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领主传奇

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Tales of the Reincarnated Lord

— 重生之领主传奇 —

- Volume 9 -

-Author-

Smoke Is A Path

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[LiberSpark]



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CREATED BY: A_MINERVA

Chapter 401

Way to Settle the Debt

"Your Grace, Oceanic Legion currently has twelve Blitz class warships, eight Swift class warships, 46 LLDM (large long distance merchant) class vessels, 124 MSM (moderate speedy merchant) class vessels, 184 MAM (moderate armed merchant) class vessels, and 44 LAC (large armed cargo) class vessels. Other than that, there are 13 LW (large whaling) class ships and near a hundred moderate and small fishing boats, four sailboats and five training vessels in Bullhorn Bay for maritime training. There is also a large base at Flagfish Ridge on Silowas.

"We also have a small flotilla of 12 patrol warships. The whole navy has about 58 personnel. Due to the profits of the trade and fishing that offset part of the navy's expenses, it costs the house just 280 thousand to 350 thousand annually. It's only a third as expensive as Firmrock and Tigersoar."

Oceanic Legion's Blitz class warships were built based on the Windstorm. They bristled with bronze cannons. The Swift class warships were based off Flying Fish of Dawn's design, with the steel ballistae replaced with nine smaller bronze cannons. With impressive ranged attack capabilities and mobility, the class could be considered the ocean's cavalry.

Charade was holding a thick stack of documents concerning Oceanic as he reported to Lorist. Lorist was prepared to make up for the deficit brought on by the four local defense legions' reorganization by first cutting the fleet's budget.

"Commander Senbaud has already received his orders. Right now, he is traveling from Silowas and will arrive in half a month. We will also have to host a meeting with the senior officials of the navy. During the 4th month, he also submitted a request for the fleet's Blitz class warships group to be expanded and hoped the shipyard at Bullhorn Bay may deliver six within the next three years. I already turned the request down. For now, the shipyard is busy with House Kenmays's order of 12 LLDM class and MAM class vessels. It will take two years to finish the order. There's no way we can fit the construction of Blitz class warships in," said Charade.

"That Kenmays fellow is really moving fast. I remember I passed a document last year

about building ships for House Kenmays. It was for two LLDM class vessels and eight MAM class vessels, right?"

"Yes. The total cost is 150 thousand gold, including training the sailors and their weapons operators. They have already sent eight hundred people to be trained."

"How about this, write him and ask. If he doesn't mind, we can sell him the MAM class vessels left over after we downscale the fleet. He wouldn't have to wait two years that way. The boats still at 70 percent condition should be more than enough for their trading activities. Naturally, if the ships are already being constructed, that'll go according to our agreement. Only offer to sell them ships in place of those not started yet."

"There's also this proposal I thought up to reorganize the fleet, take a look. When Senbaud arrives, you could discuss this with him and we'll make amendments as necessary," said Lorist as he handed Charade a document he'd drafted with painstaking effort over the last couple of days.

Charade gave it a quick read before he gasped.

"Your Grace, you're going to develop Bullhorn Bay and Northsea? Silowas too?"

Lorist nodded.

Charade continued to read it and, when he was done, gave it some thought.

"Your Grace, you're really going all out with the budget-cut. You're practically leaving only a fifth of the current legion intact."

Lorist stood up and walked to the large dominion map hung on the wall.

"I have no choice. We've been far too busy with conflicts on the continent. We didn't really pay attention to Oceanic. I didn't think it would have expanded this much. Almost all the small fishing boats have been draft and the personnel already exceed 58 thousand. I was really shocked when I heard you guys talk about it. Even though Senbaud is a rather responsible person and carries out his assignments without issue, especially with regards to how well he managed the fishing and trading activities, this isn't what I want.

"Maritime trading should be a sector that rakes in huge profits. But right now, be it

fishing or trading, the profits can't even completely cover the navy's expenses. The house still has to subsidize it with 300 thousand gold every year. Naturally, I'm not suspecting the officers of corruption. After all, Spiel is the one taking care of the house's finances. He's done well with regards to preventing exactly this kind of thing. But after analyzing the files, I realized what we were doing wrong.

"Oceanic was formed to protect our coastlines and islands. At the same time, it possesses great military might that will let us open new trade routes and fishing grounds, and prevent attacks on our fishers and merchants. Senbaud has successfully managed to do that and the navy is already the northern oceans' hegemon. There are no enemies that can threaten us by sea anymore.

"But he got something wrong. He believes we should regulate everything in the ocean and take in every sailor into the navy to keep our position. That's not what I want. A force that regulates everything isn't a navy. It's a maritime trading organization! One our house has to fund!"

Lorist punched lightly on the map by Bullhorn Bay.

"Just look at Northsea and Bullhorn Bay. Why do you think they aren't growing any busier? Having stayed at Morante for so long, we know well why Hidegold is known as the number one bay on the continent: its vigor! Yes, vigor. I've given it lots of thought. Look at Bullhorn and Northsea. Why aren't there more people? Why aren't they busier? It's simple. The navy regulates every vessel traveling to our dominion and even sets the dates in stone.

"Now, look at our maritime trade. Currently, there are only two trade routes. The first one goes from Shyarsia to Hanayabarta, and then to Silowas. It carries mainly spice and the daily necessities we produce. The other stretches from Silowas to Northsea. But what we have to pay attention to is that the endpoint for both of these routes is Silowas. Any other trade we have is done through merchant guilds Jigda and Peterson. I suspect they're suppressing our profits. They're treating us like suppliers and that's why our profits aren't enough.

"Actually, there are many business opportunities we can use. For example, we can trade with the coastal nobility in the former Redlis kingdom, or ship our goods directly to Falik. We might even go all the way to Golden Bay further south. Due to our arrangement with the Peterson Merchant Guild, though, all our trade with the Union is done through them. Jigda Merchant Guild uses most of the spice we import and

they've even suggested an agreement like the one we have with the Petersons so they can be the middleman for our produce in Golden Bay.

"I want to decrease the navy's size. It should focus solely on military matters and become a reliable navy. As for the merchant vessels and fishing boats, we can form a number of guilds to manage them. Apart from our ships, we'll have the civilians invest. We'll let them purchase our goods to do business elsewhere. We can just tax them. Bullhorn Bay will only become vigorous again if we do it this way. Our free-trading civilians can also use a loophole in our agreement with Peterson Merchant Guild and bring our produce to other markets. That's why I've decided to develop Bullhorn Bay, Northsea, and Silowas."

Charade flapped the documents in his hand.

"But Your Grace, aren't you cutting the navy a little too much? According to your proposal, the whole legion will have less than 50 ships and only 8000 to 12000 personnel."

"It's more than enough. There will be no Oceanic Legion in the future. Only Northsea. Senbaud will also no longer be legion commander. Instead, he'll be made an admiral," smiled Lorist.

"Is this really appropriate? I'm not well-versed in maritime combat, but the union's invincible fleet has over 200 warships. Every time they patrol the southern seas or Golden Bay, they mobilize up to a hundred. And yet, you've decided to further split Northsea into two separate units... I just feel our forces are too sparse," questioned Charade, doubt filled.

"Hehe, don't even compare the Union's Invincible Fleet with our house's Northsea. They only use traditional tactics like boarding. To our Blitz class ships, they are just slow-moving targets. Whether it be mobility or ranged attack capability, there is no maritime force in Grindia that can compare to us. Frankly speaking, the naval technology we use in Northsea is at least two hundred years ahead.

"We can form a flotilla with six Blitz's as the main force, four Swifts as the pursuit force, and two or three LLDMs to carry supplies with ten MSMs to protect them. The patrol flotillas will protect our overseas dominions, our trade routes, and the civilian ships that travel them. We can make two such flotillas and rotate them. Even though I don't intend to Northsea's size, I am prepared to outfit the supply ships and guards

with bronze cannons to improve their overall ranged attack."

After mocking the Union's invincible fleet and talking about outfitting bronze cannons on all patrol flotilla ships, Lorist thought for a bit.

"We have to finish the plan to deal with Oceanic by year's end. All the ships not included will have to be maintained and renewed. I intend to announce the news to the nobles and rich civilians during the year-end celebration so they join the maritime trade industry as well. Naturally, regardless of whether they form their own trading fleets or guilds, we house will get three-tenths of their revenue as compensation for developing Northsea, Bullhorn Bay, and Silowas."

"Understood. I will draw up a concrete plan and submit it as soon as possible," Charade said as he put the papers in his hand into his folder, before he took out another, "Your Grace, look at this plan to revamp the transportation routes in the Northlands..."

Just as Lorist was about to receive it, he heard Jinolio's cry from outside the room.

"Lady, this's his His Grace's study! You can't enter!"

"Who are you? Where's Howard?" said the familiar voice.

"I'm Jinolio, His Grace's attendant. Senior Howard has gone to the training grounds."

"Oh, a newbie? Make way, brute. I have something urgent to discuss with Locke."

"No, you can't go in..."

"Don't force my hand. Scram. A one-star bronze rank like you actually dares block me... What a waste of your build."

A loud crashing echoed through the door. It seemed Jinolio had been pushed into a corner.

Charade hurriedly put the folder down.

"There seems to be trouble. Let's discuss things another time."

With a bitter smile, Lorist looked at the study's door. The moment it was pushed open, Arriotoli rushed into the room angrily, followed by Jinolio who had just gotten up from

the ground. He tried to stop her with a red face.

"You shall not enter! Ah, Your Grace..."

Charade made it to the entrance and patted on Jinolio's chest.

"Big guy, don't worry. His Grace won't blame you. This young lady here is not someone you can afford to offend."

He turned back and nodded to Arriotoli.

"Good day, Miss Arriotoli. You've become much more beautiful since the last time we've met."

"Apologies, Baron Charade. Was I being too rash and interrupted your meeting?"

This time around, Arriotoli's behavior was that of a polite young lady as she made a knight's salute. However, the female half-body riding armor showed quite a bit of her cleavage.

Charade smiled with a hint of schadenfreude.

"No worries. We were just about to wrap up. I'll take my leave now. Do speak with His Grace if you need anything."

When the door was closed, the look of anger returned to Arriotoli's face.

"Arri, you're being too rude. That aside, I'm glad to see you. Is Fennazali here as well? You two were gone for quite some time," said Lorist with a hurried smile.

"Hmph, us coming back is the last thing you want, isn't it? You should enjoy your days with your princess," snorted she.

"Hey, come on, what are you so mad about? Who angered you?"

"You, you idiot! You said House Norton would gain a strong ally if you married the princess, so I tolerated it. But now... House Fisablen is your enemy and yet you're still marrying her? So you were lying back then, huh?!"

Arriotoli kicked in Lorist's direction, but he quickly sidestepped.

"Hey, keep it to words, okay? Let's talk..."

"I'll keep kicking until you die, you bastard. You want me as your lover? Done. My aunt also became your concubine and gave you a child. While the two of us are fine with this, my sister gave you her first time! At least don't anger her if you can't take her as your wife! But you made even her your concubine. We Dina sisters and my aunt are already your women, so you better make sure you make it up to my sister."

"Arri, don't try to spin this any other way. Fennazali wanted to become my concubine willingly. It's not like I tricked her..."

"I don't care. I want a satisfactory answer," insisted she before she leaped into his embrace and locked her arms.

It'd already been two months. Now that her body was pressed against his, he began to lose control.

"You came right when I needed you, how delightful. I love you so much, Arri," said he as he kissed her and removed her half-body armor.

A little shocked, she struggled.

"Are you crazy? It's still morning..."

Before she could finish her thought, her mouth was plugged with Lorist's tongue. She soon turned into a helpless lamb and began to twitch gently Lorist's every touch.

He hurriedly pushed her against the wall and hauled her up in the air facing him with both hands before entering her... *(author's note: We're saving 18 thousand characters by not going into details. I'll leave it to your imagination.)*

After one time against the wall, once on the desk, and another on the sofa, Lorist felt completely refreshed like a sage rid of worldly desires. Even while leaning against the sofa with the soft-as-clay Arriotoli hugged in his arms, his hands didn't stop working her body.

"Arri, why did you come back all of a sudden? Is there something wrong with your dominion?"

"I... I didn't intend to come back... I just... I was just sending my brother to attend Nico

Academy... and dropping by for a visit... My sister's gone to see the princess... And I'm here to see you... you bastard... to settle our debt..."

Even though Lorist didn't let up in the slightest, the first female knight of House Dina wasn't going to cast away her pride and dignity so easily.

"I like the way we're settling the debt quite a bit. I'm not kidding, I'm totally serious."

Chapter 402

Marital Bliss

Arriotoli had been bullied by Lorist into forgetting the initial goal for which she came. In the afternoon, she hurriedly left Firmrock to return to the Dina barony in Delamock. According to her little sister, their younger brother would study in Nico Academy for three years until he turned either 16 or 17. After awakening his battleforce, he would attend Dawn Academy. This was the plan Lorist had for the descendants of his house as well. He didn't expect Arriotoli to remember it and have her younger brother to go through the same process.

As the regent and knight of her house, there was much she had to deal with in the dominion. After all, the dominion was rather new and problems frequently surfaced. For instance, it was common for the folk to slack off at the dominion lord's expense. So, she couldn't stay at Firmrock any longer. She returned in a carriage instead of heroically on horseback like how she came, much to her sister's curiosity when she was sending her off.

Why does my sister look so fatigued and sleepy? She wasn't like this when we meet at noon...

Arriotoli did bring a new train of thought to Lorist apart from sexual relief. He finally found a good way to placate his four concubines. So, he ordered Jinolio to set up the rooms beside his study into bedrooms which he called 'resting rooms'. He secretly brought his concubines into the rooms for some deep and intimate interactions, ridding them of their dissatisfaction.

Sigh, I've sacrificed quite a lot for my household's peace, thought he.

These days, Fennazali, Dilianna, Daisy, and Maria flocked to him like bees to flowers. He didn't have any free time. Perhaps because of their envy, they vented it on him for how much he spoiled and tolerated Sylvia. Now that they'd finally got their chance, they wouldn't rest until at least four rounds each time. In the end, Lorist was forced to put off his duties until after tea time.

Maria and Daisy attacked him together. He spent tremendous amounts of effort on

dealing with them and wondered whether Dilianna and Fennazali would request the same treatment the next day for the sake of fairness.

Gosh, a new problem always surfaces when the old one is solved...

He now believed the usual one-man-one-wife convention in his previous world was actually meant to protect men. Even a person as well-endowed with talent as he was tired after dealing with four concubines. How were those who had tens and hundreds of women in their harems faring? He couldn't help but suspect those harem owners were constantly being cheated on.

It was all Sylvia's fault. Even though they were recognized concubines, they had to go about mingling with Lorist like they were having an affair.

If I have a proper schedule, then they won't come at me in droves...

But thinking about Sylvia's current weak girl state, he felt it was best he didn't shock her too much.

Actually, Sylvia's overthinking this. Since I wouldn't give up on my concubines for her, it's natural I wouldn't give her up for the concubines either.

It didn't mean he was an unfaithful man and taking Sylvia's feelings for granted. The main reason for the current state of affairs was that Sylvia had come into the picture a little too late. The four concubines came before her. As Lorist wasn't someone who could just cruelly ignore Sylvia's affection, he made the responsible choice to treat all of them fairly even if it meant lots of trouble for him. Yes, that was most definitely it.

Charade was currently seated in Lorist's study and enjoying a drink from the wine rack. He was one of the few who knew about the real purpose of the adjacent rooms. He was the one who had a secret path built between them and the rear castle so Lorist's four concubines wouldn't have to pass through the central hall to meet with him. That way, they would be away from prying eyes. However, Charade was quite dissatisfied at how Lorist's performance was decreasing as a result.

"Your Grace, you were late by more than half an hour again."

"I was, apologies," muttered Lorist as he pulled on the bell beside the wall.

Jinolio entered from outside.

"Awaiting your instructions, Your Grace."

"Some macks, please."

"Right away, Your Grace."

"Aren't you going to have some fruit wine?" asked Charade, a bottle in hand.

"No thanks. I'll only be thirstier the more I drink. Is there anything important with which we have to deal today?"

When they started talking business, Charade put the bottle down and picked up his folder.

"Quite a bit, in fact. This is the proposal to reorganize Oceanic Legion submitted by Commander Senbaud. Most of it is as you have specified."

"Oh? Did he not voice any objections?"

Charade shook his head.

"No, Your Grace. Instead, He acted as if a huge burden's been lifted from his shoulders. In his own words, 'I was sure I couldn't hold on any longer'. The stress of managing 58 thousand subordinates is really taking its toll on him. He said he felt something was off when he had to give permission to ten-odd small fishing boats to go out to sea and mentioned focusing on patrolling is much more relaxing than sitting in the office all day managing the entry and exit of transport and shipping vessels, becoming less and less like the commander of a legion."

"Alright then. It seems we've saved him from all the troublesome matters."

Lorist took the proposal Charade handed him and gave it a quick look.

"One patrol flotilla made up of six Blitz-class warships, four Swift-class warships, four LLDMs and 12 MAGs (middle-class agile guards), a total of 3483 crew... makes approximately seven thousand for two such flotillas. If we include the guard brigade of 3200 stationed on Silowas, the four guard ships docked there, and the five training ships and marine recruits at Bullhorn Bay, Northsea Fleet has a total of 61 ships and 11082 hands. Not bad."

"Commander Senbaud believes the guard ships built as merchant vessels to be outfitted with bronze cannons should be further reinforced. Otherwise, they won't be able to take the recoil. They face the risk of rupturing."

"I've already considered that. Funds will be provided," Lorist said as he read the proposal, "Also, have the flotilla at Hanayabarta included in Northsea's chain of command. The 12 warships also have to undergo similar modifications. Their crew have to be reorganized in the same fashion as well."

"Understood, Your Grace."

"Let the ranks of Northsea be Admiral of the Navy, Commodore, Captain, Lieutenant and Commander - for the shipboard marines' leader. Senbaud will be the first admiral of Northsea."

"Understood, Your Grace. I will have the order drafted tomorrow."

Lorist flipped to the next page.

"Over here, separate our merchant fleet from the guest-ferrying fleet. We just have to control the merchant fleet. Let others deal with the ferrying service. Maybe there will be some nobles who use their personal networks to start new ferry routes. Just collect dividends. Also, we'll keep our whaling fleet but let go of fisheries. The nobles or rich civilians can easily catch more fish than us. Not only will we gain dividends, they will also be taxed. This will allow the merchant guilds that enter the market to become more active."

After discussing the matter of Northsea's reorganization, Charade brought out another document.

"Your Grace, this is about the end of Governor Hansk's term on Silowas. The garrison commander Molocinque and Vice-Commander Wellickson have reached the end of their terms. How should we deal with this? Do we let them stand for another term?"

Time really flies. Each term lasts five years,

He shook his head.

"No. Transfer the officials and knights whose terms have ended back. We can't have them stay overseas for too long. Have Hector take over as Governor and transfer Hansk

back to the dominion. As for Molocinque, isn't Second Sentry lacking a commander? Have him take that post. Let Wellickson serve as one of Northsea's Commodores. The rest of the knights and officials are at your disposal."

"But, Your Grace, who will serve as Hanayabarta's governor?"

"Do you remember Butler Boris? He's been in charge of various matters in our dominion's administration for several years now. Given how hard he's worked to make some contributions, entitle him as an honorary baron at the year-end celebration. He'll serve two governor terms on Hanayabarta. After he returns in ten years, make him a landed noble. Similarly, have the knights and officials transfer to Hanayabarta and serve two terms and promote them when they return."

There was no other choice. Given how far out Hanayabarta was, only promotions and beneficial treatment would be appealing enough for people to accept a position there.

"Then, to which department will Baron Hansk be transferred?"

"Aren't we trying to revamp our roads? Have him take care of it. This is something the prosperity and development of The Northlands depend on. I can rest assured if Hansk is placed in charge. Hey, why are you clicking your tongue?"

Charade laughed coldly.

So this is your 'revenge' against him for causing such a huge commotion over your marriage... Now, his position has fallen from a governor to a traffic planner.

Then again, Baron Hansk's luck with people had always been rather bad. Being an old servant of House Norton, he frequently rode on his seniority when dealing with Charade and the others who came with Lorst to The Northlands. The instances of conflict had decrease quite a bit during his term as governor of Silowas.

After giving it some thought, Charade felt it was best for the man to be taught a lesson by being sent to the wilderness, so he didn't feel obligated to straighten out Lorst's behavior. It was his fault for being so vocal about his objections to Lorst's marriage in the first place. While he hadn't minded Spiel's objection, which was brought to him in private, Hansk's rallying of officials to object in unison was a huge mistake. It wasn't an objection in Lorst's eyes, but rather a threat.

"Nothing. My tongue itched, that's all," said Charade as he hid his disdain for Lorst's

payback.

Since they both knew what was going on, there was no point in mentioning it outright.

"Also, the formation of First Sentry is complete. Baron Belnick led the legion to Fort Goldridge, so it should be time for Els to return."

"Right. Have him bring the guards back," Lorist said as he downed a mouthful of macks, "Also, I'm planning to have Els serve as the legion sergeant-major and a colonel of Jaeger as Josk's aide. Reidy will take over as the guard brigade's major with Patt as the brigade sergeant-major. What do you think?"

"The affairs of the guard brigade are not my concern," Charade said with awareness of his position, "But I'm fine with Els being appointed legion sergeant-major of Jaeger. You're finally willing to let him free, huh?"

Lorist laughed.

"It's not that I wasn't willing before. The time just happened to be right now. Both of you are important friends of mine. You're a baron now, so I felt Els should have the opportunity to rake in some achievements to catch up, lest you throw around your status in front of him in the future."

"I don't have the time for that! I'm so busy I don't even have time to get intimate with my wife; I sleep right after returning home. Unlike you, who fucks around in your restroom in the middle of the day," Charade said with a squint, "Also, there's one last thing. Zanben, vice-supervisor of the construction department, reports the duke's manor in Roaring Bear is mostly completed. He hopes you will find the time to make a visit. If you have any part with which you're not satisfied, changes can still be made. I'll let you arrange a visit yourself. I have to take my leave now. There's much more waiting for me..."

At dinner, Sylvia posed a question that greatly unnerved Lorist.

"Locke, did you notice, Anna, Fenli, Daisy, and Maria become more beautiful all of a sudden? It's like their skin is glowing with youth. I asked them how they did it, but they weren't willing to tell me. Do you know?"

Of course... Wasn't it because of the 'moisture' I provided?

Before Lorist thought of how he should answer, the four concubines laughed in unison.

After giving them a harsh glare, he turned to Sylvia and said with a smile, "Perhaps they've been taking enough beauty naps. There's a saying in Morante: 'beauties are born through sleep'. Only enough sleep will maintain a woman's beauty."

"No wonder I don't see them in the morning sometimes. When I visit them in the afternoon, they're still asleep..."

Sylvia felt as if she suddenly understood the secret to beauty. However, she soon revealed a troubled look.

"But Locke, I don't understand how they can sleep like that. I can't do it no matter what after I wake up."

They sleep early because they've been tired out...

Lorist wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Well, that's to be expected, my dear. You're a two-star gold rank. They don't have battleforce. The energy you have makes it harder for you to sleep. Also, can you visit Roaring Bear in my stead? The city used to be called Gildusk. It's the city in the southern part of The Northlands. The duke's manor was just completely renovated and we will be married there. It will also be our home afterwards. If there's anything with which you're not satisfied, you may ask them to change it."

"Can't you go with me?" asked Sylvia expectantly.

"I'm afraid not. I'm heading to the east, before going to Bladedge Mountains and Northsea. I really don't have the time. I have to trouble you to make the trip on your own. It's going to be our home in the future, so I hope you can make sure it's perfect," said Lorist as he shrugged.

"Alright, I'll make the trip," said Sylvia with a disappointed look.

"What about them?" asked Sylvia as she looked at the other concubines.

"They'll go with you," Lorist decided, "We will all live together, after all. Let them pick their own residences there. You will make the trip together."

That was just in line for Lorist to get some rest. He had been rather troubled by their aggressive advances lately.

Sylvia nodded.

"Alright, Dear. We'll make a quick trip and return.

"Well... you don't have to rush," Lorist said with a pause, "Also, there are many manors belonging to the former nobles and duke. Pick one for each of you and they will be yours. All the income generated by them will belong to you personally, but they're not hereditary. The term of ownership only lasts for your lifetime. As for Sylvia, I've picked Cherry Blossom Ridge for you. You might want to check to see if it's to your liking."

"Kyaaaaaah!" Before Sylvia could reply, the four concubines screamed with excitement and joy.

It was something completely out of their expectations. At first, they were rather unwilling to accompany Sylvia to the southern part of The Northlands, but now they were itching to leave right away. They all rushed to give Lorist hugs and kisses.

"Alright, that's enough," said he with much difficulty as he tried to push them aside.

Seeing that Sylvia was pouting in a corner, he hurriedly went to console her and relieve her jealousy.

How will I spend my days going forward? Too many women is nothing but trouble... thought he as he slumped back into his chair.

Chapter 403

Negotiations

After sending Sylvia and the concubines off, Lorist prepared to head to the eastern part of The Northlands. But before he could, he received an urgent letter from Kenmays. After more than a month of negotiations, Kenmays and the envoys Duke Fisablen had sent over had finally come to an agreement regarding resuming trade between the salt merchant committee and the Fisablen dominion. Kenmays, Felim, and Shazin would hurry to Firmrock in a few days to meet with him so the agreement could be formally signed and take effect.

Lorist had no choice but to delay his journey; he waited at Firmrock. During the day, he would visit the training grounds behind the mountain to guide Howard in the Dan Ocean Ki-refining Technique while he gave some pointers to Reidy and Jinolio in the ways of the sword. At night, he would sit quietly in his study and read scrolls and documents. Now that the women had left his side, he suddenly felt the world was much calmer.

Kenmays and Shazin arrived after five days, as expected. Felim's arrival was late by a day. Apart from Kenmays expressing his disappointment at Sylvia's absence, he got into the negotiations pretty-much immediately.

"I've upped the prices of 47 products, it's just too bad they aren't big sellers. Don't worry, though, you'll each still get about four hundred thousand each," said Kenmays.

Though he was a duke, he was ever so excited about what little profit he would be gaining from the deal. Naturally, the announcement wasn't directed at Lorist. House Norton only had a ten percent share in the committee, not much at. That they had obtained tens of thousands as dividends over the last few years was already rather good. Like Kenmays had said, quantity was king. House Norton's income came mainly from the production of goods in the factories within their dominion, the good were eight-tenths of all the salt merchant committee's trade stock. That part alone already made the house a hefty sum and its share of three-tenths of all the factories in the dominion would further add to the benefits. It didn't even include the tax yet to be levied.

However, Felim and Shazin's eyes shone brightly upon hearing the figure. Their forces cost them quite a lot to maintain. Even though the soldiers weren't nearly as well taken care of as the Nortons', the costs still amounted to 500 thousand in any given year. With the dividends, their military expenses wouldn't be that huge a burden. While House Norton and House Kenmays contributed financially to the dominion relocation of the two other houses, the help didn't extend to the next year.

Felim looked at the agreement with slight disappointment.

"Why is there no agreement for a ceasefire?"

Even though Felim had already reclaimed the house's old dominion in Southern, it neighbored House Fisablen's. Firmrock was still there holding a tight defense line against House Fisablen's forces and the grassland barbarians. The conflict hadn't yet stopped. Only a ceasefire agreement would allow Felim to rest assured. Otherwise, he couldn't be confident enough to develop his dominion. He would have to mobilize his forces at the slightest commotion.

"Well," Kenmays stammered, before he said embarrassedly, "I apologize. It completely slipped my mind."

He had, in fact, forgot about it. He'd only worried about the prices of products during the negotiations. For example, 50 kilos of salt originally cost one gold Forde, but the current price was five gold for 50 kilograms. Given that the four houses were the victors, Kenmays wanted to get back at House Fisablen as much as he could.

"Don't buy it if you don't have to. I'm sure the plains have lots of salt lumps through which you can crunch." he had said, arrogantly.

He was in a strong position in the negotiation. He completely forgot how great it felt to have all the power. It was common knowledge that salt lumps would cause disease for livestock if consumed after dilution in water. It was, even more, the case with humans; death was a common occurrence. Now House Fisablen was trapped on the plains and had their trade routes cut off, they had no choice but to purchase salt from the four houses. If House Fisablen felt it was too expensive, they didn't have to buy it and could feast on unseasoned food. It wouldn't take more than three months for a huge commotion to break out in the dominion after the supply of salt was cut.

Looking at the envoys' angered and unwilling face as they agreed to the sky-high price,

Kenmays felt incomparably elated.

So what if you've occupied the greater and lesser golden creeks and have gold mines in your hands? The gold you dig up will end up with us anyway.

It made him forget the most important point: the ceasefire treaty. In other words, both sides were still in a state of war even if no conflict had broken out between them in a few months.

"Where are the envoys now?" asked Lorist.

"He followed me to Firmrock," answered Kenmays hurriedly, "The negotiation will require your agreement before it can be formalized. Also, the location of the transaction still has to be determined. Also, the two envoys say they want to have an audience with Princess Sylvia."

"Have them come to my guest lounge. I will speak with them," Lorist said before he turned his head to Shazin and Felim, "You two should come along. If Duke Fisablen really admitted his loss, then he will agree to a ceasefire. It would be a relief to him as well since he would no longer have to station any troops on the border."

The two envoys the duke had sent over to negotiate were two old men. The first was tall and had a white goatee. He introduced himself as the house's chief supervisor, Fisablen Aridok. Lorist had heard from Sylvia's two maidservants that Aridok could only barely be considered a member of the house. Though he bore the Fisablen name, he was from a distant branch family. Despite that, he was incredibly loyal to the duke and held his trust. The duke often let him carry out sensitive assignments.

The other was short and fat and felt approachable, with a beaming smile. He introduced himself as Napole; he had no surname. Lorist quickly recalled coming across the name in a list of important people in House Fisablen. Not only had Napole been on the list, he had also been marked for extra attention.

According to the reports, his father was the leader of a small grassland tribe, while his mother was one of the nobles. During one of the raids, his mother had been captured to be a sex slave for the father and Napole was born from their escapades. The tribe was soon swallowed by a larger one, and his father died. His mother was violated to death, leaving Napole a lone orphan-slave. When he turned 16, he secretly contacted Duke Fisablen and orchestrated the large tribe's extermination. It was the first and

crucial victory the duke achieved during his expansion of the empire's territory and the formation of Eastwild.

Oddly enough, Napole didn't have an official position in the house. He was a rather mysterious figure. But he was the author of most of the plots Duke Fisablen used against the tribes. Including the reselling of goods purchased from the salt merchant committee, the roping in of the subservient tribes, and the enlistment of barbarian cavalrymen from said tribes to deal with the other tribes that refused to submit. Everything had something to do with the short, fat old man.

As Lorist checked out the two old envoys, they did the same to him. Their gazes soon focused on Lorist alone, despite the leaders of all four houses being present.

The new Duke of The Northlands is really average-looking. His height and looks are average and unappealing, just like any guy one might come across in the street...

In actuality, Lorist wasn't nearly as charismatic and naturally good-looking as Kenmays. Neither was he handsome like Shazin or heroic and dignified like Felim, but the two envoys were brighter than most and didn't easily judge people on their appearance. Additionally, they had heard about the duke's thoughts on the four houses. The duke specifically stated that the truly threatening one was House Norton, or, in other words, Lorist.

And, frankly, the duke didn't really regard the other three seriously. Back in the day, the three houses wouldn't even stand a chance to queue up in the line to kiss his arse even if they wanted. House Kenmays was originally a clan of merchants that had purchased a title from the second prince. The duke considered them nothing but rich imposters. They didn't merit attention.

While House Felim had been quite famous a century earlier, they were a shell of their former selves now. Count Felim fought for the second prince and died on the battlefield during an ambush. It ended with them having to pay to keep their status as landed barons. They couldn't even make the slightest sound as the second prince sent his men to desecrate their ancestral burial site to look for hidden treasure.

As for Count Shazin, his background was even more unworthy of mention. Being a gold-ranked knight that formerly served the old Duke of The Northlands, Loggins, he was ordered to attack House Norton and was taken captive. After that, Duke Loggins made a huge mistake by putting the responsibility on Shazin's loss. As a punishment,

he forced Shazin's father to hand over his fief and become their vassal so they wouldn't be labeled as traitors. In the end, when Duke Loggins gathered the Northlander Army to take on House Norton, Shazin sat quietly and watched as the army was dominated and massacred. He even launched his own attack out of nowhere by allying with the enemy and sweeping Duke Loggins' dominion, clean. Not only did Shazin manage to get a huge sum of money, he also inherited most of House Loggins' forces.

Had it not been for Lorist, the other houses would be just a mess. House Fisablen wouldn't have a hard time dealing with them. It would be no different from how he dealt with the Southern nobles that occupied Windbury. But with House Norton's protection, the alliance became a solid and mighty union that everyone had to regard cautiously. So great was their might that they could give even the Andinaq kingdom a run for its money. Their ability to exterminate Madras and Iblia was testament.

And the key to the alliance was House Norton. The one whose decision had real weight was Lorist. It was what the duke told his envoys to remember.

"Please take a seat," Lorist said forthrightly, "Let's not beat around the bush. I want to know of Duke Fisablen's intentions. Is he willing to cease hostilities, or does he merely want to buy time and resist the four houses stubbornly without admitting defeat?"

Aridok rose from his seat and saluted.

"Revered Duke of The Northlands, whether the hostilities are to be ceased is up to you. If you stop invading our lands, hostilities will cease. Everyone knows it was the four houses that started this war. You attacked First Frontier without declaring war first. The duke was forced to resist as a result. Even though we are currently in a disadvantageous position, we will not submit to threats of force. Just like how we defeated Jaeger in Wild Husbandry, we are confident we can obtain victory in the end."

Lorist laughed.

"Ever the stubborn ones! Your mouths are harder to crack than a duck's bill! Very well, if you don't admit defeat, all the better for us. I've always wanted to bring my forces to House Fisablen's grasslands for a stroll. Worry not, we will carry out our deal according to the trade agreement. War is war and business is business. As long as you have the money, I won't stop the goods."

"I object, Your Grace, your actions oppress a prestigious house of the former empire.

This is an act all nobles scorn. Not only will you be unable to execute your plans, House Norton will also be denounced by the peace-loving and nobles..."

"Oh, really?" Lorist said with a cold laugh, "The former empire is gone, lost in the ashes of the fire set by the three princes themselves. Let me remind you that the four houses side with Andinaq. His Highness Augustus is the true heir to the throne and House Fisablen stands with a traitor prince. You call our attack unrighteous, but, to us, we're merely trying to quell a rebellion. In contrast, the actions of your duke in the capital of Windbury is the issue more worthy of spreading and scrutinizing..."

Supervisor Aridok was completely speechless.

However, Napole stood up immediately.

"Revered Duke, our duke doesn't wish to engage in war. He has always believed his true enemies are the barbarian tribes on the northeastern great plains. Actually, our duke was most pained by the war that broke out between us. If our duke is willing to cease hostilities, how would you treat House Fisablen?"

Lorist shrugged.

"Given the history between us, military negotiations and talk of trade in military equipment are out of the question. If House Fisablen really wishes to cease hostilities, keep your forces no less than 50 kilometers away from the border. If there is any incident that requires our attention, you must first inform our border guard. All your trade deals will also have to go through salt merchant committee. At the same time, your house's military affairs will be transparent. If there is any movement you want to undertake, you must first inform us. Other than that, Wild Husbandry is important to the safety of The Northlands, so we want to have the rights to station troops there for our safety."

"Not possible. Why don't you retreat from the border? Why can't we station any troops in The Northlands?" objected Aridok with a furious start.

"Simple: we're the victors," Lorist said with the heavy hand of the winning side, "Does Duke Fisablen want peace... or war?"

Though Aridok had wanted to argue, Napole gave his arm a grab. The tall geriatric shut up and lowered his head.

"Your Grace, we have already sent Princess Sylvia over as proof of our intention," replied Napole humbly.

Lorist stood up.

"Since Duke Fisablen's mind is made, then you may discuss the details of the ceasefire with Duke Kenmays. But I have to say I'm not in favor of how Duke Fisablen treated Princess Sylvia."

"Your Grace, we would like to pay the princess a visit. I wonder if we may?"

"Apologies, Sylvia has made her way to the duke's manor in Roaring Bear. You should know where it is. She's gone to check out her new residence. Also, I'd like to mention that I will be holding my wedding ceremony there in the 11th month. Sylvia will be my wife. She will become the matron of House Norton. I extend my heartfelt invitations to Duke Fisablen to visit so he may participate in his granddaughter's grand wedding. I will graciously await his arrival."

After Lorist finished, he turned and left coldly.

Chapter 404

Salt Merchant Committee

The blade cut as quickly as it fell. With but a few words, Lorist set the terms of the armistice in stone and left. All that was left was to negotiate the smaller details. Even if the alliance was the victor, the terms of House Fisablen's surrender couldn't cause them to lose sovereignty and be completely humiliated. The world of Grindia was unlike Lorist's previous one. The conditions he'd put forward were already rather excessive relatively speaking.

Normally, when two houses fought, the losing side would have to pay a large sum in wealth to end the war. If they didn't have money, they could cede part of their dominion, or pay regular tributes. Naturally, there would be additional interest if the price was paid in installments. Lorist didn't need House Fisablen's money, however. Now that they had cut off their trade routes, The house's wealth would be sucked out by the salt merchant committee sooner or later anyway. It was a longer term money-making solution.

Even after the armistice was signed, Lorist wouldn't let his guard down against House Fisablen. Only damned fools would think the war was over and everything was fine after the signing of an armistice. However, the most important conditions of the armistice were the retreat of House Fisablen's forces 50 kilometers away from the border and the ability to station troops in Wild Husbandry. At the very least, it would give Lorist more time to react to sudden changes as well as limit House Fisablen's ability to choose the battlefield.

Two days later, Kenmays brought the armistice's draft to Lorist to look over. Apart from the perfunctory explanation that the conflict between the two houses started because of a misunderstanding, the clauses on the retreat of House Fisablen's troops and the necessity to notify the four houses' garrison forces about any military movements were included. Similarly, any military mobilization of the four houses' garrison had to be announced beforehand to prevent any misunderstanding.

"These conditions don't apply to the assault legions stationed at the border of the two sides, only the garrison forces. Why so?" asked Lorist.

Kenmays hurriedly explained.

"Supervisor Aridok and the other envoy insisted on fair treatment. They mentioned that even after House Fisablen's forces retreat 50 kilometers behind their borders, the presence of Firmrock Legion at the borders of Southern and Eastwild unnerves them. They requested that only garrison forces would be allowed to be stationed at the borders. No offensive military force of any kind may be stationed at the border. Since we already ceased hostilities, I thought it didn't really matter, so I agreed."

"Sheesh, you're always giving me more trouble," Lorist said as he glared at Kenmays with a smile, before he instructed, "Jinolio, after this, have a copy of this ceasefire agreement made for Potterfang. Tell him tomorrow to change the name of Firmrock into Firmrock Garrison and call it a sentry legion. Don't make any changes beyond that. Also, send this fellow here a bill for the costs of changing the legion's banners."

Kenmays shrugged.

"Come on, you're being far too petty. You can't even pay a hundred-odd gold Fordes out of your own pocket?"

Lorist ignored him and continued reading the document. What followed were the stipulations of trade. In actuality, after the signing of the agreement, all things in which House Fisablen wanted to trade, ranging from the smallest piece of paper or salt crystal to things like cows and horses had to go through the salt merchant committee. For example, the things they purchased from the committee just recently was actually worth not more than 600 thousand gold Fordes. A few years earlier, they could have purchased it for around 800 thousand gold Fordes. But now, the hiked prices pushed it as high as two million. It was no wonder Kenmays proclaimed so gleefully that Felim and Shazin could get up to 400 thousand gold Fordes in dividends.

In matters of trade, Kenmays was still reliable. The fellow loved being the middleman and would be more than happy to take in goods with his left and sell them with his right. At most, he had to coordinate their transport. He was completely unlike Lorist, who liked to develop his dominion. According to Kenmays's own words, not only did developing means of production contain great risk, the value of the good would depreciate if they couldn't be traded. If the cost of production is high, the product would also lose its edge against its competitors. From time to time, funds would also have to be provided to develop new or improved versions of the products. All of it was rather troublesome and far more stressful than merely reselling goods like he did.

After reading the last clause, Lorist expressed his dissatisfaction.

"What's this? House Fisablen refused to recognize our occupation of the whole of Wild Husbandry?"

"I had no choice. I said all I could, they were only willing to compromise up to Soxius. We can occupy everything North of it, but everything south of it is still theirs, effectively splitting Wild Husbandry in two. They said occupying half of Wild Husbandry would be enough to ensure The Northlands' safety. I've tried my best, but I couldn't convince them otherwise. So I had no choice but to bring it to you as it is now," said Kenmays as he made a helpless expression

The territory did include a good portion of Wild Husbandry, two-thirds of it, in fact. But much of it was raided by Jaeger quite early on in the war. It was desolate and ruined. House Fisablen's Fourth Frontier suffered defeat after defeat following the ambush, causing what remained of their forces to escape to Soxius and stand guard there. It wasn't until Duke Fisablen's arrival and ambush with 100 thousand barbarian cavalymen that Wild Husbandry was reclaimed. The armistice would recognize the Nortons' occupation of the land already conquered by Jaeger.

It seemed this was the duke's baseline. Since the part of Wild Husbandry to the north of Soxius was ruined, it'd be better to let the Nortons have it as a show of sincerity. After a moment of silence, Lorist decided.

"Then let's leave it as is. Have them sign."

"There's another question we need to settle," Kenmays said, "How long do you want the armistice to last?"

Armistices, and their associated conditions, had limited terms. It was a sacred agreement in the Wargod's name that the sides involved would not take hostile military action against one another for the time the agreement was valid. When the armistice expired, however, the two sides could continue the war or negotiate an extension. If both sides reconciled during that time, however, a peace treaty could be signed and neither side would treat the other as an enemy any longer. Trade would resume and borders would reopen. The number of troops stationed at the borders would also be decreased to save on military costs.

Lorist laughed.

"Let the two envoys go back to the duke and decide this for themselves. They're free to choose how long they want, be it one or three years. We don't need to bother ourselves with what House Fisablen believes, even if they think they can recover and get back at us. The moment they strike, we will give them an even harsher lesson. Maybe, we can inflict so much pain on them they'd rather die instead. This is the extent of our might."

Kenmays was completely stoked after hearing what Lorist had said and could feel his blood boiling.

"Alright. I'll tell them, word for word. They'll be allowed to consult the duke and are free to choose how long they want the armistice to last. We couldn't be bothered to care. But the next time they dare to attack us again, the price of our products will no longer be as low as they are now... We'll double them at the very least..."

After saying that, Kenmays marched out of the door arrogantly. But just as he exited, he suddenly stopped in his tracks and walked back in.

"Um, Locke... I'd like to ask you something. Baron Charade mentioned that you're going to sell a large number of LLDAM-class vessels approximately 70 percent complete. Is that true?"

Sheesh, can't you discuss private matters after finishing the official ones first?

Lorist nodded, nonetheless.

"Yes. The house is cutting Oceanic, so we have a lot of large and small ships we aren't going to use."

"Are you going to sell them all?"

"No. I will announce this during the year-end celebration, as well as the development of Northsea, Bullhorn Bay, and Silowas. The rest of the boats will be auctioned off to the nobles and merchants so they form their own guilds to start trading and fishing."

"Oh, so that's it..." Kenmays said with a dismayed expression, "I thought you would simply sell the ships instead of holding an auction. I didn't think you were planning to do that."

"Haha," Lorist laughed loudly, "Do you wanna bet for how much these ships will sell?"

Here I am worried that I don't have enough to meet demand, and you want to buy them cheap? That's not good, you know. Then again, I suppose you can invest in the guilds. Maybe, you can even form a guild yourself."

"I won't form a guild since trading at sea is not my specialty. It doesn't feel nearly as safe as relying on you anyway. So, that's out of the question. The salt merchant committee already tires me out enough as it is. Also, the committee has the ability to trade at sea. The order our house made at your shipyard was so we could form our own merchant fleet. But the house's will also have to go through the salt merchant committee to get goods to trade. At most, I'll give them some small benefits, nothing huge," said Kenmays gleefully.

Lorist was completely speechless looking at Kenmays, who was even prepared to profit at his father's expense. However, he couldn't help but admit that Kenmays was an incredibly intelligent man who understood the true extent of the benefits of cozying up to a huge backer. The salt merchant committee was Kenmays's self-run business. He had a five-tenths share of the company and also took half of the profits it generated. The other half was split between Felim, Shazin, and Lorist. Lorist owned only a tenth of the committee whereas Shazin and Felim each owned two-tenths. At first, the three houses, save for the Nortons, each owned three-tenths. But Felim and Shazin felt bad for profiting off it for doing nothing, so they each gave a tenth to Kenmays and left him completely in charge.

The committee was originally formed as a joke, they didn't think Kenmays would grow it into the largest merchant guild in the eastern area of The Northlands. It traded in goods to upwards of 300 thousand gold Fordes annually. It became an essential source of income for the four houses. To Felim and Shazin, who couldn't manage finances well, the committee's dividends were a great help. Kenmays himself also got quite a lot of benefits, so many that he could take out nearly a million gold Fordes' in wealth and supplies to aid House Shazin and House Felim during their dominion's relocation.

On one occasion, a conversation between Kenmays and his father spread to Lorist's ears through Furybear's agents. Kenmays's father said he shouldn't give up on the family business for the sake of running the salt merchant committee. But, when Kenmays brought out the committee's accounts, the color drained from his father's face almost immediately. Kenmays's intentions were clear: the committee's turnover had long exceeded that of the house's business. Kenmays mentioned that he was already used to trading in excess of millions of gold Fordes, and that the house's entire business wouldn't even amount to one million -- not worth mentioning at all.

Enraged, his father said that no matter how small the house's business was, it was still something their house owned. He mentioned that Kenmays running the salt merchant committee so successfully was a waste of his talents since half of the profit was earned by others, and that Kenmays had to occasionally take a smaller cut to help Felim and Shazin out by rounding up their dividends. His father also complained about how Kenmays didn't allow his house to gain any benefits as seen with his punishment of one member that faked accounts to get some benefits in the committee. Apart from firing him, a large number of people from House Kenmays were kicked out as well.

Kenmays merely laughed and called his father old for not being able to see the situation clearly. The four houses had already united in alliance, and House Kenmays had the weakest military of the four. They couldn't even compare with House Norton when it came to funds. He was thankful that the three were even willing to form an alliance with his house, and the reason he focused so much of his effort on running the committee was that he wanted to do his best to contribute to the alliance. If the three other houses were really interested in going all out in business, they would've hired their own men to run the committee and kick House Kenmays out. That way, they would earn even more.

Since they had placed their trust in him, he wouldn't let them down. He mentioned that even if House Kenmays's own business got a large deal, apart from having to take care of the capital themselves, they would even have to bow their head to the other nobles and bribe them for their favor. Even if the deal got 300 thousand in profit, less than 100 thousand of it would be left for them. If they were unlucky, their efforts would probably end up wasted and they would only have themselves to blame.

But the committee had House Norton, House Felim and House Shazin backing it. With that much might behind them, they didn't have to bow down like House Kenmays's own business. They could reach anywhere within the four houses' sphere of influence. In fact, he was confident that as the influence of the four expanded, the committee could even connect to thus far uncharted territories and perhaps develop into a body not inferior to the Union's big-seven guilds.

Kenmays told his father the reason he worked so hard to manage the committee was his determination to make the alliance last as long as possible. Whether it be providing huge financial support to House Felim or rounding up the dividend of Count Shazin, it was all for the sake of the alliance's longevity. House Kenmays's position among the four houses could only grow more and more secure this way. And with the four's development, the house would truly be included in the ranks of the traditional peerage

instead of being considered as an outlier commoner who happened to be rich.

After hearing what Kenmays had to say, his father thought silently for a long time before he finally sighed. Soon after he called a household meeting where he abdicated and gave his son his position. He made it clear that he would only manage the household business in the future. All household affairs would be managed how Kenmays saw it without question.

That was the real reason Lorist trusted Kenmays so much. Only when the alliance had members who were aware of their position could the alliance last and develop in the long term.

"Alright, stop showing off," Lorist said as he tapped on Kenmays's shoulder.

"Since you're prepared to take the committee to the seas, hear a bit of my advice. You may purchase a fleet for the committee, but don't form a large one just yet. Test the waters first, if you will. As for the safety at sea, it's nothing about which you have to worry. House Norton's Northsea will protect the vessels. However, it's on you to establish the market. As the old saying goes, 'the man who leaves sooner than others picks the best apples.'"

"I know. After sending the two envoys off, I'll go look for Baron Charade," said Kenmays as he left joyfully.

Chapter 405

The Storm Brews Again

"Joe, have you recovered?"

The moment Lorist entered Jaeger's campsite, he saw Josk drenched in sweat training with his green longbow. It seemed he had been training for quite a while. Upon seeing them arrive, Josk hurriedly bowed.

"Your Grace, I've more or less recovered. I feel like I have moss growing on me -- I was in bed for three months!. I've been busy with recuperation training for the last two days."

"You should watch your condition. Your injuries have just started to recover. You know haste makes waste," Lorist said as he dismounted and handed his horse's reins to Jinolio, "Some introductions are due. This is the gold-ranked Divine Marksman, Baron Josk. Josk, this is Jinolio, my new attendant."

Josk wiped the sweat from his face with a linen cloth and nodded.

"Where's Howard?"

"He's in seclusion training like Reidy. It'll last two years."

Josk noticed Els.

"Hey, Els..."

He walked up to him and give him a bear hug.

Lorist smiled.

"Joe, Els is Jaeger's legion sergeant-major now and the colonel of his own division. He's yours now. I'm relieved you get along."

"Great," Josk exclaimed excitedly, "I was just worrying about having no one to help me

since Yuriy's still injured. This is great news."

"How's Yuriy recovering?"

"The herbalist said his injuries are recovering well. But he will need more than a year to retrain his battleforce."

Lorist nodded.

"I'll send him to Roaring Bear to recover by my side. Maybe I can help him increase his speed. Also, Jaeger's ranks should be filled by now, right?"

"I'm not too sure," Josk said, hesitantly, "You know Waxima's usually in charge of such things. I've never asked. But seeing how busy the camp is, I suppose they're full."

"Good. Apart from the 3500 new recruits from the dominion, there are another ten thousand transfers from Local Defense to Jaeger. The remaining 30 thousand used to be elite cavalymen in Madras' armies. Now you've mostly recovered, I can stop worrying. Use the remainder of the year to train. You'll deploy in Wild Husbandry spring next year."

"Are we finally going to take revenge?" asked Josk, elated.

Lorist shook his head.

"I know this might disappoint you, but the alliance has negotiated an armistice. It will take effect after Duke Fisablen decides the term and sends it back. We'll deploy in Wild Husbandry next year because in the armistice House Fisablen will recognize our occupation of half of the province up to Soxius. In essence, we've retaken the territory Jaeger conquered."

Josk was silent for a moment before he cleared his throat.

"Your Grace, we were far too incompetent... Our loss brought the house shame."

Lorist took up Josk's shirt hung on a nearby pole and slung it at his body.

"This isn't your fault. Jaeger managed to sweep Wild Husbandry and send Fourth Frontier running haggardly in the early days. This is already far beyond my expectations. Your loss was due to the insidious duke. Even I wouldn't fare much better

if I were in your position."

Josk put on his clothes, tidied himself and guided everyone into the main tent. He had the guards blow the horn to summon the commanders, Josk kept his position as the legion's general. Els was made legion sergeant-major and colonel, and given command of his own division. Waxima was made legion sergeant-major as well and chief logistics officer. Many others were made majors, with command of brigades, and captains, with command of regiments. Eidelwoke, commander of the 23rd local defense brigade, who had successfully managed to defend Pedro, had been transferred to Jaeger and given the position of division sergeant-major and major, with his own brigade command.

After the new positions were announced, everyone discussed the lessons learned from their loss and also announced a few new measures. First, Lorist was changing Jaeger's loadout. Two years of experimentation had shown that Jaeger's current loadout was rather lacking in actual battle. Coupled with the fact that many sets of the loadout ended up in House Fisablen's hands after the legion's defeat, the house had to change the style and color to prevent the enemy from sneaking in unnoticed. The remaining 20 thousand sets would be reclaimed and stored.

Second, the house would not provide Jaeger with new carroballistae. It was also a decision Lorist had made personally. He'd had a discussion with Charade, Freiyar, Belnick, and several other knights at Firmrock about the circumstances behind Jaeger's defeat. The revelations were shocking. Pete's third division had been encircled and eradicated because it had two extra brigades of carroballistae. It had also enabled Duke Fisablen to attack Yuriy's second division who approached to reinforce the third.

"Jaeger is predominantly light cavalry. The main threat of light cavalry isn't their offensive power, but their impressive mobility that allows them to come and go unannounced. Why were Duke Fisablen's light cavalry legions able to pose such a threat? He doesn't have carroballistae with impressive firing range, yet every time he comes for us, we have to face him with full alertness like we're facing a great foe.

"The reason is that we're afraid he could strike our weaknesses. Our supply line, medical stations, and food stores can easily be sabotaged. The whole legion will be affected if they're hit. It's because of those factors we lose the initiative in confrontations with their light cavalry and have to watch for them fearfully. Light cavalry should be quick to move and fast as lightning when they attack. They are the

best tools for penetration, stalling, sealing, pursuing and reconnaissance.

"The carroballistae is one of the most threatening ranged weapons in our arsenal. Even though they also have rather high mobility, they're slow in comparison to light cavalry. Giving Jaeger carroballistae is like chaining a horse to a carriage. It would lose the ability to run and escape quickly. Had Pete not had the burden of two carroballistae brigades, he could've escaped in any direction the moment he noticed the grassland barbarians approach.

"It would make it near impossible for 100 thousand barbarians to encircle third division. Had the two carroballistae brigades not been present, all it would have taken to break out was to charge in a direction. There's no way the grassland barbarians could've held them back. It's such a shame that Colonel Pete had no choice but to stand his ground because of the two carroballistae brigades.

"We have to learn. You're the house's only light cavalry legion, I have hopes for everyone in Jaeger. Though House Fisablen's frontier legions are our enemy, we have to learn some of their strengths. They are the strongest light cavalry force in the former empire. We have to learn from our failure. We must surpass them and the house will definitely provide you with the best equipment we can. I hope by the time you return to the great northeastern plains, you will be unstoppable."

Lorist turned to Josk.

"Joe, I'm marrying Sylvia in the 11th month. The marriage will be in Roaring Bear I'd like you to be my best man."

Josk didn't say a word.

Lorist smiled.

"Joe, marrying Sylvia isn't the same as making peace with House Fisablen. I personally believe Duke Fisablen will be our most formidable enemy as long as he remains alive. Please don't fault Sylvia for her identity. She's been abandoned by the Fisablens."

"Your Grace, I believe you, but I don't want to attend your wedding, nor do I want to be your best man. Would that be alright?"

"No. Just look at the friends I have around me; even Els got married. You're the only one I have to be my best man. If you get married before the 11th, I won't force you."

Josk wore a look of exasperation.

"Then I'd rather be your best man."

"Thank you, Joe."

Lorist thought to himself happily, *I managed to rope another one.*

The next morning, Lorist found Tarkel stumbling towards him with ragged breath.

"What's up, Tarkel?"

"Y-y-y-your Grace... Battle has... b-broken out..."

"Battle? Who attacked?"

"No... not us... n-n-n-nobody attacked us... Y-y-your Grace, let me catch my breath..."

Tarkel rested for a moment before he recovered.

"I almost choked to death. The strong wind didn't help either."

"Alright, stop complaining. Where did you say battle broke out? Did it happen between the second highness and the Union? Or did he attack the four central duchies?"

Lorist unleashed a flurry of questions at once.

"It's not the second highness, Your Grace. It's the Forde Trade Union and the mid-southern kingdoms. It started a month ago," said Tarkel as he took out a huge stack of newspapers from the Union.

"So they finally started fighting... The lightning has been striking without any sign of rain for well over a year now. The real deal finally began."

Lorist breathed a sigh of relief. Time really flies. Lorist recalled the conflict back in Morante when he brought Kenmays and the others there for a trip was something that happened four years back. He had convinced Academy Head Levins to move Dawn Academy to The Northlands. Dawn had already been operating for two years straight and had about a thousand new students.

After the unfortunate experience in Morante, President Peterson expressed his apologies. Lundmorde, who stayed at Morante sent word that the big-seven guilds had punished the newly entitled nobles by confiscating the titles of a few dozen who caused too much trouble and sending more than ten to the gallows. In the end, they managed to stabilize the situation and established a code of conduct for the newly entitled nobles. Also, they made the new nobles pledge to not do anything uncivil and also legislated regulations on how one could manage their dominion.

After the situation stabilized, the big-seven began talks with the surrounding kingdoms and duchies in hopes they could reopen the trade routes and stop seeing the Union as an enemy, essentially returning their relationships to how it had been before the war. The Union also pledged they wouldn't set their sights on their new neighbor's territory and tried their best to restore amicable relations.

The shape of the Grindian continent resembled a really uneven shuttle small in the north and large in the south with a few cracks. The area inhabited by humans encompassed only two-thirds of the continent and looked a little like a crescent moon. The northmost area inhabited by humans was The Northlands, which was actually near the middle of the continent. Further north, and separated by the Magic Dragon mountain range were the wildlands where humans had yet to set foot. It was marked by the endless stretches of ancient forests and domineering mountain ranges.

Stretching south from The Northlands was the territory of the largest superpower in days long gone, the Krissen Empire. Forde Trade Union's territory started in the Falik Plains. Around the Union were kingdoms and duchies of varying sizes. Including the Union, there were around 34 nations and they were known as the 34 mid-southern countries. Further south was where the second and third-ranked superpowers among the three great nations on Grindia, the Romon Empire and the Khawistan Khanate respectively. Neighboring the two greats was the Kalia kingdom. All three had a sword saint. It was precisely because of the sword saints' presence that the Romon Empire and the Khawistan Khanate -- who used to fight frequently -- had managed to maintain a fragile peace for the last three decades. Kalia also managed to remain safe despite neighboring the two large superpowers because of its own sword saint.

Further south was the great Amanjiro channel where the Cinque peninsula was located. There were five or six nations on the peninsula whom fought constantly. They had been in conflict for a few centuries, but none had managed to win. But due to its position at the southernmost tip of the continent, the peninsula was quite poor and had never garnered the attention of the mainland. Even the Romon Empire, nearest to

them, didn't bother to annex the forest-filled, barren, and undeveloped peninsula.

After the War of Glass, the Union had absorbed the territory of nine nations. Coupled with the Lormo duchy, which had seceded from the Krissen Empire, as well as the two provinces of the now defunct Redlis, the Union was now the nation with the largest territory on the continent. At the same time, the 34 mid-southern nations that stood united to resist the three superpowers north and south lost ten of their members. Faced with the Union's domination, the remaining nations united to seal off the Union's trade routes and cut off all relations with it. It was a heavy blow to the unprepared Union.

After the big-seven stabilized the Union's internal affairs, they began talks, but there was hardly any progress. As a result, the Union formed two standing legions of 140 thousand men and stationed them on their borders. The 24 mid-southern nations didn't cower, though, they mobilized nearly 200 thousand soldiers to guard their side of the borders. Both sides remained in a stalemate for more than a year and ended up going to war. It seemed that both were unable to withstand the huge amount of resources it took to sustain such armies, so they decided to duke it out for a quick conclusion.

"Your Grace, two months ago, the Romon Empire and Khawistan Khanate went to war yet again," Tarkel informed, "Romon eliminated Kalia as well and the windstorm sword saint's whereabouts are unknown."

Oh, then again, the two nations are too far away from The Northlands... Lorist didn't really care.

"There's another piece of bad news. Lundmorde was forcefully conscripted and sent to the frontlines. The Union announced this matter concerned all of its citizens and they would have to fulfill their civil duties by joining the military. The reports we just got from Morante were collected and sent back by Lundmorde's four wives. They arrived half a month later than usual."

What?! Poor Lundmorde...

Chapter 406

Inspection

Lundmorde hadn't told his wives that he was collecting information for the house. What Lorist wanted was current news and details about the situation and movements of the surrounding nations. The most crucial information he required was the military deployments and other movements of those nations. However, the reports from the newspapers of Morante Tarkel brought over were merely gossip and hearsay. They mostly contained odd erotica and chivalric romance without a trace of actual political information.

There were twelve issues of a small tabloid called 'Moonlit Tales' included among the things sent back. They contained twelve chapters of a serial erotica with a female protagonist whose husband was a sailor. The story was roughly about how after the protagonist's husband set sail, twelve handsome and rich princes on white horses showed up out of nowhere. The novel described in detail the protagonist's complex emotions and psychological state. After the protagonist spent night after night in debauchery with the twelve men, she made up her mind to run away from home with one of them. However, another prince who deeply loved her was jealous and hateful. After killing the lucky man, he committed suicide. Given how the situation changed, the remaining ten princes left the protagonist. All she could do was sit by her windowsill alone day after day, waiting for her husband's return.

Pffft!

Lorist was having breakfast when he decided to browse the tabloids. The moment he read about the twelve nights of pleasure, he spat all the food in his mouth out immediately. Fortunately, he had been eating alone. It would've been far too rude otherwise.

Isn't this plot far too ridiculous? I even thought it would be that kind of stereotypical story where the protagonist would gradually get to know the twelve princes and they would seduce her one after another and mate like rabbits. The author even described every interaction as peaceful and moving and also flushed out the protagonist's state of mind. The readers no doubt had no choice but to join in. I didn't think there would be

such a twist. This erotica changed into tragedy in a flash! It's just like having a bucket of cold water dumped on you just as things are getting exciting! It's like being rendered impotent all of a sudden! The author's kidding, right? I wonder how many people curse their name for this kind of ending...

He imagined at least one of Lundmorde's wives actually read stories like this as a hobby. It seemed there was a good chance he would be cheated on. However, he did wonder why Lundmorde was sent to the frontlines. While he was a two-star silver rank, his swordsmanship was nothing of note. He was only good as a second rank herbalist. Perhaps the Union had quite a lot of casualties, hence their need for Lundmorde's talents as a herbalist.

Putting aside the matter of Lundmorde's conscription, the conflict between the Union and the mid-southern nations was big enough news itself. The only thing was he lived too far to the north and couldn't get first-hand information on the situation. Formerly, the reports Lundmorde collected for the house would be sent through Peterson Merchant Guild when their trading fleet headed to Silowas. Needless to say, it was a rather time-consuming process; at least half a month would have passed by the time the reports made their way to The Northlands.

The house had trained messenger eagles and established a communications system but Lundmorde wasn't equipped with similar facilities. The messenger eagles couldn't carry too much, they were difficult to train, and there were people who yearned for such eagles. The house had once tried to supply Lundmorde with an eagle. But nobles from the Union had forcefully bought the eagle in less than three days. Fortunately, it flew back to The Northlands soon after. As for Lundmorde, his house in Morante was ransacked for days on end until the nobles were sure the eagle hadn't made it back to Lundmorde.

After finishing breakfast, Lorist had Jinolio call Tarkel.

"You should send someone to Morante to teach Lundmorde's wives the proper method to collect reports and information instead of collecting and sending back a random assortment of gossip and advertisements and stuffing rotten yammer, thinking they can pass it off as the real deal," Lorist said as he pointed at the documents, "Just look at this report here, it's basically nothing but Union propaganda about how the conflict broke out because of the mid-southern nations demands for the Union to hand back the territory they occupied.

"The the mid-southern nations' army would have to be insane before they'd make those kinds of demands. Those eradicated nations have long lost the successors to the ruling families. These merchants are truly far more ruthless than nobles. What's the point of reforming those nations if the successors are no longer there? Also, would the Union really agree to spit out the meat it has swallowed? There must be some other reason for the war. Not only are we unable to gain anything from these tabloids, they're just spewing crap to trick people into buying them."

"Very well, Your Grace. I'll send someone. I was just thinking of sending some people to Morante to find out why Lundmorde was conscripted," Tarkel said some hesitation, "But Your Grace, what's that about 'yammer' Do you mean yam?"

Lorist gave it some thought and came up with an explanation. "Back when I was studying at Morante, I heard my neighbors talk about this merchant at the nearby crop market who would stuff rotten yams that wouldn't sell among the good ones. That's how that saying came about."

Tarkel said with a look of admiration, "Your Grace, your wisdom stretches far and wide."

Lorist's face reddened slightly.

"Spare me the flattery and just focus on your job. Send someone to Morante to teach Lundmorde's wives how to collect proper information while investigating whether Lundmorde was forcefully conscripted or whether he offended someone he shouldn't have. Or, the Union has entered a state of general mobilization because the start of the conflict went rather badly. Make sure to find out about the circumstances that led to the war. As for Lundmorde, I believe he's been sent to the frontlines to serve as herbalist for the injured, so he shouldn't be in immediate danger. However, it's best if the people you send can find him quickly and serve as his guard."

"Noted, Your Grace," Tarkel said as he turned to leave.

Lorist stopped him.

"Wait, Tarkel," said he with a furrowed brow, pacing around the tent non-stop until Tarkel felt dizzy from following Lorist with his eyes.

