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Tales of the Reincarnated Lord

– 重生之领主传奇 –

- Volume 8 -

-Author-
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[LiberSpark]

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Chapter 351
Update on Catapults and Cannons

Nobody could imagine that the 30 thousand folks of Wildnorth Town actually paid close to 200 thousand gold Fordes in deposits alone. Not only would it cover the costs of renovating the whole residential area, it would also be enough for a public square, fountain, park, roads, sewage, and defense facilities, much to Spiel's elation.

The costs of manpower and materials would no longer be a burden as half of the profits filling up the treasuries of the house. If Wildnorth Town's renovation alone netted them close to 300 thousand gold Fordes, then the 15 towns across Felicitas and Salus would probably enrich the house by another 4.5 million.

The one in charge of the town renovation projects, Kedan, however, didn't look too optimistic. After some detailed investigation, he penned a report that stated that the expansion of Wildnorth Town would increase its area over two fold and encompass the three villages surrounding it. The population would also grow from 10 thousand to 30 thousand. He suggested it be named a city instead.

The peace the town had experienced over the past decade had allowed its population to grow considerably. Each family had an average of two to three children and, thanks to the house's initiative for small business and factories in the town, the youths from the villages could easily find jobs there. Kedan suggested the 13 villages around Wildnorth Town be fused into seven, with the leftover farmland reorganized into farm units, accompanied by the construction of town-like residential areas for the folk.

The commoners of Felicitas were also rather rich. The apartment units in four-story buildings, thought to be in the highest demand, selling for 20 plus gold Fordes each, didn't do as well as the house had hoped. Instead, too few three-story, sloped-roof houses with attics built near a small park were planned, unable to meet the unexpected demand. Each of the houses cost at least 60 gold Fordes and there were 960 planned. Two hundred and forty would be grouped into a neighbourhood; four neighborhoods made a borough. The houses were bought out almost immediately. So, Grandmaster Ciroba changed his plans and designed three other boroughs to satisfy the demand. However, the four boroughs combined occupied two times the land of the

current Wildnorth Town.

Kedan believed the fact that many households in Felicitas had family members who served in the military and the benefits they enjoyed as a result of that, such as the annual income of more than ten gold Fordes per house and the decreased taxes, was the main driving factors of their ability to purchase houses. Some households even bought two houses for their children to use when they formed their own families. As for the rich commoners that ran successful factories and business, they even purchased all of the units in the 'wealthy boroughs' situated right opposite the commercial district.

Lorist adopted Kedan's suggestion but refused to name the town a city. On Grindia, a city represented a settlement that had a population over 50 thousand and had complete administrative and public facilities. Wildnorth Town's continued development would only cause it to have around 30 thousand citizens, Lorist didn't think it would grow further. In fact, he felt it might lose some of its inhabitants.

The whole of The Northlands would soon become House Norton's dominion, and, as Charade had said, seven more settlements like Felicitas could still be built. The neighboring area would also be in the house's sphere of influence. Lorist didn't think many refugees would settle down in The Northlands. The Northlands had always had a lot of land compared to citizens, and Lorist didn't think it'd change anytime soon.

Having finished his administrative duties, Lorist traveled straight to the eastern part of The Northlands. The new Jaeger Legion was training there. Josk and Yuriy, the commanders-to-be of the legion, came over to receive him. When Lorist asked about the current combat strength of the legion, Josk explained that, so far, only one division of 15 thousand men stood a fighting chance against Duke Fisablen's Frontier Legion. The remaining three divisions still required a lot of training before they were battle ready. Josk and Yuriy had already decided they would resume training in the winter so the 2nd Jaeger Division would be ready for deployment in the coming spring.

Lorist expressed his satisfaction. Lately, since leaving The Northlands was forbidden, there was no way House Fisablen could know that Lorist had formed yet another light cavalry legion. It meant that when Tigersoar and Firmrock attacked the Iblia kingdom the following year and clashed with the Fisablen forces in Southern and Winston, Jaeger would be able to deal a fatal blow from the rear, catching them off guard and driving them all the way through Wild Husbandry. It would force the Fisablens to retreat to Eastwild to protect the greater and lesser golden creeks and surrender the

initiative to the Nortons.

After leaving Jaegar, Lorist went to check on Tigersoar and Firmrock. The two had just returned to The Northlands. During their rampage to the imperial capital, Tigersoar played a pivotal part and rushed through one territory after another. Firmrock, on the other hand, came from the seas to assault Madras. The two's reputations soared almost instantly. The main focus was their relatively low casualty rates. After returning to The Northlands, the two legions rested in preparation to serve as the main force for the next year's campaign.

All the household knights were rather excited, apart from Ovidis, who seemed rather down. Lorist knew what he was worried about. When Tigersoar was on its way back, Lorist ordered 150 of the remaining catapults given to House Kenmays, 120 to House Felim, and 100 to House Shazin. The remaining 50 were left to Kobo's garrison.

All that remained of Thunderbolt Brigade were its members. Not a single catapult returned. He didn't understand why Lorist would just give the catapults away, even if the recipients were their allies. Those were the house's secret weapons! Their campaign across the empire was a testament to the might of the contraptions. The citadels that barred their way were unable to withstand the rocky barrages and fell one after another. Had it not been for the catapults, who knew how many would have had to be sacrificed to occupy the citadels.

Lorist patted lightly on Ovidis's shoulders.

"Didn't you notice that your catapults' firing range was getting shorter and shorter?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Ovidis nodded, "I noticed the catapults' original range of 400 meters decreased to around 300 or so by the time we fought the royal defense legion. I thought it was because of the irregular shapes of the rocks."

Lorist shook his head.

"No, the problem lies with the catapults themselves. As they rely on the compressed steel springs to fire, it's only natural they'd wear down over time. Grandmaster Julian had tested them before and learned that the springs would wear out after around a thousand shots. The contortions are hard to spot with the naked eye and can only be noticed under close scrutiny. As a result of the wear, the catapults' ranges are constantly decreasing. Only replacing the springs will remedy the situation.

"Your Thunderbolt Brigade turned the tables of many battles and it's no doubt a great achievement on your part. We could've transported the catapults back and switched out the steel springs, but Baron Camorra, in charge of logistics, thinks changing to new ones would save more money. There's no need to be sentimental about the old catapults. Since our three allies have long expressed their interest, leaving the catapults with them and gaining their favor and funds was the best course of action. That's why I followed Baron Camorra's advice.

"You should go look for the baron. He's already prepared 500 new catapults for you. During next year's campaign, you'll be deployed defensively most of the time, though. You'll also, once again, leave the catapults behind when you're moved."

"Will we get replacement catapults then again?" asked Ovidis joyfully.

"No, I will give you an even better weapon. The catch is, you'll have to put in a lot of effort to familiarize yourself its operation. I promise you'll definitely fall in love with it after witnessing its might."

Lorist was referring to the bronze cannons he had originally intended to allocate to the various legions. He felt it was a little too difficult to arm so many units; the cost was just too high. Each shot cost a lot of money! While the catapults could use rocks in nearby areas as projectiles, the same couldn't be done with cannons. Each shot cost at least a few large silvers.

Not too long ago, grandmasters Sid, Fellin, and Julian were so moved by their entitlement that they dove straight back into their research. A little later, they sent Lorist a report and stated that a new bronze alloy would decrease the production cost of the cannons by a third and increase their durability as well. They were still testing the material, and should it ever work out, they could begin producing even more of them.

The cannons' construction, however, was relatively cheap compared to the costs of gunpowder and projectiles used. Even if Lorist desperately wanted the cost to produce gunpowder to decrease, he could only hope. Professor Balbo's gunpowder research lab had, so far, not yet found a replacement for saltpeter, so they could only be obtained laboriously using the regular way of scraping them off wall corners.

The new alloyed bronze cannon grandmasters Sid and Julian designed did have another redeeming point: its weight. It made them easier to transport. Lorist believed

when Ovidis saw the cannons for himself, he would definitely ditch the catapults like a heartless man who found a hot new lover.

Ovidis, who was in a rush to meet Camorra, made a knight's salute before he left in a hurry. He seemed to recall something just as he was about to close the door behind him and stopped.

"Your Grace, I'm not sure if the commander has reported this to you… I don't know if I should bring it up."

"Feel free."

"Well, when the legion was at the imperial capital, didn't His Highness want a few catapults for himself? After he was refused, His Highness brought a few scholars and worksmiths to our camp to inspect them. As it was His Highness, it wasn't my place to stop him, but later, I was severely reprimanded by the legion commander. He said I shouldn't have let him into the camp. It was His Highness, though. I didn't dare to refuse! In the end, I took responsibility and submitted a report. I wonder if you've received it from the legion commander? I've been waiting for my punishment for a good while now."

Lorist laughed. Loze had indeed informed him of the matter earlier, but he hadn't submitted the report. Lorist didn't really mind, he had been prepared for the technology to leak the moment he deployed the brigade. It was only a matter of time; Grindia was rife with talented people who could reverse engineer the catapults. Just like a sleight of hand, once the illusion was understood, it would no longer be worth witnessing any longer.

While Ovidis was a crude man, one who had been a bandit at one point, he was a deserter before that and used to serve as a squad leader in the Krissen Empire's forces. Naturally, he had an innate fear of the imperial family and really couldn't find it in him to stop the second highness. Since his status was far from Loze's, he couldn't afford to not give the second highness any face.

"I already know. Even if they copy our design, they won't be able to make catapults like ours. They can't fabricate the steel springs we use. They won't be able to replicate them even if they had one in their possession. I forgive you this time, Ovidis. But I don't want to hear anything like this again. Don't forget that you're a knight of House Norton. You don't have to care about anybody not your commanding officer, not even a king.

Besides, I didn't assign Thunderbolt Brigade to you because of your careful attention to detail, but your courage and work ethic," said Lorist calmly.

Ovidis's face flushed. He straightened his back and gazed directly at Lorist.

"There definitely won't be a next time, Your Grace! I promise!" replied he.

"Good. Remember it well. Now, go see Baron Camorra."

Lorist felt a little annoyed after sending Ovidis off.

That bastard was so shameless he even dared to send people to inspect my catapults… Even though he can't exactly make identical ones, the principle behind how they work isn't difficult to understand. It won't take long for counterfeits to start popping up… I guess battles in the future will definitely involve both sides throwing rocks at one another.

Just as he sat down to take a sip from his cup of tea, Tarkel rushed over.

"Your Grace, something bad just happened! Sir Reidy is being hunted down!" reported he.

Lorist raised his head ferociously.

"What? Wasn't Reidy traveling in the four central duchies? I thought he was heading to Morante next! What happened? Who are his pursuers?" exclaimed he.

"Sir Reidy was there when we were setting up our information network, so I asked him to kill a few pests in our way. He was eventually confronted by a messenger from Duke Fisablen in Handra who accused him of being a spy. In a fit of rage, Sir Reidy killed the man.

"Now, he's wanted by the four central duchies and being pursued as we speak. Sir Reidy killed a good number of their gold-ranked knights, so the four central duchies sent two rank 1 blademasters after him. Duke Fisablen also sent Blademaster Xanthi to seek revenge for their messenger. Right now, our informants aren't able to interfere. All we know is that he was last seen near Egret Lake."

"Blademaster Xanthi?! Hmph!" Lorist spat before he stood up angrily, "Prepare my horse! I will find Reidy!"

Chapter 352
Reidy's Encounters

Darn it, are they no longer bothering to hold back? thought Lorist hatefully.

Reidy was Lorist's first disciple and, in some sense, he was one of the people Lorist trusted the most alongside Howard. Those two held a different place in Lorist's heart than Potterfang, Charade, Els, and the others.

While Reidy was only a one-star silver rank, he wasn't training in battleforce. Instead, he was practicing the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique, which Lorist had passed down to him, so he was especially close to Lorist. Naturally, Reidy had no way of knowing that the internal techniques he learned were from Lorist's family in the previous world. He was instead told that they were passed down from the days of the eastern combat monks.

As Lorist's eldest disciple, Reidy had never let him down. In fact, Lorist had expressed more than a couple of times that his disciple was more talented in training than he was, having only taken around five years to break through the bottleneck that was the third level of the technique and approaching the fourth.

As the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique was an internal technique passed down in Lorist's family of his previous life, it was the only one that non-family-related disciples were allowed to learn. It was easy to start and hard to master. The first two stages were rather fast on the pickup for most. But only very few actually manage to reach the third level and approach the peak of the Bright Stage. Breaking through to the fourth level signified one's arrival at the Dark Stage. As for the fifth, Lorist had heard his grandfather mention that only one disciple had ever managed to reach it, at the end of the Qing dynasty, and became a grandmaster. However, they had lost all contact with him after he joined a resistance movement against foreign invaders. He was never heard from again.

Reidy was already near the fourth level and, according to Lorist, was already beyond the abilities of gold-ranked swordsmen. However, he was still a little shy of the level of blademasters. This was Reidy's true talent. Lorist himself had taken more than ten years to reach the level of blademasters after a dozen years of struggling and his fair

share of near-death experiences, but Reidy only used five years to catch up.

However, breaking through to the fourth level required understanding and insight. At first, Lorist had wanted Reidy to go adventuring on his own to expand his horizons. Unfortunately, almost all the house's knights went into secluded training at once, including Lorist's personal guard, Jim, so Reidy was left with no choice but to take up the position of Leader of the Guard until Pak could come and relieve him. By the time Els broke through to become a gold-ranked knight, Duke Fisablen's knighthood tournament was just around the corner. Reidy participated in the swordsmanship section and managed to win.

Finally, after the bulk of things stabilized, Reidy was able to travel the continent. He had planned to travel by land all the way to Morante before going to the Romon Empire where his hometown was. The whole journey was estimated to take around two years. When Tarkel found out about it, he had Reidy go to the four central duchies to help solve some troubles Furybear agents were having due to the local criminal syndicates.

Reidy had seen much during his time as the guard captain and knew that the unit carried out many covert operations. For instance, he helped Tarkel wipe out a few underground syndicates when they were in Windbury. Reidy agreed without contest to help him once more. While most of his objectives in Handra and Farkel were completed without issue, he ran into trouble in Handra's capital when he tried to deal with a crime boss.

The boss ran a large inn and was also a relative of one of the duchy's counts -- a complete weakling. The count's wife had an affair with Duke Handra himself. While it wasn't spoken about in public, it was not much of a secret either. The crime boss was the count's elder cousin and profited the count's adulterous wife quite a bit. He collected protection money, threatened merchants, and ran brothels and scams in the capital, Nawulis.

Tarkel attempted to infiltrate a couple in their fifties as his informants. They were locals and had two sons who helped out with the family leather trade. During the civil war, they escaped when the first prince attacked and ended up heading to The Northlands with the northbound convoy when they passed through the Andinaq kingdom. Their two sons joined the Norton forces. The eldest was now a squad leader and would soon be promoted to a household knight. The couple, having started to miss home, wanted to visit it, but their two sons were reluctant to accompany them. When Tarkel found out about it, he had someone act as the younger son to accompany the

couple back home.

However, when they made it to their hometown, they realized their home had been occupied by the local crime boss. When they confronted him, they were told their whole family were considered deserters who had abandoned the duchy in times of trouble. The couple left with a beating in the place of their house and all their belongings were taken. The moment word got back, Tarkel fumed with rage and issued an assassination order on the one responsible. He asked Reidy to uproot the whole syndicate.

Thus, Reidy began on his path of bloodshed across the taverns and brothels owned by the crime boss. By the time he was mostly done with the minions, he began to seek out the man himself.

Unfortunately, he encountered the noble envoy of Duke Fisablen who was lodging at the inn belonging to the crime boss. The envoy was a very close nephew of the duke himself who recognized Reidy as one of the victors from the knighthood tournament and knew he was a member of House Norton.

If Reidy had stuck to killing the crime boss and jumping out the inn's window to escape, that would be the end of it. However, due to his constant stream of victories over the last two years, Reidy developed a sense of arrogance that prompted him to leave at his own pace after slaughtering the crime boss in broad daylight. He bumped into the Envoy.

The envoy was stunned and asked why Reidy was there before he assumed he was actually there to spy on him. As he was there to represent House Fisablen to negotiate a trade deal with the duchy, he was under the impression that his mission was a grave one and jumped to the conclusion that Reidy was, in fact, tailing him. He ordered Reidy's capture without a second thought, accusing him of being a spy in the process.

The moment the few nobles and guards following the envoy heard his command, they roared and drew their weapons. In a fit of rage, Reidy killed everyone, which included half of the group the envoy came with. When he saw the envoy attempt to escape, he leaped and drove his sword through him before leaving nonchalantly. The whole duchy was in a state of panic as a result.

Having one's envoy killed was no small slight on a noble's reputation. Additionally, the man was the duke's nephew, not just some disposable noble, so the very least the

Handra authorities could do was capture the murderer. Duke Handra raged and sealed the borders before launching an extensive search.

At first, the ones sent to confront Reidy were mostly local garrison soldiers. Every time he intended to resupply at a town, he would be entangled by its guards, not that he minded much. However, when one of the gold-ranked knights fell at his sword, the Handra duchy began to deploy military personnel before ordering all towns and villages to forbid all lone travelers from entering. At the same time, they sent a rank 1 blademaster out as well.

Reidy's journey began to go south. While garrison soldiers were easy to deal with, he couldn't do much against them if he wasn't even allowed to enter. The moment anyone got close enough, the guards on the walls would order them to stop and send a few archers over to investigate. They were only allowed to enter once it was confirmed they weren't Reidy. There were a number of times he held a few of the ones sent to investigate hostage but the guards on the walls still fired their arrows without hesitation.

Reidy was finally suffering the consequences of his actions, and it only worsened when the blademaster caught wind of him. Just as Lorist expected, Reidy was still far from being able to deal with a blademaster. Even though he wouldn't be as disadvantaged as a gold-ranked swordsman, he still found it hard to fight on the same level. Fortunately, he was still able to escape when he wanted, so Reidy changed his original route and planned to go through the Shabaj duchy to reach the province of Messen, which used to be the Melein duchy's territory. He would then head to Egret Lake and reach the Andinaq kingdom before taking a huge detour to Morante.

What he didn't expect was that the four duchies were in it together. Duke Handra's messenger arrived at Shabaj first, and they also began to hunt him. He had only managed to relax for two days before he was forced to run for his life again.

His anger grew ever worse and more intense, along with it grew his cruelty. When two of the Shabaj duchy's gold-ranked knights were killed, Duke Shabaj also sent out the duchy's blademaster and swore to see Reidy's corpse torn to a thousand pieces.

Being the target of two blademasters caused Reidy endless trouble. Fortunately, while he wasn't able to handle the blademasters themselves, he was able to defeat their minions easily. The high-up blademasters normally wouldn't act until they got a definitive lead on where Reidy was. This gave him the opportunity to kill off his weaker

pursuers before he continued his escape. The small fry became terrified of him, they didn't dare to leave the blademasters' sides.

Reidy was finally able to take a short breather. His swordsmanship had been honed quite substantially during his escapade, especially during his confrontations with the blademasters. Having familiarized himself with the first blademaster's moves, he was even able to gain a slight advantage during the fights. When the second blademaster made his way there, he made his escape with a hearty laugh.

It was too bad that pleasant situation didn't last long. Having not heard anything about the capture of the one that murdered his nephew, Duke Fisablen finally decided to send his lover, rank 2 Blademaster Xanthi, to join the hunt. In only a single clash, Reidy suffered three wounds. Luckily, he made his escape quickly and jumped into a nearby river, if not, he would not have been able to get away.

The last time Reidy was spotted was near Egret Lake. So far, his pursuers were on their way there as well. Even the four duchies' combined army. stationed at Centerlake Island, were alerted. Many search parties were deployed to scour the lake.

"Map," said Lorist.

Howard, who was worried about his senior apprentice brother, had already prepared the map of Egret Lake and laid it out before Lorist.

Egret Lake was the largest plot of undeveloped land within the territory of the former empire. It separated the Great Andalou Plains from the rest of the empire's rich land and bordered Cloudsnap Mountains, The Northlands, and the Liden Mountains. The center of the empire only had two main roads, one through the Madras straight to Melein and Shabaj, and another towards the two southwestern provinces, Majik and Farkel.

The two roads could be described as a large detour. There was actually another unconventional path, across Egret Lake itself when its surface froze up in the winter. One would first go through the swamp to Centerlake Island before crossing another swampy area to arrive at Messen. The was the one Duke Melein used to transport Fiercegale Legion to resist the second prince's invasion.

Strictly speaking, the swamp around Egret Lake should be called Egret Basin. It was a large expanse of wetlands of roughly five hundred square kilometers, whereas Egret

Lake was only about five square kilometers. While some parts of the swamp would freeze up during winter, most of it still remained rather dangerous.

Ever since Melein's two provinces were absorbed into Shabaj, and following the safe return of the second highness to his throne, the four central duchies stationed their troops at Centerlake Island and constructed a wooden citadel there to prevent the second highness's forces from using it for a winter invasion. Their vigilance was only to be expected, given how the battle that shot the second highness to fame occurred during winter.

As for the other route from Madras, the four central duchies didn't mind it much. First, the route circled around Egret Lake and was incredibly hard to traverse. There was also a citadel there that could stop any invading army in its tracks. Nobody could transport their army through the pass given the horrible terrain, so most who bothered to travel on that road were merchants. It was said that Duke Madras had once discussed with Duke Melein about making that route into a highway to improve trade, but the project was delayed to no end due to financial concerns.

So far, Whitelion Legion was deployed in the two southwestern provinces to stand off against the Union at Kanbona. The reorganized royal defense legion, on the other hand, was stationed at Hanstmost against Zitram. Word was that the second highness was forming a new amphibious legion on the opposite shore of Egret Lake right next to Centerlake Island. The rumor terrified the four central duchies.

It was the 26th day of the 11th month on Grindia and there were only 44 days before the new year's arrival, If Lorist wanted to travel to Egret Lake to look for Reidy, he would have to travel by sea to Silowas and head to Jilin harbor before heading there on horseback. It was the fastest way but even so, it would still take around eleven days. This route, however, passed through the central province where the imperial capital was and it was very likely that the second highness would cause him trouble some way or another.

The second route involved traveling to Delamock before going to Vanades and heading to Egret Basin from there. The road was long and winding, it would take him at least two weeks. With Madras' conquest and its occupation by the Northland nobles, who were in the second highness's faction, Shabaj had already cut the route off and prohibited any merchants from traveling to Vanades.

After some thought, he finally decided to use the second route.

"Tarkel, notify our agents in Vanades with the messenger eagles and have them find me a guide and hunter. Prepare what I need to search for Reidy. We'll leave tomorrow afternoon."

"Understood, Your Grace."

Chapter 353
Ambush, Pursuit and Assault

Reidy lay flat in the grass, his whole body covered in mud and partially submerged as he paid attention to the barks and footsteps approaching from the distance.

I should have been on the run for a month or so by now, right? I can't even remember the date anymore. The weather's getting colder every day... winter must be approaching.

Reidy didn't expect his pursuers wouldn't give up even after he had escaped into the swamps of Egret Basin. Not only did they recruit a few experienced hunters from the nearby area, they also mobilized the standing army. Reidy's days were now harder than ever. He was even unable to get any good rest. It didn't take more than two hours for the hunting dogs to track him down. He had no choice but to continuously strain his mind and body to their limits to keep himself out of their hands.

He finally began to reflect on the arrogance and thoughtlessness he had displayed. Ever since Lorist acknowledged his swordsmanship, he began to feel proud. It was especially the case ever since he emerged as the champion in the knighthood competition. He no longer took gold-ranked knights seriously and already saw himself as being on the level of rank 1 blademasters.

Even after a bounty had been placed on his head by the Handra and Shabaj duchies, Reidy still remained confident. Certainly, mere rank 1 blademasters couldn't do much to him. He didn't fear facing one head-on since it usually took them at least a hundred strikes to gain the advantage. Had it not been for the other blademaster joining the fray, Reidy wouldn't have minded clashing with the first. Right now, he recalled his teacher's words. He was just like a 'frog in a well' who didn't know how wide the skies truly were. He could only see the well in which he lived. Thinking that he was already on par with rank 1 blademasters, Reidy proudly accepted Blademaster Xanthi's challenge, only to discover that he wasn't able to even take a single strike from her. Had it not been for the river behind him, his head would've been lopped off.

Darned old woman... She's not taking our previous interactions at all into account at all.

Back when Xanthi accompanied Princess Sylvia on her trip around The Northlands,

Reidy had been their guide and even made tea for them on numerous occasions. She knew that he was Lorist's eldest disciple, yet she didn't hold back in the slightest and fought with all her strength right from the get-go. It was apparent that Xanthi didn't care about Lorist nor House Norton. Reidy wondered what he had done to have Duke Fisablen desire his death no matter what.

The poor Reidy began to recall all that had happened during his pursuit. Usually, local nobles wouldn't care much when a crime boss or two were killed in their territory. Even if the bosses were chosen by the nobles themselves to rule the underworld on their behalf, the nobles wouldn't bat an eye to their death. They'd simply choose someone else to take their place. Even if they were to place a bounty on someone, it would only be for show. After all, it wasn't uncommon for a crime boss to be killed because of some grudge. Even if the crime bosses were the nobles' relative, the latter usually didn't want to risk the lives of their knights to avenge a mere crime boss.

Since it probably wasn't due to the crime bosses he had killed, Reidy reasoned that it had to be the envoy. The more he thought about it, the more familiar the envoy seemed. After a long time, he finally noticed that he might've seen that fellow beside Duke Fisablen during the knighthood tournament. Lorist had introduced the man as the son of the duke's younger brother. He was a three-star silver rank, the most likely to be the one to step into the gold rank after Princess Sylvia. It was too bad he had lost in the jousting match with Loze.

Reidy finally realized why Xanthi was there, and the magnitude of trouble he was in. He could no longer continue his travels and would have to return to The Northlands right away, should he manage to escape. He would only be safe by his teacher's side. However, he still had to deal with the three sword wounds that Xanthi had dealt him. He would have to stop the bleeding so he wouldn't leave any tracks.

Fortunately, he had trained in the ancient combat technique of the eastern combat monks, the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique. The method of training was completely unlike battleforce. Not only did it allow his swordsmanship to grow explosively, he could even suppress gold-ranked knights with his internal energy. The most important feature was that he could use internal energy to temporarily seal off the circulation where he was injured so he wouldn't bleed and leave a trail.

After he jumped into the river, everyone thought he would emerge on the other side. However, Reidy chose to remain where he was and slip back onto the shore where he jumped right under their noses. After sewing his wounds shut with the sewing kit he

carried with him, he applied some medicine, bandaged them, and turned tail to head to Egret Lake. By the time his pursuers realized he had turned back, Reidy had managed to buy himself a few days' time and even allowed his wounds to recover somewhat.

However, there were far too many people on his tail. Even if he were able to reach towns or villages, he wouldn't be able to gain aid there. Only a few days after he entered the swamp, the pursuers brought hunters and hunting dogs to seek him out almost immediately. Currently, Reidy was a rabbit fortunate enough to escape the trap it was caught in. Many of the vital routes to the highlands from the swamp were sealed off, further making it more difficult for Reidy to escape.

Three oily furred hunting dogs half as tall as a man lowered their noses and began sniffing the grass. Beside the dogs were a dozen soldiers and two hunters clad in brown leather. The frontmost three soldiers held up half-body shields. Four pikemen stood behind them. At the tail end of the party were two crossbowmen and three longbowmen. Each one wore alert expressions and were ready to unleash their attacks at any moment.

The three hunting dogs gradually approached a spot roughly three meters away. When the two hunters approached, they relaxed before they turned to the soldiers.

"There's no need to be so tense. We can rest for a bit. The one you're looking for is done for," reported one.

"How so?" asked the solders' leader.

"Our hunting dogs only track a human scent as far as this spot. He might've entered the grasslands here already," replied the man, pointing at the grass.

"Our orders were to find him. Even if he's entered the grasslands, we still have to continue our search," said the leader.

"We can't enter," the hunter said while his partner joined him for a laugh, "Didn't you hear me say he was done for? Don't be mistaken by how tall the grass is. The grass floats on the surface of a very deep pool. No matter who it is, once someone steps in, he will sink and die beneath the grass. The animals and people who died in the pool nourished the grass above it, causing it to grow this tall. Those around here call this the Demongrass Swamp."

"You're saying that the one we're chasing might've drowned after entering this patch of grass?" asked the leader as he relaxed.

No one could alert for so long. The moment the soldiers heard the hunters, they lowered their shields, crossbows, and bows before surrounding the patch of tall grass in discussion. A few walked up to the edge of the grass, unbuttoned their pants, and released a stream of urine.

A rush of pungent urine landed not far away from where Reidy was hiding. A little even sprinkled on his face, but he didn't move. Ideally, he would convince his pursuers he had died in the swamp. If he was already going to return to The Northlands, he could definitely do without the company of those blademasters. However, as with most dreams crushed by reality, the scenario Reidy imagined didn't come to pass.

"Which one of you will make a trip back to report what we've discovered?" he heard the leader ask.

"Leader, what should we report? Should we say our target died after escaping into Demongrass Swamp?" asked one of the soldiers.

"Officer, why can't we just head back together? There's no need to make a trip back, is there? Isn't this matter done with already?" asked the older hunter.

The squad leader sighed.

"Do you think I don't want to go back? The higher-ups said they want to see the corpse if the target is dead. If we report he died inside Demongrass Swamp, they will order us to scour the swamp until we find his corpse. All we can report is that we've lost all trace of him around here and have the higher ups send people over to do the search themselves. No matter what, we don't dare to tell them our target fell to his death in the swamp," answered he.

The younger hunter scratched his face.

"Isn't that ridiculous? How could you find the corpse if it's already sunk all the way down there?"

"Well, they might bring a torch to set the grass alight before they have us poke around inside with long sticks. Even if the swamp is deep, there's no way he could go very far in. He should still be laying dead somewhere in the shallower parts."

Reidy took a deep breath. He launched himself from the mud and dove into the group. His sword flashed quickly a few times. One figure after another fell as blood gushed out of their bodies. In a few short seconds, the eight soldiers were dead already.

Loud barking could be heard as the three hunting dogs leaped over. With a sudden turn, Reidy split one's head before he maneuvered his sword to pierce through the head of the second from below. Releasing his sword and doing a roll, Reidy managed to dodge the third. Using his right hand to take a throwing axe one of the dead soldiers carried by his waist, Reidy hacked the final dog's back. With a puff, the dog crashed against the ground, blood leaking out of its mouth as it flailed in an attempt to stand.

All that remained were four soldiers and two hunters. The leader had already got his three subordinates to hold up their shields and pikes. When they met Reidy's eyes, the four couldn't help but feel despair and panic. As for the two hunters, they had already escaped the moment they instructed their hunting dogs to attack. They were already ten meters away.

Reidy laughed lightly before he flicked his leg. A bow and a quiver on the ground by his feet shot up and landed in his arms. The squad leader's gaze tensed up.

"Careful, everyone!" yelled he as he tried his best to shrink behind the shields.

The woosh of arrows could be heard three times in quick succession. Two cries of pain rang out from behind the group. The leader turned to look and saw the two hunters collapsed on the ground. One had an arrow through his back, the other two. He flushed with embarrassment. He didn't think that being looked down upon by an enemy would be so infuriating. However, the cries calmed him, even though he had wanted to clash with Reidy just moments before. It was obvious that the muddy-looking man intended to have his whole squad stay behind.

Behind the shields, the squad leader took out a small bamboo cone and handed it to the person behind him before he whispered.

"Whoever's at the back, ignite the smoke signal. The rest of you stand your ground together. We'll try our best to stall until reinforcements arrive. We'll be safe once they do."

At that moment, Reidy was removing the sword stuck through one of the hunting dogs. He had used a little too much force to draw the bow quickly moments ago, the wounds

on his chest had reopened. It didn't stop him from killing the four soldiers in front of him, though.

He collected his spoils. He had already not eaten for a few days, his last meal was a poisonous yellowish-purple snake. He was so hungry he accidentally popped the snake's gallbladder. The contents spilt on the meat causing it to taste incredibly bitter. He had been so hungry he ate it anyway.

Currently, even normal rations tasted like delicacies to Reidy. Apart from his longsword, he didn't carry anything with him. Even his clothes were horribly torn. He was caked in mud from head to toe. As the swamps were filled with swarms of huge mosquitos who's stings resulted in massive swelling, he had no choice but to muddy himself to make sure his blood wasn't sucked dry.

The four soldiers that remained huddled together. The one at the front held up a shield and the other two raised their pikes. The last soldier was busy with something, but he couldn't see what it was. He was was sure he wasn't holding a crossbow, though, as the ones armed with them had been his first targets. The two crossbows on the floor were in plain sight. For all Reidy knew, the man might be unarmed, since it wasn't surprising for one to forget one's weapon when ambushed.

But when a loud hiss rang out, the look on Reidy's face changed. A small bamboo tube let out thick smoke into the air visible from kilometers away. The smoke signal was something Frontier Legion used to signal units far away on the great expanses of the grasslands. Reidy didn't think his pursuers would be given them as well.

"Die!" roared Reidy as he rushed forward.

He knocked the two pikes that shot at him like poisonous pythons away. Stepping hard on the shield and leaping over it, he swung his sword and cleft the throats of the two pike-wielding soldiers, before slashing behind him after he landed behind the shield bearer. The man dropped his shield and grabbed his wound before kneeling gradually. Reidy withdrew his sword. Only the pale-faced soldier holding the smoke signal was left.

"Go to hell," yelled Reidy as he ended the man with one strike.

Despite being cleft in twain, the bamboo tube still continued to let out smoke. Not long after, loud barking could be heard in the distance.

"Sol!" cursed Reidy before he picked up the two crossbows and bows on the ground, the two quivers, and the spear.

He hurriedly searched the dead soldiers' rucksacks and picked what he needed quickly. He packed everything into a sack which he tied to his waist. After looking around and seeing movement in the distance, Reidy smiled before he jumped onto the muddy slope and disappeared into the Demongrass Swamp.

Chapter 354
Demongrass Swamp

Demongrass Swamp, as the locals called it, was actually just a mud lake that covered a huge area. The most eye-catching part of the 'lake' was the grass that grew on its surface. They looked like dense growths of eupatorium plants[1] floating above the water, with their long stems reaching down deep below the water's surface. From afar, it looked just like a normal piece of land with tall grass. While the grass near the sides of the lake was rather tough and could bear human weight, the ones closer to the center couldn't. With but a misstep, one would fall straight in and sink to the bottom.

It wasn't that mud had no buoyancy; the problem was with the grass that grew from the very bottom of the lake itself. Even crocodiles, the 'kings of the swamps', don't dare to enter the lake for fear of being tangled up in the roots and drowning. Apart from insects, smaller fish, snakes, and frogs, there weren't any other animal within the lake. Most larger birds wouldn't even bother to hunt there.

Reidy wasn't unfamiliar with this kind of grass. Near Northsea, completed just two years earlier, the opposite shore of Azure River was Blackmud Marsh. The household had developed that part of the marsh into rich farmland, but ironspine crocodiles still lurked on the opposite shore of the river.

Without battleforce of at least the silver rank, one couldn't damage them at all. One couldn't even put a single scratch on their backs without a blade glow. This was precisely why the house's Oceanic Legion used armor made from ironspine crocodile leather. Not only was it strong, it also floated better and had great heat-insulating properties.

When the household developed that part of Blackmud Marsh, they fashioned two extremely huge steel ballistae solely for use against the crocodiles. Lorist also had the largest one they killed embalmed and displayed on Northsea's plaza. As a result, the plaza was known as Crocodile Plaza. Some kids even used the embalmed crocodile as their playground. One could often find little figures climbing in and out of its huge mouth.

When the house built the long wall from Tortoise Hill to Azure River, some

construction sites were attacked by the crocodiles. Thanks to the frequent waves of ballistae bolts, the crocodiles learned to behave and no longer swam to their deaths of their own accord.

'Since the crocodiles won't come over, we'll go to them,' was the conclusion the Oceanic Legion came to. They had two boats equipped with the steel ballistae, which allowed them to hunt the crocodiles as they sailed down the river. In time, not a single crocodile was visible anywhere near the wall. The hunters had to go into the deeper parts of Blackmud Marsh itself.

Blackmud Marsh was so wide that even after several years, the Nortons had only explored a third of it. During some of their expeditions, they discovered a few mud lakes just like Demongrass Swamp. At first, the hunters thought the crocodiles would surely hide in such a dense growth of grass and decided to set them on fire to flush the beasts out. They only discovered the true nature of the lake, within which was the network of roots. Simply by tossing a hook and pulling it up, they found bundles of fine stems as well as some rotten ironspine crocodile carcasses.

When Reidy was training at Firmrock Castle, he would occasionally go out for changes of pace. One time, he was asked to tag along for a trip to the marsh with Paulobins and fell in love with the sport of ironspine crocodile hunting, more specifically, fighting one on one with middle-sized crocodiles armed with nothing but a sword, using them as his sparring partners. Having spent quite some time in the marsh, he was familiar with the muddy lakes, so, when he saw one in Egret Basin, he thought of using it to escape from his pursuers and teach them a lesson.

One day, when Reidy had just arrived, he was elated to find such a dense grassland in which he could hide from his pursuers. But after taking two steps forward, he noticed something was amiss. Quickly drawing his sword and poking downwards, his blood cooled.

Isn't it all mud below? If I had taken a few more steps forward, I really would've been done for...

That night, Reidy cut a few bushes and trees near the lake for wood and used what remained of his torn-up leather armor and some vines to make a rope. He tied the wood together and laid it in the lake. While the mud did have buoyancy and wouldn't cause a living being to sink right away, it was the grass's stems and roots that mainly entangled any living thing that panicked and struggled within. The more one

struggled, the faster one would be entangled and drown.

Even though Reidy had carefully laid the little wooden raft in the lake, he was nevertheless very cautious when he got aboard. Keeping one's calm was the key when entering the mud lakes. Should one ever make any extreme movements, one's limbs would end up caught between some of the grass stems.

First, Reidy gently laid himself on the raft and pulled at the grass in the lake carefully to propel him toward the lake's bank. While doing so was Reidy's only hope of escape, it would've been far safer if he had someone watching over him from the shore.

Right now, however, he was alone. He spent the whole night getting ready before he hid amidst the grass not too far away from shore and he waited for his pursuers to arrive. No matter what, he had to steal some rations. Otherwise, it would be incredibly difficult to survive the cooling weather.

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The first ones to arrive were the silver-ranked guards of House Fisablen, led by Blademaster Xanthi herself. She had seen Reidy disappear into the curtain of grass as well as the dozen corpses on the ground.

"Find him right now!"

"Yes!" replied one of the guards.

He took ten or so others with him and into the 'grassland'.

Xanthi didn't think the silver ranks could deal with Reidy in the first place. All she wanted was for them to hold him back and buy her time to make her approach. As long as that quiet attendant of Lorist wasn't allowed to escape, Xanthi was confident she could take care of him. She recalled that Lorist had once personally introduced Reidy as his eldest disciple. She could remember how laughable it had all seemed when she heard that a youngster like Lorist had taken disciples to mimic true masters despite his youth.

A few years had already passed since that encounter when House Norton just managed to defeat the second prince's army and stormed The Northlands while they were at it. At that time, Xanthi and Sylvia were both trapped in the duke's mansion at Gildusk. They had even captured Baron Shazin Hennard and his gold-ranked knight as

hostages to negotiate their release. Unexpectedly, however, Lorist himself barged into the mansion and defeated Sylvia before moving on to beat the blademaster, forcing her to release their hostages. Despite that, the matter ended without incident after Lorist personally escorted them out of The Northlands.

She had always thought of Lorist's victory as a fluke, justifying her loss by believing that she had to hold back and not go too far given she was in enemy territory. It didn't help that she still had some energy left even after she was defeated while Lorist fainted right away. To this day, Blademaster Xanthi didn't think Lorist was truly her match.

As they traveled back to Eastwild, she learned that Sylvia got along with the new leader rather well. Xanthi took the opportunity to find out about the origins of Lorist's sword style through Sylvia. The count trained in the ancient combat arts of the now-extinct eastern martial monks of legend. It was no wonder his style was so drastically different.

It didn't mean Xanthi considered Lorist's skills seriously by any means. Even though Lorist's critique of her sword style let her gain some valuable insight to bypass her bottleneck, she didn't consider it a favor either. Xanthi believed she would've been able to fix the problems with her swordsmanship herself if she spent a few months pondering the matter. She also thought Lorist gained quite a bit of insight from their duel himself, so, strictly speaking, he gained more from it than she did.

Xanthi never took kindly to Lorist's relative lack of ambition. But even so, her beloved adoptive daughter actually began to have feelings for him, something she definitely couldn't allow. Xanthi hoped Sylvia would wed a world-changing hero instead of an average-looking count that trained in the unreliable and unproven arts of the eastern martial monks. While Lorist's household had a few centuries' worth of history and background, all it did was stay put in its dominion. It paled severely in comparison to House Fisablen's performance when it helped the second prince establish the Iblia kingdom.

What Xanthi couldn't help was how things developed so swiftly that nobody was able to react quickly enough. In but a year, she heard that House Norton mobilized their troops to conquer Windbury and capture Second Prince Iblia as payback for the latter's sending of Blademaster Zarinan to assassinate Lorist. As if that wasn't bad enough, the Nortons also defeated the two cavalry divisions commanded by Viscount Kristoph and captured all 15 thousand of his troops.

Given the situation, Duke Fisablen had no choice but to take a step back and send Sylvia to discuss a trade agreement, using livestock to exchange for large numbers of military equipment and negotiate for the release of the 15 thousand troops, all the while causing House Norton to let their guard down while House Fisablen began their campaign against the grassland barbarians.

Nowadays, House Fisablen finally managed to consolidate lots of military might. It caused Xanthi's impression of Lorist to dip even further, as it was the greed of the Nortons for gold that allowed for the formation of the strong military of House Fisablen. The duke managed to form an undefeatable light cavalry force, many parts thanks to the incessant supply of military equipment from the Nortons and conquered the greater and lesser golden creeks, an achievement that patched up one of the house's last shortcomings.

The Nortons could never imagine how much a set of cavalry equipment cost on the grasslands. Some of the barbarian tribes were prepared to beg the duke for a few sets of armor. Sometimes, Xanthi fantasized about what would happen should House Fisablen grasp the secrets of making the equipment. At any rate, they definitely wouldn't sell them for the sake of a few coins and livestock like the Nortons. It was arming one's enemy.

Of all the men in the world, her beloved Sylvia had actually fallen for Lorist, much as it vexed her. But given her understanding of her adoptive daughter's personality, she knew that nothing good would come from being too forceful. Xanthi had made a few subtle hints to dissuade Sylvia and take back her heart filled with love and fantasy, to no avail. In the end, she had no choice but to force Sylvia to enter secluded training for a few years until she broke through to the two-star gold rank.

Perhaps the passage of time will let her understand the lovestruck state she was in is but an illusion, Xanthi had thought at the time.

The last thing she expected was that four years of seclusion actually intensified her yearning for Lorist, to the point that she went all the way to The Northlands herself just to invite Lorist to participate in the knighthood tournament. Xanthi's plan had backfired completely. Fortunately for Xanthi, the duke almost flipped out completely against Lorist during the tournament and didn't agree to House Norton's request for the princess's hand in marriage. But back then, Sylvia actually didn't participate in the tournament because of the death of her short-lived, noble-blooded younger brother. Instead, she traveled to The Northlands once more to take her mind off the matters,

with Xanthi by her side, of course, so as to not give Lorist any opportunities to take advantage of the princess.

After hearing about the murder of the duke's nephew by Reidy of House Norton, Xanthi knew her time had come to forever sever the ties between Sylvia and Lorist. She joined the hunt for Reidy with fervor. Should Reidy actually die fighting her, Lorist would definitely turn against House Fisablen for good. That way, there was no way Sylvia could marry him. On the other hand, Duke Fisablen, with his renewed and empowered forces, could unite what remained of the kingdom and consolidate his power without fear for the threat of the Nortons.

Splash! Splosh! Splush!

What followed was a stream of shrieks and cries for help that caused Xanthi to turn over, only to witness half of the silver-ranked guards gradually sinking into the 'grassland'. Their bodies descended ever so slowly, covered with fine fibers of grey, black, green, and white that were laden with different kinds of leaves. The fine fibers got more tangled the more the men struggled. They sunk faster the more they struggled. Before Xanthi leaped to save them, she saw a few guards that hadn't fallen into the grass patch stretch their hands out towards their comrades, only to end up falling into the water and getting tangled up by the fibers as well.

In a few short moments, only three silver-ranked guards remained afloat. The three were slightly more intelligent than the rest. They had not moved an inch despite also calling out for help. They realized that moving and struggling would only accelerate their demise. Terrified, Xanthi didn't dare to approach the mud lake at all.

Instead, she turned to the soldiers coming from the distance and ordered, "Quick! Go pull those three out!"

After some hesitation, the three silver-ranked guards were rescued. Xanthi heard the explanations of a few local hunters and realized her mistake. Even though she saw Reidy make his way through the dense grass, it never occurred to her that it was some sort of natural trap. Still, being unable to enter the lake, what would she do?

"Burn everything. I'll see how long that bastard can stay in there. Without the grass' cover, we'll be able to know how he got in there. We'll capture him easily then!" barked Xanthi as she grit her teeth in anger.

"But… Madam Blademaster, Demongrass Swamp is far too big. We'll have to bring lots of fuel! Otherwise, the moist grass won't catch fire," said one squad leader.

"Get the fuel then! Go, now! As for the others, set up a perimeter around the swamp. Don't let that bastard escape!"

Chapter 355
Gold Eagle

A man removed the scarf obstructing his face. White puffs burst from his mouth as he did so.

"We've arrived at Egret Basin, Your Grace," said he.

It was the 11th day of the 12th month. Winter. A small round of snow had just fallen. The landscape was covered in a patchwork of white and ailing green.

"Your Grace. We received a messenger eagle from our informant in Shabaj. So far, the hunting party at Egret Basin still hasn't caught Sir Reidy. Instead, they ended up with carriage after carriage of injured troops. The informant managed to get word from them and learned they were still playing catch with Sir Reidy. He's become their demon. Nobody could resist his assaults apart from the three blademasters. Duke Shabaj also sent a regiment and a few hundred carriages filled with supplies, presumably in preparation for the hunting party's stay for winter," reported Tarkel as he read the thin cloth he took out from the small bamboo capsule.

Beside him was a heavily bearded man on horseback, on whose shoulder an eagle that looked rather warm perched as it swallowed the meat the man fed it.

Taking a look at the endless wildlands, Lorist slipped off his mount and pulled down the black scarf covering his face, "Map…"

He had brought three regiments of his personal guard, 1500 men in total. However, only thirty or so were beside him right now. Lorist couldn't afford to wait for the whole troupe to arrive, which would take three hours; he was too worried for Reidy's safety.

The heavily dressed Howard hurriedly dismounted, took a map out of his backpack, and called a few guards to hold it open.

Their guide, Jisan, took a swig of alcohol from his bronze flask, complained about the horrible weather, and walking to Lorist's side. After he looked at the map, he pointed.

"Your Grace, we're currently here. It'll take us half a day to reach Redtree Citadel. It's the only checkpoint we have to cross along this road. Both sides of the motte the citadel was built on are swamps that won't freeze even in winter. Apart from a small muddy road that only allows a carriage to pass, there are no ways to go around Redtree Citadel unless we take this detour from here."

"You're saying we don't have to go through Redtree Citadel if we use this road?" asked Lorist.

"Indeed, Your Grace. I, Jisan, am actually quite famous around these swamps. I know the routes here like the back of my hand. Honestly speaking, if Your Grace had hired any other guide, they would've been walking blind in winter. I, on the other hand, know where the swamp freezes up and where we shouldn't enter. This is all thanks to my 30 years of experience. I've been living here with my father since I was young and if I didn't learn a trick or two, I would've died many times over," said the old man as his voice coarsened from the strong liquor.

"Hehe, that's precisely why we hired you, Jisan. I just hope you're worth the fee. I'm sure you know we're here to find someone," said Tarkel.

"Oh, a search," Jisan said as he recalled something.

He turned to Tarkel, "Sir, if you're looking for someone, you should tell me roughly where they are. How did they enter and did they leave any traces or signs? Egret Basin is so big I doubt I'd be of much help without a single lead."

"Well, Mister Jisan, the person we're looking for entered the basin from Shabaj, and we think he's heading to Egret Lake. The duchy is our enemy and they sent out a search party to hunt for him, so we had no choice but to enter the basin from here. He probably didn't leave any markings, but even if he did, they were probably destroyed by his pursuers. If anything, he'd leave a circle with a cross or a picture of a bear at the lower right part of a rock or a tree. But don't worry, we have a rough idea how to locate him. We just need you to lead the way across the swamp," said Lorist.

"Ah, Your Grace, you don't have to be so formal with me. Just call me by my name. It's my pleasure to be of service," said he, a little surprised and glad after being addressed as 'mister'.

"Tarkel."

"Yes, Your Grace," Tarkel said as he turned around, "Morbinghan, we're counting on you."

The old man called Morbinghan was a bearded man with a white mop on his head. Though he looked old, he seemed far more energetic than most people his age. The old man dressed in hunting garb smiled after he heard Tarkel.

"Your Grace, leave it to me."

He lifted a large cage from the back of his horse and opened it, letting a huge eagle out onto his arm.

A cold breeze blew by, causing the eagle to flap its wings twice as it looked around.

"What a huge gold eagle!" cried Jisan.

"You've seen gold eagles before?" asked Morbinghan as he stroked his bird's feathers. The eagle seemed almost human. It scratched Morbingham's chest lightly with its talons.

"Little Inkfeather here has been with me for more than 17 years. When I picked it up at the bottom of a cliff, it still didn't have any feathers, it had likely hatched just hours earlier. I don't know how it fell, but, fortunately, it was still alive. I brought it home and treated it as my third son and spent our years together."

"Mister! Morbinghan! Snap out of it and let the eagle do its job! We can listen to your stories over some alcohol after we find our man, alright? We'll definitely listen to it even after you've repeated it for the thousandth time, alright?" beckoned Tarkel worryingly.

Morbinghan's eyes regained some clarity. He glared at Tarkel.

"What's there to rush? If I don't let the eagle get used to the air, it'll flop, fall, and die. Give it a minute."

"You're planning to let the gold eagle find your man?" Jisan asked curiously, "How does it work? Does he know the guy?"

"It doesn't," Lorist answered, "While finding a single individual would be difficult even for eagles, spotting a group isn't an issue, especially on the relatively empty swamps.

The one we're looking for is wanted and pursued, so all the eagle has to do is to bring us to them. At the very least, we'll be much closer to the one we're looking for. Oh, Morbinghan, look for a campsite or something with your eagle. They should have set up something similar in this weather."

"I will have Inkfeather search in the lake's direction. Don't worry, we'll definitely find SIr Reidy," replied Morbinghan respectfully.

Morbinghan was a special advisor to Furybear. He used his years of experience to train messenger eagles. His eldest son was a Norton knight and took care of the messenger eagle department, while his second son was still at the bronze rank. Once he makes it to the silver rank, he would also be made a household knight. Morbinghan had the same status as Grandmaster Julian, he hoped to make more contributions to the house and eventually be made a landed noble.

After a good while, Morbinghan finally released his eagle. It circled the skies for a while before flying towards Egret Lake.

"Alright. Jisan, let's head west as well. I count on you to tell me where I should and shouldn't go," said Lorist after his eyes returned to the earth.

"This… Your Grace, we'll have to leave our horses here and travel on foot," Jisan said after some hesitation, "Some parts of the swamp can't be traversed on horseback. While bringing them along would be fine, we can't ride them. If one of us accidentally rides into a mud pit, we'll be submerged before we could even cry for help."

"No worries. You're the guide. I leave the final word to you," Lorist said with a smile, "Els, have two people stay here and watch the horses. They are to wait for the rest. The rest of you, make sure to bring enough necessities and a few workhorses along. We leave first. Order Park and Shuss to set up camp here and prepare to send reinforcements."

"Understood, Your Grace," replied Els.

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Reidy found himself completely cornered.

When he disappeared in Demongrass Swamp a week ago, he managed to get two days' rest and recover some energy with the rations he'd looted. His wounds had also sealed

and the situation seemed okay. He hadn't expected Xanthi to actually set fire to the swamp.

While the grass was still green even during winter thanks to the water, he understood they would be baked dry and set aflame easily even with the smallest fires. On a day with strong wind, the fire would spread quickly over the grass in the vicinity. He had to take his leave right away.

If Demongrass Swamp was said to resemble a rhombus, his little wooden raft would be a third of the distance to the center. He still had some time to row it to shore. Fortunately for him, the water-filled grass let out lots of pungent smoke, which he could use to his advantage and escape out of sight and prevent the hunting dogs from catching his scent.

However, the wind was a little too strong and made the fire to burn wildly. Even though he tried to hurry himself up, he couldn't as his little raft had been entangled by some of the grass stems in the mud. He had no choice but to use his sword to cut them off. By the time the fire was already behind him, the little raft was still roughly five meters from shore. In front of him was a thick wall of grass that prevented his raft from advancing.

He held the oar he used to row the boat and tied it up tightly with a pike. Seeing its roughly three-meter length, he used all his energy to plunge the long contraption into the grass, leaving only a few inches of it above the muddy waters. He clutched his longsword, took a deep breath, and leaped. His right foot landed accurately on the exposed part of the oar-pike stick. The stick slipped slightly and he fell. But right before his foot touched the water, he had already gained enough of a footing to propel himself once more. With a loud splash, he landed in a puddle of mud just beside the shore.

His upper body was on the shore while both his legs laid on a thick bunch of grass stems. While he could use it as a footing, he didn't dare to stand up. The direction the wind was blowing made the smoke travel towards the shore. It was nearly impossible to breath standing up. With his pursuers waiting for him long the shore nowhere to be seen, he cut off the grass that tangled his legs and crawled forward, trying his best to breathe in as little smoke as possible.

Demongrass Swamp burned for a whole day before the lake's surface could be seen once more. Reidy managed to escape the encirclement thanks to the darkness of night

and made his way to Egret Lake as stealthily as possible. As his pursuers didn't know for sure whether he had hidden within Demongrass Swamp, he had an extra night to escape. The next day, however, the small raft was discovered half sunken near the shore, allowing his pursuers to determine where he was heading.

He had already predicted his pursuers would notice the traces he left. As he wasn't too familiar with the swampy terrain, he didn't manage to make it far in the night. He had to circle around quite a number of swampy areas without gaining much distance, so his pursuers were back on his tail just three short hours later.

Even so, they were still separated by a large swamp. He gave his pursuers the middle finger -- an insulting gesture he learned from Lorist -- and relaxed when he saw Blademaster Xanthi not giving chase.

His pursuers were unable to find a method to cross the swamp. The night before, Reidy had somehow managed to cross it by following the tree roots on the ground. Since they weren't too far apart, the pursuing soldiers fired volleys of arrows at him, causing the latter to miss the bow he left at the raft. Right now, he had no ability to retaliate. After cursing a few more times, he resumed his escape.

He ran out of rations two days later. Had it not been for the trail the water rats left on the snow, he wouldn't have been able to locate their nest. He feasted on them to fill his stomach and had a good night's rest. He would have already collapsed from exhaustion otherwise.

Not a lot of snow fell during the night, however. When the sun rose on the next day, his pursuers and their hunting dogs quickly caught his trail, forcing him to go on the run once more. When he finally arrived at a place near Egret Lake, he despaired when he saw a large troupe of soldiers with a dozen knights waiting for him. Sandwiched between two groups of enemies, Reidy laughed bitterly and drew his sword. As his teacher once said, 'kill one, make up for the loss; kill two, profit by one.' It was time to see how much 'profit' he could make with his life.

Chapter 356
Second Highness, The Path Seeker

Seeing the knights in front approach, Reidy suddenly thought of something: where did his pursuers get their mounts? Even Blademaster Xanthi had to walk on her feet during the pursuit, so how were those knights able to find a mount? Unless they came from the other direction…

As expected, the knights ahead stopped before they reached him.

"Who are you and the others over there?" asked the knight.

Reidy squinted and realized the knights were bearing the tri-colored griffin insignia of the imperial family. In other words, they were knights of the Andinaq royal family and subordinates of the second highness.

While Lorist wasn't too fond of the second highness in private, officially he was still considered a duke of the kingdom.

Reidy breathed a sigh and slumped on the ground, before taking out a silver ragebear badge and announcing, "I'm a subordinate of the Duke of The Northlands and also a knight of House Norton. Those behind me are pursuers from the Shabaj and Handra duchies. Please help me get out of this predicament."

The pursuers were already approaching and saw Reidy with the knights and around a hundred soldiers. The duchy's men didn't rush towards the knights, they stopped to gather their comrades, letting honks of low baritone resonate across the landscape.

After seeing the soldiers pursuing Reidy's equipment, the mounted knights believed him.

One laughed and said, "Very well, we were just starting to feel rather. I didn't think the duchy would actually serve themselves on a platter like this. Brother, you did well. Let us handle them for you."

With a loud cry and a crack of the whip, the knight launched forward. His companions

also joined the fray without fear. And so, the six knights stormed the snow-covered lands, leaving a trail of trodden snow in their wake.

"Hey! Come back, the enemy's main force isn't here yet! There are three blademasters behind them!" cried Reidy to the best of his ability.

None of the hot-blooded knights could hear his warning as they clashed with the several dozen duchy soldiers and began slaughtering away.

The clash between roughly 70 soldiers and six knights took place on a narrow path where the knights charged first. The soldiers couldn't get into proper formation in time and the scene that soon greeted them was nothing but nightmarish. More than 20 soldiers lay dead on the ground in a flash. The rest crumbled and attempted to escape. At that moment, they no longer cared about escaping the knights' slaughter, and instead focused on using their comrades to block their strikes so they could escape alive.

Reidy hurriedly stood up and waved his hands frantically. But the knights reveled too much in the killing and didn't bother with him. Either that or they thought he was actually cheering them on.

Soon, a figure clad in a black cloak suddenly cut in front of one of them. The latter didn't mind and merely pointed his lance at the figure's torso. To him, a mere footsoldier couldn't evade his strike and would end up skewered. However, a sword flashed and the knight felt the lance in his hand lighten by at least half. He saw his body fall to the ground, with the headless stump above his neck spurting blood all over his decapitated head. Just as he saw nothing but blood in front of him, a flash of a blade caused him to feel as if he were flying higher and higher in the sky as his consciousness faded into nothingness.

The knight's death was quickly noticed by his five comrades, who turned and charged angrily at the cloaked figure. With agile movements, the figure cut another knight in two and slashed the mount of a third. Its rider fell haphazardly to the ground. It didn't take long for a blade to meet his neck.

The first to charge quickly snapped out of it and yelled, "Run! It's a blademaster!"

Thus, the three remaining knights frantically escaped. The first didn't forget to grab hold of the reins of a mount whose master was cut apart. The figure in black didn't

give chase either, probably as a result of being tired out during the confrontation with five knights. The figure remained at the same spot even after the three surviving knights made it back to Reidy.

The first knight breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the figure didn't give chase.

Instead, he asked Reidy with a grim face, "What did you do to have a blademaster on your tail?"

"Didn't you hear me calling you back just now? Let's go, quick. There are two other blademasters coming," answered he bitterly.

The three knights were instantly shocked.

"Really?"

"Yes. Let's move!" Reidy exclaimed, "That guy was Shabaj's blademaster. The two that aren't here are even more powerful."

"You should get mounted too. His Majesty is back there and also has a blademaster with him. If can get to him, all will be well," decided the first knight.

It went without saying that the soldiers who accompanied the knights on their scouting mission would have to turn tail right away after making it there, for the sake of their own lives no less.

"I need some food," said Reidy as he mounted the free horse.

While he didn't feel the chills despite his tattered clothing when on the run, the breeze that blew against him when he mounted the horse felt like blades of ice against his skin.

One knight tossed him a liquor flask. He gulped it down and felt his body warm up.

"Thanks. Now, where's His Majesty?"

"He's just ahead. We'll see him in about 30 minutes. We set up camp on a mound nearby," replied the knight.

"How many blademasters does His Majesty have with him? What are their ranks?"

"One rank 1 blademaster, Manst. But we have two gold-ranked knights and a regiment of roughly a thousand men."

"No way. His Majesty will also have to move soon as well. I don't think those forces can hold back the pursuers," said Reidy sincerely.

"Brother, I'm really curious, what did you do to make them send three blademasters after you. Heavens, even the empire's most wanted criminals didn't get this kind of treatment," the knight said, "Whatever, don't say if you don't feel like it. I doubt I'd like to hear you brag. It's better if you tell His Majesty yourself. I bet he would be interested. As for whether we'll retreat or not, that's up to His Majesty."

"Why did you guys come here in winter? You mentioned you were surveying?" Reidy remembered the complaints uttered by the knights earlier and understood the second highness was there to find a route he could use to go around the Centerlake Island citadel. Perhaps, he was trying to launch a surprise attack on the four central duchies.

It was no wonder the knights didn't really mind they were being chased by three blademasters. They knew since Reidy was able to escape and encounter them, he would surely be more familiar with the route through Egret Basin. If they brought him to the second highness, it would save them the trouble of surveying the route.

It was too bad even Reidy himself didn't know how he had gotten through Egret Basin. It was almost a miracle he managed to make it this far. He was at his wits' end and couldn't be bothered to memorize the route. He had only survived thanks to his amazing ability to adapt. He took quite a few risks to travel around by swinging from tree to tree through the swamplands. This was the sole reason he could maintain a good distance between him and his pursuers.

As expected, the second highness was quick to recognize Reidy when he arrived at the campsite.

"Aren't you Reidy, Lorist's eldest disciple? Why do you look so haggard?"

Reidy didn't bother with too many formalities and made a simple knight's salute.

"Your Majesty, I require a bath and fresh clothes as well as a meal before I can tell you my story."

After a bath, Reidy was brought to the second highness's tent. The monarch pointed

to the table filled with food.

"You can eat as you tell me about it. My knights told me you had three blademasters chasing you. I'm really curious what caused all this."

Reidy wolfed down a piece of roast meat and took a huge gulp of wine before he spoke.

"I was traveling in the four central duchies and bumped into Duke Fisablen's envoy sent to forge an alliance between the two powers. I killed him, but he turned out to be the duke's nephew. They've been hunting me down ever since. I think it's been two months now."

"Two months?" the second highness exclaimed, shocked, "That can't be. If this were true, my informants should have noticed and notified me by now. I haven't a single word, not a whisper."

Reidy continued to stuff food down his throat.

"I'm telling the truth, Your Majesty. While Handra and Shabaj might attempt to hide the incident, I'm sure you can ask your informants whether they saw a wanted notice issued two months ago. I should be the one on the notice."

"Alright. So you killed an envoy and they don't intend to let you off. Since they've been chasing you for so long, I doubt they'd stop until they bring your head to Fisablen. Don't worry, you're safe now that you've made it here. The Handras and Shabaj duchies' blademasters aren't a concern," the second highness said casually, "I'm really curious how you managed to cross Egret Basin. I hope you can tell me."

Reidy shook his head.

"My apologies, Your Majesty, I'm afraid it won't be of much use. There's no way a group of soldiers can be led through the basin. I spent a whole month running from Handra to Shabaj before I entered Egret Basin. It took me another 20 days to make it here. I'm not familiar with the terrain, I just kept heading in the general direction of Egret Lake as best I could and circled around the swamps I came across. I've never considered actually crossing the swamps, and half the time I managed to find a route was thanks to luck.

"The three blademasters and their soldier had to rely on hunters that live nearby, many of whom brought hunting dogs with them. That's why they were able to track

me for so long. They are all traveling on foot. Egret Basin can't be crossed with cavalry. Sending only infantry to attack the duchies isn't only risky, it's suicide."

Reidy wasn't wrong. The four central duchies were not like Frederika at all. With Frederika, one could reach the city in just a night after crossing Cloudsnap Mountains. But Egret Basin… even if the second highness brought tens of thousands of foot soldiers across, there was no city or town he could attack quickly. In fact, he'd be exposing his position and allowing the duchies' cavalry forces to wipe him out. Tens of thousands of infantrymen would still fall to the charge of mounted cavalry.

"What if we wait for winter to set in? Perhaps the swamps will freeze and we can take carriages with supplies as well?" asked the second highness stubbornly.

Reidy smiled bitterly.

"I doubt I'm qualified to answer this question. All I can suggest is that you seek out the hunters that live in the swamps and ask their advice."

"Well, that…" said the second highness hesitantly. There wasn't anybody living in the part of Egret Basin near the kingdom. The second highness couldn't consult anyone even if he wanted to. That was why he sent his subordinates out to scout in the first place.

"Oh, didn't you say the duchy's soldiers you found natives living in the vicinity with hunting dogs? I just have to capture one and ask them, right?" said the second highness after he thought up his magnificent idea.

"Your Majesty," Reidy sighed, "I think it's best you worry about your safety first and retreat. While the blademasters of Shabaj and Handra aren't much -- I can easily take more than a hundred strikes from either of them one on one -- Duke Fisablen sent his lover, Blademaster Xanthi. That old hag's moves are rather odd. Even though she was already a rank 2 blademaster a few years back, I couldn't even take one of her strikes during our last encounter.

"Your Majesty's the leader of a kingdom and bears a heavy responsibility. Since you only brought a thousand men to scout the swamp, I worry the old hag will target you when she finds out. To be frank, I doubt these soldiers can take the combined assault of three blademasters. If anything bad happens to you, the kingdom will be gone."

All of a sudden, a figure of a stern old man appeared in the tent. It was Blademaster

Manst, the second highness's protector. When Reidy first entered the tent, he could tell there was another light set of breathing.

Blademaster Manst looked at Reidy in a flabbergasted manner. The latter stared back curiously.

"You fought Blademaster Xanthi and didn't manage to receive even one of her strikes?" he asked after a moment.

Reidy nodded.

Angered, the old man exclaimed, "Nonsense. If you couldn't even take one strike, you would've been dead! How could you have escaped?!"

Reidy got angry.

"Are you calling me a liar?" he shouted, "Old man, take a closer look. The wounds on my chest, shoulder, and thigh were all left by that old woman. I only managed to escape because I jumped into a nearby river."

Blademaster Manst inspected Reidy's wounds closely and sighed before he turned to the second highness.

"Your Majesty, it's best if we retreat for now. If Blademaster Xanthi comes, I doubt I can protect you."

"Aren't you about to break through to the second rank soon?" the second highness asked, surprised, "Do you think you can't match Blademaster Xanthi?"

The old man nodded.

"Your Majesty, I'm still only just preparing to break through. Blademaster Xanthi has been at the second rank for twenty years. I could tell her swordsmanship has improved considerably from this guy's wounds. To be honest, I doubt I can last ten strikes. For your safety, I think it's best if Your Majesty returns to the main camp…"

Before he finished, an alarm sounded outside the tent. The enemy was already here.

Chapter 357
The Second Highness's Strategy

Right after they exited the tent, they heard the loud cry of an eagle from afar. Upon raising their heads, they saw a large golden eagle flying past campgrounds into the distance.

"I didn't think a place like Egret Lake would be home to such a magnificent gold eagle," the second highness praised, "It's a shame we don't have the time to go check out where its nest is."

Reidy was completely flabbergasted that the second highness could still spare attention for something as so trivial despite the presence of three blademasters and the duchy's forces.

Given that he had already experienced his fair share of battles and had lots of experience, the second highness didn't just set up his camp casually. He chose a hill that only had a small path leading to the peak. The area around the mound was muddy and uneven with peaks and troughs up to tens of meters. While it made it easier to defend, it also meant the enemy could overwhelm the defenders and trap them on the hill.

The two duchies' soldiers gathered in the distance with a few men, probably silver-ranked knights, giving instructions from the front. Not far away, three blademasters with differently colored cloaks stood on a small mound to take a good look at the army camp. Even they hadn't expected to bump into the Andinaq kingdom's king here during winter. However, they quickly understood why the second highness had come.

"Ptooey! This stupid king really won't give up until he ends the four central duchies! He even came here to scout a path in this kind of weather? Fortunately, he bumped into us. It doesn't look like he brought many troops with him. Should we go mess with him?" asked the blademaster from Shabaj hatefully.

The Handra blademaster analyzed the camp.

"It seems our luck is rather good. The king didn't bring a lot of men with him, only

about a thousand. Our duchies have deployed a regiment each. We should have double their number. The king will have brought men stronger than our own, though, and we're the attackers, so we're at a disadvantage. Also, the soldiers sent with us are here on a capture mission. They don't have equipment suited for attacking an entrenched position. If we insist on taking the hill, we'll have to suffer lots of casualties.

"There should be a blademaster by the king's side at all times. If that cursed Norton boy joins hands with the blademaster, it'll be enough to deal with the two of us. The only advantage we have is Blademaster Xanthi and House Fisablen's silver-ranked guards. If she's willing to step in, I believe the king will definitely regret leaving his main force behind."

The Handra blademaster seemed far more clear-headed than the other. He understood Xanthi was the one in charge in the end, so he didn't bother to think up any plans. Neither he nor the Shabaj blademaster could take 100 of Xanthi's strikes even while working together. He wondered whether she might have broken through the rank 3 already.

Xanthi was also checking out the camp. When she heard the two blademasters talk, she turned around.

"I have two questions. First, are you certain the Norton boy managed to make it to the camp? Second, did the escaped knights and soldiers send anyone to pass on the message?" asked she.

Xanthi was worried the second highness had already sent for reinforcements. If that were the case and they didn't act fast, they would eventually be swamped by the main force. Even a rank 2 blademaster like her couldn't face waves of formations one after the other. If one didn't care about casualties, it was indeed possible to kill blademasters by sending waves of men into the grinder.

"I am certain the boy made it," the Shabaj blademaster said before he called a few soldiers over, "After seeing the Andinaq kingdom knights and soldiers retreat, these men tailed them all the way to their camp. Let them describe the situation to you."

The leader of the soldiers bowed.

