to conquer the two points at the Northlands, causing the Second Prince to decide against returning to the royal capital and instead to occupy the duke's manor and even had someone send Duke Loggins to the royal capital of the Iblia Kingdom on the grounds of treating his sickness.

The Second Prince didn't stop at that and began to set his sights on the rest of the nobles within the Northlands, only to be annoyed by Knight Hennard who had occupied the Cherry Blossom Ridge and led a skirmish against the his troops, causing him to lose around 2000 people from the defeat.

That was the main factor that prompted the rest of the nobles of the Northlands to head towards Firmrock Castle in hopes that they would be able to purchase weapons and equipment. Even though the Norton Family managed to chase away the tiger that was Duke Loggins, a hungry wolf like the Second Prince appeared there instead. To the ambitious nobles of the Northlands, this was also an opportunity for them to expand their influence and power.

The reason Viscount Kenmays wanted to see Lorist was simple: he wanted to form an alliance with the Norton Family and brought a piece of news to Lorist as well. After spending five months and countless amounts of money, the Kenmays Family have managed to set up another metal suspension bridge connecting the Northlands to the outside world and said that they no longer had to use the Hendliff Suspension Bridge that was under the control of the Second Prince to transport resources out of or into the Northlands any longer.

That was incredible news for Lorist, especially after he wasn't able to find a suitable spot at the Bladedge Mountains to build a port to reach the outside world. Lorist said that he would discuss that proposal with his knights and officers before giving the viscount a response.

Chapter 173
Top Kek

The king, Krissen Iblia, held the letter in his veined hands as his body shivered with rage.

As the Second Prince of the Krissen Empire, as well as the current king of the Iblia Kingdom, he felt that he had been insulted like never before. He would never even dream that the reply of the Norton Family leader would contain only two words: Top Kek.

The Second Prince had actually went to great lengths to collect intelligence about the Norton Family. When he first attacked the Madras Duchy, he received word that the Norton Family had a huge convoy that helped the Second Highness of the Andinaq Kingdom to tighten his hold on the kingdom and stabilize it. They also assisted the Second Highness in conquering Lichtana Citadel, ultimately helping them take the Yungechandler Province.

However, the Second Prince merely laughed it off and doubted the authenticity of the information. Even though the Norton Family was indeed known as the Family of the Roaring Raging Bear of the Northlands, after the previous successor of the family, Gold ranked knight Abelyde, died while serving him, the family had begun to spiral into one trouble after another. They were even pressured by the Kenmays Family, a merchant family he had personally entitled only recently. Since the Norton Family was no longer of any use to him, the Second Prince couldn't be bothered to care about their trivial squabbles with other nobles. To gain the support of Duke Loggins, the Second Prince even made the other nobles of the Northlands vassal nobles to the duke without their consent on his own accord.

Only after he conquered Kobo City did he get to know from the vagabonds that were left behind there that the Norton Family did indeed have a huge armed convoy of about 10000 carriages with more than 100000 vagabonds traveling with it. By that time, the convoy had already crossed Metropoulos River and the troops he sent could only watch them leave in futility.

After that, the Second Prince focused his efforts on sucking the other nobles of

Delamock Province dry by putting them to death with the reason of siding with the Andinaq Kingdom and resisting the Second Prince's reinforcement army for the Madras Duchy. He also went around the province to fight the smaller personal armies of the various landed nobles and by the time he arrived at Kobo City, he had already put the Norton Family at the back of his mind.

His excursion to the Madras Duchy had yielded him quite a number of benefits. Not only did he manage to settle his debt with Duke Madras in one go, he also got lots of riches such as money, food and other supplies to fill his treasury with from ravaging the nobles of Delamock Province.

After losing the battle at Kobo City, the Second Prince had no choice but to give the order to retreat. Having experienced failures during the 'Daybreak Assault' and the 'Battle of Kobo', the casualties of the Second Prince numbered more than 50000. While most of the casualties were from his personal force, his father-in-law Duke Fisablen's Frontier Legion also lost somewhere around 20000 people, much to the dismay of the Second Prince.

In the time of chaos, military power reigned supreme. The Second Prince understood this principle deeply and he was prepared to use the spoils he got from the excursion to form another legion belonging to his kingdom to secure his position as the king as well as lay the foundations for the next time he attacks. However at that time, the Second Prince didn't consider the fact that there was no place in his kingdom where he would be able to train his soldiers in peace.

When the Iblia Kingdom was formed, it encompassed five provinces of the former Krissen Empire. The province of the Northlands itself already took up more than half of the area of the kingdom and was governed separately in its own right. Apart from suppressing the Duke of the Northlands to stay within the kingdom, the Second Prince had never found a way to truly integrate the Northlands into his control.

As for the Eastwild Province and the Wild Husbandry Province near the Great Eastern Plains, those belonged to Duke Fisablen himself and was also the home base of the Frontier Legion. Unless the Second Prince had gone insane, he would never even attempt to take those provinces for himself.

In other words, all that remained within the Iblia Kingdom was the Southern Province as well as the Winston Province where the royal capital, Windbury City, was located. However, the Southern Province was already ravaged really badly by Duke Melein and

his Fiercegale Legion. If the Second Prince planned to train his soldiers there, Duke Melein might think that it would be a great opportunity for him to strike first to gain the upper hand. There was no way the Second Prince would allow Duke Melein to once again crusade his way to the royal capital like before.

When the Second Prince formed his kingdom initially, for the sake of his pride, he split up the Southern Province into three commanderies and the Winston Province which had a larger area was split into four commanderies. And to sustain his lavish lifestyle, he had long sold off his personal land to other nobles at a high price to the point that he wasn't able to find a place for himself to train his troops.

Just when he was worrying about his next step, one of the scouting teams of his vanguard brought him a few merchants. The Second Prince once again got intelligence from the merchants about the convoy of the Norton Family. According to them, the Norton Family convoy had defeated the allied noble army which had Duke Loggins as its leader and were completely victorious. To pay the duke back for what he did, the Norton Family even robbed the duke's dominion clean, which was one of the most prosperous areas of the Northlands, and even forcefully migrated the population away from there to their own dominion. Currently, there was no central power within the Northlands and it was in an anarchic state.

That situation was practically a godsend for the Second Prince's predicament and he sent his soldiers towards the Hendliff Suspension Bridge immediately. Without even sparing any effort, they managed to conquer the two strategic locations including the bridge and Freist Castle and proceeded to occupy Gildusk City. He also got to see Duke Loggins who was unconscious from vomiting too much blood from his anger.

The Second Prince waved his hands and ordered for the duke to be moved to Windbury City with the excuse that he would receive better treatment for his illness there. Everyone else understood that there was no way that the duke would be able to make it back to the Northlands during the rest of his lifetime.

Only after the Second Prince took control of the duke's dominion did he realize how badly it had been ravaged. He was actually unable to find even a single blacksmith or servant within the capital of the duke's lands, not to say much about the burnt remains of the villages nearby.

At that time, the Second Prince received a report that when his regiment of 2500 soldiers and another 3000 soldiers from the private armies of some nobles were about

to raid the still-intact Evanson Town, their forces were assaulted by the former soldiers of the Northland Army that emerged from Cherry Blossom Ridge nearby, causing the Second Prince's forces to incur heavy casualties with more than 2000 soldiers dead.

Enraged beyond belief, the Second Prince mobilized his soldiers right away only to be faced with no less than 10000 soldiers that formerly belonged to the Northland Army with each of them mounted and equipped with a suit of metal armor. They were even led by two Gold ranked knights, one of them being Knight Hennard, the duke's former family knight, who referred to himself as Baron Shazin, and the other being Gold ranked knight Tabik. Being among the former five Gold ranked knights of the duke, they knew the Second Prince rather well. In fact, they could even be said to be old acquaintances.

Seeing his own disorganized men and the towering killing intent of Hennard's soldiers, the Second Prince understood that a battle would not go down well for him. So, he rode out from his troops and decided to talk. It was then when he found that Knight Hennard had actually inherited his father's title of a baron and currently, Cherry Blossom Ridge was part of the dominion of the Shazin Family. Tabik had also become the family knight of Hennard.

Thus, the Second Prince could only apologize towards Hennard for the fact that his men had trespassed upon the territory of the Shazin Family and told him that because of the condition of the duke, he had already taken over the management of his dominion in his place and even extended an invitation to Knight Hennard to join him.

Knight Hennard, the current Baron Shazin, also gave the Second Prince face and accepted his apology, saying that he was not mistaken as he was unaware of the situation. However, he said that he couldn't accept the Second Prince's invitation without the personal order of the duke and said that the duke has done him a huge boon by giving him control of the Northland Army in a time of crisis like that. Not only did he allow Hennard to inherit the title of his father, the duke also allowed Tabik to become his family knight and Hennard said that he was infinitely thankful for that. That's why Hennard said that if the duke personally willed him to serve the Second Prince, he would definitely do so without another word and would even be willing to die for the Second Prince.

Having had to endure his anger from listening to Hennard's excuse to not join him, the Second Prince returned to Gildusk City with the rest of his soldiers. The only benefit

he got out of that trip was when he asked Knight Hennard curiously about the metal armor worn by his men. The knight then told him that he had traded them with the Norton Family.

And so the Second Prince once again began to gather more reports on the Norton Family. By the time he had read various smaller reports and information, the Second Prince got to see the bigger picture behind everything.

He found that the Second Young Master of the Norton Family who had been exiled for ten years since the age of 14 had actually learned a bunch of useful skills during his time away from the family. Even though his Battle Force was only at the Iron rank, he was able to defeat Gold ranked knight Tabik and caused him to spend one year in bed to recover from his injuries.

The moment he inherited the position of the family head, the Second Young Master intentionally instigated conflict with the Kenmays Family and burned down their Redriver Valley Bastide and even erected the Firmrock Castle at Morgan Hills. Faced with the harassment of Duke Loggins, he even eliminated the 4000 troops that managed to enter their dominion and even sent out soldiers in retaliation, all the while hanging the former horse breeder of the Second Prince, Baron Farad for harming one of the messengers of the Norton Family.

It was also rumored that the Second Young Master of the Norton Family had made quite an amount of wealth during his time away from the family. After he received summons from the family, he formed his own northbound convoy and had many Gold ranked family knights under his command, one of the most famous being a Gold ranked marksman who had headed to the dominion early with the young master before the convoy arrived. During the time the marksman guarded Firmrock Castle, the allied noble army formed by the duke wasn't able to penetrate it at all and ultimately suffered a defeat from the arrival of the convoy's main force.

After digesting the information about the Norton Family, the Second Prince understood three points. First, the Norton Family was incredibly wealthy right now. The wealth they pillaged from the duke's dominion was easily worth more than 1 million gold Fordes, not to say much about the huge northbound convoy of theirs with around 20000 carriages as well as their escorts who could afford to wear metal armor. Hennard even said that the armor he traded for his 10000 men were only less than a tenth of what the Nortons had.

Second, the Norton Family's forces were incredibly mighty with an estimated total soldier count of around 50000. They were far better equipped than the soldiers of the Iblia Kingdom and the Frontier Legion. So far, the Second Prince couldn't afford to antagonize the Norton Family and it was best if he could get along with them for now.

The third point was one the Second Prince found most laughable. The new family head of the Norton Family, the Second Young Master, had zero ambition and only shriveled within the dominion to defend it. If it were anyone else who had the forces the Nortons currently possessed and the least bit of ambition, they would've long devoured the delicious meal that was the rest of the Northlands, unlike the current Norton Family leader who retreated back into his dominion after defeating the duke and taking his wealth.

Looking at the map of the Northlands and the marker that denoted the Firmrock Castle which segregated the Norton Family dominion from the outside world, the Second Prince really wanted to laugh as he believed that the mighty Roaring Raging Bear of the Northlands had turned into a cowardly tortoise that withdrew back into its shell. Even though their dominion was vast, most of it was merely wastelands. The Second Prince reasoned that they must be trying to develop the land based on all the people they recently just brought into the dominion.

However, he merely felt thankful that the new Norton Family leader didn't have any ambition. Had it not been for the fact that he had defeated the duke and left the dominion unguarded, the Second Prince would never have been able to occupy it so easily. He didn't really mind the lack of citizens either as the seven commanderies which he controlled within the Iblia Kingdom had more than enough refugees and farmers who had lost their lands. He had already ordered his men to have them brought over to utilize the farmland there properly. As long as the Second Prince was patient enough, by the time the refugees and farmers settle down, he would be able to convert the dominion of the duke into a place that produced much manpower and resource.

By occupying the duke's dominion, not only did the Second Prince extinguish all chance of Duke Loggins breaking free from the Iblia Kingdom to form his own duchy, he was also granted a place to train his soldiers and generate wealth. Brimming with ambition, the Second Prince resolved himself to hold tightly onto this land and force all the nobles nearby under his command to one day aid in his plan for complete domination.

However, the Second Prince believed that he still had time and didn't have to rush things all of a sudden. When it came to the Norton Family which he couldn't afford to anger for now, he didn't plan to just leave them be. He believed that the cowardly leader of the Norton Family wouldn't be able to resist his manipulation. He even thought that the Norton Family leader would be even easier to deal with than the Duke of the Northlands.

The letter he had sent was written after careful deliberation. The three conditions were also there as a test. The first condition which asked for the wealth of the duke worth 300000 gold Fordes was essentially a chance for the Norton Family to 'legalize' their raiding of the duke's dominion. Of the 1 million gold Fordes' worth of wealth they gained, the Second Prince felt that it was pretty reasonable for him to demand only thirty percent of that and believed that the Norton Family would jump at that opportunity so that they can proudly hold on to the wealth they've obtained without having to be held accountable for the loss the duke's dominion sustained. He was confident that the Norton Family would gladly hand the 300000 gold Fordes to him.

The second condition asked the Norton Family leader to pledge allegiance to the Second Prince as he had only just inherited his noble title in exchange for an elevation in his noble rank. This was both a good offer and a trap. As long as he could get the Norton Family leader in his presence, no matter how many Gold ranked knights followed along, he could pressure them with his own two Blademasters. That was also one of the reasons Duke Loggins didn't dare to break off from the Iblia Kingdom to form his own duchy despite the fact that he had five Gold ranked knights serving him.

The third condition for the Norton Family to send two armies to help the Second Prince stabilize the Northlands is also a test for the ambition of the Norton Family leader. Additionally, the Second Prince couldn't feel at peace with a mighty military force like that slumbering within the Northlands with his own. If that condition was accepted, that meant that the Norton Family leader is truly loyal to the Second Prince from the bottom of his heart. By that time, the Second Prince could slowly think of a way to reap enormous benefits at the expense of them.

The Second Prince felt that his mention of the bravery of the First Young Master of the Norton Family, Norton Abelyde, who had died on the battlefield, before mentioning his three conditions, was incredibly logical and sentimental. He could already imagine the sight of the Norton Family leader kneeling before him to pledge his allegiance, allowing himself to profit from the manpower, weapons and equipment and other resources the Nortons had in the meantime…

Just as he was smiling and daydreaming about that possibility, he opened the reply of the Norton Family leader which contained only two words: Top Kek[1].

A phrase like 'Top Kek' didn't exist in the Grindian language and nobody had used the word 'top' and 'kek' together like that. In the first place, 'kek' didn't even mean anything in their language. The letter didn't state 'fuck off' or 'buzz off', but the Second Prince could feel the seething mockery behind those words in the letter, as if he had been slapped squarely in the face.

The Second Prince slowly folded the reply. As a senior noble, he was sensible enough to feel the intent of the Norton Family leader. Sending Viscount Zinderson away, he gritted his teeth and swore that he would definitely make the Norton Family suffer through hell the moment he got an opportunity. After enough time for preparation, he would definitely force the new Norton Family leader swallow the letter down his throat. Ever since his childhood, he had never received so great an insult given his exalted status. He made a mental note to remember those words firmly within his mind…

Chapter 174
Magical Beast Wave

Dark clouds filled the skies, giving the atmosphere a pressing presence, causing Lorist to think of a Tang poem he memorized in his previous life. 'Dark clouds encroach upon the city, threatening to enclose and overwhelm it'.

Snow clumps the size of goose feathers drifted all around them and the mountains had already been covered with a thick, white blanket.

Even though Lorist wasn't able to see far with the sky being so gloomy and dark, he could hear the grunts and roars of the magical beasts not far away amidst the sounds of the wind blowing as well as the thudding of their steps as they crossed the land.

Not long after, the wave of magical beasts proceeded towards Maplewoods Bastide and headed in the direction of the Felicitas Settlement like a wave that crawled inwards to the shores of a beach.

"Milord, it was our mistake. We neglected to take into account that every winter, the magical beast in the wildlands would cross over from the Magical Dragon Mountains to the dominion to seek food," Belnick and Pajik apologized.

With a glum expression, Lorist waved his hand and said, "It's not your fault. Instead, it's mine for not doing proper research on this and rushing for the developmental plans to advance."

Even though he said that, Lorist was still disappointed. It was only the first winter since the development of the Felicitas Settlement and he had already arranged for 300000 people to settle down and spend the winter there within 83 villages and 7 towns. While the initial fortifications and walls have been constructed, there was still the risk of the magical beasts running wild and attacking the settlements.

Given that the beasts had come from an area with little to no humans, they were rather aggressive. They hadn't seen humans before and didn't understand how terrifying they could truly be. That's why if a human being encroached on what the beasts considered to be their territory, they would attack right away and wouldn't stop until

their last breath.

"According to the family records, the magical beast wave from the wildlands will cross the Magical Dragon Mountains to the family dominion and travel all the way from the north past the family bastide, now known as the Maplewoods Bastide, to the southern wastelands to feed. The herbivorous magical beasts would push apart the snow to consume the wild plants and algae beneath it while the carnivorous ones would hunt the herbivorous ones for food, always seeking out the weaker or singled-out ones who wouldn't be able to resist them. Every winter, there would be no less than 1 million magical beasts that cross the family dominion.

"As for why the magical beasts come here, the ancestors of the family believe that it's because the dominion is near the sea according to their research. While we have the Bladedge Mountain shielding us from it, the breeze from the sea carried its smell to blanket the dominion, causing the plants here to have a salty taste, thus attracting the herbivorous magical beasts over here.

"To prove this hypothesis, the ancestors even carried out an experiment by placing some salted algae with some animal feed. It was discovered that the livestock within the dominion first consumed the algae before moving on to the animal feed when the algae was finished. After that, they even captured some herbivorous magical beasts and prepared three types of food for it, namely, dried grass sprinkled with some salt, some algae obtained from the wilds, and the normal animal feed for the livestock of the dominion. The result was that the herbivorous magical beasts preferred the salted dried grass most, followed by algae with animal feed being the least favored.

"That's why the ancestors concluded that the reason the magical beast wave comes to the dominion during winter was to sate their salt consumption requirement. This practice is so common over the years that it is already second nature to the magical beasts. Apart from eliminating the beasts that numbered at least a million, there is no way to prevent them from coming over during winter. This is also one of the reasons why the family wasn't able to reclaim this land for agriculture and settling.

"It's fortunate that these beasts only stay at the wastelands without going anywhere else within the dominion. Some beasts who are left behind after winter are also a good source of furs and leather for the family, which frequently organized hunting festivals that brought in much meat, fur and leather. However, some carnivorous magical beasts also stayed behind as well, and their presence posed quite a risk to the hunting activities of the family.

"The family records also state that when WIldnorth Town was first built, it also suffered quite a bit from the magical beast wave. It was not until most of the land around it was converted into farmland that the magical beasts stop showing up there. However, the first tens of years of the town's formation were the times when the beasts caused the most trouble, even almost driving the family dominion to a famine."

The one who explained the family records was Telesti. This time along, she had accompanied Lorist to Maplewoods Bastide to spend the winter there, with her main goal being to read the records and writings of the Norton Family about their understanding of the land. Even though she was snuggled in a large, leather cloak with only her face revealed, her face was chilled red as she was currently standing on the topmost floor of the castle.

Even though Lorist wanted to cry, he didn't have the tears for it. Everyone had worked so hard for almost a year and managed to complete the preparations by the 11th month to ready enough food and supplies for the people to settle during the winter as well as finish construction on the wooden barricades and houses with some farmland already developed as well. Had it gone on as planned, everyone would've been able to enjoy a long period of vacation and rest before resuming work after the winter.

However, nobody mentioned that the magical beast wave would come during the winter. Either they were too busy they forgot or it just didn't occur to them at all. Only during the night Lorist held a banquet to celebrate the coming of winter after he brought some people with him to the Maplewoods Bastide to spend the winter did he hear one of the retired family soldiers he invited tell him that the magical beast wave will be coming after the second snowfall after witnessing the snow falling from the sky.

It was then when the elders of the family realized that they had missed out on such an important issue with Lorist being no less surprised. In actuality, this was the first time Lorist spent winter within the family dominion. During winter last year, he had left the family dominion to seek out the convoy, so he didn't experience the magical beast wave himself. After interviewing some of the elder people within the dominion and doing some of his own research into the records and writings did he realize that the issue was far more serious than he had initially imagined.

With thick snow covering most of the roads, there was not much anyone could do about the situation. After some brainstorming, Lorist designed a ski-like device to travel on snow and tasked some work smiths to have a few sets made. However, before

he himself managed to get accustomed to them, the second round of snowfall had come and the magical beast wave followed suit.

"Mountain-climbing magical antelopes, big-horned wild goats, iron-horned magical rhinoceroses, single-horned magical goats, striped wild horses, green-eyed wild bulls and crimson-back magical wolves…" Lorist mused as he tried to account for the various types of animals that passed by beneath the castle walls. The magical beast studies course he did at Dawn Academy had finally been put to use. Lorist didn't even dream that he would actually get to see the beasts from the pictures within his text books in real life.

"Why are the magical beasts merely passing by the bastide without attacking it?" Els asked curiously.

Without waiting for Belnick to explain, Telesti who was snuggled in Lorist's embrace referenced another one of the writings of the family and explained to Els. "According to the records, during the first tens of years of the construction of the castle by the first Norton ancestor, the magical beasts attacked every winter. However, not only did they not succeed even once, their numbers were also harmed greatly. There was only one instance where a pack of winter wolves managed to enter the bastide taking another route using the slope of the nearby mountains, during which they killed a lot of livestock. After that incident, the family leader spent lots of manpower to reshape the slope into a steep cliff and that incident no longer repeated itself. As time passed, the magical beasts just ignored the presence of the castle and passed through it to their destination."

Belnick could only shrug his shoulders in admiration for Telesti's good memory and understanding of the records of the family.

Lorist hugged Telesti even tighter and rubbed the fur cap she wore with his face lovingly.

"Gosh, what in the world is that?" exclaimed Josk. Being the one with the best vision among the rest, Josk had long detected the approach of another group of beasts from the distance.

Raising his head to look, Lorist shouted out immediately, "Good Sol! Magical mammoths! What the heck is going on?"

The few beasts that neared the castle slowly were roughly 5 to 6 meters in height. The one leading the rest was easily the tallest of the group with its body covered wholly in fur. The beasts all had long and strong trunks with two curved tusks sprouting upwards from their mouths, which contained razor sharp teeth which glinted even in the snow.

While these beasts seemed to travel rather slowly, they were immensely huge and were not much slower than the magical antelopes and goats around them. One immature mammoth of roughly four meters in height even rushed towards the Maplewoods Bastide. Raising its trunk, it trumpeted loudly as if it was letting out a provocation. It was not until an elder mammoth patted its butt with its trunk that it returned to its herd unwillingly.

Lorist slammed onto the crenels of the castle wall with his fist as he imagined the wooden barricades that had been constructed throughout various areas of the Felicitas Settlement being smashed to smithereens by those humongous magical beasts as if they were paper before they rushed into the village. The mere thought of it greatly disturbed Lorist.

Telesti then said, "No sightings of these magical mammoths can be found within the records of the past ten or so years. Further back, they were only documented to show up once in a few years. For some reason, they joined the magical beast wave this time around and every time they appeared, they would cause immense damage within the dominion. The things they hate most are buildings constructed by us humans and the family records state that they have reduced even stone houses in the wilds to nothing but a pile of rubble on the ground. Even the small wooden huts built within forests for anyone to take shelter would be destroyed without exception…"

Magical mammoths were omnivores and were documented as one of the most aggressive magical beasts in the field of magical beast studies. Given the fact that they lived in herds, angering one would be akin to antagonizing an entire group. To add to that, they held grudges and were exceedingly savage. Even the fiercer carnivorous magical beasts didn't dare to meddle with them. The moment one disturbed a magical mammoth, there was no doubt that the mammoth wouldn't stop in its tracks until its aggressor was dead.

Among the various adventure records of the Grindia Continent, a rather notable one recorded the exploits of a famous mercenary crew that had accepted a mission to hunt a few mammoths for their tusks. They ambushed a herd of tens of magical mammoths

in the wildlands and successfully completed their mission. However, seven years after that, the mercenary crew once again received a request near the borders of the very same wildlands where they once hunted the mammoths. In the end, their camp was assaulted by near 100 magical mammoths during the night and of the 200 plus mercenaries that parrticipated in that mission, only ten managed to escape alive.

With the occurrence of that incident, the scholars and researchers hypothesized that it was possible that the mercenaries did not adequately clean up traces of their trash within their camp after their mammoth hunting mission, causing the mammoths that rushed over to help to be able to remember the smell. It didn't take long for them to attack once the same smell drifted into the sensitive noses of the same group of mammoths within the same area years later, causing them to gather their fellow brethren to exact revenge for the dead members of their herd, thus resulting in the tragic deaths of all those mercenaries.

"How long will this magical beast wave take to travel across the dominion?" Josk asked.

"The records state that a wave of roughly 1 million magical beasts will take roughly 15 days to pass. That metric can also be used to calculate the time required for waves of different sizes to pass," Telesti said.

"Locke, don't worry. In actuality, the development of the Felicitas Settlement this year still spans less than a quarter of the entire wasteland. And after entering the wasteland, the beast wave will disperse into smaller groups to graze. When they finish the algae in one area, they will move to another and their speed of travel isn't fast either. It's been recorded that they take roughly one month to travel from the north end of the wasteland to the south and they will turn back towards the wildlands when spring comes," Telesti consoled, well aware her lover's troubles.

"Did the records state the rough area of the wastelands where the magical beast wave passed?" Lorist asked with a low voice.

Telesti gave it some thought before she said, "There isn't. Following the tracks of the beast wave during winter to mark it was far too dangerous. However, it shouldn't be too hard to guess where they passed through. The first sector of the wasteland where Morgan Hills is located has never been touched by the magical beasts. As for WIldnorth Town in the seventh sector, after years of agricultural development, there is little to no algae growing there which the herbivorous magical beasts are attracted

to. Apart from a few smaller groups of magical beasts that stray apart from the main wave that would make their way to that area, there isn't really anything to worry about. Instead, the riskiest areas are the second to sixth sectors. That's where the majority of the magical beasts will pass.

"Locke, we've already made various preparations to pass the winter. Don't forget that we've stationed one squad of family soldiers at each village, each accompanied by one Silver ranked fighter. They will probably be able to hold on within the short term. You must trust that your own men will be able to protect the villages just fine."

Lorist shook his head and said, "That's not what I'm worried about. It's one thing if the people lose their wills and motivation to develop the area if something terrible happens during the winter. But what do we do about the magical beast wave next year? We must think of a way to curb the yearly waves of beasts properly. This is the first time we've waged a war against the magical beasts for territory! For the sake of the 500000 citizens within the dominion for them to be able to settle down into their new lives, this is a war that we absolutely have to win!"

Lorist then turned to his back and said to the rest of the people who were observing the passing of the magical beast wave, "There will be another few days before the wave passes completely. Within that span of time, I want all the family knights and the Silver ranked fighters to familiarize themselves with using the snow skis. When the beast wave leaves this area, no matter whether the snowfall stops or not, we must head towards the wastelands to ensure the safety of every single village."

Everyone stood up straight and said in unison, "Yes, milord!"

Chapter 175
Central Town

The sky looked dark and grey and occasionally, some snow could be seen drifting downwards gently to the white, empty plains against the whistling wind that blew past it.

27 Silver ranked and above family knights and fighters lined up neatly into three rows in front of Lorist, each donned in chainmail and a leather cloak with one pole in each of their hands and skis strapped to their boots. After tens of days of slipping and falling at the Maplewoods Bastide, the people present had finally managed to grasp the basics of skiing.

Lorist checked each and every one of the equipment they carried as well as their skis. Everyone of them knew that leaving the warmth of the bastide during such a harsh winter was a big risk. However, they had no choice. For the sake of the 300000 citizens who would be spending their winter at the Felicitas Settlement so that they don't get threatened by the passing of the magical beast wave, these 27 fighters all volunteered to follow Lorist along towards the settlement.

Josk, Belnick, Els, Yuriy, Patt, Jim, Pete, Pajik and 5 other Silver ranked family knights as well as 12 other Silver ranked fighters from the family forces joined in. Lined at the back most were Fiercetiger Loze and Pesha.

Loze looked at Lorist with a mischievous look happily while Pesha was slightly embarrassed and looked to the ground without daring to meet Lorist's gaze.

Lorist was completely speechless.

Only the heavens knew why those two fell for each other and started sticking around. No wonder when Lorist said he wanted to return to the bastide, Loze insisted on following no matter what. He even said that he wanted to view the beautiful scenery of the bastide and handed all his responsibilities of managing the heavy-armored cavalry to his second-in-command, Knight Waxima.

When they arrived at the bastide, Loze disappeared almost instantly, causing Lorist to

be so busy that he didn't have enough time to visit his son for the first two days. When he finally got some free time, he noticed that Loze had vanished and had everyone else search for him together. In the end, the rest realized that Loze was busy getting close and intimate with Pesha that he didn't leave the bedroom for days, completely unaware that everyone outside was frantically searching for him.

Lorist guessed that they probably met and kicked it off when the female garrison unit led by Pesha helped out with managing the magical beast corpses. No wonder Lorist felt something was off when Loze said he wanted to follow him to the bastide to spend winter there. After all, what scenery is there to see at the bastide during winter? In actuality, the only scenery he wanted to relish was that of Pesha lying on the bed…

Lorist himself wasn't too fond of Pesha. In terms of status, she was the fiancee of Lorist's late elder brother and he was obliged to treat her with respect. However, the memories Lorist inherited when he was transmigrated didn't contain any familial love for Pesha. Instead, Lorist only remembered being bullied by her during his childhood. Additionally, when Lorist first returned to the dominion to inherit the position of the family head, he had quite a few unpleasant encounters with her, causing him to have an impression that she was a proud person who didn't know what was good for herself and did whatever she pleased.

Nevertheless, it did not change the fact that she was a beauty. Not only did she have a head of beautiful red hair, her figure was also rather admirable and she also had a pleasant-looking face. However, Lorist wasn't the type to fall head over heels to just any beauty he met. He had his own unique sense of aesthetics. For instance, he graced Charade with the beautiful granddaughter of Engelich, Molise. It was only natural that he would stray even further away from a prideful beauty like Pesha.

The types of women Lorist preferred were the cute, meek ones like his own maidservant Irina and intelligent ones like Telesti. That's why when Lorist heard that Pesha had gotten shacked up with Loze, he let out a breath of relief instead as there would be one less matter to worry about within the dominion.

If this didn't happen however, Pesha could still be considered the betrothed of Lorist's late brother and Lorist had to treat her with some degree of respect because of that. This was why he didn't punish her despite the number of times he had crossed Lorist. Now that she and Loze had gotten together, she only had two choices: either she marries Loze or she remains as a normal family knight. There was no way she could retain her status as the fiancee of Lorist's departed brother, Abelyde.

Lorist patted on Loze's shoulders twice without saying anything else before heading back to the front.

"Jim, Pete, Wilson, Manjez."

Jim, Pete and two other Silver ranked fighters stepped forward.

"The four of you will head to the Firmrock Castle straight away. The safety of the 300000 plus citizens within the whole of Felicitas Settlement depends on whether you are able to make it there in time. You absolutely have to deliver news of the magical beast wave's approach so that Knight Charade and Knight Potterfang can send out soldiers to defend the villages and towns before the beasts arrive. I will be counting on all of you," Lorist said before he saluted the four in the fashion of a knight.

"Please be assured, milord. We will definitely deliver news to Firmrock Castle as soon as possible," said the four in unison as they saluted back.

Even on horseback, the fastest one could travel from the Maplewoods Bastide to the Firmrock Castle was within six to seven hours with the distance being somewhere around 50 kilometers. Given that it was winter and the paths were bound to be filled with snow, coupled with the fact that they had to travel on foot with skis in the rather dim winter sunlight, there was a good chance that they would lose their way. However, despite the risks involved, the four didn't hesitate one bit to go on their mission.

"Loze, Pesha, Pajik…"

The three of them stepped forward.

"You three will bring five other Silver ranked fighters to the seventh sector where Wildnorth Town is. What you have to pay attention to is the three new villages set up near the east of the sector. That is the place which is most probable to be subject to an attack by the magical beasts. I'll be counting on you," Lorist said.

"Yes, milord."

Loze thumped on his chest and said, "Please be assured, milord. With me, Fiercetiger Loze, over there, the villagers will be completely fine."

Lorist nodded and looked at the rest before he said, "The others will leave with me. First, we will head to the central town in the sixth sector before heading to the

eastmost village."

"Milord…" Irina called out. With Lorist's and her son hugged in her chest, she bowed deeply to Lorist before saying, "I wish you a swift journey, milord. Please be safe."

"Locke… You must take care of yourself," Telesti said.

Lorist waved goodbye to the two of them before he said, "Put on your skis! Let's depart!"

……

The wind howled incessantly as it seemed to be unleashing one ephemeral blade after another.

Even if one wore a thick scarf and a mask that covered one's face almost completely, one could still feel the chill on one's skin. One's eyes would also feel a slight sting looking at the endlessly white scenery.

Lorist pointed towards a tall mound which was covered completely in snow and was prepared to bring his men up there to check for any activity in the area nearby.

"Awooooooooo…" Chilling howls could be heard as tens of green winter wolves each the size of a young cow climbed to the peak of the mound from the other side.

Sol, Lorist thought. He didn't think that the carnivorous magical beasts that stalked the herbivorous magical beasts had long chosen that mound as their spot for waiting out any potential prey. Lorist's gang had no choice but to evade them for now.

With a wave of his hand, the skis he wore swerved in another direction and he traveled towards the forest near the mound to avoid being ambushed by those winter wolves so that their journey would not be obstructed. He understood that given that they had already encountered a pack of winter wolves, it was obvious that the rest of the magical beasts were also not far away within the area. It seems that they had to take a detour to circle around the beasts so that they could make their way around them to continue their journey.

Even if humans do not antagonize the wolves, it was in their nature to attack humans. While Lorist did try to avoid the wolf pack, they ended up surrounded by roughly 20 winter wolves that laid in waiting within the forests followed by the thirty plus more

that came down from the mound. They easily rushed down the mound with their light steps. While their bodies were no doubt huge, they had a peculiar rhythm to them as they rushed downwards with their paws not even sinking down an inch into the snowy ground. It was obvious that they were used to traveling in such conditions.

Lorist pulled his mask down and said softly, "Joe, I'll leave the front to you. Yuriy, Patt, give me your javelins. Belnick, continue heading forwards."

Josk swerved his skis and stopped in his tracks before he removed the green longbow hung on his back. After he took his aim, one green arrow after another streaked past the trees within the forests, causing tens of other wolves to sink lifeless onto the snowy ground.

Belnick pressed his ski poles hard on the ground and propelled himself forward, promoting three wolves to leap into the air in Belnick's direction. Josk fired his last arrow which pierced the head of one of the wolves, sending it flying away lifelessly. However, the other two wolves were blocked by Belnick's body and couldn't be aimed by Josk.

Belnick himself didn't panic and passed his right ski pole to his left hand and drew his sword with his right. With a gold flash of light, the two leaping wolves were cut into pieces, staining the pure white ground red with blood.

The howls coming from the direction of the mound intensified as the wolves coming from that direction quickly neared Lorist and the two others who were only standing still.

When the first wolf at the front of the group was within 40 meters of Lorist's group, Lorist made his move and tossed out one javelin after another, causing pained howls to ring out among the group of incoming wolves.

All 34 javelins found themselves in 34 winter wolves with the last javelin pinning the last wolf down only seven meters away from the three.

The howling continued upon the mound. However, it wasn't as spirited as before as the low-pitched whine sounded as if the wolves were mourning for their fallen comrades.

Carrying the two javelin quivers onto his back, Lorist told Patt and Yuriy, "Let's go."

"Won't the rest of the wolves pursue us?" Patt asked.

Yuriy responded, "They won't. Magical wolves are rather intelligent beasts. Given that the wolves that camped within the forests and the ones that came later from the mound are all dead, the rest on top of the mound will realize that we far outstrip them in terms of might. They realize that if they decide to continue their pursuit, it would no doubt end with their deaths. Based on the mourn-like cries you heard just now, you can already tell that they won't continue to chase us. Otherwise, they would bark in quick succession instead to indicate for the other wolves to take action faster so that us, their prey, don't escape."

As Yuriy was born in the Khawistan Khanate into a herding family, he was really familiar with the temperament of wolves. While the one he had more interaction with was magical wolves that lived on the plains instead of northlander winter wolves, their basic instincts and vocal responses were roughly the same and there wasn't much difference in that regard.

Lorist himself didn't expect that after taking that detour around the mound, he would need another two days to arrive at the central town of the sixth sector. That was because the magical beast wave had dispersed into various smaller groups that spread all over the place to graze for algae underneath the snow, causing Lorist's group to have to tread carefully.

When Lorist and the others eliminated a lone Gold-striped Snow Panther on a high cliff and looked into the distance, the sight they were greeted with was no longer the seemingly-infinite stretches of snow-covered land but rather one of magical beasts scattered all over the land, grazing.

The Silver ranked knight who defended the central town of the sixth sector was called Nors and he was an old acquaintance of Josk. Originally, he was the garrison captain that served Josk's adopted father, Baron Omador, and he had been injured rather badly and imprisoned by Count Cobry within the laborer camp along with his family members. He was rescued when Lorist and Josk snuck into the main camp of Geldos City with the disguise of messengers for an ambush. Having witnessed the death of Count Cobry, Nors brought his family with him along the northbound journey and was promoted to a family knight for his achievement at Nadegas City while serving the convoy.

In actuality, Nors was greatly surprised by Lorist who had brought his men to travel

in the harsh snowy weather to the town to bring news of the danger. Upon hearing about the magical beasts, he quickly looked for a map of the sixth sector detailing the layout of the town and villages.

"Milord, since the east of this place is a mountainous area, we only set up four villages there. If the magical beasts will really begin feasting from there, it will take them a few days to cross the mountainous terrain, so we still have enough time to notify the four villages…" Before Nors was able to finish his sentence, a loud warning horn signal could be heard from the town walls not too far away.

One member of the garrison rushed into the room hurriedly and exclaimed, "Mi-milord… The magical beasts… They're here…"

Lorist breathed an annoyed sigh and thought that the four villages were finished.

This time, the feeling he got from seeing the magical beast wave was completely different from the first time he witnessed it from the Maplewoods Bastide. Over there, he was standing at the top of the castle whereas the walls of this central town was merely 7 meters high and built mostly out of mud bricks. As he looked towards the magical beasts approaching the central town gradually, he could hear the chattering coming from the terrified garrison soldiers nearby.

"We must think of a way to strengthen these walls!" Lorist exclaimed.

"However, milord… The cold winter makes it exceedingly hard for us to dig to get more mud. Also, we don't have any more materials we can use to strengthen the walls," Nors said as he looked towards the incoming beasts with a look of despair on his face.

Lorist desperately looked around him and noticed that there was a wooden house not far away which had icicles forming downward from the side of the roof.

"Use water! Spray water onto the walls. Mobilize everyone within the village to splash water on the walls so that ice can form to strengthen it. That way, the magical beasts won't be able to do anything to it," Lorist ordered urgently.

The rest of the people were energized as they thought that the plan was rather sound. Hope for their survival was revitalized.

There was a total of 13000 plus people within the town. Apart from the elderly and the children, the two companies of family soldiers and one company of garrison

soldiers as well as 6000 young men and women which were fit enough to help out all worked together to carry buckets filled with water to the walls where they would be trickled down carefully from the top.

"Brother Beck, Joe, Yuriy and Els, the four of you should head towards the 8 remaining villages within the sixth sector to notify them about this method before heading to the fifth sector's central town and villages. Have them all mobilize their citizens to strengthen the walls with water and encase the towns and villages within walls of ice. That's the only way we have to ensure the safety of the citizens," Lorist instructed.

"What about you, milord?"

"I will stay here as I cannot leave. The moment of my departure would cause their morale to fall," Lorist replied in a soft voice.

"Then I won't be leaving as well and will be staying by milord's side," Josk said.

"Locke, I'm the leader of the guard division. How can I leave you, the head of the family, here?" Els interjected.

"Then, I'll stay as well…"

"Cut the crap. We must grasp whatever time we have to notify the other villages to make their urgent preparations. It's enough to have Joe, Els and Patt with me here. The rest of you will group up and have Brother Beck as first-in-command and Yuriy as second-in-command. You shall discuss among yourselves how you would go about notifying the rest of the villages and towns. Don't forget, right now, only you guys are able to travel around with skis to traverse the snowy lands. Whether we will be able to notify the rest will depend on you. Hurry, leave before the magical beasts surround this town completely! Make sure to stick together at all times on the way and pay attention to your own safety. I'll be counting on you all!" Lorist said as he made a respectful salute to his subordinates.

Belnick, Yuriy and the rest of the members from the Maplewoods Bastide stood ramrod straight and saluted Lorist solemnly while saying in unison, "Milord, take care…"

Chapter 176
Goats in the Town

Lorist was standing on the town walls while looking at the sight before him of the magical beasts outside. The sixth area's central town was like a small raft floating in a sea of monsters, constantly at risk of being flipped over and sunk.

After three days and nights of nonstop water splashing, the former mud wall had already turned into a thick, sturdy ice wall, causing the people of the town to let out breaths of relief. Some of them were so tired that they even fell asleep on the ground right away.

"Milord, you should go get some rest too. It's been three days since you slept," Nors said as he approached Lorist with an incredibly respectful attitude.

Had it not been for the fact that Lorist brought his men to the town and thought up a method to strengthen the walls by letting water freeze over it, the defenseless central town of the sixth sector would long have fallen to the magical beasts, causing more than 13000 lives to turn into ashes beneath the paws and hooves of the beasts.

Lorist's eyes were slightly bloodshot from fatigue. He shook his head and said, "I'm fine, I can still hold on for a while longer. I wonder how the beasts will react to the frozen walls."

Currently, the group of beasts that was closest to the walls right now was a few gigantic magical yak. These yaks easily weighed more than 500 to 1000 kilograms and they were extremely aggressive. With a humongous body covered completely with long, brownish-black fur, and fearsome horns, it was heralded as one of the most troublesome magical beasts to deal with. Apart from defensive ballistas, only Gold ranked fighters could cause these yaks harm.

The central town was surrounded by farmland in the early stages of preparation which only had sparse amounts of algae the herbivorous magical beasts loved so much. That's why the beasts within the vicinity of the town were few and far between. However, that didn't stop them from eating the winter wheat saplings, with the guards on the walls being able to do anything about it other than watch in futility.

"Sigh, all the winter wheat saplings we sowed are gone… These stupid beasts have eaten them all…" Nors said exasperatedly.

"We can still find other sources of sustenance apart from winter wheat. There's potatoes and millets which don't have to be planted during the winter. What matters is that we stay put within the area and think of other methods to struggle for territory with the magical beasts. This year, we've been taken off-guard by the sudden arrival of the beasts. However, it won't be so easy for them next year. Since they've destroyed our winter wheat saplings, they must pay it back with the meat on their bodies…" Lorist said with a tone of seething hatred in his voice.

One of the 3-meter-tall gigantic yaks approached the walls and rubbed its back against it in a satisfied manner, causing Lorist to be completely speechless.

After the afternoon, the magical yaks near the walls left, causing Lorist to feel much more relieved. He had some food before going to take his long-deserved rest.

He slept rather soundly for the remainder of the day. However, he was still woken up mid-sleep. Opening his eyes, he saw Patt's troubled expression as he shouted, "Milord, milord… Wake up! The magical beasts started climbing the walls!"

Huh? Climbing the walls?

Lorist wasn't able to completely process the sentence he had just heard as he was still half asleep. Els, who was sleeping on the next bed blinked slowly to clear his vision and said, "Stop bullshitting… The magical beasts don't have ladders… How are they supposed to scale the 7-meter-tall walls?"

Patt picked Els up and brought him to the window before carefully opening it and said, "Open your eyes wide and take a good look. What else can you call this?"

When the window was opened, a draft of cold air entered the room. Everyone within felt the sudden chill and was awakened by it as a result. Josk who was next door also put on his clothes and came over. After taking a look from the window, he said, "Weird… How are the magical goats able to climb the walls?"

Lorist laughed out loud and said, "What's weird about that? That breed of magical goat is called the mountain-climbing horned goat. As its name implies, it climbs tall mountains to avoid predators. To them, our 7-meter wall is only child's play. Let's leave after we get ready. We'll be having mutton tonight! Free food has just showed up

within our territory, so don't let it go to waste! Also, be careful not to be rammed to the ground by these goats. It's said that when the goats aren't able to escape from their enemy, they would abandon all notion of escaping and ram straight into its aggressor in hopes that it would be able to push it down a cliff alongside itself in a suicide attack."

"Are they easy to deal with?" Josk asked. It was the first time he saw goats like that.

"Well, on flat land, a Bronze ranked fighter can take care of three or four of these," Lorist replied.

"Tsk, that was a pointless scare. So they're only small fries whose only redeeming quality is being able to climb up our walls…" Patt said embarrassedly as he had awoken everyone within the building for a matter as small as that. Had he known about their capabilities, he would've went there and took care of them himself.

"It's fine. Are you guys ready? Let's go goat hunting," Lorist said before he left the building first.

The skies were still dark, but it wasn't pitch black either. The wooden cottage Lorist and the others rested within was quite near to the walls and the moment they left it, they could hear the bleating sounds the goats were making.

"We don't have to go up to the walls. Just deal with them on this empty space. Light some of the torches up," Lorist instructed.

As expected, the moment the torches were lit, the goats bleated more urgently and it even seemed that they were annoyed by the sudden illumination.

Sounds of hooves thumping rapidly on the ground could be heard as a bunch of black silhouettes rushed down from the slope from the walls. As the goats rushed straight towards them, Patt held his shield up and received the charge of a goat with a loud thump. However, he stood firm on his ground whereas the goat was sent flying from the force of the collision.

"Begin," Lorist ordered. Within moments, the carcasses of thirty or so goats were laid flat on the ground.

"Even though they're so weak, they actually took the initiative to attack. I really don't know what to say about these goats…" Els commented.

Lorist laughed and said, "They may be weak, but they are still magical beasts. Can't you see their red eyes? They attack humans once we enter their sights. However, within the wildlands, they are known to be one of the most cowardly beasts that run the moment they encounter their natural predators. We can ascend the walls now. There are still some up there, so be careful."

"Upon climbing up the walls and taking a look around, everyone was speechless. Multitudes of magical goats were gathered around the outside of the walls. In fact, they were merely seeking out a tall place to spend the night out of habit. From time to time, some of those goats made their way onto the walls.

However, the moment the goats noticed Lorist and the others' presence, they would rush towards them straight away, only to be put down moments later.

After circling around the walls and killing near 1000 of those goats, Lorist's group had alerted the town guards and Nors brought his men and rushed up the walls right away to combat the remaining goats.

The slaughtering continued all the way till daybreak and the rest of the goats only left the town walls after their numbers had been depleted by half.

Lorist and the rest were currently covered in goat blood from top to bottom and the carcasses of the dead goats were also beginning to freeze over atop the walls.

Nors himself was also covered in blood as could be seen when he approached Lorist and said, "Milord, it is my fault for being too lax and not arranging for a night watch…"

Lorist waved his hand and said as he laughed lightly, "No worries. We're only facing magical beasts, not enemies who are besieging the town. Given that I had ordered for your men to not startle the magical beasts during the night, it's no surprise that no night watch was arranged. Also, you guys have also worked tirelessly for three whole days, so you need to rest up as well. There's also no harm done from these goats coming up the walls to be turned into food by us. Let's get everyone to clear the dead goats up and prepare the meat. I heard that these mountain-climbing horned goats taste pretty good. We'll be having quite the meal today, haha!"

There was a harvest of more than 5000 goats, much to everyone's delight. Nors had some people bring out ten plus huge cauldrons to the central plaza of the town and made some gruel with the meat they got. Everyone could eat as much as they wanted

during that night.

Lorist on the other hand enjoyed a delicious lamb chop dish. It was apparent that the chefs within the central town of the sixth area were quite skillful and were able to cook up a juicy piece of meat. Els had already eaten six servings and he proceeded to order one more even though his stomach was practically bloating already.

Lorist himself also finished five servings of the food before something occurred to him all of a sudden, causing him to instruct Nors hurriedly to have the chefs keep the rib bones of the goats for his use later. After that, he took out the map of the town and started pondering deeply.