"Since the break-out of war a month ago, has the second highness made any moves? He should be the one most delighted by this turn of events and start something huge

in the meantime. It's extremely weird that he hasn't made any moves yet. His silence is far too weird. I'm not used to

"Your Grace, the first thing we did after we received word of the war was check on the second highness. We set up three messenger eagle stations around the capital, but all three report nothing out of the ordinary. The second highness hasn't acted at all, neither has the imperial local defense legion nor Whitelion received any orders. I just sent someone else to confirm. We should hear from him in a few days."

"Very well. I know how meticulous you can be. Go about your business and make sure to keep an eye on the second highness. I'm worried this king is up to something no good again," praised Lorist with a satisfactory nod.

The first thing on his itinerary was the visit to Jaeger's camp. He would then head to Goldridge to check on the mining facilities' construction and the early mining operations. He would thereafter travel to Northsea before finally heading to Bladedge Mountains. He would visit Nico Academy to check on Telesti and his two beloved daughters and head to the gunpowder research laboratory, the black iron refinery and the weapons forgery. It would be the start of the 8th month by the time returned to Firmrock after the whole trip.

Lots of construction was going on at Moonspring, situated along the way to Goldridge. The town was located beside the lake where the 100-thousand-strong barbarian army had been defeated. It would be the supply point for Fort Goldridge and the mine. As the lake was shaped like the circular moon, Lorist named it Moonspring, so the new town under construction came to be called Moonspring as well.

The first stages of the road construction from Moonspring to Goldridge was already complete. It was a road half a meter above the Black Forest's ground level, wide enough for four carriages to cross side by side. The road was built so the house could send reinforcements to Fort Goldridge in case of a barbarian army attack. The path still required some time for the clay and stones to be made secure and strong. Not only would it have to be flattened and leveled well, they also had to prevent it from collapsing in heavy rainstorms during the rainy season.

It took less than half a day to arrive at Fort Goldridge. Even though the trip was uneventful, the sites along the way were rather garish given the heads staked along the branches of the trees. According to one of the supervisors in charge of the construction project, the captive barbarians often tried to escape during the first

month of the project. There would be more than a hundred barbarians captured daily and they were beheaded and had their heads staked through the tree branches along the road as a warning for the other barbarians who were considering a desperate escape. The captives only started behaving more obediently after about four thousand of them were killed.

Having been a dominion lord for more than a decade, Lorist was cold enough to no longer be bothered by such things. He pretended that he didn't see the heads at all. Jinolio, however, was but a 16-year-old boy. He hadn't seen such a harrowing sight ever before and shivered on the back of his horse. Lorist gave him a glance.

"Puff your chest out and sit tight. This is nothing worth mentioning or being afraid of. If you've seen the sea of corpses of the poor folk of Silowas left behind by the horrid slave traders and the human head pyramid I erected on Hanayabarta, you will not mind something like this."

"Yes, Your Grace," said Jinolio as he sat straight up. Even though he still felt a little apprehensive about looking at the heads, at least he was no longer shivering.

Belnick came to greet them with a regiment of troops. Fort Goldridge's basic construction was done and the rest of the work was progressing smoothly. According to Belnick, the fort and walls' construction was proceeding incredibly well without any interruption by the mountain barbarians. Perhaps after the extermination of their army, they had learned the true might of House Norton and no longer dared to cross them lest disaster befall them again.

Spiel was still at the gold mine busying himself over designing a better set of protocols to regulate the mined gold. Grandmaster Sid, on the other hand, had left two months ago, leaving his eldest son in charge of the development of new mining facilities and ways to transport the mined ore.

Satisfied with what he saw, Lorist left for Northsea after resting for two days.

He was surprised to find that Kenmays was still loitering around the city when he arrived. Kenmays also excitedly informed Lorist that he had just purchased 6 LLDM class vessels as well as 18 MAM class vessels in the name of the salt merchant committee for the fleet he was building. He was also setting up a firm for the committee in Northsea which included an office and a storage area. However, he did complain about how he couldn't buy ownership over property and only the rights to

use them, making it so that he had to request official permission to even renovate the buildings as well as being taxed heavily on an annual basis for usage of the land.

Lorist shrugged and answered that he didn't have a choice since it was the land of House Norton. As the inheritor of the position of house leader, he alone had no rights to sell the rights of the house's land to others, so selling the rights to use the land was a compromise he had to make. The house would still retain ownership over the land whereas those who bought the rights to use the buildings or land could continue about their business without affecting the development of the dominion.

Kenmays however quickly and acutely noticed the hidden implications in Lorist's words, which reminded him of the two special sectors at the southern part of The Northlands where land was sold exclusively to nobles. He found another lucrative business model and pestered Lorist to talk about it in detail with him, but Lorist didn't have time to entertain him. So, he sent Kenmays off to look for Kedan after agreeing that he would consider Kenmays's plan to develop the real estate industry in the seven towns of Felicitas.

After checking on the reorganized Northsea Fleet and the shipyard at Bullhorn Bay, Lorist headed to Nico Academy. Telesti had already heard of the news of Lorist's marriage with Sylvia that would take place during the 11th month. Even though she insisted that she would remain single given her oath to the God of Knowledge and Wisdom, Siminglyde, she did bear Lorist two cute daughters. The position of matron of the house was within her arm's reach, yet she had refused Lorist's marriage proposal and pushed Lorist to Sylvia instead.

It wasn't known whether she was regretting her decision or reeling from the shock of the reality of her lover's marriage to another woman. During Lorist's five-day stay at the academy, Telesti behaved completely opposite her usual distant and cold demeanor and pestered Lorist every single day, causing him much physical and mental fatigue. But given that he understood what Telesti was worried about, Lorist tolerated her antics and treated her kindly. He also promised that he would construct a manor at a scenic location near Nico Academy for her to keep as her own private land.

After leaving Nico Academy, Lorist went to Bladedge Mountains. His first stop was Professor Balbo's laboratory. It was the main location where the cannons were being tested. The brigade of three thousand guards was secretly stationed there to master the secret weapons of House Norton: the bronze-cannon carriages. Unlike the bronze cannons issued to Northsea Fleet, these cannons designed for land use were far lighter

and were mounted on a steel carriage frame. Each carriage would be pulled by two horses, allowing the cannons far greater mobility and swifter reaction to orders than the catapults of Thunderbolt Brigade.

Major Jim, who had just recovered from the backlash he suffered when attempting to break through the gold rank, and Vice Major Paulobins who used to serve in the first local defense brigade would be in charge of the bronze cannon brigade. It was too bad for the both of them that it took three whole years for the cannon designs to be revamped and perfected. Through test firing on various different terrains, they also developed fitting orders and protocols, but the war with House Fisablen ended just when they were ready to be deployed.

Lorist also felt that it was a huge shame since these land-based bronze cannons cost the house almost five million gold Fordes to realize. So far, there were a total of 200 of those cannons and three thousand guards. That was the unit that the house spent the most on, and they were also the most powerful force among all others. Lorist believed that when they were finally deployed on the battlefield, no enemy would be able to resist their thunderous assault.

"The black iron refinery should be further down. Grandmaster Sid wrote me a letter saying that there was a surprise waiting for me there. I can't wait to see what it is. Let's go, Jinolio," said Lorist after he bid farewell to Jim and the rest.

"Yes, Your Grace."

Chapter 407

The Oddity of the Second Highness

Grandmaster Sid's surprise didn't really shock Lorist much. The experienced smith had developed another type of steel he had named Sid 303. Lorist noticed Sid was gradually developing the traits Ciroba had when it came to naming things after himself in an attempt to be remembered for generations to come.

According to Sid, Sid 303 boasted the best elasticity of all the steel types they'd been using so far. It was extremely suited to fashion spring plates and ballistae arms. And the results of their experiments showed ballistae made with the new material could be fired even further with even more force. The maximum range was at around 400 meters.

Lorist also realized that Sid was really intent on having him replace the arms of the ballistae with his new material, but he refused in the end. So far, the house's carroballistae were still far ahead of the other factions'. Even if other people could obtain a few, they would still be unable to forge similar steel arms. There was no need to spend unnecessary funds to upgrade them. But even so, the new material was still a decent step forward in their overall technological advancement.

As opposed to Sid's disappointment, he was more interested in the new forging kilns that allowed for the creation of the new steel. After two years of experimentation, the grandmaster had finally managed to come up with flame-resistant bricks he used to make a kiln that could refine black iron in extremely heated conditions. Sid 303 was created precisely through those kilns. After black iron was sent into the kiln and melted, Sid performed numerous tests by adding in various different metals before finally coming up with the recipe for the new material. To be more precise, Sid 303 was an alloy of different metals.

As Lorist wasn't educated in the ways of metallurgy, he wasn't interested in hearing Sid's lecture about the crucial points to look out for in forging metal. Instead, he found it a huge shame that the people of Grindia didn't use any form of coal or petroleum. He didn't know whether it was because they hadn't discovered other sources of fuel because logs were far more readily available. Grindians used mainly wood and

charcoal for metallurgy and when they needed to raise the temperatures, they would resort to powdered fire crystals, but the temperature wouldn't stay high for long. That was one of the reasons Grindians couldn't develop their technology quickly.

"Grandmaster, I'd like to ask you about the compact crossbow you showed me. I wonder if there're any improvements that manage to lower the production cost?"

An awkward expression appeared on the grandmaster's face.

"Apologies, Your Grace. As the cost of producing the compact crossbows was too high, the moment the house canceled their order, Grandmaster Fellin and I stopped researching it. I was busy testing new steel alloys while Grandmaster Fellin was caught up with a huge order of 20 thousand longbows. We were both far too busy with other things..."

The construction of each standard longbow took up to two years. The wood required would have to undergo multiple rounds of soaking and drying and it was a really cumbersome process overall. Lorist recalled the longbow order was made for the local defense brigade's longbowmen. Given how the two grandmasters must have presented the compact crossbows after they did their best and exhausted every idea they had to improve it beforehand, he could understand why they weren't willing to continue pouring their efforts into its development.

"I recall you mentioned the reason the cost was so high lay with the materials, right? Given the variance in elasticity in the steel you used to produce, only a small portion could be used. Their small size meant a lot of materials would be wasted after making the small individual parts. Those were the factors that inflated the cost, right?"

"Indeed, Your Grace," Sid admitted, "Because of the unstable kiln we used back then, the steel we produced would vary in some form or another even if identical ingredients and amounts were used. Additionally, the elastic nature of the steel isn't obtained simply just through repeated forging. For instance, while we can fashion mithril into steel, the material would lose its elasticity after forging, so it's not easy to find materials suited to make compact crossbows, hence the immensely high cost. Out of ten forging attempts, only one or two would be successful."

"Since that's the case, now that you've developed this new kind of steel, why haven't you considered using it to make compact crossbows? Since Sid 303's recipe is already set and stabilized, making mass production possible, I suppose this could greatly

decrease the production cost."

Sid appeared stunned before he snapped with ecstasy.

"That's right, why didn't I think of it?! I was too fixated on the carroballistae I forgot the house was looking for a weapon to replace longbows... Your Grace, I'll look for Grandmaster Fellin right away and improve the compact crossbows immediately..."

"Wait, Grandmaster Sid, there's something else," Lorist said as he stopped the man, "Go discuss with Grandmaster Fellin. If the elasticity of the steel material really is this amazing, see if you can fashion it into a bow which can be wielded and fired on horseback. Then, compare it with the longbows we use. Since Jaeger was just reformed, we require a weapon that can be fired on horseback and isn't inferior to longbows."

"Understood, Your Grace. We will come up with a weapon the house can use soon. We'll work till our deaths if it means we can be of use to the house!" said Sid excitedly.

Lorist facepalmed as he watched Sid's figure disappear into the distance. To be frank, he wondered if he had set the technological tree in the wrong direction. Ideally, he would've liked to develop firearms. But nobody was willing to get into researching them. Sid and the rest were going further and further on the path of cold projectile weapons like crossbows to the point they managed to come up with new highly elastic steel, yet they weren't willing to foray into the field of firearms at all.

Nowadays, the carroballistae of House Norton already stood at the forefront of ranged weaponry thanks to Sid and the rest's efforts. But now, they were going far deeper down that path and even researching how they could improve bows and crossbows to increase their power and range. Even though he had already provided some concept drawings and designs of firearms, the grandmasters showed no interest. He wondered if he should start a new research division specifically for firearms research, but the number of talented people required wasn't easy to find.

After leaving the black iron refinery, he checked on Ironforge Castle. It was the central weapons production plant the house had set up at Bladedge Mountains. The weapons and equipment produced at Sid's would be sent north for polishing and inlaying to make the standard equipment set used by soldiers. It was a huge production plant manned by three thousand workers. Apart from bearing the burden of providing armaments to the house's forces, they were also tasked with providing arms for the

house's allies.

The person in charge, Baron Camorra, had been waiting outside for quite some time. So far, the most important assignment Ironforge Castle had been given was the production of the 60 thousand sets of light cavalry armor Jaeger required. The armor was based on Sid's latest designs, with some adjustments after surveying the Jaeger's men and considering their suggestions. Sid basically redesigned the whole thing and made quite a number of changes. The armor's color was also changed from black to grey.

Last year, Camorra was in charge of logistics and support during Iblia's conquest and had performed wonderfully, earning Lorist's praise. Even though the war was now over, the large defensive infrastructure projects had just been started, so Camorra's duties as chief logistics officer were yet to finish. Though his job did get much lighter as the situation wasn't that urgent. Camorra appointed an aide and had him stay in Windbury while he made his way to Ironforge to welcome Lorist for the inspection.

By the time Lorist made it back to Firmrock after the inspections concluded, it was already the 7th day of the 8th month. After visiting Howard at the training grounds, he went to his study and noticed Charade was waiting for him on the sofa with another huge stack of documents. This time around it was mostly about Northsea's and Jaeger's budgets. There was also another letter addressed to him sent from Roaring Bear. It was actually a correspondence from Sylvia. She mentioned that she loved the scenery around Cherry Blossom Ridge, which he had given her as a gift. There were a few things she wanted changed, so it would take a few more days before she returned.

"Have the invitations been sent?" asked Lorist as he signed the documents.

On Grindia, noble wedding invitations usually had to be sent out half a year before the wedding. It was especially so for someone of Lorist's status, being head of House Norton and Duke of The Northlands. Not only would he have to notify all the house's vassals, even the entire kingdom's nobles had to be invited. It wasn't an issue of familiarity, but rather of noble pride. Fortunately, the second highness had wiped out most of the peerage a few years earlier and left barely any remaining. For once Lorist was thankful to the second highness. He didn't have to worry about having to interact with nobles with whom he wasn't familiar.

As the wedding would take place in the 11th month, the messengers had to be sent out at the end of the 6th or the beginning of the 7th. Some powerful nobles on Grindia

notified their guests almost a year in advance because of the time needed to travel across the continent. Additionally, the guests required time to prepare a wedding gift. However, it wasn't too troublesome in Lorist's case since House Norton's sphere of influence mainly covered the northeastern area of the empire.

"Most of the invitations were sent successfully. However, only a few nobles from the capital will attend. Almost all the nobles the second highness entitled claimed to have too much to do and expressed their regret. They did say they would send gifts to congratulate Your Grace's marriage, though," replied Charade.

"Did the second highness have anything to say?"

"That's actually the weirdest part," Charade said with a furrowed brow, "Our messenger couldn't meet His Majesty. The messenger said after the palace staff received the invitation, he was told to rest at an inn and await news. But when evening came, someone was sent over to relay that His Majesty was far too busy with other matters and wouldn't attend. He did mention that he would send messengers over to give his blessings. It really made me wonder after hearing what I did from the messenger. I can't help but think the second highness is up to something. What could take up so much of his time that he couldn't even spare any time to attend your wedding? Also, the kingdom seems rather quiet, as if His Majesty went into hiding. He actually didn't even meet our messenger face to face. Talk about being rude..."

Lorist put down the documents in his hand.

"I wonder if you've heard news of the Union going to war with the mid-southern nations? Lundmorde was conscripted and sent to the frontlines as well. It'll take more time for us to gather reliable information. However, what rouses my suspicion is how the second highness is laying low despite the situation. There doesn't seem to be any abnormality in the capital at all. Logically speaking, His Majesty should be taking the opportunity to rub more salt in the Union's wounds. he's always been all about reuniting the empire, and now the Union occupies quite a number of the empire's provinces, why is the second highness letting such an opportunity go? I can't figure it out. It all seems too weird."

"Ugh... I haven't heard of this at all. Oh well, it's got nothing to do with us anyway," Charade said as he shook his head, "We're too far away from the Union, it's no surprise the news is delayed. However, the second highness's two legions should be standing off against the Union at the border, so he should have received the news long ago. If it

really is as good an opportunity as you suggest, then it truly is weird that he hasn't made any moves. Hey, do you think he isn't in the capital? That'd explain how he didn't show up to meet our messenger."

Lorist looked stunned. What Charade just said seemed to set his thoughts down a completely different path. He pulled on the bell rope to summon Jinolio.

"Jinolio, send someone to get Tarkel."

Tarkel soon showed up.

"Tarkel, send some messages through our eagles to the capital. Order our informants to investigate how long it's been since the second highness showed up in front of anyone. Who is in charge of the kingdom right now? Find out if anything odd is going on in the palace."

"Understood, Your Grace. I will get to it immediately."

Three days later, Tarkel met with him once more.

"Your Grace, here's the report our informants sent back. It's been more than a year since His Majesty appeared publicly. According to the maidservants, they haven't seen him for quite some time now. However, they did confirm that he's been residing in a section of the palace guarded by his personal guard. Nobody's been permitted to disturb him. Word is that he's been afflicted with some weird disease, hence his self-imposed seclusion. However, the palace supervisor and the three other ministers were allowed to see him. There were some documents signed during that time and the manner in which matters were dealt with largely stayed the same. So, the kingdom's situation has remained stable."

"A weird disease?" Lorist wondered as he stroked his chin, "Impossible. What kind of disease can make a three-star gold-rank fall so sick? It's almost impossible. Maybe he was poisoned or assassinated?"

Tarkel gave it some thought.

"Assassination doesn't sound too probable. Otherwise, the kingdom would've fallen into chaos long ago. It doesn't seem like poison either. If that were the case, the palace would be hiring lots of herbalists just like when the third prince was poisoned. All the herbalists in the kingdom were summoned to the palace. However, there's one thing

worth noting. Your Grace's cousin sister, Glacia, seems to have lost the highness's trust and has been relieved of her duties. Currently, she's living alone in her private residence."

"Oh?" Lorist mused with a furrowed brow, "Is this true?"

"It is. Miss Glacia didn't seem willing to divulge any details. She did say she would travel to The Northlands and attend the wedding, though."

Lorist paced around, head lowered, and wondered about how odd it all was.

At the very least, it's certain the second highness is staying in the palace. Whatever, there's no point wracking my head. The truth will come out one day and I'll know up to what the second highness has been.

"Leave it be for now. Have our men watch the palace and report anything out of the ordinary immediately."

"Understood, Your Grace."

Chapter 408

Carriage Track

On the 17th day of the 8th month, Sylvia, Fennazali, Dilianna, Daisy, and Maria returned to Firmrock.

Back then, the The Northlands' south was the most prosperous area and Duke Loggins and the other Northlander nobles had built lots of mansions there. After the dominion relocation, the whole of The Northlands had fallen into House Norton's hands and the manors consequently ended up Lorist's property.

After settling on the plan of developing The Northlands, 27 of the mansions not too important to the plan were set for demolition, leaving only eleven known for their magnificent scenery. Lorist allowed Sylvia and his four concubines to take their pick.

Cherry Blossom Ridge was known as the most beautiful manor in The Northlands. Every year after the rainy season, flowers would bloom all over the hill, decorating the trees and coloring the air with fragrance. Heaven on earth. When the breeze rustled the leaves, flower petals would scatter all over, creating a rather dreamlike scenery. Even though Sylvia missed the blooming season, the trees full of cherry blossoms made her unable to keep her excitement in check. Cherry Blossom Ridge used to be where Count Shazin Hennard shacked up with his five concubines, though, so she decided to renovate the castle to better suit her tastes.

With Sylvia yammering on about the manor and the beautiful sights and the four concubines, who'd also picked manors with which they were satisfied, they soon engaged in a boasting match, much to Lorist's dismay. In the end, he had the five women leave the room for peace and quiet using his work as an excuse. However, before they left, they complained that calling Gildusk City of the Roaring Bear was a bad idea, and that the way laborers built the city referred to it, Ragebear, was far easier on the ears.

"Ugh... Does City of the Roaring Bear really sound that bad?" asked Lorist as he shrugged to Charade.

"Well, it's a real mouthful no doubt. It does sound a little weird," opined Charade

honestly.

The names Lorist came up with were usually rather subpar.

"But why would the laborers come to refer to it as Ragebear?"

Lorist was really curious about this. He felt City of the Roaring Bear sounded far more cultured and refined.

Have you forgotten about the skyward-facing raging bear statue in the central plaza? The plaza is known as Ragebear Plaza and it didn't take long for Ragebear to stick as the city's name. In fact, apart from referring to the city in front of Your Grace and in official documents, all the knights and officials simply call it Ragebear. It much simpler and more convenient."

"Fine," Lorist conceded, "I admit I don't really have that good a naming sense. Let's just call it Ragebear from now on. It's not like I really care whether it's the name I came up with or not..."

"Your Grace, 'tis but a small matter rectifiable with a notice. On the note of what we just discussed, the relocation of Ragebear Knights' camp to Firmrock, I wonder if there's anything we missed?"

The original location of Ragebear Knights' camp was Bladedge Castle, built atop the two flattened hills near Northsea. It was built there to protect Northsea and reinforce Tortoise Hill Fort and Hidebull Fort in case of a barbarian invasion. But the barbarian army had been defeated and there was no way they would make it into the dominion for the next decade or two. So, stationing Ragebear Knights in Bladedge Castle was a huge waste. Since Lorist was going to move to Ragebear soon, Firmrock would be left empty, the perfect place to put the knights.

Lorist ticked the document and signed his name.

"Have Terman bring the knights over and move the local defense brigade from here to Bladedge Castle. Only start moving on the 15th of the 9th, though. There are still some officials in the midst of moving to Ragebear. I leave it all to you."

Charade nodded. "No problem. Many departments have already started. One month will be more than enough time for the move."

"By the time we reach Ragebear, preparations for my wedding with Sylvia must begin. We'll also have to receive lots of guests. I hope you're well prepared."

"Don't worry, Your Grace. We've planned everything already. Those involved know what they're doing."

A knock landed on the door at that moment. Jinolio walked in.

"Your Grace, Baron Hansk requests an audience."

Hansk rushed into the room angrily.

You're doing this cause I went against your marriage, right? You even wanted to marry a woman from an enemy house! Even though there are so many women in this world, you decided on the most unsuitable one possible! As a loyal servant of House Norton, going against you is the right thing to do! I didn't think you'd not only ignore my warnings but also strip me of my position! Ridiculous!

Hansk was going to give it to Lorist. He was prepared on having an argument even if he would anger Lorist more and be demoted even further. As a loyal servant of the house, he would let everyone see how far he was willing to go for the sake of the house.

"Greetings, Your Grace," said Hansk as he made an official's salute.

"Supervisor Hansk, I was worried about you all this time. Now you've come, I can finally rest assured. Come, sit down. Are things at Silowas taken care of?"

Lorist smiled warmly as if he didn't see any trace of anger on the man's face. He didn't refer to him by his title of baron and instead called him supervisor like he did in the old days to express familiarity.

"Jinolio, serve Supervisor Hansk some tea."

"No need, Your Grace," Hansk replied with a straight face, "I have settled matters with Governor Hector. I only came back to make my report now because I was waiting for him to arrive."

"Very good. Supervisor, I know it must have been really tough on you to be away from home for so long. Why don't you take some time off?"

"Your Grace, serving the house is what I ought to do. I'd like to know what the house has planned for me."

"Well, we already have all The Northlands. In the coming two years, we will develop it as a whole. Look here, Supervisor."

Lorist pointed to the map hung on the wall.

"Only by building roads can we move towards wealth. With better and more efficient transportation, The Northlands can be unified as a strong unit. Not only will the transportation of resources be secure, good roads will also enable us to send forces swiftly to any part of The Northlands. Here is plan. We will invest a million gold Fordes into this project. The house's future depends on this undertaking. There is no more suitable person to whom to give such a heavy responsibility than you. You've been transferred from Silwas to take charge of this project."

It was a complete checkmate. The infuriated Hansk looked half as angry as before in a mere moment.

So Lorist didn't transfer me to punish me... Instead, he's going to entrust me with such an important task...

He glanced at Charade, sitting on the sofa, and made a stiff smile.

"Your Grace, this huge task doesn't really need me, does it? I'm sure Baron Charade here can..."

"No, he won't do!" Lorist exclaimed.

Charade rolled his eyes.

"To be frank, he doesn't even qualify. This is a matter that concerns the dominance of our house over The Northlands. An undertaking that will ensure peace and safety for a century to come! While Baron Charade is great at dealing with administrative tasks, he's not nearly as experienced or reliable as you when it comes to managing huge projects! And of the other officials, Spiel is good at dealing with money but not construction. Kedan is also foreign to it. In fact, the only better fits would be Hector and Boris.

"But think about it, you're a senior and Hector your aide. As for Boris, I can't trust him

fully. He used to be someone of House Kenmays, after all. Even though he's been rather loyal, we can't be sure. This is something that will affect our house for the whole of the next century. How can I leave it in their hands? Someone suggested Shadekampf, but he's one of my servants, he isn't as qualified as you. I've always felt you're the best candidate."

Hansk was smiling so bright his face was full of flowers. Lorist managed to instill in him a sense of pride and isolation felt by those on the top. Who could take care of such an important project if not he? Though the anger had long faded, he still felt he should at least try to act humbly.

"Your Grace, you hold me in too high regard. Actually, I think anyone else can do just as well. It doesn't have to be me. Shadekampf and Boris both have experience developing transportation networks. They might be more appropriate."

Lorist shook his head.

"Hansk, this project is more complicated than you think. If it's a simple matter of building roads, anyone can do it. But the road the house wants to build is the first of its kind. It hasn't ever been built on before, not once on the entire continent. It will be remembered by historians and books will be written about this historic project for generations to come. I insist you take charge."

Huh? Building a simple road will leave my name in history? How's that possible? At best, it'd just be a passing mention in the chronicles of the house. On the xth day of the xth month of year X, Supervisor Hansk concluded the project to develop the transportation system for the whole of The Northlands and allow for better resource transportation and so on... Is it really such a big deal?

Seeing Hansk befuddled, Lorist laughed.

"Hansk, just look at this design."

After squinting and looking for a moment, he finally noticed something odd.

"Your Grace, why is there a wider and smaller side even though the road only stretches in one direction?"

"Hehe Supervisor Hansk, this is a new invention, the carriage track. Come have a look. I have a model."

The wall between the room next to the study had already been knocked down. The other room was renovated into a display room. When they entered, they saw a huge sand table occupying half of the room. It was a sand table depicting The Northlands. Hansk could recognize Firmrock, Maplewoods, Northsea, the southern part of The Northlands... He found it odd that there were still wires circling the map.

"Look, these are the carriage tracks I mentioned," said Lorist as he pointed at the 'wires'.

Upon closer inspection, Hansk realized they were not mere wires. Instead, they were parallel wires separated into segments by smaller wires intersecting horizontally. *Ugh, my eyes are really starting to fail me. I really need to get Master Mancheny to fashion me a pair of glasses. I heard they help vision a lot. Even Boris had quite a few made and wears them all day...*

"Your Grace, what will the carriage tracks be good for?"

He couldn't understand their purpose no matter how hard he tried.

"This is an invention of Grandmaster Julian's. It was designed to be used for mining by sending mined ore to the surface on minecarts without relying on people or animals. It greatly decreases the cost of mining. It's a rather great idea; I've decided to use it elsewhere as well. After two years of experimentation, we finally have a sample and a model here. According to our estimations, if The Northlands relies on these tracks to ferry goods or passengers, the cost of transportation can be decreased by as much as two-thirds. It will multiply our efficiency several times over."

Lorist took a model carriage.

"Look, Supervisor. These carriages' wheels are not made of wood, but a round metal frame. The carriage wheels fit snugly in the tracks. Now look, when I connect all four carriages and give it a slight push..."

"But Your Grace, these carriages can travel on the ground without the carriage, right?"

"It's different. Not nearly as efficient," Lorist explained, "On the tracks, it just needs four horses to pull four carriages, on land, however, each carriage needs four horses. The speed is also inferior and it needs twelve more horses for the pulling. Before he repair our roads, traveling to the southern part of The Northlands on horseback takes at least two days while traveling on foot takes around six. It doesn't even take into

account interference from the weather. If you bring along four carriages, you'll also have to hire coachmen to take care of the carriages and horses. It will also take at least four days. But with these tracks, with a resting station every 20 kilometers, you can make the same trip in less than a day.

Hansk wasn't an idiot, he quickly realised how much cheaper this system was. He still had two questions that bothered him, though.

"If the wheels are changed into round metal frames, won't it impact its movement on land? Also, would the round frames affect the tracks after being used on land? How will we maintain the tracks? The costs involved seem rather high."

Lorist nodded and picked up two circular metal objects.

"Your concerns are justified. But I've already considered them. Look at these. They are tires made of resin. They're elastic. If the carriages are to be used on land, we will fit them with these tires. Not only can it absorb some shocks, it can also prevent wear and tear on the metal wheels. The only problem is the slightly high cost. Each costs a large silver. But there are also other ways such as tying wood or vines to the wheels. While they aren't shock absorbent, they're good enough to prevent damage from friction."

Lorist then slipped the metal wheel models into the tires.

"Just like that, As for track maintenance, don't worry. Unlike our highways, we'll correct tolls from those who use the tracks. Given the immense cost and time savings, the merchants who use it will be more than happy to pay the toll. Naturally, it can't be set too high either. It must be based on the number of carriages and horses. I estimate we can make the money we spent on the tracks' construction in about three years. Each set of tracks can also be used for around a decade, so the toll collected in the last seven years will be pure profit.

"This is why I said this undertaking will be forever enshrined in history. The tracks are a never before seen method of transportation. I am sure it will be honored greatly in the annals of history. It was after much consideration that I decided to task you with this huge undertaking. There's no better person. Any thoughts?"

"Your Grace..."

By now, Hansk was remorseful and moved.

"I pledge I will complete this glorious task! Please rest assured, Your Grace. I won't disappoint you."

"As expected of one of the pillars of House Norton!" Lorist praised, "Then I shall delegate this task to you. The design, monitoring, and engineering departments are all prepared and ready. You can start tomorrow."

"There's no need to wait for tomorrow. I'll start immediately! This is too important to delay, even if for just a day!"

Hansk was filled with a sacred sense of duty. He bowed respectfully before turning to leave in large steps.

Chapter 409

War in the South

"Aren't you being a little too sneaky, Your Grace? You're obviously trying to get him out of the house's central administration, yet you made it sound so appealing, what with his name being remembered across the centuries and how the project will heavily affect the house's future..."

Charade spoke while stretching after Hansk had marched out proudly.

"To be honest, we already have the departments ready for the project. We just have to carry it out according to the plan. Hansk's presence won't make much of a difference. We could easily put your name on the project instead. I'm sure he won't take to this kindly when he finds out."

"So would it be better to get into a huge argument instead? Didn't you see how jumpy he looked when he came in? If I really got into a fight now, it would unnerve the other officials, especially the older ones. I have to leave him some face either way," Lorist said with a shrug, "The old officials like Hansk think the house has reached the peak of its power. Now they think they've succeeded, they just want maintain the status quo, hence their vehement objections to the new policies. They believe stability is paramount, they don't understand we're still in an era of war. If we don't advance, we will begin to lag behind. The house might have control over The Northlands and influence over five other provinces but our enemies aren't going to sit around and do nothing. The old officials can't really see what's going on. They think we're safe."

"Hansk is the head of the officials and he is the leading member of the status quo faction. He thinks I don't know it, but the officials he promote are mostly those born in Maplewoods. He believes the older generation are more reliable even if they don't really qualify for their positions. He's also really apprehensive towards migrants. As a result, a lot of our policies and their execution are being held back because of friction in the administration. I'm sure you've read Tarkel's reports. The exposed corrupt town mayors of three towns in Felicitas were all people from Hansk's faction."

"Most of the officials who objected to my wedding with Sylvia are also from Maplewoods. At first, I didn't really mind it because I thought to have multiple factions

in the house was nothing surprising. I was going to leave it unattended as long as it didn't affect our operations. Had it not been for Kedan's reminder, I wouldn't have been made aware of how influential Hansk has become. With but a call from him, two-thirds of the officials responded. He was the best person to be sent outside to supervise the construction project. Even if he knows my true purpose, he still has no choice. After all, I didn't lie when I said this plan will indeed be a huge development never-before-seen. His name will be chronicled in our history along with the never-before-seen carriage tracks."

"Your Grace, don't forget we've planned most of the development for The Northlands. With our 800 thousand captive laborers, the project will take at most three years. What will you do with Hansk when he comes back?"

Lorist smiled.

"Don't worry. Winston and Delamock are under our control. The two provinces will also require development. At the very least, carriage tracks must be laid to increase resource transportation efficiency. It is also the key to keeping hold of the provinces. After these two, there will still be our allies' territory in Southern and Sidgler. Hansk will be forgotten by the time he returns in no less than a decade. I'd like to see how much of a chance he stands in returning to the center of the administration."

Charade had his mouth agape for a moment before he forced himself back to normal.

"Locke, you're becoming more and more a real duke."

"I suppose I should take that as a compliment?"

Lorist laid back into his chair.

"In a flash, 14 years have passed since I returned to the north. People will change one way or another. If my old self from 14 years ago showed up in front of me now, I doubt I'd recognize myself. The citizens of Wildnorth were revolting and when I brought our forces to attack the town, I couldn't press my assault when I realized the ones guarding the walls were women, the elderly, and children. It ultimately resulted in my failure to take the walls. But now, I can order my soldiers to behead more than 100 thousand captives without batting an eye!

"What does it mean to be a noble? I came to understand it only after serving as a dominion lord for a decade. One cannot change the world with hot-blooded passion

alone. You will be changed by the world instead. In my case, all I wanted was to defend my territory. But after being forced to retaliate against our enemies over and over again, I had you guys go around conquering with me, ending with the whole Northlands becoming our territory. Now I've taken the title of Duke of The Northlands, I realize I'm sitting at the edge of a volcano. If I don't expand and progress, all that awaits me is doom and ruin."

A knock on the door interrupted Lorist's long-winded dissertation. Jinolio entered and announced, "Your Grace, Sir Tarkel is here to see you."

Tarkel brought with him lots of information about the war between the Union and the mid-southern nations.

"Oh, so it was the mid-southern nations' army that loosed the first arrows, he? The Union is the retaliater?"

Lorist had thought the Union had lashed out first because the mid-southern nations tried to seal off their trade.

"Indeed, Your Grace," Tarkel said as he handed over a newspaper.

"This was the first large-scale conflict that had occurred between the two sides during the 11th month. The mid-southern nations' army attacked a Union camp. After killing around three hundred, they occupied the site. The Union promptly retaliated and the two sides struggled for control of the camp for more than 20 days before they retreated to their respective camps when winter came."

"How did their negotiations go down?" asked Charade.

"It wasn't conclusive. Three months ago, Falik Chronicles published some rumors about the negotiations," Tarkel said as he searched for the paper in question in stack.

"It says that the mid-southern nations demanded trade tariffs on any trade done by Union in their territories be raised from ten to twenty percent. The Union refused and requested the original conditions to be reinstated, which the other side refused in turn."

"How's the war looking?" asked Lorist.

"Here's a report Lundmorde wrote before the conflict broke out. As you predicted, he

had been conscripted because there was a lack of herbalists on the front. Though he's on the front, his life is in no danger. We also sent two silver-ranks to serve by his side as his bodyguards."

Tarkel handed Lorist a few more letters.

Lorist browsed them quickly. In them, Lundmorde stated that -- apart from his bad luck that forced him to leave his seven wives unattended -- he was also worried about his 16 daughters. He asked Lorist to adopt them in case of his untimely death, as well as pensions for each of his seven wives so they could live out the rest of their lives without worry.

Just as Lorist was getting rather pissed at reading Lundmorde's pointless ramblings, the writer finally got to the point. Lundmorde summarized the situation after the war and said he noticed something odd. The two sides seemed to be putting on a show in that they didn't really go all out, both sides held some of their forces back. A few of the big-seven didn't even deploy their troops to the frontlines, and the mid-southern nations also seemed content with the situation. They bother to press the attack. The forces would be comprised of the armies of a few duchies or kingdoms and they would fare horribly against the Union's properly prepared defenses.

"The army's general is Duke Lorf Fustat, a rank 1 blademaster," Lorist muttered, "Sounds familiar. I think I've heard it somewhere before. Tarkel, do you have any information on this blademaster-duke?"

Tarkel shook his head.

"No, Your Grace. The mid-southern nations are too far away and we haven't yet been able to set up our informants there."

Charade answered after a moment's hesitation.

"I know him. He was in Morante 15 or 16 years ago. He was only a Marquis back then and was at the one-star gold rank. He was there to take the most beautiful girl of Dawn Academy as his wife, a girl bearing the name of Windsor..."

Lorist felt a rush of emotions as the painful memories buried in the depths of his psyche resurfaced. He recalled the moonlit night when his first love stood by the side of the middle-aged gentleman, leaning in his embrace and speaking intimately. His heart was being shredded as he struggled to make it back to his quarters. The next

day, the middle-aged gentleman showed up and politely asked him to leave the girl's home. While Lorist didn't remember how he looked, he did remember the golden phoenix badge he wore on his chest.

The girl was Lorist's first love in both his lives. He wondered if the elf-like girl who danced under the moonlight was doing well. She was the one who wedded Duke Lorf Fustat. Sixteen years had passed without a word from her, and time had healed his wounds and almost wiped his memories. He looked gratefully at Charade. Given that Tarkel was there, Charade had reminded him who the duke was in such a roundabout way. Alongside the recollection, he also remembered that Duke Lorf Fustat was no simple noble. Back then, he had ruined Lorist's plan of restoring his first love's noble house to glory and ended up winning the hand of his lover.

After reading through the rest of the squabbles between the two sides, Lorist furrowed his brow.

"This is really odd. Duke Lorf Fustat shouldn't be this incapable. As the general of 200 thousand, how is he held back by such simple defenses? If we were faced with something similar, we'd wipe it out in three days..."

"It does seem weird, Your Grace," Charade said in deep thought, "I remember the weakest of the big-seven, Chikdor, took the Urubaha as its dominion. It is near the Golden Coast and is sandwiched between the Union and Tedanini Mountains as well as the 24 mid-southern nations. It's only separated by one duchy from Jigda. Since the mid-southern nations formed an alliance, why didn't they wipe out the guild's dominion right next to them? It really seems fishy."

Lorist pulled on a string to ring a small bell and Jinolio came promptly.

"Do you need anything, Your Grace?"

"Head to the accounting department. Bring me the trade records for merchant guilds Peterson and Chikdor," instructed Lorist as he took out a rolled-up map of the continent.

"Immediately, Your Grace."

The records were quickly brought over.

After a simple look-over by Charade and Tarkel, Charade said, "Peterson Merchant

Guild's trade records have stayed the same over the past half-a-year. There's nothing unusual about their orders. They haven't requested any additional military equipment. The good news is they paid back more of the debt as well. They now only owe about 300 thousand gold Fordes. They'll clear the debt in another year."

Not satisfied yet, Lorist asked, "Did they not ask us to sell them more food?"

"No, Your Grace," Charade said with a shake of his head, "Over the last two years, the two southwestern provinces and the imperial capital reaped great harvests. The Union occupies a few provinces of the former empire that neighbor the two southwestern provinces, so it's likely their harvests went well as well. The Union's food shortage should've been solved."

"Your Grace," Tarkel interjected, "Chikdor has been increasing the volume of their orders. Apart from buying two-thirds of our spice, they also increased the amount of daily necessities and luxury products. Our informants questioned their sailors and have found they were transporting the goods to the Romon Empire and the Khawistan Khanate. They even praised our goods for being quick sellers. There isn't nearly enough to satisfy the demand."

"Did they ask us to sell them more weapons?"

"No," said Tarkel with a shake of his head as well.

"I smell a conspiracy."

Lorist stroked his chin in deep thought. "Look at the map. The southmost Romon and Khawistan went to war after 30 years of peace. This time, they worked pretty well together to wipe out Kalia between them first before going all out against each other. The 24 mid-southern nations also went to war with the Union. The flames of war burn all over the continent. The northern part of the continent where we are has stabilized somewhat. It's really odd when you think about it."

Charade, however, thought of another question.

"Kalia was wiped out even though they had a sword saint, and that very sword saint's whereabouts are unknown. I wonder if Romon and Khawistan's sword saints forced him away..."

"Sir Charade, there are four known sword saints on the continent, right?" asked Tarkel,

"All are in the south. Apart from Romon and Khawistan's sword saints, there's just the missing sword saint and Jigda's, correct?"

Charade nodded.

"Yes. However, Jigda's sword saint is said to have been living in seclusion for more than two decades now. He hasn't shown himself to anyone and nobody knows whether he's still alive or not. The Krissen Empire used to have two but they fell during the century-long conflict with the Union. The Union also had a sword saint, he died alongside one of ours. The Union ambushed and killed the other, but they paid a ridiculous price, setting the historical precedent of burying a sword saint with hordes of blademasters."

Charade was quite well-informed about historical trivia like this.

"Alright, sword saints are too far out from where we are right now. The conflict between nations is still rooted in the military might of each. Tarkel, I hope you will pick a group of reliable informants and send them to the mid-southern nations. We have to get a better understanding of the situation, especially anything relating to their elites, such as the army's general, Duke Lorf Fustat and his household. I don't mind if it takes some time. The war will not end quickly. Even though it's quite far away, I still hope we can gain a better understanding of it."

"Understood, Your Grace."

Chapter 410

Before the Grand Wedding

Regardless of how savage the war in the south was, it wouldn't affect the factions in the north. As some officials and knights had gladly put, the territory that used to be part of the empire had burned with the flames of war for decades after the three princes' power struggle. Now, it was finally the other nations' turn to suffer.

Lorist didn't feel inclined to focus on the two warzones. He was busy moving from Firmrock to Ragebear. Though he could order thousands of soldiers around without a problem, he was completely helpless when it came to dealing with household matters. Fortunately, Sylvia was around and performed as one would expect of the matron of the house. She coordinated the servants with great efficiency, keeping what should be kept and throwing out what wasn't needed. It didn't take too long for them to finish packing up and leave.

He praised her handling of the matter with admiration.

"I'm used to moving. This isn't anything to be surprised over," replied she nonchalantly.

On the 21st day of the 9th month, Lorist arrived in Ragebear with the administrative departments from Firmrock. From that day onwards, Ragebear was the Northlands' capital and the center of administration for the house. It was built on a flat piece of land with no difficult terrain or moats. A few hundred years earlier, there was a hill that wasn't taller than a hundred meters there. An unknown noble had built a run-down stronghold and made it his headquarters. After a few different owners, the cruddy place gradually developed into a large castle built of stone. It wasn't until later that House Loggins was entitled Duke of The Northlands and given a fief there. The first Duke Loggins didn't fancy living in the cold, lone castle and hired two well-known architects to build the largest city in the region with the castle at its core.

The city came to be named after the two architects and it developed into the first city to have a population over 100 thousand in The Northlands. As a result, the southern part of The Northlands became the most prosperous area of the province. Before Lorist returned to the dominion, it was the most prosperous and merry place to be.

Compared to the magnificent city, Maplewoods in was but a little bastide in a little rural corner.

Duke Loggins only had himself to blame for making the wrong enemy. He had designated Lorist an easy and plentiful target on which to prey, resulting in the ultimate burial of his house. Following Duke Loggins's defeat, the regional capital attracted the ravenous second prince. The founder and ruler of the kingdom not only confiscated Duke Loggins's property, he also sent the duke to Windbury with the excuse of letting him stay there to recover from his sickness. The poor duke fell prey to bandits right after leaving The Northlands and his whole family was exterminated. Thus, a house of the former empire with hundreds of years of history met their demise.

When Lorist once again defeated the second highness and the 100-thousand-strong allied noble army of The Northlands, he formed the alliance of four houses and Gildusk became part of Baron Shazin's dominion, with the duke's manor falling into his hands. However, the capital of The Northlands had already been Lorist's two sieges. The rich had fled to House Norton's dominion. While Shazin did control the city, the income it generated wasn't much. Given that he didn't have enough money to sustain himself, Shazin didn't bother to take the extra mile in managing the place.

With the dominion relocation, Shazin's title was raised to that of a count and he moved his household all the way to Delamock, causing the capital to finally fall into Lorist's hands. Given its strategic location convenient for traffic, Lorist decided to move the headquarters there. He also ordered Grandmaster Ciroba to reconstruct the castle which had already stood for centuries and to revitalize it once more.

Lorist wasn't too satisfied with the first city blueprint of Ragebear Ciroba brought him. He had requested he design a city that could accommodate at least 300 thousand citizens. Even though the current population was less, he believed it wouldn't take long for it to turn busy after the house's various departments moved in.

Ciroba found himself was rather troubled because the city was originally designed to be only able to hold 100 thousand people. That was how wide the old city was. Lorist thus decided to have a central castle constructed at the center of the city as the main base of operations for the house and his residence -- just like Firmrock. The protected areas beyond the walls would be where the rich and members of the peerage would stay. As for the rest of the land, it would be split into plazas centered around business areas, military camps, and other facilities. As for commoner residences, they would be

built outside the walls. That would essentially double the area of the city and avoid the trouble of having to reconstruct the city from the ground up.

Currently, the east of the city was already connected to the two special noble areas, separated only by a man-made canal three meters wide. Clouds of dust could be seen from a distance. It was apparent that the nobles who bought their land there were busy building their own manors. Carriages and people filled the streets and gave the city a merry atmosphere.

The duke's manor at the center of Ragebear had almost doubled in size. The old manor was designed with the concept of a garden in mind, but Ciroba had built a five-story-tall castle as per Lorist's request. The old and new designs were fused without damaging the gardens. Out of consideration of safety, Lorist's residence was built atop the hundred-meter-tall hill where a new castle was constructed. It was connected to the administrative center through the walls. It almost seemed like there was another citadel built within Ragebear itself.

By the time everyone had settled down, it was the start of the 10th month. Lorist saw himself becoming busier as he hurried around to welcome the nobles who had arrived at Ragebear early to attend the wedding. On the 17th day of the 10th month, Lorist's elder cousin, Gold-ranked Knight Glacia, brought her family along.

Glacia returned to The Northlands with her mother and two younger brothers. According to young Lorist's memories, his second uncle's wife, his aunt, was a sickly beauty. She looked more or less how he remembered, just much paler and older. She was still sickly as usual and feared cold winds or strong light. After a short chat, she retired to her chambers. Lorist really wondered how a person like that had managed to survive the turbulent times of civil war.

It was Lorist's first time meeting his two cousins, however. One of them was 28 and a two-star silver rank. He was obviously not as talented as Glacia when it came to training. The other was 22 and at the two-star bronze rank, a little worse than the former. Glacia claimed they were more academically inclined and would serve as officials in the future.

Glacia herself had changed a lot. Not only did she look much paler, she had also lost a considerable amount of weight. It didn't take Lorist long to pick up on something, so he asked her about the second highness. At first, she wasn't really willing to discuss the matter, but she later helplessly confessed that she had broken up with him. That

was why she had lost her position as the leader of the city guard. She had brought her family back to the house and said she wouldn't go back.

Why? Lorist wondered, Why did the second highness break up with Glacia? Doesn't he know this means he will no longer get our aid? He might even be cautiously regarded as a potential hostile. Putting aside Glacia's father, who has loyally fought as an imperial knight and served as a brigadier-general before perishing on the battlefield, Glacia followed the second highness loyally for more than two decades as well... Not only did she charge into one dangerous battle after another, she was also his lover. How could the second highness put an end to such a long-lasting relationship?

Glacia didn't reveal any details no matter what. With a completely cold expression, she said that she was worn out and wanted to spend the rest of her life quietly. She had returned to the house mainly because of her two younger brothers, the imperial capital was not a good environment for them to grow and develop. Given how House Norton was at its peak, she wanted to entrust the elder to Lorist and send the younger to Dawn Academy. Though he was a little older than the rest, the youngest sibling was smart and curious and would definitely be quite capable in the future.

Lorist was still fraught with curiosity but there was no way he could force Glacia to tell him anything she didn't want. As for their quarters, Glacia could pick one of the six remaining manors. Even if she said she wanted to live in peace without agreeing to serve the house, she was still a gold-ranked knight and a member of the house, she deserved one of the manors.

Lorist didn't suspect for a moment Glacia was sent by the second highness to spy on him. Pulling off an act like breaking up to sneak into the house as a spy was nothing but a joke. He was sure the defeated look on her face came from true emotional shock. Otherwise, she wouldn't say anything like wanting to live in seclusion. The simple arrangements for the brothers were nothing about which to be suspicious either. The elder would join the local defense brigade while the younger would attend Dawn Academy.

Two days later, Lorist put the matter behind him. Apart from instructing Tarkel to send people to the imperial capital to find out the specifics, he was busy receiving the visiting nobles. There was one day he had to meet 16 different nobles... his face was sore from all the smiling. The date of the grand wedding had already been decided. It would take place on the 8th day of the 11th month. It was the reason for the sudden influx of nobles who came forward to present their gifts. There were also many

merchants with honorary noble titles coming over to better their relations and ask Lorist construct two more special noble areas so they could buy land and build their manors there too.

When Charade came over, he told Lorist something to which he didn't know how to react. Some time earlier, the house had released a notice stating that honorary nobles from other nations could spend a sum to convert their honorary titles into those recognized by House Norton. However, given that the fee was rather high, many merchants were unwilling to pay. So, many of them cut corners by becoming honorary nobles of Andinaq because House Norton was also part of the nation. They headed to the imperial capital to purchase noble titles from the second highness which were half the cost of conversion, allowing the second highness to earn more than 100 thousand gold Fordes for doing nothing. It also made The Northlands see an influx of near a hundred honorary Andinaq nobles.

Charade said to teach those who cheaped out a lesson, the third special noble zone soon up for auction should only be sold to nobles that converted their honorary titles to those of House Norton. After all, those of the house should look out for themselves first, even if they were of the same nation. Naturally, while the other honorary nobles from the kingdom couldn't purchase any land, they could still buy smaller villas. It was the only way they could raise their status. It was a given that they would be inferior in comparison to those that purchased their own land to build their manors though and it was the lesson they would be taught.

Lorist agreed and left him in charge.

I wondered why there were so many new honorary Andinaq nobles lately. So they came over from the imperial capital, huh... Explains how there were more people than I could spare the time to greet...

During the last three days of the 10th month, Duke Fisablen's two envoys, Aridok and Napole showed up once more. They brought the duke's reply: the armistice would last for three years. The duke had already signed and sealed the document, but Aridok didn't seem happy. When he presented the document, he mocked House Norton for downgrading their mighty Firmrock to a mere garrison.

It seemed House Fisablen had realized the banners of Firmrock, currently stationed at the borders, had 'garrison' appended. In essence, House Norton exploited a loophole in their agreement, but House Fisablen couldn't do anything about it. Lorist

wasn't embarrassed in the least. 'Firmrock had always been a garrison legion', were his words. Before the war, they had guarded Firmrock Castle. They were only moved to the borders to 'defend' them.

The two envoys didn't think Lorist would be so shameless as to insist that Firmrock was a garrison legion. Their faces darkened with anger. Apart from signing the armistice, they also came to carry out two instructions. The first was to negotiate the ransom of the 40 plus thousand soldiers of Third Frontier. Last time, they only managed to ransom the household knights and household members. Now, they believed that, since the armistice was signed, Lorist should allow the soldiers ransomed to reunite with their families.

Lorist refused without even thinking about it.

Are you kidding me? If I release the 40 plus thousand soldiers, Duke Fisablen can build another Frontier right away! There's no way I'd be crazy enough to agree!

Fortunately, the two envoys knew their request had touched Lorist's baseline and weren't too stubborn. The other mission was to visit Princess Sylvia. They said they had brought something to her per the duke's orders. Out of curiosity, Lorist sent for someone to bring Sylvia over and went to see what Duke Fisablen wanted to give her. He didn't think that after checking the three large, four-wheeled carriages, Sylvia would actually hug Lorist and start crying. The carriages carried all her possessions, ranging from the toys with which she played in her childhood, to clothes, other daily necessities, and the decorations she used in her quarters including even a small cushion and rug. Apart from that, a dozen servants came along and they were all those who had taken care of her since her childhood.

Sylvia resisted the urge to continue crying after a while before she thanked the two envoys and instructed the servants of the castle to bring the three carriages to the back. She brought out a sack of gold coins and heavily rewarded the dozen old servants, but she refused their request to stay and serve by her side before returning to the backyard.

Lorist had the two envoys taken care of after telling them they would be welcome to attend his wedding before rushing to the backyard. To his surprise, he found Sylvia starting a fire and tossing everything from the three carriages into it as she cried.

Lorist asked her what the stuff was out of curiosity.

She leaped into his embrace and whimpered.

"Locke, all I have right now is you..."

Feeling a rush of emotion, he finally understood what was going on and hugged Sylvia tightly.

Chapter 411

The Wedding

"Your Grace, word of Princess Sylvia burning all of the gifts Duke Fisablen sent has spread all over Ragebear. The knights and officials, as well as the landed nobles, are praising Her Highness. They all have good things to say about her becoming house matron," reported Charade the next day.

He himself found Sylvia's actions quite praiseworthy. Lorist didn't really know how to react. Human imagination was practically boundless. Sylvia had burned everything the day before to vent her feelings. She was torn when she saw Duke Fisablen send over everything she'd ever owned, as if he wanted them out of the house, as if he no longer acknowledged her as his granddaughter. Why hadn't even a single member of the House come over to attend the wedding if this was not so? She took it as an act of cutting ties with her. She was filled with grief and pain. In a fit of rage, she'd burned all the toys, clothes, and products she'd used since her childhood.

Since you won't acknowledge me, I won't acknowledge you. Let's burn it all so nothing remains to remind me of you. I'll have nothing to do with House Fisablen from now on.

After accompanying Sylvia for the night, Lorist had realized she was rather naive when it came to such things. She was like a ten-year-old lass, still immature. He could understand why this was the case, though; she had, after all, grown up in a very isolated and protected environment. She simply had no way to know the world's woes and the human mind. Which was why she had jumped to the conclusion that House Fisablen had been trying to cast her away.

He thought further than that, though. He was reasonably skilled at reading between the lines. He believed the duke had no intention to abandon Sylvia. Instead, it was meant as a reminder to Sylvia of the time she had spent in the house, to remind her of her origin. There was no need to send them over otherwise. The servants were also brought over so Sylvia would have people she could trust to help her manage her daily life. Additionally, there would be someone available to deliver any messages to the house. As for House Fisablen not allowing anyone to participate in her wedding, it was probably to avoid arousing the others' suspicion and to not put Lorist on alert.

Unfortunately, the duke had not expected the usually intelligent princess to be ignorant when it came to emotional matters.

Lorist's stomach ached from his suppressed laughter, but he had to maintain his solemn facade and console the girl. When Duke Fisablen received word of what had happened from his envoys, he would definitely be dumbstruck and regret his decision.

Hehe, old fox, you didn't think there would be this kind of misunderstanding, huh? It'll be even harder when you come to clarify things later. While it's easy to stick and pull out a thorn in a person's heart, healing the wound left behind is not so easy.

Though the matter seemed relatively simple, word was that Sylvia had burned the duke's gifts in the name of House Norton and cut off all relation with House Fisablen. Many people praised her. There were no idiots; everyone understood the implications of leaving Firmrock at the borders of Southern and Eastwild as well as Jaeger's reformation. Even if they had signed an armistice, House Norton still considered House Fisablen an enemy. They were even preparing for the next war when the last one had barely ended. Naturally, Lorist didn't bother to correct the misunderstanding. In fact, he couldn't be happier. He just asked Tarkel to watch House Fisablen's servants closely and make sure they didn't linger in the dominion. Given how Sylvia had already heavily rewarded them, even if they had been exiled, they should be able to start a new life somewhere else. If they really remained in Ragebear, it was a sign that they probably had other intentions. Lorist would not allow them to meet Sylvia, lest she pity them and allow them to stay at her side. It would only sow the seed of turmoil.

After sending Tarkel off, Lorist lay on the couch tiredly. Sylvia had been crying and couldn't sleep the night before. He had naturally lost his sleep as well.

"Sigh, tell me, how many nobles must I greet today?"

"None, Your Grace. I've refused all requests for audiences. You may rest."

Charade was rather considerate when it came to such matters.

"Thanks," Lorist said as he rolled on the couch to find a better position.

"I leave the rest to you. Also, the wedding is in seven days. Is everything in order?"

"Don't worry, everything's prepared. Will Your Grace stay here or travel after the wedding?"

Though the folk of Grindia didn't have a tradition of going on honeymoon, nobles would usually go for a trip. Normally, they would travel around their dominion. Some would travel to places with good scenery. Their trips were always expensive. There had once been a king who had spent three years on the road with his wife. He had traveled to nearly all the nations on the continent. It was recorded as the longest post-wedding trip in history.

"Well, I'll live in Cherry Blossom Ridge outside the city," Lorist said, "Winter will come soon. I'm too lazy to go around traveling. I'll spend winter on the estate and travel around the dominion with Sylvia come the 4th or 5th month while I check the defenses and troops. Since we don't have any major undertakings on the table for next year, we just have to keep our forces in shape, and my dominion secure. I leave the administration in your care."

Charade nodded.

"Very well. You ought to rest."

Lorist and Sylvia's wedding cost 1.37 million gold Fordes and was known as the most expensive wedding in the last century. The cost of the ceremony itself was around 100 thousand gold Fordes. The greatest expense was the gifts. To get all the citizens into a festive mood, all commoners received a gift bag including a small silver. Men would receive half a kilogram of meat and half a kilogram of wheat wine, women a set of fine cutlery or some other daily necessities. As for retired soldiers, they received meat, wine, and a large silver coin. That alone cost nearly 800 thousand gold Fordes.

Surprisingly, Spiel wasn't that stingy this time. The main reason was that the mining in Goldridge had begun. The income the mines brought the house was estimated at around two million gold Fordes. Secondly, House Fisablen had signed an armistice, and the resumption of trade on a large scale gave the house quite a boost. Lorist had also said that during the last three years the house had spent exterminating Madras and Iblia, the production of goods had been affected somewhat. The products that piled up in the warehouse couldn't be sold and the economy didn't look too good. So, giving them away as gifts would not only clear up storage space for new stuff to kick off the economy in the following year, it would also give the citizens who received the goods a taste of what they considered expensive. It would encourage them to spend their money acquiring the goods in the future instead of burying their wealth.

Spiel found Lorist's reasoning incredibly sound. Just like how the house was giving

away meat and wine, a few years back, the house had traded weapons with House Fisablen for livestock and made the western area of The Northlands into pastures. They initially thought the citizens' demand for beef and mutton would explode. They hadn't thought that apart from the household forces, the commoners were exceedingly thrifty. They would more or less only purchase meat once a month for a taste. They were used to hardship and loved to store their money up for the future just in case of any emergencies. The low demand resulted in an explosion in the livestock population instead. They had soon run out of places to make pastures. So, the house slaughtered some livestock every year and made jerky for convenient storage.

Using the opportunity, House Norton conducted a detailed survey of the population. The survey revealed that the region's total population had grown to about 1.67 million. The Northlands now once again had the same population they had had during the empire's golden age. It was a really impressive figure. Though most of the population were migrants, it was only to be expected given how much damage the civil war had wrought on the empire, especially with the chaos caused by Duke Loggins and the other conflicts between the Northlander nobles.

There was nothing much to say about the wedding. The whole city was immensely decorated and there were seas of meat and wine all over. Though the permanent residents of Ragebear weren't too many, the ones invited to observe the ceremony filled the city. First, Lorist and Sylvia paraded in the streets in a grand carriage. They then hosted a large feast and ball in the castle for the nobles and household members. When the silver moon was high in the night sky, the couple took up their place on the stage. Bathed in silver moonlight and with the nobles present as witnesses, they swore their love and respect and recited their nauseating oaths. They exchanged rings and had a Church of the Wargod cardinal officiate their lawful wedding under the Wargod and Silvermoon Goddess' purview.

The wedding was planned to be an incredibly traditional one by noble standards. Lorist felt it was not all that different from weddings in his previous life, with all the associated routines and the bride and groom being ordered about by others. In his previous life, after he'd retired from the military he took over his father's little workshop and toiled to keep it running. By the time the workshop was running smoothly again, he'd realized he was already over thirty, so he had his relatives introduce one partner after another. There was even a month where he attended eight marriage meetings.

He had been rather optimistic at first and had hoped he could find a partner that

shared his values. He soon gave up on the idea. The millennial women he met were very materialistic and talks about his car, house, and bank account were the focus of the conversation. In the end, he stopped being picky. After shacking with the one who would be his bride for two months, he got her pregnant and they soon got married.

His post-wedding life was plain, to say the least, and the couple didn't have many topics about which they could talk. It wasn't really a problem that his wife hadn't been a virgin. Most of the people in undergraduate studies probably messed around quite a bit anyway. He didn't have any specific requests, so he just went with it. The problem was that he and his wife held really different views. Though he wasn't really educated, he had served his country and shed blood and tears for it. But the contribution of which he was so proud was considered something only a fool would do by his wife. She believed he had wasted his most important years: his youth. If he hadn't enlisted in the military and actually picked up some real skills, he would've probably managed to develop his little workshop into a large listed company. They would have had enough money to emigrate.

Their first argument happened when one of his comrades came to visit him. It was his first time beating a woman in his life: he gave his wife a harsh slap. A cold war followed for half a year. They weren't willing to say a single word to each other. Had it not been for not wanting to hurt their daughter, they would've filed for divorce. The two slept separately, and, as a result, Lorist bed his secretary. Since the secretary, ten years his junior, was really open and didn't mind relieving him of his manly desires, he didn't mind doing it. She didn't have that good a relationship with her own husband either, anyway.

The flashback gradually faded. Right now, he had completely integrated into Grindia. Sometimes, he felt his past life was nothing but a distant dream he hadn't experienced himself. He was currently the head of House Norton, Duke of The Northlands, a duke of the Andinaq kingdom. He had hundreds of thousands of elite soldiers at his beck and call. And now, he had a beautiful, fairy-like girl bound to him in matrimony. Just like the netizens of his previous life would say, he was in the prime of his life.

After the wedding, Sylvia clasped his arm and took a walk across the venue. They received the greetings and congratulations of the household knights and officials, and the guests. She wore a blissful smile on her beautiful face and seemed more blinding than usual. When the midnight bells struck Lorist took her to their new room.

As opposed to Lorist, who was a little worn out from dealing with the pestering nobles,

Sylvia was extremely serious. This would be the most important night of her life, the night she gave her innocence to her one, true love. Upon entering the room, to hide her anxiety, emotional turmoil, and fear, she looked for things to do. She made Lorist some macks, wiped the table, made the bed, and realized that she was sweaty all over by the time she ran out of things to do. She had her two maids prepare a bath. When she was bathing, she felt a little anxious about Lorist coming in with her, but also hoped e would at the same time. Her feelings fluttered with the contradictory notions.

Lorist, however, didn't give it that much thought.

You're already meat on my table. Delaying the deed won't help!

He let her go about however she wished. He felt physically and mentally worn out. Interacting with all those nobles had really taken a toll on him. Just like wearing a mask, he had to put on a hollow smile and think of something pleasing to say. It was far too troubling and tiring. Sometimes, he felt more willing to take on ten rank 3 blademasters at once than dealing with nobles. The former was probably much easier. The moment he thought about how he would have to deal with the nobles in the future as well, his head numbed. Sentiments what could be expressed in a few curt sentences took ages for nobles to express; they beat around the bush too much. Though he mocked himself from time to time, the nobles regarded him with caution in fear of offending someone with his status.

What's the point? It makes things difficult for everyone... Oh gosh, I'm tired... I suppose I ought to lie down for a bit...

When Sylvia had finished her bath, she saw Lorist snoring.

Bastard, this is the most important night of my life! How can you fall asleep?!

She stopped caring about hiding her body modestly and let her towel drop to the ground. She got into bed naked, bore her fangs, and gave Lorist's shoulder a harsh bite.

"Ouuuuch!"

Chapter 412

Survey

Roughly four to five days after the wedding, Lorist brought Sylvia and his four concubines to Cherry Blossom Ridge. Logically speaking, newlyweds should have all the time with each other and it wasn't appropriate to have concubines come along. However, Sylvia had no choice as her body was more sensitive than most and she couldn't handle Lorist's vigor. Every time he reached his peak, she would've long been expended, slumping down like mud, unable to even move her fingers. So, he had no choice but to have his concubines help relieve him.

He left all his work to Charade when he began his travels and only returned to Ragebear in the snow of the 12th month. There wasn't a choice as the new year's celebration was on the horizon. It was the second celebration organized by House Norton and even more nobles would participate, landed or honorary. They all brought their families and filled up the city streets, bringing an aura of warm merriness during the cold, muted winter.