"Revered Blademasters, when we arrived, we saw our target enter the camp with a few other knights. The rest of their soldiers soon entered the camp and the gates were

closed. They haven't opened since. I left two men behind to continue monitoring the situation while I circled the hill with the rest of my men. The surrounding area has mounds upwards of 10 meters high. We couldn't climb into the camp, but those inside can't escape either."

"You did well," Xanthi nodded kindly, "I will remember your contributions."

The leader was so excited his face turned red. He bowed hurriedly before leaving. He didn't know that Xanthi had only made the comment off-handedly. She would've asked for the soldier's name if she really wanted to remember his deed.

Xanthi looked at the hill once more.

"Since we've already been on the chase for so long, we should see it through all the way. At least we won't return humiliated. Also, somehow we had the chance to meet that king and I happen to want to invite him to take a trip to the duchies. I'm sure your dukes would be incredibly welcoming of the king's visit."

Since Xanthi was willing to lend a hand, the matter would be concluded swiftly. The Handra and Shabaj blademasters called their two regiment leaders over and gave their instructions: they were to send three hundred archers to surround the other three sides of the hill and prevent anyone from leaving by rope and calling for reinforcements. The rest of the duchies' soldiers would gather at the main path leading up to the hill to cook and rest. At the same time, another group of soldiers would be sent to fell trees for wood to use as shields for the upcoming assault.

"Your Majesty, I think they're preparing to take action," said Gold-ranked Knight Ripleid with a solemn expression.

The second highness, Blademaster Manst, and Reidy all stood behind the camp's large wooden door and looked at the droves of enemies. They were as scurrying ants.

"Your Majesty, that person with the black cloak in the middle is Blademaster Xanthi. She's the shortest one. The other black-cloaked person beside her, the taller one, is the Shabaj blademaster. I don't know what he's called. He isn't that strong anyway. I fought him for over a hundred strikes and he wasn't able to do anything to me. The guy in the grey is the Handra blademaster. He's a bit stronger than the Shabaj one. I think he's called Bill-something," introduced Reidy.

"Billjack. We met on the battlefield once in Redlis," the second highness mused, "He

isn't a match for Manst. If your claim of being able to hold the Shabaj blademaster, leave Billjack to Manst. I need to find a way to prevent Xanthi from breaking through our defenses. Great, this will be quick. Ripleid."

"I await your orders, Your Majesty," replied Ripleid as he came to attention.

"We brought a thousand man regiment this time around," the second highness continued after a moment of thoughtful silence, "Including the servants and laborers, we have roughly 1100 people in total. There's also the three gold-ranked knights: You, Molva, and I. Fortunately, we have 500 longbowmen, 200 shield bearers, and 300 pikemen. It's enough to force a blademaster of the third rank back.

"Ripleid, split the longbowmen into five groups and take up the pentagon formation by the entrance. Next, match the shield bearers and pikemen into groups of ten. They will be in charge of holding Xanthi's assault back and limiting the battlespace to force her into range of our longbowmen. As for you, Molva and I, we will each take five silver-ranked knights. Once Xanthi evades the arrow volleys, we'll charge in to force her back into the longbowmen's range,0 understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I will start preparing now," replied Ripleid as he left in a hurry.

Reidy looked at the knight's back curiously.

"Your Majesty, will you be able to deal with a rank 2 blademaster like this?"

"Of course," the second highness laughed, "The combination of many normal soldiers and formations allows us to deal with high-tier fighters. It's a lesson we've learned from the centuries of warfare the empire has under its belt. As long as we stand our ground without escaping, we can even teach blademasters a lesson or two. Don't the Norton forces have a similar formation?"

"Well…" Reidy scratched his head embarrassedly, "Your Majesty, our forces have never run into situations like these before. We haven't had to do anything about it. Usually, when there's a blademaster in battle, His Grace would go out and deal with the threat himself. All our forces have to deal with are normal soldiers, whom are far from our match."

The second highness was shocked.

"What did you say?! Locke deals with blademasters personally?! I-I-Isn't he unable to

break through to the silver rank?!"

"Actually, Your Majesty, my teacher trains in the ways of the ancient eastern combat monks. That's why his battleforce has always remained at the iron rank. However, most rank 2 blademasters aren't his match. Back when we defeated the second prince's 100 thousand troops, His Grace defeated Blademaster Xanthi once," said Reidy.

"You were serious when you said you could face the Shabaj blademaster?" pressed the second highness.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Teacher taught me the ancient eastern combat method as well. While my battleforce is stuck at the silver rank and I can no longer improve it, I defeated seven gold-ranked fighters at Duke Fisablen's knighthood tournament and won the championship," replied Reidy honestly.

"Very good. Since that's the case, I'm confident I can hold the camp. Reidy, you'll be in charge of dealing with Biljack. You just have to stall him, I'll let Manst deal with the weakest blademaster so we can take him out of the picture or at least wound him as quickly as possible. He'll help you out with Billjack. As long as those two blademasters are defeated, we'll stand a chance against Xanthi. Looking at the skies, I predict there'll be a snowstorm in a day or two. Given that the enemy didn't bring any resources to weather the winter, we'll see how they fare when the snow falls," said the second highness in high spirits without the slightest worry for the busy enemy troops at the foot of the hill.

The enemy rested for roughly four hours after lunch before launching their first attack. The duchy soldiers had originally intended to establish a foothold on the hillward path, but it had two sharp turns that exposed them to arrow fire even after they deployed their wooden shields. The first offensive was forced to retreat, leaving a trail of roughly 50 corpses.

It was evident even from the camp that they paid a hefty price for retreating without orders. The first six were beheaded publicly. After regrouping, the second attack was launched. It was worth noting that the two duchy blademasters had joined the group.

"Let them come. Have the longbowmen look out for Xanthi and fire whenever she makes a move. Make sure she isn't allowed to come here no matter what. I leave the two blademasters to you two. Manst, Reidy, don't let me down. As for the other small

fry, I hope you'll deal with them, Ripleid. Instruct the shield bearers to keep an eye out for the enemy's longbowmen," barked the second highness as he watched the enemy climb the hill.

"Understood, Your Majesty."

The two blademasters didn't expect their advance to go unopposed. They arrived at the camp gates without much effort at all. They couldn't help but wonder why. They had been expecting to be hit by a volley of arrows like before; the reason the two blademasters came up with the rest of the soldiers in the first place was to nullify the damage the longbowmen could do so Xanthi could make a sudden follow-up attack. But when they saw Reidy and Manst stepping out to receive them, they knew that their plan had gone awry.

There were only a little over a hundred duchy soldiers accompanying the two blademasters. Thanks to the wooden shields were already deployed, there were only ten or so shield bearers and longbowmen among their ranks, alongside 20 or so pikemen with the rest empty-handed. Given they had to hold wooden shields with both hands, they could only draw the daggers and shortswords they brought with them. Faced with Ripleid and five other knights' charge, all they could do was cry out in terror as they were cut down. A massacre.

The two blademasters were barely holding on against Reidy and Manst's savage assault. They could only hope for Xanthi's assistance. They didn't see that two of Xanthi's attempts to get up the hill was halted by volleys of arrows.

The second highness commanded his 500 archers to fire relentlessly at Xanthi to good effect. He didn't order them to shoot at Xanthi herself, but instead at the spots where Xanthi would land from a leap. She was forced to jump around like a circus monkey and couldn't gain much ground.

After Xanthi was forced back for the third time, she picked up a wooden shield, enrage, and ran up the hill. She got about halfway before the shield was shattered -- no longer able to withstand the concentrated volleys of arrows -- and she was forced back once more. All things considered, her physical constitution as a female and light, speedy sword style, it wasn't within her capabilities to rush uphill with a wooden shield like a barbarian. In fact, the second highness would welcome several more attempts -- having the archers fire at one concentrated spot was far more effective. The combined force of 100 arrows against the wooden shield was not something a normal person

could bear.

"Agh!" cried Shabaj's blademaster as he clutched his right side with his left hand, bleeding from Manst's strike.

"What's up with you?" asked Billjack after he forced Reidy away and headed to his partner.

"I got hit over here, but such a small scratch won't kill me. Is Blademaster Xanthi here yet?" asked Shabaj's blademaster with grit teeth.

Billjack took a glance at the foot of the hill before hurriedly turning back to block an attack.

"What's going on? Why isn't she rushing up?" wondered he.

Seeing their enemies already on the brink of breaking down, Manst and Reidy intensified their attacks in a desperate attempt to force the blademasters to remain. Billjack protected his companion as he retreated slowly until he reached the side of the hill.

All of a sudden, Billjack threw his longsword towards Manst and used the opening it created to roll down the hill with his comrade in his arms. Reidy leaped down and struck out with his sword. He managed to land a cut on Billjack's left thigh.

"Ugh!" cried the two blademasters as they rolled down the hill before the duchies' soldiers dragged them to safety.

"What a shame. I didn't think those two would actually use such a method to escape. If we had a squad of archers on standby, they'd have been pincushions by now," the second highness said, slightly regretful, "Then again, it's already a better result than I hoped for. Those two have been incapacitated, so let's see how Xanthi plans to make her way up here by herself."

When evening came, snow began drifting down from the grey sky like the feathers of a swan.

Chapter 358
Made it in Time

Even though the second highness felt like crying, he didn't even have the tears to do so. Corpses lay sprawled all over the bloodied ground covered in a thick layer of snow. The soldiers fortunate enough to survive were flipping around the corpses of their comrades in hopes of finding other injured survivors.

The sky seemed to glitter as the snow fell. The snowflakes were no longer as large as a swan's feather, though. The dark of the sky stood in stark contrast with the pure white on the ground, so bright it almost seemed eye-piercing. One look would bring tears to the eyes.

The second highness looked at the enemy camp with bloodshot eyes. Over there was a large bonfire and songs and cheers of the victorious. Within a single bone-chilling night of snow when both armies unable to fight, Blademaster Xanthi actually scaled the sides of the hill to enter the campsite using a human ladder. Her sudden appearance caught the second highness and his silver-ranked knights off-guard, allowing her to slaughter away in the camp.

Ripleid came over wearing a thick bandage on his head that covered the cut. It looked just like a large hat. It was the mark Xanthi had left him. If her cut had been the slightest bit lower, not only would Ripleid have lost an eye, his face might also have ended up disfigured.

"We just finished the casualty count, Your Majesty," said Ripleid, kneeling.

"Out with it. I'm listening."

"There are 189 casualties among the longbowmen, 128 of whom are dead. The other 61 are no longer combat capable. The pikemen suffered the worst of it. Of the three squads, there are 247 dead. The remaining 53 are mostly injured. Only 45 shield bearers died with another 51 injured. We only have one combat capable squad remaining. Twenty-two of our servants and laborers were killed as well," reported Ripleid as he read the beastskin in his hand.

The second highness waved his hand, annoyed.

"How are our knights?"

"We only have seven silver-ranked knights left. Even Knight Molva was injured. He wasn't as lucky as me. He needs three months to recover. Blademaster Manst is fine, but Reidy of suffered another injury to his shoulder."

"In other words, we lost about half our combat strength in a single night," sighed the second highness.

"This isn't your fault, Your Majesty. None of us thought the enemy would attack from the sides of the hill. The two squads of longbowmen we stationed at the gates were useless."

"I've always been known for my surprise attacks, but after last night, I finally get to know how it feels to be on the receiving end. It was due to my carelessness alone. I forgot I wasn't dealing with normal soldiers, but a rank 2 blademaster instead. Had I not been numbed by the victory yesterday and thought everything was under control… I should've understood that one shouldn't follow the common train of thought when dealing with blademasters. If I had thought of this earlier, I could've set a trap in the camp and bit back at Xanthi instead of sustaining such terrible losses," said the second highness with a raspy laugh.

"Your Majesty, you shouldn't blame yourself. It is we, your subordinates, who were incompetent and unable to resist the enemy. Given we already lost most of our forces, I was thinking it's about time we handed Reidy to the enemies and come to an agreement to stop fighting. After all, they came here for that kid and even chased him for so long," expressed Ripleid after seeing that nobody else was around.

The second highness laughed bitterly.

"Ripleid, I understand you make this suggestion out of your loyalty for me and consideration for my safety. But you don't seem to understand that their target changed to me the moment they saw my banner. This matter will not end if we hand Reidy over. Also, as the king, while I can allow my own knights to make sacrifices for my sake, I can definitely not surrender my loyal servants to the enemy for a truce. This is something that goes against the honor of being a king."

Seeing Ripleid attempt once more to convince him, the second highness waved his

hand.

"I know your thoughts. You're going to say that even though the Nortons are on our side on the surface, that's not actually the case, right? I know he's let my hopes down a number of times, but he's still a duke of the kingdom and has already paid his dues. Even if there's conflict between the two of us, it's only one concerning our goals. What he cares about is the wellbeing of his subjects, while I want to reunite the former empire.

"You should respect the duke, Ripleid. Even though Reidy isn't my knight, I have the duty to ensure his safety. Reidy is Locke's eldest disciple that trains in the ancient combat arts of the eastern monks like he does. This goes to show how heavily Locke regards this disciple of his. As long as we can tough this predicament through, I am almost certain the duke will make it up to us. You don't need to convince me anymore. Make your preparations, our enemy will attack the moment the snow lets up."

Ripleid bowed deeply before leaving wordlessly.

Just as the second highness predicted, the skies brightened as noon approached. Snow fell no more and the duchies' soldiers below the hill made their preparations to attack. With high morale, they got into formation and prepared to scale the hill once more. Xanthi stood at the very front of the formation with tens of House Fisablen's silver-ranked guards behind her holding wooden shields.

Perhaps, this will be the last battle.

The second highness had the remaining 80 or so longbowmen split into four smaller squads. He no longer had the confidence to halt Xanthi's advance. Blademaster Manst stood beside him with a stern expression, prepared to resist Xanthi should she come over. While he didn't manage to fight her during the night attack, he knew there was no way he could match her.

Reidy was standing next to Manst with his shoulder heavily bandaged, the cloth died red with blood. It was the mark Xanthi left after the previous night's attack. While he managed to parry two of her strikes, the third struck his shoulder. Had it not been for Manst's prompt reinforcement, the next attack would have killed him.

Ripleid and the seven remaining knights formed the last shock troop unit. The second highness had left Reidy and Manst in charge of holding Xanthi back. Apart from the

eight knights, everyone was there to deal with Xanthi alone. The knights had to hold the 2000 or so soldiers back. It was practically a suicide mission given the odds. Even if the duchies' soldiers are really that weak, sheer numbers was enough to make up for the difference. The only question was how much damage Ripleid and the knights could cause.

The bright cry of an eagle sounded in the skies once more. It was the majestic gold eagle they saw the previous day. It was circling the area.

Blademaster Manst gave it a regretful look.

"This eagle's rather intelligent. It knows a battle will break out soon and it'll have enough corpses to feed on later."

The second highness laughed.

"Blademaster Manst, you're mistaken. Only vultures and crows like to feed on corpses. Gold eagles are majestic, they won't feed on corpses. I bet it's here just because it's curious why there're so many people down here. After all, Egret Basin should usually be rather quiet, especially during winter."

After the low hum of a horn blown at the bottom of the hill, the battle began.

The first wave of attacks ended within thirty short minutes with Xanthi unable to wreak much havoc. Even though she managed to make it to the top of the hill, she didn't think the second highness would have everyone in the camp target her. Given that it was daytime, she wasn't able to hide easily like she could in the dark of night. Under the second highness's flawless instructions, the soldiers forced the blademaster to retreat after seeing that she couldn't achieve much.

Ripleid and the eight knights were sweating non-stop. They had just managed to stop the soldiers from advancing with the help of tens of servants so they didn't have to charge out yet. They just had to throw lumber down the mound to break the formations on the slope, scrambling their ranks and disrupting their synergy with Xanthi.

After half an hour of rest, the soldiers at the base of the hill prepared for another attack. This time around, Xanthi no longer tried to enter the camp herself. It seemed she intended to join the soldiers in the climb up the slope so he wouldn't be the focal point of the second highness's attack. But right after the duchies' soldiers were given

their briefing, loud cries sounded from afar. They rumbled the ears.

Almost everyone looked in the direction of a snowy slope to the north. Nobody knew when a silhouette appeared there. The person had two long and thin pieces of wood strapped to both feet with each hand holding a black, curved stick. The silhouette pushed against the ground with the sticks and soared down the slope. It really did look like flight to the second highness. He never imagined anyone could travel down such a steep slope so quickly and only leave a trail of lines behind.

Normally, one would have to walk down the slope step by step or roll downwards horizontally. But the latter method wouldn't work when the slope was littered with rocks. Yet, the figure swerving down the slope could change direction swiftly and made it to the bottom in a few blinks of the eye.

"We're saved! We're saved! His Grace is here!"

The second highness' eyes widened.

"That… That's Locke? The Duke of The Northlands?"

"Yes, it's my teacher, the Duke of The Northlands, Norton Lorist! Your Majesty, there's no need to worry anymore. We're safe now," stammered Reidy.

"Nonsense, he can't deal with more than two thousand soldiers by himself, right? Xanthi is also here. I worry Duke Norton will be in danger as well. It's best to have him join up with us and face the enemy together," said Ripleid with rolled eyes.

Just like the second highness, he had never seen Lorist fight before and treated all the rumors about Lorist's ability as tall tales. For example, the second highness even though word of Lorist fighting at the frontlines himself was just a rumor made to boost the morale of his troops. There was no way an iron rank like Lorist was brave enough to try a stunt like that.

"Don't utter crap if you don't know my teacher," Reidy snapped, glaring at Ripleid, "His Grace would never do anything he wasn't confident he could do. Since he dares to attack the enemies down there, it means he doesn't even consider them a threat. Apart from Xanthi, the rest are only small fry to him."

Ignorant of what those on the hill were discussing, Lorist continued to advance towards the formation of duchy soldiers. Blademaster Billjack was the first to be

bothered by Lorist's sudden appearance. Even though he had suffered a strike from Reidy on his left thigh, he was only slightly hampered, unlike the Shabaj blademaster, who was injured on the right side of his torso and laid resting back at the camp. While he wasn't in danger of dying, he needed at least three months to recover.

Dragging his injured leg along, Billjack limped forward, drew his sword, and called out, "Stop! Who goes there?! Announce your identity and purpose!"

"Idiot…" Lorist didn't bother to decelerate and handed the stick in his right hand to his left before he drew the longsword hanging by his waist.

Since the newcomer was definitely an enemy, Billjack roared and positioned his injured leg to his back with his right leg in front as he turned the sword in his hand into a bolt of lightning and cast it in Lorist's direction.

Clang! The loud clash of swords reverberated throughout in the area, yet, Lorist's longsword didn't fall to the ground like everyone expected. Lorist had flicked his wrist and positioned his sword horizontally as he swooped past the blademaster.

Billjack remained standing in an odd position. A cold breeze blew by and the onlookers realized his figure shook from the wind. His head fell to the ground, rolling, before his headless body collapsed, dying the snow red.

Billjack was beheaded with only one strike. Almost all the soldiers gasped in complete shock and took an unconscious step back. They realized someone far stronger than Xanthi had arrived. Even she required three or four moves to defeat Billjack, this had been confirmed by some of their earlier sparring sessions.

Lorist circled around and stopped in front of Xanthi like nobody's business before he stuck the two sticks into the ground and took off the skis tied to his feet. He removed his scarf and smiled.

"It's my pleasure to meet you here, Blademaster Xanthi."

"How can it be you? Lorist? Why have you come here? Did you forget that y-you're the Duke of The Northlands?" exclaimed she, shocked.

Lorist furrowed his brow.

"So what? What stops me from coming over? Even His Majesty is here. Why can a duke

like me not come to receive him? I also heard you've been taking care of my trouble-making disciple, so I came here to show you my gratitude."

"Oh, really? That's very nice of you," Xanthi said before she laughed wryly.

Her expression turned serious and she drew her sword.

"Enough with your nonsense. Norton brat, since you dared to come here today, don't think I'll let you go back in one piece! En garde!"

Becoming one with her sword, Xanthi closed in on Lorist in an instant.

Chapter 359
Captive

This was already the best Blademaster Xanthi's could do. Ever since she broke through to become a rank 3 blademaster a year ago, she had never executed a move she felt was so perfect it was her ultimate move. It was swift and ephemeral, yet bright like the stars. Seeing Lorist just about to be enveloped by the sword flashes in his surroundings, Xanthi's lips curved into a smile.

Do you still think I'm that rank 2 blademaster from a few years ago? Hmph, I'll show you this isn't that soldier-surrounded duke's mansion where you acted so haughty. I won't go easy on you this time. You will learn your lesson today, Locke, my boy. Let's see whether you still dare to trick my beloved Sylvia after this… You and the sweet words with which you misled her… I'll only spare you when you kneel before my duke and sign countless treaties of surrender…

Though she already had it all planned out, her confidence was shattered by three strikes from Lorist's longsword.

Clang clang clang! The sound of clashing metal exploded from the swords' contact point. The starlight-filled surroundings vanished. Not only did the longsword Lorist casually waved accurately parry the three killing blows hidden in the starlight, the counterforce from those parries even forced Xanthi backwards in an arc across the sky. She couldn't launch any more attacks.

"Left shoulder, right torso, and right chest? Oh, and my thigh," Lorist mused as he easily deduced the targets of Xanthi's strikes with a drunk smile, "We haven't met for a few years now, have we? And to think you've become a rank 3 blademaster… It's too bad while your force did increase, your swordsmanship didn't improve at all. You're still going about it with the same approach. It seems you only broke through thanks to luck instead of some transformative realization."

Xanthi was flabbergasted.

"You… How could you take my attacks?"

"Take your attacks?" Lorist mused curiously, "Should it have been difficult? It wasn't to me, at least. I already know your sword style by heart. I can even fight you blind. Didn't you see it earlier? Stop overreacting to everything, sheesh."

While Lorist made it sound easy, Xanthi's face went pale.

"You're mocking me, aren't you?" she said gritting her teeth.

Lorist shrugged.

"If that's what you think, I can't change your mind. I was only speaking the truth."

"I'll show you!" cried Xanthi as she rushed over again.

It was too bad her frenzied attacks were completely ineffective. Lorist deflected every one of her strikes patiently and confidently as he commentated.

"Oh, this strike was insidious… You actually tried to pierce me there and end my family line? Well, you were just a little bit off. Hha, you weren't able to do it!"

"Whoa! You had that move as well? Heh, I blocked it anyway. Didn't I give you some pointers before? Mere speed is useless. You need accuracy as well."

"Only three of your ten strikes managed to connect. The other seven were only wasted effort. Why don't you understand something so simple at your level?"

Xanthi was so mad she almost coughed out blood.

How is he so shameless, to even mock me during our duel!

Lorist used the opening and put his sword to the side before he gave Xanthi a huge kick, sending her a few steps back before she kneeled on the ground and coughed up blood three times.

Despite having gotten in a cheap strike, Lorist didn't stop.

"Once one reaches the blademaster level, one shouldn't only pay attention to the sword in one's hand. One must forge oneself into a sword. This is the true essence of what it means to break through to the blademaster level, understand? The tricks you manage with the sword in your hand are limited at best. Considering your relationship

with Sylvia, I'll spare you this time. You may scoot now."

Hack! Xanthi spat out another mouthful of blood before she stood up, her hair all messed up, and rubbed off the trace of blood on her mouth.

Raising her sword, she proclaimed, "You don't have to care about what Sylvia thinks. I won't let you be together with her. It was I who disturbed your date. I'll never let Sylvia become the woman of an adulterous, unambitious man! Kill me if you can!"

Lorist laughed bitterly.

"Oh please, old hag, it was Sylvia who the first move. When I accepted her feelings and wanted to give her a happy future, Duke Fisablen refused my request. In the end, you simply just don't take House Norton seriously, do you? Very well, I'll educate you right here and now before I settle the bills with House Fisablen after new year's. I'll have you guys kneel before me and beg me to wed Sylvia."

"Dream on!" cried Xanthi like a haggard woman.

She had none of the poise expected of a blademaster. She retreated into the formation of soldiers and pointed her sword at Lorist.

"Attack! Turn him into mincemeat!"

"Kill!" cried the soldiers.

Almost two thousand men rushed over with their weapons. It was a charge most rank 3 blademasters had to evade at all costs. Xanthi was not mistaken in her decision. Since her own power wasn't enough, she'd just swamp Lorist with numbers. Two thousand well-equipped men would grind even metal into dust.

While a few hundred won't be a threat to a blademaster, two thousand elite soldiers are more than enough to push you into a corner! I'll launch surprise attacks while hiding among them. Perhaps the scales of victory will tip in my favor.

Xanthi widened her eyes and followed Lorist's every movement. She would intercept him and push him back into the group the moment he backed off. She didn't expect Lorist's reaction.

Seeing the soldiers of the duchies run over, Lorist didn't tense up. He revealed a look

of excitement, the look a predator would show when they spotted their prey.

"Come on!" yelled Lorist before he ran forward.

Whoosh! Before they even arrived, arrows flow over their heads straight for Lorist. The unit of about five hundred longbowmen had fired a volley, but they didn't expect Lorist would run forward. They had covered everywhere to whichhe could possibly dodge, but his charge rendered the whole volley useless.

"Kill!"

He had already made it into the middle of the formation. Where his swords passed, heads rolled from shoulders and blood arced into the air. The sword flash covered a circle around him and carved out an empty space. His figure could hardly be seen as he moved about at breakneck speed. His sword moved so fast it almost seemed like he was carelessly 'spilling' sword light. Not one of the soldiers were able to see him clearly. All they could register in their vision was the sight of their comrades falling like felled timber one after another nonstop.

All of a sudden, he appeared at the rear of the formation and began his slaughter of the longbowmen and crossbowmen. When there was nobody left, he looked back and saw the trail of corpses he left in his wake.

Someone dropped his weapon with an audible thud. It was like a predetermined signal, everyone's morale left them at that moment.

"De-demon!" cried the soldiers before they discarded their weapons and ran around like ants who had lost their way. The only thought on their minds was to make it as far from Lorist as possible.

"Attack!" cried a group of men from the hill.

The second highness personally led his troops to join the fight. Lorist blurred and re-appeared in front of the dumbstruck Xanthi.

"Hehe, any other tricks left up your sleeve, my dear Blademaster Xanthi?"

Xanthi pierced out with her sword, but it didn't even tear Lorist's clothes.

"Just surrender. On Sylvia's behalf, I will grant you treatment befitting of a blademaster

and captive. You have no choice left. Put down your sword," advised Lorist.

Upon mention of Sylvia, Xanthi snapped out of her stupor. Angered by Lorist's advice, she growled.

"I will definitely not let you humiliate me! I still have a choice. I can die here and Sylvia will know her adoptive mother was killed by you!"

Xanthi rushed forward with crazy fervor. She didn't even bother to use any of her skills. She focused solely on shoving her sword through Lorist's chest. She'd rather die than surrender to him.

Looks like there's no convincing her, thought Lorist, annoyed.

He had considered whether he should just off the hag already, but he wasn't sure how he should break it to Sylvia if he did. 'Honey, I cut your mother in eight,' didn't sound really pleasing to the ear.

The issue was that, while killing Xanthi was easy to say the least, capturing her alive and unharmed wasn't, especially with how she was acting now. Lorist might even get bitten, and he even believed a rank 3 blademaster like her would actually go through with it.

"Enough is enough."

Xanthi didn't respond, she just continued her charge.

"You're really asking for it," barked Lorist angrily as he twisted his sword to deflect the incoming strike.

He flipped his hand again and slap the flat of the blade against Xanthi's left cheek. With a soft crack, two of Xanthi's teeth fell out of her mouth.

"I'll show you--"

Before she could finish, Lorist angled his sword upward to block the strike and suddenly appeared directly in front of her. Shocked, she tried to duck, only to be the slightest bit too late to avoid the fist Lorist thrust at her abdomen.

"Oof!" growled she in pain as she curled up like a shrimp being cooked.

She was unable to wield her sword and clutched her stomach with both her hands, mouth open as if she was going to puke at any moment. Seeing her reaction, and not wanting to be puked on, Lorist gave her a kick and sent her flying.

Xanthi's body flew high in the air but landed not far away. She had vomited mid-air. Lorist had to duck to avoid the filth falling from the sky.

With a thud, she landed on a patch of stained, snowy ground, rolled for a while, and stopped in front of the second highness's mount. The moment the second highness saw her, he was so terrified of being attacked he instinctively raised his lance and placed it close to her throat.

But when she opened her eyes and saw who was in front of her, she instantly said, "Spare me, I surrender…" and fainted.

The second highness and Lorist, who had just rushed over, crossed gazes in an awkward moment. There was an unspoken tradition among the nobles that the person one surrendered to would be one's captor. Taking another's captive and victory was also considered a shameful practice.

The problem here was that Lorist was the one who defeated Xanthi, yet the second highness was the one she surrendered to. It made her the second highness's captive and Lorist didn't have any rights to deal with her.

The second highness wasn't faring any better either. He had wanted to welcome Lorist's arrival, but he didn't think Xanthi would pull something like that. As a noble and king, he had the obligation to ensure the safety of his captive. However, he was here to congratulate Lorist on defeating her instead of taking her captive. In some sense, the second highness had inadvertently stolen the fruit of Lorist's hard work.

The second highness's face flushed as he struggled to think of something appropriate to say. Manst, Ripleid, and Reidy arrived at that moment.

Lorist hurriedly said, "Congratulations, Your Majesty! This hag has been troubling me for so long, and to think she would surrender in fear when she saw you! Your Majesty's name truly strikes fear in the hearts of the enemy all over the continent!"

Thankfully, Lorist had said something quick to diffuse the awkward situation. He didn't feel like going through the trouble of thinking of what to do with Xanthi. He couldn't beat nor rebuke her, as she was Sylvia's adoptive mother. Not only would he

have to show her fine hospitality, he couldn't even request a ransom for her release. Should Sylvia ever cry in front of him, he'd have to set Xanthi free respectfully and without complaint.

Since the hag hates me so much, I'll let the second highness deal with her. Let her suffer and learn from this experience. We'll see whether she dares to pull tricks like this again. You think you can worsen my relationship with the second highness like this? I won't fall for it, thought Lorist with glee.

"Your Majesty, Blademaster Xanthi is already a rank 3 blademaster. She fainted from sheer anger and isn't much wounded or in any danger. She'll recover with some rest. It would be best to give her some force-dispersing toxin as soon as possible to prevent her from doing anything when she wakes up."

"There won't be a need for this, will there? She's a rank 3 blademaster. She should honor her word…" answered the second highness awkwardly.

"Your Majesty, she's a woman. No man alive can predict her next move. She's also a blademaster, she can easily find an excuse or derive a way to push her mistakes onto someone else and leave without worry. Just in case, it's better to take precautions," insisted Lorist.

The second highness thought about that snowy night when Xanthi slaughtered his army and killed so many of his nothing.

Nodding, he hurriedly ordered, "Ripleid, fetch the toxin."

"Understood, Your Majesty," answered Ripleid before he left for the camp.

"Teacher…" Reidy finally got a chance to speak with Lorist.

Lorist whacked Reidy on the back of the head.

"You little arrogant bastard… You think getting first place in the tournament is a big deal? Now you know there are so many people stronger than you, right? This time, you were lucky that His Majesty offered you protection until I arrived. If I didn't get news of your whereabouts, you might be a corpse already!"

Reidy understood teacher was rebuking him out of concern.

"I understand, teacher. Did you come alone?"

Lorist smiled and pointed at the slope he had skied down.

"I wasn't alone. I only had a head start."

Everyone turned and saw a row of people standing atop the slope. They were all equipped with the ski and rod equipment Lorist had used. They had massive backpacks on their backs as well that made them rather bulky. They slid down the hillside less elegantly than Lorist had.

"Your Grace! You shamelessly attacked first before we arrived! We wasted our time coming here!" protested Els as he breathed heavily from all the rushing.

Chapter 360
Igloo

Tagging along behind Tarkel, Howard brought the 30 guards and Jisan and the gold eagle trainer, Morbinghan, with him. It was rather crowded around Lorist and Reidy. Seeing that Reidy was fine, Tarkel breathed a sigh of relief. He had been worried he would hear word of Reidy's demise along the way because he was the one that requested Reidy deal with the underground crime syndicates.

Howard hugged his senior apprentice-brother and complained about how tough the journey had been and the interesting things they saw along the way. Els instructed the 30 guards to set up a perimeter around Lorist after removing his skis to prevent any excited Andinaq soldiers clamoring down the hill from running into Lorist and the second highness.

The second highness had already dismounted and was coming over with a soldier. He analyzed the skis and their poles as he approached. After taking a good look at the whole thing, he put the skis down and stepped on the ski binding. Poles in hand, he gave it a small push… and fell.

Lorist struggled to resist the urge to laugh as he helped the second highness up.

"Your Majesty, this is called a ski. It's used to travel on snow. You have to have adequate training before you can master skiing. Nobody can learn how to ski just by watching someone do it once, especially considering you have to learn to balance on them. If Your Majesty doesn't mind learning from me, I wouldn't be averse to teaching you in my free time."

Not only did the second highness not get angry or embarrassed, he held Lorist's hand and praised him instead.

"Brother Locke, your house's new contraption is truly amazing! This is amazing for winter warfare! If a whole legion were trained to use skis, we could cover a lot of ground with good snow coverage and even circle around our enemy's forces! We'll have a definite advantage if we can access and attack the enemy's vulnerable rear!"

As expected of the second highness -- who shot to fame after a battle that took place during winter. The first thing he thought of was military utility.

Lorist shook his head.

"Your Majesty, this is included in the standard winter loadout for our soldiers. While up to a hundred people can move together effectively like this in the winter, even faster than horses, I'm afraid I can't use them offensively on the scale of a division, not speak of a whole legion. It's no easy task."

The second highness quickly understood Lorist's meaning. The winter loadout for around a hundred scouts already cost quite a bit. Just looking at the equipment and fur mantles, which were all made of magic beast fur, it could be seen how expensive it was. While Lorist could afford to spend a little more to increase the efficacy of his guards in the winter, supplying a whole legion with such high-quality magic beast fur was a ridiculous expenditure. Perhaps all the other equipment in their loadout combined couldn't even match the fur clothing's cost.

"You're talking about this, right?" asked the second highness, pointing at the guards' clothes.

Lorist nodded.

"Your Majesty, skiing and marching in snow are different. While marching is rather tiring, your body moves constantly and generates a comfortable amount of heat. Skiing, in contrast, makes you move against the wind; the cold air will quickly cut through normal clothes and freeze you. And it's just the beginning of your troubles. The other is to make sure you don't lose your way. The winter weather changes whimsically, it would be the end of you if you ran into a snowstorm."

"But didn't you guys make it here safely?" the second highness countered with dissatisfaction, "The last couple of days' weather wasn't that good either."

Lorist sighed, turned around and pointed at Morbinham.

"That's because we had him, Your Majesty."

Morbinghan took out a jade-colored bone whistle and blew it. A loud high-pitched sound rang out, much to the second highness's surprise. The gold eagle circling around the area flew down and perched on Morbinghan's right arm. He stroked its

feathers lovingly and brought out a piece of beef warmed by his body heat and fed it to the eagle.

"Is… Is this the gold eagle you brought with you?" the second highness asked, flabbergasted, "Did you rely on it to find us?"

"Indeed, Your Majesty. This gold eagle is a precious son to Morbinghan. They've lived together for more than a decade. It only listens Morbinghan. When I received word that Reidy was being pursued and had escaped to Egret Basin, I had Morbinghan instruct his eagle to find a place where many people were gathered. Had it not been for the eagle, we would have been searching for a needle in a haystack. We would have had to wish on luck to help us find you," explained Lorist briefly.

The second highness was no fool, he knew he shouldn't desire the gold eagle after hearing Lorist's words. He looked at the eagle with a slight blush of shame and a hint of regret.

"No wonder you were able to find us so quickly. So it was thanks to the gold eagle's help. I never thought they could be used like this. I only considered them pets that brought entertainment to nobles. If only I could train them to scout… A single eagle could stand in for a scout squad of 100 men."

"Your Majesty's idea sounds magnificent," Lorist laughed, "I should go back and experiment. I'd like to see if I could train a few eagles as scouts. Our soldiers wouldn't have worry about falling into a trap or ambush."

At that moment, Ripleid returned with some toxin and fed it to the messy-haired Xanthi, who had just regained consciousness. She obediently drank it as she stared hatefully at Lorist. She didn't bother to hide her seething enmity.

Seeing her taken away, the second highness asked, "Locke, let's head to the camp first. When are you preparing to return?"

Lorist looked at the skies and saw the weak sunlight blocked by the many clouds.

"A snowstorm is coming. We'll rest at Your Majesty's camp for a few days. My guards could really use the rest. They've been running all around the basin with me. I'll teach you to ski so you can start practicing soon and master it quickly while we rest."

Upon reaching the campsite, Lorist looked at the tents, dumbfounded.

"Your Majesty, are you letting your soldiers stay in those in this weather?"

"Yes," the second highness said a little proudly, "Even though the cloth is thin, it's actually made of double-layered linen and given an oil coating. This is more than enough cover against snow and rain. When the snow melts, the water won't soak it either.

"Your Majesty, a storm is coming and snow will pile up quickly. Many soldiers will get frostbite from the cold," said Lorist without hesitation.

"Well, that was the case a few years ago. However, we've made some changes over the years as well. We assigned them gloves and extra clothing, so the number of injured should be relatively low. Also, we brought a lot of frostbite medication with us," argued he.

"This is what we call 'building a carriage with its doors closed'. You should've asked if you had anything you didn't understand. Els, build an igloo outside the camp, you have an hour. Show the second highness the right way to camp in winter," instructed Lorist.

The poor Els had to get straight to work right after putting his heavy bag down. He didn't get any rest. But when he saw the tents, he knew it would already be lucky if anyone managed to get any sleep in the night, given that one could survive it and not freeze, that is.

With a beckon, 20 guards came over to help him. Within an hour, a squarish igloo was built in front of the second highness. Its design was really simple. It started with the laying of wooden blocks to use as a base. Snow as watered next to solidify it into bricks. The bricks were then stacked and the gaps between each watered lightly. The liquid was allowed to freeze before the next placed on top. The only hard part was the construction of the roof. First, a few wooden beams were laid over the walls from one edge to the other and watered lightly so the ice would hold them in place. Finally, the whole igloo was watered from top to bottom to secure it to the ground so even the largest storms wouldn't shake it. Els also set up a tent behind the igloo.

"The tent is there to prevent the cold from harming our bodies. You can light a brazier inside. While the outside is freezing, the igloo is actually rather warm. Els will have to make some holes for ventilation. The igloo doesn't have any doors, instead, we use a fur flap to keep the wind out,"

"Locke, my brother, how do you come out with all these great ideas?" the second highness asked.

"This discovery isn't mine to claim, Your Majesty," Lorist smiled, "It was the great adventurer, Carmen Pride, who lived around a century ago, that discovered this method. I bought his autobiography when I studied at Dawn Academy and this method was recorded in it. You should know I had to deal with the magic beast wave every winter in the wildlands ever since my return to the dominion, right? Had it not been for these igloos, we'd have lost too many men to the cold, we wouldn't have been able to take out the magic beast wave."

"Even though you weren't the one who invented this, it was you who actually put what you learned into practice," the second highness continued his praise, "If it were that easy, why hasn't anyone heard of this method before and tried it out? Being able to apply what you learn gives you the most credit, my dear Duke of The Northlands."

"You speak too highly of me, Your Majesty. It's still only afternoon, we have some time to build a couple more. It would help if we could use a few of your soldiers."

"Very well. Ripleid!" called the second highness.

And so, Ripleid was made the chief supervisor of the igloo construction project to aid Els with the restructuring of the campsite.

The evening's banquet was held in the largest one. The second highness was elated as Lorist's arrival spared him the fate of being taken prisoner. Instead, the tables turned on the enemy and he even managed to capture a blademaster. A few might have escaped without him noticing, but he didn't care. Leaving for the wilds in such heavy snow was suicidal, to say the least.

Lorist left all the captives to the second highness. He couldn't be bothered to bring the thousands back. He had spent quite a number of days searching for his apprentice, in just a couple more days it would be the 24th day of the 12th month. The return trip to Firmrock would take 15 days and Lorist had to rush because he wanted to make it to the new year's celebration where other nobles and his vassals were awaiting his participation. Fortunately, he didn't have to circle around Egret Basin anymore, he could just use the main path at Egret Lake. It should take just around ten days to travel to Firmrock Castle on skis without taking any useless turns.

Outside, the storm blew strong. But the candles in the igloo merely flickered, keeping the ones making merry within warm and lit.

Blademaster Manst respectfully toasted Loris.

"Your Grace, do you think Blademaster Xanthi has broken through to the third rank?"

Lorist knew the reason Manst came over to ask that question and nodded. "That's correct. When I fought her years ago, she was still only a rank 2. Even though I managed to defeat her back then, I fainted from physical and mental exhaustion and only woke up after three days of rest. In my duel with her today, her attacks seemed even more ferocious than before, which led me to that conclusion.

"I understand what you're trying to say. You're thinking that Blademaster Xanthi is a little undeserving to be called a rank 3, right? If she really were a rank 3 blademaster, she should've been able to easily kill you instead of having a few of her strikes blocked by you during your fight at the campsite yesterday.

"I believe you interpreted the situation a little wrong. First, the attack during the night was a surprise attack, and Xanthi used mainly hit-and-run tactics while you focused on defending the second highness with the best of your ability. As Xanthi couldn't afford to clash with you and get entangled in a fight, she instantly stepped back after testing your defense out. Another factor is not the power of her attacks, but rather your advantage in terms of elemental attribute. Your battleforce attribute is earth, right?"

Blademaster Manst nodded.

Lorist continued his explanation, "Xanti's battleforce attribute is wind, so her sword style using light, swift and agile movements. Yours is the complete opposite. You express your swordsmanship through heavy, accurate and powerful strikes. Even though she trumps you in terms of rank, if you defend with all your abilities, even she wouldn't be able to get the better of you. If there were no other soldiers pressuring Xanthi to escape, you would've lost in around a hundred strikes. Also, what do you think of Reidy's swordsmanship?"

Manst gave it some thought and said, "Even I wasn't as good as him when I was his age. His swordsmanship is impeccable and he excels in both offense and defense."

Lorist laughed and said, "But even he got injured by Xanthi during their clashes

because his battleforce attribute is metal, an element that considers the best defense to be offense. That's the reason he was easily crushed by Xanthi from being unable to block those formless strikes like the wind."

Manst mused in deep thought, "Oh, so that's the case. Thank you, Your Grace, for your insight on the matter."

Raising his own golden cup for a toast, Lorist said, "You're welcome. Let's drink to this."

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, Lorist thought, *you really believe what I made up just like that? You didn't even consider the fact that Reidy no longer trains in battleforce. How would he even have battleforce attribute?*

Chapter 361
Drinking Session

The clouds were thick as the raving winds blew but the campsite on the hill was rife with activity. Thanks to Lorist's instruction, the second highness had learned how to ski and excitedly ordered his soldiers to pile up and flatten snow to make a skiing wonderland. He had lots of fun skiing with his knights despite the cold and windy weather.

Seeing the soldiers and knights on skis, Lorist felt moved somehow and thought that maybe he could spread winter sports across his dominion and make it a seasonal activity. It was far better than having his subjects stay in their homes all day long, at least. Then again, an exception would be the goat-tackling festival of Felicitas's third settlement.

It wasn't that Lorist didn't think of importing modern sports from his world, but that most were rather ill-suited for the world where battleforce existed. Take, for example, the three main ball games. Kicking a ball with battleforce would burst it outright, doing a slam dunk with the aid of battleforce would destroy the whole basket, and rugby was even further out of the question as battleforce rank and application would be the main deciding factors of victory. Frankly speaking, a gold-ranked knight could envelop himself in battleforce and run all the way to the other side of the field and score. His opponents wouldn't be able to do anything against him just because he was a gold rank.

As of now, the main sports within the dominion were swordsmanship, archery, javelin and throwing axe tossing and horse-riding, mostly traditional activities that had been passed down since days of yore. Lorist had once considered hosting a sports festival to lift his people's hearts but gave up after he realized how inappropriate the sports would be. He wasn't worried about there not being enough attendees either. In fact, a sports festival would be a great place to make the commoners spend their money and stimulate the economy instead of letting them keep their money saved and unused.

The second highness did a beautiful circular movement before stopping in front of Lorist. The surrounding guards clapped and cheered enthusiastically. Lorist clapped

a few times himself.

"Your Majesty's skills are improving by the moment! You are truly gifted."

The second highness laughed with satisfaction.

"Well, it's coincidental at best. Skiing in snow doesn't appear to be too hard. The most challenging part is maintaining good balance. I realized that the soldiers with awakened battleforce learn to do this faster than those who haven't."

"Your Majesty's words ring true."

"Locke, why are you acting so formal? I've already said you ought to treat me like a brother when we're in private. Right now, you're the only one left that carries House Norton's blood and I am the last surviving offspring of the Krissen imperial family. Each's survival is contingent on the other's."

"Hehe, Your Majesty seems to forget that there are many branch families in my house. For instance, Glacia and her little brothers, my half-brothers, and my three sons and two daughters. Your Majesty, on the other hand, ought to take good care of yourself! You still haven't produced descendants for the royal family!"

The second highness sighed deeply.

"My mind's filled with nothing but restoring the empire and wiping out the humiliation we received. I can't be bothered with anything else right now. Oh, look. The weather's turning, and the snow has also stopped. The winds aren't as strong as yesterday's either. I bet it'll be sunny tomorrow. Are you going to leave then, Locke?"

Lorist bowed his head.

"Yes, Your Majesty. I've already stayed here for the past three days. It is best I leave early in the morning. There are many things I have to deal with back home. On another note, we'll attack Iblia next year. This is a huge matter and we can't afford to delay. It's best I head back to oversee preparations. I believe Your Majesty would like to witness Iblia's end too, right?"

The second highness nodded.

"Indeed. It's a kingdom built on rebellion. Even though the traitorous second prince

has already been sentenced to death, the fact that his name still remains in the world through that kingdom is displeasing. I rely on you in this matter, Brother Locke. I hope your forces can wipe that accursed thing out as soon as possible."

"Hehe, ending the kingdom is not an issue just the Nortons will face. Duke Kenmays, Baron Falim, and Baron Shazin's forces will join the fray too. Only with the combined forces of the four houses can we ensure success. We will have to deal with the invasion of Duke Fisablen's cavalry forces as well as the four central duchies' raids against Southern once we're finished. Perhaps ending this war will take more time than we think."

Lorist was already prepared for a long war after attacking and exterminating Iblia.

However, the second highness didn't appear to be the slightest bit moved, as if he didn't hear what Lorist had said. Removing the skis from his feet and kicking the snow off his boots, the second highness raised his head.

"Since you're leaving tomorrow, let's have a drink tonight, just the two of us. Consider it a little parting celebration. Is that alright with you?"

Lorist smiled as he saluted.

"Naturally. It would be my pleasure."

That night, Lorist brought only Howard and two skin sacks filled with fine wine to the meeting. The wine was actually brewed according to a rice-fermentation method from Lorist's past life. It involved choosing the finest grains of rice and fermenting them in a very complicated process. The result was a really strong white wine with a high alcohol content that was only reserved for the enjoyment of the house's higher-ups as it was produced only in limited quantities due to the large amount of food required.

The second highness's igloo was rather empty. There was no one beside the two chefs working outside. Lorist had Howard heat the wine outside before he stepped in.

The second highness leaned against the table in deep thought. Lorist had no idea what was going through his head. He didn't notice Lorist's arrival. He only snapped out of his stupor after Lorist had called him thrice. He hurriedly invited Lorist to take a seat and ordered his chefs to begin serving the food.

The second highness sat in the main seat with Lorist to his left. Baked apples, smoked

turkey, roast meat, and various vegetables were served shortly.

Raising his wine cup, the second highness said, "In the wilds, good food is hard to come by. This is definitely far from what I can offer you at the imperial capital. I hope you don't mind, Brother Locke."

Lorist raised his own cup in response.

"There's no need to go through such trouble, Your Majesty. The food is most delectable, not to mention the honor of dining with Your Majesty personally. Cheers."

The second highness downed his cup of wine just as Lorist did.

"Thank you."

"Your Majesty, I brought some alcohol I brewed myself but it's far stronger than what we usually have. You'll have to taste it slowly to appreciate the taste. I wonder if you'd like to give it a try?"

"Very well. Let me have a taste," said the second highness curiously.

Lorist clapped and Howard entered. He poured a cup for himself before pouring half a cup for the second highness -- who looked interested only in warming his hands with the chalice.

"Your Majesty, this kind of wine is drunk in the winter to warm you up. You have to make sure to drink it in small sips like this," said Lorist before he did his demonstration.

The second highness chuckled. He felt drinking wine so sparingly was a little too stingy. He took a mouthful of wine immediately. Even though it wasn't a full mouthful, it was hot enough to cause him to redden up. "Ah, it's hot! It burns like fire…"

After a good moment, the second highness returned to normal and had a look of understanding.

"I see now, Locke! This is what your soldiers use to train how to ski and march in snowy weather! All of them have a sack filled with tough wine like this that'll give you a burst of heat?"

Lorist nodded before he shook his head.

"Your Majesty, our soldiers are indeed given strong liquor to counter the loss of heat from the chilling wind. But theirs is brewed from roast potatoes and is really different from this. This wine of mine is brewed using the large grains of rice from Falik Plains and a sack like this costs ten gold Fordes. We'd have gone bankrupt if we produced this for the consumption of our soldiers.

"Also, the liquor we provide to our soldiers is rationed strictly. They don't drink much in a day. This is one benefit of favoring more small units over one large one. It's easier to keep an eye on what they do and what they consume. You thought you could rely on the skis to launch large-scale attacks during winter, but in reality, the cold-resistant clothes cost a fortune. There's also the issue of navigating in a snowstorm. Coupled with having to deal with undisciplined soldiers who would sneak a drink or two, you'll end up with a legion of bumbling drunks instead of one that can hold their ground in a fight."

The second highness sighed before he raised his cup and took a smaller sip.

"Ahhh… Locke, I've long wanted to have a good chat with you. Let's speak openly tonight, alright?"

A little surprised, Lorist agreed, "As you wish, Your Majesty."

"Locke my brother, I really don't understand why you're not willing to help me out. Given the might of your house, if you were willing to lend me a hand, we could've united the empire already. By then, your reputation as my loyal subordinate would be recorded in the annals of history for future generations to remember."

"Your Majesty considers our might impressive, but have you considered how we got it in the first place?" Lorist asked solemnly as he sat up straight, "Do you remember the time we first met ten years ago? Our house's convoy was trapped in the Madras duchy, unable to advance or retreat. The 300 thousand or so men with us on the brink of crumbling later became the keystone to our rise in The Northlands.

"Your Majesty, you should know roughly the state of House Norton when I first arrived. On one hand, Duke Loggins wanted to force us into submission; on the other, we had a group of rebellious subjects occupying one of the largest settlements in our dominion. As for our house, we only had around two thousand people at Maplewoods

and were even faced with House Kenmays who had annexed part of our dominion.

"Do you remember how much better off you were from me then? You used my convoy to deal with the rebellious nobles and consolidated your power in the kingdom. You attacked Madras with our aid and managed to take Yungechandler. When our convoy resumed our journey northward, you led your soldiers to the east and defeated the first prince at Flowater Creek, forcing him to cede the two southwestern provinces to you. That year, your fame instantly spread across the lands and you were known as the war god of the new generation.

"But in the following half a decade of peace, you made bad decision after bad decision. You greatly expanded the kingdom's forces and actually formed an army of 300 thousand. You spent most of the kingdom's resources on just one army and wasted the peace time you could've used to rest and recuperate."

The second highness opened his mouth to speak, but Lorist didn't let him.

"Please don't interrupt me, Your Majesty, let me finish. Perhaps you did have your reasons. I know you've always wanted to reunite the empire and bring it back to its former glory. But you forgot that war is not only a matter of pitting one army against another. For instance, can you be sure how many of your 300 thousand troops are actually fighting for the sake of your ambitions?

"The empire's civil war raged for seven whole years and it took another three for the situation between the nobles to stabilize. Does Your Majesty remember the 100 thousand plus refugees loitering around in the kingdom with nowhere to go? They were originally proud citizens of the imperial capital who had been left homeless by the war. Half joined us, while you used the nobles you recently massacred to settle down the other half and finally brought peace to the kingdom.

"What the commoners want most is a life of peace and stability, but you've neglected that desire and merely promised to make it up to them after you united the empire. It's also why the kingdom's nobles supported Queen Carey's coronation when they heard of your losses in Redlis. It all happened because you failed to fulfill your empty promises.

"When you were busy building your army again, those refugees that followed our convoy managed to gain a peaceful life. House Norton abided by our promise to no longer subject them to the sufferings of war. Apart from resisting the magic beast wave

and the second prince's attacks, we stayed within our dominion mostly and instead developed it. We focused on improving the quality of our subjects' lives. We spent lots of money developing our dominion in an effort to provide our subjects with a safe home even when we were mocked for being cowardly little bears that didn't dare leave our cave.

"I'm sure you saw how prosperous our dominion was during your visit. But did you wonder even once what kind of price we paid for that prosperity? If you didn't form your army in a hurry to conquer more land, your kingdom would've been just as prosperous. You already missed your chance once. For the sake of the empire's reunification, as long as you are able to focus on development for the next decade, you'll definitely achieve your ambition."

After hearing Lorist's earnest speech, the second highness continued to sip the wine without a single word until the cup was empty.

"Brother Locke, perhaps this is the greatest difference between the two of us. My goal is the reunification of the former empire and bringing us back to the days of our prestigious past. You only reach out to another place after you develop what you already have fully. I'm afraid I'm unable to sit still and develop the kingdom like you did your dominion. I'm constantly worried that a complacent and peaceful life will extinguish this lifelong ambition of mine. I might end up addicted to peace and become unwilling to forsake it for my ambition.

"I've had much time to reflect after I reclaimed my throne and will definitely no longer throw all my resources single-mindedly into the military. I will also learn as much as I can from you by properly controlling one area before moving on to my next target and will try to increase production alongside our military force. But I hope I have your support. I need you to supply some of your weapons," revealed the second highness with a tone of one pleading for help.

Lorist kept silent for a moment.

"Your Majesty, please state your request clearly. I will agree if it is within my capability."

Chapter 362
Surprising Pledge of Loyalty

Lorist was well aware what the second highness was thinking about. It was almost certain that he had his sights set on House Norton's carroballistae. What Lorist didn't understand was on what basis the second highness thought the house should help him? In every business transaction, there would always be profit for both parties. What would House Norton gain then if he helped him reunite the empire?

In terms of contributions, House Norton easily trumped all the kingdom's other noble houses and there was no longer anything the second highness could provide that they didn't already have. Did the second highness intend to rely on a heartfelt conversation to convince Lorist to send his warriors to their deaths for his ambitions?

House Norton's current rank didn't come from nothing either. Instead, it was through the great contributions their house made to the kingdom, which the second highness understood as well. However, the monarch had always been wary of the Nortons. He was convinced House Norton would have the might he required to reunite the empire after taking a tour through their dominion.

That was also the thing that troubled Lorist the most. He had already made it clear that the second highness' choice was wrong and that all the fault lay with him alone. Had it not been for his rampant effort to raise the kingdom's military, Andinaq would've developed even faster than The Northlands. Whether it be living conditions or economy, it would have been far better than The Northlands was now. But the second highness actually gave up such a precious opportunity in favor of single-mindedly reuniting the empire. He lost everything in a single setback as a result.

Lorist was incredibly dissatisfied with the second highness' attempts to leech off his house now that he had ruined his own kingdom.

You've regained your throne and control of the kingdom, this is your second chance. I'd like to see if you will let it slip through your fingers a second time. Will you develop the kingdom quietly for a decade like we did or build a poor army and tire your people out even more than they already are?

The second highness also understood the subtext of Lorist's words perfectly. He had already failed once and only managed to convince the four houses to serve him by signing that humiliating contract. Even the restoration of his throne was thanks to House Norton. While it seemed like the kingdom was strong once more in the view of outsiders, while the kingdom's territory had increased three-fold, while the kingdom had defeated and incorporated the former Madras duchy, the second highness felt no sense of accomplishment. At the end of the day, Madras wasn't taken by his own efforts. He felt unaccomplished, left out, and even a little humiliated.

The second highness also understood that making empty promises would not budge Lorist in the slightest. Lorist was no idiot and wasn't displeased with the current situation at all. Even though a king like him had to maintain some degree of autonomy, what he did to Lorist previously had caused the latter to view a liege like him with caution. In the current situation, the second highness couldn't force Lorist to abide by his will, given that the house's might and their army was beyond reckoning with. He felt a constant pressure from them. Apart from doing his best to get on their good side or turn against them entirely, the second highness could do nothing else.

After a long period of consideration, he decided he wouldn't prioritize either military or development. Instead, he requested House Norton give him aid as sincerely as he could without putting up any airs. Lorist exhaled and began to bargain with the second highness. He knew the monarch had confiscated a huge amount of wealth from the noble houses he exterminated, so instead of letting him sink it all in the endless abyss of war, it would be better for it to be used to improve the house's income.

After a whole night of arguing, the sky began to brighten once more. The two finally came to an agreement at daybreak. As Lorist had expected, his liege would put most of his efforts into the military and didn't care much for development at all. Even the few factories he agreed to build produced arms and military equipment. But Lorist couldn't be bothered to interfere so long as he could weasel a huge sum from the man.

The second highness was also rather satisfied with the arrangement. He had never imagined he could source most of his military resources from the Nortons at such a low cost. A good portion of the gear was even better than what any factory he built himself could ever produce. According to the second highness's current plan, he would invest the ten million gold Fordes he had into the military to further strengthen his standing, only had to spend around 400 thousand gold Fordes to purchase the equipment and resources he needed, which was worth more than 600 thousand gold Fordes. It also included the catapults of which he dreamed, much to his delight. He

was so enthralled that he held dearly onto Lorist's hand, seeming unwilling to let him go even as the latter was about to leave. The other onlookers felt a chill run down their spine.

On the 19th day of the 12th month, Lorist bid farewell to the second highness, who was still unwilling to part. He left the army camp and sent an eagle to the regiment led by Blademaster Shuss and Patt he had stationed at Egret Basin. They were ordered to withdraw to Vanades and await his arrival.

On the 22nd day of the 12th month, Lorist and company arrived at Vanades. They began their journey once more after a day of rest and arrived at the lower stream of Metropoulos near the floating bridge. After crossing the river, they traveled at a leisurely pace and eventually made it back to Firmrock Castle on the evening of the 34th day.

"Thank the protection of Wargod Singwa. My prayers have been answered," Charade exclaimed as he tugged on Lorist's sleeve, "Your Grace, I was worried sick that you wouldn't be present for the first celebratory event our house is hosting on new year's. Just imagine what it would be like if you missed such a grand gathering with all your vassals and knights. It would most certainly be the most disgraceful moment of the house in its three-century-long history."

"Stop complaining," Lorist snapped, "Didn't I make it back in time? I know I can't afford to miss this event but if I didn't go there myself, we'd have more than Reidy to worry about. His Majesty was in grave danger as well."

"What? What does our bloodthirsty king have to do with this?"

Since the noble houses' massacre, the second highness had gained yet another moniker among the knights and nobles: The Bloody King.

Lorist detailed his rescue of Reidy and the second highness.

"It's such a shame, why couldn't you wait a few moments longer? Having Reidy escape during the chaos caused by the heroic death or capture of His Majesty would've been the best outcome."

"What are you talking about?!" rebuked Lorist, "He's our king, the sole inheritor of the blood of the Krissen imperial family! Who would dare kill him? Don't forget that 'kingslayer' isn't a title just anyone wants to bear. All Xanthi and the other

blademasters wanted was to capture him alive and send him back to the duchies. If that really happened, it would be troublesome for us too. As the kingdom's highest-ranked duke, we would've had to ransom him or deploy our forces to free him. It would severely disrupt our plans. I'm glad I managed to arrive in time to sort this out before it became a problem."

"I was just speaking my mind," Charade said, dissatisfied, "Your Grace, tomorrow's the last day before the new year celebration. The high-ranked officials, household knights, and vassal nobles are already here. Duke Kenmays, Count Felim, and Count Shazin are also here. Additionally, all the ceremonial preparations are complete, including the badges for the vassal nobles, new and old. Do you want to give it a check?"

"There's no need. I've already seen the drawings. It'll be fine as long as it doesn't go against any regulations. I'm very much assured about this since you're the one in charge. If there's nothing else, I'll go get some rest. Also, tell Duke Kenmays, Count Felim, and Count Shazin that I'll dine with them tomorrow afternoon," said Lorist before he headed for the rear of the castle.

"Your Grace, I understand your trip has been rather tiring, but I'm afraid there's something I need your decision on immediately," said Charade as he flipped open a folder.

"What?" asked Lorist as he stopped.

"It concerns Viscount Eidis, Viscount Zinderson, Baron Klaus, and Baron Wade from Winston," Charade said with an odd expression, "They came over to pledge their allegiance and even brought some of their family members to be political hostages. Look, here's the pledge letter they wrote."

"What did you say?" Lorist asked without receiving the letter.

He stared at Charade, confusion written on his face.

"Aren't they Iblian nobles? I recall staying at Viscount Eidis's little town for a night when we went to Windbury last time. Why has he brought his three allies over?"

"Your Grace, they really are here to pledge allegiance. This is the letter they penned. I already told them you weren't present and asked them to come back after new year's but they refused to listen and insisted on meeting you no matter what. They've already been waiting up for two weeks," said Charade after he successfully stuffed the letter

into Lorist's hand.

Lorist gave the letter a quick read as the attentive Howard hurriedly brought over a candle from the wall.

After reading the four pledges, Lorist ordered, "Charade, have them meet me in the study in an hour. I'll take a bath and have a meal in the meantime. I'll ask them why they want to pledge allegiance to us in such a hurry later."

Lorist turned to Howard and patted his shoulder.

"Didn't you hear Sir Charade say Count Felim is here? Your beautiful fiancée is no doubt here as well. I'll do fine without you for a while, wash up and meet your little wife. Be sure to behave during the night, okay? You're still young after all."

"Your Grace!" scowled Howard angrily.

He only did so for a moment. He couldn't resist the urge to see his fiancée and ran off, tomato-faced.

Charade laughed himself to tears.

"Don't forget to have Reidy come here!"

As Lorist's study was filled with classified documents, servants were not allowed to clean it up. The ones who carried out that task were usually Reidy, Howard, Els, Patt, or even Jim, the people Lorist trusted the most. However, since Reidy entered seclusion training, Els formed his own family, and Jim was sent off to carry out a secret mission at the gunpowder research lab following his recovery, Howard was the one put in charge of cleaning the room. Now that Howard's been given a short break, Charade asked Reidy to replace him for the moment. Otherwise, Lorist and he would have to clean the study on their own.

After bathing and having something to eat, Lorist headed to the study and saw Reidy finishing up with the cleaning. The fireplace was lit, its heat erasing the cold that had built up during the owner's month-long absence.

Seeing Reidy making some macks, Lorist started thinking.

Howard has a fiancée already, and Els is married, but Reidy's still single… Maybe I ought

to ask him if there's a girl he's interested in. It's about time he found himself a wife…

Before he finished his thought, the door to the study was given a knock. Reidy opened it and let Charade and the four nobles enter. They all wore expressions of delight and disbelief, as if Lorist had returned and offered them lifeboats when they were sinking.

Lorist stood up and apologized sincerely.

"I'm really sorry to have made you wait so long. I had to deal with an unexpected incident concerning my disciple and only just made it back. I heard you've been waiting for more than ten days and even wrote a letter of pledge to the house. Could you please let me know what has driven you to do such a thing?"

The four nobles greeted Lorist respectfully with a salute, which Lorist graciously returned. They breathed sighs of relief.

Viscount Eidis stood forward to represent the rest and explained with a troubled smile, "Your Grace, our four houses have reached the end of our line. We have no other way to survive but to pledge our allegiance to you."

Following the viscount's explanation, Lorist and Charade understood that the four houses had been forced into their current predicament by Duke Fisablen. Either they accepted the duke's conditions or they watched as their houses were torn apart. Only through pledging their allegiance to a powerful house like the Nortons could they survive.

The 20 thousand cavalry the duke brought with him to Windbury for the knighthood tournament last year didn't leave once it was over. Instead, they dug in. After Melein, the biggest threat to House Fisablen, the duke turned his sights to Windbury.

He brought another 20 thousand men, he clearly wasn't messing around. There was already a legion's worth of frontier cavalrymen stationed at Windbury. With this legion in hand, Duke Fisablen lashed out at the nobles in the capital cruelly. He didn't bat an eye. Every day, there were nobles either killed for treason or sent to the dungeons. Unlike the second highness, however, he didn't kill the nobles off all at once. Instead, he wore them down over the rest of the year. Even though it was no different from the second highness's act which destroyed his reputation, the duke had employed a milder method that didn't evoke nearly as big a reaction despite the fact that the number of noble houses he exterminated wasn't that far off from the second

highness. It was as if he was simmering the nobles to their deaths slowly and patiently.

Lorist had already been informed about this thanks to Furybear's informants. Since he was going to attack the capital himself anyway, he was more than glad that Duke Fisablen would dirty his own hands on his behalf. Not only that, he could even improve his reputation by defeating Duke Fisablen and conquering Windbury by claiming he did so to fight for the honor of all nobles. All he had to do was find some of the exterminated houses that managed to escape and give them aid to carry out a smear campaign against Duke Fisablen. The duke's reputation would definitely be ruined. This was also why Lorist ignored the incident and only instructed his men to quietly collect evidence instead of interfering.

But after Duke Fisablen exterminated all the noble houses in Windbury, he turned his sights to Winston. He decided to offer them a chance to pledge allegiance and have their dominions moved to Southern. It caused quite an uproar. The nobles decided to band together and resist him. Duke Fisablen was waiting for exactly this all along and declared them traitors immediately. He attacked with his full force and exterminated more than 20 noble houses in the span of two months. All the men were hanged and the women were given to the Frontier Legion soldiers and grassland barbarians that distinguished themselves during the campaign.

Even though Viscount Eidis and his three allies didn't rebel outright, the order they received required them to move to Southern in the coming spring, which was before the 5th month, with no more than a thousand of their subjects. Their current dominion would be managed by the duke's house. Southern's current desolate and bandit-ridden state was well known. Going there with only a thousand subjects was practically suicide. They would be torn apart like a raving wolf's prey. It wasn't even certain that they'd make it to their new dominions.

"Your Grace, this is why we want to pledge allegiance to you. We understand Duke Fisablen started killing the other nobles off in preparation for the conflict with The Northlands' four houses. Last I heard, Duke Fisablen was going to bring all the youths across the many dominions in Winston to Eastwild. Their other family members would be gathered at the capital. He's planning to build a citadel at Dawoktown as a buffer for Windbury and the main point of resistance against you."

Lorist nodded.

"I'll gladly accept your pledges. House Norton now considers your houses vassals and

will move your dominion to Delamock without any demotion. As for the family members you sent over, I will let them serve in my personal guard. I wonder if this arrangement is appropriate?"

The four nobles revealed expressions of elation as they knelt instantly and pledged loyalty to House Norton in the name of their ancestors. They were incredibly respectful and thankful when they left.

Charade looked at Lorist suspiciously as he waited for them to leave.

"Locke, tell me, what are you up to this time?" he asked when they were finally alone.

Chapter 363
Banquet and Entitlement

The common Grindian calendar had 12 months and it contained the good elements from the magi's calendar and the fairy calendar for practical purposes. Each month of the common calendar had 35 days. The 5th, 9th and 12th months each had an extra day, not noted on the calendar.

These three days were publicly acknowledged by all of Grindia as Bathing Day, Harvest Day and New Year's.

As Lorist had promised, Viscount Eidis, Viscount Zinderson, Baron Klaus, and Baron Wade -- nobles who used to belong to the peerage of Iblia -- were all taken in as vassals. It was rather troublesome Charade. Not only did he have to confirm their new territory, he also had to organize the formal enfeoffment ceremony during the new year's celebration. He was so busy he didn't have time to attend Lorist's reception of Duke Kenmays, Count Felim, and Count Shazin. When Howard came to ask him to attend, he said he was far too busy and merely asked some food be sent over.

It wasn't until the late morning of the 36th day of the 12th month that Charade finished his work. Lying on the couch tiredly and looking at Lorist looking the documents over, he mused that he'd definitely resign if there was another similar incident. He was more than fed up with Lorist's whimsical decisions that made him work overtime all too often.

Lorist smiled and reminded Charade that the new year's celebration would commence at seven so they had more time. Charade ought to go back home for a few hours and rest before washing up and preparing to attend the banquet. Since Charade was one of the nobles formally entitled during the celebration, he reasoned he wouldn't want to look too haggard during the party.

Charade got up and ran out. His voice drifted into the office from the hallway.

"That's right, I've finished my work. Why am I still here? I'll go back home now."

Lorist smiled.

"And there he was complaining how harsh the work I gave him was. Yet, he's running out so quickly in such an energetic manner," commented Lorist to Howard.

Firmrock Castle was decorated all over that day and the central part of the castle was been cleaned up rather well. On both sides of the streets hung flags of varying colors and the weather also seemed excellent. Not only was there no snow, the sky was bright and blue with the crescent Silvermoon hanging brightly above as well.

"If it weren't this cold, the day would be perfect," said Duke Kenmays.

He was standing with Lorist, Felim, and Shazin on the veranda on the castle's top floor, looking at the distant carriages approaching the center. Behind the four nobles were Howard and his fiancée, Katrina, Felim's beloved daughter. They were both talking quietly in a corner wearing sweet smiles.

Kenmays had already changed his dominion to Sidgler and had taken everything with him. At the same time, the five nobles' territory he occupied had also been handed to House Norton. Having nothing better to do, he came over to enjoy the festivities and dragged Felim and Shazin along to become the entitlement ceremony's witnesses.

"If you ask me, Firmrock Castle is far too small. It doesn't fit your status as a duke. It was designed to be a citadel, so it's a little too small to be The Northlands' base of operations," commented he.

Lorist nodded.

