



重生之王

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烟本是道

# **Tales of the Reincarnated Lord**

– 重生之领主传奇 –

**- Volume 10 -**

**-Author-**

**Smoke Is A Path**

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**[ LiberSpark ]**



NORTH



# GRINDIA

✕ BATTLE HISTORY

- I DUKE LOGGIN CAMPAIGN :  
NORTHLAND
- II BATTLE OF FIRMROCK :  
DUKE LOGGIN
- III BATTLE OF FIRMROCK :  
SECOND PRINCE
- IV BATTLE OF KOBO CITY
- V BATTLE OF GREEN PLAIN
- VI BATTLE OF GELDOS CITY
- VII CONQUEST OF REDLIS :  
SECOND HIGHNESS
- VIII BATTLE OF BLANCO  
MOUNTAIN
- IX HANAYABARTA RAID :  
SILOWAS ISLAND
- X NORTON CONQUEST :  
HANAYABARTA KINGDOM
- XI WAR OF FALIK PLAIN
- XII The GLASS WAR

CREATED BY : A MINERVA

# Chapter 451

## Joint Development

It was Duke Forund's first visit to The Northlands. He was shocked when he traveled through Delamock. He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the various fiefs' clearly defined borders, the wide expansive streets, and the farmland beside the road where criss-crossing irrigation routes could be spotted; it all completely turned up-ended his previous impressions regarding the province.

*Wasn't the highway supposed to be the empire's worst? The most costly, the longest, and the most indirect? I heard that in order to not infringe on the various nobles' lands, its construction was changed multiple times. It snakes across the land like a drunk reptile. I heard it was so expensive that all the nobles involved were rich by the end... What's with this flat and wide highway? Did Duke Madras build it?*

He hadn't passed through Southern, Winston, or Delamock on his way to Yungechandler. He'd instead gone through Egret Swamp. It was a harder road to travel, but twice as fast as the alternative. The other dukes had also passed through the swamp.

Kenmays had told him that everything he saw was thanks to Duke Lorist's efforts.

After conquering Madras, the duke had relocated all the nobles to Winston and invested nearly two million gold Fordes and 100 thousand captive soldiers in the new highway's construction. It had taken two and a half years to finish. He also built irrigation channels. Once they were finished, he redrew the various domains' borders before sending over the fiefs' new lord.

"...Why would House Norton invest so much money in developing a territory only under their jurisdiction?"

Duke Forund was completely speechless. Had House Norton really splurged two million gold Fordes on a province they only governed, but did not own? Who knew how many years it would take to recoup their expenses? While they controlled the territory, it belonged to their vassals. All they got from the land was a tenth of its agricultural and resource yields in tax.

Usually, highway projects of such magnitude were undertaken by kingdoms. House Norton could rightly demand financial aid from their king. However, when he thought of the king's personality, he knew it would never happen.

*House Norton really is rich...*

Kenmays laughed.

"You think this is a huge investment? You might not know this, but House Norton invested nearly twenty million in The Northlands and another twenty on their military. How do you think their elite troops were born? Pure money!"

Kenmays believe Lorist spent too much on his forces in the same vein Lorist believed he spent too much on leisure. He had heard Lorist mention before that half the house's annual income was spent on its military. Lorist had to be paranoid. He spent so much money on his military that it exceeded even the kingdom's military strength, no wonder the king was jealous.

He could easily estimate House Norton's income. This was how he came to the conclusion that they spent at least three million on their military every year. Then again, the shade was always the best under a big tree. The stronger House Norton was, the more assurance he could get from hugging Lorist's leg. He could rely on the great tree to earn his money in peace without worry of anyone else setting their sights on House Kenmays.

Duke Forund was completely dumbstruck.

"So... so much gold... How did they get so much money?"

"They took it."

Kenmays understood Lorist's background well. He had heard many stories about the northbound journey several times while drinking with Charade, Loze, and a number of others, and knew they had raided the whole way to The Northlands.

"You're joking, right? How could they possibly take so much money?" Duke Forund shook his head.

"Hehe... When that fella was still studying in Morante, he formed a convoy to return to The Northlands to inherit his title. On the way, the nobles wanted to take advantage of

him, so he slaughtered his way through their fiefs. In the entire journey, he never lost a single battle. He raided everything he could along the way. His convoy grew powerful enough to clean out all of Andinaq at His Majesty's request when they came to the kingdom's borders. He was the one that helped His Majesty ascend to the throne.

"You can only imagine how much he must've taken. He cleaned out nearly a hundred nobles! They continued raiding through Madras and the Duke of The Northlands' door. They took everything — from gold to men and women, to even the young and old. They even raided Windbury. The biggest incident was when he completely annihilated the slave kingdom Hanayabarta. That alone should have netted them at least 30 million gold Fordes."

Duke Forund's jaw dangled on his feet.

"Really?"

"What would I get by lying to you? Even Lorist and his goons talk about everything in broad daylight. Just look at their expressions when they mention raiding. You'll never understand how terrifyingly efficient Lorist's men are at raiding. The places they've raided are cleaner than fresh parchment when they're done."

Kenmays spoke of House Norton's raiding with a tone of mocking and envy. He licked his lips.

"That fella even robbed me of my 100 thousand gold Fordes..."

Lorist had just returned to The Northlands at the time, without his convoy. The first house he dealt with was House Kenmays. Not only did he set fire to their viscounty, Redriver Valley, he even swept it clean of everything and anything valuable. Not even Kenmays's 100-thousand-gold-Forde stash in his secret room was spared.

Though he now ran the salt merchant committee and dealt with millions of gold Fordes and spent more than 100 thousand gold Fordes on his luxurious life every year, the thought of his lost stash still drove knives into his heart. It was money he had siphoned from the house's guild over a decade! Even his father didn't know of it.

That he had never benefited from all his hard work pained him eternally. The thought of him living so frugally after joining the guild to put each and every coin into his stash after wiping it clean only for it all to end up in Lorist's hands enraged him. He couldn't wait to fight Lorist at the time even if it meant losing his life. Regardless of the

casualties his house suffered, he insisted on reclaiming Firmrock Castle. His stubborn insistence nearly led to a revolt.

However, his greatest trait his ability to keep a clear mind when dealing with official matters. After he understood he couldn't match Lorist, he heeded his father's advice and changed his tune completely, turning from Lorist's enemy to his friend. He even hurriedly submitted to him and ended up getting his current impressive position, allowing House Kenmays to get the whole of Sidgler.

Duke Forund had properly stepped into The Northlands when he put foot to ground on the north back of Metroupolis. Along the way to Ragebear, he finally got to see the changes brought by the tens of millions of gold Fordes' investment.

*Is this really the rural and desolate Northlands? It's all endless stretches of livestock, farmland, highway, and tightly packed villages...*

He felt the same awe now as he did when he first visited the great Andalou Plains where the imperial capital was. Actually, the awe from that visit couldn't compare to the awe he felt now. The closer he got to Ragebear, the busier it got. It was already winter and large feather-sized snowflakes drifted down from the white heavens but the streets were bustling and merry.

Kenmays told him gleefully that the southern part of The Northlands wasn't the most prosperous in the region. The truly rich areas are the older Norton lands like Felicitas and Northsea. The former was one of the first areas to be developed and the latter was part city. Apart from having a mansion in Ragebear, the largest mansion in the eastern special noble district, Kenmays also boasted the largest building in Northsea.

*House Norton is incredibly rich.*

Forund was quite assured he could borrow some money. However, after hearing Kenmays's introduction of The Northlands, an idea suddenly popped into his head. He had to ask the duke if he could survey his domain to see for himself what results House Norton's investments had wrought.

The annual celebration was the largest House Norton had ever hosted, both in terms of budget and attendance. More than 1500 nobles and their families were attending. Lorist felt Ragebear's inner city was a little too cramped. It seemed an expansion was in order, he might even need to replace his castle with a palace!

The budget was much larger this time to accommodate the many high nobles attending. There were the four dukes from the alliance and Duke Fisablen and his lover, Blademaster Xanthi. They were in a great mood. He also seemed to have the intention to build a manor in the noble sector to be close to his granddaughter and great-grandson, though he hadn't made the choice yet. Tradition dictated that Lorist should be the one offering him a manor near his descendants. It had to be at least as grand, if not grander, than Kenmays's.

Duke Forund was also participating in the celebration. Though they used to be enemies, he had submitted to Auguslo and they were now all fellow vassals of the king. Lorist couldn't just turn him away at the door. Quite the contrary; it was proper etiquette to hold a grand reception to celebrate a former-enemy-now-friend's first visit. They had been fighting the day before, but now they had to welcome each other with smiles and open arms. This was all too common in the world of nobility.

As for Duke Forund's request which Kenmays brought up, Lorist agreed to it without a second thought. Naturally, that money wasn't going to be lent out without compensation. Money lending among nobles was not so different from high-interest loans. There would also be a different interest rate if the loan was paid back within the stipulated date. For nobles on good terms, the rate was usually 9:11. In other words, one would have to pay back 11 thousand gold Fordes for a loan of ten thousand, of which only nine thousand was paid out.

Stingier nobles would charge it at a 7:13 rate. Only seven thousand gold Fordes would be given out for a loan of ten thousand. And 13 thousand had to be returned in the end, almost double the amount lent in the first place. However, the rate Lorist charged Duke Forund was 9:12 for a period of three years, much to the latter's delight. After that, the duke brought up his intent to survey The Northlands after winter before signing the deal of the lone. Lorist agreed to that without much consideration at all and even tasked Reidy with the duke's safety.

The duke began his tour with the rainy season's end. Reidy escorted him with a squad of guards. The trip lasted around two months. Upon his return to the capital city, he asked to meet Lorist again and requested new terms. He hoped the house could give him manpower and skilled laborers in addition to a loan. He was willing to greatly increase the interest on the loan to compensate for the additional labor.

The deal had changed drastically. It was no longer a simple loan. The duke was now asking House Norton to send experts to survey his domain and propose a detailed plan

for its development. He was basically asking the house to develop his lands on his behalf. This was the first time such a request had been made in the entire history of the continent.

His request caused quite the uproar in the House's management. Approval and disapproval echoed in the halls with equal fervor and volume. The biggest doubt was whether the duke was capable of repaying the loan at his proposed interest rate. He was practically bankrupt and his lands weren't worth much at all at the moment, hence his request for a loan to have it developed. Despite the risk, however, if the loan was allowed to sit for long enough, and the development was successful, they could repay it, though it would take several decades.

Lorist's impression of the duke was rather good. The duke hadn't burnt his stores of resources when he abandoned his dominion. He was so beloved by his people that a hundred thousand volunteered to follow him when he announced he would be leaving the duchy permanently.

Lorist was even more impressed that he was willing to incur such a debt so he could develop his lands. Though he had every mind to provide the duke with what he needed, he could not make such a heavy decision without first seeing what he had to work with for himself. He and the duke agreed that he would first survey his land before making his final decision.

On the 3rd day of the 7th month, Year 1785, the duke of The Northlands mobilized his experienced men to do a complete survey of Yungechandler and initiated the first joint noble dominion development venture in the continent's history.

# Chapter 452

## Contract Singing

“...To the north of Yungechandler are Liden Mountains and Yunsge Hills on the coast. There isn't much arable land. South of that is Egret Lake, surrounded by a swamp. The only arable land is the long strip between the two. Not many people live there. Records indicate it should be around 580 thousand people if we include the new arrivals; among them 145381 youths fit for work...”

“...We've discovered three iron ore deposits around Liden and Yunsge, two of which are medium to high in quality. There's also a moderate gold deposit. All-in-all it should give Duke Forund 500 thousand gold Fordes a year. We've also come across seven low capacity copper deposits. Besides ores, there are 20 other resources that the area can offer, the most plentiful of which is white clay. It could be used to start up a crockery industry...”

“...If we build a large dam in Egret Lake, we can turn Yungechandler's swamps into millions of acres of good farmland. In that sense, Yungechandler can not just become the biggest agricultural province this side of the Union, but also have a strong fisheries industry. Ideally, we'd want to plant flax so the province can get started on linen and textiles as well...”

“...It'll take about five years if we use 400 thousand laborers, a few years longer if we only use 300 thousand. Either way, it'll likely cost around seven million. Besides jumpstarting industries, we'll also have to revamp their infrastructure...”

On the 16th day of the 12th month, Year 1785, Baron Shadekampf, the one Lorist had put in charge of surveying Yungechandler, returned with the province's duke and made his report.

Shadekampf had been Lorist's personal attendant from his childhood, but had since risen to become quite the figure in the house. He'd stepped away from his lord's side and now spent most of his time out in the field managing a portion of the countless projects the house always had running. He'd been given an honorary peerage as a baron a year earlier. He'd risen from humble servant to honorary noble thanks both to his own efforts and his lord's recognition.

He'd gone to Yungechandler with an entourage nearly a hundred strong and scoured the province for four months. It would have taken much longer, but he'd been willing to sacrifice a few pounds of his flesh to make things go faster. His stalwart attitude had also earned him Duke Forund's admiration. The duke couldn't possibly be unawed at the sheer mass of talented and dedicated people House Norton had.

All that said, seven million fords was not a small price even for House Norton. Spiel objected to vehemently they had to wash the floor when he left. He was adamant that the house could only spare three million. That three was the house's emergency reserve. It wouldn't grow by just laying in the treasury, so in principle lending the duke the spare change was only beneficial.

But seven million was more than double what they had to offer up front, and more than half of the house's entire static wealth. It was too big a risk. The house had a total static wealth of just 13 million, and that included the money they would be spending to build the new palace in the capital. Grandmaster Ciroba was already designing it. His estimate of the project's cost thus far was three million.

Spiel didn't dare to let the house have only three million in reserve given his lord's penchant for impulsive spending. Not to mention the possibility of some natural disaster requiring emergency spending! Normally, three million gold Fordes was enough to last a noble household a lifetime, but House Norton was not a normal noble household by any metric. It had over two million subjects, a lord who bled money — and did so on rainy and sunny days alike — a massive military, and three allies that frequently needed money. He had to fight for every penny, not so the house could be rich, but so it could stay afloat. His life was a constant battle against the forces of evil, the foremost of which was the man known as Duke Norton Lorist.

"Your Grace, why are you building a palace so suddenly? Thank the gods we're finally at peace, but you can't spend money like it grows on trees," asked Charade, unable to suppress his doubts anymore.

Lorist smiled bitterly. This was one of the fundamental limitations of the times. Charade was already an astonishing achievement in the continent's circles of nobility. Even Auguslo pined for a supervisor or knight as capable as him. Unfortunately, as great as the man was at wartime economics, he was terrible at the same in peacetime.

Even in the midst of the wars Lorist had fought over the last couple of years, the various development projects continued full-steam. Their latest influx of new subjects

had solved their manpower shortages so they could develop as quickly as their managers and supervisors could keep up. This development created great demands that private industries fulfilled and lived on. The current generation of projects was slowly coming to an end, however, and with their end, the market would collapse.

"Have you read Spiel's report and Baron Balk's analysis?" asked he.

Old Man Balk had stepped up to fill the spot Hansk had previously occupied. Lorist had also made him a baron. He was the penultimate servant of the house, the idol to which all others should strive. He started as a common peasant, but, through his service to his lord he had become a massive figure in the house and a noble.

"I have. The house's income is decent and our reserves have grown another two million. This is the first time we've been this well-off. I've also read Baron Balk's report and the number of workshops and factories in the dominion has gone up by more than 1300, with most set up by honorary nobles and merchants. The investments almost doubled our profits in the industrial sector. Its growth is also really consistent. It's expected to reach new heights this year as well." Charade's memory was good as always. He could clearly remember even the minutest, obscurest details.

Lorist shook his head and took out another folder.

"Read this," he said, handing the folder to Charade, "I had Howard send someone to investigate this for me."

Charade saw it was a thorough report compiled by Furybear on the industries in the house with a focus on their stocks.

"40 percent, 38 percent, 32 percent, 41 percent... Your Grace, this is..."

His eyes suddenly light up as he realized something. Lorist lifted the bottle of fruit wine on his desk and poured some for himself before he gestured for Charade to help himself to some as well.