The most important part of the celebration would be the entitlement ceremony. With Iblia no more and Winston firmly in House Norton's hands, Lorist could finally realize his promise to the nobles of Delamock. There were 19 noble houses from the province to be enfeoffed land in Winston. As for the 17 Winston noble houses that had defected, they would be relocated to Delamock.

In contrast to the slightly down Madrasan nobles, the Winstonian nobles were elated. They had defected quickly and mobilized their forces during the barbarian army's attack on Pedro to help out. Also, since Delamock used to be the empire's main food store, its land was fertile and produced three times more than other areas. Those relocated there couldn't be happier. As for the nobles of the now-defunct Madras, they had picked the right side. Not only were they demoted when they were moved to Winston, the land there was also relatively poor.

Lorist also had to announce the list of House Norton honorary nobles. Most were merchants who had spent money to be given their titles, while others were house officials who had shown decent prowess; Boris, governor of Hanayabarta, Professor

Balbo of the gunpowder research lab, Kriston, head of security, and several others. Lorist didn't entitle any landed nobles this time. It wasn't that he lacked candidates. Their contributions, time, or service just weren't enough to warrant it.

Usually, new year's celebrations would go on for three days. But many of the nobles who came to participate had already purchased houses in the wealthy area of the city. Kenmays had bought a large courtyarded house nearest the duke's manor to use as his residence. It was practically next to the central castle. Following the celebration, Kenmays hosted his own parties at his residence non-stop. As Lorist had said, he preferred silence while Kenmays thrived on merrymaking. He would spend most of the money he earned from the salt merchant committee on events like these instead of developing his dominion and military.

It took Lorist only a few days of residence in the castle to lose all patience with the noise coming from Kenmays's home. He took Sylvia and his four concubines to Cherry Blossom Ridge and stayed there until after the rainy season when the winter wheat was being harvested.

Lorist returned to Ragebear and settled in for the spring. Once the spring sowing began he finally went on a tour of the dominion with his lovers. He took his time on the trip, unlike the previous year. He planned to check every location in detail, especially the seven settlements' towns. He also wanted to tour the countryside with Sylvia so she could show herself before the commoners and make her status as the house's matron known.

The trip was rather costly. They handed out a large silver for each member of each garrison of each town they visited - about 300 thousand gold Fordes' worth. Luckily it had been budgeted for, so it wasn't an unexpected expense.

As their destinations were quite numerous, the trip took some time. They only reached Northsea in the 7th month. From there, they were ferried to Silowas by a small contingent of the fleet by the same name. During the voyage, Lorist received more details about the war.

The Union and the mid-southern nations were still engaged in minor skirmishes. However, a few nations' forces had suffered quite heavy casualties. Coincidentally, the three were near the Jigda kingdom. In other words, they were not far away from the Chikdor Merchant Guild's territory. The Union spotted the opportunity and launched a major operation in the area. Their forces came by sea and landed on the border.

Within hours they were across the border and pushing everything out of the way.

Lorf Fustat, general of the mid-southern nations' military, was greatly shocked and launched an immediate counterattack. It managed to force the Union back across the border but the nobility that had lived in the area were already dead. None of the families now had any surviving heirs, save for one of the duchies, who now had but a single princess. Lorf had no choice but to station his troops in the decimated nations to keep the Union at bay.

Meanwhile, the conflict between the two southernmost nations, Romon and Khawistan, seemed to be escalating. Both sides had launched three large-scale offensives with hundreds of thousands of troops. Both sides had also suffered comparable losses. It had developed into a full-blown war and neither side could now call it off. They were constantly moving soldiers around and the battles couldn't be more gruesome. It was as if they were trying to vent all the hatred of the past two centuries at once.

Lorist stroked his chin.

While those involved might be ignorant, we spectators aren't. There must be a scheme behind all this! In fact, it seems familiar... Didn't something similar happen with House Windsor's dominion? The four noble houses around it launched a coordinated attack, and when their forces were mostly defeated, a sudden savior popped out of nowhere to eradicate the aggressors, conquering the dominions of the four houses without much effort. Right now, the conflict between the Union and the mid-southern nations seem to be going down the same path. The three nations' forces were first expended on the frontlines, then the Union launched a surprise attack out of nowhere. Duke Lorf then leads his troops to fend the Union off but the ruling families were wiped out already. He has 'no choice' but to station his troops in these nations now. I bet the three will soon be assimilated into Jigda.

They're working together!

When he read the news about the war between Romon and Khawistan, he suddenly had his doubts.

Why would these two nations go to war, and wipe out Kalia?

The three each had a sword saint. Kalia was relatively small but they had managed to

maintain the status quo for many years. No matter which side started a confrontation, Kalia would side with the other. Neither faction wished for the other two to mobilize their swordsmen against theirs, so nothing ever came of the stand-offs.

Romon and Khawistan actually united and wiped out Kalia, and made their swordsmen vanish. Then they go to all-out war? If they hadn't gone to war, they might've been attracted to the war to their north.

Even Kalia might have tried to expand while the mid-southern nations were in chaos. However, the outbreak of war between Romon and Khawistan allowed one ambitious faction in the mid-southern nations the perfect opportunity to expand.

The timing was too perfect. Duke Lorf's stationing of troops in the three nations and the inevitable absorption of their territory into Jigda kingdom wouldn't be opposed by anyone. In fact, it couldn't have been more welcome. After all, their enemy was the Union, and the Union had exterminated several of their royal lines. Only Jigda's duke could save them from their peril, so, they hurried to flock to his feet and side with him without hesitation.

Lorist laughed bitterly.

This scheme is truly wondrous. First, they incite conflict between Romon and Khawistan and have them tear each other's throats out. The bitter hatred brewed over two centuries won't be extinguished easily. Even if the conflict ends, both sides will be completely beaten up. It'll resolve the worries Jigda might have. They then incite war between the mid-southern nations and the Union and absorb the nations around them. It allows the kingdom to expand its territory and become another one of the superpowers on the continent.

Lorist had already designated the general, Duke Lorf, the main culprit. It should be expected for the playing field on Grindia to shift greatly after the war. However, he didn't know how ambitious that duke really was. How many among the 20 remaining nations would he swallow before he was satisfied?

He picked up a folder on his desk, flipped it open, and focused on a particular page. It contained information about some of the alliance's members. The first entry was of none other than Lorf himself.

Duke Lorf, member of the Jigda kingdom's royal family and chief military

strategist. Controls eighty percent of the kingdom's forces. His personal dominion exceeds the entire royal family's. He is known as the non-king king and the shadow king. His first wife passed on many years ago. Currently, he is happily wedded to his second wife, Windsor Prinna. She has borne him three sons and a daughter. The couple is happily married.

Sol!

Lorist tossed the folder to the ground with an expression bordering on crying and laughing at the same time. He didn't know what kind of emotion to feel as he recalled the moonlit night. Within the dark room, the girl sat crying as she talked about how she had no choice but to marry the marquis for the sake of her house. Lorist could recall the grief and hate he had felt at the time. He cursed the shallow mistress for suffering misfortunes after leaving him and leaping into the marquis's embrace. It was too bad things hadn't panned out as he had imagined. It was obvious that his first love was living a blissful life.

Whatever, it's been so long. Maybe that young missy has forgotten me. I have Sylvia, Dilianna, Fennazali, Daisy, and Maria now, why should I feel vexed about a relationship that ended more than a decade ago?

Lorist smiled at himself mockingly and picked the folder up again. He analyzed the information about the duke. The more he read, the more restless he became.

Since the duke is so powerful in Jigda, why doesn't he seize the throne and become king? Is he really that loyal to the royal family? Or does he have other reasons for not doing so?

As he was on a ship, there was no one with whom he could discuss the matter. So, he put the thought in the back of his mind and had Jinolio archive the reports. He stepped onto the deck and saw Sylvia and his four concubines ordering the guards to toss the fishing net into the sea. Even though the ship was currently sailing, it didn't stop the net from being cast. Sometimes, there would be surprising catches. For instance, sharks lured into the trap by beef.

They arrived at Silowas three days later. Pajik and Hector had already been waiting in the harbor. After Lorist surveyed the garrison, Pajik reported something that surprised him. Blademaster Shuss, who had been training in seclusion in Seaview Manor, felt the time had come to advance a rank. He had taken his sword and entered the volcanic areas of the island alone. If he succeeded and broke through to become a

rank 2 blademaster, he would naturally return. If he failed, he would not.

Lorist knew blademasters took quite a long time to make their breakthroughs. At the very least, it would take a year. It required summarizing one's insights and identifying one's weaknesses. During that process, the blademaster would continue training and refining his insights and feel for the next step to advance his swordsmanship. Blademasters usually headed to desolate, uninhabited places or harsh environments. It wasn't just a form of physical training, it allowed them to better attune to the changes in nature and gain inspiration to incorporate into their swordsmanship for further advancement. Since Shuss had picked that path, Lorist could only pray for his success.

He stayed at Silowas until the end of the 8th month. This time around, they would survey the eastern regions where Jaeger, Tigersoar, and Firmrock were. Out of Lorist's expectations, Jaeger's men weren't the least bit averse to Sylvia. In fact, they cherished the commemorative medals with which Lorist had come up. Who wouldn't cherish gold commemorative medals that could be traded for three gold Fordes?

When he finished his rounds and returned to Ragebear, it was already the 11th month of Year 1780. A year had passed in the blink of an eye. The dominion had truly grown too great. Before he could get two day's rest, Charade barged inside

"Your Grace... out of seclusion..."

"What? What part of me got out of seclusion?" asked Lorist, confused.

"No, not you..." Charade recovered his breath.

"His Majesty! He came out of seclusion after breaking through to become a rank 1 blademaster!"

Chapter 413

Second Highness's Scheme

"What?! The second highness broke through to become a blademaster?"

After some thought, Lorist instantly came to an understanding. So the second highness had been cooped up in his palace for the past two years because he was making a breakthrough. No wonder he hadn't bothered to take advantage of the conflict between the Union and the mid-southern nations.

Charade took out a greyish-white silk cloth filled with words.

"Your Grace, this is the eagle message we received from the imperial capital. It says the second highness ended his seclusion three days ago. First, he secretly had an audience with most of his subordinates and officials to gain an understanding of the situation of the kingdom before he announced he had broken through to become a rank 1 blademaster. He will hold a large banquet in celebration tomorrow."

Lorist received the cloth, and tossed it aside after reading it.

"I wonder if he is a favored child of the plane... He has a freaking pest's vigor and won't die no matter how he's beaten. Although it seems like things are going south for him, he just pops up energetically out of nowhere and starts causing trouble. I was wondering why he was behaving so well when he was cooped up in the palace. I didn't think he had actually broken through and become a blademaster."

Charade, having spent lots of time with Lorist, knew he was referring to the second highness as a cockroach but he still asked out of curiosity.

"Your Grace, what is this 'favored child of the plane'?"

"Well, it doesn't mean anything complicated. Word is that there are some people exceptionally lucky across the multiple planes. No matter what danger they encounter, they will emerge safely and even make unexpected gains. For example, during a time of chaos, there will be a few exceptionally lucky people who manage to start great upheavals. Such people would eventually be known as legendary heroes. There are

some who call them the plane's favored children. It's like they are loved by the plane on which they live itself."

"Oh," Charade mused, "He's considered a plane's favored child? I don't buy it. If not for the fact that you gave him Whitelion's equipment and the funds he needed and mobilized our troops to restore him to the throne, I doubt he could have regained his position. I told you he's not one to sit around and do nothing. I wonder how gleeful he must be now he's broken through to being a blademaster. Our peace will soon be disrupted."

Lorist nodded with a smile.

"It doesn't matter. Whether the second highness is a blademaster is irrelevant. He's a smart fellow. He won't target us. The same can't be said for the duchies and the Union. He might soon deploy his troops to reclaim a few provinces while the Union's at war. We just have to wait for the plot to unfold, though."

"You think the second highness will really mobilize?"

"Of course. It's been three years since he reclaimed his throne. I'm surprised he hasn't deployed his troops even once in the past three years. Though he spent most of his time training in seclusion, he did manage to succeed. Now the kingdom's situation is stable and his subordinates and troops have become rather well-trained, and, given how the Union won't want to fight a war on two fronts, there is no way this king won't cause trouble. His advancement will only make his attacks even more ferocious."

However, Lorist's guess was mistaken. Three days later, he received another eagle message from the imperial capital.

"What? The second highness will survey the kingdom? What the hell is he doing? Isn't this the time to mobilize his legions and reclaim the provinces? For him to survey the kingdom at a time like this... Is this really the second highness we know? He couldn't be an impostor, could he?"

Lorist was completely flabbergasted. He even suspected the second highness had been replaced. It wasn't weird for him to spend two years cooped up in the palace, neither was it odd for him to want to survey the kingdom afterwards. But, the eagle message staid he wasn't going to survey the provinces under his control. Instead, he was going to visit Sidgler, Delamock, Winston, and Southern.

What in the world is this bastard planning?

Sidgler was House Kenmays's dominion and Delamock and Winston territories of House Norton according to the agreement signed between the alliance and the second highness. Southern was Count Felim's domain. Why didn't the second highness survey the provinces under his control? Why was he going to go to places not under his jurisdiction? Lorist definitely wasn't going to believe the second highness didn't have something else in mind. Maybe he regretted the contract and believed he had better bargaining power now he had become a blademaster. If that were so, Lorist wouldn't mind teaching him a lesson. Rank 1 blademaster aside, he wouldn't even regard rank 3 blademasters. But, after some thought, he believed the second highness wouldn't be so irrational as to put up airs in front of him just because he had become a blademaster. Lorist had defeated Xanthi a rank three blademaster in front of the second highness' own eyes.

"Did the second highness make any other odd moves?"

Charade read the letter again. He shook his head.

"None, Your Grace. He only announced he was going to survey these four provinces. I wonder why he didn't include The Northlands. Is he planning something against us?"

"Impossible," Lorist said as he stood up and went to the map on the wall to check out the route announced.

"Based on the might he currently has, going against us is a pipe dream. No noble would answer his call. They aren't idiots. If the second highness really thinks they will rally behind him just because he's a blademaster, he wouldn't be the second highness we know. Also, there's no way he'd make his moves this public if he's truly going against us. I suspect he has other intentions. He didn't announce he would survey The Northlands, since Delamock and Winston are under our control, it won't be out of the ordinary for us to send a squad in the name of escorting him. He's our king after all. We'll make out what he's planning when we follow along."

"Who will you send?" asked Charade.

Logically speaking, Lorist was the most appropriate person to receive the second highness. However, he couldn't be bothered with meeting him, especially after the breakup between the second highness and Glacia. Lorist was filled with more

animosity towards the little king than ever before. It wasn't unwarranted either. Glacia had followed the second highness into the battlefield at the tender age of 18. Not only had she been loyal, she had even been his lover. But they broke up after spending 20 years together. Not only was it uncalled for, it showed the second highness's hostility towards the house. Perhaps it was out of concern of House Norton that the second highness refused to let Glacia become queen.

"Do you want me to go?" Charade thought he was suited for receiving the king given his status as baron and the house's chief knight and administrator.

Lorist shook his head.

"You won't do. Don't forget your identity."

"What about my identity?"

"You're a gold-ranked knight. I'm worried he will ask you to spar with him. Given that he's now a blademaster, he won't have much trouble showing off in front of you. And since you can't really refuse him, I don't want to see you return with a missing limb or two. It's not like I can avenge you if he claims it was a sparring accident. That would be really troublesome."

What Lorist was describing wasn't without precedent. When Duke Loggins went to pay the second prince, a visit, his gold-ranked knight was messed with by the second prince's blademaster. In name, the blademaster claimed it was merely to give pointers. But it was actually a planned humiliation. It made the duke lose a lot of face and even think several times over making his duchy independent, ultimately his house was exterminated.

There was a good chance Charade would be challenged to a duel in front of the other nobles so the second highness could show off his abilities. Losing face was not really a huge deal -- the second highness wouldn't dare go too far -- but, given Charade's poor swordsmanship, the worst result would be him suffering wounds. It was quite likely the second highness would deliberately try to wound him knowing how important he was to the house. He would excuse himself by saying he was still unable to control his power after just breaking through and make it up to Lorist for heavily wounding Charade. Even if Lorist wanted to lash out, he wouldn't be able to and would have to swallow the loss.

"What if I have my father-in-law go along?"

Again, Lorist shook his head.

"Forget it. Even Engelich can't protect you. The second highness has other blademasters as well. What was that guy called... The one I met when I went to save Reidy... Manst or something... I think he's a rank 2 blademaster. If you bring Engelich along, he would have to face Manst if he stands up for you. Since the second highness definitely can't face Engelich, he will have good reason to duel a gold-ranked knight.

"I have a good candidate in mind," said Lorist as he pulled on the rope connected to the bell.

"Jinolio, where's Reidy now?"

"Your Grace, First Senior Brother went to Firmrock to check on Second Senior Brother."

"Send an eagle. Have Reidy come over. I have something I need him to do."

"Understood, Your Grace."

"You plan to let Reidy go?"

"Yes. Don't look down on him just because he's a silver rank. His training in my technique allows his swordsmanship to rival that of a rank 1 blademaster, maybe even exceed it. If the second highness wants to mess with him, he'll definitely be in for a pain. And Reidy is my personal disciple, no one can say I haven't honored the second highness. I'll just have Reidy take a thousand guards along so others can't say I didn't do what was due. Pajik is a three-star silver shielder so the second highness won't cause trouble for him. Also, you can prepare a gift for the second highness to congratulate him for his breakthrough."

"Understood, Your Grace."

Three days later, Reidy and Pajik took a thousand guards to Vanades in Delamock to await the second highness's arrival before escorting him around for his tour.

Lorist pushed the matter to the back of his mind and stopped caring. As a result, Kenmays hurriedly brought a squad of men to Ragebear ten days later.

"Why have you come? Wasn't the second highness going to survey your dominion?" asked Lorist curiously.

"Don't even bring it up. That guy's there to show off. I have no intention of meeting him," said Kenmays angrily.

"He asked your gold-ranked knight for a duel?"

"Yes."

"That's fine, right? What's wrong with a gold-ranked knight losing? If he can't defeat one after breaking through, it would truly be a joke. Also, why are you avoiding him?"

"It's no big deal if my household knight loses. The problem is His Majesty hasn't come to us just for a duel. He's here to have us deploy our forces."

"Deploy? Against the Union?"

"No, against the four central duchies."

"Oh..."

Lorist's eyes sparked. The second highness had been targeting the four central duchies all along. No wonder his route was so weird. Going through Southern and attacking the four central duchies truly was unexpected, but there were lots of benefits. Mainly, after supporting House Fisablen and fighting the four houses, they had suffered a huge loss and hadn't recovered yet. This would be a good opportunity to exploit.

An attack from Southern would also come out of nowhere. Even though the four duchies had already withdrawn their troops, they were still quite tight on the border. But, since they knew the four houses were more concerned with House Fisablen, they weren't in a rush to attack in fear of House Fisablen launching a surprise attack out of nowhere. After all, the duke bore the moniker Wargod of the Plains. The four houses wouldn't dare be so careless.

The part where the four central duchies faced the second highness was the swamp around Egret Lake. It was not suited to offensives since the four central duchies had greatly fortified the defenses there and even built a fort. As for the border between the duchies and the two southern provinces, they neighbored the Union. One would have

to first breach Kanbona, Bodolger, and Anderwoff before one could push the duchies' border. It was a much longer route.

It appeared the second highness intended to first take care of the duchies as the Union fought their war before reclaiming the empire's provinces the Union took a few years earlier. Given that the Union was caught up in another conflict, they couldn't provide support to the duchies. Since the kingdom had the strategic location at their borders facing the Union, the second highness could transfer Whitelion to Southern and attack the duchies without anyone noticing. He obviously wanted House Kenmays's forces to join the offensive.

"Did you agree?"

"No. I managed to avoid him with the excuse of having gone to Northsea to meet a lover. My father was the one who received him and he didn't agree to anything either. He just said he would consider it. The moment His Majesty left, I rushed over here to meet you and hear your thoughts."

"Alright, I have to think this over."

Chapter 414

Changes

No one expected the second highness would cause so much commotion during his survey.

"Your Grace, His Majesty organized a large banquet at Kobo yesterday. He invited all the landed nobles we entitled. He didn't poach the nobles under our jurisdiction but promised those who were willing to pitch in to help the kingdom's war against the four central duchies would receive great rewards. They might even get promoted and have their dominions relocated," recited Charade the letter Reidy had sent.

Lorist didn't react at all. Charade looked at the letter again and digested its contents.

"Your Grace, if the Delamockan nobles are willing to go to battle for the second highness, what stance will we take?"

"Let them be," Lorist said as he stood up from the couch, "Such Nobles can only take around one or two hundred men. What help would they be? They might, in fact, make some contributions and be promoted and relocated, but isn't that a good thing? At the very least, we'll get their dominions back."

Lorist wasn't off the mark in that sense. Most of the current Delamockan nobles were relocated from The Northlands and Winston. House Norton only had them under control, unlike nobles entitled by the house as vassals like Potterfang and Charade, basically an extension of the house.

Delamock was a province controlled by the house. Like Winston, Lorist could entitle landed nobles or relocate others there. But he couldn't make the territory of the province his own. And though the second highness was the king, while he could promote those nobles, he couldn't increase the territory they occupied as it was power reserved for those in direct control of a province. All he could do was relocate the nobles and give them dominions elsewhere, taking the nobles under his direct rule out of the areas Lorist controlled.

As Lorist had put it himself, he couldn't be more willing to let the second highness do

just that. If he relocated the landed nobles, the territory left behind could be used to entitle new nobles and increase the number of his direct vassals. It would only serve to increase his house's influence. Not only was it a good thing, it also decreased the number of unpredictable variables with which he had to deal. However, such good things never fell from the sky. It was no longer the time when a knight with a hundred scattered soldiers could be considered a strong force. Those who rushed to answer the second highness's call were only going to become meat for the grinder.

"That's true, let's see how many the second highness can rile up. I believe they'll begin to hate this king after they suffer huge losses on the frontlines. Without our forces, those nobles won't be able to glean any benefit by tagging along," snickered Charade.

The second highness's tour progressed quickly. He stayed for just a day in Shazin's dominion before heading straight for Winston. Similarly, he held a banquet there and offered the same call to arms. The second highness's promise was received with loud cheers. The Madrasan nobles felt rather beaten by the demotion and decrement of their territory, and the second highness had come to give them a chance to rebuild their glorious names. They couldn't wait to grab the chance.

On the 29th day of the 11th month, the second highness reached House Felim's dominion in Southern. After some talks, he casually went to the border where Firmrock was for a visit before he returned to the imperial capital. Though Felim offered to accompany the second highness, the latter refused politely. He wasn't going to bring many people with him; he was going to make a quick trip with ten knights. Since Reidy and the thousand guards were by the second highness's side, and given how safe the border was with Firmrock there, Felim didn't mind and wished him a smooth trip.

And then...

"What did you say?! The second highness rushed into Eastwild, House Fisablen's dominion, with only ten knights?!" Lorist jumped with surprise.

The news was far too surprising.

Charade smiled bitterly.

"It's true. We are all dumbfounded. Reidy wanted to enter Eastwild with the guards but he was stopped by Potterfang. They are now awaiting your orders."

Lorist was seething.

"How did Reidy allow that to happen? Why didn't he stop the second highness?"

Charade looked at the silk cloth letter in his hand.

"Nobody could have predicted this. The second highness acted completely normally. After he arrived at the border, he checked out the defenses before he dragged Potterfang along and talked about the tactics we had used to retake Southern. In the afternoon, he discovered a herd of wild goats and said he wanted to add something to the night's dinner. He didn't allow Reidy to follow him, saying it'd scare the goats away. He rode forward with his ten-odd attendants. It was near evening and they quickly vanished. By the time Reidy and Potterfang realized something was off, the second highness was already long gone."

"Wait a second, what about the goats?"

Charade didn't know whether he should laugh or not.

"What does this have to do anything? They're fine. Reidy realized something was off because the goats were completely undisturbed."

Lorist's expression was dark.

"The fact that the wild goats are fine means the second highness was merely looking for an excuse to leave, nothing surprising. It must've been something he's plotted for a while now. His visit to Southern and going over the tactics with Potterfang as well as his desire to hunt the goats are all excuses. I suspect his rallying of the nobles for the war against the four central duchies is nothing but a front he put up to divert our attention to ultimately allow him to enter Fisablen's dominion."

"But, but Your Grace, even though House Fisablen has signed an armistice with our alliance, the kingdom is still their enemy! Isn't the second highness serving himself up on a platter and seeking his death? Even if he's now a rank 1 blademaster, Duke Fisablen's rank 3. It would be far too easy for him to take the second highness's life!"

Charade didn't understand what was going on. Lorist leaned into his chair heavily and breathed a heavy sigh.

"You don't understand. He's not in the slightest bit of danger by going into House

Fisablen's dominion. There's no way the duke will harm him. After all, the second highness is still a king. If House Fisablen really harmed him and became kingslayers, we could completely ignore the armistice and uproot them in the name of avenging the king. That old fox will not give us such an opportunity.

"I'm worried about why the second highness went to Fisablen without telling us. Is he going to start opposing us? It would be a valid reason for him to team up with Fisablen. With one in the east and the other in the west, there's no need for us to worry about them if they're not working together. But it'll be troublesome if they join hands. No, I have to head to the border immediately to see if there's something I can do to fix this."

Lorist grit his teeth. He really felt an urge to kill. If he could stop the second highness and the rest in Eastwild, he wouldn't mind killing them all and blaming House Fisablen before using it as justification to ignore the armistice and destroy them.

Since you're dense enough to take me for granted, don't blame me for not holding back. Even though you're king, you always have your eyes on me. You can't blame anyone for your misfortune if you actively seek death.

As Lorist saw it, the second highness was obviously trying to get House Fisablen to work together with him. As for who they were joining up against, it couldn't be more obvious. Who else was there apart from him? Since that was the case, he believed the one who struck first would have the advantage. He didn't really hold the taboo other nobles did against kill kings. If he managed to kill them all in Eastwild, who would be left alive to tell the tale? Since House Fisablen would be there to bear the blame, what was there to fear?

"But, Your Grace, it's already the end of the 11th. Winter is upon us and even if we deploy our troops, it'll be too late."

"There's no need to deploy. I will head there alone. I'll first stay with Firmrock for a few days to see if there's any lead I can follow."

"No, Your Grace, you can't go alone," Charade warned, his hand holding Lorist's sleeve, "You are the Duke of The Northlands and head of the house. You can't take this kind of risk! The new year's celebration will take place in a month and you cannot be absent! Otherwise, everyone will be unnerved..."

"It doesn't matter if I'm not there. It's not like we're going to entitle anyone."

"No, Your Grace, you really can't go."

A knock on the door interrupted their back and forth. Jinolio entered.

"Your Grace, there's a message from Firmrock."

The second letter said the second highness left Potterfang a note in his tent. The note asked them to not panic and said he had indeed left for House Fisablen. E asked Potterfang to not worry about his safety. The second highness mentioned that he had taken Blademaster Xanthi as his teacher and that he could break through thanks to her acute teachings. He had wanted to send Xanthi back to House Fisablen and would stay there for the winter and return the rainy season. Nobody had to be sent after him.

Upon reading the letter, Lorist's anger subsided. He really felt he had brought it upon himself. Why did he have to leave Xanthi in the second highness's care? It would've been much better to lock her up in a dungeon somewhere in his dominion.

I didn't think the second highness would take that old witch as his teacher and even break through. He must've been goaded to go. I'm really making one misstep after another. It's all my fault for not noticing the subtle changes.

With this in the picture, it was even more troubling to cause trouble for the second highness. Duke Fisablen, the old witch, the second highness, and Manst were all blademasters. Going into their headquarters, Crouchtiger Castle, alone was a fool's errand. He'd lost all intent on heading to Eastwild on his own.

"Tell Potterfang I've been informed. He doesn't have to deal with the second highness anymore. Have Reidy sent back as well. Don't let him wait there like an idiot."

"Understood, Your Grace," said Jinolio before he left.

"What will be our next move?" asked Charade.

"Now we prepare," Lorist said, "We'll use generals to deal with soldiers like we use mud to deal with water. I'd like to see what the second highness can do with House Fisablen. I don't mind wiping them out if they force our hand. We'll strike whoever lashes out first."

Ten days later, Felim and Shazin rushed over. Kenmays -- who had just received the letter -- also made his way over as quickly as possible. They were there to participate

in the new year's celebration and to discuss the second highness' sudden visit to House Fisablen and how it would affect them.

"I believe Lorist's guess is correct. It's obvious the second highness is trying to recruit Duke Fisablen by going there and taking the house under his wing. Though we don't know what kind of price the second highness will pay to win the duke's loyalty, with Blademaster Xanthi guiding him, he will succeed. The duke's submission will also cause his reputation to soar," surmised Kenmays acutely.

"Do you think that the second highness's rallying of the landed nobles is merely a ruse to distract us from his true goal to visit Fisablen?" asked Shazin.

"I'm not too sure. I didn't meet him when he came to my dominion after all," said Kenmays as he shook his head.

Lorist's eyes brightened.

"Hennard, did the second highness promise you anything when he made his request?"

"He did. he said if we exterminated the four central duchies, I would free to pick a province as my hereditary dominion. He also said he'd make me a duke."

Lorist then looked at Felim.

"He said he would promote me to duke and make Southern my hereditary dominion instead of most of it being merely in my control."

Charade shook his head on the side.

"Our king is behaving like he always does. He's still promising things that don't belong to him."

"Are you persuaded?" asked Lorist.

"If it were only that, I wouldn't even bother with him. But he pointed out that the bottleneck to Southern's development was the lack of manpower. If we attack the duchies, we can bring in large numbers of people to develop the province. I'm a little tempted, but I'm still considering my options," answered Felim.

"I'm tempted," Shazin admitted, "You know I'm not into developing my dominion. But

can still gain wealth through pillaging in war and it's really attractive. I was hoping to claim a mine or quarry as well. My descendants can only really have enough wealth if I did. The two silver mines and the copper mine in Sanderson Hills produces a tad too little..."

It wasn't wrong to say House Shazin was the most financially tight of them all. After taking Sanderson Hills as his dominion, Shazin was surprised to find that the mines' annual profit totaled just 300 thousand gold Fordes. While other landed nobles would consider it a fortune, for someone with a huge force like him, it was just barely enough to cover his military expenses. Had it not been for the bonuses Kenmays often gave him, he would have to consider downsizing his military.

"What about you?" Lorist asked Kenmays.

"Father says the second highness promised to let us trade unobstructed across the kingdom and he would even halve all our taxes for three years if we agreed to deploy our troops. I don't really mind since my title can no longer be raised and our house has already occupied the whole of Sidgler. Even though it's rural, it's safe and we don't have much ambition anyway. Starting new trade routes across the kingdom isn't appealing either and I can't be bothered by the meager tax savings I'll get. I'd rather he lock up our trade routes. I can simply travel by sea to access other areas for even better profits. But his offer is extremely attractive to the house's business my father runs. He wrote to me and hoped I would agree."

Lorist contemplated in silence.

"I believe the second highness wasn't lying about going to war with the duchies just to hide the fact he was planning on visiting Fisablen. First, he offered all of you different, but alluring, rewards. Second, he also made similar offers to the nobles. If he was lying about it, he would default on his promise and his reputation would fall greatly. But now he's gone to Fisablen, I can't really be sure what he's planning. It'd be best if we talk about this again when he comes back. There's no point in panicking now. I will meet him personally when the time comes."

Chapter 415

Crossing the Border

Though the new year had arrived, it wasn't really delightful. Whether they were the nobles who came over to participate in the festivities or the four houses' high-ranking officials, they were all rather disturbed by the commotion caused by the king. The hushed conversations went on nonstop. Even Lorist felt foreboded. The reason was simple: Felim and Shazin were rather attracted to the conditions the second highness had offered. To them, raiding the four central duchies for wealth before they recovered their might was an extremely tempting proposition.

Lorist couldn't hate the second highness more even if he wanted to.

He's a sneaky and insidious demon. I messed with him a few years ago and he suffered quite the loss from the agreement but I didn't think he'd come back after just three years as a blademaster and turn the tables. He's offered attacking the four central duchies as bait. The moment he tossed it out, it caught everyone's attention and even managed to shake our alliance. He made his way to the dominion of the Fisablens immediately after...

If it were merely goading the nobles to attack the duchies, he couldn't be bothered to interfere. As long as the four houses didn't make any moves, the northeast would be stable as a mountain. Whether the attack ended in success or failure, it wouldn't affect his house's standing as the local hegemon. The problem now, however, was that Shazin and Felim had been tempted as well. If both decided to join, would House Norton just sit back and do nothing? How would it affect their alliance?

It wasn't that he hadn't considered reaping benefits for himself as well, but his plan could only be carried out in another two or three years. His most dangerous enemy was still House Fisablen. There had been many precedents of snakes not killed lashing out and biting back. House Fisablen might have admitted their loss, but they were far from completely beaten. Only after two or three years of economic and military pressure to make sure House Fisablen truly submitted could he turn his attention to the four central duchies.

But now he realized his allies didn't share his view. Like Felim had mentioned, House Fisablen was an injured beast. It would recover for the next three years, it was unlikely

that it would try something in that time. As such, Felim believed the four houses shouldn't just coop up in their dominions waiting for the conflict to resume. He believed they should instead use the opportunity to increase their might, and the best target was the duchies, whose force of 70 thousand elites had already been wiped.

Shazin also believed raiding other nobles was the easiest way to get rich. Be it taking wealth or manpower, both approaches would severely weaken the enemy and decrease their ability to resist. The duchies had already crossed swords with the alliance in their attempt to aid House Fisablen; it went without saying that they saw them as enemies. A little over one year earlier, they had managed to exterminate 70 thousand elites. Surely they hadn't recovered yet. Even if they managed to get new recruits, their capabilities should be extremely low. Shazin was of the opinion that the four houses should use the opportunity to land an early strike instead of giving them time to recover. Even if the second highness wasn't there to lead the charge, the four houses would have to go to war anyway.

Felim had the intention to join in because he lacked manpower; Shazin intended to make a great haul. As for Kenmays, at first, he didn't care whether he deployed his forces or not. but after considering that attacking the duchies would allow more trade routes to be opened for the committee, and the fact that the committee would still be limited by the duchies if they didn't attack, he changed his mind and expressed his willingness to send his troops to join the offensive.

Lorist smiled troublingly at their reasoning. Ever since the duchies joined hands with the Union to defeat the second highness and exterminate Melein, they occupied eleven of the empire's 29 former provinces and had a total population of five to six million. In terms of weather and terrain, the provinces were ideal for agriculture, business, and industry. Even during the chaotic era, the duchies were still far from utter defeat and still a force to be reckoned with. There was also the fact that they were branches on the same tree. No matter which was attacked, the others would join their side.

Back then, the first prince had lusted after their riches and led an army of 300 thousand men against them. The duchies didn't have that great a start, but they didn't submit and resisted with all they had. The conflict lasted three whole years and they managed to not only chase the first prince out of their territory, they even crossed the border into Redlissian territory, forcing the first prince to surrender and sign an armistice. There was no telling when history would repeat itself. While it was easy to start a war, it wasn't easy to end one. What Lorist worried about most was that he would be dragged into the quagmire. Should that come to pass, not only would the

house not benefit, it might even affect the entire house. It might even allow the old fox to strike back. It was not the result he could accept.

That was also why he had a wait-and-see attitude. Bread had to be eaten bite by bite, and roads had to be traversed step-by-step. He wasn't prepared to start a war with another faction before completely defeating those he currently had. But so far, three out of the four members of the alliance hoped to do just that. It was quite the dilemma. If he supported them, it would disrupt the plan he had laid out. But if he didn't, the alliance might dissolve. Even if it didn't, they wouldn't see as eye-to-eye as they did currently and cooperate so well.

He suddenly realized why the second highness didn't visit The Northlands. If he did, he would have had to convince Lorist to participate in the war. If he refused, his allies, Shazin, Felim, and Kenmays would resolutely support his decision. If the whole alliance refused the second highness's call to arms, the war would end as a mere joke with the nobles the second highness managed to rally to join him. He would also be the butt of the joke.

Kenmays was rather witty in that he'd managed to avoid meeting the second highness altogether, but Shazin and Felim were convinced by his slimy words. The second highness's move was rather well-played. He had dug Lorist a pit to jump into without even having to meet with him. Whether he took the jump was his decision. If he jumped, he would prevent the alliance from dissolving at the cost of forcing House Norton into a corner in which they didn't wish to be. If he didn't, his allies would be alienated and the second highness couldn't be happier if the alliance fractured.

However, the duchies were not as easy to deal with as one might think. Their 70 thousand elites were completely decimated, but they had fought in the field. House Norton had lots of advantages and managed to win by taking them by surprise. But if they fought in the duchies, the enemy could coop up in their castles. Even if they relied on catapults, they would still have to suffer huge casualties.

Charade was easier-going.

"Your Grace, we have to fight. We not only have to fight, we have to pour in even more effort than others. We have to help Felim and Shazin achieve what they want."

"Why?"

Lorist was really unwilling to fight this war. He had constantly been searching for an excuse to avoid it.

"We don't stand to benefit at all. Felim wants manpower and Shazin wants wealth; Kenmays wishes to develop new trade routes... Even the lands we conquer in the war won't belong to us. Everything will belong to the second highness. Tell me what benefit is in this for us?"

Charade laughed.

"There will be benefits. They just aren't apparent. For starters, if we agree, Felim and Shazin will be incredibly grateful and the alliance will be even more secure. Additionally, didn't Shazin say he wanted different lands? A place with more mines? The two small silver mines and the copper mine in Sanderson Hills will be ours. We can claim a new dominion for House Shazin and the whole of Delamock will belong to us.

"Next, Felim needs manpower and Shazin wants wealth. We need both. The Northlands' population is just 1.67 million and, according to our development plan, we can only advance to the next step with a population of three million. We need at least double the resources and manpower we have now. Attacking the duchies and plundering their manpower and wealth is the best way to get what we need. Just look at our surroundings. Madras and Iblia have already been eliminated, the only target left is the duchies."

Charade's reasoning made quite a lot of sense. After a few days of consideration, Lorist came to a decision. He would deploy his troops and attack the duchies after the spring harvests in the 5th month. He wasn't that worried about field battles. His main focus was the duchies' strongly fortified and protected castles, raiding them for their wealth and manpower, and limiting the casualties he suffered in the process. Fortunately, the house had expanded the four sentry legions and it was time they gained actual battle experience.

Time passed quickly and it was the 17th day of the 4th month. A piece of news arrived that greatly shocked everyone. The moment the second highness arrived at Crouchtiger with his ten-odd knights, the Wargod of the Plains knelt and teared up and expressed his regrets for all he went through. The second highness absolved his house of its crimes and Duke Fisablen announced the house was once more under the rule of the royal family's legitimate heir. He submitted to the second highness and

would fight to unify the empire once more.

Duke Fisablen didn't just make empty promises either. He presented one million gold Fordes' worth of horseshoe gold to the second highness as military funds and 30 thousand fine horses. House Fisablen's gift and submission were still within expectation. The truly surprising part was the second highness's response. He announced the days he spent at Crouchtiger was rather delightful and that he had fallen in love with the duke's one granddaughter, Cacanne. He proposed, the duke accepted, and the two were quickly married. The kingdom now had a proper queen.

"This... I have a feeling the second highness is ripping off the second prince," said Charade helplessly as he scratched his head.

The second prince had gone to House Fisablen and the duke allowed his promiscuous second daughter to marry him. The house's frontier legions supported the prince and he successfully founded the Iblia kingdom. Like Charade had mentioned, the second highness also found himself a wife after visiting House Fisablen.

"Haha," laughed Lorist coldly.

He was the one most displeased by news of the king's marriage. His cousin had loyally followed the second highness for 20 years, but he broke it off so easily. Nobody would sincerely believe he got married because of love.

"It's obvious. I was confused at first when Duke Fisablen submitted so easily. So he still had this move. I say, House Fisablen's women are quite fortunate. They all have the knack of becoming queens."

"Your Grace, Princess Sylvia is wedded to you. She's no queen."

Lorist suddenly realized that if Sylvia wasn't sent over by the duke, she might've been the one with whom the second highness 'fell in love at first sight'. Should word of it spread, he might really deploy his troops to fight the king and send the kingdom into another period of turmoil. Fortunately, Sylvia was already by his side. He couldn't be more relieved.

A week later, Potterfang's message was presented.

The second highness and Queen Cacanne had brought a division ten thousand strong to the border and requested entry. The division was the queen's guard and would

follow her after the wedding. At the same time, Duke Fisablen had Blademaster Xanthi lead another division from one of his frontier legions to accompany the procession. She was going to travel with the king to the imperial capital. Also, Xanthi requested to visit Sylvia and send her belated blessings.

Lorist's face darkened.

Duke Fisablen you old miser... You gave your granddaughter Cacanne a division of ten thousand troops, but you only sent three carriages' worth of junk to your other granddaughter, Sylvia?! Are you looking down on me?! This is plain insult!

"Your Grace... Your Grace!"

Charade had to call out a few times to snap Lorist out of his vagary.

"What's up?"

"How do we deal with this? Should we allow the king across the border?" asked Charade as he pointed at the message.

"Let them in. I doubt the bastard would dare act rashly here. Have Loze lead Tigersoar there and escort them. I will take my guards to Windbury and await their arrival. Also, send Duke Kenmays, Count Shazin, and Count Felim a message. Have them meet me at Windbury. Since we're going to discuss our strategy for the upcoming war, we might as well settle everything in one go."

"Understood, Your Grace."

Chapter 416

Meeting

The horn blared loudly outside Windbury. Lorist organized a grand reception ceremony for King Augustus, Queen Cacanne, and Duke Fisablen. Standing beside Lorist was Duchess Sylvia. Her godmother and teacher, Blademaster Xanthi, would be there to see her. Sylvia was incredibly excited and pestered Lorist to attend the reception with her no matter what.

Kenmays and Shazin were also present. Felim had left with Loze to escort the king over.

Charade and the acting mayor of Windbury, Viscount Eidis, stood behind Lorist. The two were engaged in a low-volume, heated debate. Viscount Eidis understood well the reason Lorist had appointed him as acting mayor. Lorist had hoped trade would restore Windbury to its former glory as the center for livestock trade. He was arguing with Charade because they had different opinions on how to redevelop Windbury.

Charade believed the trading center should be located outside the city to avoid affecting hygiene and the citizen's quality of life. Letting large quantities of livestock into the city would have severe effects on the environment. It was the main reason the king had killed the livestock market in the first place. Viscount Eidis, on the other hand, believed that, since the population relative to the available land was low, allowing trade to commence within the city would improve safety. As for environmental pollution, he believed limiting the livestock to special trade areas would prevent it from affecting the citizens too much.

Charade countered that the ratio of citizens to land might be low now, but it was in no way guaranteed to remain that way, especially not if the markets were reopened. There would be merchants flocking to the city after hearing word of its developments and settle down. Thus, as a measure of careful planning, keeping the livestock outside the city would save them the trouble of moving everything out later when the population increased, saving them much trouble in the long run.

But Eidis saw limiting trade only to the city outskirts a huge threat to safety. Charade proudly proclaimed there was nobody in the region that would dare provoke House

Norton. As long as the forces existed, safety wouldn't be a concern.

Though Eidis was still filled with doubts, he yielded to keeping the trade outside the city due to Charade's overbearing. It, however, didn't stop him from having doubts on the time required for Windbury to regain its former glory. Seeing how gloomy he was, Charade secretly told him about Lorist's decision to attack the duchies and said the skilled workers and leather merchants they would force to migrate would be moved to Windbury. With the city's restoration to its former prosperous state guaranteed, Eidis's mood turned for the better. A light cavalryman appeared in the distance. He took out his horn and blew a long note. The king had arrived.

"Music!" instructed Eidis.

The band started playing. They played the tune used during the most formal of welcoming ceremonies for one's liege. Lorist was seated on his horse with a neutral expression on his face. Sylvia looked really expectant. It seemed she had really missed her godmother.

A handsome horse galloped in the distance. The moment the king heard Lorist was there to welcome him, he hurriedly rode ahead. He shouted before he was even close.

"Haha! Locke, my friend! Long time no see! I've missed you to death!"

You didn't miss me to death. You want to miss me after I die, thought Lorist.

However, he had no choice but to dismount and salute.

"Your Majesty, your loyal servant offers his greetings!"

The horse reared on its hind legs when the king pulled its reins. The second highness leaped off and took wide steps towards Lorist before giving him a hug.

"Locke, my friend, are you doing well?"

Lorist hugged back warmly.

"My king, seeing you safe brings peace to my heart," smiled he, "You should know I've been very worried since I heard you'd traveled into Fisablen's dominion... I couldn't eat or sleep well... Luckily I can finally rest assured. As the king, you shouldn't be taking such risks..."

The Auguslo glanced at Lorist's face blushing healthily.

Is that how a sleepless person with no appetite looks? I bet you can't wait for me to go back, huh? thought he.

In spite of his malcontent, he made the effort to look apologetic.

"Alright, Locke, we both know you would've stopped me if I told you I was going. As this matter is tied closely to the kingdom's future, I had no choice but to make the trip. Fortunately, Duke Fisablen was wise enough to change his ways and rejoin the kingdom. My rash actions paid off in the end."

Lorist didn't even bother to smile convincingly as he looked at the dismounting duke and the blademaster behind the king.

"It truly is a fortunate affair, Your Majesty. You were actually able to recruit the mighty Wargod of the Plains. It really is beyond expectation. I was preparing to uproot House Fisablen for good should you suffer any misfortune..."

Not only were Lorist's words incredibly rude, he also spoke them quite loudly. It was obvious the duke and blademaster had overheard him. The duke merely shuddered without a change in his expression. Xanthi, on the other hand, barked angrily.

"Would you have the guts?!"

Lorist laughed heartily.

"Well? What do you say, Blademaster Xanthi? Long time no see by the way. I see you've been having quite the good time at the imperial capital."

The look on Xanthi's face was both angry and fearful. She suddenly recalled being taken prisoner in just a few strikes. Since then, she had developed a phobia of the young man. Even when Duke Fisablen was beside her, she didn't dare draw her sword and start a fight. Fortunately, Sylvia pulled Lorist harshly before leaping into Xanthi's embrace to resolve the tension.

"Well," the king spoke, "Locke, I know the relationship between your house and that of Duke Fisablen is a little strained, you two even being at war just a year ago, but given that the duke has returned to the kingdom and is willing to put in an effort to unite the empire, and that you've already taken Duchess Sylvia as your wife - you're know

in-laws - you should be more tolerant. As Duke of The Northlands, you should act as the role model for all other nobles. I hope Houses Norton and Fisablen can once again have amiable relations so the kingdom's citizens can spend their lives in peace and stability."

Lorist really felt like punching the king in the face.

Now you have what you want, you're advocating peace? You think it's really amazing to have House Fisablen doing your bidding, huh? Who knows what that old fox is planning. Do you really think House Fisablen would submit and return to the kingdom so easily? That old fox is already looking for a way out.

He cooled down after seeing the king's sincere expression. He was well aware that Auguslo knew what Duke Fisablen had in mind, it was just that he didn't mind. In fact, he couldn't be happier if the two houses were on bad terms. He was more than willing to ensure the alliance always had trouble with which to deal. Since he could sit stably in the capital and watch the battle, he couldn't wait for the two houses to tear each other apart.

Lorist bowed slightly.

"House Norton is willing to follow His Majesty's orders. As long as House Fisablen follows the alliance's regulations, we will naturally not consider him an enemy. Being able to get along will benefit the citizens."

Hehe, House Fisablen will just have to wait a little longer to be squashed. Our regulations will do what our weapons now can't.

Lorist wasn't going to just let House Fisablen off the hook. He couldn't be bothered to care whether the duke's granddaughter was the queen or not. He wasn't about to wait for the 'Snake and the Farmer' to happen. Once the beast was locked in a cage, it shouldn't be let out ever again.

"This..."

The king was speechless. Lorist was obviously not going to listen to him and let House Fisablen off the hook. However, it wouldn't be appropriate for him to flip out at the moment. Fortunately, Kenmays, Shazin, Charade, and Eidis came up to offer their greetings, stopping Lorist from saying anything else that might push the situation out of control.

The carriage in which the queen rode finally arrived. Queen Cacanne stepped out. Lorist went up to greet her all the while checking her out. She was quite the beauty; it seemed the Fisablen genes were rather good. The men were handsome and the women beautiful. Sylvia was a step above Cacanne, though. Cacanne's arrogant and stuck-up expression gave Lorist the urge to laugh. He also noticed that Sylvia was standing to the side whispering something to Xanthi without bothering to greet her grandfather and cousin.

After some commotion, everyone returned to their respective carriages and mounts and headed to Rose Palace under Eidis's lead. Since Windbury had come under Norton control, the palace had become a temporary noble abode. Apart from Lorist, nobody was allowed to enter. Now that the Auguslo was there, Rose Palace naturally became his residence. Eidis had had a grand banquet prepared.

After enjoying the delicacies, Kenmays stood up to ask the key question on behalf of all the nobles present.

"Your Majesty, forgive my abruptness, but you mentioned you were going to attack the duchies. Is this true?"

"Of course," the king replied seriously as he put the golden cup in his hand down, "I spoke the truth. The rewards I promised are still up for the courageous to take. I also have an announcement to make in this regard. Duke Fisablen, the Wargod of the Plains, will also deploy his troops for this endeavor. So far, there are only some minor details that have to be discussed. Once these negotiations conclude and the military preparations are ready, we will launch our attack. As the king, I hope I will have the fortune to witness the brave contributions of all the nobles on the battlefield as they fight and contribute to the kingdom."

Auguslo's words inspired loud cheers from the seated nobles. Lorist toyed around with the cup in his hand as he contemplated the king's revelation about Duke Fisablen's participation. Unconsciously, his eyes drifted to the duke and saw him raising a cup to him in a toast before he gulped down the wine.

Interesting, old fellow. I wonder what in the world you're up to...

When the banquet ended, the king asked Lorist, Fisablen, Kenmays, Felim, and Shazin to stay behind. He hesitated for a moment but eventually asked Charade to join them as well. Lorist knew the true meeting was about to begin.

After they took their seats, Augustus came clean with his strategy. His plan was to mobilize the 56-thousand-strong Whitelion Legion. It would be moved to Southern before launching the invasion. The first step was to reclaim the provinces that used to constitute Melein, Messen, and Rimad, and use them as the main base and springboard for further offensives into the core of the four duchies. As it was rather far away, he hoped to first seal Southern and Rimad's border and wait for Whitelion's arrival. The operation was slated for the 8th month.

"Duke Fisablen, weren't you going to lead your frontier legions into battle? Can you tell me where you will attack?" asked Lorist, looking straight at the duke.

Duke Fisablen didn't reply or say anything.

Augustus stepped in.

"It's like this. House Fisablen will mobilize two legions. They will join in after we conquer Messen. Messen is connected to Shabaj and Forund, so I plan to divide our forces in two. Whitelion will work with the frontier legions to attack one duchy while you and the four houses attack the other. Attacking on two fronts will make the duchies unable to regroup and resist. We can only take the duchies down in one move like this."

Lorist laughed coldly.

"It seems House Fisablen really is going to do its best for His Majesty's sake, for them to be willing to mobilize the only two legions they have left. What a rare breed of loyalty."

"Well, Locke, this is the part where we need your agreement," the king said sincerely, "Right now, House Fisablen is just like House Norton, a vassal of the kingdom. Since you two have signed an armistice, as king, I hope the two of you can make up and work together to reunite the empire."

"I hope you will release Third Frontier's captured soldiers so the duke can rebuild the legion. Since you know House Fisablen only has two legions left, you should also know that they will be the grassland barbarians' primary target when they send out both their legions. I hope you will be gracious and give the captured soldiers freedom so they can contribute to the empire's reunification."

Ah, old fox, so this was what you were planning.

Lorist merely smiled coldly without speaking. The king kept going on about thinking of the big picture for the sake of the empire, and that it was all only to be used to attack the duchies. Lorist looked at Shazin and Felim; the two had their heads lowered. He then shot Kenmays a glance and saw the latter was inspecting the teacup in his hand with intense focus. He suddenly felt his heart go cold. He waved smilingly to stop the king's rambling.

"Alright. I agree to release Third Frontier's soldiers. But House Fisablen must make our losses up to us. I'll leave the details to Baron Charade and Duke Kenmays. I am feeling a little unwell and have to excuse myself."

Lorist then left swaggeringly.

Chapter 417

The Allies

"Did you guys come to an agreement?" asked Lorist faintly.

They were in one of the most lavish mansions in the Windbury's noble district. It originally belonged to an Iblian count from Southern but the mansion was sealed after the count received the death sentence for treason four years ago by Duke Fisablen. While Lorist could stay at Rose Palace given his status, he didn't want to mingle with the king, so he chose the mansion as his lodging instead.

It was already almost evening by the time Charade returned. He realized Lorist was seated in his dark study watching night fall. When he heard his question, he undid his cloak and handed it to Jinolio.

"Get me a bottle of wine. The tea I drank all afternoon left no taste in my mouth at all.

"Your Grace, we have come to an agreement. Duke Fisablen is willing to pay one million gold Fordes' worth of horseshoe gold as ransom for the Third Frontier's 40 thousand soldiers. However, he asked they all be armed properly," said Charade as he got a chair and sat beside Lorist.

"Hehe," Lorist chuckled coldly, "It seems House Fisablen still has quite deep pockets. Even though they just gave the second highness a million, they can still take out another for the ransom. It seems we'll have to increase our goods' prices even further. However, his idea of asking us to supply his soldiers with gear is a pretty decent one."

House Fisablen's third frontier legion's soldiers were originally armed with riding armor 103 which they ordered from the Nortons. Each set cost 65 gold Fordes. Following the legion's surrender, their gear was confiscated, but now, Duke Fisablen intended to resupply his whole legion and purchase their freedom with one million gold Fordes. The plan did indeed merit praise.

"Your Grace, this agreement will only pass if you acknowledge it. If you don't, we can continue to bargain. We're not the ones in a rush anyway."

Lorist shook his head slightly.

"It isn't that simple. What do our three allies say?"

Charade received the cup of wine Jinolio poured and enjoyed a sip.

"Count Felim and Count Shazin think since we're all nobles of the kingdom, not to mention our status as allies about to go to war together, we should spare House Fisablen instead of tightening the leash. Duke Kenmays tried his best to negotiate on our behalf, but Duke Fisablen harped on about it already being his baseline and that there was no more room for negotiation; they can't bring out even a single gold coin more than they've already offered. As for His Majesty, he will naturally speak on Fisablen's behalf. He had indicated on multiple occasions to accept what was offered without going overboard."

Lorist sighed.

"Whatever, there's no need to be so calculative at this point, lest others hail us as being stingy. Third Frontier is different from those we've caught in the past. Their family members live in House Fisablen's dominion, and, given that they were forced to surrender, they haven't really been convinced of their loss. They believe we won with underhanded tricks. It's especially the case with their general offing himself after the surrender to bear responsibility for his mistakes. The soldiers loathe us and are filled with the desire for vengeance, we can't use them in our own forces. The longer we keep them, the larger their hate will be. It's best we just let them go."

"Aren't you afraid you're releasing the tiger into the wild? Those soldiers will be quite the formidable force if House Fisablen goes to war with us."

Charade wasn't fond of the idea of releasing the 40 thousand veterans.

"Hehe, a formidable force? Just by themselves?"

Lorist laughed heartily.

"I admit their mental fortitude and morale will make them more powerful in the face of our forces in the future. But so what? Are we afraid of them? True might is not defined by morale, but good equipment, decent fortifications, and coordination over the long term through harsh training and confidence built by numerous battles. When they face us on the field again, they will be defeated again. They will be crushed and

left with nothing. What other might could they possibly have?"

Charade gulped down the rest of the wine.

"Alright. We'll do it as you wish."

"Wait a second," Lorist said, "Don't let Fisablen off so easily. Ask Supervisor Spiel about the worn out armor and weapons we got after exterminating Madras. I believe they're gathering dust and moss in the storehouses. Give that to the legion and tell them that we'll sell them riding armor 103 at a discount. Fifty gold Fordes each should do. We'll outfit them with that if they can bring out another two million. If he's not happy, he can come to me."

"Your Grace, isn't this a little too insidious? Duke Fisablen will definitely spew blood. You're practically giving his face a slap... Nevermind. After all the agreement only stipulates we give them equipment, not what kind."

Lorist breathed a long sigh.

"I didn't want to do this either. I'm afraid the king will spread word of us not taking the bigger picture into account and House Fisablen will hate us all the way to the bone, but I really can't afford House Fisablen regaining their strength. Forget about the king, House Fisablen is our biggest threat."

Charade stopped laughing and sighed as well.

"Are you still mad at Count Felim and Count Shazin? They're our allies but they're dragging us into the mud. Maybe we should consider dissolving the alliance. Actually, there are many in the house who think that, had it not been for the alliance, our influence would have grown even more."

Lorist stood up and walked to the windowsill. He looked at the peaceful scene outside, at the houses and streets.

"Do you think so as well? That the alliance is a burden rather than a boon?"

Charade shook his head.

"I don't think so, but I feel you think a little too highly of our allies. Actually, even their combined might can't rival ours. Ever since our attack on Madras and Iblia, there are

some in the house who started feeling you take care of our allies far too much. For instance, you allowed House Kenmays to occupy their own province and even form their own maritime trading fleet, giving them a huge cut of the profits of maritime trade in Northsea.

"As for Count Felim, not only did we send out troops to retake his dominion, we were also willing to go to battle for his sake, sacrificing tens of thousands of our loyal soldiers in the process. Many officials and knights believe we suffered quite a bit of loss after our conquest of Iblia and House Felim managed to profit a lot.

"There's also Count Shazin. He was just a gold-ranked knight when we met him. If not for our support, how would he even be qualified to be brought up in the same sentence as us?

"I don't personally endorse these views, but I believe you do in fact look after our allies a lot. But I believe you have your reasons, reasons beyond my short-sighted view."

Lorist chuckled.

"Alright, enough with the flattery. If you're trying to flatter me, at least make it seem more convincing. I don't think you don't have any talent for flattering though.

"Maybe you might not believe this, but at first, I didn't really regard the alliance with that much importance. I only wanted to establish a method by which to export our produce. Putting the alliance aside, I was more concerned with the salt merchant committee. I had hoped we could export our goods to other provinces through the committee. The reason I drafted the alliance at first was to put our allies' mind at peace," said Lorist with a lowered head as he paced about.

"Put their minds at peace?"

Charade was quite surprised, this was the first time Lorist had revealed his true motives.

"Yes. We all just happened to have the same goal of trapping the second prince. After that, we managed to eliminate the First Legion. We also sucked all the landed nobles across The Northlands dry apart from our three allies with the excuse that those nobles worked with the second prince to attack our house.

"Think about how The Northlands would have ended up had I not formed the alliance.

It's obvious that the three houses would have united against us. Since we wiped out all the other nobles, the three would have had no choice but to fight an enemy like us as one. Though we can mobilize our forces to defeat them, it would come at a great cost and The Northlands will be even more chaotic.

"That was why I formed the alliance. We will all stretch our influences outward and face the threat of Madras and Iblia together. It helped us gain the precious time we needed. What I didn't expect, however, was how that Kenmays was actually able to run salt merchant committee so well and tied our four houses together with the profits he made. That's why the alliance still exists."

Lorist had already paced about half the room.

"At first, I didn't really regard the alliance much importance. It was after Silowas was attacked and our expedition to exterminate the Hanayabarta kingdom that I realized the alliance's importance. If we didn't have our three allies separating us from the outside world, we wouldn't have been able to develop as steadily and rapidly as we have.

"The Northlands is truly too large. It's a province, but its area is three times that of Delamock. Given how strong house was back then, even if we managed to control the whole Northlands, we would've attracted lots of other hungry factions vying for what we had. Especially given that there are only three ways from The Northlands to the rest of the empire. If those were sealed off, we would lose touch with the rest of the empire. In one sense, it makes it easy to defend, but also hard to rely on others. Bullhorn Bay can reach the outside world now as well, a maritime trade route alone isn't enough to export our produce.

"We might have the strength to hold The Northlands for ourselves, but we have to rely on our allies. Even if we want to occupy the whole province, we have to use dominion relocation instead of tearing up the alliance with military force. House Kenmays was one of our earliest enemies. When I first returned to the dominion, they were laying siege at Maplewoods. Back then, House Norton was turtling up and could only endure their attacks unable to fight back.

Logically speaking, I should hate House Kenmays to the bone, right? But Duke Kenmays's father turned out to be quite the far-sighted man. He instantly made the decision to avoid the brunt of my troops and went to the eastern Northlands to lay his foundations anew out of my grasp and even apologized sincerely. Later, I realized

Kenmays himself was quite the talented man, not unlike yourself. You're better at taking the larger picture into consideration; Kenmays at business and social relations. It was my admiration for his talents that made us friends.

"Among our three allies, Duke Kenmays is the one with the most foresight. He knows as long as he can sustain the alliance, House Kenmays can transition smoothly from a merchant family to a proper house. That is why he toils away to run the committee. At the same time, as the influence of our alliance increases, salt merchant committee's reach grows. It's is a win-win for Duke Kenmays.

"I've heard a local saying that goes, 'A fence requires three posts, a good man requires three helpers'. Even though House Norton has a legacy over three centuries old, we were still a small house at the rural borders of The Northlands and couldn't compare to the ancient, powerful noble houses. In the days of the empire, we were synonymous with loyalty, and that's the reason we stubbornly support the imperial family's true heir, the Andinaq royal family. While taking up the burden is easy, putting it back down is not.

"You should know best how wary the king is of us. We can't go any higher under his wing either. We already have the highest possible vassalic title. Unless we found our own kingdom, which is impossible, there is no ladder left to climb. The second highness wouldn't allow it either. If we rebel, our reputation, earned over two centuries, would be ruined in a single moment. That's not something we can afford. 'Traitor' is not a pleasant lable to have and I don't want to be scorned by thousands either.

"The alliance is incredibly important right now. Think about how we made the king suffer through cooperating with our allies. We managed to rake in huge gains and the king got nothing. In his eyes, the four houses are one unit and he can't target any us individually. All he can do is try and destroy the alliance.

"Without the alliance, he only needs to deal with us. Using rumors, he can destroy our reputation. But now we have our allies, he has to think twice before pulling something like this. That's also why I was enthusiastic about forming the alliance in the beginning. No matter which house the king decides to take on, he has to consider the three others' retaliation.

"The duchies are bait and we have no choice but to bite. Count Felim has always wanted his house's glorious name restored and given that development of his

dominion is bottlenecked, it's no surprise he has turned his attention to the duchies. Count Shazin has always been rather bad at managing his dominion and it's only reasonable for him to want to increase his wealth with plunder. The two swallowed the bait, so we have to stay with them through it all. Just like you said, our invasion will bring us benefits as well. This is a step we have to take to protect the alliance. We shouldn't allow a rift to form so easily.

"I didn't imagine that bastard would bring that fox into this, though. That old fox wants his men back to rebuild his forces. Count Felim and Count Shazin have their vision blurred from the potential benefits. they didn't speak out against his request because they feared the invasion would be called off. That's why I agreed to release them. The only con is that we lost free manpower. We'll have to stop many of our ongoing projects."

Chapter 418

Plotting

Charade left right away. Since Lorist had already given his okay, he had to start preparing the rest. He refused Lorist's request to dine with him and left in a hurry. As the chief administrator, there was much of which he was left in charge so he couldn't just rest right after a decision was made like Lorist could.

Lorist didn't expect Sylvia would return with an angry look right after Charade left. He was quite surprised. He had initially thought Sylvia would return late. At the very least, she should've had dinner with her godmother, Xanthi, instead of rushing over in a bad mood.

She dug herself into his arms and teared up soundlessly like a lost child, distressing him greatly. Sylvia didn't have much mental fortitude, so he was very worried she might develop some kind of mental disorder at some point. After consoling her for a while, he came to know what happened. Xanthi had told Sylvia that after she took the king as her disciple and aided with his breakthrough, she wanted to find a good husband for her. She thought considered the king was a very good candidate, given his high status, impressive reputation, reputable family background, good personal combat skills, and rank as king. If she had wedded him, House Fisablen could've shed the reputation of traitor and even be one of the kingdom's top noble houses, perhaps even get out of their current predicament.

But when the king was at the crucial point of his breakthrough, Xanthi received word of Sylvia's marriage. The news concerned the breakout of war between House Fisablen and the alliance and Iblia's extermination. Xanthi had been really believed her goddaughter would finally be over the Norton kid. So, it really made her wonder what was going on when she heard about their wedding. She couldn't write it off as a joke either; the wedding invitation arrived along with the news. No matter how much she thought about it, she still couldn't remotely guess what was happening. She decided that Lorist must have forced the house to make Sylvia marry him. Unfortunately, she couldn't leave the capital, or she would have slaughtered her way into the Northlands to save Sylvia. The biggest loss was that Sylvia would lose her chance to become queen. She really wondered why the house couldn't delay it for another year.