"That's true. Come spring, I will move to Gildusk. It's a convenient place from which to oversee the war soon to take place in Winston and Southern. Baron Charade has already instructed Grandmaster Ciroba to begin redeveloping the city and the southern part of The Northlands, but Grandmaster Ciroba made a rather problematic request."

"Oh? What is it?" asked the three nobles curiously.

They all knew Ciroba was the house's chief architect. Almost all the developmental projects had to go through him before making it to Lorist's desk.

"Well, he said the name of Gildusk came from the two artists cum architects that designed the city, Gil and Dusk. He feels he's even more amazing than them and wants the reconstructed city to be named after him. Otherwise, he wouldn't involve himself.

Tell me, doesn't Ciroba sound really weird to you?" asked Lorist with a furrowed brow.

Ciroba's weird inclination to name every project after himself was indeed rather troubling.

"Hahahaha…"

"Well, Locke. just tell the grandmaster I will construct my household castle when I return to Southern. If he's willing to come help out, I'll let him name the castle," said Felim.

"Are you crazy?" Kenmays rolled his eyes, "Last time you mentioned wanting to name your castle Pegasus Castle since that was also what your ancestors' first castle was called before it was destroyed by Krissen IV in the Newmoon War. Now that House Felim is finally returning to its original domain, would it be appropriate for your new castle to be named Ciroba Castle instead? You're right, it does sound rather weird and hard to pronounce."

"Haha, I'll definitely have the castle's name engraved in the smallest form possible and display a huge statue of the Pegasus on our walls. That way, everyone will come to call it Pegasus Castle instead of paying attention to the inscribed name," Felim said with a confident smile, "Do you think I'd be that stupid?"

Kenmays gasped.

"You… Isn't that cheating?"

"What? I will inscribe his name on the castle for real. If others can't see it properly, it's their eyes' fault, not mine. House Felim doesn't pull tricks like that, alright?" argued Felim.

"Alright, there's no need to overthink this. I'll have Grandmaster Ciroba design a new castle for you. I believe he'll be more than interested in redesigning such a well-known castle without having to name it after him. All you have to do is dedicate a statue to him," interjected Lorist with a smile.

"Locke, the number of people here is increasing. Look, it's filled with carriages. It's finally time to receive the guests. How many years has it been since I attended something like this? The last time was before the second prince was defeated." asked Kenmays as he turned to the plaza.

"If you like parties so much, why didn't you just host your own banquet? You're also a duke. You're more than qualified to host a banquet. Don't tell me House Kenmays doesn't even have enough money for a simple banquet!" said Lorist with a laugh.

Kenmays sighed.

"Talking to a banquet idiot like you is really off-putting. Don't you know the most important thing of a banquet or social event is the attendees? The more the merrier! What good would a banquet do if I hardly have any household knights or vassals? There's no point hosting one just for my house!"

"You could promote a few knights. It's not like there's anyone to stop you."

"They aren't qualified yet. Their contributions are still lacking. Additionally, my father said it was thanks to House Norton and luck that House Kenmays managed to make it this far. All we should do is mind our own business and pay attention to our dominion since the external affairs of our alliance are all dealt with by you. We only have to fulfill our duties as your allies and will be compensated in kind."

"I really have to say, your father is a cunning man. Not only is he using us as his shield, he even gets to taste some leftover blood," praised Lorist.

"It's to be expected. Who asked House Norton to be the strongest? If there's anyone that has to take hits for us, it's you! Don't the rest of you agree?" asked Kenmays, confiding in his comrades.

Felim and Shazin both laughed. Without Lorist, there wouldn't be the alliance. Neither would their houses have been able to soar to such heights and even solidify their titles among their peers. Kenmays' words rang true in that Lorist was indeed their leader that had to take care of his subordinates.

"Well, it's about time. Should we head down now?" asked Shazin after taking another look at the carriages.

"Alright. Let's get going. Best not let your ladies wait," agreed Lorist.

He was chaperoned by Telesti of Nico Academy. She brought her two daughters along. The moment they met, Lorist was shocked to see how slender Telesti had become. After asking about it, he learned that she was stressed from having to take care of the academy and her two daughters. Losing sleep was something she had to deal with on

a regular basis.

"Locke, had it not been for the fact that today was also an entitlement ceremony, I wouldn't have left the academy. My schedule is really far too tight, there's too much I have to do. Stop advising me to stop. This is a choice I made for myself," said Telesti.

Lorist sighed deeply and gave her a hug.

"My dear, the sea of knowledge is vast and endless. Even a sailor has to rest and recuperate once in a while."

Kenmays' chaperone was a voluptuous noble lady -- the widow of some count long passed away.

Felim's chaperone was his beloved daughter Katrina.

Shazin came with his concubine, Kenmays' cousin, as his chaperone. It seemed the beauty from House Kenmays stood a chance of being made the matron of his house.

Lorist led the group with Telesti at the front. Applause and cheers thundered in the hall as the group entered.

The banquet's organizer, Charade, represented the house in the welcome speech. Lorist gave a light-hearted speech that basically outlined the plans for the next year, and stated that House Norton was confident their might and courage would bring them all to victory in the upcoming conflicts. Their allies' trust was thus, of course, not for naught.

"What on earth did you have me read?" Lorist complained afterward, "This isn't like me at all. Do you have any idea how embarrassed I was up there?"

"I worked on this all night, I didn't even sleep," Charade rolled his eyes, "Besides, you checked the speech yourself this morning. You should have complained then."

"Sol," Lorist gasped as he wiped the sweat from his forehead, "I didn't think you would write something like this so I didn't remember to check. Nobody reminded me either…"

"Whatever," Charade shrugged, "It's not like they were all paying attention anyway. It's mostly just formalities. What they're anticipating is the entitlement ceremony so

there's no point complaining about the speech now."

The entitlement ceremony soon began. First was the re-entitlement, or demotion, of the 17 nobles relocated to Delamock. Thereafter the five Northland nobles House Kenmays kept followed suit. Next came the two Madras nobles whose beauties had pleased Lorist and managed to save their houses by becoming vassals. Finally, it was Viscount Eidis and the other four who joined the faction at the last moment's turn. They used to be Iblian nobles, but now they were Lorist's vassals. The last one to be entitled was Baron Dina, whose title was given to Lorist's lover, Dina Arriotoli temporarily until her younger brother matured.

The ceremony was simple. Charade announced the names and rank of the house to summon the nobles. They would go up the stage and salute. They received the silver tray Howard brought over containing the deeds of entitlement and the deeds to their land, as well as a decree signed personally by Lorist along with their identification badge which bore the insignias of the respective houses.

Lorist remained seated on his throne. His right hand held a sword and his left hand was outstretched. The pose was one a liege assumed when accepting a vassal's pledge of allegiance. The left hand represented grace and acceptance, while the sword symbolized caution and might. Each noble would receive the silver tray and pledge their allegiance by kissing the back of Lorist's left hand, before bowing and leaving. After the vassals were entitled it was the turn of the 14 new houses.

The two grandmasters, Sid and Fellin, were up first. They received their certificates with teary eyes and prostrated in front of Lorist during their pledge of allegiance on behalf of their future descendants. Lorist expended quite some effort to get them to stand up and regretted giving them a rank so high it might've taxed their hearts a little too much with excitement.

Potterfang and Loze's entitlement went off without a hitch. But Charade's entitlement caused a small commotion when his father fainted from sheer excitement, much to Charade's embarrassment.

After the 14 nobles were entitled it was the honorary nobles' turn. Apart from Hanayabarta's Governor Hector -- who was absent -- the other five were present for the ceremony.

The ceremony wasn't enjoyed by everyone, however. More than 30 nobles of the

Madras duchy had been stripped of their dominions. Only after House Norton eliminated the Iblia kingdom and conquered Winston would they be enfeoffed. These nobles were in a similar situation to many of the original Northlander nobles and had no choice but to patiently wait in The Northlands.

Apart from them, and the household knights and high-ranking household officials, there were some other people of relatively higher status given honorary titles. They were the rich factory owners and merchants who operated within the dominion. However, they were considered nobility among The Northlands because of their honorary titles and status. Even Lorist didn't think The Northlands would have so many honorary nobles. A large majority were those who escaped from the smaller duchies eliminated by the Union.

While House Norton could ignore and not acknowledge the honorary titles graced upon them by others, it wasn't that they could outright revoke the titles since they were qualified to attend the social gatherings of nobility. Since they all received invitations, they had to contribute to the banquet as well by becoming event sponsors.

Kenmays was the one most familiar with the honorary nobles. It was apparent that he enjoyed the night greatly from how well he blended in with the ladies among them.

After seeing the worn-out Telesti, Lorist said with concern, "Let's go, my dear. I'll take you to rest. You seem exhausted."

Chapter 364
Strategy and Deployment Meeting

"I was originally considering how we should deal with the Frontier Legion at Windbury. It'd be ideal if they chose to hole up in the city. In that case, the worst it'll come to is the capital's destruction. Nobody can resist our forces' attack. Even if the duke was there himself, we'd just bury him alive along with the rest of the legion and end the whole lot there.

"It's just one of the possible scenarios ideal for us. It's no understatement to call the duke a cunning fox, he's been in hundreds of battles. The moment he smells something fishy, he'll run far away and make it incredibly hard to track him. The moment he hears about our troops being sent to Windbury, he'll no doubt give up on the capital and move all its food and wealth away. He might even take all the youths as well. We'll only be left with the old and the sick. Even if we manage to take Windbury, it'll only be a worthless ruin.

"The duke will no doubt continue his retreat with all the valuable resources and manpower. When we conquer Winston and head to Southern, he'll find a battlefield large enough for him to employ hit-and-run tactics. He'll definitely exploit the Frontier Legion's mobility to sabotage our supply lines and cut us off from the support of our conquered land while also grinding down our troops' morale. He knows if he drags the battle on, the day our troops wear out and crumble will no doubt come."

They were in a large meeting room. Following the three-day-long new year's celebration, everyone involved, from high-ranking household knights to knight generals, were gathered in the room, listening to Lorist give a briefing on their strategy.

It was the 3rd day of the 1st month of Year 1778. Lorist had formally mobilized the house's carroballistae to Iblia against the Frontier Legion of House Fisablen.

"According to various sources, House Fisablen's total force is around 240 thousand. Naturally, the duke won't pour all his forces into this conflict. He has to defend the greater and lesser golden creeks as well as Eastwild. Coupled with the forces defending Wild Husbandry, they likely have around 120 to 150 thousand men they can

deploy against us. There is a possibility he will recruit more soldiers from the grassland barbarians, so there should be another few tens of thousands serving House Fisablen.

"We don't really care for our enemy's numbers. But this foe will be a completely different beast from the ones we've faced so far. The main difference is their mobility. It far exceeds our forces'. When we attack Southern, we must take great precautions to defend our supply line incredibly well. This will decide whether we can cut off the duke's support from the duchies.

"We have to give it our all even for something as seemingly trivial as this. In our original plan, we will gather Tigersoar and Firmrock as well as House Felim's Pegasus to force our way through using our numbers. It'll force the Frontier Legion to retreat to Winston. Firmrock and Pegasus will invade Southern once this is achieved. Pegasus will be in charge of eliminating bandits while Firmrock will set up citadels and moats at locales with ideal terrain. We will lock Southern down complete to limit where Frontier can go.

"Tigersoar's mission is exterminating the waves of cavalry stationed at Winston to protect our supply line to Southern. We'll also take the most important citadel at the border of Winston and Wild Husbandry: Pedro. This way, we can sever any communication between the two provinces. As for Jaeger, currently stationed in the eastern part of The Northlands, they will be put in charge of attacking Wild Husbandry. I don't require our newly-formed legion to suppress the Fisablen forces at Wild Husbandry effectively. They just have to keep the battles within the Fisablen dominion. Making Wild Husbandry the battlefield to limit our enemy's ability to mobilize troops would be ideal.

"This plan has the benefit of being reliable and stable. We will have enough safeguards to ensure our success. Its downfalls are also obvious, though. Given our superiority in numbers, Duke Fisablen will have to be crazy to seek a field-battle or a siege. It'll be rather difficult to gather the enemy in one place and wipe them out in one go. The old fox will most likely abandon Winston to preserve his numbers. He'll trade land to keep the initiative in battle.

"The more places we conquer, the more troops we'll have to leave behind to defend them. Frontier Legion's mobility far exceeds ours, we can only fight defensively. With that mobility, the duke can also gather a large number of troops to attack the soldiers we leave behind to defend some places by outnumbering them. If Duke Fisablen

reduces his Frontier Legions into many divisions instead and stations them in Winston, not only will our forces be forced to be on the defensive, our supply lines will also be at risk."

Lorist used a long thin stick to tap on the map of Winston hung on the wall.

"That was our original plan, as well as why I stationed Tigersoar at Winston. It was so our supply line would be kept safe. However, thanks to Viscount Eidis and the others joining our side, there's another way we can exterminate the Frontier Legion.

"If we can exterminate them and conquer Pedro, we'll no longer have to worry about being harassed by cavalry in Winston. We can see that, apart from the main crossing point between Winston and Wild Husbandry at Pedro, the two provinces' border is the precipitous Pisper Mountain Range that stretches all the way to Southern. No large army can cross Pisper, so as long as we can exterminate Frontier Legion at Winston, not only will we be able to cut off Duke Fisablen's influence, we can also make Winston a safe place where we can fall back to.

"According to Furybear's reports and the news Viscount Eidis brought, we know that Duke Fisablen is already anticipating our arrival. So far, the duke has already killed off the nobles in the capital and started working on the older noble houses of Winston. Frontier Legion has already neutralized 23 regions."

Lorist pointed at Viscount Eidis. It was his turn to speak.

Eidis was rather moved that he and his allies were allowed to participate in such a confidential strategy meeting. It was a sign of the great trust they'd been given. At the same time, the four houses got to know that House Norton had already set their sights on Iblia for quite some time, so they were relieved they had switched sides soon enough.

"My most respectful greetings to you all. According to my knowledge, Duke Fisablen gave the order to all old noble houses of Winston approximately two months ago, demanding we pledge allegiance to him and relocate. He blames the fall of Iblia on the internal struggles between the noble houses and used it as an excuse to demote us. Many dissatisfied nobles banded together in defiance of his orders. They didn't expect that the duke was already prepared this and quickly snuffed them out by deploying Frontier Legion, however. He already ended 23 noble houses in two short months.

"Houses like ours that aren't able to resist can only abide by his order to relocate before the 5th month. In other words, right after the winter harvests, we'll have to leave our dominions for our new ones in Southern with less than a thousand people, while our original domains will be put under the management of the duke's ambassadors. It forced the four of us to seek out House Norton for help.

"I've received one of the duke's ambassadors before and my hospitality caused him to reveal that Duke Fisablen was already prepared to give up on Winston the moment he heard that the four houses of The Northlands exterminated Madras. He will stage the battles in Winston to delay us. Ideally, he will seal off the routes from Winston to Wild Husbandry, which are the two metal suspension bridges between the provinces. He's even prepared to destroy them if he has to. This way, they only have to station a small number of troops at Sanderson Hills to delay our advance. The duke will also rely on the vast lands of Winston to make use of Frontier Legion's mobility and grind away at our forces.

"The ambassador even said that Duke Fisablen was going to move all the youths in Winston to Eastwild and Goldcreek to make up for his dominion's lack of manpower. The rest will be focused on Windbury and some other fortified towns to serve as supply points for the Frontier Legion. That was why he suggested we best obey the duke's order and relocate to Southern. The duke will begin exterminating bandits in Southern after his preparations in Winston are complete so he can start trade with the four central duchies."

After finishing his briefing, Eidis nodded to the others and sat back down.

"I'm sure you guys heard it loud and clear, right? Duke Fisablen is not someone who messes around. When we plot, he also plots. Winston used to be the province with the largest population in the empire. It used to house an estimated 1.5 million people. Since then, the province has experienced years of civil war, the second prince's rampage, and our own interference. We took in approximately 340 thousand people."

Those in the know laughed when Lorist mentioned the taking in of refugees, which was a little underhanded, to say the least.

Lorist laughed as he continued.

"There are an estimated 400 thousand people still in Winston, around 70 thousand of whom are in Windbury. The rest are mostly the subjects of the province's nobles. The

nobles that actually develop their dominions and put in the effort to stimulate the growth of local production, like Viscount Eidis, Viscount Zinderson, Baron Klaus, and Baron Wade, are few and far in between. Their territories have a combined population of nearly 40 thousand, thanks to the success and prosperity of trade at Viscount Eidis's town, Dawok. They also managed to gather large numbers of refugees to kickstart farming efforts.

"Right now, Duke Fisablen is targeting nobles like them. The nobles that move to Southern will receive military support to combat the bandits and resources from the duke. The new dominions there will eventually effectively contribute to the extermination of the bandits and limit their influence and growth. Naturally, it would be quite troublesome for the duke if the nobles there end up being killed off by the bandits instead. There's no doubt it'll intensify the noble's dissatisfaction.

"We will not allow Duke Fisablen to move all the youths of Winston to his dominion. Baron Potterfang, Baron Malek…"

The two newly entitled nobles stood up upon being named by Lorist.

"You two will lead Firmrock to Dawok in Viscount Eidis's dominion in three days. Viscount Eidis, Viscount Zinderson, Baron Wade and Baron Klaus will aid you in this matter. Since it's currently winter with most of the routes sealed off, Duke Fisablen and Frontier Legion will not expect us to make our move now. Your mission is to move the subjects of these four nobles to The Northlands. Thereafter, you will disguise yourselves as their subjects to resist Duke Fisablen after the harvest during the rainy season.

"Viscount Eidis and the others should also be able to prepare a general force of six thousand. Coupled with the youths from their dominion, it should be possible to form a force of 20 thousand. To resist these 'traitorous insurgents', Duke Fisablen will have to mobilize Frontier Legion. The moment they leave the capital, we will exterminate them at Dawok and take the city with ease."

"Understood, Your Grace," said Potterfang and Malek in unison as they sat back down.

"The crucial point of this arrangement is that we don't attract the attention and suspicion of the legion's scouts. We will need the help of Viscount Eidis and the others."

"Your Grace, please be assured they will not suspect a thing," said Eidis.

Lorist nodded.

"If the rainy season didn't start in the 3rd month, I would've liked for our forces to encircle and conquer Windbury right away and trap Frontier Legion and the duke within the city. It's too bad our forces would find it incredibly difficult to stage a siege in the rainy weather, not to mention the fact that we can't bring our catapults along. It would be incredibly disadvantageous to have our troops stationed outside the city in the rainy season. A plague can spread pretty quickly under those conditions.

"That's the logic behind my intention to lure Frontier Legion out. We will trick them into a field-battle. Count Felim, make sure Pegasus is ready to deploy with Tigersoar after the rainy season. Make your way to somewhere near Dawok undetected and wait for the opportune moment, understood?"

Felim stood up.

"Understood, Your Grace."

"After the extermination of Frontier Legion, lead the troops to Southern with Firmrock right away. We must cut off the route connecting House Fisablen and the duchies as soon as possible. If the duchies' forces join up with House FIsablen, Count Shazin's household legion and Tigersoar will be the first to join in as reinforcements. We must make sure a strategic location like Southern remains under our control. This is the most important key to exterminating or forcing House Fisablen to submit to us," declared Lorist resolutely.

Chapter 365
Rainy Season

The rain fell ceaselessly.

Grindia's rainy season saw rain fall nonstop for up to a whole month. It might last more than a month or two in the southern parts of the continent and those areas were the most susceptible to floods.

Lorist was currently staying at the former duke's mansion in Gildusk, located at the south end of The Northlands. He paced about in the study, glancing at the map on the table from time to time. The door received a series if knocks before Howard entered the room.

"Your Grace, Baron Charade, Baron Camorra, and Baron Freiyar have arrived."

"Quick, invite them in," ordered Lorist, elated.

"Greetings, Your Grace," greeted the three as they saluted.

"No need for the formalities. I hate having to keep up appearances in front of insiders. Take a seat," said Lorist with a wave of his hand.

"What would you like to drink? Fruit wine, tea, or macks?" asked Lorist.

"Your Grace, I think I'll have a cup of your special brew instead. It's been really moist lately, so having some of your wine to warm up would be ideal," said Charade.

"No way. We're going to have a meeting. I can't have you getting yourself drunk! Don't push it if you don't have good alcohol tolerance. This is not normal wheat or fruit wine. You can drink those without much problem. Drinking a small cup of strong liquor is like drinking five bottles of fruit wine in one go. If you want some, I'll let each of you take a bottle with you to enjoy at home."

"I hold you to your word. Hehe… One whole bottle… Howard, you better remember this well. I guess I'll have macks for now," brightly smiled Charade.

"Sol, I got tricked again."

Camorra requested tea and Freiyar asked for fruit wine.

"It's already been raining for about two weeks. It will continue in The Northlands for another ten or so days. After the rainy season, I will head to the frontlines. The war will also start then. Whether we can expand The Northlands' influence will depend on the outcome of this war.

"After I head to the frontlines, Baron Charade will be in charge of the affairs here. Considering that it'll be drawn out, The Northlands' development in the next two years will be in the southern area. We will set up settlements Haven, Harvest, and Vigor. They're to be modeled on Salus. Each settlement will have six to eight towns. Also, have eight knight manors constructed so that future gold-ranked knights can be rewarded.

"Gildusk will also be redesigned and renovated from the ground up. It will be called City of the Bellowing Bear and will be The Northlands' capital. Apart from these, outside this manor, near the current eastern city outskirts, I will have a special area built. We will sell the land to honorary nobles of The Northlands who wish to erect their own castles and manors. The castles they intend to build must first be certified, of course, and we must keep a blueprint too. Additionally, only those with honorary titles given by our house will be qualified to purchase land. It will be auctioned off to the richest buyer, naturally."

Lorist shrugged as he continued, "We have no choice but to do it as the war with House Fisablen will no doubt cost us a lot. This plan was drafted by Baron Spiel. Currently, House Norton stands strong and the honorary titles we acknowledge are worth quite a lot. I believe our profits will range from 100 thousand to one million. If we include the profit generated from the sale of land, the house will earn up to three million. The construction of castles will no doubt require materials and manpower, so it'll also help stimulate our economy. That's why I agreed to let the honorary nobles build their manors there.

"Baron Charade, as the chief supervisor of The Northlands, you have to pay attention to these three matters. You may put Shadekampf in charge of designing the three settlements. Apart from Salus, Felicitas, Redriver, and Greatriver, which has just finished construction in the eastern part of The Northlands, Shadekampf will be responsible for the other settlements. The fellow has already garnered lots of

experience and will definitely be one of your most valuable aides.

"You should first consider Gildusk's renovation. The city will be the center of administration for The Northlands so everything has to be perfect. The other matter concerns the special area where the honorary nobles will be able to purchase land. You will head the pricing negotiations since you're the best at it in the house. Don't disappoint me. The last thing concerns Count Felim's subjects. After we conquer Southern, Count Felim will move his subjects to his original dominion in batches. You have to help out with the move. The Northlands will only truly belong to House Norton after their relocation."

Charade stood up to show his dedication.

"Your Grace, please be assured that your orders will be carried out according to your specifications."

Lorist nodded and turned to Freiyar.

"Baron Freiyar, you will be relocated here from your previous post at Silowas because of the upcoming campaign. This time around, you'll be deployed on the battlefield."

Freiyar smiled excitedly.

"Your Grace, I've always looked forward to being sent back to the frontlines. Staying at the rear for so long is making me rust up…"

Lorist waved his hand at him.

"Come and look at the map here. The local defense legion is our largest unit, with 25 brigades forming five divisions of 75 thousand men in total. You will relocate here to plan the legion's defense stations as well as coordinate the divisions on missions in Winston.

"The first local defense division, including the first to fifth brigades, will be stationed at the old dominion near Firmrock Castle. They'll be spread across Firmrock Castle, Hidebull Citadel, Tortoise Hill Citadel, Northsea, and Bladedge Castle. Originally, Bladedge Castle was the main base of the Ragebear Knights. However, they will follow me to the frontlines this time around and will be stationed nearby in the future. Bladedge Castle will have to be defended by the fifth local defense brigade.

"The second local defense division, including the sixth to tenth brigades, will be stationed to the south of Firmrock Castle. More specifically, the metal suspension bridge in the eastern part of The Northlands, Hendliff Suspension Bridge in the south, the floating bridge on the Metropoulos river, the citadel in the western part of the Bladedge Mountains that connects to the internal part of the dominion, as well as Gildusk.

"The third local defense division, namely the 11th to 15th divisions stationed at Silowas right now, will be moved here and put under Gold-ranked Knight Jades' command.

"The fourth local defense division, including the 16th to 20th brigades, is currently stationed in Delamock. Two of the divisions are located at Kobo and Vanades, with the other three supervising the 100 thousand plus captive laborers currently building the main highway. The division's commander will be Baron Belnick.

"Freiyar, you will personally command the fifth division, 21st to 25th brigades. THere are some strategic positions we have to take in as soon as possible when we invade Winston. They are Pedro, Dawok, Windbury, Twilight Lake Town roughly 50 kilometers from the capital, and the mountain stronghold, Sehak, the crossing point from Winston to Southern.

"Apart from Windbury, the other four places, have to be renovated into fortified citadels. Sehak used to be a crossing point between the two provinces, but it's been worn down after many battles. We'll have to erect a new citadel there to secure Winston properly.

"If we can exterminate the duke's Frontier Legion stationed at Windbury as planned, then our renovation and construction efforts will proceed without problems. But if it doesn't go according to plan, you will have to hold your stations while you complete your construction efforts. Duke Fisablen will definitely not leave us to ourselves to fortify those locales. He will definitely do everything he can to slow hamper our progress. This is the main reason I ordered you to relocate here."

Freiyar laughed out loud and thumped his chest.

"Your Grace, the local defense legion is particularly adept at defense. Even if we don't have fortified citadels, we still have our own ways to make the enemy bleed. To be honest, I'm getting more and more impatient to set foot on the battlefield."

Lorist punched Freiyar's chest as he laughed.

"I trust you will carry out your duties to my satisfaction."

Freiyar performed a knight's salute.

"The local defense legion will not let you down, Your Grace."

The last one to receive orders was Baron Camorra.

"I called you here to appoint you to the position of Logistics Commandant. You will be the chief logistics officer of our forces, so every shipment of resources to the frontlines must receive your screening and permission. You will control their allocation as well."

Camorra nodded respectfully.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"We have long been preparing for this war. From weapons to food and vehicles for transportation, we have almost everything ready. This is a summary of our inventory," said Lorist as he handed a thick folder to Camorra.

"However, there are a few things that you have to pay attention to. For your escort, I have already ordered Firmrock and Tigersoar to each send a brigade of retired soldiers. Viscount Eidis and the other old nobles of Winston have also picked out elite soldiers to form a division of security troops to take care of the convoys' safety. You won't have to worry about manpower on that front.

"You also have to pay attention to the one million gold Fordes' worth of resources, House Kenmays's 500 thousand gold Fordes, as well as Count Shazin's resources worth 300 thousand. Everything is support for Count Felim's relocation to Southern to settle down in his family dominion. Since Southern is more or less a wasteland right now, they will not be able to set up a stable foundation without our aid. As this shipment is only for that, I want you to place extra care and concern on it.

"Our houses have more than enough for our troops, so you don't have to worry about that. The largest problem we might face, however, is the allocation of manpower. On the one hand, our house will try to stop Duke Fisablen from moving Winston's youth to his dominion. On the other, we need you to relocate the youth.

"I'm sure you've heard about the renovation and construction efforts following the occupation of Windbury when I talked to Freiyar just now. We will no doubt require lots of manpower. I've already ordered the dominion to mobilize four experienced construction units, each number roughly a hundred men. That's why we still require approximately four units of ten thousand comprised of Winston's able-bodied youth to facilitate the construction effort.

"If the war turns out well and we successfully exterminate the duke's Frontier Legion and complete the citadels' construction, the workforce will have to head to Southern and help Firmrock set up the defensive infrastructure there. Moats will have to be dug for the implementation of our iron cage tactic.

"Other than that, if we have any captives, we will use them to work on the roads between Winston and Southern. All the equipment and resources will be transported to Windbury once it's secured and your logistics operation center will be moved there as well to make it easier for you to support the war effort in Southern.

"The whole logistics affair will no doubt be incredibly chaotic. You're the only suitable person of which I can think. Do you have any thoughts on the matter?"

Camorra nodded and simply.

"Your Grace, I will need permission to promote and encourage those of the escort team as well as the laborers. I can only raise their morale and promote efficiency if I can do that."

"No problem. You may design some reward schemes and show them to me when you're done," agreed Lorist magnanimously.

"Then there won't be any problems," said Camorra as he accepted the post.

"Oh, Baron Charade, how many people have moved from Winston in the past 1 month or so during winter?" asked Lorist when he recalled another matter of which he had put Charade in charge.

"Your Grace, Firmrock Legion's first division arrived at Viscount Eidis's old dominion near Dawok on the 10th of the 11th. The skis and sleds are functional until the 29th of the 2nd. So far the house has moved 87 thousand people from Winston, 32179 of whom are youths. The house has urgently allocated up to 100 thousand sets of cold-resistant clothing," reported Charade, uttering one number after another flawlessly.

The youths Charade referred to were men between 16 and 35.

"That doesn't sound right. Didn't Viscount Eidis say there are approximately 30 thousand people in their dominion, and that the subjects of the other three houses combined only numbered 40 thousand? Why are there so many?" asked Lorist curiously.

"When they returned in the winter, they managed to convince another seven noble houses with similar fates to switch sides as well. That's what I was going to report to you. Baron Potterfang and Baron Malek promised the seven nobles that if they cooperated, they would also be able to receive House Norton's entitlement and be given the opportunity to become your vassals."

Lorist nodded.

"Ah, those are the conditions I told Potterfang and Malek before they left. Winston's old nobles go all the way back to the time of the empire. Unlike the nobles of Southern that attempted to take advantage of the empire to extend their influence and power, the nobles of Winston sacrificed a lot for the former empire. Additionally, they didn't involve themselves in the empire's civil war, so I'm willing to give them a chance."

"You're right, Your Grace. The seven nobles have already emptied their current dominions and are bringing all their family members to The Northlands. We have temporarily arranged for their accommodation at the former noble mansions of Gildusk. They wish to have an audience with you and hope they will be given a chance to fight against Iblia.

"So far, there are still approximately ten thousand commoners at Dawok, most are young widows. Viscount Eidis said that if there are no women in the town, Duke Fisablen's ambassadors will notice and have their suspicions raised. Lord Potterfang also agrees and stationed a division of wheelbarrow-carroballista troops and a division of heavy-armored infantry, totaling 30 thousand men, at the town. The rest are hiding in ambush in Baron Wade's castle."

"Wait, what about was the allocation of 100 thousand cold-resistant clothing you mentioned?" asked Lorist.

"Your Grace, you're not seriously expecting the Firmrock soldiers to disguise themselves as Viscount Eidis's subjects clad in the equipment of our forces, are you? I

had no choice but to trade the cold-resistant clothes for the cruddy apparel of the commoners being moved here. It will also help ensure their safe travel to The Northlands in this weather. Our forces will don the beaten-up clothes of the transported commoners so they can fool the Frontier Legion scouts," explained Charade.

"Apologies, I forgot to take that into account. Also, notify the seven nobles that they may meet me and have lunch tomorrow. And Baron Camorra, you may pick 20 thousand men from the youths just arrived to group them up. When we attack Winston, they can travel there with baron Freiyar's local defense legion to the strategic locations to begin construction efforts," instructed Lorist.

"Understood, Your Grace."

Chapter 366
Extermination

"Report! An eagle message was just received. Your Grace, the three Frontier Legion divisions at Windbury have been deployed. They're heading to Dawok and will arrive at approximately during three in the afternoon," said Tarkel after he rushed to the tent hurriedly to update Lorist on the military reports.

Lorist smirked and said to Count Felim, "Duke Fisablen fell for it. He might be under the impression that this is just an act of rebellion from the nobles from Dawok in opposition to the order to move. It's probably due to the Frontier Legion soldiers that didn't get to conquer the town yesterday.

"The other noble houses' banners are hung all over the town wall, after all. The garrison soldiers there must number roughly 20 thousand already. It's only normal for the 10-thousand-strong Frontier Legion division to lose three skirmishes, with about a thousand casualties in each. That's likely why the duke mobilized the three other legions. He wants to make an example of the nobles that dare resist him. Their extermination would certainly put more pressure on other considering doing the same."

Stretching his hand over the map, Lorist laughed.

"Let's continue with our original plan. Count Felim, your Pegasus Legion will take the left flank, Loze will lead Tigersoar and attack the right flank. Terman, lead the Ragebear Knights around their rear and cut off their escape. I will join you with a guard brigade. Els, Reidy, take a squad each and deal with the Frontier Legion's scouts. Don't let them escape no matter what."

"Understood, Your Grace," said Els and Reidy as they left.

"Will we press the attack after we encircle them, Your Grace?" asked Felim.

"Yes. Given how far they have to travel, the soldiers will definitely need to rest when they arrive. Our ambush will catch them off guard when they are most exhausted. They won't be able to run from our ambush. It's ideal since we want to exterminate them

completely. Leave cleaning the battlefield to Loze. He will head to attack Pedro the day after. We will travel to Windbury through the night and take the capital city by morning.

"Oh, and Tarkel, did the message mention whether Duke Fisablen joined the assault personally?"

"No, Your Grace. Word is that the one leading the three divisions is the legion commander, Gold-ranked Knight Hemorrison. He's an old subordinate of the duke and also among the duke's most trusted aides. He's been working for him for more than three decades. He's reliable and has lots of experience," replied Tarkel.

"In other words, Duke Fisablen is staying at Windbury?"

"Yes. The message said he was preparing to take command of the capital and towns' garrison forces that used to be under the nobles he exterminated's command. He wants to form a defense legion with roughly 45 thousand men to take care fo Dawok, Windbury, and Twilight Lake Town's defenses. Perhaps he couldn't leave because of that, so he left exterminating the nobles to Hemorrison."

"Haha," laughed Lorist coldly, "It seems the duke still isn't aware that our attack on Iblia has started already. He's still going about his plans as usual. It's too bad we won't give him any more time. We ought to accept his gift with grace before we pay a visit to the war god himself at Windbury. I'm looking forward to seeing his flabbergasted expression. Let's depart!"

"Immediately, Your Grace."

……

"Why do I feel uneasy? Will Dawok go own badly?" mused Hemorrison.

The Frontier Legion commander looked around suspiciously.

"Double the scouts. Expand our surveillance area to 15 kilometers ahead."

"Is something wrong, Sir? Dawok is only 50 kilometers away from the capital. It won't take more than half a day by horse. We didn't see anything odd along the way, not since morning, right? We'll meet up with Sir Udinas in another two hours at Dawok. We can rest for the night before we take the town tomorrow. I'm sure we can deal with the

ragtag bunch quickly and carry out the duke's order. It's but a relaxing walk in the park. Why does it seem like we're facing our archenemy?" asked Gold-ranked Knight Maqais, the legion's second-in-command.

"I don't know why myself… something just doesn't feel right. I have a sense of foreboding similar to what I felt when we launched that surprise attack on the greater and lesser golden creeks but I really can't find the reason no matter how hard I think about it. The duke predicted the nobles' rebellion.

"But we didn't think they'd manage to rally another seven or eight nobles and gather a force of 20 thousand. They even made Sir Udinas suffer such a loss… It seems these nobles intend to fight a defensive battle now they just harvested their winter wheat. They want to force the duke to take a step back by prolonging this confrontation. Even so, the traitors will definitely regret it the moment we arrive. Even though we're light cavalry, we pack quite a punch," laughed Hemorrison.

"Sir, perhaps I know why you're worried," offered Maqais seriously.

"Let's hear it."

"There used to be 47 old noble houses in Winston. However, thanks to that darned king, the second prince of the empire, who sold noble titles to gather military funds, more than ten new noble houses emerged. Despite their conflicts with the nobles of Southern, which was the undoing of more than ten noble house, there are still 56 in Winston.

"Last year, we were ordered to exterminate 23 of them and the remaining 33 accepted the duke's order to relocate. Currently, there are roughly 8 noble houses gathered at Dawok. So, the other 20 or so will definitely watch this conflict from the sidelines.

"If we successfully take Dawok and exterminate the rebels, the other nobles will definitely obediently as the duke ordered. But if this gets dragged on and the rebels manage to secure Dawok, the others might be tempted to join them and stab us in the back. Winston will then be swallowed by a large-scale revolution. I believe that's what's bothering you right now, Sir," Maqais explained in great detail.

Hemorrison nodded.

"Your explanation is sound. However, what I'm worried about is that the nobles supposedly watching from the sidelines have already secretly formed an alliance. They

may be in cahoots with the nobles holed up in Dawok and stab us in the back at the most crucial moment. That way, we can't occupy Dawok to carry out the duke's order. That's perhaps the thing that was worrying me."

"We can actually afford to fight at our own pace without rushing, Sir. Didn't the duke say he would send the reserve legion here next month to face off against the four Northlands houses? If the situation you described happens and all the Winston nobles rebel, we can just hold them off until the reserve legion arrives and takes them all out," said Maqais crudely.

Currently, about half of the five Frontier Legions were comprised of grassland barbarian recruits. They were mostly domesticated barbarians not only fluent in the common tongue, some even knew how to read and write. Having mingled for quite some time, they were no different from normal imperial soldiers. The reserve legion, on the other hand, was mostly formed from barbarians apart from the commanders and knights of the house.

In other words, while the reserve legion was one of the house's strongest units, it was also the most unruly. Many incidents of conflict occurred within the ranks. Duke Fisablen decided to mobilize the reserve legion to Dawok to prevent an invasion by the four Northlands houses.

"No, Maqais. What we need now the most is time," Hemorrison countered, shaking his head, "The four houses wiped Madras out when nobody was watching and helped Second Highness Auguslo reclaim his throne. His Grace was greatly shocked and decided to prepare to defend against them immediately.

"Normally, you would have to rest for at least two or three years after a war to recover. But, the four houses' casualties during their conflict with the duchy was so little they would require just two years to recover, and that's taking into account that the duke underestimated their might. After all, it was a war that wiped a nation off the map.

"However, when we heard House Kenmays and House Shazin relocated their dominions, His Grace breathed a sigh of relief and thought they wouldn't launch an attack on Iblia within the next two to three years. Dominion relocation is no simple affair. To tempt and misguide the four, His Grace sent messengers to the Nortons and the salt merchant committee to place an order for goods worth over two million gold Fordes.

"That's why His Grace launched his plan to clear Winston. It was to prepare it for becoming a battlefield suited to weather their invasion. We need to build citadels at Dawok, Twilight Lake Town, and Windbury. As long as we can control these three strategic locations, we can rely on the mobility of our forces to drag the battle out and wear them down. That way, we can force them to retreat.

"If we fail to take Dawok, the remaining 20 plus houses will rebel and escalate the conflict. As long as this conflict persists, it might attract the four houses. Even if they haven't recovered their might, our house is similarly unprepared for it. Should we clash with the four houses right now, it will greatly affect the house's plan. What we want the least is to attract the four houses' suspicion and ruin the duke's plans."

Maqais nodded solemnly.

"In other words, we just have to crush Dawok right away and let the spectating nobles preparing to rebel see us hang the noble houses holed up within right away so they can continue to head to their assigned dominions in Southern obediently. We can easily reorganize the manpower in the dominions those nobles left behind and complete the mission without problems, right?"

"Correct. Oh, the scouts are back. Let's see what they have to say."

A scout rode quickly like the storm and came to a sudden stop before he reported.

"Sir, situation normal 15 kilometers ahead. We didn't spot anything noteworthy."

"Thanks for the hard work. Keep up surveillance and report anything you see right away," Hemorrison ordered, waving his horse whip.

"Right away, Sir," said the scout before he left in a hurry.

"Increase our pace," ordered Hemorrison as he turned to the orderly behind him.

Around two-thirty in the afternoon, Knight Hemorrison and Knight Maqais made it to Dawok with their three divisions. The third division commander, Udinas, had long been waiting to receive them.

"Sir, the camp is set up. Do you want to rest now?"

"There's no rush, Udinas. Tell me more about the situation. We can go check out

Dawok's fortifications afterward," Hemorrison said as he waved his hand before he turned to the orderly beside him.

"Have Sir Karichok and Sir Benbrik come over and survey the town's defenses later and discuss our plan of attack."

"Understood, Sir," said the orderly as he turned and left.

The First Frontier Legion of House Fisablen numbered 46 thousand divided into four main divisions and one logistics division. Its commander was Three-Star Gold-ranked Knight Hemorrison - also the first division's commander. Its second-in-command was Two-Star Gold-ranked Knight Maqais, leader of the second division. Gold-ranked Knight Udinas was the third division's commander and was at the two-star-gold rank. As for Karichok, who Hemorrison had just summoned, he was a three-star-silver-ranked knight and the leader of the fourth division. Benbrik Hand was a two-star-silver rank and the leader of the logistics division.

While Hemorrison was commander of the legion, he was extremely polite and cordial towards the two silver-ranked knights, Karichok and Benbrik. After all, they were knights bearing the surname Fisablen and were distant relatives of the duke himself. They were considered members of the house.

"Sir, we arrived yesterday morning and launched three attacks after we set up camp. We used the grapple horse jump during the second and third attacks and managed to scale the walls, but the enemy numbers up there were too high. Too few of our men made it up the walls, hence our failure," said Udinas regretfully, as he explained the reasons for his three failed attempts.

The grapple horse jump was a technique that took advantage of low defensive walls. A rider would toss a grappling hook up on the walls and use the momentum of the mount's gallop to propel oneself up onto the walls. That was a technique many grassland barbarians were familiar with, and many imperial soldiers of the Frontier Legion also knew that skill.

"How well-defended are the walls?"

"They're defended mostly by elites. There are about 20 thousand soldiers on those walls. Apart from five or six thousand experienced old veterans, the rest seemed to be the youth laborers only recently conscripted. Their weapons are all over the place,

ranging from farming to sewing tools. There were even women on the walls. Most of them are not armored at all, wearing only some worn out leather clothes. However, there are roughly 400 longbowmen who caused almost half of our casualties," replied Udinas honestly.

"Sir, the walls of Dawok are only approximately six meters tall, and rather thin, We can use rams to take them down tomorrow. Sir Udinas suffered a loss because of having insufficient troops. Now that the whole legion is here, we only have to topple the walls to finish the traitorous nobles off," said Maqais when his sharp eyes caught the wall's weakness.

"Very well," praised Hemorrison with a nod.

Just as he was about to say something else, the loud blaring of the horn rang out in the distance and interrupted him.

"What's going on?" asked Hemorrison in a panic when he dropped his horsewhip unknowingly.

The cries of the scouts could be heard in the distance.

Some used their last breath to shout, "Enemy attack! It's the Nortons and Felims!"

Hemorrison paled as he mumbled, "That… that's impossible…"

On the 26th day of the 4th month of Year 1778, the Nortons led the four houses of The Northlands to launch their assault on the Iblia kingdom, starting with the extermination of the First Frontier Legion of House Fisablen at Dawok.

Legion commander and leader of the first division, Three-Star Gold-ranked Knight Hemorrison, second in command and leader of the second division, Two-Star Gold-ranked Knight Maqais, and leader of the third division, Two-Star Gold-ranked Knight Udinas, all perished in the battle. Three-Star Silver-ranked Knight Karichok, leader of the third division, surrendered to the Nortons. The First Frontier Legion suffered more than 28 thousand casualties, with another 16 thousand taken captive without a single soldier managing to escape. This is known as 'The Dawok Extermination'.

Chapter 367
City Entrance

The purple-red tint of dawn colored the sky as buds of clouds floated past.

Vikdor opened his eyes, pulled apart the beastskin furs covering his body, and stood up on the walls. Stretching his body lazily, he wiped his face with his hand and removed a rather large piece of rheum from his eyes and turned to look at the noisy plaza in the distance.

"Darn it… The days ahead are gonna be tough… I can't even get good rest with them making so much noise so early in the morning," Vikdor mumble as he kicked his subordinates who were still lying on the ground of the walls asleep, "Get up, all of you. Stop sleeping. If the patrolling officer sees you still asleep, you'll be in for a whipping! Get up right now."

That was the north gate of Windbury and Vikdor was a leader of his squad of ten. The squad he was in charge in took care of opening and closing the city gates, with the added benefit of sneaking some 'unofficial toll' from merchants intending to enter the city.

"Boss, it's still so early, why'd you wake us up? It's not like the city bell rung already… There's no need for us to open the gates anytime before eight in the morning… Look, the sun still hasn't risen yet. Just let us catch a bit more shuteye," complained Klisha, a veteran soldier, in a sleepy voice.

Slightly pissed, Vikdor went over to give Klisha two more harsh kicks. "Don't you feel any shame from saying that? If it weren't for you and Fatty Bart asking me to go all in with my bet, I wouldn't have lost all the additional rations of our squad and take up the shift of Languan's squad, we wouldn't have to be basking in the cold breeze and could sleep well in our own camp!"

Klisha said with dissatisfaction, "That's because of your own shit luck… Languan already threw a one, three and four, and that roll is practically giving money away. Yet, you somehow managed to throw a one, two and three. Didn't you see how bright Languan's face was back then? Even after you lost the money, you didn't give up and

wanted another bet by staking us, your squad members, to replace their shift if you lost. In the end, Languan managed to throw three sixes. It's all your fault we had to sleep through the night here."

When Klisha said that, Vikdor reddened with embarrassment that turned into anger. "Well, then why didn't you stop me earlier? Instead, you got me to bet all our money and I only bet to take their shift cause I wanted to get the money back. It's not like Fatty Bart and you were against it back then. There's no point in complaining now that we've lost."

"Can you stop arguing? It really spoils the mood to hear you grumble first thing in the morning, you know. You might as well use the time to think of how we can warm up and fill our stomachs first. Those lazy bums at the camp will only send us food at nine, not to mention that they'd have to serve that master and those other idiots first. Perhaps, the food might not come before ten," said a fat old soldier who was leaning against the wall and clutching his beastskin fur tightly.

Klisha turned directed his grievances to his new target and said, "Fatty Bart, is eating all you can think of? You're already so fat."

Annoyed, the fat old soldier barked, "It's got nothing to do with you. I won't fuss over every little thing like you rascals who don't see the bigger picture. Just get over the fact that we've lost. There's no point getting hung up on it now. The only thing I regret is helping that stupid duke out. We've never had a good day since he came. We lost our post as guards of the palace and were sent to look after the city gates. Not only did we lose our bonus pay, even our salary was cut by half. It's all thanks to that darned duke…"

The fat old soldier's words struck the minds of the other soldiers, who wholeheartedly agreed. They were rather dissatisfied with how they were treated since Duke Fisablen came over. Originally, they were part of the regiment of guards of Rose Palace under the direct command of the queen. Working at the palace was nothing short of a dream come true. Not only was the pay great, sometimes nobles would pay them huge sums to find out about hearsay in the palace. Not only that, there was also the benefit of networking with others. Fatty Bart used to get along with the guard of the royal kitchen and fattened up because he ate too many delicious treats from there over time.

However, the first act by Duke Fisablen when he arrived was to disassemble the regiment of palace guards. The regiment leader and the company leaders' heads were

hung at the plaza of the palace. As for low-ranked soldiers like Vikdor, Bart and Klisha, they were distributed all over the four city gates to replace the private soldiers of the nobles from Southern.

Back then, the nobles of Southern had fought quite extensively for the right to control the city gates. Yet, with but an order from Duke Fisablen, they had no choice but to hand control of the gates back thanks to the threat of the Frontier Legion. Similarly, that also set their own paths of doom in stone. Without control of the gates, they couldn't freely leave the city as they pleased, making them vulnerable to the duke's whims at any given moment.

Vikdor, however, was terrified when he heard the disrespectful words uttered by his subordinates. "Shhh! Shut up, all of you! Even if you don't feel like living anymore, don't drag me into this! Did you forget about how many people the duke killed during the second half of the previous year? How many of those aloof nobles are still alive right now? The pit we dug was filled with hundreds of corpses! Did you forget how many powerful nobles that were rendered into nothing but fertilizer for the soil?!"

Seeing the pale faces of his quiet subordinates, Vikdor continued satisfiedly, "Mere soldiers like us won't usually be the target of those nobles. But speaking bad of them is the worst taboo you can possibly commit. If word of it gets around, all ten of us, perhaps even the whole squad, will be beheaded by those cold-hearted nobles! Not just those who talk bad about them! All they need to end us with is an order! Do you understand? Now, get yourself together and stand properly. The patrol soldiers will come to check on us later, so do it right if you don't want to get caned."

Not long after, an agonized cry could be heard from the plaza in the distance. However, the sound soon came to a sudden halt.

Vikdor felt a chill run down his spine and mumbled, "I wonder which unfortunate fellow's head will be displayed in public next…"

Klisha said, "There were 17 yesterday… How many heads will fall to the ground today?"

Bart turned to the plaza and said, "Boss, I heard Burk from the palace kitchen say that the thousands gathered at the plaza to train are only the first batch. Duke Fisablen decided to form a new garrison legion with the private soldiers of the nobles and Burk even encouraged me to sign up fast. I'm a two-star iron-ranked after all, so there'd be

no problem for me to become a leader of a 100-man squad. But now, I'm starting to wonder if a normal garrison legion even requires such strict training…"

Vikdor nodded and said, "That's right. I heard Squad Leader Boston say that this garrison legion is held to the highest standards of discipline, even higher than normal standing armies. I heard that they will be stationed at some strategic locations, so the instructors Duke Fisablen sent over are more harsh than ever. They just go around punishing or beheading people without a blink of an eye. I think you ought not to find trouble for yourself. The soldiers of that legion don't have it easy. I doubt you'll be able to handle it."

"Boss, stop talking. The patrol team is here," said another soldier who was squinting at the silhouettes in the distance.

The patrol team was formed from members of the personal guard of Duke Fisablen. A few teams would patrol all corners of the city multiple times daily. The patrol team for the walls numbered only ten people, but all of them were silver-ranked and were armed with the gear of House Fisablen, striking fear into the hearts of those that weren't content with being under the duke's rule.

"You guys seem well and energetic," the knight from the patrol team said in his rare acts of praise, "Who's in charge of you guys?"

Vikdor bowed as he said, "Sir, I am ten-man leader Vikdor."

The knight leading the patrol team said, "Vikdor, you did well. The duke ordered the gates to be opened one hour earlier and closed one hour later for these two days. Also, the men defending the city walls are to be doubled. I believe your squad leader has received the order already."

"Oh, why is that?" asked Vikdor curiously.

The knight didn't mind the question and explained the reason for that order. "After the winter harvests, the duke ordered the commoners of the dominions that are currently not under noble rule to bring the winter wheat to the city, hence the extension of the opening time for the gates. Also, First Frontier Legion was deployed yesterday, and we believe a messenger will come during these two days to send a report. We're leaving the gates open for longer so that we don't miss the messenger, understood?"

Vikdor nodded as the patrol team took their leave.

Bart said excitedly, "Boss, if the transport team is here, we can get a sack of winter wheat for porridge! Porridge made from fresh winter wheat is just so delicious!"

"We'll see. Go check if that's the transport team over there. There's such a huge convoy heading here, a little earlier than expected. Klisha, ask Squad Leader Boston why the additional men assigned to the gates aren't here yet. We won't open the gates until they come," said Vikdor as he looked at the long convoy approaching the city.

The men sent over by their squad leader were none other than Vikdor's nemeses, Languan's own group of ten. Languan used to be a mercenary and was of the three-star iron rank, yet nobody could recall what he went by in the past. Languan was but a nickname of his.

At that moment, the bell within the city rang seven times. After a short pause, it rang another seven times. It would ring another seven more times before the time reporting protocol concludes.

"Time's up. Languan, open the city gates. We'll stay here since running up and down like this is just too tiring," shouted Vikdor from the top of the walls towards Languan's group below.

Languan cursed, "I thought I could take some time off after winning against you yesterday, but that darned Boston sent me on another job. I still haven't had my breakfast, you know! I hope his member doesn't ever stand again even after seeing that young wife of his!"

Vikdor and the rest atop the walls laughed heartily, before Vikdor recalled something and shouted to Languan, "Hey, the transport team is already here! Get a sack of winter wheat from them! We'll make some porridge at the tower over there!"

It wasn't know whether Languan heard what Vikdor said. All he did was nod before instructing his men to open the gates. As the convoy approached the gate, a few men sitting atop the carriages filled with linen sacks jumped off and talked to Languan before handing a sack over. Languan stepped aside and let one carriage after another enter the city.

The one who handed Languan the sack remained at the gate and chatted with Languan. He also handed him a waterskin.

Darn, that must be wheat wine or something. Languan really has it good, thought Vikdor

enviously. However, he soon felt a the walls of the city vibrate slightly.

What's going on? Vikdor thought he imagined the feeling, but he heard Bart say with a trembling voice, "Bo-boss… Look… Cavalry…"

Vikdor raised his head to look and froze up instantly. Countless numbers of cavalry troops could be seen swarming towards the city, and they didn't seem to be First Frontier Legion that left yesterday based on their armaments. Their armor and banners were different and they had to be the enemy.

"E-enemy attack!" shouted Vikdor with difficulty to Languan below, only to see the man from the transport team pull out a bloody shortsword from Languan's body before he turned up and smiled at Vikdor.

It's all over… The gate can't be closed because of all the carriages down there… We'll definitely die if we go down right now! The transport team is actually the enemy in disguise! The capital will definitely fall! thought Vikdor as his mind blanked out. *What should I do… Oh, those cavalry came from the direction First Frontier Legion left in… That means the legion is already wiped out…*

Who could possibly exterminate FIrst Frontier Legion and still have enough men to attack Windbury with? Vikdor looked begrudgingly at the cavalry approaching from the distance and saw a familiar insignia on the banner. *A picture of the raging bear? Isn't that House Norton from The Northlands? They're here again… And there's also a banner with a pegasus… So House Felim is here as well…*

Clang! Vikdor discarded his weapon and kneeled down on both knees on upon the walls,

"Bossm what are you doing?" asked Bart in confusion.

"Drop your weapons and kneel like me now! I'm making sure that you get out of his alive! If you're still armed when those guys make it up here, they'll attack you! Quick! Discard your weapons and kneel behind me!" cried Vikdor as quickly as he could.

……

Lorist was the first to ride all the way into Windbury. His target was Rose Palace because Duke Fisablen was over there. As long as he could capture the duke, the rest of the plan would be a no brainer. House Fisablen without the duke would become

malleable as clay for Lorist's purposes. With Duke Fisablen out of the picture and Blademaster Xanthi held captive by the second highness, House Fisablen would have no one to lead them. Since Viscount Kristoph was someone Lorist could easily deal with, all he had to do was to wait for Sylvia to come crying to him and beg for House Fisablen to be spared. She would definitely agree to any condition Lorist brought up by then.

Well, that's thinking a little too far. First, I need to catch that slimy old duke, thought Lorist as he wiped the drool off from the corner of his mouth and continued riding towards Rose Palace.

Behind him, the soldiers bearing the banner of House Felim and the Ragebear Knights were flooding into Windbury through the north gate. Els, who had pretended to be part of the crew of the transport team to jam the gates with the carriages, was busy looking for a mount so that he could join up with Lorist.

After wiping out House Fisablen's First Frontier Legion at Dawok a day before, Lorist brought his guard brigade, Ragebear Knights and House Felim's Pegasus Knights with him. They left for Windbury at seven that night. Potterfang and Malek would follow behind them with Firmrock Legion and Loze and Tigersoar Legion was tasked with clearing up the battlefield.

At first, Lorist wanted to mount a night attack on Windbury, but he realized that his men and horses were already tired out when they were about 5 kilometers away from Windbury. Having no other choice, Lorist ordered his men to set up camp and rest. After all, even the strongest men couldn't handle fighting after a whole night of travel right after the battle to wipe out First Frontier Legion.

Guess we have no choice but to attack head on, thought Lorist. However, before six in the morning, the scouts patroling in the distance noticed a large convoy traveling towards the capital. After asking around, Lorist was delighted that such a convenient method of entering the city had fallen right into his lap. Els and Reidy brought the guards to masquerade as those of the transport team and quickly managed to take over the north city gate, causing Windbury to fall to their hands just like that.

The loud blaring of the alert horn finally rang out, causing the city bell to ring nonstop in response to the enemy attack. The patrol teams bravely resisted their foes, only to be reduced no nothing but bloody corpses soon enough.

The two large golden doors of Rose Palace was finally visible before Lorist. He drew his longsword and rushed straight towards the tens of soldiers standing guard at the palace entrance.

Chapter 368
Escape

Duke Fisablen woke up really early in the morning. With the coming of old age, his need for sleep diminished. However, he never thought of himself as old despite being at the age of seventy. As a rank 3 blademaster, his body was as fit as a man in his fifties. He was still so healthy he could release his pent-up desires the night before on two maidservants in his palace.

The reason he couldn't sleep was probably due to all his worries.

I wonder what happened to Xanthi… She still hasn't returned. I heard from an informant in Shabaj she was hunting down that Norton child with two other blademasters, but she hasn't contacted me since the chase started. What was that child called again? I think he was the swordsmanship section of the knighthood tournament's champion. Poor Jinuindor… For such a rare talent to die at the hands of the Nortons like that…

The duke felt his rage well up every time he thought about it.

Xanthi should be fine. She's a rank 3 blademaster, after all. I sure was surprised when she broke through three years ago. I resolved myself to attack the greater and lesser golden creeks thanks to her breakthrough. The Hubet tribe there aren't people to mess with lightly… They have seven fighters on par with blademasters.

Duke Fisablen had had to work together with Xanthi to kill six of the blademaster-level fighters to cause panic in the tribe before the military attack could be launched. They wiped the tribe out in one go and conquered the creeks.

As a rank 3 blademaster, Xanthi should have nothing to fear when traveling across Grindia. All she had to be wary of were the old hidden masters. Even if she met other rank 3 blademasters she could still escape unscathed.

She must just be having too much fun and forgetting to report back in time… Well, women are free spirited I suppose, thought the duke as he shook his head and stopped worrying about Xanthi.

He never even dreamed that Lorist would deal with his lover and make her the second highness' captive.

With his dominion peaceful, and Viscount Kristoph taking care of the golden creeks, he focused on the citadels and basic infrastructure at the golden creeks' construction. So far, House Fisablen had forcefully moved more than 200 thousand young men and women from Melein and settled them down at the creeks. They planned to move another 300 thousand citizens from Eastwild make the creeks the house's new headquarters over the rest of the year.

As for the lack of manpower at Eastwild, Winston's citizens being moved there would have to suffice. Coupled with some of the domesticated barbarians, Eastwild's population could still be maintained at approximately 500 thousand. As Sylvia was put in charge of dealing with the development of Eastwild's irrigation infrastructure, he hoped the dominion's agricultural growth would make it self-sufficient within the next two years so they would no longer have to rely on importing large amounts of food from the salt merchant committee. While House Fisablen's dominion was not lacking in meats, it would be quite a waste to let the commoners feast on meat all the time. All they needed was a filled stomach.

Currently, House Fisablen relied on their livestock to trade for resources with other nations. While the house had started to earn much more from mining gold following Goldcreek's occupation, the mining operations themselves cost quite a bit to set up. Gold could also be kept for times of need, while livestock was another story altogether. House Fisablen was provided with livestock by the grassland barbarian tribes annually, almost 100 thousand animals each time. It didn't come at any cost to the house either. They were able to exchange the livestock for lots of goods from the salt merchant committee, which was in turn used to trade for more livestock at a marked-up rate with the barbarian tribes. The trade netted the house quite a bit of profit.

The moment he thought of Princess Sylvia, Duke Fisablen's expression darkened.

Sylvia was so obedient and delightful when she was younger... Why did she grow into such a rebellious woman? She actually fell for that kid leading the Nortons... What's so good about him anyway? He doesn't even take a duke like me seriously. To be honest, he would make a decent husband, but he isn't on our side. In fact, the Nortons are secretly our enemies...

The duke felt like he had been slapped in the face when Lorist refused his conditions

for the marriage up front.

Rumors were not to be believed so readily. It was widely said among the nobles that House Norton's new leader was someone who didn't have a shred of ambition and only knew how to turtle up in his dominion like a coward. He even formed the alliance of four houses for protection. If other noble houses had that kind of military power, they would've started a war by now. However, Duke Fisablen didn't share their opinions. When he analyzed Lorist's actions and predicted his moves, he couldn't help but be awed.

Even though he didn't know of the saying, 'one can easily be king by erecting high walls and stockpiling food', he didn't look down on Lorist's plans in the slightest. The Northlands had been turned into a tank since House Norton consolidated the strength of their three allies. They were at a point where they could attack and retreat as they pleased. When word of Madras'conquest spread out, the duke was surprised, but not dumbfounded. The four houses did have the might required to end a nation.

It's no wonder that kid dared refuse my conditions. He had that kind of confidence all along. When it comes to his personal strength and the might of his house, he's not the slightest bit inferior to House Fisablen. In fact, he's better in many respects…

Duke Fisablen took a deep breath.

And to think I tried to put a leash on him using Sylvia in hopes of being able to keep his house out of my way… It's a shame he's far too stubborn… Or, maybe he knew that was what I was going for all along and crudely refused my third request.

There's no doubt House Norton is going to turn against us completely soon. The last batch of arms they sent over was just a ruse. The apology Count Kenmays sent last year said they would raise prices two or three-fold. It seems they want to bleed our newfound gold out of me.

However, that wasn't the main thing that worried him. Even though the four houses knew the house wiped out Melein and established a trade route to the four central duchies, they still raised the price of goods. Weren't they worried the house would order what they needed from the duchies instead? The duchies had more than enough salt to go around.

It all pointed at only one conclusion: the houses were trying to stretch their claws into

Iblia. Perhaps, wiping out Madras had given them the confidence to ignore the house's existence. It was common knowledge that Iblia mainly relied on House Fisablen and declaring war on the kingdom was akin to challenging the duke himself.

What he regretted most was taking too much time to deal with the kingdom's nobles. Fortunately, two of the four houses of The Northlands relocated their dominions at the same time. He believed they would only settle down this year. The soonest they would act was next year.

Perhaps I should send out an envoy to prod the waters. Even if it'll cost me two million gold Fordes to strike up another deal with them, at least I get to buy a year of peace, thought he.

Hopefully, my plans for Winston can be completed this year so we will be ready for them and can fight them over there. We're too tight on time. The three citadels must be completed this year. We still need to train the garrison legion to man them and move Winston's people away… There's too much to do!

The two maidservants pleasured to unconsciousness by the duke finally woke up. Seeing the duke breathing heavily, clad in nothing but his night robe, they hurriedly brought over some warm water and shyly cleaned up his body while letting him cop a feel or two. The two were planning to give the duke some quick morning stimulation, but he refused their offer and left with his sword to train.

By the time Lorist arrived at Rose Palace, Duke Fisablen had ended his training and was enjoying a hearty breakfast in his study after his bath. He looked over stacks of documents as he ate. Just as he was dealing with some of the kingdom's matters, a horn rang out. It did nothing but cause the duke to crease his brows, however. He thought it was just the soldiers gathering to train at the plaza causing trouble.

It was to be expected, many of the soldiers were picked from the Southern noble's private forces. Many had already awakened their battleforce. Though they were mostly bronze or iron ranks, some might think it was a good time to cause trouble now that First Frontier Legion was away.

No worries, I'll just take my personal guard and kill off a few of them later. I'm sure the rest will quiet down and become obedient.

He always ruled with an iron fist. How would the rowdy grassland barbarians obey

him otherwise? He employed the carrot and stick approach. If they obeyed orders, they would be rewarded; if they didn't, death was the way to go.

But when the alarm bell signaling an enemy attack sounded, he finally lost his cool.

This isn't just some disobedient soldiers... Who's attacking?

Just when the duke was about to send the palace guard out to check the situation, a loud bam echoed through the castle as the main doors were kicked open.

A familiar voice declared as arrogantly as possible, "Duke Fisablen! You have an honored guest! Aren't you gonna come over to receive me?!"

"Who dares act so impudently?!" roared the duke.

The moment he left his room, he saw Lorist fighting off a bunch of palace guards near the collapsed doors. With but a flash of the sword, a loyal palace guard's limbs fell all over as he tumbled to the ground and joined the 40 or so corpses already there.

"Stand down!" yelled the duke.

The guards were the house's elites. Following the knighthood tournament, he had taken a page out of Lorist's book and picked two thousand soldiers with awakened battleforce to serve in his personal guard. He was planning to have them train beside him for another three years before assigning them as squad leaders to his main force. It would not only increase the loyalty of his troops, but also the strength of his forces through an effective chain of command.

"Hehe, Your Grace, Norton Lorist pays his respects!" greeted Lorist after he stopped chasing down the small fry.

While the duke appeared calm on the surface, he was actually quite unnerved.

Lorist? How did he come all the way here and bust down my door?

He had been incredibly wary of Lorist ever since the latter killed a gold-ranked knight with one move during the duke's banquet ahead of the tournament. If he was armed, he wouldn't have any trouble taking out a gold-ranked knight instantly either, given his prowess as a rank 3 blademaster. But even he wasn't confident he could do the same unarmed like Lorist.

"Yo-you… How did you get here?" asked he.

As he spoke he secretly made a gesture with his left hand behind him.

"Haha, Lord Duke, I came to visit with my forces, of course! Since Iblia no longer has a king, it's about time the kingdom goes with it. Our four houses have come to help it along. Come, Lord Duke. Let us discuss what lies ahead for the two of us."

From how he was still holding his sword, it didn't appear he wanted to talk about anything though.

"Dream on! I'll not permit Iblia to fall!" roared the duke.

"Oh really?" Lorist snickered, "I'm afraid it's not up to you anymore. Pops, your First Frontier Legion has already been wiped out completely. Not one made it out alive. How'd you think we got here? Listen to the cheers outside. That's the sound of our victorious occupation of Windbury. It's over, pops. Drop your weapon and surrender. I'll give House Fisablen a chance for survival on behalf of Sylvia. You'd better be obedient though! Hahaha…"

Lorist laughed heartily now that the duke was in front of him. There was no way he could escape now. As long as the duke was felled by his hands, all his troubles would be solved.

"Bullshit!" the duke cried, "Norton brat, I'll never yield to the likes of you in the name of House Fisablen! You better forget about making me surrender. As long as I have a sword in my hand, I'll fight you to the end!"

"Is that so?" Lorist said mockingly, "No worries. I'll fight you until you discard your sword and kneel before me. Let's see what kind of crap you can spout then! En garde!"

Lorist dashed forward and launched a flurry of attacks.

Clang-clang-clang!

Three sword clashes saw Duke Fisablen knocked backwards three meters.

"Not bad, pops. Your foundations are much stronger than that old hag. It seems I'll have to break a sweat to take you down," praised Lorist.

"What do you mean?" asked the duke as he carefully circled Lorist, sword raised, as if he was trying to find an opening to attack.

"Don't you get it? By old hag, I mean Blademaster Xanthi. She's a rank 3 too, right? She didn't even take ten hits. She's currently in a cell in the imperial capital."

While Lorist appeared confident in being able to take down the duke, even engaging in small talk, he was still extremely cautious. If he failed because of too much gloating, he would become a huge joke. The duke had been a rank 3 blademaster for a long time already and might still have some tricks up his sleeves.

"You're… you're lying!"

Duke Fisablen messed up his footwork in a fit of slight panic.

Lorist didn't take advantage of it, however.

"Oh really? Do you think House Norton will let you beat us around as you wish? You knew Reidy was my disciple and even dared to chase him down yourself. Did you think I was someone you could afford to piss off? Don't mistake a resting tiger for a cat! You think our four houses wouldn't know what you're trying to do at Winston? How idealistic of you to think we would let you turn Winston into the stage for our battle. Dream on!"

"You're going too far! I… I'll take you down here!"

The duke's face flushed angrily as he prepared to leap at Lorist.

"Well said!" replied Lorist as he made his preparation to receive the rain of attacks.

He didn't think the duke would actually jump back instead after feinting and shout.

"Fire!"

The moment the order rang out, more than a hundred longbowmen hiding in the corners of the palace appeared and fired at Lorist all at once.

"Sol!" cursed he.

I didn't think he'd do something so shameless! He's a rank 3 blademaster, isn't he?! How

dare he ambush others with hidden bowmen?!

Lorist had to deal with the hundred longbowmen first. A good number were of the silver rank. The arrows they fired were quick, accurate and powerful. He had to leap about and deflect a good number of them before he managed to approach the archers. The moment he did, he launched into a bout of massacre. However, he lost track of the duke as a result.

The loud neigh of a warhorse sounded from the outside. Lorist leaped up a beam on the main hall and saw the duke leaving Rose Palace with tens of guards towards the south gate. Before he rode away, the duke even gave Lorist a glance from afar.

Darn it, that old pest is trying to escape! Lorist leaped down from the beam and headed for the gate as well.

Chapter 369
Pursuit

Whap! Whap! Lorist slapped himself hard on the face and wallowed in deep regret. He didn't think a rank 3 blademaster like Duke Fisablen would run without hesitation after crossing swords only twice. He had also been far too hasty in that he didn't conquer the other three city gates first before coming to seek out the duke.

Darn it! It's like having a duck fly away before I even cooked it! If that old fellow manages to get away, my strategy will be greatly affected!

Seeing the duke ride away with several dozen people, Lorist realized his legs would never catch up to them. He hurriedly shouted at the duke.

"Fisablen you asshole! Is your zodiac sign the rabbit? Why do you run so quickly?! Come back and fight me if you have any guts! Don't just run away! Some rank 3 blademaster you are! Wait, is your level even real?! Don't tell me you're just faking it!"

Upon hearing those words, a number of guards were angered and turned to chase him down. Duke Fisablen shouted something as he turned around. Most stopped disgruntledly. But three who couldn't or didn't listen to the duke's orders continued their charge.

Duke Fisablen stared coldly at Lorist without caring about those three guards. He gave a few orders to the guards at the south gate and left the city.

The three that charged at Lorist got into an arrow-shaped formation, with the guard captain swinging his silver-blade-glow-infused sword down at Lorist. The two guards behind him wielded spears that also had silver blade glows. It looked incredibly similar to a poisonous python and went for Lorist's flank.