Josk walked to Lorist's side with a smoked goat's leg in his hand and asked, "What's up? Do you have another idea?"

Lorist replied, "I was thinking if we should let the magical beasts enter the town…"

"What?! Have you gone insane?!" exclaimed Josk.

"You're the insane one! I was thinking that we could set up some traps within the town and let some herbivorous beasts into the town like today to clear them up conveniently. I'm sure you've noticed that during these past two days, the folk of the town were feeling rather worried and down. But right after we killed so many magical goats, they look much more energized and happy. I'm worried that if we only stay put and defend, that will internalize the fear and dread the townsfolk have for the magical beasts. However, if we can let some of the beasts into town and set up traps in advance, we can turn the magical beast wave into an opportunity for hunting so that the townsfolk will no longer have to fear them," Lorist explained hurriedly.

"Gosh, you really scared me," Josk said bashfully. "Milord, since you're so confident, go ahead. I don't really understand complex things like that, but I'll support your decisions anyhow."

At that moment, Nors entered the building and his hands held a plate on which a rib bone with some meat still stuck on it was placed. "Milord, do you want to eat this? How would you like it cooked? Smoked or steamed?" Nors asked.

Lorist took the rib bone into his hand and shaved off the meat with a dagger before proceeding to sharpen the two ends of the bone. After that, he said, "Get me a basin of hot water."

Some hot water was quickly brought to Lorist which he used to submerge the rib bone with. After that, he twisted the rib bone gently inwards into a circular shape and had Patt get him a string which he used to tie the two sharp ends of the bone together. He then took some meat that he shaved off the bone just now and pasted it on the circular rib bone before tossing the whole thing on the snowy ground.

Everyone present merely stared curiously. Lorist proceeded to explain, "I have just made a trap with that rib bone that we can use to take care of the carnivorous magical beasts."

"Milord, you're not kidding, right? How would we be able to take care of the carnivorous beasts with just that?" said one of them. The rest also didn't seem to believe that it would work.

After the rib bone froze over, Lorist asked someone to bring it back.

"Look. When the carnivores notice these on the ground, they will definitely swallow them whole," said Lorist as he removed the string tying the two ends of the rib together. The frozen rib still retained its curled shape.

"Think about it… The stomachs of those beasts should be rather warm, right? Just like this basin of warm water," Lorist said before he tossed the rib bone into the basin.

Not long after, the frozen meat on the bone began to melt and fall away from the bone. After that, the rib gradually uncurled again and returned to its former slightly curved shape with its two sharp edges pointing outwards.

"If rib bones like these revert back to their original shape in the stomachs of the beasts, hehe… No matter how savage they are, they would die all the same. Do you guys understand now?" Lorist said as he looked at the rest with a confident smile.

"Whoa! Milord, you're a genius! Using this method to deal with the carnivorous beasts really saves us a lot of trouble!" Patt praised, with Nors nodding in agreement.

"At the end of the day, Locke, you're the only person who can actually think of something as devious and insidious as this… But, I like it," Els said as he took the rib bone and inspected it.

Lorist stared at Els and thought, *was that supposed to be a compliment?*

"That doesn't seem right," Josk said as he furrowed his brow. "Milord, usually, these carnivorous magical beasts would their food a bite or two before swallowing it. Given that their teeth is sharp and hard, wouldn't the bone be ground to pieces before it is even swallowed?"

Lorist clapped his hands and said, "Joe, you have a point. The sample trap I made just now was only a makeshift one with some meat plastered onto it. The actual traps we will use will be covered in goat fats. Since goat fats will melt the moment it enters the beasts' mouths no matter how frozen it is, the beasts would just swallow the bone whole straight away because there's no need for them to chew on the fats.

"In fact, this trap was not invented by me. It was actually designed by one of the most prominent adventurers who lived roughly 100 years ago, Carmen Pride. Having been trapped on an uninhabited island for two years, he used this trap to hunt for carnivorous magical beasts which helped him sustain him until the day of his rescue. Due to the fact that magical mountain-climbing horned goats liked climbing to high places, their rib bones were rather elastic. Hence, the rib bones of the goats were the ideal material for these traps."

Lorist looked at the rest within the building and said, "In another two days, the magical beast wave will leave the sixth sector and head for the fifth. Following behind the main group would be the carnivorous beasts, which are very different from the herbivorous beasts we see now. While herbivorous magical beasts only attack if we're in their sights, carnivorous ones will hunt us down the moment they get a hint of our scent. Even though we have the ice walls protecting us, we must still be careful. Just in case, it's better to make more of these traps and there would be no harm having a little more than we need either."

"Yes, milord," said the rest in unison.

"Also, I was thinking of opening the town gates to let those aggressive but weak goats inside so that we can gather more meat. What do you guys think?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, I have no issue with that. I will await your instructions," Nors said.

During the last two days of the magical beast wave at the sixth sector, Lorist opened the town gates twice at opportune times and let in huge groups of magical mountain-climbing horned goats, big-horned wild goats and striped deers into the town. However, during the first time, the gates were closed a little too late, letting in around

20000 of them as a result, causing everyone to be busy killing them off all the way till midnight. Some unlucky fellows were also injured from the wild ramming of the goats. It was fortunate that the soldiers that participated in the slaughter were equipped with metal armor, ensuring that none of them incurred lasting injuries.

The atmosphere during that time was exceedingly wild with most of the soldiers that participated in the hunt running all over the streets of the town, either chasing the beasts or being chased by them. Sometimes, the soldiers who were chasing a small group of goats would turn their backs when they noticed a larger group up front, resulting in them being chased for a change, until another group of soldiers came to their aid and began their counterattack.

The other townsfolk that didn't participate in the activities instead got up to the roofs of their houses and cheered nonstop excitedly. When the hunt came down to the last magical goat, the soldiers didn't kill it right away either and instead took up their shields and made a game out of resisting the goat's charge. Some were knocked flying by the goat and were laughed at by the onlookers while others were cheered for after knocking the goat flying and even received air-kisses from some of the womenfolk.

At that time, Lorist would never have imagined that the practice of letting the magical beasts into town would evolve into a local holiday known as the 'goat ramming festival', which prohibited the use of weapons against the goats they captured and only allowed participants to ram the goats with their shields until they lost consciousness.

Originally, after opening the gates for the first time, Lorist didn't want to do it a second time. However, that decision was received negatively by of the townsfolk, causing him to have to once again open the gates and let in a few thousand magical striped deers to keep the festivities going.

The magical striped deers were the last of the herbivorous magical beasts and what came after were the carnivorous ones that stalked the herbivores from afar, the most common of which being the various types of winter wolves.

From the walls of the town, Lorist discovered that the largest group of winter wolves numbered around 1000. He then instructed for the goat rib traps to be tossed outside the town and made preparations for the collection of the carcasses two days later.

Chapter 177
Wrapping Up

"Milord, why did the wolves leave the carcasses of the ones who had swallowed the traps right there just like that? Didn't you say that magical wolves often cannibalize one another?" Nors asked curiously.

The sight before them was rather shocking with magical wolves dead all over the plains in all form and fashion after being trampled upon by some other magical beasts. Hundreds of their carcasses could be seen with some of them even having their mouths wide open as if they were in great pain. However, not one of them had a visible wound on their body. Had it not been for the fact that they already knew about the situation, the people would no doubt find that sight extremely odd and terrifying.

However, the ones who followed Lorist outside the town already knew about the rib bone traps and were merely shocked at how effective they were despite their simple design. Before them were hundreds of winter wolf carcasses. If they were alive, they would pose a huge threat to everyone who set out of the town and could even potentially wipe out a whole army.

"Magical wolves are rather intelligent beasts. Some scholars have hypothesized that their intellect were on the level of children aged five to six years and they were one of the magical beasts that knew how to coordinate with each other well. They only cannibalize out of necessity when the pack is too huge for the prey they hunt to be able to support the population, causing them to even feast on the corpses of their dead brethren to ensure the survival of the pack.

"However, they are also incredibly sensitive and suspicious. During the magical beast wave, they don't lack any food source. And the fact that many of their own collapsed due to reasons unknown to them should prove quite frightening as well and cause them to want to leave the place as soon as possible. Just like humans, when one or two of us dies, we would stop and investigate the cause. However, if one after another collapses dead, there is no doubt that the rest of us would prioritize our own survival and leave the area before doing anything else. The wolves are the same with us in that regard," Lorist explained.

"Alright, let's keep moving. We have to transport the wolf carcasses with our carts to be back. Hunting them this way really keeps their fur in perfect condition. I wonder how the fur merchants' faces will look like when they see all the fur we have for them," Patt said towards the rest of the garrison soldiers on the carriages.

After half a day of work, Nors came over to report to Lorist. "Milord, there are 745 wolf carcasses in total. Are we going to return to the town right now?"

Lorist furrowed his brow and said, "Hmmm, that doesn't seem right… We tossed out a total of more than 2000 goat rib traps. This number is a little too low. Josk, bring a group of people with you on patrol to check if we have any other gain. Be careful."

After Josk searched the area once more with his men, he discovered a few hundred other dead carnivorous magical beasts. Some beasts like cloud panthers and patterned panthers were discovered to be dead hanging from tree branches while others like ligers collapsed on top of mounds. There were also some tracks that led to a rather large catch.

It was a humongous iron-sideburned wild boar which weighed almost 1000 kilograms. It was apparent from the fallen trees and toppled rocks in the vicinity that the gigantic beast had rampaged around from the pain of the bone piercing its stomach and ended up in a snowy trench after breathing its last breath.

Seeing the state of the trees leading up to the boar's carcass, Lorist couldn't help but let out a cold sweat as he imagined whether his javelins would be of any use should he encounter a beast like that. The meter-long javelins seemed like a toothpick when compared to a beast of that size.

Els came over to Lorist side to look at the soldiers who were prepared to use tens of horses to pull the boar out of the trench. He asked Lorist, "Locke, are we going to tail the magical beast wave to the rest of the sectors?"

Lorist shook his head and said, "We won't be able to make it. When we departed from Maplewoods Bastide, the magical beast wave had just started to disperse, so we could still circle around them to reach the town ahead of them. Just look at the state of the land now: wherever the magical beasts passed, all that's left of it is muddy ground which we can't travel on even with our skis. Right now, we can only hope that the beasts will leave when spring comes."

"Locke, don't worry. With Knight Belnick and Knight Yuriy sending word, I believe that the magical beast wave will not cause too much damage to us. In fact, nobody here is afraid of the coming of the magical beast wave anymore," Els consoled.

"Els, to tell you the truth, I'm scared. I'm afraid of seeing how the other four villages fared when we visit them later. These people have toiled hard to follow the convoy all the way to the Northlands and thought they could start their peaceful lives anew. However, none of them knew that what awaited them was the magical beast wave. I truly have wronged them, so I feel really bad for that," Lorist said as he shivered slightly.

"Locke, this is not your fault. I'm sure none of us would have envisioned that things would turn out like this. But, since what's past is already past, we have to face the future with courage. Come on, let's head back to town. The soldiers have already hoisted the boar up with their horses," Els said as he patted on Lorist's shoulder. "Brother, don't forget that no matter what happens, I will always stand by your side."

Lorist and the rest were quite surprised when they visited the other villages in the sector later. The villages that they thought had been utterly destroyed were not in that bad a state they originally imagined. Faced with certain demise with the approach of the magical beast wave, some of the villagers had all thought up various means to struggle for their survival.

The fourth village was located atop of a small mound and the Silver ranked fighter stationed there was one of Lorist's old acquaintances, Paulobins. He currently held the position of a squad leader of one of the light cavalry scout squads and had been sent along with his men to that very village during the winter season. When he realized that the magical beasts were on their way, he had the villagers build a wall with snow to surround the village which was later strengthened by the freezing temperature, causing the magical beasts to have a hard time climbing up the walls, thus securing the lives of all the villagers.

However, after the herbivores passed by the village, tens of snow panthers attacked and ten plus villagers were either hurt or killed. Even Paulobins himself was injured, but they still managed to chase the panthers away. Greeted with such an optimistic outcome, Lorist was so elated that he knighted Paulobins as a family knight on the spot, thus fulfilling his long time wish.

The third village however didn't share the same good fortune as the casualties were

rather bad. The womenfolk and the elderly managed to escape the horrors of the beasts by hiding within an underground tunnel. The rest of the youths and the garrison soldiers as well as the squad of light cavalry scouts led by a Silver ranked fighter had perished in a fight with a huge group of big-horned bulls that assaulted the village.

The second village contained yet another surprise for Lorist and the gang. Apart from the fact that the buildings of the village were completely razed down, the people there and other resources were completely fine. The main reason for that was that the village had been built upon a mountainside where a cave was located not far away. The moment they detected the coming of the magical beasts, the villagers escaped into the cave and sealed the entrance, thus managing to evade a catastrophe.

Even so, the first village fared the worst among the rest with only 17 survivors out of the original 3000 plus people. When the magical beasts arrived there, it was only midnight and the guards on the walls thought that only a small group of magical beasts were trampling the farmland they had cultivated. As a result, they shot fire arrows from the walls and provoked the whole group of magical beasts which proceeded to launch a full-on assault on the village. The remaining 17 villagers only managed to survive by hiding amidst the rubble of the wooden houses.

……

On the 18th day of the 3rd month was a gentle spring rain. Many people were gathered within the main hall of Firmrock Castle. Every family knight and administrative officer listened carefully to the report given by Charade about the passing of the magical beast wave.

"During winter, the magical beast wave caused the family to lose near 10000 citizens and more than 1000 heroic soldiers, including 7 Silver ranked fighters and three family knights. The one who should shoulder most of the responsibility for this is me as I have began the development of the wasteland without first doing proper research and understanding the situation of the family dominion, causing us to suffer from something we could have planned ahead for.

"When I received milord's urgent warnings about the magical beasts from his messengers, I still didn't take it seriously and even gathered the soldiers to form a defense line in the third sector's central town to resist the magical beast wave. Had it not been for Knight Belnick and the rest who informed us of the idea of securing the

town walls by letting water freeze over it, I would've sacrificed even more of our forces to fight against the magical beasts. My failures for this incident cannot be excused and I hope that milord will give me a fitting punishment…"

Lorist currently wore a very stiff expression as he never would've dreamt that Charade would perform so terribly in the onset of the arrival of the magical beast wave. After Jim and the other three traveled two days and one night to Firmrock Castle to report on the news of the wave's approach, Charade didn't take it seriously and believed that the magical beasts they mentioned were merely weak little herbivorous ones like magical goats and deers with their only advantage being their numbers. He even boasted to Potterfang that the magical beasts came just at the right time to help the dominion relieve its food shortage problem.

After spending seven days preparing, Charade and Potterfang left with their troops and they spent tens of more days to travel to the third sector because of the road conditions from the snowfall, only to meet Belnick and the rest who were splashing water on the town walls urgently. After that, despite the objection of Potterfang and Belnick, Charade even ordered more than 20000 family soldiers to erect a snow wall and get into position in preparation to fight the magical beasts.

When Lorist heard about that, he could only laugh bitterly. Charade had underestimated the magical beasts severely and treated them as if they were human enemy troops who wouldn't be able to withstand even one assault from them. He didn't even stop to consider whether the longbows and crossbows his soldiers were equipped with would even be able to cause the magical beasts significant casualties.

When the magical beast wave eventually made its way to the defense line, the longbows of the family troops were still able to harm the smaller herbivorous magical beasts. However, when the magical bulls and 6-meter-tall mammoths showed up from behind, everyone was shocked into stupor. Fortunately, Potterfang managed to take quick action and ordered the soldiers to retreat to the third sector's central town to fortify the walls using the water freezing method, thus ensuring the survival of the 20000 plus troops.

In the end, the 20000 plus troops that Lorist had placed his hopes in were trapped within the central town for more than a month. Not only did they consume the food reserves of the town incredibly quickly, they were also forced to starve for days until the magical beast wave thinned and allowed them to hunt some scattered beasts for sustenance. They eventually returned to Firmrock Castle with the last bit of morale

drained out of them.

"I hereby renounce Knight Charade's position as chief officer of the Felicitas Settlement development project and also his title as the chief knight of the Norton Family Knights. Shadekampf will temporarily be in charge of the development of Felicitas Settlement," Lorist stood up and announced his decision.

"It's only the first time that we've witnessed the magical beast wave within the dominion. However, does that mean that we've lost confidence to develop Felicitas Settlement? In actuality, we shouldn't fear the magical beast wave. While we aren't able to prevent it from happening, we can still give it our all to make the best of this situation," Lorist said.

After that, he briefed the rest about the methods they used within the sixth sector's central town and even demonstrated how to make the rib bone trap. "It is apparent that as long as we have a secure and stable wall to protect us, the magical beast wave is actually a good hunting opportunity. With enough preparation, we can even make the walls into a trap for hunting magical beasts. However, we must also be careful and not provoke them when the gigantic ones are around. When the time is right, we can even let some of the weaker beasts into the town. Not only can we obtain more fresh meat and furs, we can also decrease the fear the folks have for the magical beast wave so that they will be confident in their future lives here."

Lorist then proceeded to describe the situation of the four other villages within the sixth sector. "From these examples, it can also be seen that the villages can also survive the magical beast wave, provided they have good defensive preparations and an escape route to a cave or an underground tunnel. That way, they can survive the winter without any worries.

"That's why, with the coming of the new year, the family will focus on developing the defensive walls and other necessary infrastructure of the towns and villages within the second to seventh sectors for the well-being and safety of the citizens. Even though the magical beast wave has receded, huge groups of magical beasts still remain within the dominion. So, from tomorrow onwards, the family forces will be tasked to eliminate those magical beasts both to ensure the safety of the citizens within the dominion as well as to replenish our food stores so that our hard-working citizens can live with a peace of mind without worries.

"Shadekampf, this year, you must focus on developing the six central towns. I will have

Telesti arrange for her designers to draw up some plans for the towns soon. Additionally, make sure that walls are built around the villages and plan a reliable escape route should anything go wrong. As for the farmland, we can plant some beans to relieve the food consumption temporarily. The family will also try to help by purchasing huge amounts of food.

"Also, the 16 Silver ranked fighters that have performed exceptional feats will also be promoted to family knights. The others who have contributed will also be rewarded. I hope that all of you here will brainstorm hard for more methods that the family can use to mitigate the damage brought by the magical beast wave. You can send your thoughts in a letter to me personally. The prosperity of the family dominion will depend on the our combined efforts. So, I will be counting on you all."

After the meeting adjourned, Lorist had Charade stay back. Even though he had relieved Charade of his duties, that didn't mean he didn't intend to give him other tasks.

"Brother Charade, I will leave Firmrock Castle and the valley city in your hands because those parts didn't incur any damages from the magical beast wave. You have to work hard on the development of the valley city and the nearby farmland as well as plan for the development of the wasteland near Firmrock Castle. Before Felicitas Settlement can be free from the harm brought by the magical beast wave, these two locations I want you to work on will be the cornerstone of the family's survival by ensuring a continuous food output. I am prepared to set up another town at the intersection of the Bladedge Mountains and the Morgan Hills. That will be where the smiths and miners of the family will live and it will become the main industrial city of our dominion that will produce most of the weapons and equipment for our family forces. Do you understand the importance of this place now?"

Charade nodded and said, "Locke, I thank you deeply for this opportunity. As your brother, I promise that I will no longer let you down."

Chapter 178
Ballistas and Metal Materials

"Milord, a top quality ballista can fire up to 300 meters away with a margin of error of less than half a meter. Only with that will it be able to pose a real threat against the enemy. During the time of the former empire, Krissen V drafted a standard for the construction of defense sentry ballistas, causing the ballistas produced during that time to be among the best ones ever made. However, the standards were later slackened and the empire never produced ballistas as good as those ever again."

Grandmaster Fellin was currently giving a lecture to Lorist about his knowledge on ballistas. Before them were a number of ballistas of differing types used by the Norton Family forces. Even the original 12 ballistas obtained from the armory of the Dawn Academy that were used by the carroballista unit were there.

"The most important part of a ballista is its arm. In actuality, no matter what kind of wood used to make it, a ballista should be able to shoot 300 plus meters away. The only shortcoming of using arbitrary wood is that the arm will not last long. That is to say, the second shot from that particular ballista will be magnitudes nearer than the last. In other words, elasticity is the most crucial criteria when deciding which material to use as the arm for a ballista. That material must be able to return to its former shape quickly so that the second shot can match the first shot in both distance and accuracy. Based on that alone, many other types of wood won't even make the list for consideration."

Grandmaster Fellin then brought Lorist in front of two small ballistas and said, "Milord, these two ballistas can be considered to be one of the finest ones I've seen in the last ten years. They are almost half as small as usual defense sentry ballistas and are easy to operate and aim with with their firing distance reaching around 260 meters. I've asked Dulles about it and he said that they were part of the original set of 12 the convoy bought from the Dawn Academy. I heard the reason they were abandoned and sold to you was because they were too hard to operate?"

Lorist nodded as he recalled reading the log of the armory that recorded that exact reason.

Grandmaster Fellin laughed and said, "They were mistaken. Milord, think about it. A normal ballista would take up to 5 people to operate while this smaller one only requires 3. It wouldn't make sense for the ballista that requires a smaller number of people to use to be more complicated. The real reason it wasn't used was because the price of production was too high and these ballistas couldn't be mass produced.

"Milord, do you know what material was used to make the small ballistas?" the grandmaster asked Lorist as he pointed at the small ballistas whose arms seemed to have properties of both wood and metal from the look of them.

Lorist merely shook his head.

"The arms of these ballistas were made of Arrowdragon Wood, a material that is only found on the Relic Islands, which gains an elastic property after being treated by three submerging processes. According to the ancient records, Arrowdragon Wood was a plant that the magi transported from another dimensional plane during the time of the magical civilization and were used in construction of magical ballistas. Wood the size of the ballistas' arms would take roughly hundreds of years to grow. The Dawn Academy must've expended quite a sum to get their hands on so much Arrowdragon Wood. It's a shame that the future generations couldn't recognize quality goods even when they see it, hence leaving them unutilized and gathering dust within the armory."

Grandmaster Fellin stroked the dark-colored wood of the ballista arm as he sighed and said, "In terms of ballista construction, Arrowdragon Wood is indeed the ideal material to use for the arm of the ballista. However, the exorbitant price of the material and the troublesome preparation works against its favor. Even the submerging processes alone requiring six different solutions would take up seven years to complete. Affordable prices and mass production availability with the emphasis on easily replaceable spare parts are important things to consider for military gear. Additionally, given the additional complications involved in siege equipment like that, there isn't a perfect solution for adopting the use of such high quality gear for widespread use.

"Milord, I've already analyzed the ballista designs you drew before and if we can make it, it will definitely be a revolutionary upgrade to any existing ones. However, I am not sure if I will be able to find someone to make the kind of elastic metal you specified. Without those metal plates for the ballista arms, your ballista that is designed to be used against magical beasts cannot be constructed," Grandmaster Fellin said. While he

understood Lorist's intentions, he was only familiar with employing wood to make ballistas. Given how much work required to process wood, it would be difficult to suddenly supply a huge number of ballistas for their forces.

"How about this, Grandmaster Fellin, why don't you accompany me to Bladedge Mountains tomorrow? The family has built a metal refinery over there. We'll go there to see for ourselves whether Grandmaster Sid can fashion a suitable material for the ballista," Lorist said.

……

After leaving the ballista workshop, Lorist returned to his office on the second floor of the Firmrock Castle.

Upon entering, he noticed Telesti laughing uncontrollably while slumped on his work desk.

"Darling, what's wrong?" Lorist asked curiously.

"Locke, didn't you ask your family knights and other officers to come up with methods to deal with the magical beasts? The letters are already collected over here. Look, haha! This letter suggests that we open a path through the Bladedge Mountains to the sea so that the magical beasts can travel straight into the sea and drown there… Hahaha… It's too funny…"

Lorist also laughed out loud. Just recently, he had forced his subordinates to try to come up with methods to deal with the magical beast wave. However, not one of them had any practical ideas, so they merely submitted whatever they could write up with their ridiculous imagination.

"Well, at least this is still more plausible than another letter I've read that suggested a wall be constructed all the way from Firmrock Castle to Maplewoods Bastide to seal off the Felicitas Settlement," Lorist commented.

That person who came out of the idea was preoccupied with the notion of keeping the magical beasts out of the Felicitas Settlement. However, he didn't even consider the distance between the two places and the costs, manpower and time involved in building a wall of that length. The idea made quite an impression on Lorist because it reminded him of the great wall in his previous life.

Telesti laughed out loud again as she said, "Locke, do you remember that one of the knights even suggested to gather up everyone within the dominion to dig up an enormous trap hole for the magical beasts to fall into? I replied to that knight and asked him what we would do with the dirt we get from all that digging. His reply just came in and he said that we can just dig out another hole to be filled with the extra dirt, hahaha…"

Lorist laughed bitterly as he shook his head in futility. Quite a number of knights within the family were muscleheads who didn't like to think about complicated stuff like that, so it was quite troubling for them to be requested to come up with a countermeasure for the magical beasts.

Picking up a few letters from the table, Lorist began reading. The first letter suggested that the algae be completely eradicated from the lands of the Felicitas Settlement so that the magical beasts would no longer head there if there was nothing for them to eat. *Sigh, why doesn't he think about how huge the settlement really is… And is it really possible to root out something like algae? I bet that a new patch would sprout the moment one was removed… How clueless…*

The second letter sounded even more ridiculous. The writer of the letter suggested that a large amounts of poison be sprinkled all over the lands of Felicitas Settlement so that the magical beasts would die from consuming the poisoned algae. *Well, I'll leave it to you to come up with a poisonous solution that will be effective even after being exposed in the air for a few days.* As a rank one herbalist, Lorist felt that if anyone really came out with a solution like that, he would definitely receive a reward from the Forde Research Fund of 200000 gold Fordes for such an achievement.

The third letter described an gorge that was located near the Maplewoods Bastide. That place was rather wide and if there was a way to lure the giant-class magical beasts such as magical mammoths to that place, then it would be far easier to deal with the smaller herbivorous beasts.

Oh? This is a rather sound plan, Lorist thought as he looked at the name of the writer. The person who wrote that was called Tarkel, whom Lorist thought to be rather familiar. *Was there such a person among the family knights?* Lorist really couldn't recall that person.

He then pulled on the bell rope to summon Reidy.

"Reidy, have this person come over here," Lorist instructed.

After a while, somebody knocked on the door of his office. However, that person was Charade.

"Milord, Knight Ovidis sent someone to report to me that the Second Prince sent you an invitation to attend a gathering for nobles at Gildusk City on the 15th day of the 5th month. Do you think we should attend?"

"Why would I go to a stupid gathering for nobles? In the end, it's just all a ploy of the Second Prince to siphon some money from the nobles who attend. I wouldn't want that now, would I? Just send a letter to refuse the invitation. I have no time to play games with the Second Prince," Lorist said in annoyance.

"Alright, I'll send someone to notify Knight Ovidis to have the messenger of the Second Prince scram," said Charade.

"Also, come with me to the metal refinery at Bladedge Mountains tomorrow. I have something I want to discuss with Grandmaster Sid. We can also check out on the plans for the industrial city I left in your hands," Lorist said.

"Okay. I'll wait for you tomorrow then," Charade said before he left.

Reidy only managed to find Tarkel in the evening and brought him to see Lorist.

"Oh, it's you?" Lorist said as he laughed. "No wonder I felt that your name sounded familiar. I'm really sorry, I've completely forgotten about you due to being so busy."

The man standing in front of Lorist was one of the guards of Count Cobry's laborer camp within Geldos City. Tarkel, who looked burly and uncultured on the outside, was discovered by Lorist to have a knack for noticing the more obscure details and being able to handle matters effectively. Thus, he forced Tarkel and his family to travel with him to the Northlands despite the latter's objection, only for Lorist to end up forgetting about him after he left with a few others earlier to head towards the dominion to inherit his position.

On the way north, Tarkel had endured quite a bit of hardship, as could be seen from how unpleasantly silent he was when he looked at Lorist.

"Fine, Tarkel. I once again apologize to you for forcing you and your family to move

over and forgetting to take care of you as I have promised. How about this, no matter what you're working on right now, why don't you become my personal attendant? Oh, Reidy, arrange a residence nearby for Tarkel and his family and give him ten gold Fordes as my token of apology," Lorist told Reidy.

"Who's that? You seem to regard him rather highly," Telesti asked when Tarkel left with Reidy.

"Hehe, while that fellow looks rather burly and brutish, he's incredibly keen on picking up on the smaller details most people ignore. He has a great talent for information gathering and spying, but he's a tad too cowardly for that and also treasures his family a lot. I've noticed his talents sometime back and forced him to come with us to the dominion, but I forgot about him after I left the convoy to inherit my position at the dominion. Had it not been for the letter he wrote me, I wouldn't have been able to recall him either. Here, have a look. Of everyone who has written to us, his idea is the most viable," Lorist said as he handed Telesti the letter.

"I see. Locke, are you heading to the Bladedge Mountains tomorrow?"

"I am. This time, I think I'll be staying there for quite a while. When I finish my affairs over there, I will check on the development of Felicitas Settlement. I will leave the matters here to you and Charade. Just send me a letter if there's something you need me to deal with. Well, it's getting late, so let's get some food."

……

The refinery that was built near the black iron mine made the atmosphere of the Bladedge Mountains much rowdier than before.

"Milord, we've set up seven blast furnaces in total and the daily production is around 1500 kilograms." As the chief supervisor, Grandmaster Sid was showing Lorist, Charade and Grandmaster Fellin around the refinery.

Lorist discovered that the furnaces they used at the refinery were rather primitive with the main difference between them and those used in Lorist's past life was that the main refining chambers were located underground with pillars of smoke emanating from the holes of the floor. The black iron ore would be brought to the refining chambers underground with chunks of charcoal placed next to them. After that, air would be blown into the chamber to aid in the combustion process, thus

raising the temperature high enough so that the ore could be melted down before it would be funneled into casts where it would be made into black iron ingots.

"I believe I've seen a different method for refining metal in a book somewhere that would produce stainless steel right away without first having to refine the ore into black iron ingots," Lorist said as he started drawing a design of a blast furnace from his past life and handed it to Grandmaster Sid. "I recall that the combustion material they used was a kind of black-colored rock which emanated extremely high temperatures."

Holding the beastskin design in his hand, Grandmaster Sid wore an awkward expression as he said, "Milord, your widespread knowledge is truly admirable. However, we're not able to construct a furnace of this design."

"Why?" Charade asked.

"That's because this kind of furnace must be made from a kind of brick that is incredibly resistant to heat. Otherwise, it would crack right away during the smelting process. We do not have the ability to make bricks like that," Grandmaster Sid said.

Lorist nodded and thought, *so he really does know his stuff...* Grandmaster Sid had already noticed the key flaw of the furnace design. However, even Lorist is unaware of how to make the heat-resistant bricks that the grandmaster mentioned, so he made a mental note to experiment on it in the future.

"As for the black rocks which are combustible that you mentioned, I've seen them before. They're called blackfire rocks and they let out a pungent stench when ignited. Additionally, ingots smelted using blackfire rocks are not good enough as they are rather brittle," Grandmaster Sid explained.

Oh, so coal is called blackfire rocks in this world. Even so, he couldn't recall the process of coking which was used to make coke, which was in turn commonly used as fuel in blacksmithing. If one were to use sulfur-rich coal instead of coke, the end product would no doubt be brittle.

"Then, how do you guys make steel?" Lorist asked.

"Well, you can take a look over there, milord. That is the blast furnace we use to make steel. First, we put some iron ingots into the furnace as well as some other ingredients according to prescribed recipes. After that, we heat it up long enough and start the

stirring process before finally pouring the molten metal into casts. Then, we take it out and start hammering to remove impurities until we are satisfied with the product," explained Grandmaster Sid.

"I see. Then, I have a something I want to build which will need a particular kind of steel. I wonder if you can make it," Lorist said as he unrolled the ballista design he drew and Grandmaster Fellin proceeded to describe the properties of the ballista to Grandmaster Sid.

After looking at the design, Grandmaster Sid furrowed his brow in thought before he asked someone to bring an old guy to him.

"Milord, this is Master Julian and he has worked in the field for most of his life back during the days of the empire in the imperial capital. If even he can't make the kind of metal you want, no one can," Grandmaster Sid said.

While Master Julian looked rather meek and gentle, the moment he heard about the request from Grandmaster Sid, he nodded fervently and said, "It is possible. Back then, His Majesty Krissen VII commissioned for an even more elastic metal to be made for the spring absorbers on his carriage and I still remember the recipe. However, we must repeat the hammering process and remelt the material multiple times and employ the quenching process, which will no doubt require a lot of manpower. While we would be able to make it in small amounts, it'll be hard for us to mass produce the material as we don't have enough experienced blacksmiths to do the hammering. If the hammering is done wrong, not only will the end product be useless, it will also waste the precious material."

Lorist laughed and said, "There will be no issue with that. I can design a water-powered hammering machine for you. I was just thinking that it was a waste not to utilize the waterfalls at the cliffs nearby. Let me draw it for you…"

Within moments, a simple water-powered hammering machine blueprint was drawn. It was a really basic design which utilized a water wheel that was connected to a series of gears powered a hammer that banged against an anvil. The design blew the minds of everyone present who had only seen it for the first time.

Master Julian cried out in surprise, "Milord, you're a genius! With this, no matter how much material you need, I will be able to make it for you…"

Chapter 179
Daily Life Within the Dominion

Lorist traveled with Reidy and Tarkel to check out the development of the Felicitas Settlement, especially the defensive infrastructure that was just constructed within the various villages and towns. By the time they returned to the refinery at Bladedge Mountains, it was already the end of the 7th month.

Within the span of two months, many changes at that valley could be observed. Firstly, Grandmaster Fellin had moved his ballista workshop somewhere nearby the valley. He was currently inspecting a few ballista parts that were made according to Lorist's design and was discussing them with Master Julian quite audibly.

Other than that, a row of water-powered hammering machines of differing sizes and complexity could be sighted near the waterfall by the cliff. It seemed that the people at the refinery had also modified some of the machines to better suit their needs.

When Lorist approached Grandmaster Fellin and Master Julian, they both welcomed him gladly.

Grandmaster Fellin said, "Milord, the elastic steel plate you wanted is already complete. We've already used one to make a ballista to test the steel plate as well as decide on the final design of the prototype."

Master Julian smiled satisfactorily with his mouth wide open, revealing the whites of his teeth.

"Not bad. I'm really satisfied with your progress. Reidy, after this, reward Master Julian and Grandmaster Fellin 100 gold Fordes each. The others who have contributed will receive 10 gold Fordes each." In terms of rewarding skilled workers, Lorist was not one bit stingy at all.

"Thank you, milord. However, you should take a better look first. We discovered that the ballista we made according to your design has two problems," said Fellin.

The ballista Lorist designed was not made wholly out of steel. Apart from the arm,

eccentric wheel and the loading mechanism which utilized steel parts, the rest of the ballista was still constructed from wood.

"Oh? What problems are there?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, the elastic steel arm allows the ballista's firing distance to increase to around 320 to 350 meters with a margin of error of 2 meters. During testing, we discovered that using wooden ballista bolts caused the bolt's center of gravity to be a little off, hence increasing the error margin. This is why it's difficult to aim with this new ballista. So, we made an iron ballista bolt and while the distance the iron bolt could be fired was only at around 280 to 300 meters, the error margin is far smaller with it being less than half a meter. The problem is that the iron bolts cost twice as much as the wooden bolts to produce. That's why we need your thoughts on which bolts to use for this ballista in the future," Fellin explained.

"Then, which type of bolt has more power?" Lorist asked.

"Naturally, it's the iron one," Fellin replied.

"Then we'll use iron bolts. I'll have a ballista bolt manufacturing plant set up with Master Julian as its head then," Lorist declared right away.

"The second issue is the rate of wear for the string on the steel ballista, which is far too staggering. The wooden ballistas could fire up to 20 rounds before needing its string to be replaced. However, the vibration caused by the steel arm of this ballista causes much more damage to its string, meaning that it has to be replaced after every seven to eight shots. Even so, we've started working with Master Julian to make a string that combines metal fibers, fur, and cow sinew. We'll be able to see the results in a while," Fellin reported.

"Good. Grandmaster Fellin, Master Julian, I'm assured that the two of you are working on this. I'll be leaving the matter of the new ballista to you and I hope you'll be able to finalize its design soon enough and put it into mass production. It's already the end of the 7th month and I hope that we'll have around 3000 of these ballistas by the 10th month so that we can be better prepared to deal with the magical beast wave," Lorist said as he nodded.

"Milord, we will not disappoint you," said Fellin.

Seeing Grandmaster Fellin order his apprentices and descendants around to conduct

the tests, Lorist looked around him and asked Julian, "Why isn't Grandmaster Sid here?"

Julian pointed to the waterfall and said, "Milord, ever since these water-powered hammering machines were built, Grandmaster Sid got obsessed with them. The other machines over there were actually augmented by him. Currently, he's trying to make a water-powered wire-drawing machine so that we can take advantage of the waterfall to make some tight-fitting mail armor."

Lorist laughed out loud and said, "That's great. Grandmaster Sid truly is sharp and quick-witted as seen from his ability to apply the concept to something else so quickly. Reidy, don't forget to reward him with 100 gold Fordes as well and 10 gold Fordes for each of his subordinates."

"Yes, milord."

……

After a round of rewarding his subordinates, Lorist returned to Firmrock Castle while feeling elated about the progress. Following a few days of making out with Telesti, Lorist finally thought of something important and climbed out of his love nest to instruct Reidy to summon Dulles from the carroballista unit to him.

"Milord, did I do something wrong? Why are you decreasing the number of troops in the carroballista unit?" Dulles said desperately. He was incredibly pained that the unit he had poured his sweat and blood into building was going to be downsized.

It was no wonder Dulles would react like that since Lorist had ordered that the 12 small ballistas be transferred to Els's guard division. Apart from that, only the best ballistas from those of the Whitelion Legion's would be kept with the remaining 300 plus ballistas being sold away.

To Dulles, there was no point of the carroballista unit's existence without those ballistas. He was so sad that tears formed at the corner of his eyes as if he was about to cry at any moment.

Lorist on the other hand was surprised at Dulles's overreaction and thought, *what the heck is this fellow imagining?*

"Dulles… Dulles!" Lorist shouted.

"Ah, milord…" Dulles said as he snapped out of his stupor and paid attention to Lorist.

"After gathering up the ballistas that are to be sold and handing them to Supervisor Spiel, begin recruiting more men. I plan to organize the carroballista unit into a full-fledged division containing five regiments in total with each regiment having 2500 soldiers equipped with 500 carroballistas within three months' time. By the 10th month, these preparations should be completed and you will then receive the new steel ballistas. I've already assigned ten plus family knights some posts within your carroballista division and the equipment for the recruits are mostly in place. Now, I only need your signature to distribute the equipment. This coming winter, the carroballista division will serve as the main force against the magical beast wave, understood? Don't screw this up, alright?"

"Mi-milord… So you're not downsizing my unit but expanding it instead?" Dulles asked, now with an incredibly bright expression on his face in stark contrast to his previous one.

"That's right, you fool. Did you understand what I just said?" Lorist asked as he looked at Dulles with annoyance.

"I-I understand, milord! I will begin work right away," Dulles said as he hurriedly rushed out of the door, before sticking his head into the doorway again to ask, "Milord, are you really going to give us so many new ballistas?"

Lorist nodded and said, "Of course I am. Additionally, these new ones are far better than the defense sentry ballistas you're using now. Otherwise, I wouldn't allow you to sell those away."

"Yahoo!" exclaimed Dulles before he rushed off again.

"That idiot…" Lorist mumbled as he shook his head and continued to browse the documents that had piled up on his table during the months of his absence.

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During the end of the 8th month, the family dominion fared rather peacefully with one piece of good news coming after another. The potatoes that were planted during the 4th month were just harvested during the 7th month and totaled up to around 35 million kilograms, almost completely replenishing the food stores of the family. The various kinds of millet that were planted during the 5th month would also be ready

for harvest on the 9th month. The weather was mostly pleasant for most part of the year, allowing for the crop to grow with abundance. Even though the area of the farmland wasn't that huge and wasn't able to accommodate the food consumption of over 500000 people within the dominion, it was still heartening news.

Other than that, the clearing out of the remaining magical beasts within Felicitas Settlement had completed during the 6th month, with more than 100000 magical beasts becoming the main source of meat for the dominion. According to some reports, magical beast meat with potatoes had already become the staple food of the people of Felicitas Settlement. However, hundreds of family soldiers had either died or gotten injured while hunting the carnivorous magical beasts. Had it not been for the numerous Gold and Silver ranked knights that were helping out, the casualties might have been even worse.

However, Lorist believed that the addition of Dulles's expanded carroballista division will further decrease the casualties of the family soldiers during the extermination of the magical beasts next year. According to Potterfang's report, apart from Josk's mounted archer unit and Pesha's female garrison unit, the other units have been temporarily disbanded so that the soldiers could help out with the construction of the defensive fortifications within the various villages and towns of the settlement.

As the chief supervisor of the mining operations within the dominion, Old Man Balk submitted the most reports and was also the one to bring most of the good news. Currently, the Bladedge Mountains' salt farms were outputting huge amounts of high quality salt. Not only did the production manage to match the consumption of the dominion folk, there was extra left over that could be exported to other areas. Additionally, the green vines within the valley had also started producing lots of green vine glue. However, most of the supply of the glue was being used by the construction operations within Felicitas Settlement. Given the developing state of the dominion, it was foreseeable that the family would require all of the supply within the next five years. They would probably have to import more to accommodate the need.

What pleased Lorist the most was the fact that the factories managed by Balk to produce daily use products for the dominion folk were incredible successes. The reports indicated that up to 50000 people were hired to work in those factories, with the beastskin processing factory having the most workers at roughly 10000 people. With the recent gain in leather and furs from the magical beast wave, the estimated production of beastskin documents that year was as high as 500000 pieces that was worth about 20000 gold Fordes. There was more than enough beastskin documents

to satisfy the number required for the administration of the dominion.

When it came to managing the factories, Balk used a competitive model; he set up two of each type of factory with their own unique specialties and allowed them to compete mutually. For example, there were two pottery workshops. One of them produced bowls and plates while the other produced pots and jars, hence eliminating the possibility of monopoly by either firm.

While the daily product factories within the dominion was still young and were only run on a rather small scale, it was quite impressive for them to be able to sate the demand of more than 500000 people. By the time everything stabilized, the factories would be further developed. As long as they can come up with a product unique to them, the dominion would have yet another staple export which they could trade with other areas.

The next reports Lorist read were from the three main administrative departments of the family. Supervisor Kedan from the human resources department submitted a report that expressed his immense satisfaction for one of his managers and even recommended heartily for the manager's promotion.

Lorist smiled when he saw the name written on the report as that manager was in fact Camorra.

After Camorra was rescued from Duke Loggins's water dungeon, he refused Lorist's offer to serve as one of his aides and insisted that he wanted to live the rest of his life as a commoner. However, his talents didn't go wasted for long as he had signed up to be one of the administrative workers when he arrived at the dominion and started his career as one of the lowest ranked administrative officers. It didn't take long for Camorra to show his impeccable performance that even earned him the trust and recommendation of Kedan.

Lorist then wrote a message that authorized Kedan to promote Camorra as he saw fit. In actuality, Lorist had other plans for him. For now, he allowed Camorra to work for his subordinates. But he believed that there would be a time when he would need to rely on Camorra's abilities for something important in the future.

The last report he read was submitted by Charade. Having experienced his failures, Charade got his act back together and spared no effort in the tasks he was given. Within only half a year, he had finished the plans for Firmrock Castle's rear city, the

valley city as well as the industrial city located between the Morgan Hills and Bladedge Mountains and even began construction on all the projects. The finer details of relocating the people as well as agricultural and industrial development had also been arranged perfectly.

With the industrial city being the most important equipment production hub of the dominion in the future, everyone related to the production had already been moved to where the city would be built to help out with the construction of the means of production and residences. The valley city at Firmrock Castle on the other hand was planned by Charade to be a hybrid location for agricultural and industrial production, with most of the daily life product factories being located there. Additionally, the family members of the miners working at Morgan Hills were also moved there. Coupled with up to 30000 farmers, the valley city was easily one of the most populated locations within the dominion with a combined citizen count of around 70000.

The main immigrant camp near Firmrock Castle that was packed to the brim before had only around 40000 people left who were family members of the soldiers after the various citizen relocations. The rear city that Charade had planned was to be built on the location of the camp and that project was also the one that progressed the slowest. However, more than 70000 square meters of farmland had already been developed outside the rear city. Charade's plan involved the construction of irrigation routes in the following year so that the rear city would become the main food producer for the family dominion.

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When Tarkel entered the room, Lorist was reading a report about the mountain barbarians.

Perhaps it was due to the passing of the magical beast wave that caused large numbers of carnivorous magical beasts to be left within the dominion, the barbarians haven't trespassed the family dominion's borders for an attack for the past half year. According to the leader of the Pentasword Mercenary Crew that was stationed there, even though they did detect traces of barbarian activity within the vicinity, they deduced that they were only there to hunt. So far, no signs of any imminent barbarian attack had been discovered.

Lorist humphed softly as he recalled the time last year when the mountain barbarians mounted a large scale attack with roughly 1000 troops with the intention of taking

control of the army base that controlled the area where the river could be accessed. The Pentasword Mercenary Crew lost 13 members during that assault, but the smoke signal they made summoned Josk and his mounted archer troops as well as Pajik's garrison company to the scene, causing the barbarians to incur huge losses as a result with half of their numbers culled before the rest were able to escape. Lorist hoped that the barbarians had learned their lesson and thought that he would first focus on wiping out the magical beast wave with the barbarians being next in line.

"Milord, I'm back," Tarkel greeted respectfully.

"Oh, how are things going on your side?" Lorist asked as he put down the report.

When he surveyed the Felicitas Settlement a couple of months ago, Lorist brought someone with him to inspect the gorge that Tarkel had mentioned where the gigantic magical beasts would be trapped and left with much satisfaction. The reason Tarkel knew about that place was because he had joined Yuriy's light cavalry scouts to make a living and had traveled throughout the family dominion during his service.

"It's already completed. When winter comes, we can begin strengthening of the walls at the front lines. I promise you that once the magical beasts enter the gorge, they will no longer be able to leave," Tarkel replied.

Lorist stood up, walked to Tarkel's side and patted on his shoulder as he said, "You did well. When the magical beast wave comes this year, we can begin our plan. Whether we succeed will determine whether we can stabilize the family dominion for further development. Tarkel, continue to work hard. When you reach the Silver rank, I will recruit you into the ranks of the Norton Family knights."

"Yes, milord. Thank you for giving me this opportunity," Tarkel said.

Chapter 180
Count Kenmays's Visit

"Milord, Count Kenmays is here," Reidy reminded as he walked into the room.

"Alright, I'll go receive him," Lorist said as he stood up and headed towards the main gates of the castle.

Count Kenmays had brought around 100 men with him on his excursion to Firmrock Castle this time around with him being seated in an extravagantly-decorated carriage, much unlike half a year back when he only came with ten plus attendants.

It is worth noting that while Lorist was busy settling down the 500000 citizens within the dominion and making all those development plans, the Kenmays Family didn't slack off either. They had also made a plan to develop the eastern Northlands. Ten plus other noble families had also been drawn into the plan whether they agreed or not, with the 7 who had resisted exterminated and the rest who knew what was better for them or didn't have the ability to rebel signing the agreement to cooperate with the plan that effectively handed their territory for the Kenmays Family to manage while they only had to wait for the profit to roll in to support their lavish lifestyle.

To summarize, the Kenmays Family had taken full control of the eastern Northlands, causing even the Second Prince to be unable to do anything about it apart from accepting the reality of the situation, however unwilling he was to do so. Additionally, by pressuring the Second Prince with their wealth, the Kenmays Family got elevated from the status of a viscount to a count by the Second Prince during the noble gathering that had occurred during the 5th month with the reason of that promotion being their contribution to improve the connectivity of the Northlands to the outside world by building the metal suspension bridge. Naturally, with the promotion in rank, the Kenmays Family officially gained control of Count Lopez's dominion as well, thus completing the grasp of control of the Kenmayses on the eastern Northlands.

The radiant Count Kenmays was the first one to get off the carriage, followed by two extravagantly dressed female attendants. The Norton Family's policy of not providing their guests with women to warm their beds caused the count to have to spend 3 lonely nights during his former visit. This time, he had learned his lesson and brought

his own female attendants along.

Lorist stepped forward and casually greeted the count. "Hey, why have you come here this time? Based on what I see, you plan to stay here for long?"

Already used to Lorist's antics and noticing Lorist staring at his attendants, Count Kenmays said, "Oh? You're interested in them? Do you want me to present one of them to you as a gift? Tell you what, they have received professional training in the finer arts of pleasure and can absolutely bring you to paradise when you're in bed…"

"Nope, not interested," Lorist said as he turned away from the women. "I was just a little curious… Can your body really handle those two? How long have they tended to you? Why haven't you been sucked dry of your vitality yet?"