Counter to the picture Xanthi had in her mind of the situation, Sylvia couldn't be happier. She didn't care for the position queen and was more than satisfied that she could be with the man she loved. After finally meeting the godmother she had relied on from her childhood, she had told her everything about how she felt, including the harsh treatment she had received from the house and how hollow she had felt after she was abandoned and sent to Lorist as a gift. She also told Xanthi about what Lorist had done to nurse her back to health and the effort he had put in to make her his lawfully wedded wife.

Xanthi grew more furious the more she listened. Everything was the duke's fault! She dragged Sylvia over to her grandfather to settle the matter. The girl didn't want to meet the duke but she didn't have much of a say, not with a blademaster dragging her along.

The old woman and the old man argued incessantly and Sylvia became a potted plant watching the affair. She couldn't bear to listen to their fight and tried to move as far away as she possibly could. Unfortunately, she encountered her cousin, Cacanne, touring Rose Palace with a few others, as she tried to escape. Cacanne greeted her as the queen and even sneered at her in front of everyone. The girl couldn't endure the humiliation and slapped her before running away. On the way, she started to feel more and more anxious about what she had just done and came to Lorist to tell him about it.

Lorist laughed heartily when the story finished.

"Dear, it's fine as long as you didn't come out worse for wear. In fact, it was worth it if you gave that queen a slap."

"But... But my cousin is the queen!"

"So what? Slap her if you want."

Lorist wasn't taking it seriously at all. If Auguslo really wanted the alliance's support in the coming war, he couldn't bother with blame games now. He was too cold-blooded to care about the queen's face as long as it didn't affect him anyway. He wasn't the kind of king that would draw his sword for a beauty. Even if he did, he'd still have to consider whether a mere rank 1 blademaster could afford to do so against Lorist.

"Your Grace, His Majesty has arrived," reported Jinolio.

He informed the two that the king seemed rather angered, though he had only brought

two guards with him.

Well, I suppose it's only to be expected. He'd lose quite a bit of face if his wife was slapped without any recourse. No matter how bad their relationship, a husband has to stand up for his wife. Since it isn't appropriate to go after Sylvia, he has to come to me.

Lorist let Auguslo in. He gave Sylvia's rear a light slap as he waited.

"Go hide this out. I'll deal with this for you. I hope you last longer tonight."

Sylvia gave him an embarrassed glance before leaving. He heard the king's loud footsteps as he entered. He didn't bother to stand up. Instead, he remained laid back in his chair as he stretched out his hand.

"Forget this matter and I'll give you 50 catapults. What do you say?"

"Ah," Auguslo mused, "One hundred, and I'll treat it as if it never happened."

"Hehe," Lorist laughed, shaking his head, "Fifty. That queen of yours ain't worth a hundred."

"No way, she is my wife and the kingdom's queen. Don't you think it's a slight on my reputation without at least a hundred catapults?"

The second highness's insistence was already clear.

Lorist withdrew his hand.

"Fine, if you don't want fifty, then you'll get none. Do whatever you want, I'll take it all. Just tell me if you want to end our friendship."

Auguslo was stunned.

"Locke, what's the meaning of this?! Why aren't you following the script?!" he cried.

"Script? What script?"

"Shouldn't we bargain a little more and settle in the middle? With that, we can both step down with our reputations intact. How could you end it all like this?"

Lorist laughed for a moment before his face sunk into a resting bastard face.

"My offer is final, 50 catapults and not one more. You should understand better than anyone that I offered you 50 catapults just because it's you. Do you think I would bother making it up to anyone else?"

"Fine, 50 it is."

Though Augustus knew that it was already Lorist's baseline, he was still not satisfied.

"Why don't you go slap her again and give me a hundred catapults instead?"

Lorist laughed so hard he lost his breath.

"Those 50 and your Whitelion should be more than enough to take down quite a few walled cities and forts. You shouldn't be too greedy. Also, I can't be bothered to slap your wife. Come to think of it, I think you owe me an explanation for why you broke up with my cousin."

Augustus sighed and took a seat.

"A cup of wine."

Jinolio served some wine and immediately left again, closing the door to the study behind him. Lorist got the wine bottle and poured himself a cup as well, which he downed in one gulp, before handing the rest to Augustus. The latter didn't bother with the cup. Instead, he emptied the bottle directly into his mouth. After a loud burp and a sigh he began.

"I have wronged Glacia..."

"Of course you have. She joined you when she was 18 and has been by your side for 20 years. She charged into battle for you, fought wars for you, and served you in the night. She gave you all the time she had in the prime of her youth. Even if you're wary of us, you of all people should understand how loyal she was. I didn't think you'd abandon her so easily and let her leave. I really look down on you, 'Your Majesty'. This just confirmed I was right not to cooperate with you. If this is how you treat a woman so loyal to you, how much easier would you throw us away once you had no further use for us?" mocked Lorist coldly.

"You can't blame me," argued Augustus.

Since Lorist was being forthright, he didn't bother with false pretenses.

"Your forces are strong enough to exterminate nations like it was a mere stroll in the park, yet you're unwilling to help me reunite the empire. Do you really think I can not worry about you? I'm afraid your methods would be far worse if you were in my position. I'm already really tolerant of you. Tell me. Do you think I could really take Glacia as my queen?"

"But, Your Majesty, you know we aren't the least bit interested in the throne. Our house's centuries-long legacy should be ample proof. We pledged allegiance to you because you were the legitimate heir to the royal family. You know I don't have much ambition either. All I want is to develop my dominion and spend my days in peace. It's really unfair for you to be so wary of us."

"No, no..." the second highness said as he shook his head, "Locke, I know you don't have much ambition. I have no choice. If I took Glacia as my wife, as the kingdom's strongest duke, you would influence its affairs one way or another. Given that Glacia is a Norton, you will always back her. Even if you pledge your allegiance to the kingdom, you can't promise that your descendants will do the same. I have to consider the future beyond those currently heading the houses."

"So you're saying you're taking a woman from House Fisablen so they can be our foil? You're willing to give up on Glacia, who has followed you for over two decades, just for that?"

Augustus laughed bitterly.

"I won't deny I did hold the thought at one point. The real reason is to take House Fisablen back into the kingdom including the old empire's two border provinces they control and use them to attack the four duchies. Locke, you know my dream is to rebuild the empire. Through reuniting it, my name will be recorded and remembered in the annals of history.

"Blademaster Xanthi asked that I marry someone from the house. She said Duke Fisablen wouldn't be persuaded otherwise. At first, Princess Sylvia was supposed to be the one I married, but you'd already taken her as your wife. So, I simply chose another. I don't love her. I made it very clear to Glacia that I was doing this for the

empire, nothing more. If she were willing I would have taken her as my second wife, but she would have none of it.

"Do you think I don't feel bad? I really don't have a choice. Since you were unwilling to help me, I had no choice but to ask House Fisablen. There's no way I can defeat the duchies with just three legions and 150 thousand men. I need to borrow the strength of others. House Fisablen has deployed two legions. Coupled with the four houses, we have more than enough to wipe out the duchies now. After reclaiming the eleven provinces and recuperating for a few years, we can finally take back the empire's land the Union now holds."

Lorist sighed deeply. He felt great pity for the king all of a sudden. For the sake of reuniting the empire, he was willing to take any step necessary like he was possessed by a demon. He didn't hesitate to slaughter the traitorous nobles. He was also ready to sacrifice his love to gain House Fisablen's support. But people couldn't come to agreements if they weren't on the same page. Had it not been for his allies, Lorist wouldn't have bothered to help with the upcoming war.

Fine, let's just consider this the last time.

"Alright, I'll join the war this time to sate your desire for revenge. I won't let you command our forces, though. We will decide how and when to attack. I guarantee we won't miss the opportunity should it present itself, so I hope you won't hold me back."

Augusto cracked a smile and gave Lorist a high five.

"Deal!"

The king was quite happy with the results of his visit and refused Lorist's cordial invitation to having dinner together. He said he had to go back to Rose Palace and calm the slapped queen down.

"Do you really think you can handle the scheming old fox?" Lorist couldn't help but ask as Augusto was leaving.

The king smiled brightly.

"What do I have to worry about with House Norton around?"

Lorist shook his head, a bitter smile on his face, as he watched the king leave.

Why, aren't you the real schemer here? You know the one I'm most wary of is Duke Fisablen. So you let them do what they please without much consideration. You understand that if House Fisablen regains their strength, they would slap me down hard first. You're letting them clutch your leg for a chance of surviving and rebuilding. I have been unconsciously made a weapon with which you threaten that old fox...

Chapter 419

Declaration

The second highness soon left; he had to take the queen back to the capital before leading Whitelion to Southern. His trip would take about two months, so the war would only start in the middle of the 8th month. Currently, it was only the 5th.

A large military camp had already been built in Southern. House Norton's Tigersoar and House Felim's Pegasus were the first to arrive. The two legions' camps sandwiched Third Frontier. Firmrock was still stationed at the border with Eastwild to maintain security.

Lorist planned to mobilize Tigersoar, two sentry divisions, and two divisions from Jaeger. Tigersoar would be the vanguard. The sentry divisions and Jaeger's divisions were brought along for training, to provide them with experience. The other reason was to ensure numerical superiority so the Fisablens wouldn't do anything fishy. Even if they were on the same side, Lorist wasn't willing to let his guard down.

Duke Fisablen had been acted within his bounds as of late. Even after seeing that the released soldiers were armed with only old and beaten armor and rusted weapons, he just sighed a few times and resisted the urge to make his objections heard. He moved in to live alongside his soldiers. Xanthi, however, sought out Sylvia to vent her frustration by talking bad about Lorist, forcing Sylvia to get her husband to give out thousands of better weapons and make up for it.

Kenmays mobilized two heavy-armored divisions but they would first meet up with Whitelion before heading to Southern. Shazin mobilized all his forces. All 48 thousand had departed and would arrive in Southern in another ten days. It was apparent that Shazin was rubbing his hands in anticipation of a huge haul. As for House Fisablen, they were mobilizing two legions. Apart from the freed Third Frontier, they also mobilized another legion. They had brought quite a lot along, so their journey would take longer and they were estimated to arrive in Southern in the 6th month.

Apart from the four houses and House Fisablen's forces, the landed Delamockan and Winstonian nobles had brought their private armies. The furthest ones even came all the way from the capital, they didn't bring many men, though. The smallest were

around ten strong, the largest around a hundred. They all traveled together in a huge convoy that totaled roughly ten thousand by the time they arrived. However, it seemed they weren't there to go to war, but rather, to make a killing pillaging.

Much to Lorist's surprise, his lover, Arriotoli of House Dina, also brought around a hundred farmers. She even got into trouble the moment she entered the military camp. It was not surprising that a rare female knight would be teased by the rough crowd. However, she was far too short-tempered and got into a fight immediately, setting off an incident that resulted in one dead and three injured. The whole camp broke into a commotion. Lorist only discovered what was going on after sending Loze to stop the fighting.

Exceedingly troubled, Lorist had no choice but to send Charade to deal with it by paying reparations for and to the dead and injured. However, not only did Arriotoli refuse to let it go, she even demanded Lorist avenge the seven casualties on her side. Lorist had no choice but to have her men stationed at the campsite of the sentry divisions and 'punish' her in his unique way in order to calm her down.

Despite the various commotions, it was soon the 20th day of the 6th month. House Fisablen's second legion arrived. The moment Lorist heard the report Firmrock sent from the borders, he knew both he and Auguslo had fallen for it. The legion mobilized wasn't a frontier legion like they had thought, but rather House Fisablen's newly formed reserve legion, 35 thousand grassland barbarians graced with 50 thousand war horses and a large number of leather armor and weapons for Third Frontier, they looked more like proper light cavalry again.

That old fox! thought Lorist furiously as he glanced at Duke Fisablen. It so happened that the other was looking at him and even shot him a slight smile.

Lorist nodded and had Loze increase their guards. He had thought House Fisablen would mobilize both frontier legions and was wondering whether he should cause Duke Fisablen some trouble during the attack so they would lose more men and further weaken them. But now, there was no need.

The reserve legion's loss wouldn't impact the house in the slightest. After all, grassland barbarians were a dime a dozen. As long as the house had money, they could recruit as many as they wanted. Duke Fisablen was obviously trying to save Third Frontier and use the reserve legion for the main charge. Though Lorist had gone through the trouble of arming Third Frontier with poor armor, the duke now had a good excuse to

not send them into battle. He had truly miscalculated.

On the 27th day of the 6th, Lorist received Tarkel's report. The four duchies were aware of their movements and even knew the war would erupt in 8th. So far, Handra, Farkel, and Forund had prepared. Each had formed a legion 45 thousand strong and were preparing to form a second. At the moment, the three legions were on the march to Shabaj. They would likely arrive at Rimad by the 30th of the 7th. They would later set up fortifications with the intent of bogging them down at Rimad. They wanted to turn this into a war of attrition.

Additionally, ever since exterminating Melein, Duke Shabaj had moved their capital to Messen Castle in Messen. After their defeat during the war between the four houses and House Fisablen, they had sought to defend themselves from further attacks by stationing the duchy's second legion in Rimad, the first legion, 45 thousand strong, in Messen, and a division of 12 thousand at Egret Swamp to prevent Augustlo from attacking there.

Even if Shabaj still had a population of around 800 thousand, having a standing force of 100 thousand was definitely no easy feat. Hence why the second legion relied mainly on the support of the three other duchies. When word of Andinaq's upcoming invasion spread, Duke Shabaj requested aid from his allies and held a recruitment drive.

Messen used to be House Melein's hereditary dominion. After it was conquered, the whole Melein family, save a seven-year-old boy and a four-year-old girl left at the imperial capital, were put to death. Though Duke Shabaj had moved his capital there, he couldn't capture the citizens' hearts, resulting in the snail-paced war preparations. Nowadays, the duke could only rely on his first legion. It was the greatest pillar of his house. He planned to join up with the three other duchies before heading to Rimad.

Lorist looked at the map for quite a while before he sent someone to call Duke Fisablen, Felim, and Shazin for an emergency war council. During the council, he briefly summarized the intel he had.

Pointing at the map, he said, "So far, Handra, Forund, and Farkel's reinforcements have yet to arrive. While Whitelion hasn't arrived for us either, given how urgent the situation is, I don't want to wait. Let's attack as soon as possible and force the reinforcements outside the border."

Shabaj contained three provinces. Rimad and Messen were former dominions of Melein. The other province was Jigzai, the original hereditary dominion of House Shabaj. Originally, both Jigzai and the neighboring province, Samora, belonged to them. But when Auguslo was trapped in Frederika, he asked Duke Melein to reinforce him by deploying his troops at Samora and fight with the four ditches. After Melein fell, Shabaj occupied Rimad and Messen while transferring their former dominion, Samora, to Farkel.

The duchy now had an oblong shape. If Lorist and the rest could barge their way into Jigzai, they could gain the initiative. They could attack Forund in the south or Farkel in the west. As a result, the four duchies would be forced into a passive, reactionary position. Shabaj would also have no choice but to turtle up and defend while the other three couldn't reinforce it at all. They would only be able to protect their borders.

The others were all experienced veterans who could tell his decision was the best choice under the circumstances. Felim and Shazin weren't a problem since they were part of the alliance. They all turned to Fisablen. If he insisted they wait for Whitelion and Auguslo's arrival before launching the offensive, they would pretend Lorist didn't bring anything up and get ready for a long, grueling war.

Duke Fisablen looked at the map wordlessly.

Finally, he turned to Lorist and asked, "How do you all plan to attack?"

"Simple," Lorist said as he pointed at Jigzai, which belonged to Shabaj, "House Fisablen's reserve legion and Third Frontier, and House Felim's Pegasus are all light cavalry. You can drive straight into the province and avoid the citadels all the way to Jigzai. Seal off Forund and Farkel's borders and pillage the two duchies to force them to send their reinforcements there instead.

"Count Shazin's forces and the nobles will go to Messen and encircle Messen Castle. We just need Shabaj's first legion trapped. I believe our surprise attack will catch the duke off-guard. They believe our attack will only start in the 8th. Their preparations aren't finished yet, so we can catch them with their pants down. Duke Shabaj can only stay and defend Messen Castle.

"As for Tigersoar, they will deal with Shabaj's second legion stationed in Rimad before regrouping with Shazin at Messen. We can plan our next moves then. Your forces will have to hold the borders until then."

Felim and Shazin both agreed. Fisablen, on the other hand, just stared at Lorist.

"Two conditions," he finally said, "First, you may not sabotage my legions. Second, you will pledge the logistics support is kept fair and is the same as that of the other houses. Swear to the Wargod in the name of House Norton's ancestors. I won't trust you otherwise."

Lorist blushed, some sweat trickled down his neck. He had thought he was the only one cautious of his opponents. He didn't Fisablen also saw him as a crook. Both sides were incredibly wary of a huge commotion breaking out.

"Fine, I'll swear," Lorist said, "But you must also swear your allegiance to Andinaq with Singwa as your witness and pledge to be serious in this war. Only if you swear publicly can I treat you fairly."

"Will you withdraw Firmrock if I do?" countered the duke.

"No. That's a different matter entirely. Firmrock is just a garrison force. They aren't part of this war, what does your oath have anything to do with them?"

The two argued for the rest of the meeting before they arrived at a compromise and made their oaths publicly. Lorist was quite satisfied that he didn't have to withdraw Firmrock from the borders, and Duke Fisablen was assured he wouldn't have to worry about being caught in a trap.

"One more question. How will the spoils be split?" asked the duke.

Lorist gave it some thought.

"You keep what you get. To prevent conflict, we can even designate which areas will fall into whose jurisdiction."

"Alright," agreed the duke as he stretched out his hand.

Chapter 420

The Battle Begins

On the 5th day of the 7th month, Year 1781, the four house alliance launched a surprise attack on the four central dutchies' Shabaj.

On the 6th day of that month, House Norton's Tigersoar attacked the dutchy's second legion. The battle lasted for half a day before the legion finally crumbled. The legion's general, the gold-ranked knight, Morind, escaped with what remained of the once-proud legion and withdrew to Farkel.

On the month's 9th day, House Shazin's and various other nobles' forces encircled Messen Castle. Duke Shabaj guessed that his enemy was just above 100 thousand strong and didn't dare to send the legion he had in the city out. He huddled in the castle and waited for reinforcements.

On the 11th day, Felim's Pegasus and Duke Fisablen's reserve and third frontier legion arrived at Jigzai and began raiding the region. The troops defending the area soon fell into complete chaos. The neighboring provinces -- Samora of Farkel and Freewood of Forund -- were greatly alarmed. The reinforcements originally intended for Shabaj were diverted to Samora.

Lorist's sudden attack had caught the four duchies completely off guard. They had focused their attention on Auguslo, not much had been spared for anyone else on his side. It didn't help that the logistics of effectively gathering information on an entire kingdom's nobles, each acting independently, was impractical. Do not forget that Lorist's Furybear was quite the novelty in its day. No one else had thought of setting up a network of professional informants.

The dutchies had both considered themselves and been considered by others the enemies of the four houses since the day of their defeat at the hands of Lorist at the behest of Duke Fisablen. Shabaj, who shared a border with Southern, had created a second legion to prepare for the inevitable, eventual invasion and sealed its borders with the four houses' lands. Felim who resided in Southern also sent Pegasus to watch the border. The two sides had apparently completely antagonized each other; it was no longer a question of if they would go to war, but when.

The locked border prevented people from crossing, but with it, information. The duchies' informants had to send their reports from Southern to the imperial capital, through the two southwestern provinces, from there it traveled all the way to Handra, before crossing over to Shabaj. Though they were only two provinces apart, the information had to make a huge detour and it took up to three months to reach the other of the border.

The battle in Southern had happened three years ago by now. The reports the duchies managed to obtain were only about the conflict between House Fisablen and House Norton, such as Firmrock's attack on Boblige and the long-term defense they had set up on the border. They also got word of how Duke Fisablen had defeated Jaeger and House Felim's development of its new dominion.

The duchies had dropped their guard. Unlike Augustus, the four houses' attention wasn't focused on them. They were still caught up in a war with House Fisablen. Given that the two sides were still entangled, the duchies reasoned they wouldn't be a target for quite a while. They regretted believing House Fisablen about how the four houses were nobles of Andinaq, causing them to send their forces to reinforce the duke. In the end, not only did they manage to antagonize the alliance, they also suffered a huge loss, nearly 60 thousand elite infantry.

Just three years had passed since the loss but they had already dropped their guard. The way they saw it, with House Fisablen giving them trouble in the great northeastern plains, the alliance wouldn't have enough resources to turn on them. So, they focused on Andinaq's king. They were aware that he hated them to the bone for betraying the empire and had had his eye on them for a long time. They didn't dare to be careless and overlook the man called the new generation's war god.

Hence why the news of Augustus breaking through and becoming a blademaster was such a shock. His tour of the northeastern territories drew their attention even more. He even convinced Duke Fisablen to return to the fold. By the time news of the planned expedition reached their ears, it was already well into the 5th month. Even they would require some time to rally their armies. Shabaj's reinforcements would arrive only barely in time.

Each duchy normally only had one standing legion, with the exception of Shabaj. The moment there was an invasion, they would rally more men, split the usual force in half, and fill their ranks until they became two legions -- their experienced veterans leading the new recruits. This way, the overall strength of their legions didn't decrease by

much. One of the legions would stay at home and defend the duchy from whence it hailed and the other would mobilize to meet the enemy. If the war dragged on the two legions would switch regularly so neither ever became too fatigued.

After receiving word that Auguslo was going to attack them through Southern, Handra, Farkel, and Forund all ran conscription campaigns and sent their legions to Rimad whilst keeping a close eye on the king's movements. The king was going to return to the imperial capital to move Whitelion from the borders of the two southwestern provinces to Southern. By the time that was completed, it would already be the 8th month, and the attack would only take place in the middle of the month. The reinforcements would've erected their defenses around Rimad already. The only thing left was to wait.

The duchies weren't in a rush and did everything according to plan. They indeed hadn't predicted that Lorist would attack more than 50 days earlier than planned without waiting for the king. It completely flabbergasted the dukes.

Didn't they say Auguslo's Whitelion was still only at Delamock? Weren't they going to join up with Duke Kenmays's two heavy-armored divisions? Given their speed, it would take at least a month more to reach Southern! Why has The Northlands and House Fisablen started already? Aren't they afraid of the king's rage?

Dukes Farkel and Forund snapped out of their days, and started to panic, when news came from the frontlines. Felim's Pegasus and Duke Fisablen's two light cavalry legions had barged into their duchies and begun raiding the settlements. Not only did they take wealth and riches, but also citizens. The two dukes cursed Duke Fisablen angrily for forgetting how they helped him and betraying them. They conscripted more men and started setting up defenses at their borders. At the same time, they asked Duke Handra for help. Given the situation, neither of them could be bothered with Duke Shabaj.

Their forces were mainly infantry, though, they lacked cavalry entirely. They had agreed to aid the duke three years earlier because they had been guaranteed a steady supply of steeds but the plan was ruined by Duke Norton. Not only did he break the trade route with House Fisablen, he also unknowingly disrupted their supply of steeds.

Though there were some in the duchies, there weren't enough to form a proper cavalry unit. As a result, their forces were completely helpless when faced with Fisablen's two

legions and Felim's Pegasus. With their hit-and-run tactics, Farkel and Forund's garrisons were forced to act defensively. They had to sit in the settlements and wait to be attacked. This persisted until the reinforcements arrived Samora's border.

Once the three legions secured the border, however, they suffered horrendously. Duke Fisablen's suggestion to leave Third Frontier at the border to hold the enemy's reinforcements while the reserves barged into Forund through Freewood all the way to Forund's capital, Paetro, had struck home... hard. The fires of war spread across the dutchy. Duke Forund was completely overwhelmed. He tried to hold down the fort as best he could whilst he sent word of his predicament to the other dukes.

Lorist had Tigersoar press forward and destroy all the crucial forts and attack the village strongholds around Rimad after eradicating the dutchy's second legion. At the same time, he instructed his two divisions from Jaeger to sweeping across the province and capture all the civilians and scattered soldiers. They were to be moved to The Northlands.

Loze finally arrived in Messen two months after the war began and join up with Shazin. The whole of Rimad had already been swept through. Only wasteland was left.

Duke Shabaj, who had been cooped up in the castle, finally made the decision to break out. The city had a native population of 70 thousand, which had swollen to 100 thousand with the refugees from the countryside. There were enough people to defend the city and the food stores could last for a year but the duke was getting too worried. He hadn't just sat around and waited for the hand fate had dealt him to be revealed. He tried his best to engage Shazin's forces but he didn't gain much.

The reason was simple. Shazin had a stalwart defense. The city had three main gates and House Shazins' forces could be split into two light infantry and two light cavalry divisions. Count Shazin stationed his two infantry divisions at the two side gates. He left the main gate to the other nobles. Their mission was to hold the camp when Shabaj's first legion attacked so the count could lead his two light cavalry divisions in a counterattack.

By putting up a false show of strength, Shazin managed to dupe the duke for a while, during which he hurriedly pressed the construction of the small forts. By the time the duke was aware of what was going on, the forts were already complete. Duke Shabaj had once tried to use three divisions to attack the stronghold near the north gate, but Shazin's two light cavalry divisions' responded with an easy pincer. The men were

forced to drop their equipment to escape. The attack cost the duke five thousand men.

He didn't sally forth again. He might be a rank 1 blademaster but he hadn't reached the rank through his own efforts and insight. He had relied on large amounts of precious medicines to raise his strength, he feared death immensely and never led his men personally. It was so bad he didn't dare send his rank 2 blademaster bodyguard. If he did, Shazin would've suffered quite severe losses.

The duke had sent out lots of informants and messengers to request aid, only a few ever returned. Those that did, brought bad news. When they reported the situation of his allies, the other dutchies, the duke slumped into his throne, despondent. Farkel had sealed its borders and Forund couldn't even adequately protect itself. They obviously couldn't send help. Staying in the castle only delayed the inevitable. When he was informed of Tigersoar's arrival, he only had one thought: escape! Escape as soon as possible!

Loze was caught off guard completely. He had decided to let Tigersoar rest before launching the final assault, but, that night, the city's gates opened and what appeared to be every able-bodied man in the city charged out.

The duke had one division occupy the enemy, and escaped towards Jigzai. Loze and Shazin, just about to go to sleep, heard the alarms and thought the duke was launching a surprise attack. As they ordered men around and had others gather information, they realized -- about an hour later -- that something was off. Some soldiers reported that the gates had been left open. The strongholds attacked also sent word that one of the duchy's regiments had escaped.

The two finally realized what was happening and set off in pursuit. Before leaving, though, they had the men move in to occupy the city and wrote to Lorist. The city's easy conquest was completely unexpected. Lorist hurried there with Jaeger.

He arrived just as another war was about to start. Both Loze and Shazin had left to pursue the duke. When the nobles realized the city had been taken, they demanded to be let in to collect their spoils, but, without any such orders from their superiors, the occupying forces denied them entry. The nobles' ire had risen to the point they were about to attack the city.

Seeing the noble's men chanting "Enter the city, plunder wealth, get women!", Lorist put a quick end to the confrontation. He gathered the nobles and divided the spoils.

He needed manpower and Shazin needed wealth, he would take the citizenry, and Shazin would keep everything in the castle. The rest of the city was left to the nobles, divided by lot-drawing. Each noble could scour his lot to his heart's content and keep whatever he found, minus the people, of course. Lorist put Jaeger in charge of overseeing the looting and keeping everyone honest.

Some of the nobles were dissatisfied that they wouldn't get any women but eventually yielded. Once everything was decided and arranged the citizenry were quickly moved out of the city. Cries and wails burst from the city walls like a damn overflowing.

Lorist shut his eyes.

"Tell the civilians we're protecting them by chasing them out. If they fall into nobles' hands, or that of their men... well, you know what'll happen," he told Jinolio.

Chapter 421

War

Lorist and his two thousand guards were on their way to Jigzai. It had been more than ten days since the attack on Messen and Lorist couldn't have been busier. Organizing everything for moving Messen's citizens to The Northlands was taking up most of his time. They had no homes anymore, so they were now considered the lowest class of people and they hated the Nortons for it.

Lorist had no real say in the matter, though. They were at war and he had protected them as best he could already. Even so, he couldn't stop them from losing their wealth, thus their hatred. At the same time, not only did he have to deal with their accommodation and food on the journey, the old, the female, and the young had to be allocated carriages. It was beyond confounding and Lorist could only escape after Camorra arrived and took over.

On the way, the conscripts they passed cheered, hands full of spoils and cruddy weapons. They made way for the entourage respectfully. Lorist's face was dark and he couldn't be bothered to regard the ragtag bunch, though. To him, his so-called allies were far more worthy of hate than his enemies.

He had ensured the 100 thousand citizens' safety, while these conscripts raided the city for wealth. For that, they were willing to dig deep into the ground and level buildings. After they were done, they even set fire to the buildings. Had Lorist not stopped them quickly, the whole city might have burned to the ground. When he stepped in, however, they dared declare they had been given these areas and could do whatever they wanted.

Lorist had hanged the nearest ten men right there in a fit of rage. If they had really been allowed to set fire to the areas they were allowed to raid, what would the others in the city do? Were they going to burn together when the fire spread? Many of the conscripts had experienced the civil war. They were accustomed to such behavior. Some wanted to burn everything down to vent frustration at bad plunder, while others just went with the flow.

Even as Lorist began moving the former citizens out, the nobles and their men plunged

the province into chaos. The provincial capital had fallen, but many villages were still ripe for the picking. The nobles unsatisfied with their plunder in the city turned their attention to the countryside. Messen's cleansing had begun.

The nobles' retinues were very different from House Norton's military. House Norton's men were disciplined and professional, the nobles' retinues were barely any different from bandits. They killed, raped, and burned without restraint. Some even tried to capture villagers and sell them to Lorist after hearing House Norton needed people, but Camorra quickly put a stop to it.

He told Lorist with utmost seriousness that he shouldn't be buying people. If he did, it would set a precedent and establish a good excuse for the noble's to continue capturing people. If the house were involved in slave trading, they would be no different from slave owners and that went against the oaths they had taken to be against the slave trade. If the nobles knew they weren't buying, they would instead turn their sights on wealth and women. House Norton could then take in the ruined villagers, who would, in turn, be thankful.

Lorist knew Camorra was right. Though he sympathized with the poor villagers, he had to steal his heart. House Norton's forces could easily wipe the noble's out but it wasn't in his ability to stop this. He didn't have the authority. This was war, a war on Grindia. The noble's and their men's behavior was only to be expected. It was really common for nobles. Noble houses with oaths against such practices were exceedingly rare.

All Lorist could do to console himself was repeat the phrase, 'see no evil', in his mind. No matter what, the nobles were his allies. Fighting one's allies for the enemy's sake was something only an imbecile would do. Lorist pretended he saw nothing and made it to Jigzai.

A messenger sent by Loze two days earlier reported that Duke Shabaj had successfully escaped with his family to Farkel. However, as the duke had sacrificed part of his cohort every time he was about to be captured, only about five thousand men of the dutchy's first legion remained. The remaining ones had been exterminated for trying to stop Tigersoar and Shazin's two light cavalry divisions.

Shabaj was completely lost. Apart from a few strongly defended towns, nothing remained. Even Duke Shabaj had to escape, further sealing its fate. The few forts and towns would either surrender or be flattened.

Farkel was going to send three legions to aid Shabaj. They managed to secure Rimad and erect a strong defense to hold off Pegasus, Fisablen's reserve legion, and Third Frontier' assault. Forund wasn't in as good a position, Freewood had already been breached. Even its capital, Paetro, located in Prolina wasn't safe. It frequently came under attack.

Fortunately, Handra's two newly formed legions were sent to Forund. Duke Farkel also managed to recruit two legions of troops and sent one to Samora to reinforce Forund and the other to reinforce Paetro. It gave Duke Forund a decent boost. He also managed to rally two legions. In total, there were five legions, roughly 200 thousand men, manning Freewood's defenses. The front was currently at a stalemate.

Lorist was quite satisfied with how everything had turned out. He still had the initiative. The three remaining duchies had suffered because they didn't have strong cavalry to counter the highly mobile light cavalry. Though Farkel and Forund both had defenses set up and manned by nearly 300 thousand men, they had to defend two fronts. The alliance and House Fisablen only had to occupy Jigzai and launch an attack on either front. Forund and Farkel could only fight back passively.

Lorist decided to take a breather. There was no need to send light cavalry to attack strongly fortified defenses. He would wait until Auguslo and Whitelion arrived. Reports from the rear were that upon hearing of the conquest of Shabaj, Auguslo doubled the march and had now entered Southern. It would still be another 30 days before he arrived.

Actually, the conquest of Shabaj did not net the alliance and House Fisablen much.

Shazin was one of the few who fared better. He had gotten 300 thousand gold Fordes' worth of plunder, while Lorist got around 200 thousand from single-handedly conquering a few towns and citadels. Felim and Fisablen got about the same: less than 100 thousand. Each of the minor houses got a few thousand.

The biggest gains from conquering Shabaj was manpower and food. Apart from House Norton, which needed more manpower to develop Southern, Shazin also took around three thousand households with three to four people in each back to his dominion. They were influenced by Lorist in that they focused on keeping families together. Only by doing so could the new citizens acclimatize more easily to their new environment and become loyal subjects of the ruling house.

What troubled Lorist was that Duke Fisablen had similar intentions. However, his method was crueler in that he only took in young men and women and abandoned the old and the weak, causing the outskirts of his captive camp to be littered with white heads. They begged to be reunited with their family but their cries fell on deaf ears.

When Duke Fisablen sought Lorist out and asked him to open the borders of Southern so he could send the spoils home, the latter sighed deeply and told the duke he was rather unwilling to let House Fisablen take so many youths into its dominion because it would only strengthen them. But as he had pledged to treat House Fisablen as he would his allies, he would have Firmrock open the borders nevertheless. However, he requested the youths be allowed to reunite with their family members so they wouldn't be torn apart because of the move.

Duke Fisablen nodded and left. Lorist then saw the camps' gates open, letting the old folk flood in. Cries of gratitude echoed across the plain and Lorist penned a border-crossing permit. Only after sitting down did he slap himself in the forehead upon realizing that he had fallen for the old fox's trick.

It was obvious the scene of tearing the families apart was made for him. The old fox was worried he wouldn't be willing to open the borders and let him through, so he came up with this trick. Otherwise, he would've chased the old people away already. He knew if he really abandoned them, the youths would hate him and his house. There was simply no way the old fox wouldn't understand such a simple principle. The reason he separated them was to stimulate Lorist's sympathy and allow them to cross the border.

Lorist smiled bitterly.

Whatever, there's no need to go through so much trouble. No matter how he grows his house's might, he can't catch up to me. I already have the right timing, terrain, and men on my side. If I really allow the old fox to turn the tables, I'd bang my head against a flagpole until I die.

The old fox was even more careful of him than he was of the duke. It was obvious from how he made Lorist swear to not set any traps for their forces.

Jigzai used to be House Shabaj's hereditary dominion and it was also an agricultural province, having wide expanses of flat land. It was the perfect place for light cavalry troops to show their prowess. Following the When word of Tigersoar's attack on the

few citadels and town spread, as well as the defeat and retreat of Shabaj's 12 thousand troops stationed at Egret Swamp by Els's Jaeger Legion, it could be said that apart from the duke himself, the Shabaj duchy was already exterminated.

That war was far too cruel on the duchy. All three of its provinces were torn apart from the war. It wasn't due to the mere loss of wealth, but rather, the large droves of population that were forced to move away. Before the war, the duchy had a population of around 800 thousand, but only less than 300 thousand survivors remained in the three provinces. Apart from the casualties of war or the refugees that escaped to Farkel, almost half of the population of the duchy had been moved to the dominions of the four houses of The Northlands or House Fisablen, causing development in those provinces to stagnate in the following two decades after the war.

On the 7th day of the 9th month, the late Augusto finally arrived at the camp in Jigzai with House Kenmays's two heavy-armored divisions.

Following three days of rest, Augusto held a military council and discussed how they should proceed with the attack on Farkel and Forund. The situation was quite clear-cut. Farkel and Forund were in full-on defense mode while Andinaq held the initiative for attack and could hit wherever they wanted. Whether it be the defense line of Farkel and the borders of Samora or the defense line of Forund at Freewood, as long as either one was breached, the other duchy would also be affected.

If the extermination of the eight garrison legions at those locations were successful, then Forund, Farkel, and even Handra's extermination would be at bay. To the three duchies, their current predicament was far more dangerous than the first prince's invasion a decade ago. That was especially so in the case of Shabaj's extermination and the infiltration of Andinaq's forces into the heart of the duchy. From both terrain and military might, the three duchies were at a disadvantage.

Augusto hoped to leave only one light cavalry legion to hold back Farkel's three garrison legions and focus all the other military resources on breaching Forund's defense line at Freewood. Even though there were up to five garrison legions there, that defense line was spread out and the terrain was flat, which made it even more suitable for a cavalry attack.

Augusto was going to use Whitelion and House Kenmay's two heavy-armored divisions to breach one of the spots on the defenses to make an opening while House Fisablen's reserve legion and Third Frontier, House Felim's Pegasus, House Shazin's

two light cavalry divisions and Lorist's Tigersoar would enter Forund through the opening and attack Handra and Farkel from the rear, deciding the outcome in one battle.

The king said, "The three duchies are an egg. Their only hard points are the two defense lines before us, and as long as we can breach it, we'll be able to taste the sweet, delicious yolk within. I believe that the might of our combined forces is unmatched and they won't be stopped. Wars are won through might and things are fell through fights. The four central duchies will soon be history, so I wish that you will give this your all and make wondrous contributions to the unification of the empire."

Chapter 422

Trenches and Mud Walls

"March forward!" cried one of the company lieutenants as he drew his sword.

He instructed his troops to push the shield carts filled with sacks of mud forward.

Auguslo's Whitelion had been attacking the defenses around Freewood for six days and five night without rest. The legion had lost ten thousand men without punching a hole through the defenses. It wasn't Auguslo's fault; the three duchies' troops knew the defenses were integral to their survival. Even though their losses were easily three times greater than their enemy's, they held the line. Loud rhythmic drums echoed continuously across the battlefield. Whitelion's men pushed their large shield carts and advanced to the trenches with great difficulty. They used the earth the shield them from the incoming bolts and tossed the sacks into the trenches before they turned to run. Soon, the trenches were mostly filled and soldiers carrying wooden boards rushed forward and laid them across the trench.

Four men were struck down along the way. One was now dead, the other three injured. They had all been recovered, though. The dead one had unfortunately been struck in the head. The bolt had gone through his left eye and stirred his brain. The only consolation for his comrades was that he had likely not suffered. The trench's filling didn't bring joy to the men's faces, though. They looked infinitely fatigued; they were numb to joy or any sense of accomplishment, there were simply too many trenches still left unfilled. All the land from their feet to the horizon was covered in trenches like the scars on a slave's back. They had already filled six kilometers in the last two days, and there was at least as much still left.

"They're likely digging even more as we speak," said Kenmays.

Nobody had expected this. The attackers had taken a month's respite after their first offensive as they waited for the rest of the invasion force to catch up. The enemy had used the quiet wisely, though; they had dug a massive network of trenches for who knew how many kilometers. The true extent of the network was still unknown, but its sheer scale was slowing being unveiled as the pushed forward. A single cord was easy to break, but a net was infinitely more resilient.

Lorist was reminded of a saying in his past life. He couldn't remember the exact words, but it basically said that war was the best teacher. The mudscape that now confronted him certainly didn't contradict the saying. Trenches were nothing new to the continent, but in all of Grindia's history, no such an extensive network had ever been built. Defenses were always focused on specific points, usually castles or forts. Even when forces were small they would at most dig a trench or two around an encircling mud wall.

House Norton's catapults had changed everything. The castles that towered over the landscape were now basically just target practice. And none of the other defensive structures were worth anything. Tigersoar's sweep of Andinaq in its quest to restore Auguslo's throne had proven the catapult's supremacy.

During the battle for Southern three years ago, Lorist had used trenches and arrows to form a perfect counter against House Fisablen's light cavalry. During a field battle, they also used the catapults to crush 70 thousand infantrymen and obtain victory. He never thought the battle would inspire the duchies so much. Auguslo thought Whitelion's strength and Lorist's 50 catapults alone could easily breach the trenches and mud walls. He didn't think the walls and trenches would extend from hell's gate to heaven's door. The realization of this reality made everyone despair. How were they supposed to continue fighting? Was this some kind of mining or digging game?

During the first day of the offensive, only a thousand soldiers manned the defenses. When they were bombarded by rocks about the size of 50 human heads, they broke and fled. Whitelion managed to fill 14 trenches and breach 21 walls, but they got no spoils. All the enemies had escaped.

They pressed on on the second day, only to discover after advancing 200 meters that another trench and mud wall stood in their way. This time, the defenders were far braver. They resisted about half a day of catapult bombardment with the cover of their mud walls and used their crossbows to kill tens of Whitelion men in exchange for the loss of 200 of their own.

Whitelion took two whole days to make a few paths across the trench before they advanced again, only to be greeted by yet more trenches and mud walls about 300 meters on. Everyone was furious.

What the hell, there are only a few thousand defenders and they aren't really resisting either. All they know is how dig trenches non-stop! Can this even be called a war?!

Augustus could stand it no longer and gave an order he would come to regret. He ordered the legion to stop pushing the shield carts to fill the trenches. Instead, he had them rush forward and cross the trenches with their wooden boards. He was trying to conquer the trench area as soon as possible. So, Whitelion sent a division of sword-and-shield soldiers to mount an attack. They soon eradicated the enemy in the vicinity and they moved forward.

However, the trench area was much, much larger than normal. By the time the division almost disappeared from sight, cries and sounds of fighting could be heard in the distance all of a sudden. Augustus was fumbling about anxiously like an ant in a heated wok as his cavalry wasn't able to reinforce them one bit given the presence of trenches all around. The few people he sent to check the situation were killed. But if he were to send a large number of people, while they could reinforce the troops, he wouldn't be able to receive any reports on the situation and would only hear the sound of fighting get louder.

The ones there were intelligent enough to know that they'd been caught in a trap. But the problem was apart from Whitelion three remaining divisions, they only had House Kenmays's two heavy-armored divisions and Count Shazin's three light-infantry divisions, totaling about 90 thousand men. While the total number of duchy troops was around 300 thousand, most were infantry. There was no way Lorist and the rest could send their cavalry out as footmen as reinforcements.

The problem was that Whitelion's sword-and-shield forces had charged too fast. Augustus didn't think something like this would come to pass. Half the battle was already lost if he couldn't even grasp the situation. Right now, all he had to consider was whether he should send out all his infantry.

It wasn't an easy decision. Duke Fisablen had figured out Augustus intended to breach the defenses a few days after the attack began. That defenses were was manned by 200 thousand garrison troops. It was all the soldiers Duke Forund could muster.

The attacking sword-and-shield forces probably fell into a trap and were surrounded. The plan was possibly to lure Augustus into sending even more forward so they could exterminate his 100 thousand infantry with their numerical advantage. In the end, the cavalry would be left behind staring at the defenses, unable to do anything.

Augustus discussed the matter with Lorist before finally deciding to send the two heavy-armored divisions in as reinforcements. It was crucial that he knew what was

going on. But, just as he was pretending to mobilize, the remnants of his forces returned. They were in a rather sorry state; less than three thousand of the original ten thousand had returned. One colonel and four captains had died. Among the three thousand left, the two highest ranking officers were lieutenants. One was lightly injured, the other hurt rather badly. Most also seemed injured to some degree.

The attack proceeded unnaturally well. After they wiped out the thousand-man garrison, the next target they had encountered were garrison soldiers in thousand-man units. The enemy couldn't hold against the sudden appearance of the division. Before they noticed, they had advanced by a kilometer only to discover three completely equipped infantry divisions waiting for them.

It was like they were being clubbed on the head while under the assault of the three elite infantry divisions; the casualties were great. The only thing about which to be glad was that the trenches behind them had served to protect them from pursuit after the colonel gave the order to retreat.

They didn't expect that the trenches and walls weren't used for defense. Another infantry division had used the mud walls as cover to circle around them and seal their escape route. The division crumbled quickly. The colonel and the couple captains had fought with all they had to break through, sacrificing themselves in the process. Not long after, the enemies cheered as they raised a few decapitated heads.

The failure was a slap to Augustus's face. He, who had thought it easy to breach these defenses, was given a harsh wake-up call. He began to ask the others for ideas, but no one had any good methods to deal with this. Neither the deeply experienced Duke Fisablen nor the witty Lorist could come up with a comprehensive plan.

Lorist was the most shocked by this strategy out of everyone.

Looks like they're not as stupid as I thought. They're using trench warfare.

A few informants hidden in Paetro sent eagle messages that reported that almost all the civilians had been mobilized to dig trenches and erect mud walls across the 50-kilometer stretch from the front line to Paetro. Even the informants themselves were conscripted.

They've really gone and done it! cursed Lorist.

It was obvious the mud walls and trenches were specifically designed to counter his

catapults and carroballistae. The impressive weapons were now spayed and neutered. Without elevated ground, they couldn't target effectively. There were no targets and all they could do was demolish the inconsequential walls. The duchy's garrisons also snuck around in the trenches like rats. Augustus was well aware of this. In the next three days, he had no choice but to fill up trench after trench to establish a new path forward. What he didn't see coming was that the filled trenches were dug up again overnight. The legion's morale fell after seeing their hard work undone. Not only that, the enemy even began to act more actively. They harassed the men at every opportunity.

Currently, Augustus was caught in a tough dilemma. The trenches they filled were dug up in the night, and the soldiers they sent to watch the trenches would be harassed non-stop. The soldiers sent to hunt down the enemy in the trenches got lost easily or were lured into traps and killed. The situation continued for another five days and four nights, after which they'd only advanced another kilometer. Everyone was beginning to despair.

"How are we supposed to fight a battle like this? I'd rather the three duchies send all their troops against us in open battle. I wouldn't mind even if their numbers are ten times ours. But this business with the trenches is truly far too annoying. Even the soldiers are cursing out nonstop with their morale falling fast," complained Augustus to Lorist.

Lorist then dealt Augustus the final blow by handing him the reports he received from Paetro. The king read the reports with doubt and was flabbergasted when he read about how the 50-kilometer stretch of land around Paetro were covered with trenches too. He was so startled he jumped out of his seat and said anxiously, "Is Duke Forund insane? How's he going to plant crops if his whole duchy is filled with trenches?"

Soon, however, Augustus realized Duke Forund couldn't do anything but this to resist his cavalry troops' attacks. At the very least, filling the duchy with trenches could stop the offensive there. There was the other half of the duchy that could be used for agriculture, and if they didn't have enough food, they could always borrow or buy more from Handra. If the frontlines couldn't be sustained, the duke wouldn't have to consider the problem of food. He couldn't even be certain he could keep his life if Augustus caught him. It was common knowledge that Augustus hated the four dukes to the bone.

"Blow the horn and return to camp," ordered Augustus exasperatedly.

Nothing he did would be of use now. The mere thought of there being another 50 kilometers of trenches and mud walls was horrifying. It seemed he would have to think of another way to attack the three remaining duchies.

Later surveyed showed that nearly a million people were mobilized. They dug 431 trenches across 83 kilometers of land. The entire network's trenches were all between 2 to 3 meters deep and everything was connected. The earth dug up in the making of the trenches was used to build walls about 2 meters tall. It was hailed as a military miracle and chronicled as one of the oddest sights to surface in the history of war on the continent.

Chapter 423

Stalemate

Mountains, rivers, plains, hills, plains, mountains, Egret Swamp...

A brief description of the terrain in Farkel and Forund now occupied by Andinaq could be no other way. In more than a month, the map had almost been torn to shreds multiple times. Heated arguments broke out all the time in the incessant military councils. The nights of non-stop brainstorming for new ideas tired out many of the higher military officials. Nothing, whether it be probing or reconnaissance, helped the situation.

The four central duchies had been famed for producing the most elite infantry troops in the empire. The terrain was rather hilly, which only served to complement their strategy: defense. While they lacked cavalry, should the war continue dragging on, it would only continue to sway further in their favor. The first prince, who led an army of 100 thousand against the four duchies, had been entangled for three years and eventually retreated having suffered almost complete casualties. This allowed the duchies to invade Majik and force the prince to sue for peace.

It wasn't that Auguslo had never thought of aiming for the hills. The current problem was that, among the troops on their side, the only ones suited for battles in the mountain were Count Shazin's two light infantry divisions, just 20 thousand men. There was no way a force that small could carve a path through the enemy lines. Whitelion and House Kenmays's two heavy-armored divisions were equipped with heavy armor. While they were great for besieging castles and defending them, having them scale the hills and travel across wetlands was futile. Even if they made it they would be too exhausted to fight. Nobody could cross the large river on Forund's borders as no one had any naval troops in the area. Boats could only ferry a few soldiers across at a time, and they were easy targets. The construction of boats would also be rather costly.

Auguslo's plan to attack the four central duchies was originally centered around using cavalry to sweep across the plains and taking the initiative away from his enemies before waiting for the heavy-armored legion's arrival to conquer the citadels and

towns. He had wanted to exterminate the duchies in one go and capture the traitorous dukes. That was the main reason he gave for having Duke Fisablen submit.

However, nobody would expect that Duke Forund and Duke Farkel would dig so many trenches and erect mud walls to widen their defensive network. It completely warped the plains and rendered cavalry useless. The trenches even neutralized House Norton's siege weaponry as well. It seemed from the current situation that there was no way to continue apart from filling the trenches patiently.

Augusto was incredibly dissatisfied and had launched a few probing attacks on different locations no avail. The results were the same. Facing them were endless stretches of trenches and mud walls. Even after Lorist handed over control of one thunderbolt brigade, they still couldn't break through.

As Lorist had said, "There's no target to strike. What would you be demolishing with our catapults?"

When Augusto discovered that no matter which location he attacked, the enemy would move through the trench network to reinforce it, he finally gave up and wiped the thought of more offensives from his mind. After returning to the camp, he stayed in his tent to brainstorm in hopes he could find a way to break through the current obstacle. The only reasonable method available was suggested by Kenmays. He had come up with it based on how Augusto crossed Cloudsnap Mountains in the snow to attack Redlis and conquer Frederika. Kenmays believed they could launch a sudden attack in the dead of winter through Egret Swamp, which should be frozen over at that time. As long as they crossed the nameless mountains and hills at the side of the swamp, they could quickly arrive at Farkel's capital, Freimox. If they took the city, the rest would follow.

Kenmays's suggestion made the others see him in a different light. They didn't think a duke from a merchant family could actually have a talent for matters of war. It was truly shocking. But Lorist soon shot down the suggestion. The three remaining duchies understood Augusto well, what Kenmays had just suggested would definitely occur to them as well. The king's reputation was practically built on launching surprise attacks; the enemy would definitely pay attention to Egret Swamp in the winter and further reinforce their weak points. They could be forced to return without achieving much, or, in the worst case, be caught in an ambush. Not only would it make them suffer huge casualties, it would reinforce the enemy's confidence and resolve.

Kenmays wasn't satisfied at first and argued that the enemy probably wouldn't be so thorough, but he knew Lorist was right the moment he witnessed the acknowledging gazes of Duke Fisablen and King Augustus. The only true idiot was he who considered his enemy an idiot. Duke Handra, Duke Farkel, Duke Shabaj, and Duke Forund were all elite tough nobles who had far more experience in conflict. They were obviously not as careless as he was suggesting.

Duke Shabaj's defeat was thanks to Lorist's sudden moves. His capabilities could already be seen from how he decisively abandoned Messen and escaped for Farkel without Tigersoar and Shazin's two light cavalry divisions able to do anything about it. Had he been a day late or had he stubbornly continued his course, it would have ended up completely differently. He would have either died in the final battle or ended up a prisoner of war.

Actually, Kenmays's suggestion to attack Egret Lake and head to Farkel's capital had already occurred to the others long ago, and they had given up on it for the very same reasons. The other reason was that it was still only the end of the 10th month. There were at least two months to wait before Egret Swamp would freeze over. The military expenditure for 300 thousand troops over the course of two months during the cold weather was astronomical. The food they managed to obtain from Shabaj was already running out and they would have to bring in even more. It was not only a huge undertaking but also a troublesome effort.

The main mechanic of war was logistics, and should they emerge victorious, there would be profit to gain. The food they obtained at Shabaj would at most sustain the army for a month. Nobody had expected they would be stopped in their tracks as they had been. Their original plan was to live off the resources they obtained. But most of the food had already been expropriated. Shabaj had been cleaned. And there was the fact that Augustus had to provide for the 200 thousand civilians being moved away given his position as king. He couldn't just leave them alone, so that would have to factor into the total food consumption.

So far, Camorra was stationed in Messen and used the place as a logistics outpost. All resources transported by any house would be kept there. The food Augustus had no longer had to go through a long way to arrive from the imperial capital. The route stretched straight through Egret Swamp and passed Rimad to arrive at Messen. Lorist was faring rather well in that there was still a lot of resources he could ship over from Windbury through the same route from Southern, to Rimad and Messen. Duke Fisablen and Shazin shared the same situation in that the distance to transport food

was great, so lots of it would be consumed along the way. It was already quite impressive for sixth-tenths of the food they made out with to end up there. The one in the worst position was Felim. His dominion had just begun to develop. With the 500 thousand civilians forced to move there, he already had to rely on Lorist for transportation costs and food for the move. He didn't have any vigor left to press the attack.

Duke Fisablen suggested they retreat temporarily and wait for another opportunity to attack in the future. It didn't mean they would give up on Jigzai. They would leave a cavalry legion behind to hold any attacks off and retaliate. When he made his suggestion, he gave Lorist a look and obviously hinted that Tigersoar was the best candidate. 'If Farkel and Forund see our troops retreating, they might want to reclaim Shabaj. At that time, having a strong force like Tigersoar counterattacking would be a great blow' was the gist of it.

Naturally, since Tigersoar wasn't a light cavalry legion and was thus slightly limited in their mobility, Duke Fisablen was willing to leave his reserve legion behind as well. If there were any who disobeyed Lorist's orders, he could do with them what he pleased as well.

While Lorist didn't really understand the reason the duke made the suggestion, there was something lurking beneath his actions. But before he could figure out what, Auguslo announced their war council would recess for a while. He would consider Duke Fisablen's suggestion and give his answer in two days.

After leaving the tent, Lorist sought the duke out to ask about the suggestion and was even willing to leave reserve legion under his command.

"There's no helping it. It's for the bigger picture. I can't allow this to go on. We'll retreat and lure the snake out of its hole. I believe you can deliver fast results. Even if they don't come out, don't worry. Hold them there for three or four years. The remaining three duchies will be unable to sustain the costs of defense and might crumble on their own."

"Old guy..."

As the duke walked away, Lorist thought, *That darned fellow is trying to keep me here at Jigzai for a few years so I don't cause trouble in The Northlands. That's why he's even willing to let me command even the reserve legion...*

However, he still couldn't help but spit in spite. The reserve legion was wholly grassland barbarians. Even if he wiped them all out, the duke wouldn't be bothered. While the legion wasn't that important, it would still make Lorist owe him a favor.

He didn't imagine Augustus would overthink the duke's suggestion. While he understood the current situation and knew retreating was the most rational choice, the fact that he couldn't accomplish much during this war frustrated him greatly. He was really unwilling. Then came Duke Fisablen's suspicious suggestion.

What's this? Has Duke Fisablen really made peace with Lorist? Why else would he be willing to hand his reserve legion over? The grassland barbarians are wild and disobedient and listen to nobody apart from the duke. Yet, he's going to hand it to Lorist just like that? Did they come to some kind of agreement? Do they have some scheme in mind?

It was as if Augustus had developed a phobia for ropes after being bitten by a snake. When he was being restored to the throne, he fell for the alliance's scheme and lost Delamock, Sidgler, Winston, and Southern. The mere thought of it made him feel as if his heart was being cut open. He had even been the one to propose the agreement.

Thinking back, he felt great regret and wanted to cut off the hand that had signed the agreement. While the four provinces hadn't been under his control, as he saw it, he should be the one to control them after reuniting his empire and leave his name in the annals of history as a great emperor. The agreement he signed was the largest humiliation in his entire bright career. So, to him, the alliance's conquest of Iblia and Madras was not an honorable contribution, but a sore slap to his face instead.

Even if he admitted Lorist was the best choice to leave behind and keep the three duchies engaged, it didn't feel right for him, who couldn't understand the reason Duke Fisablen had suggested Lorist. If he didn't have answers, he couldn't calm down. The suspicion he had about Lorist and Duke Fisablen aiming for the duchies made him delay the announcement more than three days.

Lorist didn't plan on staying in Jigzai for a few years either. He decided that if Augustus really wanted Tigersoar to remain, he would leave it to Loze. He brought Loze to a hill just behind the front line to check on the situation and told Loze about some tactics he could use to deal with retreating enemies.

"Do you think we can attack a front like this?" asked Lorist.

Loze shook his head.

"Your Grace, this is completely impregnable. I suspect this system is designed specifically to counter Tigersoar's ranged weapons and cavalry. The duchy's infantry are moles; they burrow underground all the time. With the mud walls' cover, we can't figure out their deployment. Usually, knowing the enemy's deployment is a great advantage to the attacking side. Also, we are cavalry troops and the enemy are trench-dwelling moles. As long as they stay in their holes and tunnels we can't do much."

Beside them, Dulles, colonel of the carroballista division, spoke.

"Your Grace, our ballistae are completely useless in trench warfare. It's better to use the old style mangonels. While those don't shoot far, their shots are quite powerful and their smaller size also makes them more convenient for use in trenches like these. Our current ballistae are completely useless against these entrenchments. Our ballistae have always been famed for being able to fire further, stronger and more accurate shots, but now they are completely useless. I can't help but wonder if our research has gone down the wrong path... What would we do in the future if our enemies use these tactics again? This is troubling."

Lorist patted Dulles's shoulder.

"Worry not, this is but an exception. The reason Forund and Farkel can set up such a formation is that we've given them time to mobilize their civilians. The duchies always had elite infantry, so they excel in terrain like this. If any other nation copies this without any elite foot soldiers, it would be a fool's errand and they'd just be wasting their manpower and resources."

"If Lord Potterfang were here, maybe Firmrock could breach their lines by attacking from within the trenches," said Loze.

Lorist remained speechless. Firmrock was currently stationed at the border with House Fisablen's territory as its main defense. There was no way he would mobilize them. That aside, even if he did, they would still have to pay a huge price to breach the enemy's line. He didn't want to lose so many men for Augustus's sake.

"Maybe we can wait for winter. When the snow falls and fills the trenches, we can rely on sleds and snowboards to cross the fortifications," suggested Dulles.

"Are you an idiot?!" Loze rebuked, "Since when has snow stacked up to over two

meters? These trenches are at least two or three meters deep! What kind of snowstorm would we need to fill the trenches?!"

"W-well, we could wait for the rainy season... When the rain pours over the trenches, the mud here won't be able to hold its shape," countered Dulles with dissatisfaction.

"Wouldn't we have to be rained on as well?" said Loze as he knocked Dulles on the back of his head.

"Wait, what did you say?" Lorist snapped suddenly before he laughed, "Return to camp at once! I know how we can breach the lines."

Chapter 424

Flooding

"You're saying you want to flood the trenches?" asked Duke Fisablen, his eyes flashing.

"Yes. As long as the trenches are flooded, the duchy's little moles can't stay for long. The moment they come out, they'll be in our sights. Locke, you really have come up with a brilliant idea. Why didn't I think of this?"

Auguslo slapped his forehead. The tents atmosphere lightened up immediately. They finally had a way to turn the situation around. Everyone was glad they didn't have to stay for long. They were rubbing their hands in anticipation of continuing their invasion to show the enemy what they were made of and vent the pent-up frustration they had been bottling up over the past month.

"Haha, it's all thanks to Dulles. Had he not brought up the fact that the rainy season would flood the trenches and force the duchy's moles out, It wouldn't have occurred to me we could flood the trenches artificially. The moles will have no choice but to come out and face us now," said Lorist with a humble smile.

"Bu-but where will we get enough water?"

Kenmays came later than the rest but still asked his question. Lorist's smile showed his teeth in full.

"Simple. Nibarak River isn't far from camp. We will first dam up the river, build a small reservoir, and dig our own trenches to connect everything to the enemy's network. We then just have to wait for the reservoir to fill and overflow into the trenches."

"We will also have to press our attack. We have to keep the project a secret and initiate the flood in the dead of night. We might just be able to give the moles a rather unpleasant surprise," continued Auguslo.

"We also need wooden boards, as many as we can possibly get. If we can bridge the trenches during the chaos, we can drive our cavalry all the way to Paetro and force the dukes into a corner. We'll get Duke Forund in one strike," added Duke Fisablen.

"So it shall be," Auguslo decided, "Locke, I put you in charge of the construction efforts. You can use whatever forces, including the local civilian population and any free cavalry, you need. Try to get it done in three days if possible. Duke Kenmays, I'll take command of your two heavy-armor divisions. We have to put pressure on them and keep their attention on our forces. Count Shazin, take your forces and cut down as much wood as you can."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

With this the war as on to the next offensive. This time round, however, the defending generals felt something off. They realized the heavy-armored soldiers didn't attempt to fill the trenches and knock down the mud walls. They just lay a wooden board across over the gaps to cross before they used their crossbows, javelins, throwing axes and other short-ranged weapons in a shootout with the defenders. Given the advantage of shooting from a height, they managed to kill many more than they lost.

Maybe they intend to conquer our formation by severely increasing our casualties.

The duchies' generals figured this must be their enemy's plan and began moving to counter them. They withdrew their troops and gathered a large force in the rear in an attempt to lure the enemy there. They could repeat the victory they had achieved last time. Naturally, they also had a division lay-in-wait to intercept any reinforcements.

Unexpectedly, the enemy didn't press the attack beyond occupying ten-odd trenches. Instead, they saw large numbers of wooden boards brought over from the rear and erected in the trenches.

What's going on?

The generals had a meeting to discuss this new development and concluded that the enemy was planning to use the wooden boards to seal the trench network so the defenders couldn't attack using them. Reasoning that it must've been a new tactic involving wooden boards, the generals were led astray in their considerations of countermeasures. They used the nights to launch sudden ambushes and set fire to the boards. In one night, they managed to burn several large stockpiles. But it proved futile. The next day, the enemy brought even more boards and re-erected the blockades. They also lit bonfires at night and had crossbowmen stationed above the trenches. The moment any movement was spotted, the alarm would ring to call for reinforcements and the attack would be repelled. It went on for four or five days, but

the attacking side could only occupy around 50 trenches.

It relieved the defenders. Though the wooden board tactic was really effective, it wasn't that threatening. Currently, Andinaq's forces were making slower and slower progress, while the duchies' resistance only grew stronger. Only a maximum of five trenches was now being conquered a day. It would take at least three years to make it to Paetro at this rate. All the dukes had to do was hold on for a few more days and the enemy would have lost all their vigor.

One night, the duchies prepared to counter-attack. They wanted to retake a third of the trenches. One of Forund's vassals, Viscount Sanskro, serving as the second garrison legion's general, in command of the offensive, noticed that their enemy had not pushed as hard that day than the days before. It was like they were putting on a show. Maybe there were far too many wooden boards transported to the frontlines, so many that it was muddling their offensive.

"The enemy's bravado is crumbling. Tonight it is our turn," said the viscount, "Didn't you notice the bastards were absent-minded today? They mobilized a division in the evening, but they don't look nearly as energetic as they were a few days ago. The time has come for us to strike back. Split one division into smaller teams and harass them through the night. Our main offensive will begin at dawn. We will push them out of the trench network entirely!"

Only a few dozen trenches at the very front of the network were straight, the rest zig-zagged all over the place. At each of the zigs and zags' corners were mud lookout platforms to help with spotting enemy movement. When an attack was spotted everyone would hide in the trenches. No wonder the enemy considered them moles.

The only direct confrontation between the two sides had taken place recently as a result of a surprise push by a division of Whitelion... and it ended in Whitelion's loss. The next ambush's scale would no doubt be far greater. As Dulles had said, the carroballistae weren't of much use in this kind of terrain. Instead, the defending side's shorter-ranged, mangonels were far more effective. The number of heavy-armored soldiers injured as a result of mangonel fire had grown beyond the hundreds.

Additionally, the duchies' soldiers were equipped with shortswords, throwing axes, small bucklers and other equipment better suited to the tight trenches. The heavily armored soldiers couldn't battle effectively in the trenches because they were mainly armed with spears and two-handed swords. If they entered the trenches, they would

be slaughtered. So, they could only sigh in exasperation as their weapons failed them.

Forund's general was quite experienced. He had quite the reputation in the duchy. Be it the first prince's invasion, the duchies' retaliation on Redlis, Auguslo's trapping, Melein's extermination, or the battle in Southern, Viscount Sanskro had been involved in all of the duchy's wars. He had been promoted from a gold-ranked knight to a viscount by the duke himself and was one of the duchy's most trusted generals. Being someone who had participated in the battle in Southern, Viscount Sanskro had managed to escape alive despite the severe losses. He had suffered from the experience since.

His impression of the Nortons' ranged weapons couldn't be deeper. When he learned that House Norton was participating in this campaign, he stopped the standard defenses' construction immediately and started figuring out how to counter their weaponry. He had been the one to come up with the trench network and so far had performed admirably.

He could grasp the strengths and unique features of both the attackers and defenders, so he was filled with confidence in his planned counterattack. He would use the cover of night to harass the enemy so they couldn't get any sleep. By dawn, they would withdraw and make the enemy think the attack was finally over. When the enemy dropped their guard, he would launch a sudden attack with all his forces.