Lorist suddenly fell backwards. The sword missed his chest by a hair's breadth. The mount's hooves landed right next to his head. The three guards didn't think he had such a move up his sleeve. The mounts lost their target, causing the two spears to pass above him. Lorist leaped up and landing as lightly as a feather on the left spear. He pivoted onto the warhorse. With three flashes of his sword, the three guards were

beheaded and thrown off their horses.

He flicked his sword clean and sheathed it before he hooked the falling spear with his foot. He twirled it around and hooked the other two horses' reigns. He pulled harshly and turned all three around.

"Hiyah!" cried Lorist as he rode towards the south gate, now with three horses in tow.

He resolved to chase the duke down no matter what.

"Fire!"

The moment the duke arrived at the gate, he gave the order to fire. In response, several dozens of arrows descended from the top of the walls. Lorist looked up and saw a dozen spear-wielding guards firing at him while a few more turned were turning a sentry ballista around.

He cursed and spun the spear in his hand, deflecting the arrows. Currently, the sentry ballista was almost turned around. He jumped off his mount and flung the spear at the walls like a javelin. It pierced the three guards moving the ballista like lightning bolt. The three were nailed to the walls with audible squishes and squelches. They could only cry out in despair as the spear punctured their abdomens.

The other guards looked at them with shocked expressions before they cast their bows, shields, spears, and other weapons away and ran screaming, no longer caring about manning the gate or walls.

Lorist got back on the saddle and prepared to continue chasing the duke down, only to see his mount slump from an arrow it had taken in the chest not too long ago. It was currently stumbling towards the front with hints of blood coming out of its mouth.

He had no choice but to jump off. One look told him it was no longer salvageable; the arrow had pierced about a foot into it. It was already on the brink of death. Fortunately, he had two other mounts. He quickly decapitated the dying horse, ending its suffering, and mounted one of the others. He immediately resumed the chase.

After an hour, the duke and his cohort's mounts began to slow. Lorist switched his final mount and spurred it onward. The change let him finally close the distance a little. Earlier, the people at the front had only been only as large as peas, now, they were of the size of a thumb. He estimated he had probably closed the distance from 300 meters

to about 200, and it seemed it wouldn't take too long for his targets' mounts to wear out even further.

He could hear horses galloping behind him. He turned around and saw forces with Count Felim's banner coming up behind him. It was none other than their light cavalry. Much to his surprise, there were only a couple of men but each brought with him three or four spare horses.

"Your Grace! Your Grace!"

A familiar voice rang out. Lorist took a closer look. It was Reidy and Els. They had six mounts with them besides their own.

"Where did you get so many horses?" asked Lorist.

"We found them at the camp stables, Your Grace. There are about ten thousand. They must be the First Frontier Legion's reserves. Count Felim said you went after Duke Fisablen by yourself, so he had us follow you to bring more mounts. He also sent Knight Bonawar and a regiment of light cavalry over. Count Felim and Terman's knights are behind them," yelled Els.

As there were too many horses around, much of what he said was drowned out by the galloping had he been softer.

"How's the capital?" yelled Lorist.

"I'm not sure, Your Grace. When we left, the four gates were already taken. I believe Count Felim wants to leave the city to Sir Potterfang."

Lorist didn't say any more. He pointed at Duke Fisablen's group in the distance before picking up his pace again.

After yet another hour, the duke slowed even more. No matter how they were whipped, they couldn't run any faster. The best they could manage was a decent trot. Lorist's group fared much better, but they were similarly tired by such a long chase. Lorist and Els switched mounts again and closed another 100 or so meters. They could even see their targets' panicked expressions clearly.

It wouldn't take them more than ten minutes to catch up.

Hehe, Duke Fisablen, I'll see where you can run now! thought Lorist with an insidious and excited expression.

However, the moment they approached a mound, Lorist was completely flabbergasted. The duke's group ahead hurried their mounts the best they could towards a pasture nearby where hundreds of other saddled warhorses were grazing peacefully.

"Sol! Where'd those horses come from?!" cursed Lorist as he saw the duke switch mounts.

A hundred or so men wearing the armor of House Fisablen saluted the duke. He didn't dally and rode away after saying a few words and pointing at Lorist. The soldiers ran at Lorist, weapons raised.

The countless light cavalry troops behind him drew their swords and spears and engaged the enemy. The Fisablen soldiers were terrified when they saw so many cavalry troops coming from behind. They swallowed their battlecry and stared at the oncoming cavalry blankly. In the last moments, before they drown in the sea of horses and men, they understood why the duke was in such a hurry. They had so foolishly thought Lorist was the only one giving chase and even tried to take him down.

"Why's there a patrol here?" asked Lorist curiously.

"Your Grace, Twilight Lake Town is roughly 15 kilometers ahead. The patrol was probably sent from there," reported Knight Bonawar of House Felim loudly.

"Oh, Twilight Lake Town…" Lorist recalled the report Tarkel sent him.

There were two regiments of roughly two thousand men stationed at the town. They were likely part of Third Frontier Legion. As they had participated in Melein's conquest two years earlier, they had incurred some casualties and part of their ranks were not yet replenished. They currently numbered 37 thousand men and were stationed in Southern to protect the road between Winston and the four duchies, Twilight Lake Town was loaded with construction materials for the three citadels Duke Fisablen intended to build.

"Forward! Give chase after we switch mounts. Duke Fisablen must die today!"

Lorist grit his teeth and switched to another mount. He chased the duke once again,

now about 200 meters ahead, followed by Reidy and Els.

The 15 kilometers was covered quickly, and the stone-and-timber walls of Twilight Lake Town came into view. The guards there had already blown a horn to alert the rest to open the gates for the duke.

Lorist drew his sword and pierced his mount with it. It cried out in pain and rushed forward with every ounce of energy it had like a mad beast. He approached the group in front more and more as the seconds ticked by.

When the last of the duke's guards entered the town, the guards manning the walls quickly prepared to close the gates. Just before the door shut, Lorist appeared and pulled on the reins of his horse whilst simultaneously spurring it on with his feet. The horse read and kicked off. It soared through the sky and rammed into the gates. A loud bang echoed out over the pain and reverberated through the walls as the gate was knocked open. The guards operating it from behind were sent flying. They coughed out blood as the crashed into the ground several seconds later.

Lorist jumped to the ground and walked through the gate, his mount breathing its last desperate breaths behind him. He pointed his sword at the duke and called out.

"Old turtle! Why aren't you running?! Don't tell me this's all you got! You better surrender now!"

While Duke Fisablen's expression darkened considerably, he didn't leap at Lorist with rage. Instead, he pointed at him and said something to his guards. The extravagantly dressed men beside him waved their hands and yelled out some orders. A few hundred cavalry clad in Fisablen armor approached him, shields and spears raised.

As it happened, fighting in the midst of chaos was Lorist's favorite pastime. He calmed himself as the blood-colored world filled his vision. The cavalry galloping towards him turned into mechanical mannequins. He launched forward. Like a gentle breeze, the sword in his hand raked past their ranks with a bright glow as it claimed one life after another with startling ease.

Corpses littered the ground and blood flowed in streams down the streets. When there was no one in front of him, Lorist woke from the blood world. Much to his dismay, unfortunately, apart from the Fisablen soldiers, whom now stared at him with terror, no one else was present. The duke had once again left.

"Good… Good Sol! Fisablen you coward! Won't you fight me properly even once?!"

Galloping sounds once again echoed into Lorist's ears as Els, Reidy, and Knight Bonawar approached. The soldiers, who'd faced his wrath and saw their duke escape with a few others, intelligently dropped their weapons to surrender. They were spared in return.

"Should we give chase, Your Grace?" asked Bonawar respectfully.

He had finally witnessed what the duke of House Norton was capable of and understood why his lord adored him so much. Lorist had massacred the guards all by himself and even scared a rank 3 blademaster away. Nearly half of the 700 plus soldiers of the town had been killed by Lorist alone, 297 in total. It was no wonder they dropped their weapons and surrendered the moment Bonawar arrived. He had thought he would have to fight a bloody battle first.

Lorist shook his head exhaustedly. He had tired himself out with the massacre.

"Forget it. Have our troops occupy the town and deal with the remaining soldiers. We'll head for Southern when the rest arrive. Our men must be worn out as well. We'll achieve nothing even if we continued the chase. Let's all have a good rest."

"Understood, Your Grace."

Chapter 370
Humiliation of the Duke

Three days later, Duke Fisablen's group rode haggardly past the crossing point at Southern and arrived at the main gates of Third Frontier Legion's campsite.

After taking a bath, the duke ignored the fatigue and summoned his military officers to a council meeting. The duke told them the harsh truth: they had been attacked by the four houses and First Frontier Legion had been wiped out. They had also lost Windbury and Third Frontier Legion would be the next target.

A substantial commotion broke out among the officers and the house's household knights. They either barked about how they would make their enemy pay, or expressed worries about the might of the alliance's forces. After all, First Frontier was fully drafted and armed, and was among the top three forces in the whole of the house's forces. If even they were wiped out in a single confrontation, the Third Frontier would have a far harder time.

Duke Fisablen also didn't explain why he only brought a select few with him on his escape from Windbury. All he did was issue a successive stream of orders. First, they would regroup, especially the patrol troupes they had scattered, to fortify their military camp. The walls would be strengthened and outposts erected. Moats would be dug and supplies gathered. They had to be completely prepared for their enemy's inevitable arrival.

They would send scouts and informants to Winston immediately to monitor every enemy movement. They also had to find their missing soldiers and find out where the First Frontier Legion's captives were being kept. If everything really was as Lorist had said -- that First Frontier Legion had been completely wiped out -- then the house's informants had to find out how. Most importantly, they had to find out how many forces their enemy had deployed, and why.

They also had to send envoys to request help from the four central duchies. Duke Fisablen told his envoys to inform his allies that Iblia was currently under attack by the nobles led by the duke of The Northlands, Norton Lorist. They had already lost Winston and Windbury, and House Fisablen's forces were mounting a defense in

Southern. However, their enemy was immense and they could only barely hold their ground, but not for long. The moment Southern fell under enemy control, Duke Fisablen would have to return to his dominion to defend it, and the duke of The Northlands would probably turn his sights on the four central duchies.

The central duchies' biggest worry was Andinaq's king, Auguslo. The man previously known as the second highness was the Krissen imperial family's heir and wasn't keen on pardoning their traitorous acts. The four dukes knew the four houses of The Northlands, who had reinstated the second highness, were loyal to him. The moment the second highness joined forces with the four houses, themselves powerful enough to wipe out Madras and possibly Iblia on their own, they would target the central duchies.

Duke Fisablen wasn't sure, however, whether they shared the second highness's goal. He knew Lorist wasn't someone loyal to Andinaq, given how his forces were busy exacting revenge against the Hanayabarta kingdom so far away when the second highness was on the frontlines waging war against Iblia. If Lorist were truly on his side, the second highness's throne wouldn't have been taken over by Queen Carey either.

But his suspicion wouldn't affect his excuse to get his allies to aid him in the slightest. It was mainly because the duchies were unwilling to share a border with Anidnaq. If they did, there would be no peace for them. It was far better for House Fisablen to tangle with The Northlands' forces in Southern than having the conflict take place within the duchies' borders.

So, Duke Fisablen didn't hold back. Not only did he have his envoys call the duchies to reinforce him, he also requested astronomical amounts of food and equipment. He was confident the dukes would seriously consider his request. Even if he only got half of his request, it was already enough. It was expected that the duchies would try to bargain.

After sending out his envoys, he ordered his soldiers deployed. Apart from ordering the reserve legion set to arrive at Windbury that month to regroup with him instead, he also ordered Fifth Frontier Legion, stationed in Eastwild, to rush to Southern to bolster his forces. As for the defenses in Eastwild, it would be handed to the garrison legion. With the few legions Duke Fisablen mobilized guarding Southern, their dominion was still safe for the time being.

So far, Second Frontier Legion was defending the greater and lesser golden creeks while Fourth Frontier Legion was defending Wild Husbandry. Neither could be mobilized. They were, instead, alerted of the attack and prepared to defend against them. Wild Husbandry bordered The Northlands, after all. The best way to deter an invasion was to destroy House Kenmays's iron suspension bridge so they would have one less place to defend. That way, Fourth Frontier Legion could tangle with the enemy in Winston through their citadel at Pedro.

After giving his orders, Duke Fisablen stared at the map silently for a long time. Finally, he decided what else he had to do. He would conscript soldiers from the hundreds of grassland barbarian tribes in the great northeastern plains. The barbarian soldiers could prepare their own robust warhorses, weapons, and rations. And as reward for joining the war in Southern, he generously promised whatever they managed to obtain during the campaign would be theirs.

The household knights and officers in the tent were shocked at the duke's order and objected strongly. The moment they allowed the barbarian soldiers to raid during the campaign, it would do more harm than help to the house's forces. If word of House Fisablen becoming the enablers of barbarian raids spread, their reputation would take a huge hit. Even disregarding that, having disobedient barbarians that preferred to act on their own accord would give their forces a lot of trouble.

Duke Fisablen laughed bitterly. He explained that the Northlander houses couldn't be underestimated, given how they could silently eliminate First Frontier even though they were just 50 kilometres from Windbury. The two regiments of Third Frontier at Twilight Lake Town, almost two thousand men in all, were wiped out as well. Given the current numbers of Third Frontier, the duke wasn't confident they could hold off the inevitable attack. He would have to thank the heavens if their two reinforcement legions could arrive in time.

"This isn't hearsay or propaganda. This war will be a tough and drawn out one. If we don't throw in everything we have, we will be forced back to the corners of the great northeastern plains. Even if we survive, we will be at the mercy of others, subject to their whims and desires." he told his subordinates solemnly.

"But if we manage to emerge victorious, we'll be able to suppress the four houses and link Winston, Southern, and The Northlands into one solid wall. We will be the hegemons of the whole northeast. By relying on the trade route with the four duchies, we can build our strength up gradually. Everyone that contributes to this war will be

greatly rewarded, and I won't hesitate to give out titles and land to distinguished household knights and make them part of the peerage.

"The more grassland barbarians that participate in the war, the better it is for us. We can use the promise of great reward and strict military discipline to control them to some extent. Those who don't obey shall be sentenced to death as traitors and their tribes will suffer collective punishment. Those who follow orders will be our scapegoats. We can use them to grind away at the enemy's forces while diminishing the barbarian's numbers as well, removing the threat they pose for good. We must use the casualties we will sustain to neuter the possibility of a revolt from the barbarians."

When the meeting adjourned, Duke Fisablen had a simple meal. He went to bed immediately afterwards and slept for ten hours straight. The days of running had tired him greatly. When he woke up, he took another bath, had some food, changed into some nice clothes, and had his attendants leave him alone while he enjoyed a bottle of fruit wine as he wallowed in his own tears. All this time, he had been torn by the fact that he had been chased away so haggardly. It was the most humiliating moment of his life.

He had never had to run for his life as desperately before. Not only did he lose Windbury and Twilight Lake Town, he also lost First Frontier. It messed his plans up entirely, and deprived him of the wealth and manpower of roughly 300 thousand people. He had been robbed, beaten, and stripped naked. The robber had even wanted to take him hostage and threaten his house. Fortunately, he managed to escape.

Thinking back on when he confiscated the wealth of the Southern nobles he slaughtered at Windbury and the Winston nobles that rebelled, the duke felt the onset of a headache. It was a huge sum, more than three million gold Fordes. He had intended to use it to construct a strong garrison legion with which to man the three citadels to secure Winston as the battlefield for the upcoming conflict. But it had all become the four houses' spoils.

When he took Lorist's two strikes at the Rose Palace, he could tell the young man wasn't a beat weaker than he in terms of swordsmanship. While he could probably rely on his vast battle experience to hold him back for about 300 strikes -- and even win with some luck -- he was well aware that the result of the duel would be meaningless if what Lorist had said about the extermination of First Frontier and Windbury falling were true. Based on that information, he believed escaping the capital as soon as possible was the only choice.

And yet the duke didn't think Lorist would go out of his way to hold him back. He even sunk to the depths of street thugs and cursing like them as he gave chase. It was due to the pursuit that the duke truly understood that if he had lost to Lorist in the duel, House Fisablen would no longer have a strong foundation to rely on. It would scatter into chaos and the alliance would easily harvest the fruits of victory.

He had come to this conclusion during his escape. He couldn't afford to fall into Lorist's hands no matter what. He could lead the house to regain what he had to give up to escape, but only if he escaped. He would make Lorist pay for this humiliation with blood and flame.

Naturally, Duke Fisablen still had lingering fears of Lorist's swordsmanship. He recalled he had wanted to use the confusion the 600 household soldiers created when the attacked Lorist in Twilight Lake Town to launch a sneak attack or two. But when he saw Lorist dive in like it was just a training exercise, he lost all hope of confronting him. Even he would run away if he had to face a regiment like that. Perhaps he would have to rely on hit and run tactics to slowly kill them off. The most important part was that he absolutely couldn't be surrounded and entangled by so many soldiers at once. That was why most blademasters weren't willing to face off against whole formations of soldiers.

Yet, he had witnessed Lorist charging at the swarm of soldiers. Like an agile fish swimming freely in the river, like the gales blowing freely through the dense forests, he wasn't threatened in the slightest by the spears and swords of the many soldiers. He was like the ghostly apparition of a reaper of life reaping his harvests, claiming the life of one soldier after another, longsword in hand.

Duke Fisablen was immensely shocked at how everything had gone down. It was the power of a domain. He had called his guards and left without a word. It was no wonder he dared to barge into the Rose Palace and face off against a rank 3 blademaster alone. Lorist had absolute confidence in his abilities and swordsmanship. He dared to do so because he was certain he could deal with the situation. Duke Fisablen was relieved he didn't fall into his trap and escaped instead.

However, he was still confused. How did Lorist manage to wield a domain even though he wasn't a swordsaint? Normally, only people in the saint realm could use domains. Lorist didn't gave off the impression of having broken through as a swordsaint.

Duke Fisablen had met a swordsaint personally before. When he was still a rank 1

blademaster just appointed to be the commander of the empire's Frontier Legion, he had an audience with Krissen VII. Back then, the empire still had a resident swordsaint. The feeling he got when he faced the swordsaint was the domineering oppressiveness of a mountain. All of a sudden, the peak of the mountain turned into a vast and endless ocean. The only feeling left within the duke's mind was one of indiscernible nature. It was precisely because of what he experienced then that he trained even harder and managed to reach rank 3 as a blademaster 20 hard years later.

Lorist didn't give off that kind of aura.

Perhaps the kid happened to figure out how domains worked by sheer luck. Oh, back then, Xanthi said he was training in the arts of the ancient eastern martial monks. Either way, he's already a quasi-swordsaint. He just needs a little bit more time to fully break through.

It would be great if Xanthi were here. Perhaps we could work together to resist him, perhaps even teach him a lesson.

When the duke recalled that Lorist said Xanthi had been taken captive by the second highness, his anger only got more severe.

I should send someone to find out more about this! Perhaps that kid was just messing with me! I hope he was!

When he finished his bottle of wine, the duke finished venting his feelings.

Kid… Lorist… Perhaps you dwarf me when it comes to swordsmanship and training… But let's see who triumphs in the war. I swear on House Fisablen that I will pay back all the humiliation I've suffered at your hands ten times over. I'll start by wiping out every last man under your and the other nobles' command!

Chapter 371
Arrival

Five days later, House Fisablen's light cavalry scouts bumped into the alliance's vanguard. The 100-man squad belonging to Third Frontier were attacked by a light cavalry unit that had the same numbers. Third Frontier retreated immediately, leaving 37 corpses behind. During the short skirmish, no more than 10 minutes, the Northlanders scored 37 kills for 13 casualties. This was recorded as the first of many battles in Southern by later historians.

The information Duke Fisablen managed to gather from the survivors revealed the attack wasn't carried out on a whim. Instead, it was a planned and prepared step to conquering Iblia. The Fisablen guards that escaped Windbury said they discovered three legions bearing the Norton banner and a knight brigade. There was another legion with the Pegasus banner.

The Nortons had mobilized Firmrock, Tigersoar, a local defense legion and Ragebear. The Felims sent Pegasus along. The move caused the duke much stress and worry. House Norton had already sent its entire main force to Winston. Were they trying to fight House Fisablen's forces to death? Or, had Lorist received orders to conquer the four central duchies right after conquering Iblia?

If it were the latter, the duke didn't mind keeping low and letting the duchies duke it out with the alliance. In fact, he would be secretly glad. The grudge the second highness held was common knowledge, and it wouldn't be surprising for him to order the four houses, who were loyal to him, to attack the four central duchies, after all. House Fisablen could most definitely wait until both sides were worn thin before it deployed its forces and claimed the spoils of defeating Lorist and the alliance.

However, his hopes was shattered completely two days later when a few riders delivered two pieces of bad news. First, the citadel at Pedro, the only place to cross from Winston to Wild Husbandry and vice versa at the Pisper Mountains, had been breached by Tigersoar. Only two thousand of the ten thousand-man division of Fourth Frontier managed to escape alive. The second piece of bad news was: Wild Husbandry had been attacked by the Nortons' light cavalry. Their casualties were horrible and up

to twenty thousand citizens had been forcefully relocated to The Northlands. Fourth Frontier's commander, Gold-ranked Knight Bakri, was ambushed when he was leading his division in pursuit and perished on the battlefield from three arrows.

So far, only 28 thousand men remained in Fourth Frontier. After the vice-commander, Knight Benlyse, reported everything to Duke Fisablen, he requested reinforcements. As they had to defend the commoners' settlements, Fourth Frontier was at a disadvantage when they faced House Norton's Jaeger. Conflict broke out in Wild Husbandry and Jaeger was roaming freely in the province and moving droves of citizens, livestock, and horses to The Northlands. House Fisablen's losses were huge.

The duke smashed the golden cup in his hand on the ground in fury.

There's no need to wonder anymore. Lorist's campaign is definitely directed at House Fisablen! It was nonsense to think the four houses were loyal to the second highness. It's obvious they will only deal with the duchies after House Fisablen is no longer a threat to them! This is a war for the house's survival!

He knew, however, he couldn't afford to be distracted. During the past two days, House Felim's Pegasus had arrived in Southern. As a light cavalry legion, they were engaged in all out war with Third Frontier. There were more than ten skirmishes on a daily basis. It appeared, from the reports, Pegasus' light cavalry scouts had an obvious advantage. The northern part of Southern was slowly being taken by Pegasus and Third Frontier was unable to breach their defense lines.

The duke was being held back in Southern. He was most concerned about the Ragebear Knights. They had mysteriously stopped all advance the moment they arrived at Sehak near the border between Southern and Winston.

What's going on? Shouldn't they be forcing Third Frontier back to their camp by launching a coordinated attack?

Fifth Frontier would arrive in another two days, so Duke Fisablen would have a total of two legions under his command, approximately 70 thousand men. However, the duke really doubted the capability of Fifth Frontier. From the reports sent over by Third Frontier soldiers, Pegasus wasn't much stronger than Third Frontier. In fact, they paled in comparison when it came to courage and hardiness. However, they had an edge in terms of equipment. If a soldier of Third Frontier got cut with a sword, his guts would spill out, followed shortly after by death. However, the soldiers of Pegasus

would suffer just some damage to their armor. While they might end up gravely injured, it wouldn't be fatal. It reminded the duke of what Lorist had said about how one copper coin could only buy goods worth one copper. The equipment House Fisablen bought from the Nortons were the cheapest ones.

If the Ragebear Knights attacked Third Frontier's camp, he was confident his defensive arrangements would be able to fend them off and inflict huge casualties. Even though Ragebear Knights were heavy-armored cavalry that far exceeded Third Frontier in terms of both attack and defense, attacking a fortified camp was another story. He had his own method of dealing with those walking tin cans.

He wasn't surprised that Ragebear Knights were the Norton unit to arrive at Southern. He had paid great attention to their troops since for some time now. Firmrock was comprised mainly of heavy-armored infantry and it would take more time to arrive. Tigersoar was a spear cavalry unit somewhere between light and heavy cavalry and would remain at Pedro for the time being. The local defense legion was a defensive unit only sent to Winston to take over the defense of strategic locations. It made it possible for Ragebear Knights, a heavy cavalry unit, to be the first to arrive at Southern.

What in the world is Lorist up to? Don't tell me he intends to gather all his house's forces for an all out battle in Southern? What reason would Ragebear Knights have for staying put at a stronghold like Sehak otherwise? Defending? That can't be right. Knight brigades aren't used for defense. Weren't they giving us time to mobilize our forces by leaving their knights just sitting there? The correct way to do this should have been attacking without hesitation to drive Third Frontier out of Southern so we wouldn't be able to join up with the duchies' reinforcements…

Duke Fisablen couldn't leave Southern at the moment. He came to the sudden realization that he had to defend the route to the duchies by himself. Not only that, the invading forces were able to move about unhindered and didn't even take the forces stationed around Southern's crucial transportation points seriously. Not only did House Norton station Ragebear Knights at Sehak, House Felim also occupied the northwestern part of Southern and set up a tight defense. They even began eliminating bandits in the area.

What's going on? thought Duke Fisablen as he scratched his head, confused.

He only realised Count Felim was reclaiming his house's old dominion after staring at

the map for a long time. It had already become a wasteland over the years, however, hence the duke's confusion at first. It was no wonder Pegasus set up a tight perimeter around the old dominion's borders.

Duke Fisablen snorted.

Southern's going to be embroiled in war soon enough. What's the point of occupying your old dominion? To develop it? You might as well throw gold coins straight into the water!

There wasn't anything left in the old dominion. No castle, farmland, manors, commoners, no nothing. Only bandits all round. Developing the area was a huge endeavor that would consume gold, manpower, and time. The efforts would be wasted during a time of war and chaos.

House Felim's dominion occupied up to a quarter of Southern. Even though it was in the northwestern and Pegasus had the advantage in a confrontation with Third Frontier, it was House Fisablen who held the initiative. There was no way the northwestern part of Southern could escape involvement in the upcoming battles. Other than that, no matter how huge Pegasus was, it was only a light cavalry legion. All House Fisablen had to do was send out two of their own frontier legions to wipe it out.

I'll spare House Felim's legion for now and let them do their thing, thought Duke Fisablen.

He had to deal with the Nortons first. Ragebear Knights' halt at Sehak possibly revealed Firmrock's low mobility. It would take a few more days for them to arrive.

It seems Lorist is intent on having a field battle… Does he think I'm an idiot?

Duke Fisablen would never engage in a field battle with the Nortons if he had the choice. Trying to ram against heavy cavalry and infantry with light cavalry was a move an imbecile would make. The duke's original plan was to fortify the campsite's defensives and drag the battle out as long as he could to sap the enemy's morale before ambushing their supply lines and harassing their advance to force them to retreat from Southern. It would leave a void for the frontier legions to fill and take Winston. The conflict would be ended there.

After much consideration, he decided he would ignore the situation in Wild

Husbandry for now. He penned a letter for the vice-commander of Fourth Frontier, Benlyse, to appoint him as commander, inform him about the situation, and that the house couldn't offer any reinforcements at the moment. If they couldn't hold on any longer, they were to evacuate all the commoners to Soxius's east shore. They could effectively hold their ground along the river while waiting for the situation to turn for the better when House Fisablen regains their advantage.

Soxius originated from the mountain Pisper and flowed across Wild Husbandry into the great plains. It was Wild Husbandry's main source of water for both domestic use and husbandry. Soxius' shores were Wild Husbandry's most fertile land but they weren't near the province's center. They were closer to Eastwild. The implication of the duke's order was the loss of two-thirds of Wild Husbandry. But it was enough for the battered Fourth Frontier to hold the river's eastern shore. To the duke, Southern's situation was far more important.

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On the 32nd day of the 5th month, Firmrock Legion finally arrived at Southern.

Lorist was rather troubled by how long it took. *It's all that cruddy road's fault, being muddy and moist.* The journey that should've taken only twelve days got extended to 26. As a result, Firmrock Legion also served as road repairers during their travels. If they didn't do so, even if they arrived timely in Southern, their supply line would be unable to effectively support them given the condition of the road.

Lorist finally understood why the second prince and the nobles of Southern didn't think about going back to the province and instead moved to Windbury even if it meant being in conflict with the nobles of Winston. Apart from the fact that Southern was a wasteland, the roads were already badly ruined. While a small merchant convoy or two could barely travel there, it was impossible for a large convoy to do the same. In other words, that main highway was even harder to travel on than a pedestrian's path.

However, the delayed arrival of Firmrock also brought with it some benefits. Firstly, Loze managed to conquer Pedro with Tigersoar. The remains of the Winston soldiers were also wiped out at the same time. Winston was already under complete control of the house. Next, Josk, leading Jaeger Legion, managed to greatly damage Fourth Frontier Legion. He even managed to kill Two-star Gold-ranked Knight Bakri with a surprise attack of three arrows, allowing Jaeger Legion to control the pace of battle

against Fourth Frontier Legion, managing to beat them back haggardly.

With Winston and Windbury under the house's control, the supply lines could be arranged without problem. Baron Camorra had already initiated the transport of resources from Gildusk to Windbury. Military supplies such as rations and wealth obtained at Windbury also greatly pleased Lorist. He didn't think that the wealth Duke Fisablen confiscated from the nobles he exterminated would fall into the hands of the house. It truly was a gift that popped out of nowhere.

As for the four brigades of fifth local defense division Baron Freiyar commanded, they were headed for Dawok, Pedro, Windbury and Twilight Lake Town respectively to begin work on the construction of defensive citadels. The remaining 25 local defense brigades were headed for Southern. As Ragebear Knights was going to make Sehak their main camp, they would save lots of construction work for the 25 local defense brigades.

However, the original plan to launch a lightning-fast attack had been ruined by the accursed road. Lorist had actually planned to chase Duke Fisablen out of Southern before setting up a few defense perimeters at key locales and digging lots of moats to completely incapacitate cavalry troops. Given the situation at Southern, it seemed that Duke Fisablen would be fighting a defensive battle. While Lorist was still on the way, he received reports from the cavalry scouts on Duke Fisablen's deployment layout implied that the duke intended to wear down the Norton forces gradually. After all, defending was far easier than attacking.

It's a shame you miscalculated, old guy, Lorist thought with a gleeful smile as he watched the catapults being transported along the repaired road, *You'll quickly be able to witness for yourselves the might of these weapons our house developed. Times have changed, and an old relic of a wargod like you should retire already.*

Chapter 372
Tower Defense Tactic

"Watch out! The grassland barbarians are here! String the steel ballistae! Prepare to fire!"

Tall stone towers straddled a very normal-looking hill's brow. Each was surrounded by a ditch roughly a hundred meters from the tower. The spiral ditches were also laden with barricades. Any attacker would have to circle around them while being fired at from the towers to pass through and arrive at the tower's doors. The towers themselves weren't that big, they could fit at most a hundred people [1]. Towers like that were rather rare in the eastern parts of Southern. They were arranged in a net-like formation that spanned almost half of Southern and reached all the way to the border of the eastern half of the province.

About a thousand leather-armor-wearing, messy-haired grassland barbarians with varying face paint stopped at a point far away from the towers. The carriages that followed soon arrived and large shields were brought out. As they waved their crude weapons around, the barbarians bolstered their courage with their war cries and advanced, shields in front.

One of the towers near the frontmost part had already been set alight. A wisp of green smoke floated into the sky; it was the signal that indicated the tower had been breached. As a few other towers nearby lit up as well, it was a sign that the whole front part of the battlefield was under enemy attack.

A Firmrock soldier biting one stalk of dried grass in his mouth looked at the slowly-advancing barbarians. Even though the enemy outnumbered them ten-fold, he didn't seem concerned. Spitting out the grass, he turned back.

"Leader, there's really something wrong with these grassland barbarians' heads. Have they already forgotten about how terribly they were massacred during the last few attacks? Did they think those eight wooden shields would be able to deflect the steel ballistae bolts? They're really stupid… I wonder how many of them will die this time before they retreat…"

A soldier next to him, aiming the steel ballistae smiled.

"Wanna bet? I bet a gold coin they'll drop the shields and run after only around a hundred die."

A heavily bearded soldier came over. He was the person in charge of manning the tower, a company leader with 100 men in his command. Mostly, forces with around a hundred men were squads. They had one leader in command of the whole group. Beneath him were the lowest command rank, ten officers each in command of ten men. The Nortons' forcers, however, had ten men in each squad, with the squad leader being in charge of ten men as well. Companies had a hundred men. Five companies made a regiment, and five combat regiments and a supply regiment made a brigade of three thousand men. Five brigades formed a division, and four divisions a legion with 60 thousand men in total.

The bearded man slapped the back of the soldier who'd asked to bet's head.

"Like I'll let you bet more than a month's salary away. You're not a child anymore. You should be saving up for your family and thinking about retiring from the corps if you have so much time on your hands. Be more alert. Our armor might be pretty good, but the barbarians aren't vegetarians. Klido was struck in the arm by an arrow and it had to be amputated. You guys better be unharmed by the end of this, you hear?"

When the thousand or so barbarians messily used the weapons in their hands to attempt to fill the ditches, one of the towers, stationed with a company of troops, armed 20 ballistae all at once. The towers were roughly twelve meters in the air and split into four separate floors. Each of the floors from the second floor upwards to the roof had five ballistae installed. Apart from the uncovered roof, the floors below were shielded well and the ballistae fired through aiming holes. In other words, the towers were actually designed by Lorist using the 'pillbox' structures used by the Japanese in the historical films he watched.

The ballista operators within the towers were incredibly cunning. They didn't fire at the large shields, instead, they targeted the barbarians filling up the ditch. When one of the barbarians died, the others would scramble behind the shields in fear without making any other attempt to fill the ditch. Though there were a few archers that fired towards the towers, given that they were roughly a hundred meters apart, they weren't able to get an accurate aim at all. Given the crude bows of the barbarians that couldn't fire with much force, the parabolic shots scattered without reason or order

at random locations.

It was nothing but a joke. That didn't resemble a proper battle at all. Instead, the attackers were akin to targets the defenders used to practice with. Even after more than 60 barbarians died near the ditch, not half of it was filled yet. In the end, all the barbarians hid behind the shields and didn't dare to look out. The attackers were completely stuck.

Should the barbarians press their attack without regard for their casualties, they could reach a tower's entrance for every two to three hundred men lost. If they were lucky, they might even get to break the doors down to attack the soldiers inside the tower. That was assuming the towers didn't have other tricks to react to such situations. However, the problem was that no barbarian was willing to become one of the two hundred. They had come to raid, not die and let their comrades profit in their stead.

The bearded man looked at the eight still-standing wooden shields and mumbled to himself as he stroked his beard.

"It really is quite the task for them to push shields that large up the hill. But what can they do merely hiding behind them?

"Leader, should we use flaming arrows?"

The bearded soldier shook his head.

"It's pointless. Those large timber shields would take far too long to burn down. It's too bad we weren't allocated any catapults. Otherwise, one fireball would be enough to take care of the shields."

"Leader, should we focus fire on those shields and see if we can damage them?" asked the gambling addict.

"Alright. Let's try," agreed the bearded man.

They targeted the middlemost shield and with an order from the bearded officer, 20 bolts shot out like lightning towards the shield. However, it merely shuddered for a bit without moving much. The bearded soldier said with disappointment.

"It's useless… It managed to hold up…”

Barely before he finished his sentence, the soldiers' cheer could be heard from beside him. "Leader, look! The shield's falling!"

The shield that was struck with 20 ballista bolts fell to the ground and smashed to pieces, revealing near a hundred of barbarians standing behind it as well as those who were crushed by the shield itself.

Seeing a chance, the bearded man yelled, "Restring and shoot the little rabbits!"

It did indeed look like a rabbit hunt. The barbarians that lost their shield hopped about chaotically. Apart from half of them that managed to hide behind the other shields, the rest were targeted by the steel ballistae. After three volleys of ballista fire, more than 45 barbarian soldiers fell. There were a good number of barbarians that tried to run out of the ballistae's firing range only to fail and be impaled from the back by the bolts.

By the time the second wooden shield was successfully taken down, the barbarians hiding behind the other shields could no longer take it and turned tail to run, their weapons discarded. There were even some who rolled down the hill. They knew that the wooden shields couldn't protect them. Sooner or later, the shields that remained would be shot down as well and it was far better for them to run than be sitting ducks.

A bunch of horses could be seen roughly four hundred meters away from the towers, out of their firing range. From their previous attacks, the barbarians had learned that it was ill-advised to ride their mounts up the hill. Despite the non-stop firing from the ballistae in the tower, at least half of the barbarians managed to leave the firing range. By the time they were only about 60 meters from their mounts, a large group of light cavalry showed up and scattered them like eagles scattering chickens. Alas, two legs were slower than four. Soon, one after another fell from the riders' blades and dyed the foot of the hill red.

……

"Now you see it, right? Duke Shabaj, this is the step-by-step strategy employed by the four houses. They set up the towers like a wide-encompassing net. Some towers are just 300 meters apart. They are closer to one another than the range of the ballistae. I've ordered a thousand-men cavalry regiment to pass between the two towers. We didn't think there would be more towers behind them. Only 400 returned."

Duke Fisablen was currently speaking to an old man clad in elegant armor. Not long

ago, their group just stopped at a hill not far from the battlefield to witness the sight of the barbarians' failure to breach the tower formation.

"Towers like these only have a hundred men inside at most. The only question is where the four houses managed to obtain so many sentry ballistae. Based on my observations, these ballistae should be modified variants. Their firing rate is fast and they also have great range and accuracy. Even though I had more than ten thousand barbarians attack ten towers, the results are obvious. These barbarians aren't for sieges. While they excel in field battles, they have no way of defeating these towers.

"If we want to eliminate them, we will have to use disciplined infantry. House Fisablen's forces are mostly light cavalry so we have no way of dealing with them. In fact, our mobility is greatly limited. Lord Duke, I hope you can hurry the other duchies to send their troops as soon as possible. Since we're in the same boat, we'll have to drive the four houses away and stop them from conquering Southern. Otherwise, no of us will have peace in the days to come," said Duke Fisablen frankly.

It was the 12th day of the 7th month on Grindia and it had already been almost 50 days since Firmrock arrived in Southern and faced off with Duke Fisablen.

The moment Firmrock arrived, they began to set up camp near the duke's defenses. He didn't mind and decided he would first set up his defenses well before launching his attack. That was but common sense. He just ordered his two legions to prepare for a defensive battle.

What the duke didn't expect was that Firmrock would take so much time setting up camp. After three days, he finally felt something was off. When he took a look at the camp with his own eyes, he realized they weren't actually setting up camp at all. Instead, they were working on defensive fortifications as well, fortifications far more defended than the duke's.

Not knowing what was going on, the duke thought,*what the heck is going on?! Who's supposed to be the defender?!*

Even after Firmrock finally finished setting up their defenses, they didn't launch an attack. Instead, they began construction on the tower outposts. Under the protection of Ragebear Knights, they managed to finish the towers' construction in ten short days. The construction materials shipped non-stop were used to fortify the towers. Most of it was green glue.

When Duke Fisablen realized the towers would become a huge obstacle for light cavalry, he immediately ordered for the reserve legion that had just arrived to attack. But he, regretfully, came to realize that even the ferocious reserve legion wasn't able to do much against those tower outposts. Instead, they returned with huge casualties. The moment he ordered them to retreat, Ragebear Knights launched their attack from hiding and caught them horribly off guard. In the end, they were only able to retreat after losing half their numbers.

Duke Fisablen currently faced a huge dilemma. He realized the light cavalry he had used to storm the grasslands had lost all their potency in Southern. The net of towers constructed by the four houses had greatly limited what light cavalry could do. Even though he would still be able to take the towers down by sustaining huge casualties, he knew well that sacrificing hundreds of household soldiers for capturing one tower was not a worthwhile exchange. Each tower only took about ten days to build, but training light cavalry soldiers as qualified as those he'd lose took years.

Seeing the number of tower outposts grow before his eyes to cover even more land, he considered whether he should give up on the crucial transportation point and find another important location where he could set up towers just like the houses had. But before he settled on that decision, he received a piece of good news: Duke Shabaj had personally led 20 thousand troops to reinforce Southern and was already on his way to meet him.

Duke Fisablen was elated to hear that and turned his sights on the reinforcements of the four duchies. As almost all of the reinforcements were infantry, they were just the right fit for taking down the towers. Afterwards, his light cavalry could mow down what remained of the forces. The duke had unconsciously changed his goals from taking Southern back to fighting to the death.

To sound more convincing, the duke intentionally had ten thousand volunteer barbarians with disciplinary problems attack the towers. The would be forgiven if they participated in the attack. The duke was also generous enough to offer them a huge reward should they emerge victorious and even prepared large shields for them to weather the endless ballista fire. Even though he didn't hold much hope for their success, the barbarians' performance caused the color to drain from his face. Even so, the demonstration only reinforced his words about how inadequate it was for light cavalry to attack the towers.

Duke Shabaj was a blademaster with lots of experience. However, he was merely a

rank 1 blademaster that broke through relying on precious and rare medicines. Seeing the barbarians' attack, he laughed.

"Lord Duke, the four central duchies are paying lots of attention to what is happening here in Southern. This matter is of utmost importance to our peace and we have decided to not let this province fall into the hands of the Andinaq kingdom's alliance of four. Apart from the 20 thousand troops I brought with me, the other dukes will arrive soon with their own 20 thousand. Not only that, we also brought you a lot of resources you can use.

"Since we're allies, we will definitely uphold our due responsibilities. We definitely won't sit by and watch the forces of the Andinaq kingdom invade the territory of your house. As for how we should take down the towers, we'll have a discussion when the others arrive. We'll stand by your house no matter what and drive Andindaq's claws back."

Chapter 373
Onset of a Great Battle

Lorist kept sighing in his tent. The situation in Southern seemed to be building up to a huge conflict unlike what anyone had expected. He regretted that he didn't attack Duke Fisablen to stop him from constructing his own fortifications the moment Firmrock arrived at the frontlines. That way, even if he had sustained huge casualties, he could have driven House Fisablen's Frontier Legion out of Southern instead of merely standing off against them like he was now. As the enemy reinforcements increased, he could only take a defensive stance.

The tower outposts tactic was something he'd deployed by drawing inspiration from the tower defense games he played in his past life. Originally, he merely wanted them to encompass the area he controlled to stop enemy messengers from passing through to limit their communication. However, he had not foreseen how effective they would be against cavalry. So, he continued to build more and more and covered the area he controlled with a network of towers. Ragebear Knights and the three Tigersoar divisions he moved over were like the spiders perched on a net, they would devour anyone caught instantly.

The towers' construction was relatively simple. First, the foundations had to be secured, then the ground filled with rocks. Green glue would be poured into the seams to secure them in place. Thereafter, evenly cut rocks would be stacked on top of the foundation until a tower was built. As the northwestern area of Southern was rather hilly, rocks were easy to come by. Given that the silver-ranked knights of Firmrock were already used to using their blade glows to cut rock, one day of hard work by ten silver-ranked knights was enough to gather the rocks required to build the towers. It would also train their battleforce, so it killed two birds with one stone.

All that was left was to fill in the seams with green clay again and a tower that could defend an area with a radius of 100 meters around it was ready. Given that it only took ten days to build one, towers were erected day after day and the area Lorist controlled expanded. A third of Southern was already under the four houses' control.

However, as the number of towers increased, Lorist realized that something was

wrong. What he was doing was unlike the tower defense games he played. Each tower he built had to be manned. So far, there were a total of 170 towers, but a little more than one division's worth of men from Firmrock had been sent to man them. That was more than 17 thousand people.

A month ago when he arrived with Firmrock, they were faced with House Fisablen's two legions of 70 thousand men and a further 30 thousand grassland barbarian soldiers as well as a greatly fortified camp. If they were fighting a field battle, he didn't fear the duke's 100 thousand troops. However, leading 60 thousand soldiers of Firmrock and 10 thousand from Ragebear Knights to attack a heavily fortified camp was a rather foolish idea. So, he ordered three divisions from Tigersoar sent over to bolster his forces. By the time the three Tigersoar divisions arrived, House Fisablen's reserve legion had also arrived. The number of the duke's troops was still about 30 thousand above Lorist's.

House Felim's Pegasus was still exterminating bandits in the province's northwestern area. Since he couldn't afford to have his rear so chaotic on the frontlines, Lorist decided to wait for Pegasus to clear the area up first before ordering them to reinforce him. However, he didn't think so many grassland barbarians would answer Duke Fisablen's call. Their numbers neared 70 thousand. Lorist began to build his towers in response. It was not until he had built too many that he had split up Firmrock. Duke Fisablen, on the other hand, gained even more reinforcements: the 20 thousand Shabaj infantry.

All Lorist could do was look on as the enemy's numbers slowly grew to double his own. Frustrated and annoyed, he had no choice but to continue his tower tactic. If he didn't have enough soldiers, he would have to send an envoy to Count Kenmays and Count Shazin and request each send a division or two so they could man the towers instead of Firmrock's soldiers. That way, Firmrock's forces could remain consolidated and ready for an enemy attack.

How'd it turn out this way? I should have been the attacker, but now I'm playing a defensive game. I wanted to wipe out the duke's forces and the four duchies separately at first, but it seems they have now joined up against me. The war has evolved to the point all the plans I've drafted have to be put aside. I really don't know how this situation can develop in the future, thought Lorist.

All he could do now was respond to the situation on the fly. The tent's entrance opened and Potterfang walked in.

"Your Grace, Count Felim sent a messenger. According to him, Knight Bonawar is heavily injured."

"What?" Lorist said with surprise, "Knight Bonawar was injured? How? He's the commander of a legion! How could he have been in harm's way? Was it an assassination attempt or an ambush?"

Potterfang shook his head.

"I'm not sure myself. The messenger said he had heard it from someone else. Let's read the letter first."

Potterfang handed the letter over and Lorist gave it a quick look.

"Oh, it's about the issue with the mines. I see I'll have to make a trip there to solve the issue."

"Mine? What mine?" asked Potterfang.

"Just read the letter," Lorist said while he pointed to the letter on the table, "Andelik Hills is located near the border of Southern and Winston and there are two iron mines there, one larger than the other. Both are located within the old dominion of House Felim. When the second prince signed a treaty with the Union's Wessia Merchant Guild, he sold them a thirty-year mining permit. With the second prince now dead and Iblia gone, our alliance can naturally not be expected to honor that contract. Count Felim sent people to reclaim the mines, but it ended with Knight Bonawar being injured heavily by a blademaster guarding it. The blademaster even boasted that if we wanted the mines back, we would have to face his sword first. Wessia definitely won't hand the mines back so easily."

"Can't Count Felim just deploy Pegasus to retake the mines?" asked Potterfang without bothering to read the letter.

"He did, but the mines are on high ground and it's hard to attack. There's no way to encircle the mines and sending only a few up there is pointless. I have to make a trip to help the count out. His house's foundations rely on those two mines."

Lorist had no choice but to go as the four houses faced their enemies together. As House Felim didn't have their own blademaster, their gold-ranked knight was injured by an enemy blademaster. As the boss, Lorist ought to fight for his ally's sake. In the

end, the trip took only around 6 days. It ended with the blademaster dead. It Lorist just three exchanges. The guild's supervisors and engineers were taken prisoner. The fellows who initially condemned Lorist that their guild would definitely not let him off turned rather timid after a few were hung. They answered when they were questioned and Lorist and Felim soon learned the truth of the matter.

They didn't think Wessia had invested so much money in the mines. Not only did they get new mining equipment, they also set up a refinery and smithy nearby. Within the smithy's storehouse were tens of thousands of sets of plate armor. According to the supervisor, the armor was ordered by Duke Fisablen. There were fifty thousand sets of armor in total and they were due for delivery to Windbury for the new garrison legion. Given that the city had already fallen and that the garrison legion was no more, the armor was left in the storehouses.

Apart from the armor, Felim's greatest gain was the hundreds of technicians and smiths. The refinery and smithy could continue to operate with them there and it would greatly speed up the growth of his old dominion. Thirteen thousand laborers were also liberated.

Originally, he had wanted the laborers to continue mining, but Lorist stopped him.

"Are you stupid? If you spare them from mining, they will instantly be completely loyal to you! Weren't you complaining about having nobody to recruit into your army? These miners are the perfect target! If you start recruiting them, you'll be able to form a smaller garrison legion. Not only that, you don't really lack weapons now, do you? With the refinery and smithy, you can already start making the gear you need, right?"

"But who will dig out the ores?"

While Felim was moved by Lorist's suggestion, he was still troubled that he had nobody suitable to mine.

"Mining? It's hardly skilled labor, right? Just use the bandits you caught. We also captured lots of grassland barbarians from the frontlines. They are fit and strong and a good fit for the task. Maybe you can set a mining quota. They will only be fed if they meet the quota. If they don't, it's their own fault," said Lorist mercilessly.

"But, we don't have enough prisoners. There are less than two thousand altogether."

"Worry not. The number will grow as the days pass. Didn't you see our enemy's camp?

There're more than 100 thousand troops and about 70 thousand barbarians. We'll have lots of captives after this conflict," replied Lorist confidently.

But, a few days after Lorist returned to the frontlines, he was devastated to hear the report from the light cavalry scouts. The four duchies' reinforcements had arrived, roughly 60 thousand men in total. They also brought along carriages filled with resources.

Ten thousand men would already fill one's vision, not to say much about 60 thousand that brought carriage after carriage with them. They lined up like a long dragon leading to House Fisablen's camp. It took more than three days for the convoy to settle down. In the meantime, Ragebear Knights and the three Tigersoar legions had been waiting for an opportunity to attack but failed. The duke was rather cunning. He formed a tight defensive line with his frontier legion and the other barbarian troops to protect the reinforcements.

Looking at the distant cheering barbarian cavalry, Lorist turned down Terman's request for the Ragebear Knights to be allowed to attack.

"It's pointless. You'll only be falling into the duke's trap. If you attack they can grind you down with tens of thousands of barbarian soldiers. Even if your armor is strong, the warhorses can't fight that long. The moment your warhorses tire, heavy-armored units like you would be like fish on dry land. There are many ways to deal with you if that happens. Return to your post. Since the old guy's troops grow more and more numerous, it won't take long for him to go on the offensive. We have to be even more prepared."

House Fisablen currently had Third Frontier, which numbered 32 thousand men, Fifth Frontier with 45 thousand men, 18 thousand men from the reserve legion and 70 thousand barbarian soldiers. There was also the 80 thousand elite infantry from the four central duchies. The number of enemies Lorist had to face grew to a staggering 240 thousand plus. Facing them were the 60 thousand of Firmrock, 45 thousand of the three Tigersoar divisions. and the 15 thousand men of Ragebear Knights. For the last one, only three thousand knights and six thousand squires were combatants. The remaining six thousand were merely horse tamers and servants in charge of supporting the knights without any actual fighting capability.

However, Count Felim had also brought his two divisions of 20 thousand men to the frontlines, while Count Shazin was on the way with two divisions of 24 thousand men

and would only arrive ten days later. Duke Kenmays, on the other hand, sent 15 thousand men, but it wasn't sure when they would arrive at the end of the month since they departed from rather far away. The alliance of four houses had 140 thousand men standing against the combined forces of House FIsablen and the four central duchies. There was a difference of 100 thousand men.

So, Lorist decided to go all the way with the tower tactic. At the broader areas up front, he constructed multiple tower clusters. Firmrock's soldiers also toiled through the night to connect the surrounding moats to make an uncrossable barrier.

Ten days passed. When the horn sounded on the other side, countless grassland barbarian troops rushed out of their camp. The first siege battle in Southern thus began.

However, that battle only lasted one day. The four central duchies mobilized 20 thousand of their elite infantry while Duke Fisablen deployed Third Frontier and 30 thousand grassland barbarians. As they were attacking the towers roughly 5 kilometers away from Lorist's camp, he deployed one Tigersoar division and three carroballistae brigades.

The attack on the towers was not a probe. Instead, they had discovered a weakness in Lorist's layout that allowed them to suffer fewer casualties. The duchies' 20 thousand elite infantrymen only suffered around three thousand casualties while the barbarians lost about ten thousand, mainly due to disobeying orders and being heavily punished by the Tigersoar division as a result.

Lorist looked solemnly at the enemies retreating in an orderly fashion from the mountain stronghold. While he had only lost little during that battle, three towers had been burned down and the 200 soldiers manning them lost. If the enemy was willing to pay the price of around 200 casualties, they would be able to reach the tower's base and set it on fire. While the outside of the towers was built with stone, the main structural support and floors within were constructed with wood and caught fire easily.

While the enemies retreated this time, there was no doubt that they would come back swiftly. They would definitely come up with even more methods to deal with the towers given their experience today.

The harsher battles ahead still lie ahead, thought Lorist.

Chapter 374
Open-Field Battle Preparation

Thunk! A thick wooden board fell to the ground and formed a three-meter-wide bridge over the ditch. A 100-man leader wearing leather armor and a black helmet on which a white feather was placed roared.

"Quick! Push the second ditch-filling cart[1] over!"

A dark form flashed past like a bolt of lightning. With an audible whoosh, the leader's body was knocked flying by a bolt coming from a tower roughly. He landed about four meters from where he had been standing. He desperately tried to feel the bolt that had pierced through him before he coughed out several mouthfuls of blood and collapsed dead, his eyes rolled.

The 100-man leader's death dropped the rest of the squad into chaos. However, another leader came over immediately. He wasn't as brave as the last one, who dared to stand right next to the ditch. Instead, he hid behind one of the carriages carrying a large wooden shield and barked orders for the ditch-filling carts to be pushed forward. The squad's men calmed down and continued their push. At the same time, the leader had his own squad, a hundred longbowmen, fire at the tower.

This was the second siege battle of Southern. It took place on the 4th day of the 7th month, Year 1778, more than a month from the first battle. During the past month, House Fisablen and the four central duchies' forces had cleared quite a number of forests in the area to construct large numbers of siege engines and the two-wheeled shield carriages. They only launched their attack against the four houses after properly preparing and getting a good rest.

From the fortified camp defended by Firmrock to the flatter expanses of land roughly five kilometers to its left were nothing but fire, smoke, clashing blades, blaring horns, cries of death, and thumping drums. Whether they be the attacking or defending soldiers, they shared one desire: victory against the enemy for the survival of themselves.

From a tall viewpoint, the elite infantrymen of the four central duchies seemed like

waves in a rising tide. They came wave after wave, and the towers seemed like bedrock at the shore, breaking the force of the waves without ever falling. All the attacked towers retaliated with non-stop ballista-bolt barrages. Droves of enemies died bloody deaths at a time.

However, across the month, the four central duchies' forces managed to prepare some large siege engines perfect for taking down towers. The moment the ditch-filling carts were pushed to the moats, the moats would be filled and rendered useless. As the two-wheeled shield carriages of the duchies blocked defenders' attacks, the soldiers hacked down on the towers' wooden doors. Fighting soon ensued at close quarters within the towers. Battering rams were also deployed on the battlefield and with only two or three knocks, holes would be made in the towers. Some of the soldiers within rushed out to fight their enemies to the death, only to end up falling one after another.

The ones who attacked Firmrock's fortified camp were none other than the grassland barbarians. Not only did more than 20 thousand of them dismount and turn into infantry, they also pushed similar ditch-filling carts. Originally, the two-wheeled shield carriages and the battering rams were going to be escorted by House Fisablen's Third Frontier before they could be used. However, the infantry from the four duchies were far more compatible of operating those engines. After three attacks and two or so hours of effort, not much was done apart from the three thousand plus corpses and five ditch-filling carts left at the three frontmost ditches.

Lorist observed the barbarian infantry march forward towards the defensive formations atop a small hill in the middle of the main camp. The troops retreated after leaving another one or two hundred corpses behind. However, his expression was grim; definitely not the joyous one he ought to have after driving his enemy back. That was because he just received a report that the 47 towers at the flatlands to the left had either fallen into the enemy's hands or burned down completely. The household soldiers defending those towers perished. Given that the ditches dug around the towers enveloped them almost completely, the defending troops had nowhere to run to and didn't have a choice but to sacrifice themselves and try to take as many enemies down with them as they could.

Ah, I really tied myself up like a caterpillar weaving a cocoon.

While the tower tactic was extremely effective against cavalry, it wasn't much use against infantry, which were far better at attacking, especially when the enemy had so much experience as well as their adeptness at constructing various siege engines.

They were also willing to pay the heavier price required to take the towers. That way, the enemy could make up with the disadvantage using numbers. The defending soldiers atop the tower outposts were practically sharks in a pond. All they could do was make up for their own losses by taking as many of the enemy with them as they could.

I still really lack experience… Tactics from an era with firearms are really unsuitable in a setting that only has cold weapons.

No matter how strong each individual steel ballistae was, there was no way they could pierce the carriage's shields. Their log shields weren't a threat when they were pushed by humans, but now they had the grounding and support of the two-wheeled carriages. Even if it were to shatter from concentrated fire, it wouldn't fall over to affect the soldiers hiding behind it. There was also the ditch-filling carriages. Once the enemy got close enough to the towers, the steel ballistae wouldn't be able to target and the defending soldiers had no choice but to fight their attackers in close quarters.

"Is Fiercetiger Loze managing?" asked Lorist.

"Your Grace, Sir Loze can hold on. But he was injured by a unit of enemy longbowmen when he led one of his spear cavalry divisions to reinforce the first line. He is injured pretty badly," answered the messenger.

"How did it happen? Didn't the carroballistae return fire?!" asked Lorist a little angrily.

"Your Grace, the carroballistae couldn't be deployed on the frontlines. They were stopped by the ditches behind the third line and couldn't fire that far. Sir Loze was also attacked by the enemy because they were bottlenecked by the ditches' intersection points," mumbled the messenger softly.

Lorist really felt like giving himself a harsh slap. It was another one of his mistakes. He had set up three lines of tower defenses in an area roughly five kilometers left of his current position. The first and second lines were 200 meters apart, while the second and third was 300 plus meters apart. The problem was that he had ordered his men to dig ditches around the towers at the first and second defense lines. He had initially thought that the winding route would delay the enemy's advance and allow the defenders to have more time to wear their numbers down. However, the enemy's ditch-filling carts instantly rendered the ditches useless. Not only that, they were even an obstacle to the reinforcements he sent to the first line of defense.

Sigh! Back then, everyone agreed to my idea of using the tower tactic to stop House Fisablen's light cavalry, so nobody said anything about it when I ordered the ditches dug. This ended up being my fault yet again. No, I can't stay here for long.

"Send someone to notify Potterfang. I will head to the battlefield near our left flank where Loze is," Lorist instructed Els, "I need to make sure he holds on to the defenses there. Also, don't move the battle standards. The guards shouldn't follow me either. Our movements must not be noticed. Just have Reidy bring a company along. Also, have Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade and Terman's knights secretly travel to the left flank and be on standby. Since the four central duchies are so willing to sacrifice themselves for Duke Fisablen, I'll make sure they sacrifice all their men."

"Understood, Your Grace," replied Els before he turned and barked his own orders, sending three other guards riding down the hill.

Just before Lorist left, he suddenly recalled something.

"Els, if the main camp is suddenly attacked by the grassland barbarians, you may have Potterfang retreat gradually and give up on the defenses at the front. The only important thing is the main camp. Also, if there is anything urgent, you may lead the guards into battle, understood?"

Lorist brought Howard, Reidy and a company of 100 guards to leave for the left flank.

"Your Grace? Why have you come?" asked Loze with a bloody bandage wrapped around his left shoulder.

"How did this happen?" asked Lorist, concerned.

Loze gave an embarrassed smile.

"I rushed a little too fast and didn't notice the volley of arrows. I didn't think one would pierce through my armor and strike my shoulder like this. Fortunately, the shoulder pads were tough and only a small wound was opened. It's just a flesh wound, nothing serious."

"Are you really fine? It wasn't poisoned, was it? Have you gotten it checked by a herbalist?"

"I have. I even drank a bottle of cleansing. The wound has already been treated and it

won't affect my deployment. Just look," Loze said as he waved his hand around relaxedly.

"Your Grace, don't worry about a small thing like this. I'm really fine."

Lorist nodded and turned to look at the front. The battlefield had already quieted down.

"Your Grace, the enemy's currently resting. Even though they breached the frontmost 47 towers of the first line of defense, their casualties weren't light. They should be well over 10 thousand. For each soldier we lost, we killed about two or three enemies. It's not a bad exchange," briefed Loze hurriedly.

As the terrain around that area was rather flat, the tower outposts Lorist built were clustered together in threes. While the four central duchies' infantry managed to take down 47 them, they also paid a huge price. Looking into the distance with his telescope, Lorist could see the soldiers of the four central duchies busy cleaning up the battlefield and moving one corpse after another onto carriages before shipping them back. There were some others who were resting, as well as others from regiments behind transferred over to maintain the siege engines. One could probably hear the sound of hammering as they repaired the log shields.

Lorist looked at the position of the sun.

It's still roughly ten or eleven in the morning. The enemy might still attack after lunch. The four central duchies must be planning to push through the towers lines here at the flatlands and use their numerical advantage to occupy this place. After that, they can have House Fisablen's Frontier Legion launch their attack from here towards our main camp to force me to leave Southern.

"Heed my orders. Have the soldiers at the second defense line withdraw from the towers with their ballistae immediately."

"Your Grace, we can't have that!" Loze blurted, shocked, "With the presence of the towers, it will cost the four central duchies at least half of their forces to breach all three lines. While we would sacrifice more than ten thousand soldiers defending all three lines to do so, the enemies that remain would be much easier for us to deal with!"

Lorist shook his head.

"Our house doesn't make our soldiers fight suicidal battles just to grind away at the enemy forces. Even if the kill-death ratio is one to ten, it's still too huge a loss for me. Also, I believe it will be House Fisablen's Frontier Legion's turn once they breach our three defense lines. The enemy will definitely not give us a chance to exact revenge on the four central duchies' forces. The moment we allow their light cavalry to advance to our rear through this hole, we would lose the initiative on the battlefield. Recalling our soldiers from the towers doesn't mean we won't engage in battle. Instead, giving up on the towers will be advantageous to us."

"Advantageous?" Loze said as he blinked, "Your Grace, what sort of advantage do we have?"

Lorist laughed.

"Even though our numbers can't compare to theirs, we are definitely more advantaged in field battles and taking an offensive position. Have you forgotten? Look at the area between here and the second line. There is a distance of 340 meters. This whole flatland spans five kilometers and is sufficient to position more than 100 thousand soldiers. My plan is to position our soldiers in a horizontal formation along the third line. If the enemy wishes to breach this line, they will have no choice but to fight a field battle. Hehe, when it comes to those, who do we have to fear?"

Lorist's plans were simple. Loze and Pajik, two gold-ranked knights, would each lead one Tigersoar division and another Pegasus division with a total of 50 thousand troops and get into formation at the left and right flanks. Malek's carroballista division, a light cavalry division from one of Count Shazin's two divisions, as well as the heavy infantry legion sent by House Kenmays would form the center that numbered 40 thousand. They would be lined up horizontally. The soldiers of the four houses preparing for a field battle numbered a total of 90 thousand men. Coupled with Count Shazin's light infantry division and the retreated soldiers from the second line that would be in charge of manning the towers of the third line, their force numbered 100 thousand in total.

The second line soldiers' retreat shocked the enemies resting at the first line. When they realized, they hurriedly occupied the empty towers and let out cheers of triumph. It was apparent that the second line's occupation was a great morale boost. However, they quickly caught on to the enemy's positioned in the manner fitting of a field battle at the third line and quieted their cheers gradually. Perhaps, it had occurred to them that even though they were spared a grueling siege, an even bloodier field battle

awaited.

The enemy also reacted quickly. The enemies that occupied the second line used the tower outposts as a means of preventing ambushes. A large group of tool-wielding soldiers began to fill up the ditches before shield carriages were lined up at the front of their forces one after another. Finally, the infantry regiments began to position themselves in battle formations.

"It seems the enemy is ready to engage in a field battle. But it looks like it'll take them a number of hours to get ready. Blow the horn, how our men take a break. We'll let everyone get some rest. Have the logistics cook up something delicious so we'll have enough energy for the coming massacre," instructed Lorist.

"As you wish, Your Grace."

Chapter 375
Victory

Afternoon at two, Lorist stood atop a tower in the middle of the third line of defense. He looked at the four central duchies' and House Fisablen's forces as they gathered under their banners following horn after horn. Gradually, they got into formation for the upcoming field battle.

"Your Grace, aren't they a little too slow? It's already been two hours since lunch, yet they're still not done arranging their troops. Look, our men already took a short nap," complained Howard as he pointed to the lazy-looking household soldiers who had just woken up.

Reidy patted his shoulder with a smile.

"That's why His Grace had everyone rest well after lunch. Weren't you against it at first? You thought we were being a little too careless, weren't you? You even said we'd suffer heavy losses if we aren't able to react in time. But look at how it turned out. They're still getting into formation after we took our nap. If we had the soldiers stand at attention for two whole hours, they'd be worn out before the battle even started."

Howard hurried to find an excuse.

"Well, I was just saying that we should be ready just in case! If everyone dismounts and rests and the enemy suddenly launches an attack, then we'd be too late! The distance is only 300 meters and it won't take them a few minutes to reach us! I'm curious why they didn't launch a sudden attack like I thought they would, though."

Lorist laughed.

"If we were facing that old fellow Duke Fisablen himself, I wouldn't have allowed the rest. It would have been far too risky. But we're faced with the four duchies. When we got into formation for a field battle, even if House Fisablen's cavalry wanted to attack, the duchies would object. Just look at our enemy. They've placed their heavy infantry in the center. They intend to use their numerical superiority to crush us and win.

"However, infantry troops like those travel really slowly. And after fighting and conquering our first line of defense, they've no doubt suffered a lot of casualties and require some time to reorganize. When they saw us dismount and rest, they thought we were trying to bait them into attacking and falling into a trap. Even if they only launched their cavalry, if we did in fact have an ambush prepared, they would suffer huge casualties. Having one's cavalry so badly beaten would only negatively impact army morale. So they opted to stay put. There's no way they would've allowed the cavalry to attack when we're resting. The other reason is that they need time to arrange their forces. Having our own troops dismount to rest is a signal that we'd wait for them to get into formation before beginning the battle and that we wouldn't disrupt them before they finish getting into formation."

Loze and Pajik both arrived on the roof and saluted Lorist.

"How are the flanks? To which house do the troops facing you belong?" inquired Lorist.

Loze gave Pajik a look. The latter nodded.

"Your Grace, the troops on both our flanks are the same. They're the divisions from Fifth Frontier. On my side, they are the first and third division, on Pajik's, the second and fourth. They brought 20 thousand barbarian cavalry along. We each face around 40 thousand," replied Loze.

"24-25 thousand faced with 40 thousand, huh… Even though the enemy's numbers exceed yours, I doubt they'd center their attacks on the flanks. The mounted barbarians are merely a hodgepodge bunch that can only help in battles they're already winning. As long as you can endure the first three waves, they will reach their limit. Given Tigersoar's might and equipment, we still suppress them.

"As for Fifth Frontier, according to our captives, they're a newly formed legion and also the weakest of Fisablen's forces. The only thing worth considering is the fact that most of the soldiers are armed with crossbows and other ranged weapons. I heard they are most used to dismounting and launching ranged attacks in a formation. So when the battle begins, make sure to pay attention to our spear cavalry when they launch their attacks," said Lorist after some thought.

"As you wish, Your Grace. We will be on the watch," Loze agreed, "However, we're currently worried about our center. The enemy has obviously centered most of their forces, so aren't our own a little thin?"

While both flanks of the enemy number approximately 80 thousand troops combined, the center had 60 thousand duchies forces and 20 thousand from House Fisablen's reserve legion, adding also to a total of 80 thousand. It was almost double the number of troops Lorist had stationed there. It was no wonder Loze and Pajik were rather worried.

"It's fine," Lorist laughed, shaking his head, "I have already secretly moved Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade and Terman's Ragebear Knights behind of the center. When the battle begins, we'll give our enemies a surprise. The numbers of an enemy destined for failure is nothing to worry about. It is your flanks that require more attention. In the event the enemy crumbles, don't give chase. Let House Felim's Pegasus chase. They are light cavalry. You two will have to lead the Tigersoar divisions to the center to intercept them. Our target this time is the duchies' elite infantry. As long as we can eliminate enough of their infantry, the old fellow won't be able to stand back up, understood?"

"It will be done, milord," said Loze and Pajik as they puffed out their chests.

"Good. Go lead your troops. The enemy's finishing up their preparations and the fight will break out soon. Make sure to watch out for your own safety too. Don't forget to protect yourselves as you rake in achievements."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

Long, low-pitched horn blowing could be heard. Loud drumming rang throughout the enemy lines. From the tower, the enemy could be seen waving their banners, cheering and shouting their chants.

Lorist snapped alert.

"It's finally beginning. Howard, what time is it now?"

Howard ran downstairs and back up quickly. "It's fifteen past three, Your Grace."

"Blow the horns! Have all troops get ready!"

There were no messengers sent over to formally declare war, nor were there knights who came forward to issue challenges. The duchies' elite infantry and House Fisablen's forces rested for less than half an hour after getting into formation and launched their attack. Countless two-wheeled log shield carts were arranged into

three neat lines, forming three defensive lines at the enemy's vanguard.

"Your Grace, we can have Thunderbolt Brigade fire their rock projectiles now. They are already in range," suggested Howard as he looked at the waves of wooden shield carts.

"Patience. They just started moving. It won't be too late to strike when they cross the centerline. I already ordered Ovidis to estimate the range. Wave the black flag in ten minutes, the signal to fire," Lorist said without any hint of haste, "Also, order Suleimos to be prepared to receive the enemy. His heavy-armored division is the first line of defense of our center formation."

Suleimos was a household knight of Duke Kenmay -- a one-star gold rank. It was said that he used to be a slave fighter of the Hanayabarta kingdom. Back then, Kenmays was still a viscount and his father had traveled to the slave kingdom on a business trip and watched a bloody show in the dueling grounds. He became interested in Suleimos, the victor, and paid a huge sum to buy his freedom. Suleimos, having become a free man, joined House Kenmays as a household knight. Just recently, he had been transferred to his position as division commander of the house's heavy-armored division.