The matters of sexuality was a soft spot for all men, Count Kenmays included. Putting his hands to his hips, he said, "Hmph, my body is far tougher than you think. Don't get the wrong impression just because those two look like small little kittens. I can easily do them two to three times in a single night."

"Yeah, boast all you can. Let's go have a real chat in my study," Lorist said as he smirked before he led them inside.

Lorist himself found the relationship between his family and the Kenmayses to be rather weird. Even though they had made peace between one another, the Kenmays Family no doubt lost quite a bit from their interactions with the Norton Family and they should secretly feel hateful of that. And given that the Norton Family profited quite a bit off the Kenmayses, they should also be rather vary of them. The two families should only be friendly on the surface. However, the more Lorist interacted with Count Kenmays, the better friends they became, to the point that they were able to tell one another anything down to the most private matters. Lorist felt that there was no way he could truly hate the count even if their families were to be on hostile terms.

"Every time I walk into here, I feel like I've entered a bandit's lair. Heck, even this castle was taken from me by force," Count Kenmays said as he started to bring up the matters of old.

"Let me state clearly once again that this castle was built within Norton Family grounds. I've only chased away a bunch of bandits who tried to occupy my land and taken control of their lair," Lorist said.

"Fine, this castle was indeed constructed on the lands of the Nortons," Count Kenmays conceded. "But you have to admit that the manpower, resources, funds and the designer of the castle himself were taken from my family, right? Poor old Grandmaster Ciroba… Even now, we don't know his whereabouts."

"Let me warn you upfront, just state what you came here for and don't even think of trying to weasel the location of Grandmaster Ciroba from me. There's no way I will restore his freedom until he has served the family for ten years as penance. He's also incredibly busy on many things right now, so if your family wants a castle to be built, you should look for another designer," Lorist said as he exposed the count's intentions right away.

Count Kenmays shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, personally, I couldn't care less about what the grandmaster is doing right now. However, my old chap back at home wanted me to try to get some information about him and ask you whether we can pay his ransom to have him back at our dominion to help us build some castles. Since you've been so clear about your intentions, I'll give up on it. It's not that I didn't try, I wouldn't have been able to do anything about this anyway."

"Pffft!" Lorist couldn't control his laughter. "Fine. Just tell me what you're up to by traveling so extravagantly with so many people."

"Where else would I go but Gildusk City?" Count Kenmays said as he took out a large bottle of wine from a corner of the study. "Huh, just look. One bottle of fine wine after another. And you said you weren't a bandit… Which one of these were bought by you with your own money? Didn't you get them all from robbery? The wine aside, look at the sofa you're sitting on. This is a prized item of the Mijis Royal Family which Duke Loggins spent more than 1000 gold Fordes to obtain back then at the Royal Capital of Windbury City. Within but a few years, it has already made its way to your study without you having to spend even a single coin on it…"

"If you shut up about the bandit thing, I'll let you take two bottles of wine back with you," Lorist said.

"Really?" exclaimed the count happily.

Lorist merely nodded.

"Fine, I won't mention it from this moment onward," said Count Kenmays as he started

to pick the wine from the rack.

"I'm still curious why you're setting out even though it's the 11th month already. Don't tell me you don't plan to stay within your dominion to spend the winter?" Lorist asked.

"Haha, brother, nobles don't 'spend winter' cooped up within their homes. Only commoners do that because they don't have enough food and clothing to endure the cold weather. Nobles like us have to continue living our luxurious lives regardless of the seasons by holding banquets which span night after night, attending balls to recite poems and invite the beautiful and gentle noble ladies to a dance and even have a secret rendezvous with one of them during the cold winter night to get to know each other more 'deeply', if you know what I mean. That's how nobles like us should spend winter…

"And you, my friend, shouldn't be cooped up within this cold and lonely castle of yours. You should come out to see the city. The Second Prince will be holding a grand event during the winter there and all nobles of the Northlands are invited to attend. By that time, the city will no doubt be incredibly merry with beauties all over the place and that's not an opportunity you should miss. If you attend, I bet the Second Prince would be happy as well. He's been wanting to meet the terrifying Raging Bear that shocked the whole of the Northlands," Count Kenmays said as he tried hard to convince Lorist to join him for the festivities in Gildusk City.

"I'm not interested in attending pointless events like that. I'm also really busy during winter, so I don't have time to play games with the rest of you. Also, you don't have to be too courteous to the Second Prince on my behalf. I have a feeling that he doesn't have good intentions about the Norton Family. So, I am very straightforward in my attitude towards him: no matter what he desires from me, I will refuse it. If he asks why I didn't attend the festivities, just tell him that it's because I'm still bearing a grudge for the fact that he abandoned the family after the death of my elder brother who had served him and tell him that the Norton Family has drawn a clear line to not want to be involved with him any further," Lorist said calmly.

"Whoa, you're really going all out to sever relations with the Second Prince, huh. I really think that there's no need for you to go that far. As long as you be polite on the surface, you will be fine. And if the Second Prince has any unreasonable requests, you can just pretend to be really bothered by it and refuse. As long as you have power, the Second Prince can't do much about you but endure silently," Count Kenmays said as he objected to Lorist's course of action.

"That's far too troublesome. It's better if I let him choose outright whether he wants to be the enemy or ally of the Norton Family. Either way, the Norton Family will always continue the tradition of our ancestors to defend the borders of the empire and will not be interested in the petty power struggles of others. As long as others don't mess with us, it's fine," Lorist said.

"Sigh, your family truly is one of a kind. It's currently a time of chaos where heroes have the opportunity to shine. Doesn't your family have the slightest ambition?" Count Kenmays said as he looked at Lorist.

Lorist shook his head and replied, "No, we don't. The primary objective of the family is to establish a peaceful and stable life for our citizens within the Northlands. We don't have the slightest desire to fight for supremacy and territory and it's not something a small family like us can afford to involve ourselves in. If things don't go well, our family will only head to ruin. I only wish to propagate the glory and honor of the family as that is my main duty as the head of the family. However, your Kenmays Family has deep roots as one of the largest construction merchant families in the old empire. I'm sure you'll have something to gain from all this."

"Haha, you really praise us too much. Our Kenmays Family definitely isn't as sophisticated and deep-rooted as the Norton Family is. To be honest with you, I only wish to stand with the victor. Right now, I'm still deliberating who to side with," said Count Kenmays as he laughed.

Lorist laughed out as well and said, "If you have a good candidate, don't forget to tell me about it. After all, good things must be shared, right? Alright, let's not talk about pointless things like this. Since you've stopped here on your way to Gildusk City, you must have a reason for doing so. Tell it to me right away."

"Well, the Second Prince did ask me to invite you to Gildusk City, but you've already refused it. The other reason I came was to notify you about the green glass and oil glass you ordered, which will be arriving in another half month. My father also asked whether you need any green vine glue. We can sell you 50000 buckets for a low price and if you're lacking in funds, you can trade some metal armor with us for it. We'll definitely give you a great rate for the armor," said Count Kenmays seriously.

Lorist thought solemnly before laughing out loud and saying, "So your family is after my metal armor… How many do you need?"

Count Kenmays lifted three fingers.

"Three thousand? No problem," Lorist said.

"What? No. I want 30000 sets," Count Kenmays corrected.

"Huh? 30000? Putting aside whether you can afford that many, what would you do with all that?" Lorist asked curiously. Even if he sold one set of metal armor at 40 gold Fordes, 30000 would cost more than 1 million gold Fordes. Did the Kenmays Family intend to bankrupt themselves?

Count Kenmays took a deep breath before saying, "I have no choice, friend. My family wouldn't do that either if we had a choice. One of the biggest gains of our family's conquest of the eastern Northlands was a gold mine. Before this, the smaller noble families mined the gold there privately and we've taken over and started proper mining operations. Each year's output is estimated to be around 20000 plus gold Fordes' worth. That's why, you don't have to worry about us not paying back. You can even send someone to audit the mine if you wish."

After a short pause, the count continued, "Do you know how much wealth the Second Prince has siphoned from our family? 120000 gold Fordes. We paid that price so that we would be able to rule over the dominion of Count Lopez legally as well as get promoted to the rank of a count. I've also received reliable intel that the Second Prince intends to form the First Army of the Iblia Kingdom at Duke Loggins's dominion that will number around 56000 soldiers. To avoid being pressured by the Second Prince into giving him more money when the time comes, my family has also decided to form a force numbering 30000 soldiers to make sure that the eastern Northlands will be free from the Second Prince's influence."

Count Kenmays laughed bitterly and said, "The time of war has come and without our own army to rely on, there's no way that our family will be able to survive. The moment the Second Prince makes his move, the eastern Northlands will face assault from both sides. You should know that the iron suspension bridge built by my family is linked to the Wild Husbandry Province that is controlled by Duke Fisablen. In other words, we have also gained another potential enemy as a consequence of building the bridge.

"That's why my family has decided to spare no effort in forming a reliable force and equip it as well as we can regardless of the price so that we can ensure the survival of our family. However, I'm sure you know that the only two iron refineries within the

Iblia Kingdom is controlled by the Second Prince, so it's very hard for the equipment that is produced there to make their way into the hands of noble families like us. The Northlands lack metal the most and only you can supply our force with decent equipment right now. No matter what, I really need your help this time, please," pleaded Count Kenmays before he bowed to Lorist sincerely.

Lorist stroked his chin in deep thought for a moment before he said, "I agree to sell your family 30000 sets of armor and weapons. You can negotiate with Knight Charade about the price. You can also use food and other resources to trade for the equipment as well. Also, I can provide around 100 units of military grade ballistas produced in the former empire if you require it."

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Count Kenmays stayed at Firmrock Castle for five whole days, with each day being round after round of sharp-tongued bargaining with Charade. In the end, the total price was settled at 1.8 million gold Fordes. The agreement stated that the Norton Family must provide the Kenmays Family with 33000 sets of metal armor and weapons including 143 military grade ballistas. The Kenmays Family would pay the Norton Family 500000 gold Fordes in cash with the outstanding balance being paid with food and other resources of equal value. After signing the agreement, Count Kenmays left with his attendants and resumed his journey to Gildusk City.

After sending the count off, Charade let out a breath of relief and said, "Half of the metal armor and weapons of the northbound convoy has already been sold out. It would be great if there's another person who wants to buy them all up. Now that we have the equipment of the Whitelion Legion, the old metal armor is taking up space unnecessarily. We even thought of smelting it down for the metal to be used in other places…"

Lorist laughed out loud as he said, "Don't worry. I'm sure that business will boom after this year passes. Count Kenmays said that the Second Prince plans to form an army of 56000 soldiers next year within the duke's dominion. To ensure their own survival, the various noble families within the Northlands will definitely be desperate to arm themselves so that they don't end up as free lunch on the Second Prince's plate."

Chapter 181
Facing the Magical Beast Wave Again

"Steady… Don't panic. The magical bull herd is incoming. Aim for the ones at the very front and lure them here. Alright, fire!" Lorist said as he flung his hand forward. The three steel ballistas let out three thunderous twangs as the bolts were fired across a distance of 300 meters, piercing deep into their targets' bodies.

Blood splattered all over as the deathly cries of the bulls echoed throughout the gorge. The magical beast wave seemed to have stopped in its tracks all of a sudden as the other bulls around the two collapsed ones looked around to seek out their enemy.

"Reload and keep firing."

After the second volley was shot out, the confused bulls finally noticed that the bolts had flown over from the top of a cliff nearby.

Loud grunts could be heard as the herd of magical bulls rushed towards the cliff with breakneck speed. In a few moments, the originally snow-covered surface of the hill slope had been run over by multitudes of stampeding bulls.

However, the bulls later noticed that the cliff they climbed up was not where the bolts had been fired from. Instead, the cliff where their attackers were was further down the other section of the mountains. Also, it wasn't actually a rock cliff but rather a huge wooden rectangular structure. By that time, the bulls which had low intelligence soon forgot about the 'ants' that had attacked them from the top of the rectangular structure and instead had their attention captured by a bright red cloth that was hung at the top of the wooden structure.

The stark contrast between the crimson cloth and the white snow-covered land instantly captured the attention of all the bulls there.

Angry moos and grunts soon erupted and echoed throughout the mountains. Anyone with common knowledge of bulls knew that they should never be shown the color red as that would cause them to go berserk and rampage around until they obliterate the red cloth altogether.

The bulls on top of the slope started to move. Lowering their heads and positioning their razor-sharp horns, they rushed straight towards the red cloth. However, not one of the bulls realized that the closer they were to the cloth, the steeper the slope got. By the time the bulls reached the ground, they were 2 meters beneath the red cloth they had loathed so deeply.

Some bulls at the front then raised their heads and realized that there was another red cloth not far ahead seemingly there to welcome their arrival. Needless to say, the bulls rushed towards it with abandon with their heads lowered.

That was how roughly 30000 magical bulls were lured to part with the magical beast wave. Upon being teased by red cloths, they lost all sense and rushed straight down the steep slope. By the time the ones at the front regained any semblance of 'reason', there was no way they would be able to make their way back up the steep slope. There was a tall 7 meter snow wall in both directions that completely blocked off their way. And there was no way for the other bulls that were still rushing down from the slope to head back up either as the other bulls behind that were not aware of the situation merely went with the flow and pushed down the slope.

When they all snapped out of their frenzied rage, the bulls realized that they were within a gorge that was bordered by tall cliffs in all directions. Those bulls still didn't know that they had fallen into a trap and continued rushing for tens of kilometers before stopping to rest and graze at the algae on the ground to replenish their energy. Thus, the group of magical bulls dispersed into smaller groups and headed their own ways within the gorge with some occasionally stopping to graze at the algae beneath the snow.

This was the Crewe Circular Gorge which was located within the Norton Family dominion. The whole gorge was shaped as if a child had dug a circular ring deep into the ground. While there were a few gaps that could be used to leave the gorge, those very gaps would spell the end of the magical bulls.

A few of the magical bulls headed towards the gaps and finally managed to step onto higher ground. However, what greeted them there were loud twangs of ballistas firing. Within a flash, the bulls were hit squarely by the bolts and killed within an instant.

"Quick, move those carcasses away. More bulls are coming from behind. Get ready!" said Dulles energetically as he ordered his carroballista division to proceed. This gorge was his battlefield, and the magical bulls, his enemy.

A few of the family soldiers stepped forward quickly and tied up the dead bulls in a practiced manner before they gave a signal to prompt the horses tied to the rope to move forward and haul the bulls away to an empty spot not far away. The carcasses that weighed hundreds of kilograms were rather easy to move as the the snow-covered ground decreased the overall friction. After being left at the empty spot, the carcasses of the bulls quickly froze over in the cold weather and would be dealt with at a later time.

A loud boom resounded as the rectangular structure shook, causing snow to slip all over the place. That green-eyed wild bull that rammed into the structure shook its head furiously and paced about in circles as it was a little disorientated from the collision. Regaining its balance, the bull retreated a few steps and readied itself for another charge.

"Good Sol!" Lorist exclaimed as he took control of one of the steel ballistas to aim at the bull. In the end, the green-eyed bull died from a ballista bolt just before it managed to ram into the structure again.

Lorist and the rest were on top of a rectangular structure that was 12 meters wide and 8 meters tall. To avoid letting the bulls ram at the base of the structure, Lorist intentionally decreased the amount of red cloth at the bottom of the structure so that the bulls would be lured to pass through the middle of the two pillars at the side which were the foundations of the structure.

However, somehow, that particular green-eyed bull fixated itself on the left pillar and began to ram into it time and again. The only option available to Lorist and gang was to shoot it dead on the spot. Otherwise, things would've turned out far worse if the structure had collapsed from the bull's incessant ramming. It was fortunate that the ballista fired by Lorist didn't attract the attention of the other bulls that were running towards the red cloth and passing beneath the rectangular structure.

"When this group of green-eyed bulls pass below us, pile up some snow around the pillars and splash some water onto it. We have to better secure the stability of the structure by letting it freeze over so that the frightening situation from before doesn't happen again," Lorist said.

"I think so too," Els said as he leaned on the wall nearby.

To deal with the magical beast wave this year, Lorist had mobilized almost all the

forces available to him within the family dominion.

First, Lorist had made preparations to divert the larger herbivorous magical beasts away from the main group such as the various types of magical bulls into the Crewe Circular Gorge. That way, the rest of the magical goats, horses, etc. would be easier to deal with.

Lorist wasn't over ambitious about his plans either. If there was around 1 million magical beasts in the wave this winter, he only hoped that half would remain behind so he could deal with them when spring came at Felicitas Settlement. That way, only 300000 to 400000 beasts would be able to return to the wilderness. Lorist believed that if they repeated this process for a couple of years in succession, they would be able to thin the numbers of the beasts so much that the beast march will no longer occur and cease to be a threat.

To achieve his goals, he ensured that his family knights and soldiers had received proper training. The defensive structures at the second to seventh sectors of the settlement had also been built up properly. Additionally, the second to sixth sectors which would be the first to be engulfed in the beast wave each had a Gold ranked knight stationed at their respective central towns. The towns would also let the weaker magical beasts into the city periodically, effectively turning the winter into a crazed festival of in-town beast hunting.

As for the seventh sector where Wildnorth Town was located, it would not be visited by the magical beast wave, so there was no need to pay extra caution to the preparations there.

As for the sixth sector's central town, Beastguard Town, which was named by Lorist himself, chief Gold ranked knight Potterfang was stationed over there to defend it.

The central town of the fifth sector that was still unnamed was guarded by Gold ranked knight Fiercetiger Loze.

As for the central town of the fourth sector which was also nameless, it was guarded by the silver-haired Belnick.

The third sector's central town was guarded by Gold ranked mercenary Chino Freiyar.

And finally, the second sector's central town was guarded by the Gold ranked knight which had just broken through recently, former Whitelion Legion officer Iron-faced

Mons Malek. After the convoy arrived at the Northlands, he was given a vacation by Lorist to focus on his Battle Force training. After one year of hard work, he finally broke through to the Gold rank and became the sixth Gold ranked knight under Lorist's command.

By the time everything was in place, everyone awaited the coming of the magical beast wave with full confidence and anticipation. As for Divine Marksman Josk, he followed Lorist and Els, the head of the guard division, to camp at a small mountainside. They carried out the most difficult part of the whole plan there, which was to lure the magical bulls away from the main wave into the Crewe Circular Gorge.

"This should be the third group to enter the gorge, right? How many bulls are there roughly?" Patt asked.

"There should be around 60000 of them, at least that's what I can see," Els replied.

Lorist said, "That should be about right. After this group enters the gorge, we'll head over to the camp over there for some rest. Have Josk bring someone to replace us for our shifts. Also, don't forget to have someone move the dead bull over there back to the camp. I feel like having some fresh meat after two days of eating nothing but dried food up here."

"Alright, milord."

A temporary camp was set up at a small hill not far away from the slope where the rectangular structure was built. There was a waterfall over there which was the main reason it was chosen to be the campsite as water could be easily obtained there. However, when Lorist and the rest arrived at the camp, a heated battle was occurring. Around 100 winter wolves were surrounding and attacking the camp. Even so, under the fire of Josk's bow as well as four steel ballistas, the wolves didn't fare any better either. Many carcasses of wolves were littered all around the camp.

The temporary camp didn't span a huge area and it was surrounded only by a wooden fence that was five meters tall. At four corners of the camp were four lookout towers which were each equipped with a steel ballista.

Josk laughed bitterly and said, "Milord, it seems that we've neglected to weed out the carnivorous magical beasts around the area. It's fortunate that only a hundred plus wolves attacked us this time. We would've fared much worse if there was more than a

thousand."

Within the camp lived around 100 elites of the guard division along with Josk, Els, Patt and Jim. In the coming days, the snowfall was rather heavy, so Lorist instructed his men to construct another 5-meter-tall snow wall surrounding the camp which was completed within three days. After solidifying the walls using the water splashing technique, Lorist led the rest up the other slope and began to lure more beasts away from the main wave again.

Within the span of a little over ten days, Lorist and Josk alternated their shifts and managed to lead 7 groups of huge magical bulls into the gorge. They now numbered around 100000 and the main wave seemed to have passed the area already. The only beasts that remained were the carnivorous ones. Following that, Lorist and the rest were held back at the camp for 7 days as they defended the camp against a few waves of attacks by magical wolves and panthers. Only after having their numbers culled substantially did the carnivorous beasts cease their attacks on the camp, allowing Lorist and his group to finally leave the camp and head to the gorge.

By that time, the gorge had already turned into a huge bull slaughtering center. The bulls that found their way to the gaps at the gorge numbered thousands daily as opposed to the hundreds in the beginning. The carroballista division commanded by Dulles set up multiple defense lines outside the gaps and fired whenever any bull made its way through them. The moment when each bull struggled to regain balance after stepping out of the gap, the ballistas were fired and that bull would fall dead to the ground. The process then repeated as one bull after another squeezed out of the gaps.

The carcasses had already piled up so high that it started to seem like a small hill that was roughly seven to eight storeys high, thus establishing the need for more piles to build up at the empty lot. Dulles had already sent Firmrock Castle an urgent request for an additional thousand plus people and horses to move the carcasses of the bulls away to make more space.

The land around the gorge had long been stained crimson from the blood of the dead bulls. Even so, with the constant influx of bulls into the gorge day after day, the algae within started to run out and some bulls which weren't able to find any were forced to find a way out of the gorge. Some of them even turned back and wanted to leave from the way they came.

While Dulles's whole unit had 2500 ballistas in total, only 400 were situated at the gaps. Lorist had arranged for another 1800 plus ballistas to be placed at both sides of the road which the bulls used to enter the gorge. As a result, the bulls that attempted to exit the gorge through the way they came were completely lacerated by the ballista bolt storm. The carcasses of the bulls only continued to stack up, with their leaking blood forming a small river that flowed downhill.

During the whole winter season, Dulles's newly-expanded carroballista unit had spent the whole time killing bulls at the Crewe Circular Gorge. Within two months time, they had finally exterminated around 170000 of those magical bulls. Everyone in the unit was completely worn out with over a thousand steel ballistas going out of order from overuse.

By the time the last group of bulls collapsed dead on the spot after being shot when they made their way out of the gaps, Dulles, who was seated on a carriage and operating the ballista on it said to Lorist, "Milord, I don't think I want to shoot a bull ever again for the rest of my life. I already feel a little sick after looking at these bulls."

With the coming of spring and the departure of the magical beast wave, one piece of good news came after another. Firstly, the sixth sector's central town, Beastguard Town, was one of the first areas to face the magical beast wave. Thanks to Lorist and the rest's efforts to redirect most of the bulls from the magical beast wave, Potterfang managed to open the town gates more than ten times to let in around 200000 weaker magical goats and deers, causing Beastguard Town to be the town that profited the most from the magical beast wave. Following that, they made large amounts of goat rib traps and managed to get a haul of thousands of carnivorous beasts.

Following that, the fifth to second sectors' central towns also had huge hauls. Most of the herbivorous magical beasts had already been wiped out by them with only less than 300000 of the original million plus magical beasts returning to the wilderness.

Incredibly delighted by the results, Lorist predicted that the magical beast wave would be completely wiped out within another two years. By then, he can finally begin to develop the farmland without any worries.

Patting Dulles on the shoulder, Lorist said, "Alright, let's head out now. Josk's mounted archer division will escort your carroballista division to wipe out the magical beasts that remained within Felicitas Settlement. Fiercetiger Loze's heavy-armored cavalry troops are already waiting for your arrival at the third sector. While there might be

some bulls within the settlement, most of the beasts there will be carnivorous ones, so you have to watch out for your own safety. When you return from your mission, I promise that you will have new ballistas waiting to replace your broken ones."

"Yes, milord," Dulles said as he saluted.

Chapter 182
Military Reorganization

Lorist said, "As long as we come up with adequate countermeasures, the magical beast wave will no longer pose a threat to us."

"I think that the magical beast wave brings some advantages to us too. At the very least, they provide lots of fresh meat. Burp. Apologies, I've had a little too much mutton," said Potterfang.

"I want some vegetables… Even potatoes would do… Don't feed me any more beef… I've been eating beef and drinking beef soup for two whole months now and I already feel like puking the moment I smell it," Els complained.

"I agree with Els, I want some potatoes too," Patt said.

"Haha, the magical beasts didn't even stand a chance against the carroballista division!" exclaimed Dulles excitedly.

Josk said, "I think that the ballista milord designed changed our situation entirely. We wouldn't have been able to defeat the beasts with only courage and passion and no good equipment."

"The creation of the steel ballistas did in fact prepare us well for the coming of the magical beast wave. This truly is a mighty revolution in the field of ballistics. After that, we will start working on more improvements on the current ballistas. Our goals for now are to increase the firing distance, firing rate, accuracy, and strength of the shots," said Grandmaster Fellin.

"I suggest that the ones who contributed a lot to the resistance against the beasts be rewarded 50 kilograms of magical bull meat. What do you guys think?" Charade said.

"The quality of the skin of the bulls are great for making leather products as long as we dry and preserve them well. The skins of lower quality can also be made into beastskins. Additionally, the meat can be dried and preserved or made into sausages. As for the bones, we can use them as soup stock and even burn them to ash to be used

as fertilizer. We must use all we can with as little wastage as possible. However, it definitely will be a little hard to clear up so many bull carcasses. Milord, can you please send a few thousand more family soldiers to help out? It's not possible for the current workforce of over 10000 men to deal with all those carcasses within a month…"

Due to the sheer amount of beasts they had killed, Lorist mobilized near 100000 men within the dominion and managed to take care of the matters before the 5th month.

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On the 10th day of the 5th month, Lorist organized the first meeting of the year at Firmrock Castle with the family knights and officers of the dominion. Like the previous year, Charade was in charge of giving a summarized report about the happenings within the dominion.

"The magical beast wave that came during the winter brought us countless amounts of furs and leather as well as near 15 million kilograms of bull and goat meat. It can be said that the dominion will no longer have any problems with food for the next three years. The most encouraging piece of news is still the fact that the magical beasts will no longer pose any threat to us and will instead be an opportunity for us to gain big hauls."

Everyone applauded as they regained the hope of settling down in a harsh and desolate place like the Northlands based on the harvests and hauls in recent times.

"After enduring a year of hardship, the construction of the defensive facilities at the towns and villages of Felicitas Settlement is finally completed. That's one of the main reasons we were able to survive the magical beast wave. This year, our focus will be on building more roads to make the villages and central towns more interconnected as well as building proper residences so that the people at the settlement can live within warm and safe homes. Not only is this the promise of our lord, it is also his way of rewarding the hard-working citizens who had accompanied the convoy to the dominion despite the things we suffered on the way.

"Other than that, we will also form several departments for the seven sectors of Felicitas Settlement. Each department will have to maintain and improve the living standards of the sector they are put in charge of and contribute to the family in the coming year.

"Even though last year was a tough year, it was also a plentiful one. The factories and workshops set up within the dominion has also made us self-sufficient. I believe that the Norton Family's future will shine under milord's leadership!"

The room once again erupted with applause, ending the meeting on a grand note.

After the meeting, Lorist had six Gold ranked knights and Charade, Yuriy, Terman and a few other knights stay back for another meeting focused on military reorganization matters.

The military distribution of the various powers on Grindia were mainly organized as armies. Each army would have multiple divisions with each division containing a few regiments. A regiment on the other hand would contain a few companies which in turn was made out of a few squads. The various units would also be classified according to the types of soldiers within, such as a longbow regiment, a heavy-armored company and a pike infantry squad, etc.

A squad usually consisted of 80 to 150 people and the squad leader was the most basic commanding officer who was aided by a few vice squad leaders who would each be put in charge of tens of other soldiers.

Lorist was quite dissatisfied with this arrangement as whenever a squad leader and his aides fell on the battlefield, the whole squad would fall into disorder. However, Lorist did not want to overhaul the organization completely and instead divide each squad into smaller teams.

As a solution to that, Lorist devised a new, more discrete organizational structure with ten people for one squad of mixed types of soldiers unlike the former structure which had soldiers of the same training and equipment in the same unit. Each squad would have sword and shield infantry, pikemen and longbowmen so they can better adapt during times of battle.

Lorist hoped that his troops would one day be able to form the 'mandarin duck formation' of the 'Qi Family Troops' he had heard of from his previous life. Even though he wasn't too well-versed in the military tactics of old and didn't understand the specifics, he felt that he could slowly experiment around with trial and error until he found the perfect balance. In the era of cold arms, only with coordination and tactics can a unit be effective in combat as well as survive the chaotic situation of the battlefield.

Potterfang and the other family knights on the other hand felt that Lorist was trying to incorporate the tactics of smaller mercenary groups into the family forces, which was not a completely foreign thing to them. It was a known fact that a small group of elite mercenaries were more effective and versatile than huge numbers of family soldiers.

Above the newly-revamped squads of ten men were companies. Each company would include ten squads, totaling at a member count of 100. Five companies would form a battalion of 500 men and five combat battalions and one logistics battalion would form a brigade of 3000 men. Lorist made it so that a brigade would be a singular, full-functioning unit capable of acting independently.

WIth the aim of completely reorganizing the military of the family, Lorist first disbanded the three garrison divisions. Each of the 80 plus villages within Felicitas Settlement would have a company of garrison soldiers of 100 men formed and each of the central towns of the seven sectors in addition to the industrial city at Bladedge Mountains would have a garrison battalion of 500 men stationed there. Similarly, Maplewoods Bastide and Firmrock Castle each had a battalion of 500 garrison troops stationed there.

These garrison troops were mainly responsible for the security and stability of the towns and the areas surrounding it. The task of restructuring the garrison force was handed to Gold ranked knight Freiyar to be completed within the year.

Lorist then ordered Gold ranked knight Malek to form a patrol company of 100 men at each town that will be responsible for solving civil disputes, maintaining order as well as hygiene of the towns. The members of these patrol companies would be picked from the ranks of the retired family soldiers and the disbanded garrison troops.

Following that, Lorist turned his 'scalpel of reorganization' to Potterfang and Loze's heavy-armored division and requested them to reform their organizational structure into 2 brigades, each numbering 3000 men. The ones to be picked for the brigades must be of Iron ranked Battle Force at the very least ranging from the age of 20 to 25. As for the officers, they can be as old as 35. Lorist stressed that he didn't want to focus on quantity but rather quality.

Dulles's carroballista division was also restructured by Lorist into three brigades of 9000 men. The steel ballistas had replaced the longbow troops as the main ranged attacking force of the family and Lorist didn't intend to change that.

Yuriy's three regiments of light cavalry scouts was changed into a brigade of 3000 men. Apart from the ones who were disqualified based on their age or Battle Force rank, the men who were not included into the light cavalry scouts brigade formed companies of 100 men and were absorbed into the logistics battalions of various other brigades. Lorist felt that every logistics battalion should have one light cavalry scout company, one heavy-armored infantry company, one logistics company as well as two cargo guard companies. Only by having 500 men supporting the main force of 2500 men within a brigade could it function independently.

Josk's mounted archer unit however wasn't affected by the changes. Lorist was already working with Grandmaster Fellin to work on a new riding bow that would eventually replace the longbows used by the mounted archers. Even so, the prototypes so far still weren't able to emulate the strength of the longbow. It was apparent that a proper replacement would only come at a later date.

Terman's knight brigade wasn't touched either, but Lorist still had it reorganized into a brigade of 3000 men according to his new standards, causing Terman to have to recruit a few hundred others to fill in the extra vacancies.

The guard division led by Els on the other hand underwent a huge overhaul. Originally, the division numbered around 5000 soldiers and their duties, according to Els, were all over the place. Some were in charge of escorting the convoy, others were guarding the mines and factories with some even monitoring the laborers. Additionally, Lorist's personal guard was also part of Els's guard division. They were basically something like duct tape, which was used to patch up all sorts of smaller problems.

The guard division was split into two in the end and the first would cease all their activities and only answer to Lorist and Els's orders. The newly-formed guard brigade would take over the duties of securing the warehouses, refineries and other jobs. Lorist also planned to have the other soldiers who were removed from their respective units as a result of the reorganization to join together and form a second guard brigade which would be in charge of monitoring the 30000 plus laborers.

Apart from that, the former-bandit Ovidis's defense company was revamped into the first local defense brigade that would defend Firmrock Castle. Knight Pajik on the other hand was tasked with forming the second local defense brigade to defend Maplewoods Bastide.

Pointing at the map, Lorist said that he wanted to build a new citadel at Hidebull

Mound where the mounted archers were stationed so that the two other citadels at the border of the dominion and the Magical Dragon Mountains could be better provided with support. Additionally, it was a strategic location with the river valley and two citadels to its east, the Blackmud Marsh to its north, and the Poplar Coast to its west. As long as Hidebull Mound could be occupied, even if the two mountain citadels were to be taken over, the barbarians still wouldn't be able to launch an attack on the dominion. Also, the magical beast wave had to pass through that area, meaning that attacks could be launched from there if their numbers were small to wipe them out before they even set foot into the Felicitas Settlement.

While the family did plan to build a citadel at that location, it lacked the manpower and funds at that time and was also bogged down by the troublesome folk of Wildnorth Town. The citadel constructed at Hidebull Mound had to be huge; small ones wouldn't be that reliable and sufficient for the purposes of the family. Now that the family had stable foundations and additional resources, the project could be realized and Knight Pajik's second local defense brigade would be able to guard it to ensure the safety of the family dominion.

Finally came Pesha's female garrison unit. They performed exceedingly well during the past two magical beast extermination operations at Felicitas Settlement. Lorist allowed Pesha to expand her unit to 3000 women but also requested her to have her subordinates be well-versed in first aid and medicinal skills so that they can also play the role of a medic unit on the battlefield.

As for the medic squad of the northbound convoy, Lorist disbanded it and tasked Lundmorde to set up medical centers within the various towns and distribute the medics around to manage the centers and tend to the sick and injured.

Lundmorde himself was given two choices. Either he takes up his post as the manager of the medical center at Firmrock Castle or he becomes a medical instructor for the female unit.

Needless to say, Lundmorde happily chose the latter went to report to Pesha for his new post.

Potterfang asked, "Milord, since our forces will mainly be using brigades as the largest unit, we won't have legions and divisions in the future, right?"

Lorist laughed out and said, "How can that be? So far, the military trend right now is

for legions to be formed. Even the Kenmays Family formed a legion of 30000 soldiers, not to mention the Second Prince's Iblia Kingdom's First Legion that he recently formed with around 56000 soldiers. My plan is for five brigades of 15000 men be put under a division, with five divisions of 75000 men forming a legion. So far, the point of the reorganization is to cement this new structure into our forces so that future expansions will be much more convenient."

"I see, so that is what you have planned. I understand now. I will definitely train an elite troop of soldiers for the family according to your orders, so please rest assured," Potterfang said.

"But milord, why didn't you give me any tasks?" Belnick asked as he stood up.

"Calm down, I was just going to get to that," Lorist said as he waved his hand. "I plan to set up a new recruit brigade at Maplewoods Bastide for those aged between 20 to 25 with Battle Force beneath the Iron rank. There, they will continue to train until they meet the conditions to join the other units of our forces. In the future, we no longer have to recruit soldiers from our citizens. The men we need can be sourced from this brigade.

"Other than that, every male citizen below the age of 18 will be required to join the recruit brigade to accept training to awaken their Battle Force. This will be optional for female citizens of the same age range. Each course will last three months and those who haven't awakened their Battle Force can attend these courses three times in succession. In the future, the candidates for recruitment will be chosen from these people who pass the course. The main force of the family will be required to have at least Iron ranked Battle Force with the garrison troops having the Bronze rank as the base requirement. When we have enough soldiers in each unit, we can begin expanding. I will leave this recruit brigade for you to manage, Brother Beck."

"Yes, milord," Belnick said as he saluted.

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Not including the garrison troops of the villages and towns, the family forces had a total of 16 brigades with almost 50000 troops in total. To Lorist, that was only barely satisfactory with the ratio of soldiers to citizens at around 1 to 10, and even then, that ratio was obtained by including the garrison and patrol troops as part of the family forces. Even if Lorist disregarded those two units, the family still had to spend quite a

bit on the salary of those soldiers.

While the northbound convoy didn't do much trade on its journey to the Northlands, it was fortunate that they did quite a bit of pillaging, garnering the family up to 3 million gold Fordes in wealth. Given that the equipment of the Whitelion Legion were given to him, Lorist was still able to sustain the current family force.

Now that the various industrial activities within the dominion was owned by the family, it wasn't too hard for Lorist to offer special bonuses to the family soldiers either.

By the time he finished drafting the regulations of the family forces with Charade and the others, it was already near the end of the 6th month. Just when Lorist was about to set out to Maplewoods Bastide for two months of vacation to spend some time with his son, Count Kenmays came to visit.

The reason for the count's visit was to fulfill the agreement they signed the last time. Not only did the count ship away the 33000 sets of metal armor from Firmrock Castle, he also struck a bargain and bought 200000 gold Fordes' worth of salt and 1 million kilograms of smoked magical bull meat from Charade.

Charade was incredibly mad by the time the negotiations concluded as he understood that the count could sell the stuff he bought with 200000 gold Fordes for 600000 gold Fordes simply by reselling them to another party and marking up the price.

However, Lorist felt that there was nothing they could do about it as the suspension bridge was controlled by the Kenmayses and there was no point in keeping the extra meat and salt stored up anyway. Since those were local products of the dominion, Lorist felt that it was a rather good source of revenue despite the slightly low price offered by the count.

Charade on the other hand felt that they absolutely had to find a suitable place to build a port within the dominion as the furs they had could be sold at Morante City for a high price.

Lorist agreed to that suggestion and made a mental note to continue to look into it more when he had more time.

Chapter 183
Sid Steel Armor

At the end of the 7th month, Lorist who was spending his time at Maplewoods Bastide received a letter from Charade. The letter stated that Baron Felim Chalvode had sent a messenger over with a request to purchase 5000 sets of metal armor from the Norton Family. Additionally, Baron Shazin, also known as Knight Hennard, wrote a letter to Lorist that asked to be sponsored 3000 sets of metal armor and other weapons.

As a result, Lorist had no choice but to return to Firmrock Castle. Old Man Gleis's sickness worsened over the months and he could no longer get out of bed. Patt had been spending the past two months staying by his side and serving him.

Taking a look at the map, Lorist thought for a bit before starting to write his reply to Charade. He wrote that he agreed to sell the armor to the Felim Family since he had nothing to lose and stated that they could trade other resources if they didn't have enough money for the purchase. As for Knight Hennard, Lorist wrote him a personal letter to invite him over for a talk.

By the time Knight Hennard arrived at Maplewoods Bastide, Old Man Gleis had just passed away. Before his death, the old man miraculously regained his clarity of mind and grasped onto Lorist's hands as he stated his final wish to Lorist: to be buried within the family's forbidden area so that he may be with the former family leaders even in death.

Lorist nodded, before shaking his head later. Gleis didn't understand the meaning of Lorist's gesture and died without ever finding out.

Patt on the other hand broke down completely. He had lost his parents from a young age and had been raised by Gleis, his grandfather, all his life. Now that his only relative had died, Patt was in incredible pain. He also didn't understand why Lorist refused his grandfather's last wish since Gleis had served the Norton Family for his whole life and even managed to hold the family together during the recent time of crisis by withholding the succession ceremony until Lorist's return to the dominion. It was a given that he should have the honor to be buried in the family's forbidden area.

Lorist explained that he planned to build a new mausoleum for the family on Whitedeer Mound, stating that the place was a gift from the Silvermoon Goddess to the Norton Family as a final resting place for the elders of the family that was unfortunately neglected by those who came before. He also stated that he intended to move the remains of the people buried within the forbidden area to the new mausoleum so that they can truly get their final rest within the embrace of the ground. He also said that Old Butler Gleis would be buried there as one of the treasured members of the Norton Family.

That caused Patt's emotions to change completely and he even said that he wanted to work on the construction of the mausoleum as well. Lorist on the other hand ended up incredibly busy managing the project. He decided to first cremate all the remains of the ancestors within the forbidden area so that their ashes could be buried at Whitedeer Mound and have proper tombstones made for them by hiring stonemasons.

Knight Hennard stayed at the bastide for 12 days and also attended the funeral and cremation of Old Butler Gleis. All that remained was erecting a statue of the butler as a memorial which Lorist was naturally in charge of. However, that didn't have to happen right away. Despite that, Lorist managed to find some time to have a formal discussion with Knight Hennard.

In actuality, Knight Hennard was facing huge amounts of pressure and stress as the threat of the Second Prince's newly formed First Iblia Kingdom Legion of 56000 soldiers that were stationed near his dominion was looming over him. Hennard had no choice but to gather up all his men to defend the place. Even though he had 20000 men who were formerly part of the Northland Army, he tried his best not to engage in conflict with the Second Prince despite the latter's constant aggressive and provocative actions.

During the gathering of the nobles that year during the 5th month, the Second Prince expressed some passionate and bold statements. He said that he wanted to rebuild the former Krissen Empire starting with the Iblia Kingdom and hoped that the other landed nobles would cooperate with him as only when they act as one would they be able to actualize his dream of returning the empire to its former glory. However, he said that there were quite a number of nobles who refused to heed his orders and avoided him as best as they could.

That was why the Second Prince said that he would give them a chance to right their

wrongs. As long as they were willing to pledge allegiance to the Second Prince and contribute to the restoration of the empire, the Second Prince said that he wouldn't seek retribution for their past mistakes. Otherwise, the Second Prince threatened that he would bring his First Legion of the Iblia Kingdom to show those rebellious nobles the cost of infringing upon his royal pride and refusing to heed his orders.

That was also one of the reasons Knight Hennard decided to expand his forces and better equip them as well. However, while it wasn't too hard to recruit more soldiers, it was really troublesome and difficult to secure equipment for them. The dominion Hennard's father left him was relatively barren and he could only rely on Cherry Blossom Ridge and Evanson Town to sustain the livelihoods of his 12000 men. Had it not been for the fact that he had pretended to be one of Lorist's men to raid the dominion of Duke Loggins's two years ago, he would've gone bankrupt long ago. This time around, he decided to expand his forces to 15000 people and hoped that he could rely on his connection with Lorist to be sponsored some equipment and weapons.

Lorist was a person who treasured his relationships and he felt sympathy for Hennard and agreed to his request by sponsoring 3000 sets of metal armor and weapons and even told him of a way to generate income before asking him to see Charade for the specifics. He let Hennard be the middleman to sell around 500000 kilograms of salt produced within the Norton Family dominion. If Hennard was successful in his venture, he could earn up to 1 million gold Fordes, which will be enough for him to fund his soldiers for half a year.

After sending off the incredibly grateful Hennard, Lorist began to pick the members for a team to survey the terrain of Hidebull Mound and draw designs for the citadel that was to be built there. Hidebull Mound was mainly formed from granite and it was around 15 kilometers away from the point where the two other mountain ranges intersected. The mound got its name because it was shaped like a bull crouching down on the plains in hiding. For now, Josk and his mounted archer brigade were stationed there.

By the time the designs for the Hidebull Mound's citadel was completed, it was already the 9th month and the mausoleum at Whitedeer Mound was nearing its completion as well. Lorist then conducted a formal cremation ceremony for the Norton Family's ancestors' remains and buried them properly at Whitedeer Mound.

The mausoleum was built at a very scenic and relaxing location. The various trees that were on the mound were cut down and the first Norton Family ancestor was buried

at the very top of the mound, with his grave marked by a stone statue of a knight with a drawn bow accompanied by the a stone tablet beneath the statue detailing his founding of the family and contributions to it.

Apart from that statue, many other gravestones could be seen on Whitedeer Mound. The statues honoring the others were not yet complete and would be installed at a later date. Apart from that, the mound was covered with a nice coat of green grass with the mausoleum surrounded by a short fence made with maple wood of the highest quality. Whitedeer Mound itself was also surrounded by a thick, maple forest.

When the night came, white deers appeared on the mound and played around the statues and gravestones. Under the illumination of the silvery moonlight, they added another layer of peacefulness to the pure and mysterious atmosphere of the mausoleum.

Everyone who witnessed that agreed with Lorist that the Whitedeer Mound was indeed the perfect gift from the SIlvermoon Goddess to the Norton Family as a final resting place for the ancestors. The mausoleum was also called the Whitedeer Sanctuary because of that.

After the mausoleum was settled, Lorist received a piece of good news: Grandmaster Sid had successfully made a set of armor that was superior to that of the Whitelion Legion. The messenger said that he had been sent to the bastide to make a report the moment research was completed.

Hence, Lorist went to the refineries at Bladedge Mountains right away with a few others.

Grandmaster Sid's smile was as radiant as a Chrysanthemum flower. Now that he had made a set of armor that was better than the one created by tens of elite blacksmiths back in the Krissen Empire for the impressive Whitelion Legion, he no longer had any lingering regrets.

It was not until Lorist actually saw the armor that he understood that the Whitelion Legion's armor couldn't even compare to it!

The Whitelion Legion's equipment were mostly made of fine iron that was slightly purplish-brown in color as the blacksmiths of the Krissen Empire had infused certain other ingredients into the mix to improve Battle Force transfer. The ideal ratio of

ingredients was found only after countless experiments before the metal mix could be cast into their molds, and have the final touches added at the end. The defensive capability of the Whitelion Legion's armor was a whole level superior to that of normal metal armor, as was witnessed during the battle at Firmrock Castle where Duke Loggins's bowmen's arrows did not harm a single Norton soldier that was equipped with the armor of the Whitelion Legion, ultimately resulting in the latter's triumph.

The armor plate made by Grandmaster Sid was silvery white in color which was made using black iron reinforced into steel after being processed using the various water-powered tools.

Lorist inspected the armor and noticed that it had the same three-layer design. The outermost layer was the steel plate itself followed by grey-colored magical bull leather and another tight mesh of steel wire mail in the innermost layer.

"Milord, the unique combination of ingredients for this steel was only discovered after long experimentation by me and it is at least two times stronger than the material of the Whitelion Legion's armor, with it also being able to distribute Battle Force more evenly overall. In our tests, the Whitelion Legion armor breaks from an arrow fired from a longbow 80 meters away whereas our armor can get as close as 60 meters before breaking. If this armor is reinforced with Battle Force, the distance where a longbow would pose a threat would shrink down to 30 or 40 meters.

"The whole set of Whitelion Legion armor weighs around 19 kilograms while ours only weigh 14 kilograms, a staggering 5 kilogram less. That is a lot less burden a soldier has to bear and our armor even covers more area of the body than that of the Whitelion Legion's, providing even better coverage and defense. Not only that, this armor allows for better freedom of movement for our soldiers too…" Grandmaster Sid continued to show off the perks of his steel armor and it seemed that he was extremely satisfied that his creation was able to completely best the Whitelion Legion armor in all areas.

"Find someone to wear and try it," Lorist said.

Excited and intrigued, Els put on the steel armor impatiently. When he was done, Lorist almost fainted. *This seems familiar... Wait, isn't this the imperial stromsoldier armor from the Stellar Wars universe?*[1] Apart from the helmet and the faulds at the waist which replaced the triangular crotch armor of the stormsoldiers, the rest of the armor seemed remarkably similar. At that moment, Lorist almost suspected that

Grandmaster Sid was also transmigrated from his world.

The helmet Grandmaster Sid designed was a pointed, conical type with a neck guard equipped with a visor that could be pushed down to protect the wearer's face, giving the wearer a ferocious impression. Wearing the armor, Els took out his sword and practiced some fighting maneuvers. After getting used to it, he even called a guard or two to spar with him for quite a while before he returned with ragged breaths.

"Locke, this armor set is definitely far lighter and agile than the Whitelion Legion armor. Also, it's form-fitting so it doesn't feel like it bogs down your whole body. I want my guard brigade to be the first to change into these!" Els requested excitedly.

Lorist looked at Grandmaster Sid and asked, "Grandmaster, how many sets of these can you produce within a day?"

"Milord, there are 21 parts required in the construction of this armor. Even though that's 7 parts more than the Whitelion Legion armor, with the aid of the water-powered tools, it isn't too hard for us to make them. Over here, we only focus on the production of the parts which we will ship to the industrial city to be assembled together. Given our slightly lacking manpower, we can only produce and estimated number of tens of sets per day. If you can increase our workforce by a thousand more people and have a few more kilns made to increase production of steel, we would be able to make around 200 sets per day," Grandmaster Sid replied.

"Good. Grandmaster, I will assign another 1000 people to your workforce. Other than that, we will name this armor after you. Let's call it the Sid Steel Armor. This will become the standard equipment for our forces. The only change I require is for the pointed helmet to be flattened into a circular surface and for the Raging Bear insignia of our family to be put onto the breastplate. Is that alright?" Lorist asked.

Upon hearing that the armor would be named after him, Grandmaster Sid widened his mouth in joy as he would be forever remembered in the annals of history for his contribution. "Milord, please be assured that I will definitely make the changes you request so that our forces can wear this armor as soon as possible and ditch the heavy and clumsy Whitelion Legion armor."

"Why do I get the feeling that the grandmaster somehow loathes the armor of the Whitelion Legion?" Els mumbled.