The bare minimum he had to achieve was retaking a third of the occupied network. If he was lucky, he could even take back two-thirds. He believed the enemy's morale would suffer heavily from such a blow and they would never mount such a large-scale attack again. The use of the wooden boards had actually put a lot of pressure on the defenders but it wasn't sustainable. As long as the defenders were willing to pay an even higher price, they might be able to deal with it.

It was late in the night. They were just a few hundred meters from the enemy. Viscount Sanskro observed his surroundings. The trench in which he was, was much deeper and wider than usual; he couldn't afford to let the enemy discover he was gathering his troops. They had dug out a space the size of a small plaza. The three thousand men were resting in full battledress. Not a single man had undone his armor. They kept their weapons by their side. Even if they couldn't fall asleep, they tried to shut their eyes and rest a bit. They were heading into battle in just over two hours. There were eight of these plaza-sized pits along the front.

The weather was perfect. Clouds filled the sky and obscured the moon's light. Viscount Sanskro was worried at first.

The 11th month is almost here. It wouldn't start raining now, would it? Light rain would be fine, but heavy rain would be terrible. Having water gather in the trenches will be troublesome. Though it wouldn't affect our defense much, the mud will affect our speed and we'll have to suffer even more casualties. I hope the enemy doesn't think of attacking. That would be the best result.

Fires burned on the front and sounds of fighting echoed across the plains. It seemed the ambushing troops had set fire to a few wooden boards, causing them to burn pretty brightly. However, a huge commotion came down the trenches. It seemed the enemy had mobilized even more troops. The fires were a little too bright. Soon the sounds of battle and murder changed. Instead, confused cries grew louder and louder.

An odd gushing sound gradually climbed out of the cacophony. It crawled down the trench towards the viscount. The soldiers he sent to harass the enemy stopped responding. The enemy's torches came closer and closer. Was his enemy launching an attack as well?

His worry intensified. he popped out of the trench and hid behind one of the mud walls. Just as he peeked over the wall, the clouds cleared somewhat and the moon peaked back at him. It's dead-gray light descended on the landscape.

"What... What the hell?!" cried one of the soldiers on an outpost as he pointed at the front.

"Shut up, idiot! Do you want to attract attention?!" cursed the viscount.

He removed his helmet and gazed ahead. The trenches crisscrossed the landscape like veins of ore. The trenches filled with a liquid, like melted silver being poured into a cast. The viscount quickly realized the trench toward him was filling with the liquid silver quickly as well, it rushed at him with startling speed. The clouds closed in and the silver landscape descended into darkness again, peppered with yellow orbs.

The gushing grew louder and louder. The viscount paled as he realized what was happening.

"Get up! Get up quick! The trenches... the trenches are flooding!!" yelled he with wild abandon.

Thus the tragedy unfolded. The plaza-like trenches where the soldiers could be gathered were a little too deep, about three meters. The soldiers had been resting flat on the ground. Even though some were woken or kicked awake, they were still quite dazed. The water rushed in. Those in the trench-plazas panicked and started climbing out, but only four or five made it out. The troops squeezed against each other and not many managed to get out in time.

As the water flooded in, everyone became panic-stricken. They knew the trenches were the deepest of them all and their unit crumbled. Everyone struggled desperately. Those at the edges tried to climb out immediately. But, when they were digging it, they even smoothed out the walls' rougher edges. It was near impossible to get out normally, much less under such circumstances. Not many get out, most were dragged back down by their comrades.

To add fuel to the fire, the soldiers were all clad in metal armor. It pulled them under no matter how hard they struggled to stay afloat. The mud at the bottom of the trenches had also become soft and clamped shut like the jaws of a hungry beast, stopping them from kicking off to get a breath.

Viscount Sanskro had screamed until his voice went. He managed to organize the remaining troops somewhat. He had the soldiers form human ladders to allow those in the rear to ascend first before they pulled the others up. It didn't last long, however; the water level soon rose to their necks. The shorter men were already unable to feel the ground beneath them and could only hold onto the soldiers in front of them. The soldiers in front, unwilling to be dragged down, pushed the soldiers behind them into the water, but those at the back were unwilling to let go and dragged the ones in front of them into the water as well. They struggled briefly before sinking into the depths.

The sky brightened slowly. Viscount Sanskro stared at the now-tranquil trenches with bloodshot eyes. The small plaza-like trenches had turned into small ponds where the corpses of drowned soldiers clumped together tightly.

The couple hundred men fortunate, or unfortunate, enough to survive were shivering in the breeze. Looking at the submerged corpses and the soldiers standing at the side of the trenches, the viscount screamed at the top of his lungs before slitting his throat. Blood splattered everywhere as he fell into the flooded, corpse-filled trenches.

Chapter 425

The Two Dukes' Decisions

The wooden boards used as blockades had been converted into solid wooden bridges across the trenches. If the defenders knew they were the result of inspiration derived from a whim by the heavy-armored soldiers, they would vomit blood with rage. After conquering the front part of the formation, Auguslo had arranged for the boards to be brought over so the soldiers could set up simple camps and outposts for the night watch. They would then be removed and used as bridges when the flooding came.

One Whitelion captain was too troubled by the network of trenches. Their plan was to attack during the day and hole up during the night. The captain believed not sealing the trenches up and building their simple camps would invite attack from the moles. They just had to use fuel and fire arrows to set their camps on fire and disturb his troops for the rest of the night. However, Auguslo's orders were clear. They were not to block the trenches.

Though the captain didn't know the flood's timescale, he wasn't willing to let his soldiers lose their lives in a night attack. After troubling himself over it, he gathered his lieutenants to discuss what they could do to deal with the duchies' moles and curb their night attacks. Just as they were scratching their heads over their lack of ideas, one of the men on watch mentioned that the wooden boards were roughly as wide as the trenches. They could just use them to block the trenches.

The captain was elated. He rewarded the man heavily and tried to ascertain how he'd come up with the idea. The man said shyly that he'd gotten into trouble while transporting some of the boards. He'd startled nearby horses. His fright at their loud baying made him drop the boards. They fell into the trench and dug into the ground. It took him quite a while's struggle to get them out. His current shift was his punishment. When he overheard their discussion, he was reminded of how much he'd struggled.

Thus the birth of the tactic that contributed to in the demise of thousands of Forund's soldiers. Had the men not been distracted by the pressure the use of the boards allowed their enemy to put on them, they would have discovered Auguslo's ploy long before it could have come to fruition. It was far too obvious and easy to detect, no

amount of effort on their part could have hidden it. Unfortunately, the men were pre-occupied with countering the boards.

The sky brightened. As the water filled the trenches, the soldiers of Whitelion successfully arrived at the first of the plaza-like excavations. The men were broken, wet, and exhausted; they offered little resistance. Not that they really could, most were unarmed - having dropped their weapons and armor to get out of the trenches faster. Even had they been armed, they did not have the willpower or presence of mind to fight. They had watched their friends die, watched their corpses pulled along by the water down the trenches. They had been mere meters away as their comrades drowned, but had been unable to do anything. Soon, many were captured.

Upon receiving the report, Auguslo, Lorist, and Fisablen made their way over. They were also shocked to see the large, corpse-filled trenches. They had thought the flooding would only force the moles up to the surface, they had not expected the near ten thousand blue corpses.

They only realized what had been happened when they were informed of Forund's planned counterattack. Such a huge coincidence. The enemy were to blame for their own misfortune. Their timing was just horrible. The eight 'plazas' had turned into corpse ponds. All-in-all just over 20 thousand lay entombed beneath them. Only those near their edges had managed to escape, the rest were now resting eternally. Viscount Sanskro's plaza had had the worst of it. Only 524 of the three thousand waiting in the plaza had escaped.

The viscount's body had been retrieved. Auguslo had a proper wooden casket made for this enemy before his corpse was sent back to his family. Whitelion's men were currently still looking for survivors and overseeing the corpses' retrieval.

One filled carriage after another passed by on the wooden road. Men were constantly filling in the gaps between the boards so the carriages wouldn't get stuck. The road was set to be extended, they were just waiting for more material to arrive.

"Your Majesty, Your Majesty..." an officer cried as he hurriedly made a knight's salute, "The water has stopped further ahead..."

"Any idea why?" asked Auguslo.

"The trenches end. The water overflowed and flooded a few low-lying areas. The

scouts say the area beyond the network is three-kilometer-wide flatland. There's another network beyond that, though."

Forund must have either not had enough time or not enough manpower to connect the two networks. Either that or they had been using the flat area to house and train troops.

"Let's take a look," said Augustus as he waved the horsewhip in his hand and rode towards the road. Lorist, Fisablen, and a few others followed.

"What should we do?" asked the king after his inspection.

"We'll dig another trench and connect the two. First we have to seal the reservoir again, otherwise, we'll turn this whole region into a marsh. We'll conquer this network as well. The enemy will be prepared for us this time. We won't take out thousands again," replied Lorist jokingly.

"Hahaha," Fisablen laughed heartily, "They were so enthusiastic about digging trenches and erecting mud walls. But now they rush to demolish what they've built! Talk about turning security into fear! Their waste of energy is really entertaining. If only I could see their faces... Hahaha..."

Everyone broke into a fit of laughter. The world's changes were truly wondrous. They had thought they would have to break their backs over refilling the trenches while Forund's troops dug more. But now the tables had turned completely. Now they were the ones digging trenches and the enemy were the ones filling them in.

Augustus nodded.

"Very well. Duke Kenmays, cooperate with Whitelion in your attack. Take at least ten trench-lines. Your use of the wooden boards was truly genius. Reward whoever came up with the idea well."

Kenmays was all smiles.

"Naturally. The house will promote him and use him well."

Augustus nodded before he turned to his guards.

"Have the logistics team speed up. We need a lot more boards. Also, erect a temporary

campsite. Whitelion and the heavy-armored division will rest in shifts. Also, tighten our defenses, I don't want any counterattacks."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

.....

Duke Forund stared at the old, algae-filled walls of his castle. It had been built over seventeen years and had since weathered centuries of war. Who knew how many plots it was privy to, how many life-changing decisions and declarations it had heard.

Its name, Summer Palace, had been given during the time of the Krissen Empire. It had been one of the most famous palaces in the empire. The duke had lived in it his whole life. His smile and silhouette had been traced in every nook and cranny, secret or otherwise, of the place.

"Your Grace, we need to go," reminded the captain beside him.

The old man withdrew his unwilling gaze with a sigh.

"I must be the most unfilial descendant. I'm actually abandoning my house's pride and dominion, a dominion over which we've reigned for nearly three centuries, to escape to Handra. If my ancestors were to know of this, they'd definitely curse me."

"Your Grace isn't to be blamed for this, Andinaq's king is. He is far too sly! He actually flooded the network! The trenches we had the whole duchy dig..."

The captain felt his oratory skills rather lacking. He had wanted to console the duke, but had, instead, taken the conversation in an uncomfortable direction. The old man smiled bitterly.

"You've said enough, Rikol. Everyone knows I spent three months rallying the civilians to dig those trenches. It's become a huge joke. Why didn't it occur to me that a simple flood could lay waste to my effort? Poor Sanskro... He should know I wouldn't blame him for coming up with the idea. He shouldn't have offed himself."

"Your Grace..."

The old man waved for the captain to stay quiet. He turned to look at the lonely castle. It was no longer the merry palace in his memories. It stood now as a lonely tower,

gazing out over a deserted landscape. He sighed again and cleared his mind.

"Let's go. I hope I can come back again, to see this place as happy as it used to be. It shouldn't die like this, it's not right. My ancestors built it to be a place of happiness, not the solemn husk it is now..."

Upon stepping out the castle, the old man mounted his white horse. Several cavalymen came galloping up the road. One dismounted and knelt before the duke.

"Your Grace, Sir Nuori refused to withdraw. He told me to tell you that there's no way Andinaq can deal with the mountain legion. He won't budge. He says he'll show the people you haven't abandoned them."

The old duke waved the guard up.

"It's no surprise. Whatever, winter is near. Auguslo won't defeat Nuori. Even if he waits till next year, Nuori should have more than enough room to hold them back. He doesn't lack for resources either. I knew he wouldn't withdraw without fighting. Leave him be."

He turned to the captain.

"Have everyone else left?"

"Yes, Your Grace. The first young master was the first to leave. He took everyone else from the household, the resources, and the garrison with him seven days ago. The second young master and Sir Rimad left for Cuda. They await Your Grace. The guard regimen is all that's left."

"Alright, let's go. Any messengers from Belias?"

"No. Didn't Sir Belias send a messenger over yesterday? He said he can only hold on for another two days. Andinaq's advance can't be stopped. The fifth garrison legion can't resist anymore. They're suffering heavy casualties. Sir Belias had to use the threat of heavy military punishment to stop the men from deserting. He hopes you will leave Paetro as soon as possible."

The old duke shook his head with a bitter smile.

"Alright. We'll leave. I hope Belias will make it back safely."

The castle's exit connected to the main street of the duke's manor. More and more citizens gathered on the sides of the road as horses continued to pass by. Everyone knew Andinaq was about to arrive. Though the duke had them dig trenches for three months, they still couldn't stop the enemy. Messengers from all over had come to the city to request help. To prevent the citizens from falling victim, the duke had decided to give up on the city and leave for Handra.

Everyone began tearing up. The atmosphere was grievous. Everyone stared at the duke until the procession vanished in the distance. Just as they were about to arrive at the southern gate, the duke pulled on the reins. A fat silhouette emerged from the crowd and made his way to the duke.

The duke smiled.

"Maritt, my friend, I am leaving the city to you after I leave. I hope you can keep everyone safe. It is my hope to meet you again in the future."

"I will do my best, Your Grace," said the man with a bow.

He was a merchant who had dealings with the salt merchant committee and had even visited Duke Kenmays before. The duke had allowed him to represent the citizens in their surrender to Andinaq. He had hoped military discipline would be upheld and that the citizens wouldn't come to harm.

"Maritt, two-thirds of the food stores are still in the castle's storehouse. If Andinaq wants it, they can take it."

Maritt froze.

"Your Grace, this is...?"

The duke smiled bitterly again.

"Maritt, Andinaq is more than 300 thousand strong. If they don't have enough food, they will raid the farmers and commoners. With those resources, our citizens wouldn't come to grave harm."

Maritt bowed again.

"Thank you, Your Grace."

.....

At the same time, in the southern district of Freimox, Farkel's capital, Duke Farkel's eyes were completely bloodshot.

"The people have already been chased out! Why hasn't it begun yet? Start burning! Burn this place to the ground! I will not let that blasted Auguslo have my city and castle! Quick burn everything!"

The wind helped the flame along. Soon, the entirety of Freimox was submerged. Tens of thousands of commoners - chased out of the city - wailed as they watched their lives crumble to ashes.

Completely unmoved, The duke turned his horse around.

"We leave! Head for Handra! We still have an army! We have all the time to tussle with that bastard when we reach Handra. He wants to eliminate our duchies? It won't be so easy!"

Chapter 426

Rescue

On the 6th month of Year 1781, the four houses of Andinaq and House Fisablen of the three northeastern provinces launched a sudden attack on Shabak and initiated Andinaq's invasion of the four central duchies.

On the 17th day of the 8th month, Duke Shabaj gave up on Messen to escape to Farkel. The four house alliance and House Fisablen's cavalry headed straight to Paetro, the capital of Forund. Farkel's Samora and Forund's Freewood were swept by the cavalry attack and consumed by the flames of war.

On the 7th day of the 9th month, Andinaq's king, Augusto, led Whitelion to Jigzai to join up with the allies' forces, rallying a total of 300 thousand men.

Duke Forund mobilized the duchy's citizens to spend more than two months digging 431 trenches on the stretch of land 83 kilometers across from Freewood to Paetro. More than a thousand mud walls were also constructed to defend against the invasion. It was the first defensive battle fought mainly with trenches in the continent's history.

On the night of the 3rd day of the 11th month, after a stalemate that lasted more than a month, the Andinaq's forces flooded the trenches by diverting the Nibarak river, catching Forund's second legion completely off-guard and killing half of its men. The survivors were captured and General Sanskro, a viscount, slit his throat and fell into the water. The army was decimated. Despite the constant flooding, Forund's garrison legion didn't surrender. They relied on the low mud walls to resist the enemy's advance, suffering severe casualties in the process.

On the 24th day of the 11th month, Duke Forund announced he would give up Paetro and led the first and third legions to Handra where he would continue his resistance. Upon the insistence of General Nuori, he was left in the hilly area near Paetro to harass the advancing enemy.

Duke Forund didn't burn the years of food stored in the city's warehouses before

he left, he left it to the invaders. The gesture moved the king and thanks to the duke's benevolence, the invaders kept discipline and didn't wrong the city's citizens.

Given that the trenches in Forund had been breached, the neighboring Farkel lost the protection its flank had enjoyed until then and the sparse rear defenses allowed Andinaq to quickly overwhelm it. Duke Farkel had no choice but to give up his duchy and head to Handra with his four legions.

Before he left, to show his determination to resist till the end, he swore not to let the enemy step into his city and castle. Right before winter, he chased the residents out of their homes and set fire to the castle, the duke's manor, and the city. Nearly 100 thousand commoners had no homes and became vagabonds.

Duke Farkel's irrational decision made the whole dutchy's citizens lose trust and respect for his house. The first ones to abandon the duke were the four legions he had decided to take to Handra with him. Many large-scale desertions occurred along the way to Handra. It got so bad the duke had to treat his legions like prospective criminals and monitor them intensely to prevent more from deserting.

However, by the time he arrived in Handra, nearly half of the four legions had left him. Many of the house's knights and officials had also left without a word. Those that remained didn't even fill two legions. The duke finally regretted his decisions.

-- Excerpt from "Rise of the Raging Bear Dynasty" written by Dawn Academy Head and famed military historian, Lord Professor Geisthausen Year 2317.

.....

On the 27th day of the 11th month of Year 1781, Andinaq's forces occupied the undefended Paetro.

"So this is the fifth-ranked palace in the empire, Summer Palace?" mused Lorist as he checked the intricately decorated palace.

"Yes," Auguslo said in awe, "When I was five and seven, Royal Father brought me here for the summer. The scenery is completely different from winter. It was practically heaven on earth. Flowers were all over the place, the trees were tall and provided good

shade, different tones of green grass formed a whole layered picture. It was the haven of my dreams back then. I would roll about in the grass freely to catch the goats and ponies without anyone disturbing me, unlike now, when my retainers would remind me to watch my behavior so I don't tarnish the family's reputation."

Lorist scratched his head awkwardly. He didn't think his off-handed comment would send Auguslo into a flashback. The flashback held whole group up. The king's eyes were still a little glazed. His expression suggested he was still reminiscing about his sweet forlorn childhood.

Fortunately, he snapped out of it quickly. He laughed mockingly at himself.

"Apologies for dwelling on matters passed. The impression living here left on me is truly deep."

Duke Fisablen smiled.

"No trouble, Your Majesty. We got the opportunity to regard the famed Summer Palace well with our eyes after all. Come to think of it, this is my first time here. The sight really is a little beyond description. The beauty and elegance of Summer Palace are truly befitting its reputation."

.....

On the 33rd day of the 11th month, word of what happened in Farkel arrived. Auguslo was positively incensed. He swore he would never forget Duke Farkel and his house. The news also stated that a large number of refugees had appeared in all three of Farkel's provinces. If they weren't promptly taken care of, droves would die when winter came. The situation was dire.

Auguslo instantly summoned Lorist, Fisablen, Felim, and Shazin to discuss how they would resolve the crisis. He had originally intended for the army to spend winter in Paetro so they may begin their attack on Handra early the following year. Currently, all the duchies' dukes were gathered there. As long as their armies were defeated, the plan would be complete. He could then finally reclaim 11 of the empire's provinces.

The king didn't want Lorist and his ilk to be involved in the matter. Before he arrived with Whitelion, all five houses had made quite the mess in Shabaj. So, during the grand military council, Auguslo announced the military regulations and forbade nobles from privately raiding the lands and taking people away. He even had two nobles who

disobeyed orders and secretly sent their troops to raid the nobles manors in Forund punished as an example. Not only were their noble titles revoked, they were even hanged outside the camp's gates along with the near hundred attendants who participated in the raid. It was meant to be a lesson to the other nobles.

A few days earlier, he didn't really mind when he heard Farkel was on his way to Handra with four legions and was quite glad the four dukes were gathering in one place. He wouldn't have to split his forces to deal with them one by one. They could be defeated in one fell swoop next year, far less troublesome. Even if the combined forces would number almost 300 thousand, could they resist his indomitable army?

He had thought the duke would similarly leave behind some supplies before departing and thought Whitelion could send a division to occupy the towns. He didn't imagine the duke would burn his city and render the three provinces a mess for him to clean.

He ground his teeth in anger. He was the king. He couldn't just stare wide-eyed as more than 100 thousand refugees froze and starved, could he? But sending aid was no less of a headache. It wasn't just about feeding over 100 thousand mouths. Large amounts of supplies to survive the winter would have to be prepared as well. As winter was just around the corner, how would they get those supplies in time?

The supplies left at Paetro and those transported by the logistics sections would allow the 300 thousand troops to spend winter comfortably and warmly. However, there were 100 thousand more refugees in Farkel now. Even if they heavily rationed supplies to aid the refugees, it wasn't enough.

Helping them or not wasn't a matter of ruthlessness, but rather reputation. It was Auguslo who had led his army to invade their home. Now, Duke Farkel had escaped and Auguslo was the victor. Those in the future wouldn't condemn the duke for causing disasters, but blame him, the king, for not doing anything to solve it. If it were to be chronicled in the history books, then he would be described as a ruthless ruler, not a good reputation to have.

He already had quite a bad name for killing off so many noble houses to clean up the peerage in the imperial capital. He didn't really bother about their rhetoric because he would be the one to have the last laugh. However, if the 100 thousand refugees really died, he would never shed the label of a cruel and ruthless ruler.

Such was his dilemma. Even though he wanted to help, he couldn't. But if he didn't, his

reputation would suffer. Even if he were to become the emperor that successfully reunited the empire again, there would still be a blemish on his legacy.

"Your Majesty, let me get on it. Tigersoar is mainly a cavalry unit and they travel fast. They can make good use of the time," offered Lorist as he stood up to take the initiative.

"What are you planning?" asked Augustus.

"Move the refugees," Lorist replied without hesitation, "The winter and the rainy season will last far too long. If the refugees stay outside, their survival is impossible. We can't ensure sufficient food and winter gear. Putting aside how troublesome and difficult transporting the supplies would be, we can't ensure sufficient food and clothing for so many. The consequences are beyond fathoming if our supply lines are cut. If the refugees are left to starve, it would be over for the three provinces.

"Additionally, those refugees are mostly not farmers, but city folk. They only ended up like this because that dastardly Farkel burned down their homes. Without the city, they will still be refugees all the same next year. There's also no way to build a city overnight, not to mention the ridiculous amounts of resources it would require. I believe the optimal solution is to move them to another city."

"Which city?"

"Windbury," Lorist replied, "I'm sure you all know it used to be the largest livestock producer in the empire and the largest city in the north-east. The civil war and the chaotic conflicts thereafter have reduced it to barely more than a ruin. The city could house 300 thousand citizens. Most of the houses are empty.

"Most crucially, a good number of the refugees are artisans who have no fields to farm. They rely on their skills to make ends meet and feed their family. They would be used to their new environment at Windbury. We just need to fund their endeavors and start their own workshops and businesses to revitalize the city."

Augustus was a little unwilling. Though he knew Lorist was right, Windbury was under Norton control. Lorist was still the city's administrator.

It's all because of that darned agreement! I didn't want to let them move the citizens, but Lorist found a loophole and even justified it magnificently. It's obvious he wants to strengthen his house with this misfortune.

Augustuslo rubbed his forehead. Though he had a slight headache, he had no choice but to agree.

"What do you need?"

"Let Pegasus join me. They're light cavalry, so we can head there quickly. The sooner we get there, the better. Also, we need food for 200 thousand people for half a month."

The food required was far less than Augustuslo had expected. However, he wasn't willing to do it the way Lorist wanted.

"I can give you the food, but why do you need Pegasus? Isn't it the same with Fisablen's Third Frontier?"

"This..."

Before Lorist could speak, Fisablen interjected.

"This won't do, your Majesty. You should know Third Frontier used to be captives of House Norton. They still hold a grudge. Letting them go will spark conflict and affect the rescue efforts. And without Third Frontier, the grassland barbarians of the reserve legion will be hard to control. Not only will they not obey orders, they will also cause trouble. For the sake of military discipline, it's best to have Pegasus go."

Huh? That's weird. Why's that old fox speaking on my behalf? thought Lorist troubledly.

Augustuslo had made his decision.

"Alright, Pegasus and Tigersoar will head to Farkel and save the 100 thousand refugees. Locke, Count Felim, you two must complete this mission and ensure the people survive."

Lorist and Felim stood up.

"Understood, Your Majesty."

Chapter 427

Migration

As Lorist saw it, the 100 thousand refugees of Farkel's the three provinces weren't a bundle of trouble. Instead, they were gifts. As Charade and Camorra had suggested, both Windbury and The Northlands required great masses of people to fuel their development.

The reason House Norton had a different retirement condition for its soldiers was so the converted captives could truly become the house's subjects. Basically, most of their soldiers weren't sourced from the dominion, but rather from the captives who had served their three-year labor terms. After five years of service, they would develop a sense of belonging and would willingly become subjects.

Three years of service was enough to wipe the grudges away. After that, they would be drafted into the household forces. The captives, who had gotten used to hard labor, would accept the arrangement. However, the great benefits and treatment, as well as the strict discipline, would foster a sense of belonging. When they retire after five years, they would even be given farmland. They would be allowed to reunite with their families, or in the case of singles, form new families, and everyone would end up honest subjects in the dominion.

That was Lorist's conversion plan and how the house's forces had grown to the hundreds of thousands. If the method wasn't employed, allowing youths who used to be enemies to enter the dominion would only serve to introduce an unstable variable. Fortunately, thanks to the wealth they plundered from Hanayabarta, Lorist was able to keep such a policy going.

However, the policy required time. After all, military service lasted five years at least. So, the other method of increasing the population was to forcefully migrate commoners. To Lorist, following the extermination of Madras and Iblia, the only enemy left around The Northlands was House Fisablen who occupied three provinces on the great northeastern plains. However, those provinces were even more barren than The Northlands. A lack of population was one of the duke's most pressing problems and Lorist couldn't scour population from him even if he wanted to.

As a result of the swift migration of Shabaj following the conquest, not a single soul could be seen in the plains around the city, or in the city for that matter. Twenty years since the civil war between the three princes, almost every house came to understand the importance of a huge population. Apart from plundering wealth, youths were a rare and dwindling resource.

The reason Lorist agreed to deploy his troops to attack the duchies was largely so he could migrate the population. Currently, The Northlands only had a population of roughly 1.67 million. No one knew how many more years it would take to grow it to three million, not to mention the fact that the target was Charade's minimum manpower requirement to satisfy the development plan of Lorist's dominion. It would take too long to rely on natural population growth through childbirth, mainly because it took more than ten years for a child to mature and there were many risks along the way. Migrating the population from the duchies on a large scale was much faster.

While the duchies were known to be rich, Lorist knew the incessant wars of the last decade had dwindled their income. Especially after they lost 70 thousand elite infantrymen in his last war. And after only three short years to recover, they were invaded by Augustus. It was pretty apparent that gaining great wealth from them was not realistic. The only thing worth going for was the population.

It was a shame that after attacking Shabaj, apart from the 100 thousand inhabitants of Messen and the 160 thousand refugees whose homes were ruined, the rest were taken by House Fisablen, House Felim, House Shazin and a few other nobles who knew what they were doing. Of the dutchy's three provinces, Rimad was occupied by House Norton alone, Messen was split between House Shazin and the allied noble army, and Jigzai was divided between House Fisablen and House Felim. Of the 800 thousand subjects in Shabaj, only 300 thousand were left after Augustus declared a ban on migration.

The king believed he had to limit the migration. Otherwise, what would he use to revitalize the economy and redevelop the land? He still had to deal with the Union after all. Fortunately, Lorist and company were aware that they were going a little overboard. Given the current state of the dutchy, if Augustus didn't stop the migrations, the three provinces would end up empty.

So, after conquering Forund, Augustus enforced strict military regulation and forbade the nobles from entering Farkel. Since Duke Farkel had already fled for Handra, Augustus would be the one to take the towns. What would be the point of sending the

nobles who had ill intentions out?

He didn't expect that the duke would leave such a troublesome mess for him to clean up, putting him in quite a dilemma. He knew Lorist was gunning for the 100 thousand refugees but he had no choice. After all, given the current situation, Lorist's idea was the best. Otherwise, he had to watch the refugees freeze and starve. Additionally, the cost of migrating the 100 thousand refugees would be borne by House Norton. That was another reason he allowed Lorist and Count Felim to head to Farkel and relocate the refugees.

Augusto must not have known about the saying 'the general far away didn't have to wait for the decrees of the monarch to act'. Additionally, the relationship between lieges and vassals on Grindia was not strictly hierarchical. As Duke of The Northlands, Lorist had the right to refuse any of Augusto's orders he deemed to harm House Norton's interest. After receiving the king's permission, Lorist was a bird flying free in the sky and a fish swimming freely in the endless oceans.

Though there were refugees across the three provinces, namely, Samora, Phapsia, and Kribia, most were gathered in Phapsia. It was the province in which the capital, Freimox had stood. The duke had the food stores of the towns in the other provinces burned. The townsfolk now had no food, though they at least still had roofs over their heads.

Given that the total population of Farkel was around a million, how could a mere 100 thousand sate Lorist's appetite? On the way to Kribia, Lorist had already struck an agreement with Count Felim. House Norton would take most of the refugees while House Felim took only a few. After all, House Felim had to rely on House Norton for food after the huge migration since there was no way Southern could sustain so many people in its undeveloped state.

No matter what, Augusto was still the king. He had to be given due respect. The two came to an agreement. They wouldn't raid the three provinces as bad as they had Forund's. It had to be slightly better at the very least.

Lorist wouldn't touch the farmers properly registered as citizens. It was easily done by referencing the dominion's registry. But as a result, the homes and lands of the nobles who had left with Handra became the target. The nobles were traitors to Augusto anyway and he would have to do the same thing after he conquered Farkel. Lorist might as well give him an early hand and use the resources he plundered to aid

the refugees.

It was a really odd opportunity, to say the least. Even though the provinces had already fallen into Auguslo's hands, the only thing that was really passed to him was the dominion registry that recorded the subjects of each town.

Additionally, subjects of the nobles entitled by the duke were not recorded in the registry. It was not unlike the 1.67 million population count of The Northlands. The number only included the subjects of House Norton. While Delamock and Winston were also controlled by the Nortons and had a combined population of around 700 thousand, they were registered as citizens of the provinces and couldn't be counted among House Norton's subjects.

For example, the citizens of Windbury were considered subjects of Andinaq. While Lorist was the governor and had similar rights to deal with the citizens of the city as he would his subjects, he couldn't consider them his. The governor term could be revoked. Even if Lorist were to serve in the position for the rest of his life, he couldn't pass the position down to his descendants. The household dominion, however, was hereditary. That was also one of the main reasons Auguslo allowed the refugees to migrate to Windbury. They would still end up under his control.

While the population was roughly a million, only were House Farkel's subjects. Now, around 100 thousand had been forced to become refugees by the dim-witted duke. Lorist and Count Felim would soon arrive to move them to Southern. While it didn't seem all that beneficial to The Northlands, all Lorist needed was an excuse to rescue them. He was actually counting on the subjects of the other nobles. He was confident he could migrate them to The Northlands.

Well, I should give Auguslo some face and move only 300 thousand to The Northlands.

With that, the conquest would add 500 thousand more subjects to The Northlands. It didn't include the refugees. House Norton was the one that profited the most from the war. Lorist wasn't too worried about the migration either.

The Norton forces had rich experience migrating droves of people. Count Felim was no stranger to it either. After Tigersoar and Pegasus arrived at Kribia, Pegasus left a division behind to work with Tigersoar to rally and watch over the refugees. Its three other divisions continued to Phapsia and Samora. As they were light cavalry, they moved quickly and could provide aid to the refugees and maintain order sooner.

Loze would lead Tigersoar per Lorist's orders to clear up the dominions of all the local nobles who left with the duke. The order was simple: the resources plundered from the dominions would be used to aid the migration. And for the subjects of the nobles who lost the resources, they would have to join the refugees on the migration so they didn't starve or freeze.

It was another reason Lorist wanted enough food to feed 100 thousand people for only 15 days. It would be enough to ensure that the refugees could make it to Windbury. The duke only burned the resources and warehouses of the areas and towns he controlled, but he didn't order his vassals to do the same. Given the good weather the duchy had had for the last couple of years, the warehouses across Farkel were filled with food. Furybear's informants Lorist had installed in the houses had long investigated and reported everything. The reports were so detailed they even had an estimate of the amount of food present.

Some of the reports even told of some road guides who led Tigersoar along for some good profit. Apart from sparing ten-odd nobles who didn't follow the duke and gave Tigersoar a huge sum of money to leave them alone, there were 34 houses razed to the ground. The army was very thorough; all valuables were taken. It was no great feat, they were so used to raiding. Another 100 thousand people became refugees.

To other houses and forces, winter was a really threatening season. Apart from having nothing better to do for most of it, nobody was willing to be on guard duty in the chilling and windy weather. House Norton's forces were different. They had to train and carry out missions even during the coldest time of winter. With thick furs to stave off the cold and great experience making long marches in the cold, even blizzards were no issue. As long as there was enough snow piled up on the ground, their sleds and skis could see some use.

With sleds, transporting the refugees to another location would be an even quicker affair. Lorist had Charade and Camorra to set up a complete transport line. Rest stations for the refugees to rest and resupply along the way were set up in Messen, Southern, and Windbury. Along the way, the refugees could get off their sleds to stretch their bodies until they arrived at their respective drop-off points.

After the third bout of snow stopped, the already-prepared Tigersoar soldiers led one sled after another on their long journey. It inconvenienced the Norton forces greatly by transporting large numbers of people during winter as there was no need to have anybody supervise the refugees. After all, anyone with half a brain wouldn't separate

from the group to wander off in the snow or cause any trouble. Leaving the wind-shielded sleds in such cold weather only meant death.

So far, more than 400 thousand refugees had been gathered in Kribia. Tigersoar had also swept the province clean and was preparing to carry out the final sweeping operations in Samora. Lorist gave Loze a quota of 800 thousand refugees. Having been under Farkel's rule for just eight years, it was hard to find so many refugees. However, Loze promised he would find a way.

After clearing up the lands across Kribia and Phapsia, the most plentiful among the spoils was food. They obtained very few gold Fordes, around 400 thousand. There were far more luxury goods and collectibles that used to belong to the nobles. Those were worth approximately a million gold Fordes. It was decided that the cash would go to Felim and the rest would fill Lorist's coffers.

On the 32nd day of the 1st month of the next year... More than 50 days had elapsed since the migration began. The refugees from Phapsia had all been migrated, and only 40 thousand remained in Samora. Lorist estimated they could settle the refugees down on the 15th day of the 2nd month with the sleds before the thick snow melts. The rainy season and a month of good rest would follow. They could start making their contributions to the house thereafter.

Potterfang, who received a secret order to lead three divisions from Firmrock unnoticed to Phapsia, entered the main tent in the igloo.

"Your Grace, we are ready. Shall we begin?" asked he, saluting.

Chapter 428

Hot Spring Valley

A beastskin map was spread on the desk, depicting the terrain around Paetro. It was laid between Forund and Farkel and stretched more than 50 kilometers, straddling. Dense forests covered the region with many streams, valleys, and cliffs scattered all over.

After being obstructed by the trenches and mud walls, Auguslo had tried to take the area near Paetro. As long as he could breach it, he would become a threat to Forund's capital, Paetro, and Farkel's capital, Freimox, at the same time. In the end, however, he just sent a division of Whitelion on a probing attack before abandoning the idea. It couldn't be done. The mountain roads were long and perilous, not suited for large forces to use.

The greatest difficulty was still the mountain legion Forund had stationed there. Most of the soldiers were mountain folk, incredibly fast at climbing and descending the mountains. Not only were they familiar with the terrain, they could even construct traps. Being people who loved battle, they were courageous and didn't fear death either. The division Whitelion sent was a thousand strong. They were ambushed by 400 mountaineers. Auguslo and Lorist were so shocked at the enemy's capabilities they withdrew after just a short skirmish.

In less than half an hour, Whitelion's 1000-man unit suffered nearly 700 casualties while the mountaineers lost less than half their men. While Whitelion's troops were more than double the enemy, given that the battle was fought in forests on the hills, the heavy-armored Whitelion soldiers couldn't do much against the poorly equipped mountaineers armed with small weapons and who cruised between the trees like they were flying. The men couldn't do anything but fight and cry in desperation.

The mountaineers were far too good at utilizing their terrain advantage. One of the rescued injured 100-man leaders reported his experience.

"I never knew where they were. They jumped down from the trees and blended in with the woods, and attacked when our guards were down. They never fought us head-on unless they had nowhere to go...

"There were a few times we managed to force them into a corner, but they would manage to climb the trees and escape or jump down and disappear quickly. We weighed down by our armor and couldn't keep up with them. Each time, by the time we realized they were gone, they were already behind us or had already found and taken out their target. We could do nothing but watch..."

Auguslo unwillingly withdrew his decision to take Paetro by breaking through the hilled region. The casualty rate was completely beyond anyone's ability to absorb. Whitelion had five divisions and one logistics brigade, around 56 thousand men. Each division had ten 1000-man units. They had suffered a full division's worth of casualties during the fight over the trenches, so they didn't have the strength to take the hilled area. They could easily have defeated the enemy on flat, open plains, but fighting in the mountains was a completely different story.

When he occupied Paetro, Auguslo heard the mountain legion had not withdrawn with the duke. Instead, they had chosen to stay in the mountains. He couldn't afford to dedicate troops to deal with them, however.

Let's leave them be in the mountains for now. If they dare to come down they won't be a match for my men

Since Auguslo wasn't going to deal with them, Lorist wouldn't either. Besides, sending cavalry forces, like those in Tigersaor, into combat in the mountains was just looking for death. He had barely made his decision when Tigersoar came under attack. He didn't suffer many casualties, but not so few that he could ignore it like one would a fly buzzing around one's head. The legion came under constant attacks until the snow and winds of the 12th month closed in. By that point, the legion had swept Phapsia clean of nobles and were headed to Samora.

The harassment infuriated Lorist.

You were fortunate enough to have me not bother with you, and yet you still came looking for trouble? You're pushing your luck!

Had it not been for the fact that they were busy with the migration, he would've slaughtered his way up the mountain long ago. He sent word to Potterfang and Malek, dying of boredom on Southern's border, to send over three divisions disguised as refugees. They quietly set up camp and replaced the refugees sent away.

"I had Reidy take several men and reconnoitre the area while the storm was at its heaviest. If not for winter they would've been discovered. The enemy does have winter gear and could theoretically attack us even now, but they seem unwilling to move in the cold."

Lorist pointed at a red circle drawn on the map.

"We had our pursuit teams stop at the border of the foothills after each attack to leave the impression of being unwilling to go up the mountains. Instead, I had Reidy and his men track them in secret. We've located their main camp, it's in this circle.

"Hot Spring Valley, the largest valley in the region. There are lots of hot springs apparently and it's almost as warm as spring there. Their entire force is housed there. Our informants in Forund, tell me 80 thousand mountain folk spend winter in the valley every year. Coupled with the legion's 35 thousand, there should be just over 100 thousand. That's why I mobilized three of Firmrock's divisions.

"Two divisions from Tigersoar will also join you. They will dismount and enter the mountain range to seal off any escape routes. Pog, you'll take three divisions and attack Hot Spring Valley with me. We have to catch our enemy all at once. I'm sure you've already screened the more detailed plans. We don't need to exterminate them. We want prisoners. The mountain folk are a good source of manpower. Our development projects depend on their contributions and services."

The household knights in the tent all laughed ghastly. They knew their lord had the poor mountain folk in his sights. Lorist also chuckled. He had Jinolio open another map.

"This is a detailed map of the valley. According to the intel Reidy gathered, the eleven hills around the valley have watch posts and smoke signals. If we attack, we first have to take out the watch posts. If they raise the alarm, the rest in the valley will be on their guard. If they seal the three entrances to the valley it'll be very difficult to get in without suffering unacceptable numbers of casualties. Reidy, his men, and I will take care of this. Pog, you will take the three valley entrances.

"The north side is completely blocked by cliffs. The east, south, and west sides each have an entrance. The valley itself isn't completely flat either. It has around ten small hills. The mountain legion occupies them. Most of the mountain folk use the run-down bases as residences. Forund counts on the legion to govern the mountain folk. We have

to make sure we pull the roots out completely, we can't leave loose ends. Understood?"

"Understood, Your Grace," replied the knights and high-ranked military officials.

.....

"Shut the door quickly. I'm freezing to death," barked Jack.

He had become more and more susceptible to the cold lately, possibly due to his age. Every time it became wet, he would feel intense pain in the joints of his arms and legs. It was probably a serious case of cold autoinflammatory syndrome which Jack probably got because of his exposure to cold during his youth. The treatment was simple, though - just a simple medical concoction worth 10 gold coins a bottle. Three bottles would return everything to normal.

"What horrid merchants!" complained Jack, *Do they think gold Fordes are so easily earned? I sold half my life to the mountain legion and only saved 23 gold Fordes... I'm already over 40. Thankfully, the Norton cavalry scout I killed had three gold coins. I also got one coin from general Nuori.*

At that moment, the old man was faced with a difficult choice. Upon saving up 30 gold coins, would he buy the medicine required to cure his disease? Or would he use it to wed the widow, Sarina? He was rather old already, he didn't have much time left in the legion. Sarina had told him he could buy farmland with the 30 gold. He could farm herbs and hunt -- a decent life for a family. She would marry him if he could provide her with such a life; they could have children and he could spend the rest of his life in peace.

"Sigh, Old Jack, the mountains are really cold. Even such a short trip froze my limbs stiff! I really miss the hot springs in the valley. Bathing and having a few shots of steaming hot wheat brew in this kind of weather is the ultimate pleasure..."

The one who had just entered was Maskrei. The two were in charge of one of the outposts together.

"Do you think I don't want that as well?" Jack said, rolling his eyes, "But for the sake of my gold coins, I have to forget about luxuries like that. If not for your gambling debts, would you be willing to spend winter here with me?"

His words rang true. It was precisely because General Nuori offered a reward of two

gold Fordes. Jack and Maskrei were only willing to leave Hot Spring Valley to suffer the cold for the coins. As long as they could endure the winter, they would get two gold Fordes.

"Any signs of movement outside?" asked Jack.

Maskrei shook his head.

"Nothing, like always. I only see white no matter where I look. Staring too long only makes my head hurt. I circled the peak a few times. The woods are quiet. I did see a muntjac deer down the cliff, though. It's a shame we can't get down there. Otherwise, we'd have fresh-meat soup tonight. I'm sick of drinking salted-meat soup and teething on black bread every day."

They were stationed at the outpost built on the outermost hill. It was also one of the tallest, so it was incredibly hard, even outright impossible, to descend especially during winter. The small path that required one to walk sideways was sealed. The two could only spend winter in their run-down shed. Their rations were also brought up using a rope that hung over the cliff.

"Winter's still fine. When the snow melts and rainy season comes, it'll be far worse. We'll know if our sheds have leaks then. We might have to basically rebuild the entire shed, otherwise we won't sleep all season," said Jack.

"I see..."

All of a sudden, Maskrei's ears twitched.

"D'you hear anything? Something's outside."

"Impossible, no one could climb a cliff like--"

Before Jack could finish, there was a knock on the shed's door. It was pushed open a moment later. A lone figure filled the doorway. The cold wind squeezed in around him.

"Surrender now. You have one chance," said the caped, white-scarfed figure.

Jack's teeth chattered, either from fear or the cold, he didn't know which.

"Y-y-you... How did you get up..."

"How?" the figure mused as if it was an odd question, "Isn't there a path? I got up using that."

Jack had calmed down. He secretly tugged on Maskrei's clothes.

"Hold him off. I'll light the smoke signal and help you deal with him after," whispered he.

The smoke signal fire was behind the shed. However, there was an opening in the cabin that gave access to it. Jack had already thought up a plan. As long as Maskrei could hold the figure off for a moment, he could get some quick-burning firewood, ignite it, and toss it out the window. The pile, pre-doused with fuel, would be set alight immediately. If he was fast, he could do it in a few blinks. The enemy's plan would fail and they'd either try to kill the two or panic and run away. Either way, Jack would've completed his mission. Jack didn't mind if it broke into a fight either. Having dwelled on battlefield after battlefield for most of his life, he wasn't afraid of tussling with a rookie.

"Now!" cried Jack before he took out the quick-burning wood from his waist pouch and turned to the opening behind him. From the corner of his eye, he saw Maskrei draw his sword and dash towards the figure.

"I did it!" cried Jack.

Just as he was about to open the wooden window, he felt a cold sensation in his chest and lost all his strength. He lost his balance and crashed into the wall.

What's going on?

He lowered his head and saw a blade poking out of his chest.

"Ugh..."

He turned around with much difficulty and saw Maskrei, still standing a moment before, collapsed on the ground. He didn't know if the man was dead. The figure drew his sword and complained.

"You really don't know what's good for you, do you?"

His vision darkened. He slumped to the ground and lay there, dead.

On the 3rd day of the 4th month, Year 1782, House Norton attacked Hot Spring Valley near Paetro. Forund's mountain legion was completely defeated. General Nuori fought to his death at the hands of General Potterfang. More than 10 thousand mountain folk resisted and were massacred. The remaining 50 thousand discarded their weapons and surrendered.

Chapter 429

Word of the Swordsaint

"Take a seat. Is the rain outside heavy?" Lorist asked Charade, who had just come in, as he leaned against his chair. After a busy winter, he had finally dealt with the migration and returned to Ragebear before the rainy season. After a few days of messing around with Sylvia, whom he hadn't seen for a while, he finally returned to dealing with business.

"What do you think? I really hate the rainy season. This incessant rain makes me feel moist as if I have mold growing on me even if I wasn't in the rain. The thought of having to endure this for more than 20 days really drives me crazy," complained Charade as he approached the fireplace like he was trying to bake his clothes dry.

When he felt warm again, he sat on the couch and asked Jinolio to get him a bottle of fruit wine.

"Hey, how's it going with Howard lately? He should be making good progress training in seclusion, right?"

Lorist nodded.

"Yes. Reidy's gone to Firmrock to check on him. He can leave in another half a year. Potterfang also told me before he went to the border that the moment Howard comes out of seclusion, he will marry him to the beloved daughter of Count Felim. Seeing as only Handra remains, if we succeed, Count Felim will be made Duke of Southern. So, Potterfang is getting a little anxious. He worries that, after Felim's promotion, he will not regard his title as baron fondly and make changes to Howard's marriage with his daughter."

"Hehe, Potterfang's brain is rusting. What's there to worry about?" Charade criticized impolitely, "Even if Count Felim is promoted to duke, he would still have to rely on us. Without our support, could he develop his dominion and secure Southern? If Firmrock really was called back, The count would only be able to sleep well if he keeps one of his eyes open at night. Would he really think the armistice signed with Duke Fisablen is a guarantee for peace? The moment Frontier troops march into his castle, it would

all be over."

Charade's words contained some truth. Even if Count Felim was to be made duke after the four duchies' conquest, he would still have to stand behind House Norton. If he really were to cut ties with the other houses, he would definitely be swallowed whole by House Fisablen.

"Then again, Howard already has a good carrier, and Katrina seems to be a good girl who's also a great match. The two get along well as well. I've decided to let them get married after Howard exits seclusion," said Lorist.

Taking a sip of the delicious fruit wine Jinolio served, he asked, "The new migrants are doing well, yes?"

The refugees forced to migrate from Farkel to The Northlands totaled 230 thousand. Coupled with the ones from Forund, the number exceeded 400. That was to say, the population of The Northlands had shot past two million.

"It's going well. There haven't been any revolts yet. Even the last batch of mountain folk have been behaving."

Charade saw Lorist was ready to talk about serious matters, so he motioned his attendant to get him his personal folder and searched for the relevant information. Upon mention of the mountain folk, Lorist snorted.

"Make sure to watch them closely. They're really feisty and disagreeable. When we surrounded Hot Spring Valley and forced them into a corner, they actually dared to continue resisting? It took us more than a thousand casualties to subdue them and forced us to have Malek's carroballista division massacre the bulk from afar before they were finally willing to discard their weapons and surrender.

"The mountain legion was the same. Even though they were obviously encircled and their gold-ranked knight general, one of the mountain folk called Nuori, had died, they still persisted. They just wouldn't surrender. In the end, we had to burn their camps down to chase them out and kill them. We lost 18 thousand possible captives. Those we caught were mostly injured. I've decided they will work for eight years, not just three."

"Eight years? Well, Your Grace, weren't you going to recruit them into our forces? Logically speaking, the mountain folk should be rather decent recruits," wondered

Charade.

Lorist shook his head.

"They have a really tough personality and they've always been loyal to Forund. They are proud to be citizens of the duchy. Additionally, House Forund's policies towards their subjects are aimed at gaining their loyalty. You might not know this, but there's only been one form of taxation for the mountain folk in the last century: blood tax. That is to say, the mountain folk have to serve in the military. House Forund also gave back by allowing them to congregate in the hilled area near Paetro and develop as they want. Thus their loyalty, unlike soldiers from other factions or houses that joined to make ends meet. Their loyalty will be hard to change."

Charade nodded. Now that he knew, even he did not intend to recruit them. Eight years of labor should teach them their place. After that, they would be placed all over the dominion so they will assimilate as its subjects. He took out another document.

"The plan to settle the refugees is already complete. Do you want to look it over?"

Lorist raised his cup.

"Just give me a brief. As long as the rough details make sense, I'll sign."

"Alright."

Charade cleared his throat and recited, "There are 2871 households among those who migrated to Windbury. They are 98236 people, most are artisans and merchants. We assigned them to the houses across the nearby streets so it would be convenient to set up shops or workshops. We expect Windbury to develop explosively once they're settled down. We estimate the livestock trading centers and leatherworking workshops will be established in Windbury's northern sector next year.

"More than 360 thousand migrants are expected to enter The Northlands in total. They will not be assigned to the three new settlements in the south, but rather, the east where two new settlements are being built, Prosperitas and Bliss will be completed later this year. As for the three completed settlements in Southern, namely, Harvest, Vigor, and Haven, they are located near Ragebear, so we have decided to move a few loyal subjects from Felicitas, Salus and Redriver Valley over. The rest will be assigned to the soldiers who are retiring in the coming three years.

"Additionally, the refugees distributed to our vassals are around 13 thousand. That is the gist of it. After the rainy season, we will bring the new subjects and allocate farmland and houses to them. We'll try to have everything settled by the 8th month. Does anything need amending?"

Lorist gave it some thought before he offered, "Let's leave it as is. The plan's fine, there's no need to change it. Just let me sign and have your subordinates execute it."

As Lorist was signing, Charade brought out another document.

"Your Grace, this is the report Grandmaster Sid submitted last year. He has successfully used the new elastic steel to make new compact crossbows for cavalry use with a greatly lowered cost. It seems that, so far, each compact crossbow costs only 7 gold and 8 large silvers to manufacture. I already allocated a budget of three thousand gold Fordes in research funds and requested the production cost to be further lowered to five gold Fordes before we put it into mass production."

Lorist was elated.

"Finally! Now Jaeger's ranged weaponry issue can be solved. Then again, do you know what the range, force, and speed re?"

Charade answered a little apologetically.

"I'm not too sure... I was too focused on the cost. A crossbow usually costs between two to three gold Fordes, the compact crossbow should be at least double in performance. In that sense, it would be acceptable for the cost to even be two times as high..."

Lorist waved Grandmaster Sid's report.

"Since it's not stated here, I believe Grandmaster Sid intends to keep it secret. how about this, write Josk a letter and have him pick a hundred loyal and reliable elite light cavalry from Jaeger and head to the grandmaster after the rainy season. They can do some practical testing to further refine the prototype. After all, they will be the ones to use them in battle, so they should be the ones giving input. Also, there's no need to lower the price further, it might affect the quality."

"Alright, understood."

The two discussed a few other matters. Jinolio knocked on the door and entered.

"Your Grace, Sir Tarkel is here."

The reason for Tarkel's visit was so he could give Lorist reports about the war between the Union and the mid-southern nations. Though Lorist had been on the frontlines last year, he still managed to get some snippets about the war. However, as most were sent via eagle, they were concise and simple. Now that he had returned to Ragebear, he had Tarkel gather and bring him the reports and newspapers from Morante.

Tarkel entered the study holding a stack of newspapers half a person high. It was a collection of seven to eight different publications in Morante throughout the previous year. After putting the stack of newspapers down, Tarkel handed him a folder.

"Your Grace, this is a gross summary of what these newspapers report."

Lorist took the folder. The first page he read shocked him.

"What? The windstorm swordsaint is now living in Morante?"

Charade flabbergasted.

"What did you say?!"

Tarkel smiled bitterly.

"Your Grace, I already reported this to you in an eagle message."

"Sorry, Tarkel. I was too focused on information concerning the four duchies I didn't give those much thought."

Tarkel flipped through the newspapers and took out ten or so.

"The details are in these. This swordsaint is rather low profile, he went into seclusion and nobody has seen him since the interview on his first day in Morante. The Union's law enforcement hasn't allowed the press to send people after him either. Apart from the commotion this caused during the first month, nothing else happened. But with a swordsaint supporting the Union, their morale has risen greatly."

Charade flipped through the newspapers quickly, but was soon disappointed.

"All the newspapers tell his life story and legend. It doesn't contain anything about how Kalia was wiped out and why the swordsaint decided to leave and accept the Union's invitation. They also don't say anything about what the Union did to get him! What kind of bullshit reporting is this?!"

Lorist sank into deep thought for a moment.

This means the Union just gained a swordsaint protector. Auguslo's ambition of retaking the provinces lost to the Union just became pretty much impossible. I bet he won't react well to hearing this news. Then again, this won't affect us much since we're so far away.

Even so, he was still really curious about the price the Union paid to invite the swordsaint over.

"Tell me, if His Majesty were to invite the windstorm swordsaint, what kind of price do you think he'd be willing to pay?"

Charade and Tarkel both blanked. They didn't know what this had to do with Auguslo. But since Lorist had asked, they tried their best to come up with an answer.

"At least 100 thousand gold Fordes, as well as a training hall for him to pass on his swordsmanship," offered Tarkel.

"Not just that. Your conditions aren't much different from how it was for the swordsaint back at Kalia. If His Majesty really wants to recruit him, he'd have to give a province as his hereditary dominion and name him a duke," offered Charade.

Lorist laughed.

"That's more like it. However, the Union's recruitment is horrible news for His Majesty. You should know how he rambles on about reuniting the empire. I'd really like to see the look on his face when he hears about this. Even after exterminating the duchies, he still has to face the huge pressure of a superpower like the Union. Before he comes up with a method to deal with the swordsaint, he will cool down and not try so hard to advance.

"I will soon return to the frontlines with Tigersoar. Though there's only Handra left, the other duchies' forces have gathered there. Coupled with the terrain limitations, this isn't going to be a smooth fight. It may take up to a year. I leave the dominion to you, Tarkel. Take note of news of the war down south. Inform me immediately if any

major changes come about."

"Understood, Your Grace," replied Tarkel with a bow.

Chapter 430

Method

Auguslo spent the month-long rainy season with a constant gloom on his face. The news Lorist had brought had already unnerved him so much he didn't have an appetite and couldn't sleep. Then there was the failed attack on Handra. Suffice to say, even being a rank 1 blademaster, his teeth stung like a shard of bone had found its way beneath the enamel.

The herbalist that had just left had infuriated him even more. It took considerable effort not to just end the man right then and there. The man just shrugged, there was nothing he could do to ease or relieve the pain. It was nerves and stress, not anything related to the teeth themselves. In herbal medicine, toothache was a huge problem. Unlike normal bodily diseases, which one bottle of concoction could usually solve, there was only one way to deal with a toothache: tooth extraction. However, it left the unfortunate patient with fewer teeth. Dental filling was unheard of.

Auguslo opted to keep his teeth. A king was not truly a king if he didn't have a full smile. It wasn't that there wasn't a solution; a tooth from a dead person could be extracted and implanted in the lost tooth's place on social occasions -- many nobles resorted to this -- but the thought of putting a dead man's tooth in one's mouth only to remove it before a meal to avoid accidentally swallowing it... wasn't exactly invigorating.

With no other options available -- or allowed -- the herbalist left to prepare some general purpose anti-inflammatory solutions. Auguslo was in so much pain he'd have given the herbalist a beating had he been able to say something properly.

Why, in the world of medicine, where ruptured organs aren't a big deal, is a simple toothache such a pain?! What's this bullshit about teeth being the crystallization of human bones and different from the other parts of the body... He's just making shit up to cover his incompetence! I really shouldn't have spent so much money feeding him!

Looking at the Morantian newspapers Lorist had brought, Auguslo felt his lucky stars were really misaligned. Though the four duchies' collapse was within his grasp and his ambition of reunifying the empire seemed achievable, his biggest enemy, the

Union, actually managed to recruit a sword saint. With a sword saint supporting the nation, could he send his troops to reclaim the provinces? If he were to give up on them, though, would the reunification ever truly be achieved? Would he be able to claim that he was the ruler that reunited the empire?

Meanwhile, Lorist was accompanying Shazin to check out the battlefield. After the rainy season, Lorist stayed at Ragebear for half a month until Auguslo had sent three messengers asking him to get a move on, prompting him to unwillingly mobilize Tigersoar. He handed the king a few reports from Morante about the Union's recruitment of a sword saint.

After checking the defenses, he understood why the king was so distraught. At first, Lorist was quite unwilling to mobilize his forces, as using heavy-armored infantry was the way to go in hilly terrain. Tigersoar was a cavalry unit and they couldn't play too huge a part in such a fight. But upon seeing the battlefield himself, he finally understood that the king didn't need his cavalry, but rather, the legion's thunderbolt and carroballista brigades.

When Lorist arrived at the frontlines, it was already the 21st day of the 5th month. After the rainy season, Auguslo led his troops of 200 thousand men into Handra's province, Westwood. At first, it went really smooth and a quarter of the territory was conquered. They were soon held back on the Welony mountain pass, however, and lost a few battles in a row. So, they had to borrow Tigersoar's ranged forces to suppress the defenders, hence the messengers' hurried beckoning.

"This battle won't be easy," said Lorist.

That true. Westwood, as its name suggested, was a province covered in hills and forests. It was also rather large. In the common tongue, 'west' was used to describe mountainous areas. Cloudsnap near Egret Swamp actually stretched all the way from Kanbona to Westwood. It crossed five provinces altogether. Though it was one of the mountain range's ends, it was covered with dense forests, making it hard to attack and easy to defend. The first prince had led 200 thousand men in his invasion of the duchies, only to be stopped in Westwood. Many battles were lost during the two years of conflict there. But the first prince had attacked from the south northwards while Auguslo was doing so in the opposite direction.

Welony pass was the true endpoint of Cloudsnap. Its terrain was a little similar to Pispir pass, in which stood Pedro, but the opening was far wider at about five

kilometers. While it was wide, the cliffs on either side were incredibly steep, exposing the attacking side to great risk. It was exceedingly disadvantageous.

From the telescope, was clear that the Handra garrison was using the same trench and mud wall network. They also constructed a lot of archer towers, though. There were also a lot of ruined shield carts laid all over the network, with the ground around it bloodied and crimson. It was probably the blood shed by the attacking soldiers. There were also a lot of bumps and potholes of varying size dotting the slope.

"Look at those two areas poking out on the slope," said Shazin.

"What are they?"

Lorist pointed the telescope where Shazin had pointed and saw a row of man-made crane-like contraptions on tall wooden structures.

"Catapults," Shazin replied, "When His Majesty deployed the catapults to cover Whitelion's march, he didn't think the enemy would be prepared. Those weird wooden buildings with long arms are actually catapults. Though their range isn't as great as ours', given their elevation, they have the advantage in terms of terrain. Whitelion's assault suffered a hideous loss and huge casualties. Even ten of His Majesty's catapults were ruined."

Catapults? So Handra has already come up with a lever contraption. The wooden buildings below the arms must be to hide the lever. Hehe, so they're pretty secretive.

Lorist counted around 40 wooden towers on one side. There were near a hundred in total on both sides.

"How heavy are the rocks they throw? How far can they reach?"

"More or less the size of a human head, around 20 kilograms. They can be thrown around 300 meters at most. The catapults His Majesty sent were shot down at around that range. His Majesty even threw a tantrum and said the catapults you gave him were defective and couldn't fire as far as the enemies'. That's because, when the enemy started using their catapults to attack us, our catapults also retaliated. But our rocks all fell short."

Lorist snorted lightly.

"Defective products? Props to him for daring to say that. He didn't even think about how we're fighting a literal uphill battle. The enemy has the high ground which means they have a great advantage. Given the difference in elevation, it's no wonder our catapults don't fire as far."

"Yeah. His Majesty also realized this a little later. He tried a night attack but failed because the enemy was on ready. Right now, it's exactly the opposite of how it was in Forund. We dominated and Forund's garrison had to attack at night to retake the land they lost in the day. Now, however, with the hundreds of catapults up there, the day is now their domain. We have no way of launching an attack."

Those hundred catapults were a grave threat. They had to dodge rocks whenever they were in range. Their chances of victory were all but zero.

"Did His Majesty try attacking somewhere else?"

"It's useless," Shazin said, shaking his head, "This is the flattest terrain in the pass. I've already checked everywhere else and it's all worse than this. Some passes circle around smaller hills, even more beneficial to the defenders. The large pass here is the main highway between the duchies and the smallest threat. We didn't think Handra would install so many catapults."

"What is the enemy's disposition?"

"Our scouts and the few prisoners we caught, the pass is defended by Handra's Reddragon. Together with Whitedragon, Reddragon is one of the two standing legions, and, just like Whitedragon, it has 24 thousand men. They are divided into two divisions and another brigade. They're known as the Twin Dragon Legion, though they always fight independently. Currently, Reddragon has four divisions guarding the pass, eight thousand men in each. There's also another logistics brigade of three thousand. All-in-all, we face 35 thousand.

"The eastern part of Cloudsnap is defended by Forund's first legion, Matnamady in the west is held by Farkel's Forestmont. We don't know where the rest are. Altogether, we face 130 thousand men."

Shazin was quite well-informed.

Lorist pointed at the distant, foggy Matnamady stream.

"Has our king not thought of attacking there?"

Shazin smiled bitterly.

"Of course, and it cost me one regiment of elite light infantry scouts. Matnamady sits on mountainous terrain; there's no way to bypass it. There are a number of streams in the area, which completely lock down any possible bypass route. Farkel's Forestmont only has to occupy a few strategic points to make it hard for us to escape. I sent a regiment of elite scouts to reconnoiter the area... less than three hundred returned."

"Isn't the Nibarak river beyond Matnamady? It connects Handra's inner land, Deramak province, right? Has His Majesty considered sending an assault for that way?"

"It's useless. Duke Fisablen suggested that move, but even he lost almost a whole light cavalry division," Shazin sighed, "Handra has long made preparations. Duke Fisablen recruited some worksmen and constructed countless wooden boards to head down along Nibarak. He didn't think Handra would install chain blockades at three turning points of Matnamady."

"In an attempt to launch a surprise attack, Duke Fisablen didn't send anyone to scout, fearing it would alert the enemy. In the end, the grassland barbarians were sent down the stream only to be stopped by the chains. The troops standing guard on shore hurriedly called for reinforcements and shot flaming arrows and fireballs at the river while dumping fuel into the water. They then set it alight and everything burned. The legion lost 10 thousand men."

Duke Fisablen is really unlucky. The division he lost was burnt alive without harming a single hair on the enemy.

After indulging in schadenfreude, his expression darkened as he thought back to how he had promised the king he would come up with a method to attack the defenses they now faced.

I'm really dumb. Why did I have to mock them for being stranded here? Auguslo's words got on my nerve and I promised confidently I would come up with a way to conquer the duchy... Remind me to never get drunk when the king's near ever again. I really let myself get into a horrible corner this time...

"Show me if there're any weaknesses, Hennard."

Three days later, the herbalist's concoction began to take effect. While Augustus's tooth still hurt badly, the inflammation subsided and he could speak normally again. With a hint of frustration, the king called for a military council to discuss how they could break through their current predicament.

"Locke, last time you told me you'd find a way to take Welony pass. Have you come up with anything yet?" asked he the moment everyone was present.

Who asked you to bring Tigersoar over so unwillingly? You even said you were busy migrating the refugees and bragged about how you'd solved my problem with the mountain legion and wanted to rest for the winter. You even said Tigersoar wouldn't fight without you present. You're really vexing.

Duke Fisablen even explained how perfect the fortifications are. But you bragged that there was no such thing as a flawless defense and that we just hadn't noticed its weakness... I bet you just had a little too much to drink. You didn't leave before giving me the newspapers and kicking off my toothache... You forced me to suffer all this pain!