The duchies' advancing forces looked rather impressive. However, they crept forward at a moderate pace, The three frontmost rows of shield carts wouldn't be easy to push all the way to the third defense line as there were roughly 300 meters to cover.

Given that the log shield carts were crudely made, with their wheels being not perfectly round or of identical size, some of the carts got stuck after being pushed around 50 meters. A good number had malfunctioned.

Lorist's original estimate of ten minutes for the enemy to make their way to the centerline was 20 minutes off. It took them nearly half an hour. At that moment, a few of the carts in the rear stopped. Those were intended to protect the longbowmen who could now reach the four houses' lines. They would start raining arrows down on their ranks soon.

"Have Thunderbolt Brigade start firing. Destroy the shield carts in the front and order Malek's carroballista brigade to target the longbowman. Have Suleimos's heavy-armored division defend against the arrows!"

Lorist barked three orders in quick succession, compelling Howard and Reidy to wave the flags around to relay the orders by the edge of the tower's roof.

Shen the first volley of 500 stone balls were sent flying into the ranks of the duchies' infantry, many of the soldiers merely stood still, watching as the gigantic projectiles unknown to them crashed down from the sky.

While the log shields were able to block bolts, they weren't able to resist the gigantic stone balls. Tens of log shield carts were smashed to smithereens immediately. In one of the cases, a stone projectile slammed down on a log shield cart. Not only did the shield crumble, the two-wheeled cart was sent flying. A few unprepared soldiers pushing it were sent flying 8 meters away. There were also more than ten unlucky fellows tossed about by the force of the impact.

Apart from the stone balls that struck the shields, those that landed on the ground bounced and rolled through the infantry's tidy ranks. In mere moments, their formation was completely destroyed. None were able to stop the gigantic balls. Any soldier in the balls' way ended up injured or dead. Cries of despair and pain could be heard from the dozen centremost formations.

It was only the beginning, though. Countless blurs whooshed through the gaps left by the obliterated shield carts. The carroballista division's bolts killed the fortunate, disoriented soldiers not crushed by the stone balls. Corpses piled into mountains and blood flowed in rivers. The cruel sight was difficult to watch.

Even though the damage only covered a small part of their ranks, the rest hesitated after taking such a blow. The soldiers pushing the shield carts not struck raised their heads to look at the skies. Even the foot soldiers following behind directed their attention up.

They were not disappointed. Soon, closely packed gigantic stone balls became visible again. The moment they were certain where the balls would fall, the soldiers pushing the shield carts turned tail and ran. The foot soldiers behind them caved as well and scrambled all over the place as they screamed at the top of their lungs. The 100-man leader that intended to stop them was pushed to the ground and trampled by tens of feet without the slightest hesitation.

"Oh? What's that?" asked Duke Fisablen, his eyes popping out.

He was watching the battle from the roof of a tower in the second defense line with fright as the foot soldiers were turned into shambles by the balls that fell from the sky.

"I heard that when the Nortons attacked Andinaq to force Queen Carey's abdication, they used a contraption that could fling gigantic rocks to take down the citadels. I think they were called catapults. Those stone balls should have been fired from one of those," said Duke Shabaj with a grim look.

"What should we do now?" asked Duke Handra anxiously.

The ones being smashed were his duchy's most elite forces.

"Signal the retreat. We'll retreat for now while we figure out how we should deal with the catapults," suggested Duke Farkel.

"No!" Duke Fisablen exclaimed, "You saw how messy the lines are right now! The moment you call a retreat, they'll crumble completely and the enemy will give chase! Your foot soldiers won't be able to outrun their cavalry. We should signal a charge and fight to the death. Our forces still outnumber theirs and our losses aren't that heavy yet. We still have hope if we launch an all-out attack!"

"What crap are you spouting?!" Duke Handra cried, "Just look! The lines are already falling apart! There's no way they can launch a frontal attack now! We'd best retreat while more than half of our forces can still hold on. We should quickly retreat and reorganize. The enemy won't give chase because of our superior numbers."

As the dukes argued, the situation devolved beyond control. With most of the shield carts destroyed, the carroballista division gave the four duchies a taste of their ballista firestorm. The incessant stream of ballista bolts penetrated the dozen 1000-man formations in the front. One duchy soldier after another fell to the ground.

Thanks to the rain of gigantic stone balls and ballista bolts, a dozen more infantry formations. The soldiers discarded their weapons and ran. The remaining formations in the rear fizzled with commotion.

"Have Ragebear Knights attack. House Kenmays's heavy division will follow. Have Malek's carroballista division advance and support them. Thunderbolt Brigade should advance as well. Have the catapults fire as far as they can and stop the enemy from retreating!" ordered Lorist once more.

The attack of Terman's Ragebear Knights accelerated the enemy's crumbling. The sight of the heavy-armored knights cleaving away at the backs of the retreating soldiers was akin to the sight of a light assaulting a herd of sheep. However, the enemy also reacted quickly. House Fisablen's reserve legion hurriedly charged forward to tangle with the knights and protect the infantry as they retreated.

Lorist was getting rather impatient. If more than half of the infantry were allowed to retreat, his victory was still in question. Even if he managed to gain the upper hand for now, if the retreated soldiers regrouped and were sent into battle again, the enemy could still use their numerical advantage to turn the tide. He had to crush them completely.

It would be great if my guards were here. I could lead them into battle myself.

"Ready the horses. Let's join the fray."

He needed all the forces he could muster right now.

The moment he descended from the tower and mounted, loud cheers echoed from the battlefield.

"Your Grace, we've won! We've won!" cried Howard full of excitement.

Lorist looked up and saw Tigersoar's banners on both flanks. Fiercetiger Loze and Pajik didn't let Lorist's hopes down and ordered their cavalry to cut off the enemy's retreat from both sides.

Lorist smiled.

"Yes, we've won. Blow the horns and have everyone engage!"

Chapter 376
Retreat

The second battle of Southern was the only time House Fisablen's and the four central duchies' forces faced those of the four houses in a field battle. Near 160 thousand soldiers were pitted against The Northlands. After House Norton unleashed their secret weapon, the catapult, the elite infantrymen of the four central duchies crumbled in the face of the gigantic stone balls falling from the sky. The Nortons unleashed a storm of ballista fire, inflicting more than 60 thousand casualties on the four central duchies' men. They were utterly defeated. Had it not been for House Fisablen's reserve legion that intercepted the pursuing Ragebear Knights, the four central duchies might've been massacred as they ran.

Extract from Chronicles of the Grindia Continent: Records of the Rise of the Bear - - Battles of Southern

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Lorist finally let out a breath of relief after the battle's victory was decided. The tide of war in Southern was finally under his control. However, he was quite troubled by his massive casualties. Thirty thousand of their 100 thousand troops were incapacitated, much more than what Lorist initially expected.

The greatest losses were in Loze and Pajik's Tigersoar divisions. They had crushed the three assaults by the barbarian cavalry and even launched a counterattack and defeated House Fisablen's Fifth Frontier. They rushed with what cavalry they had left into the enemy's two flanks of the enemy and managed to break them, building a firm foundation for the victory that followed. However, less than a third of the original 30 thousand spear cavalry troops remained. Not counting the injured, there were more than ten thousand dead.

Up next was the Ragebear Knights. Three thousand silver-ranked knights and six thousand knight attendants fought against the 20 thousand of House Fisablen's reserve legion. Even though they managed to hold them back, they suffered four thousand casualties.

Count Felim's two Pegasus divisions were in charge of aiding the Tigersoar divisions led by Loze and Pajik. While the main force was the Tigersoar soldiers, the Pegasus legion suffered around six thousand casualties as well.

House Kenmays's heavy-armored division was intercepted by the four duchies whilst in pursuit and suffered two thousand casualties.

Lastly, House Shazin's two division, one light cavalry division, and another light infantry division, were deployed on Lorist's order. At first, their pursuit was rather successful. However, when House Fisablen deployed Third Frontier to receive the retreating soldiers, the two were stopped. The two sides fought an intense battle and the two divisions incurred a total of four thousand casualties.

The unit that suffered the least casualties was Firmrock, who had taken charge of defending the main camp. More than three thousand barbarian corpses were littered around the camp, but Firmrock only suffered about five hundred casualties. However, if the dead soldiers defending the towers were included in the count, Firmrock had lost a total of five thousand men.

In total, there were around 30 thousand casualties, half of whom had perished heroically on the battlefield. Lorist sighed as he finally understood what the saying 'ten thousand skeletons for the fame of one general'.

The four houses' forces had suffered 30 thousand casualties during the second battle of Southern, yet House Fisablen and the four duchies couldn't shed a single tear even if they tried to. House Fisablen had lost a whole reserve legion, 20 thousand soldiers who could be considered their strongest force. They had all been completely wiped out on the battlefield. Fifth Frontier was crippled. Only around 16 thousand of the original 40 thousand light cavalry returned, yet all of them had to reinforce Third Frontier and fought fiercely with the light cavalry and infantry divisions of Count Shazin. Their fight ended in a draw with them losing another three or four thousand.

What angered the duke most was the grassland barbarian cavalry. He had deployed all of them under his command, split into three separate units. Around 20 thousand were sent to attack the Nortons' main camp under the purview of Third Frontier. But they had refused to attack after losing a mere three or four thousand. Seeing as those at the camp only intended to stall for time, Duke Fisablen couldn't be bothered to deal with them just yet.

However, he wouldn't forgive the 40 thousand barbarian cavalrymen deployed on both flanks, of whom only 20 thousand managed to return alive. According to the household knights serving with Fifth Frontier's reports, barbarian cavalrymen were defeated because they refused to follow orders. When they ran away during the chaos, they disrupted the legion's longbowmen formation, allowing the Nortons' two spear cavalry divisions to break into their formation and massacre them. Unable to resist the crushing defeat, Fifth Frontier had no choice but to retreat.

With the reserve legion completely wiped out, the 45-thousand-man Fifth Frontier left with only 18 thousand, Third Frontier lost four thousand. Including the 25 thousand casualties among the grassland barbarians, the house had lost a total of 75 thousand men.

Not including the barbarians' losses, it had lost 50 thousand. Despite that, the reserve legion's complete defeat tore at Duke Fisablen's heart. It was the knife the house had spent so long sharpening. Almost everyone was most elite barbarian captives that helped the house suppress the rebellious barbarian tribes across the grasslands, a great contribution to the house. They were all gone just like that. The duke regretted it greatly and wondered why he sent them out in the heat of the moment to help the troops of the four central duchies retreat. Had he known earlier this was how it would turn out, he would've retreated and preserved his forces. In the end, not many of the duchies' infantry managed to escape anyway.

As opposed to the regretful Duke Fisablen, the four dukes had cried their tears dry. They lost 80 thousand troops in one battle! Only around ten thousand managed to make it back to the main camp. Shabaj was the most fortunate. They had around five thousand soldiers left because they were placed in the back of the army. Handra's infantry fared the worst, less than 800 were still alive. They were placed at the vanguard and had to weather not only the fall of the gigantic stone balls but also the storm of ballista bolts. Their casualties were heavy beyond imagination and the ones who remained were only able to survive thanks to the fact that they turned tail to run.

About three thousand Farkel soldiers managed to make it back. Forund had a similar number. All the soldiers who escaped and returned to camp were panicked and traumatized. Many shot out of their slumber noisily at night, haunted by nightmares. The soldiers probably thought they had just experienced the forbidden spell, Meteor Rain. It was a legendary spell of the magic civilization. To them, there was no way so many stone balls could be fired without magic. It was suicide for commoners to fight the legendary magi.

And, in actuality, it was the second battle of Southern that propelled the Norton catapults to fame. Almost every nation developed a great interest in their catapults and steel ballistae. The four central duchies, who attacked the first line of defense managed to capture quite a number of ballistae and they had their worksmiths try to reproduce them, to no avail. The most difficult part of forging them was the steel plates they used for the arms.

There were quite a number of replicas made of the catapults, though. Even though many of the nations didn't get to see the real thing themselves, the mere idea of flinging gigantic rocks through the air let quite a few worksmiths figure out the mechanism. It didn't take long for springald, arm-and-bucket, and lever catapult designs to be produced. Even though they couldn't throw rocks as far or as accurately, and could only fire projectiles of relatively smaller size, they were a fresh new military engine for the armies of Grindia. A symbol of technological advancement.

"Your Grace," Els said as he rushed in, "the scouts report an abnormal situation broke out in the enemy camp. The four duchies' banners are nowhere to be seen."

"What?" Lorist raised his head. The battle had ended less than three days earlier, but the duchies' banners had disappeared completely. What was going on? Did they turn tail and run?

"Send people to search the highway to the duchies immediately. If they really escaped, they must've left some traces," instructed Lorist.

By three in the afternoon, the scouts returned. They brought word of fresh carriage and horse tracks along the highway heading for the duchies. They were presumed to have been made around five at dawn. It was obvious they had given up on fighting the four houses in Southern and retreated with what remained of their men. Currently, all that faced them was House Fisablen and its forces.

"Your Grace, should we send a unit to chase them down?" asked Howard.

Lorist stroked his chin in thought. He eventually shook his head.

"There's no need to care about the duchies. They're no longer in one piece anyway. Our men are busy cleaning the battlefield right now. We also have to spend quite some time to recover from this battle. I worry we will fall into an enemy trap ourselves if we send our light cavalry after them. It's best we don't spread ourselves thin."

After pacing around in the tent for a bit, he asked, "Are there any other oddities at the enemy camp apart from the four duchies' banners disappearing?"

"No, Your Grace," Els replied, "The scouts report House Fisablen's forces are forcing the barbarian cavalrymen to dig ditches and set up defensive fortifications. Our men couldn't circle around to the rear of the camp. Frontier was quite thorough with their patrols."

"It seems the old man intends to clash with us even after the four central duchies escaped!" Lorist said with a laugh, "We can resume our original plan for Southern. When our forces finish resting, we'll go hammer House Fisablen's tortoiseshell. Chasing them out of Southern is the first step of completing our plan. Once they're out of Southern we likely won't have any more large battles. When we fix Southern into an impregnable metal wall according to our plan, House Fisablen will be pushed back to the great plains. I really want to see when the old guy will finally submit to me."

With House Fisablen's reserve legion gone, Fifth Frontier neutered, and Third Frontier pushed to their limits -- given that they weren't even fully manned at 30 thousand men -- as well as the duchies' withdrawal, Lorist had the advantage.

As long as House Fisablen could be chased back to the great plains, Southern would fall into the four houses' hands and the trade route with the duchies would be cut off. Salt Merchant Committee could then monopolize the market and mess around with House Fisablen however they wished. No matter how much gold they managed to mine, it would inevitably fall into the four houses' hands.

However, Lorist still had to remain patient for now. There was much to do after the battle. There were more than 30 thousand casualties on the duchies' side, another 30 thousand plus captured. In all, the duchy lost 70 thousand elite infantrymen. This was why Lorist didn't care about the duchies' escapees. They were just troops in shambles on which he didn't have to keep an eye.

Apart from the duchy captives, there were also another eight thousand plus barbarian captives. Lorist sent them all to Count Felim for his mines without a second thought. As for the 30 thousand captive foot soldiers and ten thousand plus injured captives, Lorist put them in Baron Camorra's care. They were young, strong laborers that could contribute much to the repair of the main highway between Winston and Southern. As for the injured captives, they were given treatment and would be released in three years after their recovery.

On the 28th day of the 7th month of Year 1778, the third battle of Southern began. However, this time, it was started by the 70 thousand soldiers of the four houses. They faced 50 thousand Fisablen troops and 40 thousand barbarian cavalrymen. Even though the numbers of Duke Fisablen's men exceeded those of Lorist, the latter grasped the initiative and the enemy could only react passively.

Lorist proudly snorted, "What I have is time. I can take everything as slowly as I wish."

The snort obviously sounded rather horrid, as evidenced by Howard, who clasped his ears tight after hearing the annoying sound. However, the other guards didn't notice what Howard did as they watched the gigantic stone balls fall from the sky on the enemy's defensive formations. Thunderous sounds rang out non-stop, accompanied by showers of dust.

Thunderbolt Brigade, under Ovidis's command, had smashed all that obstructed them. Potterfang and the soldiers of Firmrock, together with Suleimos and the heavy-armored troops of House Kenmays, focused their efforts on making makeshift bridges with the ditch-filling carts. As for the forces of House Fisablen, their efforts of countering the attack were straight up laughable. Malek's carroballista unit waited hungrily for prey. Any of the Fisablen soldiers who fought back were either crushed by the falling stone balls or skewered by incoming ballista bolts.

Lorist didn't mind spending a few days taking down the defensive formations set up by Duke Fisablen. However, the duke wasn't willing to stay and keep on playing. He pulled his army back during the third night. When Lorist realized he had done so noon the next day and wanted to give chase, the last few knights who remained at the camp set it on fire. The great flames prevented the four houses from giving chase until the fire was put out three days later. But by then, the camp was already a burnt husk and Duke Fisablen long gone.

"Old fellow, you won't be able to run," said Lorist hatefully.

Chapter 377
Boblige Mountain Range

Lorist thought Duke Fisablen had no option but to withdraw his army. After all, the border between Southern and Eastwild was not far past the camp being burnt down, he was not rushing in the slightest. He had his scouts go ahead to find out where Fisablen's forces had gone while he allowed the rest of his forces to prepare to pack up and leave in another two days.

Maybe I should even send troops straight into Eastwild while I'm at it, all the way to House Fisablen's headquarters. I wonder if Old Fisablen will finally face me or lower his proud head in submission if I really razed his precious castle?

Just as he was lost in his thoughts, a scout came returned.

"Lord Duke, House Fisablen's forces didn't retreat to Eastwild. They set up camp at the Boblige mountain range in the south of Southern instead."

"What?"

This surprised Lorist greatly. The name sounded rather familiar.

"Map."

Howard quickly opened the map of Southern and laid it on the table. Lorist took a look. Indeed, his doubts were answered. In his original plan, after chasing the Fisablens out of Southern, he'd have set up a defense line along the border of Southern and Eastwild. Part of the plan involved building a citadel at the Boblige mountain range, which would serve as the defense headquarters and seal off the border.

The border between Southern and Eastwild was not only long, it's terrain was also really flat; the grassland barbarians had mainly relied on the route from Southern to the inner lands of Eastwild to conduct their raids. Count Felim's ancestors used to reside in Southern, they had learned the advantages of the barbarians' ways and formed a famous light cavalry legion like Pegasus.

The border was also what separated the grasslands and the hilled area. While the lands were relatively flat, there wasn't a shortage in lakes. Lorist had intended to capitalize on the natural terrain by erecting five citadels as the center of defense to support towers which would be connected by trenches and set up a spider-web-like net as a defense to seal House Fisablen's off from the outside world. It would prevent the frontier legions from launching hit-and-run attacks against his forces stationed in Southern.

What does the old fellow intend by bringing his forces into the Boblige mountain range? Why didn't he retreat to Eastwild? It's his dominion, his playing field. The lands are wide and flat, perfect for the tactics the frontier legions use. House Fisablen would be like a fish in water. It seems the duke isn't aware of this? He's even left the way to Crouchtiger Castle wide open. What does he intend by stationing his troops there? Isn't he worried I would send my catapults to destroy his new camp?

After staring at the map for a good amount of time, Lorist still couldn't figure out the duke's intentions. However, it seemed he had no intention of returning to his dominion.

Perhaps he's venting? If he can't defeat me, he wants to piss me off just because he can by leaving 80 thousand troops in my yard so my rear is constantly under threat? I would have to delegate a number of troops to watch him. It would limit my moves.

After scanning the area around the Boblige mountain range, Lorist realized he would have to control three points around the mountains to be able to effectively keep Fisablen's forces quarantined. It would require he build a citadel and station at least 60 thousand people.

Sol, this old man is trying to spread my forces thin, cursed Lorist hatefully.

He was starting to understand why Duke Fisablen had done what he did. If he left the route into Eastwild undefended by stationing the troops at the Boblige mountain range instead, Lorist couldn't afford to leave them unattended. If he intended to attack Crouchtiger Castle, there was a chance Duke Fisablen could interfere. The consequences could range from having his supply line disrupted to causing chaos in the entire Southern.

There were only two ways to keep them in check. The first was to deploy troops to defeat them and chase them out of the mountain range. The other was to station

troops to guard a few vital transportation routes and build temporary forts, which was both costly and time-consuming. Stationing 20 thousand people to guard one spot was only good for defense and not for offense. After all, House Fisablen's forces numbered 80 thousand. Just like a fist, they could be flung wherever they wished. Defending three locations by stationing each with 20 thousand men to control the situation in the mountain range effectively took 60 thousand men off Lorist's roster. The move also prevented him from taking the initiative and attacking as the enemy's numbers were quadruple that of the troops stationed at each location.

Even though it was only a small part of Southern, the mountain range was a range that could be reached from quite a number of paths from both Southern and Eastwild. Many roads crossed it. By occupying it, House Fisablen's frontier legions could leave Southern and retreat to Eastwild any time he wished. It was a place easy to defend and convenient to use to launch attacks.

I have to take the mountain range and chase House Fisablen out of Southern, thought Lorist resolutely as he decided to make a trip to check the mountains out for himself.

Duke Fisablen knows I have the advantage of catapults and steel ballistae. Why did he choose to occupy the range? Where did he find such confidence?

Lorist couldn't calm down until he surveyed the mountains with his own eyes.

He left for Boblige mountain range with only Reidy, Howard, Els, and a thousand of his personal guards with the light cavalry scouts as his guide in spite of his household knights' objection. The moment he saw the mountains, he understood why the duke had chosen to occupy the location.

Unlike other mountains, the mountain range's outer area was surrounded by cliffs at least 40 to 50 meters in height. The routes to the central part of the range were either valleys or sides of a cliff. The scouts caught an old bandit who gave them a brief introduction to the range. According to him, the slopes leading up to the top of the cliffs were only accessible from the inner part of the range. It was the opposite of most other mountains. However, this mountain range was a one which sloped upwards from the inside. It was a citadel formed by nature itself.

The old bandit also said there were originally six bandits who each set up their own strongholds in the mountains. Each housed a few thousand men. But last year, Third Frontier came over on the duke's order to have the bandits surrender. They launched

a sudden attack in the midst of negotiations instead and managed to conquer all the strongholds before moving all the youths to Eastwild, supposedly to mine gold.

Given the bandit's age and bad leg, Third Frontier's troops spared him. He now lived in a small hut at the foot of the mountains. He farmed a small plot of land for a living. Before he had time enjoyed his freedom for long, he was captured by a different group of soldiers.

Given that the bandit had lived all his life in the mountain range, he was really familiar with the terrain and routes. He told Lorist that, while its cliffs sealed it off from the outside world, there was a nice valley, forest, and even a stream within. It was a wide and scenic location. Apart from the three routes that led into the mountains, there was no other way to enter the range.

"Milord, while it might seem like there are a lot of small paths you can use along the cliffs, they all lead to dead ends. You won't know it until after half a day of travel. Basically, roads where there is thick grass are all dead ends. The other paths meet up at this main route over here, which is the same one that stretches into the mountain range. The other two routes are roughly 25 kilometers to the south. The other is roughly 2 kilometers to the west."

As the old bandit didn't know who Lorist was, he went with 'Milord' to be safe.

"Is the terrain around the two other roads like this as well?" asked Lorist while he pointed at the cliff.

"They're all like that, Milord. The mountain range is rather weird. The outer region is mostly like that, whether it be the end near Southern or Eastwild. Legend goes that its name actually means 'giant's stronghold. It really does seem like a gigantic stronghold," replied the old bandit confidently before he snuck in the little factoid about mountain range's name.

The problem now was that Duke Fisablen had occupied the gigantic stronghold with a force of 80 thousand. Taking the mountains would require forces were sent in from three paths towards the main peak. Lorist didn't think Duke Fisablen would give him that chance. According to the old bandit, it would take about half a day to reach the center along any of the three paths. All Fisablen's forces had to do was roll a few large boulders from higher ground to bring about a tragedy for those attempting to invade.

He brought out his simple telescope and inspected the tallest peak. A Fisablen banner fluttered in the wind on the edge of a cliff along the way there. It was apparent attacking via this particular path wasn't an option. The enemy had also built fortifications along the way. Though they were only rock and wood, they put great pressure on him.

The bastard really picked a good place. This range renders two of our most advanced weapons useless.

Lorist believed Thunderbolt Brigade's catapults couldn't lob their stones over the 50-meter-tall cliffs. As for the steel ballistae, firing at an angle couldn't achieve any results either. With the enemy hiding beyond the cliffs, the catapults and ballistae weren't a threat.

If there was no way to attack, he had to consider how to defend. After much thought, the only reliable solution he could come up with was to construct three forts, one at each of the paths into the mountain range. He was really bitter about it. Constructing three forts handed the initiative to the enemy. The project would consume lots of funds. Following their completion, each fort would also have to be manned by 20 thousand soldiers. In other words, 60 thousand of his troops would be held back just to defend against the enemy here. On the other hand, if Boblige mountain range was under his control, he only needed 20 thousand men to secure the border.

He continued to scan one peak after another using his telescope.

Oh? What are those soldiers doing?

It took quite a while to understand that House FIsablen's soldiers were setting up a suspension bridge that connected the two cliffs. It would allow them to move their forces around much faster. The duke soon emerged. It was indeed the duke. His face was clearly visible through the telescope's small lens. The old man seemed to have aged quite a bit and no longer looked as domineering as he had in the past. Nevertheless, he still oozed pride. He must be monitoring the soldiers constructing the suspension bridge. Lorist only got such a clear look because the duke faced him directly. The old man must've realized Lorist's forces had arrived and was checking them out.

Lorist and Duke Fisablen were looking at each other from a distance of about 500 meters. However, Lorist could see better with his telescope while it took quite a while

for the duke to realize the one standing at the foot of the mountain was Lorist. His expression tensed as he said something. Lorist felt they must've been curses directed at him.

It didn't take long for the low sound of a horn to echo down the valley between the cliffs.

"The old man actually deployed his troops?"

Not long after, hordes of grassland barbarian cavalry gushed out of the route leading into the mountain.

"Good Sol! This bastard's far too shameless! He actually sent his grassland barbarian cavalry to apprehend me," cursed Lorist.

He felt completely humiliated. Even though he had managed to chase a rank 3 blademaster like the duke away, the duke actually thought grassland barbarians were enough to apprehend him. It was clearly an act of mockery.

"Your Grace, we ought to leave."

Els didn't hold the same opinion. Thirty of the duke's 80 thousand men were grassland barbarian cavalry. The rest were the remnants of Third and Fifth Frontier. As Lorist only brought around a thousand guards to check out the mountain range, Els didn't dare to be careless. After all, even elephants could be bitten to death by swarms of ants.

"Alright. Let's retreat. Bring the old bandit along. He's a living map and will be useful," Lorist ordered as he turned his horse.

Either the barbarians were bored to death staying in the mountain range or Duke Fisablen had placed a ridiculous bounty on his head. The barbarian cavalrymen numbered close to ten thousand and showed no sign of giving up the pursuit. Frustrated, Lorist ordered Howard to head back and make a report with a few other guards while he brought the rest up a small hill to take a defensive position. After battling on the hill for more than two hours, the barbarian cavalry didn't manage to bring anything back. Instead, they left behind more than two thousand corpses.

Lorist faced the ten thousand troops alone. He occupied the path leading up the small hill and slaughtered the barbarian soldiers till they lost every ounce of their courage.

Bathed in blood, he managed to vent his frustration. It didn't take long for Pegasus to arrive and disperse the remaining enemies at the foot of the hill. They escorted him back to the camp.

He changed into new armor after he'd washed up and entered the tent.

"Tomorrow, we depart for Boblige mountain range. I want everyone to come up with an idea that could allow us to take the enemy camp," he said with a glum look to his commanders.

Chapter 378
Two Pieces of Bad News

Faced with a place with such unique terrain, no one could come up with a way to attack it. Lorist was prepared to gather the house's skilled fighters and launch a swift attack in the night while Fisablen's men were off guard. He wanted to bust through the defenses along the path between the cliffs and kill all the forces he encountered while his main force made it to the insides of the mountain. Unfortunately, the plan was objected to by his higher-ranking subordinates. None of them wanted Lorist to take such a huge risk.

Putting aside the cliffs approximately 50 meters tall, which would cause everything to go south with the slightest mistake, as well as the question of whether it was even possible to scale the mountain in the dead of night, even if the group were able to get up the cliffs, how many enemies would they face? Eighty thousand! And, according to the old bandit's estimations, the household forces would take at least half a day without obstruction to travel along the paths through the cliffs into the open area deeper inside.

In other words, Lorist and his group would be fighting to defend the main force for eight whole hours! It was nothing short of impossible. It was especially so since the group couldn't just hold one position. They would have to respond to the main force's progress. Also, if the group got into some trouble on the cliffs, the main force traveling below wouldn't be able to escape and would fall into enemy hands.

Lorist was no superman. He understood that well. Even if he were a swordsaint, he would be pushed back when faced with a ten-thousand-strong elite troop. No matter how strong a swordsaint was, he would at most be able to kill around three thousand enemies before being swarmed by the soldiers that remained. Lorist was filled with regret. At first, he had planned to make a tactical assault on Duke Fisablen's position. He wanted to bring his men up on the cliffs to cause trouble for the duke. As long as he was able to capture or subdue the man, perhaps the 80 thousand soldiers would surrender obediently.

Naturally, it was just his fantasy. Given Duke Fisablen's personality, even if he fell into

Lorist's hands, he would struggle like a dying fish and might even order his troops to fight to their deaths. There was no way they would meet his terms. The moment the duke realizes Lorist was on the cliff, he would not hesitate to order his troops to attack.

Potterfang made a rather sensible argument: when it came to numbers and household might, the Nortons were superior. No matter how long it took, he was confident they could defend against Duke Fisablen's assaults. Other things aside, holding out for a year was something the four houses could do incredibly easily. House Fisablen, on the other hand. would be on the edge of collapse because of their lack of resources. After all, sustaining a force of 80 thousand wasn't easy.

So far, Southern was basically in the four houses' hands. Having successfully cut the trade route between the Fisablen dominion and the four central duchies off, even if the 80 thousand troops occupied Boblige mountain range, there wasn't much they could do. The general situation was already set in stone. The most they could do was struggle to their deaths. Even if House Norton couldn't attack Eastwild, all they had to do was form a strong defenses at the mountain range. The more time passed, the more resources House Fisablen would consume, and the sooner their defeat would come.

Despite that, Lorist was still rather unwilling to accept this state of affairs. While Potterfang made it sound really easy, House Fisablen's occupation of the mountain range bogged down a substantial number of the houses' soldiers. In their original plan, they would have chased House Fisablen's forces out of Southern and built forts at the border between Southern and Eastwild. All Lorist had to do was let Firmrock guard the border with House Felim's Pegasus' support.

The current situation forced him to station the four houses' forces here instead. And not just the same amount he had planned for originally, nearly double! This meant he had no troops to keep in reserve. Even though the house was rich in resources, it would still cost quite a bit to keep House Fisablen's forces cornered and he didn't doubt that Baron Spiel, the one in charge of the house's finances, would come see him not long after he heard about the plan.

While he was rather troubled, a place like Boblige mountain range was not a place the household forces could attack. Doing so was nothing short of suicide. The old duke had found a great spot Lorist could do nothing about. After some thought, he ended up going with Potterfang's suggestion. First, they would set up proper defensive fortifications and drag the situation out. The one that gave out first would be House Fisablen.

Lorist left the assignment to Potterfang and Firmrock. He ordered House Felim's Pegasus to aid them. Fiercetiger Loze would lead Tigersoar and House Kenmays's heavy-armored division, and House Shazins' light cavalry division and light infantry division to the border of Southern and Eastwild and set up their defenses there.

Time flowed quickly. The next three months were rather peaceful. Apart from the occasional attack by the grassland barbarian cavalry, there were no large conflicts. Even the night assaults were ended in moments. If the Fisablens saw they didn't hold any advantage, they would retreat as quickly as they attacked. It would be more appropriate to describe their attacks as harassment instead.

It was already the 11th month and the weather was getting progressively colder. Lorist was curious how House Fisablen's forces intended to spend the winter given their equipment. The mountains were definitely much colder than below and the winter could freeze people to death. Lorist had inspected them closely on a few occasions and didn't discover any signs of timber felling. When he questioned the old bandit about it, he was assured there were no large caverns within the mountain range. Perhaps House Fisablen had set their camp up on the other side of the mountain.

Then again, launching a surprise attack in the winter was a rather good idea. He believed House Fisablen's soldiers wouldn't stand on the cliffs like idiots when it was snowing, so their guard on the routes stretching into the insides of the mountain range might not be as well guarded. When the snow covered the mountain roads, they could use skis to launch a sudden, swift attack. The house's forces had always insisted on training in the winter after all. Perhaps they could even mount the steel ballistae on sleds and take the mountain range with only one division.

The more he thought about it, the better Lorist felt about the plan. Just as he was about to gather his generals for a discussion, he saw Howard enter the tent frantically.

"Your Grace! Your Grace!"

"Clam down. What's there to panic about? It's not like the sky's about to fall. You must always keep your calm, even when a mountain is about to collapse. Where did all your training go?" rebuked Lorist, dissatisfied.

"No, Your Grace! Look! These are two secret reports from the dominion! It's incredibly urgent!"

Howard put the two pieces of silk cloth, thin as a moth's wing, on the table. The cloths were covered with tight rows of words and were probably delivered by the messenger eagles.

Lorist took a look and felt his head blur for a moment. He read the messages and paled right away.

Sol, we've been had! Fisablen, you old fox… How did you manage to spirit yourself away all of a sudden? I thought you were still in the mountain range, but you got back to Wild Husbandry?!

There were two heavy attacks launched on two critical locations, yet Lorist couldn't move his troops to respond.

The two silk letters brought over by Howard were fraught with bad news. The first letter reported that Jaeger had suffered heavy casualties in Wild Husbandry. Their commander, Divine Marksman Josk, and vice-commander, Yuriy, sustained heavy injuries. The third division commander, Pete, perished. The three divisions suffered more than 30 thousand casualties and Jaeger had been neutered completely. They were retreating to the eastern area of The Northlands. The huge territory they occupied in the province had been completely reclaimed by House Fisablen. Had it not been for the seventh local defense brigade that guarded the iron suspension bridge with their steel ballistae, the bridge might've been destroyed as well.

The letter cited the reason for Jaeger's defeat: ever since Josk defeated Fourth Frontier with his legion, he managed to conquer a large part of Wild Husbandry. Fourth Frontier had no choice but to retreat to the east bank of Soxius, allowing two-thirds of the territory to be occupied by Jaeger. According to their former orders, Jaeger forced the commoners and livestock of Wild Husbandry to move to the eastern part of The Northlands to wear away at House Fisablen's might.

Three days ago, Pete led Jaeger's newly formed division and two carroballista brigades and carried out a sweep of Wild Husbandry's borders. The 21 thousand men carried out the mission without issue, but they didn't expect to be suddenly assailed by countless grassland barbarian cavalrymen. In the end, they were forced up the highlands to call for help with their messenger eagles. Yuriy, who had received the call for help, rushed to their aid with the second division of Jaeger. But it was a setup. Before they arrived, they were attacked by Fourth Frontier. After a tough fight, they managed to break out of the encirclement and meet up with what remained of the

third division.

Had it not been for Josk, who came to their timely aid with the first division, the second and third divisions would've been wiped out completely. By then, Pete had already fallen and Yuriy was greatly injured. He helped the remaining soldiers escape, but he ended up falling from his mount and greatly injuring himself for attempting to hold Duke Fisablen back. He was only saved thanks to the sacrifice of seven other silver-ranked household knights.

According to the report, the grassland barbarian soldiers numbered over a 100 thousand. Jaeger's survivors recalled the number of grassland barbarian soldiers didn't decrease at all no matter how many they killed. They also used large shield carts to make the steel ballistae lose their effectivity. Jaeger's soldiers had no choice but to fight the barbarians in close combat. Fourth Frontier was also recently assigned more men to fill up their ranks, but most of those who joined were picked from the barbarians as well.

It was bad news indeed. Without Wild Husbandry and with Jaeger neutered, Pedro, the citadel located at the crossing point through Pisper Mountains, which was the border between Wild Husbandry and Winston, would lose all protection. If Duke Fisablen led his grassland barbarians to besiege Pedro and conquered it, Winston would be a shivering and helpless girl before an assailant. The effort the four houses had expended conquering Windbury would also go to waste. There was nothing they could do but recall all their soldiers to Winston and launch a counterattack. Should that happen, the situation in Southern would revert to how it was previously, with House Fisablen and the four central duchies' connection restored.

What a move!

Lorist was faced with a dilemma. He couldn't send any troops from Southern given that House Fisablen's 80 thousand men were still cooped up in the mountain range. If he really did send reinforcements, the defenses they had spent three months building would easily be breached. Given that Lorist had already pushed House Fisablen's forces to the door, if he sent soldiers to reinforce the other front, the old fellow would lead the grassland barbarians into Southern and further worsen the situation.

"Where's Baron Freiyar?"

Lorist suddenly thought about the local defense legion's commander.

"This…"

Howard flipped open a notebook and scanned the pages quickly.

"Your Grace, Lord Freiyar left for Windbury after checking on the construction at Sehak. On the way back, he still has to check the construction at Twilight Lake Town. He should've just made it back to Windbury."

"Send a messenger eagle immediately and tell Freiyar to defend Pedro no matter the cost. Send another message to Count Shazin to inform him of the current situation and request he sends another household division to reinforce Pedro."

"Yes, Your Grace," said Howard as he hurriedly left the tent.

Taking a deep breath, Lorist continued, "Els, Reidy."

"Your Grace," said the two in unison.

"You've heard everything, right? The old bastard managed to deal us a huge blow. I have a mission for the two of you. Think of a way to capture a few soldiers from the mountains alive. I want to know how many men are still holding the place and how many he brought away with him, as well as how they intend to spend the winter."

"Understood, Your Grace."

When Els and Reidy left, Lorist sat down again and read the second silk letter. It was a letter Tarkel had penned personally, it didn't bring any good news either. The letter described the movements of the mountain barbarians in the Magical Dragon mountain range. They seemed to be targeting the Norton dominion for a raid.

The mountain barbarians were a sensitive matter to him. He had been intentionally avoiding the affairs concerning them. Even though he had spent a few months among them and learned quite a bit, like the tribe that neighbored the Nortons, Habibaba. Back then, there was a conflict for the position of Great Jambassen, so they didn't divert much of their attention to his dominion.

During the first few years after Lorist returned to the dominion to answer his calling, he set up a small tower outpost near the border and hired the Pentasword Mercenary Band to guard it. After his narrow escape from the assassination attempt and his stay with the barbarian tribe, he gave the tower outpost to Pentasword Mercenary Band

and developed it into a small town for mercenaries. The town became the main trade hub for the barbarians, where they traded for other resources.

Tarkel warned off an incident concerning the town. Thanks to rumors that the mountain barbarians would soon invade the dominion, the townsfolk panicked and mostly moved back to the household dominion. Not only that, the person in charge of the salt merchant committee's trading post there sent over a secret correspondence. The barbarians who had good trade relations with the trading post revealed that a group of grassland barbarians traveled into the mountains hoping to join up with the mountain barbarians and attack the dominion together.

Needless to say, it was a move made by Duke Fisablen.

One move after another, huh. As expected of the war god of the plains.

Lorist deliberated whether he ought to return to the dominion to calm the people there down. The mountain barbarians were no threat given that there were so many local defense brigades in the dominion. The only thing he worried about was whether he could keep Pedro. It was the key factor which would determine whether House Fisablen could turn the tables completely.

Chapter 379
Eidelwoke

"Good morning, Sir," greeted the patrolling soldiers.

Eidelwoke nodded before he ascended the stairs to the roof.

They were in Pedro. Centuries ago, a count named Pedro built the first castle here to defend against the grassland barbarian raids in hopes he could stop them from entering Winston. It had been destroyed and rebuilt numerous times of the subsequent centuries. The moss-covered stone platforms still had lots of blade marks. Some were even rust-colored as a result of blood draining into their clefts, signs of the cruel sieges the castle'd weathered.

Pedro only saw peace after the Krissen Empire was formed and the barbarian territory now Wild Husbandry was conquered. Afterward, it became the connection between Winston and Wild Husbandry. As Windbury became the largest livestock trading area, the path through Pedro became more and more important for Wild Husbandry's herders, who had to travel to Windbury. They would often rest there in the middle of their journey. The merchants soon saw an opportunity to trade there. Over many years Pedro gradually grew into the city it was today.

The conflict between the three princes, which eventually led to the seven years civil war, didn't disturb Pedro's peace. However, the livestock market at Windbury's ruin did land Pedro a killing blow. Herders no longer traveled to Windbury with their livestock, so the merchants' trading posts eventually closed down. When the second prince founded Iblia, the heavy taxes he levied caused the population to dwindle even further. It was further exacerbated by the second prince's expedition against the Melein duchy, who moved the last garrison force away from Pedro, abandoning it for good.

It didn't take long for the city to become a haven for deserters and bandits. It became a lawless paradise. Duke Fisablen deployed his forces to eradicate the bandits that frequently caused trouble for the herders in Wild Husbandry and took it under his personal control. In contrast to the ignorant and incompetent second prince, the duke regarded the city with great importance. He considered it a strategic location that

could put pressure on the prince and control Windbury. He ordered his eldest disciple, Viscount Kristoph, to guard it with two divisions of the frontier legions' soldiers.

When House Kenmays built the iron suspension bridge in the east Northlands, connecting their dominion to Wild Husbandry, two trade routes formed to Eastwild and Winston respectively. The various goods produced by House Norton was marketed in droves to the two through the salt merchant committee, which was operated by Duke Kenmays, who was a count back then. The products were really popular. As a result, merchant convoys began to see Pedro as a fitting place to rest and the city recovered a bit of its former merriness.

However, when House Norton wanted to pay the second prince back for sending Blademaster Zarinan to assassinate their leader, they mobilized their soldiers to conquer Windbury and captured the second prince. Viscount Kristoph, stationed at Pedro to guard the city, led its two divisions to stop their forces and ended up a captive following his defeat. While Duke Fisablen resolved the tense situation between the two houses with the arms deal and ransomed the viscount and his two divisions, he nevertheless became aware and wary of the four houses.

Even so, Duke Fisablen never imagined the four's attack would be so sudden and savage. The sole division from Fourth Frontier stationed in the city only lasted a night under Tigersoar's fierce assault. Fourth Frontier was badly beaten by the Nortons' Jaeger soon after and forced to retreat to Soxius' east bank. At the same time, Pedro was being rebuilt into a citadel with even stronger defenses.

As the leader of the 23rd local defense brigade, Eidelwoke was currently rather disturbed. He had taken in around ten thousand of Jaeger's remaining forces three days ago and they brought him a piece of bad news: Jaeger had suffered a great defeat. All the soldiers said the barbarians were all over the place. They had fought for a full night and still lost. In the end, they were separated from the main force and had no choice but to retreat, The last order they received was to break out of the encirclement.

The worst part was that the 23rd local defense brigade wasn't assigned any messenger eagles; there was no way to send word out. After all, messenger eagles were incredibly hard to train and were only given to the main combat units and the Oceanic Legion. For the local defense legion, communication was only established between the divisions and they had to rely on mounted messengers.

While it had been approximately six months since Pedro was conquered, it was

currently defended by only the three thousand soldiers of the 23rd local defense brigade. There were another ten thousand laborers working on construction. Only half of it had been completed in six months. The only thing Eidelwoke was happy about was that the completed half was facing Wild Husbandry. In other words, when the grassland barbarians launched their attack, the 23rd Local would have complete battlements to rely on.

After receiving reports from the soldiers about Jaeger's defeat, Eidelwoke immediately sent someone to Windbury with a call for reinforcements. He had a strong feeling that House FIsablen and the grassland barbarians would soon attack Pedro. Thinking back to the soldier's looks of despair, he didn't think he could hold the city with only three thousand men. He had to get more reinforcements!

Unfortunately, the messenger that returned the next day with more bad news. The legion commander, Baron Freiyar, wasn't present in Windbury. Only Baron Camorra and the city governor nominated by Lorist, Viscount Eidis, was there. When they received word from Eidelwoke, Baron Camorra was of the opinion that Pedro had to be held no matter what. However, only 21st Local was defending Windbury and Baron Freiyar wasn't around to mobilize the soldiers.

Despite that, Baron Camorra and Viscount Eidis gave Eidelwoke two pieces of hope. Camorra promised that the five security brigades sent to escort a convoy would be sent to reinforce Pedro the moment they returned. Viscount Eidis couldn't transfer 21st Local, however. He could only assign them to defend Windbury. However, he would rally the old nobles' private armies to reinforce Pedro. It required time, however. He estimated they'd only arrive in six days.

Camorra also gave Eidelwoke an idea. He suggested the ten thousand laborers be organized into a militia. Given the urgent situation, the fact that a local defense brigade leader like Eidelwoke didn't have any power to recruit soldiers was irrelevant. As long as he could hold Pedro, Camorra was willing to bear all the consequences. If the city couldn't be held, House Norton's plan could not be realized. It was one of the most crucial parts of the plan.

Eidelwoke took Camorra's suggestion without hesitation and forcefully conscripted the ten thousand laborers into a militia. He stood now in front of this makeshift group.

"Duke Fisablen didn't just bring his own army, he also brought countless grassland barbarians," he began, "He allowed the barbarians to raid as they pleased and keep

what they take.

"Would you rather end up barbarians' slaves or resist them together and protect your families in Winston?

"Living as their slaves is far worse than death. The slaves rescued over the centuries have taught us that much. If you die a heroic death as a Norton soldier, you won't have to worry about your families' lives. Every dead soldier's family will be paid a handsome pension that will allow them to spend their days in bliss.

"And if you don't end up dead on the battlefield, you'll be greatly rewarded when we win. Whether you choose to retire or continue to serve as a soldier afterwards is up to you. House Norton doesn't mistreat those who serve it. Even if you retire, the house will give you priority for positions at the factories and workshops in the dominion. You'll also be prioritized when it comes to the distribution of houses and farmland. Think carefully; think well. Even though you're about to go onto the battlefield and face death, this is an opportunity for you all. You just need to place your bet."

In the end, all the laborers accepted conscription. Given that it was a time of war and chaos, Eidelwoke's words weren't wrong. This was a chance for them to take hold of their fate and change it. As a Norton soldier, the lives of their families would be guaranteed. It was far better than being enslaved and used as cannon fodder. If they were victorious and managed to survive somehow, a blissful future awaited them.

With another ten thousand men in hand, Eidelwoke breathed a sigh of relief. The only thing he wondered about was where House Fisablen's men were. It had already been three days, yet the enemy was nowhere to be seen. Their tardiness allowed Eidelwoke the precious time he needed to have the ten thousand laborers dig more than ten deep ditches in front of the city to defend against the swift barbarian cavalry.

It would be great if Tigersoar's logistics and support division were here… The city would be more secure at the very least and someone my superior would be responsible for everything, thought Eidelwoke as he leaned on the roof's railings.

It was too bad Tigersoar had been transferred to the frontlines in Southern three months earlier. While it was very successful during the second battle of Southern, they also suffered heavy casualties and required the support and care of the logistics and support division. At that time, it had still been sweeping through Wild Husbandry with great success. While Pedro was a strategic location, it had always been rather peaceful,

sizeable conflicts rarely broke out. It was out of anyone's expectations that Jaeger would suffer such a huge hit, making the city the enemy's next target.

"Time really flies, huh. It's already been ten years," mumbled Eidelwoke.

Looking at the ditch-covered ground, he was at a complete loss at how to defend the city.

This was the first large battle he would face. It was also the first actual siege since his appointment as 23rd Local's leader. It wasn't a training session or a drill, but an actual siege. He could still remember when he first saw Lorist ten years ago clearly. He had been just a small carpenter in the household bastide back then. His greatest responsibility was to gather sawdust for his mother, the kitchen head. The sawdust would be mixed into flour to bake bad-tasting black bread for the servants. He had asked his mother why they mixed sawdust into the flour.

"It's household tradition," his mother had said.

Those were the most difficult times the house ever faced. The first young master perished on the battlefield, the third young master died, and the old master passed after heading into battle with sickness. Even though the old master was his biological father, he didn't feel much grief following his passing. Instead, it was his mother who grieved the most. Not long after, House Kenmays caused trouble for them and encircled the bastide with their troops for three whole months, only to withdraw after running out of food.

At the time, everyone had been panic-stricken. Without the house's leader, everything fell to the old and sickly chief butler, Gleis. Pesha had wanted to raise the first young master's illegitimate son to household leader, but many objected. Molocinque and Wellickson's mothers came out and said their sons were more closely related to the old master given that they were his illegitimate children and claimed they had the right to inherit the position.

Naturally, his mother didn't want to lose out and also claimed he was a rightful heir. But he knew better than anyone he was but a consequence of the old master's advances when he was drunk. His mother was young and his personal maidservant, one of the eight at least. Which hadn't lain with the old master? His mother was only made head of the kitchen because she became pregnant. His mother loved the man dearly and didn't marry anyone else, unlike Molocinque and Wellickson's mothers,

who married other servants.

Lorist had come then. While he had been exiled by the house, nobody contested his right to inherit the position and the peerage. He still recalled the first day after the succession ceremony when Lorist taught the bad-tempered Pesha a huge lesson and asked him why he was sawing wood everyday. When he told him it was tradition, Lorist simply said it was a tradition not worth keeping. Already out of a job, he asked Lorist what he should do. Lorist suggested he join the household forces and serve the house. He must not let the Norton blood in his veins down, he had said.

In the short ten years since, the house had soared to the skies. Thinking back to the difficulties they faced when they initially tried to develop, he was incredibly thankful that Lorist ended up the leader. A clueless, illegitimate child like him even ended up a two-star-silver-ranked knight. He now even bore the proud Norton name and was a member of the family. Nowadays, Molocinque and Wellickson served as division commanders of the garrison in Hanayabarta. He himself had a position as the leader of 23rd Local.

Maybe this is where it all ends for me.

He looked at the Raging Bear flapping in the skies above the city. His face eventually settled into a resolute expression.

I am a Norton! I will not let my family's honor down! I will not sully our name! As long as I breathe, Pedro will not fall!

A waft of black smoke rose from a peak near the city. The scouts were sounding the alarm.

"Blow the horn; ring the alarm! Everyone to attention! The enemy is here!" yelled Eidelwoke at the top of his voice.

Chapter 380
100 Thousand Barbarian Cavalry

Seeing the smoke signal from the distance, Duke Fisablen waved his horsewhip around.

"Send someone to survey the location. Prevent the Northlands lookouts from observing our activities," ordered he.

"By your command, Your Grace," responded a guard, nodding.

He turned to inform the others of the orders. A few moments later they set out.

The duke tugged on his horse's reins. The horde of grassland barbarian cavalry stopped their mounts as well. The mass of men and horses stretched beyond what the eye could see. Poles grew out of the sea of heads. On them, banners of different designs rustled in the wind.

He took out a telescope -- it was part of the spoils he got from defeating House Norton's Jaeger Legion -- and inspected Pedro, where the alarm bell rang.

On both ends of the city cliffs approximately ten meters high cut off any route around the settlement. Right in the middle between them ran a steep slope, about one and a half kilometers from cliff to cliff. On the horizon above the slope, towering over the city walls, stood a huge stone castle. It marked the crossing point of Pisper; Pedro, part city, part citadel.

Pisper lay between Winston and the northeastern grasslands, a natural border. A wall thousands of meters tall and about as wide. There was, however, a large gap in the mountain range that allowed the opposite sides to be connected. If one stood on top of the mountain, perched on the peak of the slope, one should be able to see the grassy plains beyond.

It was precisely because of this hole in the wall that Count Pedro decided, all those years ago, to erect a fort at the slope's peak. He hoped it would stop the grassland barbarians' raids into Winston. The citadel that peaked into the duke's vision,

however, had changed its appearance greatly. It was far more than just a frontier fort, it was a full-fledged man-made mountain, complete with extensive defensive fortifications.

"It's only been six months! House Norton is very reckless with its spending. They actually managed to completely reform Pedro's fort into a full-fledged citadel. That kid really thought this through. His moves are firm and leave no gaps for me to exploit," the duke mumbled to himself as he lowered the telescope with a slight tinge of regret, "I should've ignored the squabbles of the grassland barbarian chiefs and forced them to go south and attack Pedro after defeating Jaeger three days ago. At least, I would've been able to capitalize on the element of surprise. Now three days have passed… Pedro must be prepared for me. I guess there's no choice. We have to force our way in."

"Well, I don't really mind since the troops to die aren't from my house," he sighed after a moment's thought, "It's about time those arrogant barbarians were taught a lesson. They all think they're at the top of the world. Did they think they could really conquer the realm with only 100 thousand cavalrymen? The more idiots perish, the better it'll be."

When he had left Boblige two months ago to return to his dominion, he gave the conscription order to the various tribes across the northeastern plains. However, he didn't employ force. Instead, he presented himself as the one who would help and guide them across the realm of civilized man. They would raid together and profit together as partners to satisfy their respective needs.

He managed to gather 150 thousand cavalrymen quickly. After spending a month to instill the smallest amount of discipline required in them and filling Fourth Frontier's ranks again, he set his sights on House Norton's Jaeger which had swept across Wild Husbandry. After a series of schemes and plots, he successfully ambushed the legion and inflicted great damage on it, eliminating a large part of its forces. Only a small number managed to escape to The Northlands.

However, he realized there were many situations beyond his control during the attack that ultimately cut him short of eliminating the legion completely. The main factor was his soldiers' insubordination. All the barbarian chieftains wanted their tribe stationed in the rear for fear of suffering heavy casualties. The chieftains' lack of confidence filtered through to their men, many of whom broke rank and tried to preserve their own lives when the situation looked unfavorable.

There was nothing he could do about it. He was no different, he, too, had tried to preserve Fourth Frontier. The casualty count after the battle was like a wake-up call for the chieftains, though. While Jaeger lost close to 30 thousand men, the barbarian cavalry incurred more than 60 thousand, 30 thousand of which were dead, with the pained cries of the other 20 thousand injured resonating across the battlefield.

After sending more than ten thousand barbarians, injured beyond saving, back to War God Singwa's embrace, the duke fulfilled his end of the promise and treated the lightly injured. The chieftains were engaged in an intense argument over the battle's spoils. They had delayed everything for three whole days, foiling the duke's plan to head south and take Pedro by surprise. He had no choice but to find a way to mediate between them, lest the chieftains break into a full-on conflict for the sake of spoils.

The spoils they were referring to were the armor, weapons, and warhorse equipment of the dead Jaeger soldiers. There were also the steel ballistae left behind by the carroballista brigade as well as the thousand plus soldiers and five thousand lightly injured personnel that were taken captive. The heavily injured ones had already been beheaded. There were approximately 16 thousand complete sets of equipment stripped from the captive and dead soldiers as well as near four hundred undamaged steel ballistae. Those were the main cause of the chieftains' arguments. Even the spoiled equipment or ballistae were not spared as metal was most scarce on the plains.

Duke Fisablen made the magnanimous sacrifice and gave up his right to distribute the goods and only demanded the captives and lightly injured personnel as well as two hundred undamaged carroballistae. His self-sacrificing move won the barbarians' praise. The duke suggested another idea. Half of the spoils would be divided according to the respective casualties incurred by each tribe. Naturally, the tribes that were too impatient and ended up losing most of their members were ignored since it was only a matter of time before they were assimilated into other tribes. The other half would be distributed evenly to all of the barbarians. In other words, while the strong would get most of the reward, the weak would also have something left.

The tribes were finally placated. The plentiful spoils attracted even more barbarians and their numbers soon rose back to 100 thousand. The chieftains quickly forgot about the heavy casualties they had previously incurred. When the duke got to know from the captives that only a brigade of three thousand defended Pedro, the barbarian chiefs were already clamoring to go south.

To the naïve chieftains, Jaeger was the most impressive enemy they had to face. Given that they had already paid such a huge price to defeat such a great enemy, they believed what remained were merely weaklings to be picked off, nothing worth mentioning. In their minds, 100 thousand barbarian cavalrymen were enough to sweep the whole of Winston. Perhaps, they would even restore the honor of their ancestors and get to water their horses at Egret Lake.

"Lord Duke, my dearest lion, why did you stop in your tracks?" asked an eerie-sounding voice as a few majestic warhorses galloped towards the duke.

The guards beside Duke Fisablen wore looks of rage. Some of them had their hands by the hilts of their swords, while others gripped their spears and lances so tightly their veins popped to the surface. With one word, they would not hesitate to storm the northeastern plains. Even though all the chieftains addressed Duke Fisablen as Regal Lion Duke or Your Leonine Grace, the person that just showed up called the duke '**my** dearest lion' in a way he would his pet. It was a huge slight on his honor and the young hot-blooded guards glared at the approaching group with anger and hostility.

Duke Fisablen raised his horsewhip without the slightest change in expression to stop his subordinates from doing anything rash. At the same time, he greeted the riders as they arrived.

"My brother, Beloved Chieftain Korinubi, we've arrived. Do you see that castle atop that slope? That's the city of Pedro. I think we should set up camp here and discuss how we will attack after settling down."

Korinubi was a great grassland barbarian tribe that had a population of approximately 100 thousand. They were able to call on 30 thousand battle-ready cavalrymen and were not among the tribes that had submitted to the duke. Instead, Korinubi had always maintained a trade relationship. This time around, Duke Fisablen prepared a lot of gifts to convince the whole of the tribe to head south together, with raiding Winston their goal.

The chieftain was a short, thin man of forty or fifty years. He looked rather martially challenged, but no one doubted his cunning. Duke Fisablen always felt really tired after dealing with Korinubi's chieftain. He wondered how such an oddity managed to surface in the great plains where martial prowess was paramount. All Korinubi chieftains were named after the tribe. It was part of their tradition. After inheriting the position, they would cast away their former name and be addressed only with the

name of the tribe.

Chieftain Korinubi completed his mission during their attack on Jaeger perfectly with his 30 thousand cavalry. Their mission was to harass the enemy at range and not engage in close quarters combat at the frontlines. In spite of their relatively removed role, they managed to obtain most of the spoils. In the southward march that followed, the tribe also absorbed four smaller tribes and expanded their numbers to 40 thousand.

Perhaps because of the increase in the men under his command, Chieftain Korinubi relaxed his attitude towards the duke. The duke had only brought ten thousand men on the march. After all, he was only there to guide the way. The main force was the 100 thousand barbarians. There was no need for him to bring along a lot of men. He would also get the least spoils this way and everyone was happy with the arrangement.

"Setting up camp?" Chieftain Korinubi looked at the sky and smiled rather exaggeratedly.

"It's still early. Why don't we just rush straight at Pedro and attack? We won't have to set up camp that way. We can celebrate our victory in the city itself."

"My dear Chieftain, if we can have 100 thousand soldiers encircle Pedro immediately, I don't doubt it will fall in half an hour," Duke Fisablen said as he pointed at the city with his horsewhip, "But please take a look. That's the only way through Pisper and it's rather small. Those cliffs resemble a horn; it gets narrower the higher it goes. Pedro also occupies most of the space in between. We can only have about three thousand men effectively deployed at a time. There's no way we can attack all at once. The city has already made its preparations. I believe it's best we discuss our approach beforehand."

Chieftain Korinubi shielded his eyes from the sun as he leered at the city in the distance, Without a telescope, he wasn't able to see how prepared it was. After giving it a good look, he turned back to the duke.

"Leonine Duke, are you sure we can really only deploy three thousand men at a time like the captives said?"

Duke Fisablen laughed as he shook his head.

"There's no way to confirm the claim. Before we launch our attack, I won't be able to

grasp the state of their defenses. After all, three days have passed. Perhaps lots of reinforcements have already arrived. We've truly delayed for far too long."

Korinubi fell deep into thought before he made his decision.

"I will have my men probe their defenses. If they only have three thousand men defending the city, we will take Pedro in no time. What do you think?"

The duke knew the chieftain had made his decision out of greed. When they were traveling southward, it was established that the tribe that conquered a town or city would be given control of it. They could keep whatever they pilfered from it. Nobody would be allowed to violate their rights to the spoils under oath to their gods.

The moment he heard there were only three thousand soldiers defending the city, Korinubi became anxious Even if it took him three men to kill one of the defenders, it was still more than worth it if he could take Pedro for himself. He could even use the place to recover while the other barbarian tribes tested the waters in Winston. If things went south, they would be able to retreat to the northeastern great plains easily. If a lot was made through raiding and pillaging, the returning barbarian tribes would have to submit to him before they returned to the great plains because he controlled the passageway. Perhaps, he might even manage to swallow a few more smaller tribes.

"Why not?" the duke said as he nodded warmly, "The mighty Korinubi tribe has the strength to emerge victorious. The city's guard pales in comparison to your tribe."

Korinubi smiled, elated.

"Thank you for your praise, Leonine Duke. I believe it as well. I'm very confident in the tribe's warriors."

He instructed the barbarian guards next to him.

"Have Halikai, Lunigigi, and Morimod attack the city! Tell them the one who breaches the city will be greatly rewarded. I'll behead the one who doesn't contribute!"

Darn, no wonder the fellow was willing to take in the smaller tribes on the way. He wanted to use them as fodder, cursed the duke.

The three names were the smaller tribes Korinubi had absorbed along the way here. They were each less than a thousand. Originally, they wanted to get the scraps of what

was left by coming along but they became Korinubi's targets and were forcefully absorbed.

The low-pitched blare of a horn spread out over the grasslands as the horde called out.

'Korinubi! Korinubi! Korinubi! Korinubi!'

The barbarians considered being the first to enter battle a sign of bravery and honor. However, the thousands of cavalrymen called to participate didn't look too willing. They were escorted by a thousand more from the Korinubi tribe and divided into three units quite messily after a good while. The three units were sent towards the slope on which Pedro stood.

On the 11th day of the 11th month of Year 1778, at around ten in the morning, the 100 thousand barbarian cavalrymen surrounded Pedro. The bloody siege battle had begun.

Chapter 381
The Bloody Battle of Pedro (1)

People and horses rolled down the slope. The first wave of attacking barbarians, around two thousand riders, were crushed before they even scaled half of the slope. Of the riders flung off their mounts, the fortunate ones were still not beyond salvation, while those less fortunate broke their necks and suffocated to death. The second and third waves of barbarian riders following tightly behind them stopped their mounts immediately and began to rescue the rest. After a lot of effort, they turned tail and ran. The cheering barbarians all seemed to have been given a face slap and no longer uttered a sound. They made no further movements on the city.

Chieftain Korinubi's expression was rather sour. He felt like he lost a lot of face for stopping his attack halfway.

"Go, get Halikai, Lunigigi, and Morimod here. I want to hear their explanation for stopping their attack."

The barbarian guards soon returned with the two of the three.

"Revered Chief Korinubi, your humble servants Halikai and Morimod greet you."

"Where is Lunigigi?" hmphed the chief.

"Revered Chief Korinubi, Lunigigi has returned to the embrace of the wolf god," replied Morimod, the elder of the two, respectfully.

"What did you say?!" the chief exclaimed, stunned, "He's dead? Nonsense. How could he die? He drank a large jar of my milk wine yesterday and one of my roast goats! Wasn't he looking well when he was sent out?"

"It's true, Revered Chief Korinubi. Your humble servant dares not lie to you. The brave Lunigigi rode at the front as per your instructions. However, the cowardly flatlanders dug lots of horse pit traps on the slope. His steed stepped into one of them and broke its right front leg. Lunigigi was flung off forward. He broke his neck and returned to the wolf god's embrace," described Morimod in detail.

"What? The slope was fraught with pit traps?"

"Yes, Revered Chief. Your humble servant doesn't lie. Of the two thousand riders Lunigigi took with him, more than 1300 lost their horses to the pits. More than a thousand are injured. Over a hundred returned to the wolf god's embrace just like Lunigigi. Not only did the flatlanders dig pit traps, they also dug a lot of other ditches and traps with wooden stakes inside. There was no way we could rush up the slope with our horses. We decided to retreat first," explained Morimod hurriedly.

He wanted to make it clear it wasn't that they didn't want to fight. They simply had no way to.

"Hmm, I hope you speak the truth," said Korinubi as he swept Halikai and Morimod with his gaze.

Seeing the two of them stand there like the most natural thing in the world, he reasoned that they couldn't have been lying, so he turned to Duke Fisablen.

"Haha, no problem, my friend."

As Duke Fisablen also heard the conversation, he took the initiative to speak first.

"I will leave the shield carts we brought with you. I'm sure you know better than anyone how to use them. With the shield carts, you can fill up the ditches quickly enough while protecting your riders as they approach the city walls. I think it's obvious from the number of traps and ditches they don't have nearly enough troops to defend the castle. They had no choice but to use such underhanded tactics to delay our brave warriors' attack."

Even though Korinubi had hoped the duke would send Frontier to use the shield carts and protect his men as they made their approach, the duke had spoken out first and stated his intentions.

You can have all the shield carts you want but don't even think of laying your hands on my men.

Hatefully cursing the old fox under his breath, Korinubi nodded and thanked him. He instructed Morimod and Halikai to collect the shield carts. He also had some of the barbarian riders dismount and grab some tools to fill the traps, ditches, and holes up and down the slope.

Duke Fisablen gave the order to set up camp and Korinubi didn't bother to stop him. As pushing the shield carts up the slope would take who knew how long, and filling up the traps and ditches would require lots of manpower and time, there was no way they'd let the 100 thousand barbarian cavalrymen wait like idiots on their mounts. Korinubi postponed the attack by a day and stuck with establishing a method for the attack for what's left of the current day.

At four in the morning, they'd managed to push the shield carts 300 meters up the slope. As the people in Pedro didn't seem to respond at all, the tool-wielding barbarians dropped their guard and focused their attention on filling up the traps and ditches. Korinubi had given the order for one route of attack to be established by the end of the day. As not one of the barbarian soldiers wanted to be punished, they only thought of completing their work as soon as possible so they could rest when they returned.

Without anyone noticing, the 23rd local defense brigade, led by Eidelwoke, formed an assault unit around a thousand strong. It left through the rear gate and circled the moat, approaching where the barbarians were. When they were less than ten meters away, they leaped and rushed into the crowd of busy soldiers.

It was a complete massacre. The four thousand or so barbarian soldiers filling up the ditches were caught completely off guard and met tragic ends. When their enemy showed up, they panicked and forgot where they put their weapons. The tools in their hands were broken by a single slash before they felt a cold glint and lost consciousness, seeing nothing but darkness.

The 100 thousand soldiers who'd settled down in the camp stared wide-eyed at the massacre atop the slope. All of the working barbarians were slaughtered easily like chickens. Only a fortunate few managed to run down the slope, crying for their parents. However, they were not so lucky in the sense of having left the shield carts behind. Due to the inactivity of Pedro's defenders, they didn't feel the need to push the heavy shield carts up the slope, so they proceeded without them.

Currently, the carts were obstacles to their escape. The groups weren't able to squeeze between them as the barbarians behind began to let out pained cries. The local defense brigade soldiers that caught up were able to pierce three enemies' chests with only one thrust of their spears.

The barbarians in the camp finally snapped out of their stupor and reacted. They let

out beastly cries and got onto their mounts without caring about anything else. They rode for the slope. At that time, the city's bell rang out once more. The local defense brigade soldiers that came out to launch a surprise attack didn't pursue their enemy. Instead, they took out the leather sacks slung on their sides and splashed the fuel contained within on those huge, wooden shield carts before they ignited them. More than 50 bonfires were lit on the slope. Following that, the local defense soldiers stayed to loot the dead barbarians before returning to Pedro.

Only around seven hundred of the original four thousand barbarians managed to make it back. They left approximately three thousand corpses on the slope along with the 50 shield carts that were all set alight. That was a huge and harsh slap to the faces of all the grassland barbarians.

The riders rode to reinforce their comrade with fervent anger. They had just received the other seven hundred plus who managed to escape and stared red-eyed at the corpses of their fellow tribesmen that littered the slope. The mocking laughter and cheers from Pedro sounded ever so ear-piercing. One of the grassland barbarians cried loudly in a crazed manner and rode speedily upwards the slope. Countless other riders joined him in his endeavor with similarly pained cries and launched their attack on Pedro.

The riders' skill seemed to improve thanks to their anger. They rode speedily up the slope, almost seeming like they were flying up the uneven terrain as they passed the burning shield carts and avoided the corpses of their tribesmen, approaching the walls at breakneck speed. But they ran into some trouble when they were less than three hundred meters from the walls. The ditches and pit traps began to slow them down. Some riders would fall from time to them from the traps or ended up in ditches because of riding too quickly. However, those whose heads were filled with wrath and felt no fear. Those able to get back up after their mounts collapsed continued running at the city while waving their weapons around as they called out loudly to plead for the protection of the wolf god.

"Fire!" Seeing the grassland barbarian troops appearing within two hundred meters of the walls, Eidelwoke finally gave the order.

Following the subsequent twangs, the first volley of the two hundred plus steel ballistae mounted on the walls blanketed the battlefield, skewering the approaching barbarians, mounted or otherwise. Many of them were nailed to the ground by the bolts along with their mounts. Cries of pain and agony reverberated throughout the

slope.

While the two hundred or so bolts gave the grassland barbarians quite a harsh blow, even more barbarian cavalrymen took their place. They ignored the skewered bodies in front of them as well as the incoming ballistae attacks as they rode onwards towards Pedro, shouting to raise their morale and courage while they were at it.

"Steel ballistae, fire at will! Longbowmen, standby! Fire when the enemy is a hundred meters away! There's no need to wait for further orders!" instructed Eidelwoke once more.

House Norton's local defense brigades comprised two regiments of sword-and-shield infantrymen, approximately a thousand of them, one regiment of five hundred heavy-armored pikemen, one regiment of five hundred longbowmen, one regiment of five hundred ballistae soldiers armed with a hundred ballistae, as well as a logistics regiment of five hundred men. If they were tasked with defending a location, they would be assigned another hundred steel ballistae to be manned by the regiment of sword-and-shield soldiers. The 23rd local defense brigade was stationed in Pedro and assigned two hundred steel ballistae in total, which were all installed on the front wall by Eidelwoke and were engaged in a different type of massacre against the barbarian riders.