"These past two years our ferocious economic development has been predicated on Duke Fisablen's large orders and his permission to trade with the grassland barbarians. The value of these goods last year was about a million, the same was two million the year before.

"Our houses internal demand has also been a major dependency. The 400 thousand

refugees we moved over have settled down and gathered some savings, so they will purchase some daily necessities. There's also Supervisor Kedan's traffic revamp. The amount of meat and wheat ale consumed by the mountain barbarians working on it isn't miniscule.

"The private sector's expansion has been built on these demands. Our industries cater to these demands—" Lorist downed the whole cup. "—Do you remember what I said earlier? Most merchants are short-sighted profit-mongering idiots. Many of the honorary nobles are actually merchants who wish to take advantage of the peace here and our large demand to make profit.

"While having lots of local investment is good, it can't be good when it all relies on just two huge business deals. If you read this report, you'll discover that the businesses the merchants set up are mostly what we already had. If there are too many people producing the same thing the prices will collapse when demand lowers. The business will bankrupt themselves and the entire industry will collapse. The merchants will leave and we'll be left to clean up the mess."

"Has something gone wrong with Duke Fisablen's order?"

Lorist nodded.

"The orders have been a show of goodwill. I told you they don't really need so much. They resell most of what they buy to the grassland barbarians. The last two rounds of direct trade have confirmed my suspicion in this regard.

"Everything has its limit. Just like House Fisablen's orders, there is a limit to the trade with the barbarians. They are quite numerous, but most live in extreme poverty. Whether it be the goods resold by Duke Fisablen or the products the committee brings over, there is a limit to how much they can consume. They can't consume more.

"A few days ago, Duke Fisablen made it clear that their orders won't be over a million in the future. Duke Kenmays also confirmed future trade with the barbarians will at most be worth just over a million a year.

"That's why I had Howard investigate the businesses that keep on borrowing money. They'll realize too late that they've made more than our economy can absorb. And their collapse will affect the entire domain severely. One look at this map will show you our products can only be sold to our neighboring provinces, other places can't

afford our products or don't have a stable market for them."

"I believe I understand now, Your Grace. The palace's construction is actually a way to keep the demand up and the economy stable?"

"No, that's only a small aspect," Lorst said with a smile, "I will announce House Fisablen's order in the 1st month of next year. I believe the news will cause many businesses in our dominion to panic about the possibility that they won't be able to sell their produce. Your job will be to rectify and support them.

"By rectify, I mean we only have to maintain two to three units. Split the order among those retained businesses so they will compete against each other to ensure quality.

"By support, I'm referring to the financial support of any new and unestablished industries. Encourage them to grow as large as possible. Currently, the house isn't in any tight predicaments, nor do we have any enemies. This is an incredibly hard-sought time. We have to give up on redundant production and encourage the growth of new businesses.

"For example, the palace's construction will need high-quality materials. Given that we are no longer at war, the peaceful lives the peasants lead will raise their standard of living. So, we need new production units for some more luxury goods. It will allow us to maintain our grasp on the market initiative and earn us lots of money.

"Other than that, the reason I agreed to develop Duke Forund's dominion is so we can turn it into a market for our goods. Think about it: five years from now when Yungechandler's development is complete, we will have another market to dump our surplus produce into. Money must flow through the market for it to be useful. It shouldn't be kept in the treasury for emergency use like Supervisor Spiel thinks."

On the 4th day of the 2nd month, Year 1786, House Norton and House Forund signed an agreement to jointly develop Yungechandler. House Norton will provide seven million gold Fordes over the course of five years as funds for development and send Baron Shadekampf to be the chief advisor to aid House Forund in their dominion development. Five years later, House Forund will start to repay House Norton at a rate of two million gold Fordes a year for five years, paying back ten million gold Fordes in total.

# Chapter 453

## Hostage

"Good news, Your Grace. Blademaster Shuss is back..." said Jinolio with ragged breath as he rushed into the study with a white silk cloth.

It was an eagle message from Silowas.

"Let me see it," said Lorist, shooting to his feet.

Shuss, who was guarding Silowas, went to the island's mountains four years earlier to break through. He left a letter saying he wouldn't return if he couldn't become a rank 2 blademaster. While Lorist was worried, the recent war broke out soon after he left. He didn't have any time to visit the island since his return. He forgot about the old man. He couldn't be happier to hear Shuss was returning.

The letter was penned by Baron Hector and Pajik. It said the fire crystal foraging team on its way to the volcano angered the white-headed sea condors. They were surrounded and attacked when Shuss showed up and killed their seven attackers. The report said he broke through to the second rank two years earlier but had stayed in the mountains to stabilize himself. He bumped into the team and helped them. He would join Lorist in a few days.

Apart from Lorist, the house also had Engelich and Shuss, both blademasters. Reidy was also now equal to a rank 1 blademaster. Lorist didn't include Engelich in his force count, however, the old man was a coward and wouldn't ever be of any real use. He wasn't just living in 'retirement' at his home, not contributing to the house at all, he pushed every ounce of responsibility he could onto others. Besides, he had grown so weak even Reidy could defeat him now.

In contrast, Shuss used to be a dueling slave in Hanayabarta. He spent years struggling to survive, living in slaughter. His bloodthirst and killing intent were among the strongest Lorist had ever encountered. Even as a rank 1 blademaster back then, he was on equal standing with a rank 2 blademaster. His breakthrough added substantially to House Norton's might. He was the best sparring partner for Reidy, at the very least.

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Tarkel entered the study with a large stack of documents.

"Your Grace, something big's happened in the war in the south," said he the moment he was inside.

"What's wrong?"

The war was in its fifth year, yet nothing had changed in the last two. The nations to the south of the war-zone, those being led by Jigda, were completely disorganized. The union swallowed up three and turtled. Everything was peaceful on the border, like there wasn't a war.

"Romon and Khawistan signed an armistice not too long ago. The fighting there has ended. Khawistan suffered slightly more and gave up a part of Kalia's land. Their new border is the Kesarubi River. Back with the Union's war, Jigda swallowed seven nations stormed by Union forces. Their territory has doubled. They now rival Romon in size. Some of the remaining 13 countries finally woke to the scheme. Jigda and the countries suspicious of its intentions are now at war. The coalition army disbanded as a result.

"The Union signed a peace treaty with Jigda and recognized their sovereignty over all the land they now control. All the trade routes are now restored, and they signed a mutual defense agreement. Other than that, the Union gave Jugda a 15 million gold Forde loan, without interest. Our informants have yet to infiltrate their internal councils so we don't know too much.

"The 13 remaining independent countries are split into two factions. The five neighboring the Union have formed a union of their own, called the Morunzik Union of Kingdoms. They're preparing to negotiate peace with the Union. Maybe they think they can't keep fighting the Union and are trying to protect themselves? Either way, they want to end the war.

"The eight countries nearest Jigda will continue to fight. They made Jekhano's first prince, Yorksem, their new commander-in-chief and are launching a new campaign against Jigda. Duke Fustat is in command on the other side and is leading 100 thousand men against the former's 140 thousand. They're expected to clash in what used to be the kingdom of Odma. We expect it will be another stalemate.

"Lundmorde is still in Jekhano with that prince. Also, the Union have yet to reinforce Jigda per their treaty. They've sent out envoys to negotiate peace instead."

Lorist choked on his tongue and laughed. What a joke! Who would have imagined this? It was flabbergasting. The initial 24 countries that formed the coalition had united against the Union. But now Jigda had betrayed them and eaten up at least a third of the coalition. Rather than unite to pool what strength they had left they turned on each other. The coalition was now two broken factions. To top it all off, the Union was now playing the nice guy? How laughable! Nobody could make this prediction when the war started, hell, nobody could predict this three months ago. They might as well just have skipped the fighting altogether. Just sit around a table and negotiate a few concessions.

Lorist walked over to the map of the continent hung on one of his study's walls. He updated it with a pencil to match the information Tarkel had just given him. Jigda's current size took Lorist aback. This was the most complex and impactful plot he'd ever seen.

"What is it, Your Grace?" asked Tarkel.

Lorist shook his head.

"See this? You were right. This whole war was just a farce. It's finally been exposed, but it's too late, Jigda is one of Grindia's superpowers. The guy who came up with this must be a genius..."

"But, Your Grace," Tarkel said with some dissatisfaction, "Don't you think this was a little rash, absorbing seven countries? Everyone now knows what Jugda is up to. They can't do this again. It feels a little to bumbling to have been carefully planned out. They should instead have simmered their prey and taken them in slowly. They wouldn't be facing any backlash that way."

"You're wrong. Your suggestion will only work if Romon and Khawistan kept fighting. Unfortunately, the two countries are at peace. They'll go after Jigda the moment they recover.

"Jigda can't keep fighting in the north. They must focus on stabilizing their gains and building their military strength back up. If not, there's no way they can stand up against the two empires when they invade. They forcefully absorbed the last seven

countries so they can prepare for the inevitable invasions as soon as possible. The relationship between them and the Union is also very obvious now, so it's best that the Union sends no reinforcements. If they did, the remaining countries in the coalition will fight even harder to spite them and the war will just drag on.

"This is the only reason the Union is sending negotiators. It's the best move they can make. This will save Jigda's strength so they can better resist Romon and Khawistan. If negotiation go well, the coalition will also form a deep grudge against Jigda, so they won't make as much trouble for the Union. The Union at least fought them openly and honestly, Jigda is a snake, a traitor deserving of all the contempt in the world. This will also make sure that Jigda won't have any energy to spare to have plans for the Union.

"Despite Jigda becoming a superpower and gaining a lot of land, they didn't really get much. They now have a lot of territory with people that hate them, they are the sole opposition to two empires, and have at least eight countries in their backyard that hate them and can't wait to get in a good jab. The Union, they are the real beneficiaries of this whole debacle. They got three countries' territory, force the trade routes to open again, and got a strong buffer between them and Romon and Khawistan. The coalition are the real losers. They lost half their countries and are now split in two weaker factions and have another superpower on their borders."

Lorist 'tsked' audibly.

"They're all burning the midnight oil, huh? None are idiots. Tarkel, increase our surveillance on the Union and Jigda. Try to find the mastermind behind this."

"Understood, Your Grace."

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Jinolio entered the room with a gold-gilded invitation card.

"Your Grace, Duke Kenmays sent an invitation to the summer party. It'll be on the 15th day of the 8th month at Platinum Beach."

Lorist suddenly remembered Kenmays wanted to build a grand palace there. He wanted to make the beach a tourist destination. So he had finished the palace and was now holding the opening ceremony...

*I must attend. There're two months before the party. I have nothing better to do. Might*

*as well go and relax. Oh, I should bring Sylvia, the girls, and the kids as well!*

"All right. Tell him I'll bring the family along," answered he.

"Yes, Your Grace. Will you travel by ship?"

Lorist shook his head.

"I'll go by land. I'd like to visit the Dina barony along the way."

Arriotoli had given birth to a son named Dina Terryke almost exactly a year ago. She wrote Lorist saying the kid would be turned into the most impressive knight in the history of her house and Lorist had no say in the matter. He could only pray the kid would survive his mother's demonic claws.

"Understood. When will Your Grace leave?"

Hasty footsteps stopped Lorist's reply. A moment later Howard burst into the room.

"Count Lower's whole family's been captured!"

*Count Lower? Who's that?* wondered Lorist.

Howard caught his breath and explained. Count Lower wasn't a member of the house. He was a noble from the capital. He'd bought his title of count from Auguslo several years ago. The count moved to The Northlands when he realized he couldn't do business in the capital and had even bought a commiserate title from the house. Lower had decent instincts. He had quickly realized House Norton's shade was a lot better than the king's.

He moved to The Northlands five years ago and bought a plot of land in the second special noble district. He also partnered up with a few people and built several factories and even started a merchant guild. It specialized in leather, wine and other foodstuffs. His factories were already well-established when Duke Fisablen made his massive order two years ago and got the biggest slice of the pie. He had trouble finding places to store all his gold. His business expanded rapidly and his partnership soon had ten more factories.

Unfortunately for him and his partners, Lorist announced that the volume to be traded with House Fisablen would be cut in half overall, daily necessities was the section

hardest hit. The coming years would be hard for the count.

While the factories could be closed and skilled workers fired, their money lay in warehouses as products that could now not be sold. This story rang true for most merchants all across the duchy. They either had to sell at trash prices, or hope to sell things off over several decades.

Charade's revamp project was also now in full swing. He closed many duplicate production units and arranged new jobs for the fired workers. His efforts were showing signs of stabilizing the duchy's economy. Their swift action limited the damage to the merchants.

Lower had made the choice to keep his produce. He hired a mercenary band to keep watch on his warehouses, but most of them were killed off during an excursion to hunt ironspine crocodiles. They demanded he compensate them for their losses but he had no money. A fight broke out and the band had taken the entire family hostage.

"Baron Ovidis and the local garrison have surrounded the manor and Sir Charade will be on-site shortly. The mercenaries insist that they won't let anyone go until their ransom is paid. They even demanded we leave, apparently this has nothing to do with the house," reported Howard.

Lorist quietly took his sword.

"Let's go look," said he.

# Chapter 454

## Rescue

The special noble district wasn't far from Ragebear. From the city center to the first manor was just 15 minutes by horse. One arrived at the district's central lake immediately after crossing the moat outside the east gate. Stretches of green grass and fragrant orchards covered both sides of the road.

There was such a high demand for noble housing that the house was building eight special districts instead of four. These districts had the continent's most expensive land. They were also the house's most profitable. Its sale alone had netted Lorist six million gold Fordes thus far. Charade and Spiel also nagged Lorist to build yet another two districts.

All that was left was to build the final districts around the gourd-shaped lake. Two of the eight districts were for nobles, two for high-class commoners, one for luxury commerce, and the final for a variety of services.

The four noble districts were completely sold. Half of the fourth district's manors were still being constructed, but the other three districts stood completed. Many of their windows already stood lit in the evenings. Only public facilities and final decoration work still needed to be done.

The high-class residential area was also already completed. Five-floor apartment buildings filled the district. Each unit had three bedrooms and two general purpose rooms. Merchant guild supervisors and high-ranking accountants or factory managers made up the bulk of the residents. A few nobles yet to get land in the noble districts also lived there.

Most attractive of all the districts was the luxury commerce. The house owned all the shops, nothing was for sale, only rent. Clothes, jewelry, accessories, ingredients, spices, and rare herbs lined the roads. If you couldn't find something there, you would not find it anywhere else on the continent, save maybe Morante itself. Of the two hundred guilds licensed to do business in the dominion, a hundred rented buildings in this district. The things sold there were the highest quality possible, but also twice as expensive as anywhere else.

The general district was much larger. The various facilities and sports arenas took up a lot of space. Nothing was finished because they took longer to build. Though estimates said the district would be done by either the 7th or 8th month of the following year.

Charade and Spiel didn't know if they should turn the high-class residential district into a noble district or not. It would save the house a lot of money. They had to finance and build the apartment blocks, but nobles built their manors themselves. It wasn't that simple, however. They could fit many more people into the district through apartments, the overall sales income would be higher, and the businesses serving the district would do much better. They could make more money from renting shops.

Lorist took Howard and Jinolio with him to the second noble district where Count Lower's mansion stood. Nightingale Manor, as the count called it, was surrounded by many busybodies whom chattered in quiet hushes. Lorist discovered the roofs of the surrounding manors were filled with people enjoying either a cup of macks or tea.

*Do they think this is a show?*

Lorist dismounted located Charade. He was being crushed by the crowd and the angry Ovidis.

"Shut up! What's going on?" shouted Lorist.

Everyone saluted and shut up.

"Ovidis wants to force his way in, Your Grace." answered Charade.

"Why? Where's the hostage?"

"The mercenary is impolite. He insulted the house. I want to teach him a lesson," explained Ovidis.

Do you have a clear picture of the situation?"

"They have seven hostages, Count Lower, his wife and children, and two servants. Two other servants are dead and the rest escaped. Their captors are thirteen strong," explained Charade.

Lorist was pissed.

"How did thirteen armed idiots get into the noble district in broad daylight? Explain this, Ovidis."