If you can't come up with a way to take the pass, I'll mock you into your grave! Who asked you to run your mouth?

Lorist raised three fingers.

"Please forgive my incompetence. I could only come up with three ways to take care of the situation."

Chapter 431

Three Methods (1)

Are you fucking kidding me?! thought Auguslo blankly.

Rage followed momentarily.

We spent so much time leading the troops in attempt after attempt to take the pass and failed, but you say you found three methods to do just that in just a few days? Aren't you saying we're incompetents? That all the experienced generals and nobles here can't compare to you?!

The king suppressed his rage. However much he wished to deny it, he needed Lorist's input. Perhaps he really had discovered some weaknesses that could be exploited. He silenced everyone and smiled at Lorist.

"Is that so? I look forward to hearing them."

Lorist pulled the rack on which the map hung over.

"We've been stopped dead in our tracks. The enemy's trench network is similar to what we faced in Forund, but even more effective thanks to the terrain. This network is in the middle of a pass half-way up a mountain, there are no streams from which to draw water, so we can't defeat this network the as we did the one in Forund.

"Trenches and mudwalls alone, however, are not that much of a problem. Even if Handra added turrets, they can't hinder our assault that much. The real problem is the catapults. They stand far above us, which gives them far greater range than our weapons, effectively making our ranged equipment useless. We can't break through with a frontal assault.

"Granted, if we threw enough bodies at it, we could get through, but we can't afford the losses necessary."

Ah, I see. Why don't we just dig trenches and tunnels so our men can move hidden from the enemy catapults? They aren't nearly as accurate as ours, so it's not likely they'd be

able to hit into the trenches.

Hold on, Lorist did mention this would cause too many casualties. This might not be one of his methods.

Though Auguslo didn't mind sacrificing troops to, Whitelion was the kingdom's only standing royal army. They had already lost over ten thousand men. It would be best if excessive casualties could be avoided.

"Will all the three your methods avoid burning out the men?" asked the king with a beaming smile.

"Well..."

Lorist was a little taken aback by the sudden question.

"About that, it's not that it won't cost us any men. It's about minimizing the losses. The first method is a little dangerous."

"Danger? What kind? Let's hear it," Auguslo said with a smile.

"War is inherently filled with danger. I'm sure no one here fears danger."

"Okay. My first idea is to launch an assault with shock troops," Lorist said as he pointed at the pass on the map, "Since the biggest threat is the catapults, we destroy them first."

"Hah, you make it sound easy. It's not that we didn't think about it before. The problem is how. Without conquering the slope, we can't attack the catapults."

The one who spoke was Auguslo's long-time subordinate, Gold-ranked Knight Ripleid, whom Lorist had met when he was at Egret Swamp during his rescue of Reidy. Currently, Ripleid was Whitelion's general.

"I'm not talking about ordering our soldiers to take the slope," Lorist said with a smile, "We'll form a small elite squad. His Majesty, Duke Fisablen, Blademaster Manst, Reidy, and I combined are five blademasters. We just need ten gold-ranked knights. I've analyzed the enemy's rear. They are ready to fight an army, not a small team. It won't be hard to sneak a dozen or so people past them."

"As long as we secretly circle around, we will arrive at the slope where their catapults are. There is no way that the enemy can resist a surprise attack by five blademasters and ten gold-ranked knights. Additionally, the moment the catapults are set on fire, our main force will advance. You will lead the troops and attack from below and we'll wreak as much havoc as we can."

"I object!" As the king's personal bodyguard, Blademaster Manst was the first to speak out. "Lord Norton, I won't oppose you if you want to head out and risk your own life. But His Majesty cannot leave; he is responsible for the entire kingdom. There's no way he can head out so easily. If something goes wrong, you will be the kingdom's most wanted and hated man! War is rife with dangers and I will not let His Majesty take this kind of a risk!"

Lorist shrugged, "Then, just pretend I didn't propose it."

What does it have to do with me?! Would Duke Fisablen go if Auguslo doesn't go? Would you, Auguslo's bodyguard, go? You want Reidy and me to deal with it ourselves?! Since you are unwilling, why should I bother? Do you think we'd destroy a hundred catapults without at least five blademasters?

Auguslo, as opposed to his guardian, was rather moved by the proposition. Lorist's suggestion was rather suited to his tastes. However, the squad's composition was rather problematic. He was indeed a rank 1 blademaster, but unwilling to risk himself. He had earned his name as a genius military strategist, not as a frontliner.

Ideally, Lorist, Duke Fisablen, and the rest of the squad would ask to be given the responsibility while he remained in the main camp to command the main force from its relative safety. He thought about it for a few moments, and realized why Lorist had included him. The two dukes, Lorist and Fisablen, were not going to go on a dangerous mission their king wouldn't join. They weren't obedient people; to them, a king wasn't worth any more than them.

"Let's put the shock squad aside for now. Tell us the other methods."

He decided he would slowly discuss how he should proceed after hearing all three methods.

"As you wish. My second method involves splitting our forces." Lorist used a pencil to draw a line across Nibarak.

Auguslo said with disappointment, "Locke, we tried that already. Duke Fisablen suffered heavy casualties as a result of its failure. The four duchies' defenses are really tight."

Lorist shook his head.

"Your Majesty, your previous attempt involved leading part of the troops along the river to the enemy's rear. I'm not suggesting this. We will split a section off and send it to Handra's province, Deramak. We don't want to face Reddragon, from both sides, we want to race Hans, Handra's capital. We can cut their supply lines."

"This... How is this different from Duke Fisablen's suggestion?"

"There are quite a few, actually," Lorist said as he pointed at the map, "The duke's reserve legion was sent along the stream to the border. The plan was to chaos cause, and while the enemy was reacting, launch another attack on the pass. You forgot that the dukes are battle-hardened generals. The dukes have thought of this possible approach and prepared accordingly."

"However, aren't you suggesting splitting the forces the same way?" asked the reserve legion's general.

He was a gold-ranked knight called Hausen, a rather rough subordinate of Duke Fisablen.

"The goal is different. We aren't splitting the force to attack Wesstwood from behind. We're pressing forward and sowing havoc along the way. We'll burn the whole province to the ground."

"How will you get through their defenses along the river? They have chains and at least a division stationed along the river and they have numerous catapults."

"Simple. We won't go down the river. We'll cross it and continue east. We'll move down along the farthest banks. It may have dense forests and swamps, but we can manage."

Flabbergasted, Auguslo asked, "But... But won't the enemy discover us?"

"So what if they do? Just look. Nibarak is the province's border. Even if the enemy discovers the troops, what can they do? Cross the river as well? It'd be great if they did, actually. We can march proudly and in the open on the other side of the river. If

the enemy wishes to stop us, they'll have to line their troops along the river. Given how long Nibarak is, I really wonder how many legions the enemy will need. They'd have to line the entire river, but we can just pick a spot and cross again wherever we choose," said Lorist gleefully.

"No matter how the enemy chooses to react, the moment we head east, they will be incredibly riled-up. Even if we choose to not cross the river, the enemy will still be held back. They'll send three legions to follow us. In fact, we just need one cavalry legion to lead them by the nose. Let's not forget the duchies don't have cavalry like we do. They can't keep up."

Everyone finally understood what Lorist was planning. The moment the enemy realized the kingdom's troops were on the other side of the river, they would have to respond. The duchies would definitely not allow the kingdom to cross the river unabated and ravage their undefended belly. They would send troops to follow the split-off unit everywhere they went. Lorist was correct in that the duchies' infantry would always be lagging behind. The kingdom just had to race up and down the river to tire everyone out, attack.

Auguslo was convinced. "I wonder if we can split one light cavalry legion off to carry out this plan."

After some thought, Lorist replied, "Your Majesty, I believe it would be best to allow our house's Tigersoar and Felim's Pegasus to conduct this operation together."

"Why?"

"One legion won't be much of a threat. The enemy just has to retreat into their towns and focus on defending them. Additionally, Tigersoar's field and siege capabilities far exceed normal light cavalry. We might exterminate a few legions by working with Pegasus."

Auguslo nodded. Lorist's words made sense, but just as he was about to agree, a switch flicked in his head. He thought back to what happened in Farkel. He realized he had nearly been duped.

What is Lorist up to this time? Why is he so eager? Is he planning to strip Deramak clean as well?

He had lost so much he was instinctively afraid something was going on. The more he

thought about it, the more suspicious he became. It was worth noting that the spoils any noble obtained during war would belong to them. The king was afraid he would receive a completely empty plot of land even if he managed to eliminate Handra, and Lorist would have captured the citizens and called them his spoils.

No way. I cannot allow Tigersoar to go there, even if they are the most suitable candidates, thought he.

His face remained a mask.

"You said you had three methods, right? What about the last one?"

Chapter 432

Three Methods (2)

It seems Auguslo has realized my intentions. He's actually learning his lesson, thought Lorist as he sighed, disappointed, It's over. I shouldn't think of taking advantage of him anymore. It's getting harder and harder to swindle him. It seems he isn't as much of a fool as I thought.

"The final option is to just continue the stand-off."

"Continue the stand-off?"

"Yes. Think about it, according to our reports, Dukes Forund and Farkel brought two legions to Handra, Duke Shabaj also brought a division. There are 200 thousand more people in the duchy than is normal. Additionally, Hans's reports say Duke Handra has also expanded the Dragon Twins. Coupled with the city garrison, there are a total of 100 thousand men.

"Handra has three provinces and a population of approximately one million. Over a third of their bodies are now in uniform, I doubt the duchy can support so many people essentially just sitting around for long. So far, the dukes are working together to defend against us. But they are running out of money and supplies very quickly. We can just sit around and wait for them to crumble.

"There's be complete chaos when they do, and the three dukes now guests in the duchy won't disband their forces and give up on their claims so easily. If Handra's supplies and money runs out, there'll be hell to pay. I doubt any of the dukes will be willing to disband their forces, they'll try to get more supplies instead.

"I'm sure you can imagine what'll happen then. All three dukes will begin vying for resources, and Handra will recruit even more men to defend his territory against his allies, which'll only worsen the situation and bring the collapse about so much quicker.

"The longer we stay put, the worse things will get between the three. They might be able to hold out without much issue for a year, but no more. And they will inevitably turn on one another when the food runs out. They'll no doubt try and suppress the

conflicts at first, but that just means it'll burst out like a hot geyser all at once and the three will be at each other's throats.

"The dukes will likely set their sites on the commoners first. They'll raid the villages and farms for food and other supplies. As the duchy's ruler, Duke Handra will have to protect his subjects. Which will pit him against the other three. We can just sit by and watch the show. We don't need to lift a finger or lose a single life. Handra will fall apart on its own.

"If Your Majesty can be patient enough, just wait until they start fighting amongst themselves. It might even be that the losers will defect and lead us into Handra. If we march in at that time, the victor will be too battered to fight back."

The tent was completely silent. Everyone was analyzing Lorist's third and final suggestion. After a while, Duke Fisablen stood up and gave sound to his doubts.

"Lord Norton, while what you said makes sense, you seem to have forgotten an important point. Handra's Majik province neighbors Anderwoff, which is currently under the Union's control. The Wessia merchant guild occupies Bodolger right next to Anderwoff. The duchies could request support from Wessia or trade with the Union to get more resources and continue to resist."

Lorist laughed heartily.

"Your criticism is fair, Duke Fisablen, but you presuppose the guild will choose to trade with them. Merchants prioritize profit above all else; if the duchies still exist, Wessia's dealings will at the very least break even if they don't profit. But three of the dukes have already lost everything. They still control many men, but they can't trade in people if they want to continue fighting, and they have nothing else.

"Wessia might only provide minor support on account of their cooperation in the past, but they won't truly support them. The guild might instead be the first to crumble if it did. Given that Wessia occupies the former imperial territory of Bodolger, they will rely mainly on the Union instead of the duchies.

"As for the four dukes trading with the Union, that would depend on whether the dukes have something to trade as well. Among them, Duke Shabaj escaped in a hurry and should be the one who brought the least resources. Dukes Forund and Farkel left with the wealth of their house and duchy, so they might look like they are loaded, but

given that they're no longer in their dominion, they don't have an income.

"Their forces will only consume their resources, not generate any. After we occupied the two duchies, we estimated they each took around a million to two million gold Fordes. I believe Duke Handra's pouch is in more or less the same state. He still has his duchy, yes, but the war is sapping its vitality, not to mention that most of his tradable produce probably goes to feeding the guest armies.

"How long do you think two million gold Fordes can sustain two legions? Forund and Farkel have already been conquered, and the two dukes have a combined 90 thousand men. No matter how savvy they are, they will still be spending money like water.

"They can't invest their funds in trade with the Union. They'll rely on Handra completely instead. Handra might be forced to give his produce to feed the two legions, but I doubt he'll do so willingly, or be happy about it."

Ah! thought Auguslo as he clapped his hands, I see. The more pressure I apply to them, the more united they will be. But if I let them be, they will fight amongst themselves. Lorist's right. The duchy can't support 300 thousand soldiers for long. They can't sustain that kind of consumption.

"How long do you think we have to wait until the enemy caves?"

Lorist smiled, the whites of his teeth showing. He stretched out two fingers.

"Two years at most, nothing more. Probably less."

"That may be good, but we have forces to feed and pay as well. True, we have an entire kingdom's resources, but that also means we have far further to transport them. It is no cheap endeavor. Two years is a long time. We also have so many cavalry troops here. The food we need is at least double our enemy's." Auguslo furrowed his brow at the thought that Lorist's proposal was a double-edged sword.

"Hehe, Your Majesty seems to be forgetting that you have two new territories nearby. You could spend the two years governing the two properly. We can use its produce supply the army.

Each noble can look after his own forces in terms of any other supplies as long as Your Majesty remembers our contribution in eradicating the duchies and reward us accordingly."

Augusto paced around, his head lowered. The others present gazed at him, waiting for his final decision. He appeared rather troubled. Lorist's first suggestion was the simplest: keep up the assault. But, the shock squad his participation and it had already been shot down. The second method was to split off a portion of the troops, and the best candidate for the job was Tigrisoar as Lorist had said. But, out of worry for any hidden intentions, he'd mentally crossed that off as well. The third option was to stand off without fighting. Everyone understood from Lorist's breakdown that it was the best method; they just had to sit around and wait for the enemy to implode. However, it would take quite long and a lot of supplies to pull off. However, it wasn't a big deal in that the supplies would have to be spent either way regardless of which choice they made. Apart from Whitelion, the standing armies of the various noble families were gathered under Augusto's banner. Lorist had specified that they only needed food since they could take care of the other supplies.

What troubled Augusto was what reward he would give to the nobles if he chose this path. Usually, the nobles got to keep what they pillaged. The right to pillage was their reward. But the enemy this time was practically sucked dry already, and would certainly be if they waited for them to collapse. There would be nothing left to give away as spoils of war. He would have to reward the nobles from his own coffers. After pacing about several times and checking the expressions in the tent, it was obvious most of them preferred the third method.

It's true that fighting an enemy that occupies strategically advantageous terrain is really taxing on everyone's forces. It's better to sit and watch as the enemy crumbles on its own. Though it might take longer, they could gain victory and be rewarded without much cost.

"Let me consider this a little longer. We'll discuss this again in two days."

In the end, Augusto, didn't settle on a method immediately and adjourned the meeting.

What in the world is he planning? thought Lorist curiously.

The next morning, he noticed Duke Fisablen had been called for a private meeting with the king. Thereafter Kenmays, then Felim. He was just guessing who would be next when Kenmays came over.

"D'you know why the king summoned me?" asked he.

"How would I know?"

"His Majesty asked me what reward I would want for having the two heavy-armored divisions stationed here for two years."

Lorist finally understood what was going on.

"What did you request?"

Kenmays stretched out two fingers.

"I want the salt merchant committee completely exempt from tariffs in the kingdom for two years."

Felim soon came over as well.

"What did you request?" asked Kenmays.

"I asked for 50 thousand young laborers for Southern's development, but His Majesty only agreed to give me 30 thousand."

"What about Hennard?"

"He should've been summoned already."

In the evening, Auguslo sent two guards to invite Lorist for dinner.

"You should know my intentions for inviting you. Tell me what you want. Don't be greedy," said Auguslo frankly.

"Your Majesty, have you decided on not fighting?"

The king nodded.

"The part I'm most satisfied with is that it'll cause the four traitors to fight each other. Just like you said, the moment they turn on each other, a lifelong grudge will form. The most troublesome part of the four central duchies is that they're four nations in one and they'll support each other no matter what. Regardless of how this turns out for them, I'll be satisfied as long as they're at each other's throats by the end. I have more than enough patience to watch them tear themselves apart. But, I'm sure you know how worried I am about not getting any spoils as a result. I wanted to set the reward beforehand."

Lorist smiled.

"Your Majesty, may I know what Duke Fisablen wanted?"

"He didn't ask for much. He just wanted enough equipment to outfit a legion and 50 thousand migrants."

"Oh," Lorist said, "Then I'll have..."

"Stop! Locke, don't even bring up migrating people. I will not allow it. I regret letting you deal with moving the refugees in Farker the most. You should know what you did," interjected Augustuslo.

"Fine," Lorist conceded with a shrug, "But what else can you give me apart from people? Any ideas?"

"Locke..." Augustuslo slapped his forehead in preparation for the impending headache, "As long as your request is not overboard, I will agree."

"Fine. Exempt my dominion and the territories I control from taxes for five years." Lorist had no choice but to come up with such a request.

"No way," Augustuslo objected, before he stared Lorist in the eye, "Fine, three years at most and not a month more."

"Deal."

Lorist stretched out his hand.

Chapter 433

All Quiet on the Southern Front

After deciding to take on a passive stance, Auguslo gathered his generals and reorganized his forces. The main camp would be moved back 25 kilometers to Westwood's border. They still had to erect outposts and defenses at the new location to protect against any surprise attacks.

The camp itself would be split. Kenmays's two heavy-armored divisions, Tigersoar, and Pegasus would be in the left camp, standing between Handra and Farkel's Kribia. Whitelion, Third Frontier, and the reserve legion, they would be in the right camp, their backs facing Paetro. The two camps on the two sides of Westwood were two blades. Handra did not know what to make of this arrangement.

Had Auguslo stayed where he was, Reddragon would have been tasked with defending Welony Pass, and Forund's forces, stationed at the end of Cloudsnap, and Farkel's forces, stationed to the east of Matnamady, would have launched ambushes. Now, however, the enemy's forces had withdrawn by 25 kilometers; the defenders had no idea how their enemy planned to attack. Each of their three staging grounds could now be assaulted with equal chance.

Handra sent lots of scouts down the mountains to find out why the enemy had withdrawn. Unfortunately, the enemy had set up their new camp on flat terrain, the perfect place to use cavalry. Almost none of the scouts returned, they were all captured or killed. Barely six managed to limp back and make their reports.

A withdrawal was not the same as a complete extrication, the kingdom's forces still had a strong presence in the area. It was a tactic often used to keep up the pressure even when a side had taken a passive stance. Auguslo had struck this balance well. Despite moving the camp back, he had Tigersoar and two of Fisablen's legions move out and surprise the enemy with their presence every now and again. The enemy was not allowed to relax and become complacent.

Auguslo relegated field command to Lorist and Fisablen, granting each command over their camp, after sorting everything out. They were to keep the enemy pressured and try to force them to make mistakes that could be exploited. He then returned to Paetro

with Shazin and his forces. He planned to make Summer Palace his headquarters for the time being. He would manage the entire kingdom from there, as well as the eight newly acquired provinces. They had to be developed rapidly to support the frontline forces.

Looking at the distant multi-colored military banners, Kenmays, who had come to send Augustus off, spoke.

"Hennard's just too stupid. He didn't just not get any benefits from His Majesty, he's even being used like a gofer. I bet His Majesty will start dealing with Forund after he goes back to Paetro and Hennard will be the blade he uses," said he to Lorist.

In return for their cooperation with the new strategy, Fisablen had requested enough military gear to outfit a legion, and 50 thousand migrants from Handra; Kenmays got a two year tax exemption within the kingdom for the salt merchant committee; Felim got 30 thousand youth laborers; and Lorist got three years' tax exemption for his dominion and the areas he governed. Each had gotten something out of it one way or another. Shazin, however, had been too straightforward. He had asked before the campaign to be enfeoffed mineral-rich land, when this round of negotiation had come around, he had not made any further requests.

"Fools have their own kind of luck, you know," Lorist said, "Actually, Hennard being used as a blade to cull the nobles is His Majesty's reward. Now that our forces are stationed here, the costs of shipping resources from so far away had gone up. Though Forund hasn't really been torn apart and ravaged by the war and the winter harvests are decent, it isn't enough to supply them for long.

"The next harvest is still four months away. No matter how resourceful the king is, he can't get food out of nowhere unless he relies on growing it here. Shipping food from elsewhere will be very expensive. The best option available to him is to clear out Forund's minor nobles. The king can easily get a year's supplies this way. Hennard's going to be used to do this. Do you really think he'll allow himself to come out of this empty-handed? His Majesty would shut one eye even if Hennard snuck away two or three hundred thousand gold Fordes."

Felim humphed a little unhappily.

"That bastard is really lucking out. I hope he isn't poached."

"Hehe..."

Kenmays came in to back Shazin up right away. He was in a sense related to him, after all, his cousin was House Shazin's matron.

"Don't worry. Though Hennard isn't that sharp, he knows well that we four houses are a united unit. His Majesty is only using him. There's almost no chance he'll be recruited. Also, didn't your two houses eliminate the Farkellan nobles last year and piss His Majesty off? His Majesty is targeting the nobles now because of you."

Felim was completely speechless. He had kind of stepped out of line when it came to sweeping the nobles.

"You don't know the predicament we were in," Lorist countered, "His Majesty only gave us 15 days' food. Would it have been possible to transport so many refugees all the way to Windbury? If we didn't raid the nobles, where would we have gotten food and clothing? It would have had to be done anyway, we just saved him the trouble of doing it himself. He didn't just fail to thank us, he even got mad. How ridiculous."

Kenmays and Felim laughed uncontrollably. Even the king had no way of dealing with Lorist. Augusto was a great schemer, but he suffered every time Lorist was involved. The other three houses also profited at Augusto's expense quite a bit.

Lorist was rather dissatisfied. On what grounds did Augusto disband the minor noble's army, refuse to let him return to The Northlands, and, instead, put him in charge of the frontlines even after he had elected to take on a passive stance? What was there to deal with anyway? It wasn't like they were like to fight any major engagements soon. If the only thing required was to put pressure on Handra's defenses, Loze was more than enough. There was no need for him to be present personally.

He had dug himself an even deeper pit it seemed. The prospect of having to stay there for the next two years turned his insides the wrong way. But, seeing that Fisablen was also kept there, he felt a little better. Such was human nature. Suffering together was far better than suffering alone, especially when one could indulge in schadenfreude.

After some careful thought, Lorist came to the conclusion that Augusto's arrangements regarding him and Fisablen were rather interesting. If the two were allowed to return to their own dominions, Lorist might think of messing with Fisablen some more. It couldn't be helped as they were the only remaining target in the region.

Given how close they had become to the king, and how he didn't want a threat like that to exist near his dominion, he wouldn't hesitate to apply pressure whenever he could.

Though Augustus was rather hostile to the four houses; given how far he was, and the appearances he had to keep up as king, there was no way he would shed all pleasantries and fight them directly. That's why Lorist was so careful whenever it came to messing with the king. As long as he didn't grab hold of anything he could use against Lorist, there was nothing he could do. Other than that, he also had to be wary of House Norton's might. Even if he wanted to turn against them, he had to think twice about whether he could afford to be their enemy.

Now that Augustus had forcefully made the two dukes stay at the frontlines and given them command over the troops, his intentions for the two were obvious. He wanted them to cool down and stop gunning for each other the moment they returned to their dominions. Given how the kingdom was in the final stages of the war with the duchies, Augustus didn't want Lorist causing any more waves between House Norton and House Fisablen lest it affected the frontlines.

If you're that trigger-happy, vent it all on Handra. Don't dare mess around under my watch.

It seemed the king understood well that even though House Fisablen had signed an armistice with the four houses, the matter of them submitting to Augustus and receiving lots of help from him frustrated the houses greatly. No matter who it was that led House Norton, they definitely wouldn't allow him and House Fisablen to form a joint front against them. There was no way Lorist would let an opportunity to screw things over for the Fisablens pass him by. As for the armistice, he just had to avoid open armed-conflict until he could properly justify it. Excuses to start wars were easy to find if one bothered to look.

If only Lorist was left behind, he would definitely not feel safe enough to stay put. He might even leave with his forces without a word. If only Fisablen was left behind, he wouldn't sit there calmly either. Maybe word of House Fisablen being uprooted would soon spread. Only by having both stay could they be assured. At the very least, they could hold each other back there. Maybe that had been the king's plan all along. As he was residing in Summer Palace, he could also make sure no huge conflict erupted between the two.

A few days after Augustus departed with his entourage, Kenmays and Felim bid Lorist

farewell. They generously handed command of their forces over before departing lightly. Kenmays was heading to the eight occupied provinces to build a network for the salt merchant committee while Felim was returning to Southern to take care of its development. Augustus had only told Lorist and Fisablen to stay on the frontlines, so they were free to come and go as they pleased. They also felt assured that Lorist wouldn't use their men as cannon fodder, so they were comfortable leaving them in his care.

As Kenmays himself had said, 'We four houses are one. I feel assured with you in charge of the forces.'

After they left, Lorist became bored. Though Felim said he would rush back in two months, Lorist was still exasperated. So, he turned his attention to dealing with Handra's three defense lines.

So their catapults occupy the higher ground and can shoot further, huh? Those lever-style catapults aren't nearly a match for our catapults otherwise.

He got a few worksmen to build several tens of gigantic lever-style catapults and placed them right in front of the three lines. They periodically launched their stones at the defenses and caused a lot of chaos. Lorist's actions were far too eye-catching, even Augustus was shocked. He quickly rushed to the frontlines to see what was going on. Lorist didn't mind. While his crude gigantic catapults could fire far, they weren't accurate at all. They were also quite troublesome to operate; each toss required ten soldiers to pull on the lever. They also needed heavy counterweights. They were terribly inefficient.

Despite this, Augustus and Fisablen were incredibly impressed. The design was simple, a huge wooden rack and a strong log made up the level and counterweight. On the opposite end of the log from the rack was a leather scoop that could hold a rock up to the size of a human head. Cutting the rope that pulled the lever down and lifted the counterweight^[1] would cause it to swing, sending the rock half a kilometer away into the enemy's defenses.

It was an unexpected surprise for Augustus. He asked whether Lorist could have more of them made to destroy the defenses so they could give another go at breaking through.

Lorist shook his head.

"This isn't very useful. It's way too inaccurate, it has a spread of 200 meters at just 500 meters. You can't hope to hit anything smaller than a town with it. It's only useful for annoying the enemy," replied he.

Auguslo left angrily. He did make sure to sketch the catapults before he left, though, not that Lorist particularly minded. He actually looked forward to seeing the king use them in battle. What a joke that would be. When his bronze cannons were fielded, the catapults would be completely useless, nothing but targets.

Though he didn't hope for anything and only used the catapults to harass the enemy, the three duchies' garrisons soon couldn't take it anymore. The catapults were completely unpredictable; no one knew where the next rock would fall. The men had to keep a watchful eye on the sky all the time, lest they not even know what had squashed them.

As such, the three garrisons came together and arrived at a solution. They launched a surprise attack in the night. They managed to break through the perimeter and set the catapults on fire. Angered, Lorist ordered for the worksmen to build even more and even funded them out of his own pocket. He fielded double the previous number of catapults. Within a few days, the weather forecast once again became sunny with a chance of rockfall.

This time around, the catapults fired not the human-head-sized rocks from before, but rock shards. Large fist-sized pack of rocks rained over a large area. Though they weren't fatal, they were more than enough to badly wound their victims.

The men were soon at wit's end again and descended the slope for another attack. This time Lorist was prepared. He put Tigersoar's carroballista division in covered positions and ambushed the enemy as they approached. They were all but wiped out.

Lorist was inspired by the fuel the attackers had brought along. He shipped large amounts of fuel and put it into jars to be flung at the enemy with the catapults before sending waves of flaming rocks after. The defenses were soon engulfed in flames. The garrison there was pretty capable though and quickly put out the fire with sand and mud.

Chapter 434

The Line of Succession

"Great news, Your Grace! Great news!" cried Loze as he ran into the tent with a dozen guards. He barged in it with Dulles hot on his heels. The latter was smiling so brightly he appeared foolish.

"Great news? What news could merit such jubilation?" asked Lorist, somewhat annoyed.

He had been studying Handra's three defensive lines. He'd spent the whole night brainstorming ideas to turn the tables after they'd suffered some casualties in several skirmishes the day before. The stalemate had remained unchanged. The three lines' garrisons couldn't do much about the catapults, so they moved their camps a few hundred meters back, out of the weapons' range. It flabbergasted Lorist. Just like that, he had lost all use for the damned contraptions. The things weighed way too much, it was impossible to move them forward up the slope to get them back in range. Additionally, unlike his mobile catapults, these couldn't be quickly set up if they were packed, so they had no way of retaliating if they came under attack during the move. Fisablen had wanted to try his luck, but his catapults were destroyed soon after they started moving. The enemy threw rocks and logs at them down the slope. The men couldn't do anything; a hundred died or were injured before they finally retreated.

Lorist's forces occupied the low ground, his enemy the high ground. The two lines were 500 meters apart, so even though the enemy had pulled back a few hundred meters, they could still react in time to any offensives... and there was nothing Lorist could do about it from his position. The defenses didn't just cover the flats of the pass, but ran up and down the slopes on either side of it as well. No matter how he tried to get around the defenses, he always ran into more. Lorist couldn't do much to the situation personally, either. He may be somewhere between a rank 3 blademaster and a sword saint, but even he couldn't do much to the enemy's defenses.

He had led a night assault with a small force the night before but everything fell apart very quickly. The first trench was filled with broken glass. Whilst he wasn't personally harmed, his men didn't fare as well. They were clad in heavy armor, but the soles of

their feet were exposed. The moment they descended into the trench, men cried out in pain up and down the trench. Arrows rained down on them moments later, followed by rocks flung from the slope above by the enemy's catapults, a few fireballs mixed in. He ordered a retreat the moment he noticed something was off, though, and saved many of his men. He still lost around 400 of the thousand, though. He was so infuriated that he'd lost so many without doing anything to the enemy he almost lost it entirely. He only calmed down after reminding himself it could have been worse. He sent a recovery group in as soon as they had regrouped. They managed to recover all of the downed men. Of the 400 taken down, luckily only a dozen or so were killed, the rest were only injured. He was greatly troubled by how to make up for this loss, so he didn't have the energy or patience to deal with Loze's ridiculous joy.

"A messenger came over from Ragebear. He brings good news."

"What good news?"

"Madame Sylvia is with child. She is two months along."

Sylvia's with child?!

Lorist was dumbstruck.

It's the beginning of the 7th month now, so if she's two months along, it should have happened around the end of the 4th month.

When Sylvia learned Lorist was staying on the frontlines for who knew how long, she stuck to him like glue for several days. She even called all the concubines, including Dilianna and Dixie over and arranged for them all to sleep together. She made sure she was the one in whom he finished each time, however. Her efforts must have paid off since she was now with child.

"Good news indeed! Why should you be happy about it, though?" Lorist wondered, *It's not like I don't have a son already. Irina already gave me two, and Anna's child is also a boy. Telesti gave me two daughters as well. It's only natural for Sylvia to get pregnant. What are they so happy for?*

"If Madame Sylvia's child is a son, you'll finally have a legitimate heir! The knights now have hope for the long-term future!" explained the foolish-looking Dulles with a beaming smile.

"Buzz off!" Lorist cried angrily, "I'm not even 40 and still full of life! Do you really look forward to my son taking over so much?!"

Dulles knew he had said something better left unsaid. He crouched and hugged his head fearfully. Loze stood beside him awkwardly.

"Hey, come back."

Dulles, who was just about to leave, turned around.

"Your Grace..." mumbled he.

"Where's the messenger?" asked the duke glaringly.

"Outside—"

"Why haven't you called him in yet?"

Lorist recognized the messenger, he was one of his three thousand strong personal guard. He had brought just two of the three thousand along to the frontlines. He'd left the rest in Ragebear to look after his family. The messenger, a young man named Wallon, was a lieutenant.

Wallon had with him a letter penned by Sylvia herself. She had written of her pregnancy and her pride at it. Lorist couldn't help but smile when he read her arrogant tone. She also wrote a lot about how much she missed him. She had left the capital for Cherry Blossom ridge where she would stay until the child was born. The place was quite a bit cooler than the city, so it was indeed the best place to stay for the summer.

Once he finished the letter Lorist told Wallon to rest for a while. He would call for him once he had a reply for him to take back. His brows furrowed as the man left the tent.

"I already have three sons. Irina's first is eleven, staying with Malek; her younger is seven and I'm still looking for a good tutor for him; and Anna gave me my third, now four. I don't want for successors and I promised all my children would be on the family registry and thus have a place in the line of succession.

"While it's great Sylvia will also give me another child, it's only to be expected. I certainly am happy, but not ecstatic like you two. Tell me, honestly, how many of the men share your view? How many are skeptical of my concubine's children?"

Loze and Dulles stared at each other for a moment Loze stepped forward.

"I'm not trying to be a busybody, Your Grace. Actually, I believe having the concubine's children registered in the family registry is one of the most important things to ensure the house stays stable across generations. If Your Grace hadn't gotten married, I wouldn't have had anything to say about letting all of the concubine's children be in the line of succession. But you're now married, Lady Sylvia is your wife. Her children are your legitimate and primary descendants, they should also be the first in the line of succession. Most of the house, if not everyone, agree with me."

Dulles wanted to say something, but kept silence. Lorist glared at him.

"Speak freely. No matter what you say, I won't hold it against you. Though the house has developed a lot, those willing to speak the truth have become fewer and fewer. Tell me your honest thoughts.

"Think about the hardship we suffered on the way north all those years ago and what we have now. You were my first vassals, I've never doubted your loyalty. Please, share with me your thoughts."

"Very well," Dulles surrendered and raised both hands, "It is not that we don't have our thoughts and opinions, we just feel they aren't appropriate to voice to Your Lordship. You made it clear with Sylvia marriage, after all, that we have no place interfering in your personal matters. However, the matter of succession is not the same, it is at the core of the house's future, something that deeply affects all of us. If you are followed by an incapable or unsuitable heir, the entire house's future could be in doubt. We are very loyal to your majesty, but we also have families to look after, and those of us with land and titles, like Charade, also have to think of our subjects.

"Take the first young master as an example. We have kept a close eye on him. Baron Malek said that he has great potential to become a fearless knight, but he has no aptitude for governance; he won't be a good duke, his personality is too crude and cruel. Lady Malek tried her best to educate him in etiquette and restraint, but he still kills small animals in awful ways. Keeping him as your heir apparent is a disaster for the entire house."

"He's still young," argued Lorist hopelessly.

It wasn't that he didn't know about the reports concerning his first son. Tarkel had

sent a few informants to check on the child's progress. The one that left the deepest impression was the time his son was punished by Malek's wife. He went out of the house, shot a squirrel with a bow and turned the poor critter into minced meat with his shortsword.

"This is not something age will solve, Your Grace. A child his age should no right from wrong. Venting his rage on a weaker being is not courage. We believe he became this way because his mother spoiled him too much when he was younger. We don't think his younger brother will be much better. They are not fit to succeed you," continued Dulles.

Lorist kept silent for a while. He knew this was a minor act of rebellion by his vassals. He didn't know when the two factions had come to be, but they were undeniably present. The old faction included the house's original members, specifically Maplewoods' members. They were prideful and looked down on the newer members as being not 'true members of the house'. They were the 'new ones'. They believed only those who'd, like them, been brought up in the house were truly loyal. The rest were opportunists who couldn't be trusted. Hansk was at the faction's head. They believed that despite being only a concubine, as the only of Lorist's lovers to have been brought up in the house, and being the first to give birth to possible heirs, her children were the true heirs to his title.

The new faction was composed of most of the knights and officials who'd followed Lorist to The Northlands or had joined the house since. They didn't see the old members of the house in a good light. They believed they were cowards who could only stand tall because Lorist gave them shade. Just look at the state they were in when Lorist first arrived. They were just country bumpkins barely hanging on to life. The new faction's members believed they'd proven their loyalty through the hardships they suffered on the way north and through their outstanding service to the house since they'd joined. They were the ones who'd walked alongside Lorist to bring the house to its new heights. The old faction's members had overseen the house's downfall and had contributed little to its recent rise, what rite did they have act all high and mighty in front of the new faction and boss them around?

Not everyone had chosen a side, though, many were still neutral. Charade, Potterfang, Spiel, Kedan, and Belnick were among them. They did not concern themselves with the faction of the person who made a proposal, they made decisions based on the options' merits alone. They had worked hard to keep everything between the factions under control.

Lorist knew about the rift between the two factions, but wasn't too concerned. If anything, the rift made the house easier to control. He hadn't thought, however, that the old faction would make so much of a ruckus when he chose to make Sylvia his wife. Now the new faction was trying to get back at the old faction by kicking their candidates from the line of succession. *Can't they tone it down a bit?*

"What about Anna's child? She gave me a son too, right?" asked he finally.

Dulles shook his head.

"Madam Anna's status is not suitable. She's not even your concubine so the house's reputation will be severely damaged if her child becomes your heir."

Lorist understood Dulles was hinting at him about Dilianna's identity as a widow as well as a participant of Queen Carey's Paradise Gathering before becoming Lorist's concubine. Paradise gathering was famous among the nobles. Though Queen Carey was now dead, and the noble who participated dead, knowledge of the party was widespread, and who knew if someone could associate his concubines with it.

If Dilianna's son succeeded him, she would have to appear before other nobles eventually. Should anyone find out about her past, they could use it to blackmail her or cause trouble by spreading it around, possibly bringing her son's legitimacy into doubt. Dilianna preferred a peaceful life above all. She just wanted her son to support her in her old age; she had no ambition for her son in the line of succession.

Sigh, I didn't think Sylvia's child would cause so much trouble.

News of her pregnancy was both good and bad. No matter his stance on the matter, some things couldn't be avoided. This really wasn't as simple as a personal matter. His decision in this regard affected everyone in the house, he couldn't justify doing this without considering them as well.

"Dismissed. Let's leave it for today. Don't get too entangled with this. We're worried about this a little too soon. Right now I just want Sylvia to give birth safely."

Lorist waved as he sent Loze and Dulles out before he sat in his tent, smiling bitterly. Now that the house had conquered the whole of The Northlands, its future was immeasurably bright. But the way he saw it, he had only gotten strong enough to defend himself. Just as the house's situation appeared good, internal strife brew. This was probably unavoidable. But it didn't make it any easier.

Those bastards! I'm not even 40! If I really become a swordsaint, I'll easily live for another two or three hundred years! They have too much time on their hands. They're not considering my feelings at all... This should've been good news, not a troublesome matter I should worry myself over.

He spent the rest of the day writing a love-filled letter for Sylvia. It was filled with line after line of his longing for her. He also urged her to take care of herself and promised he would go back to spend time with her whenever he could. He had Wallon take the letter back. He deliberated whether he should hold a banquet to celebrate the occasion or keep it private. The decision was only complicated by the fact that this concerned Duke Fisablen, he was Sylvia's grandfather, after all.

Should I invite him? Will he even accept? pondered he.

Chapter 435

Round Up and Hunt

Duke Fisablen accepted Lorist's invitation without any trouble. He didn't even bother to ask why Lorist had invited him and only brought a single attendant along. It made Lorist feel a little like he was the bad guy, seeing how the duke wasn't worried whether Lorist would harm him. Then again, if he really did invite him over with ill intentions and word got out, it would tarnish the house's name.

Putting aside the huge loss of trust, a good portion of the household knights might leave as well. On Grindia, a house's reputation was sacred, as was that of the individual noble. At the very least, most nobles, knights, and commoners held the same belief. Some nobles and knights were even willing to sacrifice their lives to uphold their house's honor.

In Lorist's case, he had no choice but to serve Augustus to protect his house's reputation of being loyal to the imperial family. Even though it might already have exceeded Andinaq might, Lorist still had to stay put obediently as the Duke of The Northlands and put up a cordial front to Augustus.

In Grindia, keeping one's word and being loyal were considered virtues. Even if two nobles were at war with one another, they had to justify their actions proudly. In the millennia of the continent's history, traitors were far and few in between, and every one of them were nailed onto a rack as examples for all to see. Such were the continent's traditions. Should a lord be unfair, his vassal may resist, but not rebel.

Fine, this is all that slimy of fox's fault. Why would he accept my invitation out of nowhere like this? Does he really not think I'll harm him? Or is he looking down on me? Does he think I don't dare touch him?

Lorist grit his teeth and tried to push the blame on the old man who had chosen to attend the banquet. Yet, he still had to force a smile and welcome him warmly.

Lorist chose a private function. He had a table set up in his tent for himself and the duke; he wasn't going to get all the troops involved. The main reason was that he already had five children, so Sylvia's pregnancy wasn't a big deal in any way. He was

also worried celebrating this with the troops would instill a misunderstanding in some's minds that he was preferentially inclined towards his legitimate heirs. After much thought, he decided to host a private banquet and break the news to the duke without spreading it around.

In all seriousness, this was the second time he'd met the duke in person. The first time was back at Windbury when he'd privately discussed the matter of wedding Sylvia with him. As he didn't agree to the duke's third condition -- to abandon his concubines and children -- they had parted on bad terms. A year later, he led the alliance and chased the duke and his troops all the way back to his dominion, forcing them to present Sylvia to him and sue for peace.

Auguslo visited Eastwild soon after and the duke submitted to him and became his vassal. It resulted in the duke joining the same faction in which Lorist was. Not only was the old man incredibly thick-skinned, he was also incredibly adaptable. This made him even more wary of the old man. Even though he was in the same camp as the Duke now, Lorist had never met the latter again. They only met during Auguslo's military councils where many others were present.

Perhaps the duke thought Lorist wanted to ask him for advice after the loss he suffered a few days earlier during his attempted night attack. He was in charge of the attacks against the three defense lines, after all. The duke had long gotten wind of the failure. However, even an experienced general like him didn't have a solution to this new problem as he didn't have any methods to counter the defenses either. He could only advise him to be patient.

Lorist didn't know how to react to the duke's consolation.

"You are mistaken, Lord Duke. I didn't call you here to ask for advice on dealing with the enemy. Sylvia is with child and I thought it only right I tell you personally. I also thought we could have a small celebration—"

"Sylvia's pregnant?!"

It was rather surprising that the old guy was even more worked up than Lorist. He was so happy he didn't touch any of the wine and circled the table constantly as he muttered about how Sylvia should take care of herself and be careful. He even began to consider where to hire an experienced midwife.

"Gosh, aren't you thinking a little too far ahead? Sylvia's belly isn't even visible yet. Gods willing, it'll be another half a year before we even need to consider what to do about the birth."

It wasn't easy for the duke to realize that he'd lost his grip. He made a toast to Lorist despite being the guest and got drunk in no time. Lorist had no choice but to have someone send him back to his quarters.

Two days later, Lorist received an invitation from the duke. Thinking that it was a reciprocal invitation, he brought only Jinolio with him. He'd not expected the camp to be so merry.

"Why everyone so jolly?" he asked one of the guards.

"We heard His Grace's granddaughter got knocked up. His Grace was so happy he's paying out of his pocket so we can celebrate for three days straight. Not only do we get to eat all we want, there are even bonuses being flung around! Everyone's so happy. We hope she's knocked up every year!" replied the guard.

Jinolio burst out in laughter, while Lorist just stood there, not knowing what to do.

Damned old man, you should've been clearer about why you're celebrating so much! Now it's turned into such a huge joke down the grapevine!

However, he didn't intend to take what the guards had said to heart. He just barked outside the tent, "Alright, old man, you want to make a big deal out of this?! Jinolio, pass this on to Loze: have the army throw a celebration for three days! Double the bonus they're giving out over here! I will cover all the costs!"

In the end, even Augustus, residing in Paetro, learnt of Lorist knocking up the duke's granddaughter as well as the three-day celebration. He sent Lorist a huge gift to congratulate him. Lorist felt he was being chased off the stage by the others. The whole debacle did have an upside, though; the enmity built up between Lorist and the duke vanished. The duke would frequently visit him to inquire after news on Sylvia or to chat about the war. Lorist realized the old man was pretty self-aware in that he knew Sylvia didn't want to meet him, her own grandfather, given how hung up she was on being sent to him as she had been. So, he collected lots of precious herbs and gave it to Lorist so he could give them to Sylvia.

For instance, he heard some locals say that goldscale crimsonlip fish could be found

in Nibarak. The fish was an incredibly rare ingredient in the field of herbal medicine and was really good for stabilizing pregnancy. However, they were slowly vanishing and it was really hard to catch any these days. So, he had a large number of worksmiths build boats to catch the fish. The enemies noticed and thought Augustus was preparing to attack down the river, so they fortified their defenses there.

Through his informants and scouts, Lorist quickly grasped the change in deployment and understood the situation. He called Fisablen over to discuss how they would apply even more pressure on Handra. His plan was simple: he would have House Kenmays's two heavy-armored divisions defend the main camp, and Pegasus deployed on the field for launching feint attacks on the three defense lines from time to time. At the same time, he would lead Tigersoar and House Fisablen's reserve legion towards Nibarak, loudly proclaiming that he would construct a road on the other side that stretched southward to Deramak.

This was the third method he'd suggested to Augustus: splitting their forces. However, Lorist didn't really intend to go all the way, he only wanted to apply more pressure on Handra and force them to strengthen their defenses near the river and thus consume more resources. He caused a lot of commotion by sending his troops all over the place after they crossed the river, though that was actually just a welcome side effect. His true goal was to make some extra pocket money for himself and his grandfather-in-law. While the road's construction was only being done half-assed, the hunting was intense.

Nibarak was considered a natural border that separated the civilized lands from the wilderness. On one side were rich farms, well-maintained orchards, and peaceful villages, on the other the ancient forests, swamps, and ever-stretching mountains. Even the duchies' hunters only dared to hunt within five kilometers of the riverbank, they didn't dare to go any further east.

Forund had once had plans for the other side of the river a few decades ago. They had wanted to develop the land there and recruited nearly a thousand commoners to build a few villages. Magic beasts attacked the villages during the winter. If not for the fact that the river didn't freeze during the winter, the villages within the duchy would have been attacked as well.

He crossed the river after the rainy season to check the villages, to find only ruins. All the villagers had been killed. Only blood and destruction was left. Almost all of the four duchies' inhabitants feared the other side of the river and even began to call it the

demonic lands.

According to the hunters, the most common magic beast they encountered was the dire wolf. They were incredibly cunning. According to folklore, they could understand the human tongue and would exploit it to lure the hunters into the deeper parts of the forests and become their prey.

The huge wolves, easily bigger than cows, were the rulers of the demonic lands. Dire wolves lived in packs and were the most dangerous. They also never forgot their grudges. When Duke Handra had still been young, he had brought a regiment of troops across the river for a hunt. However, he was unfortunate enough to encounter a pack of more than 20. They managed to exterminate most of them, but three or four wolves slipped away. In the end, the three gathered others and attacked his party day and night. By the time he returned across the river, only three hundred of the original thousand-man regiment was still alive.

Lorist didn't really care about the dire wolves. Usually, hunting was something undertaken when there was no other option. While the army did have food support from Auguslo, meat was incredibly rare. The food provided was only enough to keep the men's stomachs full, but far from well-fed. Transporting meat from The Northlands added a lot to the costs, so much that it wasn't much of an option. Duke Fisablen had ordered a large number of cows and goats brought along only to realize that the livestock had lost most of their weight by the time they arrived.

So, the construction of the boats was both for capturing some goldscale crimsonlip and procuring meat. Lorist's idea of hunting the magic beasts had the duke's full support. Hunting magic beasts was but a common affair for Tigersoar. From the time they had hunted the magic beasts that remained in the dominion following the beast wave to the time when they went into the wilderness to hunt the beasts down, they had slain more than a million. However, the grassland barbarians considered beasts like the resilient and ridiculously strong cliffbear, the savage and sharp-toothed swordtooth tiger, the terrifying giant pythons, or the giant swamp crocodiles whose skin seemed stronger than metal something against which they didn't stand a chance. Even though they were accustomed to various types of wolves, the gigantic dire wolves could still inflict heavy casualties. But the moment Tigersoar struck, their eyes were opened. They witnessed the escaping magic beasts being used for target practice first hand.

In just two short months the meat started overflowing. The processors couldn't keep

up with how quickly more was being brought in, so an entire division was dedicated to the task.

Tigersoar and the reserve legion had stormed half of the demonic lands and were beginning to head south. When Handra's soldiers discovered enemy cavalry on the opposite bank, they got even more anxious and hurriedly constructed one watchtower and signal fire point after another.

Lorist was so busy rounding up the magic beasts on the opposite bank that he had tossed his other directive to the back of his mind and forgotten about it completely. He had just set his sights on the magic beasts' fur. It was a good source of income. Given that there was no cotton on Grindia, winter clothes were made of various animal pelts. Even though he had started a large livestock farm in the west of The Northlands where near a million goats and cows were reared, their skins weren't the best material for winter clothing. Instead, the fur of magic beasts was ideal.

Some fur from rare magic beasts were priced in the thousands of gold Fordes. Apart from fur and meat, other parts of certain beasts were considered precious medicinal ingredients and sold for great prices on the market. Lorist roughly estimated that the two months of hunting had netted him nearly a million gold Fordes, not included his grandfather-in-law's share. He was pleasantly surprised that he could still make so much money on the side even though he was at war. He didn't even bother with answering the king's inquiries on the situation.

In the blink of an eye, the 10th month came around. Duke Fisablen had to send ten plus messengers to call Lorist back. The moment he entered the tent, the old man rushed over to tell him that Duke Handra had privately sent an envoy. The envoy had already been waiting for four days."

Chapter 436

Envoy and Conditions

The moment he heard Fisablen say Duke Handra's envoy had been waiting at the campsite for four days, Lorist stopped in his tracks.

Wait, something's amiss.

The gears in Lorist's mind started turning. Looking at Fisablen glumly, he thought, *What is this geriatric planning? Handra's envoy should be seeking an audience with the king. What does he plan to achieve by staying in the campsite I'm in charge of and calling me? Is he going to keep it from Auguslo and drag me down?*

A single look told Fisablen that Lorist had misunderstood him. He hurriedly explained.

"We know the envoy and he came to find us specifically to ask what price the king wanted to stop this war. I don't dare make any decisions on my own. You know the king far better than I, so I need your advice. You know my campsite is under tight surveillance, I can't just bring him in there, especially not considering that I've only recently returned to the fold."

Come on, isn't that basically trying to pin part of the blame on me? Also, since when were we close enough for you to be bothered by my opinions?

Despite his skepticism, his interest had been aroused.

"I know him too? Who is it?"

You must've had some sort of complicated relationship with the duchies. They even sent 70 thousand of their elite infantrymen to aid you. But now you've suddenly submitted to Auguslo and even led your troops against them, a thankless traitor. Don't tell me you haven't heard how the enemy curse your men. How dare you have the balls to hook up with them again?

And that Duke Handra is really something. Why would he even bother sending an envoy to negotiate with you? If I were in his shoes, I would fight to the bitter end.

He understood such things were only common for nobility, however. Everyone was making their decisions for the good of their house. He didn't have much control over what Fisablen did. It was common for people to switch sides overnight and no one thought it something immoral and appalling.

"The envoy is Count Chujway. You met him during the knighthood tournament. You even invited him to the inn called Anna's Abode for a talk once," whispered Fisablen, his eyes keeping close watch over their surroundings.

It almost seemed like an incredible secret was being revealed. Lorist quickly took two steps back.

"Oh, it's him? And what does he have to say?"

"Uhhh..." Fisablen hesitated, "You should talk to him yourself. Given my relations with them, it's a little awkward for me to deal with him."

"It's good you're aware," Lorist nodded, "Where's he now?"

Count Chujway dallied in a corner in the back of the camp. There stood a few ad-hoc wooden houses. They used to be isolation cells for Tigersoar soldiers who broke regulations. However, Fisablen had Pegasus's general, Penawar, clean it up and refitted to be a guest house.

Lorist was speechless. If Tigersoar had remained in the camp, Fisablen and even Lorist himself would have had to be announced before they could enter the camp. Now that Tigersoar was in the demonic lands, the old man could come and go as he pleased. However, Lorist understood Penawar was a knight of House Felim, whose dominion in Southern bordered Eastwild. Though House Felim was a member of the alliance, he couldn't afford to offend the duke for no good reason. Additionally, the old man was technically Lorist's grandfather-in-law and had been visiting him quite frequently as of late. The least Penawar could do was make it easier for him to come and go.

The moment the two entered, Count Chujway was ready to receive them by the door. He bowed to the two respectfully. Lorist immediately noticed the joy in Chujway's eyes when he saw he'd had arrived. He might have believed Lorist was the only one who could call the shots.

Fisablen was surprisingly quiet once they sat down as if he wasn't willing to speak at all. Lorist didn't have to beat around the bush for long for Chujway to cave in and

stated outright why he'd come: Duke Handra wished to affect Augustus's moves through the two to stop the war.

Lorist played around with the teacup in his hands as if it contained some sort of interesting secret. When he became a little annoyed by what Chujway was saying, he asked softly, "Oh? So Duke Handra can't resist anymore?"

"That's not what I said!" Chujway denied firmly as he started like a person being injected with chicken-blood injected, "Duke, all our nobles and commoners are prepared to resist you to the end! We've formed three legions so far. Coupled with the garrison legion in the capital, Hans, as well as the various garrison forces across the land, our duchy alone has 200 thousand soldiers!

"Additionally, the three other dukes brought over 200 thousand men, we have at least 400 thousand between us, far more than your 300 thousand. The duke can mobilize another 200 thousand youths at a moment's notice. However, my lord is benevolent and treasures our history with the empire. That is why we have not launched any offensives."

Lorist put the cup down and applauded. "Well said, Lord Chujway. Do continue."

Continue? What's there to continue? Chujway looked at Lorist blankly. He didn't understand what the duke meant. But, seeing how attentive Lorist was, he had no choice but to turn to Duke Fisablen.

The duke felt a huge urge to laugh, but suppressed it by coughing loudly a few times. "Well, Duke Norton, do you think given our numerical inferiority, we will really be successful in attacking Handra?"

Old fox, you're feigning ignorance again and pushing this bad cop role to me. Lorist smiled and spoke frankly, "Lord Chujway, Handra has three provinces and a total population of around a million. I'm sure feeding an army of 400 thousand is quite challenging."

Chujway reddened immediately but was still unwilling to concede. "It's not difficult at all! The last couple of years had great weather and amazing harvests. Food fills our warehouses to the brim and we can feed our army for even five years. The Union has also been very generous with their aid. They've been sending streams of resources since they first heard of our predicament.

"They hope the army can teach your king a lesson and wake him up to reality so he drops his reckless ambitions. The duke was too kind and wasn't willing to go to all-out war, hence his sending of me to inquire as to your king's intentions. If His Majesty's requests aren't outlandish, we can cease hostilities and restore peace."

Hehe, what a load of bull! Nobles are so shallow. If it's really as you say, then why would your duke bother to send you? Let's see who can last longer. Lorist smirked disdainfully but refrained from bursting his guest's bubble just yet. Instead, he acted as if he was really troubled, "Lord Chujway, I completely believe you. But you should know what our king's temper is like. He's been holding a grudge for your betrayal for years and believes had you submitted to him and returned to the empire when he first asked, his dreams of reuniting the empire to its former glory would've been successful."

"It's not that I don't want to give you a hand, but our king's mind is made up. He wants to wipe you all out no matter what. It's best they turn themselves in and beg His Majesty for forgiveness. I am confident His Majesty won't them."

"Impossible!" Chujway barked. face red, "We have 400 thousand men! We won't go down so easily!"

Lorist slapped his thigh. "Wonderful. Since you're unwilling to surrender despite understanding our king's stance, you might as well send your 400 thousand troops over all at once. We'll unravel our defenses and prepare for a grand battle. As long as you defeat us, our king's anger might just subside and we can finally get the peace we all want."

Chujway understood the situation in a moment. He had taken his threats too far. Currently, his side had no other option available but to defend, especially with Lorist standing with Auguslo. It wasn't that the count hadn't witnessed the might of House Norton's forces before. His strong act had completely backfired.

"Haha... Hahaha..." Chujway laughed dryly and hurried to change the subject. "Well, Lord Norton, I... I have come on the orders of my duke to sue for peace. I wasn't going to suggest we engage in a huge battle. My Lord truly wishes to end the war. He sent me over to ask what the two of you think about whether there'd be a way to end this needless conflict."

"Really?" Lorist mused, "Then tell me, what kind of conditions did your lord suggest?"

"Well, he said if the two of you could convince His Majesty to restore the four duchies, then the dukes will pay two million gold Fordes as compensation and even relinquish their sovereignty. They are also willing to pay the royal family a million gold Fordes in annual tribute."

Lorist was so angry he felt like laughing. *You expect Auguslo to accept these conditions and even want me to convince him? No wonder that old fox isn't saying anything. Had the war not happened, Auguslo might really have taken these conditions seriously. But now that three duchies have been conquered, that's all they're willing to offer? Has Duke Handra had his head kicked by a mule?*

"Do you think the king will accept this? If Duke Handra doesn't have the intention to be sincere, he shouldn't have sent you over. How about this: Why don't I send you to the king and you tell him these conditions yourself?" asked Lorist discontentedly.

Chujway's face greened and paled. In actuality, even he felt the conditions were a little ridiculous. But there was nothing he could do; the conditions had been agreed upon by all four duke. Given how unstable the duchy was, the four's relationship was rather strained. Forund had promised his subordinates, and Duke Shabaj wouldn't be able to cause any commotion even if he wanted to. The most troublesome was Farkel, who acted completely without tact. Though he was a guest, he didn't consider Handra with respect at all.

That was especially so with Duke Farkel's knights, who behaved no differently from bandits. They actually dared to raid villages in the duchy and violate the women. They even proudly proclaimed they had abandoned their own nation to come protect Handra, so it didn't really matter what they did to the wenches.

Handra was enraged and sent his knights to apprehend Farkel. Considering their status as allies, He left the fate of the knights to the duke. But the latter just released them and even argued it wasn't a big deal for a few commoners to be killed. He even invited the the duke's knights to go along and rape some of his subjects when the dominion was conquered.

It was Handra's own misfortune to encounter such a ridiculous person, an ally, no less. Though he still had lots to spare after forming two legions, a duke formed the third Blackdragon Legion to keep an eye on Duke Farkel's Bloodspear situated within the duchy to prevent them from messing with the villages.

Chujway was aware of the current situation. While there really were 400 thousand soldiers, his statement about being able to feed them for five years was a lie. Even if the duchies had had great harvests for several years running, their consumption was immense. The latest estimate predicted their food could last them only six months. Even if they included the fall harvest during the 10th month as well as the following spring harvests of the winter wheat next year, they could drag the war on for another month or two at most. During such a critical lack of food, Duke Farkel even wanted his legion to be supplied with good grain and meat.

It wasn't that the dukes didn't try requesting aid from the Union. But the Wessian supervisor, the nearest to Handra, said they couldn't help even if they wanted to and expressed his sympathy. Currently, the Union was caught up in the war with the mid-southern army; they were unable to provide aid. But, given how Wessia had old ties with the duchies, they said they could sell weapons and other supplies at a discount on account of that.

While they claimed it was a discount, the price was actually three times normal and the quality was bad. The supervisor's answer was that he had no choice. Given how war was all over the place, all sorts of supplies were in short supply. Being able to procure some to sell was already the best they could do, causing Duke Handra to question on the spot whether Wessia was worried Augustus would turn his sights on Bodolger after the extermination of the four central duchies, given that it used to be Krissen Empire territory as well.

The supervisor proudly replied that Wessia Merchant Guild was not the least worried about that happening, given how they were backed by Forde Trade Union, Grindia's number one superpower.

The reason the four dukes wanted to make peace with Augustus was because they were unable to procure aid from the Union at all. However, their first condition to restore the four central duchies to the state they were before the war was akin to saying that they wanted the conquered territory of the three duchies to be returned. There was no way Augustus would agree to that. It was like asking him to spit out a piece of meat he already swallowed. As for the two million gold Fordes, that was even more unconvincing. If Handra's defenses were breached, the money wouldn't be going anywhere either.

"If... If the two of you are able to convince His Majesty Augustus to agree to our request, the four dukes are willing to gift each of you 500 thousand gold Fordes..." Chujway still

tried to make his best effort.

Lorist felt his anger rise. *I already earned close to two million gold Fordes from the demonic lands already! Are you mocking me with your measly 500 thousand?*

"Lord Chujway, since you're an envoy, I can tolerate your impolite transgressions. However, I will not allow you to humiliate us like that. You may leave. Tell the four dukes to keep their necks clean. I don't want my longsword to be dirtied when the time comes."

"You..." Chujway glared at Lorist angrily.

Lorist shrugged him off and ordered, "Men, send the guest off!"

Chapter 437

Moonlight Stones

Watching as Chujway left on horseback with his two attendants, Duke Fisablen finally spoke.

"Is it really alright to refuse?"

Lorist snorted.

"Come on, stop putting up that act. Isn't the reason you called me over because you couldn't bear to refuse them because of your history and wanted me to play the bad guy? I'm sure you understand Count Chujway had come to ask us to speak to His Majesty on their behalf as well as to find out more about what we thought about the four dukes. In actuality, he's here to check whether we are having the same supply problem as them. They want to make sure whether His Majesty is going to see this through."

Duke Fisablen shook his head with a smile without refuting Lorist's hypothesis.

"Don't you know I had Count Chujway sent to your main camp and even welcomed him with a banquet? He was so surprised when served the magic beast meat and even felt bad for eating something so luxurious. When I told him even our soldiers ate it, he didn't believe me. So I led him around the camp. He was speechless when he saw the soldiers making jerky. He hurriedly requested to try to make peace between them and our king. I only called you over because I couldn't refuse him."

"It's obvious they're really tight on supplies. They might've begun rationing already," Lorist said, understanding the subtext of Fisablen's words, "While what Count Chujway said about them having 400 thousand troops is true, the claim that they' can sustain them for five years is definitely fake. Otherwise, he wouldn't be so surprised by how rich our meals were. I suspect the claim that they're receiving lots of aid from the Union is false as well. There's no way they'd take the initiative for peace talks if they were indeed being supported by the Union."

"But their conditions are a little too insincere, right? How could they expect His

Majesty to agree? The first clause itself required him to give up the eight occupied provinces and return the territory to how it was before the war. The kind would never agree," Duke Fisablen argued, "Their request was just an excuse. The commotion you caused on the bank on the other side of the river is what worries them most. If we really head to Deramak from the demonic lands, we can strike their weak points. Even if they have the Union's support, defending the whole riverbank will require lots of soldiers. They've sent this envoy over to see if we can avoid exactly this outcome."

"Perhaps," Lorist continued after some thought, "I believe the four dukes think that we're in a similar situation as they are. If they are lacking in supplies, they'll believe that it's the same with us. Though their troop numbers exceed ours by around 100 thousand, our dominions are quite far from here and transporting resources here could prove difficult. They believe the eight provinces we've just occupied can't be used for the next two or three years. What they don't know is that His Majesty has already effectively cleared out and organized them.

"And there's your call for those worksmen to craft boats upstream and my proclamation that I'll build a road at the demonic lands. Logically speaking, there's no way we could afford the supplies. Maybe the dukes believe we're just putting up a front, so they sent Count Chujway over to check. It would certainly explain why he changed his mind so quickly and asked for our help.

"It's a shame the conditions the dukes proposed were predicated on the fact that we're in a similar situation. They consider us on equal standing with them and believe that their conditions are a good exit for His Majesty to step out of this situation while maintaining his reputation. The other conditions are merely empty promises. If we really are to negotiate with them, we'll demand they pay up right away. They are tests as to whether we really want to negotiate with them, so I refused them immediately."

Duke Fisablen nodded in approval. "Your inference is sensible. However, I think it's better to lead them by the nose a little longer. We can fight while we negotiate and find out about the internal situation of Handra and whether they can hold on from their envoys."

"There's no need," Lorist refused the suggestion immediately, "Since Count Chujway already found our supplies are far more than three years, coupled with our swift refusal of his request, the four dukes will be faced with an immediate dilemma. Continuing to defend the riverbank will only make their supplies tighter. But if they don't, they'll have to fear our advance into the heart of Deramak. My refusal of their

request will also reinforce His Majesty's resolve to eradicate the duchies. Next time they send an envoy, their conditions will be far better and their attitude will definitely be sincere."

Surprised, Duke Fisablen asked, "Do you think that they'll send envoys again?"

Lorist nodded.

"Yes. They don't have any choice. They have to start negotiating while they still have cards to play. If they continue on like this, it's either extermination or exile. If they know what's good for them, we can put in a good word or two. There's no real need to stay here for a few more years in a stand-off."

"Oh? Didn't you say their supplies were dwindling? They shouldn't be able to last much longer."

"No," Lorist smiled bitterly, "I miscalculated. The duchies are far wealthier than we imagined. Didn't you hear Count Chujway say they were willing to pay two million gold Fordes as compensation and said we'd each get 500 thousand as a token of gratitude if we helped them out?"