The first surprise attack by the local defense brigade soldiers gathered by Eidelwoke was conducted with close combat. But now, the soldiers manning the steel ballistae were engaging in ranged combat with the approaching cavalry. As soon as one of them evaded the traps and leaped over the ditch, the ballistae bolts that followed would put an end to their anger and effort in an instant. From time to time, soldiers would be sent flying by the bolts and fall into the ditches or onto the ground. Not one got to within a hundred meters of the walls thanks to the storm of ballistae bolts.

Korinubi and many other chieftains were calling out loudly to motivate their men.

"Rush up there! Kill them all! Massacre the whole city!"

In the end, Duke Fisablen was no longer able to resist and reminded, "I think it's best we retreat for now. If we want to mount an attack, we can use the shield carts left. Rushing up there right now would make you nothing but targets and sacrifice the lives of our brave warriors."

Korinubi snapped out of his blinding rage.

"That's right! Blow the horn and have our warriors retreat for now!"

The loud blaring of the horn covered the whole plains and the attacking barbarian riders finally regained their sanity. They retreated from the slope like a receding wave, leaving behind a fresh trail of blood and corpses.

Then they had all made it back to camp, the chieftains conducted a head count. They were all deeply enraged. Before they even launched a proper attack, more than six thousand had died on the slopes. Korinubi himself was incredibly regretful as his tribe had already lost around four thousand men from the first attempt at filling up the holes and ditches and the second retaliatory attack which he personally encouraged.

Duke Fisablen advised, "Even though it didn't start off well, we managed to get an understanding of Pedro's defenses. Taking a loss due to carelessness isn't much. Let's rest for a night and attack the city tomorrow."

Korinubi refused Duke Fisablen's advise coldly with bloodshot eyes.

"No, we will press our attack through the night. I will not allow them to rest well for even one more night. A debt of blood must be repaid in blood. We have 100 thousand men, and from now on, I won't give them even a moment of rest. We will continue to attack until we conquer the city. Great Lion Duke, please leave the remaining shield carts with us. We will organize our men into different units and have them take turns attacking."

"Naturally. We are allies and should stand together. I will have all the shield carts I have left sent to you. At the same time, I pray for your success in conquering the city and avenging the brave warriors lost so far," agreed Duke Fisablen with a smile.

The horn rang out once more and three square formations of barbarian soldiers gathered at the foot of the slope. Each of the formations contained five thousand men. In front were roughly thirty wooden shield carts. These barbarians had dismounted and were split into three waves that would push the shield carts up the slope towards the city. The orders received by the first wave were simple: collect their comrades' corpses as they close in on the city. The second wave would use longbows to suppress the enemy and defend the other barbarian soldiers who would fill up the holes and ditches. Naturally, they would also have to pay attention so any surprise attack like the

last one wouldn't be repeated.

The third wave was the attack's main force. Apart from bringing shield carts, they also carried many wooden ladders. After the second wave opened a path towards Pedro, they would approach the walls. They would then scale them with the ladders as the longbowmen protected them and slaughter away at the enemy when they made it to the top. They would take control of the area so their comrades could continue to flood into the city and obtain victory.

That was the traditional siege tactic used by the barbarians against flatlander towns for the past few centuries. That was the reason the third wave of barbarian soldiers comprised only the most famous warriors and strongmen across all the tribes. Currently, they were drinking the milk wine from their water skins nonchalantly as they packed up their armor and waved the weapons in their hands around, laughing and talking loudly as the other barbarian soldiers looked at them respectfully.

The skies soon darkened and the shield carts that laid across the near-one-kilometer slope burned even brighter. The horn blared once more. The only difference was the steadily thudding drums that accompanied it. The booming drums echoed across the wide expanses of the plains and brought with them a feeling of cold dread.

The barbarians at the foot of the slope all let out a chilling war cry.

"Hujorah!"

That was the name of the celestial wolf god that all the grassland barbarians across the great northeastern plains worshipped. Calling out the name symbolized a single-minded determination on marching forward to victory or to death. The first wave of the barbarians marched up the slope, pushing the shield carts as they advanced. The siege on Pedro had begun.

Chapter 382
The Bloody Battle of Pedro (2)

The cheers in Pedro resounded through the pass and across the lower lands on both sides of the mountain range. Both attempts by the barbarians to take the walls had failed, with their corpses littered all over the slope. There was an estimated five or six thousand. The casualties sustained by the defending side, on the other hand, was negligible. The first attack only caused ten casualties while a few fools hurt themselves with their own carelessness during the second. They were mostly skin-deep wounds, though. It gave the conscripted soldiers a great boost to their confidence. They thought the barbarians were nothing much and their numbers weren't a cause for concern.

Eidelwoke wasn't too optimistic about the situation, in contrast. In fact, he was fraught with incessant worry. When the soul-chilling horns and drums were played on the plains as the barbarians cried out 'Hujorah', he knew the thing he was most worried about was about to happen. The enemy had already been enraged by their two failed attempts and were going to press the attack through the night. For the soldiers defending the city, the most difficult hurdle was now here

The first wave pushed the shield carts near the walls in short order. Thanks to the light from the burning carts, the guards on the walls could easily see the barbarians were collecting the corpses of their comrades.

"Sir, they' collecting their corpses. Do you think they'll attack again tonight?" asked one of the guards, hope written on his forehead.

"Maybe. I am not too sure about their plans either. They're still far away, we shouldn't fire now. If they're only here to collect the corpses, we'll spare them. But they might be doing so to have an easier time attacking later. We should be careful," said Eidelwoke solemnly.

The skies soon darkened completely and the shield carts looked like silhouettes in the dark connected next to each other. Some of the flaming carts were extinguished. What they were doing behind them was no longer visible. Not only did the shield carts arranged next to each other obscure much of the light, it also blocked the defenders' vision.

"Longbowmen, fire a few fire arrows[1]. Let's see what they're up to," instructed Eidelwoke.

Tens of lights arced across the night sky in a beautiful parabola before they planted themselves in the ground behind the carts. The defenders intended to see what their enemy were up to by relying on the faint illumination the arrows provided.

"They are filling the ditches!" called out a voice.

"The barbarians are going to attack tonight!" Eidelwoke's heart sunk.

With the cover of night, the enemy was much harder to deal with. It definitely wouldn't be as easy as it was during daytime.

"Steel ballistae one through ten, get some oil jars over there. Tie them at the front of the bolts and fire at the shield carts[2]! Longbowmen, loose your fire arrows at the shield carts as well!"

Eidelwoke gave two consecutive orders. Without delay, ten jars filled with flammable oil were tied at the head of bolts before they were fired at the shield carts. While they didn't harm anyone, the jars shattered against their targets and covered them in fuel. The fire arrows soon descended from the skies onto the shield carts and set them alight one after another.

"Very well," Eidelwoke said with satisfaction for his impromptu idea, "Steel ballistae one to ten, continue tying jars to the bolts and firing them at the carts. The rest will fire at the burning carts as illumination. Your targets are the enemies trying to fill the ditches. Longbowmen, continue to rain arrows down on them!"

The soldiers toiling away below had already noticed the fires on their shield carts. As the ones that hurried to put the fires out were taken out, the rest pushed the burning carts away from the ones not yet set alight. The others ignored the rain of arrows by raising their shields over their heads after each volley was fired and continued to fill up the ditches in the intervals at an even greater speed. They were less than a hundred meters from the walls at the moment, but they'd run out of options. All the remaining carts that protected them were burning. The ground below the walls was bright as day with all the fires.

Less than two hours after the first wave retreated, however, another closed in. Each soldier had a sack of mud on his back. Under the carts' protection, they emptied their

sacks into the ditches and soon established a way through which they could pass.

All the longbowmen changed from firing arced shots to firing directly at their targets. The ballistae also fired non-stop. However, there were far too many enemies on the slope. In the darkness, the shots weren't that accurate either. No matter how many casualties the barbarians suffered, they kept swarming forward. They filled the ditches and fired back at the men on the walls from the safety of their carts. The guards' casualties started piling up.

"Ah!"

One of the ballista operators cried in pain and collapsed, his hand clasping an arrow sticking out of his right eye. After his hands and legs twitched, he stopped moving altogether. The soldier reloading the ballista shouted 'Brother!' before he hatefully pulled the trigger with the ballista aimed at the man responsible for his friend's death.

The walls hissed and clinked as hundreds of arrows bounced off them. Ten laborers busy rescuing the injured were caught in the middle of the volley and collapsed after taking tens of arrows each. Unlike the local defense soldiers who were equipped with good armor, they suffered huge casualties.

"Over there!"

One of the soldiers quickly noticed where the barbarian longbowmen were gathered. They were standing behind a flaming shield cart. A dozen ballistae fired in that direction.

"Hujorah!"

Yet another group of barbarians pushed more than ten shield carts up the slope swiftly.

"Have the ballistae and longbowmen pay attention to the barbarian archers. Suppress them!" Eidelwoke just gave an order that he would soon come to regret deeply.

Pedro's walls were six meters tall and their gate was reinforced with a layer of iron, with another huge portcullis behind. What could the barbarians do even if they managed to reach the entrance? It would take them far longer to breach the gates with the weapons they wielded, so Eidelwoke decided to target the barbarian archers instead as they were the only ones who posed a threat at the moment.

He didn't expect that the barbarians who rushed over to be so agile and swift. They rushed to the foot of the walls and drew out many long ladders from behind their carts and laid them against the walls. Some of them even used grappling hooks to ascend the walls by flinging them between the crenels of the wall. Others thrust battleforce-infused spears into the walls to use as makeshift ladders.

"The barbarians have scaled the walls!"

Eidelwoke was startled by the cry. When he turned back, he saw a number of barbarians on the walls flinging their weapons against the defenders as they roared unintelligibly.

Not far away, another barbarian made it onto the wall. With but the cold glint of a blade, the ballista operator who was taking aim had his head lopped off. His neck fountained blood as he collapsed. Before the three soldiers next to him could react, they were taken out as well.

Filled with rage, Eidelwoke drew his sword and rushed forward. The moment the barbarian saw Eidelwoke's blade which didn't have a blade glow, he let his guard down and thought the man a mere guard. He swung his shortsword up to parry as he thrust the dagger in his right at Eidelwoke's throat.

Before he could react, Eidelwoke's longsword shimmered the moment it clashed with the barbarian's sword. The man could only look at the shimmer as it cut through his sword, his shoulder, and the rest of his body on its way to his abdomen.

Kicking away the bisected corpse, Eidelwoke followed up with a strike that sent another barbarian just about to scale the walls back down.

He got some jars and smashed them against a nearby ladder. He held a torch against the two legs. His breathing only resumed once he saw the flames chase the other barbarians down the ladder.

"Have the close combat forces come to the walls immediately. Have the reserves armed with pikes and stand by as well."

It was too bad the order was given too late. More and more barbarians made their way up the walls with every passing moment. The five-man ballista teams couldn't deal with the savage assault. Many ballistae stopped firing and the number of barbarians beneath the walls increased as well.

Eidelwoke realized his mistake. He had allocated most of the space on the two-meter-wide walls to the steel ballistae, longbowmen, and laborers to supply more ammunition. So, he wasn't able to station any close combat forces on the walls. He had thought the enemy couldn't get up the walls in the first place, so he allowed the pikemen and other foot soldiers to rest in their barracks. Who knew the barbarians would actually scale the walls so quickly?

"Retreat! Retreat to the towers and shut the gates. We'll keep firing at them from there!" yelled he when he noticed the number of barbarians on the walls increasing.

After Pedro was renovated into a defensive citadel, its structure was thus: the towers extended outwards from the city's walls and were two meters taller. On both sides of the central tower, walls about a hundred meters long stood. Both ends were fitted with towers again which served two functions: to go up and down the walls and to keep situations like the current one from becoming worse. Even if they lost the walls, they could still hold the towers so the city behind the walls wouldn't be compromised.

Eidelwoke grabbed a soldier nearby.

"Cinque, go assemble 50 steel ballistae on the second wall! Fire at the enemies on this wall, quick!"

The second inner wall was two meters higher than the outer and was roughly 50 meters away. It was the final line of defense for the citadel, besides the keep. The citadel would only truly fall if the second wall and the keep were conquered.

Cinque knew how urgent the situation was and left hastily without hesitation.

"You guys should follow," ordered Eidelwoke the longbowmen on the top of the towers.

They had already tried their best; none had fired less than 40 arrows. But the enemy was far too numerous. They attacked before the longbowmen were even allowed to rest and recuperate. During the time the steel ballistae suppressed the barbarian archers, some of the barbarians scaled the walls and they lost up to a hundred men.

Currently, the part where the battle was most heated was at the four towers on the walls. Each tower only had six openings for arrows facing the city walls, so only six arrows could be fired at a time and that was not the least problematic for the barbarians, who were filled with frenzy and excitement for conquering the outer

walls. They ignored the projectiles fired from the towers completely and attempted to use the shields and weapons in their hands to bash down at the towers' metal doors. Under the constant abuse, a large hole had been made in the metal door at the foot of the tower. Quickly, four to five pikes poked out from the hole with lightning speed, piercing the barbarians in the chest.

Within the tower, the dozen heavy-armored pikemen stood in a semicircle with their pikes pointed at the entrance, thrusting and taking their enemies' lives when they caught sight of them. But from time to time, the dying barbarians would unleash their final attack and cause the pikemen great harm. The injured would soon be replaced by the other pikemen behind, though.

Corpses soon piled up at the towers' entrances, almost sealing it completely. However, the number of barbarians that made it up to the wall only increased. They pushed their dead tribesmen off the walls and rushed into the tower when the opening was widened before they turned into corpses themselves that were similarly flung off the walls.

There could never be enough soldiers to go about. Each heavy-armored pikeman regiment only numbered five hundred, so each of the four towers were only stationed with a little more than a hundred. As more and more pikemen were injured or killed, they were soon replaced by the sword-and-shield soldiers. However, they suffered even heavier casualties. Though they managed to hold on for a little longer, they were quickly pushed to their limits. Eidelwoke had no choice but to order the reserve soldiers into the fray.

Even the reserve soldiers were mostly laborers, they didn't receive even an ounce of training, nor were they properly armed. The most they could do was to push back at the enemy with their pikes. Their numbers diminished even faster than the two units before; approximately five or six of them died before one barbarian soldier could be killed. This time around, the corpses that piled up once more were those of the reserve soldiers.

When the dead or injured were dragged away to be replaced, some of the reserve soldiers crumbled and ran all over the place in panic after discarding their weapons. Eidelwoke could do naught but form an enforcement unit with the 60-odd remaining sword-and-shield soldiers to get rid of near a hundred deserters on the spot. Only after their heads were lopped off and mounted on the pikes was the situation back under control.

Just as the reserve soldiers were being sent to the meat grinder that was the four towers, the steel ballistae and longbowmen were finally in position at the second wall. They soon dealt a huge blow to the barbarians who thought that the city was finally within their grasp. There were no shield carts to protect them on the outer walls of the city, and the skewered barbarians soon fell from the walls like leaves from a tree.

The walls were filled with so many corpses that there was almost no space left for walking around. The amount of blood gathered there pooled up to one's ankles. Ballista bolts and feathered arrows decorated the corpses all over. From a distance, it looked like there was a small neat forest growing on the walls. The depressing horn tune of retreat could be heard as the barbarians at the slope began their retreat. The drums that seemed to have rumbled throughout the night had already quieted down and the bloodshot-eyed Eidelwoke who was covered in blood stood up with much difficulty by holding onto the railings of the walls. He looked down at the slope and only saw the silhouettes of a few retreating grassland barbarians who carried longbows.

The enemy finally retreated and Eidelwoke finally let out a breath of relief for having defended Pedro. However, the pain from his injury made him moan uncontrollably. He had got that when he was fighting off a dozen of barbarian warriors with ten-odd other local defense soldiers. The casualties they suffered were intense and Eidelwoke himself got hurt by three sword strikes and one axe strike. Fortunately, those hits weren't fatal and he was still able to command the troops to defend the castle after wrapping his wounds up.

"Sir, reinforcements! Reinforcements are here!" cried Cinque who was in command of the second wall. He rushed to the wall and held onto the wobbling Eidelwoke and said, "They're flying Lord Freiyar's banner! The legion commander has finally made it!"

Eidelwoke suddenly felt the urge to laugh when he recalled a joke that was passed around in the household forces about how reinforcements only ever arrived after the battle was over. But before he could say anything, he blacked out and lost consciousness.

Chapter 383
The Eccentric Queen

During the 11th day of the 11th month of Year 1778, 100 thousand barbarian cavalrymen attacked Pedro. The battle lasted until dawn. Corpses piled up like mountains and blood flowed in rivers. During the intense battle, the barbarians managed to take over the outermost wall for a time. However, the 23rd brigade of Fifth Local managed to successfully resist and keep the city from falling with only three thousand soldiers and ten thousand laborers. When dawn broke, the barbarians finally retreated, having suffering huge casualties.

Both sides had been bled, but 23rd Local's steadfastness allowed the four houses to eliminate Iblia. Winston and Southern were successfully annexed. It also enabled the four houses to gain the advantage over the War God of the Plains, Duke Fisablen. From that moment on, House Norton firmly suppressed the house and turned a new page in the chapter of the Ragebear dynasty.

Extract from Grindian Chronicles: Records of the Bear's Rise -- The Crimson Battle of Pedro

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'The 23rd brigade has 1728 men left. Most are injured and at least half of their gear and equipment have been worn out or ruined. The reserves formed from the laborers suffered four thousand casualties. The barbarians left more than twelve thousand corpses behind; their losses are estimated to be around 20 thousand. I've instructed the 22nd brigade and the first to fourth security brigades to move to Pedro. At the same time, Viscount Eidis will lead noble's private armies, totaling around six thousand, to Winston. The name list is as follows… '

Thus was the message sent by Freiyar. Lorist breathed a sigh of relief after he read it. Now that Pedro had successfully been defended, the strategy to eliminate Iblia had succeeded halfway. As long as he could conquer Boblige and chase House Fisablen's forces out of Southern, he could finish up perfectly. It would then be Duke Kenmays's turn to leverage their economic and trade power to suppress House Fisablen so they would submit. He wasn't the least bit interested in humoring the old fox and fighting

him in the open on the great northeastern plains.

Following the bloody battle, the 23rd brigade managed to hold Pedro despite losing over half of their number. Freiyar was full of praise for Eidelwoke, the one in charge of their side during the battle. Lorist really didn't think his illegitimate brother would have the ability and was truly happy for his sake. For the current House Norton, as long as the blood of the Nortons flowed in their descendants' veins, even in those of illegitimate children, it would be a great help if they were talented.

Now, Freiyar had arrived at Pedro and took over the defenses. With him there, Lorist no longer had to worry about Pedro's security. However, the battle reminded him that his strategy had almost gone completely wrong because of his own carelessness. Such an important place was under-defended; it had just a brigade three thousand strong. At the very least, there should have been three brigades.

Also, one brigade wasn't enough to defend strategic locations such as large cities. For instance, the 21st local defense brigade stationed at Windbury was in charge of both maintaining security and securing the city gates. If the enemy really attacked it, there was no way it could defend all four gates. Maybe a reorganization of the local defense legion was due. The 75 thousand troops were quite a force and splitting them over three provinces made commanding them a little difficult.

Just when Lorist was considering how he should split his forces, Howard walked into the tent.

"Your Grace, Baron Camorra sent a letter from Windbury; the queen is throwing another tantrum at Rose Palace. She claimed she would fast in protest of our impolite treatment and humiliation. Baron Camorra hopes you will deal with the queen soon so she doesn't continue to cause trouble for everyone."

Lorist couldn't help but admit the queen was truly a weird one. Not only didn't she care about the kingdom's survival, she also didn't bother with her title. All she wanted was to participate in parties, balls, and banquets, to indulge in nothing but pleasure. Even after Windbury was conquered, she wasn't moved and didn't even bother finding out about her father, Duke Fisablen, who had been clashing with the four houses in Southern. She only demanded she be treated in a manner fitting of her status as queen. She even tried to seduce Camorra and Freiyar.

While she was a beauty, she was already nearing her fifties. The two were naturally

not interested, perhaps out of concern for Lorist's reputation. Having been refused by the Northlands' nobles and officials, the queen, with the help of her maidservants, actually brought the soldiers standing guard at the palace gates into her chambers. The next morning, they emerged with large bags under their eyes and pale faces. They wobbled out of the castle on unsteady legs. The queen infuriated Camorra so much he even considered beheading her and being done with the whole business.

Naturally, he didn't act on the thought. Killing a queen would cause lots of trouble from the peerage. Nobody was willing to be known as a queen slayer. Apart from being indecent and unruly, the queen wasn't a threat to anyone, neither was her demand to be treated in a manner fitting her status, unfounded. Even if she was a captive, her father was still a consideration. Nobody was willing to cross a rank 3 blademaster hailed as the War God of the Plains.

Lorist was unwilling as well. Though he was arch enemies with the duke at the moment, he didn't want to vent his frustration on his daughter. Apart from being a famously loose woman, she hadn't committed any particular wrong. While she was Iblia's queen, her marriage was a purely political one and her bad relationship with the second prince was an open secret. But since Camorra had made a number of complaints regarding the issue already, Lorist felt it was about time he dealt with it.

"Howard, write the baron a letter. Have him pick a few Fisablen household knights and a hundred of their soldiers. We will release them, arm them, and let them escort the queen back to their dominion. Also, tell him to not touch the queen's personal belongings. If she thinks she doesn't have enough things, give her some money to cover her expenses. That way, we will be rid of our troubles," instructed he.

It was the best way to deal with the situation. By sending her away with a generous gift, nobody would be in debt. As for what kinds of waves the queen would make after she was sent back to her house, it wasn't Lorist's problem. This way, the other nobles would also praise him for his benevolence.

"Yes, Your Grace. I'll write the letter right away," said Howard.

"Oh, Howard, is there still no word from Els, Reidy, and the others?" Lorist felt something was off.

A few days ago, he had given Els and Reidy orders to capture a few Fisablen soldiers from Boblige alive and question them about some basic information such as the

mountain ranges terrain, the number of men Duke Fisablen left behind, and so on. However, they hadn't returned since they departed, not a single word.

Howard shook his head.

"Your Grace, I'm not sure what happened either. Nothing's been heard of them since Els and Senior Brother Reidy left. They didn't take any messenger eagles with them either. I've instructed the scouts to pay attention to any trail they left during their patrols, but they haven't found anything yet."

"Weird… Where could they have gone?" pondered Lorist as he stroked his chin.

"Are they in trouble, Your Grace?" asked Howard worriedly.

Lorist chortled.

"No way. Given Reidy's strength and Els's hardiness, even Duke Fisablen wouldn't be able to hold them back. At least one would make it back. Also, they took ten guards. They could scatter and at least a few would return. I believe they've only encountered some kind of delay. Perhaps, they'll return in a few more days."

At that moment, Lorist thought of Morbinghan's golden eagle. It was too bad Tarkel's project would take two to three years. Otherwise, Jaeger wouldn't have ended up in such bad shape. They would've realized Duke Fisablen's grassland cavalrymen were lying in ambush and could've avoided it.

Thinking about how it would take the eagle program six years to show results, it was understandable that training eagles to track enemies would take a substantial amount of time. Lorist had already promised Morbinghan many things as long as he could train a batch of similar eagles. At the very least, he would be rewarded with a hereditary barony. Lorist believed Morbinghan would do his best. As the saying went, 'suspect not those you use, use not those you suspect'. Since he'd left the matter to them, he would trust their ability to carry it out.

But if he still hadn't received any word from Reidy and Els, he would have to trouble Morbinghan to use his gold eagle to track them down.

"Your Grace, I know we managed to defend Pedro, but what about the mountain barbarians trying to attack the dominion?" asked Howard as he recalled the matter.

"Relax, we'll be fine," Lorist said with a smile, "The mountain barbarians would never descend from their mountains to raid in the winter. Currently, they are busy gathering resources to survive the winter. Every winter season is a trial for them. Unlike our household forces, armed and trained properly for winter and able to travel as they please with skis no matter how cold the weather, the barbarians are trapped. The soonest they'll invade in spring. By then, we'll be back in the dominion and will've made our preparations. It's due time we refreshed their memory."

"Okay," said Howard as he nodded before returning to his task.

Ten days later, there was still no word on the two. Just as Lorist was about to write a letter to request Morbinghan's help, Freiyar's report arrived. It stated that the grassland-barbarian army finally retreated from Pedro.

The barbarians had launched a number of attacks since Freiyar took charge of the city's defenses. None of their attempts were successful and they only lost more men. None of the battles were nearly as brutal as their first two encounters. In the last few attempts, they seemed to quit after a few men from their first wave died. All they did was shout and intimidate outside the steel ballistae' range before retreating after hearing the horns.

Freiyar described one incident in his report. The night before they retreated, chaos broke out in their camp. Fires burned, people cried, and fierce fighting erupted. It was as if a large battle had broken out. He'd wanted to gather the forces he had to attack their main camp, but he worried that it was a trap and didn't mobilize. He only realized a real battle had broken out in the morning. The main camp had been ruined and there were at least 30 to 40 thousand bodies. As for the surviving barbarians, they were nowhere to be seen.

Even though Lorist was curious about what had led to the incident, he knew his men had no role in it. The good news was that Pedro was safe and the enemy had been forced to retreat. It was already a huge victory.

Along with news of the victory came word of Camorra's escort. They were the 100-carriage convoy that escorted the queen and they had just arrived at the main camp. Camorra wasn't present but he had written Lorist a letter. In it, he explained that to send the queen back to the dominion, he had no choice but to agree to a few of her requests. For example, she was to be allowed to bring back all the furniture in her palace; hence the huge convoy. Not even the toilet bowls weren't left alone.

There were the three hundred plus maidservants. Camorra felt it was kind of a shame as they were just as loose as the queen. He had intended to open a brothel for the household forces, but after considering the fact that many of the maidservants were former members of fallen noble houses, he worried it would cause a lot of trouble for the house. So, he allowed the queen to take them all.

He also mentioned that he had to give her 100 thousand gold Fordes, she believed she was due the money, before she was finally willing to leave. She also brought with her lots of other resources, so there was a chance the cohort of ten silver-ranked Fisablen knights and 100 Fisablen soldiers wouldn't be able to protect the whole convoy. They had no choice but to dedicate some of their forces to escort the convoy to Lorist's camp.

Lorist had no choice but to hurriedly prepare to receive her. After all, he was a noble and throwing a banquet for an occasion like this was unavoidable. While he was an enemy of House Fisablen as well as the sole cause of Iblia's demise, having captured the second prince and handing him to the second highness, nobles were supposed to keep their bearing at all times. Even if the queen was the house's captive, she still had to be treated properly.

The queen didn't treat him as she would an archenemy during the banquet. In fact, she was thankful to him for capturing the second prince and allowing her to spend a few years in peace and luxury. Lorist finally realized how eccentric and indifferent she was. It didn't change how troublesome she was, though. While she didn't mind the kingdom's downfall, she lamented the loss of her annual allowance that went with it and cried and begged for Lorist to make it up to her.

He reminded her tactfully of the 100 thousand gold Fordes Camorra had given her, but the queen said her yearly allowance was 20 thousand gold Fordes. A hundred thousand would only last five years. Since she was young and not yet forty (despite the fact that he real age was 46), she could live on for at least 20 or 30 years.

"How will I live in five years?!" cried she out loud.

Lorist had just met the real deal. He promised he would do his best to provide her another 100 thousand gold Fordes just to get her to shut up and stop crying. However, perhaps because she felt Lorist was too easy to push around, she demanded another 200 thousand after pocketing his initial offer. Angered, Lorist refused her, and the queen stayed at the camp and refused to leave.

He would soon regret his decision. Though Camorra didn't form a brothel unit from the queen's maidservants, the queen started running a prostitution service in the camp. It cost one gold Forde to sleep with one maidservant for a night. If anyone was willing to pay ten gold Fordes, the queen would join the fray herself. While she was a little aged, her looks were still rather fine. That aside, she held the title of queen. To normal soldiers, spending ten gold Fordes to have a go with a queen was something they could brag about for the rest of their life. They were even willing to borrow money to not miss out on the opportunity. Soon, the queen's business boomed. Customers came her way nonstop.

Lorist paled. They were at the frontlines in the middle of a war. Having wobbly legs after doing the deed was unacceptable. Intent on going to the army camp to enforce military discipline, he was surprised to find that the soldiers and knights that spent time with the queen didn't violate any military regulation. They only paid a visit to the queen's when they were off duty and didn't leave the camp. There was nothing to punish.

Lorist didn't dare visit the queen's quarters, lest he be assaulted by a couple of naked maidservants. It had been happening to Potterfang whenever he was nearby.

Since he'd treated the queen rather well, there was no way he could flip out on her out of nowhere. While it did sound weird for a queen to be prostituting herself in an army camp, it wasn't causing any trouble. In fact, the soldiers' mood improved considerably and it didn't seem to be a bad thing at all.

In the end, Lorist acknowledged his misfortune and wanted to encourage the queen to be on her way by taking another 200 thousand gold Fordes out of his pocket. House Fisablen's forces in Boblige had already been waiting to receive the queen outside their camp for almost ten days.

She was really reluctant to leave and said that if she was allowed to stay in the camp until spring, she wouldn't need the 200 thousand gold Fordes.

"It's best if you leave earlier. If you stay here until spring, the men's salary will end up in your coffers…" Lorist responded.

Darn, this queen is far more capable than Duke Fisablen. At least the duke didn't manage to sneak 300 thousand gold Fordes from me, thought he as he watched the convoy depart.

Chapter 384
Scheme

It started to snow two days after the eccentric queen was sent away. The weather was rather cold. Camorra, at Windbury, responded logistically by sending lots of resources to the frontlines. All of the four houses' soldiers wore thick fur and cold-resistant clothing. They were still fully combat-capable.

The only thing that troubled Lorist was the large delays in the construction of the provinces' defenses thanks to the cold weather. It was especially severe when it snowed; everything had to be halted. However, given the current situation, it seemed the House Fisablen's forces in Boblige would fare even worse. Even though they still stationed themselves on the cliffs to monitor Lorist's camps, there were only half as many as before. Their attacks also stopped completely.

Just when Lorist was about to call for Potterfang, Malek, and the other knights to discuss how they should launch a surprise attack, Howard rushed into the tent.

"Your Grace… Els and Reidy are finally back…"

"Oh?" Lorist raised his head and smiled.

He was glad he no longer had to worry about them. He had originally planned to seek them out in a few days, having asked Tarkel and Morbinghan with his gold eagle to come to the frontlines. They would arrive in another five or six days, but the two missing individuals returned before they arrived.

"Where did they go? Why were they gone for so long?"

Els and Reidy entered the tent clad in dirty furs. Long hours of riding against the cold winds had drained the color from their faces. It seemed they were chilled rather badly.

"Y-y-your Grace… W-we're back," stuttered Els as he rubbed his hands together.

"Where have the two of you been? Do you have any idea how worried I was? Was capturing two enemies alive that hard? I thought the area near Boblige was heavily

guarded. Shouldn't it have been easy to locate two guards?" asked Lorist, trying his best to appear angry.

"No, Your Grace. We didn't capture anyone. It would've startled the rest too easily. Instead, we traveled into the mountains," explained Els.

"What? Into the mountains? But how?"

Everyone in the tent was stunned. Did they manage to find a way into the mountains without alerting the guards?

"No, Your Grace, we only circled around the mountains and entered from the entrance Eastwild entrance," replied Els.

Els proceeded to explain and Reidy helped fill in the details the former missed. It didn't take long to explain how they entered Boblige. Lorist had ordered them to capture two soldiers alive to understand what was happening, but the two didn't believe the patrolling soldiers would know much. So, they went all the way to Eastwild and bumped into some 50 Fisablen soldiers led by two Fisablen knights transporting two carriages filled with medicine into Boblige. The two ambushed the caravan during the night. After interrogating the troops, they killed them all and buried them before entering Boblige by disguising themselves as the squad in charge of delivering medicine.

"Wow, you guys are really courageous. Did you even consider the consequences if you were recognized? Don't laugh, Reidy. I was talking about you. Els trains in the dark attribute battleforce technique passed down in his family. Also, his looks don't attract much attention, so it's no surprise people wouldn't take note of him."

"Hey, my wife says I'm the best!" objected Els.

Lorist continued unphased.

"But you, Reidy, you got first place in the swordsmanship competition. Too many people can recognize you. If the duke left a few guards in the mountain range, there would've been no way you'd have not been caught."

"Your Grace, we asked the knights escorting the squad and they said only Third Frontier was left in the mountains. Duke Fisablen had disbanded and redrafted Fifth Frontier. They were absorbed into Third Frontier to fill their ranks. Two years ago,

Third Frontier had been led by the duke on an expedition against the Melein duchy and have been stationed in Southern ever since. Given that Fifth Frontier was formed in Eastwild, I doubt anyone from there would recognize me. Also, I wore a fake mustache so it was even harder for others to recognize me," explained Reidy as he took out a fake mustache from his pocket and pasted it on his face.

It made him look much older and people who were not familiar with him would have a hard time recognizing him.

"Your Grace, the two knights have also been stationed at Crouchtiger Castle in Eastwild. They were originally citizens of the Melein duchy moved to Eastwild. They were just recently promoted to become household knights. They don't recognize the people from Third Frontier. When the duke went back to Crouchtiger Castle, he casually picked the two and had them transport the medicine into Boblige. It was practically tailored for us, so we decided to take the risk and enter the mountains," Els added.

"Look, Your Grace. This is the map we drew."

Reidy took out a beastskin from his robes. Howard received it and spread it on the table. Boblige mountain range covered a really large area. From the top, it looked a little like the cracked shells of a chicken egg. However, the shells were in fact cliffs and beyond them were lush forests, lakes, and streams. It was large enough to be a viscounty.

"Your Grace, two of the three routes into the range have been sealed. Only the one in the middle is still usable. Attacking through the other two routes isn't possible. As for the route in the middle, it's severely booby-trapped. For example, the latter half is just next to a valley. The moment we arrive, the enemy just has to gather at the cliffs and roll boulders down at us. We won't be able to run. That trap is truly horrendous.

"Just 46 thousand men from Third Frontier are there now. Duke Fisablen took his personal guard and the grassland barbarians back to Crouchtiger Castle. Third Frontier's commander is Three-star Gold-ranked Knight Galini Beloput. It's said he used to be the duke's playmate and childhood friend. He's someone the duke trusts greatly because of his reliable and resolute personality. The duke trusted him enough to leave the defenses of Boblige to him…"

"Duke Fisablen didn't return to Crouchtiger Castle,"Lorist interjected, "He gathered

the 100 thousand barbarians and defeated Jaeger in Wild Husbandry. They suffered severe casualties. He's since moved on to Pedro. Luckily 23rd Local managed to hold out until reinforcements arrived. Ten-odd days ago, the duke lost his last hope of taking the city and withdrew."

"Ja-jaeger Legion suffered huge casualties?!" exclaimed Els.

"That's right. Both Josk and Yuriy are heavily injured, and Pete died. The two of you will take over Jaeger once this whole business is dealt with. Get them back up to full strength. Before we deal with the matter here, we won't be able to return to the dominion. Anyway, continue with your report."

Els nodded. He had an idea of what was going on.

Pointing at the map with his finger, he continued, "Third Frontier is stationed at four locations in Boblige. One division each is stationed at the left and right flanks. Their job is to pay attention to the two routes they sealed off, to patrol, and to maintain security. It takes at least 15 minutes to travel from the foot of the mountain to the cliff, and each of the peaks there has watchtowers. Their shifts change eight times a day. Each shift is about three hours. The defenses are really tight; it'll be incredibly difficult to enter the mountain range there. They've been modifying the towers to be more resistant to the cold.

"Third Frontier's main camp is in the middle. There are two divisions stationed there. As the junction in the middle is the only way in and out right now, they've focused most of their resources there. The number of watchtowers and patrols decrease beyond the main camp. Also, they've long built some caverns in the mountains as shelter against the weather. Most of the patrol squads are there. If there is an alarm, they'll arrive at their posts within ten minutes. I feel that it's incredibly difficult to launch an attack."

Els pointed at the rear half of Boblige.

"Third Frontier's supply camp is here, half a day's travel away from the main camp. Not only is it their main resource storage area, it's also the central area of defense against anything coming from Eastwild. Just like the three main routes on the other side, the Fisablen forces sealed two of the three on this side and left only the central one free for transporting resources. However, I discovered the soldiers of Third Frontier are rather lax on security. They send only one patrol along the cliffs twice a

day and there are also no watchtowers. Perhaps they feel there's no need to put up such a defense in the direction of the dominion."

"I suggest we circle around to Eastwild and attack from there. We stand a much better chance that way," Reidy said, continuing Els's thought, before he recalled something, "Oh, right. Your Grace, when we left, the fat logistics supervisor complained that there is a huge shortage of resources even though it's getting colder. He hoped we'd encourage the duke to send more supplies. If we don't bring more furs, the soldiers will have no choice but to hide in the camps and huddle around fires. There'd be no way for them to patrol."

Lorist nodded.

"You did well. If we manage to take Boblige, it'll be thanks to your efforts. You guys heard Els's report. Any thoughts?"

Potterfang laughed.

"Your Grace, Els and Reidy truly made a great contribution. Just as they said, we can take a detour around the mountains. As long as we don't get discovered by Fisablen's scouts, we can attack Boblige from the rear. Given that the area is so large and the rear and main camps are so far apart, even if we're discovered, we can still conquer the rear support camp before reinforcements arrive. As long as the support camp falls, Third Frontier will be ants in a bowl. They'll have nowhere to run."

Malek gave it some thought.

"Your Grace, while Potterfang's plan is no doubt good, I believe it's best we wait for a little longer."

"Why?" asked Lorist.

"If we attack now, it'll take too long to circle around the mountain. Traveling there on horseback and carriage causes too much commotion and it'll be spotted by the scouts easily. We should wait a little longer for the snow to cover the plains before we depart using skis and sleds. The scouts won't want to come out on patrol in that kind of weather either. Third Frontier's defenses will be more relaxed as well."

Lorist laughed.

"You're right. It sounds incredibly appropriate, save one part: we will have to deceive our enemy."

"Deceive? How so?" asked Potterfang curiously.

"Huh…?"

Lorist was so surprised at Potterfang's query he looked at him oddly.

"Think about it. Given that our camp is facing Boblige directly, any movement will be detected immediately. There's no way we can stay here until the snow falls before taking the detour. Even if the enemy can't see where we're heading, they'll be alerted by our movements and perhaps even strengthen their defenses where we want to attack. Since their commander is reliable and competent, we shouldn't let our movements rouse his suspicion.

"From tomorrow onwards, we'll transfer House Kenmays's heavy-armored division over to guard the camp while Firmrock packs up and retreats to the rear. We'll make it look like they're going to wait out winter in the back so the enemy don't suspect anything. When we move out, you should go to Loze's camp first and go to the rear of the mountain range from there and exterminate Third Frontier!"

"But, Your Grace," Els said as he stood up, "There's a whole legion in Boblige, Third Frontier no less. Isn't it a little careless to leave just one heavy-armored division here? Maybe Third Frontier will notice the decrease in manpower and attack. If that happens, we'll suffer huge losses."

"It won't happen. I will have Count Felim send two Pegasus divisions over to hold onto the main camp with House Kenmays's troops. Given the cold weather, it should start to snow soon. Galini will also consider whether Firmrock Legion's retreat is a ploy to draw them out of the mountain range. He should know that snowfall impedes light cavalry. If he really attacks, he'll find it incredibly hard to retreat. I don't think he'll make the decision to attack that lightly."

Lorist stood up.

"It's decided. Howard, take a squad of guards and head to Loze. Have Suleimos move his heavy-armored division here and tell Loze to expand the camp. In a few days, we'll move Firmrock over a division at a time. Make sure he's prepared."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Chapter 385
Galini Beloput

The fine snowflakes floated daintily to the ground. The sky was dark and gloomy and the chilling winter moaned past the ridges and peak, making many shiver and sneeze. Those out in the cold's feet went numb. Galini Beloput stood atop one of the cliffs, looking at the messy camp of the Nortons' Firmrock in the distance.

From time to time, soldiers left the campsite, undid their pants, and relieved themselves. From time to time, the wind brought the soldier's cries to the cliffs.

"Idiots! We're gonna go rest for winter! Enjoy the breeze up there! Hahahaha!"

A few officers got out of the camp and gave the men a few kicks, probably getting them to go pack up. After another hour, the first batch of three thousand departed. They marched neatly towards the southwestern part of Southern, flags and banners raised. Their marching songs fought through the wind and snow and echoed faintly into Beloput's ears. From time to time, some cruder folk songs and cheers came through as well.

It seems they're really going to bed for winter. I doubt they'd be so relaxed and joyous otherwise.

Beloput clutched his leather cloak tightly. He was rather moody and gloomy.

When we were marching back after eliminating Melein, Third Frontier's soldiers sang in the same fashion. Though we did incur rather substantial losses, we were all experienced veterans who trusted our lives to fate. The spoils were quite voluminous as well. Spirits were naturally high.

But now? The enemy marches home to rest for winter right in front of us while we have to suffer the cold in a mountain range surrounded by enemies. I can't blame the men for having low spirits, especially not with the snow. I can't even give everyone a fur to hold the bite of the cold at bay… Lord Duke's letter said the house has already done its best. 'We were attacked out of nowhere so we had no time to gather the necessary supplies' indeed. Even with the four central duchies' aid, we don't have what we need for winter.

They just sent over stuff civilians use…

Beloput didn't blame the duke for the current situation. He'd grown up together with him so he understood how frustrated he must have been when he wrote the letter. The duke had been a proud person as long as he'd known him, even going as far back as his early years. The duke looked down on the former empire's corrupt nobles. He didn't consider them much different from the plains' barbarians. While he was called the Wargod of the Plains for expanding the empire's territory and his many other achievements and contributions, he'd always been suppressed by the empire's nobility. He only managed to throw off his shackles and take full control of Eastwild and Wild Husbandry with the civil war.

It was truly a shame. His plan would've taken shape if it had been given another year. If they'd had just one more year, he could've rightfully taken the position of hegemon in the northeastern area. He might even have been able to form his own kingdom. It would've marked the house's rise to prominence. No one expected the four houses to shatter the dream out of nowhere. Their ambitions had joined the winter's snowflakes.

"Sir, is Firmrock really going to bed for the winter?" asked a household knight.

"It would appear so, given what we're seeing," answered Beloput.

One heavy-armored division, bearing House Kenmays's banner, had arrived at the camp a few days ago. Beloput had even put his troops on high alert in case this warned of an impending attack. But he soon realized the enemy was just changing shifts. Firmrock would withdraw for the winter while House Kenmays's division was there to stand guard.

"Sir, after Firmrock leaves, there'll only be one division there. Their numbers are small. Should we attack? It's a good opportunity," suggested the knight.

Beloput kept silent for a moment. He shook his head.

"Let's not push ourselves too far. The weather's getting worse by the day, it's even begun to snow. How many people do you think we can afford to mobilize? More than half our men still haven't received winter clothing. They'll freeze if they go outdoors. We received near 20 thousand of Fifth Frontier's men. Most are domesticated barbarians still unused to Third Frontier's regulations. Not taking action is the best

choice under these circumstances. It'd be a disaster if we get entangled with the enemy!"

He patted the young knight's chest and swept the snow off his shoulders.

"Seirya, you're a young lion, a courageous knight, but victory in war isn't always decided by exterminating the enemy. Our main goal is to hold Boblige. That's the duke's directive. No matter how many times we defeat or exterminate the enemy, if we lose our hold on the mountain range we'd have failed.

"Before the duke left, he told me why we can keep the initiative if we hold Boblige. The four houses will have to keep a good portion of their forces here to keep us in check. They'll end up spending way more resources than we will. We can advance or retreat as we please, but they have to hold their positions no matter what. The war's scale is great and it might stretch on even longer. We're not aiming for outright victory, instead, we want to force them to sign a peace treaty. We don't need to exterminate them to achieve that, we just need to make it too expensive for them to keep on fighting. It's the only way the house can rise up again."

"Is there no chance to win?" asked Seirya stubbornly.

Beloput smiled as he shook his head.

"Nobody wants to lose, but we've lost our chance of victory. The four houses' timed their invasion too perfectly. They struck us when we were completely unprepared. First Frontier was completely destroyed and Windbury taken. Even our joint assault with the four duchies failed. The reserve legion's loss might not be particularly bad, but Windury and Southern's loss? That's an entirely different story.

"You should know why. The reserve legion is like a knife. If we lose it, we can easily replace it, but First Frontier was our true backbone. Losing it has greatly destabilized us. Not even disbanding Fifth Frontier can compare. Our Lord is focused on keeping Second, Third, and Fourth Frontier as intact as possible. They're the core of the house and our last hope to rise again. We can't risk Third Frontier.

"Do you know why the duke wanted to return to the dominion?"

Seirya shook his head.

"He's not there to salvage the situation in Wild Husbandry. Even if he did heavily

wound House Norton's Jaeger, it still won't change the overall situation much. He has two aims. First, he'd like to see whether he can conquer Pedro and cause even more chaos in this war by pitting the grassland barbarians against the four houses. If he doesn't manage that, the house will have to suffer through several tough years. He plans to wipe the barbarian tribes out so they won't be a threat."

Beloput looked at Seirya's shock and disbelief, and sighed.

"Seirya, Fisablen blood runs in your veins. You are the new generation's elite and both the Lord and I have high hopes for you. That's why I told you about this. Fighting with courage is only good for a moment; planning with the future in mind is good for life. Failure isn't scary; not learning from your mistakes and failures is. This time around, our loss is inevitable. We can only hope to minimize or losses, or maybe force a draw of sorts."

Seirya nodded gratitudenously.

"Thank you, Uncle Galini. I understand now."

Beloput patted his shoulder.

"Alright, I brought it up casually to give you a rough idea. Let's get down from the mountain. When you're not on duty, make sure to train in your hereditary battleforce technique. Your talent is pretty good. I hope you can become like Her Highness, Princess Sylvia, and make it to the gold rank soon. Make the house proud."

"I will do my best, Uncle."

"Oh, and Seirya, there's something with which I have to trouble you. Can you go to the support camp for a bit and tell Uncle Woryo I, as the commander of Third Frontier, hope he won't act too excessively. His actions when the queen passed through made the soldiers incredibly angry. Also, I hope you can get him to do his duty properly and not half-arse the defenses there. I'm just one of the house's servants, I don't have the status to order him around, but I'm also the legion's commander, so I hope he doesn't force me to impose military discipline."

Seirya blushed, speechless. What a horrible shame. The kingdom's queen and the logistics supervisor of Third Frontier, one of them his aunt and the other his uncle, had become the house's most shameless members!

As the duke's daughter and queen, his aunt had actually started a brothel in the camp. The next day, she complained rather vocally about how the soldiers were all poor bastards and couldn't even pay a single gold Forde for pleasure.

"It's no wonder the Nortons beat them so easily," she'd said.

She also mentioned that the Nortons were far better off. They could pay a gold Forde without issue, some even took out ten.

Seirya was so embarrassed by the comment he wanted to hide in the nearest hole. Not even in his wildest dreams had he thought his aunt would be so shameless and not care about the house's reputation. That was why the commander had ordered her out of the camp as soon as possible.

In the end, the queen's carriage was stopped by Seirya's uncle. As the logistic camp's supervisor, he cooperated with the queen and allowed her to open a brother with her maidservants. She even launched a huge discount promotion: any soldier could spend a night of pleasure with one of the queen's maidservants for a single large silver. The logistics supervisor could also lend money to soldiers who couldn't afford it, but they had to exchange something for the loan. Anything would do, even their rations and supplies.

The crooked pair caused the whole atmosphere of the logistics camp to go sour. That even affected the four divisions at the main camp. After three days of enduring, Beloput could no longer tolerate it and sent his own guards to chase the queen away from the camp and forcefully escort her back to the dominion. When the guards who were sent on the escort returned, they said that the queen cursed the commander all the way for stopping her from earning money.

Because of that, Beloput also offended Woryo, who was a member of the house and the nephew of the duke himself. Beloput's father, on the other hand, was but a normal servant and it was only because Beloput had gotten to know the duke in his youth and they got along that he managed to reach his current position. Even though he was both a gold-ranked knight and commander of Third Frontier, not many descendants of the house thought highly of him, some even called him 'servant-spawn' in private.

Before, Beloput would ignore Woryo's actions of sneaking away more resources than he ought to have. As long as the logistics unit could support the legion well enough, it was best to maintain a cordial relationship with him. But now, Woryo had gone too far

and hoarded the resources that were due to be sent to the main camp in retaliation, using lack of manpower as an excuse, causing the soldiers of the main camp to complain nonstop to vent their frustration. That severely impacted the morale of the troops.

Beloput was also incredibly mad at that. Even though this was a crucial time for House Fisablen, a descendant of the house like Woryo still ignored the needs of the house to prioritize his own little gains. He even used the opportunity to delay the resources to get back at Beloput in a complete act of idiocy. However, Beloput couldn't just flip out against a person from the Fisablen house lest he offends the rest of them. So, he had Seirya warn Woryo to tone it down a bit.

……

"Your Grace, it's already the third snowfall and the snow on the ground is almost half a foot thick. I think it's time we departed."

"You're right, it is time for us to give Third Frontier Legion the final blow."

"Your Grace, it's fine if you want to come along, but I refuse to let you be in the vanguard. We'd rather die than let you do that."

"Hehe, Pog, you dare threaten me?"

"Your Grace, I insist you not rush to the front if you come with us. Everyone else holds the same opinion. The house is only stable with you around. It's fine if we're gone, but the house can never do without you, Your Grace."

"Alright, I'll stay at the back like you wish."

On the 23rd day of the 12th month of Year 1778, House Norton's Firmrock Legion traveled through the stormy, snowy weather to launch a surprise attack on the rear side of Boblige. In one go, they conquered the completely unprepared logistics camp of Third Frontier Legion and forced the four other divisions at the main camp to surrender. The commander of Third Frontier, Galini Beloput, publicly committed suicide after surrendering. His last words were: 'I have failed the Lord and shall atone for my sins with death!'

Chapter 386
Three Requests

With Boblige conquered, Iblia's conquest was complete. Lorist stood on one of the cliffs behind Boblige and looked at the snow-covered fields, smiling in a good mood. The old fox, Duke Fisablen, had finally been locked in a cage. From that moment on, House Fisablen's road to hegemony was cut off and they would not pose a threat to House Norton again.

Jaeger and House Fisablen's Frontier Legions might be entangled in Wild Husbandry for a good while. Or, House Fisablen might join with the barbarians to attack Southern's border. There was also a chance the duke himself would find a way to launch a surprise attack on Pedro. But, the general situation was now set in stone. No matter how hard House Fisablen tries, they could not win anymore. Even if they manage to sneak a few victories, those couldn't do much harm to the Nortons overall. As long as the flow of resources and products was regulated closely, the house might become just another barbarian clan like so many already on the plains.

The only thing left is to see whether the old fox knows what's good for him, thought Lorist gleefully.

Howard, standing beside him, was already at his limits; he could no longer resist the cold and pulled his cloak tighter.

"We ought to go back, Your Grace. What's so interesting about the white abyss? The wind's so strong too."

The logistics camp was actually a renovated bandit stronghold. The logistics officer, Woryo, had ordered his soldiers to build a luxurious three-story-tall stone house for him. It was now Lorist's chambers. The former owner was kept in the stinky barns with the soldiers he loathed and on which he looked down. He was now just a Norton captive. He'd been given a decent pummelling during the first night. His bruises were so bad it made it difficult to look at him.

Howard added another piece of pine wood to the fire. He added some macks and water into the copper kettle and hung it over the fire. Drinking a cup of steaming-hot macks

on a winter day was a bliss that filled the hearts of many with warmth and comfort.

Els kicked his feet at the entrance before he wiped some snow and mud off his boots on the rug. Once satisfied that his shoes were clean enough, he headed for the second floor.

"Your Grace, Seirya arrived."

The young Seirya no longer looked impressive and domineering. He was pale and silent as he was presented to Lorist. The things that'd happened to him over the last couple of days was a nightmare. First, House Norton's Firmrock weathered the snowstorm and appeared out of nowhere near the Boblige's rear entrance. They took the unprepared logistics camp by storm with before they encircled the main camp of Third Frontier's four other divisions. Using their ballistae which had incredible firing range for a lockdown on the various sections of the camp, no one could rush out of their lodges to launch a counterattack.

After enduring and starving for two days, Potterfang's threat to burn the place down finally forced Beloput to have his men drop their weapons and surrender. He committed suicide publicly soon after, saying that he had failed the duke's trust and expressing his desire to make up for his sins with his life.

Nobody reacted in time. It all happened so quickly and without warning. Seirya thus had to watch his commander, his respected uncle, fall -- his throat spurting blood everywhere and staining the ground red. He was completely frozen. They had lost just like that. There was no grand charge into battle, no great faceoff on the battlefield, no exciting exchange of blows and blocks, nothing. Boblige was lost just like that, and Third Frontier had surrendered to the enemy. It was a complete defeat where all the soldiers were wiped out. The commander decided to take responsibility for the shame of surrendering by taking his life. What was left for him to do?

Over the past two days, he'd lived like a walking corpse. He ducked in his corner, not caring about anything, neither drinking nor eating, until he was brought before Lorist.

"So you're Fisablen Seirya?" asked the man as he looked at him curiously.

Seirya acted as if he heard nothing.

Els patted on his shoulder and yelled, "Hey, are you deaf?! We're talking about you!"

Seirya snapped out of his stupor.

"Ah, what did you say?"

The man smiled and repeated his question.

"Yes. I'm Fisablen Seirya, a member of House Fisablen. Do your worst, I'm not afraid," said Seirya emotionally.

"I don't need you to do anything. Don't worry, even though House Fisablen is our enemy, we will follow the traditions and customs and the code of chivalry. Now you're our captive, I want to ask you something…"

"In your dreams! I will not betray the house!" exclaimed Seirya resolutely.

"Hahahaha!" the man laughed.

He pointed at a youth standing nearby buy, whom in response poured some macks and offered it to Seirya.

"Nobody wants you to betray your house. We're not really interested in House Fisablen any longer anyway. It's simple: you lost. The war's outcome is certain no matter what you try."

"You launched an underhanded surprise attack. I'll never accept this."

"Whether you accept it or not isn't my concern. The only goal of war is to emerge victorious. Strategy and tactics are of utmost importance. Didn't the duke teach you something this basic? Don't tell me your duke fights his enemies one-on-one honorably all the time? If that was the case, House Fisablen would not even be worth my mention," said the man in a calm tone.

Seirya blushed and realized he had uttered something foolish. The reason Duke Fisablen was given the title of Wargod of the Plains was that he often fought with the odds and numbers stacked against him. Tactics like surprise attacks, ambushes, and assaults were milked dry of their efficiency. In the end, it all culminated in new territory for the empire, as well as the house's growth into one of the strongest in the northeastern area.

"Drink some macks first," said the man warmly, "I asked you to come here to fulfill a

plea your commander, Galini Beloput, asked of me before his suicide."

"Commander?" asked Seirya, suspicious.

"Yes," Lorist nodded and said, "Before your commander ordered you to surrender, he made three requests, two of which I've agreed to. But I didn't think he'd actually be that stubborn. Even though we conquered the camp and you had no chance, he would only order your surrender after he was assured you'd be spared."

"He… He made requests?" asked Seirya.

"He was an honorable knight, determined and persevering. He single-handedly bore the responsibility for your loss. He was no coward, but a knight and military officer of the highest caliber. I admire his courage and feel pity for House Fisablen's loss of such a magnificent and heroic knight," continued the man solemnly as he stood up.

On Grindia, suicide was considered an act of cowardice. Regardless of what god or goddess one believed in, none of them advocated suicide. For example, the warriors and knights that were believers of Singwa considered suicide humiliating and cowardly. Back when Gold-ranked Knight Chevany, a subordinate of Duke Loggins, lost the battle against the Nortons, he chose to die by Lorist's blade for the same reason. He couldn't commit suicide by his own hand as believers of the war god believed the souls of suiciders wouldn't enter the god's kingdom.

"Thank you…" Seirya finally lowered his head as tears fell uncontrollably.

The praise his enemy offered in the honor of his commander had finally opened his heart. His vexation finally melted away. Instead, he even felt a sense of pride over what his uncle had done.

After crying for a good while, he muffled his voice. The young man passed him a hot towel. After he'd cleaned his face, he stood up and saluted his captor.

"Lord Norton, may I know what three requests our commander made?"

"Sure. I'd tell you even if you hadn't asked. Sit down and have some macks. I heard you haven't eaten anything for two days. I'm concerned for your health. If you continue like this, you won't complete the mission your commander left for you," said Lord Norton as he gestured to the sofa.

"The first request was that news of your surrender be delivered to the duke. He asked that you be the envoy to deliver the news. Given that the snow's made it impossible to travel, he agreed for the news to be sent after the rainy season passes. You may pick twelve soldiers to go with you. We'll provide the mounts and supplies. Also, keep your commander's remains well. You'll have a carriage to take it with you."

Seirya teared up again.

"Your commander also asked I let your house ransom the knights and attendants. I must admit he duped me into agreeing. I thought he was referring to the Fisablen knights and attendants in Third Frontier. He only revealed he meant everyone in the in the legion after I'd agreed. I'm pretty mad about it, but I am a noble, so I'll keep my word. As long as the house can afford the ransom, I will let them go."

Seirya raised his head proudly when he heard this. His commander had duped Norton Lorist!

Such a child… Lorist smiled, *What point is there to keeping the knights here? They would never betray their house unless they were abandoned. If they did they'd have no honor to live by left. Even I won't recruit a knight who so easily betrays his oath. Your house controls the greeks, so I can make a nice trade.*

"I didn't agree to his third request, though. I won't let the house ransom the rest of the legion. It's impossible. I won't have the duke rebuild his forces so easily. Beloput tried to convince me they'd only be used to deal with barbarians. He hoped I'd let them go so they could return to their families. I may be benevolent, but I'm not naïve. I did promise to let them go when House Fisablen surrenders or signs a peace treaty, though."

Lorist stared intently at the kid.

"That's all I have to say. You may pick 12 soldiers to follow you back. You don't have to stay with the captives either. Your treatment and rations will be same as that of my men. If you have any additional requests, feel free to bring them up and I will do my best to assist you."

"I only have one request. I wish to leave before the rainy season. May I go after the snow lifts in the second month next year?" asked the kid, standing up.

Lorist observed his resolute expression… and nodded.

"As you wish."

Snow usually stopped falling in the 2nd month of the year. However, the ground would still be frozen and muddy -- hard to travel on. People and horses slip and fall easily in such conditions. Despite that, Seirya insisted on returning early and Lorist didn't stop him. It was his business if he wanted to look for trouble.

After Seirya left, Potterfang and Malek entered the room. Lorist greeted and had them take seats.

"You should know what comes next not that we have Boblige, right?" began he as he tapped on the map of Southern that hung on the wall, "We'll hold Southern against the barbarians. This won't be a quick operation. It'll likely continue for several years. Firmrock is the house's best legion, there's no unit better suited for this operation."

Potterfang and Malek stood up straight.

"Worry not, Your Grace. Firmrock won't let the Fisablens into Southern."

Lorist had the two sit down again.

"With Boblige in our hands, the defenses in Southern will have more support. The house can now transfer Tigersoar there, it doesn't have to station as many men here. House Kenmays's heavy-armored division and Shazin's light cavalry and light infantry divisions can return as well. I will leave everything here to Firmrock. Naturally, Count Felim's Pegasus will aid you. I'm putting them under your command.

"Also, I will replenish Firmrock's two thunderbolt brigades. You may use the 23rd local defense brigade's tactic of setting fire to shield carts. I won't say much more. The rest is up to you.

"I will return to The Northlands in a few days; there's much to deal with there. Set up proper defenses, I don't want any mistakes, understood?"

"We will not disappoint you, Your Grace."

Chapter 387
Property and Taxes

Lorist returned to The Northlands on the 7th day of the 1st month of the new year. He observed The Northlands' capital, Roaring Bear City, formerly known as Gildusk, from a distance in the cold. Grandmaster Ciroba had renovated it without a hitch. He'd even gone out of his way to fashion a huge statue of a bear in the central plaza. The plaza was thus named Ragebear Plaza.

The city needed another year's work before renovations would be complete. Most of the year's infrastructure was completed the year before, from waterways and irrigation works to walls and roads. What had to be done now was the building of the many houses and buildings. Ciroba had proclaimed optimistically that everything would be done before the eighth month of the previous year, but the internal furnishings and decorations would take more time. Ciroba's aide, Zanben, would be in charge from the 5th month since Ciroba had to head to Southern to build Pegasus Castle.

Lorist stayed in the city for just ten days. Apart from checking out its progress, he also met with Shadekampf. The servant who'd followed him around since his childhood had become a magnificent talent in management. The new settlements in the south of The Northlands, namely Haven, Harvest, and Vigor's, construction was proceeding well. It would be completed in no more than two years. The only problem was the relatively low population. Settlements had to be populated to become prosperous.

Charade brought Supervisor Spiel in a hurry to receive Lorist. Ever since he'd received Tarkel's report in the 11th month about the possibility of a mountain barbarian invasion, he'd stayed at Firmrock Castle to guard it. Lorist understood the barbarians' might well and was certain they wouldn't leave their mountains in the winter but Charade still had to be prepared just in case. Now that Lorist had returned, the situation in Southern had stabilized, Iblia conquered, and Tigersoar returning soon as well, Charade could finally let go of his worries.

He also gave Lorist a piece of good news: the estates in the east of Roaring Bear, that is, the section reserved for nobles' manors, were selling like hotcakes. All 67 estates

had been gobbled up by the nobles and House Norton's funds had grown by roughly 1.6 million gold Fordes. Spiel was so ecstatic he almost couldn't shut up. It should be noted that the land sold was completely empty. It didn't have a single building.

The nobles that bought the land would have to spend even more of their money to build their manors. All House Norton had to take care of was making sure the basic infrastructure, such as roads and parks, was in place. The endeavor was very profitable. Mainly because the landowners also had to pay an annual tax on their land, which was a thousandth of its market price. In other words, while the land sold was private property, it was still Norton territory. Given that the Nortons were in charge of the land's safety, they would have to pay some sort of 'protection fee'.

Lorist was incredibly shocked. The plots ranged from five to eight thousand gold Fordes. How did it add up to 1.6 million? It was already six times more than what they'd estimated they'd get. What in the world had made3 the nobles willing to spend so much money? Charade explained gleefully that he hadn't settled on a fixed price. He just drew the boundaries, listed a minimum, starting price, and sent the maps to the various nobles, both honorary and landed. The entire peerage received the same map, including the old Winston nobles that'd joined their side. The demand turned out to be incredibly high, so Charade organized an auction. In the end, given the demand, the plots all sold at five to ten times their original price.

The nobles that didn't get any of the plots, demanded the district be expanded so they could get a plot as well. He'd estimated they could set up two similar districts and still sell out. So, he and Spiel picked two more areas set up another 150 plots. Lorist just had to give his approval and they could go ahead with the auction.

Lorist looked over the documents and scribbled about with his pen. He crossed out the larger district and left only about 58 plots. Charade and Spiel looked at him anxiously. He was denying them a mountain of gold!

"There's no need to be hasty," Lorist explained, "The two districts ensure all the nobles can get a piece of land. Do you think they'll go crazy for them during the auction if they know they're sure to get a plot? It'll be difficult to raise the price if everyone has a guaranteed spot. We can only increase their value if we limit the number."

Charade's eyes widened and he smacked his forehead.

"Apologies, I was being too hasty and forgot about that completely. I thought the new

districts would sell for the same price as the first. This is my fault."

"It's not your fault. You two just didn't understand the reason the nobles were so crazy for the land," Lorist consoled with a smile, "Basically, the reason they're willing to pay such a high price is: the act of purchasing a plot is an expression of loyalty."

"An expression of loyalty?" asked the two oddly.

"Yes," Lorist nodded, "You carried out the auction after we'd already eliminated First Frontier and conquered Windbury, and the duke'd fled to Southern. Everyone can see we're winning the war. House Fisablen may be a strong house in our region, but they suffered defeat after defeat at our hands. It's nearly impossible for them to turn the tables. Unless we do something incredibly stupid, Duke Fisablen will lose the war, War god or not.

"Given these circumstances, and that House Norton is the alliance's leader, they placed their bets on us. We've also now decided where The Northlands' capital will be and given it a name, one reminiscent of our own family: Roaring Bear. Clearly, this is now our headquarters. The act of purchasing land from us here is a gesture of loyalty. In other words, they're saying they're willing to be in the same boat with us. Naturally, they're also looking for more opportunities to work with us. If they have any dealings with us, there's no doubt they'll prosper.

"Now that we've achieved our goal of conquering Iblia, Winston and Southern are under the four houses' control as well. Andinaq now controls more than half the former empire's territory. While we're loyal to kingdom in name, the four houses are their own powerful faction. The nobles know this as well. Compared to the second highness, we're a far better option for their allegiance. They can't even be bothered to deal with our king."

Lorist pointed at the documents in his hands.

"Actually, no matter how much we charge for these plots, the nobles will grit their teeth and buy them to show they stand with us. However, I don't wish to sow any animosity. Apart from making them willingly give us their gold by raising the land's value, we have to make the value compound and rise over the years.

"For example, I plan to put just 40 plots up for sale. The rest will be used to build kickball stadiums, horse-racing stadiums, and battleforce-training halls. We'll also

build facilities for high-level herbalists. We can even dig a small stream from a nearby lake so the people here can swim and kayak. The lake can be used for picnics and walks as well. We'll have luxurious restaurants and tea houses, and luxury shopping areas and streets. We'll make this district a noble paradise. If we do this, the land will be in greater demand and its value will go up even more.

"We can set up another special district or an elite residential area nearby afterwards. Naturally, the price will be even higher thanks to the surrounding infrastructure and the value of the land nearby."

"Your Grace, you're a true schemer," exclaimed Charade.

Spiel furrowed his brow.

"Your Grace, don't you think these two districts sound a little similar to the rich district in the city? Won't this lower the rich district's value?"

"Hehe," Lorist shook his head, "The rich district is just that, an area for rich nobles and commoners alike. Anyone with money can purchase land there. However, these two will be for nobles only, or guests that receive invitations from nobles. No amount of money will let you qualify to purchase land here. This will inevitably inflate the nobles that purchase land here's sense of status. And, given that the rich commoners also wish to be a part of this, they will try even harder to contribute to the house so they may receive our recognition and be given an honorary title.

"Starting next year, the house will no longer acknowledge other nation's titles. Supervisor Spiel, set up a system for foreign honorary nobles to become local honorary nobles. Naturally, they'll have to pay a fee."

"But, Your Grace, what point is there to this? They're only honorary titles, what difference is there between titles we issue and titles other nations issue?" asked Spiel, confused.

Charade chortled.

"Absolutely golden, Your Grace! The difference is huge, Spiel. First, His Grace said that honorary titles from other nations won't be acknowledged starting next year. In other words, honorary nobles from other nations won't be able to attend any of our gatherings, balls, or banquets. They won't be able to mingle with the four houses or their vassals.

"All the foreign nobles that've purchased land already have to have their titles converted or they'll lose the land. We don't offer noble titles very easily, people without noble titles can't buy them no matter how much they pay, so our titles are worth far more than other people's titles. Our faction is one of the strongest on the continent. Honorary nobles we acknowledge will have a far higher standing in other nations' noble circles. People will have to think twice before offending them since we are their backers and will stand up to defend them.

"Also, after this announcement, the land's price will go up even more. Honorary nobles will scramble to get a plot. I don't doubt for a second that the 40 pieces we'll sell this time round will be worth far more than the 67 we sold first…"

Since it would soon rain gold, Spiel kept his mouth shut and waited.

Lorist smiled bitterly.

"Had it not been for our losses, I wouldn't have come up with something like this. Then again, taking money from nobles and rich commoners is far better than increase the poor's tax. Also, Baron Charade, Tigersoar and Jaeger's casualties are quite heavy. Make sure their pensions are paid to the families as well as those who retired because of their injuries. I've decided to decrease the taxes levied on households with dead or injured soldiers while maintaining the benefits they receive like the other soldiers of the house. Reduce their taxes by a third."

Most landed nobles taxed their commoners more than two fourths. In other words, half of the crop grown on the rented land would be given to the noble as rent. Also, there were miscellaneous taxes such as for housing, water, boats, etc. Nobles would only have to pay a tenth of their tax revenue to their liege in tribute. Many nobles raised their taxes as high as seven tenths and kept their subjects poor. They would have to rely on labor and blood tax to keep up with the high taxes.

Labor refers to working for the nobles for free. They even had to prepare their own food. Usually, labor terms lasted from 12 to 15 months. Blood tax refers to serving in the noble's levy. The nobles provide two meals a day, basically pig feed, the commoners wouldn't be paid a dime. They only profited from plunder. But most of the spoils would be given to their lords. If they were unfortunate enough to die in battle, their lord just had to inform their families, they didn't have to give them any compensation. The households that lost precious family members would find it even harder to cope with their main manpower gone.

House Norton's taxes had always been two fourths. It was already the lowest among nobles. When Lorist returned to the dominion to take up position as household leader, he learned that the taxes were too high and had tried to make them 30 percent, but it'd prompted strong opposition from the household knights and officials. Charade had privately advised him to not stand out too much by adopting such a radical policy, as it would cause them to be ostracized by the rest of the nobility. So, Lorist had never touched the main taxes. However, he did decrease the miscellaneous taxes wherever he could. One of the big ones was the fishing and hunting tax, which was only one tenth.

Even though the main taxes couldn't be touched, soldiers' families would receive benefits. Households with members in the garrison would receive a tax cut of one tenth. They only had to hand in four tenths of their harvests. Households with members in the house's main forces were only taxed three tenths. If they retired, the taxes would only go up to four tenths.