Ovidis was in command of the city's guards. This was entirely his fault.

"They passed our patrols on Count Lower's carriages. The guards believed they were acting on the count's orders. They noticed nothing untoward. This is on me."

"How did Count Lower and the mercenaries become acquaintances? What demands did they make?"

Charade answered this time.

"They belong to a band called Crimsonflame. It's about a hundred strong. They registered with the house seven years ago. Usually, they operate around Twinmount Town. They only recently showed up in Northsea. We learned they often take on missions in the Magical Dragon Mountains and Blackmud Marsh, and occasional escort missions. Their commander is leading the group in the manor, he's a three-star silver-rank swordsman. Everyone considers them one of the top bands in the duchy."

Crimsonflame was similar to a band his trusted subordinate, Knight Jim, used to be in. Such bands were average in Morante, but since there weren't many mercenaries in The Northlands, they were near the top here.

"The leader is called Lind," Charade continued, "He used to work near the imperial capital and is an old acquaintance of the count. The count ran into him when he came to The Northlands to set up several businesses and hired him and his band. Wesde, the count's merchant guild, deals with furs and leathers, and run a shop in the luxury district. They need a lot of high-grade fur. The two worked together for five years and trust each other a lot. The band even invested most of their savings in the count's ventures. Count Lower accepted an order for horse armor and needed ironspine crocodile leather. He hired Crimsonflame to get it.

"The band was wiped out while on this mission. They brought back the leather, but only a few survived. They learned of the count's financial losses when they returned and panicked. Worried that their investments were all gone, they kidnapped the count to force him to pay everything back.

"Unfortunately for both them and the count, he does not have their money. It's all been invested in the products sitting in his warehouses. We understand he told them he

couldn't pay them back now, but that his business hasn't failed yet; he needs more time. When they heard it would take them thirty years to get their money back, they lost it. He couldn't even pay the fee for their latest mission.

"The count believed his long history with the band and his close relationship with their leader would make them trust him and be patient, but that didn't happen. The group kidnapped him and brought him here, hence our current predicament."

"How much money do they want? Have you sent anyone to negotiate?" asked Lorist.

"I did. The count owes them four thousand gold Fordes. His partner's have agreed to pay the ransom and the mercenaries have calmed down somewhat, but they've become cocky."

"How so?"

"They're demanding ten thousand now instead. They say it's interest. When the count's partners agreed to mortgage his shop to pay the ten thousand gold Fordes, they increased their demands to 20 thousand and told us to scram. Apparently this is a matter strictly between them, the count and his partners and we have no place butting in. The captain even threatened to make trouble in the dominion if we don't leave them alone. This is an affront to the house I can't let this stand," muttered Ovidis.

"Where are the hostages now?"

Ovidis pointed at the manor.

"We knew they're in the guest hall on the second floor. It's the room with the balcony. The mercenaries have two men keeping watch. When Sir Charade went to negotiate, they brought the hostages to the balcony with blades pressed against their necks.

"The manor is encircled. Most are on the second floor, in the back. A few are guarding the sides though. They'll see us no matter which side we attack. Our best shot is to sneak in during the night," Charade interjected.

Lorist shot Charade a glance.

"If you understand the situation, why are you trying to go in?"

Ovidis lowered his head.

"I... I couldn't stand that the bastards insulted us. They recently violated the two maidservants in the guest hall by the windows so everyone could see. They forced us to listen to the two women scream in pain and them laughing like devils..."

Lorist stiffened. He patted Ovidis on the shoulder.

"I understand. I'll go have a chat with them. Stay here, don't follow me."

A path ran on the other side of the back gates. It was wide enough for three carriages and connected to a semi-circular plot of empty land. Three carriages stood parked on it, the gray-white mansion behind them. Its entrance protruded from the wall, the space above it forming a balcony large enough for two tables.

Two mercenaries sat on the balcony. They shouted at a man clad in a black cloak approaching the door beneath, bows partially drawn and arrows pointing at him.

"I am Norton Lorist, Duke of The Northlands. Bring your leader out," the figure said.

Its voice wasn't loud, but echoed throughout the manor.

Six people stepped out onto the balcony. A tall, lanky man stepped forward. When he recognized the face beneath the cloak, he shivered.

"It's... it's really D-duke Norton... Y-y-y-Your Grace... d-d-d-don't come here!"

Lorist's footsteps didn't stop.

The man's eyes widened and his pupils dilated.

"H-hostage... The hostages... B-b-bring them out now..."

Count Lower, his wife and children finally made their appearance. Two naked, weeping women were dragged out behind them, clutching scraps of cloth to try to cover up as best they could.

The tall man grabbed the count and pressed his sword against his throat.

"Y-you... Stand still! If you don't, I-I'll kill him..."

Lorist stopped five meters from the entrance and stared up at the group, sighing.

"You're Lind, right? I used to be a mercenary as well. I understand how you must feel. Unfortunately, you chose the wrong way to solve your issues. You even got innocent people involved. You have two options. Either surrender, in which case I guarantee you a fair trial, or continue resisting, in which case your friends and family won't even have a corpse to bury."

"I-I choose neither! Y-you can't fool me..."

Lind shook Count Lower around emotionally. The bruised man moaned in pain. A thin line of blood oozed out of his freshly cut skin.

"This bastard took the money we put our lives on the line for! We want our money back! Y-you can't threaten us! You might kill me, but I'll make sure they all die with us! They'll only survive if you swear on your ancestors you'll let us leave your lands with our money safely! If you don't they'll all die and House Norton will be a laughingstock! Are you willing to gamble with your house's honor?!" cried Lind.

Lorist smiled.

"Yes."

Lorist was less than seven meters from his prey. They were well within Slaughter Domain's range.

*I am the god of the space around me! It is my world!*

A crimson veil covered his eyes.

"W-what did you—"

The mercenary's words were cut short. A wave of energy surged from below. It covered the balcony and everyone on it. The sky turned red. Lind's body only heard a single heartbeat in his ears before his body deflated like a sack of water poked with dozens of holes. He collapsed and life left him.

*They weren't lying. The duke really is a swordsaint...*

He hadn't believed a word of it at the time, but now, in his final moments, the truth was revealed to him. He died believing every word he'd heard.

Lorist sheathed his sword and smiled at Count Lower. The man stared blankly at his rescuer. Lorist waved at the crowd across the street and Howard come rushing over.

"Go. Don't spare anyone."

The family burst into tears. They cried like they'd just woken from a terrible nightmare.

"By your command," said Howard as he drew his sword and rushed into the manor.

# Chapter 455

## Swordsaint's Domain

"Tell me what you know," said Lorist, staring out of the window.

There were three people in the study. Charade sat on the sofa, Baron Kriston sat in front of the desk. Kriston had been a security chief on Silowas when he joined Lorist and took charge of the duchy's security forces. He was made an honorary baron two years ago for his contributions in this capacity.

The third person was Supervisor Doboﬀ, the man in charge of the eastern part of The Northlands. He used to be the mayor of Twinmount Town, but, given his contribution to the house in discovering barbarian gold mines, had been raised to a high-ranking official in the house.

Lorist's interference resolved the hostage incident. His men slew the mercenaries on the spot. He'd served in a mercenary band in Morante so he understood their feelings. Anybody would be enraged if someone lusted after their hard-earned wealth. However, they picked the worst possible method to take revenge. Though they only wanted to take back their money, they forced House Norton to kill them by challenging their honor. Lorist had given them a chance to receive mercy; as long as they surrendered, they would be tried fairly. Crimes must be punished. They might have survived at least. Unfortunately, they had refused his magnanimity, so he had to kill them. He could not let the house be ridiculed, its reputation must be upheld.

"Yes, Your Grace," Doboﬀ answered, "Most mercenaries gather in Twinmount Town. Many form parties and settle in the duchy. Most choose the life because they lust for adventure and abhor servitude. Some are retired soldiers, many of whom served the house. They are more skilled with the sword than the sickle, so they become mercenaries; they dream of becoming finding a great treasure and becoming rich overnight.

"Foreign mercenaries have to register for licenses to enter the wilds and sell their catches. Some go to hunt, some to gather, some to peddle wares to the barbarians."

Charade looked at the thick stack of documents.

"We have registered three thousand seven hundred and sixty three and more than sixty parties to date. The small ones tend to be around ten strong and the largest around a hundred. Crimsonflame is considered one of the strongest eight.

"Two-thirds of the mercenaries are foreigners. Some of our retired soldiers occasionally tag along without a permit."

"Chief Kriston," Lorist called, "Are these mercenaries doing anything illegal? How frequent are conflicts between them and my subjects and how are they settled?"

"Conflict is infrequent," Kriston explained, "Normally, the settlements are not in favor of the mercenaries. The towns and villages' garrisons do not like them. They keep a really close eye on them when they're in town.

"Our garrisons are mostly well-trained and seasoned veterans from the army. The house is also famous for its strict handling of any offenses, so the mercenaries are very careful not to step out of line.

"Such conflicts are usually dealt with as civil security issues. Even when the garrisons step in on occasion, they generally hand things over to the local officers. It's rare for cases to be concluded in the mercenaries' favor. They never break the law with their rulings, but they definitely favor your subjects."

Lorist nodded.

"We may have solved the current predicament, but it's clear there is a greater threat. We have failed to oversee and regulate the mercenaries. You three will come up with a solution. Find an effective way to manage the mercenaries."

"Will you start an organization similar to the mercenary guild, Your Grace?" asked Charade, shocked.

Lorist chortled.

"Yes and no. You and I have had some dealings with the mercenary guild in Morante. Though it acts as an intermediary that provides services to mercenaries, it is more like a business that tries to make money off them. The organization I envision will harness their strengths and fight for their rights. We both used to be mercenaries, we understand their pains, let's offer help wherever we can.

"For example, in the future, conflicts between mercenaries and our subjects will be dealt with by this organization. Take, for instance, this incident involving Crimsonflame. Instead of taking matters into their own hands, they should be able to lodge a complaint with the organization and have their case resolved through them instead. Publish a notice that only those who register with the organization may work as a mercenary. It is illegal to work without registering. Non-compliers will be sentenced to three months' unpaid labor.

"Also, any request made by guilds or individuals have to be handled via the organization. House Norton will not be involved in resolving any disputes. I couldn't care less if mercenaries are killed because they took matters into their own hands rather than work through the organization.

"Figure out how this organization has to work. After you create it, appoint Supervisor Doff as its manager under Charade. Kriston, you will also handle its judicial elements. You have to be fair and unbiased. Don't let either party's relation to us, or lack thereof, influence your judgment.

"I must stress that they work as an extension of the house. All mercenaries must answer any calls we put out in emergencies."

"Understood, Your Grace."

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Ten days later, the mercenary organization's formation was announced. It was to be called the Assembly of Free Mercenaries, colloquially known as the Assembly. Its headquarters stood in Northsea, with a branch in Twinmount Town. Doff acted as its chairman, with Kriston its chief enforcer.

Blademaster Shuss arrived on the same day. Lorist couldn't be bothered with a banquet; instead, he dragged him to the training hall for a duel as soon as he set foot in the castle. The two fought for who knew how long.

The fight finally ended when Shuss could go no further.

"A rank 2... blademaster... like me... is a child... compared to... Your grace... I couldn't attack... at all..." the blademaster gasped.

"Your swordsmanship improved a lot," Lorist consoled, "You relied on courage and

savagery before you broke through. But now your killing intent is hidden and makes you even harder to deal with. I fought Duke Fisablen but even he was not as imposing as you. A fight between you two will be a draw at worst."

Shuss calmed his breathing.

"Can you deploy your Slaughter Domain, Your Grace? I wish to experience it for myself. Word of your domain has spread throughout your dominion after the hostage incident. Count Lower keeps telling everyone you're a swordsaint. He said you enveloped them in a blood-red world. He blinked, and everything was back to normal, save all the mercenaries being dead."

Lorist's lips curled into a troubled smile. He had used his Slaughter Domain to rescue Count Lower and his family. He couldn't help but enveloping them with it when he acted. It appeared the count had blabbed about it to his friends. Lorist could have explained it as a hallucination if the count were the only one who'd experienced it, but his wife and children, and the two servants, had as well. Sharp ears heard the rumors and sharp minds guessed at his true strength.

Tarkel had rushed over to ask him about the blood world.

"Why do you ask?" he'd replied.

"I'm going to publicize it, of course!" the man had answered, "The more impressive Your Grace's reputation, the more stable the house. The nobles who sided with us will also feel safer and our subjects will be even more loyal."

Lorist didn't think Shuss would want to experience it as well.

"Alright," he surrendered.

Shuss took up a defensive stance.

"Ready, Your Grace."

A gust of wind slapped Shuss across the face. He closed his eyes for a moment. When they opened again the world around him was crimson. It almost felt like he was standing in the middle of an old, arcane temple. He had done his best to prepare, but he was still overwhelmed and unnerved. His mind didn't dull, but his body was heavy and unresponsive. The world vanished just as he prepared to try to move. His gaze

returned to where his lord had been standing before it all started, only to feel a cold line across his throat. His lord's sword was pressed against his throat.

He dropped his sword, his expression somewhere between depression and despair.

"Is this... the domain? It's too weird... It ended before I could react..."

Lorist returned his sword to its scabbard.

"I don't know if it's a domain or not. I can keep it up for a few minutes at best. My body can't handle any more. I don't know if a sword saint's domain is supposed to be like this. It's not like there are sword saints lying around I can ask. I named it my Slaughter Domain because it's the most accurate way I can describe it."

"This is definitely a domain," Shuss said as he plopped his rear on the ground, "I've heard a few slave instructors talk about sword saint domains. One had personally experienced one. He said Jigda's fire soar sword saint demonstrated it once. He said it was like his body was dumped in an oven and the entire world was burning. He was so frightened he pissed himself."

"So the fire soar sword saint's domain has the fire element, right?"

*Don't tell me my Slaughter Domain is thanks to my battleforce's blood attribute...*

"Yes. His battleforce attribute is fire," Shuss affirmed as he stumbled to his feet, "I didn't think Your Grace had become a sword saint at such a young age. Grindia has never seen such a young sword saint. This is definitely an occasion worth celebrating!"

Lorist waved Shuss's comments away.

"It's nothing worth bragging about. Keep it a secret for me. I don't want unnecessary chaos. Everyone is just guessing right now, all hell will break loose if you give them certainty. Keep this to yourself. I don't want lines of people begging me on their knees to be my disciples."

Shuss nodded.

"I understand. But please share some pointers with me from time to time, Your Grace."

"Of course. You're one of my people. I'm confident you'll become a sword saint too, in

good time."

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On the 10th of the 7th, Lorist brought Sylvia, his concubines, and his children to Delamock for a survey and accepted Kenmays's invitation to the party in Sidgler.

After touring Delamock, he stayed at the Dina barony for ten days. He suffered greatly at the hands of his wife and his lover, both wrapt with jealousy. He snapped when his attempts and appeasing them failed and rammed them into the bed for a whole evening.

They arrived at Platinum Beath on the 12th of the 8th. Kenmays organized a grand banquet. There were many familiar faces in attendance. Dukes Handra, Shabaj, and Fisablen were just a few of the names.

"Everyone," Kenmays toasted, "let's eat and drink and make merry!"

# Chapter 456

## Platinum Beach

Sunlight danced on the azure waters. Fine white sand glimmered golden on the beach. Platinum Beach lived up to its reputation.

The near hundred nobles and their families present were having fun on the beach and playing along in the water. This was a fresh experience for Duke Fisablen and the three dukes from the plains, it was a fresh experience. They had never played on a beach before. They'd seen the sea, sure, but this was their first time soaking in its water. The bravest among them even tasted its salty riches before spitting it out to a chorus of laughter.

Many clean silks cast patches of shade across the beach. Washrooms and changing rooms dotted the gentle curve of the bay every hundred meters or so. At the peak of the arch several pavilion-like canopies hosted nobles resting out of the sun. Lorist lay sprawled over a footless rattan rocking chair under one such canopy. He dabbled in various delicacies; fruits, nuts, juices and wines. As he lazed — a king of the world he saw — the cool, moist breeze obediently wafting in over the waves, servants danced around him like fairies, refilling the plates and trays silently.