Lorist laughed out loud upon hearing that as he had once heard Ovidis mention that Grandmaster Sid had worked as an apprentice armorer for the Krissen Imperial Forces in his youth. During one of the times he was tasked to repair a set of armor, he had a hunch that he could improve the armor's defense if he made some adjustments. In the end, he secretly conducted some experiments and ruined three sets of armor, causing him to be punished severely and stripped of his job and position in the imperial armory.

After that, he toiled hard and learned from many other masters all over the place and only attained the rank of a grandmaster armorer 20 years later, only to be embroiled into the chaos caused by the power struggle within the empire and being forced to make armor for the bandits of Plate Mountain to ensure his family's safety.

Els was right in that Grandmaster Sid harbored a deep hatred for the armor of the Whitelion Legion. That was why he conducted his research like a crazed madman without pause after the discovery of the black iron mines at Bladedge Mountains and ended up fulfilling his dream of making a set of armor that was far superior to that of the Whitelion Legion.

"Reidy, heed my orders," Lorist instructed. "To award the contribution of Grandmaster Sid for creating the Sid Steel Armor, the family will award him 1000 gold Fordes with 100 gold Fordes for each of his aides. Naturally, get the list of aides from the grandmaster himself. The rest of the people here will all get 10 gold Fordes each."

"Yes, milord."

"Grandmaster Sid, don't forget that the Whitelion Legion's equipment is more than just a set of armor. They also come with shields and other weapons, so you will have to continue to work hard as well."

"Milord, I'll definitely keep that in mind and work on weapons and shields that will fit nicely with the armor I created," said Sid.

Lorist then ordered Shadekampf to have 1000 of the 20000 laborers that were building roads at Felicitas Settlement to be brought over to the refinery before returning to Firmrock Castle with his guards.

……

When Lorist reached the castle, before he even got to take a short rest, Pesha forcefully

brought Lundmorde to him to lodge a complaint.

As Lundmorde was familiar with the field of medicine, he was sent to teach Pesha's female garrison members some medicinal knowledge. And during the span of 5 months from the 5th month to the 10th, he had managed to impregnate 7 of the female soldiers there.

The moment Lorist heard about that, his jaw dropped, before he broke out of his stupor and pushed it back in.

What a beast…… Lorist looked at Lundmorde with a gaze of admiration and wondered why he didn't realize how promiscuous Lundmorde truly was during the days at the academy.

Pesha on the other hand was furious as 3 out of the 7 Lundmorde slept with were squad leaders, two of whom were Pesha's aides. There were two others who were rather capable as well and were just about to be promoted. However, they had all bore Lundmorde's child.

Despite that, all 7 of the female soldiers said that they approached Lundmorde willingly and that he didn't force himself on any of them. That's why Pesha couldn't do much no matter how angry she was. In actuality, she couldn't wait to lop Lundmorde's head off with a blade, but with the those 7 women who were pregnant with his child protecting him, Pesha had no choice but to look for Lorist to settle the issue.

After flipping through the regulations of the family forces, Lorist didn't find any ruling regarding that matter either. He then asked, "Where are the 7 female soldiers?"

Pesha replied angrily, "They're at the lobby on the ground floor accusing one another for seducing their lover… This Knight Lundmorde…"

"Go bring them up here. I'll ask them what we should do."

In the end, Lorist's whole office got turned into a noisy marketplace with each of the seven women shouting at the top of their voice, all wanting to become Lundmorde's proper wife and give birth to his child. Lundmorde on the other hand hugged his head meekly in a corner without making a sound.

"Alright!" Lorist shouted as he thumped on the table to stop the argument. "Enough already. How about this? All 7 of you should just get married to him and he'll have

seven wives. If anyone makes any more fuss, they will be excluded from this arrangement."

At that moment, Lundmorde looked at the seven women he knocked up and started crying.

Full of sympathy, Lorist looked at him and said, "Knight Lundmorde, as a man, you have to bear the consequences of your actions. Since you've gone and done it, take responsibility. How about this, I'll allow you to have a long vacation so that you can spend quality time with your wives until they give birth to your children."

That was the only solution Lorist could think of for the situation. After Knight Lundmorde left with his wives, Lorist say back down in his chair in a tiredly and started to think.

Pesha was not too satisfied with the arrangement as her force had just lost 7 capable women and she said that Lundmorde got off easy and even got to marry the 7 in one go without receiving any punishment.

"She said he got off easy?" Lorist muttered as he laughed coldly. "No, on the contrary, getting married to seven wives is the biggest punishment he'll get… His 'blessed' days will be filled with fights and arguments… How befitting of a man who can't keep his junk inside his pants…"

Chapter 184
Princess Sylvia

Soon after, Count Kenmays came to visit again and from the size of his escort, it could be inferred that he was planning to spend winter at Gildusk City, Duke Loggins's dominion.

"Lord Baron Norton, this time, I have received the order of our king to invite you to Gildusk City to attend the new year's celebration and matters relating to marriage…" said Count Kenmays in a formal tone.

Given that Lorist had not bothered to pay the Second Prince a visit yet, his title of a count was not recognized and the Second Prince still considered Lorist to be a baron. Additionally, even though the Norton Family's dominion was technically within the area of the Iblia Kingdom, Lorist had accepted the title from the Andinaq Royal Family.

Lorist's hand shook and he almost spilled the macks in his cup onto the table before him. Just a few days back, he had blessed the marriage of Lundmorde and his seven wives. But now, Count Kenmays was going to talk to him about that again, causing him to wonder if karma is here to bite back at him.

"Come and have some hot drinks, my friend. Tell me, what's our king up to this time? For him to have a count to come talk to me of matters relating to marriage… It seems that the family of the bride is quite influential," Lorist said as he invited Count Kenmays to try the macks he had just made.

"Even though I know this messenger duty will be a pain in the butt, I have no choice but to carry it out. The Second Prince has written me a personal letter and it's a pretty long one at that," complained the count as he relaxed himself by pacing about.

"Aren't you gonna address him as 'His Majesty the King'?" Lorist said as he snickered.

With a smug tone, Count Kenmays said, "Does he behave like one to be deserved to be called that? Ptooey! Definitely not!"

"I don't understand why the Second Prince bothered to write you a letter just to have

you come over here… Instead of being so roundabout, couldn't he have just written me a personal letter?" Lorist said, annoyed.

"That's because he has his pride, you know. You've already refused his invitations a number of times, even though most of those invitations were also made through me… Now that the Second Prince has such a strong army, his arrogance has gone through the roof. If you had refused his personal messenger outright, how would he be able to step down from the humiliation? Apart from punishing you with his soldiers, he has no other way to save his face.

"Quite a number of other nobles within the Northlands can't wait for you to start fighting against the Second Prince so that both of you will end up crippled. That would be the ideal outcome for them. The might the Norton Family had shown two years back made quite a deep impression in their hearts. To those nobles, they can't wait for the hungry wolf that was the Second Prince to fight against the Family of the Raging Bear and wear each other out."

Pausing to take a sip of macks, Count Kenmays continued. "The Second Prince understands that as well and even though he has an army of 56000 troops, if he can't make your family submit to him, the other nobles will remain loyal to him only on the surface. Even the taxation orders he issued recently was resisted by those nobles, some publicly with most others doing so behind his back. Even so, the Second Prince still wouldn't dare to antagonize your family which is famed for having defeated the duke in one fell swoop.

"The reason he wanted me to pass his message to you on his behalf was because he knew that the relationship between our two families decent. He wants me to encourage you to at least visit him once at Gildusk City so that he doesn't have to lose face over this issue. The other reason was because he wanted to check on my family's might. I'm sure the rumor of my family's formation of a 30000-strong force has already reached his ears. That's why his messenger was accompanied by many other attendants who snuck around in my army camps and even gathered information in the taverns. Did he think I wouldn't notice?

"You wouldn't even be able to imagine the expression of the Second Prince's messenger when I told him straight up that my family formed the force to defend against unpredictable mountain barbarian skirmishes. Hehe, it's still funny now that I think about it," said Count Kenmays triumphantly.

"Haha, every noble in the Northlands know that you have good relations with the barbarians. Your trade with them and have exclusive monopoly on the goods the barbarians produce, causing many merchants to be incredibly jealous. Nobody would believe that the barbarians were the reason for the formation of your army," Lorist said as he shook his head in laughter.

"It's their problem whether they believe it or not. That will be the official reason used by my family anyways. Also, here's the letter the Second Prince wrote to me. Read it yourself," said the count as he brought out a thick bunch of beastskins and handed it to Lorist.

In the letter, the Second Prince expressed his greetings to Count Kenmays as well as his feelings of apology towards the Norton Family after he recounted the death of their First Young Master, who was Lorist's elder brother, Gold ranked knight Abelyde, who had so valiantly fought and died for the Second Prince. He sincerely requested Count Kenmays to invite the current head of the Norton Family, Baron Norton Lorist, to attend the new year's celebration he would be holding at Gildusk City. He added that he heard that Lorist was single and that he would be willing to introduce Princess Sylvia to Lorist and encourage them to form union in marriage.

"Huh? Who's this Princess Sylvia? I thought the Second Prince only had three illegitimate daughters who are not of marriageable age yet," Lorist said curiously.

"Tsk tsk tsk…" Count Kenmays clicked his tongue. "The Second Prince has truly went out of his way to make a huge offer for your family's sake and even put Princess Sylvia on the table! To be honest, Locke, you really should head out and see the world instead of staying cooped up in your dominion, ignorant of all else that is going on like a little bug in a small corner.

"Princess Sylvia is one of the most prominent roses of our Iblia Kingdom and is even known as the brilliant pearl of the grasslands," Count Kenmays said grandiloquently.

"Never heard of her," Lorist said.

"You…" Count Kenmays was speechless as he turned to Lorist and stared at him. "As expected of a bug. Do you know who Duke Fisablen is?"

"I do," Lorist said as he nodded honestly.

"Duke Fisablen has 3 sons and 1 daughter. That daughter of his is the beautiful queen

of our Iblia Kingdom and is also the Second Prince's wife. Duke Fisablen's eldest son passed away at a young age, leaving behind his only daughter, Princess Sylvia. She is the beloved granddaughter of the duke and is the only niece of our queen and was given the title of a princess by the Second Prince. Do you understand now?" Count Kenmays said angrily as he schooled Lorist about the princess.

"Gosh, why are you so agitated?" Lorist asked in confusion.

"You wouldn't understand… Princess Sylvia is the goddess that holds an absolute place in my heart. With the incredible beauty and impeccable bearing she showed during the time I was fortunate enough to see her at Windbury City, she has made a lasting impression in my heart and I always find myself missing that mysterious, forlorn smile she showed at that time, as well as her enchanting, emerald-green eyes," Count Kenmays described.

"And then you proceeded to expel your desire and lust for her onto the noble ladies you met with in secret, right?" Lorist interjected.

"You…" Count Kenmays was struck speechless yet again.

"Since you're still single, I'm sure that you can afford to ask for Princess Sylvia's hand in marriage given your family's influence," Lorist said nonchalantly before he took another sip of macks.

"Sigh, you wouldn't know…" Count Kenmays said, crestfallen. "That time I met her was already four years ago. Back then, she was only 16 and was already one of the most beautiful women I've seen my whole life. A family with a merchant background like mine definitely wouldn't impress her one bit. She is the glowing pearl of Duke Fisablen and according to some of the rumors told by the princess's handmaidens, the princess had always wanted to be wedded to a peerless hero since long ago. Do you know why so many young knights were willing to follow the Second Prince to the battlefield? They wanted to rack up some achievements there so they can gain the favor of the princess."

"Oh, so there's something like that going on, huh…" Lorist said, before he suddenly thought of something. "I thought the Second Prince was a person who was too lustful for his own good. How could he bear to not touch a person as beautiful as Princess Sylvia?"

Count Kenmays looked around the study to make sure there wasn't anyone else near by. Even though he ascertained that only Lorist was within the room with him, the count still lowered his voice as he said, "The Second Prince doesn't dare. It's no secret that his relationship with our queen is not that good and the both of them have various affairs of their own. However, if he ever dares to stain Princess Sylvia with his filth, then it will be the end of him as Duke Fisablen will definitely not forgive him.

"Let me tell you something. The Second Prince and the queen have never really bothered with one another and they both lead their own private lives. The Second Prince has three illegitimate children while the queen has given birth to two children, both of whom are not the Second Prince's offspring, and they are being raised by the knight families of the duke himself. There was once when the Second Prince went to the duke to request for aid against Duke Melein who had crippled his forces badly. In the end, he was locked up together with the queen and Duke Fisablen didn't let either of them out until the queen had gotten pregnant with a successor.

"You must understand how painful it must be for them to be forced to have intercourse despite their hatred for one another. Even so, the duke steeled his heart for the sake of the continuation of the royal bloodline Iblia Kingdom and even provided some sexual stimulants for them. This was also the reason the duke lent the Second Prince his three Frontier Legion units to the Second Prince to fight against the Madras Duchy.

"Just last year, the queen gave birth to a boy who is destined to be the successor of the Iblia Kingdom in the future., However, that child is neglected by both the Second Prince and the queen and was only brought up by his nursemaid. It was like the Second Prince and the queen had fulfilled their duty by giving birth to him and left him to fend for himself. Right now, the one in charge of raising the child is Princess Sylvia."

"Hehe, nobles truly are a confusing bunch!" Lorist exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" Count Kenmays said before he scratched his head in thought, only to slightly comprehend the meaning of Lorist's statement.

"Don't forget that you're part of that bunch as well," Count Kenmays said in annoyance.

"I'm different from you lot. I'm a proper landed noble and my family has hundreds of years of tradition and virtues which we hold very highly," boasted Lorist.

"Tch, don't think that I don't know that you have something going with that scholar

Miss Telesti. I could tell from a glance by the way you looked at each other," Count Kenmays said as he exposed Lorist's affair and dispelled his claims of virtue.

Pointing at the Second Prince's letter, Count Kenmays said, "Well, you should at least give me some face this time around and pay a visit to Gildusk City, even if it's only for the sake of meeting Princess Sylvia. The Second Prince said that he would encourage the union of the both of you. If you can pick this rose for yourself, you'll definitely profit big time and have Duke Fisablen at your back. That way, the Second Prince will really cease to be a threat to you."

"I won't go," refused Lorist flatly as he thought, *hmph, with my power and might, why would I need Duke Fisablen's support? He's looking down on my family a little too much.*

"My friend, can you at least tell me the reason for your refusal? After all, the Second Prince did invite you sincerely for a number of times already. It'll be a little too much to refuse without a good reason, right?" Cout Kenmays said as he couldn't figure out what Lorist was thinking.

"If you're worried about the two Blademasters by his side, you don't have to. The Second Prince only wants to use his Blademasters to teach your Gold ranked knight subordinates a lesson using 'educating' them in battle as an excuse. However, they won't go too far since the Second Prince only wants to show off the superiority of his Blademasters to suppress the ambitions of the other nobles by reminding them he that has the might to keep them under control.

"In my case, I didn't bring any of my knights there, so the Second Prince couldn't use that as an excuse to teach me a lesson. Naturally, you would want to bring some of your Gold ranked knights with you for safety, so you just have to endure it for a bit while you're there. With me there watching over you, you have nothing to worry about. I promise that you won't regret this trip. Even if you don't kick it off with Princess Sylvia, I can still introduce you to many beautiful and great noble ladies. Even though they're far from Princess Sylvia's level, they are cute and gentle all the same and are very adept at soothing your mental scars by spending a sensual time with you through the cold, lonely night," said Count Kenmays with a teasing and magnetic tone in his attempt to entice Lorist to go to Gildusk City with him.

Laughing out, Lorist said, "My friend, thank you for your kind intentions. However, I have my own reasons for refusing your offer. Perhaps you are unaware of it, but while you spend your time enjoying magnificent wine with those fine noble ladies as you

witness the beautiful snowflakes fall from the sky with music playing in the background, I will be bringing my knights with me at great risk to fight for our lives within the wilderness of my family dominion…"

Seeing the count's surprised look, Lorist continued. "My friend, where do you think the 1 million kilograms of magical bull meat came from? You should ask your barbarian friends about the magical beast wave, they should know about it. Every winter, there are almost 1 million magical beasts that come from the wilderness into my dominion to lay our yearly farming efforts to waste. That is why we were willing to trade metal armor with you for huge amounts of food."

"Magical beast wave? I think I've read about it from some book before," Count Kenmays said. "I think I read a journal written by someone who traveled around the Northlands before. That book described that during winter, huge numbers of magical beasts from the wilderness would travel to the wildlands of the Northlands, causing the people there much fear and grief. Our family however has never noticed such a phenomenon during our time in the Northlands, so I thought that it was just something the writer of that journal made up. So, the magical beast wave only passes through your family's dominion and not the whole of the Northlands…"

"That's right. For two years back to back, my family forces have been busy fighting against the magical beasts in the wildlands for domination and this year won't be any different. I will have to leave in another 20 plus days, so, I hope that you understand that I have no choice but to refuse your offer. As the dominion lord, I can't stand back and party when my soldiers are out there fighting against those ferocities. I must stand there at the frontlines with them so that my forces will have the courage and morale they require to hold on," Lorist said with a solemn expression.

"Your family forces must suffer quite a huge casualty yearly, right? Should I skip out on the celebration as well and see the beasts for myself then?" Count Kenmays said after he gave it some thought.

"While I appreciate your kind intentions, it's best if you forget it. It's nothing but a barren wasteland with us having nothing but dried rations to eat and icy-cold water to drink, not to mention the freezing weather. In the darkness also lurks countless other magical beasts and you'll never be able to imagine how it feels to be chased by tens of thousands of those red-eyed magical bulls as well as the sight of those 6-meter-tall mammoths that crumble our formations. Just thinking about it sends chills down my spine! However, I have no choice. This is the dominion of my family, and, by

extension, the territory of humankind. The Norton Family will not allow the beasts to roam free within our lands!" Lorist proclaimed.

"It's especially tough because we can eat nothing but dried preserve food. The moment we light campfires to cook meat, we will attract the carnivorous magical beasts like the magical wolves and panthers, causing us to be unable to sleep well at night! Winter is definitely not a good time for the people of our dominion!"

Count Kenmays lost all interest in going along all of a sudden. While he personally didn't mind the cold, not being able to eat and sleep well was something he would never be willing to subject himself to at any cost. He then said, "I guess it's better for me to go to Gildusk City and enjoy some fine food, wine and music. That kind of lifestyle definitely suits me better…"

Lorist laughed out as he said, "No worries my friend, this is but the burden the Norton Family has to bear. Back then, our ancestor pledged to protect the borders of the empire. Naturally, as his descendant, I must carry out my responsibilities according to that pledge. That is the ultimate calling of our family which we will not abandon. As your friend, I only hope that you can remember that I am engaging in bloody fights against the magical beasts while you enjoy your time during winter. That much is enough for me."

"No worries, my friend, I will definitely spread the heroic tale of the Norton Family to the rest of the world so that they don't forget the contributions your family has made to protect the borders of the empire," Count Kenmays said as he thumped on his chest to reassure Lorist.

Chapter 185
Count Kenmays's Letter

"Those magical bulls lowered their heads and stared with their glowing red eyes as they roared and rushed over with crazed frenzy with a cold glint emanating from their horns, furiously ramming against the mud walls reinforced by ice. The ice cracked all over as a result and the mud walls started to shake, but the soldiers desperately stabbed towards the crazed bulls from the walls with their pikes. For every bull that fell, many more rushed over. From a higher vantage point, one can only see nothing but bulls, constantly rushing over. The way they covered the wide expanse of land gave off a feeling of pressure and despair…"

Count Kenmays paused to take a sip of amber-colored fruit wine before he continued to tell the others present about his imagining of the scene of the Norton Family soldiers battling against the hordes of magical beasts. Next to him listening to his story were tens of elaborately dressed noble ladies who were completely absorbed in the count's tale.

"One particularly huge magical bull rammed harshly onto the tough face of a shield, causing it to rupture into pieces with the shield-bearing soldier being knocked flying into the air. By the time he landed, he had already lost consciousness and fainted. Beside him, a few other soldiers managed to stop the bull's charge using their pikes to stab at it. However, with a twist of its body, the bull shattered the pikes with relative ease. It was at that moment when a horn signal was blown, causing the soldiers to breathe a sigh of relief. This was the signal to retreat to the second line of defense, which prompted some soldiers to fend of the remaining bulls as their injured comrades made their way up another tall stone wall.

"This stone wall was far larger and tougher than the wall at the first line of defense and many ballistas were also installed on this wall. After the order to fire was given, bolt after bolt as long as pikes were fired, causing the bulls at the front to fall, much to the soldiers' delight. But at that moment, another loud roar resounded from the distance and out came several gigantic animals around 6 meters tall from the snowstorm. Each of them had thick fur and two large, curved tusks sprouting from either side of their mouths as well as a long and strong trunk. With each step they

took, they left a deep imprint onto the snowy ground."

Currently, the count was at the duke's mansion at Gildusk City which had been taken by the Second Prince to be used as his own residence.

It was the last day of Year 1770 on the Grindian Calendar. The Second Prince and his queen were receiving the coming of the new year with the other nobles of the Iblia Kingdom by having a grand celebratory banquet.

While the weather outside was harsh and cold, it was nothing but warm and comfort within the mansion as the various fireplaces and steam pipes within the walls continuously gave off heat to keep the temperature from plummeting. Elegantly dressed noblemen and noblewomen could be seen all over the mansion, with some of them talking in low voices in smaller groups and others trying hard to expand their network of acquaintances as they awaited the chime of the clock that signified the coming of the new year.

It was at this time that Count Kenmays fulfilled his promise with Lorist to spread the heroic tale of the resistance of the Norton Family soldiers against the magical beast wave to his audience who comprised mostly of beautiful noble ladies.

"These great magical mammoths continued their charge despite the fact that there were countless ballista bolts buried deep within their skin. When they neared the walls, they flung their trunks around furiously and smashed against the ballistas, causing the soldiers operating them to be tossed into the air. The formation had completely collapsed and the soldiers could only fend for themselves by running all over the place in panic while the magical mammoths easily caught up with them and stomped at them with their feet, turning the unfortunate soldiers into flattened meat pies on the white, snowy ground."

"That's horrible…" muttered one of the ladies who was huddled up and shivering with a few other noblewomen.

At that moment, a voice rang out from behind the count. "My dear Count Kenmays, what tall tale are you telling now to frighten these beautiful ladies?"

Count Kenmays hurriedly stood up and put down the silver cup he held and bowed respectfully. "Greetings to Your Majesty, the king and his beautiful queen, as well as the goddess which will always have a place in my heart, Princess Sylvia. Your humble

servant pays his respects."

The noblewomen who were listening to the count's story also hurriedly made their greetings one after another.

The Second Prince revealed a gentle smile and hurriedly asked them to drop the formalities while the queen merely kept her mouth shut and nodded coldly towards them. Princess Sylvia who stood behind the queen smiled as she curtsied to return their greetings.

"I seem to have heard you describe a huge battle just now. What epic poem might that be from, Lord Count?" asked the Second Prince casually.

"Oh, no, my king. What I was describing was not from a poem at all. It's a true story. As I enjoy this peaceful night with these beautiful ladies here, the soldiers of the Norton Family are engaging in a bloody battle within their dominion against the magical beast wave," replied Count Kenmays.

"Magical beast wave? The Norton Family? Can you tell me more about this?" asked the Second Prince as he narrowed his eyes with scorn.

The queen then interjected. "Are you referring to that Baron Norton who has refused the kind invitations of the king for a few times? It's as if he doesn't even have any respect for our king…"

The Second Prince's face twitched as he laughed awkwardly and said, "If his dominion is truly facing a wave of magical beasts, then I suppose he has no choice but to refuse my invitation. I believe that when his dominion calms down, Baron Norton will definitely come forward to me to pay his respects. Isn't that so, Count Kenmays?" As he asked that question, he glared at the queen furiously. The queen on the other hand merely humphed and turned her face towards the roof without even caring about the Second Prince's glare.

"Naturally, my exalted king. Baron Norton expresses his regrets for being unable to attend the celebratory feasts of the past few years as well. During every winter, his dominion will be assailed by the magical beast wave and he has no choice but to remain there to keep things together. It was definitely not his intention to neglect Your Majesty's invitation.

"Personally, I've read about the magical beast wave from a book titled 'The Northlands

Journal' written by Count Fogland. According to him, the magical beasts travel from the mountainous wastelands to the wildlands of the Northlands every winter. However, since I didn't witness this for myself when I moved to the Northlands, I believed that this phenomenon no longer occurred.

"It was only recently that I found that it was because of the Norton Family's resistance against the magical beasts that they didn't spread to the rest of the Northlands. I've asked a few older Northlanders and they said that the magical beasts that the Norton Family face number up to one million," Count Kenmays said as he improvised to make his words sound more convincing.

"I see… My Lord Count, please greet Baron Norton and his soldiers on my behalf and tell them of the respect I have for them for facing off against the magical beast wave. It's about time now and I should head to the main hall for the countdown to the new year. I hope the rest of you beautiful ladies will have a pleasant night. We'll take our leave now, see you during the ball," said the Second Prince politely towards the others.

However, Princess Sylvia stepped forward and asked, "Lord Count Kenmays, can I make a request of you?"

"Why, naturally, princess. Your will is my command. As long as it is within my capabilities, I will definitely fulfill your request," Count Kenmays said as he bowed deeply while the other noblewomen looked at the princess curiously.

With a slight blush on her face, Princess Sylvia said, "It's like this… Even though I just heard about those bloody battles between the Norton soldiers and the beasts, I've never actually seen a magical beast myself and don't know how they look like. If it's possible, can you write a letter to Baron Norton and have him send over a few magical beast carcasses to satisfy my curiosity? I understand that the beasts are the spoils of battle for the Norton Family, so I'm willing to offer 100 gold Fordes to them as reparation for the beasts. I wonder if this is too much to ask…"

"Oh, it's definitely fine, my goddess. Beloved princess, your request is but a small task for me to accomplish. I believe that Baron Norton will also be happy to comply and send a few beasts over as your new year's gift. Please rest assured, I will send my messenger there first thing tomorrow morning to fulfill your request," promised the count.

"Thank you for your trouble, Lord Count. I will take my leave now," Princess Sylvia said

before she curtsied and left.

"We should head to the main hall as well. The clock is about to ring at midnight," Count Kenmays said to the other beautiful ladies there.

"Shouldn't you be following that goddess of yours? Why are you mingling with mere mortals like us?" mused a voluptuous lady unhappily. It was apparent from her expression that she was a little jealous of the attention the count showed Princess Sylvia.

Count Kenmays held that woman by her waist as he smiled and said, "Goddesses are only to be worshipped and put on a pedestal. On the other hand, you, my darlings, are far more suitable for a mortal like me, isn't that right? Us mortals should hang together to find our own happiness…"

The clock in the main hall sounded loudly as the snow continued to paint the lands in white, indifferent to the coming of the new year.

……

As the nobles were celebrating the new year at Gildusk City, Lorist was laying flat on a snowy slope with his men, spying on the rear of the magical beast wave.

"Milord, this year's wave seems to be half of last year's. There were only around 70000 magical bulls which were lured into the Crewe Circular Gorge this time and that's even less than half the number of last year," Josk said. Being a stellar marksman, he was easily able to notice the difference with his sight when compared to the rest.

Lorist nodded and said, "We should leave now. Otherwise, the magical wolves and panthers that are circling around in this area will come for us. There should be only around 500000 magical beasts remaining. Order Dulles to bring his three carroballista brigades to exterminate the bulls at the gorge as soon as possible before heading to the fourth sector. We will meet up there. We must force the remaining magical beasts to stay within the Felicitas Settlement so that the magical beast wave will not show up next winter."

15 days later, Lorist brought around 30000 family soldiers to the central town of the fourth sector to build three ice walls around it so that they can use the town as a stronghold to wipe out the magical beasts there.

Knight Waxima, who was stationed to guard Firmrock Castle, sent a few soldiers to escort a messenger to Lorist.

"You are the messenger sent by Count Kenmays and came all the way from Gildusk City?" Lorist asked the man whose nose was bruised either from a fall or the extreme cold and wondered what prompted the count to send a messenger to him in that kind of weather.

"Yes, yes I am… Milord, here is the personal letter of the count," said the messenger as he shivered and labored to take out a letter from his breast pocket.

After reading it, Lorist felt like screaming out in anger. *Despite knowing that I'm fighting for my life here, that Kenmays fellow actually wants me to send some carcasses over there for him to show off to the ladies? And what's this about sending the carcasses as a new year's gift for Princess Sylvia? He really has nothing better to do, huh…*

Wait a second, Lorist thought, as his lips curved into a sly smile.

"I apologize, mister messenger. I'm sure you've seen that this is already our last line of defense with only three layers of walls. With the magical beasts almost at our doorstep, I really can't afford to send any of my men to fulfill the count's request. How about this, I have to trouble you to return and have someone from your dominion come over. My soldiers will move the carcasses in front of Firmrock Castle so that your men can transport it to Gildusk City, is that okay?" Lorist said with a troubled expression to the messenger.

"Is that so…" said the messenger with a sullen look. Normally, it would only take five to six days to travel from Gildusk City to Firmrock Castle on horseback. The snowy weather however caused it to take more than 14 days. The messenger and the rest were already really worn out from the long period of traveling and really didn't feel like returning again after asking for someone to come.

Lorist on the other hand fully understood why he was so bothered.

"How many people came with your group?" Lorist asked.

"Seven of us, with 10 horses. The rest are waiting at Firmrock Castle for the reply," said the messenger.

"How long did it take you to travel here?"

"14 days. We even lost one horse on the way."

"It must have been tough for you to have to travel in this weather to send this letter. But as you can see, we really can't spare anyone else. Count Kenmays also said in his letter that you would cooperate with us in any way you can so that the carcasses can be transported to Gildusk City as soon as possible. The quickest way for that to happen is for you to find more men from your dominion to transport the carcasses there. I will have my men prepare a sledge for you so that your horses can drag you back to your family dominion. I believe this mode of travel will be much faster. Also, I'll give you five gold Fordes and two gold Fordes to each other person in your group for your troubles. I really have to thank you for your effort to deliver the message in this weather."

Lorist's sudden generosity surprised the messenger and he suddenly felt energetic and forgot about the cold altogether. However, he still asked something before he left. "Milord, how many people should I bring over to transport the carcasses?"

Lorist stretched out a finger and said, "One thousand men with horses should be sufficient. There are many carcasses and I'm prepared to send one of each magical beast to your count."

Five days later, the magical beast wave arrived at the central town of the fourth sector and began to make its way towards the walls of the town with abandon. However, the three thousand plus steel ballistas installed on the walls caused one beast to fall after another, covering the land with more and more dead magical beasts. Even the hundreds of magical mammoths collapsed under the incessant fire of the ballistas.

When the last single-horned magical rhinoceros fell, the family soldiers dropped their weapons and started cheering. Lorist and the other knights were smiling at the sight too. The magical beast wave had finally been annihilated, removing the threat that has bothered the family for hundreds of years.

"Dulles, regroup your carroballista brigades and replace the broken ballistas. We will be heading out to wipe out the remaining carnivorous magical beasts.

"Fiercetiger Loze, escort the carroballista brigade with your heavy-armored cavalry brigade and help them out with the extermination of the carnivorous beasts. Terman, your knights will head out together as well.

"Josk, bring your mounted archers to secure the area around the Crewe Circular Gorge

and Maplewoods Bastide. I don't want a single beast to escape and return to the wilderness.

"Pog, your two heavy-armored brigades will stay guard here and protect the area to ensure that the people collecting the magical beast carcasses don't get attacked by the carnivorous beasts.

"Charade, I'll leave the collection of the carcasses for you to manage.

"Yuriy, after taking care of the carnivorous beasts with your light cavalry scout brigade, make your way to the first sector and try your best to round up the beasts that escaped their doom and minimize the damage they can cause to our farming efforts next spring."

After giving the chain of orders, Lorist recalled Count Kenmays's letter and asked Els to come over. "Els, pick some magical beast carcasses and remove the ballista bolts from their bodies and make the wounds look like sword and spear wounds instead. Make sure that nobody will find out that the cause of death for the beasts are from the ballista fire. You may even embed some broken swords and spears into their bodies to make it seem like it took us a lot of effort to exterminate these beasts. After that, send these bodies to the empty space in front of Firmrock Castle and wait for the men of Count Kenmays to collect them."

Els laughed out loud before he said, "Locke, are you up to something devious again? Alright, leave the shady stuff to me. I promise that nobody will be able to find out about this…"

Chapter 186
A New Sea Port

After 28 days of difficult hauling, the carcass delivery team finally arrived at Gildusk City. Part of that was thanks to Lorist's considerate and appropriate preparations by tying up the frozen carcasses securely onto the sledges so that they could be transported more easily. Otherwise, it would've taken far longer for Count Kenmays's order to be carried out if they had resorted to normal carriages.

One panicked lookout guard blew the horn accidentally at the sight of the arrival of the team and woke the whole of the city, causing many to flock to the square outside the duke's mansion to take a curious look.

Over 200 magical beast carcasses of roughly 40 different types were arranged into a few rows at the square, the most eye-catching of which being the four-meter-tall mammoth carcass which radiated a tense air of savagery. Had it not been for Lorist's worry that the city gates wouldn't be able to let a bigger carcass through, Lorist would've sent them a mammoth that was over 5 meters tall.

Count Kenmays was so excited that his face flushed red as Lorist truly had gave him a lot of face by sending over so many carcasses per his request and even wrote him a personal letter. Apart from stating that he had sent the carcasses as a gift to Princess Sylvia, Lorist said that he would leave the rest for Count Kenmays's keeping. The moment he finished reading the letter, the count instantly came up with a few ways to use the carcasses to improve his relationship with the other beautiful noble ladies and expand the Kenmays Family's network.

The Second Prince walked forward with the queen and Princess Sylvia along with a large group of nobles and observed the magical beast carcasses up close. As the rest of the nobles were chattering about, the Second Prince was instead observing the wounds on the bodies of the magical beasts.

"Count Kenmays, where is the person in charge for the transport of these carcasses? Call him over so that I can reward him. Now that I've seen this, I forgive Baron Norton for refusing my invitation. It seems he has indeed been busy battling magical beasts. That person in charge should be aware of the situation of the battle, right? Have him

brief me on it," instructed the Second Prince.

Count Kenmays held his chest and saluted as he said, "I deeply apologize as the ones who transported the carcasses were the soldiers of my family and not those of the Norton Family. According to my messenger, the Norton Family could not even send out so much as a guide as almost all of the soldiers of their family are caught up in the massive battle."

"Oh, I see. Then it's fine," said the Second Prince, a little crestfallen.

"My Lord Count, I'd like to have that huge snow leopard and those two green-colored winter wolves. Oh, and that antelope over there catches my eye too. I wonder if you would be so kind to part with these carcasses…" Unlike the Second Prince, the queen was instead intrigued by the furs of the beasts.

"My beautiful queen, your servant will be more than happy to satisfy your demand. However, that white snow leopard and antelope is meant to be a new year's gift from Baron Norton to Princess Sylvia, so it is truly not my decision to make. As for the two winter wolves, I shall present them to you as a sign of my apology, my beautiful queen," Count Kenmays said apologetically.

The queen merely nodded before heading to Princess Sylvia and whispering something to her.

……

The Second Prince sat in his study with a middle-aged man standing before him.

"Did you manage to find out about it?" asked the Second Prince.

"I have, my king. That messenger said that when he met with the baron, he was leading his family soldiers and building a defense line at the plains using frozen ice walls to stop the charge of the magical beasts. The messenger reported clearly that all of the Norton Family soldiers were stationed at that defense line to the point that they couldn't afford to send even a single one of them to help out with the transport of the carcasses. That was why they messenger had no choice but to return to the dominion of the Kenmays Family to arrange for another transport convoy to complete the operation," replied the man respectfully.

The Second Prince then tapped on the table with his finger in deep thought.

"Your Majesty, the messenger also said that he had estimated that the soldiers at the defense line numbered only around 30000 people. He was quite worried that a small number of men as that would be unable to withstand the assault of the magical beasts."

"Oh, are you certain?" asked the Second Prince as a gleam shone through his eyes.

"Yes, Your Majesty. That messenger has long worked to deliver messages for the count and he is already used to the sight of their own troops of 30000 plus men training. That was why he was able to get a rough estimate of the number of soldiers of the Norton Family."

The Second Prince pondered for a while before changing the subject. "Have you seen the magical beasts at the square just now?"

"Yes, I have. The fatal wounds on the beasts' bodies were probably the cause of their deaths. That mammoth I saw seemed to have been struck by 3 ballista bolts before being attacked by infantry troops all over and collapsing with the fatal strike possibly coming from a spear thrust by a Gold ranked knight from the look of the wound on its forehead. I also noticed traces of blood at the bottom of the feet of the mammoth and that could be an indicator of the price the Norton Family paid to take down the beast.

"Those magical bulls also have sword and spear wounds on them, leading me to conclude that the Norton Family possibly does not have that many ballistas. Apart from the mammoth and a few larger magical bulls that have ballista wounds, the other magical beasts seem to have been killed with swords, pikes and axes. However, the smaller magical beasts looked like they were killed by a longbow instead," the middle-aged man expressed his detailed observations.

The Second Prince asked another question, "Have you found out where Baron Shazin obtained so much salt from?"

"Your Majesty, Baron Shazin purchased around 5 million kilograms of food from the duke's dominion during the 9th month of last year and shipped those to the Norton Family's dominion. That's why I suspect that the salt was produced in the land of the Nortons as there is a coast near the Bladedge Mountains. Also, the only parties that are selling salt are Baron Shazin and Count Kenmays. Both of them have good relations with Baron Norton and have a history of trading with their family."

The Second Prince stood up and started walking in circles in his study.

"Three years ago, the Norton Family's 40000 plus forces raided the duke's dominion and even defeated the Allied Noble Army led by Duke Loggins at Firmrock Castle in one fell swoop, thus forcing around 200000 citizens of the duke's dominion to move into their own. Ever since then, they have cast a strong presence on the tides of the Northlands…

"Ever since my arrival here, I've felt a little unsettled by the Norton Family's mysterious attitude. Not only did he decline my invitation and refuse to obey my orders, he even accepted a title from the Royal Family of the Andinaq Kingdom! That is outright treason! Even though I now command the First Legion, I still don't dare to prod the bear that is resting at a corner of the Northlands, because I'm worried that the army that I've toiled so hard to build up would end up in shambles in the aftermath of the conflict with the Raging Bear and allow others to have an opportunity to take a bite at my expense…

"On the other hand, I'm worried that if I allow the Norton Family to settle down their 200000 new citizens in peace, they would grow stronger gradually. However, today's news has made me really glad. Hahahaha…" The Second Prince started laughing out maniacally without warning.

"It seems that the Norton Family also has to deal with the magical beasts! Their 40000 plus troops three years back are only left with less than 30000 now. I wonder how many more men they will continue to lose for the rest of the winter. With the magical beasts attacking their dominion yearly like that, there is no way they will be able to settle the 200000 citizens down. That's why they have resorted to increasing their salt production to trade it for more food and even decided to sell off the precious weapons and metal armor of their family just to be able to sustain their population…

"I've never heard of a dumber dominion lord all my life. He truly is an embarrassment to us nobles. I've never understood why the Raging Bear chose to hide in a corner like a frightened turtle, but now I see that it was because they have took on a burden they couldn't sustain. Hehe, they think they can protect their dominion with only Firmrock Castle? In actuality, we don't even have to attack them up front. We can instead choose to surround them and cut them off from the outside world so that they lose access to food and sustenance. I'm sure that they will crumble after 6 months of encirclement, unless, they resort to cannibalism… Otherwise, they will be groveling before me to ask to be spared… Hahaha…"

"Your Majesty truly is wise," praised the middle-aged man.

The Second Prince continued in circles within his study before stopping entirely and said, "Have Viscount Zinderson visit the Norton Family's dominion again as my messenger to plant a spy there when the snow melts around the 15th day of the 3rd month. You will pretend to be a normal attendant and try to uncover more details about the Norton Family to see if they are truly crippled by the onslaught of the magical beasts."

"Your will is my command, Your Majesty," said the middle-aged man before he left.

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On the 15th day of the 3rd month within the grand hall of Firmrock Castle, Lorist delivered his speech of gratitude to his knights and administrative officers. "During the 5th month last year, we were seated here within this exact hall when we laid out our plans for the rest of the year. However, it's only the 3rd month right now and we've gathered here once again. 'Why is that so?', some of you may ask… That's because we have already persevered through the long and grueling battle with the magical beasts and have eliminated the magical beast wave! From today onwards, we will be able to live calm and peaceful lives…

"I thank you all for your sincere efforts. As for the brave soldiers who have sacrificed themselves for this endeavor…" Lorist proceeded to bow deeply to the knights and the officers of the family, who quickly got up and returned the bow.

"Norton… Norton… Norton…" A chant started to brew within the hall.

Lorist waved both his hands downwards to gesture for the chant to quiet down for him to continue his speech. "For the past three years, we have been dealing with the magical beast wave as well as developing the dominion. During this time, we have constructed new houses, roads, and even started multiple factories. We have developed the empty wasteland from nothing into the one we see today. As your dominion lord, I feel proud for all of your achievements and the talent you all have."

The hall once again erupted with applause.

"That's why we will begin mass agricultural development in Felicitas Settlement, beginning first with building the irrigation, thus fulfilling one of the family's promises to our citizens by assigning them some farmland so that they can start their peaceful

and blissful lives here with us," Lorist announced.

Reidy and Patt stepped forward and hung a huge map in the middle of the hall.

"Now, I will brief you all on the focus of the family for the coming years," Lorist said as he took a small wooden stick and walked towards the huge map.

"As everyone of you know, the Northlands is rural and isolated from hugely populated areas. Originally, there were only two routes in and out of the Northlands and a new suspension bridge at the eastern Northlands have also been built recently. Despite that, one of the routes at Metropoulos River has been sealed off by Duke Madras, preventing anyone from crossing the river there. That can be said to be our fault as the northbound convoy did indeed act a little out of hand while crossing the duchy," Lorist joked.

Quite a number of ex-convoy members within the hall laughed out loud as well.

"With the crossing point downstream blocked off, the Northlands only has two exits. However, we must be aware that both of these routes head towards the border of the Iblia Kingdom. For example, even though the Kenmays Family controls the suspension bridge at the east, they have to face the pressure of the troops of Duke Fisablen's Frontier Legion and arm themselves as a precaution.

"As for our family, we have never really placed our interests in these routes as it would take far too long to reach the central nations of the Grindia Continent by traveling on land. There are also too many variables to look out for using that mode of travel. I trust that all of you don't want another experience of traveling with a huge convoy.

"For now, we will focus our attention towards the sea. Look over here. If we are able to find a suitable place to build a port at the Bladedge Mountains, we will be able to form a trading fleet and have access to the Madras Duchy, the Andinaq Kingdom, the western part of the Redlis Kingdom, the Lormo Duchy, the Hanayabarta Kingdom as well as reach Morante City within one month of travel using a sea route. We can even reach the Relic Islands as well as many other nations that are near the coasts.

"However, we still haven't been able to locate a suitable place to build a port at Bladedge Mountains. But, that doesn't mean that there isn't one within the dominion. Look at this map here," Lorist said before he instructed Reidy to hang out a different map.

"This map details the most dangerous terrain within the family dominion: Blackmud Marsh," Lorist said.

The people within the hall gasped in unison before they began to chatter.

"Everyone, please quiet down. Perhaps some of you have heard that anyone below the Silver rank should not even enter the marsh. That is in fact true because there are savage magical beasts living within the marsh such as Ironspine Crocodiles. Only blade glows of Silver ranked fighters can injure those beasts. But, if you take a closer look at the map, you will realize why I chose Blackmud Marsh to be where we build our port."

Lorist pointed at a spot on the map with his wooden stick and said, "This here is the Azure River. It stretches from the depths of the Magical Dragon Mountains to the ocean coast and splits the marsh into two parts. The marsh on the side of our dominion is only a fourth of the whole Blackmud Marsh. And over here near the border of the marsh and Bladedge Mountains is a bay. That is the perfect place for us to build the port!

"In actuality, after doing some research on the documents archived by the family, the real Blackmud Marsh is actually on the other side of the Azure River. It is because during winter, the ice that forms on the river often blocks off the river opening to the sea, causing the overflowed river water to flow onto the bank of the Azure River on our dominion's side frequently, eventually turning that part of the dominion into part of the marsh.

"Right now, we will try to change the marsh on our side for it to serve as a home to our port. Near the river is a tortoise-shaped mound which we call Tortoise Hill. We will build a wall from Tortoise Hill all the way to Hidebull Mound to connect those two places. That way, no magical beast or barbarian will be able to pose a threat to the family.

"After that, we will build an embankment along the Azure River all the way from the Tortoise Mountain to the border of the Bladedge Mountains to prevent the Ironspine Crocodiles from attacking that wall as well as the river from overflowing. Upon completion of the embankment, the rich land around the Blackmud Marsh can be developed into rich farmland and a thriving port city…"

Chapter 187
Development Plans

"Milord, I have a question…" said Supervisor Hansk who was the head of the allocation department as he stood up. "If we were to build a 10 plus kilometer wall and another embankment that stretches around 50 kilometers, as well as build a port and clear out the magical beasts within the part of the Blackmud Marsh near our dominion, this will be a huge undertaking and will definitely span a long time. How much manpower and resources does the family plan to invest and where would we get all these resources?"

Lorist nodded towards Supervisor Hansk before pointing the wooden stick to the map of Blackmud Marsh. "I have come up with this plan with the future of the family in mind. To realize this plan, we will have to rely on everyone's efforts. Not only that, this plan will even affect the prosperity of the family for the coming hundreds of years. Once we achieve it, our family dominion will no longer merely be in a rural corner of the Northlands and will be the main cornerstone for humanity's venture into the wildlands and unknowns.

"This plan to build a port will definitely have a long term effect on the family's development. As for manpower and resource allocation, the family is definitely committed to it. We will support this venture with all we can regardless of the cost. No matter how long it takes, we have to complete this venture. Now, may I have Grandmaster Ciroba and Mister Zanben stand up for a bit…"

At the back of the hall, Grandmaster Ciroba and the slightly tanned Zanben both stood up.

Telesti had gotten two maidservants to take care of the grandmaster perhaps due to her pity for his experiences. Because of that, Grandmaster Ciroba looked rather well and no longer shivered in absolute terror when he saw Lorist like before. Even though he still seemed a little stiff, it was quite commendable of him to be able to retain his calm when faced with the many curious stares of others within the hall.

As for Zanben, the former talented slave laborer among the 2000 plus laborers bought by the Kenmays Family that was promoted by Telesti, he had already gained Lorist's trust after his involvement with the construction of the defense infrastructures of the

many towns and villages within Felicitas Settlement. That was why he was allowed to attend the family meeting along with Grandmaster Ciroba. But because it was his first time, he felt a little unnerved being the center of attention.

"I must first thank Grandmaster Ciroba and Mister Zanben for their efforts of surveying the land from Blackmud Marsh all the way to the bay at Bladedge Mountains which took up to half a year. Even though they have experienced some potentially life-threatening experiences, their efforts still resulted in the culmination of the method and procedures of this development plan.

"From today onwards, I intend to form a construction department headed by Grandmaster Ciroba with Mister Zanben as his aide to manage this huge project of constructing the sea port. The other departments of the family shall aid and cooperate with them in all construction-related matters," Lorist said as he waved his hand to gesture for Grandmaster Ciroba and Zanben to sit back down. Since they were already introduced to the others within the hall, there was no longer a need for them to remain standing.

Lorist once again pointed to the map with the stick and said, "For the next five years, we will work on gaining control of this part of the Blackmud Marsh to set up the foundation for the plan. There will be three main components which we will have to focus on. The first component is the completion of the initial stages of construction for the citadel at Hidebull Mound as well as the foundations of the 20-kilometer wall from Tortoise Hill. The surrounding area of Tortoise Hill will be cleansed and a defense camp will be set up there.

"The second component is to build a path from the middle of the Blackmud Marsh connecting it to the Highlands over here.

"The third component concerns the Bladedge Mountains. We will start collecting rocks and earth here to fill up the gullies and the swamp around the parts from Bladedge Mountains to the place where the Azure River meets the ocean. By filling up the reefs and connecting them to the bay, that place will be able to serve as the departure point for the ships of our family."

Lorist then shook his head and laughed bitterly before he said, "There is no doubt that this undertaking will cost us lots of manpower and resources. However, as long as we take this first step and continue down the journey, there will be a day when we complete it. No matter whether it will take 10 or even 20 years, we must definitely

achieve that milestone! As long as we have this port, we will definitely have a bright future ahead of us!

"Old Man Balk, your task this year will be really important. Not only do you have to gather up the carpenters who have experience building ships to begin research and development into constructing large sea vessels, you also have to head to the Black Forests to find some wood that will be suitable material for those ships and have them dried in the shade. The moment we connect the Bladedge Mountains and the sea port with the highland hills, you will have to find a suitable spot to build a shipyard. I hope that by next year, we will be able to use the bay to begin training our sailors and navy troops."