"I expect the three million gold Fordes is but a third or fourth of their wealth. Otherwise, they wouldn't even make this offer. If they choose to escape, that wealth could let them spend a few lifetimes in luxury in the Union. Similarly, if they choose to resist, it can buy supplies that'd last a year or two."

"His Majesty doesn't mind spending two or three years here. He has already cleared up all the nobles in Forund and Farkel and started managing them effectively. Shabaj's three provinces have also begun to regain their vigor and their development is on track. The king doesn't mind taking his time. But do we really want to stay here for two or three years?"

Fisablen was speechless at how unwilling Lorist sounded when he spoke. While he had agreed to help Augustus conquer the duchies and spending a year or so wasn't a huge issue, dragging the war on for two or three years for the meager rewards Augustus had promised was not an option. However, honoring promises was an exalted virtue and he couldn't just drop everything and leave.

Seeing that the three duchies were already gone with only Handra struggling at the brink of death, he was determined to not waste a number of years on the battlefield.

It would be best if he could withdraw and return to his dominion rather than remaining here. If he could make the four dukes submit, everyone would have saved their faces and it would be for the best.

"Oh, when is Sylvia expecting the child?" Fisablen changed the subject.

"It should be in the 1st month of next year."

"When are you going back?"

"Maybe in the 12th," Lorist said with grit teeth, "Before I leave, I have to take one defense line and put more pressure on the four old bastards. I have to force them to send an envoy sooner to discuss their surrender. Otherwise, I won't hold back..."

Though he had agreed to help the king, his forces didn't really have a chance to perform. Instead, they'd been acting to prevent as many casualties as possible while taking advantage of the enemy's weaknesses from time to time. It was mainly because he felt sacrificing his forces for the sake of reuniting the empire was incredibly wasteful and only wanted to do the bare minimum to fulfill his obligations. One look at Fisablen and one could see he only used the reserve legion for dangerous missions. Grassland barbarians were not in short supply on the plains, after all. Third Frontier had been sitting in the back and watching the show the whole time.

"But... Isn't it winter in the 12th month? How will you attack the defenses?"

Lorist rolled his eyes. "Stop pretending, old fox. Wasn't your Third Frontier forced to surrender to me in the winter? I'll tell you frankly that my men aren't affected by winter. In fact, it's an opportunity to show off. You'll see how we launch our assault when the time comes."

Fisablen smiled a little awkwardly.

"Fine, I'll finally see it for myself. But aren't you worried it'll delay your return? It's Sylvia's first child. I'm worried for her safety."

"Worry not, I've already written a letter to tell her I'll make it back before she gives birth. As long as there are a few heavy bouts of snow, I can travel back in three to four days. It's five to six days faster than traveling on horseback."

"Uhhh... Could I go with you? I know things have gone awry between me and the girl,

but she's my granddaughter. I really want to be there for her when she gives birth," asked Fisablen shyly, his head lowered.

Lorist was taken aback and found it a little funny.

"Fine, come along if you want. We can go back together."

"Thank you, Lord Norton," exclaimed he, elated.

Lorist looked at him, sighing. "Call me Lorist it's just us. You're Sylvia's grandfather, my father-in-law. There's no need to address me by title."

"Alright. Thank you, Lorist." the duke responded.

"You're welcome. Also, these are the profits we got from the demonic lands. You can have a third according to our agreement."

Lorist took out a small pouch and tossed it to the duke.

"What's this?" Duke Fisablen opened the sack and found ten smooth oval-shaped pebbles, glowing white like jade.

"Moonlight stones?!"

They were very well-known jewels. Some scholars believed they were a kind of fluorescent stone, others thought they were a variant of jade. Perhaps they were produced when jade was washed onto shore and gradually molded into the round pebbles one usually discovered, beaten by waves and bathed in moonlight for centuries. The silver moon's light gradually caused the jade to become fluorescent. Whenever it's light fell on the stones, they glowed like stars.

It was said that on the southernmost tip of the continent, the Romon Empire had a very famous palace which's roof was decorated with a circular arrangement of moonlight stones. When a candle was lit in the middle of the palace in the night, the stones would reflect the light as white light and make the whole palace bright as day. The palace was named Brightmoon Palace as a result.

The value of moonlight stones varied depending on the strength of their glow. The most expensive ones could go for up to 10 thousand gold Fordes while the cheaper ones cost only around ten gold coins. Most moonlight stones on the market sold for

hundreds to thousands of gold coins. The sack Lorist had tossed to the duke contained ten moonlight stones of high quality, even the cheapest was worth over a thousand gold.

"Where did you find these?" asked the duke as he toyed with one of the stones.

Lorist turned to the demonic lands.

"Your grassland barbarians were rather lucky. They discovered a huge creek as they were chasing down a herd of magic goats. While it looks normal during the day, it shines silver during the night. They thought some deity lived there and instantly dismounted and started worshipping the creek.

"When we received their report, we knew they had discovered a stash of moonlight stones. We harvested nearly a thousand, worth around 700 thousand gold Fordes in total. Don't worry, you'll get a third. We've signed an agreement, you don't have to worry about me breaking it. These are your third of the best batch. As for the grassland barbarians who discovered the creek, I've given each five gold Fordes."

Duke Fisablen was speechless. It was a gap in knowledge. The grassland barbarians discovered a moonlight-stone-filled creek and thought it sacred and didn't dare to enter it. They even dismounted and started kowtowing in awe. Lorist, on the other hand, knew it was treasure waiting to be found and managed to get nearly a thousand stones and profited greatly. It was no wonder he was so happy hunting in the demonic lands and didn't want to return.

After some thought, the duke put the stones back into the sack and handed it back to Lorist.

"I think you should keep them. Use the stones to decorate the house after Sylvia gives birth. That way, you won't have to worry about the possibility of a fire from using too many lamps to light the house."

Lorist wasn't the least bit surprised and accepted the sack.

"Fine, I'll accept your gesture."

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On the 21st day of the 12th month of Year 1782, House Norton's Tigersoar

launched a surprise attack on Welony Pass's defenses under the cover of snowfall and crushed Handra's Reddragon in a single fight. Reddragon lost at least half its forces, the remaining men only barely managing to escape a similar fate by retreating to the second line of defense.

At the same time Welony Pass was conquered, the two defense lines in the flanks were assaulted as well. Forund's first garrison legion and Farkel's Forestmont had no choice but to give up on their defenses and retreat. Countless troops died from the frost. Forestmont raided and burned the villages they came across in accordance with Duke Farkel's scorched earth strategy, resulting in some 30 thousand dead civilians, sowing the seeds for the coming strife between Duke Handra and Duke Farkel.

Chapter 438

Argument

"Why have you come?"

Blademaster Xanthi had returned to her residence. She was surprised to see Fisablen seated near the fireplace drinking tea. They were at Cherry Blossom Ridge. The moment Xanthi received Sylvia's letter about her being with child, she had rushed from Crouchtiger Castle all the way there, ignoring Fisablen's order to guard the dominion, opting instead to stay by Sylvia's side. It was only after Lorist returned that Xanthi returned to her residence for not wanting to see him.

"I came back together with Lorist," the duke replied, "Also, how's Sylvia doing?"

"Not bad. She should be giving birth in a month or so. Now that the guy has returned, she's so happy she's stopped caring about me, her adoptive mother," complained she.

"Hehe, someone your age is jealous of their juniors?" Fisablen teased laughingly, "Come, sit down. We haven't spent much time together for quite some time now."

Xanthi walked over and sat down, leaning on the duke and snuggled into his embrace. Every time the two were together, she would turn into a little girl and stick closely to her man.

"You've come so far in this cold, stormy weather. You must be worn out, right?" asked she as she reached her hand out to touch the duke's face.

"I bet you wouldn't believe me if I told you I didn't suffer at all. I traveled from Westwood all the way here with Lorist without rest. It took only four days and three nights," said he, sighing.

"Impossible! How many provinces did you have to cross? Let me count... Westwood, Perolina, Freewood, Jigzai, Messen, Rimad, Southern, Winston, and The Northlands. Look, even if you travel on horseback for a day and a night, you'll only cross one province. How could you go through nine provinces in this kind of weather so quickly?"

"It's true, I'm not lying," Fisablen said as he gave her face a kiss.

She giggled and buried her face even deeper in his chest.

"I bet you never would've imagined we didn't come on horseback. We came on sleds. Apart from the mountainous paths where workhorses had to be strung, we only used sails to travel down the mountains and across the plains. I didn't think sails could be used in such a way as well. The heavier the storm, the faster the sleds. It was like a bolt of lightning. The scenery whooshed by so fast I couldn't see it at all.

"Lorist said House Norton only experimented with two kinds of sleds with the aim of solving the problem of transportation during the winter. We'd used one of them. Unfortunately, you can only transport small amounts of supplies like this; you still need animals to pull larger loads," said he with much insight.

"That kid loves to use these unconventional and devilish methods," said Xanthi.

"Devilish? Haha, you look down on them too much," said the duke, a little crestfallen, "I only now understand they were holding back when they attacked us. Had he not been worried that nobody would keep the grassland barbarians in check, he could've long sent his troops to Crouchtiger Castle.

"Don't tell me we have a huge population in Eastwild with limitless potential and that our frontier legions are best at hit-and-run attacks. As long as it's winter and our soldiers huddle up in the castles for heat, House Norton's forces can use sleds to send their forces to encircle us. There'll no way we can escape."

Xanthi's eyes widened. "It can't be. If even you're so pessimistic... are the sleds really that amazing?"

"This isn't really a problem of sleds. While they are indeed quite suitable for use on the plains, especially when snow covers them, I am more concerned with the mindset behind it. The is far more conservative than House Norton. There are no talented people in the next generation that stand out with creative ability and tolerance.

"Oh, and, six days ago, House Norton's Tigersoar used the cover of the snow and their skis to attack the defenses in Welony Pass. I watched the battle myself. I saw Lorist lead his men across the snow to the defenses' rear quickly.

"The defenders would never have imagined that the enemy would show up behind

them in that weather. The many blizzards have packed snow hard on the ground. Using the skis, Lorist can attack quickly and easily from anywhere.

Reddragon was completely swarmed. They didn't even know how the enemy had appeared. The hundred or so catapults along the mountain pass fell without inflicting any casualties, and the number of enemies that escaped was negligible. The defenses that had held us back for eight months were conquered in a few minutes, with few, if any, casualties on Lorist's side. I understand completely why Lorist says winter is his friend, not his foe."

"Then we can also train House Fisablen's forces to fight like that! I'm sure you can do whatever that kid can," consoled Xanthi.

Fisablen laughed bitterly. "I already told you it's a problem of mindset. I've seen how the soldiers of Tigersoar are armed and their response to orders. It isn't something a quick training course can achieve. It's the result of years of regular winter training.

"Each soldier is given a set of specially made insulating clothing. They know how to not lose their way in the midst of a blizzard as well as how to camouflage themselves in the white, snow-covered fields and even how to prevent snow-blindness and keep their body temperature up.

"I really can't fathom Lorist investing so much into his forces. I asked around at one point; it's not just Tigersoar that has that training. Every Norton soldier has to go through it every year."

Fisablen sighed.

"I've always thought my fate was unordinary and dreamt of ushering in a new age for the house. But compared to Lorist, I am worthless. Whether it is personal power or the might of our armies, I'm not his match. I'm not saying this just because I'm sour. We're just too far apart.

"It really is unfortunate we have such a neighbor. The only thing I can be happy about is that this kid married my granddaughter and can be considered my son-in-law now. As long as I don't step out of bounds, I don't have to worry about House Fisablen being exterminated. I'm sure the kid will give us a hand in consideration of Sylvia."

.....

On the 11th day of the 1st month, Year 1783, House Norton's matron, Duke of The Northlands', Norton Lorist's, wife, Sylvia, gave birth to a healthy child Lorist named Anderbael, 'peaceful bearling' in the language of the fae.

Auguslo's envoys traveled to The Northlands one after another after the rainy season ended, with the order to return to the frontlines. Duke Fisablen had already returned. After the attack on Welony Pass, the entrance to Handra was opened. It wasn't known whether the four dukes would react in desperation. So, Duke Fisablen rallied his troops after the new year's and rushed back to the pass. Lorist used the excuse of accompanying his wife and child to delay his return.

He only started packing in the 5th month. Had it not been for the king's consideration of how a monarch should behave, Lorist suspected he would have cursed in his letters already.

As expected, the frontlines were in complete chaos. The successful attack had been a pleasant surprise for the king. When he received word of it, Lorist had already returned to his dominion. As it was due to Sylvia's upcoming labor, there was nothing he could do. When he rushed to the frontlines in the blizzard, he quickly realized it was thanks to the skis he had obsessed over so much that the attack could be carried out successfully.

In Egret Swamp those years ago, he had seen how fast Lorist had traveled across the snow with the skis and even learned how to make them. He had forgotten one important factor, though. When he returned and wanted to form a ski assault corps, he realized all the men would have to be provided the skis, and a set of expensive heat-retaining clothing.

The reason Lorist could outfit his men was that he had a massive surplus of the necessary material from the magic beasts they had hunted. He had exterminated millions of them and obtained their pelts. But, lacking any way to ship them for sale in large quantities, he had used them for winter clothing for his troops.

Auguslo didn't have that kind of fur. He realized every soldier being given a set would be a huge burden on his finances. So, out of consideration for his coffers, he dropped the plan. He was really envious of the equipment Tigersoar's men had. He had wanted Tigersoar to press on and continue raking in the victory while winter lasted but Loze refused. He had told the king that Lorist's orders were to defend the pass so their efforts wouldn't be wasted if the enemy launched a counterattack. Additionally, the

skis could only be used to catch the enemy off-guard. Now that they were aware of their presence, they'd definitely be ready. Any further attacks would only lose them more men.

What a load of bull. So what if the enemy is prepared? There's no way they'd stay in their trenches during the blizzard! They'd freeze to death before you even fight! Who else would have such priceless winter gear and the ability to show up out of nowhere in this kind of weather?

It was too bad Tigersoar wasn't under his direct command. Loze could rightfully refuse his orders because he wasn't their commander.

He returned, anger-filled, and swore he would spend even the last gold coin in his coffer to form an assault corps he could deploy in the winter as well. All he could do in the moment, however, was watch as the opportunities slipped away. After the rainy season passed, he kept on sending envoys to Lorist to have him return.

What are you doing in your dominion now that your child is born? Get your ass back here!

Welony's conquest meant that at least half of Westwood was now controlled by Andinaq. With Handra losing their advantageous defensive position in Cloudsnap, they had no choice but to retreat a further hundred kilometers. Fortunately, there were a few low hills there where the duchies had set up defenses to resist the first prince's invasion. The legions made their way there, reformed and took up position.

For now, six legions were stationed there. The four dukes had basically deployed all their forces in that single location. Forund's first and second legions, Handra's Whitedragon and Blackdragon legions, as well as the horribly defeated Reddragon, joined ranks. Farkel's Forestmont and Bloodspear were also there. As for Duke Shabaj's division, it was stationed along Nibarak to keep the enemy from passing through.

Perhaps because of the stimulation of Tigersoar's attack, Auguslo had led Whitelion and Duke Fisablen's the reserve legion in attacks on the defenses multiple times. But the defenses held and he was unable to break through.

"Locke, only the defenses in front of us are left. As long as we break through, we can completely annihilate the enemy. I believe it's possible with Tigersoar's capabilities. I

hope you'll take this on," said the king during their council.

After inspecting the troop layout diagram a scout had drawn, Lorist shook his head.

"Not possible."

"Why?" Auguslo's face darkened.

"Simple. The reason I led Tigersoar to attack Welony was to apply even more pressure on their defenses. The four dukes will soon crumble on their own. One look at the defenses and you'll understand they have to form new legions now that they've stationed the six available legions they have there. They also have to make sure the riverbank is defended to keep us from launching an attack there.

"We can only imagine how many soldiers they need to ensure their full defense. There's no way they can keep this up with only two provinces. As long as we maintain this stance without going all out, Handra can only keep trying to increase their defenses until they can no longer keep it up. Why would we then waste our men in battle?"

"But our attack could apply even more pressure on them! If we succeed in crumbling this line, the enemy will fall even faster!" argued Auguslo loudly.

"Perhaps. But it will kill our men as well. Since victory is already assured, why sacrifice unnecessarily?"

A voice interrupted the exchange from outside the tent.

"Reporting to His Majesty, Duke Handra's envoy is requesting an audience."

Chapter 439

House Nordingham

The envoy Duke Handra sent was the familiar Count Chujway. However, this time he looked paler than the last, with a gloom on his face. Upon entering the tent, he respectfully bowed to Augustus.

"Count Chujway of Handra pays his respects to the king of Andinaq."

Augustus's expression was stern. Lorist's refusal to obey his order to attack had enraged him a lot. He didn't really react much to Chujway's greeting. He only came back to his senses when Duke Fisablen coughed a few times beside him.

"Well, you whatchamacallit... Just say what you want. What does that traitor Handra want you to tell me?" he said, waving his hand annoyedly.

Chujway's face reddened immediately. Augustus's nonchalant attitude and impolite words nourished his anger. He stood up and glared at Augustus.

"Your Majesty, please honor the dignity of nobles. I have a name and it is Nordingham Chujway! Our duke isn't a traitor either! He's never betrayed the empire!"

"Haha, traitors never admit their sins. As for you, a count appointed by a traitor, you should be grateful that I even acknowledge your presence," said Augustus with a snark rather than blowing up in anger.

"That so? Then Your Majesty considers your ancestors traitors as well? I have nothing to say in that case. However, I really wonder how a person who considers their own ancestors traitors can claim he wants to further the empire's glory!" argued Chujway, not holding back.

"What did you say?!" barked Augustus angrily.

He was most concerned about his family's legitimacy. Chujway's accusations enraged him so much he was about to draw his sword and end the envoy.

Chujway smirked without moving.

Fisablen had no choice but to step in to keep the situation under control.

"Your Majesty, please calm down. The envoy is the current head of House Nordingham, a descendant of Blood Knight Nordringham Jadeweis. His title is bequeathed by Krissen VI, not Duke Handra."

Stunned, Auguslo stood absentmindedly for a few moments.

"Blood Knight Nordingham Jadeweis? Why is he with Duke Handra?"

Auguslo understood he had spoken wrongly. While he could call Duke Handra a traitor, he didn't have any right to say the same of House Nordingham. If word of this really got out, it would become a massive joke. In the history of the Krissen Empire, Krissen VI was a rather ordinary emperor who was in power for only 17 years. Within that term, he resumed Krissen V's policies of invading the Union. And during that time, he only led his armies to the Union once.

House Nordingham had risen to fame in that single march. Krissen VI's invasion was one of the biggest military failures in all recorded history. Not only was the army completely defeated, even Krissen VI was completely surrounded. Fortunately, the Union's forces didn't know and tried to pursue the escaping forces before dealing with those they had encircled. One first had to bite through the meat to reach the bone.

Baron Nordingam, arriving late to the invasion, came onto the battlefield with 1300 men, most of his retinue, in that time. The battle had already passed its climax and there was no way to change the outcome. He could only help cover for the retreating forces. The surviving nobles gathered in the evening and realized Krissen VI was not among them.

They were so terrified of the Union, however, that no one wanted to save the emperor. They argued incessantly about who should save Krissen VI. Baron Nordginham Jadeweis was infuriated and led his forces back onto the battlefield to look for the emperor on his own.

No one knew how many engagements he and his men fought, but they eventually returned, triumphant. But of his original 1300 men, only thirteen remained. The baron collapsed, a bloody mess, the moment they reached friendly forces. He had suffered 46 wounds and it was a great struggle to save him.

Looking at Nordingham Jadeweis's bloody form and thinking back at the heroic sight of him charging into the enemy formations to make way for himself, Krissen VI was greatly touched and named the baron his blood knight and made him a count. The emperor's failed invasion had cemented House Nordingham's reputation as a house of loyalty. They became the idol knights strove to mimic.

Augustus hadn't heard Chujway's self-introduction properly and had mistaken him as a count entitled by the traitor. He had slighted his own reputation. Krissen VI was his great-grandfather, and it had been that emperor that had entitled House Nordingham. It was common knowledge to every noble in the empire.

"Your Majesty, House Nordingham's dominion is in Westwood. During the civil war, Duke Handra was given jurisdiction over Westwood by the late king. So, House Nordingham is a vassal house of Duke Handra," explained Fisablen.

Upon hearing the explanation, the king did something shocking. He walked up to Chujway and bowed incredibly respectfully.

"Apologies, Lord Nordingham. I am truly sorry for my rude behavior. Please forgive my ignorant transgression."

Chujway was moved and hurriedly pulled the king upright.

"There's no need for this, Your Majesty. I apologize for not being clear when I requested an audience. This apology is too heavy for me to accept."

Augustus smiled.

"I shall correct my errors. It's alright as long as Lord Nordingham doesn't fault me."

Chujway hurriedly waved his hands.

"Please address me by name, Your Majesty."

"Oh? May I know why?"

"Before my father passed away, he handed me the dominion. His last words were that while the house was now loyal to House Handra, its name belonged to the empire. So, until the empire is restored, I cannot in good conscience use my family name. As such, I will only be known by my title and given name."

"House Nordingham truly is an exemplary noble house! The symbol of loyalty indeed!" the king exclaimed.

The king glanced at Lorist as he said so, making the latter pout.

"Come, take a seat, Lord Chujway. Men, bring us some refreshments! Have the butler arrange a banquet! I wish to properly welcome the lord count," yelled Augustlo.

"Lord Chujway, I wonder for what reason you have requested to meet me?" sked the king once everyone was seated

"I have come on the instructions of Duke Handra. He wishes for peace."

The king shook his head.

"Lord Count, I cannot forgive the traitorous actions of the four dukes. I respect House Nordingham's loyalty and would be more than glad to welcome you to the kingdom. I hope you don't remain entangled with those traitors."

"You are mistaken, Your Majesty. The four dukes aren't traitors. They never betrayed you," argued Chujway.

"Never betrayed me? Haha! Had the duchies agreed to come back into the fold when I asked them to after I'd conquered Redlis, the empire would've been united again by now. But the traitors didn't want to give up their independence and refused to rejoin the empire. Instead, they got together with the Union and the Redlissian traitors and continued to resist. They are the ones who prevented the empire from reforming by taking Frederika from me. They are traitors and I have sworn an oath to bring judgment down on them. They will not extinguish my dedication to reforming the empire," said the king, standing furiously.

Chujway applauded.

"I really look up to your efforts and I'm sure the empire's nobles also understand it. But you are wrong that the four dukes betrayed you. They are not traitors.

"Everyone knows their houses have remained loyal. From quelling revolts to sending forces to attack the Union, they've always played a huge part in maintaining the empire and have never disappointed. Many members of their houses have sacrificed themselves on the battlefield for the empire's sake.

"Even when the civil war broke out, the dukes supported King Andinaq and believed he was the late emperor's true heir. They resisted the pressure and temptations the first and second princes laid on them to get them to join their sides. They even sent their forces out to help the late king quell rebellions and suffered retaliation from the other kings as a result. These retaliations have ruined most of their dominions. Their loyalty is what prompted the previous King Andinaq to grant them jurisdiction over their provinces. I'm sure Your Majesty won't deny this.

"It was thanks to the dukes' continuous support that the late king's forces could defeat his rivals. Duke Madras rebelled just as everything was about to calm down and the duchies were cut off from the kingdom. The land and the people were too exhausted to go on another campaign, so the dukes had no choice but to hunker down and rebuild, waiting for the kingdom to expand its borders and meet up with them again.

"Your Majesty knows the war stopped when the Union intervened. But they did not allow the four duchies to become part of the kingdom, and instead declared that they were to be independent. The dukes secretly contacted the king and let him know that if the opportunity ever present itself for them to rejoin the kingdom, they would do so. Somehow King Redlis learned of this and invaded.

"The war lasted three years and left the duchies exhausted again. King Andinaq suffered an assassination attempt and everything fell apart. It wasn't until Your Majesty took power that the situation stabilized. Your Majesty was preparing for battle and the dukes answered your call with supplies and funds despite how poor the last war had left them.

"When Your Majesty launched a surprise attack and conquered Frederika, all the nobles celebrated the renewed hope for the empire's restoration. But then you demanded that the Dukes give up their land, be move to Madras and accept a demotion. On what grounds? Your Majesty, what have the four central duchies done to upset you and the kingdom? What sin have they committed for you to treat them so poorly? Just because they didn't send their forces to reinforce you? Is that a justification others would accept?

"When they heard about it, the duchies' nobles were in an uproar. You hadn't even shown us the courtesy of telling us yourself, you just sent a knight with the message. We could not accept such disrespect, so we broke with the kingdom. We are not traitors, we are resisting an unlawful command. Every noble has the right to do so in good conscience!"

Chujway became more charged as he spoke. Lorist laughed. He had already heard the story once, but hearing it again as an accusation against the king was novel indeed. The king was indeed the kind of person who'd make such an unreasonable demand, especially considering that he had been on a roll. He had just conquered Frederika and had 300 thousand men in his army. He had let his successes go to his head.

Augusto glared harshly at Lorist.

"Apologies, Lord Count. I was injured from crossing Greatsnow Mountains and had been recovering in bed after the surprise attack on Frederika. I've never given such an order before. My subordinate knights must have misinterpreted my decree and caused such a misunderstanding."

Augusto pushed responsibility for his ridiculous actions on his dead knights. Though it was true that he had been suffering from an illness and hadn't revealed himself to anyone.

Chujway, not expecting such a reply from the king, froze for a moment.

"If it was truly just a misunderstanding, may we discuss peace sincerely? This war only harms the empire's vitality. We have never been against becoming a part of the empire again. We wish to see the empire restored."

Augusto remained silent and sat back down.

"Lord Count, I'm sure Duke Handra told you their requests before you left. Let me hear them."

"The dukes are willing to relinquish their sovereignty and submit to you, they will also pay a tribute of three million gold Fordes. Their only request is to be allowed to remain in their hereditary dominions."

Lorist shot Fisablen an eye with the intent of conveying something along the lines of 'the one million gold Fordes they promised the two of us have all gone to Augusto now'.

"...Rest here a few days, Lord Count. I will consider their request seriously," offered the king politely.

Chapter 440

Submission

Though he had agreed to seriously consider Handra's requests, Auguslo didn't really wish to. Whether it was a misunderstanding or not was of no concern. The key lay in the fact that he had a good chance of victory at the moment. Everyone knew the dukes were on the brink of defeat and tethered on their last lifeline, as long as he gave it another push, Handra's second defense line would collapse. What remained would be stomping on a losing hound.

However, the thing he most hated was Lorist's attitude. Lorist didn't agree to press the attack at all and believed there was no need to continue and sacrifice the lives of his soldiers given that the whole situation was set. Since the dukes had already admitted defeat, even though they had brought up conditions, they were still surrendering. What need was there to kill them? Additionally, they had also made it easy for him to step back from the war without harming his reputation by agreeing that it had started because of a misunderstanding. People didn't know whether the duchies had actually betrayed the empire.

Lorist had told him to accept the olive branch instead of dallying. He was the one in the wrong in the first place anyway. The dukes had been on good terms with the kingdom during the late king's reign and were also famed heads of prestigious houses during the empire's era. Not only had they been loyal, they had made great contributions to it. Yet they were now called traitors. He should clean up his own mess before accusing others.

The ing was pissed off a lot by Lorist's arguments, but he couldn't do much about it. He was inferior to the man in both personal strength and military might and House Norton had made huge contributions during the expedition as well. Lorist himself had also solved the king's refugee problem. While he had poked around where he shouldn't have, it was still a great help to the empire's reformation. The attack on Welony Pass had also been the deciding move that had placed the king in a superior position on the battlefield and had forced the duchies to send an envoy to sue for peace.

In stark contrast to the amazing performance of House Norton's forces, the other nobles's forces were just tagging along. His own Whitelion was used as a labor force, they had lost nearly half their numbers for meager results. House Fisablen's reserve legion had accompanied Whitelion and served as fodder. Though, since the ones who had died were mainly grassland barbarians, the duke didn't really care. In fact, the more he lost, the stronger his loyalty to the king was.

It was the king's greatest tragedy. Lorist's achievements were great, but his men didn't obey their king. The four houses of the alliance were in cahoots; since Lorist, the alliance's unofficial leader, couldn't be ordered around, neither could Kenmays, Felim, or Shazin's forces.

No matter how he tried to divide or tempt them, it was useless. Shazin had appeared infinitely grateful when he had ordered him to sweep the dominions of Forund's rich nobles, so Augustus had thought he was now loyal to him, someone he could use. But the moment the man returned to the frontlines he obediently took up his place behind Lorist again. The mere thought of that particular failure incensed Augustus all over again.

While Andinaq's army numbered 300 thousand in name, he was aware he could only command Whitelion and House Fisablen's reserve legion. Whitelion had lost nearly half its men during the campaign so far and only had 30 thousand men left. The reserve legion was formed from grassland barbarians and their casualties had filled with resentment. They may be barbarians, but they weren't idiots. They had become very willing to follow Lorist's orders since they didn't incur as many casualties and even profited quite handsomely on occasion, while Augustus had lost his ability to easily command them because he would only send them on suicide missions.

As for Third Frontier, it was Duke Fisablen's treasure. The king knew there was no chance in hell the duke would give him command of it. It wasn't quite like he wanted to shatter it anyway, he preferred it remain intact to cause trouble for Lorist when they returned home. At times — when he was calmer — he would ask himself whether the expedition's casualties would have been this low without Lorist's help. If he had been in total control on his own, he would've opted for a brute force approach and might've not even taken a single duchy by now.

It wasn't that he considered his achievements in military strategy inferior to Lorist's; he just had to consider the bigger picture since he was now the king. From this perspective, the ideal result was for both the duchies' and the alliance's forces to be

battered and defeated by the end of it, while he would deal the final blow and conquer everything. It would cement his superiority over his disobedient vassals and shave off a considerable portion of their power. He also had to keep both Lorist and the duke on the frontlines so he could keep an easy eye on them. It had the unfortunate side-effect of allowing Lorist to rake in great achievements.

House Kenmays's two heavy-armored divisions had suffered the most casualties, around 1300 men, of the four houses' forces. Shazin's men had suffered the worst next, losing around 800 men during their sweep of the Forundian nobles' dominions. House Felim's pegasus came thereafter. They had been in charge of defense and scouting, and had lost around 500. Tigersoar had lost the least men, just 400. These numbers could barely be considered casualties compared to Whitelion's losses. It could even be considered an insult to Augustus. It had even gotten so bad that rumors were spreading that he wasn't really the genius strategist he had been thought to be.

He was incredibly frustrated. He couldn't do anything about Lorist, and the rest of the man's alliance had stood behind his decision to not press the attack firmly. Even Duke Fisablen had privately told him to leave a thread of mercy for the dukes. They had already admitted their loss, after all.

Though he had his worries, they weren't something he could speak of publicly. It wasn't that he didn't want to spare the dukes, he had already set his sights on their dominions. While Andinaq's territory was vast, most of it wasn't under his direct control; he only had command of a couple around the capital and they had long been stripped of all their worth already. He had been sucking the provinces dry since the day he decided to reform the empire. That was why he had killed all the nobles involved in the rebellion after he retook the throne, even at the cost of his reputation. Without the resources those nobles had, he couldn't maintain the forces he needed to achieve his ambition.

He had planned to use the four duchies to rebuild his forces, to assemble an army half-a-million strong and to march on the Union. Them having a sword saint supporting their position as the continent's largest nation, but it would cost them dearly. Even they had to be wary of creating a death-feud with a nation with an army half-a-million strong.

He believed the merchants would make a wise decision. His requests weren't excessive. As long as they returned the provinces of the old empire they now occupied, there was no need for war. He might even consider trading with them, even giving

them special privileges, once the empire had been restored to its former glory. He looked especially forward to using them to deal with the alliance and its salt merchant committee.

In order to achieve these things, he couldn't accept Chujway's conditions, even after considering it for several days. He had decided; the duke would not get their dominions. They were crucial to his future and his ambitions. Lorist and Fisablen continued to pester him, so he wanted to finalize his decision as soon as possible. He summoned Chujway and gave him his conditions. He could forgive the dukes, but they would not get their current dominions back. They had to accept new dominions around the capital. They would also have to pay way steeper fines than they had offered. Handra, Forund, and Shabaj each had to pay 1.5 million gold Fordes, and Farkel had to pay 3 million because he dared to burn his city and the surrounding settlements. Finally, the dukes were only allowed to take 45 thousand men with them, everyone else had to be left behind and would be under his direct command. The duke's vassals would also no longer be such, they would fall directly under the king and would be demoted depending on their house's historic contributions to the empire.

His conditions were unexpectedly harsh. Though Chujway had wanted to contest, the king withdrew to his quarters and refused an audience. His attendants simply said the conditions were final and couldn't be negotiated. Chujway had no choice but to return and pass the message along.

Kenmays and the others were confused. They went to Lorist for clarification. Why had the king come up with such ridiculous demands? Wasn't he forcing the dukes to fight to the death? Would continuing the war be beneficial to him somehow?

Lorist smirked and pointed at the map.

"Our king has his eyes on the duchies. It's simple. To him, while gold is important, it can't compare to the manpower the duchies can provide. Reforming the empire with the provinces near the capital is a pipe dream. With these provinces, however, he stands a chance against the Union."

The rest gasped. Lorist warned them to be prepared just in case the dukes decided to fight to the death. Nobody could predict how long the war would last if they did. They might even resort to underhanded methods like assassination, so they had to watch out. Lorist was more hopeful that the dukes would accept Augustus's conditions.

"What? Why would they even consider it?" Shazin exclaimed, "If it were me, I'd rather die than accept those demands."

Lorist shook his head.

"You don't understand. This concerns their houses' survival. It's not something the dukes can decide on a whim. They have no choice but to seriously consider it. The demands are unfair, but not so much so that it's completely unacceptable. While wealth is important, it can't compare to the house's legacy and continued existence. The most important thing is that they won't lose their peerage or be demoted, granted, they will lose their current titles.

"Their new dominions will be poorer, but they can rebuild. They haven't lost the right to have levies either. They can each keep a force of 45 thousand. If they bring these men's families along, they will have secure control of their new lands in no time. They don't have to be too concerned about their future"

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On the 6th day of the 7th month, Year 1783, more than 50 days since Chujways' return. Andinaq's army remained stationed opposite the second defense line. Augustus was still rather mad at Lorist for not wanting to press the attack and couldn't command Whitelion and House Fisablen's reserve legion to go on a suicide mission either. Duke Fisablen tried his best to appease the king and had managed to get him to agree to stay on the defense for a little longer.

That night, the sounds of fighting echoed over no man's land into Augustus's, Lorist's, and the others' ears. Fires lit up the night soon thereafter. It appeared Farkel's Forestmont and Bloodspear's camps were under attack. It was incredibly odd; Augustus believed it a trap to lure them into attacking.

A few scouts soon brought over a bloodied Chujway. He reported that Handra, Forund, and Shabaj had accepted his conditions and were willing to surrender. But Duke Farkel wanted to resist to the end and swore he would rather die than surrender. Though they managed to convince him otherwise after much difficulty, he then said he didn't have that many gold Fordes.

Just as they were considering whether they should send a messenger to ask for the Farkel's dues to be lowered a little he actually ordered his two legions to raid the

duchy's towns and villages. They took, killed, and burned, committing every sin imaginable. Handra had sent his men to stop him, but the latter said that since the rest were going to surrender anyway, and that the territory would soon no longer be theirs, he might as well take what he could and leave nothing for Augustus.

Angered to the point of coughing up blood, Handra led his troops into battle against the duke and managed to push him back to the frontline. He convinced Forund and Shabaj to surround Farkel's two legions. But before they could mobilize, Farkel attempted to escape.

Fortunately, Handra's garrison troops had long been prepared and didn't allow him to go anywhere. The situation had been thrown into chaos and Forund's forces had broken into Farkel's camp and were slaughtering everything on the hill. Chujway only barely managed to make it out of the mess to request reinforcements.

Greatly elated, Augustus hurriedly ordered his generals to reinforce the frontlines to prevent the criminal ringleader, from escaping. Lorist actually obeyed his commands without protest for once. The mobilization of cavalry was the last nail on Farkel's coffin. They crumbled like withered barks as the cavalry charged into their lines. Many died or surrendered. Perhaps because the two legions had committed too many evils in Handra, Handra's men began to slaughter the surrendered soldiers after gathering them up. By the time Lorist realized what was happening, it was already too late. Most of the 30 thousand captives had been slaughtered, less than a third were still alive.

Handra and Farkel's clash marked the end of the campaign. The three dukes surrendered without further ado. Farkel, unfortunately, managed to escape towards Majik with a hundred riders and sought asylum in the Union. From that day forth he was a renegade noble.

Chapter 441

Distribution of Rewards

The war was finally over. Auguslo was fraught with tasks. There was much with which he had to deal as king. First, he had to arrange the new dominions. After negotiations, the two southwestern provinces became Duke Handra and Duke Shabaj's new dominions, Yungechandler, which neighbored Delamock, became Duke Forund's.

The two southwestern provinces, now formally named South Derika and West Derika, used to be known as the Derika area. Krissen I had split it into two provinces. West Derika was also known as the northwestern province and the two bordered Kanbona, which was forcefully occupied by the Union. In some official documents, they were known as the two southwestern provinces, but recently they were often called the frontline provinces.

When Auguslo vanished after his military loss at Frederika, Queen Carey had ceded them to the Union, who didn't absorb them directly, instead, they formed the Allied Duchies of Britt to serve as a buffer between them and Andinaq. But after Auguslo returned to power, Tigersoar destroyed the nation returned the land to the king's control. The provinces had served as Whitelion's main base since and contained most of the kingdom's defenses against the Union. However, given that it had been rather tumultuous over the years, less than ten percent of the population remained. Civilian life was desolate. There used to be as many as 500 thousand refugees at one point. Though Auguslo had tried hard to restore their economies, their ceding had sapped them of the last of their vigor. The provinces were mostly plains, but everything had been devastated and was no largely desolate.

The king had decided to give the provinces to his new vassals to get rid of their burden. He was intent on having Houses Handra and Shabaj serve as a barrier between him and the Union, and leave the land's development to them. This was the only reason he was willing to let them bring along some of their subjects. With the 45 thousand soldiers and their families, the lack of manpower could be solved. When it came down to it, manpower was the most important resource.

As for Duke Forund, he was given the title The Duke of Yungechandler. Though the

province was small and poor, it was in a strategic location. Between The Northlands and the country's center, where the imperial capital was located, was Delamock, Yungechandler, and Welbassia. Auguslo enfeoffed Yungechandler to Duke Forund as his new dominion for less than pleasant reasons. He was intent on building a wall between himself and the alliance.

What's that guy up to? He's trying to raise his guard against us at a time like this? thought Lorist as he stroked his chin.

Upon knowing about Auguslo's arrangements, he couldn't help but praise his abilities as king. It was no wonder he allowed the three surrendered dukes to each bring a legion along. Not only could he retain the citizens', who would move to the new territories, loyalty, which would reduce unrest, he could also let the three dukes serve as his guard dogs. He was a true schemer.

Lorist believed that, if Duke Farkel hadn't escaped, Auguslo would have given him Rimad, right next to Southern. It would have been as good as closing the empire's doors to the alliance. However, fate was ever elusive. Duke Farkel wasn't willing to submit and had escaped to the Union. No one knew whether the Union would cause trouble for the king in the duke's name.

It was a busy time for everyone. The king was so busy taking over management of his new territories and planning the defenses and patrols so the folk could start producing without worry that again he was virtually unseen. The three remaining dukes were also busy rallying their forces and families in preparation for their move to their new dominions. House Fisablen was given the task of reorganizing the soldiers left behind before handing them over to gold-ranked knight and Whitelion general Ripleid, who would then integrate the elites into the legion's ranks and form two garrison legions from the rest. Kenmays, he was busy doing business with the dukes. Though they had each given 1.5 million to the king, it should still only be half of their available wealth. Kenmays had his sights on the rest and unleashed his silver tongue on the dukes. He wanted to convince them to purchase the supplies they needed from the salt merchant committee. He had even thrown in free delivery. Felim and Shazin were busy looking for Auguslo. They were going to demand their rewards.

After the battle, the two were made dukes as was promised. However, they weren't trying to confront Auguslo about their titles. Felim wanted to have the 30 thousand youths sent to his dominion to help out with its development, while Shazin wanted Auguslo to enfeoff him a province with lots of mineable resources. Auguslo was

elusive, however, nobody knew where he was at any given time.

Lorist suddenly found himself the freest of his peers. Apart from being invited to socialize in the banquets organized by the three dukes, who thanked him for not pressing the attack, he spent the rest of his time listening to his two companions' complaints about their inability to find Augustus. He advised them to stop looking for him.

"His Majesty would never avoid you intentionally. Maybe he's just surveying his new provinces. I'm certain he will return in time."

Though he said such words, he was becoming annoyed with the king as well. He could just return to The Northlands with Tigersoar and his two guard regiments even without receiving the king's signature on the contract that recognized his three-year tax exemption. He didn't care about the document at all. He'd love to see whether the man would risk his rebellion for not acknowledging the promise.

When he thought of Sylvia and their child, that the baby was half a year old now, the urge to return became overpowering. However, the cursed king chose now of all times to go survey his new lands and had the others wait for his return to Hans! How ridiculous! Rather than sit around spending money on his forces and having both himself and them grow lethargic, he would much rather return to the demonic lands on the other side of Nibarak. He could keep his men fit and sharp there. and make money instead of bleeding it.

The 8th month soon passed and he finally received news of Augustus through an envoy. The man asked him to not dally around the demonic lands anymore. He hurriedly returned to Hans, Delamock's capital. There he realized the three dukes had brought their remaining subjects and were on the way to their new dominions.

Kenmays had long received proof of kingdom-wide two-year tax exemption for the committee, so he'd hurried back to organize the transportation and distribution of various goods. He left a letter for Lorist which said it was a huge deal estimated to rake in a million gold Fordes in revenue. If he could satisfy the three dukes and receive more orders from the three new dominions, it could turn into a long-term business relationship.

Duke Fisablen had also left with Third Frontier and the reserve legion with the rewards Augustus had given him without meeting Lorist first. Only Felim and Shazin

had remained at Hans with their forces. The two new garrison legions were there as well. As for the restaffed Whitelion, they had left for Majik half a month earlier on their king's orders. They were tasked with guarding Anderwoff's border to keep the Union from invading.

Lorist's two companions didn't look good when they received him. They appeared rather frustrated. Felim spat on the ground harshly after handing over Kenmays's letter before he told Lorist what had happened. Auguslo had duped him and reworded 30 thousand youths into 30 thousand people. There were less than seven thousand youths among them and the rest were their families.

Felim complained that even though his reward was similar to Duke Fisablen's, who received all 50 thousand youths and had a total of 170 thousand people, their families included, Auguslo suppressed his complaints. The reason was that Duke Fisablen had expanded the empire's borders and required more people for his dominion to prevent the lands from returning to being a breeding ground for grassland barbarians. Southern, however, was well within the empire's borders and faced no threats, so its population could grow naturally with the passage of time.

Additionally, Auguslo also compared Duke Fisablen and Felim's forces. He had said House Fisablen's reserve legion suffered heavy casualties during the expedition, with more than ten thousand dead, while Pegasus hadn't suffered nearly as much since it was tasked with scouting and patrolling. So, his reward was naturally inferior to Duke Fisablen's.

While he could only accept his bad luck. Shazin's matter was different entirely. Auguslo had given him two options. The first was to choose either Rimad or Messen as his hereditary dominion; the second, to wait until the kingdom reclaimed the territories the Union currently occupied. The latter would yield the house Bodolger, home to Frederika.

Shazin didn't want either. Rimad only produced lumber and stones and high-quality materials like gold crystals, black crystals, and red maple wood. However, there was no demand for such things in the chaotic time of war they were currently in. Messen also produced quite a bit of mineable resources, but it was worth something because of its quantity, not its quality. For example, the two silver and one copper mines only had small ore veins that would run out after some 30 years of mining. The quality of the mined ore was also disappointing and it was considered a rather bad place to mine.

Shazin didn't want to pick either Messen or Rimad, mainly because the two provinces had been ravaged thoroughly by the minor nobles' army at the start of the civil war, becoming barren and unpopulated. Naturally, the alliance had obtained some benefits, but Augustus's decision to give either of the provinces to House Shazin felt like an insult even to Lorist directly.

No matter which province Shazin received, he would have to invest huge sums of money to gather refugees and spur development. It wouldn't recover for at least two to three decades. Augustus's second offer also greatly enraged Shazin. Bodolger was the dominion of one of the Union's big-seven, Wessia. While Bodolger was a huge mining province, the question was: when would Augustus reclaim it?

Shazin was very worried the answer was, 'not soon at all'. He might not even live to see the day. Additionally, he was worried that if he accepted Augustus's second offer, House Shazin would be pushed to the forefront of battle in the name of reclaiming its dominion, which would push it into conflict with the rest of the alliance. While he appeared the rough one of the four, being greedy and a little daft with a common family background, he was no idiot. He understood on what House Shazin was dependent. Without Lorist's, House Kenmays', and Felim's care, he would be nothing. He might even be wiped out before he managed to truly establish his house.

He would rather remain at Lorist's side than join Augustus. After all, Lorist's words were far more trustworthy than that king's. Lorist, at the very least, wouldn't forget to share some of the benefits. If it were Augustus, he couldn't count on getting anything out of him other than trouble. He would be lucky if the man cared at all. The king praised someone to high heavens and tossed them away with the same mouth. Shazin could see this clearly.

He had refused the king's offers and asked for Kribia instead, one of Farkel's old provinces. Its main products were rock salt, gold silver, purple bronze, white lead, and black iron. There were also dozens of other resources and it provided around a million gold Fordes annually. He had long had his eyes on it.

The king would have none of it, however. By what right did this duke demand such a jewel? Whether it came to his contribution to the empire generally, or during the campaign specifically, he had done far from enough to deserve Kribia. The province had always been under the imperial family's direct control during the empire's days. And it had only ever been handed over temporarily to the dukes during the civil war. Farkel had been supposed to return it once the war was over.

The king told Shazing that he would pick one of the options he'd been given, or not get anything at all. Kribia was out of the question.

The duke had stormed out furious.

"Does that mean your efforts were in vain, Hennard?" asked Loris.

Shazin shrugged hatefully.

"I guess so. I can only blame my shitty luck. I'll never trust him again."

Lorist patted his shoulder.

"Just endure for now. You didn't suffer much either. You also earned quite a bit from Forund's nobles. It's a shame we didn't discuss our conditions with him beforehand. Whatever. I'll go see him and see what he has to say."

Chapter 442

Big Business

"You're back, Locke." Auguslo was really busy and only briefly greeted Lorist, who had just entered the hall. In front of him stood a thick stack of documents which he gave some thought before he started penning.

"Good afternoon, Your Majesty," replied Lorist with a bow, stealing a quick glance.

His eyesight was pretty good and he could clearly identify that the documents contained personal information about nobles and their houses. It had to be information about the nobles who had followed the four dukes. The king was in the midst of deciding what he would do with them.

Seemingly not noticing Lorist's greeting, the king continued to focus on the document in his hand. Lorist didn't mind much, though. He straightened himself before checking the palace that was now the king's residence. It was one of the ten famed palaces of the old empire, Inkcuby Palace. Cuby was a thumb-sized fairy that existed in Grindian folklore said to bring bliss and luck. Legend had it that there was a black-haired fairy among the cubies who liked to make dresses out of black-colored flower petals, it was called the ink cuby. It liked brave and battle-hardened warriors. If a warrior was lucky enough to gain an ink cuby's favor, he would be endowed with courage and endurance and dominate the battlefield.

One of House Handra's heads was a warrior that frequented the battlefield and rarely emerged with any injuries, rumors quickly spread that he had gained the blessing of an ink cuby. The lord didn't waste the admiration his people, he used the wealth he gathered to commission Inkcuby Palace in his old age.

The artisans of the famed palace had hidden a thousand different ink cubies among its engravings. Legend was that, should a person find the thousand ink cubies, they would receive its blessing.

Inkcuby Palace used to be House Handra's residence, but now it was being used by Auguslo. Lorist stared at the decor. He wanted to see how many ink cubies he could count.

"What are you up to?"

Auguslo came to Lorist's side after a while and stared at the roof as well, curious to see at what Lorist was looking.

"Ink cubies..."

His effort was wasted. Though he had managed to count 53, Auguslo's disturbance made him forget whether he had already counted some of them.

Whatever. There's only about 60 in this hall anyway. Counting them is a waste of energy and effort.

Auguslo almost lost his wits from laughter.

"You believe that legend too?"

Lorist shook his head.

"No, I only counted them out of curiosity. The legend is a trap."

"A trap?" Auguslo hadn't expected Lorist to respond thusly. "How so?"

"The effort required to count the ink cubies would be better spent training oneself. Training will naturally elevate one's strength to the ranks of indomitable warriors."

Auguslo nodded.

"Makes sense. Actually, House Handra has records of such an incident. Around 70 years ago, one member made an oath to find all the ink cubies and gain their blessing. He scoured the palace for thirty years but could only find 997. No matter where he looked, he couldn't find the last three. He finally lost his sanity, what little he clearly had to begin with and spent the rest of his days wandering around the palace muttering to himself incoherently. He fell into a pool one night and drowned. What a sad end."

Lorist sighed.

"A tragedy indeed, Your Majesty."

"Yes. House Handra forbade any searching for ink cubies. Augustus looked at the engravings above. "Just as you say, if he had spent those 30 years on battleforce training, no matter how average his talent, he would've reached the gold rank. It would've been a great result for both himself and his house."

Lorist chortled lightly. Augustus was acting rather weird, as if he had completely let go of the matter of his non-compliance with the king's orders. Currently, he appeared as friendly as he used to and completely let go of his seething hatred.

"Alright, enough with the idle chatter. You're here to claim your reward, yes? I already wrote it down for you. I'm really reluctant to see you depart, you know," said the king as he returned to his desk and handed Lorist a beastskin.

It was the proof he needed. Both the seal and decorative border proved Augustus didn't plan to mess with him. He had already been completely prepared. However, as Lorist scanned through the date, he felt surprised.

"Your Majesty, did you get the date wrong?"

Though the exemption was agreed to last three years, the document in his hands presently put it at five years. Weird... Had the sun risen from the west today? Why was Augustus being generous all of a sudden? It had to be a mistake. Augustus waved casually it off casually.

"It's what you deserve. It was thanks to you that we were able to wrap this campaign up so quickly and easily. Nobody contributed as much as you. We've had our fair share of difference, but it is because of our differing views. Time has proven you right. I am the king; I cannot afford to hold grudges when I was clearly in the wrong, I must keep the bigger picture in mind and act in accordance with what is best for the kingdom. Your contributions merit a reward greater than what you demanded, so I adjusted it accordingly."

Lorist bowed.

"I am grateful for Your Majesty's generosity."

"Drop the pleasantries. I'm just trying to be a king whose judgment isn't clouded."

"Do you then not agree that your treatment of Duke Shazin is a little unfair?" Lorist took the opportunity to confront Augustus.

"Well..." the king was a little taken aback. He was a little troubled, but maintained his composure and smiled as he shook his head. "I see Duke Shazin went to you to complain, which is totally in order. But think about it. I already gave him two choices, yet he didn't accept either. Can you really blame me? I already did what I said. Rimad and Messen are both provinces with rich mineral resources that produce more income than his current county. He just needs to invest in his chosen dominion a little. I can't do anything if he doesn't want my offers."

"I'm sure Your Majesty understands Messen and Rimad's current situation. It's obvious that Duke Shazin wouldn't want such provinces. He isn't very good at management so how could he choose dominions that require exactly that?"

"Hahaha, you can't blame me for his shortcomings, though," Augustus laughed, "Who was it that ravaged Messen and Rimad? It certainly wasn't done by my order? Consider this: Duke Shazin wanted Kribia, yes, but do his contributions merit such a reward? Is he not satisfied that I've given him the title of duke? Even if I give him Kribia, can he accept it without feeling any shame at all?"

Lorist shrugged. There was nothing he could do about it either. Augustus was right in that Shazin's performance had been mediocre at best. He was a character cheering from the sidelines. He had followed Lorist closely, yes, but he didn't contribute much. Lorist could argue little with such a reason.

"Fine. Your Majesty is correct. Duke Shazin shouldn't have had such blind ambitions. I take my leave now."

Lorist felt he should leave now that matters had been settled.

"Locke, wait. There is one more thing I wish to discuss."

"Oh?" Lorist thought, *the show's finally starting. He definitely has something in mind, he would not have increased reward otherwise. Wise, objective king my ass. I knew he had something in mind. What exactly does he want, though?*

"What is it, Your Majesty? Do you have any instructions?"

"Well, it's like this... You've been hunting magic beasts in the demonic lands for the last month, correct?"

"Yes... You were surveying your new lands and I didn't want to sit around in Hans until

you returned. So, I went to demonic lands to train alongside my legion. The hunting was to put some meat in my men's diets."

"I have no intent to fault you for your actions. I just wish to know if the furs are still here."

"They are indeed, Your Majesty," Lorist replied, slightly reserved, "Would you like a few? I just recently put together a selection of the best ones. I'll send someone over with a few."

"I can pay for them."

"No need, Your Majesty. There are only ten. Just consider it a gift," said Lorist generously.

"That's not quite what I had in mind, Locke. I wish to purchase all the furs."

"All the furs?"

Can you really afford it? Lorist wondered, Apart from the more precious ones I shipped back to the dominion last year, all the furs are still here. All together they should be worth at least a million gold Fordes—

A spark suddenly lit up in his mind.

—Of course! You just took four duchies. Funds are the one thing you don't lack right now.

Three of the dukes had paid him 1.5 million each. He had also taken a million gold Fordes left behind in Duke Farkel's camp. There was also the money the minor nobles had paid to avoid further prosecution. The king was a complete tycoon now. He looked at the man with blazing eyes like he was looking at a statue made of gold.

Then again, what does he want with the furs? Some clarity returned to his mind immediately. Maybe he's trying to train a unit or legion that can act during winter as well?—

It didn't take long for him to guess the king's intentions.

—Whatever, I'll sell them first. It's only a waste not to profit. I'll regret it if I miss this chance. Does he think training a winter force is easy? Does he really think winter clothing

alone is enough to let men move around freely in the middle of a blizzard? Hehe, your thinking far too simply.

Augusto nodded slightly.

"Very well. The furs I have on my should be worth about 1.45 million. Since my client in Your Majesty, I'll lower the price to 1.2 million. How's that? I'll also throw in a few dozen precious pelts as a gift."

Alright. I'll just give him all the precious furs if that's what it takes.

"Wait, how many furs do you have? 1.45 million gold Fordes? Do you really have that many?" Augusto was a little taken aback. He hadn't expected Lorist would have that many. *How many magic beasts did he kill?!*

He was going to form a small legion named Blizzardblitz. He would train them to use skis and launch surprise attacks in winter. His march on Frederika had taught him a harsh lesson. Of the 30 thousand troops he mobilized, only eight thousand made it to the city. He didn't think he'd need so many if their casualty rate could be lowered with their equipment and training. He only planned to purchase 10 thousand sets. He wasn't going to train every soldier under his command in winter combat. It would be a waste.

He had known of Lorist's hunts for a year now. He didn't really mind since it let the men eat more meat and bewildered the enemy. Personally, he believed sacrificing soldiers to hunt magic beasts was incredibly wasteful and foolish. He had no idea the Nortons had begun their rise to power with killing magic beasts. Lorist had shipped most of the valuable furs back home. Only the lower quality dire wolf and magic goat furs were left.

He thought Lorist only had furs worth 400 thousand and enough to outfit his new detachment; he might even have some left over. That was the only reason he had not specified a number but had offered to buy them all. The difference between his expectation and Lorist's quote shocked him.

"Naturally, Your Majesty. I have been hunting for a whole month and those are the furs I brought back from the hunt. Don't worry. The furs are in great shape. I wouldn't throw in any torn ones to inflate the number. I can assure Your Majesty. Then again, I didn't think Your Majesty would be so adept at business. I'm sure you will resell them

for quite the profit in the capital." Lorist pushed the sale with all he had.

"This... well..." Auguslo had forgotten about the new furs. He had over-promised and found it hard to deliver.

"Surely Your Majesty wasn't joking around with me?" asked Lorist gloomily.

"Of course not. I have to keep my word as king, after all. I'll send someone over to appraise the furs later." Auguslo forced himself to swallow the pill.

"Very well. I'll take my leave. I'll wait for your men in my camp."

Chapter 443

Return to The Northlands

Augusto personally brought a large number of administrative officials to House Norton's camp. He didn't believe Lorist really had magic beast furs worth over a million gold Fordes and he really hoped he had been teasing him. He was destined to be disappointed. All the appraiser he brought along agreed that the pelts were worth at least 1.67 million. Lorist's asking price was a massive discount.

Lorist watched gleefully as the king signed order gloomily. The sun was truly shining brightly. His luck was great. He managed to sell the normal pelts, usually hard to get rid off for a great price. The house had a large store of them already so these weren't worth anything to the house themselves.

Cotton didn't exist, so silk, linen, and hemp were usually used to make warm clothing and other items like blankets. Grindians, who were indoors for most of the winter usually used leather and fur to make outdoor clothing, and best among them was magic beast fur.

The first years of his reign as the head of the house saw it fighting the magic beast wave every winter. They had accumulated more than enough to supply the domain for decades to come. With the market saturated, though in principle the pelts were very valuable, there wasn't an easy way to turn them into money. The situation was worsened by the fact that untreated fur and leather had a shelf life. Since the materials had to be treated differently depending on their intended use, the house couldn't pre-treat them and store them for later sale, which meant that if they weren't sold relatively quickly, they would become and worthless. The market price for the materials wasn't very good in The Northlands either. Households that needed the material to replace worn items just went out and hunted for it themselves, so he also couldn't wait for an increase in demand and sell the stuff at a higher price then.

When Lorist established the domains naval presence, Petersen Merchant Guild bombed with the information that there wasn't actually much of a market for pelts and leather anywhere on the continent.

How could that be possible? He clearly recalled that when he was 20, Charade dragged

him to participate in a risky mercenary mission that involved exploring an underground cave. Because of the immense cold, Lorist had no choice but to purchase a singlet made of magic goat pelt to keep warm. As he remembered, the fur his house had stocked up should be a hot product given how he sold furs back when he still hunted magic beasts as a mercenary.

President Peterson gave him an explanation that simply baffled him. The lack of a market was because people didn't want or need pelts, it was simply that nobody could afford them. The guild was the largest fur trader on the continent, they held a complete monopoly on the Union's market, so their knowledge could not be brushed aside.

While magic beast fur was much better at resisting the cold than human-reared livestock, the common folk mainly used the latter given that the former was easily over three times as expensive. The guild could only really profit off the small trade because they sold them at hiked prices.

Given their position, they would certainly not let his pelts flood the market, it would destroy the delicate balance they had spent years building. President Peterson also warned him that mercenaries were the main users of the fur. The common folk would never spend that kind of money on clothing they were only going to wear inside, for which they were overkill.

The guild was also only really interested in dealing in high-value goods. The rich were far more generous with their coin. In total, the guild only bought a few exceptional pelts worth about 500. The more common varieties were wholly undesired. And they were exactly what the house had in bulk.

Given how much effort it was to properly treat furs for storage, it was far more useful to just turn them into clothes for his soldiers. The king thought Lorist was very invested in training his force to be elite winter troops, so much so that he was willing to spend ludicrous amounts of money on their material and training, but the reality was that it didn't cost him much. It wasn't that he was obsessed with having a good winter military, but that it was just a more convenient way of using the materials and time he had. It wouldn't cost him much to make the winter clothes, he already had the material by the storehouse, and he had to pay his men their salary anyway, so instead of having them sit in their barracks the whole winter, he might as well have them do something productive.

When he led Tigersoar to hunt in the demonic lands, most of their prey was dire

wolves and some herbivorous magic beasts. Similarly, their furs had high value but a non-existent market.

He could still remember that he had once considered selling the pelts in bulk at the price of livestock leather and thought the low price would let him forge a market. But the Peterson Merchant Guild turned him down. The supervisor said that if magic beast fur was sold at that price, it would collapse the price of normal fur and decimate the market. When the supply then ran out, there would be no livestock fur industry to replace it.

The house hadn't feared the freezing winter when they had moved the refugees the previous winter because every person got a set of magic beast fur clothing for free. The abundance of rest stops and the fast travel facilitated helped as well. If he declared his house used the most magic beast fur on the continent, no one would argue the point. The annual winter training also swelled his stock by over 100 thousand. His storehouses had never been fuller.

The furs he got from the recent hunts weren't much use to the house as materials, and the delicate market made it nigh impossible to sell off. Had this been a time of peace things might have been different, but, alas, it wasn't.

So far he'd only bothered to ship the best pelts, like the skins of gigantic swamp crocodiles, back to the dominion because they would always sell. He had yet to worry about the rest. He certainly didn't think the king would take such an interest and end up taking them all off his hands. He couldn't be happy about this turn of events.

These days, fools are just as hard to find as rich tycoons.

He had offered the discount and included a few of the remaining precious pelts to make sure the deal would go through. He also agreed to sell a few catapults at 150 gold each without hesitation. He'd even offered to sell them 2500 carroballistae he had with him, but the king would have none of it.

Auguslo considered House Norton's catapults the world's ultimate weapons. They were far more flexible than the simple lever-style catapults, even in defensive situations. At the very least, they were mobile, not the fixed emplacements that were so easy to target.

The house's carroballistae had tempted him. But the advent of shield carts they had

become far less attractive. No one but the greatest fools still deployed armies without proper protection against them. Whether it was offense or defense, shield carts had become a standard in the continent's armies. And they were always improving.

He only had six million gold left and he had other things to do with his money, so he turned the sale down. He couldn't wait to form his new standing legion. The campaign hadn't ended pyrrhically as he had expected, and he was thankful for that. It made it much easier for him to move on the next one quickly.

He needed a strong force in the kingdom as soon as possible to keep the alliance, Duke Fisablen, and his three new vassals in check. He planned to rest for two or three years and rebuild his military strength before taking on the Union. He wasn't afraid of having too much money. Even what he had felt like too little, instead. It would have been preferable to have wiped the rebellious dukes out rather than taking them back under his wing.

Kings had to be true to their word, Auguslo could not just withdraw his offer to buy all Lorist's pelts without good reason, a predicament Lorist exploited excellently. He forced the king to buy all the furs, even though it cost him three times what he had expected to spend.

Auguslo was filled with regret at his previous enthusiasm. What on earth would he do with so many furs? Fortunately, the duke had mentioned the possibility of reselling the leftovers in the capital, words his one financial advisor didn't miss. The only problem was that it wasn't going to be a quick sale. Just as Lorist could sell off his furs in bulk, so too could the king not sell his stock in bulk. The risk of collapsing the market was too great. He could only hope to make a small profit from the leftovers over several years. Even so, it was still a much-needed consolation.

He was far more frugal after blowing 1.2 million on fur. The purchase of several catapults was a welcome surprise, but he didn't want to spend any more money on the man. He had his craftsman duplicate the designs, but the metal parts were impossible. The steel just couldn't be replicated. Without the steel the replicated catapults were useless.

Lorist wasn't too disappointed at failing to sell his carroballistae since they were going to be useless soon anyway. Both the catapults and the carroballistae would be completely obsolete soon after he returned to the northlands. Wear and tear was a thing in this world, after all.

Tigersoar didn't get many kills during the war, but they played an essential role in putting the enemy under pressure. Their preferred tactic was to assault under heavy cover-fire from carroballistae and catapults, a tactic that proved very effective.

A good catapult in prime condition could fling rocks up to 500 meters. This didn't last long, though, its effective range dropped with every shot. It didn't take long for the range to drop down to just 320 meters, which was where the catapults used in the campaign were now. The carroballistae were in much worse condition. They were used really frequently to hunt magic beasts in the demonic lands. Most of the beasts died by bolt. But the constant use took a great toll on their steel arms. Their effective range had been decreased from 300 to just 230 meters.

Lorist estimated that they would be rendered useless after another two or three hundred shots. Since Auguslo wanted to buy the catapults, Lorist tried to push the carroballistae as well. It was too bad shield carts were a thing.

On the 10th day of the 9th month of Year 1783, He made an easy sale and returned to The Northlands with gold Forde notes worth millions. Tigersoar and his guard regiments returned with him; Felim and Shazin accompanied them with their forces as well.

While Auguslo had taken eleven provinces, he wasn't the biggest winner. Of the four dukes he claimed were traitors, three had submitted and one escaped. The king had no choice but to accept the conflict was a result of a misunderstanding and could not continue to label them traitors either. Chujway's take on the situation was the worst part. When the truth of the conflict spread, his cruel and harsh personality was made known to the rest of the continent's nobility.

The whole campaign did absolutely nothing for his reputation. Instead, it ruined it even further. Some nobles of the provinces' minor nobles would rather be stripped of their titles and fiefs and continue to serve the dukes than be the king's vassals.

Chapter 444

Dealing with Matters

"Now *this* is life!" exclaimed Lorist.