He was joined by Kenmays, filling his stomach with a bottle of fruit wine. The duke clasped a palmful of sand, which he let flow between his fingers.

"People used to think the sand his gold," he said.

"I can imagine," Lorist replied, his gaze still lazily wandering over the figures dancing in the waves.

"They tried to refine gold, to no avail. Complete idiots, don't you think?"

"Depends..."

"True, they weren't wrong. Platinum Beach is a gold mine, they just had no idea how to mine it. This spot, right here, is the most enchanting sight in the entire Cursed Coast. It's not a mine you empty of its riches, it's a mine you let others come and fill for you.

I've invested nearly two million gold Fordes to get it to where it is now. Any suggestion on how I could improve it further?"

Lorist leaned back in his rocker until his headrest pressed against the sand beneath and closed his eyes.

"There is nothing to improve with the accommodations. The castles, palaces and mansions are perfect. The food has great quality too, but it lacks character. This is the same food you can get in the capital, or with some effort and money, even in The Northlands. Your food should be as unique as this beach. A fish dish that can be made only with what grows and lives here naturally will add to the experience and, if it is good enough, might become a draw in its own right.

"It's also a hassle to get to the beach. Make it easier for nobles to get from their accommodations down to the sea. A mode of transport that will also allow them to enjoy the sites along the way. Replace your dingy carriage with open ones. If you have to, give them a silk cloth canopy. Covered walkways that lead to the beach will also be good. Maybe decorated with grapevine canopies? Souvenir shops would be good as well. Let people take something from here with them to keep reminding them of it and make them want to come back.

"You also only cater to the lords. Most, like me, bring their families along, do something to entertain them as well. On top of that, the lords have fiefs to govern, they don't have a lot of time on their hands, but their families do. Take me as an example. I hardly even have to time to see my family, much less disappear with them for a month or two. Sylvia, however... They can come here for several months every year."

Lorist pointed at his large household as he spoke. They were dancing on the edge of the water and playing in the sand. Even his three-year-old son, Anderbael, was joining in. Dilianna watched on as her seven-year-old Waldbeck lead his half-brother around to catch crabs and play with things they spot along the way. Her gaze lingered on the pair for a few moments before it turned to Lorist's other concubines piningly.

"You don't have anything here to make things entertaining and enjoyable for them. Build playgrounds for the children, or slides and other rides in the beach's shallow areas. I heard from some of the locals that certain sea creatures like dolphins are numerous a little further out to sea and often play with fishermen and swimmers. You could organise trips out to go see them or even raise a few here. You should also build a jetty and a hand railing into the deeper waters."

"Why would I build that?"

"Are you stupid? Did you not notice many of the people here play in the shallows but never go into the sea? Most of them come from inland, many haven't seen the ocean like this before. The open blue awes them and scares them at the same time. Many can't swim but don't want to learn. If you make a jetty they can experience the feeling of the open sea around them without being in the water. And the hand railing will give people the confidence to go deeper into the sea without needing to swim; they can just hold on to the railing."

Kenmays's face reddened. He had thought he'd thought of everything, but Lorist easily pointed out a dozen things he'd missed.

"I'll work on it immediately. Anything else?"

Lorist motioned at the maidservants with his eyes. "Isn't their clothing a little odd?"

"Huh? I don't think so. It's standard servant clothing. Is it not sexy enough?"

"Oh? Are you interested? You don't have to hold back. I can have curtains put up quickly."

"Screw you!" Lorist grabbed a strawberry and flung it at Kenmays's head, "I'm not a dog in heat like you! This is serious business talk. Yes they're wearing standard uniforms, but it's inappropriate for the setting. The guests wear only shorts or undergarments. Some of the kids are even naked. The whole atmosphere is one of relaxation and unrestrained play and enjoyment. The servants destroy that atmosphere with their formal clothes."

"You're right," Kenmays agreed, wiping the strawberry juice off his nose, "We're not hosting a formal occasion like a ball. We can have them walk around naked. I'm sure it'll draw even more people—"

"Fool! Are you trying to start another Paradise Gathering? I literally just told you to stop catering to the men only! Just let them dress more casually so they help create the relaxing, playful atmosphere you're going for here. They could even be a part of the attraction."

"But... but how can I make the maidservants into attractions?" Kenmays said in deep thought, "Maybe let them wear clothes made of only thin veils? I remember the

servant at Princess Carey's Paradise Gathering used to dress like that..."

"Give me a beastskin and a pencil!" Lorist barked, his patience running thin with his perverse companion.

He sketched a few simple designs; one-pieces, bikinis, half-n-halves and so on. Kenmays's eyes lit up as he saw the designs take shape.

"Wonderful! I never thought covering up could be more sexy than revealing! I never new you had a talent for clothing design! You learn something new every day..."

"I'll have the tailors rush these out as quickly as possible."

Lorist didn't know how to react.

"...Make a few with the same kind of cloth for the maidservants. As for the nobles' wives, they are more conservative, so just use silk to make the last one-piece design that only exposes their calves and arms so it'll be easier to play in the water. Best make the embroidery and patterns different too."

Kenmays snatched the beastskin and rushed off. He stumbled to a halt halfway out of the pavilion.

"What should I call these?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

"Kenmays bathing suits."

*I'll let him take credit for this. I don't have the energy to deal with the commotion this'll cause. He already has a reputation as a scandal and a flirt, it makes sense he'd come up with something like this...*

Grindia's first bikinis made their appearance the next morning. It cause quite the commotion among the nobles. The lords couldn't help but stare lustfully at the bashful, semi-covered maidservants. If not for their families' presence, they'd have turned the entire beach into a Paradise Gathering. Lorist struggled to hold his laughter as he watched the scene unfold. He didn't fail to enjoy the alluring figures now unveiled on the beach either.

'This,' he concluded, 'was the way to spend a summer.'

He had several duels with his laughter on the way back to his castle when he saw a number of lords walking around awkwardly, bruised and beaten. He had hidden his admiration well so he didn't suffer at his wife's hands as much as those nobles. He did not come away unscathed, however. Sylvia stuck to him like wet clothing, she didn't even let the maidservants serve him.

His lovers finally mustered their courage on the second day to wear the new suits. They weren't bold enough for the bikinis, though, they settled for one-pieces. They were not the only ones. Most of the other nobles' wives were also wearing the bathing suits. The most daring chose suits that revealed arms and even, almost scandalously, thighs.

*That's what a beach should look like!* Lorist shouted silently. His wife and concubines had tortured him the previous night. His vitality was non-existent today, so the scene he currently witnessed was a welcome recharge.

"Your Grace, Your Grace! Wake up!"

"What's wrong?"

"His Majesty is about to arrive. Duke Kenmays wishes you join him for the reception."

"Huh? I thought His Majesty said he didn't have time for such frivolity?" Lorist crawled up and rubbed his face.

He secretly gazed amorously at the ill-covered servant. Her face, which she did her best to hide, was as red as strawberries.

"Lead the way."

The two dukes awaited the king's arrival in the palace garden. Dukes Fisablen, Shazin, Felim, Forund, Handra, and Shabaj accompanied them along with two dozen marquises and counts. Lorist hadn't dressed formally like the rest. The weather was just too hot, he had no intention of sweating on his vacation. He just threw on some dry shorts, wrapped a towel around his shoulders, and stood with two sandals on his feet. His attire drew countless awkward stares.

His grandfather-in-law, who stood next to him, couldn't stop gaping at him secretly.

"What are you looking at?" Lorist asked.

"Don't you think this is a little too impolite? He's our king. You have to show him at least some respect."

"It's not like I asked him to come. I came here to enjoy myself, not to stand in the sun and wait for him. Don't come here if you want to talk about the kingdom's affairs! Sheesh, can't you guys let me enjoy my vacation in peace?"

The old man couldn't help but laugh.

"For once, you make sense. I cannot argue."

The duke was still trying to recover his composure when the trotting of horses echoed into the garden. Augustus strode in atop his horse accompanied by Kenmays and his guards.

He stopped his approach halfway and stared at Lorist.

"Locke, what's going on?"

"We're here to enjoy our vacation, Your Majesty. What else would you wear on the beach? We will return to the beach after receiving you anyway, so we might as well spare our clothes."

"This..."

Augustus's words faded into laughter as he tried to reply. He dismounted and gave Lorist a hug. He tossed his cloak aside and stripped to his underpants.

"What are you doing, Your Majesty?!" everyone shouted, their jaws paving the ground.

"Locke's right. It's only natural to wear less when you are on vacation. Duke Kenmays, bring me some slippers and a towel," chirped Augustus.

"Immediately, Your Majesty."

The other nobles didn't hold back either. Soon clothes littered the garden and things started looking like a Paradise Gathering after all.

"Come, Brother Locke, show me around. I haven't had a chance to visit yet despite this place's fame."

Augusto acted really familiar with Lorist, like they were real brothers. The other lords gazed at the pair enviously.

*What was that saying again? When someone is being polite, they have a favor to ask. I wonder what in the world Augusto is planning this time,* Lorist sighed.

# Chapter 457

## Refusal

"Whoa..."

The bikini-wearing maidservants shocked even the usually steady Augustus. His gaze wandered to Lorist.

"I finally understand why you didn't want to wear those gaudy robes... Stripping is very troublesome, yes?"

Lorist did not expect the king to say that.

"This is Platinum Beach, they are House Kenmays maidservants. Are you okay doing the deed in front of so many even if the servants are willing?"

Augustus shrugged.

"You can find a way. The tents around the beach must be your lodging, correct? They are most alluring in their current garb. They match the scenery perfectly."

Augustus was a few centimeters taller than Lorist. The two had the same fit figure. However, compared to the scar-ridden duke, the king's handsomeness and fair unmarred skin caught the maidservants' attention far more effectively. When they learned of his identity, they stepped forward to serve him with fire in their eyes. They flirted with everything they did, whether it was walking, replacing a tray, or filling a glance. It was quite likely that, if not for the many guests, they would have dragged him to a nearby tent themselves.

Augustus didn't try to resist or object either. Lorist just sat, giggles swallowed, watching the play. Since Augustus had said they were here to have fun, they did as they pleased. Only Lorist stayed to accompany him. No noble worth his wit would step in and interrupt the two most powerful men in the kingdom. Perhaps they were discussing something paramount.

Lorist dismissed the servants when they were done.

"Locke, do you really like to see me make a fool of myself?"

"I don't. You are the king. The servants don't meet someone of your stature often. Their enthusiasm is understandable. Besides, it didn't look like you were objecting much. I can't match your fair skin, anyway. My hard life has left me scar-ridden, so it's only natural that they have more enthusiasm for you than me."

"Haha, you like to joke, don't you?" Auguslo laughed dryly a couple of times, "Oh, I heard House Norton lent Duke Forund seven million gold Fordes to develop Yungechandler. The term is ten years and ten million gold Fordes will have to be repaid?"

"Yes. I must apologize in advance if Your Majesty would like to borrow money as well. This loan took up most of our funds. We will not have any money to lend until this current loan is repaid."

Lorist wasn't the least surprised Auguslo got wind of this deal.

"That can't be. Seven million is enough to dry up your treasury? I could have offered to double your loan in ten years."

"Don't make these kinds of jokes, Your Majesty. I'm sure you understand I'd never lend you money, even if you are the king."

"Why not?"

"Duke Forund borrowed money to develop the economy of his dominion and improve the lives of his subjects. In ten years, our products will have a market in a developed province. If I lend money to you, you'd use it for war. It's a massive risk. You might break even if you win, but I lose everything if you don't. Duke Kenmays did tell me we could double our loan in three years if you win, but the risk is just too great.

"Business, too, is war. While there are many that can imagine its profits, most either can't or won't think about the risk of failing. Take the merchants and nobles who invested blindly into the factories in my dominion. Many suffered heavy losses and three even committed suicide because of their debts. THAT's why Duke Kenmays only resells materials

"Sometimes, when there are too many products, they will cause economic disaster. That is why I am willing to spend ten years to build up a market. We want another

outlet to sell our products. The money we loan will go towards this goal. It is a safe investment. We're not even giving them much of the money immediately. They're getting it in steady installments over several years."

"Fine. Please don't lecture economics now. I was just bringing it up casually. I won't really borrow any money. I know you won't give me any face, I won't bother to ask. You are the man that brings me the most sleepless nights, but I cannot help but admire your single-minded dedication to developing your fiefs. I must admit not even a king can match you in that regard."

"You praise me too highly, Your Majesty."

"But... do you really think so badly of my efforts? You know what I'm talking about. Be frank."

Lorist shook his head.

"The Union is now very powerful, they're a match even for the Empire during its heyday. The difference between the kingdom and the Union of today is no different from the Union as it was compared to the Empire a century ago. We cannot match them, Your Majesty. You have received up-to-date reports from the Union, yes?"

Augusto

"Even you must be surprised by their war with the coalition's outcome. The four year war didn't just not bring them to their knees, they came out victorious. They almost doubled their strength and have a new ally of about equal strength. The most important thing, however, is they forced the trade routes open again. Their economy is back on track and their coffers filling up once more.

"They have the windstorm sword saint and nearly a hundred blademasters now. Andinaq had less than twenty blademasters by comparison and no sword saints.

"Each of the seven main guilds have their own armies and they've been trained into elites in this war. The smaller guilds are weaker, but together they still contribute 300 thousand men. All-in-all the Union has at least half a million soldiers.

"Even with years of preparation you've only gathered 300 thousand, and they're nowhere near as well-trained as their Union counterparts. If you threw in every garrison under your command in the kingdom, you'll only match them. If myself and

the other dukes join in, you have 800 thousand. But they can't match the Union's experienced troops.

"At best we'll be on par. But it's more likely that, even with a 300 thousand lead, we'll be fighting uphill. On top of that you have to remember that the Union has vast stretches of developed land with a strong economy, our lands — save The Northlands — have been ravaged by war and can't support a prolonged war. You need at least a decade of focused development to fix that."

Auguslo's resolve wavered, though only momentarily.

"No, Locke, you're wrong. Now is the best time to strike. I cannot miss this. We might catch up to where the Union is now in ten years of development, but they will have continued to strengthen as well. The gap will only get wider. I must use this chance to take back our provinces and restore the empire!"

"Oh? Best time?"

"The Union will continue to view us as an enemy, a threat, even if we make no moves to take back our land."

Auguslo's words were true. The Empire had shattered into three kingdoms and numerous duchies and had no official heir, but the Union always held more suspicion and caution for Andinaq than the other splinters. Trade embargos were everywhere. Auguslo was also incredibly hostile towards the Union.

"You know the situation in that part of the continent. The fighting has stopped, but a true end to the war is still not certain. Until negotiations finish, the majority of the Union's forces will be in Chikdor lands, thousands of kilometers away from the Union proper. Three of the Union's four main legions will return and strengthen their borders with us."

"It's simple. When Andinaq wiped out the four central duchies, Madras, and Iblia, the Union's trade routes there were cut off. They will try to force us to open the trade routes. You know my temperament, do you think I will yield? This is not a war we can avoid, and now is the best time to strike.

"Even if I were willing to open the trade routes, it would have to be to a fair deal, and we both know they would never give us that. Certainly not now that they think they are so powerful."

Lorist had to admit that Auguslo spoke sense. It seemed the king was not as blind as he had first thought. The question was why House Norton should participate in this war. Sacrificing his subjects for the king's ambition was foolish. The king could offer him nothing to make it worth his while. There was no rank above duke that was not king, so there could be no promotions. And praise was far from enough.

"I'll admit you have good reasoning behind your decision, but I will have no part in this war. My ambitions do not stretch beyond my borders as yours do. My oath is to ensure a good and peaceful life for my subjects. I have lived by this oath from the moment I set my first foot on the road back home from Morante and I will not break it now. I will live in peace with my wife and watch my children grow up.

"Even if you manage to convince my allies to take up arms, mine will stay in the armory. I remain convinced this war holds no benefits for the kingdom. Of course, if we are attacked I will defend the kingdom, but I will not march beyond its borders. It is unwise to start a fight we cannot win."