Balk stood up and said confidently, "Please be assured, milord. I will definitely complete this task. It is also my earnest wish to one day see the magnificent sight of the ships flying the Norton flag being sent out to sea…"

Lorist laughed out loud said, "Things occur because people act. That day will definitely come. As long as we put in effort, there is no unachievable goal."

Lorist turned his attention back to the map and said, "As for the future plans of the family, I'm sure that all of you are aware of the three components I've just mentioned. As for our security during the development process, I will have the carroballista brigade be the main force to defend us from the Ironspine Crocodiles in the marsh. I will also have all the Silver ranked swordsmen and knights form smaller groups to escort the carroballista brigade when they travel.

"Since the roads within Felicitas Settlement are almost completely built, I will use the 30000 plus laborers there as manpower for the three main components of the plan. Apart from some of them whom I will assign to help out with the mining efforts, the rest of them will all be sent to the Blackmud Marsh."

"Wait, milord, you seem to have forgotten a key point," said the human resource department head, Supervisor Kedan, as he stood up.

"What's wrong?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, some time back, you have promised the laborers that you would free them after three years of labor. And that term will end by the 5th month of this year. We will have no choice but to let them go," Kedan reminded.

"Ugh…" Lorist said as he facepalmed. "I apologize, I have indeed forgotten about that. Thank you for your reminder. That means that they only have two months of service left?"

"Yes, milord. Should we extend their term by one year?" Kedan suggested.

"There's no need. We must definitely not go back on our word. This is a matter that concerns the reputation and prestige of our family and we cannot treat it lightly. For now, have the laborers finalize the construction of the roads at Felicitas Settlement and carry out the final touches. After that, let them take a break," Lorist said.

"However, milord, some laborers already have their family members moved into the dominion by us, and a good number of them have decided to remain within the dominion and also hope that they can bring their families here. Others who have awakened their Battle Force also want to join our family forces," Kedan said.

"Hmmm, then let those who want to remain do so. You will be in charge of registering the family members of the laborers who have decided to stay that come into the dominion. Now that the Felicitas Settlement has a stable foundation, let's allocate some farmland and houses to these laborers and treat them no different than we would our own citizens. Help those with other skills find jobs as well and we can also offer loans to those who wish to start their own production workshops. Remember, don't look down on them just because they have been our prisoners, okay?" Lorist reminded as he made his decision.

"Milord, what about those who want to join the family forces?"

"Take them in as long as they satisfy the Battle Force requirements. The Iron ranked ones can first be accepted into the new recruit camp for three months of training before being assigned to more specialized units according to their individual skills."

"Milord, I was just about to report to you that from last year to now, the new recruit camp has produced around 5000 soldiers with awakened Battle Force apart from those who were disqualified because they couldn't keep up. All of them are eager to be enlisted into our official forces," Belnick said as he stood up.

Even though Lorist specified that the formal soldiers of the family had to have at least Iron ranked Battle Force, 75 percent of the 16 brigades of the family don't meet that requirement with most of them still being at the Bronze rank. That's why he had no

choice but to have the respective leaders of the brigades organize regular training sessions every day so that they rise up to the Iron rank as soon as possible.

When the family forces were first reorganized, there were around 10000 youths around the ages of 20 who have been removed from the forces because they didn't meet the minimum Battle Force requirement. They were subsequently sent to train within the new recruit camp. Surprisingly, many of them awakened their Battle Force within a short half year.

After some consideration, Lorist felt that there wouldn't be a point for those soldiers to remain within the new recruit camp and decided that it would be better for them to be assigned to other units.

"How about this," Lorist said. "Since the carroballista brigades will play a huge role in the development of Blackmud Marsh, we will expand it by two more brigades into a total of 5 with a soldier count of around 15000 men, essentially making it a complete division. Gold ranked knight Mons Malek, you shall pass on your duties on managing the patrol companies of the seven central towns of Felicitas Settlement and take up the position as commander of the carroballista division with Dulles as your second in command."

The emotionless Malek stood up and said, "Yes, milord."

Dulles also stood up at the same time. He understood that his Battle Force was still at the Three Star Silver rank and he also had some trouble controlling and disciplining some experienced soldiers within the three brigades he commanded. Given that complaints of discontent were already floating around among his troops, there was no way that he would be able to shoulder the burden of the two additional brigades. The reason Lorist appointed Iron-faced Malek to become the commander of the new division was probably because he had heard of such troubles and decided to reinforce the discipline of that unit.

That was why Dulles didn't feel at all discouraged by Lorist's decision. In fact, he was even a little thankful. "Milord, I will definitely help Knight Malek to the best of my ability in the management of the carroballista division."

Lorist nodded and said, "It is one of the main forces of the family troops and I have high hopes for you all."

"It is in safe hands, milord," Malek and Dulles said as they saluted.

Lorist then turned to Belnick and said, "If the number of laborers who want to join the army is enough for two brigades, make one brigade of armored pike cavalrymen and another brigade of heavy-armored infantry soldiers. However, make sure that they receive the basic three month training and understand the regulations of our army well before assigning them to their respective units."

"Understood, milord," Belnick responded.

Potterfang and Loze also stood up and said, "Thank you, milord."

"The two of you will have to work hard too. Pick a few experienced soldiers from your troops and have them serve as instructors in the new recruit camp to help Knight Belnick with training the fresh recruits. Pog, I am especially satisfied with the attack formation you devised with small teams of ten. However, you still have to practice and improve upon any weaknesses you may find."

"Yes, milord. I will work hard on it," Potterfang replied.

"Alright. Back to the main topic. Since we're no longer able to utilize the manpower of the 30000 prisoners, we will have to turn to our own people. I hereby order that our family forces who are off-duty to work in shifts of three months to develop the Blackmud Marsh. Whether they be of the main family forces or the local garrison forces, they have to participate in this endeavor. The garrison of each village and central town will have to take turns to work there. Naturally, the soldiers of the main family force will have to serve too as this concerns the future of the whole dominion," Lorist said.

"But, milord, why don't we just recruit laborers from the citizens of Felicitas Settlement? It won't be hard to find 100000 free laborers from our 500000 citizens. They'll work as long as we feed them well," Terman said as he felt that letting his knights work as measly laborers was extremely demeaning.

Lorist's expression turned sour right away. He gave everyone within the hall a look before turning his attention back to Terman. "I hope that all of you can understand a simple principle. The forces of the Norton Family is not a tool we use to oppress our citizens, nor are they superior to those citizens who are not enlisted in our forces. Instead, they are their protectors. They should be the ones whom the citizens of our

dominion place their trust in as well as the ones who pave the way for the development of the future of the dominion. Additionally, they are the most reliable force available to the dominion lord who are willing to even climb mountains of blades and enter seas of fire to achieve the lord's goals. In other words, they are the most resilient executors of the lord's will.

"Now, do you still honestly think that serving the family by contributing to the construction work is an insult to your personage? My hope is that everyone within the dominion, no matter they be family knights or family soldiers, will become the constructors of our own home so that tens of years later in the future, you all can be proud of the prosperous cities and rich farmlands and stand tall when you tell your children and grandchildren that it was you who had turned the wastelands into the grand spectacle they see before them. It was you, who have put in your efforts in turning the Blackmud Marsh into the haven they live in.

"As your dominion lord, I will also accompany you and work alongside you at the development site itself just like any common soldier so that I can make my own contributions to the family's future."

"Milord, you don't have to say anything else. It was my mistake. I will definitely strive towards becoming one of the constructors of the dominion's future myself," Terman said as he sat back down in shame.

"In actuality, you're not entirely wrong, Terman. I have no doubt that many others will have the same opinion you did and question why I don't just use the citizens as my workforce instead," Lorist said with a solemn voice. "It's not that I didn't think about it. However, the citizens of Felicitas Settlement has just managed to settle down and wouldn't be able to handle the additional burdens this project will place on them. We, the Norton Family, can't just make decisions based on what we see now. I'm sure you all know that since the magical beast wave is eliminated, we must proceed to develop farmland at the settlement to be able to sustain the food consumption of the dominion.

"Starting from next year, we will start collecting taxes from the citizens that settled there. That's why, we must also work harder to ensure that they can begin their peaceful new lives here without a hitch. Apart from criminals and prisoners of war, the Norton Family will not use our own citizens as free laborers. While we can offer to pay them to work on the construction when most of the farming is done, we will definitely not force them to work as unpaid laborers so that they don't feel like second class citizens of the dominion. That is a small insistence of mine as the dominion lord."

The hall quieted down before erupting into a torrent of applause.

"Milord, we are grateful for your benevolent intentions," said the family knights of common birth like Potterfang as they stood up and saluted Lorist in unison.

"Alright, now that the general direction of progression for the family's development has been decided, let me brief you all on the specifics. There will be an administrative department formed for each central town of the seven sectors of Felicitas Settlement. These departments will collectively form the administrative institution of the family dominion which will be led by Knight Charade with Butler Boris as the vice head. Other than the seven central towns, the Maplewoods Bastide and the rear city at Firmrock Castle will also fall under the jurisdiction of the administrative institution.

"Mister Camorra, please stand up," Lorist said.

The current vice head of the human resources department, formerly known as Baron Camorra, stood up.

"I hereby appoint Mister Camorra as the main supervisor of the military resources department. From today onwards, the management of the military provisions will be done separately from that of the citizens. The military resources department will be in charge of the allocation of weapons and equipment, food and other consumables as well as the benefits and salaries of our family soldiers. As you all know, Grandmaster Sid has just developed a set of metal armor that is far superior to that of the Whitelion Legion. Therefore, Mister Camorra's first assignment will be handling the replacement of the Whitelion Legion equipment of the family forces with the new armor across the various brigades of our forces. I hope everyone will be patient as well, your turn will definitely come," Lorist said as he laughed.

"Alright, meeting adjourned. The various department heads and brigade leaders will have to stay back for a little longer. The rest of you may rest today and tomorrow and we will set out to the Blackmud Marsh the day after. Let's all put in our fair share of work as one into the development of the dominion for the prosperity of the family."

"Yes, milord!"

Chapter 188
The Ultimatum

Viscount Zinderson departed from Gildusk City on the 15th day of the 3rd month as the Second Prince's messenger. As the snow was still melting, the roads were muddy and hard to traverse and he arrived at Firmrock Castle by the 23rd day of that month. At that time, Lorist had already brought around 40000 of his forces to the Blackmud Marsh to begin gathering stones and earth in preparation for laying the foundations for roads to be built there.

Charade, who was in charge of various miscellaneous tasks at Firmrock Castle, received Viscount Zinderson. Upon hearing that he had come as a messenger of the Second Prince, Charade asked him to rest for a few days so that he could contact Lorist and ask him to return.

On the morning of the 25th day of the 3rd month, Lorist was standing before the carcass of an Ironspine Crocodile that was almost ten meters long and inspecting that beast's weakness. The crocodile's body was impaled with more than 30 iron ballista bolts and it was one of the largest they have encountered during the past few days. Even though it had sustained the strikes of more than 30 bolts, it still struggled intensely like a lively tiger and rushed towards the carroballista brigade with its fangs and claws bared.

Had it not been for the good fortune which allowed one of those bolts to pierce through its tail and nail it on the ground almost 30 meters from the carroballista brigade, that reptile might have began a massacre at the defense lines of the brigade. It was not until the crocodile breathed its last breath that everyone let out a breath of relief.

"Milord, look. This Ironspine Crocodile died because of this bolt that pierced its lower jaw into its head. At that time, it was nailed to the ground at its tail but it was still rushing forward with all its might with its head raised, allowing us to fire a bolt to its underjaw. As for the 30 plus bolts on its body, even though they did injure the beast, they weren't fatal nor effective and only served to provoke it further. We were quite lucky this time around to have not lost any men to this ferocious beast," said Malek,

who was the current commander of the carroballista division.

"During the past few days, we've killed around tens of those crocodiles and even the largest one was only 5 meters long and died from 5 ballista bolts. We were too careless and thought that those crocodiles were the worst the marsh could throw at us and that there was nothing to worry about. To think that an even larger one showed up… It seems that our steel ballistas won't be that effective against these larger ones. The bolts on its body seem like small toothpicks," Els described the situation imaginatively.

"Given the size of Blackmud Marsh, there might just be crocodiles that are even larger than this. Milord, even though this one is already around 2 meters tall, I've read in the family records that they can be as tall as 5 meters as well. I wonder how long would a crocodile of that height be… I heard they were essentially as large as a small mound," said Patt worryingly.

Lorist nodded and said, "That said, the development of the marsh must continue. We must best the obstacles no matter how large they may seem. However, I will be wary of your warnings as well. To be honest, even I didn't imagine that we would have so much trouble with the beasts given that we have our steel ballistas. Reidy, make a trip to Grandmaster Fellin's and ask him if he can construct an even larger steel ballista for use against these Ironspine Crocodiles. It doesn't have to adhere to the strict military standards of those used in the carroballista division, so it's fine if it takes more time to operate. I only need it to have at least twice the power."

"Yes, milord. I'll depart right now," Reidy said before he left.

"Alright. Malek, have someone deal with this carcass. Even though it looks ferocious and savage, its meat tastes pretty good, you know. Tell the rest that we're having crocodile meat today. Don't forget to keep the leather as well. This leather is the ideal material for the leather armor of our navy troops," Lorist instructed. "Also, tell the others to pay attention to their safety when they work later. It's okay for them to work at a slower pace. If the sky starts darkening, have them stop for the day lest they be ambushed by crocodiles."

"Alright, milord. I will caution them well," Malek replied.

At that moment, Jim brought a few others over. He was currently a regiment leader of the guard division. "MIlord, Knight Charade sent someone over to pass the message that Viscount Zinderson has come to visit again as the messenger of the Second Prince

and he hopes that you can return to Firmrock Castle sooner."

Huh? Lorist was a little shocked as he thought, *what's the Second Prince up to again? Even though I've already refused him so many times, he still hasn't given up. Isn't he worried that I will once again refuse him this time around? I have no time for the silly games of nobles. How annoyingly persistent.*

After a pause, Lorist said, "Have Viscount Zinderson stay there for a few more days. I will head there within two days."

……

"My deepest apologies, Viscount Zinderson, for making you wait for long. I've really been far too busy with various matters."

Lorist only made his way back to Firmrock Castle on the 28th day of the 3rd month. Without bothering to take a bath to wash off all the sweat and dust from traveling, he met with Viscount Zinderson right away.

"I suppose it's understandable. After all, your family must be busy fending off the magical beasts during the whole winter. To be honest with you, Baron Norton, I have seen the carcasses of the magical beasts back at Gildusk City and I truly express my deepest respects to your family's efforts. It's no wonder the Norton Family is also known as the Raging Bear of the Northlands. Only a family like yours can bear **Ryogawa: pun unintended** to resist the fierce assault of beasts like that," Viscount Zinderson praised.

"I appreciate your compliment. Might I enquire why you've made your visit?" Lorist asked, not even bothering to put up with the pleasantries and going straight to the point.

"Oh. This time around, I have come on His Majesty's behalf to deliver a letter to you and inform him of your response. The letter is here with me and I believe he expressed his worries and concerns for your family's heroic battle against the magical beasts within it," Viscount Zinderson said as he passed the letter over.

Lorist received the letter with a smile and said, "Oh, isn't it a little too much to send a viscount like you all the way here for a small task like this? Couldn't he have sent a normal messenger? It's a little bit of overkill for His Majesty the King to send you here just to deliver a letter."

Viscount Zinderson mocked himself in a joking manner and said, "Oh, Lord Baron, you truly give me too much credit. I'm merely an honorary noble and not a landed noble like you. Also, I don't really have much on my plate, so doing various errands for the king is the least I can do."

"Lord Viscount, you're being far too humble," Lorist smiled before tearing the envelope open.

Sol! This Second Prince must have gone crazy. There's definitely something wrong with that head of his!

Even though Lorist felt like cursing out loud, since Viscount Zinderson was right in front of him, he had no choice but to resist the urge.

The tone of the Second Prince in the letter was unlike the pleasant one within his previous letter. In fact, the Second Prince launched into three demands straight away.

First, Lorist was to head to Gildusk City before the 5th month to meet the Second Prince to pledge his allegiance to him and present a fitting gift as a sign of respect.

Second, the Norton Family must pay 500000 gold Fordes to the Second Prince as a punishment for the disrespect they have shown the Second Prince.

Third, from that year onwards, the Norton Family must provide the Second Prince with 5 million kilograms of salt without any cost annualy.

At the end of the letter, the Second Prince stated that he was already unable to bear the Norton Family's refusals to his numerous gestures of goodwill. He stressed that if the Norton Family refused these demands of his once more, he would form an allied noble army and march towards the Firmrock Castle. He warned Lorist that the fate of the Norton Family hung on his decision to accept the demands or not and advised him to choose wisely.

Only a madman would dare to imagine that this would go his way. He must've received some kind of stimulation that prompted him to issue an ultimatum to the family like this. That letter was akin to a declaration of war as there was no way that Lorist would agree to those unreasonable terms. *Where did that bastard gain his confidence from? His First Legion that has only been formed for one year? Hahaha…*

Lorist raised his head with a cold smile and asked, "Lord Viscount, are you sure you

want my reply to this?"

Viscount Zinderson nodded and said, "Yes, His Majesty stressed that I must have a reply from you before I return."

"Alright, please wait a moment," Lorist said before he sat down on his desk and quickly drafted a response.

"Tarkel," Lorist said as he pulled onto the rope bell to summon Tarkel into the room.

"The Lord Viscount has traveled far and must've suffered quite a bit to get here. Go get a few magical beast furs and give it to him as a sign of our gratitude for his troubles," Lorist instructed.

"Yes, milord," Tarkel said before he left.

Lorist handed the letter he wrote to Viscount Zinderson and said, "Please forgive me, Viscount Zinderson. The Norton Family's dominion is located in the rural, far ends of the Northlands and there isn't anything valuable that we can present to you. The most fitting gifts that I can think of are these furs which I present to you as an apology for not being able to offer anything better. I am also really sorry for the troubles you have went through to carry out this errand."

Viscount Zinderson happily accepted the letter and said, "Thank you, Lord Baron, for your gift. Actually, I do fancy these furs quite a lot."

……

Bam! The Second Prince smashed his chair right on his desk in front of Viscount Zinderson. On the desk was a beastskin which was Lorist's reply to the Second Prince's letter, on which only a single, huge 'Ptoooey!' was written.

The Second Prince was so mad that his face flushed completely red. The response he received was akin to a square slap in the face by Lorist. When he first saw the letter, he recalled the last letter Lorist wrote him which contained only the words 'Top Kek' which evoked a massively humiliating feeling in his mind and couldn't control his anger any longer, causing him to unwittingly stand up and smash his chair onto the desk despite being in the presence of Viscount Zinderson.

The loud bang snapped the Second Prince out of his fury. Even though the chair was

completely shattered, the letter Lorist wrote was still in pristine condition, causing rage to well up in the Second Prince once again. However, he managed to suppress himself and waved towards Viscount Zinderson as he said, "Buzz off. And don't you go around blabbering about this."

Viscount Zinderson retreated with a pale face as he hurriedly said, "Yes, Your Majesty."

The only ones who remained within the study were the Second Prince and the man who had disguised himself as Viscount Zinderson's attendant during the visit to Firmrock Castle.

"How dare he… How dare the Norton Family disrespect me so dismissively? Do they think that they will be safe just because they have Firmrock Castle locking us out? Well, I will crush their naive dreams and will never forgive them. They will pay this price in blood. Only their fresh blood can wash away the humiliation I have received…" roared the Second Prince as he paced around in his study.

After a while, the Second Prince stopped in front of the silent man and said, "Tell me, what did you manage to find out during the visit?"

The middle-aged man bowed down and said, "Your Majesty, as you have predicted, the defenses at Firmrock Castle is extremely lax and I estimate that they have only 3 companies of roughly 1500 men defending that place. Three companies of troops are responsible for the defense of the front, middle and back walls of the castle respectively. Regrettably, I didn't encounter a single Norton Family soldier when I visited the taverns and inns over there. Apart from the walls and the army camps, the soldiers were not allowed to go anywhere else."

As the middle-aged man didn't know about Lorist's reorganization of the military structure, he could only see the Norton Family soldiers through the mold of the First Legion's organizational structure. He wasn't aware that almost all the family soldiers of the Norton Family had been deployed to develop the Blackmud Marsh and at least half of the soldiers defending Firmrock Castle had been sent away as well with their shifts rotating every three months.

"I've heard one of the tavern owners complain that after every winter, some magical beasts will remain in the dominion even if the wave has passed and that seriously affects the agricultural development and the spring harvests. That's why the Norton Family soldiers will still be occupied with killing the rest of the magical beasts. That's

also where they get their source of meat. The tavern said that the effort usually lasts till the 5th month. I believe this year will be similar as well."

Apart from informing the family knights and administrative officers of the dominion, the development of the marsh to build a port was not publicly announced. The fact that the family soldiers were mobilized to work on the project also made the citizens within the dominion think that they were being deployed for the usual hunt for the magical beasts post the yearly wave.

"Your Majesty, I also discovered that the Norton Family's second line of defense, which are the garrison soldiers that are responsible for the security of the place, number only very few. Even the warehouses were only guarded by ten plus people each, far less than a usual squad. Additionally, behind Firmrock Castle, a new city has been constructed and is defended by only less than 300 garrison soldiers. Also, I used the excuse to visit the Martyrs' Graveyard to climb up a hill that was near the rear city walls of Firmrock Castle and discovered that there was not even one defense ballista atop those walls. It seems that they have lost a huge number of ballistas from their battles with the magical beasts."

The middle-aged man was indeed a talented spy. However, he didn't know that Lorist had actually reformed the command units of his forces with the smallest squads numbering only 10 men. When it came to keeping an eye on the warehouses, that arrangement was in fact ideal as before the reformation, the 100 plus men of each squad was far too large a number for a menial task like guarding a warehouse, resulting in many of them sitting around having nothing better to do. Also, almost half of the soldiers from the garrison regiment at the walls of the rear city of Firmrock Castle were deployed as laborers for the marsh development project with the middle-aged spy to know no better.

Thus, the middle-aged man took the drastically small number of soldiers there to be a sign that the Norton Family was extremely lacking in military might. The absence of any ballistas at the wall of the rear city also seemed to convince him further about the theory that the Norton Family lost a lot of men and equipment from battling the magical beasts. That's why he believed that the reason the Norton Family refused the Second Prince's demands was due to their pride as a noble family and not the fact that they could back themselves up in terms of military might.

"Hahahaha…" After hearing the conjectures of the middle-aged man, the Second Prince laughed out maniacally.

"After the winter harvest concludes in the 5th month, I want to deploy my soldiers in a campaign against the Norton Family," said the Second Prince coldly.

"Coincidentally, the various nobles of the Northlands will gather for their regular alliance meeting. At that time, I only have to announce that the Norton Family has disrespected me and showed signs of rebellion with Baron Norton's acceptance of the title granted by the Andinaq Royal Family as proof to declare war against their family with the aid of the noble alliance."

"Your Majesty, you should also be vary of Baron Shazin and Count Kenmays. Those two have had business relations with the Norton Family and they also have strong forces of their own. It's better if you be on guard towards them as well," reminded the middle-aged man.

The Second Prince nodded and said, "I am well aware of that. When they come to the alliance meeting, I will forcefully hold them back to make them contribute to the campaign. Baron Shazin shall give me at least 10000 soldiers and since the Kenmays Family has a force of 30000 men, they will naturally have to send 20000 of them to me at the very least if they want their count to survive that ordeal.

"There's also Baron Felim from the Family of the Pegasus. That guy also has quite a formidable force in his hands, so I'll have him send 5000 of them my way as well. Apart from the Norton Family, these three noble families are the most powerful ones at the moment. This time around, not one of them can hope to sit back idly and must all do their part in this campaign. Then again, Baron Felim has always been rather respectful towards me, so I might just raise his title after this campaign if he performs well…"

"Your Majesty truly is wise," praised the middle-aged man. "So, how many soldiers does Your Majesty plan to deploy against the Norton Family?"

The Second Prince fell into deep thought before he said, "This campaign will be a good chance to show off the prowess of my kingdom's army, the First Legion, to these backwater nobles. The First Legion shall deploy 50000 troops for this campaign and leave behind 10000 troops to guard the main camp. The remaining two regiments will be in charge of the supply lines."

"Your Majesty, isn't that a little too much for a small family like the Nortons?" asked the middle-aged man.

"You don't understand. The Norton Family doesn't even consider me a worthy adversary. But, we only need to lock them in their dominion for half a year to win without even engaging in a single battle with them. I'd like to see how the Norton Family plans to feed their 200000 plus citizens without access to food from outside their dominion. I won't be that stupid to have my First Legion attack the Firmrock Castle head-on and cause any unnecessary losses.

"The deployment of the First Legion is mainly to pressure Baron Shazin and Count Kenmays's forces to attack the castle in our stead. With the might of the First Legion, let's see how many nobles of the Northlands dare to hold any reservations about serving me. I hope that after this victory against the Norton Family, the situation of the Northlands will be able to stabilize, causing it to become a rich provider of food and soldiers for me in the future," said the Second Prince.

"Your Majesty truly is wise!"

Chapter 189
The Onset of War

Lorist wasn't aware at all that the Second Prince had made his decision to deploy his troops against the Norton Family; in fact, the reason he believed that the Second Prince was crazy in making his ludicrous demands known was because he felt that there was no way that the Second Prince would willingly engage in a full-on conflict against him and believed that the Second Prince's letter was merely an empty threat. Lorist thought that the word 'insane' wouldn't even be able to aptly capture the essence of the Second Prince's mania.

Had it not been for the fact that most of the elite troops of the Norton Family were occupied with developing Blackmud Marsh, Lorist would've taken the initiative and mobilized his troops to teach the Second Prince a lesson himself. However, seeing that the Second Prince had nothing else to say in his letter, Lorist didn't take it seriously and even confidently wrote his insulting reply in hopes that the figurative slap on the face his letter represented would wake the Second Prince out from his pipe dream.

At that moment, Lorist was standing atop a huge wooden 'tank', which was what Lorist called this new carroballista devised by Grandmaster Fellin to satisfy Lorist's request. Apart from its size that is easily three times that of the normal steel ballistas, the 3.6-meter-long, cone-tipped, armor-piercing bolts it used were far heavier than the riding lances used by Terman's knights.

For the convenient installation of the humongous ballista, Grandmaster Fellin also had some experienced master carpenters fashion a large flat cart for ease of transportation. When Lorist first saw the 5 pairs of wooden wheels beneath the cart, he immediately named the 7-meter-long contraption a tank.

It's a shame that the tank wasn't able to move by itself. Given its size, it also took 15 days, a staggeringly long time, to be transported from the ballista workshop at Bladedge Mountains all the way to the Blackmud Marsh with the aid of ten huge work horses. After that, the tank's wheels got caught in a pothole at the marsh, causing Lorist to have to gather 50 family knights and tens of horses to spend half a day hauling it out of the pothole.

"There wasn't any other choice. Due to the incredible recoil generated by the firing of this ballista, normal carts would easily be torn apart from the recoil. That's why this platform cart is not hollow and weighs around 2500 kilograms," Grandmaster Fellin explained in a slightly embarrassed tone.

"Grandmaster Fellin, what you've made is nothing short of a road roller! Didn't you notice that the paths this carroballista traveled through have all been flattened nicely?" Lorist joked. "Tell me more about the might of this ballista."

After that debacle, Lorist still felt that it was better to just call it a carroballista. Even though it did have five sets of wheels, the lack of autonomous mobility is a huge disadvantage.

"The main problem we're facing now still comes from the custom made ballista bolts. Bolts as long as those are a little too heavy and the weight will severely impact the accuracy of the ballista. Despite that, the force of the bolt is indeed increased and it has a firing range of around 500 meters. I can assure you that even a crocodile of 20 meters in length will be killed if hit by a single bolt," Grandmaster Fellin praised his creation confidently.

"Ironspine Crocodile! Careful, they're here! Three of them from the left! There's a huge one and two smaller ones! Carroballista units, prepare to engage!" shouted one of the scouting soldiers at the front. Reports like these were already a common occurrence since two months back, so everyone returned to their usual jobs without bothering with the presence of the magical beasts as they were confident that the carroballista units would protect them well.

Of the three components of the development project drafted by Lorist, the first one which involved the construction of a wall from Hidebull Mound to Tortoise Hill so far hasn't encountered with any troubles with Ironspine Crocodiles. The other component involved filling out tens of meters of the marsh to connect the marsh to the highland hills where the port is near. Given that rocks and earth were constantly rolled down the Mountains, the Ironspine Crocodiles naturally didn't interfere. Additionally, the crocodiles showed little to no interest with the sea and usually wouldn't approach its vicinity, so there was no need to worry about the safety of workers there.

So only the central component of the plan, which was constructing a road from the Blackmud Marsh all the way to the highland hills, was under constant threat of

Ironspine Crocodile attacks. There, the carroballista division has already eliminated over 200 of those magical beasts.

Lorist jumped down from the gigantic carroballista and ran forward to take a look. A little over a hundred meters into the marsh, three faint ripples in the mud could be seen approaching. Based on the displacement of the mud, Lorist estimated that the two crocodiles on the left and right are not that big, being only around the 4 meter range. The crocodile in the middle however was slightly larger at around 7 meters. *Wonderful, just right on time for us to test this gigantic carroballista out.*

"Stand back and move the carroballistas to the side of the gigantic carroballista and lure the crocodiles over here. I'll leave the small ones to you. The big one will be our test subject of this gigantic ballista's might," Lorist instructed.

Lorist had no choice but to order for the other carroballistas to be moved as the gigantic carroballista truly took too long to mobilize. Luring the crocodiles in the direction of the gigantic carroballista would be much faster.

The soldiers manning the five smaller carroballistas happily complied to their orders. To ensure that the ballista bolt was forceful enough to kill the crocodiles, the soldiers usually waited for the crocodiles to be within 5 to 10 meters before firing away. That way, the collection of the crocodile carcasses would also be much easier as the carcasses would slowly sink back into the mud given enough time. However, that method was not without its shortcomings: the larger crocodiles would pose a real threat to the carroballistas. With their much thicker hide, they could still attack with full vigor even after being pierced by a couple of 2-meter-long bolts. They could only be stopped if a bolt pierced them squarely in the head.

At that moment, every one of those soldiers was looking forward to witnessing the might of the huge carroballista and quickly moved beside it and waited.

After the three Ironspine Crocodiles got onto land, their travel speed was significantly slowed by the uneven terrain. Given that they were far less agile on land than in the muddy waters, that made them easier targets to aim at.

Twang! A thunderous sound rang out followed by the unnerving hum of the vibrating ballista string as Lorist saw the ballista bolt silhouette whoosh past his side from the corner of his eye, nailing the forwardmost, 7-meter-long crocodile onto the ground. The crocodile struggled for a few breaths before ceasing to move entirely.

"Great!" Lorist roared excitedly. WIth a super ballista like that, they wouldn't even have to fear crocodiles that were over 5 meters tall!

Just as he was about to turn around and praise the grandmaster, the sight before him shocked him quite a bit.

The soldier who had aimed and fired the ballista was shivering nonstop as the other two assistants by his side gave him massages to his upper body muscles.

"What's up with him?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, this is also one of the weaknesses of the gigantic ballista. One person can only fire it once. Due to the vibration of the steel fiber wire, every archer who fires it will become like that and will have to rest for more than half an hour before being able to recover. Additionally, the archer should not attempt to fire this ballista another time to make sure he doesn't suffer from long term injuries. However, you don't need to worry about this as we have over 10 archers trained to operate this ballista to take one another's place," Grandmaster Fellin explained.

Lorist inspected the ballista closely again and noticed that the steel ballista mounted on the wooden platform was slightly different from the normal ones. Even though the ballista was only mounted with one support pedestal, it was three times as thick as that of the normal ballistas. At the top of the pedestal was a large steel sphere bearing which was clipped nicely into a semi-spherical hole at the bottom of the ballista itself which allowed for ease of movement across multiple axes for aiming. However, the archer had to use his shoulder to prop up the ballista from the rear end to aim before firing. It was no wonder the archer would be that severely affected by the recoil of the ballista.

Lorist breathed a huge sigh and thought that it was probably a mistake to have Grandmaster Fellin to come out with the huge modified ballista. Recalling that the assignment he gave him on researching a new type of bow that could be fired from horseback wasn't progressing well, Lorist concluded that Grandmaster Fellin was not a creative or innovative person.

Even though Lorist had asked for a larger ballista to be built, Grandmaster Fellin merely used the exact same design and enlarged it threefold without thinking about possible optimizations he could've made with some tweaks to the design. What irked Lorist most was the fact that the scale of the enlargement of the design was so

perfectly done that he didn't know whether he should praise the grandmaster for his close attention to detail or not.

Oh well, I guess I can't do much about the archers only being able to fire one shot per day. After all, we have a division of soldiers at our disposal. At most, we'll just have to get them to line up for their turn to fire the ballista. I'm sure that we'll eventually wipe the Ironspine Crocodiles out.

"Grandmaster Fellin, I'm rather satisfied with what this super ballista can do. So, manufacture two more of these. I believe that with 3 of these at our disposal, the family soldiers will no longer be under threat from the magical beasts during the development project," Lorist said.

"Understood, milord. We will definitely build the other two ballistas as soon as possible and have them delivered here to the marsh." Grandmaster Fellin on the other hand was quite elated that he had gained Lorist's approval and instantly agreed to the request.

……

At the end of the 5th month, Ovidis, who was the current commander of the first local defense brigade, sent Lorist an arrow letter.

According to the messenger, the arrow letter was sent by a knight who had appeared before Firmrock Castle yesterday afternoon. The letter was tied to an arrow which was shot up by the knight to the walls of the castle. After seeing the knight leave, Ovidis noticed the letter tied onto it and saw that it was addressed to 'Baron Norton', before he immediately sent the messenger along with a squad of men to Lorist right away.

A 'Z' shaped insignia could be seen on the letter. Thinking that it seemed rather familiar, Lorist recalled that it was the insignia of Knight Hennard's family, the Shazin Family. Upon opening the letter, Lorist was enraged. Even though he hadn't went seeking trouble with the Second Prince, the latter had already began to make his move.

Knight Hennard's message was simple: he stated that when he attended the Northlands noble gathering at Gildusk City, the Second Prince declared that he would launch a military campaign against the Norton Family with the reason being the disrespect they have shown for the Iblia Royal Family and their refusal to heed the orders of the Second Prince by not paying a yearly tribute to him as well as their

acceptance of the entitlement by the Andinaq Royal Family. 'Because of that treasonous act', Hennard quoted, the Second Prince decided that he would deploy his forces to mete out punishment.

Knight Hennard also added that he had already been imprisoned by the Second Prince and was forced to provide 10000 soldiers in the battle against the Nortons and that this letter was written by him in secret and sent back to his family along with the order to deploy the soldiers so that it could be relayed to Firmrock Castle after that. He also said that he would do his best to delay the proceedings and estimated that with the hesitance of the other nobles of the Northlands, the Second Prince would not march to Firmrock Castle with his troops before the 20th day of the 6th month and hoped that his timely warning would give Lorist enough time to make his preparations. Additionally, he mentioned that Count Kenmays has also been imprisoned and forced to contribute to the campaign as well.

Sol! Can't you let me farm in peace? Even though I have completely no interest in playing the game of war and domination with other nobles and only want to develop my dominion, why does trouble always come my way? Do they really think that the Norton Family is that easy to bully? It seems that the lesson I taught Duke Loggins wasn't impressionable enough. This time around, I better make an example out of the Second Prince. Let's see if anyone will dare to wake the Raging Bear that is the Norton Family after this incident…

"Pass my orders down. From today onwards, all development work at Blackmud Marsh will be put at a halt. Have all the knights assemble here as soon as possible. I want to host an emergency meeting," Lorist instructed the guard nearby, quickly sending more messengers to rush to deliver the message as soon as possible.

During the night, a small tent was filled to the brim with tens of Norton Family knights with many of them still covered in dirt and grime. Every one of them was curious why Lorist had called for a meeting on such short notice and wondered what was going on.

Reidy pushed the tent entrance open and Lorist marched into it with a solemn expression.

"Greetings to our lord!" Potterfang announced. All the knights within the tent stood up straight and saluted.

Lorist nodded and said, "There's no need for pleasantries. Take a seat. Today, I have

gathered you here to tell you of some bad news. The Second Prince has gone insane and wrote me a letter that demanded me to pledge allegiance to him and also for our family to pay 500000 gold Fordes to him as well as supply him with 5 million kilograms of salt yearly without cost. Naturally, I have rejected all of them. Now, he has issued a call to arms to the other nobles of the Northlands to launch a campaign against our family and they will bring their soldiers to Firmrock Castle soon."

The people within the tent instantly broke into loud chatters. What surprised Lorist was that everyone seemed to look rather excited. He really didn't understand why they were so happy even though they were going to war.

"Locke, your plan truly is amazing. You had us fake the wounds on the magical beast carcasses before and now, idiots have come to our door knocking," Els said happily.

Lorist grimaced the moment he heard that. He had asked had the sword and spear wounds on the beasts to be faked back then because he didn't want outsiders to know that the family had such advanced steel ballistas. After all, Lorist understood the principle of not showing all your trump cards to your opponent. The other reason was that Lorist wanted to show the outside world the might of the Norton Family forces that could crush even those ferocious magical beasts with only the sword and spear.

Contrary to Lorist's expectations, however, the Second Prince had interpreted that as a sign that the Norton Family lost a lot of soldiers as a result from the battles with the magical beasts, which was the deciding factor for his declaration of war against the Norton Family. Had Lorist known about that, he would definitely sigh in regret that his smarts had brought another needless conflict to his dominion.

"Milord, please don't worry. Given the might of our family forces, it is a given that we will defeat the allied army of the Second Prince and the nobles of the Northlands. In fact, not only do we have to defeat them, we have to catch as many prisoners as we can," Potterfang said, representing the other knights by expressing their dedication and determination to win the upcoming battles.

"Catch more prisoners? Prisoners take food to sustain, you know!" Lorist rebuked jokingly even though he didn't mind the idea. It was a good thing for them to be confident in their victory. What worried him was their battle lust, which was a little too high for his tastes. *For them to all look so happy despite hearing about an inevitable battle ahead, how weird… Why didn't I get this vibe from them on usual days?*

"While it's great that you're all confident in our victory, we still shouldn't be careless. I know that our forces are incredibly mighty and we must take this opportunity to teach the Second Prince and the other nobles a lesson they'll never forget to quench their thirst for the riches of our family dominion. However, the variables on the battlefield can change at any moment, so we must still take the necessary precautions lest we suffer any unnecessary losses at the brink of victory. I hope you all will heed my caution well," Lorist reminded.

"Since the enemy is almost here, we must make our preparations as well. I have ordered the work at Blackmud Marsh to be halted for now. Have the garrison soldiers return to their respective posts within the dominion within the next five days and make sure they're ready to mobilize at a moment's notice. As for the formal soldiers of the family, have them gather at Firmrock Castle to make preparations. The new recruits who have been training for two months or longer shall be enlisted into their respective units as soon as possible and make sure they are ready for battle and familiar with the new command structure," Lorist instructed.

"Yes, milord!"

Chapter 190
Before the Battle

By the time Lorist arrived at Firmrock Castle, he met up with the messenger of the Kenmays Family right away. The messenger said that he was sent over by the head of the Kenmays Family, Count Kenmays's father. In the letter, the count's father stated that Count Kenmays had been held hostage by the Second Prince and the Kenmays Family had no choice but to send them huge numbers of soldiers to help out with the war effort. However, he promised that the 20000 plus soldiers sent by the Kenmays Family will definitely not attack the castle with their own initiative and would only provide moral support from the rear lines.

"Cunning old bastard," Lorist commented after he saw the messenger leave. However, he understood that even though the Kenmays Family had no choice on that matter, things could change at any moment. While the head of the Kenmays Family promised that his forces would not actively participate in battle, would that really be the case? The moment the situation turns bad for the Norton Family, there's no way the Kenmays Family who has a mercantile background would pass up the opportunity to backstab the Nortons for even more profit.

And given that Count Kenmays was being held hostage by the Second Prince, he would be an idiot to not utilize the 20000 soldiers that were forcefully provided to him. It was extremely possible that he would use the 20000 plus soldiers as the main force to attack the castle. However, what the Second Prince didn't expect was that the Norton Family didn't intend to defend from within the castle. Instead, Lorist wanted to defeat the First Legion of the Second Prince in an open field battle as a grand show of might of the family's forces. The silver lining of that was that the Kenmays Family's forces no longer had to be needlessly sacrificed by besieging Firmrock Castle.

At night time the next day, two mysterious grey-robed men entered Firmrock Castle and announced themselves to be the messengers sent by Baron Felim of the Family of the Pegasus. After confiscating their weapons and giving them a thorough search to ensure that they didn't bring along anything dangerous, Ovidis brought the two to see Lorist.

When one of the men removed his hood, Lorist was so shocked that he jumped off his chair. "Baron Felim, why have you come?"

This man was indeed Baron Felim Chalvode of the Family of the Pegasus.

"Just call me Chack. Even though it's our first time meeting, I have a good feeling about our Family of the Pegasus forming an alliance with the Family of the Raging Bear. That's why I have come to express the intention of my family to befriend your family," Baron Felim said as he laughed while extending his right hand towards Lorist.

Lorist stepped forward and shook his hand firmly.

"It is my pleasure to receive the amicable intentions of the Family of the Pegasus. However, right now, the Norton Family is in quite the predicament. I'm sure that you understand that well. Why, then, did you come here and even offered your assistance?" Lorist asked.

"Well, let's get straight to the point. Our Family of the Pegasus has had enough of that buffoon of a Second Prince. The reason I've come is to propose an alliance between our two families and cause the Second Prince to sustain a huge loss. That way, he will have an even harder time suppressing my family as well so that we can take our time to recuperate and develop," Baron Felim said straightforwardly.

Upon seeing Lorist's questioning gaze, the baron laughed and said, "To be honest, I'm actually quite reluctant to come all the way to the Northlands. As I'm sure you understand, the original dominion of the Family of the Pegasus is within the Southern Province of the former empire, which has been divided into three commanderies by that buffoon ever since he came into power. During the days of the civil war, I've become the Second Prince's subordinate and battled along his side for five whole years, hoping that I can receive a noble title and be enfeoffed the former land of my family.

"However, I didn't expect that during the formation of his kingdom. the buffoon sent his messenger to me and asked my family to provide a huge sum of funds, citing the reason that the formation of the kingdom has caused them to be quite tight on money, and saying that I will only receive the title if I agree to help out. I trusted the words of the Second Prince and agreed to help him raise some money, with the condition that my family will be enfeoffed our former land when we are given a noble rank again, to which the Second Prince agreed.

"In the end, on the day when I was entitled, I found out that the land I had been given was actually in the Northlands. When I asked the Second Prince why, he said that he wanted to deploy his troops against the Melein Duchy and explained that the three commanderies of the Southern Province would be the frontlines of battle.

"I only found out later that it was the sum of money I had given him that prompted him to have suspicions about my family's wealth. He thinks that hundreds of years ago when my family fought Krissen IV in the Newmoon War, we hid a lot of our wealth within our family dominion and believes that to be why we were able to procure such a huge sum for him so easily. And so, the Second Prince sent his men throughout our old dominion and dug all over the place to look for the so-called treasures and even desecrated the tombs of our ancestors."

As he said that, the baron's eyes were reddening with rage. "I only discovered the ruined graves when I paid a visit to the old dominion a few years ago. When I confronted the Second Prince about it, he insisted that he wasn't behind it and put the blame onto the Melein Duchy's forces when they invaded. Naturally, I had to hold my temper back then since he was a king after all.

"Before I came to the Northlands, the Second Prince encouraged us nobles who had been enfeoffed land here to start fighting against the old noble families of the Northlands and promised that no matter how much land we obtained as a result, he would acknowledge our ownership over it. That's why battles broke out all over the Northlands a few years back. Even though I was only a baron, I still managed to conquer the lands of a nearby viscount and two other barons. After linking the four dominions together, I no longer sent out any more troops and wanted to focus on managing my territory.

"Two years back when the Second Prince launched his assault against the Madras Duchy, he ordered me to send some support. So, I had my cousin brother bring 1000 soldiers there only to have them completely killed off by that buffoon with not even one of them returning alive. My cousin brother who had fought with me for over ten years and was a Three Star Silver ranked knight who could've become Gold ranked like me, gone, just like that, and that buffoon didn't even attempt to address that matter and pretended that it didn't even happen!"

The longer the baron told his story, the angrier he got. "That buffoon then occupied the dominion of Duke Loggins who was defeated by your family and the moment he got a foothold here it the Northlands, he instantly dropped all attempt at diplomacy.

After I paid my yearly taxes to him, he sent a tax officer to demand for extra money that was due from the lands of the two barons and viscount I've conquered! Not only that, he sent his soldiers to ransack the houses of the citizens of my dominion. Even though I argued that I've already paid the due taxes, the officer said that it was only for my own barony and not the other two baronies and viscounty.

"Thus, I went to look for that buffoon again and he said with a straight face that the situation has changed as the Northlands, which was under the rule of Duke Loggins formerly, is now under his personal rule. That's why he forbade battles between nobles from that day onwards and even said that he would take the lands of the defeated noble families back into his own hands. The hard work I put into conquering the three extra territories had all gone to waste! What would I take to feed my 10000-strong army and my citizens?!"

Clutching Lorist's hand emotionally, Baron Felim continued, "That's why I have decided to join hands with the Norton Family and give that buffoon a lesson. I have an idea that can allow you to defeat the buffoon's First Legion within a single battle."

The baron's idea was a rather simple and straightforward one: ambushing during the night. As the Family of the Pegasus had been forced to lend 5000 soldiers to aid with the war effort, Baron Felim wanted to reenact the 'Daybreak Assault' that Duke Madras had managed to pull off. He believed that if Duke Madras could pull it off, then there was no doubt that an allied effort between the Family of the Pegasus and the Family of the Raging Bear would succeed.

Lorist smiled as he shook his head and told the baron that there was no need to go out of their way for a night ambush as he was confident that he would be able to crush the Second Prince's First Legion in an open field battle and also show the might of the Family of the Raging Bear to the world at the same time.

Lorist told the baron that he did not need the latter to do anything aside from ensuring that his 5000 troops wouldn't rush into the battlefield lest they get involved in the assaults of the Norton Family forces.

A little bewildered by Lorist's confidence, Baron Felim reminded Lorist that while the Second Prince was a first rate buffoon, the First Legion he commanded still numbered up to 60000 people. With the addition of Baron Shazin's 10000 soldiers and Count Kenmays's 20000 plus family forces. as well as his own family's 5000, coupled with a ragtag combination of the various forces of the smaller noble families in the

Northlands, he estimated that there would be a little over 100000 soldiers in total. He wondered if Lorist actually thought that facing off against a threat as huge as that in a single open field battle was possible.

Lorist merely laughed and told Baron Felim that Count Kenmays and Baron Shazin had the same thoughts as he did and that they would definitely not willingly march head-first into the battlefield. With only the First Legion and the combined forces of the smaller noble families actively participating, Lorist merely dismissed them as a disorganized mess.

"But, I should at least contribute in some way, shouldn't I? I won't feel satisfied just sitting down idly doing nothing," said Baron Felim unwillingly.

"How about this," Lorist said before he went into deep thought and brought out a map of the Northlands. "You ought to include as many cavalrymen as you can among the 5000 soldiers you're sending to the Second Prince. The moment the First Legion he commands is defeated, your troops can take advantage of the chaos and travel to conquer the Hendliff Suspension Bridge and the Freist Castle when they least expect it. That way, the two towns and three bastides nearby will be under the control of your family. I believe with that, you'll be able to sustain your family forces and possibly even expand it."

"What you're saying is…?" Baron Felim said hesitantly.

"That's right. I'm also prepared to drive the buffoon of a Second Prince out of the Northlands with this battle so that he doesn't cause any more turmoil over here and keep everyone on edge," Lorist said confidently.

Baron Felim continued, "Then, what about Gildusk City?"

"Of the dominion formerly belonging to the duke, I plan to hand half of it which includes Gildusk City to Baron Shazin. Essentially, you'll be splitting the dominion with him equally in half," Lorist said without hesitation.

"Alright, then it's a deal." Even though he wasn't able to gain Gildusk City for himself, with the Hendliff Suspension Bridge under his control, he would still be able to profit somewhat from collecting toll there, and Baron Felim was more than satisfied with that arrangement. Right now, he only had one worry, and that was whether the Norton Family could actually defeat the Second Prince's forces.

"Don't worry. In ten more days, you will get to see with your own eyes where all my confidence came from," Lorist said while smiling as he sent the baron away.

"Milord, did you reject his suggestion because you feared that he would be a spy sent by the Second Prince?" Tarkel asked hesitantly. As Lorist's personal attendant, he was there the whole time during the discussion between Baron Felim and Lorist.