Before, households with members in the military who died in battle would receive a one-tenth decrease in taxes permanently. However, Lorist wanted to decrease it by another ten percent and was unyielding despite Spiel's objections.

"Actually, Supervisor Spiel, our house's main source of income isn't the taxes we levy on the harvests. Instead, it is the industrial and business sectors. Even after developing Felicitas, Salus, Redriver, and Greatriver, our annual harvest tax has still not exceeded a million gold Fordes. It's not worth much more than what we generate in Wildnorth Town in Felicitas itself. The harvest tax isn't actually anything worth considering. Decreasing it by another one tenth would instead generate goodwill and gratitude among the commoners.

"This time around, our casualties are as high as 40 thousand. Our annual pension payouts in the future will near 100 thousand gold Fordes. There's no need to grumble about something insignificant like a harvest tax that doesn't amount to 10 thousand gold Fordes. Forget about such a small amount of money and let the households of those who sacrificed themselves for us know that we will not forget the blood they've spilled and the sacrifices they've made for our sake."

"I apologize, I was in the wrong, my Lord. I will respect your decision," apologized Spiel with a deep nod.

Chapter 388
Mayor Doboff

On the 27th day of the 1st month of Year 1779, Lorist returned to Firmrock Castle.

There was no new year's celebration this year, mainly because the leader of the house, Lorist, was not around. There was also the matter of the war, which made holding a celebration a little inappropriate. However, Iblia conquest was complete. Winston and Southern were both now under the four houses' control. House Fisablen was locked within the three provincial plains, and Lorist also managed to get the position as governor of Windbury. Basically, it meant Winston would soon also be in the Nortons' jurisdiction.

While there wasn't a celebration this year, next year's would be even merrier. It would see the house welcome even more vassals. Lorist would have to entitle another large group of honorary nobles to acknowledge their contributions over the previous two years.

Rumors of a mountain barbarian invasion, surprisingly, hadn't caused a panic among the folk. However, the atmosphere in Firmrock Castle was still anxious and lifelessness. Lorist went to the rear of the keep and found only Dilianna and her one-year-old son there to receive him. After asking her about it, he learned that her two nieces, Arriotoli and Fennazali had gone to the new Dina barony now in Delamock. She had only refused to go because she was worried that the cold of winter would harm her precious child.

The other two new maidservants he'd taken in didn't think he would return in a month, so they had returned to their families for new years.

Oh well, it doesn't really matter if they're not here. I'll be fine with Dilianna.

He didn't manage to get any good sleep, in spite of the castle having so few occupants, because this son made too much noise in the night. Either he wanted to be breastfed or be with his mother. Given that he'd tussled with Dilianna three or four times already, he ended up getting no sleep.

He decided to go to his study for a nap. Just as he was walking there yawning, Howard appeared.

"Your Grace, Sir Tarkel and Mister Doboff have been waiting for you in the guest room for more than an hour now."

While it wasn't odd for Tarkel to come over so early in the morning, Lorist couldn't quite recall Doboff, though the name did sound familiar.

The moment Howard saw his expression, he knew his teacher was having a hard time recalling the man.

"Your Grace, Mister Doboff used to be the Pentasword Mercenaries' leader. You made him mayor of Twinmount Town."

Oh, that's the guy…

Lorist had hired the mercenary group to guard the outpost at the intersection between Magical Dragon Mountain Range and the dominion, as the first line of defense and an early warning. However, after he'd spent time among the barbarians, he got to know that the ones neighboring them were engaged in internal conflict, so they wouldn't come down to raid the dominion anytime soon. Hence the outpost being rather quiet for two years besides a few small skirmishes shortly after its first completion.

After that came the house's development of Blackmud Marsh. A wall was built on the border between the dominion, Tortoise Hill, and Hidebull Mound, along with forts at the other two areas. One local defense brigade was stationed at both the forts, so the outpost between the two mountains outside the dominion began to lose its importance. As a result, the house terminated the mercenary band's contract.

At first, Lorist had planned to absorb the group into the household forces but their leader, Doboff, refused. He was already old and didn't wish to live a life of blades and blood anymore. Given that he was going to disband the group, he would leave whether to join up to the men themselves.

However, he'd had already grown attached to the outpost he had lived in over the years. Given the recent time of peace, it had managed to develop into a small town where many mercenaries and adventurers would gather before they headed deeper to explore Magical Dragon Mountains. It was also through that town that small merchants traded with the barbarians. Some of the latter, who were more adaptable

and intelligent, came to the town to trade their wares. The town had become a small bridge that connected the dominion and the barbarians.

However, Lorist had just returned from barbarian captivity and he avoided all word on them thanks to his traumatic experiences. He refused to even consider the notion of using the town to infiltrate and influence the barbarian tribes. Since Doboff was unwilling to leave, he made him the town's mayor. Apart from paying a small tribute, their administration wouldn't be interfered with in the slightest. They were left to do what they pleased. To Lorist, since the area was outside the household dominion, there wasn't a difference whether they controlled it or not. It wasn't something that would affect the house greatly.

When the intelligence agency, Furybear, was formed, the one in charge, Tarkel, took note of the small town outside the dominion and sent his men to do a detailed investigation. In the end, he realized the town had developed properly under the ex-mercenary leader's administration. Doboff himself hadn't overstepped his bounds and considered Twinmount Town under Norton control. Hd didn't rule with uninhibited ambition. Apart from paying a yearly tribute, the extra funds collected would be used to develop the town's infrastructure. Twinmount Town's population had grown to roughly two thousand. Most of whom relied on hunting, collecting herbs, and trading with the barbarians to make a living.

Two years earlier, Tarkel had submitted a report to Lorist about Twinmount Town. In it, he suggested it could be directly administered by the house. Building it into a large-scale trading post like the one House Kenmays had in the east would not only provide large amounts of herbs and other rarities, it could also be used to take note of the barbarians' moves.

However, Lorist had been completely occupied with his dealings with the second highness and the plan to take out Madras. Given the unpleasant memories he had, he neglected reading the report in detail before archiving it. No matter how much he tried to avoid the matter, however, he was only delaying the inevitable. The barbarians were a looming threat that had recently begun to move again.

"Get me a basin so I can wash my face. And bring those two to my study!"

He ought to freshen himself up to understand the possible attack thoroughly. Tarkel and Doboff soon made their way to the study. After greeting Lorist, Tarkel reported his experiences before he sent out the emergency message.

The matter was first discovered by Major Doboff. According to him, the barbarians would be most active during autumn. It was also when their trade with Twinmount Town would be most frequent. But, when Doboff inspected the trade market, he realized something weird was going on. The barbarians that had come didn't bargain at all. They were willing to complete the trade even if it meant taking a loss, and they purchased mostly metal tools and weapons.

This odd behavior peaked his interest and roused his caution. While it wasn't uncommon for barbarian traders to incur losses, those who'd come to town in recent times were sly and cunning. The number of merchants that got scammed was also increasing. Those who treated the barbarian traders as uncivilized fools often ended up suffering losses. But this time around, the barbarian traders were unusually agreeable and didn't mind taking losses if it meant being able to purchase even more metalware and weapons. It was weird, considering that they'd mostly bought daily necessities in the past.

Doboff secretly sought out an old barbarian that Doboff had rescued once. When the barbarian first arrived at the town, he bumped into a tough mercenary whose eye caught onto the piece of fine white leopard skin the barbarian'd brought to sell. He insisted on trading a cruddy old sword for it and even boasted that the sword was a precious weapon. However, it broke apart the moment the old barbarian knocked against it with his dagger, so he refused the trade 'offer'. It resulted in the mercenary blaming him for breaking his precious weapon and beating him until he spat out blood.

Doboff happened to pass by at that moment. He rescued the old barbarian, got a hold on the situation, and punished the mercenary. He became good friends with the barbarian and had frequent interactions with him. Sometimes, the man even brought precious herbs as gifts for the mayor during his visits to his home. Given their relationship, Doboff trusted his information he got from him on occasion.

He revealed that the last year's Kubawessen festival, held only once every twelve years, the barbarians celebrated the birth of Mountain God Kubawessen and would have all sorts of activities to commemorate their deity. For example, they would have one sacrificial rite monthly where they sacrificed large numbers of livestock to the mountain god. All the chieftains would also participate. Most \hailed from the larger tribes, with the chieftains being mostly Jambassens from other territories across Magical Dragon. The Jambassens were similar to landed nobles.

The largest tribe neighboring the Norton dominion was called the Habibaba. Their chief was a Great Jambassen, roughly equivalent to a duke, with more than 20 tribes under his control. In the past, Habibaba had always been struggling for the title of Great Jambassen with another large barbarian tribe. But in the recent Bywessi Conference, they yielded to Habibaba and their chieftain's wish came true. He was finally made a Great Jambassen. After the conference, the Great Jambassen decided he would show the flatlanders what the mountain barbarians were made of. It was highly probable the barbarian horde would start their invasion next year, hence the majority of products traded for being metalware. They wanted to caste them into arrowheads and weapons.

The old barbarian advised Doboff to leave Twinmount Town so he wouldn't be in the way of the invasion. The army mobilized this time would number up to a hundred thousand. Upon hearing of how developed the Norton dominion was from his subordinates, the Great Jambassen soon turned the focus of his campaign there. It was said some traveling merchants were also bribed to be their informants and guides.

The moment Doboff learned of this, he made a report to the house. Tarkel was the one who personally went to verify it's veracity. Some mountain barbarians were bribed with luxuries and meals and gave similar reports.

At the end of the 11th month, the old barbarian made his last visit and told Doboff that a group of grassland barbarians came to request the Great Jambassen form a grand army and set out for the dominion. They claimed the land was almost completely undefended. The old barbarian didn't know whether the Great Jambassen accepted the proposal and set out for Twinmount Town because he was worried about Doboff's safety and wanted to advise him to leave.

As Lorist had expected, the barbarians didn't launch their invasion when winter was so near. Even if the Great Jambassen accepted the proposal, there was no way it could be achieved given that they couldn't leave their shelters without cold-resistant clothing. If there was a snowstorm, loads might die without even a fight. He estimated the soonest they would descend would be during the 4th month after the rainy season.

A barbarian army of 100 thousand, huh, thought Lorist with a cold smile.

Currently, the forces of the Norton house wasn't like it had been back during the days of Lorist's father, when a few hundred barbarians were all it took to plunder the house's livestock and scour about without worry. House Norton was a huge entity, one

that rivaled even a kingdom. Both their advanced siege weaponry and military gear were far beyond the barbarians. Even another 100 thousand wouldn't be much trouble.

"Your Grace, I have a map of a gold mine," said Doboff as he stood up and carefully took out an old an torn beastskin and placed it on Lorist's table.

Tarkel looked surprised. It was obvious he hadn't anticipated something like this transpiring. It seemed he wasn't aware that Doboff possessed such a map.

"Actually, I wasn't the one to discover it, nor does it have an owner," Doboff explained, "Two years ago, an old mercenary got shot with a poisoned arrow. I discovered him unconscious on the ground when I was out hunting. It was a shame he was beyond saving. He handed me the map as he breathed his last breath. During the past two years, I surveyed the area carefully and found the mine, deep within the Black Forests. There's a small hill near a riverbank where the mine is. However, the area is inhabited by roughly 30 thousand barbarians.

"Your Grace, to be honest, I've thought of monopolizing the mine by keeping its existence secret. However, I realized I have no way of dealing with the tribes, so I can only give you this map."

Lorist appreciated Doboff's frankness greatly. He recalled the riders that he encountered when he was on the way to Firmrock Castle from Maplewoods Bastide back then. That time, Josk showed off his divine archery skills and made them discard their shot comrades and retreat into the forest. When they went to investigate the bodies, they found they were carrying sacks of gold grains. Lorist had suspected the barbarians controlled a gold mine, and it seemed he was right. The mine Doboff mentioned could possibly be the one the riders controlled.

"Thank you, Mayor Doboff. Your contributions will be remembered. We will not mistreat our loyal subjects. We thank you for your efforts," said Lorist as he stood up.

"You're welcome. It is my pleasure to be of service to the house," replied Doboff a little hastily, surprised.

"Tarkel let Mayor Doboff rest in the castle for a few days. When Tigersoar arrives, we will hold a meeting to discuss how we should deal with the barbarian army. We will have to trouble the mayor to brief us on the situation as well. Let's leave it at that."

"Understood, Your Grace," said Tarkel as he stood up.

"Thank you. I will be more than happy to help the house out," said Doboff.

Chapter 389
Barbarians and Gold Mine

On the 23rd day of the 2nd month in the meeting room on the second floor of Firmrock Castle, Lorist tapped on the map of the dominion on the wall with a wooden pointer.

"I'm sure you've all heard what Mayor Doboff had to say about the barbarian tribes, right? A hundred thousand barbarian soldiers can't compare to even just one of Duke Fisablen's frontier legions' strength. In terms of organization and equipment, our forces' greatly surpass theirs. I ignored them until now because they haven't caused trouble before and I didn't want to bother playing hide and seek in the forests.

"But now they've come with an army of 100 thousand. They consider us no different from the scattered nobles of past Northlands. They really think that 100 thousand soldiers will let them walk unhindered through The Northlands. In actuality, they're no different from a dish served to our doorstep. Like a fresh fish sent for us to butcher. We ought to polish our blades and think of where we should cut first."

The household knights laughed at how Lorist described the whole situation.

When they'd quieted down, he continued, "I never really considered them a threat. Not because of ignorance, because I understand them far too well. Even if they have another 100 thousand, they still won't be a threat.

"They'll have a hard time coming for us from the 500 kilometer stretch starting from Azure River to the eastern part of The Northlands, all the way to the part of Magical Dragon Mountain Range that border the dominion. But, according to historical records, only two areas were really harmed by their pillaging: our dominion and the eastern Northlands. These two areas are where their raids are most rampant. They are also the most developed areas.

"Ever since House Kenmays took control of the eastern area, their approach to dealing with the barbarians has been carrot and stick. They set up a trading post and began doing business with them. Through trading fairly according to market price, they managed to obtain various specialties in exchange for other useful daily necessities. As a result, the barbarians were able to get their hands on what they needed and

wanted without resorting to pillaging. They also divided them to incite inner conflict between the tribes through trade relations. This way they could ensure they wouldn't unite.

"As for the barbarian tribes that only cared for pillaging, House Kenmays hired other tribes to attack them. They offered high rewards according to how well the employed barbarian fighters performed and also occasionally mobilized their household forces to deal an even harsher blow to the incessant raiders. By exterminating them or driving them far away from the eastern area, the raiders were no longer a threat. Within five or six years, the eastern part of The Northlands no longer had to suffer pillages. The border was completely peaceful.

"The facts show that House Kenmays's policy is really effective. Currently, the barbarians' herbs and specialties are a large part of the salt merchant committee's business. I really can't help but admire House Kenmays' head for his wit and farsight. As expected of one who hails from a merchant family.

"However, we can't mimic their methods. We're running out of time. The barbarian army will soon arrive. While we did have the opportunity to do so in the past, we didn't set our sights on them. Back then, our forces were far too busy with things going on in the west.

"Mayor Doboff just briefed us on a tribe called Habibaba which rules the territory near our dominion. Habibaba is a tribe with roughly 300 thousand members. The chief is the Great Jambassen, akin to a duke. He also commands over 20 vassal tribes. Given their tradition of conscripting all their tribesmen as warriors, it's no ruse that they can mobilize 100 thousand.

"Even though there is also word of the army's intentions to raid the eastern area, it's all based on the testimonies of the barbarians that come here to trade. They spread it around like some kind of folktale. The area they'd have to go through to attack the east isn't under Habibaba's control and the tribes there haven't answered the call. This alone makes me confident they won't target the eastern area. While we still have to keep our guard up, there's no need to be too anxious.

"In the area between the eastern Northlands and Firmrock Castle is the fully developed settlement, Redriver. It's separated by hundreds of kilometers and the Black Forest from the mountain range, which serves as a natural barrier, there's no way the barbarian's will attack through there unless they're willing to spend two or

three months paving a way through the forest. This is why Redriver wasn't invaded in the past, and why it won't be now.

"Our house has also developed part of Blackmud Marsh near our dominion. We have a wall from Tortoise Hill to Hidebull Mound where the 3rd and 4th local defense brigades are. Twinmount Town is right in front of that line, and that's where it'll be the easiest for them to invade. They used that very spot to enter the dominion in the past as well. Now that we have completed our defenses there, we can be confident in keeping them out.

"If their army is blocked here, they'll look for another location to break through. The area between Hidebull Mound and Firmrock Castle is separated by the Black Forest, which is roughly 50 kilometers wide. However, that part of the forest isn't where the swamp intersects, so it's the mostly likely place to go through. It'll be Tigersoar's hunting ground. All the mountain barbarians coming through there are your prey. I don't want to hear about any barbarians making their way to the villages or towns."

Fiercetiger Loze stood up and clutched his chest.

"Your Grace, Tigersoar will not disappoint you. We promise to not let even one escape."

Lorist nodded and gestured for him to sit.

"I trust you and Tigersoar's abilities. I'll leave this to you. As for Terman's Ragebear Knights, you will be transferred to Tortoise Hill fort to hold them there. The moment you see their forces split, attacks them from the fort. Strike all the way along Azure River until you circle to the rear pathway where they came from. From there, launch a pincer attack to crush them completely."

"Understood, Your Grace," said Terman as he stood up and accepted the order.

Lorist pointed the stick at the eastern Northlands.

"I've already ordered Waxima to temporarily serve as Jaeger's division leader. This time around, they suffered huge casualties because of the ambushes. However, the remaining soldiers are still enough to form a division. We will station them in the eastern part of The Northlands as a contingency. As for the villages of Felicitas, Salus, and Redriver, have them enter combat level two after the harvest. Make sure they're on guard when they start sowing seeds for spring. Also, form garrison regiments that can be sent to reinforce the frontlines at any time. Baron Charade, you are in charge of

this."

Charade stood up.

"Your will be done, Your Grace."

"Next, we have a piece of good news," Lorist said as he tapped on the map, "Over here."

Lorist pointed at the part of Black Forest between Hidebull Fort and Firmrock Castle. He dipped a goose feather into some ink and drew a red circle around the area. "This is the hilly part of the forest. There's also a large riverbank there roughly 20 kilometers away from Firmrock. According to Mayor Doboff's surveys, there is sure to be a gold mine. He reported his findings not long ago.

"However, it's inhabited by 30 thousand barbarians. They're a tribe called Warisingk, one of Habibaba's vassals. Our true focus this time shouldn't be defeating the 100-thousand-strong barbarian army, but, instead, occupying these hills and taking the gold mine.

"Let me first remind all of you that in this conflict, performance is not measured by the ratio of kills to deaths. Instead, what we want is for as many of them to be taken captive as possible. Why do we want that? Simple: the house is extremely lacking in manpower. The 20-odd thousand captives that surrendered after we took Madras have already served two years. This year is their third and they'll regain freedom the next year. The transportation and irrigation routes in Delamock have also been greatly overhauled thanks to the hard work of these captives and they will be working on the final phase of development for the rest of the year.

"However, we just defeated House Fisablen and obtained two provinces. Winston and Southern are in need of development. It's rather barren and there will be lots of development projects that require lots of manpower. While we have more than 100 thousand captive soldiers, a good number of them are injured, far from enough are left to develop the two provinces.

"The whole region is now under Norton control. It's imperative we restructure the transportation facilities to increase the region's productivity. We need lots of free labor. Even if we conquer the gold mine, we will need laborers. Since there's an army of 100 thousand coming our way, I hope we can capture at least 60 thousand youths to contribute to the development of our dominion."

Tigersoar's carroballista division leader and Gold-ranked Knight Dulles stood up.

"Your Grace, do the barbarians we capture this time get freed after three years of labor as well?"

Lorist shook his head.

"They're not soldiers belonging to the former empire. They are different from us. These barbarians will serve eight to ten years until they assimilate our way of life. When they agree to be our subjects, they will regain their freedom. Otherwise, let them work as laborers for the rest of their lives."

Dulles breathed a sigh of relief.

"I can finally stop worrying. If you said they would be free after three years of work, where would we find free labor after that?!"

The rest broke into laughter. Tigerloze stood up again.

"Your Grace, is Tigersoar put in charge of securing the gold mine?"

"No, you will only play a supportive role.

" Lorist said as he pointed to Reidy.

"Originally, I had planned to have Els and Reidy take over Jaeger, but, due to the matter of this gold mine, I've decided to let them take over the two guard brigades as the main force for the operation. At the same time, I have also transferred the 7th and 18th local defense brigades over to take charge of the defenses at the gold mine after we conquer it.

"Tigersoar lost almost a division after the huge battle in Southern. They'll have to wipe out the mountain barbarians that come out from that part of the Black Forest. As for the hills around the gold mine, I will leave it to Els and Reidy's guard brigades."

"Understood, Your Grace," said Loze as he sat back down.

"Even though I want you guys to catch as many captives as you can, but don't take any risks. A hundred thousand mountain barbarians aren't scary. We can definitely defeat them. But what we have to watch out for is that each of those mountain barbarian

warriors is tough and courageous. They will fight to the end even when the odds are stacked against them, given how they glorify death on the battlefield. In the same vein, I hope that you guys don't put our household soldiers in danger in trying to catch those captives.

"The easiest way to deal with these barbarian warriors is to take out their braves. Fight them one on one and make them lose their morale and their will to fight to the death. Mountain barbarian warriors have always worshipped strength and they believe that one-on-one duels are sacred. They will definitely not do anything underhanded to interfere with a duel. That is a trait we can make use of. After encircling the enemy, challenge their representative to a duel. If we win, they surrender, and if we lose, we release them. Only through doing so will those mountain barbarian warriors obediently surrender themselves to become our captives.

"That's the gist of our strategy in dealing with the barbarian invasion. If there's anything that we need to change later, I will make sure to notify all of you. It is now the second month and I estimate that the barbarian army will descend from the mountains around the 5th month. There's still roughly three months' time. The rainy season will follow after winter and we have to harvest the winter wheat and plant the spring crop following the rainy season. So, we must use what little time we have to train an reorganize. If you guys need anything, report to Baron Charade. He will be in charge of the logistics in this operation to resist the barbarian army."

After Lorist concluded his announcement, the meeting adjourned. Everyone returned to their own posts to begin preparation. Lorist, on the other hand, brought a regiment of guards and headed to the eastern Northlands. He wanted to visit Josk and Yuriy, the two commanders of the defeated Jaeger Legion who were recovering from their injuries.

Chapter 390
Jaeger's Consolidation

The snow began to melt during the second month. Both large routes and small paths from Firmrock Castle to the eastern Northlands were muddy and hard to travel on. That was also why Lorist wished to redo The Northlands' whole transportation infrastructure. At the very least, the roads had to be usable, unlike the current mud-rivers they were. This was how most roads on the entire continent were. A merchant's most important tool, a tool he had to have with him at all times, was a spade. A spade so he could fill up the holes in the road on the fly to keep his convoy moving.

House Kenmays hadn't scrambled to build a massive city when they took control of the eastern part of the Northlands, there were currently still just two relatively prosperous towns there. One was Singe, on the border with Magical Dragon Mountain Range, where the barbarians traded. It was filled with taverns, whose customers were exactly these barbarians. You could even see drunk barbarians snoring away on the sides of roads at times during the night.

The other was Whiterock. It used to be a small village, named after a huge white rock near the town. It had caught its new lords' attention because it was the area's settlement nearest the suspension bridge to over the border river between it and Wild Husbandry. It was made the salt merchant committee's headquarters and expanded with several dozen warehouses, carriages garages, and lodgings for the committee's employees. The village soon grew into a proper town.

When their dominion was moved, House Kenmays moved to Sidgler and took more than 200 thousand citizens with them. A small number of Sigler citizens were relocated to this part of the Northlands. There were less than 50 thousand. This was mostly because most of those moved to the Northlands were moved into the three new settlements in the southern Northlands. The place was reasonably developed already, it just lacked population.

While House Kenmays took many citizens with them when they left, they left the traders that dealt with the barbarians and also those that maintained the warehouses in Whiterock Town. It was actually a request made in the name of the salt merchant

committee. Given that the Nortons had a stake in the committee as well, they would receive quite a bit of profit from their operations, so they agreed quickly.

Jaeger's main camp was currently there. When they received word of Lorist's visit, Waxima, the legion's temporary commander, rushed out of the camp to receive him. He'd taken half a year to recover from his failed attempt at breaking through to the gold rank two years already and was currently once again at the peak of three-star silver-rank. He was likely to make his next attempt soon.

Lorist had contemplated a long time before letting Waxima take charge of cleaning up the mess that was Jaeger. He'd always been a loyal, courageous, and responsible knight. While he wasn't much of a talker, he was sincere, accountable, and frequently demonstrated his worth with his actions. Given that Jaeger had suffered a huge defeat and their morale was low, they needed a knight like Waxima to slowly build themselves back up.

And he'd not let Lorist down. Even though he hadn't been in the position for a whole month yet, Lorist noticed the camp was incredibly orderly and clean, everything was in order. The men carried out their various duties efficiently. No one looked down or depressed; on the contrary, everyone seemed polite and energetic. They had a very hopeful atmosphere about them.

Lorist did notice something out of place, though. Everyone wore a single non-uniform-code-abiding item, a single white feather.

"The feathers are to remind everyone of the brothers they lost, to remind everyone of the humiliation they were put through. The feathers must be stained red with the blood of our enemies to wipe this shame away. It is also to honor the sacrifices of their fallen comrades that has given them a chance to take revenge sometime in the future. These martyrs are worthy of being remembered for their sacrifice, and their valor," Waxima explained when Lorist inquired.

Lorist nodded.

"You're right. But I don't think Jaeger suffered a huge loss. Three of our divisions faced off against 100 thousand grassland barbarian cavalrymen. It wasn't just any confrontation either, they were part of a far bigger, organized offensive. Yes, the casualties were great, but Jaeger should be proud of their performance in spite of these odds."

"A loss is a loss no matter how you sugarcoat it, Your Grace. Jaeger was defeated because it was too careless. They thought they could roam Wild Husbandry unhindered and neglected to survey the area properly. Even after they discovered some barbarian scouts, they thought they were only a small cavalry unit and proceeded to attack. That was why they fell for the ambush. Commander Yuriy who set out to reinforce them didn't first try to find out why they'd been put in such dire straits first, he just charged in blindly.

"I questioned the surviving soldiers and have written a detailed report. I'm not trying to pin the fault on anyone. I just want this valuable lesson to be learned and remembered so our men don't make this mistake again. Jaeger became arrogant with their power and lowered their guard, they underestimated their enemy, which gave them the chance to catch the legion off guard. Had they stayed vigilant, had they stuck to procedure, they wouldn't have been caught as they were."

Lorist was rendered speechless. He understood Waxima wasn't trying to make him look bad, though; he was just stating the facts as they were. He appreciated his frankness even more.

He responded after a moment of silence.

"Apologies, I was wrong. Your words ring true. A failure is a failure. We shouldn't try to underplay it just because we had to sacrifice many of our men. However, I'd like to know why the scouts weren't sent out when the third division was out on a mission."

"Well, according to third division's men we managed to rescue, division leader Pete was worried the scouts wouldn't be enough to take the unit on. He thought it would lead to unnecessary casualties. He only sent the scouts out as far as they could be covered by the carroballista.

"Sir Pete died on the battlefield. I am unfit to judge whether his decisions were correct, but I believe he didn't realize there were 100 thousand enemies waiting for them. He just wanted to keep the men safe. Third Division was newly formed at the time, and heading out to Wild Husbandry was supposed to be training for them. He had to think carefully about pitting greenhorns against barbarian cavalry.

"Taking into account that Third Division brought two carroballista brigades, it's obvious he believed the small group of enemies weren't anything to be afraid of. They couldn't stand against his men. So, he only sent the scouts around three hundred

meters ahead so they would still be protected by the carroballistae. That's how they were eventually encircled."

Waxima's theory sounded rather reasonable but Pete had died so there was no way to hold anyone accountable. He just had to accept the explanation without comment and continue surveying the campsite.

Dinner was held in the mess hall. Lorist dressed like all the other soldiers and dined together with them. Those that dined with him were so elated and excited they almost forgot to eat. He chatted with them and asked about their families. He didn't forget to motivate them and tell them how much the house was prioritizing the legion's reconstruction either. He hoped they would stand strong again soon and wash their humiliation away.

During the night, he visited Josk and Yuriy, who were still recovering from their injuries. The herbalist in charge informed him that, while Josk's injuries were rather severe, he was recovering quite well… mainly because he had a great constitution. There was also the fact that he was rescued right after he was injured, unlike Yuriy, who continued to fight maniacally despite his injuries. By the time he was rescued, he was already at his last breath, unconscious and injured all over, with his flesh flayed and bones chipped. A couple of his battleforce circulating major nodes had also been destroyed; he was no different from a disabled person. He required help from consumption to excretion. The herbalist estimated it would take at least three or four months for his normal bodily functions to recover, and another one or two years of training before he would return to the gold rank.

Josk was already well enough to sit up.

"That damned duke set me up," he grunted, bitterly, "Even though a marksman like me can shoot enemies from a distance, I didn't think the duke would disguise himself as a normal soldier and launch a surprise attack from in their midst. I was busy looking for the leader to snipe and left the normal barbarians to the guards.

"In the end, that bastard jumped out of nowhere. Anyone who blocked his way was killed. He quickly approached me. I knew something was off when I recognized him. I fired a dozen arrows, but he blocked them all, before I turned and rode away. The duke knew he couldn't give chase, so he threw his longsword at me. Fortunately, a guard blocked it. It still pierced through him and bit into me. I fell with him. The ground shoved the damned thing right through me. I nearly fainted.

"The bastard caught up pretty quickly. A few dozen men took up positions between us to try and protect me. It was too chaotic and I lost the sword somewhere along the way. I only heard what happened to the guys that stood between us after we'd already gotten pretty far away from the battlefield."

"What happened?"

"Dead, they're all dead…"

Josk's physical condition was good. He'd only injured his sternum and lungs and was recovering rather well. He would be right as rain in a few months. At one point during their conversation, he even proclaimed -- basically shouted -- that he would lead Jaeger back into Wild Husbandry one day and slaughter everyone who'd taken part in the attack. Seeing that he was still that spirited, Lorist stopped worrying about him.

Yuriy, however, laid in his bed like a dead man. Despite his necrotic disposition, he was alive and conscious. Tears poured out of his eyes when he saw Lorist. The latter held his hand by the bed and accompanied him for a long time. He told Yuriy there was no rush and he should prioritize recovering from his injuries first. Now that the house had forced House Fisablen back to their own dominion, and cut them off from the outside world, the duke could struggle all he wanted, but he wouldn't be standing up again anytime soon.

When Yuriy recovers, Jaeger would've been rebuilt and retrained. According to Lorist, he would accompany Yuriy to the great northeastern plains and sweep it clear of the barbarians before going to make trouble for House Fisablen. They would test themselves against Frontier to see which was the better light cavalry unit.

Lorist stayed in the camp for half a month before he returned to Firmrock Castle. Before he left, he instructed Waxima to make preparations to defend against the mountain barbarians' invasion. Though the eastern part of the Northlands probably wouldn't be attacked, it couldn't hurt them to be prepared, just in case.

Two days after he returned to the castle, the rainy season began.

After a few days of consideration, he called for Charade and Spiel.

"I'm going to reorganize the local defense legion. It will be made three legions with slightly smaller numbers. There's no need for each to have 75 thousand men, Currently, apart from The Northlands, our house also controls Delamock and Winston.

Windbury and Pedro, both strategic cities in Winston, are a little short on defenses. They can't just have three sound strong brigades guarding them. The moment they are attacked, we might lose them and our house will suffer immensely for it."

Lorist took out the plan he had spent a lot of time coming up with.

Charade praised the reorganization from a strategic perspective.

"Your Grace, as the dominion's main defense force, the might of the local defense legion is indeed a little lacking. Even though it numbers 75 thousand, the dominion and influence of the house have expanded and many other places will have to be defended. The local defense legion can't handle the load.

"Even though the Northlands is the province with the largest area in the old empire, almost thrice Delamock, we only have 30 thousand men, ten brigades, stationed here. Even though each village or town has its own garrison, we still have to mobilize Tigersoar and Ragebear Knights to make sure we're safe. There's no way we can rely on the local defense legion alone to hold off the barbarians.

"If our household forces' field legions are all on excursions, what can we do in the event of another major barbarian invasion? Your Grace should increase the size of the local defense legion. From a strategic view, it needs to have at least enough power to hold off and defend against large-scale barbarian invasions like this independently."

However, Spiel, the one in charge of the household finances, expressed his objections.

"Your Grace, two-thirds of the household's budget is spent on the military! It's already going too far!"

Chapter 391
Persuasion

Spiel objected to Lorist's plan. He brought out a large list that detailed the scale the house's military and its huge yearly expenses.

So far, House Norton had five legions in total. Firmrock, with 60 thousand men, Tigersoar, with 60 thousand, the reformed Jaeger, with 60 thousand, the 75 thousand of the local defense legion, and the 55 thousand of Oceanic Legion. In total, the forces numbered 310 thousand.

At the same time, there were the 15 thousand from Ragebear Knights, the three thousand from Lorist's personal guard, and another three thousand from the guard sent out to carry out top secret missions. Lorist's personal guard was basically two brigades. The total number of men would be 331 thousand people. They were all the soldiers that enjoyed tier one benefits, with their total salary alone amounting to 1.3 million.

The house had another ten police brigades in charge of guarding warehouses, prisons, factories and other household properties and serve as supply convoy escorts. There were also the garrison units of the various towns and villages that totaled around 40 thousand men. Even though they were tier two forces, their salary and other benefits were still worth 200 thousand annually.

"Your Grace, the total number of men we have exceed 400 thousand. The entire population of The Northlands is just 1.6 million. Even if we include Delamock and Winston and the citizens of our vassals, it's still only 2.3 to 2.4 million. Having a citizen-to-soldier ratio of five to one is incredibly dangerous. As if the burden of having such a military is not enough, our house has been involved in war consistently for the last two years and the military budget has grown immensely. If not for the 30 million gold Fordes plundered from Hanayabarta, The house would've gone bankrupt long ago."

Spiel looked rather emotional.

"Your Grace, that was only an estimate. If we include the expenses of Furybear in

setting up a patrol unit in every town, and the pension paid out to the dead or injured soldiers, the total annual amount would exceed two million. It doesn't include the expenses incurred in replacing broken equipment and dead warhorses as well as lodging, clothing, food, medicine, and other necessities.

"We spent four million just last year. Forming Jaeger alone cost us a million, and conquering Iblia another three million. Even though by occupying Windbury, we obtained near two million gold Fordes, our expenses are still double our income! While the house has about ten million gold Fordes stored, if we continue like this, we won't even last three years! The house will collapse!

"I'm not exaggerating this at all, Your Grace. At first, I was thinking of telling you to cut the budget by half after we deal with the invasion. The number of soldiers our house employs rival that of the imperial family of the Krissen Empire! They could have so many forces because they controlled the entire empire. We only control three provinces. One legion is already enough to defend each. If war breaks out, we can emulate the imperial family and have our vassals conscript soldiers to mitigate our costs."

Lorist laughed bitterly when he considered the appalling difference in mentality. If Lorist acted like the former Duke of The Northlands, Loggins, he could've lived out the rest of his life in comfort and luxury, given the house's current standing. However, it was currently a raft traveling upstream. If it didn't progress, it would regress. The hidden threat the second highness posed, the longevity of the alliance, and the pressure of the countless knights jumping for a chance to contribute forced him to walk down the road of expansion.

Spiel wasn't wrong in that only one legion was needed per province. However, if the house wanted to expand, it had to possess a spear and a shield; Firmrock, Tigersoar, Jaeger, and Oceanic were the spear, while they only had the local defense forces as the shield. There was no way Lorist would give up his spear for a bigger shield. He would be wasting his previous efforts. House Norton would be constantly barraged with attacks until it lost all the power it currently had.

Spiel didn't have any ill intentions. He was one of the house's most loyal elders. Otherwise, Lorist wouldn't have allowed him to hold so much power as the chief finance-officer that managed all of the house's finances. However, as Spiel paid too much attention to its spending, he wasn't aware of the situation the house currently faced. While it seemed to be a rising star, with Madras's and Iblia's conquests under

its name, and its widespread fame following the successful suppression of Duke Fisablen, dangers still lurked beneath every syllable of the song of victory being sung.

Needless to say, Lorist had made Duke Fisablen fall into endless despair. It was like he gave the wake-up 'kick' to his dreams of monopolizing the eastern part of The Northlands. With but a slap, Lorist had sent the duke falling down from his pedestal, with his troops ruined and him losing his chance of coming back strong. All he could do was lick his wounds in his own dominion. However, Lorist didn't dare to let his guard down. It was obvious that House Fisablen would become the house's worst enemy in the east, one deathly resilient as well. Lorist had to be on constant guard.

While Lorist was an Andinaq, being the Duke of The Northlands and having the impressive achievement of conquering Iblia, Lorist knew better than anyone that the second highness to the west was not one to sit quietly and watch that unfold. The greater Lorist's contributions, the greater the second highness's doubt of his house. The second highness might have been quiet during the last year, and hadn't incited any conflict with the four duchies or the Union, but Lorist didn't think he was up to nothing. Given that he had conspired with Kenmays to make the second highness incur a huge loss through the contract, he was definitely scheming to get back at Lorist.

Right now, House Norton's impressive military was what prevented him from acting rashly. If they crippled their own forces, the second highness would be the happiest person. He could launch one attack after another against the house by rallying more troops, slowly overwhelming Lorist.

The legions can't go. At the very least, their current numbers have to be maintained.

Regardless, convincing Spiel that was the case was not going to be easy.

Looking at the list of legions, and their units and scale, and thinking back at the cost, He couldn't help but feel the supervisor's criticisms were valid. Having a citizen-to-soldier ratio of five to one was egregious. Most other nations that reached that point were biting off more than they could chew and weren't far from collapse.

Lorist stroked his chin and thought frustratedly, *Why do I feel like I don't have enough soldiers even though we already have over 400 thousand?*

He recalled a very famous saying on the web in his previous life.

Hmm, it must be a qualitative problem. What, then, is wrong with the house's forces?

Charade's laughter entered Lorist's ears.

"Hehe, Supervisor Spiel, your citizen-to-soldier ratio is mistaken. Instead of five to one, it is actually 20 plus to 1. We're definitely capable of having more soldiers than we do now."

Spiel flipped out in rage and flailed about as he stood up.

"Ridiculous! The figure isn't wrong, neither is the population count of The Northlands! Also, our military spending doesn't lie either! Strictly speaking, the ratio is four to one! Not five!"

"Please sit back down and calm yourself, Supervisor Spiel," Charade said calmly, "I wasn't suspecting the figures. I was just pointing out that the citizen-to-soldier ratio is mistaken. We shouldn't take the total number of soldiers and divide it by the population of the dominion. If the ratio was really as you said, then our dominion would have collapsed long ago. It wouldn't look prosperous and developed like it is now. Actually, you forgot two important things.

"The first is that our household has only launched a recruitment drive for the forces three times. The first was when we were recruiting marines for Oceanic -- I believe we got 20 thousand men -- rest of the 55 thousand were made up of mostly rescued slaves and pirates. The second time was when we were forming the wheelbarrow-ballista division, which saw 15 thousand people sign up. The third was carried out last year during Jaeger's formation. We recruited around 27 thousand soldiers and mixed them with 20 thousand veterans from other legions. Even though Jaeger's troops should number 60 thousand, the ranks were never filled. Only three of the divisions were successfully formed.

"In essence, we have only recruited a little under 80 thousand men from the dominion. Compared to the population of 1.6 million, the actual ratio is less than 20 to 1. Not only that, the space available in our legions is limited, resulting in many able-bodied youths being unable to join the ranks, having no other choice to join the garrisons. The youths serving in the patrol units across The Northlands frequently complain about how they're unable to join our forces despite their desire to.

"The second point you've forgotten is the origins of the soldiers that make up most of our forces. They weren't our subjects when they joined. Instead, they were mostly captives or rescued slaves. To be precise, they are serving as work-for-hire, hence the

high military expenditure. The formation of Firmrock and Tigersoar was a result of the captives we got with the defeat of Duke Loggins and the second prince. These captives served our house for three years and obtained freedom. To avoid them having no other place to go and wandering around aimlessly, we recruited them.

"The formation of the local defense legion was a direct result of the 200 thousand slaves we liberated. As our dominion wasn't able to integrate such a huge workforce in a short time, we formed the legions to limit the chaos the slaves could cause. Not only did the formation of these legions not involve our youths, they're comprised mostly of captives and former slaves, who helped the dominion's population grow. The family members of these soldiers also moved to our dominion because of them serving in our military.

"Supervisor Spiel, I don't deny our military spending is high. But it's because of this kind of treatment and arrangement that our forces hold superior combat ability and are unstoppable on the battlefield. They are also incredibly loyal. Take, for example, the serious defeat of Jaeger at Wild Husbandry. Even though they were in an incredibly hopeless situation, the men still continued to fight. While we lost 30 thousand, the enemy suffered more than us. Following their defeat at the hands of the 23rd local defense brigade at Pedro, their morale dropped quickly and they soon lost the will to fight.

"Without our household forces, House Norton wouldn't have achieved these heights. It was precisely thanks to our forces that we were able to exterminate Hanayabarta and obtain so much wealth. Now that Delamock and Winston have been added to our dominion, our sphere of influence has greatly expanded even though we didn't obtain many resources. We are now the sole hegemons of The Northlands, and this will bring bright prospects in the near future.

"This time around, His Grace's plan to reorganize and expand the local defense legion isn't without good reason. It is intended to keep Delamock and Winston in our hands. Also, His Grace isn't planning to recruit soldiers from the dominion. Instead, he has his sights on the 100 plus thousand ex-Madras soldiers. Even though our military spending will increase by a bit more, we can integrate Madras's former forces into the house and better control unstable variables. It is extremely beneficial to us.

"I've always thought of having the captives of our house join our forces officially after serving their term. Not only would it increase their solidarity after serving in the forces with our own men, it would also make their families become our subjects

willingly. While the military costs would stay high for a little longer, the house's income will increase as well. After all, we obtained two additional provinces. The local defense forces' expansion won't be a huge burden in the long run."

As the house's chief administrator, Charade understood it's situation exceedingly well. His arguments were so well-formulated that Spiel couldn't pick at any shortcomings. Everything Charade'd said was fact.

After some thought, Spiel found that Charade made a lot of sense. The house has always expanded its military through the captives first without affecting the development of the dominion. In that sense, Spiel's citizen-to-soldier ratio of five to one was inaccurate as the soldiers that were recruited into the force weren't subjects of the house in the first place. In fact, if the captives were allowed to do as they pleased after they obtained freedom, huge problems would easily arise. At the very least, the internal security expenditure of the house would increase. The free captives who were used to fighting and skilled at wielding weapons could easily be driven to the path of desperation for food and shelter. Recruiting them in the force would, therefore, be the better alternative.

"Very well, I agree to His Grace's plan to expand the local defense legion," said Spiel without objection, knowing when to step back when he was mistaken.

Lorist was elated that he no longer had to waste so much energy trying to convince Spiel. Charade really outdid himself this time.

Chapter 392
Admitting Loss

Within the great hall of Crouchtiger Castle in Eastwild, the young Seirya knelt on one knee on the floor with soundless cries. In front of him was the coffin of Third Frontier's Commander, Galini Beloput. After much trouble and effort, he'd finally completed the bumpy trip across the plains to Crouchtiger Castle just as the snow began melting. The grief from being forced to surrender to the enemy made him unable to face Duke Fisablen and the rest of his family.

The duke didn't look too surprised, nor did he flip out with rage. He just circled the coffin, step by step, before finally sighing. He stretched out his hand to touch Beloput's icy face and mumbled.

"I doomed you, old friend. If I had made the decision to retreat to the dominion, you wouldn't have died like this. It's because I was too greedy. Even though we were in this kind of predicament, I hoped we could use Boblige to bargain with our enemy. To think it resulted in your death and the whole legion's capture…"

A look of defeat finally surfaced on the duke's face. Everything had gone against his wishes. Ever since he left Boblige and returned to the dominion, he'd led the various barbarian tribes on military campaigns, first to reorganize the half-beaten Fourth Frontier in Wild Husbandry, then to ambush Jaeger, before finally leading the 100 thousand barbarian cavalrymen to attack Pedro.

Back then, the duke thought there was much he could do to turn the situation around. He didn't think, not even for a moment, that he could turn the loss into a victory, he just wanted to make sure the kingdom the enemy took was nothing more than a ruin. He had acted like a spoiled child with the mentality of 'if I can't have it, you can't either'. The reason he allowed the grassland barbarians to raid and pillage was so he could cause as much trouble as possible. Nobody was supposed to profit. It had been the only way he could make their enemy wary of the house and not push to exterminate them completely.

He didn't think the barbarians would actually be so spineless as to lose all their morale losing just 30 thousand men against a fort defended by just three thousand. The

moment they saw the enemy reinforcements arrive, the dozen chieftains began thinking of retreating for winter.

That was the moment he knew he was beating a dead horse. He decided to go all the way with his other plan: gather all the tribes that had submitted to him and launch an attack on the strongest tribe, Korinubi, the night before the retreat. Caught off-guard, the great tribe suffered a disaster. He then led his barbarians to the plains to plunder the spoils from what remained of the tribe.

The situation was set in stone. Since House Fisablen would be trapped in their dominion, the great northeastern plains, he would give the strong tribes a makeover so they wouldn't cause trouble for the house in its weakened state. At the same time, he could make up for the house's losses by sucking the life out of the tribes. Since the troops he used were the other grassland barbarians, the house wouldn't lose anything. He just had to throw a bone to a dog to bite another dog to death.

At the end of the previous year, he'd been far too busy thinking of how to deal with the alliance after stabilizing the internal situation of the dominion. The great plains stretched far and wide and he was confident the four houses couldn't set foot in his dominion easily. All conflict would be limited to Wild Husbandry. As for the border between Southern and Eastwild, the four houses' forces were busy constructing defensive infrastructure, such as moats, to cut off traffic. He predicted the four houses would defend the south and attack from the east. They were gradually limiting the space he could roam free and survive.

That was why Boblige was so advantageous, he could both attack and defend from there. They could mobilize their troops from time to time to stir up unrest in Southern. Many times the number of troops were needed to defend against these raids. As long as they could drag the war on for long enough, the alliance would lose their grip on the resources drained and would be forced to the negotiating table. He could then bargain for better conditions to manage the damage the war would do to him.

He hadn't thought, however, that House Norton would deploy their troops in the middle of winter and take the huge risk in circling Eastwild to the rear of Boblige and conquering it. They'd forced Third Frontier to surrender without a fight, a fatal blow to the house. The duke didn't blame Commander Beloput for committing suicide to atone for his mistakes. He knew there was no way they could resist and not surrendering would result in a needless massacre.

"You shouldn't have killed yourself, old friend," murmured he with another long sigh.

He left the coffin after giving the cold face a final touch.

"Rise, Seirya. You've fulfilled your duties, you didn't let down the honor of Fisablen knight. Tell me about the time the duke of The Northlands met you. I want to know every word he said in detail and guess his intentions behind allowing you to do this. Did he really do so because he admired Commander Beloput's courage?" asked he as he raised his hand to have Seirya stand up.

Seirya wiped the tears from his weather-beaten face, stood up, and reported his meeting with Lorist completely. He tried hard to recall Lorist's exact words.

After a pause, Duke Fisablen waved weakly.

"Seirya, you must've been worn out. Go groom yourself and rest for a few days. I will take your contributions to heart. You're still young. You're the house's hope. Train hard and remember this trial. The house will require you young ones' service in the future."

"Understood. I will train hard to serve the house," promised Seirya emotionally before he left.

Tap, tap, tap. The duke knocked on his desk with the middle finger on his left hand in deep thought. He cracked a bitter smile. According to Seirya's recollection, Lorist was obviously sending him a message. 'House Fisablen's time is over. All that's left is for you to decide whether you'll admit your defeat.' If he submitted obediently, they would be spared. Otherwise, Lorist would stop at nothing to kill of every last one of them.

"Hmph, you ruthless and scheming brat… Forget making me submit! You shan't be allowed to mess with House Fisablen!" humphed the duke loudly with ragged breath.

He described Lorist the same way he would the duke. Even though each had never heard of the other's insult for them, they were mysteriously of the same mind at that moment. The only difference was that the duke called Lorist a brat instead of a sly old fox. Each considered the other his biggest rival.

However, Duke Fisablen knew staying angry would do nothing for him. His house was tough only on the surface at the moment. Third Frontier's surrender was not as huge as First Frontier's complete defeat. Theirs was the truly harmful scheme. The legion's soldiers fought to their deaths rather than submit. The legion was eradicated as a

result. Given that the four houses didn't declare war beforehand, the house was caught completely off-guard.

Third Frontier, on the other hand, was forced to surrender. The house would have to take out a massive sum to ransom the knights and house members back. The duke believed Seirya that his relative and distant nephew, Woryo, was the cause of the legion's downfall. But there was no point to being angry at him. Having his own clansmen take up positions in the logistics of each legion was the elders' will. They believed only that would grant them a firm hand on the legions to ensure they would remain loyal.

Not all members of the house were loyal and wanted to serve it. For instance, the duke's second daughter, Iblia's queen, was intent on going against his will. The moment he thought about his daughter who had just made her way back to the dominion, he began to have a headache. He didn't think a queen would be inspired to start a brothel and ruin his reputation completely. Even now she was making her way to the greater and lesser golden creeks, thinking there was gold to mine there and that she would definitely get incredibly rich.

He slumped down in his chair in his study for a long time and thought about how he could deal with his current predicament. The house would probably have to suffer a huge humiliation in the coming days and endure their anger as they spent the next couple of years in their dominion. The four houses had cut the roads and paths that led out of their dominion and the house only had two legions' worth of men, around 100 thousand. Second Frontier was stationed at the golden creeks and Fourth Frontier in Wild Husbandry. There was also another 20-thousand-metal-armored garrison legion and his thousand personal guards stationed in Crouchtiger Castle.

While the house still had 120 thousand men, it would take most of them to defend its three provinces. Fortunately, when the duke was dealing with the threat of the grassland barbarians at the end of the previous year, he'd picked 20 thousand to form a new reserve legion as a tool to use against the barbarians in the future. That way, even if the remaining tribes united to attack the house, they would have a way to resist them. However, while it had enough troops to deal with the barbarians, it didn't have enough to take on the four houses.

Having ample for defense but not attack. That was the situation the house was in. Second Frontier couldn't be mobilized either as the golden creeks were one of the foundations of the house's revival. Many of the house's elders suggested its

headquarters be moved to Goldcreek, but the duke considered the fact that it was a little too far from the central area of the former empire and decided against it.

"Have Sylvia come over," instructed he an attendant outside his study.

The one most hurt by the war no doubt Princess Sylvia. She had thrown a huge tantrum and tried a fast strike because of her desire to marry Lorist. But the poor princess didn't think that her paramour would actually attack her house without even declaring war and bring his allies to attack Iblia, making her grandfather escape haggardly back to the dominion after incurring huge losses.

When the war broke out in the 5th month of the previous year, First Frontier was completely lost, Windbury was conquered, and the moment the duke returned to Crouchtiger Castle, Sylvia's days became incredibly hard. Some people secretly cursed her for being a harbinger of misfortune after hearing about First Frontier's defeat and worrying about their relatives' well-being. They believed bad luck would be present wherever she showed up. The last time she traveled to The Northlands for a trip, the second prince was defeated by House Norton and a 100-thousand-strong army was wiped out. Now, when she wanted to marry into House Norton, it ended with them exterminating the whole kingdom.

When word of the four central duchies aiding Duke Fisablen spread, the ones who made the curses were delighted when they believed the four houses were going to be defeated. Some even told the princess up front that the Norton kid would soon be captured and made a serf. She wouldn't have to be married so far away and could see her lover in the dominion all the time.

But word of the coalition army's loss soon spread. It had been a complete smack on the face. The mocking and subtle cursing turned into full-fledged rebukes. Sylvia had lost quite an amount of weight from weathering the stress.

"Sylvia, you lost more weight. Are they still causing you trouble?" asked the duke warmly when he saw her.

"No, Grandfather. I'm used to it, I'm fine."

"I'm sorry, Sylvia. This isn't your fault, the war didn't break out because of you in the first place. House Fisablen wanted to rise to new heights and become the northeastern area's hegemons. That desire is also shared by the four houses and it resulted in this

war. This was an inevitable conflict from which neither side could escape," said the duke with much thought.

Sylvia nodded wordlessly. On one side was her lover, on the other, her house. She was numb to all the happenings, caught in the middle of it all.

"I want you to go to The Northlands, to House Norton's dominion."

"What?" asked Sylvia, wide-eyed.

"I've no choice," he said with a pained smile, "We've lost. The situation is set, there's no turning back. I hope you will have a good talk with that brat so he shows us some mercy and not cut off too much meat. We're still the main force against the grassland barbarians. Without House Fisablen, they will frequently invade and harass the empire's borders. Have the kid think about this well."

Duke Fisablen breathed a long sigh.

"Sylvia, as your grandfather, I regret this deeply. I shouldn't have refused his marriage proposal. Otherwise, the war wouldn't have happened… but it's too late for regrets now. I need you to do three things on your trip. First, ransom the members of the house and our household knights. Second, have the salt merchant committee lift the sanctions on daily necessities. The plains only have alkaline soil and no edible salt. The farmers are at their wit's end. I hope they won't sharpen their blades quickly. Lastly, think of a way to convince him to let us ransom Third Frontier's common soldiers. We will need them to resist and suppress the grassland barbarians.

The duke silenced for a moment.

"Go pack up your clothes and luggage. Bring as much as you can with you. I will let you stay there for good.

"Grandfather, you…" Sylvia was sent into a stupor. "This means…"

"Let's leave it at that. I will arrange your escort and the negotiators that will join you. You will set out immediately after the rainy season," said he without giving Sylvia even a glance.

He turned with a wave of his hand and left.

Chapter 393
The Barbarians Cometh

The rainy season was over and the winter's wheat harvest was underway in the 4th month. The entire Northlands was becoming very lively.

Just as Lorist was about to depart from Firmrock Castle to check on the other parts of the dominion, Sylvia and her escort set out for The Northlands from Crouchtiger Castle. She had been given the heavy burden of being an envoy to House Norton.

As the barbarian invasion was impending, Lorist had the house's forces be on standby even though it was harvest season. In the fields, the harvesters had a sickle in one hand and a weapon in the other. Halfway through the harvests, however, word came from Twinmount Town that the barbarians had finished their preparations. According to the plan, the town's residents would be evacuated orderly. They would leave traces of panicked escape, though, to mislead their attackers.

On the 21st day of the 4th month, the barbarian army conquered Twinmount Town. Great volumes of fine wine and other daily necessities intentionally left in town made the barbarian soldiers incredibly excited about their victory. They believed the might of their combined force was enough to sweep the whole Northlands. Every warrior scrambled to be made part of the vanguard in fear of losing out on the chance to raid for spoils.

Lorist arrived at Hidebull Citadel on the 23rd day of the month. This was where the wall was and it would be among the first places to come under attack. He had to be present to make sure it remained safe. At noon, however, he received an urgent message from the acting commander of Jaeger, Waxima. House Fisablen's Princess Sylvia had come as an envoy to discuss the ransoming of his prisoners and matters relating to trade.

After receiving the news, he was both elated and troubled. He was glad that the old fox had finally acknowledged his loss. However, he was troubled that the envoy was Sylvia. He couldn't receive her even if he wanted; he was just too occupied. After some consideration, he sent the messenger back to Firmrock have Charade receive her for him and have her stay there for the time being. He would only return after the current

situation was dealt with.

Frankly speaking, the part that troubled him the most was that he didn't know how he should face the princess. He was aware that he had completely flipped out against her grandfather when he led his forces to exterminate Iblia and a number of House Fisablen's legions. He had inflicted a lot of damage on her house. He had suppressed their rise to power and was one of their archenemies.

Because of that, he was incredibly troubled by the fact that the princess who loved him so dearly, to the point she would marry no one else, was a member of the house he had just ruined. As Kenmays had said jokingly, Iblia's extermination was in part the four houses venting on Lorist's behalf for Duke Fisablen's refusal to accept his proposal. At the moment, word among the folk was that House Norton's leader, Duke Norton, had rained fire and fury on Iblia and focused their attacks on House Fisablen because of this. Sylvia's name was no different from other bad omens now.

He sighed lightly.

I guess I can only wait until the war is over. I'll make it up to the girl afterwards. I really made her suffer this time, especially with what this has done to her reputation…

Actually, even Duke Fisablen knew that even if he'd agreed to let Sylvia go through with the marriage, war would've been inevitable. House Fisablen's dominance conflicted with House Norton's interests, only one could emerge victorious.

"Your Grace, they're here."

Lorist gazed into the distance. He just barely make out clusters of black dots among the trees. The clusters coagulated into a larger mass as a wave rushed at the wall, swallowing the land as it went. Using the telescope, he could see the different beast-leather armor they wore. Some of them even fought with their chest exposed. Their faces were painted with ghastly and eerie tattoos, wielding bronze axes and weapons of crude design as they ran maniacally at the walls.

At four in the afternoon of the 23rd day of the 4th month, the barbarian vanguard launched the first wave of attacks on the defensive wall between the citadels at Hidebull Mound and Tortoise Hill. However, these barbarians had never seen such a tall defensive wall before and they couldn't help but stop in their tracks when they encountered the ditch. They stared at the three-to-four-meter-deep ditch laden with

spiky wooden stakes in a stupor before the carroballistae on the walls took their lives with ease.

The first wave's vanguard soon turned tail and ran. They left about 500 corpses behind. Around five or six in the evening, the vanguard launched another attack. They were probing the wall's defenses. This time around, they used wooden shields tied together with vines as walking planks to cross the moat. Even so, the carroballistae mowed their ranks down just as easily. Nearly a thousand fearless barbarians died unceremoniously. The crudely made shields were ripped to pieces. Those not killed outright had no choice but to run away again.

"Haha, this is far too easy. It felt like we were shooting turkeys. How relaxing."

The carroballistae operators seemed rather excited. The enemy on the other side of the ditch were nothing but target practice. Some would rather die than retreat. The braver ones were frequently skewered by ballistae bolts.

The wall between Hidebull Mound and Tortoise Hill stretched for 36 kilometers. It was eight meters high but only six wide. The wall was also separated by battlements every five to six kilometers where the soldiers could rest or stand guard. When the fight began, the battlements could be left in charge of a company. In front of the wall, a moat five meters wide and three to four meters deep was also dug, creating a chasm in the flat ground.

"I'm bored…" yawned Lorist.

The invasion didn't put even the slightest pressure on his forces. Their threat was far inferior to even that of the four duchies and Duke Fisablen's allied army half a year ago. Only local defense brigade soldiers who hadn't seen combat would be excited about fighting them. However, it was not often that the local defense brigades who only trained all day got to see blood. He decided he wouldn't give any commands during the battles to assess the command abilities of the two brigades' leaders. The only reason he stayed was so the soldiers would feel at peace, and to act as a contingency against any enemies of the blademaster level. There should at least be a few in a 100-thousand-strong army. They were Lorist's actual targets.

The enemy vanguard finally learned their lesson after their second failure. They knew they couldn't scale the walls on their own, so for the next two days, they patiently waited in the forests for the rest of their forces to arrive.

The rest of the army arrived two days later. Lorist learned the intel they received was accurate. There were at least 100 thousand men. Even though they lacked supplies and didn't set up a campsite, their bonfires looked like a field of stars in the middle of the forest. The forest seemed littered with little embers.

Many of the soldiers in the local defense brigades had never actually seen such a large army before. The elation they felt at their victory two days earlier washed away completely. They began to talk in silent hushes; they doubted whether they could actually defend against so many barbarians. They put aside their lack of confidence and anxiety during the battle the following day, though. All they had to do, after all, was load the machinery, fire, rinse and repeat. They forgot everything else and followed the instructions of their superiors like mannequins.

"Fire!"

The order sent a volley of arrows at the barbarians' ranks. They rained down and cleared out an area on the other side of the ditch, making countless barbarians clutch the parts where they were hit and scream in agony. It didn't last long, though; more barbarians replaced them soon enough. Those injured lightly were quickly taken back while those beyond salvation were given a quick send off, back to the embrace of the mountain gods, as they sang their songs of war.

The ditch was soon filled with corpses, branches, mud, stones, and other miscellaneous materials. Countless barbarians swarmed towards the wall, unhindered by the now-filled moat. They soon found themselves in another awkward position, though: the ladders they brought were far from tall enough. In a fit of rage, some tossed their weapons up at the walls, inflicting some light injuries on the defenders.

Some witter barbarians lash some of the ladders together, but they were soon spotted and shot. Whenever similar attempts were spotted, they would be promptly stopped. None of the attempts succeeded. Instead, the barbarians soon began to connect the ladders further away from the walls. Though they finally had their ladders, they were shot before they made it up to the walls. The sword-and-shield soldiers, bored to death, finally had a chance to act. They tossed rocks, fuel jars, and torches down the walls. The smell of burnt flesh soon filled the air. Some vomited from the disgusting smell.

The barbarians' ferocious attack lasted from morning to after noon. The only time a

dangerous situation almost came into being was right before they retreated. The enemy had gathered a group of braves to attack the walls all at once. They were surrounded and slaughtered by a group of Ragebear Knights before Lorist could react. As the knights slaughtered the braves one after another, it was as if all the barbarians felt themselves punched in the gut. They let out cry after cry of grief and began to hesitate.

Soon, the retreat was blown. The horn resounded across the plain. Lorist watched them retreat, leaving their comrades' corpses all over the battlefield. There were so many they were several layers thick in some places. They barely left any room for people to move around. Seeing this, he took benevolent action. He had the ranged units hold fire to the enemy could retreat unharassed. There were an estimated 20 thousand corpses beneath the walls. The battle taught the barbarians a huge lesson. They lost nearly half of the 50 thousand that had participated in that assault. He believed they would not attempt to take the wall again.

After Lorist gave his order, the area around the wall quieted down. But the silence didn't last long. Cheers soon exploded all along the wall.

"We won! We defeated them! We held the wall!"

Many exhausted ballistae operators collapsed right away. Many had fired non-stop for the whole battle like autonomous machines. Only after receiving the order to stop did they realize how fatigued they were. They were so worn they didn't feel like moving, even their voices were sore. The only thing they could do was tear up joyously.

Opposed to the optimism on the walls, pained and grief-stricken cries wafted over from the forest on the wind. They grew ever louder until it sounded like a chorus. It seemed all the more ghastly and sorrowful when night fell.

Lorist looked at the forest in the distance before gazing at the corpses littering the battlefield. He shook his head.

"Maybe the barbarians will know this defensive wall of ours as the wailing wall in the future," he sighed at the commander of Ragebear Knights, "They will remember this staggering loss of life. I don't feel a thing for them, though. If the wall were breached, it'd be our people crying."

After the failed assaults, the enemy army stopped bothering with it. Over the next four

days, they only sent several parties to collect the dead's heads. They also took the ballistae bolts. No one dared approach the not or the wall, though. In the end, Lorist ordered two regiments of pikemen and sword-and-shield infantry to move the corpses in the ditch and at the base of the wall to the barbarian corpse collectors under the longbowmen and ballistae's protection.

After another six uneventful days, Lorist was woken by Terman, who was running and screaming as he approached Lorist's bedroom.

"Your Grace! Your Grace! They're on the move! They split up!"

Chapter 394
Defeating the Barbarians

"Their movements are still within our expectations. A few days ago, Fiercetiger Loze sent a messenger to report that a number of scouts showed up in the area of the Black Forest near Firmrock Castle and Hidebull Fort. Apart from breaking through in that part of the forest, there's no way they can enter our dominion. Even though they number 100 thousand, they're not worth any concern to be honest. Fighting them feels like bullying little children… Victory won't even be sweet!" complained Lorist as he washed his face.

"Well," mused Terman, scratching his head.

Lorist was right. Apart from numbers and dumb courage, the barbarians were inferior to the household's men in almost every way. During the assaults over the last couple of days, Terman got the feeling the barbarians posed even less of a threat than the magic beast wave had in its heyday. He also felt the wall was far too long. Only two brigades, approximately six thousand people, manned them. Strictly speaking, that was an incredibly weak force. Should the barbarians split up into thousand-man units and spread their attack out along the full 35-kilometers of the wall, they wouldn't have had such a hard time trying to breach it. However, simple-minded as they were, they used units of ten thousand instead to attack five different spots which weren't spread out either. They were really stupid beyond belief.

The two brigades hurriedly brought their longbows and carroballistae to the attacked areas. They just needed a thousand men to deal with the assaults. They used their ranged weapons' firepower to start a massacre, inflicting huge casualties on the attackers. One time, Terman and a number of other knights even felt a little pity for them.

Lorist took him to a battlement on the wall and observed for a good while with his telescope.

"When did the barbarians split up?"

Terman gave it some thought.

"It should've been around five this morning, at dawn. The soldiers on duty noticed some movement among the enemy's ranks. They believed they were trying to attack, so they reported it to me. I headed up the wall and realized the barbarians in the camp had decreased when day broke. I walked along the walls but I could only see half as many as before."

"Alright," Lorist said as he tossed his telescope to a nearby guard, "Let's wait until the night and see. If the barbarian army truly split up, there won't be that many bonfires tonight. We'll wait for the rest of the day. If the number of bonfires is really fewer, we can confirm they've split up. I will lead Ragebear Knights to Tortoise Hill Fort and launch an attack there. We'll take a detour around Azure River to launch an attack from the rear and put an end to this."

The barbarians left behind didn't know about intrigue or misdirection. They lit only a fourth of the bonfires compared to the previous evening when night fell. Everyone was now certain in their victory the moment they saw this. The next day, Lorist took a regiment and launched an attack from Tortoise Hill Fort at the rear of the barbarian army, accompanied Ragebear Knights.

The surprise attack went without trouble. None of them expected the enemy to emerge from the safety of their walls and attack them. The ten-odd chieftains all thought the walls' defenders were the entire enemy force, given how they only dared to retaliate from the walls' safety.

Even though they weren't well-informed, the chieftains knew they couldn't rely on their advantage in numbers. The brave barbarian warriors' blood shouldn't be casually spilled. Instead, they bribed the traveling flatlander merchants to guide them and soon found another route leading into the dominion. The only trouble was that it passed through the Black Forest for five kilometers.

While there were still about 50 thousand barbarian warriors left at their campsite, most of those that had set out were the young and brave. The ones that remained were either elderly or female non-combatants or the lightly injured who were saved from the walls just a few days earlier. The campsite didn't even have proper defenses. There wasn't a single fence or moat in sight. Only the injured got to sleep in simple tents made from beastskins, the rest camped in the open near their bonfires all over the forest regardless of sex or age.

When the six thousand heavily armored Ragebear Knights rode into the camp with

their magnificent and armored steeds, the enemy crumbled completely. None could defend against the metal monsters. While some brave warriors sacrificed themselves to protect the others, and were trampled to minced meat, quite a number lost control of their bowels completely and cried out in agony, slumped on the ground.

The local defense soldiers launched their attack from the other side, having already made their preparations, and quickly captured a large number of barbarians. But Lorist was disappointed that he couldn't find even a single chieftain, nor was he able to kill any blademaster-level warriors. It wasn't that they weren't present. Instead, they escaped the moment they saw Ragebear Knights approach and abandoned the rest of their tribesmen.

He wasn't satisfied, even after a sweep of the entire battlefield, and led Ragebear Knights to attack Twinmount Town. Again, the completely unprepared enemy were completely defeated. This time around, Lorist finally saw blood. As they were fighting in a town, the knights only took care of sealing off the exits while Lorist brought a thousand guards with him inside. They quickly chased the barbarians out of the houses and made obedient captives of them.

Though Twinmount Town was supposed to be the barbarians' supply center, Lorist didn't get much, mostly some herbs and miscellaneous produce from the mountain range, most of the latter was kudzu roots. They were probably the emergency rations. Usually, each warrior would carry seven days' worth of food with him into battle. If he ran out, he would forage for food wherever he was. Unless the situation was dire, the tribes didn't need to supply their warriors with food or weapons. Apart from medicines, the barbarians got everything through pillaging. It was a sign of incompetence, a blotch on his reputation and character, for a barbarian to be unable to forage for his own food.

That was why the ones defending Twinmount Town were mostly slaves, punished barbarian warriors, or barbarians too young or old to be of much use in battle, Under Lorist's savage assault, the thousand crumbled with a touch. They didn't manage to cause Lorist many casualties before they were taken captive.

"Retreat and bring the captives and spoils along. We will return to Hidebull Fort. We'll have to rush to Fiercetiger Loze to exterminate the enemy that split off," ordered Lorist.

Along the path connecting Firmrock and Maplewoods was a lake formed from an

underground fountain. The lake was deep, but rather small, and its water was incredibly refreshing. Many passers-by favored it as a resting spot. This part of Black Forest was also where Lorist met the group of mountain barbarian cavalrymen when he first got back to the dominion.

The warriors that split off finally passed through the forest after four days of travel and appeared near the lake. It was soon surrounded as one barbarian after another emerged from the trees. It was only to be expected, they were tired and thirsty after four days' travel. The most crucial part was that that part of the forest was drier than the rest. There were no streams or springs nearby. They were only able to get a little water by digging deep in the mud or biting into bitter leaves. Now that such an alluring lake was right in front of them the moment they emerged from the forest, they jumped with joy.

Even though there were about 30 thousand or cavalry among the troupe of 70 thousand, they traveled at the rear with the chieftains and the other warriors of high status. The cavalry had to dismount and lead their horses through the forest and could only mount again after they were near the forest's edge.

After the chieftains and high-status barbarians exited the forest, warriors that had earlier stepped aside to make a path for them. The moment he drank some of the refreshing lake water, the commander of the army, chief of the Habibaba and the Jambassen, nodded with satisfaction.

"This is very refreshing water. But the lake's quite small. Will it be enough for everyone?"