The king was severely displeased. Luckily no one had heard this refusal, so his reputation was not harmed. He had prepared himself for this as well. He knew the duke was not easily persuaded. A smile returned to his face naturally.

"We came here to have fun, so let us not spoil the mood with serious talk. Come, let us drink some more. I heard you swim pretty well. Care to teach me?"

"I'm glad to be of service."

Auguslo was really busy in the following days tending the other nobles. This was supposed to be a vacation, but Lorist felt the atmosphere slowly stale. Even the nobles' families slowly lost their relaxed moods. A few nobles packed and returned home. Their grim expression betrayed the thoughts on everyone's minds: war was on the horizon.

Lorist was quite curious. The 9th month was on them. Rallying the army would take at least two months. It would be well into winter before they could do anything.

*Don't tell me Auguslo is planning to start the war in mid-winter? Surely not. Even if he purchased all the beastskins from me to make winter clothing, he can only make 30 thousand sets at best. Going against the Union with just that is suicide.*

Kenmays, Felim, and Shazin came to visit him. He could tell they'd come to an

agreement with Augustus.

"I will not discuss the war. I already refused the king directly. I will not listen to news of the war either. I will not take part and that's final."

# Chapter 458

## Lorist's Considerations

Though it was late, Lorist couldn't fall asleep. He lay on the inclined chairs under the grapevine and let the silvery moonlight shine through the leaves and dance on his skin.

*Why am I not willing to deploy troops? Lorist thought, Because I am thinking about the house's future. I admit Augustus is talented and has a good eye. He can see things clearly and grasp opportunities as they come. But...*

Augustus was determined to take the provinces while the Union's army was held up in Chikdor's territory before the war formally ended and they returned. The Union couldn't turn their forces and march them north while the accords were still unsigned in the south. The only thing preventing open war from breaking out again was their presence in the region. If that went away, the remaining coalition members would lash out. Under these circumstances, the Union had no choice but to negotiate with the king.

While Augustus sounded audacious, he wasn't prepared to take back the provinces that had joined the Union of their own accord, such as Lormo. He couldn't go too far since he was relying on the Union's willingness to negotiate. If he insulted them too much, and they decided to duke it out, he would lose.

As Lorist had said, the Union wasn't the small merchant state it had been during its war with the empire. It was now a superpower that stood near the peak on the continent. It had rich and developed land while Andinaq was barely anything more than a barren wasteland. The kingdom inherited the empire's legacy, but not its power.

This moment when the Union was distracted was a great opportunity. It was a moment that would vanish the instant the Union signed the accords with Jigda and the coalition. He would instead enjoy the Union's full attention and lose his last hope of re-establishing the empire.

The empire's first prince broke the empire when he rebelled. His entire kingdom, spanning Kanbona, Bodolger, and Anderwoff was now under Union occupation. Bodolger, which boasted a huge mining industry, was now Wessia's territory. The

lands bordering Andinaq in the north of the kingdom had also been turned into the puppet duchy Zitram.

Coupled with the two provinces in Lormo that joined the Union, the state occupied five of the empire's old provinces. The king's ambitions would never be fulfilled until they were retaken. While Lormo was a difficult goal, the three provinces occupied by the Union weren't, so he had to, at the very least, get them.

He planned to take the two provinces by force, then fortify the border with Lormo and annex the duchy in the peace negotiations. If he could do this, he would have restored the empire. He could then reform the empire proper, make his family the imperial family again and write his name in the history books as the second founder of the empire.

His plan sounded sound, but nothing was certain. Things could easily go just bad as they could good. Lorist admitted the plan would catch the Union of guard and the minimum goals of taking the three provinces would likely be achieved, but the negotiations thereafter were likely to either fall apart completely or end with far fewer benefits than the king hoped for. Even if Augustuslo agreed to reopen the trade routes, the Union would not agree to give up Lormo. He might not even manage to get them to the negotiation table. The Union knew they were far more capable of fighting a drawn out war than Andinaq, even better if it was a war fought with stares and standing armies rather than battles. Their economy could soak up the losses, Andinaq's couldn't.

He had advised the king against this several times. The best scenario was that they negotiated and came to a compromise that led to peace but disappointed Augustuslo. The bad outcome was that the Union simply sat across from the border and waited for Andinaq to collapse under the costs of maintaining such a massive army. But the worst case was that they retaliated with force. There was no way they wouldn't deploy their sword saint if they did, and Andinaq had nothing to counter.

Augustuslo was convinced the sword saint wouldn't go to the front, especially not to target him. He was protected by thousands of veteran soldiers! He believed that, even if he did come out, he would just die eventually.

The king had convinced Kenmays to deploy his troops by promising to make the salt merchant committee the empire's sole business partner. They would be the only guild officially endorsed and supported by the empire and the imperial family. They would

get first pick of any business or contract the empire had to offer.

The king promised Felim migrants, financial aid, and tax rebates and exemptions to get him to agree to join the campaign. It helped that Felim was a knight at heart, not a lord. He lived for war and pillaging, not management and careful governing.

Shazin also used to be a knight. Though he was a duke, he governed a piece of land the size of a county. He was still want for a proper duchy. Auguslo gave him written oath that, should he provide his forces, and Auguslo succeed in establishing the empire again, he would get Kribia, the province he had wanted all along. The king's oath and letter of guarantee, the poor fool was roped in yet again.

Auguslo might have thought the three houses would convince Lorist to join, but he would not even listen to their appeals. There was nothing he needed from the king, nor anything the king could offer. The only way he could go from where he was independence, but Auguslo would never agree. He would march every two-legged man in the kingdom on the duchy before he would accept a declaration of independence. Lorist wasn't afraid of fighting him if it came to it, he would win without a doubt, he just had no interest in being called a traitor.

Duke Forund had visited him earlier. He told him he had agreed to deploy his men. The king had promised to return his original duchy to him once the empire was reformed. The land there contained two hundred years of his family's roots, they had built the Summer Palace, even his family mausoleum stood there, he would do anything to get it back.

This through their previous agreement down the drain. The duke wouldn't hold on to Yungechandler as well as his old territory, he would be trading it in. Auguslo would get the province back, and he would not abide by the agreement between the two dukes. The investments made thus far were worthless to the house now, there was no reason to keep throwing money down the drain.

The duke didn't want everything to be canceled, however. He didn't know if the war would end well for the kingdom, and, in that case, he wished to resume the programme. Lorist assured him he was willing to only put the programme on hold and not cancel it outright. The duke was incredibly grateful. He told Lorist that the same offer had been made to Madras, who agreed immediately.

Among the four dukes, Houses Forund, Handra, and Farkel were the first nobles

entitled by the founding emperor, Krissen I. Their houses made countless contributions, gradually raising their titles to that of duke despite being only low nobles at first. It was easy to see why they were so sentimental about their territories. Auguslo's move made them willing to serve him despite their animosity. Lorist was surprised, impressed, and slightly concerned. It was never a good thing to have a competent rival.

As for Shabaj, his house was moved to their former lands by Krissen VI and weren't as attached to it. Additionally, it was obvious how badly Jigzai was treated by the alliance and Fisablen. They didn't feel like going back to clean up the mess. Auguslo instead offered them Bodolger. As he shared the same fate as Duke Handra, the duke made peace with Auguslo and agreed to mobilize his forces.

Currently, apart from Duke Fisablen — whose conditions were still unknown — only Lorist had not jumped on the bandwagon. He counted six dukes with 280 thousand men and Auguslo's own 500 thousand made 800 thousand already. If Fisablen joined them Auguslo might have up to a million men.

No wonder the king was so confident. It wasn't impossible that the Union would be wary of a war against a million men and be willing to negotiate. It was far from certain, or even likely, though. And if they decided to continue the war, the million-strong army would bleed the kingdom dry in two years at most. Even if they did agree to negotiate, if the negotiations weren't completed within two years, Auguslo would still run dry and have to agree to whatever was on the table at the time.

Auguslo's decision shocked everyone who heard about it. Luckily there wasn't the added shock of Lorist participating. The primary reason for his decision to stay out of the war wasn't that he thought it would likely end badly, though he did think that, it was that he knew he would be next. Auguslo would never settle for having a duke that could rival him in his kingdom. He would turn on Lorist the moment the war ended and not stop either outright conflict or sabotage and subterfuge until he felt the duke was sufficiently suppressed and obedient.

Lorist actually hoped the campaign was a massive failure. A successful conclusion to the war would signal the start of a protracted cold war, possible even a hot one, between him and the king. But, regardless of his disdain for the reckless man, he had to respect his blind determination to his ambitions.

'Where there's a will, there's a way; the beast that lies in waiting will eventually catch

its prey. The heavens won't disappoint hard workers; even a desperate rat can swallow a cat.' Lorist's grandfather from his previous life used to quote these often. 'Always study hard... ', 'Always aim high... '. Auguslo must have been one of his cousins from his previous life, he epitomized his grandfather's teachings. He stood up from one failure after another unwaveringly and always continued to walk on the path he drew for himself. There was a certain point, however, at which determination became foolishness. Lorist wasn't sure on which side of that point the king stood.

*Having a rival like Auguslo is troublesome...*

As his liege, he had learned from his lessons. He had a good grasp of his vassal's temperament and stopped at the right point whenever things were getting uncomfortable. They appeared amiable, even close, on the surface, but they both knew how guarded each was against the other.

Take the king's move on Duke Forund. He appeared to not mind Lorist refusing to join the war, but went and vaporized Lorist's agreement with the duke. It was clearly a show of force. The king could have used any number of conditions to get the duke to participate, but he just to happen to choose the one that screwed Lorist over.

Lorist would not participate no matter what the king offered because the latter could offer nothing short of independence that was worth anything. But he knew how stubborn the man was. He would not let Lorist sit by idly. The only reason he hadn't made his move yet was because he was still trying to find out how he could rope him in.

Lorist got up and went for a walk, feeling the onset of a headache. Half an hour in a light breeze blew by and Lorist stopped dead in his tracks.

"Who's there?! Come out!"

Jinolio, who stood beside him, drew his sword and stepped in front of his lord. A figure appeared from the man-made hill further ahead.

"It's me," Duke Fisablen's voice echoed down the hill.

# Chapter 459

## Secret Plot

Duke Fisablen revealed himself to the pair. He stood clad in a nightgown and slippers. Had no weapon. It looked like he two had just gotten out of bed to take a stroll.

Lorist patted Jinolio's shoulder.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"Haha, I couldn't sleep. I decided to come out for a walk. The moon is beautiful tonight. I wandered over without realizing," the duke answered sincerely.

Lorist pouted slightly and glared at the duke oddly.

*Who are you kidding, old man? Your villa is three buildings away. You're telling me you wandered by three buildings to my particular garden by happenstance, without noticing? And did so whilst avoiding my guards? Is this your idea of a casual walk? It's blindingly obvious you want to talk to me in secret.*

"Let's head to the study."

Jinolio looked like a brute, but actually had quite sharp senses and a strong wit. He entered the study first and lit the candles before closing the curtains.

"Does Your Grace need anything else?"

"Bring us food... and a few bottles of wine from the cellar. You may rest thereafter, it's getting late," said Lorist.

Jinolio acknowledged and left. Duke Fisablen looked around awe-filled.

"Duke Kenmays is more respectful to you than he is to His Majesty. Apart from giving you the best villa, he even hid all the fine wine in the cellar. He made His Majesty stay in an inferior residence instead..."

Augusto arrived unannounced a few days earlier. Normally, the most lavish residence should be offered to him. But because he came without informing anyone, Lorist had already occupied the best villa. Kenmays didn't bring it up and instead gave his personal villa to the king. Everyone was expecting a commotion but was left speechless. Nobody dared to get Lorist to move out for Augusto, nor did the latter mind it. He told the other nobles that since he came late as a passing guest, there was nothing he could complain about since Kenmays had moved out of his own villa on his behalf.

Everyone knew Lorist wouldn't refuse to move out of his villa if asked, but would leave for The Northlands when he did. Augusto could not let him do this, since his plot would not have time to be put into motion if that happened.

"Do you know how many bottles of wine Kenmays drank and pilfered from my place? It can't compare to how many you took, but it was at least half as much."

He offered the duke a seat, which the latter accepted. He'd interacted with the duke a few times now and knew that, despite being a rank 3 blademaker, he was a lustful alcoholic. He didn't know how he became a blademaker. He was just like Kenmays. He couldn't go into Lorist's study to drink there, but had his own ways. He would disappear sometime during the final night of the new year's celebrations and be found near the cellar.

Lorist hadn't bought his collection. They were spoils of war. Most were from his conquest of Hanayabarta. He'd brought back ten thousand bottles. He had wanted to split it with his men, but Charade wouldn't let him. Even the cheapest wine was several gold Fordes per bottle; the most expensive could go for upwards of three thousand.

In the years since, between the celebrations and Lorist's normal consumption, there weren't many left. And the last couple of years Fisablen had stolen a good portion of what there still was... He would steal at least three bottles every day while he was present.

Three hundred bottles went missing every time he visited. Spiel, who was responsible for keeping an inventory of the cellar, cursed the bastard to hell and back every time.

"Why are you here in the middle of the night?" asked Lorist as he pulled up a chair.

"Nothing, I was really just taking a walk."

"Do you think I'm gullible?"

Fisablen slumped into the couch.

"I had nothing serious in mind. I just wanted to ask why you won't take part in the war."

"Do you even have to ask that? Why would I send my men to die for the king? He gave you guys great deals, sure, but what has he offered me? He can't offer me riches, he's poorer than me. He can't offer me a promotion, I'm just one step below him. And he will never offer me more land, not even in his testament. I will not accept talk of 'restoring the empire' and 'building honor through contributions'. I will not send my men to their deaths in a war that does not concern them."

"I see. You make sense," agreed the duke.

This was the keystone of any and every noble decision — benefits. Relations were only sour when there were conflicts of interest. Even if an exchange promised benefit, they would carefully weigh everything up, even if the other guy was their brother or father or son. People who honestly believed in loyalty and generosity were known as fools.

"What did His Majesty offer you?"

"I haven't agreed to mobilize," replied Fisablen.

"What?! Why not?"

Fisablen, whom Lorist thought would be the first to answer Augustus's call, actually hadn't agreed to mobilize. Lorist's curiosity was piqued.

"I told His Majesty that if you don't deploy, neither can I. We've always considered each other great rivals. How can I leave my home unguarded if all your forces are sitting on our border?"

"You... Pops, I am being roasted already. And now you're using me as a frying pan?!"

The duke hadn't refused because he honestly believed he couldn't leave his demesne open to Lorist. He obviously didn't like the conditions and Lorist's refusal was just a good excuse.

"Well played. Then again, do you think His Majesty will believe you?"

"I don't know. I know I do."

Lorist gave the old man a thumbs up.

"Old Man, you're far too shameless. You've been coming to the new year's celebration and stealing my wine. Do you think His Majesty doesn't know? What kind of fool do you think he is?"

"So what? Don't forget, I'm Sylvia's grandfather. What's wrong with visiting my granddaughter? Besides, the king doesn't care about me drinking my granddaughter's wine, he's worried that we're working together now. I've already admitted to him that the alliance forces me to buy lots of daily necessities and refuses to sell me military equipment. He's asked me to endure and avoid conflict, to consider the bigger picture..."

Lorist was speechless.

*As expected from the old fox. He managed to cut our relation clear with just a few words. He even spun it so he is only attending our new year's celebration out of obligation. He made it sound like we're working together to suppress him. And of course that dimwitted fool believes him...*

Lorist sighed.

"You really are frivolous. You were the mastermind behind the second prince's founding of Iblia, and yet the king believes you more than he does my loyal house. How ridiculous..."

"Hahaha..." Fisablen wanted to say something, but a knocked on silenced him.

Jinolio entered with a few bottles of wine. A couple of servants trailed behind him with some snacks. Lorist dismissed them when they were done. Lorist poured himself and the duke each a cup.

"Tell me, what unacceptable offer did the king make?"

"He promised another 200 thousand civilians."

Lorist snickered.

"I figured it would be something like that. He can't come up with anything better than that. Don't forget that if House Norton ever falls, House Fisablen will be the next biggest thing on His Majesty's mind."