Lorist shook his head and said, "Tarkel, you don't understand. As a noble, Baron Felim will definitely not work as the Second Prince's spy. Even if the Second Prince were to emerge victorious as a result of his efforts, if word of him being sent here as a spy spreads out, the Family of the Pegasus's hundreds of years of reputation will have evaporated. Everyone will be going on about how they sabotaged us and they will be isolated by the other noble families. To them, that fate is even worse than complete decimation."

"Then, why didn't you take him up on his suggestion? With Baron Felim's men sending crucial intelligence to us, wouldn't we be able to achieve victory far more easily?" Tarkel asked.

"Tarkel, I want to use this battle to show the world the might of our family. And fighting in an open field battle instead of turtling up in the castle will be the best way to do that. While it is indeed much easier to achieve victory by launching an assault at night, it will let others think that we won only because we used cheap tricks and nobody will truly be convinced of our might. I want to use this opportunity to kill the chicken that is the Second Prince for all the other monkeys to witness[1], that is, to make an example out of him so that the others will think twice before even considering provoking the Norton Family!"

"The Second Prince is a chicken and the others are monkeys? Milord, your words are too deep for me to comprehend," Tarkel said as he scratched his head in thought.

……

On the 14th day of the 6th month at the Somm River within the western part of the Northlands, the Kenmays Family forces that have arrived there were setting up their main camp. Near 10000 tents were erected in neat order, forming quite the magnificent army camp.

The Second Prince was currently riding a big, green-colored Zeno Horse with a proud

air about him as he marched into the camp.

"I am very satisfied with how the Kenmays Family forces is operating," the Second Prince praised Count Kenmays with a haughty tone.

"As your faithful subordinate, this is the very least that I can do," Count Kenmays replied exasperatedly. He didn't think that the Second Prince would actually imprison him and force him to mobilize 20000 of his family forces for the campaign and even had him supply the resources needed for the Second Prince and the allied noble army as well as handle the logistics.

He had thought that with 30000 soldiers in his control, the Second Prince would think twice about messing with him. It was completely out of the count's expectations that the Second Prince would abandon all decorum and shamelessly hold himself hostage to force his family to comply with the demands. The moment he recalled that fact, the count felt so humiliated that he wanted to die. However, he held that urge back and could only grind his teeth in secrecy.

"Hahahaha, with a force of 100000 soldiers, is there anyone within this realm that would dare to bar my way?" the Second Prince said as he laughed out loud. He had completely ignored the presence of Baron Shazin, Count Kenmays, Baron Felim and the other nobles and treated those soldiers as his own already. In fact, the Second Prince has decided that after taking care of the Norton Family, he would once again attack the Madras Duchy on the following year. With a force of 100000, the grudge-holding Second Prince couldn't wait to pay back Duke Madras for the troubles he has caused.

"Heed my orders. We will rest for two more days before packing up and departing. Our 100000 soldiers shall march to Firmrock Castle in the grandest fashion possible to wake that dumb bear out of its stupid delusions. Perhaps, upon seeing our arrival, that dumb bear might actually come out and surrender! That way, it'll save us far more trouble," instructed the Second Prince as he waved the horsewhip in his hand.

Noon of the 17th day of the 6th month, the 100000-strong army finally arrived within the line of sight of the guards of Firmrock Castle.

The Second Prince brought the various nobles of the Northlands to a spot that was roughly 600 meters away from the castle to check it out. The Second Prince nodded and said, "This castle is indeed easy to defend and hard to besiege. No wonder the

Norton Family dares to be so arrogant. However, they'd never expect that I have 100000 men under my lead. I can already imagine the leader of the Norton Family curling into a ball while crying out profusely within that castle and regretting his pathetic decision. Hehehe… Heed my orders! Begin setting up camp right away. We have all the time we need, so take it slow."

"Your Majesty truly is wise," said the few other Northland nobles beside the Second Prince in unison.

The moment the praise of the nobles stopped, a loud, resounding sound of a horn could be heard coming from Firmrock Castle.

"This… This is the tune of assault!" cried a surprised noble out loud.

The others were all dumbstruck by the scene that were unfolding before their eyes. *Did the Norton Family go insane? For them to come out for an open field battle instead of hiding within the castle and fighting defensively, what in the world is going on?*

Just when the nobles finished that thought, the gates of Firmrock Castle opened and countless soldiers clad in shiny, silvery armor marched outward and charged in the direction of the Second Prince's forces.

The Second Prince's expression changed immediately. Even though he had 100000 soldiers, he had only just arrived and still required some time to gain a proper foothold. If the Norton Family forces manages to rush over and catch his troops off-guard, then he truly would become a laughingstock.

"Baron Shazin, Baron Felim, Count Kenmays, order your troops to assemble immediately!" The Second Prince made his decision swiftly to have the troops of the three families intercept the first wave of the Norton Family's forces.

"Yes, milord." Only Baron Felim responded to the Second Prince's order before he headed out immediately.

Knight Hennard and Count Kenmays on the other hand merely looked at each other.

"Your Majesty, without me personally leading them, my forces will definitely not heed any orders," Knight Hennard said.

"It's the same for me too," Count Kenmays said.

Both of them understood that if the Second Prince continued to hold them hostage by his side, even though their forces would follow the order to go into battle, who knows what they would do once they were on the battlefield? If they did not act upon their orders, the Second Prince would be ultimately responsible for what would transpire.

"Fine, both of you can go lead your troops," said the Second Prince. He figured that since those two were already so deeply involved, he didn't have to worry about them secretly working with the Norton Family. It was also true that there was no guarantee that their troops would carry out their orders perfectly without them personally being in the lead. However, the Second Prince was still worried that the two nobles would only help out superficially and won't really put their best efforts into it, so he decided to send someone to follow and supervise them.

"Wait a second. The two of you shall bring two of my guards with you. Baron Shazin, you will protect the left flank of my army along with Baron Felim. Count Kenmays, your family forces shall defend my right flank. After that, I will transmit additional orders by blowing the horn, understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Knight Hennard and Count Kenmays said before they left hurriedly with two of the Second Prince's guards.

"Heed my orders! The First Legion shall march forward and assemble into the assault formation. Have the longbowmen make firing preparations. As for the troops of the other nobles, stay behind the ranks of the First Legion to await further orders and be prepared to intercept the enemy." No matter what others said, the Second Prince did in fact emerge from battle during the vicious civil war. Even though he hasn't fought that many battles, his orders reflected his experience and mastery over troops.

The First Legion of the Iblia Kingdom were well-trained as they responded to the orders rather quickly. After receiving the Second Prince's orders, the sword and shield infantry stepped forward followed by the pikemen behind them while the longbowmen completed their preparations. The two cavalry divisions of the legion surrounded both flanks of the army and were prepared to intercept the enemy soldiers that were charging straight into them.

Loud drumming sounds rang out as the forces of the Norton Family began assembling into their formations 400 meters away from the Second Prince's forces. They took on a similar formation with their infantry being in the middle, flanked by two cavalry troops on either side. The troops assembled into one square formation after another

lined up next to each other within the line of sight of the 100000 enemy troops.

The battle was ready to break out at any moment…

Chapter 191
Ballista Storm

400 meters away from the Second Prince's army, the Norton Family arranged themselves in a weird manner with three square formations of silver-armored infantry soldiers lined up next to each other, forming a straight line of sorts, with cavalry troops flanking both sides of each of those three square formations.

Even though the Second Prince had experienced many battles, he was also confused by the odd formation. While having cavalrymen flanking both sides of the infantry troops would allow quite a bit of flexibility in that they would be able to both attack and defend, lining up three square formations in a row decreased the overall defensiveness. Additionally, the space between each of the three square formations were a little too wide and if they were closer together, they could form a larger rectangular formation instead.

Eventually, nine square formations were formed neatly with each one having roughly one regiment of troops at a total troop count of roughly 20000. *It seems like the Norton Family had indeed sustained huge casualties from fighting the magical beast wave. But despite having only 20000 troops, they chose to fight an open field battle… What's going on here? Are they so desperate that they lost all their wits? Or are they going to engage in a suicidal battle to make sure we suffer even more to retaliate against me no matter the cost,* the Second Prince wondered.

And so, the Second Prince decided not to mobilize his troops and have his First Legion assume a defensive formation. If the Norton Family troops don't show any movement in the coming moments, the Second Prince would order Count Kenmays or Baron Shazin to send out part of their forces to test the waters. Since the Norton Family only have that many soldiers in contrast to the Second Prince's own 100000, which was easily five times as much as the former's, the Second Prince figured that the Norton Family wouldn't be able to fight their way out of this predicament no matter what.

At that moment, the Second Prince was already considering whether to move the soldiers of the allied noble army to the front of his First Legion troops so that he would be able to sustain far less losses.

"Your Majesty, the Norton Family does seem rather wealthy. Look, all of their soldiers are wearing a shiny, new metal armors that cover their whole body for optimal defense. Tsk tsk tsk…" The one who said that was a high officer in the court of the Iblia Kingdom, who was in actuality the personal guard of the Second Prince, Blademaster Louinse. Had it not been for his presence, Baron Shazin Hennard, who was a Gold ranked knight, wouldn't have stayed by the Second Prince's side so obediently for such a long time.

The Second Prince turned his attention back to the forces of the Norton Family and instantly felt a mix of hate and jealousy. Even a normal soldier of the Norton Family was equipped with defensive armor more complete than that of his own knights, causing them to look far more impressive in comparison. All of them looked like shiny, gleaming tin men.

"Hmph! Even if they have money, they have nowhere else better to spend it apart from the defense of their own soldiers. After all, they have to rely on these soldiers to fend off the assaults of those magical beasts. If they don't arm them enough, how would the soldiers be willing to stand off against those ferocious beasts? However, it won't matter. These shiny armor will eventually be mine anyway and I will form a personal guard that will be given the armor we take for ourselves today. Just follow me closely by my side," the Second Prince said before he gripped his horsewhip and waved it in the air harshly, as if the armor of the Norton Family would belong to him in mere moments.

"Your Majesty, look, what is that? A war chariot?" Blademaster Louinse said urgently as he called out to his liege. The battlefield had been introduced to yet another variable.

The Second Prince snapped out of his daydream and raised his head only to see one chariot after another fill up the ranks of the Norton Family. Countless black chariots traveled between the space of the square formations and took their place at the very front to form a defensive line. It was as if they didn't even consider complementing the square formations and decided on the spot to line up in a straight line. In fact, the row of chariots even blocked the cavalrymen behind.

These chariots looked like wide-open wooden boxes with one fully-armored coachman for each controlling the horses and two fully-armored pikemen equipped with kite shields and two other soldiers at the back. Each chariot was manned by 5 soldiers in total.

"Haha, so this is the vanguard of the Norton Family?" the Second Prince said before he laughed out loud. "Does he really think his chariots stand a chance against my 100000-strong army? Is the dumb bear treating us like magical beasts? They must be brain dead… Hahaha… This is far too idiotic. Have they been isolated from the world of men for far too long?"

"Your Majesty, what do you mean?" Blademaster Louinse asked as he didn't understand why the Second Prince was ridiculing the Norton Family troops.

"My dear Louinse, as a Blademaster who concentrates all your attention on the path of the blade, it's understandable that you're not well-versed in the art of war. It is obvious that the Norton Family intends to take advantage of the wide-open battlefield by surprising us with the war chariots. They intend to use the chariots which have good defense and mobility to break through our defense line to massacre away as well as allow their troops at the rear to follow up with the assault to gain victory in one fell-swoop," explained the Second Prince.

"So what's the problem then?" the Blademaster said, still confused.

The Second Prince felt a little tired and annoyed from having to explain the basics of military strategy to the fool. "My dear Louinse, you don't understand… Hundreds of years ago, humankind has already abandoned usage of war chariots on the battlefield because of its impracticality. No matter how good the defense or mobility, as long as the chariots enter the firing range of longbow troops, the horses would definitely be the first to be shot at.

"As long as the horses are killed, the chariots will no longer be able to advance would even become obstacles to the troops that are charging up from the rear. And usually, if only a single chariot is stopped, a chain reaction would occur causing the other chariots will crash into one another as a result. To prevent that from happening, the distance between each chariot must be increased. However, that in itself will decrease the impact of the chariots' charge.

"Also, the use of chariots are also really situational with terrain being the most important aspect. A simple ditch of 1.5 meters deep can easily stop the advance of those chariots. The most crucial point here is that we have a large number of cavalrymen. As long as the cavalrymen circle around to the back of those chariots, the soldiers riding the chariots will be defenseless against our cavalrymen's attacks. The reason I was ridiculing them was because the Norton Family treated us as magical

beasts. Using chariots against magical beasts is indeed a valid strategy because those beasts don't have ranged attackers and don't know how to circumvent the approaching chariots to attack them from the back. However, it's downright delusional to think that this tactic will work against us."

"I see, I didn't know that chariots had so many downsides. I even thought that riding on a chariot seemed pretty imposing. Your Majesty, after we defeat them, let me have one of those chariots to play around with. Hmm? Your Majesty, look over there. Are those two huge things chariots too?" Blademaster Louinse said curiously after seeing two huge 'chariots' appear at the ranks of the Norton Family's forces that were each pulled by tens of horses. It advanced slowly between the three infantry square formations before stopping entirely.

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It was entirely Lorist's fault. As he had felt that victory was already at bay, he didn't bother to give the family knights specific instructions. The strategy he had initially chosen to employ was to fire a few waves of ballista bolts to crumble the morale of the enemy before letting the other units charge into the disarrayed enemy ranks.

It wasn't that Lorist underestimated the Second Prince's 100000-strong allied noble army, but he truly had access to far too many ungodly powerful ballistas -- five whole brigades of them. Each brigade had 500 carroballistas with a grand total of 2500 of them within the division, each with a firing range of 320 meters. The only thing that piqued Lorist's curiosity was how many volleys of ballista fire the Second Prince's First Legion could endure.

That's why Lorist made a careless mistake. What he truly underestimated was the battlelust of his subordinates. The moment the tune of assault was blown, Potterfang's 3 heavy-armored brigades, Fiercetiger Loze's 3 pike cavalry brigades, Terman's knight division, Yuriy's light cavalry scout brigade and Josks's mounted archer brigade all rushed out of Firmrock Castle, leaving the carroballista division that was making preparations to be the main attacking force at the rear. Lorist, who didn't expect that to happen, was flipping mad when he saw that unfold before his eyes.

At least those fellows didn't turn stupid from the battlelust and know how to get in formation first before rushing into the enemy lines, thought Lorist before he hurriedly ordered Malek to direct the carroballista division to get into formation ahead of the other soldiers.

On the other hand, Els himself was up to some other mischief and insisted that the supersized carroballistas Grandmaster Fellin built to be deployed as well. He ordered his guards to painstakingly bring the gigantic carroballistas out from the castle gates past the drawbridge out to the battlefield.

"Locke, I'm not being stubborn. i just want to see how far these super ballistas can fire. According to Grandmaster Fellin, they can shoot as far as 500 meters. Think about it, by launching only two bolts to the enemy's command center, we will be able to shake this battle up quite a bit. Maybe, we might even wrap this battle up before it even beings, just like that 'shoot through the brain'[1] tactic you mentioned, with which the enemy forces will crumble in confusion and mayhem from the loss of their leader," Els said.

Fine, I'll let him do as he likes since we're gonna win anyway, thought Lorist, too lazy to continue arguing with Els.

"No matter what, just make sure you clean up the mess after playing around with it," Lorist said as he yawned. Incidentally, he had 'worked' himself quite tirelessly with Telesti the night before and didn't get enough sleep.

"Alright, Malek, if the preparations of the carroballista division is ready, you may begin. The sooner we finish, the sooner we'll be able to rest. After this, we still have to go back to developing Blackmud Marsh," Lorist said to Malek, who was mounted and riding forward beside the super carroballista.

"Yes, milord," Malek said as he made a knight salute and headed to the front.

Having nothing better to do, Lorist sat down on the super carroballista and looked at Els give his commands. "It's that spot over there in the middle with the huge rectangular flag with the royal crest on it. That represents the Second Prince. He must be beneath that flag, so just aim there…"

"But sir, I really can't see it clearly enough," complained the archer who was operating the super ballista. It couldn't be helped as average humans couldn't see a spot 500 meters away with perfect clarity. Perhaps, only eagles were capable of that.

"Sheesh, what a useless idiot you are… How did you become an archer with that eyesight of yours? Have someone else who has better eyesight take your place," Els reprimanded with dissatisfaction.

After finally settling on the right person to make the shot, Els jumped down the super ballista and headed for the other one. Before he left, he had a few guards stay to give instructions in his stead. "When I finish the preparations over there and give the order to fire, you shall follow suit. Understood?"

The horn resounded once more and the carroballistas at the front row advanced tens of meters before stopping once more, followed by the second and third rows. After that, all three rows of carroballista units adjusted their aims.

Subsequently, the drums began to pound. For as long as the drum beat went on, the ballistas must continue firing without stopping unless the ballistas malfunctioned for some reason.

The two shield-bearers at the front of each 'chariot' squatted down, revealing the loaded steel ballistas behind them, before one loud twang another rang out across the battlefield in a constant, repetitive rhythm.

Countless bolts whooshed through the distance that separated the two armies, heading straight for the First Legion's formation, causing one cry of agony after another to be heard. The frontmost row of soldiers collapsed within an instant with black, iron ballista bolts piercing through their bodies. Some ballista bolts even skewered a few soldiers in one shot.

The First Legion also responded rather swiftly. The blow of a horn could be heard as the two cavalry brigades on each flank rushed forward with the obvious intent of taking out the ballista troops as they were busy reloading to spare their own comrades from the fate of being impaled once again by the powerful ballista bolts.

Lorist who was seated on one of the super ballistas clicked his tongue and thought that the Second Prince did indeed have some military experience after all. However, what the Second Prince didn't expect was how advanced the steel ballistas of the Norton Family were compared to normal ones. It only took less than 40 seconds for the next bolt to be loaded, and that time even included the time an archer required to take aim.

The pulley-like mechanism Lorist included when he designed those ballistas allowed the next bolt to be easily loaded by a simple tug of a lever at the side of the ballista to cock the string followed by an assistant placing the next bolt into the slot, similar to the mechanism used in older machine guns in Lorist's world.

Another round of twanging rang out as the second volley was launched straight into the cavalry brigades that were charging straight for the carroballistas, completely decimating their ranks.

Apart from a few hardy war horses that neighed out loud from the searing pain, the whole battlefield was almost entirely quiet. Even the cavalrymen who were following the first wave behind stopped advancing altogether. There was still a 300 meter distance to cover, and the time that they required to reach the enemy ranks would be well enough for another four to five volleys of ballista bolts. To them, this wasn't a battle. It was a massacre.

Another honk of the horn rang out, prompting the longbowmen of the First Legion to step forward and begin firing in rage right next to their fallen comrades.

Perhaps due to the lackluster quality of the longbows of the First Legion, thousands of arrows landed straight on the ground with only a couple managing to reach the ranks of the carroballistas. However, with the shields protecting the soldiers on the carroballistas and the armor the horses were equipped with, apart from one unlucky horse that got struck in its rear, there were no other results to show for the volley of arrows fired by the First Legion.

Due to their short firing range, the longbowmen of the Second Prince's army marched forward to make up for the deficit, only to be hit squarely once again when the third volley of ballista fire began, easily crippling half of the ranks of the longbowmen. The lucky ones that managed to avoid being perforated by the iron bolts stared at the fallen corpses that littered the battlefield before letting out cries of panic as they abandoned their bows and fled. They had lost all hope.

Twang, twang! This time around, Els finally ordered the two super ballistas to fire. Unsurprisingly, the two archers that fired the super ballistas were stunned from the recoil of the shot.

However, something out of Lorist's expectations occurred. After the two super ballistas fired, the flag representing the Iblia Royal Family collapsed, causing the rear of the First Legion to break into mass confusion.

Baron Shazin, also known as Knight Hennard, and Baron Felim's troops that were stationed at the left flank of the First Legion, also began to leave the battlefield. In a mere couple of moments, all that could be seen in their direction was the dust that had

been kicked adrift from the movement of man and horse. As for the Kenmays Family forces that were positioned at the right flank of the First Legion, they retreated two hundred meters before beginning to set up their camp, taking up a neutral stance.

The twanging resumed as the fourth volley of ballista fire began. After that, three short honks of the horn could be heard accompanied by a continuous drum beat. That was a signal for the carroballistas to advance 30 meters forward before resuming fire.

By the time the fifth and sixth volleys were released, the remnant enemy troops that managed to survive already turned tail to escape.

The drumming finally stopped before a loud, sharp honk was heard, signalling for the troops to pursue the fleeing enemy soldiers.

"Norton!" A loud cheer rang out as the pike cavalrymen, light cavalry scouts, mounted archers and knights charged towards the enemy.

Els jumped down from the other super carroballista and got onto his mount before shouting out, "All mounted guards, charge forth! Let's go catch ourselves some prisoners!"

"Gosh, what's up with you guys? Are you really that excited for battle? Also, shouldn't your war cry be something simpler like 'kill'? Why are you so specific about catching prisoners?" Lorist said with a hopeless expression before turning around only to see Reidy trying hard to hold back his laughter.

Reidy had followed Lorist along when he was 16 and 4 years had already past. As Lorist's eldest disciple, he had just broken through to the Silver rank ten or so days ago and was just recently knighted by Lorist. He was currently the youngest knight of the Norton Family.

"What are you laughing about?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, did you forget that you said that the Norton Family could only use prisoners and criminals as unpaid laborers?" Reidy reminded.

Good Sol! Lorist suddenly realized the real reason his knights were so eager to do battle and why they were so happy when they heard war was about to break out. In actuality, they had wanted to catch prisoners to take their place in the development of Blackmud Marsh. No wonder back then Potterfang said that the knights of the family

would do their best to capture more prisoners, not to mention Els's weird war cry.

Lorist laughed out loud and grumbled, "What do I do with you guys, sheesh…”

Chapter 192
The Unfortunate Blademaster

On the 17th day of the 3rd month in Year 1771 of the Grindian Calendar, the battle that transpired at the Northlands would henceforth be known as 'The Raging Bear's Massacre'. The allied noble army led by Krissen Iblia (the Second Prince), King of the Iblia Kingdom, to admonish the Norton Family who refused to submit to him, engaged in a short-lasted conflict outside Firmrock Castle. Of the 100000-strong army, half of them left the battlefield at the early stages of the battle while the rest were completely wiped out. King Krissen Iblia only managed to flee the Northlands along with tens of his personal attendants.

Of the soldiers that remained on the battlefield to fight the Norton Family forces, there were up to 51000 men of the First Legion of the Iblia Kingdom. The Norton Family on the other hand had up to 45000 soldiers on their side. However, they made use of their arsenal of an estimated 3000 ballistas to launch ranged attacks. By the time the sixth volley was fired, the morale of the First Legion's troops had completely crumbled, with them being ordered to retreat after sustaining more than 10000 casualties. Subsequently, the Norton Family launched their pursuit and ended the battle in a landslide victory.

The various historians and military scholars of the Grindia Continent only had these words to say about that battle: unexpected victory. The Norton Family had relied mainly on their advantage with ranged weaponry to launch an attack against an enemy that was not well-prepared. The tight defensive formation the First Legion soldiers were in only boosted the effectiveness of the ballistas. Additionally, the First Legion troops were also unable to react well because they were almost constantly suppressed by ranged fire, causing them to eventually fall into ruin. Apart from the disparity in technology, the military tactics used by both sides were roughly on par and there was nothing else about that battle that was too eye-catching.

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Count Kenmays rode over on horseback with two of his attendants from the distance and greeted Lorist. "Brother, that attack of yours was amazing! I can finally breath a

sigh of relief now that the Second Prince is defeated. He actually imprisoned me for more than a month and even threatened my family! Gosh, you can't believe how frustrated I was."

As Count Kenmays's force of 20000 didn't leave the battlefield and merely set up camp nearby to take up a neutral position, Mons Malek commanded two carroballista brigades to watch the camp of the Kenmays Family cautiously and let the other three brigades partake in the pursuit of the enemy forces.

Lorist greeted the count with a smile and even gave him a hug after he got off his horse. "Well, I'm just relieved that no harm has been done to you. Now, you understand why I refused the Second Prince's invitation, right? I already knew long ago that he didn't hold any good intentions. If I had gone there, who knows if I will be able to make it back to my own dominion…"

Count Kenmays spat on the ground angrily and said, "Who would expect that a king with exalted status would actually resort to underhanded methods like that? He's nothing if not an insidious thug. What an embarrassment to us nobles. I will definitely not trust him in the future."

Lorist laughed and said, "Don't worry, you won't have to see him in the Northlands ever again. Also, bring a squad of troops with me to Gildusk City for some matters."

"Umm…" Count Kenmays was stunned. After a while, he recovered and stammered, "Lo-locke… You… Are you really going to kill him off? No-no matter what, he's still our king… Ki-killing a king is definitely not something you want associated with your family…"

Lorist shook his head and said, "I am not that irrational. I only want to chase him out of the Northlands. I will capture him before sending him off officially. However, if he does die on the battlefield for some reason, then that would save me a lot of trouble. The reason I want to go to Gildusk City is to bear witness for Baron Shazin and Baron Felim's signing of the agreement to split the city up so that they won't have any disagreements about territory in the future."

Count Kenmays asked curiously, "What's going on between those two?"

"I have divided the dominion of Duke Loggins into two halves for those two. They left the battlefield so quickly just now because they're afraid that they would get the short

end of the stick if they're late to arrive," Lorist explained casually.

Upon hearing that, Count Kenmays's mercantile instinct to take advantage of every opportunity he could find tingled. He objected and said, "It's a little too much for only them to take the dominion, right? As your friend, I demand to be treated as an equal. You must also care for my family too, you know…"

Lorist faked a laugh and said, "My friend, your family has already taken over the whole of the eastern part of the Northlands, yet you want to stretch your influence over here? Listen to yourself, sheesh…"

"This…" Count Kenmays was speechless as that was indeed a fact. There wasn't really any more incentive for his family's dominion to expand. At most, they could take over two other dominions further to the east and connect the Kenmays Family dominion to that of Baron Felim. However, those two dominions were quite impoverished and would require lots of funds to develop. Count Kenmays felt that it would be better to leave them to be buffer zones between the Kenmays's and Felim's dominions.

"How about this, you ought to split some of the land you conquered in the eastern Northlands among the nobles who are living off your family and send those traditional nobles of the Northlands to me. I will take charge of assigning new dominions to them. As for the new nobles that have only come recently, we will send them out of the border. That way, the whole of the eastern Northlands will belong to the Kenmays Family. How does that sound?" Lorist suggested.

"I have to go back and discuss this with my father first. If he agrees with your proposition, then we will do it your way," Count Kenmays replied after giving it some thought.

At that moment, four horses could be seen approaching from the distance. It was Els and his two guards.

"Lock--, milord, you should see the results of firing the super carroballistas…" Since Count Kenmays was there, Els referred to Lorist formally instead of using his nickname.

Els headed to the fourth horse and heaved the corpse on it onto the floor. That corpse had a huge hole bore through the torso. It was obvious that it had been caused by the bolt fired by the super ballista.

Who's that old guy? Well, at any rate, it definitely isn't the Second Prince. He's not that chubby-looking. From the look of this corpse, the Second Prince should be at least ten years younger. This fellow looks to be around 60…

As the cheerful Els inspected the corpse, Count Kenmays's face turned completely pale once he recognized it. "This… this is Blademaster Louinse. H-how was it possible for you to have killed him?"

"Why isn't it possible?" Els said seriously. "This old guy was such a big idiot that he actually attempted to stop the bolt of the super ballista with a single sword! Even though he managed to divert the first bolt, he spat out blood on the spot and the second bolt that headed his way pierced him through completely and even knocked down the battle standard of the Second Prince, causing him to fall into a stupor. His guards feared that we would fire another one of those bolts and quickly brought the Second Prince with them to escape. That's how the whole legion's morale collapsed immediately.

"Look, milord. Wasn't my decision to use these two super ballistas worthwhile? You heard that guy say it too, right? This old guy is a Blademaster! A freaking Blademaster! Haha, with but a shot of our super ballista, the Second Prince lost a Blademaster. Hahahaha, I'm just so pumped up right now! To tell you the truth, I wasn't willing to believe the prisoners who said that this old man was a Blademaster at first! Haha, our super ballista is truly unparalleled!"

"It's just a fluke!" Lorist cursed to snap Els out of his giddy laughter. Lorist himself probably wouldn't have believed that they managed to kill a Blademaster with the two super ballistas before the battle even began, but the proof was right in front of him. It's no wonder Els was in such high spirits given that the alleged Blademaster's corpse was on the ground like that.

This result was completely out of anyone's expectations. The unfortunate Blademaster Louinse had actually sealed his own fate. The first bolt fired by the super ballista was actually slightly off course and it would have flown over the Second Prince and the rest and missed them entirely without causing any casualties. However, Blademaster Louinse, perhaps feeling that letting a ballista bolt fly past him like that was humiliating, decided to leap and parry the ballista bolt with his sword.

It's just that even the Blademaster himself underestimated the velocity at which the bolt was flying at. While he did manage to divert the bolt mid-air, as he wasn't able to

pass the momentum to the ground in the air. All the force contained within the bolt was transferred through his sword into his body, badly injuring his internal organs and causing him to vomit blood. The truly unfortunate part was that the Blademaster had landed right in the trajectory of the second bolt.

Had the Blademaster stood still and not react, those two bolts fired by the super ballistas wouldn't have harmed anyone and would at most only cause some distress among the troops. But fortune is fickle by nature. Perhaps, it was the old Blademaster's fate to have died on that day. Needless to say, everyone else on the battlefield was dumbstruck as a mighty Blademaster had died that easily. If two more bolts like those before came again, who would be able to deflect them? Without much consideration, the Second Prince's guards hurriedly evacuated with their master, leaving the entire legion of troops to fend for themselves.

"Hey, what are you doing?! You can't get up there! Come down this instant!" Els shouted as he pointed to the super carroballista.

Lorist turned his head only to see that Count Kenmays had climbed his way up the super carroballista. At that moment, he was caressing the steel ballista as he would a stunning beauty, mumbling, "What a godly weapon…"

"Pull him down right now!" Els shouted angrily.

Count Kenmays was brought down from the carroballista by two guards in the end.

"What are you doing?" Lorist asked with a solemn look.

"Brother… Oh Brother Locke… You must sell me one of these godly weapons no matter what…" Count Kenmays said frantically as he clutched Lorist's hands.

"No way," Lorist said, shaking his head.

"Come on," pleaded the count once again with a wanting look.

"Nope, I'm serious," Lorist replied.

"Sigh…" Count Kenmays also understood that Lorist wouldn't sell him such a powerful weapon. But he knew that he had to try no matter what.

"Why are you sighing like that? These two super ballistas are made just for use against

magical beasts. It's not like your family dominion is near the wildlands anyway, what would you do with one of these?" Lorist asked curiously.

"To defeat Blademasters of course!" Count Kenmays answered, much to Lorist's surprise.

"Do you know how many Blademasters are there in the Iblia Kingdom?" Count Kenmays asked.

"I have no idea," Lorist said. "I only know that the Andinaq Kingdom has two working for the Third Prince. I also heard that Duke Melein himself is a Blademaster. As for the Iblia Kingdom, I only know of two who work for the Second Prince, that's about it."

Count Kenmays stretched his palm out and said, "The Iblia Kingdom has a total of five Blademasters."

After saying that, he kicked the corpse of the old guy and said, "However, there's only four remaining. The Second Prince himself has two by his side, one of whom was the Second Prince's tutor when he was younger, Zarinan. However, that old fellow had always wanted to become a Sword Saint and often secludes himself to train and research the path of the sword. Before the new year, he visited the Northlands, and that was the only time I've seen him. He then left for Windbury City at the end of the 3rd month to escort the queen there. The other Blademaster is this old guy here, Louinse. He can be considered Zarinan's junior apprentice brother. Since Zarinan is busy training to become a Sword Saint, Louinse is the one who guards the Second Prince."

Count Kenmays kicked the corpse of the old man a few more times and said, "This old guy truly is the worst. The Second Prince relies on him to toy with the Gold ranked knights of the other nobles and he happily complies and doesn't stop until his opponent is completely humiliated. Not only that, he's a greedy prick who is also extremely lustful. That time, he forcefully took poor Viscountess Justine from me and even forced me to give him a gold Forde note worth 10000 gold coins! Oh, I better check if he still has it on his person…"

Count Kenmays searched the corpse so thoroughly that his hands were covered in blood, but he still couldn't locate the note.

Lorist turned to look at Els only to see the latter smirking. He instantly understood

that Els had long searched the corpse of the Blademaster and took all his belongings.

As his attendant wiped the blood off his hands, the count said, "Apart from the aforementioned two Blademasters, the others usually stay with the Second Prince's father-in-law, Duke Fisablen. That's also one of the main factors for the Second Prince's fear of the duke. Firstly, Duke Fisablen himself is a Blademaster, as well as his trusted subordinate and family knight, Viscount Kristoph. The last Blademaster is a woman called Xanthi, but I don't know her family name. She's also Princess Sylvia's adoptive mother and is also rumored to be Duke Fisablen's lover. However, she had a miscarriage for some reason after her pregnancy and that was just around the time Princess Sylvia's parents passed away, causing her to decide to raise the princess as she would her own child.

"Currently, the suspension bridge built by my family connects to Duke Fisablen's sphere of influence, the Wild Husbandry Province. So, you can understand how much pressure the duke's Frontier Legion and his three Blademasters put on me. I can't even sleep well at night because of that. But, if I have that killer weapon of yours, I would feel much better…" Count Kenmays explained as he begged.

Lorist smiled and shook his head before he said, "My answer is still the same, I cannot afford to let this weapon out of my hands. But you shouldn't need to worry. Now that the Second Prince is out of the picture, the affairs of the Northlands will only be dictated by us four families. As long as we form an alliance, nobody will dare to cross us. We will definitely help each other as one no matter which one of us gets into trouble. Even if Duke Fisablen plots against you, he will have to take us three other families into consideration. If you're still worried, you should just destroy that metal suspension bridge of yours. I believe the Blademasters wouldn't bother to jump across a ravine just to cause trouble for your family."

"Hmph, in your dreams." Count Kenmays knew that Lorist was only joking as there was no way that they would destroy a bridge they had spent so much to build. Additionally, the toll collected from the bridge was also a good source of income.

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Lorist remained at Firmrock Castle for another day and ordered Potterfang to have his three heavy-armored infantry brigades set up a prisoner camp in front of the castle to process the prisoners before transporting them to work at Blackmud Marsh. He also made sure Els dealt with bringing the two super carroballistas back to Firmrock

Castle. After Count Kenmays had his forces head back to his family dominion, Lorist brought him along with a few other guards to Gildusk City.

After three days of travel, Lorist received word that the Second Prince was still on the loose and nobody had any idea where he had gone. Additionally, Baron Felim assaulted Freist Castle and Hendliff Suspension Bridge according to his agreement with Lorist and was currently attacking the two other towns and three bastides near that area. He reported good progress and it was only a matter of time before he conquers those places.

The dominion formerly belonging to Duke Loggins consisted of Gildusk City, Hendliff Suspension Bridge and Freist Castle, as well as three bastides and seven towns. Knight Hennard occupied Cherry Blossom Ridge, which was one of the bastides, and Evanson Town. Only two bastides and six towns remained for the taking.

As for the three bastides Baron Felim conquered, apart from one which used to be part of the duke's dominion, the other two belonged to some nearby landed nobles. As the three bastides were not too far apart from each other, Lorist assigned them under Baron felim's control. Since the landed nobles joined the Second Prince's war effort, Lorist didn't bother to show them any mercy.

On the other hand, Knight Hennard wanted to occupy another bastide and four other towns within the duke's dominion, as well as Gildusk City, the capital of the dominion. The messenger that came before noon reported that Baron Shazin Hennard's progress was much faster than that of Baron Felim. So far, apart from Gildusk City, he had already taken control of the four towns and bastide.

Along the way, the group witnessed batches of prisoners being escorted to Firmrock Castle, causing Lorist to marvel at the potential of men. In but a few short days, the remnant soldiers of the allied noble army had actually managed to flee that far before they were captured.

That night, Lorist had a few cups of wine with Count Kenmays at the campsite and chatted for quite a while. Just as he was about to take a rest, a messenger came riding into the camp.

The moment he entered the tent, he knelt down and said, "Lord Norton, please save our two leaders!"

What's going on?

After hearing the messenger's report, Lorist gasped in shock and said, "What? Did you say that Gold ranked Knight Tabik was captured and imprisoned in the duke's manor by Princess Sylvia? Knight Hennard was captured as well from attempting to save him?"

"That's right, Baron Felim has already surrounded the manor with his troops and requested the princess to release the two of them, but the she refused and threatened that she would kill those two should Baron Felim's troops dare to enter the manor. Right now, they're in a stalemate and Baron Felim urgently requested for you to hurry to Gildusk City to solve the problem and save our two leaders," said the messenger as he sobbed.

Chapter 193
Confrontation with Princess Sylvia

Even Lorist couldn't have predicted that things would turn out this way. Just that morning, he received a report that Knight Hennard had occupied Gildusk City with his troops, and just now during the night, he got wind that Knight Hennard had become a prisoner. That was too drastic a development! And so, Lorist had no choice but to head straight for Gildusk City.

By the time he arrived there, it was already the evening of the next day. Baron Felim who had his troops encircle the duke's manor came forward to receive Lorist and Count Kenmays had one of Knight Hennard's subordinates explain the details of the situation.

It all began because of Gold ranked Knight Tabik's rude mouth. As he had received orders to take control of the duke's manor, when he met with Princess Sylvia, perhaps because he believed that the Second Prince had completely lost and the princess no longer had anyone to rely on, he began to flirt with her. That caused the princess's rage to well up before she challenged the knight to a fight immediately. In an unexpected twist, the princess actually knew how to use Battle Force and was a Gold rank at that. It must be known that Princess Sylvia was only 20 years old that year, and 20-year-olds who had trained up to Gold ranked Battle Force were few and far between. It was something that usually wouldn't be possible even with exceeding talent.

The poor Knight Tabik never would have dreamed that the stunning beauty that was the princess was actually akin to a female dragon in strength, causing him to be caught completely off-guard. Not only was he captured by her, he was pummeled thoroughly first in front of everyone present.

When Hennard heard about it, he instantly rushed over to negotiate with Princess Sylvia for Knight Tabik's release and apologized on his behalf. He also promised that he definitely would not touch the princess's residence and would allow her to roam freely as she wills within the Northlands.

Initially, the talks went well. However, the princess suddenly drew her sword and pointed it at Hennard and said that she would only release Tabik if Hennard defeated

her in a duel. Having no other choice, Hennard accepted the duel reluctantly.

As Hennard was an experienced knight that had partaken in many battles with Two Star Gold Battle Force, his techniques were naturally superior to that of the princess, allowing him to gain the upper hand right away. Even though he was fighting at a disadvantage because he was afraid to accidentally wound the princess, he believed that she would eventually give up, so Hennard's family knights merely watched the duel calmly.

But, when Hennard decided that he wanted to knock the princess's sword away with one blow to force her to surrender, his foot suddenly slipped. Not only did his strike miss, he even exposed his chest completely, causing Princess Sylvia to be able to have the chance to put her sword up to his neck.

Seeing that, the other Silver ranked knights immediately drew their swords and rushed forward, only to see Knight Hennard toss his sword away and shout at them to look for Baron Felim and Lorist to come over to solve the problem before being guided into the duke's manor with Princess Sylvia.

When Baron Felim first heard about it, he was greatly shocked and instantly sent his troops to surround the manor and demanded the princess to release the two hostages. However, the princess said that she would only comply if she was defeated in a duel and said that if the baron dared to send his troops into the manor, she would kill off the two knights immediately.

The reason Baron Felim didn't want to confront the princess himself was because he felt that he wouldn't be able to take her on. He was also warned to refrain from doing so by Knight Hennard's subordinates because if he was captured as well, there would no longer be anyone there to take charge of the situation. Additionally, Knight Hennard's loss was a little weird as making a simple mistake like that was unlike the performance of a Gold ranked knight.

"And that's how we arrived at a stalemate here. Princess Sylvia has sent someone to request for some fresh fruits and vegetables and we've satisfied that demand of hers," said Baron Felim as he laughed bitterly.

After patting his attire, Lorist turned to leave and said, "I will head to the duke's manor to take a look."

At that moment, Baron Felim and Count Kenmays hurriedly stopped him and said, "Lord Norton, Locke, don't be hasty. We must discuss this in detail…"

With a mere turn of his body, Lorist evaded Baron Felim's outstretched arm and said, "Don't worry. Princess Sylvia is a Gold ranked swordswoman and she wouldn't go out of her way to cause trouble for an Iron rank like me…"

On the other hand, Count Kenmays was being restrained by Reidy.

The count shouted angrily, "Are you going to just watch as your lord walks to his death?"

Reidy snickered and said, "Don't worry, Lord Count. My lord has yet to lose a single battle so far. And, Gold ranked Knight Chevany had died because he was defeated in a duel with my lord…"

"Is that true?" Count Kenmays said, shocked. Baron Felim who was beside them also had his interest piqued. Both of them knew that Knight Chevany and Knight Hennard were the ones who were ordered by Duke Loggins to lead the 4000 Northland Army soldiers to invade the Norton Family dominion. In the end, their army was utterly defeated with Knight Chevany dead on the battlefield and Knight Hennard captured. Apart from that, no other detail was made known to anyone else.

Reidy pointed to the guards beside them and said, "It's true. Just look at our guards who are not even nervous in the slightest. That shows the confidence they have in our lord. Before this, our lord led the soldiers himself in every single battle we fought and usually charged at the very front. We're already used to seeing him slaughtering the helpless enemies while not even getting injured himself. That's how we managed to capture Knight Hennard in the first place and that's also why he's thoroughly convinced of his loss."

In a few moments, Lorist arrived at the entrance of the manor and he lightly pushed open the main gate.

Beyond that door was a small courtyard where the guards of the manor trained and changed shifts.

Standing at the gates, Lorist took a deep breath and announced his presence. "I, Count Norton Lorist of the Norton Family, have come to pay Princess Sylvia a visit! Please grace me with your presence!"

Even though Lorist wasn't shouting, his voice was clear as thunder and echoed throughout the skies of the manor.

All of a sudden, a commotion seemed to have occurred within the manor before a large group of guards scrambled out of it to face Lorist as if they were going to fight a formidable enemy.

Not long after, a loud call could be heard. "Princess Sylvia of the Iblia Kingdom has arrived…"

This was Lorist's first encounter with the princess and he finally understood Count Kenmays's obsession with her looks. She did in fact possess beauty that rivaled that of a goddess. Despite the fact that Lorist had lived two lives and met his fair share of beauties, he was still quite impressed when he saw the princess. Only one word popped up within his mind at that moment: fairy.

She did indeed look as beautiful and elegant as the fairies depicted in ancient folklore. Lorist sighed in marvel slightly and calmed his mind to stop focusing his attention on her stunning looks.

Princess Sylvia was also checking Lorist out herself. Ever since she arrived at the Northlands, she was curious about this dominion lord who had yet to show himself publicly and her first impression of Lorist was that he looked really common. He didn't wear the shiny Sid Steel armor that his family soldiers wore and was only dressed in a common grey-colored linen short coat on the outside with a black shirt underneath. He wore a pair of long black pants and a pair of black leather boots. He also donned a layer of silver wire mesh armor on his upper body.

At a height of 1.8 or so meters, Lorist was considered of slightly above average height among the people of the Grindia Continent and his looks didn't stand out at all. He didn't look particularly handsome nor was he any ugly, just normal. Princess Sylvia who has definitely seen her fair share of handsome men would definitely not even be able to recall how Lorist looked like had she met him on the street. He practically looked like a forgettable extra in a movie scene.

However, what made Princess Sylvia feel that Lorist was more than meets the eye were his rich, black eyes that were filled with spirit which inspected herself with perfect clarity, radiating a sense of calm and security, much unlike the glazed stares of other nobles which seemed respectful on the surface but actually gave off a lewd vibe.

Lorist's long, black hair was tied up in a ponytail at the back of his head, and his brows seemed to give off a sense of confidence, giving him a unique aura that made others feel that he would never cave from any challenge, which was quite unusual among nobles.

Lorist lowered his head and bowed down slightly with his right hand clutching his chest to make a salute among nobles of equal standing and said, "Your Highness, revered Princess Sylvia, the current head of the Norton Family, Norton Lorist, pays his respects."

"As a noble of the Iblia Kingdom, how dare you not submit yourself to the princess? Are you refusing to acknowledge her superiority?" Before Princess Sylvia even said anything, one of the guards harshly reprimanded Lorist.

"May I inquire since when has the Norton Family been a noble family of the Iblia Kingdom? Why don't we know about it? If the Norton Family did in fact pledge allegiance to the Iblia Royal Family, then please show me the document of proof! Otherwise, shut your pathetic mouth!" Even though Lorist still remained smiling, the rage in his eyes forced the guard to take two steps back without being able to make a retort.

Princess Sylvia stepped forward in front of the guard with a cold expression and said in a cold tone, "Does that mean that Baron Norton does not acknowledge that he is a noble of the Iblia Kingdom?"

"Naturally. Your Highness, everyone knows that the Norton Family of the Northlands only promised the Krissen Royal Family to defend the empire's borders and we have carried out our duty for the past 300 years without rest. After countless generations of effort, we brought peace to the Northlands. However, the empire fell into chaos with the three kings fighting for power, breaking what we used to know as a strong, formidable empire into shambles. Despite that, the Norton Family continues to carry out our mission to protect the borders of the empire and refused to participate in the chaotic internal affairs of the empire. Let me ask you then, Your Highness, whether the behavior of the Norton Family qualifies and unswerving loyalty?"

"Are you sure? Don't forget that your family pillaged the duke's dominion like bandits a few years back. Even though the empire has fallen, does that allow you to act wantonly like that?" Princess Sylvia retorted coldly with a smile.

"Your Highness, even though the empire is gone, the Norton Family is still fulfilling its mission and is upholding the burden by defending the rest of the lands from the magical beast wave. As for the unfortunate incident that occurred a few years back, it was sorely due to Duke Loggins's reckless greed that prompted him to stretch his claws maliciously towards the Norton Family. What we did was merely self defense. As for the citizens of the duke's dominion, they have followed us back to our own dominion on their own accord to flee from the flames of war and begin their peaceful lives anew. Your Highness, think about it, has the Norton Family occupied any inch of land that rightfully belongs to others? No. We have only stayed within our dominion and continued on with our lives. Even so, there were some that didn't want to let us rest in peace, forcing us to retaliate in kind," Lorist argued.

Princess Sylvia's fair, white cheeks reddened as her anger welled. "You truly have a cunning mouth, Baron Norton. Did you rely on that mouth of yours to fight against the magical beasts, I wonder?"

Even though her insult was harsh, Princess Sylvia had already been embarrassed to the point of rage and could no longer care less.

Lorist merely smiled calmly and said, "Don't forget, Your Highness, that I have already satisfied your request for some corpses of the magical beasts. You should know how much our heroic warriors have suffered after seeing the corpses yourself. Need I remind you that the Norton Family currently holds the rank of a count as well? Because of the efforts of our generations of ancestors in protecting the borders, the Andinaq Royal Family, true heir to the blood of the Krissen Imperial Family, has entitled us with the rank of a count, and we have accepted it as we believe our efforts merit the promotion."

Even though Princess Sylvia didn't have anything to say about the first part of Lorist's statement, when she heard the rest, she snorted and said, "I see that your family has colluded with the Andinaq Royal Family… No wonder you dare to be so defiant to the King of the Iblia Kingdom and has refused his demands multiple times…"

Lorist burst out in laughter before he took out a piece of paper from his breast pocket and said, "Your Highness, perhaps you should hear for yourself the three demands your king issued to my family."

So Lorist recited the demands word by word out loud, and with each sentence, the face of the princess paled. She understood that no noble would ever agree to demands as

preposterous as those. Those demands in essence wanted the Norton Family to jump blindly into an endless abyss! This time around, the princess truly felt utterly humiliated.

"No, I don't want to hear it anymore! I don't wanna…" muttered the princess as she stomped her feet on the ground repeatedly, throwing a massive fit.

"I've finished reciting them, Your Highness. Let's put aside the grudge between the Second Prince and I, since the 100000 soldiers he brought to attack us has already been wiped out and his whereabouts are currently unknown. The reason I'm here is to discuss with you about the release of Knight Tabik and Baron Shazin, both of whom you have imprisoned. On what conditions will you grant them their freedom? You should know better that there is much to attend to after a huge battle and that there are many responsibilities waiting for them to fulfil," Lorist said.

Now that they have returned to the topic at hand, the princess regained her calm and said, "It's simple. As long as you can defeat me, I will let them go."

After taking a closer look at Lorist, Princess Sylvia clicked her tongue and said, "Count Norton, you shouldn't have any business here since you're an Iron rank. Have a Gold ranked knight of your family fight in your stead."

Lorist merely laughed out loud and drew his sword. "I might as well give it a try…"

"How dare you?!" shouted the guard who stood by the side of the princess as he charged over with his longsword that emitted a silver blade glow.

Thud! A moment later, that Silver ranked guard fell flat on his face right at Lorist's feet.