A person dressed like a merchant replied respectfully, "Revered and undefeated Great Jambassen, I've traveled this route many times and I know this lake well. Don't worry about whether there'll be enough water. There's a fountain beneath the lake and the water level will be retained no matter how much you drink. I even dare to swear on my life."

"Hahaha," the Great Jambassen said with a hearty laugh, "You're a pretty decent fellow for bringing us through such a nice route. Um, what are you called again? Whatever, it's not like I can easily remember the names of you flatlanders. Don't worry, I'll reward you with gold for leading the way. So, is this the core of the Norton dominion?"

"Revered and strong Great Jambassen, thank you so much for your generosity. Your

humble and loyal servant pays his respects. That is right, this is the center of the Norton dominion. To the south is Firmrock Castle, to the north is Poplar Town and Maplewoods, to the west is a settlement called Felicitas with seven towns and hundreds of villages. Apart from Firmrock Castle, the other places are rather weakly defended. House Norton's forces are mostly gathered at Winston and Southern to fight against another duke, the very duke that had your fellow tribesmen from the grasslands pay a visit to you. That's why the soldiers defending those towns and villages will not be able to handle your brave warriors. They are weak and helpless maidens lying on the ground, waiting for you to conquer."

The merchant named Benlaihez bowed respectfully. He was a merchant captured by the Habibaba during the previous year's summer whilst traveling. Given the choice between the bloody axe and gold, he picked the latter and agreed to guide them. As he had stayed in the mountains for quite a while, he wasn't aware of the current situation of the house, nor of Lorist and his forces' return.

The merchant's words made the rest of the barbarians laugh. The Great Jambassen, in particular, laughed so hard he couldn't catch his breath.

"You… Ben-whatsyourface… You really have a way with words… Like helpless maidens… Hahaha. I like these words. But as it's already evening, the sky should be darkening soon. My warriors have traveled for a good couple of days. Let's rest here for now. We'll eat well, refresh ourselves and rest. Tomorrow, the helpless maidens will be ours to conquer. Ahahaha…"

The Great Jambassen's words prompted a round of applause. Soon, the bonfires were lit and the barbarians brought out the dried food they carried with them and began to dine and enjoy the delicious lakewater.

All of a sudden, an ear-piercing horn sounded. Loud drumming echoed in from all directions. The warriors all stood up, dazed, and watched as the faintly visible black banner with a golden tiger with two wings entered their sights.

The merchant jumped with shock.

"Impossible! Why is Tigersoar here?! No, it's an ambush! Run!" yelled he.

"Run?!" mused the Great Jambassen as he clutched the merchant's clothes, "You led us into this trap! You ought to die!"

He killed the merchant with a stab of his sword before he roared.

"What are you panicking for?! Everyone, get together and get ready to attack! Don't forget! We are 70 thousand!"

Tigersoar didn't give them much time to prepare, however. The carroballistae launched began firing. Bolts rained down on their ranks. Men fell in droves. While the barbarians did indeed have 70 thousand, 70 thousand warriors who weren't able to approach their enemy were nothing but targets. Soon, they began retreating slowly. The carroballistae division pressed its assault. Under Dulles's command, the carroballistae fired two bolts for every two paces they moved forward, maintaining a constant wave of pressure on the barbarian army. When the four thousand plus barbarian cavalry were dead, the army collapsed completely. They all turned and ran, wanting to leave the storm as behind them as possible.

But when the forest entered their sights, they soon realized there were three rows of metal-armored mounted monstrosities.

"Attack!" bellowed Terman.

The horn was blown and Dulles ordered his men to stop firing and stand by. At that moment, Loze came from the left and Pajik from the right. Each led about six thousand metal-armored spear cavalry. They charged into the mess' flanks.

Lorist drew his sword and pointed it at the chieftains and high-status warriors wearing exquisite feather headgear and roared.

"There they are! Kill them all!"

On the 4th day of the 5th month, Year 1779, House Norton's forces successfully defeated the 100-plus-thousand strong mountain barbarian army and obtained countless captives.

Chapter 395
Gold Mine Obtained

"The spoils this time around are pretty decent," said Lorist, filled with satisfaction.

His current location was the hilly part of Black Forest at the old mine. They were in the secret gold storehouse of the barbarian tribe Walizinge. The guards, led by Els and Reidy, had broken into their campsite at dawn. The tribe was now just one of the many casualties. The tribe did have two strong ceremonial warriors, but Lorist was quick to kill them.

The little cave now in front of them was stuffed with crudely made golden wares of varying sizes and odd shapes. Under the torch's illumination, they gleamed temptingly. An approximate count placed the content of the cave's worth at around two million gold Fordes.

"Why would the mountain barbarians use gold to make these weird little things?" Lorist wondered as he picked up a crude heavy great-axe fashioned of pure gold and waved it around, "This doesn't seem too practical."

"Your Grace, according to the old barbarian slave, these golden wares were made with great care and scrutiny to be used as sacrifices to the mountain deity, Kubawesson," explained Howard swiftly.

From the perspective of the mountain barbarians, gold was the most useless resource. They couldn't eat it or use it to make good weapons. It didn't help that they traded using mainly barter either. It was said that, in the distant past, the barbarians valued gold no more than a simple rock. However, when they realized that gold could be used to trade for incredibly practical goods from flatlander merchants, its demand spiked. Soon, they replaced good weapons, which used to be regarded as the most important resource, as sacrifices for the mountain deity.

Since the discovery of the gold mine in the hills, the Walizinge tribe had become one of the richest tribes. They traded gold with the other tribes to gain slaves, food, and livestock and enjoyed a decent life. It was reflected in the golden decorations hung around their grass huts. They could even hire two strong ceremonial warriors to keep

other tribes from having designs on their territory.

It had now all fallen to the Nortons. Perhaps, the years of living in peace and luxury let the tribe lose their fighting spirit. The chieftain's instinct to preserve his life took over the moment the two warriors fell and he hurriedly surrendered.

"Not only did we not suffer any losses, we also managed to earn quite a bit. I'm sure Spiel will be glad. Oh, also, when will Grandmaster Sid arrive?" asked Lorist.

Grandmaster Sid was going to estimate the amount of gold available in the mines. Only after finding out whether it could be profitable to mine it would the house decide on investing funds into the facilities here. If it was already mostly dried up, then the house would leave with what they had. In a few more years when another tribe mines the rest of the gold, the house would attack them instead and make off with some pocket change or collect some tribute.

"There's no way he'd arrive this quickly, Your Grace. We took this place just this morning. It hasn't even been half a day since we sent the messenger. Each trip takes at least five days. Also, the path through the forest isn't easy to tread. Els already gathered some of the barbarian captives to build a road through the forest," complained Howard.

He had slipped and fallen a number of times because they were rushing to launch the surprise attack.

"Oh, apologies. I'm just far too happy. I forgot," Lorist consoled with a shrug as he tossed the golden axe back into the pile before turning to leave, "Alright, let's go. Seal the door and have Spiel make an inventory when he arrives. Just tell me the worth of it all in gold Fordes."

Usually, there would be people on hand to make an inventory. However, Spiel had to deal with stashes worth more than a million gold Fordes personally. As the house's chief financial supervisor, he rushed to the area after hearing about the gold mine's capture and the golden wares they'd obtained despite how tiring or arduous the journey was. He arrived on the third day.

"Your Grace, I've made an inventory of the golden wares. They are worth 2.32 million gold Fordes in total," reported Spiel, a little crestfallen. Had the household forces arrived a few years earlier, there would've been a few times more gold. According to

the slaves' testimonies, during the Kubawesson festival last year, the Walazinge tribe fashioned countless golden wares to trade. At the same time, they made a 1.3-meter-tall golden statue of the deity as a tribute to the holy site on Smormilgen Mountain. Near a thousand cows were used to transport it.

"What a waste. They actually used gold to make such a statue and even used the cows they traded for with gold to transport them. They even had to generously feed the thousands of barbarian warriors escorting the statue and used the remaining cows as a blood sacrifice for the festival. They squandered everything so easily!" exclaimed Spiel hatefully.

Lorist didn't take Spiel's words seriously. Had he really attacked the Walazinge tribe back then, it would've been a disaster. Taking the statue made as a tribute to their gods was shaking a huge hornet's nest. He'd have made an enemy of every barbarian in the Magic Dragon Mountains. They would all hate House Norton for stealing their holy statue. While the household forces could easily take care of 100 thousand barbarians, it couldn't deal with a million at once. Even if they obtained gold worth tens of millions, it wouldn't have been worth it.

"Also, Spiel, make sure to give ten percent of our spoils, 230 thousand, to Mayor Doboff. It's the bonus I promised him," instructed Lorist.

Spiel hesitated for a moment.

"Your Grace, isn't it a little too much? Actually, the mayor would be satisfied even if we gave him ten or 20 thousand. It's not like he knows how much we got anyway…"

Lorist smiled and shook his head.

"Just do as I say. A man cannot stand without his word. While you can hide the truth from people, you can never deceive the eyes of the gods. While ten percent of the spoils is definitely a lot, it's nowhere near worth tarnishing the house's name. Trust is the foundation, and we must definitely stick to our word. If we cheat the mayor for just this much today, would we cut the pension of our brave warriors tomorrow? Doing something like this will shake the house's foundation to the core, do you understand, Spiel?"

"It is my mistake, Your Grace," confessed Spiel, lowering his head.

"I'm not blaming you. You are my chief financial supervisor. You are an earnest man. I

trust your ethics and character. You only did what you did out of consideration of the house's interests, not your own. After all, House Norton is rising rapidly and we've spent quite a bit these past years. It's only natural you, as the financial supervisor, would seek to balance our spending. I admire your attitude when it comes to furthering the house's interests. However, some things cannot be dealt with based solely on consideration for our finances. We would quickly be blind to the better, yet distant future by the allure of short-term profit. Do you understand?"

He was finally trying to address Spiel's increasingly miserly attitude.

"I understand, Your Grace. I promise not a single copper less will be paid when we hand this bonus to Mayor Doboff."

"Very well. I leave this to you. Also, tell Mayor Doboff that, since the mountain barbarians suffered heavy losses, he can expect a good period of peace. The house has decided to take in Twinmount Town officially. He has done well as the town's mayor for these ten years, so ask him if he would stay on as mayor or join the house's administration. Our sphere of influence is expanding quickly and we really need officials like him. His talent shouldn't be wasted in a single frontier town. Please pass my thoughts on and tell him that those who serve the house loyally will be rewarded."

"Understood, Your Grace. I will pass on your evaluation and your expectations word for word. I believe he'll make the most sensible choice."

Grandmaster Sid arrived, disciples in tow, two days later.

Without even bothering to rest, he had his disciples conduct a detailed survey of the area and the mine itself. He also entered the mine personally to check on the gold veins' distribution. After three days of hard work, Lorist received the report.

"Congratulations, Your Grace. The mine is still rich. We've determined that less than a tenth of the ore has been harvested. Our observations and the slaves' testimonies confirm the mine's previous owners used one of the most primitive mining methods of which we know. They only got 500 thousand gold Fordes' ore in a year.

"If we invest heavily in the mines and uses the latest mining and refining techniques, we can produce 1.5 to 2 million gold Fordes every year for the next century. This is definitely something worthy of a huge celebration!" reported Sid excitedly.

Ever since he was made viscount and given his own demesne in Delamock, he was

proud of his identity a Norton noble.

He was genuinely happy for the house for obtaining such a rich gold mine. If the house had funds, Lorist could give him more support to invent even more unimaginable inventions. Currently, he only received 100 thousand gold Fordes' funding annually like Professor Balbo's gunpower laboratory. They were sourced secretly and not reported publicly. While he did enjoy the benefits as they were now, he was worried the house would one day be forced to cut his budget because of financial concerns. It would severely impact his goal of raising his rank to the next level through his experimental contributions.

"Thank you, Grandmaster Sid. You have truly brought me very good news," thanked Lorist with a beaming smile.

A gold mine producing up to two million gold Fordes for a whole century was truly incredible. Even Spiel, who was just standing nearby, couldn't keep his mouth shut.

I really didn't think this unnamed place in the Black Forest would have such a large gold vein. Even the golden creeks House Fisablen spent lots of effort to conquer doesn't generate more than a million gold Fordes a year. Now House Norton has its own gold mine, not the least bit inferior to the golden creeks, how can we not be jumping with joy?!

"This place shall henceforth be known as Golden Ridge. What do you think?"

He was so happy he couldn't help but name the place immediately.

Nobody had any objections.

Out of excitement, Spiel added, "Your Grace's naming sense is sound. This is indeed a ridgy area full of gold. However, I believe we should concern ourselves with setting up some defensive arrangements so the house can conquer the mines for good and keep it from falling back into the barbarians' hands."

Spiel's timely reply had Lorist call for a meeting immediately to discuss their plans to build a citadel at the ridge for the protection of the mine.

"We'll give up on the other smaller hills. Build a fort to protect the mines and outfit it with a complete loadout. We'll call it Fort Goldridge. Additionally, we will build another long wall from Hidebull Fort to here around the hills to the left of Firmrock Castle. This way, we can split this part of the dominion off from Magic Dragon

Mountains completely. We won't have to worry about any invasions again.

"We shall also build a highway through Black Forest to connect to the lake. We shall build a town there to provide support and supplies for Fort Goldridge. As it is also situated within Black Forest, we will have to clear the surrounding land, everything within half a kilometer regardless of whether it encompasses the wall or the other forts will be cleared. The barbarians must have no cover for any future attacks.

"This will be a huge project, but the house has to do this no matter whether we're at war or not, regardless of the manpower and funds required. Building the wall and Fort Goldridge is of utmost importance. Els, Reidy, you two will take command of the guards and 7th and 18th local and defend this place. Be incredibly alert and ensure the laborers' safety. Deal with any incident as you see fit. Understood?"

"Understood, Your Grace," said Els and Reidy in unison as they stood up.

"But, Your Grace, won't you have no one by your side if the guard squads stay here?" asked Reidy.

"Don't worry, I need just 500 men."

"Grandmaster Sid and Supervisor Spiel, I need you two to stay here for a while. Grandmaster, I will trouble you with setting up updated mining and refining facilities. Spiel, you will draft the budget and allocate the supplies the fort and wall's construction. Make sure to monitor the mining strictly as well. I hope everything will proceed even as we work on the construction instead of beginning after everything is complete."

"Very well. Your Grace. We will start the upgrade work as soon as possible," replied Sid loudly.

"Understood. Your Grace, I'll make sure the mining process is monitored strictly," said Spiel as he stood straight up.

Chapter 396
Insomnia

After delegating the construction and mining projects at Goldridge, Lorist brought Howard and five hundred other guards to Firmrock. He thought about how Sylvia was waiting for him there and felt hesitation overwhelm. But, no matter what, he wasn't going to run away. There were some things that had to be settled. He understood the girl in love with him was the one most hurt by his conflict with House Fisablen.

They traveled without rest and arrived at Firmrock at midnight the next evening. It was already rather late and most of the inhabitants had already fallen asleep. After entering the gate, Lorist dismounted and instructed his guards to rest, refusing their offers of further escort. He and Howard take their mounts along the quiet path to the center of the castle.

The streets and alleys in the castle-town were illuminated by silver moonlight. Under its gentle embrace, the cool night breeze blew refreshingly.

Lorist stretched and relaxed his body, fatigued by two days of non-stop riding.

"Time really flies. Come to think of it, you're getting married next year," he said eyeing Howard, "I remember how small you were when I first saw you. Now you've grown into a magnificent young man. Oh, Howard, didn't your father-in-law write your father and I letters to prepare for your marriage? You said you would think about it back then. Have you come to a decision?"

Howard didn't respond. He just kept moving forward with his warhorse.

"Eh? Howard, weren't the two of you getting along well? You're always glued to her when she comes over. What's going on now? Having a spat?"

Howard looked straight at Lorist.

"Teacher, I want to put the marriage off for two years…"

"Oh? What's going on?"

"I've asked senior apprentice brother about this and he said I'm already at the two-star silver rank and can start learning the Dan Ocean Ki-refining Technique. You promised to teach me two years ago, but it slipped your mind when the war started. Brother Reidy said he could teach me, so I want to learn it first before marrying. He said that, given that I'm smarter than him, I could establish my foundation in two years of focused training."

Lorist only just recalled that he'd forgotten his promise.

"I'm sorry, Howard. I was far too busy and forgot about it. Since the household won't be caught up in anything for now, I'll teach you. As for your father-in-law and your father, I'll personally write them a letter to delay the marriage. I'm sure it won't be too much trouble."

"But Teacher, if I start training, I'll have to train in seclusion. Then, there'd be nobody to serve by your side," hesitated Howard.

"There's no need to worry about that," Lorist smiled, "Oceanic Legion's commander, wrote me a letter just last month to remind me of my promise. Howard, do you still remember your junior apprentice brother? Sunbaud silly firstborn? What's his name again?"

"Jinolio."

"Darn it. When I said I wanted to take him as my disciple, Senbaud seemed to be in so much pain, as if he'd ate a pile of fly-infested shit, cause he thought I was taking his son as a hostage to ensure his loyalty. But now, he's anything but reluctant. It's almost like he wants to dump his son on me. Last month, he wrote me a letter saying his son's now 16 and has awakened his battleforce. He asked me when he should send him over to be my attendant so I can start training him. Sol, I said I wanted to take him as disciple back then to erase some of his doubts. I didn't think he'd actually take it seriously."

"Hehe."

He was aware of the matter as well. Senbaud was originally a pirate who'd been subdued and forced to serve House Norton after his attempt to raid Lorist's ship. But later, his forced service turned into willing service. It didn't take long for him to become loyal to the house either. It was simple; the more Lorist showed the true extent

of his abilities, the more Senbaud respected and admired him.

"Teacher, that junior is far from silly. He's just a little bigger than most his age. It's not like you didn't read the letters he sends us. He has an incredible way with words," argued Howard.

"Tch. Come on, they were written by his mother. Didn't you see how neat and elegant the handwriting was? Men often write with large and sharp strokes, which usually result in messy writing that almost pierces through the parchment. Your father's handwriting is rooted to the parchment, and Loze's seems like it carries a hint of killing intent. Handwriting is a good reflection of a person. Do you think such a huge kid can have that kind of nice and tidy handwriting? It's just as ridiculous as a brute doing embroidery."

Howard had to admit that Lorist made quite some sense. What in the world did Senbaud's huge son eat for him to grow to two meters tall at the tender age of 16? Given his build, it's no wonder Lorist calls him 'silly brute'. However, he liked his junior quite a bit. Perhaps it was because of Senbaud's amazing skills in setting people up with each other. Apart from bringing his son along to the dominion for the annual reports, he also had him write to Howard in the name of being his junior to ask about things he should pay attention to about battleforce awakening. In time, Howard grew to like his straightforward, if huge, junior.

"Fine. Write a letter to the silly brute and have him come over. Since you aren't going to start your training immediately, give him a few pointers and evaluate his personality. Even though I also instructed Tarkel to pay attention to it and he hasn't reported anything bad about him, we only know about the surface. You should be able to get a better understanding of him after you spend some time together. If he's untrustworthy, I'll only have him as a disciple in name and won't treat him like you or Reidy."

"As you wish. I'll write him a letter and have the guards bring him here tomorrow."

The two walked in silence for a while before Howard spoke again.

"Your Grace, are you afraid of meeting Princess Sylvia?"

Now they weren't conversing as teacher and disciple, Howard changed his tone.

"I'm not. Why would I be?"

Howard stared at him suspiciously.

"Why would I lie to you?" Lorist continued, a little embarrassed and mad. I only wanted to take a slow walk because of how nice the moonlight is. It helps me relax after riding for two whole days. Also, given that it's already midnight, riding into the castle will wake everyone. Incredibly inconsiderate, isn't it?"

"Fine, fine," smiled Howard.

"Hmph."

Lorist continued his walk discontentedly. No matter how long the walk took, arriving at the destination was inevitable. The path to the keep wasn't that long either.

After the guard brigade left with Lorist, the police brigade took over defending the keep. They were mostly retired soldiers who couldn't give up on military life completely. They all knew Lorist rather well. The moment the squad saw the two approach, they hurriedly greeted them and took care of their mounts.

"Don't bother, there's no need to open the main gates and wake everyone. We'll enter from the side. Have the servants boil some water, make us food and send it up to my study. We'll be there. Leave any and all reports to tomorrow," ordered Lorist as they got closer.

The guards' leader saluted and rushed off to carry out his orders. The two that brought the hot water, however, were two female servants. Lorist looked at them oddly. He usually had male servants on duty at night. Why would these two be on duty this time?

"Princess Sylvia is having trouble sleeping, Your Grace. We're on duty in turns at night to take care of her needs," explained one.

"Oh? Sylvia's losing sleep?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"On which is she now?"

"The east wing's third, where she used to stay, Your Grace."

Lorist hurriedly washed and changed into some comfortable clothes. By then, the two

maidservants had already brought two large plates of food over. After biting off a piece of honeyed bread, Lorist asked, "Um, how has the princess's appetite been in the past two days?"

"Your Grace, she's only eating very little. She said that she doesn't have any appetite and only has a bowl of soup every meal," replied the maidservant.

Lorist couldn't sit still. He turned to Howard.

"Get some rest after you're done eating. I'll go see the princess."

The keep was built against the mountains, split into four sections. The front was the main work area where Lorist's study, the guest hall, meeting hall, and the various departments of the house were situated. The rear wing was Lorist's personal area where his concubines lived. The west and east wings housed the main guest accommodations.

The two differed from one another slightly. The east wing faced had a beautiful view of the castle. Guests of high status tended to reside there. So far, apart from Princess Sylvia and the second highness, the others who lived there had some form of relationship with the house's three allies.

Sylvia was currently staying in a room on the wing's third floor. Lorist had had the room sealed after the princess moved in. It was now her personal quarters and wasn't used for any other guests.

Lorist stepped lightly. A reclining chair on the balcony greeted him as he entered the room. A person dressed in a snow-white linen gown lay on it, bathing in the moonlight as she hummed to the night breeze.

Lorist slowly approached.

"Didn't I say I don't want to eat or drink anything? Well… It's not your fault… I'll tell your manager about this tomorrow," said she clearly when she noticed Lorist's footsteps

"It's me, Sylvia…"

Lorist realized how hard it was for him to speak out. His voice was as soft as a mosquito's buzz, almost entirely inaudible. The princess, however, sunken into the

depth of the recliner snapped up like she was struck by lightning.

"Is it you, Locke?" her voice shaked.

"Yes…"

His voice was slightly louder this time. He took a few steps into the moon's embrace.

"Locke!"

Sylvia leaped into his arms and hugged him with all her might as tears streamed down her face.

"I missed you so much…"

"What's wrong, Sylvia? Why have you lost so much weight?"

She was only half the size he remembered. Her face had thinned, but her two big emerald eyes were still just as alluring as he remembered. He hurt when he hugged her. She must've suffered a lot to thin this much.

"Nothing's wrong… I just couldn't sleep or eat."

Sylvia cried in her lover's embrace. Her eyes fountained rivers down her face and neck.

"Locke, Grandfather doesn't want me anymore… I can't go back to the house either… He said I shouldn't think of going back after coming here… Will you still have me?"

The usual proud and unapproachable princess was gone. Sylvia cried like a child who'd lost her way home, like a dog waving its tail desperately to please its master.

"Of course I will. Idiot, why wouldn't I?"

Lorist's heart spasmed as he stroked her hair gently and hugged her thin frame.

"My little fool, no matter what happens, I'll always be here for you. I'll stay by your side until our hair snows. I vow it."

Sylvia couldn't hear him. Her emotions flowed out of her like her tears, and drew her consciousness with it. She collapsed in his embrace and fell into a deep sleep. Her face,

however, glowed lightly with a serene smile. Her petite hands tugged on the corners of his clothes, refusing to let go.

Her cries startled the two servants. When they entered the room, Lorist hushed them quickly and help him guide the princess to her bed. He pulled the blanket over her gently and turned to leave, but her hands, as thin and petite as they were, clamped on his clothes. They held on tighter than a magic beast's claws.

"Fine, I'll stay."

Lorist smiled bitterly and asked the maidservants to get him a chair. He would spend the night by her side.

"Well, can you tell me about why she can't go home? Speak softly. Don't wake her."

Having nothing better to do, he decided to ask the maidservants about the situation. As Sylvia's personal servants, they also suffered quite a bit. They told Lorist about how the princess was treated by her house and how the duke only allowed her and them to take their clothes when they left. Even the princess's guard was disbanded and absorbed into other units.

Lorist nodded. He understood Duke Fisablen's intentions in sending Sylvia here. He admired how ruthless and straightforward the old fox was.

Poor Sylvia, she doesn't know the grandfather that spoiled her so much has placed her on the table as a bargaining chip.

She wasn't sent here as an envoy, but instead, as a token of apology. He wanted the four houses to spare House Fisablen and not force them into oblivion. Lorist made a silent decision the moment he saw Sylvia's thin, sleeping face.

Chapter 397
Untitled

Princess Sylvia slept for almost five hours. When she saw Lorist seated beside the bed, she smiled happily. Lorist had the maidservants prepare a luxurious breakfast. He even fed the princess two small bowls of wheat porridge himself. He refused to let her off the hook until she finished another two pieces of bread and some milk.

As he stroked her long, platinum-blonde hair like he would a spoiled little girl, he said, "I want to feed you until you're nice and chubby like a little piggy. I won't let you stay this thin. Look at your hands… I can even see your veins. They're practically skin and bones. Sylvia, do you know how much it hurts to see you like this?"

Sylvia buried her head in his chest shyly. She hammered his chest at the mention of feeding her like a pet pig. Though, she did so with a delightful, satisfied smile.

Lorist was could only leave after having lunch with her and promising to join her for dinner. Even though Sylvia was acting incredibly clingy, she was still aware of his status House Norton's head and as Duke of The Northlands, titles that came with their share of duties. She had no choice but to watch him leave eventually, however unwilling she was.

It's always the hardest to be expected by a beauty.

Lorist sighed deeply. He turned back and smiled at Sylvia, waving at him from a balcony on the third floor, before he left in large strides.

Her situation is indeed rather troubling, thought he furrow-browed, *She's naive, but no fool. She's surprisingly sharp…*

From what the two maidservants had said the day before, Lorist surmised the princess probably realized the intention behind the duke sending her to The Northlands. She thought she had already been abandoned, falling from her position as a treasured princess to a token of apology. After the four houses attacked Iblia and fought House Fisablen, Sylvia had received lots of scorn and criticism from her house. Everyone saw her as a bringer of misfortune and the war's cause. According to the maidservants, all

Sylvia could do was stay home as much as possible and avoid interacting with others. It didn't stop the rumors from reaching her, though. She cooped her up in her tower and spent her days there, hoping desperately the nightmare would soon pass.

If Sylvia's godmother, Xanthi, had been there, she would've had a much better time. It was too bad the blademaster had dug her own grave and pursued Reidy. In the end, the teacher came out to stand for the disciple. Given that Reidy was his eldest disciple, he didn't plan on reasoning with Xanthi. No matter who Reidy had killed, they deserved it. He set out to save Reidy himself and left her under the second highness' supervision. It had been a year since then already, and it had caused Sylvia to lose her strongest supporter, as well as the shoulder she leaned on.

The Fisablens were a large house. While Duke Fisablen was its head, he didn't have a say in every single thing. There were still a few elders that just wouldn't die, and a huge bunch of relatives. If the house had been in the inner parts of the empire, they would've split off and formed branch families long ago. But given that they were on the grasslands and faced the constant threat of the barbarians, strife and division would most certainly send the house down the road of demise. Its members had no choice but to huddle together for warmth. They had secured their land and legacy through unity. But it also resulted in problems, particularly the many malaligned goals of the house's many members. Some were loyal and willing to serve the house with all they had, others would take advantage of it when the opportunity arose.

In times of peace and prosperity, the members would get along just fine and share the fruits of their success. Anyone bearing the Fisablen name would be served delicious meat, or if not, some soup. But the house was now in a pretty dire predicament, with First Frontier exterminated, Third Frontier captured, and Fifth Frontier disbanded, and the reserve legion ruined. The four houses had stripped the elegant clothes off the former empire's most powerful faction and even dragged them across the ground. Be it the surface or the interior, those watching properly knew House Fisablen had utterly lost.

Even with Duke Fisablen's non-stop encouragement and his recruitment of the grassland barbarians to reform the reserve legion, the house's members had begun to hold varying opinions. On the great northeastern plains, barbarian cavalrymen were common as clouds. Rider or mount, as long as one was willing to pay the right price, they would charge to the frontlines for your sake. But the problem was that, while recruiting them was easy, feeding a force of 20 to 30 thousand was rather difficult.

In the past, when the salt merchant committee was trading daily necessities in large quantities, the house just had to sell the goods to the barbarians and profit. They were even able to use the supplies to hold tight control over the tribes and use them to conquer the golden creeks, causing the area rich with gold to fall to them. This spurred on rapid provincial development and caused the house's fame to rise even more. Those were the good old days.

All of the momentum the house had come to an end when they asked the four central duchies for reinforcements to eliminate Melein. On the surface, it seemed they'd obtained large numbers of young laborers by exterminating the duchy, given that they'd moved up to 300 thousand to their domain and had increased their might. At the same time, they established a trade route to the four duchies. As the house had been quite well-off financially, they formed two more frontier legions. The household's might and impressive military had given the duke with the ambition to take control Iblia's affairs.

"You were so blinded by your ambitions that you couldn't see the way forward clearly!"

One of the elders had criticized the duke thusly. The one who'd said it was the duke's uncle. The old man was a lustful alcoholic. Though he was almost a century old, he still hadn't passed on and met the Wargod. He continued to cause trouble for the duke instead. He even had seven children and held quite a bit of power. Woryo, Third Frontier's logistics officer, was his most pathetic son, and his youngest.

"Your carelessness and your pride made you ignorant to the fact that the four houses are guarded against us. When they eliminated Madras, you should've already been on alert. That way, our house's forces wouldn't have suffered such heavy losses!" the uncle had rebuked during a household meeting after the fact, bringing the duke much trouble.

He'd completely forgot that he'd been the most steadfast supporter of the duke's plan to conquer the northeast, busying himself with allocating his descendants to preferable positions.

"Why didn't you agree to the marriage to House Norton's head? Letting Sylvia marry the Duke wouldn't have been humiliating at all. He was already profiting greatly from his agreement to the first two conditions. You just had to ask him to chase his concubines and illegitimate children away! That's no doubt what made him see us as

an enemy. Face… I wonder how much is our 'face' worth. Since when was Sylvia so high up she couldn't tolerate a few concubines?"

Had it not been for the duke's status as one of the strongest fighters in the house, being a rank 3 blademaster, the others might've ousted him already. After all, the duke's failures cost them a little too much. Many lost a close relative or two, especially those who'd placed them in profitable positions. None had expected it to end up a suicidal affair. They didn't hesitate to voice their malcontent at all.

Given that even the duke was forced into such a tough position, what happened to Sylvia was to be expected. Her father was the eldest son of the duke who had unfortunately perished in battle with the grassland barbarians. Sylvia had yet to be born. As her mother had heard the news of her husband's death right before her birth, she passed on right after making the delivery. The orphaned Sylvia was left to the duke's lover, Blademaster Xanthi, to raise, so she didn't have any close ties to many in the house.

Sylvia only reentered the duke's sights when she grew up and showed talent in battleforce training. She was one of the very few who showed such characteristics. Back then, the second prince, Iblia, came to Eastwild personally to ask the duke's support to found his kingdom. At that time, he entitled Sylvia with the title of princess and increased her status among her peers. Coupled with the intentional effort on the duke's part to make her into the house's face through the formation of her own personal guard, her status was unmatched and she came to be known as the most beautiful pearl of the kingdom.

With the aloof Xanthi's protection and the duke's deep care, Sylvia's life was simple and joyful. The dark side of the house had never been shown to her. That was why Lorist found her naive and filled with optimism and hope for the world. She was a cute and pure girl like an elf worth protecting. However, back then, Lorist wasn't in the mood for a romance and busied himself with the house's affairs. What he didn't expect was that his casual tone and the unique tales of being exiled by the house when he furthered his studies, as well as his loss of contact, left a huge impression on her.

As the godmother who'd raised her single-handedly, Xanthi was quick to realize Sylvia's fondness for Lorist. She herself was completely uninterested in him. In her eyes, he was an average-looking, good for nothing low-ranked and cowardly noble ten years older than Sylvia that only knew how to hide within his dominion despite having such an impressive military. He also trained in the weird and uncommon fighting

techniques of the eastern martial monks.

Naturally, she would never acknowledge she was biased against Lorist because she was dissatisfied with losing a match to him. She believed he'd used her unfamiliarity with his fighting technique to catch her off guard. He even stopped fighting when he had the advantage and collapsed from fatigue the moment he stepped out of the duke's manor.

Despite her objections, though, Sylvia's interest in Lorist only grew. Following their subsequent interactions, her interest changed into admiration. Xanthi, seeing that the situation was turning grim, forced Sylvia to train in seclusion for four years in a hurry and hoped the passing of time would calm her mind and dull her love until it disappeared. She didn't expect that after four years, while Sylvia had managed to break through from the one-star gold rank to the two-star gold rank, her love had turned into a deep longing. The moment she heard Duke Fisablen was going to organize a knighthood competition, she hurried to The Northlands and expressed her desire to have Lorist participate.

What followed would become the two most painful and impactful experiences she had. First came the death of the 'little brother' and heir of Iblia she had raised. The little prince that was the result of a drug-induced copulation between the second prince and the queen orchestrated by the duke had died from a prenatal heart disease. The queen and the duke's coldness towards the matter caused Sylvia much grief. She ignored the duke's orders and returned to the dominion to attend the funeral for which not many others cared.

She then went to The Northlands to calm her mind. Lorist told her the second piece of bad news there: the three conditions the Duke had brought up. While he had agreed to the first two, he couldn't agree to the third because he was not a heartless person. The duke refused his proposal for a union with the house as a result. While the princess was disappointed, she didn't really take it to heart. She believed her grandfather was just worried she would have to suffer jealousy from the concubines after marrying Lorist. She believed that after returning to the dominion, she could convince her grandfather to agree to the marriage.

Sylvia spent her time traveling around The Northlands in peace. That was the happiest time of her life. Lorist accepted her feelings and accompanied her on the trip. He even brought her to Silowas, allowing her to experience a kind of beauty non-existent in the grasslands for the first time. Had it not been for Xanthi's watchful eye, she might've

been so deeply submerged in the river of love she would've gone to Lorist's bed willingly.

However, what awaited her when she returned was the duke's rage. He had given her a curfew to prevent her from stepping out of Crouchtiger Castle. She begged her loving grandfather to agree to the marriage. She explained she didn't mind Lorist having a few concubines, but the duke told her it wasn't her decision to make, and that Lorist's refusal to agree to that condition was a slight on the house's reputation. Marrying Sylvia under these circumstances would damage the house's reputation.

She never imagined her loving grandfather would give her such an answer. Was the reputation of the house more important than her happiness? No matter how she cried and begged, the duke's answer to that question was the same: 'Yes'. As a result, he started a hunger strike. But thanks to Xanthi's consolation, she was saved in the end. That was also the driving factor behind Xanthi's rampant pursuit of Reidy. She had intended to offend House Norton intentionally and make the two houses enemies so Sylvia would completely give up on the notion of marrying Lorist.

In the end, Xanthi's wish was granted. While she didn't manage to make it back and ended up the second highness's prisoner, House Norton did end up becoming House Fisablen's enemy. Lorist led the four houses to crushed House Fisablen's frontier legions and the four central duchies' reinforcements.

Then came the blame of the members of the house on Sylvia. The matter of her failed attempt to marry Lorist had been made known throughout the house. It was inevitable that she would be criticized. What she didn't think was that her grandfather would actually present her to Lorist to make peace.

Marrying Lorist and being given as a gift were two different things. Marriage represented the union of the two houses and was a celebratory affair. However, giving her to Lorist was treating her like a female slave that could be beaten or scolded however her master liked. Her life would depend on his whims.

She never imagined this kind of ending for her. She thought about her cousin, Cacanne's, insult.

"What's so great about you?You just have a blademaster guarding you. Now the blademaster was captured by your lover and sent to the imperial capital's prison, you deserve what you get. So what if you got the gold rank after a few years of training?

You're close to 28 and still single! You want to get married? Dream on, you harbinger of misfortune!"

Caccane was six years Sylvia's junior. Her paramour was one of the household knights serving First Frontier. Sylvia's own maidservant had seen the knight climb the walls into Cacanne's chambers in the middle of the night. Now that First Frontier was no more, it wasn't known whether the knight still lived. So, she directed her angst at Sylvia.

While Sylvia could pretend to not hear the curses house's members flung her way, Duke Fisablen's mission to head to The Northlands as an envoy was the biggest mental blow she could suffer. On the surface, she was there to provide a peace offering. Only, she was the offering she was presenting. Even though she could finally stay with Lorist, it was in the most humiliating fashion possible. She was filled with despair and completely isolated. The only reason she didn't crumble completely was her yearning to reunite with Lorist.

The moment she met him, she was elated. Hearing the sweet whispers of her lover finally made all the emotional tension that had built up inside her and which'd made her suffer insomnia go away. She fell asleep immediately and, by the time she woke up, Lorist felt a little off with how clingy she was being. The slight hint of despair that hid behind her two loving eyes made him feel even sourer.

He knew letting the naive, fairy-like girl stay with him like this wasn't the way to go. He wondered if he would regret the decision he was about to make.

Chapter 398
Decision

"Your Grace, this won't do. You can't do this. I strongly object to this decision of yours!" said Charade with a jump.

He had come over to bring a stack of documents to be signed. After putting down the documents, he reached for a bottle of fruit wine from the rack. He heard Lorist talk about the decision he made right after he sat down and instantly voiced his objections.

Lorist had said he wanted to get married to Princess Sylvia and wanted Charade to start preparing a grand wedding ceremony to take place in half a year. He believed the time would allow Sylvia to recover from her mental scars as well as her malnourishment. He didn't think the moment he revealed his intention, he would receive an instant objection.

"Why? Weren't you guys in agreement about this before?" asked Lorist a little angrily.

"Your Grace, it was a matter of timing. Right now, House Fisablen is our enemy. While I believe Princess Sylvia's qualities more than qualify her to be your wife and the house's matron, given that she bears the Fisablen name, I cannot allow it."

Lorist shook his head.

"This is a personal matter. I won't take anyone but her as my wife. Whether you agree to this or not. This is none of your concern. I've made my decision. Just do as I say."

"No!" Charade said desperately, "A duke has no personal matters! Your Grace, you don't just represent yourself. You are the face of the house and the representative of our 1.6 million subjects as well as our loyal household knights! You must consider the house's reputation!"

"Hehe, is that so? Why didn't I know I represented so many things? Did anyone ask me whether I was willing to represent them?" Lorist said without holding back, "You're telling me I have to go through you lot to even pick a wife? So if you're against it, I can't be with the woman I love? What do you treat me as? A mannequin you can push

around? Must I do everything according to your will?"

"Well…" Charade realized he had used the wrong choice of words. "Your Grace, you know that I didn't mean it that way. Nobody dares to treat you like a mannequin. You are truly the Duke of The Northlands and this is a fact that everyone recognizes. What I'm against is only your decision to take Princess Sylvia as your main wife. Before, we were more than happy to accept her because House Fisablen wasn't an enemy. Your marriage to Princess Sylvia would also gain us a strong ally.

"But now, not only is House Fisablen our enemy, they also suffered such a huge loss at our hands and no doubt consider us their archenemy. Most importantly, they've already been defeated and forced to stay in their dominion. Our generals are currently mocking them and no longer take them seriously. We're still in preparation to take revenge against them for Jaeger's loss in Wild Husbandry. Do you think it's appropriate to marry Princess Sylvia now?

"Think about the rumors about the reason of the war being Duke Fisablen's refusal to allow you to marry Sylvia, and Duke Kenmays's joke about how our three allied houses are joining in on a battle to secure you a wife. If you take Princess Sylvia as your wife now, you will only be validating the rumors. What would the family members of the sacrificed soldiers think? Would they get the impression that their loved ones died because of your marriage issues?

"Also, how should our soldiers face House Fisablen in the future after Princess Sylvia becomes the house's matron? Do we treat them as in-laws? If House Fisablen launches another invasion, I suspect our men wouldn't know whether to retaliate or not. Your Grace, if you make this decision lightly, you'll cause lots of chaos in the house. Most of us will not support you in this decision."

"Nobody would be as stupid as you say and not resist when an enemy is right in front of them," Lorist said disheartedly, "So what if I marry Sylvia? It's not like House Fisablen will stop being our enemy."

Despite his continued counters, Charade had made a few good points he hadn't considered yet. As the head of the most powerful house in The Northlands, he would have to think this through properly. However, his decision was already made and he would not change it. He would definitely give Sylvia, who loved him so much, a reliable place to which to belong.

"Here's something you don't know about. On the surface, the duke sent Sylvia as an envoy, but she told me she no longer has to return to the dominion. Didn't you notice she didn't bring any guards? Only two of her personal maids came along. Also, the one in charge of the talks is someone else. Do you understand? The old guy is insulting our love. I have to give Sylvia a proper resolution and take her as my wife," insisted Lorist.

"Sol, this old man is far too cruel."

Charade finally realized why Lorist was so set on marrying Sylvia. He recalled that when he was a child, the store near his house had gotten some new wooden dolls. One of them was a colorful clown with a long nose. It was incredibly beautiful and rather expensive. As he'd wanted the toy a lot, he begged his father to buy it. But his father said he could only get it through his own efforts, so he let Charade take care of some chores in exchange for pocket money.

Charade, who wasn't even ten years old at the time, worked hard to earn the money copper by copper. The days passed one after another, and by the time he finally saved up enough, he learned the shop's owner was organizing a stock-clearance. According to the owner, he was going to go back to his hometown and would no longer run the shop.

Seeing Charade come over, he said with a smile, "You still want to buy that doll? Since it's no longer worth anything, I'll give it to you as a parting gift."

The experience left the deepest impression on him. Seeing the thing he pined for day and night just abandoned by someone else, he looked at the pouch of coins he had saved up after working hard for three months, and looked back at the toy the shop owner had tossed to him. It made Charade feel incredibly vexed, and he left the toy in a corner of the house when he got back. He never played with it.

Lorist's current situation was similar. Perhaps, it was even worse. Duke Fisablen was practically giving Sylvia away as a gift to express his willingness to submit. 'Here you go. Didn't you start the war for her in the first place? We'll give her to you now that we've lost hopes that you'll spare the house.' Either Duke Fisablen didn't really consider the emotions of the two involved, or he was intentionally mocking their relationship. 'Didn't you guys want to be together? Alright, you don't even need to ask to marry her or spend so much money on this anymore. I'll just give her to you. Do with her what you want. You're satisfied now, right?'

“…You two can be together. We'll host a wedding ceremony in a few years, once the matter subsides, but please don't invite too many people. We have to keep the effects of this as small as possible. Is this alright? In fact, you can make Princess Sylvia the house matron right now if you want. She'll only not be one in name for the time being," suggested Charade after some thought.

It was the best solution he had for now.

"No," Lorist refused right away, "I can't let Sylvia live with me just like that. How different would that be from making her my concubine? I know you're taking the house into consideration, but Baron Charade, did you consider how the princess would feel? It's already bad enough her house abandoned her. If I treat her this way, she would really become a gift House Fisablen tossed our way. I want her to have a grand wedding.

"It will give a huge face slap to that old man at the same time. Did he think I would treat Sylvia like a female slave? I will publicly make Sylvia my bride and the house matron. She'll be Duchess of The Northlands. I'll have everyone feel envious of her and let House Fisablen regret their decision. I trust Sylvia will be quick to forget the Fisablen name after marrying me and take on the Norton name proudly."

"B-but Your Grace, we have to answer the men…”

"No worries. This will be easy. I will express my gratitude to them for their courage, for making House Fisablen submit and send Princess Sylvia. We two lovers were finally united thanks to the great contributions of our troops."

In essence, Lorist was trying to affirm the rumors that he had exterminated Iblia for Princess Sylvia, taking on the active stance instead of remaining passive. That way, not only would he be able to pin the war between the two houses on a juicy legend, the gossip lovers would surely spread it around as a tale of war for the sake of love.

"Our men will be proud. When they are old, they will be able to boast to their descendants how they fought for the sake of the Duke of The Northlands's marriage and crushed House Fisablen so badly they had no choice but to hand over the princess. They brought the tragic lovers together. This way, House Fisablen will be painted the villains. Hahaha, this idea sounds rather decent!

"Also, our house has conquered the Goldridge mine and obtained more than two

million gold Fordes. We should use some of it to make commemorative badges with Sylvia and my name on them and the saying 'Love Persists till the End'. We'll distribute them to everyone who participated in the war, including our allies. Everyone who took part will get one. I believe nobody will complain about fighting for the sake of my wife after receiving these," said Lorist with both his legs against his desk gleefully, greatly satisfied with the excuse with which he had come up.

"Your Grace, isn't this a little too shameless…" Charade was both humored and troubled at the same time.

"Don't sweat the small details," replied Lorist lazily before he leaned back and started napping.

It was only to be expected since he hadn't slept when he was accompanying Sylvia throughout the night.

"Baron Charade, I'll leave the preparations. Give me a budget and the rough timeline. We still have half a year, so set it at around the 11th month. Don't forget the guest list. I want a grand ceremony, understood? If there isn't anything else, you may leave. I'll get some shut-eye."

"Hey, not so fast. I came here for official business, you know. These documents need your signature urgently. You've wasted enough of Howard's time on your wedding. Howard, splash some cold water on His Grace. Howard, Howard! Where's he?"

Charade called out few times, but nobody answered him.

"Stop calling him. He's not here. He should be on his way to Northsea to pick up his junior," Lorist said after recalling his conversation with Howard the previous night, "Also, I wasn't joking with you about the wedding. I'm serious."

"Understood. I'll make sure everything's in order. Don't worry. Just sign these first. Stretch your face a bit while I get someone to bring you a basin of water," said Charade before he left the room.

He returned a moment later with a basin.

"What's the matter? You mentioned Howard going to Northsea to pick up his junior?"

"Did you forget I told Senbaud I'd take his son as my disciple? Now he's 16 and has

awakened his battleforce, Senbaud wrote me a letter to remind me of the promise. I had Howard go to Northsea to pick him up. He'll serve as my attendant in the future. I'll see whether he's worth training or not," said Lorist.

He submerged his whole face in the basin to wash his fatigue away.

"I did hear you mention it once. Isn't his son the silly brute that follows him around all the time?" Charade had gotten the same impression of Jinolio because Senbaud always brought his son along to the dominion when he made reports on Oceanic Legion.

"That's the one," Lorist affirmed as he picked up the stack of documents, "What's with all this? What's so urgent about it?"

"It's regarding the local defense legion's reorganization and expansion. The expenditure and rationing all require your signature before they can be arranged. Also, you have to appoint the four other legion commanders to the new legions."

Local Defense would be reformed into four new legions. Each would be comprised of four divisions, subdivided into four brigades. Each legion numbered 48 thousand, with there being at least 100 thousand captive soldiers drafted. The captives had already served a little more than two years and were the main contributors to the transportation routes and irrigation construction efforts in Delamock. They would regain their freedom at year's end. According to the traditions of the house's military, captives of war could freely join.

"How about this, call Baron Freiyar and Baron Belnick back and have them deal with reorganizing the legion. You focus on the marriage," said Lorist as he signed one document after another.

"By your will, Your Grace," said Charade with a shrug and a look of frustration.

Chapter 399
Effect

Lorist had not expected that after word spread of his intention to marry Sylvia, he would receive countless letters from the household knights and officials. All of whom were against Sylvia becoming the house's matron.

As opposed to the officials who tried to come up with nuanced arguments about how that would be inappropriate, the household knights were far more forthright. Their argument was strong. They believed a woman from a defeated house wasn't fit to be House Norton's matron.

Charade predicted the situation's turnout well. Everyone opposed Lorist's decision. Hansk, governor of Silowas, was the leader of the officials who objected to the decision and most of the administrative officials agreed with him. How could Lorist take the descendant of an enemy house as his wife? It was completely different from their agreement two years earlier.

One of the people to express the strongest reaction was the chief finance supervisor, Baron Spiel. His reasons were different from the others'; he was against Lorist throwing a huge wedding ceremony. He believed the funds it would require was a huge waste. In his letter, he stated that if Lorist was marrying a princess from another nation, then a huge wedding ceremony was inevitable because it would increase the house's reputation. But Princess Sylvia's current status didn't necessitate that kind of spending. He believed a quiet ceremony would suffice.

Lorist was both glad and angry after he read Spiel's letter. He received Potterfang's letter soon afterwards. It was similar to Charade's. He was worried the soldiers would be swayed and their morale would fall. He also believed, like the other knights, that Sylvia, being a member of House Fisablen, had no right to become the duchess.

Thankfully, only six of the 16 gold-ranked knights publicly wrote him letters to object to the wedding. Josk and Yuriy had suffered a huge loss from House Fisablen's forces in Wild Husbandry, so their objection was only expected given their animosity. Loze and Dulles, commanders of Tigersoar, also expressed their objections. Loze was the representative of the knights that believed a member from a house they defeated

didn't qualify to be married to him.

Dulles had only joined in the objection because of his close relations with Yuriy, hardly unexpected. Vice-Commander Belnick, stationed in Delamock with part of the defense legion, probably wrote his letter reluctantly, given his status as a knight from Maplewoods. The last one was Potterfang.

The ten other gold-ranked knights, apart from Senbaud, didn't express any opinions. As Charade knew Lorist's mind was set, he didn't bother to do much after advising him against it the first time. Terman's view was that it was a private matter, and a household knight only had to follow his orders and do his duty instead of objecting to Lorist's decision. The ex-bandit Ovidis would never dream of objecting given how enamored he was with him. He wouldn't dare risk crossing his bottom-line. Freiyar and Pajik kept their silence and didn't tell anyone what they thought no matter who asked.

The commander of the local defense legion -- stationed on Silowas -- Gold-ranked Knight Jades, and Messen, serving the legion from Firmrock, didn't dare express their opinion given their lack of understanding of the overall situation since they had only served the house for a short while since their liberation. As for Malek, he fought with Potterfang and believed his friend ought not write Lorist a letter of objection. However, he didn't express any support for the matter either. Last was Els, who merely laughed when he heard about Lorist's decision. As the leader of the guard brigade, he was the one most familiar with the relationship between Lorist and Sylvia. Given how well he understood Lorist's temperament, he didn't care much about those who opposed the decision.

The only one who wrote a congratulatory letter was Gold-ranked Knight Senbaud, commander of Oceanic Legion. He said he was glad that the two were finally able to get married. It was the first positive response he'd received, all Lorist did after reading it was snicker and call Senbaud a sneaky bastard. Even though he was also a member of the household, Oceanic Legion was a more independent entity that didn't have to care much about what the other knights thought.

House Norton had two other blademasters, one was Engelich -- stationed at Firmrock. Even though the old man was a rank 1 blademaster, he was so afraid of Lorist he acted as meekly as a mouse before a cat whenever he saw him. There was no way he'd dare object. As for Blademaster Shuss stationed on Silowas, he was preparing to break through to the second rank and couldn't be bothered to stick his nose into this matter.

Even though Governor Hansk had tried to get him to co-sign the letter, he wasn't even allowed to enter his room.

Being rather furious, Lorist decided he would teach these fellows who didn't know what's good for them a lesson. He hosted a grand meeting at Firmrock and called all the knights and officials that objected to his marriage with Sylvia. During the meeting, Lorist let his rage explode as he rebuked those present about how they'd forgotten their place and criticized the head of the house for something as trivial as marriage and overstepping their bounds. During the most climactic point, he got hold of a vase and smashed it hatefully on the ground before storming out of the room.

The household knights and officials didn't imagine Lorist would react that strongly. Seeing the smashed vase and Lorist's figure leaving angrily, they all began to feel unnerved. Some more fearful ones were covered in cold sweat, while others started to reflect on whether their objection to the marriage was appropriate.

Just as the panic started to build up, the 'good cop', Charade, got on the podium. As he consoled his colleagues, he reminded them.

"House Norton is only able to achieve its current glory thanks to none other than the current duke. While His Grace is rather agreeable most of the time and respects the opinions and suggestions of all of you, as seen with how he frequently promotes those with good problem-solving abilities, that is only when it comes to public matters. It comes as no surprise that the duke, most impressive leader of House Norton, to be consumed by anger if he was criticized by his subordinates on a private matter like his marriage.

"But worry not. His Grace was only angered by the fact of the matter, not the people involved in it. The reason for His Grace's rage was because you interfered in a private matter. If you contribute well in your duties, His Grace will still reward you fairly without question. What you need to know is that the marriage between His Grace and Her Highness Princess Sylvia is already set in stone, and that your objections will not sway His Grace's dedication in the slightest. I advise you not to waste any more of your attention and energy on this matter and carry out the duties you ought to in service of the house. Naturally, if there are those who can't to accept this and decide to leave, the house will not stop you."

Naturally, no one did. Only idiots would leave at a time when House Norton was in its prime. The officials and knights only had their current positions because of Lorist's

leadership. Many had only joined in the objection because they didn't want to feel left out and went with the flow. When Lorist showed his anger, they were already drowning in endless regret. Who wouldn't take the opportunity to step down after Charade's pep talk?

"Think about this. His Grace brought us to The Northlands and turned the desolate dominion into paradise. Which one of his decisions has been wrong? Ours is not to reason why, ours is but to do and die. One can only look afar from a high vantage point. Given His Grace's high position, it's only natural that he'd be able to look further than we can. His decision is not something we should question. Only time will prove this decision right or wrong."

He adjourned the meeting and went to Lorist to report the results of his consolation.

Lorist wrote a letter of explanation to Hansk that carried a hint of scolding to remind him of his position as an official and not to meddle in his private affairs. But at the same time, he praised him for his loyalty and expressed his recognition of Hansk's contribution to the house given how Silowas had entered a new age of prosperity under his management, turning into an island with filled fishing and trading activities.

Lorist's letter to Spiel contained one simple message. Either he shut up and obey his orders to serve as the chief financial supervisor or go mine for gold in Goldridge since he likes it so much.

It was said that Spiel was so mad that he couldn't even eat after receiving that letter. It was only after Sid's consolation that he came to an understanding. Since Spiel was one of the house's old officials, it wasn't that hard for Sid to convince him. He reminded Spiel how much money the bastide had when Lorist first inherited the title and how much the house had now. A simple comparison showed the immense difference which wouldn't have been possible without Lorist's efforts. And, since he practically earned all the money, he should be allowed to spend some of it, all Spiel had to do was supervise and record the spending for Lorist's reference. He had no right to tell Lorist how he should spend it.

Spiel was initially vexed and believed Lorist had wrongly blamed a loyal official like him for worrying over the house's expenses. But after Sid's explanation, he realized his shortcomings and no longer said anything.

Lorist's third letter was addressed to Loze. In it, he didn't scold or criticize him,

instead, he thanked the soldiers for resisting House Fisablen and fighting to wrestle Sylvia from the duke's hands. At the same time, he wrote that he would be making commemorative gold badges to be distributed to every soldier who had participated in the war and asked Loze for his opinion.

Lorist understood Loze well. He was a freak for battle who would fight in every conflict that came his way regardless of whether it was for conquest, or, as Lorist put it, 'wife taking'. The reason Loze objected to the marriage was that he saw House Fisablen as the loser instead of being against Sylvia herself. As expected, Loze was happy to receive the letter and incredibly pleased by the notion that they'd fought for the sake of Lorist's marriage. He quickly replied that the soldiers were looking forward to receiving the medals and had already forgotten that he had objected to the marriage in the first place.

The last one Lorist wrote to was Potterfang. He didn't hold back in this one and rebuked him with two whole pages before sending it to him with a messenger eagle.

Charade laughed when he read Lorist's letters. He understood the reason he was so cordial with Hansk was that he didn't trust him that much. As for Spiel, while it was apparent that he trusted him, there was a hint of annoyance at how stingy the supervisor was being. It was also apparent that Lorist not only appreciated Loze as a general, but also understood his personality incredibly well. The letter was completely on point. As for Potterfang, it could be seen that he was the knight that Lorist trusted the most. Otherwise, he wouldn't have dared to scold him that harshly.

"Your Grace, don't forget about Josk and Yuriy."

Lorist didn't intend to write any more letters. He just nodded.

"I know. I plan to visit them personally at Jaeger's camp and give them an explanation. They only have so much animosity for House Fisablen because of the loss they suffered. I'll tell them that even after taking Sylvia as my wife, House Fisablen will still be our enemy. I trust they'll understand. As for Dulles and Belnick, they only joined in because of their positions. There's no need to write back. Let's spare them the awkwardness."

Lorist sigh after dealing with the house's opinions. Before he resumed his days of bliss with Sylvia, Freiyar and Belnick hurried to Firmrock to report. The two barons were summoned to deal with the reorganization and expansion of the local defense legion.

After Charade briefed them, the two were called to attend a meeting.

"The local defense legion will be expanded into four units. I plan to have the first and third take care of The Northlands. The second and fourth will be stationed at Delamock and Winston respectively. You two will serve as the commanders for one of the legions. In which would you prefer to serve?"

"The fourth, Your Grace. Given that Pedro and Southern might come under attack in the near future and that I am already familiar with Winston, I'll stand guard there," said Freiyar first.

Belnick complained with his arms opened wide, "Freiyar, that's not fair. You chose the spot where conflict will break out again. Your Grace, which legion will defend Goldridge?"

"The first," Lorist replied, "It will also take care of Firmrock and the dominion. Goldridge will come under the first after the renovations there are complete."

"Alright, I'll take the first then. If the barbarians come, I'll get to vent as well," said Belnick.

"Then, do you guys have any commanders you could recommend to head the second and third?"

"Knight Jades is a decent candidate," offered Freiyar.

"Even though Ovidis has been serving you for so long, he's only the leader of a brigade. It's high time he's promoted," recommended Belnick.

"Then, what will we do with Silowas? We need to station a gold-ranked knight there."

After some thought, Freiyar said, "Let Pajik serve there for a few years. He's mentioned that his wife and children quite like the scenery there. He also said that his prospects for training are already limited and that he will find it hard to break through to the two-star gold rank. It's a little dangerous to have him serve in Tigersoar's vanguard."

Hmmm, makes sense.

Lorist thought of the two times Tigersoar had charged into battle as the vanguard. While Loze hadn't been injured, Pajik had gotten some light injuries a few times. His

skills paled in comparison to Loze's.

"Alright then, we'll have Pajik stationed on Silowas."

Chapter 400
Right of Inheritance

"Locke, take a rest. Look, you're already sweating all over," said Sylvia as she wiped the sweat of Lorist's face with a linen cloth lovingly.

When word of how Lorist had insisted that he take her as his wife even at the cost of going against his house's officials and knights, including holding a meeting just to scold those who'd objected and forcefully suppressing their opinions, spread to Sylvia's ears through the gossiping maids, she felt incredibly moved and seemed like a completely different person. All her low spirits and depression faded away at once.

With her mood changed, her appetite returned to normal and she was getting much better sleep, unlike before when she still required Lorist to accompany her at night, holding her hand. She would panic whenever she couldn't see him. She was a two-star gold rank, so now that her emotional problems were gone, her body recovered quickly and she soon regained her stunning beauty.

She was still as clingy as usual though, which made Lorist feel a little troubled by what he had done. It wasn't that he didn't have a chance to finally bed her. There had been an instance one night where he'd made out with her enough that she was willing to dive into the river of love with him. But for some inexplicable reason, he'd decided to resist the urge and leave it for after their marriage. After all, the best moment should be left to the most important night of their lives.

So, he spent the two months at Firmrock with his self-imposed celibacy. While Dilianna and two other concubines were there too, he had no time to 'cheat'. Currently, he was living in the room next to Sylvia's. While they didn't sleep in the same room or bed, they were practically next to each other. Sylvia slept lightly and couldn't do so without Lorist remaining by her side. She would be woken by the slightest movement.

There was this one time Lorist had received an urgent military notification and had to deal with it in his study. However, it was a false alarm. A newly formed garrison squad had gone missing during its training session in Black Forest. The officers thought it might be a barbarian attack. So, Firmrock's troops were put into battle stations. After waiting for an hour, the squad made it back safely. Relieved, Lorist left his study and

saw Sylvia in her night robes with her maidservants huddling in the corner of the study's mini lounge. According to the maidservant, when the princess realized Lorist wasn't by her side after waking up, she wanted to look for him no matter what. When she found that access to the study was restricted, she decided to wait in the lounge until he came out.

Seeing Sylvia's panicked, loving eyes, he had no choice but to forget looking for his concubines to relieve him and accompany Sylvia to her room to lull her to sleep again.

Every morning, he was greeted with Sylvia's smile before he had breakfast with her and headed off to his study to work. The local defense forces' expansion had gotten underway recently. Even with Freiyar and Belnick in charge, Lorist still had to personally sign off on the transfers and appointments. He also had to gain an understanding of the newly appointed knights and pay attention to the mine's development, as well as the fort to be built there. There was also the matters of the overhaul of The Northlands' roads and the general construction endeavors within the dominion. Having to provide general oversight to everything made Lorist so busy he usually didn't even have time for lunch.

But no matter what, he still had to accompany Sylvia for dinner every evening. Dilianna and his two other concubines, Daisy and Maria joined them. Fennazali and her elder sister Arriotoli still hadn't returned from new Dina barony. Dilianna's son was already almost two years old, so she brought him with her all the time. It didn't bother Lorist, but Daisy and Maria felt a little vexed when they saw the gazes Lorist gave his child. Ever since he'd returned two months ago, he still hadn't made a move on them.

Lorist had his share of troubles. Celibacy was taking quite the toll on him, but he didn't have the time to relieve himself. These days he was busier than ever during the day. And he spent the night with Sylvia. He only had his stupid mouth to blame for suggesting they left their 'best moment' for their wedding day. Even though Sylvia had already recovered more or less, whenever Lorist tried to strip her after a making out session, she would always say the same thing with teary eyes.

"Locke, do you still love me? Didn't you say you would leave it for the best night of our lives?"

Lorist slapped himself to calm his fire. Though she was right in front of him, he couldn't dig in at all. Sometimes, he was so sexually frustrated he was tempted to crawl

into the two maidservants' beds. If not for his fear of inadvertently waking her, he would've done so long ago.

I wonder how long I can last… Lorist counted the days since he'd last relieved himself, *Why was I so stupid to set the wedding for the 11th month? It's only the 7th… Looks like there's still quite a wait…*

Though he had a rare free day today, he had to go to the training grounds behind the mountain after having breakfast with Sylvia. It was the first day Howard would officially enter secluded training to work on the Dan Ocean Ki-refining Technique. Given that he'd experience teaching the technique to Reidy, it wasn't too hard to repeat the process with Howard. Lorist left after teaching him some key points and making sure he wasn't making any mistakes.

Nowadays, the one who served by Lorist's side was Jinolio, Senbaud's son. He had only just turned 16 and awakened his battleforce a year ago. Senbaud had already written Lorist a letter to remind him so he wouldn't forget his promise to take him in as a disciple. Before this, Howard had already mentored him for a month to show him the ropes as Lorist's attendant.

Though Jinolio was only 16, his physique was incredible. Lorist himself was only 1.86 meters, but Jinolio was a solid 2.06, at least 20 centimeters taller. He was also big-boned and looked really tough overall, much to Lorist's displeasure. As Howard was shorter than 1.8, Lorist could easily stroke his head or pat his shoulders to praise him. However, given his new attendant's, he had to tiptoe to do the same.

The thing most unexpected of this new addition, however, was neither his height nor his girth, but his neat handwriting. It completely disproved Lorist's theory that his mother had been the letters' author. At the same time, he also realized that Jinolio was a gifted academic; he was so good that even Lorist felt he was inferior.

He once asked his new disciple how he'd learned so much. The honest and frank kid said it was all thanks to his teacher. It all started when Senbaud pledged to serve House Norton loyally and recalled that Lorist said he would be taking Jinolio as his disciple. He knew that Lorist had done it merely to appease him. However, he feared a person with his background might be looked down on by his peers in the house, so he decided to make sure his son wouldn't. Senbaud, in a flash of inspiration, thought that letting his son actually become Lorist's disciple would secure his position.

So, he thought of everything he could do to nurture his kid to appeal to Lorist. From his early childhood, Jinolio underwent physical training to mold his will and took classes to learn the traditions and etiquette of knights. When he was twelve, Senbaud attended a household knight meeting and heard Potterfang praise his own son, Howard, for his avid interest in reading. Upon hearing that Lorist greatly favored Howard, Senbaud realized his son was nothing more than a slightly literate hunk of muscle.

This won't do. I have to make Jinolio proficient in both the physical and intellectual. I can't have him lose out to Howard if I want Lorist to favor him.

So, Senbaud started looking for tutors. He couldn't find anyone suitable even after many months of searching. Everyone he came across was either too young or too old. The old ones without an impressive reputation made him feel they probably didn't do well in their field, while the younger ones couldn't inspire his trust. As his wife was quite the beauty, he didn't feel safe having young male tutors around. Given that he was the commander of a Norton legion and often had to go out to sea for months on end, them having an affair with his wife was a realistic possibility and he definitely wouldn't allow it.

In the end, he found Jinolio a female tutor that eight years the child's senior. She was young and beautiful and it was said her father was a famed scholar who had passed away from illness during the civil war, leaving her and her mother to fend for themselves. When Senbaud learned that she was at least four-fifths as accomplished as her late father, he was convinced and hired her as Jinolio's private tutor.

The woman proved worth her salt. Within four short years, Jinolio became a refined scholar. The interactions they had also let him not only develop respect for her, but also love. The reason he could write so finely was because of the painstaking effort he took to mimic his teacher.

"That female tutor of yours is really something, for her to be able to educate you so well. Oh, and, Jinolio, do you really like her? Personally, a difference of eight years isn't much of a problem. Since I'm your teacher now, I can find a way for you," teased Lorist.

Jinolio smiled bitterly.

"Thank you, teacher, but there's no longer a need. She's my father's concubine now."

Lorist couldn't find the words to react. He just patted Jinolio on the back softly.

After returning from the training grounds and having lunch with Sylvia, he took a stroll through the gardens. Tea time soon came. Sylvia quite liked Dilianna's son and played with him the whole time. Lorist was glad that Sylvia treated his concubines rather well. As the three present knew that Sylvia becoming House Norton's matron was already set in stone, they got along with her without any issues, save for how she monopolized Lorist the whole time without letting him look for the concubines privately, much to his frustration as well.

Having nothing better to do, he had Jinolio practice some basic swordsmanship techniques and pointed out his flaws, fully enjoying his role as teacher. He also demonstrated some techniques a number of times and ended up sweaty.

Just as Sylvia was lovingly wiping the sweat off his forehead, a guard came to make a report.

"Your Grace, Baron Kedan requests an audience."

Ever since Supervisor Hansk was made Governor of Silowas, Kedan had taken over the census department of which the former used to be in charge. Coupled with his responsibilities as the human resource department head, Kedan was busy almost all the time. Had something happened in the dominion for him to request an audience?

Hansk, Spiel, and Kedan were old hands in the house who came from Maplewoods. They were the three administrative talents trained by the old butler, Gleis, himself. Kedan was the first to get along with him after he took over the house and also the first to pledge his fealty.

Kedan was the only supervisor among the three who hadn't expressed any objection to Lorist's decision to marry Sylvia. When he entered the study, Kedan made a bitter smile and an exasperated expression.

"Your Grace, Madam Irina had me come over to remind you not to forget the promise you made back then."

Huh? What's going on with Irina that Kedan had to personally make a trip? thought Lorist as he dove into his memories.

Lorist and Irina's relationship had worsened quicker than ever these last two years.

As the only maidservant Lorist had bedded since he returned to the dominion and the first concubine to birth him any offspring, Irina should have received the most love and care. However, she had an odd quirk in that she wouldn't leave Maplewoods. Given that Lorist was busy traveling around to develop the dominion and expand his power, Maplewoods rapidly lost its importance as the house's headquarters. Nowadays, the bastide was a forgotten corner in the dominion something akin to Irina's demesne.

Lorist had once fought with her because of their son, Lysecott. The eight-year-old was raised into a lawless tyrant thanks to how much his mother spoiled him. Lorist had given him a harsh beating and took him away from Maplewoods to put him in the care of Malek's wife, though Irina through a massive tantrum upon being informed of it. But after Lorist threatened to strip Lysecott of his rights as the first successor, Irina stopped causing trouble.

In the days thereafter, Irina wallowed in depression in the bastide. She hated how Lorist took her beloved child from her and binged all the time. In the two years since, she had doubled her girth. She was no longer the petite girl Lorist had bedded all those years ago.

"Your Grace, Irina's father was a household knight and he took care of us very well back in the day. But he perished in battle for the house's sake, so we took his daughter in. It was because of that connection that Baron Hansk was so against your marriage with Sylvia. I have come here because of Irina's beckoning to remind you of your word to not change the position of Lysecott as the first successor," explained Kedan.

Lorist was struck with a sudden realization. It turned out that Irina was worried that after he married Sylvia, their child would come to be the main contender for Lysecott's position as heir. After all, Irina was only Lorist's concubine. While Lysecott was on the household registry, the son of the main wife usually carried far more weight than that of a concubine.

"Sigh…"

What the hell is this? Even though I'm still alive and well, they're already discussing succession… If I do become a swordsaint, I might even outlive my sons. Come to think of it, it isn't weird for a swordsaint to have to attend his grandchildren's funeral…

"Tell Irina to stay put in the bastide and warn her to keep her imagination in check. During the year-end celebration this year, I will make her a life peer, a baron, and

Maplewoods will be her dominion. It will only be reclaimed by the house a hundred years after her birth date. I hope she will live out the rest of her life happily. As for my sons, the elder one has already changed a lot and I will send him to attend Nico Academy when he is twelve. Before that, I will allow him a trip back home for a meeting with his mother. Since the younger one is still by Irina's side, I hope she doesn't spoil him like she did Lysecott. That will be all, Baron Kedan."

"Understood, Your Grace.

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