"That's why I used you as an excuse. If the sky falls, you'll be there to bear it for me. He actually thought he could get me to slave away for just 200 thousand people. He dreams big."

"Then tell me, what do you want?"

"I want a province in the inner kingdom."

"Ugh..." Lorist started so bad he almost flung his cup at his grandfather-in-law. "—Is that even possible? Dream on, Old Man. It's about time you went to wash up and sleep. You're drunk."

"Of course it's possible. The king will agree if you'll cooperate. I haven't even drunk a bottle yet. How could I be drunk?"

"That so? You sure sound like you're drunk. Think about it, you're just like me. We each have one hereditary title and two territories we only govern. Aren't we big enough already in his eyes?" mocked Lorist.

"That's why this is the perfect opportunity. We both know what he plans. It's entirely possible no huge conflict will break out. He's trying to pressure them to the negotiation table with his million-strong army. The plan has a decent chance of succeeding so the risk isn't too great. The problem is we need benefits he isn't really willing to offer. He will, however, have no chance but to give in if we work together."

"I will not take part in this war and that's final."

"So you're not interested in Wild Husbandry?"

"Haha, and what of it if I am? His Majesty won't give it to me. What are you planning? Don't forget Wild Husbandry is technically yours."

"Something that will benefit us both. The king will come to negotiate with you again soon. Just tell him you want Wild Husbandry."

"You make it sound simple. How will I justify this?"

"Foolish kid! Just tell him you want it as a buffer between us. If you have it no one can attack directly at your core territories. It's entirely in line with your wants. As long as you insist, the king will eventually have to give in."

Lorist smiled.

"And you'll ask for an inner province as compensation for giving up Wild Husbandry. There's still one thing I don't get. You're developing the north-east very well. Why do you want an inner province? Splitting your house might make you an easy target."

"You'll understand the real troubles of a family head when House Norton's branch families get stronger. If the house were in an inner province I would have sent the branch families to the plains. But we aren't so I can't.

"My house has a thousand members at least. Naturally there are both good and bad apples. And everyone is constantly fighting for a better footing. Even as the rightful lord and title holder, I can only do so much without the family's permission. I want to kick the bad apples to the inner province. Sending them there will make it look like we're strengthening our bloodline by spreading out, but it's actually a purge."

Duke Fisablen downed the last of the wine and stood up, holding two more bottles in his hand.

"Well, now you're informed, it's time I left. Just remember to insist on Wild Husbandry. The king will come to me and I'll deal with the rest. I won't give him a choice, hehe, he'll have to agree to my conditions as well. He has no confidence in this war without us!"

Fisablen left as unnoticed as he came. Lorist's study was illuminated until daybreak.

# Chapter 460

## Deal Sealed

"Why go to such length so we will do something we have no desire to do? Even without House Norton, you still have a million-strong army. You should have no trouble achieving your strategic objectives," advised Lorist with a troubled smile.

"Locke, my friend, are you really going to sit back and watch the war? You'll let House Norton be nothing but a spectator? What if your descendants ask about this? Would you tell them you did nothing but watch the show?"

Lorist rubbed the sides of his arms; he could feel the goosebumps.

"Stop. Doesn't that sound gross to you? It's making my hair stand on end! When did Your Majesty become a traveling poet? I will tell my descendants I was watching a bunch of fools tumbling around fighting each other, and it was quite a show."

"You..."

Auguslo glared angrily, not that the latter minded. He pretended to not notice anything.

"House Norton must deploy their forces. As Duke of The Northlands, you have to contribute to the kingdom!"

"Alright. As Duke of The Northlands, I am willing to serve the kingdom. How about this, I'll go to the front-lines myself and charge the enemy myself. You may order me around as your vassal, but you have no right to order the needless sacrifice of my men. By the same token that you may order my person around, I may refuse any unreasonable orders where my subjects and domain is concerned."

"Ugh..."

Auguslo tried his best to release his anger. Lorist's argument was airtight. He couldn't do anything to him.

*What's this about going to the front-lines yourself? It sounds impressive but it's just an excuse to avoid deploying your troops! You think waving your sword and killing a soldier or two means you've fulfilled your obligations? You think you can just go back and watch the rest of the fight? How's that different from not doing anything at all?*

"Fine, Brother Locke, tell me what you want. As long as it's something reasonable, I will agree."

Auguslo seemed to have surrendered. All would be well as long as Lorist agreed to deploy. The conditions could be discussed later. In the worst-case scenario, he could just delay the fulfillment of his promise the best he could.

"I want a sense of security."

"Sense of security?" Auguslo's eyes widened.

*The hell is that? I haven't heard of anyone asking for this before.*

"If you agree to give me Wild Husbandry, I can send my men to war."

"Wild Husbandry?! Impossible!"

"Then there is nothing more to be said. Jinolio, please see His Majesty ou--"

"Wait! Brother Locke, we can talk about this." *What the hell?! You can't send people off without giving them a chance to respond! Nobody negotiates like this!*

"I return to The Northlands tomorrow. I wish you success in your campaign. Godspeed," said Lorist as he shook his head.

"No, Brother Locke, please tell me what you meant by safety. What does this have to do with you wanting Wild Husbandry?"

The king wouldn't leave until he understood what was going on. Lorist glared at the man like he was an utter idiot.

"Locke, what's the meaning of this?"

"If you don't understand, please turn back and take a look at the map," Lorist sighed deeply.

"Map?" Augusto turned around and saw a map of House Norton's dominion on the wall. Different territories were rendered in different colors. What did they mean?

Augusto got up and walked over.

*Hmm, The Northlands is green, the ocean blue, Delamock and Winston light green, and Southern and Sidgler light yellow. The provinces around the capital and the eleven central provinces are golden yellow. Only House Fisablen's Eastwild and Goldcreek are dark red. Wild Husbandry is light red. Magical Dragon Mountains and the wildlands are gray-black.*

*What is this?*

Augusto soon noticed the color legend on the bottom of the map. Green was for the safest areas under the Lorist's direct inheritory rule, mostly the duchy. Light green was for safe areas only under Lorist's jurisdiction. Blue was the ocean. Yellow marked the safe territories of allies, golden yellow territories under the royal family. Dark red areas were danger zones, and light red areas those to be monitored closely. Grayish-black zones were unexplored frontiers, the threat level of which was unknown.

The map's clarity was immediately apparent. He soon felt a little uncomfortable.

"Why are the areas under my control not marked as safe areas or those of allies?"

"You tell me, Your Majesty. These categorisations aren't decided on arbitrarily, nor did I or any of my people have a hand in deciding what went where. This map was drawn based on feedback from hundreds, if not thousands, of merchants. This is how they evaluate the different areas based on their security and stability."

Augusto couldn't find a retort. He understood that due to his efforts to rally his forces, he had focused most of his attention on the military. He hadn't paid attention to the civil side of his rule. It was good enough that his subjects stayed alive so they could join his army. Crimes like robbery and murder had gone unchecked and grown rampant. No wonder his lands were mediocly rated at best. One could only feel relatively safe if one carried a weapon on ones person at all times. Merchants could not operate without escorts and had to travel in large convoys.

He finally understood what Lorist meant by 'sense of security' and how it related to his desire for Wild Husbandry. The Northlands had four routes connecting it to the outside world. The maritime route started in Northsea. The three others were over

land. One went through Winston and one through Delamock. The final went through Wild Husbandry. Both Winston and Delamock were under Lorist's control. He had worked hard to stabilize the situation, so they were now rated as safe. Only Wild Husbandry was light red, an area of low safety that had to be carefully monitored. The recent war between House Norton and House Fisablen had plunged the province into poverty and lawlessness and without control of the area, Lorist could not feel safe about the crime possibly spilling over into his lands. It was also a route House Fisablen could use to attack him, a place where he had no buffer.

*Haha... I didn't think Lorist would really treat Fisablen as his most dangerous enemy even though they've signed a ceasefire. It seems Fisablen's claims about the alliance forcing them to buy daily necessities and open up trade routes were true. They're trying to squeeze all the gold Fisablen gets from Goldcreek. Hmmm, not bad. The more conflicts between them, the deeper their grudges will be. I might get a chance to exploit this if I play my cards right.*

Auguslo paced back and forth in front of the map. He only snapped out of his reverie after several minutes.

"Brother Locke, didn't Fisablen sign an armistice with you? I also heard trade is doing really well. You are both Andinaq nobility, you've even married the duke's granddaughter. I don't understand why you still see Fisablen as your enemy. Don't you think this is inappropriate?"

It was quite unnecessary for Lorist to want Wild Husbandry.

*He just has to cut the suspension bridge. With the bridge gone, Fisablen can't attack him without either spending several months building another bridge, or detouring through a lot of Norton land. Fisablen has long withdrawn his forces from the province as well. It's basically yours already. Why do you want to force me to recognize your control formally? Can't we just shut one eye and have a tacit agreement?*

*Even if we ignore the fact that Fisablen has full legal rights to the land, there is no precedent for this, this has never been done before. No noble has ever had more than two territories besides their hereditary fiefs. But you want three? You're just making trouble for me! Wild Husbandry isn't a great province either. It might be a lot of land, but hardly anyone lives there and the few that do are raided by barbarians frequently. My forefathers use to exile people there, but you you actually WANT it? Do you have so much free time you feel like trying to govern that shithole?*

Lorist smirked.

"If not for my alliance forcing Fisablen into a corner, do you think they would be so easy to handle, they would have submitted to you? Have you already forgotten it was Fisablen that drove the founding of Iblia? Do you think you can trust his loyalty just because you married one of his offspring?"

"House Norton never forgets its enemies. Ceasefire or armistice or not. We remember well they were the ones who sent the barbarians our way, who killed tens of thousands of my people. Fisablen bled my men for Wild Husbandry, now I want to see his face as I tear it from his hands without losing a single drop of blood. I will build a monument to my men there, where he can stare at it across the border as it mocks him from sunrise to sunset and throughout the night.

"I've already contributed greatly to your cause. My endurance of these losses, my making peace with that man... that is my contribution to your war, and it is a far greater contribution than any of my armies can get you on the battlefield. My men will sit patiently at their posts, waiting for our opportunity. Whether you agree to let me take that and or not doesn't matter. One day Fisablen will turn his back on you, and we will march over the river and pry Wild Husbandry from his cold, dead hands."

Auguslo was overcome with joy. He finally caught a glimpse of the true hatred Lorist felt for the duke and finally understood he really wanted the province to placate his conscience and wipe away the shame of his loss there.

*Hahaha! It seems I have nothing to worry about. There's no way he will ever work with Fisablen. This kind of hatred can't be faked. Letting Lorist take Wild Husbandry forcefully will shame Fisablen as well. They'll hate each other to the bone and look for every chance to slit a few throats.*

Trading a useless barren expanse for House Norton's participation in the war and adding trouble to House Fisablen at the same time was ideal. As for the limitation of each house having only one fief and two jurisdictions, Auguslo could circumvent it. The province wasn't technically his, after all. It would not be him, as the king, giving Lorist jurisdiction, he would only be acknowledging the exchange. It would not adversely affect his reputation, and he paid no other price for it either.

It wasn't that simple, however. Since the land was not his, he could not just give it away. He had to convince the rightful juris prudent to hand it over. Luckily, he felt confident

in his ability to convince the duke. He had all the leverage in that relationship. Fisablen was being suppressed by the alliance and could only stand by the king's support. He could just threaten to withdraw it.

He knew the duke would demand compensation, however. How would he compensate the man?

*I can't have Lorist deploy and Fisablen stay. Lorist won't stand for it, even if he has Wild Husbandry. He'll either withdraw from the offer, or only deploy a token force. I need his men to achieve my objectives.*

"I can agree to let you administer Wild Husbandry but the land isn't mine to give. It belongs to Fisablen. I cannot forcefully give you the land either, even as king I do not have the authority or the right to. I'll have to convince Fisablen to do it voluntarily but I promise I'll get him to agree. Just give me three days before you leave, okay?"

Lorist bowed deeply.

"I shall do as Your Majesty pleads. If you can get Fisablen to hand over Wild Husbandry, I will move my men to the front and join your offensive."

Auguslo left in a hurry. Lorist cracked a smile. Perhaps Wild Husbandry was just a barren wasteland in the eyes of others. But to Lorist it was precious trade territory. His most profitable partners were the grassland barbarians. He didn't just want to trade with them, though. He wanted to make them pledge themselves to him and become his subjects. He would nurture them into yet another foreign market for his goods.

The villa complex near Platinum Beach was quite rowdy for the following three days. The nobles learned by gossip of Lorist's conditions. Kenmays, Felim, and Shazin each paid him a visit but he kept silent. Silence, too, however, was an answer.

On the first day, Auguslo went to negotiate with the duke. Rumor had it the old man was so pissed he yanked his sword out of its scabbard and tried to march right over to Lorist's villa.

'Wild Husbandry is MY land. I won't give it to anyone else even if I have to kill them or die for it! That brat is going too far! Let me go kill him!' he was said to have said.

Luckily, he barked loudly but only nibbled. He would not really challenge Lorist.

Augusto only had to put in a sliver of effort to stop the duke. He refused to listen to Augusto's advice however and locked himself in his room for the rest of the day.

The king visited him again the next day. The old man had cooled down somewhat. He listened to the king silently. He didn't say a single word for the whole visit.

The king made his third and final visit on the third day. This time, the old man was far more relaxed. He was willing to give Wild Husbandry and join the campaign if he was enfeoffed a province in the centre of the kingdom.

Augusto agreed after pondering for a few minutes. He didn't promise a territory he currently controlled, however, but one that he would if the war ended well. He promised that, if the first phase of the war was successful, Anderwoff, one of the reclaimed provinces, would be given to Fisablen.

Fisablen wasn't the least bit surprised. Promising to give something in the hands of the enemy was a habit of Augusto's. He agreed, nonetheless, but had him sign a letter of oath. The duke went to Lorist's villa and handed over control of the province formally after he got the king's signed oath. Augusto also signed the document to officiate it. After the procedure, Fisablen flung the quill he used to sign the agreement and left angrily.

On the 32nd day of the 8th month, Year 1786, Duke Fisablen, under the eyes of Andinaq's king, Augusto I and the nobles present, transferred the writ of Wild Husbandry to Duke of The Northlands, Norton Lorist, allowing House Norton to be the only landed noble house to have one direct dominion and three other jurisdictions.

# Chapter 461

## Prepare for War!

15th day of the 9th month, Year 1786. Lorist, just returned from Platinum Beach, called a war council.

"...His Majesty will split the army in two. Our alliance will be in one of them together. We'll attack Anderwoff and Bodolger from Majik. His Majesty will meet up with Dukes Fisablen, Forund, Handra, and Shabaj and the minor nobles and head for the two southeastern provinces.

"He intends to clean up the northeastern area first and eliminate Zitram before striking Kanbona in a three-pronged assault. Lormo's provinces, Malivia and Yamanya, will be won through negotiation. The war will be over once we hold those provinces, and the empire will be whole once again."

Lorist tapped on the large map with his wooden pointer.

"The king is convinced this war will be no more than a year. More accurately, he cannot let it last more than a year. This is where we come in. For this to work, the attack has to happen when the enemy least expects it, and when it can least respond: winter. We are the only ones on the continent who can fight effectively this time of year. The rest are too soft!"

Everyone sneered.

"The king at least has this much wit. He knows Blizzardblitz, the poor imitation of our forces he trained cannot match us. We could have told him this even before he tried though..."

Another round of sneers.

"It's likely we'll have to fight most of this war on our own. I doubt he'll take Kanbona before we're done. We might well have to press into Kanbona and then sweep back north to help him out in Zitram."

"It's nice that he knows we're so much better than him," Charade jeered, "But he's given us the bone and chosen the meat. Don't you think a single province is a little meager for everything we're expected to do?"

Charade wasn't wrong. House Norton had to take two provinces, one of them Bodolger, the current dominion of Wessia, the guild well-known for being the Union's principle weapon supplier. Their army would definitely be well-kitted and fully armored. They had also only deployed a small portion of their army to join the Union's war in the south-east, most of their army still sat in barracks in the cities and on the border. House Norton's forces had the mobility to attack in the dead of winter, but their mobility was largely useless against an enemy that only had to hold the towns in which they sat and didn't have to move out into the frozen winter wilderness.