Swoosh! Two other Silver ranked guards rushed forward with their swords as well, only to suffer the same fate as their comrade.

By the time there were tens of guards by Lorist's feet, he got annoyed and said, "Your Highness, how many more guards do you have? You might as well have all of them come at me so that I can save more time…"

With a serious expression, Princess Sylvia drew her sword and waved it at the guards who wanted to rush forward and said, "You're not his match. Let me…"

"Neither are you, Your Highness Princess Sylvia. Have that person hiding behind you

step out. Don't think that I didn't notice it just because that person is hiding beneath the shade of the tree," Lorist snapped candidly before turning to look at a huge tree near the walls of the courtyard.

"I've never seen a sword style such as yours and I don't know how you managed to discover me. I can only say that your style must be of a very peculiar origin," said a woman with a hoarse voice as she stepped forward from the tree, dressed in a loose, black robe.

It was the first time Lorist revealed a nervous look. His dynamic vision was actually unable to pinpoint the location of the person, who seemed to be standing beneath the tree. He just couldn't sense the human presence from under that robe.

Lorist licked his lips and said, "I believe you're Her Highness's adoptive mother, Blademaster Xanthi. No wonder Knight Hennard had lost during his fight with her. I see that you have been giving her a hand. I knew that something felt weird… The princess is definitely talented, no doubt, but given her young age and her One Star Gold Battle Force, how could she have defeated a Gold ranked knight who had experienced multitudes of battles?"

"You dare to look down on me? En garde!" shouted the princess in rage as she launched herself towards Lorist with her sword drawn, emanating a golden blade glow.

"Stop!" shouted the woman wearing the black robe. It was unclear whether she was asking the princess to stop or for Lorist to not resist and allow the princess to expel her rage by striking him.

Naturally, Lorist did not pay that voice any heed. Bending his body backwards, the princess's sword pierced only thin air. And as if he was a spring, Lorist bounced back up and approached the princess quickly.

The princess was shocked as she previous thought that Lorist would dodge or parry her strike. But she didn't expect that he would remain at the same spot despite dodging and even spring back up to get so close to her. The poor princess had never had another man so close to her face within her personal space and instantly lost her cool and panicked with the only thought in her mind being to stretch out her hands to push Lorist away.

Lorist's body swerved once more and now, he appeared behind the princess and caught the sword-hand of the princess with his own. His other hand reached for his own sword and pressed it against the fair face of the princess, causing her to stand completely still upon feeling the cold flat of the blade against her face.

A glint from a sword suddenly manifested mid-air and headed straight for the princess's pale face…

Chapter 194
Victor of the Duel

But the glint dissipated as the black-robed shadow landed lightly on the ground 5 meters away from Lorist and Sylvia.

"Release Sylvia right this instant!" said the robed woman in her enraged, hoarse voice.

Lorist seemed serious, but unhurried, as he smiled and said, "I believe you'll be willing to release Knight Tabik and Knight Hennard now, right?"

The black-robed woman didn't hesitate as she turned to the stunned guards nearby and instructed, "You guys, bring those two Gold ranked knights over here and tell them that they're free to go."

"Yes, revered master," said the guards as they stared at Lorist who was holding the princess hostage before entering the manor hesitantly.

Lorist kept his sword and took a few steps back, releasing Princess Sylvia in the process.

Now that she was free, Sylvia wasn't flustered at all and instead turned to look curiously at Lorist.

The moment the black-robed woman saw that Lorist had released Sylvia, she immediately leaped to her side and as she did so, Lorist stepped back another four meters to ensure that there was at least 7 meters of distance between them.

"You truly have keen senses. However, aren't you afraid that I will turn back on my word now that you've released the princess?" asked the robed woman with a haughty tone.

Lorist shrugged casually and said, "I didn't have a choice. Senior, you are a Blademaster and the pressure you're applying on me is too much. Only by maintaining our distance can I be confident that I will be able to receive your blows. And if a Blademaster like you can't keep a promise, I can only blame my bad luck."

"Good…" The black-robed woman hugged Princess Sylvia in her bosom and said, "I will release the two Gold ranked knights. However, you will have to stay."

"No problem," Lorist replied. "I'm of the intention of sparring with you as well, senior…"

At that moment, Princess Sylvia regained clarity of mind and plucked her face from the robed woman chest and asked, "Um, Count Norton… What's your name?"

Even though there was a slight breach of etiquette on the princess's part, Lorist nevertheless responded. "Norton Lorist. Your Highness, my name is Norton Lorist."

The princess nodded and said, "Regardless of our status as nobles, as a swordswoman, I will definitely defeat you to wash myself of the humiliation I received."

Lorist broke out in laughter uncontrollably at the princess's childish temper that caused her to behave like a sore loser.

"Your Highness, you're a Gold ranked swordswoman. Do you really have to stoop that low for an Iron rank like myself?" Lorist asked.

"I don't believe that you're only Iron rank. You must be hiding your true abilities," Princess Sylvia retorted.

"You should note that I only used my skills without circulating the slightest ounce of Battle Force when I defeated your guards and caught you just now," Lorist said.

After hearing that, the princess gave it some thought and was shocked to realize that what Lorist said was completely true.

"Hehe…" snickered the black-robed woman. "Sylvia, he's merely misguiding you. While he did in fact not use any Battle Force, he's using some kind of energy that we are completely unfamiliar with. Even though this kind of energy is less noticeable than Battle Force, it is actually more explosive than it. As it is stored within the internals of his body, he can react and move much faster and more agilely than normal people. I bet it's also because of the mysterious energy that he's able to detect my hidden presence. You are definitely not his match right now. I will be testing his true strength shortly."

Lorist started letting out some cold sweat in awe of the Blademaster that had so

quickly discerned the anomalies during his quick fight with the princess to the point that she was able to feel the internal energy flowing within his body. The acuity of her senses was far too frightening.

At that moment, Knight Hennard and Knight Tabik walked out of the manor and let out a look of joy the moment they set eyes on Lorist. However, they quickly discovered the black-robed woman and Princess Sylvia, causing their expressions to return to their former seriousness.

"Are you confident?" Knight Hennard asked.

"It's hard to say, I think I stand a 50 percent chance. You guys should leave first so that I will have one less thing to worry about and can fight more freely," Lorist said in a low voice.

"Do you need us to apply some pressure?"

"No need, just leave. Women are fickle and they change their minds for reasons men like us can never fathom. If you leave, even if I lose, you'll still be able to escape. But if you stay and I lose, this trip I made will have been in vain," Lorist whispered quickly.

"Alright, then we'll head out first. Be careful," Knight Hennard said with a nod and left with Knight Tabik without any hesitation.

"Hehe… You said that women are fickle?? I see that you have quite a peculiar view on us women. Since you said that, Lord Count, I suddenly feel like going back on my word. Since you're so confident, I'll chase them down once I apprehend you first…"

Even though Lorist said that in a very low volume, it was still audible to the black-robed woman.

As he concentrated all his attention, Lorist smiled and said, "Your reaction to that only serves to prove my point."

"Ugh…" The black-robed woman groaned, speechless at Lorist's statement. "Sylvia, stand back. Look closely at how I teach this bastard a lesson!" roared the woman in her hoarse voice.

"Okay. Godmother, please be careful…" Princess Sylvia said before she stepped to the side obediently.

All of a sudden, biting, cold flashes of the blade filled the area around them and the darkening sky seemed as though it had been sliced clean apart by a blade of light. Lorist was slightly stunned as he thought, *so this is what happens when a Blademaster goes all out? It does cause me to feel a kind of despair and hopelessness of not being able to escape…*

Biting his tongue and using the pain to snap himself out of his daze from gazing at the beautiful arcs traced by the Blademaster mid-air only to be faced with the countless blade strikes coming his way, Lorist said, "Here I go…"

Not only did he not retreat backwards, Lorist stepped forward into the storm of slashes, becoming one with his sword as he charged straight for the eye of the storm.

Clangclangclangclang!

Loud clashes of swords could be heard nonstop. Sparks could be seen where Lorist's sword parried the slashes as his body occasionally shifted in and out of focus, leaving behind an afterimage or two. The Blademaster's posture was graceful as ever as she landed lightly on the ground while Lorist took a few steps back as he hurriedly parried another four blade attacks coming his way before regaining his stability.

"No wonder you're so arrogant. With swordsmanship like that, it's easy to see where your confidence came from," said the Blademaster calmly with not one trace of anger from before.

"You're quite formidable as well. I've finally experienced a Blademaster's strength for myself," Lorist said with a forehead full of sweat with a few sword cuts on his coat. Even though his body wasn't harmed in the slightest, the mere sight of the cuts on his clothes showed how dangerous that exchange had been. However, Lorist still wore a relaxed expression as he understood that while it would be difficult for him to defeat the Blademaster, escaping wouldn't be a problem at all.

Even though Lorist and his subordinates had killed two Blademasters before, it was the first time Lorist faced off against one in a melee. The case with Blademaster Louinse was merely a result of bad luck on the Blademaster's part. The other time was when Lorist first led the northbound convoy towards the Northlands and encountered the Sloph Slave Traders at the Lormo Duchy who were backed by a Blademaster. In the end, the Blademaster was wiped out during the conflict with the convoy along with the organization he tried to protect.

The moment that Blademaster whose name Lorist had already forgotten got off the ship, he was killed from the combined fire of the 400 plus crossbowmen and Lorist's 72 internal energy-infused javelins and didn't even get an opportunity to show off his sword skills.

Lorist has always kept the words of Blademaster Claude of the Dawn Academy close to his heart. 'A Blademaster's area of influence in which he can observe with perfect clarity was spread out like a plate. As long as one was within that area, the Blademaster would hold an advantage of over ten times. Fighting against a Blademaster was like placing a cup onto a plate. The cup will always be within the area of influence of the plate and be put under pressure. That's why the optimal way to defeat a Blademaster was to stay out of the plate and defeat him with ranged attacks.

And that was exactly what Lorist had done in the past. However, after experiencing a head-on fight with a Blademaster in close combat, Lorist truly understood the degree of their abilities. When compared to a Gold ranked swordsman, a Blademaster was completely in a different league. When Lorist fought against Gold ranked swordsmen, Lorist was able to gain the upper hand early in the duel and obtain victory quite easily. But when he fought Blademaster Xanthi just now, he was constantly at a disadvantage and preoccupied with defending like a turtle trying to withdraw into its shell.

Perhaps due to Blademaster Xanthi's gender and physique, she trained in a swordsmanship style that was quick and swift. Her sword strikes were fast as lightning and the constant streams of strikes gave off a feeling of invincibility. However, in terms of pure strength, Lorist felt that her strikes were on par with most Gold ranked knights. That's why they didn't pose any real threat to Lorist.

Despite that, Xanthi's strikes were truly too fast. If Lorist didn't have the aid of his natural gift of dynamic vision, he definitely wouldn't have been able to resist the torrent of blade glows like he did just now. The 'sense' of the Blademaster within her area of influence was nothing to scoff at and she reacted by changing the trajectory of her strike the moment the previous strike was parried to have it come from an unpredictable angle, forcing Lorist to fight defensively without being able to launch a counterattack.

If the Blademaster didn't knock herself and Lorist apart after her first torrent of attacks, Lorist probably would've been unable to continue resisting. As he was already sweating all over, he believed that the Blademaster was probably having a hard time as well, but he couldn't be sure as she was wearing a black robe that obscured her face.

Lorist subsequently widened his legs and got into a horse stance that seemed as stable as a mountain. With a serious gaze, he stared at the Blademaster and said, "Senior, if you may…"

"Heeaaargh! En garde!" shouted the Blademaster as she leaped forward. This time around, she used a different attack pattern and moved like a black butterfly, circling Lorist gracefully nonstop as she snuck in one swift strike after another.

On the other end, Lorist held his treasured sword with both hands tightly and blocked the incoming strikes in a seemingly slow fashion with the least possible movement. He was defending with all his might without the slightest intention to attack.

Clangclangclangclang!

Loud clangs rang out once again as the swords clashed, but it was unlike the clear, crisp sounds from before and instead carried with them a low hum.

This torrent of strikes lasted shorter than the previous one as Blademaster Xanthi somersaulted backwards in the air. But when she landed, she seemed to stagger as if she didn't find a good footing.

"Gah, you…" mused the Blademaster in rage.

"Senior, if I don't return your strikes, it would be disrespectful of me! Here I come!" Lorist roared before he smiled and shifted his feet. His figure was approaching Blademaster Xanthi at breakneck speed with his sword slashing diagonally downwards.

At that moment, Lorist seemed to have transformed into a fierce general on the battlefield, cutting down two sword strikes at once with the sword not diverting from the original trajectory in the slightest. On the contrary, the Blademaster's wrist shivered as the stream of internal energy passed from Lorist's sword to hers, causing her to be unable to continue holding onto it. The sword slipped out of her hand and landed on the ground with Lorist's sword pointed at her chest.

What followed was complete silence. Nobody expected Lorist to defeat a Blademaster at all. Even Xanthi herself was unwilling to accept the result and merely continued to stare at the sword pointed towards her while shivering in fear.

"Thank you for going easy on me, senior," Lorist said before he sheathed his sword and

turned to leave.

"Wait… Can you tell me what that energy within your body is called?" said Xanthi with her hoarse voice.

Lorist stopped for a bit before he said, "To be honest with you, I am indeed not training in Battle Force. I call the energy I use 'internal energy'."

"Internal energy? Energy brought out from within the body? What a fitting name. This style sounds similar to the training method used by the ancient martial monks of legend…" mused the Blademaster who no longer cared about the fact that she had lost to Lorist.

"Milord, milord…"

It was then when Lorist realized the presence of Reidy, Els, Patt and Josk within the manor. They had been observing his fight with Xanthi the whole time with Josk having drawn his bow in full alert.

"Don't say anything. Let's leave first and chat later," Lorist instructed in a low voice.

All of them complied and left quickly with Els even going out of his way to close the gates of the manor.

After walking several meters away from the manor, Lorist's body slumped weakly right onto Els, much to the others' shock.

"Don't panic, I'm not injured. Just tired. I already don't have enough energy to walk, so carry me back. Reidy, prepare some hot water for me to bathe in. I should recover after taking a long rest, so don't worry," Lorist said with the last of his breath.

Josk said, "Follow milord's orders and bring him back first. Look…"

Everyone lowered their heads to look at the footsteps Lorist left on the ground which were wet from all his sweat…

As a result of having gone all out, the internal part of Lorist's dantian had been deprived completely of all energy. The match that lasted a whole hour was one of the riskiest fights that Lorist had ever been in. If he didn't decide to end the fight by expending all his internal energy during the second clash to shake up Blademaster

Xanthi's Battle Force, causing her to drop her sword and be unable to parry the next strike, he might have lost the battle in the end.

The main factor Lorist was able to win was his explosive use of internal energy to suppress the Battle Force of his opponent. By the time the Blademaster dropped her sword, Lorist no longer had an iota of internal energy that he could circulate and use, hence his brief departure from the manor without much of a word. With him being exhausted as he was, he would have collapsed right there on the spot if he had stayed any longer. It was fortunate that Josk and the others were there for him to carry him back while he was immobilized.

Chapter 195
Four Family Alliance

After stretching his body, Lorist no longer felt any desire to sleep. At that moment, he was filled with energy and he unconsciously recalled the scene when he fought against the Blademaster. Back then, it felt like the whole area was a completely separate space cut off from the outside with a wave of cold that swept away everything… Lorist couldn't help but feel the urge to spar against the Blademaster again.

However, he was surprised to find that he no longer felt the previous subconscious uneasiness and alertness when thinking of Blademaster Xanthi. Instead, he regarded her as a fighter on the same level as if that was the most natural feeling to him.

Now that he had slept for a long period of time, his body was well rested and completely rejuvenated.

Lorist got off his bed and assumed the horse stance to circulate the Crimsonblood Battle Force of his family before switching to the Aquametal Technique. With each cycle, internal energy was restored to his dantian and he only stopped when it was completely filled.

Even though Lorist had expended all his internal energy during his fight with the Blademaster, he realized that his internal energy capacity had increased despite being stagnated for quite some time. He now understood that only by using up all his internal energy would it benefit his training. As he thought that, Lorist continued to analyze the internal constitution of his body.

At that moment, sounds of familiar footsteps could be heard coming from outside the door. Lorist only just realized that the sky had already darkened.

Reidy pushed open the door and saw Lorist standing by his bed. Elated, he said, "Milord, you're finally awake?"

Lorist nodded and said, "Reidy, get me something to eat. I think I can swallow a whole cow right now."

"Milord, you've been asleep for two days and three nights! It's no wonder you're hungry! Wait for a bit, I'll go cook something up," Reidy said before he left hurriedly.

"Huh? Did I really sleep for that long?" Lorist mused in a shocked manner. However, Reidy had already left and he didn't get to ask for a more detailed explanation.

Fortunately, Patt, who had heard the commotion next door, came over and explained that Lorist was so deeply asleep that he couldn't be woken up no matter how loudly they called. He also said that Josk theorized that given the drawn-out breaths Lorist was taking in his sleep, he was fine and would wake up naturally when he was rested enough.

Reidy returned soon with a few pieces of white bread and a cup of macks. "Milord, fill your stomach up with these first. I've already woken the cooks and they'll be cooking up a feast for you."

"Did anything significant happen during the two days I was asleep?" Lorist asked as he bit into a juicy piece of roast chicken leg. That chicken was roasted early in the morning and it was already cold and hard. But Lorist couldn't care less as he was far too hungry.

"Yes. Yesterday, Princess Sylvia sent a messenger to inform us that she will be returning to the Wild Husbandry Province two days later and appointed milord to be her escort. Also, Count Kenmays and Baron Shazin have been arguing for the past two days about salt trading. Count Kenmays said that Baron Shazin didn't know how to do business at all and competed directly with his family's business while Baron Shazin said that the Kenmays Family were devious merchants that slipped sand into their salt so that they could sell less for the same price. The argument got real bad while Baron Felim merely watched without doing anything," Reidy reported.

"Those two fellows…" Lorist muttered. "When I finish eating, I'll go and settle this with them."

……

Baron Shazin Hennard had gotten on rather bad terms with Count Kenmays from the arguments during the past two days. Actually, he understood why Lorist had him, the count, and Baron Felim meet at Gildusk City. After chasing the Second Prince out of the Northlands, the four families will be the local hegemons. As long as they entered

an alliance, there was no longer a need to worry about others taking advantage of them.

However, Knight Hennard didn't think that he would be reprimanded by Count Kenmays with the reason being how he resold the 500000 kilograms of salt Lorist sold to him for 10000 gold Fordes for only twice the price, earning himself 10000 gold Fordes in the process to relieve his military costs, much to his delight. But that act of his caused him to be berated by Count Kenmays who thought that the same amount of salt could be sold for 30000 gold Fordes as well as the fact that the sudden influx of salt in the market harmed the Kenmays's own salt business.

That being said, Hennard didn't give the count any face either. Even though they've met a few times at the noble meeting hosted by the Second Prince, they didn't socialize much. To Hennard, Count Kenmays was a useless heir to the family who only knew how to mess around with women, but he still tolerated his behavior on account of his relation to Lorist. After all, he knew that the Norton Family and the Kenmays Family were on good terms.

Even when Lorist arrived, those two argued nevertheless like two enraged cockerels, one of them berating the other as a brainless brute while the other laughed at the former as a babyface who only knew how to mess around with women.

Lorist looked at Baron Felim who was enjoying himself as the argument continued. It almost seemed like he would clap his hands in amusement. Lorist sighed as he had no choice but to sort out the trouble between his two allies.

"You two, can't you save others some worry? To think that the two of you are practically related…" Lorist said in a raised voice.

"What did you say? He's related to me? How did I not know that?" Hennard said as he pointed at Count Kenmays.

Count Kenmays also tapped his chest and said, "Who said we were relatives? Our families have never interacted. Locke, don't just go around spouting crap…"

Lorist sighed and looked at Count Kenmays before saying, "Didn't you say before that if your cousin sister didn't go missing, you would've sent her to me as a concubine? You even said that apart from Princess Sylvia, your cousin sister is the most beautiful woman you've ever seen, right?"

"I did, so what?" Count Kenmays said as he recalled the time when they chatted in private, not knowing the relevance of that conversation to the current situation.

Sometime back, when the count was chatting with Lorist, he mentioned how difficult it was to prove himself in the circle of nobility as a family that had recently just been given a rank with their merchant background. He also talked about his cousin sister Olivia who had been sent to Duke Loggins to be his lover at the young age of 21. She had also gone missing by the time the Norton Family razed the duke's dominion to the ground.

At first, the count suspected that the Norton Family had imprisoned her, but when Lorist allowed him to check if she truly was anywhere within the Norton Family dominion and look through the newly-made registry, the count's cousin was nowhere to be found. Count Kenmays mentioned that his father was too short-sighted to have used such a beauty to appease the duke in hopes that it would gain the family a better standing among the nobles. In the end, the storm that was Lorist swept his father's plan under the rug without warning at all.

Had his father been able to plan further and waited more patiently, he would've united Olivia and Lorist in marriage so that they would no longer have to worry about their position in the future. Count Kenmays felt extreme regret for what his cousin went through and even though she was already the duke's lover, he had still intended for her to become a concubine for Lorist so that their families would have a better relationship.

Concubines were usually maidservants of nobles who have physical relationships with nobles but couldn't be officially married. Even though children given birth by concubines would be considered illegitimate, there was still a good chance for them to be included in the official family roster and enjoy same benefits as direct descendants.

Count Kenmays also swore that his cousin Olivia's beauty was only second to that of Princess Sylvia, causing her to be cared for extremely well by his father. His father had mentioned that Olivia would become an insurance for his family in a political marriage. It's too bad that she was seen by the duke who appreciated his cousin's beauty a lot and indirectly forced the hand of the Kenmays Family to send her to him.

When the Kenmays Family first arrived at the Northlands, they didn't have a good foothold yet, so the count's father wasn't able to resist the pressure and had no choice

but to present Olivia to Duke Loggins. According to the count, if Olivia didn't go missing after the conflict between Duke Loggins and Lorist, then he would've had her become Lorist's concubine instead since that was not a bad position to be in and it was probably the only thing the Kenmays Family could do to make up for the bad experiences she suffered.

"Just go ask this fellow over here. Wasn't the concubine that gave birth to his most beloved child called Olivia? He even included that child in his family roster and allowed him to become the heir of his family," Lorist said as he pointed to Hennard, who had even written a letter to Lorist one year back asking him to become the godfather of his son.

"Huh? This babyface is the cousin brother of Olivia?" Hennard said with his mouth agape from the shock.

"So you only care about her body without bothering to check out her family background? Even though she warmed your bed for the past two years and even gave birth to your child, you didn't even bother to find out?" Lorist questioned.

"This, this… Olivia never mentioned her family background in detail to me and only said that she came from a mercantile family and was forced to become the duke's mistress because of his threats… I thought that it was a pretty common occurrence so I didn't bother to ask anything else," replied Hennard abashedly.

Hennard was quite the romantic person. Ever since he secretly escorted the favorite lover of the duke away with the help of Reidy and brought the other four beauties from Wildnorth Town back with him, he declared that all five of them would be his concubines and even pledged that he wouldn't take an official wife for the rest of his life. All children of his five concubines would also have a chance at being the heir of the family.

However, the first three children were all daughters. It couldn't be overstated how happy he was when the duke's former lover gave birth to his first son. Delighted that his family finally had a successor, he even asked Lorist to be his godfather.

It was not until Lorist heard from the count that he had a cousin that he understood that the concubine that had given birth to Hennard's son was in fact the missing cousin of Count Kenmays. Initially, he had planned to inform the count of that fact in private soon, but he didn't expect the two of them would get into such a fierce argument

before he found the chance.

At that point, Count Kenmays and Hennard both looked at each other awkwardly without saying a word.

Breaking the silence, Count Kenmays said, "Um… Is… is Olivia doing well?"

Hennard quickly replied, "Yes, definitely… She's a good mother…"

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that Hennard's act of secretly bringing Olivia out of the duke's dominion was the sole reason that caused the count to be unable to locate her. When Hennard realized that, he was so embarrassed that he kept his gaze on the ground the whole time like an ostrich.

Even though Lorist wanted to laugh at that hilarious situation, he had to resolve it nevertheless. He knocked on the table a few times and said, "Alright, settle your family issues later. Let's first discuss the reason I had our four families gathered here. Now that the Second Prince has escaped with his whereabouts still unknown, the Northlands has basically fallen into the control of our four families. From this day onward, there will be none that will take advantage of us and I will also not permit anyone to even try. That's why I am here to propose an alliance between our four families to maintain complete control over the Northlands as well as back each other up in times of need. What do you guys think of it?"

None of them had any objections as an alliance was beneficial to all of them. In fact, they were all eager to enter one. Baron Felim laughed exaggeratedly before he said, "I suddenly feel that the skies look brighter than before now that I'm free from the grasps of others. The taste of freedom is delicious."

"Alright. Next, we will decide the area each family will rule over so that we will not have any territorial disagreements in the future. As the Northlands is huge with abundant land, develop it as you please. But, I only have one condition. While I won't oppose it if you desire to conquer more territory, you must develop the lands you conquer. If you don't, I will not recognize your ownership over that land, so I hope you all remember this point," Lorist said resolutely.

Hennard, Count Kenmays and Baron Felim all agreed to Lorist's condition as there was no point in conquering more land without developing it to generate income. Add to the fact that it would also piss off the Norton Family, only an idiot would do something

like that.

"I also have a suggestion," Lorist said. "The disagreement between Count Kenmays and Hennard about the sales of salt made me believe that we should also form a trade agreement. I have decided to establish a salt merchant committee dedicated to managing the sales of salt. The Norton Family will be selling 500000 kilograms of salt to the committee at a price of 10000 gold Fordes for it to be resold. Are you guys willing to take part?"

"How will we split profits?" Count Kenmays asked.

"Each of your families will own 30 percent of the shares by investing 10000 gold Fordes as capital and manage the committee's operations. I, on the other hand, will only take 10 percent of the committee's shares and I will not be sending anyone to be part of the management. If you guys can agree on it, I suggest that we let the Kenmays Family be in charge of the main business decisions while the other two families send accountants to monitor the operations. Profits will be split according to the respective shares we hold," Lorist said.

"I agree," Baron Felim said right away.

With a great opportunity like that, Baron Felim naturally agreed as quickly as he could. In fact, he was so grateful that he had the urge to hug and kiss Lorist to express his gratitude.

"I agree as well," Hennard said. He understood that Count Kenmays was not wrong that he was not a good businessman and the salt business was merely a side job for him to make more money for the bonus salary of his troops.

Currently, only Count Kenmays remained in deep thought. In actuality, his family had the most to lose from Lorist's suggestion as his own salt business could earn up to 40000 gold Fordes for every 10000 invested. If he agreed to join the committee, his profits would naturally be lesser in comparison. Coupled with the fact that he had to split 70 percent of the profit with the others, it wasn't worth it at all no matter how he looked at it.

But when he raised his head and saw Lorist smiling, he suddenly understood Lorist's intentions. The formation of the salt merchant committee was a necessary component for a functional and beneficial alliance for all. Only if the other families stood to gain

something from the alliance would they truly be willing to help the Kenmays Family out with utmost sincerity in time of need. Compared to the extra profit of a few ten thousand gold Fordes, the loyalty and aid of the other families were far more valuable.

"I'll be part of this as well and I'll definitely earn all of us good money," Count Kenmays said.

"Then it's decided. We just have to sign over here to agree to the terms we've discussed," Lorist said as he took out a document.

……

With but a short meeting, the four families of the Northlands formed an alliance. Historians in future generations would come to praise the alliance as it allowed the Northlands to constantly develop and have lasting peace, drawing many people all over the war torn lands to move to that peaceful haven.

The four families would also continue to honor the alliance for the millenia to come with not a single one of them betraying it or regret being a part of it. Whenever there was trouble for one family, the other three families would definitely do their utmost to help, turning even the most dire situations around so that the alliance members could continue to propagate and flourish. The alliance was such a long-standing one that it was even heralded as the pinnacle of trustworthiness and unity by all.

Chapter 196
Prisoners and Letter

With the four family alliance settled, Lorist breathed a sigh of relief. After all, the Northlands was far too large; the area it covered was easily as wide as that of two duchies combined. To travel from Firmrock Castle all the way to Hendliff Suspension Bridge took at least 7 days on horseback. However, given that it was occupied by Baron Felim's forces, there was no longer a need to worry about troublesome outsiders like the Second Prince entering the Northlands without warning.

Lorist hoped that Baron Felim and Hennard would reorganize their troops and build up combat ability by routinely sending them to the Second Prince's Winston Province for some excursions to bring in more commoners to the Northlands while pillaging some nobles who didn't cooperate. The point was to cause as much turmoil as possible within the area around the Iblia Kingdom's capital to sabotage the Second Prince's chances of forming yet another army to once again threaten the peace of the Northlands.

Baron Felim and Hennard both agreed to that request right away but they also stated one of their own. As they were quite impressed by the performance of the Norton Family's soldiers, they requested Lorist to provide them with the same stainless steel armor that they thought Lorist's soldiers were using. However, they didn't know that the armor used by the Norton Family forces were actually made from an extra durable steel which was only coated in silver.

Initially, Lorist had planned to distribute some of the metal armor taken from the prisoner soldiers of the First Legion to the other two nobles. However, Baron Felim and Hennard perceived those armor as inherently inferior and believed that the low quality only provided slightly better defense than normal leather armor. Having witnessed the performance of the armor used by the Norton Family forces, they naturally didn't hold normal iron armor in high regard.

At that moment, Count Kenmays came to join the conversation and also decided to outfit his own troops with better equipment. In the past, no matter they be plate armor, scale armor or chain mail, he would be satisfied as long as they were metal

armor. However, after seeing the armor of the Norton Family, he felt that his own troops were poor beggars in comparison. Putting aside other factors, just based on looks alone, the Norton Family troops looked far more imposing. Additionally, he felt that getting new sets of identical armor for his troops would improve their uniformity as well as give a slight boost to their morale.

Seeing the other three pleading nonstop, Lorist told them that Grandmaster Sid was the one who redesigned the armor for his troops. He also mentioned that while he naturally couldn't offer the armor used by his own troops for sale, he could have Grandmaster Sid design other custom-made armor sets for each of the three families which would have no less defensive capability than the armor of the Whitelion Legion.

With that, the other three revealed expressions of joy. But before saying anything else, Lorist snapped them out of their daydreams and asked them how they would be able to pay for the cost as each set of armor cost no less than 40 to 50 gold Fordes to make alone, not to say anything about profit yet.

Upon mention of funds, Baron Felim and Hennard's expressions both turned sour. Fortunately, Baron Felim had some wealth on his hands valued around 100000 gold Fordes from his successful conquest of the two bastides of other landed nobles. But Hennard was practically broke and couldn't pay out more than 20000 gold Fordes. Initially, he thought that he could raid the treasury in the duke's manor to gain quite an amount of wealth, but out of his expectations, Princess Sylvia and her Blademaster godmother was still there and had captured Knight Tabik and himself before he could start. Had it not been for Lorist's timely arrival, both of them would still be imprisoned within the manor.

By the time Princess Sylvia leaves the manor, there shouldn't be any valuables remaining within it. Hennard sighed in resignation at the depressing thought. But at that moment, Count Kenmays approached him and gave him a novel idea as his cousin-brother-in-law.

Count Kenmays said, "Right now, what do you think you can do to gain the most amount of money? The answer is, selling off military equipment. Before this, us three families bought a huge number of metal armor from the Norton Family, right? We can just resell that armor to others and use the funds we obtain from that to buy new equipment. As long as Lorist cuts us some slack and doesn't profit too much at our expense, we might even have some funds left from selling the old gear."

Upon hearing that idea, Baron Felim and Hennard turned their frowns upside down and praised Count Kenmays for his keen insight. They followed up and asked who they should sell the old equipment to.

Count Kenmays answered, "I believe the ideal person to sell them to is Duke Madras. These past few years, his forces suffered huge casualties and the Madras Duchy doesn't have any copper mines. Most of the equipment purchased by the duke is either done at a high price from the central four duchies or traded with using food. Currently, as the four central duchies are arming themselves for war, Duke Madras wouldn't be able to buy any equipment from them to refit his army. If we can get into contact with him, I believe he'll offer a good price for our equipment."

The three of them continued to discuss the matter for the rest of the day before finalizing it and handling it to the salt merchant committee since Count Kenmays was in charge of it anyway. However, since they had just split the duke's dominion, Baron Felim and Hennard had things to settle within the area, so the meeting was scheduled one month later at Firmrock Castle, during which Lorist would present the armor designed by Grandmaster Sid to the three other families.

……

Now that the matter was handled, Lorist intended to return, only to remember the troublesome task that awaited him. Princess Sylvia said that she wanted to return to the Wild Husbandry Province and even appointed him personally to be her escort. *Even though the Second Prince's territory is on the other end of the Hendliff Suspension Bridge, can't you go back yourself? Why would you go out of your way to use the suspension bridge built by the Kenmays Family at the eastern Northlands?* It seemed that Lorist would have to spend at least ten or so days to accompany the princess all the way to the territory of the Kenmays Family.

Even though Lorist had planned to drag Count Kenmays along with him on the trip with the princess, the moment the truth about Hennard's concubine being the count's cousin sister was revealed, he insisted on meeting up with her first. Coupled with the fact that he would be a little busy meeting up with his other lovers at Gildusk City, the count couldn't leave that area during the days that followed, so Lorist had no choice but to escort the princess himself.

What a useless friend, Lorist thought helplessly. Fortunately, Josk's mounted archer unit had just arrived at Gildusk City. Coupled with the guard brigade led by Els, there

would be around 6000 men joining the trip. But when it came to dealing with the princess, Lorist was the only one who could handle it.

Princess Sylvia's own escort consisted of around 400 soldiers, including a fully-armed squad of mounted guards of 120 plus soldiers, split into equal halves of men and women, with most of them being Silver ranks. Combined with the princess's own Gold ranked Battle Force and her Blademaster godmother, Lorist couldn't imagine an imbecile that would dare to provoke them.

Apart from that, they had more than 80 four-wheeled carriages as well as around 300 attendants and maidservants. Given its large scale and status as a noble's convoy, it was the least Lorist could do to show respect by providing a suitable escort.

Just a while after they departed, Lorist's expression had already changed, because along the way he saw many of his own family soldiers escorting groups of poorly-dressed people who were carrying their belongings with them heading in the direction of Firmrock Castle. As Lorist could no longer withhold his curiosity, he stopped one of the squads of soldiers and asked them what was going on.

The squad leader who recognized Lorist frantically saluted before replying seriously, "Milord, these are all prisoners…"

Enraged, Lorist pointed to the elderly folk and women and shouted, "Are you blind? Who told you that these elderly people and women are prisoners? Do they look like they would be sent to the battlefield?"

The squad leader said in a panicked manner, "Milord, I didn't have a choice either. If we don't classify them as prisoners of war, the supply stations on the way won't provide us with any food to distribute to them. How else would we feed them? Additionally, they are family members of the soldiers that joined the allied noble army who have become our prisoners. These people here are worried about their captured family members and willingly followed us as prisoners to be brought back with us. Just now, they were even singing aloud happily as they traveled…"

"Ugh…" Lorist was completely speechless as the people he saw did indeed not look like they were forcefully captured. Instead, they seemed to be in high spirits. However, Lorist found something weird about the guard's statement and questioned him about it. "What's that about supply stations along the way?"

"Milord, I'm not too informed about this either. The orders from the top was for us to transport these 200 or so people to the main camp at Firmrock Castle and the supply stations that were set up along the way was there for us to rest at night and resupply," replied the squad leader.

Lorist finally understood that the supply stations were not that much different from those that were set up during the days of the convoy's travels. The reason the supply stations were set up was to facilitate the transportation of so many people, which the squad leader wasn't aware of.

After waving for the soldier to return to his duties, Lorist called for Els and said, "Els, bring some people along with you to find out why the convoy situation is repeating itself even though all we did was win a battle."

After Els left with ten or so guards, Lorist heard a clear, crisp voice asking, "Count Norton, what's going on? Where are they going? What are your family soldiers doing to those people?"

Turning his head, Lorist saw Princess Sylvia with her face veiled by her scarf, riding atop a snow-white Zeno Horse with a few mounted female guards by her side. She was observing the people who were passing them by intently.

Lorist took a deep breath and replied with a sycophantic tone, "Oh my dear revered princess, ever since the Second Prince entered the Northlands, he raised the tax rate heavily and oppressed the various landed nobles and commoners in that area, causing everyone there to be displeased. Not only that, the Second Prince even ransacked the property of the citizens to raise supplies and funding for his own army for his ambitions of conquest, further pushing the commoners into lives of poverty and suffering.

"But upon hearing that I've defeated the Second Prince, the commoners from all over the Northlands were incredibly elated and celebrated us for chasing the Second Prince out of the Northlands. But they were worried that he would one day return. Coupled with the word that our family provides free housing and farmland to newcomers into the dominion and enforcing only a low tax rate, these commoners made up their minds to follow our family forces back to the dominion in hopes that they will be able to live more peaceful and happy lives.

"Sigh, I didn't get a say in that matter given that they all came willingly. Just look at

their happy faces. No matter how hard we tried to dissuade them, we weren't able to shake them off. Operating with such a benevolent policy is harder than I thought and their presence only serves to make it harder for my family forces. Not only do I have to task some soldiers to escort them along the way, I also have to feed them. What do you think, Your Highness? Does a benevolent and peace-loving noble family like us, the Norton Family, deserve any praise for our efforts?"

Reidy and Patt who were listening to Lorist's speech nearby found it incredibly hard to suppress their laughter.

Princess Sylvia on the other hand was completely shocked at what she heard. When she rode away with her horse, she said in a low voice, "Count Norton, you're truly thick-skinned, you know that? How shameless…"

However, Lorist didn't blush at all and merely snickered at that comment.

……

Els returned after a day had elapsed since his departure. He said, "Milord, I've met a messenger along the way."

According to the messenger, he had been sent to deliver a letter to Lorist by Knight Potterfang, Knight Charade and Knight Loze.

Lorist understood the situation after he opened the thick envelope and read the letters within.

It actually began ten days ago when the various nobles fled the battlefield with their remaining soldiers the moment they saw that there was no hope for them to overcome the waves of ballista bolts. To capture more prisoners, Fiercetiger Loze, Terman, Yuriy and the rest led all their mounted forces and gave chase. A couple of nobles who managed to retreat into the castle of a local noble family along with their shambled forces put up quite a fight for their survival, causing Fiercetiger Loze's forces to sustain tens of casualties from sheer carelessness.

Enraged, Loze called for a brigade of carroballista troops as reinforcements and after flurries of ballista fire, he managed to take over the castle and had the 7 nobles who resisted hanged. After that, he cleared out the dominions of the respective nobles and shipped everything he could find ranging from food, supplies, and money to Firmrock Castle, including even the citizens of those dominions.

Coincidentally, Charade had just arrived at the prisoner camp outside Firmrock Castle and he, Loze and Potterfang had a joint meeting. They concluded that the development of Blackmud Marsh required lots of manpower and given that most of the nobles within the Northlands had participated in the Second Prince's campaign against the Norton Family, apart from Count Kenmays, Baron Shazin and Baron Felim's families, all the other noble families were to be considered enemies of the Norton Family. Thus, they decided to wipe them out all in one go so that there would be no one remaining to cause trouble for the Norton Family in the future.

As the order Lorist gave his subordinates was to pursue the shambled enemy forces, the nobles were considered by Loze and the rest as their target so they decided to carry out their orders thoroughly by pulling the weed out at its roots. If said nobles had surrendered without resistance, their lives might've been spared and their treatment would've been left to Lorist. But those who resisted were hanged along with their family without exception. It was as if Charade, Potterfang and Loze were reliving the days when they exterminated noble families as they traveled with the convoy through the Andinaq Kingdom.

After receiving news about the three wiping out the resisting nobles and sweeping their valuables clean, Yuriy, Terman and the rest supported those actions and split their forces into four, with the leaders of each being Loze, Waxima, Yuriy and Terman respectively, all bringing around one carroballista brigade with them to raid the rest of the Northlands. They destroyed castles, burned towns and took all the resources and commoners along with them.

Lorist had stayed at Gildusk City for a total of five days and that included the two days and three nights when he was out cold while recovering from the duel with Blademaster Xanthi. Before that, he took around 5 days to travel from Firmrock Castle to Gildusk City. Within the short ten days Lorist left Firmrock Castle, the Norton Family had already cleared out the landed nobles in the surrounding area, leaving only tens of noble families within the eastern Northlands temporarily untouched. It was estimated that within another half a month, apart from the Norton, Kenmays, Shazin and Felim families, there would no longer be any other noble family within the Northlands.

What troublesome bastards! Lorist put the letters away helplessly and understood why the messenger took so long to arrive. His subordinates had twisted his order to pursue the fleeing enemy into exterminating all the other nobles in the Northlands they considered to be their enemy! That's why the three responsible, Charade, Potterfang,

and Loze, intentionally delayed the news from spreading to Lorist lest they receive the order to stop. And even if Lorist pressed the matter later, the others who didn't oppose the operation would all be held jointly responsible.

The problem was that most of the nobles within the Northlands had supported the Second Prince's campaign because they didn't dare to do otherwise. Now that most of their forces had been captured as prisoners, the remnant forces that defended the dominions of those nobles were naturally unable to resist the attacks of the Norton Family forces, allowing the dominions to be pillaged clean.

Whatever, I'll handle the issue of the other Northlander nobles when I get back, Lorist thought. What truly troubled him was that the others approved the actions of Charade, Potterfang and Loze. The main factor the knights were so keen on capturing prisoners and moving more commoners to the dominion was because they weren't willing to be part of the development effort of Blackmud Marsh. In the past, Lorist used the reason that the dominion didn't have enough manpower to convince them to help out. But right now, while the dominion definitely had more than enough manpower, it might come to lack food next.

Those bastards, always causing me to worry like that, Lorist cursed in his mind.

Chapter 197
Escort

"Your Highness, Battle Force is contained within the bloodstream of our bodies. The various blood circulation nodes within the body are used to form a pentagonal or hexagonal star. The key to training in Battle Force lies in controlling the speed of the flow of blood to generate a rhythm. That's why people who have awakened their Battle force can move at explosively fast speeds, gain increased strength, vitality and endurance as well as various other boosts in the body's condition.

"The technique I train in however, should be one of the ancient techniques passed down by the eastern martial monks within the legends like your godmother speculated. However, my technique manual was an incomplete one, so I myself don't know where this training method will take me in the future. As the ancient chronicles state, after a millenia of dark times since the fall of the magical civilization, too much information had been lost. The best we can do in our time is to speculate the wonders they could achieve during the age of the magical civilization based on the artifacts we find within the ruins.

"While Battle Force exists within our bloodstream, the energy I use to train exists deeper within my body compared to Battle Force. For example, Your Highness, you should be know a bit about the vital organs, right? Just like how Battle Force forms a pentagonal or hexagonal star from the various circulation nodes within the body, my technique connects my vital organs into a cycle along which I circulate Battle Force. That is the reason why I say my internal energy exists deeper within the body.

"Why am I training in internal energy, you ask? Well, it's a long story. I left my home to head to Morante City for my studies at the age of 14 and back then, I only had the first part of my family's Battle Force manual and could only train up to the Three Star Iron rank. Right after that, civil war broke out within the empire and I lost all contact with my family. I was only 17 at that time, so to make a living, I worked as a mercenary. Oh, are you surprised that a noble like me actually worked as a lowly mercenary before?

"Your Highness, you don't have to apologize. It's fine, I don't mind. With no one to support me, I could only rely on myself to survive and earn enough money to pay off

my tuition. While life was definitely hard back then, I managed to live through it. The only problem I had was that I wasn't able to find a Battle Force manual that was suited for my Battle Force attribute. Back then, I wasn't aware that my family's Battle Force technique was of the blood attribute, so most of the high-ranked Battle Force manuals I bought to research didn't fit me. As I was unable to continue training, I couldn't break through to the Silver rank and was truly depressed back then.

"But when I first arrived at Morante City, I came across a worn-out little book which contained a diagram of the human body, much like those seen in Battle Force manuals, but there wasn't any pentagonal or hexagonal star diagram to be seen. Given that it had piqued my curiosity, I bought it and placed it on my shelf once I was done browsing through it. Little did I know that it would come in handy later. As I was unable to find a suitable high-ranked Battle Force manual suited for me to train in, I was extremely frustrated and annoyed. And one night when I was at my tipping point, I pushed all the books off my shelf in a fit of rage before going to sleep.

"When I woke up in the middle of the night, I regretted my outburst and proceeded to pick those books up. I didn't even have a candle back then so I could only rely on the moonlight coming in from the window to see. And when I picked that old, worn-out book up and held it under the illumination of the moonlight, I noticed that the page where the human body diagram was on seemed to have several layers. I then peeled of the outer beastskin layer of that book and found a thin silk cloth hidden within that beastskin page which had a picture of a bald martial monk with a training method inscribed beside it…

"Your Highness, you should know how frustrated I was back then from my stunted progress in training. I couldn't hold my curiosity back after seeing a novel technique like that, so I gave it a try, only to find out later that I would no longer be able to advance in Battle Force for the rest of my life, causing me to be stuck at the Iron rank forever. Despite that, my internal energy training progressed rather well. Even so, I've already trained to the peak level as described by that piece of cloth and even I don't understand how much further I can progress with that technique."

Lorist inspected the princess's expression and confirmed for himself that she was incredibly entertained by his story of a young boy who was exiled to a faraway place from home and eventually lost all connection with his family and had no choice but to struggle and work as a mercenary to make ends meet. Driven to despair by the inability to progress in Battle Force training, a miracle occurred and conferred upon that boy another chance. It was a tale filled with adversity and hardship that ended on

a happy note.

When Lorist heard Blademaster Xanthi describe his training technique as the ancient technique of the eastern martial monks of legend, Lorist gained a sudden inspiration. *That's right, why can't I just say that the Aquametal Technique is something like that?* Even though nobody directly asked him about it after witnessing him defeat so many strong enemies, they were indeed curious what training technique Lorist used. As he couldn't possibly reveal that the Aquametal Technique was a hereditary one passed down within his family in his past life, he could still pass it off as a lost technique of the ancient martial monks.

Thus, Lorist retold his story in a fashion similar to those chivalric novels by mixing fact and fabrication intricately. Princess Sylvia on the other hand didn't have a single doubt for Lorist's story as she believed that he had no reason to lie to her.

Lorist thus decided that he would use that explanation for his odd technique in the future as well. At that moment, Princess Sylvia asked, "What's the difference between Battle Force and internal energy?"

"Well, the main ones I can think of are the observable effects and explosiveness," Lorist said after giving it some thought.

"Your Highness, Battle Force practitioners are able to manifest a blade glow to increase the damage of their weapons starting from the Silver rank, right?" Lorist said as he dismounted and approached a nearby boulder. " I believe you can easily split this boulder with your blade glow."

"Let me try," said the princess as she dismounted and approached the boulder with her sword drawn. Upon manifesting her golden blade glow and slashing, the boulder was split into two cleanly.

Lorist also took out his sword and said, "In that regard, we can say that there isn't much difference between Battle Force and internal energy. The only visible difference is that Battle Force gives off a blade glow while internal energy doesn't. However, infusing internal energy into my sword will also generate the same result, only without the flair of the blade glow."

Lorist then slashed downwards and split one half of the boulder into two separate pieces.

"Based on looks alone, it can be said that blade glows give off a more imposing impression. But in terms of explosiveness, internal energy is superior than Battle Force," Lorist said a he picked up a fist-sized rock. "Your Highness, if you don't use your sword, can you use your Battle Force to crush this rock?"

Princess Sylvia thought for a bit before shaking her head.

Lorist then clasped the rock with both his hands as he infused a little bit of internal energy into them, causing the rock to disintegrate within his grip with its powdered remains falling to the ground. Princess Sylvia widened her beautiful, big eyes in shock as she witnessed it.

"That is why I consider internal energy to be more explosive than Battle Force," Lorist concluded.

Princess Sylvia nodded and said, "My godmother told me before that the ancient eastern martial monks prioritized bringing out the inner potential of the human body from the inside like you said. According to her, their martial arts were more plain and trod a different path from Battle Force. As it was hard and arduous to train in, it was eventually lost in the passage of time. It must be fate that you managed to acquire a surviving copy of the technique."

"Perhaps. Never would I have imagined that my reckless action in the past would produce the results today. As I'm no longer able to train in my family's own Battle Force manual, many people look down on me because they think that I'm merely an Iron rank. Just like you did previously, princess, when you asked me to step down and have a Gold ranked knight duel for me," Lorist joked.