He was in his study on the third floor of Ragebear's central castle. The pleasant, warm sunlight of the 11th month danced gently on his body through the window. It stole his energy and made his eyes heavy. Sylvia and his concubines had straddled him the whole night. When they all collapsed, exhausted, on the bed, his beloved son had woken him with his crying. The lack of sleep made the sun all the more pleasant and sleep all the more inviting. However, Charade and company's arrival forced him out of his bliss.

"Hey-hey-hey! Your Grace has rested for six days already since your return! It's about time you started being productive," complained the man.

He hated seeing Lorist so laid back. The mere thought of his liege lazing around, basking in sunlight, while he was swamped with work drove him mad. Lorist rose from his chair with great effort and sighing. When he saw the three attendants behind his friend, carrying stacks and stacks of documents, he involuntarily emptied his lungs again.

"No... Why so many documents?" he wailed passionately.

Charade had the three attendants put the documents on the desk before leaving. Jinolio got him a bottle of fruit wine and he had the kitchen staff send some snacks to the study. He would be staying to work for the rest of the day.

"You call this a lot?" Charade snapped, "Have you seen my office? It's a parchment storehouse! These documents are summaries of the various reports for the last two years. I've gone over them roughly. You just have to give them a look and sign them before I archive everything in my office."

It was a house rule. Even though Charade could deal with matters in Lorist's stead, the documents couldn't be archived without the lord's personal signature. All matters dealt with had to be given a once-over by the lord so he had a general idea of what was

going on.

Lorist was quite quick in dealing with the documents. He gave them rough scans before signing. As the house's chief knight and vassal, Charade had dealt with the matters appropriately and he approved of the baron's methods. He picked some of the more interesting documents and placed them aside for later reading and discussion. It didn't take long for him to deal with one of the huge stacks, but there were three other ones remaining on the desk.

"Oh, Your Grace, has Howard not returned yet?" asked Charade as he saw Lorist pausing to stretch as he enjoyed his wine.

"Reidy went to fetch him. He'll be back tomorrow or the day after."

The two years of seclusion training had long passed. However, Howard seemed to have gained some insight during his training process and was polishing his swordsmanship. Lorist had to send Reidy to call for him when he returned.

"Are you going to let Howard take over the guard brigade?"

"Yes—" Lorist nodded, "—but the most important thing now is for him to get married. Before I returned, Duke Felim complained that his daughter's turning into an old maid. I promised I'd have Howard and Katrina's wedding planned when he brings his daughter over at the end of the year."

"Did Duke Felim bring up the dowry?" Charade asked curiously, "He's a duke now, so I expect it'll be grand."

Lorist smiled as he shook his head.

"It's not like you're unaware of House Felim's situation. The whole of Southern is now their dominion and Felim's so desperate he might split a gold Forde coin and treat the halves as two. Southern is completely desolate and it'll be really hard to develop it with his budget. So, his daughter's dowry won't be huge. Though he is planning to have the whole area around Boblige made into a county as the dowry. We will have to help out with its development."

"Wow, how generous! That's almost a tenth of his entire demesne. That brat sure is lucky, he gets a county even without a title!"

Lorist nodded.

"Can't be helped. When Auguslo was sending us off, he dragged the two of us together and said that while the alliance is tight-knit, it might be inappropriate for me to station troops on Southern's border with Eastwild since it was House Felim's dominion. He's trying to get me to withdraw Firmrock."

"It's none of his fucking business."

"Gossip is a fearful thing," Lorist said, "Southern has already become House Felim's. Our stationing of Firmrock on the border is so we can defend against Fisablen and help Felim in the process. Others unaware of this fact will think we're suppressing Felim instead."

"I'm prepared to leave the front to Felim. His dowry also solves this problem. If we station Tigersoar there, we can respond at a moment's notice, while still being outside his domain, thus avoiding any gossip."

Charade burst into a short bout of unreserved laughter.

"If we withdraw Firmrock, Duke Felim will be the first one to feel threatened! There's no way he'd be confident enough to think his troops can resist Duke Fisablen."

"It can't be helped. Right now, Auguslo is staying in Hans and working on the eleven provinces. He'll be counting on Fisablen to suppress us. The reason he's getting us to withdraw from Southern is so its borders will be unprotected. At the same time, Felim wouldn't wish for his dominion to serve as the pathway between the king and his pet duke. He made the county the dowry so we can keep watch over his lands."

"Do you think Duke Fisablen will attack Southern?" asked Charade.

"He won't. That old fox understands the current situation. He'll sit tight and focus on strengthening his hand. Conflict is the last thing he wants right now. Iblia has faded into history, so there's no way he can take control of the northeastern area. On the one hand, there's the alliance and on the other Auguslo. If he still harbors any foolish ambitions, he'll throw the whole of his house into the abyss."

"I suppose we're in for a few years of peace."

"I hope so. We just have to keep an eye on Auguslo. I don't want him messing around

again."

Lorist suddenly remembered something. He flipped through the pile of documents he'd put aside to go over again later.

"The compact crossbows are completed and have been distributed to Jaeger. How do they look?"

"They're great. Your Grace might not be aware of this, but Grandmaster Sid's new design is a masterpiece. It can fire accurate shots up to 120 meters. Most importantly, it can easily be strung on horseback. I hear he used the lever mechanism you suggested.

"Josk's in love with it. He's been driving the men into the ground with training. He's even developed a new tactic for using the crossbow from horseback. He says Jaeger will be the most effective offensive legion on the continent once they're done with training."

"I see. It seems I have to go take a look," Lorist said as he changed the document in his hand, "Does the year-end celebration really have to be so expensive?"

"Don't forget that the house hasn't had a celebration in two years. This year, Duchess Sylvia had a son and you returned from campaign. How can the celebration be anything but grand? Everyone above commander rank will attend. Dukes Kenmays, Felim, and Shazin, as well as all your vassals, have announced their attendance as well. We expect at least a thousand people. If we lower the budget at all we won't be able to through a proper banquet and we'll embarrass ourselves."

Fine. Makes sense.

Lorist casually tossed the budget aside.

"It's just that it's a little too much, spending 70 thousand gold Fordes on a seven-day celebration..." muttered he.

That was Lorist's personality for you. While he was extremely loose-handed when it came to spending on armies and developing the dominion, he hated spending money on almost anything else.

"This is not something we can do half-heartedly. For our subjects as well, the more

money we spend on the celebration, the merrier the festivities will be. The commoners will come to think of nobles as powerful and mighty, it makes it easier to rule over them."

Lorist nodded. He picked another document.

"What's up with Supervisor Hansk? How is the project so far over budget?"

"I've already had someone look into it. The main problem is that much of the work has to be redone. The laborers have been very rebellious and have caused frequent delays. The project isn't just over the budget by half of the budget itself, but the work has been held back by three years."

"How is Hansk dealing with this? Isn't he punishing the workers?"

"Actually..."

Charade hesitated. He took a deep breath and steeled himself for what was to come.

"The supervisor is the cause of all the problems. He wanted to speed everything up so he made their shifts longer and took away a lot of their benefits. His disciplinary methods have also been very unproductive. He is very harsh on even the smallest mistake or disobedience. These three things together pushed the workers over the edge and they've been revolted almost weekly since. Firmrock's kept things from getting out of hand, but they haven't gotten anything done since."

"Why don't I know about this?"

"I'm not in a good position to interfere, Your Grace. Hansk is the chief supervisor. He was the one who tried to hide things. I didn't notice until he requested a budget increase. I sent someone over to investigate what was going on and found out the truth. Tarkel had left for Morante already and I couldn't just step in. You were going to return soon so I thought it better to wait for you so you could deal with this yourself."

Lorist nodded. Charade wasn't wrong. Tarkel's reports confirmed his observations about Hansk's situation. Tarkel was busy investigating the conflict between the Union and the mid-southern nations, however, so the news pipeline had slowed down.

Lorist pulled on the bell, calling Jinolio.

"Head to Furybear and bring me the scrolls concerning the conflict between the Union and the mid-southern nations as well as the reports on Hansk."

"Understood, Your Grace."

"Is there anyone that can replace Hansk?"

Charade thought about it for a moment before he answered.

"I think the biggest problem is the barbarians. They've always been a rebellious bunch, they'll only be obedient if you treat them well. Supervisor Kedan has the best personality to deal with them."

"I'll think about it."

"There's another thing you should handle as soon as possible, Your Grace." continued Charade as he stood up and picked up a blue folder.

"This is the list of people that are to be promoted or entitled during the year-end celebration. Take a look. I should prepare the certificates and their title deeds as soon as possible."

Lorist checked the list. When he got to the bottom he added one name: Reidy.

"Reidy isn't a gold-ranked knight yet, Your Grace..."

Lorist grinned at his old friend mischievously,

"He can't advance in the ranks anymore, but he's already equal to a rank 1 blademaster."

Charade slapped his forehead. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten Reidy was his liege's eldest disciple. The kid trained in a different discipline, his strength couldn't be measured using the traditional rank system.

"Ah, I understand."

Chapter 445

Trouble and Busywork (1)

The clattering of the horses' hooves beat constantly. The beaten dust shrouded the figures on horseback as they rode out of it domineeringly. The only difference between the spear cavalry formation of Tigersoar and this one was that it wasn't that concentrated. Two meters separated each rider from those around him as they charged. A sharp sound pierced the air. A wave of bolts flew away from the ranks. The riders reloaded and let bolts fly again.

The figures at the front suddenly split in two, the rest following. The bolts they fired spread outward again and again.

"This is the training routine I've designed, Your Grace. If an enemy gets assaulted this way on the march, they'll be completely annihilated if we can keep the fire up long enough. Of course, it's not as effective if they're in formation on an open field," explained Josk gleefully.

As the compact crossbow had to be kept secret so outside forces wouldn't find out about it, Lorist rushed to the secret training grounds to observe a training session.

"How did you come up with it?" asked he.

"It's nothing extraordinary. The most elite light cavalry soldiers are mostly scouts. They are in charge of discovering and tracking enemy movements. The way they usually fight is to dismount and use ranged weapons before getting back on horseback to fight in a melee. There're only a few talented ones that can use ranged weapons from horseback, and most only know how to use short-ranged ones like throwing knives or javelins. Most of the time, a longbow would be needed to attack an enemy at range.

"Even House Fisablen's famed frontier legions considered the most elite light in the empire don't behave much different. Jaeger was defeated because the forces were only ever harrassed from a distance and drawn out of cover range of our heavier pieces. The legion was then overrun by sheer numbers.

"If we'd had these crossbows, we would have ripped them to shreds instead. The riders don't even have to dismount during a pursuit. Even if we're surrounded, we don't have to dismount to fight back. There are no enemies that can resist us, especially when we charge at them when they're marching. The full potential of the mobility and agility of light cavalry can be exploited to the fullest this way..."

Josk rambled on about many useless things, but Lorist got the gist. The main goal of light cavalry was to scout and harass the enemy. Given the relative lack of ways to attack from a distance, the best ranged maneuver available were to dismount and cause chaos from up close. However, dismounting meant losing mobility and the threat the men posed would be greatly decreased. Having light cavalry charge against an enemy was even more out of the question. Their melee fighting and defense capabilities were far inferior to fully-equipped, heavy-armored infantry unless their enemy was trying to retreat.

But with the compact crossbows, not only were their offensive capabilities greatly improved, their agility and mobility could now be retained. Even if the enemy got into a tight formation, the light cavalry could still use their mobility to circle to the more weakly defended rear or split up and attack from multiple sides. They would rain bolts down from a distance and avoid clashing head-on. In that regard, even light cavalry could hold their own in a field battle.

Lorist took a compact crossbow and inspected it carefully. Strictly speaking, it was more of a bowgun. It was unlike the many crossbow-like weapons on the continent. It appeared Grandmaster Sid had borrowed inspiration from the firearm Lorist had had him design. The crossbow had a gun stock and a handle grip that not only allowed easier aiming, but also allowed easier and quicker reloading.

"The design was finalized with the help of the hundred light cavalry I sent to the grand master after a year and a half of testing. So far, this feels like the perfect ranged weapon. We'll kick up a storm when we finally use it," said Josk proudly.

"Does the compact crossbow have no weakness?" asked Lorist as he waved it around.

"Well, there is one. Battleforce can't be infused into it and the force comes mainly from the crossbow's arm."

When a longbowman's battleforce reached the silver rank, they could infuse it into their arrows to make it fly further and be more accurate. A small blade glow could

even be formed at the tip to pierce through shields and armor. A gold-ranked divine marksman like Josk could give even a blademaster a run for his money with the green-colored bone bow in hand. But marksmen talented enough to use a longbow on horseback were almost non-existent. There was no way Lorist could find enough to form a legion. The compact crossbow was the only choice for a light cavalry ranged weapon. Not being able to use battleforce was a small issue.

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"Are you ready? I'm going to start," asked Lorist.

Howard nodded and took up his stance.

"Come at me, Your Grace."

Lorist's longsword moved like lightning, closing the gap in an instant with the sound of piercing wind. Howard held his ground and used his longsword like a snare. He kept a perfect defense. The master-disciple pair engrossed themselves in the fight.

Beside them stood Reidy and Jinolio, the latter wearing an expression of envy.

Reidy laughed, "Learning the sword is filled with hardship. I gave Howard a harsh lesson when he started."

Jinolio nodded respectfully.

"I can take it, Senior Brother. No matter how tough, I will give it everything I have."

Reidy smirked.

"Very well. I'll find some time to talk to His Grace. However, our school of swordsmanship requires us to establish a foundation with dynamic vision. If His Grace agrees, Howard and I will develop this ability in you."

"Really?" Jinolio exclaimed happily, "Thank you!"

"Don't worry. You're my junior after all," smiled Reidy evilly.

Who should he bring along to watch the show? He might even start a betting ring. How long would the kid last on the chair?

Clang! Lorist's sword accurately struck Howard's and sent it flying.

"Not bad. I didn't think you could take more than 20 strikes," praised he, somewhat surprised.

As expected of Potterfang's son. His defense was just as tight when he'd dueled me all those years ago. I didn't think Howard would be even better than his father. He's Potterfang's kid alright!

Though he'd held back, his strength was beyond that of a rank 3 blademaster. It was nothing short of shocking for Howard to take more than 20 strikes and still be standing.

"No wonder Reidy said he could only defeat you after 100 strikes when he went to pick you up," Lorist said as he handed his own sword to Howard to put it away. "Your style is different from Reidy's. He was graced with superhuman strength and prefers domineering force and quick and unyielding attacks. You're much more like your father. Hell, had he not been alive I'd have thought he'd reincarnated. Reidy's style meant he had to travel around and experience life and death to hone his style but you don't have to. You should go to the guards and have them attack you all at once instead."

"Thank you for your guidance, Teacher."

Lorist stroked Howard's head.

"I have to settle your marriage first. Your father-in-law won't stop bothering me otherwise."

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"I'm incredibly disappointed, Hansk," said Lorist.

He was really discontent with the supervisor's performance, so much so he didn't invite the man to sit.

"I can't be blamed, Your Grace. It's those barbarians. They refused to follow orders," argued Hansk.

The way he saw it, he had been toiling away for the house's sake in the wilderness and

brainstorming ways to speed up the project. He had tried his best, but the stubborn savages wouldn't cave even after being killed. How could he be satisfied being blamed?

"Hansk, it seems you're still unaware of your mistakes. As the person in charge of the project, your role is to supervise the facilities. You're supposed to make sure everything runs smoothly and stays on schedule. That's why I let you manage the budget and workflow. All you had to do was make sure the plan was implemented as I'd written it. This being your duty, pray tell, why did you change their work hours and meddle with their benefits?"

"Please don't forget the barbarians are the enemy. Your father and countless others have died in their invasions. You shouldn't consider them equal to our subjects. They do not deserve meat and wine." countered Hansk with a raised voice.

"Uhha, haha, hahahahaha..." Lorst's fury dragged laughter out of him. "—So, that's why you took away their privileges and gave them nothing but two pieces of moldy fist-sized biscuits? You had them work day and night because of that too? Do you think that shows your loyalty? Are you avenging my father and everyone else? How foolish!"

Lorst slammed his hand on the desk. The bam made Hansk jump. Even Howard, outside the study, pushed the door open slightly to peek.

"To link Goldridge and Moonspring together and build a road through the forests, at least 7000 of 30 thousand barbarian laborers were killed. All that for the sake of a bloody path filled with death. We even staked the heads of the barbarians that tried to escape on the sides of the road. After killing so many, we finally found the way to make them work obediently: provide them with meat and wine. That is their reward for toiling for 12 hours a day, and that's also why they're willing to serve us. They consider the wine and meat as their pay.

"And then you go and treat them like begrudged enemies, like murders, and scamps, and go and take away their meat and wine and have them work four hours more. You're really something, huh? Do you think you can subdue them like this? You even had Belnick kill ten thousand when they revolted? Do you think killing them will make them submit?! What about the work?! It's stopped completely!

"I should never have trusted you with something so crucial for our future. You have disappointed me, more than that, you've let me down. You tell me the barbarians are our sworn enemies... You're not wrong but that doesn't mean we have to kill them all.

The 70 thousand we have are all youths. Do you know how much wealth they can make us if they're appeased? Do you know how badly we lack unpaid labor? Do you have any idea how much we'll have to fork out to get them calm again?—"

Lorist shook his head.

"—I'm really disappointed, Hansk. You've contributed much in the past, so I was willing to overlook your past mistakes. You know of what I speak. Some things are not for you to comment on. I will forgive you this once, and only this once. Go back to your barony and think about what you've done wrong."

Hansk paled, his lips shuddered. He slowly turned around and left, dumbfounded. This was exile in all but name. He had been stripped of his power and his influence. He had lost any right he might have had to influence what happened in and with the house. He'd only been spared losing his title because he had a long history of contributions before his recent failures. He stopped at the entrance for a moment. He scraped together his courage and charged back to his liege.

"I will leave and never get involved with the house's matter again, but just this once, this one last time, listen to my advice."

"Speak."

"Your Grace has to decide on an heir. Your subjects and vassals cannot rest easy until you have."

"Heh. Tell me, who should I choose?" asked Lorist teasingly.

"It must naturally be Young Master Lysecott. He's already 13. He'll come of age soon and he's your first-born."

Lysecott was Lorist and Irina's first child. He had a cruel personality, mainly because he was spoiled badly and had turned into a lawless brat. In the end, he was sent to Malek's family so his wife could re-educate him and had just started his studies at Nico Academy.

"Do you think I'll be short-lived?" asked Lorist intentionally.

"There's no harm in being careful. That's what your late father believed as well. He forced himself to go stop the barbarian invasion even though he was sick and..."

rambled Hansk.

"Get out of my sight!"

Lorist flung a folder at the man angrily.

Chapter 446

Trouble and Busywork (2)

"Supervisor Hansk hasn't returned to his barony," reported Howard.

Lorist had given the boy the position of deputy department head of Furybear's investigative division instead of making him the vice-commander of the guard brigade. The division's investigative capabilities had decreased significantly with Tarkel's departure for the Union, which dissatisfied Lorist a lot. He hoped the kid could get everything back on track.

"Oh, where's he gone?" asked Lorist, his expression shifting.

"He's gone to Maplewoods. Madam Irina had someone pick him up. She said she wanted him to tutor Young Master Koboshik in the basics."

Koboshik was Lorist and Irina's second son. Lysecott had been sent to Malek's home for his re-education, but his younger brother had not been moved. Lorist was almost always out in the field doing one thing or another, so he rarely saw or heard from or about the kid. He had heard that he was very similar to his mother. He was small and resembled a ball. Lorist had recently started to think about finding him a proper teacher since his eighth birthday was around the corner, but it seemed Irina had gotten the jump on him and had hired the exiled supervisor.

Lorist shook his head after a moment of silence.

"Whatever. What the heavens will shall come to pass. Let them do whatever they want."

"Why is Your Grace tolerating Supervisor Hansk's impudence and letting him off scot-free? He hasn't just disobeyed your orders, he's even accepted Madam Irina's invitation. He is acting as if Your Grace doesn't exist. He doesn't deserve his title," inquired Howard.

"Some things aren't as simple as they appear. He's done everything on purpose, he wants me to take his title. He needs a reputation far more than a title, exchanging his

title for a reputation as a loyal subject would be very profitable for him. If Lysecott inherits my titles, Hansk will get back everything he's given up and then some."

"Your Grace always sees the worst in others, don't you?" Charade chirped in, "Hansk is truly loyal to the house. His loyalty is just misplaced in term of the individuals within the house."

Lorist snorted.

"Did Tarkel say when he'll return?"

"I got an eagle message just earlier today about that. Sir Tarkel is onboard a ship bound for Silowas as we speak. He should be back in The Northlands in about 15 days. We also received a dossier on Young Master Lysecott's behavior recently. It wasn't labeled as urgent so the agents didn't give it special attention. I only noticed the report when I checked..."

Lorist took the folder, shaking his head, a bitter smile on his face.

"You see?" he said, looking at Charade, "Furybear became a mess the moment Tarkel left. The aides don't know what's important at all."

Charade cringed.

"The blame shouldn't be on Tarkel's aides. This happened because Supervisor Spiel had the agents focus on gathering information for his annual financial report. The division can only do so much, so they had to loosen their grip on other matters."

Lorist nodded slightly. He opened the file and started going through it. It didn't take long for his face to contort and his eyes to start burning.

Bam!

He slammed the report down on the table and shot up, shooting the chair behind him into the wall.

"Ridiculous! Howard, bring Reidy! Also, send Jinolio to bring my horse whip!"

"What's wrong, Your Grace?" Charade couldn't help but be curious after seeing Lorist's sudden explosion.

"It's a tragedy. Just look!—" Lorist handed the document to his friend. He retook his seat and finished off the fruit wine in the bottle in two large gulps. "—I'm a failure of a father."

Lysecott had entered Nico Academy late the previous year to learn some basic knowledge and noble etiquette. House Norton's descendants had always been taught in Maplewoods. They only had to be somewhat literate and have a rough grasp of proper etiquette. The main focus of their training had always been martial arts. After all, martial power had always been the most secure way to ensure the house's survival.

Lorist had changed this because he wanted to fix the house's problem with lacking heirs, especially those left by his deceased elder brothers. He made it compulsory to attend Nico Academy and be schooled in basic culture and etiquette when they turned twelve. They would only begin martial training at the age of 15. He needed the next generation to have a broader view of the world.

Nico Academy was a boarding school. It aimed at developing independent people who could function on their own. It also wanted to build circles of common interest and identification beyond the family or town, to build a sense of unity between people from all across the Norton lands.

Lysecott, after enrolling at the academy, broke free of Madam Malek's discipline. He returned to his old ways almost immediately after getting used to the academy. In the couple of months he'd been at the academy he'd gotten into numerous fights and was now the academy's worst terror. Even the young female instructor in charge of him couldn't control him. She'd punished him a few times in the beginning, but he quickly started cursing at her and using his position as the duke's son to threaten her. He'd threatened to torture her until she died once he grew up.

It eventually escalated beyond anyone's control. The instructor ran to the headmistress, crying. Telesti had since sought the young master out numerous times to try and reason with him, but he acted very differently in front of her. He was always humble, polite, and willing to accept criticism, but returned to his cruel ways the moment she left. With those above him unable to keep him under control, he'd become the academy's little boss.

He thought he was free to do what he wanted, that he was out of his father's gaze. He did not know that Lorist had sent people to keep an eye on him. Furybear's informants noted his performance and recorded and passed on everything to their lord. Lorist

became more and more dissatisfied with his eldest as he read through the dossier.

Telesti had refused Lorist's proposal and given up her claim to a position in his family. Her daughter, thus, didn't have his family name, but their mother's instead. Lorist was very unhappy with this state of affairs, but he couldn't do anything about it; he at least had to respect his lover's decision.

His eldest daughter, Nico Olijess, was eleven years old, and her younger sister, Nico Freycia, seven. Both were wonderful cute little girls. They had grown into two little princesses loved by many under their mother's intensive care and tutoring. Lorist didn't visit them at the academy often, but sent gifts frequently. He also had them come visit him wherever he was from time to time and would always spoiled them when they did. Telesti hadn't let the girls visit him since his marriage, however.

The last entry in the dossier recorded an incident which had happened 20 days earlier. The two girls had been playing in the garden in the rear of the academy. They ran into Lysecott, who'd been skipping class. The little tyrant didn't know the two fairies were his half-sisters. Seeing their beauty, he started harassing them. The informants watching over him couldn't stand by idly, knowing the identity of the two girls. They were just about to take action when someone else stepped in.

Lorist's nephew, the son of his eldest brother, Helias, 15 years old, stepped in to put a stop to what was happening. He was about to transfer to Dawn Academy the following year for his martial training. He was considered one of Nico Academy's honor students, and had graduated only a short while before the incident.

Lysecott left fuming. He returned to his room and took out his shortsword. He hid it under his clothes and confronted Helias during lunch. He suddenly started stabbing and slashing the boy during their confrontation. Caught off guard, Helias couldn't react in time and was severely injured before the nearby instructors managed to subdue his attacker. Telesti was completely shocked by the incident and had Lysecott imprisoned. Whilst being taken away the kid threatened to kill anyone who crossed him when he became duke.

It was a horrible scandal. Fortunately, Helias survived. Worried that the news would affect the house's reputation, Telesti silenced everyone who witnessed or knew of what happened.

"Why wasn't I informed immediately?!" shouted Lorist furiously.

"Maybe Miss Telesti is still fretting over how to punish your son. I don't think, considering his identity, she knows what to do. She's no doubt very afraid that others will think she has some personal vendetta since she also has your children."

"That's her academy. What does she have to worry about? If she can't even deal with something like this, how can she run the academy? Lysecott should've been disciplined when he left Madam Malek's care. I'd like to know why starting assuming he was my heir de jure after going to the academy. Who put that idea in his head? He's always talking about what he'll do once he takes over. He didn't even think that I might not let him inherit my title."

Lorist paced around impatiently.

"Maybe I should revoke his position as heir apparent..."

Charade choked a few times.

"You can do anything but that, Your Grace!"

"Why not?"

"You have to think about Anderbael's welfare."

Anderbael was Lorist's youngest son, and his firstborn with Sylvia.

"What does this have to do with little Andy?"

"If you revoke Lysecott's title as heir apparent it'll look like you're preparing things so Anderbael can take his position. If this is done before everyone learns what Lysecott did to merit this, people will think that you're favoring Anderbael and going against your oath. It won't just hurt your vassal's loyalty, it'll damage the house's reputation. And if an outsider decides to interfere things will only get worse. It's fine to punish Lysecott, but don't take away his title, at least not until we can be sure others will understand why and support your decision."

Lorist nodded slowly.

"You're right. I was a little too quick to decide what to do. I can come back to this when the children are older."

The study's door opened at this moment and Lorist's three disciples entered.

"What are your orders, Your Grace?" asked Reidy.

Lorist took the elegant gold-laced horsewhip from Jinolio and waved it around a few times. The whip clapped loudly each time it whiplashed through the air. He handed it back to Reidy.

"Take this to Nico Academy and tie Lysecott up. Give him 30 lashes in front of all the students. I want each lash to draw blood. Don't stop no matter who tries to stop you. If they want to know why you're doing this, tell them I told you to do this myself. If they don't listen, kill them on the spot!"

"Understood, Your Grace."

Reidy accepted the whip and turned to leave.

"Reidy, hold on a moment. Send him to Maplewoods afterwards and tell Irina he doesn't have to attend the academy anymore."

"By your command."

When the three had left, Charade smiled bitterly.

"This is the same as revoking his title in all but name. What will he learn in Maplewoods? You know exactly what he'll become without proper training and several more years of Irina spoiling him."

"It's what they deserve," Lorist said, his eyes abyssal, "I remembered a report I saw soon after Lysecott went to Malek's family. They had frequent visitors. At the time I thought they were just household friends visiting the couple, but I now realize they were there to influence Lysecott. No wonder he didn't change at all despite them teaching him properly for several years."

Charade creased.

"Isn't this a conspiratorial, Your Grace? I visited Baron Malek's household several times as well."

"Hahaha... You only visit once or twice. The people I'm talking about sometimes went

there even several times a week. I thought Madam Malek was just very popular but that clearly wasn't the case. We should know soon as Howard goes through Furybear's records."

Chapter 447

Knight Lundmorde

"I've returned, Your Grace."

Tarkel appeared before Lorist fifteen days later.

He had had no choice in his travel to Morante. He'd been sent to the city in the 8th month of the previous year. Knight Lundmorde, we had previously served on the frontlines as a medic, had gone missing along with his secret bodyguard after being ambushed by a unit of mid-southern forces. When word of it got out, the four wives in Morante at the time set out to look for him, causing the flow of information to stop. Tarkel had to check on the situation personally.

"Did you find him?" asked Lorist.

Lundmorde was a legendary figure in the house. He used to be an honor student in Dawn Academy's herbalism faculty, but he was suppressed because he differed from his professor on a key research topic. Coincidentally, Charade was rallying a force for their move to the north. Feeling he had lost his future at the academy, Lundmorde was swayed and became one of the 36 students to join the convoy.

He didn't make any outstanding contributions during the journey. But he was really responsible with the herbalist team of which he was in charge. His capable leadership had won Lorist's trust by the time they reached The Northlands.

After finally finishing the journey, he became a household knight. He refused the appointment to head of the herbalist teams and instead joined the newly formed female knight unit as an instructor. He said he wanted to teach them some herbal remedies useful on the battlefield.

He shocked everyone soon after doing just that. Barely three months after joining the group, he'd already knocked up seven of the trainees. What was even more shocking, was that they all wanted to marry him. Their insistence drove Peshra irate. She dragged him in front of Lorist and demanded he do something about the man. In the end, Lorist decided his punishment was to marry all the women he'd knocked up.

His life collapsed nearly immediately. On top of his suffering, he became infamous thanks to the records he set.

His first was that he had the most wives of all the household knights — seven in total. Fiercetiger Loze had many lovers, but only one wife: Pesha.

His second was being the most surveilled man in the duchy. His seven tiger-like wives always had him under eyes.

The third was being the most virile knight in the duchy. He had 17 children among his seven wives. He had no choice but to work every waking moment of his life to keep them all fed and looked after. No matter how far into the night or how bad the weather, he could always be seen scurrying down the street carrying his medical kit — of to answer some call for treatment. He naturally became known as the most dedicated herbalist in the duchy. Given his 'talent' and his age, many had ongoing bets regarding how many offspring he'd sire before he turned 50.

His fourth was being the poorest knight of all. His entire income went to his wives. They only gave him one small silver a month with which to feed himself. It was more accurate to say he got an allowance from his wives, than a salary from his lord. And he had no say in the matter. The family was huge and the costs of running it immense, and he was the sole breadwinner.

All Norton knights had rather decent benefits alongside their salary. Even if they didn't make much progress in their training, a silver-ranked knight's yearly salary was around ten gold Fordes. To the knights of other houses, that was enough to live luxuriously and free from worry. But Lundmorde would be satisfied if it kept his family fed.

His punishment meant he couldn't take up other posts either, so he had lost the opportunity to earn a higher income and get better benefits. It forced him to wander around as a freelance herbalist for extra income. It did result in him becoming quite well-known and well-loved in the in the duchy, though, especially because he was willing to treat illnesses for food, fur, or just some fruit.

His fifth record was that he was the most abused knight in the house's service. While others only had to deal with one or two wives, he had to deal with seven. All of whom were talented warriors with extensive training.

While his wives took care of his children, he had to toil day and night to earn a living. His house was always merry. Once one of the wives got some new clothes, the others would want some too. When one broke through in her training, the others were quick to catch up. Lundmorde could only resign himself to his position.

When the last of his wives broke through to the silver rank, he was still stuck at the rank's first star. He had not advanced at all since his academy days. He was also only an average swordsman, so his wives had no trouble overpowering if they got into a fight or if he tried to fight back against their abuse. The greatest blow to his hope of ever being free of his seven demons came when they broke through to the silver rank. Pasha offered them another chance at becoming part of the all-female knight unit, but they turned it down.

His wives were, though horrible wives, at least responsible mothers. The biggest issue was that there were way too many of them — as far as Lundmorde was concerned, seven too many. It was very common to see all seven walking around green-eyed. In fact, they hadn't turned down Pasha's invitation because they had no interest in becoming great or famous warriors, but because they were afraid that if anyone didn't join, they would use the opportunity to bamboozle the others out of their share of the house's finances. Besides, they already had a husband to give them the money they needed, so why take the risk?

At one alumni gathering, Lundmorde had recounted his typical day to his fellow students. They were so depressed on his behalf they all cried together. He didn't have a chance to really enjoy a good chat with his old friends, though, because one of his wives showed up and dragged him away. When she burst into the tavern she shouted at him. He jumped back and hopped over like a frightened hare. That was the moment that everyone understood why his marrying the seven women was a punishment.

When Bullhorn Bay was finished and the trade route to Morante established, he was sent to the city to gather information. Lorist had originally relied on the Peterson guild and Red Grace Inn for information, but that dried up quickly. Lorist soured his relationship with the big-seven on his last visit, so he couldn't trust that the guild, being one of the big-seven, would give him crucial information that might not be very beneficial to the Union. And, considering his soured relationship with the Union's leaders, he didn't want to drag old Char into the mess.

The two had a good relationship, the old man was Els's uncle and rather close to Reidy. Lorist, however, was a noble from a hostile kingdom, and had a sour relationship with

the Union, so it was likely that the old man and his inn would get into trouble if it was discovered it was being used as a gathering point for Lorist's informants. To avoid involving Charlando and his family in any trouble related to the house, Lorist set up another gathering spot for his informants. The man he sent to set it up and run it? Lundmorde, of course. He was the most suited for the job, after all.

Firstly, he was a herbalist who had some semblance of a reputation in the city. It was also only known that he'd left the city, not that he had pledged himself to House Norton. Most people just assumed he had left because of his falling out with his professor. It was only natural that he would eventually return and settle down in his home city.

Given his profession, he could also set up his own apothecary in the city's commoner sector and his wives could be his assistants and guardians. They were even stronger than him, so there would be no need to send others along.

He thus set out for the city with four of his wives. The other three stayed behind to raise the children. The three weren't very happy about not being able to go to the city, so it was decided that they would rotate annually. Every year one of the four in Morante and one of the three back home would switch places.

Lundmorde's was really efficient. All sorts of information started to flood onto Lorist's deck soon after the man left. At the same time, his apothecary became quite popular. It was a huge change for Lundmorde. The commoners in Morante were far richer than those in The Northlands and all the profit was his to keep. Given his extra income, Lundmorde himself slowly became rich.

He initially used the Peterson guild to ferry his reports to the Northlands, but as the situation between Andinaq and the Union worsened, they could eventually not be trusted with such sensitive information. Lorist gave him an eagle with which to send his messages out of the city, but that was his downfall. The cover story was that a relative of his who lived far away from the city had sent him the eagle to help them keep in touch. It unfortunately caught the eye of one of the Union's new nobles, who forced him to sell it to him. The eagle, luckily, remembered its training and flew back to the dominion the first time the lord took it out on a hunt.

Incensed, the noble ransacked his house to make sure it hadn't returned to its former owner. He found nothing and had to let the incident go. The noble, however, had every intention of getting back at Lundmorde for this perceived wrong. When the war

between the Union and its neighbors started, he made sure the herbalist was forcefully conscripted and sent to the frontlines.

His departure cut the flow of information. Luckily two of his wives knew of his mission and were scheduled to return home soon. They informed Tarkel of the situation and he sent two agents to replace him.

The younger of the two was sent to Lundmorde's side as a relative to keep him safe, while the other took over his position in the apothecary. The latter, unfortunately, did not have Lundmorde's more sensitive, well-placed, and important connections, so the information he could get was mostly of only passing interest.

The last year's 8th month saw the war rapidly deteriorate. One of the enemy's armies assaulted a Union logistics center. It was just a skirmish as far as the war was concerned, something the history books would easily overlook, but Lundmorde and his young guard were involved. When the Union sent reinforcements to clean up the mess, they found Lundmorde and his guard missing. The moment his wives found out what had happened, they packed up and left to look for their husband. Not even Lundmorde's replacement in the apothecary could stop them; he could just send a report back home with all expediency.

Tarkel had mobilized several experienced units and had headed off immediately to clean up the mess.

"We've located Lundmorde. He's been captured by the army that attacked the camp. We can't bring them back, however. The Union's declared him a traitor," said Tarkel with a bitter smile.

"What?!"

Lorist felt faint.

"...The Union managed to capture a few of the Jekhano Kingdom's men, among them was the kingdom's eldest prince and heir apparent. He was severely injured and the Union didn't know of his identity. Lundmorde insisted on treating him and managed to save him. The prince's other subordinates attacked soon after, rescued the prince and took Lundmorde and his guard with them.

"The traces they left behind guided his four wives to them but the Union scout saw the reunion. When he reported what he saw to his superiors, the Union ruled that

Lundmorde must have been a sleeper agent and declared him a traitor. They blamed him for camp's loss as well so they didn't have to worry about taking responsibility for their failures."

Lorist didn't know how to react.

"So there really is no way Lundmorde can go back to the Union now. We'll have to bring him back sooner or later."

"Of course, Your Grace. It's just that we haven't found a reliable way to do that yet. We'll have to wait for the war to end."

"Learn anything else on your trip?"

Tarkel hesitated for a few moments before he answered.

"I suspect this whole war is a big conspiracy..."

Chapter 448

Conspiracy

Within the wide, illuminated meeting room hung map after map of the mid-southern nations. There weren't many people present, only Lorist, Tarkel, Charade, and Kedan, who had replaced Hansk. Reidy, Howard, and Jinolio remained seated to the side.

Tarkel was arranging some documents. He stood in front of one of the maps with a wooden pointer.

"The Union has swallowed nine nations, including Teribo, since the War of Glass. Not including Lormo and Mobia, which gave up their sovereignty voluntarily. It has become one of the largest nations on the continent. Most of the other nations have weakened since the start of its rise. Trade routes have been cut and borders sealed. Everyone around the Union is wary of its domineering attitude.

Four years ago, the big-seven guilds organized an effort to increase their sphere of influence by enacting regulations to restore order to trade and resolving some of its internal conflicts. They then turned their attention to their neighbors. They had hoped to smooth over their relationship and get the borders re-opened and be able to start trading again. The neighboring nations did not trust them enough to give them a chance, however. The Union has become the greatest threat to peace, so no one will give them a chance to get stronger."

Tarkel tapped the map in front of him.

"The middle part of the continent has formed its own loose coalition of kingdoms over the last 300 years. While there are frequent conflicts between the 34 member kingdoms, they always stand together when someone outside the coalition threatens them. The most recent such threats were the Krissen Empire, the Romon Empire, and the Khawistan Khanate.

"The two kingdoms that usually faced the last two were Kalia and Jigda. Jigda is separated from their opponent, the Romon Empire, by the Erimalaf mountains and the impregnable Madris Pass. They haven't actually fought much as a result. Kalia is the kingdom that's done most of the actual defending.

"Before this, the windstorm swordsaint used to represent Kalia. The kingdom was adept at balancing relations between the two superpowers and were supported by seven neighboring nations. Until recently, they'd been keeping the peace very effectively; it's been 30 years since the last conflict. Neither of Kalia's opponents were willing to sit by and watch their enemy take over the kingdom. Its fall to the enemy meant the enemy had the opportunity to raid the other kingdoms to the north. Neither side could afford to give the other a chance to gain so much and tip the balance in their favor.

"However, it wasn't the legendary windstorm swordsaint that caused Romon and Khawistan to refrain from invading. The two superpowers each had one swordsaint after all. There were also rumors that the windstorm swordsaint had a really bad relationship with the royal family. Someone involved revealed that the Union had been working on him for seven years before finally getting him to switch sides.

"That is the truth of Kalia's demise. Romon and Khawistan cooperatively divided Kalia's territory among them evenly before going into all-out war with each other. The war has been going for three years now and neither side has much stamina left. Romon currently has the advantage. However, according to intelligence reports from Romon, most of the nobles are asking the king to end the war.

"Jigda became the coalitions front line. Though the 34 stand together, they're actually divided into five factions.

"The Union leads the northernmost faction, the nations on their side are mostly those that fought alongside the Union against the Krissen Empire. In the south is the faction led by Kalia. The other factions are sandwiched in between them. It's almost impossible to figure out what geographical area each of the three controls because it's one big orgy of marriage alliances and chaotic borders. They send supplies, money, and the occasional expedition to whichever border nation is currently facing invasion from outside the coalition, but are nearly wholly occupied with their own squabbles and feuds.

"The old empire fought them and the union on the Falik Plains for over a century. The only reason the union didn't collapse was that the coalition kept on helping them out. The empire collapsed instead. With the threat to the north eliminated, the force that kept the alliance between the Union and the coalition going, disappeared. The War of Glass severed what goodwill still existed between the Union and its former allies, especially after its absorption of nine of the coalition's members. The Union has

become another nation filled with ambitions for the coalition's territory, another enemy to fight."

Tarkel took a folder from his aide. It was a report by the Morante Daily from three years ago with the headline 'Coalition's army invades! 300 Union soldiers make heroic sacrifice!'

Tarkel waved the newspaper around as he spoke.

"This is how the conflict started. As the newspaper reports, it was the coalition's army that attacked one of the Union's camps first. We didn't think much about it at the time. And nothing came of it. A year later, however, the Union suddenly marched on the border and stood off against the coalition; 140 thousand men on the Union's side, and at least 200 thousand on the coalition's side.

"When I visited Morante, people in the loop obtained some fresh information. Some say this was because the coalition's army didn't prepare for war to break out at all. They had stationed their troops there only in defense. To the various nations, the Union was a force so huge they didn't dare offend it. Gathering 200 thousand men was only a show of force to have a better position in negotiations. Why would members of the coalition attack if they were too afraid of provoking the Union?

"I've discovered that the unit that attacked the Union first was sent by Jigda. After the war broke out, it used the excuse of the backlash from the other nobles for their drawing first blood to return to their nation. There are a few crucial things worth mentioning. The windstorm sword saint's departure to the Union as well as the smooth division of Kalia's territory is highly suspect.

"Then, there's also the immediate outbreak of war between the two empires. It was as if they wanted to duke it out first before going for the richer coalition.

"Additionally, with Kalia eliminated, Jigda had to defend against the two, making them the most important and influential nation in the coalition. It's strange that the kingdom isn't worried about the two empires on their border. They were the biggest contributor of forces to the border with the Union before the war started.

"While it's one of the strongest proponents of the anti-Union sentiment, they're all bark and no bite. Apart from sending out the first unit to kick off the war, they haven't provided any substantial aid. Even when the Union's armies completely dominate the

coalition, all Jigda does is complain about how incompetent the commanders are.

"Duke Fustat was appointed commander-in-chief and took an army of 200 thousand to face the Union. I think the damage Jigda has done to its neighbors is much worse than what the Union has managed.

"Duke Fustat has also been very passive as of late. He hasn't just completely ignored Chikdor's territory, he's also refused to send troops to reinforce his allies before they agree that he is in charge.

"Chikdor is exposed. It's too far from the Union for it to support the guild. It's also only a kingdom and a duchy away from Jigda. Duke Fustat could easily occupy the territory but he's not doing anything.

"And every time someone tries to bring it up, he either tells them his forces aren't organized yet or says he can't move out until this with Romon and Khawistan calms down.

"Then there's the very convenient coincidence that the Union and Jigda appear to be moving in concert. The Union occupied the kingdoms and duchies bordering them and immediately shifted the bulk of their forces to Chikdor's territory. It looks like they want to crush Duke Fustat's army.

"But now there appears to be a dance going on. The Union invades, takes over some territory, but just as it seems they're about to break through and completely ravage the coalition, Duke Fustat intervenes and pushes them back to Chikdor's borders. People have missed something key, though. Every time Fustat takes action against the union, he also annexed land from the kingdoms and duchies around him. He's already taken over five kingdoms. The Union magically knows where to attack to capture the kingdoms' heirs or rulers. They always vanish or die in the fighting. Fustat then takes over their lands to ensure stability. I have no doubt the kingdoms will be incorporated when the war ends.

"The Union's armies have suffered rather heavily in these engagements, that's why Duke Fustat hasn't garnered any suspicion yet. However, when I was in Morante, I discovered that the Union troops sacrificed weren't the big-seven's forces. They were all always from second or third-rate guilds and mercenary bands. The big-seven's forces will take a territory, then turn it over to the smaller forces to hold. The enemy will attack right after the big-seven withdraw..."

Tarkel used pointed at the map with the distribution of territorial control between the Union and the coalition.

"Because of these six points, we suspect the whole war is a farce, a show put on by Jigda and the Union so they can swallow the other kingdoms and duchies. Jigda might become another superpower like the Union by the end of the war."

That was the conspiracy Tarkel suspected. Everyone in the conference looked at each other, flabbergasted. It sounded a little far-fetched. If it really was so, then the continent was going to change drastically in the coming years. The formation of new superpowers would usher the continent into a new age of struggles. The warring states era would come to an end.

"Are the kings and dukes that blind? Don't they suspected anything at all?" asked Spiel.

"Maybe they do, but I can't be sure. This is all happening quite far away. Furybear can't stretch its claws that far yet. We can't get any concrete information. However, given the chaotic situation they are in, the kings and dukes are probably trying to rake in benefits. Maybe they haven't even considered that they would be the targets of others.

"Then again, it's not like there aren't any clear-headed people in the coalition at all. I visited the frontlines. I got to know the prince of Jekhano through Knight Lundmorde. The prince is quite bright and he also suspects Jigda of colluding with the Union. He was in the midst of his investigation into the matter when his unit was attacked. Fortunately, Lundmorde saved him.

"The prince had prepared to form an alliance with the surrounding nations to defend themselves against Jigda. They wish to break off from the coalition Fustat controls and form their own coalition to defend against both. Maybe they will be forced by circumstances to unite into another large kingdom. The only shame is that we don't have access to their trade routes. They really need military equipment and daily necessities, things we can offer in abundance," said Tarkel.

Lorist stood up.

"Let's adjourn the meeting for today. We've gained a basic understanding of the situation. The war is a little too far from The Northlands, so even if the conspiracy is real, it won't affect us in the near future. I am confident that, as long as we stay strong, we have no need to fear becoming embroiled in any storms."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Chapter 449

Helplessness

Howard stood with Tarkel before Lorist and said, "Milord, the results of the investigation are in."

Lorist handed a signed document to Charade, his face stone cold.

"Tell me who had a part in this."

Howard opened the blue folder and took out a piece of paper.

"Knight Ziwek's wife, Lady Moya, Supervisor Youkiz's wife Seshla, Miss Krado and Knight Lambord's wife, Lady Darley. They are the ones who visited the Malek household the most. As Milord said, they visit at least three times a week with the express aim of getting on Madam Malek's good side. They all used to be Irina's maidservants from Maplewoods. Even Supervisor Youkiz was a bastide servant."

"What's going on with Ziwek and Lambord? Why have they taken Irina's maidservants as wives?"

Lorist snapped his quill in fury and dropped it. He recalled that the knights used to be refugees. They had joined the northbound convoy. They served as guards and were eventually taken in as household knights when they broke through to the silver rank and made captains of Firmrock regiments. Lambord was even going to be promoted to major for his contributions.

"Ziwek and Lambord were guards when they got to know their wives. They had asked Irina for the hands of her maidservants in marriage, but were refused. Four years ago when Young Master Lysecott was sent to Baron Malek's manor, Madam Irina agreed to the proposals. Their wives asked them to move to Redriver, which is near Baron Malek's manor.

"I recall Ziwek had boasted in a tavern that his new wife was really attentive. Firmrock was stationed in Redriver at the time, so the move wasn't an issue. He said his wife sold her house in Felicitas to move to Redriver because she wasn't willing to stay far

away from him. So, moving would make it more convenient to visit her when he was off duty. After Madam Malek was acquainted with the two, and Supervisor Youkiz's wife, the visits became more frequent and they would often have tea and snacks together.

"The informants in charge of recording Young Master Lysecott daily life didn't notice anything untoward. Since they were wives of household knights, they also tried not to pry too deep and avoided them. As a result, they didn't keep a close eye on their interactions with the young lord. When I went to investigate, the two informants only recalled that the ladies seemed to have a good relationship with him."

Tarkel's became quieter as he spoke. It was a huge blunder. Lorist had strictly ordered that Irina not be allowed to interfere with Lysecott's growth and education, yet a small detour was enough to continue with her meddling without anyone noticing. Had it not been for his suspicions, no one would have known. This was a slight on Tarkel, who was put in charge of the house's intelligence network.

"Who is this Supervisor Youkiz?"

Howard checked the folder.

"Youkiz used to be Maplewoods servant, He was a favorite of Supervisor Hansk. His first wife was also a bastide servant. She died in childbirth. Youkiz is a responsible and reliable fellow who does what he is told properly.

"After Young Master Lysecott was brought to Baron Malek's household, Supervisor Hansk suggested Madam Irina let the kitchen's chief maid, Seshla, marry Youkiz as his second wife. At the same time, they made him the chief supervisor of the servants working across eight different manors and used it as an excuse to acquaint him with Madam Malek. Given his wife's culinary talent, Madam Malek invited her over frequently. Lambord and Ziwek's wives were also introduced to Madam Malek through Seshla."

"That's enough!" Lorist roared as he slammed his table.

Documents, a few ink bottles, and some utensils fell to the ground.

"Very impressive. They managed to weave such a huge net without anyone noticing. It's no wonder Lysecott didn't change at all. He even learned how to put up a front..."

Lorist paced around in the study. Charade, Tarkel, and Howard remained silent. They knew the flames of wrath burned in Lorist and they didn't know when they would explode.

"Chief Supervisor Charade, how do you think we should deal with this?"

"Your Grace, is there a need to go so far? You've already all but disinherited Young Master Lysecott. As for Lambord and Ziwek, they are entirely unaware of this. Even Supervisor Youkiz is just a loyal and honest servant.

"This is a conspiracy of their wives under instructions by Irina. No one in the house will accept the punishment of innocent bystanders. Even if it is by your order. If you punish their wives—" Charade paused, "—Your Grace, they are not wrong to worry about Young Master Lysecott. There is no good excuse to punish them. Instead, this would affect your reputation and become a scandal..."

Charade was right. This was not something that could be brought up publicly. No matter who it was, they would believe Irina was only looking out for her son, which was only to be expected.

Lorist continued his pacing, dissatisfied.

"Charade, transfer Ziwek, Lambord, and Youkiz to Hanayabarta for ten years starting next year's 5th month."

For the second time in his life, and the second time in as many weeks, Lorist was exiling people under him in all but name. Hanayabarta was far from the continent, at least a month removed by sea. Charade shook his head exasperatedly. He did not protest, however, he knew there was no further compromise to be made.

"By your command, Your Grace. How shall we treat them?"

"Like everyone else," Lorist replied, before he turned to Tarkel, "The house will likely not deploy any forces for the next two years. We need to let our forces rest and recuperate. It's okay to relax foreign intelligence a little. I need you to help Howard set up an internal security department. First, we have to deal with the various relations within our dominion. Give me a list of everyone who has close relations and frequent contact with the bastide. I'm sure Hanayabarta will appreciate a few more helping hands."

"Understood, Your Grace," replied Howard and Tarkel together.

"Your Grace shouldn't cause such a ruckus over this," Charade advised when the two had left the study.

Lorist sat down and clutched his head.

"Sigh, you don't understand. I already knew something was off when so many people opposed my marriage to Sylvia. The net was woven right under my nose without my noticing. I am shocked. I never expected the little birdie to grow into such an ambitious and scheming wench..."

Charade kept his mouth shut, pretending he hadn't heard anything. After all, this was one of those family matters Lorist was so touchy on. He considered it wholly inappropriate and unacceptable for anyone else to have an opinion.

Lorist looked at Charade's feigned ignorance and laughed.

"That's why I want to cut off all her tentacles. She really doesn't understand what's at stake. She dared to use her maidservants to rope in my household knights. Since she likes it so much, I'll let her weave her net in Hanayabarta.

"You don't have to pretend you can't hear me. I need you to keep an eye on them. Have Howard and Tarkel first investigate the staff in Cherry Blossom Ridge. I don't want anyone with any connections, even if they're two degrees separated through family or friends, with the bastide or anyone in the bastide. Same goes for anyone brought up the ranks by Hansk. Move them somewhere else. I want nothing that can endanger Anderbael or Sylvia anywhere near them."

"Understood, Your Grace," Charade nodded.

Lorist finally sat back down.

"New year's is in a few days, our celebration will start soon. I bet Felim, Kenmays, and Hennard will arrive tomorrow. Is everything ready?"

"Don't worry, Your Grace. We're more than prepared. They might not stay in the mansion, though. Their private manors were recently completed in the special noble sector. Naturally, Duke Kenmays's is the grandest in the city. Rumour has it he plans to host non-stop banquets all through the winter after our new year's celebration ends."

"He's always like that. He loves enjoying himself and making merry. He could maintain another legion with the money he splurges on banquets and feasts."

Lorist sometimes envied Kenmays's hedonistic life. He didn't have any worries at all. Apart from running the salt merchant committee, he didn't have to deal with anything as Lorist took care of everything else. There was nothing Kenmays had to fear.

Year 1784 soon arrived. The house held a grand celebration which lasted for seven days straight. It was the first celebration in two years, so there was quite a bit of ceremony to get out of the way. The duchy had 14 new landed barons and seven honorary barons to enfeoff and entitle. There were also a hundred foreign honorary nobles who'd converted their titles in the last two years.

The house hosted a second banquet after the first ended. Howard and Katrina were the guests of honor this time. Everyone was celebrating their marriage. Felim had declared in front of everyone in attendance that he was giving a new viscounty around Boblige to his daughter. Thi enraged Duke Fisablen and made all the other nobles envious. Luckily the old man kept himself under control and didn't cause a ruckus.

Lorist had not expected the duke to head to The Northlands to attend the celebration, but it wasn't an unpleasant surprise. It wasn't like he could stop him anyway. Even Sylvia couldn't keep him from coming — he was playing the role of Xanthi's chaperone. The girl had no desire to see the old man, but she had little choice but to exchange pleasantries with him. She was still very close to her adoptive mother, but the woman's tense relationship with her husband troubled her.

The whole thing was awkward for Lorist. He had to be polite during the war for the sake of appearances and to keep military cooperation going smoothly. That, and he couldn't be seen to be disobeying his king's orders to get along with his rival. They had helped each other out a few times but he still considered House Fisablen his greatest threat.

What made things even more awkward was that the old man had switched gears completely with Anderbael's birth. He no longer acted like the rival proper as he should; he was now a pitous grandfather-in-law. The sudden and extreme change completely unnerved Lorist. The only thing he could do to ease his discomfort was to mock the old man for his thick skin. He couldn't believe his rival was now suddenly acting like his senior. Even so, it wasn't like he could chase him away. He gave in and welcomed them with a smile and hospitality.

His visit wasn't just awkwardness, though; he brought with him a two million gold Forde order. He couldn't be bamboozled as he had been last time, however. He absolutely refused to purchase anything at the five-fold increase in price he had to with their last transaction. He demanded market price and wouldn't accept a copper more. If Lorist couldn't satisfy him he would make the deal with Auguslo instead.

The king had just reclaimed eleven provinces. Territories like Handra, Forund, and Farkel had pretty developed handcraft industries where daily necessities could be produced. Though Lorist had swept Farkel's craftsmen clean, if Fisablen really gave the order to him, it would spur the economy on and the king would benefit a lot.

He's a real fox, that bastard, thought Lorist.

House Fisablen's submission and return to the kingdom had completely ruined his plans.

He knew the Duke Fisablen had offered the order as a gesture of friendship. Kenmays was chomping at the bit to close the deal. They wouldn't make as much out of it as they had last time, but it was still 400 thousand clean profit.

This wasn't the only hit the duke would get in on him, though. They had barely finished talking about the first order when the duke hit with his second offer. He offered to allow the salt merchant committee to send an annual convoy to the eastern plains to trade directly with the barbarians. He would obviously handle the convoy's security, but other than that he would have minimal involvement.

Kenmays almost wanted to bite off Lorist's leg so he could run around hugging it all day. His eyes bled the blood-wine mixture in his veins.

"Do you have any idea how much money we'll get from this?"

Lorist kicked the leech away.

"Fine, you win. I agree."

Chapter 450

A Peaceful Year

1784 was a rare year where Lorist got to spend his time in comfort and peace. The house was moving towards prosperity and there were no longer enemies in the region. He had toiled without rest to protect it in the past, from building up his military, to preparing for battle, to developing the dominion non-stop, to leading the troops to defeat one noble house after another...

Finally, he could spend some time in the dominion, quietly. Most matters were on track and didn't need his oversight. The once desolate and rural Northlands had turned into a symbol of prosperity. Developed residential areas, busy city squares, newly opened shops and workshops, and endless fields of golden crops painted a mural of hope and peace. In contrast, his enemies and rivals were ridden with famine and chaos. He was certain the rest of the year would be quite peaceful.

Augustus was busy managing his new gains. Naturally, he cared more about expanding his armies than appeasing the populace. All his resources were spent on his forces. It slowed the return of civilian life to normal and the provinces' repair. The king even had to buy 400 thousand gold Fordes' daily necessities from House Norton.

According to Furybear's informants, there were only 350 thousand people left in the eleven provinces. The king was relying on the seven still in decent shape to form seven field legions and two garrison legions, nearly 350 thousand men in total. He was obsessed with military expansion

He had changed some of his tactics, though. Instead of keeping the soldiers in barracks all the time, he allowed them to farm part-time. They had to till the soil along with their normal military training. He had learned at least part of the lesson. He intended to create a well-trained force this time rather than the ragtag militia he had used in the past. Their upkeep, however, drove his entire demesne, from peer to peasant, into extreme poverty.

Charade reminded Lorist that he shouldn't be careless in light of the king's expansion. He might change his mind and turn on them. Lorist just laughed. He told Charade that their king wouldn't be that irrational. Besides, even if Augustus wished to go against

The Northlands, what threat could he pose with just 300 thousand average troops? The Northlands wasn't directly connected to the king's demesne. Even if he wanted to launch an attack, he would have to occupy Southern. This would immediately warn them of his intentions and not do any direct harm.

House Fisablen's changes shocked Lorist the most. The duke returned to Eastwild after spending the winter in The Northlands. Upon his return, he started a complete reorganization of his armies. He disbanded the three frontier legions and the garrison legion in Crouchtiger Castle, and formed two garrison legions, each around 28 thousand strong, as well as two cavalry legions around 45 thousand strong. He stationed one garrison legion and one cavalry legion in Eastwild and Goldcreek respectively.

In some sense, Duke Fisablen's reorganization could be taken as down-sizing of his forces. He had 20 thousand men less in his forces after the reorganization. However, it served to decrease his neighbors' hostility and wariness. The frontier legions were known for their surprise attacks, after all.

Kenmays's salt merchant committee sent a large convoy to the east in the 6th month. They continued to trade for four months. The convoy returned triumphantly in the 10th month with more than two million gold Fordes in profit. Kenmays had barely set foot back in his domain and he was already gathering up the goods for the following year's convoy.

Lorist wasn't that surprised. Given how large the great northeastern plains were, the number of grassland barbarians living there was surely hard to count. House Fisablen was considered the plains' hegemon, but it only occupied the southeastern part of the plains, a third of its entirety at best. They controlled the trade routes tightly and without their permission, no convoy could enter the plains.

The house had, in the past, bought large quantities of goods from the salt merchant committee and resold it to the barbarians at two or three times the buying price. That was also one of the reasons Lorist had attacked them. He wanted control of those routes instead. On the one hand, he wanted to suppress the house's expansion, and, on the other, he wanted a bite of the cake.

Before Kenmays set out with the convoy, Lorist reminded him to check the records of their sales to House Fisablen in the past. He shouldn't bring what he thought the barbarians needed over there and should avoid selling the same things House Fisablen

had bought in the past. These things had already been sold to the barbarians and wouldn't fetch as good a price. It was best to take things they didn't have.

Kenmays listened carefully to his friend's advice and closely analyzed the list. His analysis revealed two golden opportunities. The first was that the products House Fisablen had purchased from them were durable, they could withstand lots of punishment and still work. Such things usually sold for very little. The second was that House Fisablen only bought three types of consumables: salt, tea bricks, and linen.

Kenmays came to a simple conclusion: there were different social classes even among the barbarians. He should cater his sales to each of the different classes. He thus focused his loadout on luxury goods and strong liquor. As expected, they were incredibly popular and the fierce demand raised the prices manifold. He grinned so broadly he couldn't close his mouth.

Unlike Kenmays, who only wanted to focus on forming convoys and doing business, Lorist turned his attention to Wild Husbandry. The province neighbored The Northlands and the bridge House Kenmays had built connected the provinces on either side of the river. This was another way out of the proverbial island of the north.

So far, Houses Norton and Fisablen's borders in Wild Husbandry was the Soxius River. House Norton occupied two-thirds of the province, House Fisablen the rest. Their reorganization, however, saw them withdraw all but a few small garrisons from the entire region.

Lorist had wanted Wild Husbandry solely for trade with the barbarians. If the province was completely under his control, he could build a huge window in the market in Eastwild. It wasn't on the same scale as the annual trade session House Fisablen allowed the salt merchant to commit. Instead, it would be a year-long open market. The potential profit was immense.

However, before he could confirm the province belonged to him, he couldn't realize his dream. The province was supposed to be under House Fisablen's rule in name. This was neither Augustus's order nor second prince Iblia's decree. It was instead the honor bequeathed by Krissen VII after Duke Fisablen expanded the empire's territory into Eastwild. Krissen VII made Eastwild House Fisablen hereditary fief and gave them jurisdiction over Wild Husbandry as well.

This meant that the reason House Fisablen had three provinces under its control had

nothing to do with Augustus. Wild Husbandry and Eastwild were given to them by Krissen VII and Goldcreek was new territory they had conquered on their own. There would be no problem for them to rule those territories for the foreseeable future.

That was the problem. If he wanted to take Wild Husbandry, even if Duke Fisablen was happy to give it away, Augustus wouldn't allow it. He would never allow House Norton to take yet another province as long as he had even a peep of say in the matter. If Fisablen relinquished his claim on the territory, Augustus would claim it for himself.

It's all that old fox's fault. It'd be great if he were still enemies with the alliance. At the very least, he could've waited until I conquered the whole province before going into talks...

If he had conquered the whole of Wild Husbandry, he could have forced House Fisablen to cede land during the ceasefire talks and Augustus wouldn't have been able to do anything about it since it was awarded as a spoil of war between noble houses in conflict. There would have been no way he could have meddled.

It was good that the duke had made a gesture of amity to the alliance and had even decreased the size of his forces. It was good news to the alliance as they no longer had to worry about him as an enemy, especially since he was Lorist's grandfather-in-law and his wife's grandfather. There was a saying in his previous life, something along the lines of 'it's hard to work against someone closely related'. Lorist believed this was the perfect example.

Having no way to deal with the duke, Lorist could only turn his attention to teaching and guiding his three disciples. After getting his permission, Reidy happily strapped Jinolio onto the rotary device and began the spinning. Three months later, Jinolio managed to develop man-made dynamic vision.

The sight of Jinolio on the ground, snot leaking out of every hole that had it, was so terrifying it made Freiyar give up on the idea of getting his 16-year-old twin sons to become Lorist's disciples. He decided to keep his sons by his side and teach them himself instead. Though taking Lorist as teacher was something of which to be proud, Reidy told Freiyar that all of his disciples had to suffer the hell he had just witnessed. The twins shrunk after seeing the incessantly vomiting Jinolio, much to Reidy's disappointment.

Lorist trained a lot and accompanied Sylvia and his four concubines these days. He

also played with his infant son Anderbael, who loved to crawl around, and taught his three disciples. The days passed quickly and the year's end soon came 'round. Charade was preparing to organize another grand new year's celebration.

Lorist felt the year wasn't really all that productive. The only thing worth mentioning was that he had impregnated Arriotoli during her visits. When she realized she was pregnant after returning to her family barony, she penned a letter and launched into a long stream of curses before declaring. She ended the letter with the declaration that the child would have her name, Dina, not his, and demanded that he leave a barony to the child, be it boy or girl.

To the house's many officials and knights, however, 1784 wasn't a peaceful year at all. They suffered through a massive purge. Every household knight and official with ties to Maplewoods was reassigned to either Hanayabarta or some rural corner far away from Ragebear. Those with key positions in the house were also given only peripheral positions at their new postings.

Lorist brought his wife, concubines, and sons to pay respects to his ancestors during the 8th month. While staying at the bastide to visit Whitedeer Mound, he taught Irina and her two sons a quick lesson before ignoring them completely. He left with his entourage for Nico Academy as soon as the ceremony was over. His visit the bastide and what he did to his ex-concubine and her offspring also informed everyone why he had conducted his purge. The bastide was quickly isolated from the rest of the house, avoided by the officials, and feared by the peasantry.

Kenmays brought a guest with him when he came for the annual celebration: Duke Forund of Yungechandler province. The duke had come to participate on the surface, but the real reason was to ask Lorist for a loan.

He only realized how impoverished his new fief was when he arrived. He tried to forage some minerals to begin developing it and tried to develop part of Egret Swamp into farmland. Unfortunately, he only had a little under a million gold Fordes, far from enough to keep his fief afloat. He had come to ask for a loan of three million gold Fordes.

Kenmays was fine with lending him money as long as Lorist agreed, but he could only give him half of what he needed. Since House Norton was currently pretty well-off, Forund could ask them for the rest. Kenmays was certain, given Lorist's obsession for development, he would be willing to chip in.



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