The officers and commanders chattered amongst themselves in hushed tones. No one liked the deal. Lorist tapped on the table and the voices quieted. If they were allowed to continue, they might even veto his decision to join the war. Loyalty to their king didn't factor into this concern. As far as they were concerned their only sovereign was Lorist.

"Stop complaining. There is nothing more the king is willing to give in return. The man only agreed thanks to Fisablen's machinations. And what is done is done, anyway. Alright, listen up. Here are your assignments. I want everyone to do their best. We cannot have delays in our development projects because of the war, and we cannot be seen to be doing a half-arsed job of our part in the campaign either."

Lorist swept his gaze over his subordinates and vassals.

"Firmrock and Tigersoar will deploy together. You will take Anderwoff as quickly as possible. Spare no one who resists, I want only obedient subjects and corpses left for Fisablen when you move on. Once Anderwoff is taken, Tigersoar will clean it up and hand it over to Fisablen.

"Firmrock will roll straight ahead into Bodolger and take Frederika. Once the forces in Frederika are wiped out Wessia will only have dispersed garrisons and small patrol forces left. They stand no chance at retaking the city so you'll wait for Tigersoar inside. The scattered remains of their forces pose no threat to us so we can take care of them after you regroup."

"I must object, Your Grace," Josk interjected, "Why aren't we deploying Jaeger?"

"We already have control of Wild Husbandry, but the province is a complete mess. Jaeger is to clean it up. Wipe out the gangs and the barbarians roaming and raiding the countryside. I clean province ready for development to greet me when I return from the front-lines. However, don't just kill every barbarian you see. If they're willing to submit and become my subjects, then leave them be. Ideally they'll become no different from our current stock of sedentary subjects. Teach them husbandry, build small towns and settlements for them.

"Kedan, I'm making you the province's administrator. Make this happen..." Lorist ordered as he glanced at the aging man.

"I am not holding Jaeger back because I doubt its abilities in a fight, there is just too much to do, and the weather isn't fitting for Jaeger. It's a light cavalry legion. Horses do not do well on snow, and Tigersoar and Firmrock are much better on foot. Neither of them, on the other hand, can fight the barbarians anywhere near as well as Jaeger can on Wild Husbandry's plains and rolling hills."

"But fighting the barbarians is no fun at all," Josk complained, crestfallen, "I want to fight on a proper front-line again for once."

"Fine, if you can clean everything up in Wild Husbandry before year's end I'll let you join us on the front with a few of your guard."

The man had spent several years training Jaeger by now, so it was only fair he be given a taste of proper action again.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Josk said as he pulled Els along by his collar, "Come on. Let's go finish this quickly."

"Sit down... Sheesh. You have more than enough time, a few hours spent in a meeting won't make you miss the deadline," snapped Charade, "Your Grace, how many men is Fisablen sending out?"

"The duke is deploying as many as last time; one frontier legion and one barbarian reserve legion. He's holding two garrison legions and the second frontier legion back. They won't be full-strength, though. Fisablen told me he plans to pull men from the three to make a 30 thousand strong garrison legion which he'll station in Anderwoff once it's handed over."

"Will this not affect our supply line?" Charade enquired.

Lorist shook his head.

"No. Fisablen has agreed to only move the legion over after the rainy season. They shouldn't arrive before the 6th month next year. They'll be escorting House Fisablen's branch families over.

"He plans to create one marquisate, three counties, seven viscounties, and more than 40 baronies in the province, all of which will be given to members of the branch families. The new legion will also be split between them. They'll pose no threat to us. This is also why Fisablen wants us to clean the province up before they arrive."

"I understand. I can't help but get the disturbing feeling the duke is actually sincere in his desire to keep a good relationship with us. Well, for the duration of this campaign, at least. But are we really going to help the old fox for nothing in return?"

"Of course there will be benefits. Anderwoff has 600 thousand inhabitants. I promised the duke we won't ravage the place. We'll only take the noble's wealth and one sixth of its population."

"Don't the four houses in the alliance tread the same path? Do we have to split this between the four of us?"

"They get nothing. We are all three fighting this war together, true, but they have nothing to do with this conquest or this deal. They will only join in after the rainy season. Since we will take the provinces alone, we get all the benefits. They're only responsible for showing up and using their numbers to pressure the Union during the negotiations. The same actually goes for all the other nobles involved. We and the king are the only ones expected to do any actual fighting."

"I'm still convinced we got the short end of the stick. No wonder the king kept pestering you to join the war. We're fighting almost the entire campaign. We might as well just march in and take everything for ourselves for all the work we do. That blasted king no doubt wants to be able to push all the blame on us if this fails."

"We don't have to pick this bone with him. The enemy can't gather up a force capable of fighting us as equals. Actually, the bulk of our benefits will be here."

Lorist tapped on Bodolger with his pointer. "Frederika is Wessia's headquarters. Everything they own will be ours if we take it. Wealth is only a small part of the benefits we will gain. Talent is the biggest thing I'm aiming for.

"The province's population has exploded to 800 thousand people since they took over. They've moved in thousands of artisans and other skilled labor. Almost the entire guild now lives in and around the city.

"We tried to start trade with the Union about eight years ago, but Wessia crushed our plans. They deal primarily in weaponry and other military equipment, so of course they wouldn't let us encroach on their market. They are both our public and private enemy.

"Why not wipe this pest off the map while we have the chance? Even just the chance to rid ourselves of this nuisance is enough of a reward to deploy. A snake's head should be cut off when you fight it. With the guild having concentrated itself around this one city, we can not just cut off its head in one strike, but toss it into the fire-pit entirely. Even if the Union wins the war in the end, Wessia will be done for. The big-seven will be the big-six when this is over, no matter how it ends."

"How has the king told us to deal with Bodolger and Wessia?"

"The king was too preoccupied with getting Fisablen to agree to the deal to think about that. I suspect he doesn't think we can take Frederika quickly. It does have a 48 thousand strong military presence after all. This is nothing like when he took the city. It was only guarded by about one fifth the forces then.

"Besides, he's already promised the province to Shabaj. Whether the province is in ruins when we let it go or not doesn't affect him at all. Maybe he also thinks we won't dare offend the Union too much and so will restrain our urges. Unfortunately for him, and luckily for us, he knows nothing of our grudge with Wessia."

After a few laughs, a stern expression returned to his face.

"Firmrock will stay in Frederika and oversee our extraction of Wessia's people. The province also has about 800 thousand inhabitants. Strip it down to 300 thousand. I entrust this to you, Potterfang, Malek. Understood?"

The two generals stood up and saluted.

"Understood, Your Grace."

He returned to pointing his stick at the map.

"Today is the 15th of the 9th. We still have three months before we launch our attack. The road is long though. We have to cross Winston, Southern, Rimad, Messen, Jigzai, Freewood, Perolina, Westwood, and Deramak to get to Majik. If not for our ability at traveling on snow and ice, it would have been impossible to be ready in time.

"Camorra, you are in charge of our move to the front-lines. Shadekampf will be your aide. Set up a reliable supply line from here to there in these three months. I want at least one supply depot in each province. You don't have to worry about interference, I've already cleared this with the king. You have full authority to set up camps as and where you see fit. Freiyar I'm putting you in charge of security.

"I picked two divisions from the forces in Delamock and two from those in Winston. Form them into a temporary guard legion and keep the supply line safe. Put around a brigade at each depot. The rest will patrol the route and escort our convoys back and forth.

"I've also freed two divisions from the south of The Northlands. They'll fill in for Tigersoar and Firmrock and hold Anderwoff until Fisablen can take over.

"Also, Terman, your knights will move to Vanades just in case. Wait there for further orders. I may need you on the front-lines if things don't go as planned. Charade, as per the usual, you will be in charge of the household while we're off on campaign. Supervisor Spiel, help him with the migrants. Everyone understand their responsibilities?"

All the household officials and knights stood up and saluted.

"We understand, Your Grace!"

# Chapter 462

## Start the War!

"We've just received a message from Baron Camorra!" Jinolio yelled as he rushed into the room, handing Lorist the white silk cloth he brought with him.

Charade, discussing trade with Lorist, saw his expression change as he quickly scanned the message.

"What happened?" asked he.

"Someone's itching to do something. We should teach them a lesson," Lorist said, handing the cloth to Charade, "Take a look. Baron Camorra's supply stations in Jigzai, Freewood, Westwood, and Deramak were attacked. The local nobles didn't just refuse to cooperate with our investigation, they even blamed us for attracting bandits. They're demanding compensation."

"Hrmph! Darned thieves are calling blame first! How could our stations be attacked by bandits without the nobles' cooperation? I wouldn't be surprised if the 'bandits' were the nobles themselves. I didn't think the cowards would become this daring the moment the king left. To think they want to prey on us... Do they think we're that easy to bully?"

As the main force would be split two ways, Auguslo had mobilized his army to the southwest in 9th month. He even left Whitelion at the borders of Majik. That way, they could reach Lormo'd border as the rainy season ended.

However, with Auguslo and his army gone, the relatively peaceful empire quickly became rowdy. The nobles, previously pressured into good behavior by the king's massive army, could breathe freely enough to start exploiting everyone else. At least a dozen small wars were fought already in just two months. Some of the less scrupulous nobles even went straight to banditry.

Lorist had never imagined, however, that they would actually have the balls to target his men. Either the provinces had been suck bone dry by the king, or he'd truly killed off everyone with any brain cells at all.

He had set up a dozen supply camps along the route and stocked them to collapse with resources in preparation for the war and subsequent migration. He had not been expecting this level of debasement among the nobles, so he had not manned the route with a lot of men. Even the biggest depots only had a brigade of guards. They were the perfect targets for unscrupulous nobles.

Charade read the letter in detail.

"Camorra didn't mention casualties so it shouldn't be too serious. The same can't be said for our schedule. We're badly behind now. Freyar's forces are just too thinly spread."

Lorist nodded.

"The route is too long. We didn't think of the nobles being this stupid when we came up with our plans. We have to increase the guard. I want to teach the idiots a good lesson too though. It's only been a few years, but they've already forgotten how deadly we can be... Jinolio!"

"Your Grace."

"Take this with you. Send an emergency missive to the king. Tell him we're about to deal with the nobles along the supply line. We cannot send our men into combat if we cannot ensure our supply line's integrity."

"Understood, Your Grace. I'll get to it immediately," said Jinolio as he bowed and left the study.

"The war is just around the corner, we just have to ensure the line's integrity, why get ourselves involved with those insects?" asked Charade.

Lorist tapped his fingers on the desk.

"No. If this were a simple matter of keeping the line safe, it would be no trouble. But I'm worried the nobles will be angered by our retaliation and attack us foolishly even if it won't benefit them. They might be forced into a desperate corner. If things get really bad, we might even have to deal with spiteful sabotage.

"For the nobles it'll only be a venting of their anger, but for us it might cost us the war and hundreds of thousands of lives.

"We have to clean the route entirely of all the polyps growing on it. We have to uproot whoever attacks us, no matter who they are."

"Will the king allow it though?"

"He will. Anyone who interferes in his plans are his enemy. As long as we launch our surprise attack according to plan, he will even close an eye to us wiping out every noble along the road."

Lorist suddenly started.

"FUCK! We've been had."

"Huh? How so?"

Lorist paced about in the study.

"This might be exactly what the king wants. He plans to use us to clean up the aristocratic mess in his land."

Charade's expression soured as well.

"Any proof?"

"It's simple. He's given us the rights to set up these camps, everyone should know how serious he is about this. So why would they interfere and risk having their entire family exterminated? He must have not told them about this. Hahaha..."

Lorist's laughter turned cold.

"It's not just a gut feeling either. Think about it. This was is the most important one he'll fight in his entire life, do you really think he'll let himself make such a mistake when it concerns such an important element of his plan? Of course not! If he'd warned the nobles beforehand, no one would dare attack the depots. They would be challenging the king himself. There was no such announcement, however, so all they see is ripe fruit ready to be picked. At worst they expect this to just be a scuffle between minor nobility."

"So it's the same old trick he used last time?" Charade commented, "He first causes trouble, then gets us to clean his mess for him, and then even uses that as a leash to

keep us under his thumb... He will ignore it now because he needs us in the war, but make no mistake, he'll bring it up the first opportunity he gets afterwards.

"So he gets a leash, cleans up a mess, and sours our relationship with the three dukes all in one shot? He must be really proud of his plan. If he can sour our relationship with the dukes, the alliance will be cut off from most possible friends in the empire and they'll be more likely to side with him against us — it would be a great power balancer."

"That is the kind of bastard he is. We are at least as strong as a full-fledged kingdom. Only my loathing to be called a traitor is keeping us under his wings. He will never trust us." Lorist continued, "But is there a point? All he achieves is being looked down on even more. As long as we don't lose the strength we have now, even as an emperor at the head of an empire he will be defenseless and fangless against us. Short of declaring open war on us there will be nothing he can do to try to tame us."

"I doubt he'll really go that far," Charade offered, "He may have an army of 500 thousand, but he knows they're not our match. Our biggest issue is how we're going to deal with this. Tigersoar and Firmrock are on their way to Majik. Should we divert them for them to the trouble areas?"

"No need. The two must rush to prepare for the attack. The 10th month is closing, we don't have much time for rest. Don't waste their time for a few bandits.

"Mobilize a division from Jaeger. Josk can lead them. They'll help Freiyar keep the line safe and patrol the area. Call Els and Reidy back as well. Send them over with a thousand men. They can deal with the nobles interfering in house business."

"What will Jaeger do without either of its commanders?"

"Don't worry. There's still Yuriy and Waxima. They are more than enough. It's time for Josk to see some proper action again and Els is only a fill-in for Yuriy, who can now take over again. It's time Els got a decent position anyway. I'll put him in command of a legion after the war."

On the 31st 10th, Year 1786, Lorist sent the general of Jaeger, Josk, with a division to the supply lines to combat the threat of the unidentified forces of the bandits and nobles. At the same time, he had Reidy and Els lead a thousand guards to investigate and obliterate the noble forces and bandits that played a part in the raiding of the

supply stations.

All the way until the 30th of the 11th, House Norton cooked up a bloodstorm along that supply line. Near a hundred bandit bands were wiped out by the sudden attack of Els and Reidy's guard brigade as well as the ferocious pursuit of the Jaeger troops. More than 50 landed nobles were wiped out for involving themselves with the bandits. Their dominions were also raided clean.

Back then, Auguslo enfeoffed less than a hundred noble houses in the central provinces, yet House Norton wiped out half in such a short time. All of a sudden, House Norton's savage reputation spread like wildfire across the provinces. Apart from a few doomed fools, nobody dared to approach the supply line. Even if they had to cross it, they'd rather take the long way around. No one dared to get close to the depots.

On 20th of the 11th, Lorist led a thousand guards to Majik, accompanied by Rank 2 Blademaster Shuss. Sylvia, the four concubines, Lorist's two sons and a few officials were there to send him off.

After bidding them all farewell, Lorist told Belnick, general of the first local defense legion, "I leave The Northlands in your care."

Belnick made a knight's salute.

"Please rest assured, Your Grace. I won't let you down!"

Lorist nodded.

"Depart!"

## Chapter 463

### Baron Abott

The clouds filled the skies. Cold winds blew. Ice feathers fell from the sky, covering the plains and mountains in a white sheet. Winter descended on the world again.

*I guess I'm getting old...* thought Baron Abott.

No matter how brightly the flame burned in the fireplace, he still shivered in his chair under his thick blanket. His hands clasped it to him and he sipped fruit wine from his golden cup shakily as he stared at the pale world outside his window.

His thoughts went back to the day he would gather his mercenary friends at a local tavern and make merry. Ah, what good days! But, they were not to be anymore. The band no longer existed. Pale-eagle was no more. He still remembered how their leader used to announce he would make the band one of the best in the Union in his many drunken stupors. Everyone, none less drunk than him, would loudly swear their aid in realizing this ambition.