"You're still bringing it up…" Princess Sylvia muttered as she blushed. She then pouted and said, "You're the biggest liar of us all. Even though you can rival a Blademaster, you pretended to be an Iron rank to duel against a puny Gold ranked swordswoman like me… How shameless…"

After spending some time with Princess Sylvia, Lorist realized that the 20-year-old Gold ranked swordswoman wasn't the haughty and prideful noble mistress he initially thought she was but rather an incredibly curious, naive child. Having lost her parents at a young age and being spoiled by her grandfather and godmother, she trained hard in Battle Force and eventually matured into a most beautiful flower of unparalleled charm. But, as she hadn't experienced any turmoils of the outside world before, she

was extremely curious about Lorist's own experiences and kept on questioning him about it. Even though she still acted a little spoiled, Lorist thought that she was merely a noble lady that hasn't truly matured through experiencing trial and adversity.

In another day, the group would arrive at the dominion of the Kenmays Family. In fact, they were already technically there, but ever since the Redriver Valley Bastide was burned down by the Norton Family. the Kenmays Family have given up on their original viscounty and focused all their efforts on their new territory in the eastern Northlands.

During most of the journey, the princess spent lots of her time pestering Lorist and asking him to tell her more stories about his days working as a mercenary at Morante City. Sometimes, Lorist would intentionally piss her off by talking bad of the Second Prince in front of her and saying things like how her grandfather Duke Fisablen was a warmongering lord, causing her to leave angrily as she couldn't make a retort. It became apparent that she was inferior to Lorist in both the sword and the word. But usually, she would come back after a while when her anger calmed to continue bugging Lorist for more stories.

Naturally, Lorist also got to hear quite a bit of rare intelligence from the princess, such as the fact that Blademasters were categorized into four ranks. For example, Blademaster Louinse who died from the bolt fired by the super ballista was merely a rank 1 Blademaster and he could be considered fortunate to have been able to reach that rank. But, his chances of actually becoming a rank 2 Blademaster was almost nil.

The princess's godmother, and her current teacher, Xanthi, was a rank 2 Blademaster while her grandfather Duke Fisablen was a rank 3 Blademaster, similar to the Blademaster serving the Second Prince, Zarinan. Princess Sylvia proudly declared that while Lorist managed to defeat her teacher and godmother, he would definitely stand no chance against her grandfather and would definitely lose within less than a hundred strikes.

Lorist said that it didn't matter because he was still young and could potentially outlive her grandfather. He said that he would challenge Duke Fisablen when he was so old that he could no longer hold a sword properly so that his victory would be assured.

Naturally, that statement pissed the princess off and caused her to call Lorist names like 'shameless' and such, which Lorist pretended to not hear.

Additionally, the princess also mentioned that age was not a factor for the various ranks a Blademaster could reach. Instead, profound insight was required. For instance, while Blademaster Xanthi did lose to Lorist in their duel, she did gain lots of inspiration from the duel and spent most of her days during the escort trip within the carriage to meditate upon them. That's why the princess was not obstructed from interacting that often with Lorist.

Ah, I see, Lorist thought as he came to realize that the reason Blademaster Xanthi did not meet him wasn't because she held hard feelings for losing but rather because she was meditating upon her insights within the privacy of her carriage.

Lorist laughed and said, "I believe that it would be quite difficult for her to gain any benefit from the insights she gained from the battle with me because the style of her swordsmanship is inherently quick and agile. When I realized that, I changed my approach to one that was as stable as a mountain and used weight to combat her lightness and accuracy to match her rapid strikes. While my sword style seemed slow to the eye, it was the perfect counter for her quick and incessant strikes, ultimately causing her to lose. If she intends to improve, I would recommend her to experience the wind. Be it a light gust or a windy storm, as long as she can comprehend the irregular flow of the wind's rhythm, I believe she will definitely benefit quite a bit from it and be able to improve her swordsmanship."

Princess Sylvia was stunned for a while when she realized Lorist was giving her godmother free training advice. When she recovered, she said, "Thanks, Locke. I will tell her about it right now."

……

The head of the Kenmays Family had been waiting for the group's arrival at the border of his dominion. After greeting Princess Sylvia, he told Lorist that five days ago, the Second Prince brought tens of guards to cross the metal suspension bridge of the Kenmays Family, presumably heading to the dominion of Duke Fisablen to borrow more soldiers from his father-in-law before returning to the Northlands for revenge.

Lorist said that it didn't matter since the four families had already formed an alliance. He told Count Kenmays's father that if the Second Prince came, he only had to stall him on the other side of the suspension bridge and within less than two days, the reinforcements from the three families would back him up so that the Second Prince never sets foot into the Northlands again.

When they were in the presence of the head of the Kenmays Family, Princess Sylvia was very conscious of her own behavior and no longer sought out Lorist that often as she did previously, once again putting on her polite princess persona, much to Lorist's delight as he hasn't had such a quiet and relaxing day for quite a while.

On the next day, Princess Sylvia set foot on the metal suspension bridge and the moment she crossed the river, she would be at the Wild Husbandry Province and Lorist's mission to escort her would end. He returned to the family dominion right away after bidding the princess goodbye.

On the way back within the carriage, Princess Sylvia sulked. Her godmother, Blademaster Xanthi, pulled her into her bosom and asked, "What's wrong? Did he move your heart?"

"Of course not, godmother… I only feel that Count Norton is quite different from the other nobles I've met. His stories are really interesting," said the princess as she started to blush.

"He is indeed a weird one. I couldn't read him at all. Sylvia, did you take a close look at the forces of his family? A little more than half of the soldiers are Iron ranked with the rest being Silver ranked. A random squad from his forces could even match up to your personal guards. Additionally, his soldiers are veterans that have experienced true combat and each of them radiate a strong killing intent. It is obvious that their combat ability far surpasses that of your personal guards.

"But here's the weird part. Even though the Norton Family has such competent and loyal soldiers equipped with quality equipment, rivaling even the personal guards of your grandfather, the count only stays within his dominion. If it were some other noble, they definitely would've conquered the whole of the Northlands right after exterminating the 100000-strong forces of the Second Prince. But what did he do? He actually formed an alliance with the three other families and let the land that would rightfully belong to the Norton Family remain in the hands of others!

"I really cannot fathom how he came to that decision. Even though I can't necessarily call him an idiot for doing so, he definitely lacks even the tiniest shred of ambition. Given the recent times, the various factions within the former empire are all gearing up for war. In another year or so, the peace treaty between the kingdoms and duchies will expire and the times of chaos would come again, spreading the flames of war all throughout the land. Even a person like your grandfather is worried for the future of

the family.

"Your grandfather is an extremely prideful person. Had it not been for the fact that he was a general of the Frontier Legion, he definitely wouldn't have supported a wolf like the Second Prince. Additionally, the young generation of the Fisablen Family doesn't have any talent apart from you. Your grandfather also knows that he has made lots of enemies, so he places his hopes for the family on you. A person like Count Norton who doesn't have the slightest ambition is not even worth the attention of your grandfather, so he definitely wouldn't approve of you getting into a relationship with the count."

Blademaster Xanthi continued to stroke the princess's hair lovingly as she sighed inwardly. *Even though this girl has always set her sights high, why would she be smitten by such an unimpressive person like Count Norton? This is going to be troublesome…*

"Godmother, that's not true at all. I've never thought of having him as my partner… He's far too detestable and keeps bad-mouthing grandfather. He even said that he would duel grandfather when he's too old to hold a sword properly and win, how despicable…" Princess Sylvia muttered as she buried her face in her godmother's bosom. After that, the two no longer talked and only the rattling of the carriage's wheels could be heard.

Chapter 198
Settling Down

With a stern expression, Lorist was seated within the tent and looking at the crestfallen knights of his family.

"Well, explain. Why aren't you saying anything even though all of you dared to go overboard? While having more manpower will add to our might, do we have enough to feed them all? The Felicitas Settlement has only just recently stabilized and we still need to send food there for this year as they can only begin to sustain themselves starting next year after the first harvests. I'm sure you've heard what Supervisor Spiel and Supervisor Camorra said just now. The food stash within the family dominion can only last us 8 more months at this rate.

"It's already the 12th day of the 7th month right now and there's only 4 months before the 11th month comes. And all of us will have to survive the winter for three whole months from the 12th month to the 3rd month next year. What comes after that? We'll run out of food by the 4th or 5th month. For two whole years, we've spent so much resources and funds to develop Felicitas Settlement and our future seemed so bright that I thought we could even relax for a bit. But you lot on the other hand gave the family another huge burden!"

Lorist was incredibly troubled as he had much to worry about. The Northlands had a total population of around 800000 people. During the pillaging of the duke's dominion, they moved another 300000 people. This time around, the family knights had swept clean all of the dominions of other noble families within the Northlands apart from those of the Kenmays, Shazin and Felim families and brought in another 280000 people into the dominion. Right now, apart from the original 200000 plus people within the dominion and the 800000 people that the Second Prince brought to the duke's dominion for the past two years, almost the whole of the population of the Northlands had been gathered up.

"I bet you thought that you could gain a lot of food from the dominions of those other noble families, didn't you? You all know how that plan turned out. The Second Prince has already sucked the whole of the Northlands dry. And do you know how much the

nobles taxed their citizens during the reign of the Second Prince? 70 percent! 50 percent of that alone would go to the Second Prince. The commoners only had the bare minimum of food to survive. Otherwise, why would they be so willing to follow our soldiers back to the dominion as prisoners of war? The food we brought along with us was akin to something that they hadn't even had the chance to taste for a year or so. They also got to eat until they were full…"

Lorist laughed bitterly and thought back at the supply stations he passed by when he escorted the princess to the Wild Husbandry Province. During mealtime, the supply stations would be really crowded with elated commoners that were traveling to the Norton Family dominion. It was like they were holding a large banquet. When Lorist went to check out what was going on, he found that the magical beast meat porridge was a delicacy that those commoners didn't get to eat usually. Not only that, the porridge was cooked with salt, a rare commodity for commoners, and they also each received a piece of thick black bread.

If the commoners remained under the rule of their original lords, this season would be when they conducted the yearly potato harvest. Even though more than half of the crop was going to be taken away by the nobles, they would still be able to survive on some wild vegetation through the cold season in time for the winter harvests.

But the Norton Family forces arrived and captured their ruling noble, ransacked the castle, and forced all the commoners to leave with them. While some of them were unwilling in the beginning, upon hearing mentions of free housing and farmland, not to mention the relatively low tax rate, everyone was eventually convinced. And when the commoners saw the soldiers cook their porridges with thick slices of dried magical beast meat, they all scrambled for their share and happily accepted the status as a prisoner of war.

If Lorist had enough food, there would be absolutely no reason for worry. Without the 280000 commoners, even if they were to gain an extra 60000 prisoners, the family's food stocks could sustain the population of the dominion for up to 15 months. Even if some natural disaster were to happen, they would still be able to fare well. But with the extra 280000 mouths to feed, the supervisors estimate that their available food stash could only last another 8 months. Even if the year end potato harvests at Felicitas Settlement were to be taken into account, that would at most buy them another three months.

Settling down the 280000 commoners by allocating housing and farmland to them

would also take up to two years at the very least. During that time, they will be dependent on the Norton Family for food. Add to the fact that a lot of manpower was required to develop Blackmud Marsh, those commoners would not be able to produce food for the next few years. For the next three years at the very least, the commoners were nothing but a burden to the family.

Taking a deep breath, Lorist looked at his knights with a stiff gaze and said, "What's wrong? Have you all turned mute? Where would we get food to feed all those people?"

Charade said with a hint of sobbing, "Milord, it's our fault. We've committed a mistake… Please punish us however you see fit…"

"Hand me the map of the family dominion as well as the map of the lands originally belonging to Count Spenseid," Lorist instructed Reidy.

"How many prisoners did you manage to capture this time?" Lorist asked.

"There are a total of 63248 people. Every soldier of the allied noble army that isn't dead has been captured by us. The First Legion of the Second Prince sustained around 11000 casualties with 8000 dead and around 3000 injured. We've already given them treatment and they can begin working after they recover within a few months," Charade said. While feeling awfully repentant, he still had a good grasp of the statistics.

It was no exaggeration that the allied noble army of the Northlands numbered around 100000 soldiers. However, after they had been completely defeated, not a single managed to escape capture. Even their base was wiped clean completely.

"How many of those nobles are still alive?" Lorist asked.

"47 of them. There were 20 who resisted and were hanged by us," Charade said in a low voice.

"Sigh…" Lorist thought deeply in silence before saying, "Supervisor Camorra, you will bring Tarkel with you to deal with these nobles and hang those who don't behave well. Send the nobles entitled by the Second Prince out of the border. As for the original nobles of the Northlands, treat them the same we do the Spenseid Family and give them a yearly pension. As their castles have been destroyed by us and their commoners moved to our domain, sending them back would be equal to sending them to their deaths. We can only postpone the assignment of new dominions to them for

the future."

"Yes, milord," said Camorra.

Reidy came back with the maps and laid them up on the table.

"Since the three of you were the main cause of the trouble, you will be in charge of fixing it. Knight Potterfang, lead three heavy-armored infantry brigades to escort the prisoners to Blackmud Marsh to begin their work term. Remember two things. First, the defensive walls and entrenchments from Tortoise Hill to Hidebull Mound must be completed before the 11th month. Just use the dirt dug out for the entrenchments as material for the defensive walls and pour water over them during the winter to freeze them up. I don't want to mess around with the magical beasts again during winter this year, so we'll bar what remains of the magical beast wave outside the walls.

"Second, the construction of roads at Blackmud Marsh can be slowed down for now. I will have the carroballista division cooperate with you to eliminate those Ironspine Crocodiles. However, the construction of the roads near the coast have to be sped up so that we can have a pathway to the highland hills soon. I hope that we can begin searching for a suitable place near the coast to build a shipyard, understood?" Lorist said as he tapped the map with his finger.

Potterfang straightened his body as he said, "Yes, milord. I will definitely fulfill your two demands."

"Don't agree to them so quickly before hearing the whole thing. The width of the wall I mentioned just now must be increased until we can at least fit two rows of chariots lined side by side," Lorist said. As two rows of chariots occupied up to 5 meters of width, the workload of the construction of the wall would be almost doubled.

Stunned, Potterfang asked, "Milord, why do we need it to be wide enough for two rows?"

"The distance between Tortoise Hill and Hidebull Mound is more than 10 kilometers. Are you going to have our family soldiers run that distance every single day? We must make it so that it is wide enough for two rows of chariots so that during emergencies we can mobilize the carroballista division to defend ourselves, understood?"

"Yes, milord," said Potterfang as he lowered his head in embarrassment.

"Knight Charade, you will have a lot on your hands to do. First, the distribution of farmland to the citizens of Felicitas Settlement must be completed by the end of this year. Don't forget to get the planting going as the land is being distributed. There is still enough time from now to the 11th month to plant some potatoes. We must definitely make use of as much planting area as we can as food is of critical importance right now. After harvesting the potatoes, you have to have the citizens there begin the planting for the winter wheat and tell them that magical beasts will no longer come this winter so that they won't have to worry about their crops being ruined and can plant without worries. Next year, the family will only collect 10 percent of their harvest, so the more they plant. the more they have remaining for themselves."

"I understand, milord. I will definitely do it well," Charade said.

"You can leave small matters like these to Butler Boris. What you have to focus on is not that," Lorist said, before he pointed to the commoner camp outside the tent. "You will be forming a labor team of youths from the 200000 plus commoners that have just arrived to begin building a town at Poplar Coast. I want to use the town there as a supply center to facilitate the development of Blackmud Marsh. So, transport the related development resources there.

"Additionally, we also have to prioritize the construction of the rear city at Firmrock Castle. Both the defensive facilities as well as the residential areas must be completed before the end of next year to spare me from seeing half-completed rubble all day. After these two projects are complete, you can prepare the construction of the Firmrock frontal city.

"Lastly, come over to take a look at the dominion formerly belonging to Count Spenseid. Loze, you come over here too," Lorist said as he tapped on the map on the table.

Both of them walked towards the table obediently.

"The land encompassing the dominion of Count Spenseid as well as several other nobles around the area is one of the rare places within the Northlands which is rich with aquatic plants. There are also 8 lakes in total, with three of them being larger ones, which are extremely suited for reclamation for agricultural production. I have decided to call this place Salus Settlement and from today onwards, that land belongs to the Norton Family.

"Salus Settlement can be divided into eight sectors similar to Felicitas Settlement. Knight Charade, you will be responsible for settling the 200000 plus commoners there. I will have Supervisor Kedan assist you with arranging for their residence as well as making a registry of their households. Supervisor Spiel will be in charge of the distribution of food while Supervisor Hansk will aid you with surveying and planning. I need the place to be managed like the towns of the seven sectors of Felicitas Settlement.

"But, after you divide the Salus Settlement into eight sectors, only focus the developmental efforts on three or four sectors first. The remaining ones shall be developed when we have a bigger population. Make sure to take the soonest opportunity to have the commoners plant potatoes on the reclaimed farmland. It's always better to have some extra food. As for Loze, all three brigades of your pike cavalrymen will be stationed at Salus Settlement and be responsible for the security of the area," Lorist explained. He had spent much of his recent time in coming up with the plan to handle the extra citizens.

"Milord, why don't you just move the commoners into the dominion? Look, along this path from Firmrock Castle to Maplewoods Bastide, the Felicitas Settlement on the left that is near the Bladedge Mountains has already began developing. On the right side, we have the Black Forests and that land is even wider than the Felicitas Settlement. It would definitely be able to house more people than Felicitas Settlement," Charade said.

Lorist shook his head and said, "We still haven't ascertained the safety of that area. I don't plan to develop that piece of wasteland just yet. While we could still use it for husbandry, forget building towns and reclaiming farmland for now. Do you remember that three years ago, our supply convoy transporting resources from Maplewoods Bastide to Firmrock Castle was attacked by barbarians near that area? Fortunately, Josk was there and used his divine archery skills to kill more than 30 barbarian soldiers in one go, sending the rest scurrying back into the Black Forests in fear.

"Until we deal with the mountain barbarians, it's better to leave that wasteland untouched for now. If they show up there and are discovered by us, we will use our forces to eliminate them. But if we start developing the area and the barbarians attack during that time, the laborers will sustain quite a lot of casualties. At that time, we will have to divert more military force to ensure the safety of the developers and stretch ourselves thin, so it is far from ideal.

"Now that only the four allied families remain within the Northlands, we are relatively safe from outside threats and don't have to rely as much on the defense of Firmrock Castle to ensure the safety of our dominion. As long as we can build reasonably good defense infrastructure at the towns and villages of the Salus Settlement like those of Felicitas Settlement, even if enemies invade us, the garrison there will be able to withstand the first wave of attacks. After that, our family forces will go to reinforce them and wipe the enemy out.

"That's why, the development of Salus Settlement is one of our top priorities. The invasion of Duke Loggins and the Second Prince have boosted the reputation of us, the Family of the Raging Bear, and it's about time we stretched out our claws towards more territory lest we be regarded as turtles who only know how to hide within our comfort zone. Do you guys understand now?"

"Understood, milord," replied the knights within the tent in unison.

"Also, there are two other things. The first is to make sure some plot of land is set for the construction of a bastide in each of the eight sectors of Salus Settlement. That will be left to Knight Charade," Lorist said.

"Milord, what is that for?" Charade asked curiously. He wondered why there would be a need for a bastide when there was already a central town in each sector where soldiers could be stationed.

Lorist laughed and said, "The family already has 6 Gold ranked knights. According to tradition, each one of them should already be given their own bastide. I've been delaying that right of theirs for the past two years as there were too many matters in the family that had to be settled first. Now that the time is right, it's about time they be given their own manorial estate bastides. The construction of two of those manor bastides is due to Terman and Yuriy's quick progress in training during the recent years. Since they left the academy a few years ago, they've already trained to the peak of the Silver rank from the Three Star Silver rank. Within two or three years, I believe that they'll be able to break through to the Gold rank. At that time, we should have those manors ready for them.

"Knight Charade, you also have to train harder and not fall behind. Also, Dulles, don't be so smitten by the might of the carroballistas. You should not neglect your training as it is also quite important as well. If you're able to reach the Gold rank, then you'll definitely have your own manor as well. I can even help you form another carroballista

division which you will be the commander of."

"Really?" said Dulles excitedly.

"I won't lie to you," Lorist said as he nodded.

"Alright, then I'll begin training hard tonight when I get back," Dulles said as he patted his chest, causing everyone present to laugh out loud.

When the laughter died down, Lorist's expression turned serious again when he said, "Yuriy, I heard that you were the most enthusiastic one during the pillaging of the other nobles. This second matter will be handed to you. During the 8th month, Old Man Balk will be bringing the woodworking masters to the Black Forests to look for suitable wood. You shall lead your cavalry troops to serve as their escort and make sure that not one of them get injured, understood?"

"Yes, milord. Just like you said, these masters are all valued talents of the family. I will definitely give it my all to ensure their safety. If I knew that beforehand, I would've picked up woodworking myself in the past," said Yuriy, whose voice gradually lowered as he continued.

"It's not too late if you start now, you know. I can give you two years of vacation for that and when you come back, you will become the first knight carpenter of the family. When we go to war in the future, I will make sure to send a group of soldiers to protect you too," said Lorist, who had heard what Yuriy muttered.

"Milord, there's no need for that. Otherwise, I think you'll ask me to carry a saw instead of a sword into battle…" Yuriy responded with a bitter look.

The people within the tent broke into another bout of laughter.

Chapter 199
Master-Disciple Conversation

It was a good day for Howard as he had managed to awaken his Battle Force successfully after receiving permission from Lorist. Howard would be 17 years old in another six months' time.

In actuality, he had long been hoping that he would be able to awaken his Battle Force sooner and stay by his master, Lorist, to receive his teachings like his senior apprentice brother Reidy. But after Lorist gave his body's condition a check, Howard was prevented from awakening his Battle Force. Due to being birthed into an era of war, he and his sister Alisa spent two whole years living on the bare minimum of necessities before they were located by their father Potterfang. Because of that, Howard's body condition wasn't in an optimal state.

That was why Lorist felt that there wasn't a need for him to awaken his Battle Force so early and instead focus on building up the basics first so that he could travel further in the path of Battle Force training in the future and become a Gold ranked knight like his father. Being incredibly respectful of Lorist, Howard followed the routine his master drafted for him very strictly for two whole years before he was allowed to awaken his Battle Force.

Following behind Reidy, Howard entered the study and bowed respectfully to Lorist who was sitting at his desk. He greeted, "Master."

Lorist, who was in the middle of contemplating something, raised his head and smiled when he saw Howard. He was very satisfied with that second disciple of his that was witty, passionate about learning, hard working and upright. As he had to take care of his sister and survive in the war-torn imperial capital, Howard matured much faster than ordinary youths of his age.

Time really flies. Four years back, Lorist was still at the Dawn Academy being pushed around by the academy head to fight against Silver ranked instructors from other academies, eventually including even all the Silver ranked swordsmen and mercenaries within Morante City to spread the name of the academy. It was then when Lorist met with Potterfang on the dueling platform and defeated him. After that, he

took Reidy in as his attendant when Els gifted him with a luxurious carriage. During the same night, he saw Potterfang and his two children sleeping at the public park.

And so he went to have a chat with him, during which two Gold ranked swordsmen wanted to cause trouble for Lorist. With Potterfang's aid, Lorist managed to kill the two assailants. Given that Potterfang was injured from battle, Lorist had Reidy bring Potterfang's two children back home and after living together for half a year, he even took Howard in as his disciple. Currently, that quiet youth who liked to read had already grown up, just like Reidy who came before.

"Howard, why isn't your rowdy sister Alisa here today?" Lorist asked with a warm smile.

"Master, did you forget? Alisa brought the Chino brothers with her to follow Miss Telesti to the Bladedge Mountains," Howard said.

Patting his head, Lorist thought, *darn, I've forgotten about this completely.*

For the past two years, Telesti kept Lorist's promise to build an academy in her mother's name in her mind. Before that happened, Lorist gave Telesti a task, and that was to gather up the various young children of the family knights, boys and girls of ten plus years of age, to educate them in basic cultural education.

Among these children, the 11-year-old Alisa was a boss-like figure who led around the Chino brothers as her minions. The Chino brothers were actually the twin sons of Gold ranked knight Chino Freiyar and one of their favorite pastimes was following Alisa around to mess with other kids.

Of all the children, Telesti's favorite was Alisa and she had intended to raise her into a scholar like herself just like how her adoptive mother, Lady Nico, passed her knowledge onto Telesti and trained her as a scholar. However, Telesti's efforts and attention on Alisa had all been in vain.

Even Lorist could not have imagined that Alisa's idol was Pesha instead. It all happened when Alisa witnessed Pesha leading a few other female soldiers on horseback passing through the central highway of Firmrock Castle. It was at that moment when the elegant form of horse-riding was imprinted into Alisa's head, causing her to make an oath to be a female knight on the very next day.

Alisa's relationship with her father as of late had also turned a little awkward. Two

years back, Count Spenseid's widowed daughter had become Potterfang's maidservant. Just recently, she had been impregnated, and Potterfang focused his attention on his maidservant and her unborn child while neglecting her daughter in the process. Feeling that she had been forgotten by her father, Alisa promptly ran away from home, and when she traveled to Telesti's residence, she made up her mind to stay there for good.

Back at the beginning of the year when they first eliminated the magical beast wave, Lorist told Telesti happily that the preparatory work for the construction academy could begin. That was why Telesti set out with her students during the 6th month to Bladedge Mountains to find a scenic place on which to build the academy.

However, the choosing of the place took quite a long time. Even though Lorist had already defeated the Second Prince's 100000-strong army, and even wiped out most, if not all, of the nobles aside from the families in alliance with the Nortons, Telesti's trip would take two more months according to the messenger. The operation was progressing at a rather slow rate as Telesti and her students didn't hold back on having fun at the mountains and only managed to survey half the area so far.

"Come, Howard, stretch your hand out so I can read your pulse," Lorist said.

Howard placed his hand on the desk in response. Pulse-reading was no longer foreign to him as it was through using that technique that Lorist had managed to identify the condition of his body.

"Not bad. Your body's in great condition. Howard, for the next three months, you must focus on your Battle Force training from morning till noon and serve as my attendant in the afternoon. Three months later when your Battle Force stabilizes, you will also have to go through an arduous test just like your senior apprentice brother Reidy did and use the spinning chair to hone your dynamic vision. You better be prepared," Lorist said satisfiedly. Not only was Howard's body in perfect health, his foundations for training were also rather firm.

"Master, I've long been ready," Howard said with a look of seriousness.

"Alright. As there's only the three of us, master and disciples, here today, let's not be too formal. There's still much time in the days ahead. If there's anything you don't understand, Reidy can inform you about it. You can also ask me about it too. When we're in the presence of others, just call me milord like everyone else. But when we're

together in a private setting, just refer to me as master," Lorist said.

"Master, I've always had a question about the family's military strategy and plans and I don't know why you chose to do what you did. Can I ask something about that?" Howard said, not holding back.

"Go ahead," Lorist said with a smile.

"Master, with the might of the Norton Family, we can already rival a kingdom in terms of military force. Ever since the convoy arrived at the Northlands, we've managed to defeat the Duke of the Northlands without much difficulty and that time, you have already accepted the entitlement of the Andinaq Kingdom and have been was considered an enemy of the Iblia Kingdom. We could've taken over the whole of the Northlands rightfully. But why did you not do that and insist on staying within the family dominion and allow the rest of the Northlands be occupied by the Second Prince, leading to the battle we fought with him recently? I really don't understand your intentions, master…"

Howard looked at Lorist with a straight face and earnestly wished that his question could be answered.

Lorist smiled and thought that it was interesting that the first person who had actually questioned Lorist's decisions was his own disciple. He nodded approvingly and said, "Howard, let me ask you a question. What do you think a person who has traveled far for an extended period of time would wish for when he returns to his homeland?"

"He should be visiting his home as soon as possible, I suppose," Howard responded after giving it some thought.

"That's right. He wouldn't think of having a drink first nor meet up with his old friends for a chat. Similarly, he wouldn't bother with the fact that his enemy's territory was conquered by another person. All he would care about is to return home as soon as possible, take a warm bath, and experience blissful time with his family. When everything calms down later, only then would he go get a drink at a tavern and tell the tales of his travels to his old friends. Or, he could go find trouble with his neighbor against whom he bears a grudge.

"In a way, our northbound convoy is that homesick traveler that just experienced a long and arduous journey filled with hardships and bloody battles, before finally

arriving at the Northlands after walking a path of slaughter. Do you know the real thing that held everyone together the whole time? Do you remember how we encouraged the people of the convoy to persevere?"

Howard hesitated before he said, "The slogan for the northbound convoy was 'free housing and farmland to restart peaceful lives'…"

"That's right. Most of the people within the convoy had never been to the Northlands before. But because of our slogan and promotion, they have started to believe that our family dominion is the haven they have always craved. That's one of the main reasons why everyone was able to endure the journey with us and hate Duke Loggins in unison as he was the one who attempted to invade our haven. It was because of that hate that the morale of our soldiers were able to be so high as to allow us to easily crush the duke's forces.

"Come over here and look, Howard. This is the map of the Northlands. What thoughts do you have about this?" Lorist said as he stood up and headed to the wall on which a map of the Northlands was hung.

"The Northlands is incredibly large, master," Howard said.

"That's right. The Northlands is indeed large. Let's see, if we had proceeded according to your thoughts and conquered the duke's dominion, what do you think would happen?" Lorist asked as he pointed at the surrounding area of the duke's dominion. "These landed nobles would take mainly two actions. Either they can try to get on our good side, or resist us. Regardless of the choice they make, it will cause our family to be unnecessarily tangled up with them. The family forces will also have to be spread out. Not only do we have to defend the Hendliff Suspension Bridge and eliminate the nobles hostile to us, we will also lose the ability to act on our own initiative.

"Just like this," Lorist said as he opened his hand, "we would be spreading our fist into several fingers and put each finger against the fists of others in a fight. Not only will that cause harm to us, it will also cause us to lose the most important things, the spirit of the people and morale, mainly because we didn't fulfill our promise and dragged the commoners and soldiers into another era of war.

"That's the main reason I gave up on taking the duke's dominion for myself and focused on bringing everyone into the family dominion. During the past three years, we've developed the Felicitas Settlement, eliminated the magical beast wave and

fulfilled our promise to distribute houses and farmland, granting them the peaceful lives they deserve. That's why, even though the Second Prince brought his troops of 100000 to face us, we were still able to gain victory within a single battle."

"But master, even though this time around we gained a huge victory in battle, you didn't even think about taking the duke's dominion and instead formed an alliance with the other three families and gave them so many benefits while not gaining any for ourselves. I believe that your decision wasn't too logical," Howard said.

Lorist laughed out loud and stroked Howard's head before he said, "How bold of you to say that to me.

"My explanation is still the same. The Northlands really is too big. Look here, traveling from Firmrock Castle to Gildusk City would already take 5 days, 7 days if you're planning to go all the way to Hendliff Suspension Bridge. Even if we take over the whole Northlands, information alone would take lots of time to transfer from one part to another. Additionally, those three families have also been on rather good terms with us. While it would be easy to turn our friends to enemies, our family stands to lose quite a lot by doing that. I know that our family soldiers are mighty, but needless sacrifices are nothing but wastage. Even if we take over the duke's dominion, will we still have enough resources to develop Blackmud Marsh?

"The future of our family and by extension, that of the Northlands, does not lie with those two suspension bridges. If the enemy seals off the other side of Metropoulos River, we will be effectively locked out and be unable to contact the outside world. Forming an alliance with the other three families is akin to passing that burden to them so that they can defend the two bridges while our family can use the bridges to procure more food and resources from the outside world as well as sell our own produce to them like salt and other goods.

"I believe I've already mentioned why I'm so focused on my own dominion, and that is because only our family dominion has access to the sea among all the other places in the Northlands. When we form our fleet, we will be able to travel to the other coastal nations of Grindia and that will be when our family's development will truly take flight. After that, the Northlands will one day be truly dominated by the banner of the Raging Bear."

"But master, what if the three families don't allow that to happen?" Howard asked.

"They will have to agree. By the time our family's might puts pressure on them, they will look for the soonest opportunity to leave the Northlands. Maybe we can even help them obtain new dominions of their choice. Howard, it is praiseworthy that you are ambitious for conquest. But your current thoughts are almost identical to that of the various powers struggling for domination right now in that you want to alpha strike[1] everything, and that is not to be encouraged," Lorist said.

"Master, what's an alpha strike?" Howard asked.

"In war, one has to consider not just the military aspect. There are lots of other factors that seem unrelated at first but will actually decide one's victory. War is actually a struggle for supremacy between two nations and it involves an incredible number of profound plots and tactics. The victor is always the one who makes the best preparations.

"However, it's a shame that there has yet to be any military experts in Grindia that has noticed this fact. All they know is to wage battle using the grandest of maneuvers. They are in a way similar to chess players. The winning player will no longer have the pieces necessary to face off against other opponents.

"Take for instance the Second Prince. During the three years he was at the Northlands, he put in lots of effort and finally managed to form his First Legion. Combined with the soldiers of other nobles, he has a force of about 100000 men. If he didn't cause any trouble for the Norton Family, who do you think he would target instead?"

After Howard gave it some thought, he said, "The Madras Duchy."

"Not bad. His target is very likely to be the Madras Duchy as our Second Prince is a person who holds grudges deeply. Naturally, there's no doubt that he hates our family the most now. But if he didn't act against us, he would definitely have sent his 100000 soldiers to the Madras Duchy. Needless to say, the duchy would have made their own preparations as well, so an intense battle would break out causing both sides to be crippled in the end with not one of them being able to continue any further. They will eventually have to sign a peace treaty for a few years to lick their wounds. After that, they would rebuild their army and have another conflict a few years later. That's the alpha strike I was talking about.

"If you have a constant stream of reinforcements however, no matter how many casualties you sustain, do you think the other side would be able to hold on? The result

is obvious in that the side without reinforcements would definitely end up defeated. But take a look at the various duchies and kingdoms that have split from the Krissen Empire right now. Most of them build up their forces, engage in battle, and either gain or lose a little before signing a peace treaty that lasts only a few years. That is the alpha strike in action. Apart from worsening the standard of living of the commoners, there is completely no long-lasting benefit to it," Lorist explained.

"Master, I think I understand what you're trying to say. War is not chess and it requires might and power to fall back and rely on. And as you said, the more our family develops the dominion, the stronger our family will end up being, and the more victories we will obtain in the long run, right? That's why you focus on developing the dominion unlike other nobles who think that conquering more territory is automatically better," Howard said with a tone of realization.

"Not bad, that's exactly it. Howard, you'll definitely become a stellar strategist in the future," Lorist said as he laughed.

Chapter 200
Reidy's Request

"Come on, Reidy, don't just stand there laughing. Howard will be relying on you in his training from now on and it's your duty to guide him as his senior apprentice brother. Oh, and I just remembered that I haven't given you a reward yet since you broke through the SIlver rank a few months ago and I took you in as a family knight, right? What do you want as that gift?" Lorist asked with a smile.

Lorist was quite satisfied with both his disciples. Reidy was a quiet person who was earnest and loyal and was gifted with strength that was better than most. His body's condition was one of the best available with his mind also being keen and insightful. In other words, he was pretty talented on both the physical and the mental. During his four years journeying with Lorist, he trained from the Two Star Bronze rank all the way to the Silver rank, meaning that he broke through one rank every year and was progressing at breakneck speed. The ignorant youth from back then had already become a magnificent and prominent Silver ranked knight.

However, Reidy did something that was completely out of Lorist's expectations. He approached Lorist's study desk and suddenly kneeled down, saying, "Master, I want to train in the internal energy method you mentioned…"

Lorist was shocked as he came to realize that while he wasn't sure whether Blademaster Xanthi and Princess Sylvia truly believed that his technique originated from the ancient martial monks as his story suggested, Reidy definitely fell for it hook, line and sinker.

"Cough… cough, cough…" Lorist almost choked himself to death as he was in the midst of swallowing some tea. After clearing his throat and standing up, he said, "Reidy, you must understand that if you train according to the high-ranked Battle Force manual I gave you, you'll definitely become a Gold ranked knight in the future. And when you reach the peak of the Gold rank, you might be able to gain some sudden insights and become a Blademaster.

"It's not that I don't want to teach you the technique, it's just that training in internal energy is much too different from training in Battle Force. For you, it's like learning a

whole new set of things that is totally unrelated to what you have done before. As I'm not sure whether you'll be able to take it all in, I cannot guarantee whether you will succeed or not. Right now, you are already far more fortunate than I was before and don't have to take so many risks like I did in the past. And just like what I said to Princess Sylvia, I'm still unsure of how I would continue improving down the road with my technique.

"Are you sure you want to train in internal energy? When I began training in it, I was still at the Iron rank and it was only done out of desperation. After beginning internal energy training, you will also no longer be able to rise in rank in Battle Force training. Right now, you're already at the Silver rank and I'm not sure what will happen if you begin training in internal energy from there. As this heavily concerns your future, I really don't recommend that you to train in this art."

"Master, I really want to learn it," Reidy said while raising his head and looking at Lorist resolutely.

While Reidy had many good points, his stubborn attitude was definitely not one of them.

Lorist gave it some thought before waving his hand and telling both Reidy and Howard, "Both of you should leave for now. Give me some time to think. Reidy, I will give you three days to reconsider. After that, I will give you my answer."

"Okay, master," said both of them before they left.

Lorist fell into deep thought as he tapped onto the surface of the table with his finger. He understood Reidy well; that disciple of his was someone who would not turn back after making his decision. During the past four years, Reidy had already become one of Lorist's most trusted people. Putting other things aside, based on Reidy's personality alone, Lorist was sure that his grandfather from his past life would definitely like him quite a lot and take him into their school of training without the slightest hesitation. Currently, Lorist wasn't hesitating about whether to teach him the technique, but rather whether Reidy will be able to learn it properly. He was worried that venturing into uncharted territory like this would heavily affect Reidy's future.

After all, the two paths were completely separate and distinct methods. As the Aquametal Technique was a hereditary technique, Lorist couldn't teach it to anyone except his own kin. It wasn't that there were any other internal energy schools within

this world, but it was best if Lorist kept a trump card like his family's hereditary technique to himself in a foreign world like Grindia.

If Reidy really insisted on wanting to train in internal energy, Lorist was prepared to teach him the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique. In comparison to the Aquametal Technique, the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique was more stable and calm. It was one of the internal energy techniques that the ancestors of Lorist's family in his past life had modified based on another cultivation school's technique and it was split into five stages, each with increasing difficulty. The first two levels were rather easy and focused on guiding the ki into the body, cultivating the practitioner's grasp and mastery over it, and refining the body itself, further enhancing one's physical qualities. The latter three levels would compound in difficulty and anyone who managed to train successfully to the peak was definitely blessed with unparalleled talent.

Lorist had heard his grandfather of his past life mention before that one of his ancestors in the Qing Dynasty had took in an orphan as a disciple. After 30 years of painstaking training to reach the 5th stage of the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique, that orphan was able to contend with one of the most powerful martial masters within the republic that succeeded the dynasty and his reputation was quite well known in the martial world. After that when the enemy invaded the republic, that man went to the battlefield for his country and gained one achievement after another in battle. But in the end, that person disappeared during one of his battles and was never heard from again.

Perhaps it was a rather good idea to teach Reidy the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique. Firstly, that act would leave a lasting mark on the civilization of this world and be able to differentiate the training method of the Norton Family from other people's in the future. Also, if Lorist chose to teach the Aquametal Technique to his descendants in the future, they wouldn't be the only ones training with internal energy. Additionally, the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique was indeed used by Lorist's past life ancestors to teach disciples of their school that didn't belong to their bloodline and unlike the Aquametal Technique, there wasn't a restriction on teaching it to others.

Aside from that, Lorist was also quite curious to see what results would take shape after Reidy trains in the technique. He could also use this chance to understand the effects of melding Battle Force and internal energy training. Little did Reidy know that if he insisted on training in internal energy, he would essentially become a guinea pig for Lorist's experiment.

After making his decision, Lorist no longer hesitated and took out a pen and a piece of beastskin and began drafting.

Three days later, Reidy appeared before Lorist again.

"Have you made your decision? Are you sure you won't regret it?" Lorist asked.

Reidy didn't say anything and merely nodded.

Lorist opened his drawer and took out a beastskin on which a diagram of the human body was drawn and handed it to Reidy. "I will give you three months to memorize everything on that diagram."

Receiving the diagram, Reidy asked curiously, "Master, what is meant by the 'pressure points' you drew in this diagram? Also, what are 'meridians'?"

"You can think of pressure points like the circulation nodes of the bloodstream in Battle Force training. However, it's completely unrelated to them. And while meridians aren't really visible to the eye like blood vessels, you can think of them as an imaginary blood circulation system. However, what flows within is not blood but internal energy. Right now, you have to remember the position of the pressure points and meridians within the human body."

Lorist sighed before he continued, "Reidy, this is a completely different training method to Battle Force and you have to unlearn all the concepts you used and remember all you see on that diagram by heart. Only after that will I teach you how to guide ki into your body and circulate the internal energy. This is an extremely risky move and I have no idea whether you will succeed at all. Are you truly sure you want to train in internal energy?"

Reidy nodded resolutely and said, "Master, I really do. If I continue to train in Battle Force, I will eventually become a Gold ranked knight and perhaps even a Blademaster like you said, but that will take far too much time and I would probably be around 50 years old by then. But if I learn internal energy from you, I might be able to defeat Blademasters before the age of 30 like you."

Lorist was struck with realization as he recalled that he told Princess Sylvia that he had begun training in the 'technique of the ancient martial monks' at the age of 18 when he could no longer make any progress to break through to the Silver rank. Right now, he was only 28 and within 10 short years of training in internal energy, Lorist

was able to defeat Blademaster Xanthi. It was no wonder that Reidy was so motivated.

Right now, Reidy was already 20 years old and he had just broken through to the Silver rank recently. If he continued to train in Battle Force, he might be able to become a Gold ranked knight but he definitely wouldn't be a Blademaster at that age. But if he trains in internal energy, he might turn out to be another Lorist within ten years and be able to kill Gold ranked knights as easy as he killed chickens and even take a Blademaster head on. Given Reidy's unyielding personality, it was a given that he would insist on wanting to train in internal energy.

Lorist laughed out loud and stepped to Reidy's side and ruffled his hair. "Just give it your best effort. As long as you can remember everything on the diagram, you can take your first step into internal energy training. I will pay close attention to your progress in the near future, so don't let me down."

……

Howard knocked on the door twice and heard Lorist say, "Come in."

Pushing open the door, Howard reported respectfully, "Milord, Grandmaster Sid and Grandmaster Fellin are both here. They even brought with them a few sets of armor."

Lorist stood up and said, "Come, let's go take a look."

Upon reaching the reception room on the second floor, they saw Grandmaster Sid leading a few servants around to place the armor down properly.

Before Lorist left Gildusk City to become Princess Sylvia's escort, he had already written Grandmaster Sid a letter with a request to design a few armor sets for the Kenmays, Shazin and Felim families. However, he didn't expect that before one month even elapsed, Grandmaster Sid was able to come up with 7 sets of armor that were ready for production.

Seeing Lorist and Howard arrive, Grandmaster Sid received them and said, "Milord, according to your orders, I have come up with these stainless steel armors, 3 of which are traditional types while the other 4 are the newer full-body ones."

"How are their defense capabilities?" Lorist asked. That was the main thing he was worried about because if they were too weak, he wouldn't be able to sell them.

"Milord, don't worry. Even though they're only half as tough as our own steel armor, they are still comparable to those of the Whitelion Legion. We've conducted experiments by shooting at these armor with the steel ballistas of our family and the bolts could only penetrate the armor if fired at a distance of 260 meters, 10 meters closer than the Whitelion Legion armor's 270. I suspect that is because the quality of the black iron produced by our family is too good," said the grandmaster. When it came to these armor, he spoke incessantly and enthusiastically.

"How much do they each cost to make?" Lorist asked.

Grandmaster Sid took a look around him before raising two fingers in the air and whispered, "Milord, they cost below 20 gold Fordes to make…"

Incredibly satisfied, Lorist replied quietly, "We'll quadruple the price when we sell them, understood?"

Grandmaster Sid laughed out loud and said, "Milord, I was just about to tell you that each set of Whitelion Legion armor cost 150 imperial gold coins to make in the former empire! Back then, the empire was still strong and the exchange rate of imperial gold coins wasn't as low as it is now at 3 imperial gold coins for 1 gold Forde. It should've cost around 108 gold Fordes according to the rates today. As you specified in your letter to prioritize controlling the cost to make the armor because you were prepared to sell them for 40 or 50 gold Fordes each, I felt that the profit margin was too low. I thought that we had to at least triple that amount."

Lorist laughed and said, "Alright. Grandmaster Sid, you should rest well these two days. When the people from the other three families come, brief them about these armor and try to sell it for more than 80 gold Fordes. For each set sold, I will give 10 gold Fordes to your armor development department as commision for you to distribute to the smiths who worked hard for this."

Grandmaster Sid stroked his goatee and happily said, "Rest assured, milord. I will show you what I can do when the day comes."

And so, when Baron Shazin, Baron Felim and Count Kenmays learned that they wouldn't be dealing with Lorist but instead the stingy Grandmaster Sid, they were all flabbergasted.

Lorist merely shrugged and said, "I had no choice. Even though I'm the dominion lord,

I cannot oppose the grandmaster's wishes. He's the sole armorer that serves my family and he has a really high status. I can only abide by his wishes. Otherwise, if he leaves the family, my tears would all dry up before I even get to cry."

All the three other nobles nodded in unison as they understood that armorers were people whom even noble families couldn't exert total control over as they were the cornerstone of the might of their military force. They believed that Lorist truly had his own troubles and decided to first listen to Grandmaster Sid brief them on the armor.

When the grandmaster gave the presentation, he went all out and praised his creations like they were forged in the heavens themselves. To better convince the three dominion lords, he even had three sets of Whitelion Legion armor brought over so that they could compare and contrast them against his own creations.

The armor Count Kenmays took a fancy to was the one that was coated in a bright layer of silver. That armor had three unique features, with the first being its smooth surface. The second feature was the tight and encompassing protection it afforded to the body as a result of being a hybrid between plate armor and ring armor which gave it an incredibly sturdy look. Among the seven sets of armor, Grandmaster Sid praised it as the one with the highest defense which surpassed that of the Whitelion Legion armor by at least 10 percent. That was one of the main factors why it caught Count Kenmays's attention. Third, it was the most expensive one and each set was to be sold for 100 gold Fordes with no room for negotiation whatsoever.

However, Count Kenmays had one question, and that was why the armor was coated so brightly in silver while the Norton Family's armor was colored dull greyish silver instead.

Grandmaster Sid looked at Lorist with an insulting gaze and said to Count Kenmays, "That is because that lord of ours is too stingy and diluted the silver concentration with a ton of lead…"

Count Kenmays laughed out loud and said, "Fine. I will choose this set of armor and place an order for 20000 sets for now. Depending on the situation, I might want to add another 10000 more later."

Since Count Kenmays had made his offer, Baron Shazin and Baron Felim no longer held back. Shazin Hennard ordered 10000 sets of armor which was priced at 80 gold Fordes each while Baron Felim chose an armor that cost 85 gold Fordes and ordered

10000 sets as well. Lorist was surprised that the two didn't even attempt to bargain and made their orders so quickly.

Curious, Lorist asked, "Why didn't you even try to haggle? Did you find a gold mine or something?"

Count Kenmays laughed out loud and said, "You don't understand, Locke. Just a while ago, we managed to get into contact with Duke Madras and sold the armor we bought from you previously. The good ones sold for 80 gold Fordes each while the ones in worse condition sold for 45. It's a shame we didn't have enough as the duke plans to form two legions of soldiers and will require another 10000 sets of armor. After paying with the money we got from the duke, the order we just made will only cost our families around 20000 to 30000 gold Fordes."

Lorist stretched out his thumb and said, "Good for you. Since there's such a good opportunity, why don't you help me sell off our old armor for a ten percent commission? In the meantime, I'll need you to use that profit to buy some food for my dominion. I will also pay you ten percent of that price for that. Just by doing this, you'll be able to get a commission of 20 percent. You in?"

Count Kenmays clapped his hands and said, "Only an idiot wouldn't take this opportunity. However, why don't you contact Duke Madras and handle this transaction directly?"

Lorist laughed bitterly and pointed to Hennard before he said, "He knows the best that back then, the forces of us, the Norton Family, defeated Duke Loggins's forces because we were able to fight our way through the Madras Duchy and cross Metropoulos River from his dominion, causing him quite a bit of losses. That's why he later sealed off that crossing point and prevented anyone from crossing the river there. If my family intends to send a merchant convoy there, I'm afraid the duke will send his soldiers after it."

Hennard merely nodded and smiled.

"Alright, then I'll accept your proposal as a job for the salt merchant committee. However, Locke, you're far too stingy. You're already selling the committee your salt for 10000 gold Fordes per 1 million kilograms. Even though you're already making money off that, why are you still taking 10 percent of the profit by involving your family in the committee?" Count Kenmays said as he recalled the agreement they had

made previously.

Lorist shrugged and said, "Well, I could leave the committee if you want. I just have to double the price of the salt I sell you."

"Then forget it, it's better if you stay in the committee…" Count Kenmays said exasperatedly.

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