The one-eye owner of the tavern, Mot, would always smile at them kindly if somewhat helplessly. Everyone would cheer with them. No one mocked the young men's dreams. Everyone wished to turn their band into Morante's greatest back then, back when Morante still was the continent's home for mercenaries. It was the highest honor a band could get.

It took them two decades of walking on the edge between life and death, but, with great effort they made it into the twenties. They were just a few ranks from their goal, but that would be their end. Everything changed when the Union became a feudal society. The War of Glass came nearly immediately after. Pale-eagle's leader moved the band to Teribo. He wanted to carve out a small title for himself. To win a place he and his comrades could call home.

Everyone was in high spirits when they departed. They were no longer a small-time band. They were 21st on the rankings. All three leaders were gold-ranks and everyone in the band were silver-ranks, about a hundred of them stood behind the leaders. Things went great for them initially as well. They successfully raided three noble

manors and got a lot of spoils. Everyone was convinced this was the right decision. Abott had even gotten to bed several of the noble ladies he could in the past only admire lustfully from a distance.

Their glory was fleeting, however. Ten days into their expedition, their leader caught wind of a massive bounty on a blademaster. He left their camp with forty men. Only three returned.

Pale-eagle was crushed in an instant. Rifts formed between the remaining members as everyone fought for control of what was left. Abott and the band's third-in-command fought each other tooth-and-nail. He suffered a severe wound to his arm whilst the other had an arm and a leg broken. Abott won in the end, but his opponent, unwilling to accept his loss, left with his followers.

Abott had skills, but lacked the charisma needed to hold everything everyone together. His men slowly slipped away one by one. With the band on its last legs, he called in a favor from one of Twin Dragon's deputy supervisors. He'd gotten acquainted with the man by a lucky twist of fate a while back. Through his connections with the guild, he used the band's funds to buy a small barony and its associated title.

The heavy wooden door to the room suddenly swung open and the cold wind burst in from outside. Abott snapped out of his reverie and clutched his blanket even tighter. He gazed at the door through squinted eyes and saw two familiar figures. A huge man stood in front — his chief knight, Adrian — he was an old friend and comrade from the Abott's mercenary days. Behind him stood a slender middle-aged fellow, Krigar — Pale-eagle's former logistics officer, and now his chief treasurer.

"We have returned from our patrol, Milord. The snow is piling up, it's almost to my knee. The livestock are still fine, though, we've only had one death so far. The slave in charge of it will be punished accordingly," reported Adrian.

"You didn't have him beaten to death, did you?" asked Abott.

"I have not, Milord. Don't worry. I know how to punish. Those pathetics won't be obedient unless they're punished anyway. They're tough so they'll survive the winter regardless."

The baron nodded silently.

"You did well. Appropriate punishment is necessary. They'll slack off otherwise. Just...

we spend money on them, so don't kill them. Every death is money down the river. The war is over now, so it won't be cheap to replace lost slaves anymore either. Slaves will become more expensive now again..."

"I understand, Milord."

The Union had caught hundreds of thousands of soldiers during the war. It could not afford to keep and feed them, so the big-seven sold them off as slaves. Well, they weren't technically slaves. The Union always made a big ruckus of individual freedom and condemned slavery. The slaves weren't sold as property, instead the captives' labor rights were what was sold. A civilian served a three year prison sentence and a soldier five. What was bought was the right to use them as labor for the time they were prisoners. They technically had to be released when their term was up. Few people expected this to happen though.

This was one of the Union's most profitable and successful policies to date. It got rid of the housing and feeding burden, sated the nobles' demands for labor, and made a lot of money in the process.

Anderwoff had 80 new nobles, one of which was Baron Abott. Unfortunately it had been cleaned by Andinaq's king just a few years earlier. It was barren of wealth and desolate of people.

When Abott came over seven years ago, there were less than a thousand people in his entire fief. And most of these were only there because they didn't have a skill they could sell elsewhere. He had managed to cobble together a few thousand people through recruitment efforts and wars with his neighbors. His barony had just over 10 thousand subjects now. His was the strongest territory in the region at the moment. The only problem was that the majority of his subjects were elderly and could not do much hard labor. To alleviate this problem he'd bought three hundred youths from the Union.

"Everything is good in the manor as well, Milord," reported Krigar.

"You two did well as well. Come, let's have a drink and warm ourselves up. There's a small cow leg over there, Adrian. Bring it over and we'll roast some."

Abott didn't put up any airs in front of his companions in private. He may be a noble by title now, but he was still just a common mercenary at heart. It made him beloved

by his old friends and kept his old subordinates loyal, but left him isolated from noble circles. The other wannabe nobles from his region didn't like that he wasn't upholding their new, pretentious customs.

The three sat around the fire enjoying the warmth and food together.

"Now this is life," Abott groaned, "We should build a proper stone castle next year."

He wasn't troubled by the other nobles' mockery, but his lack of a stone castle irked him. This was his seventh year as a noble, but he had yet to put a single stone on top of another. Proper nobles had proper castles, but he lived in nothing more than a hut. It wouldn't even be considered a wooden castle — it needed a palisade to be a wooden castle, and it lacked even that.

"We need not defend the borders anymore so we'll have the manpower soon enough. But what will we do about the materials and costs?" asked Adrian.

Auguslo I attacked their neighboring duchies four years earlier. Word only reached them via an envoy from Duke Handra asking for help when they were all but overrun already. The nobles were utterly bewildered. Some immediately marched for the duchy to help defend it, whilst other packed up and prepared to run to Morante. Just as everyone was about to scatter their own way, Wessia's vice-president toured the region and calmed everyone down. They were all Union nobles, a superpower on the continent. Yes, most of their forces were caught up in the war to the south, but they were far from defenseless, at the very least they had a sword saint. The king would not anger them even if he only had half a brain.

His words calmed everyone and time proved him right. After the dukes submitted, Andinaq ended the war and withdrew. They left Whitelion behind but they only took up defensive positions and stared at Anderwoff across the border.

Things weren't completely golden, however. The many minor nobles banded together and formed a 10 thousand strong standing army just in case. Several years had passed now, however, and Andinaq had showed no movement that indicated any intent to invade. People were beginning to ask whether the army should perhaps not be disbanded. The army cost the nobles most of their budgets, ones that were already strapped thin because of their lands' desolation.

They couldn't just leave the border undefended, however. What would they do if

Andinaq did decide to invade? Their solution was to put everyone on a rotation of sorts. They would draw lots every three years and the losers had to man the border until the next round. To keep this from disproportionately affecting smaller, less populated fiefs, it was decided that each lord only had to contribute one twentieth of his population to this duty. This system only counted for the men, however. Everyone would contribute the resources needed to feed, clothe, and house the forces.

Abott, the lucky man, had drawn a losing lot. He could not refuse, so he sent out five hundred youths and Adrian. His term would be up this winter and his men would finally return. Their absence were why he had to buy the 300 slaves.

Abott smiled.

"You might not be aware, but Auguslo is rallying his forces. He's preparing to invade the Union. We're lucky, though. His forces are gathering in the southwest so we won't have to fight this time. He must be wanting to push straight for Morante, and there is much closer."

"No wonder Whitelion left the border. Their side of the border now only matches ours. I suspect they might even be greenhorns. That said, they haven't slacked, I saw no gaps in their defenses before I left. We couldn't sneak any scouts through." Adrain commented.

"At least we have nothing to worry about. We can watch other fight from the sidelines. We should focus on our own business when the war starts next year. Viscount Wamus must be the one who rigged the draw... He made me waste three years. We'll use the fountain as an excuse to start a war with him. He only knows how to talk, he can't fight. He only has 200 men and only three of them are silver-ranks. We can steamroll him easily. It's just too bad we aren't allowed to kill other nobles... We'll just strip his land and castle clean. The worst the Union can do is send someone over to keep an eye on us for a while. They might not even bother if the war gets serious enough.

"We'll take what we don't have from our neighbors. Haha... We didn't waste the three years we spent on the border. I should thank you, Adrian. You've trained our men into a strong force."

Krigar looked incredibly elated.

"It's about time we dealt with that prick. He openly mocked us last time we met... So

what if we were mercenaries? They were just merchants!"

Abott laughed heartily but cut it short mid-laugh.

"I hear something outside."

Soft rustling broke through the winds lonely wails.

Adrian stood up.

"Let me check..."

A couple of people dressed in white capes and pelts rushed into the room through the door. Their eyes, swords, and spears glinted viciously in the flickering fire-light.

"Don't move!" one yelled, "Keep your arms where I can see them! Drop your weapons and kneel! Surrender and you'll be spared!"

# Chapter 464

## Surprise Attack Ongoing

The wooden houses in the distance burned brightly. Crimson streaks stained the white ground. Pained cries echoed out of agonized mouths and mixed with the wailing winter wind.

The last three days' heavy snow had stopped just in time to fail to cover this horrid scene. A few streaks criss-crossed the thick clouds, giving glances of the blue sky; Needles of sunlight mocked the world below.

Lorist's expression gloomed at the hut in front of him. 173 Tigersoar soldiers' bodies lay in neat rows on the ground in front of them. Many were missing limbs and several had severe wounds on their torso. Their crimson-stained bodies were tragic against the pure snow.

"What happened here? How could a ruddy manor cause so many casualties among my men?"

Pale words seeped out through the gaps between Lorist's teeth. Who knew what kind of fire burned in his heart?

"It's my fault, Your Grace," Dulles said as he stepped forward, "We didn't expect this old manor to be Baron Abott's dominion, the one Sir Tarkel warned in his list we should be extra careful about. He used to be the Union's 21st-ranked mercenary band's vice-captain. He was a gold-ranked know as 'Goldeagle'.

"One of the troops from a scout company discovered this run-down manor. None of us associated it with Baron Abott. They rushed in to force its occupants to surrender, but found the baron and his knight inside. The entire company was wiped out.

"Baron Abott prepared to attack us, but we caught up too quickly. We lost 421 people in total, 173 of them lie here, dead. The baron only lost 70. Everyone's been beheaded."

House Norton's military units were divided into squads of ten, their leader a sergeant. Ten squads made a company, their leader a lieutenant. Per the house's winter

protocols, the scout company would watch a spotted target from afar undiscovered while it waited for the main force to attack.

Furybear finished their investigation of Anderwoff's nobility more than a year earlier. Their informants donned various disguises and roles and scoured every corner of the region. They recorded everything, from the number of the noble's men, to the daily routines of their servants. Tigersoar only needed to look through Tarkel's list and act accordingly and the region could be taken in a few weeks.

The only mistake they'd made so far was the one currently being confronted. The baron was marked as a target of concern requiring caution because of his retinue's size, but three days of incessant snowfall made it almost impossible to match map to land. So, despite his mansion being marked on the map, no one realized the unassuming hut was his residence.

Most people assumed all decent nobles lived in stone castles, so no one thought the little wooden motte-and-bailey castle would belong to Baron Abott. At best they thought it belonged to an inconsequential, broke minor noble. It might possibly even just be used as whilst the noble hid out the winter in the nearest large town. Given their disposition, the officer launched an attack without proper preparation or consideration.

When the soldiers rushed in, the baron and his knight fought back ferociously. The two-star gold-ranked baron, his three-star silver-ranked knight, and his one-star iron-ranked treasurer massacred their attackers. The group realized their mistake too late and were slaughter to a man. The three broke out of the hut, immediately rallied their men and attacked the rest of the company.

Fortunately, the reinforcements arrived at almost the same time. They arrived as the baron was killing the last of the scouts, he had yet to find out who was attacking. Seeing their comrades' corpses, they returned the favor with furious gusto.

The first squad to arrive couldn't match their opponents and lost quite a few men initially. The situation quickly stabilized as more reinforcements arrived and soon the tables turned. The three men were finally overpowered when about a hundred more had arrived.

Lieutenant Dulles's arrival was the final straw. A gold rank himself, Dulles ignored the baron's attempts to surrender and beheaded him on the spot. The knight attempted

to escape but was skewered by the just-arrived ballistae. Out of all the men, only the treasurer was taken captive, barely alive.

"Goldeagle Abott..." Lorist stared at the corpse. He recognizes the face in spite of its state.

The old man could be considered an old acquaintance. Lorist's first paycheck was related to him, in fact. He, Charade, and a few friends had gathered some capital to have some modern rucksacks made and sold at the mercenary guild. Some rowdy mercenaries wanted to buy them at an extremely low price. Goldeagle Abott had stepped in and helped them. He paid a huge price to buy all their remaining rucksacks and also made an order for another batch.

Lorist was out of contact with the house at the time and had to work as a lowly bronze-ranked mercenary for his semester fees and living costs. The rucksacks were one of the means he'd used. If not for Abott's intervention, he might've been beaten alongside Charade.

Two decades later, because of a twist of fate, Lorist's benefactor, had become an enemy and was now dead, killed at the hands of his beneficiary's men. A long sigh escaped Lorist's mouth, but he remained silent. He made sure Dulles gave the man a proper burial before leaving.

On the 27th of the 12th, Year 1786, Lorist's Tigersoar used the strong snowfall to occupy the whole of Anderwoff without Wessia's knowledge. Frederika was in a festive mood in preparation for the new year's celebration.

Given the surprising number of casualties in the operation — mainly from the Abott incident — Lorist decided to slow down and take the necessary precautions going forward. He reached Frederika only on the 21st of the 1st.

"We've arrived, Your Grace," Potterfang and Malek shouted as they rushed over.

They were gathered in a large snow-made dome. It was indistinguishable from the terrain at a glance. Many of these 'mounds' dotted the hillside, connected by ditches and tunnels dug into the white blanket covering the land. Men could move without anyone on top knowing any better. They would only be discovered if someone quite literally stumbled over or into one of their constructions. A large tent filled the inside. Eight braziers filled its corners, fueled by smoldering coal.

"How are things coming along?"

Lorist removed his furs, handing them to Jinolio, before motioning for the rest to take their seats.

Potterfang brought out a map of the capital and lay it on the wooden table.

"This will be a tough battle," he commented, his expression solemn.

"How so?" asked Lorist.

"Wessia completely reworked the city's defenses. Most of the layouts we have are completely useless now.

"We've investigated as best we can. The city is split into five districts. The center is the inner-city district, where the palace is. It's now surrounded by a high wall. The eastern district houses the high-class' residences, the southern district holds most of the city's industry and commerce, the western district contains most of the military, and the low-classes live in the slum of the northern district.

"The city used to have 200 thousand inhabitants, but after the king's attack several years ago, that dropped to 100 thousand. Most now live in the slums and serve their Union overlords. Wessia clearly considers Frederika crucial. They use it to store most of their wealth, especially that taken from the region. They've split up the region up between 37 new nobles. We don't have to worry about their forces in the city as long as we take them by surprise, but that's the issue. The castle has several good lookout points that can keep an eye on most of the city and all the approaches to the castle.

"Wessia has taken Frederika's previous fall very serious and have made adjustments to make sure it can't happen again. We've noticed all their properties light torches every 10 days. It must be a way to check whether a place has fallen to an enemy. We've waited for your arrival rather than attack on our own when we can't finish everything in one go.

"The city itself has a 45 thousand strong garrison. The nearby fortifications can reinforce the city with a further 18 thousand within a few hours though. We've confirmed Sir Tarkel's report; they do indeed have four blademasters, though only one, maybe two, are in the city. One is stationed in the city specifically, the second protects the guild president, so his presence or absence depends on whether the president is in the city or not. Of the other two, one is guarding the guild's properties

in Morante and the other is with the forces they've deployed to Jigda. The ones guarding the guild's properties are new recruits.

"We noticed most of the city's inhabitants are still active. Their clothes aren't as good as ours, but it's enough to let them move and work outside despite the cold. The city walls' defenses are also tighter than the castle's. The walls are patrolled every two hours, and each tower is manned. We don't have a good chance of slipping in undetected.

"We've set up camp so far from the city so we won't be discovered, if not for their tight defenses we would have done so much closer. We've sent out three divisions to set up positions all around the city. When we're joined by Tigersoar, we will be strong enough to attack.

"We don't have any elegant solutions to taking the city. Brute force is the only real option. I'm concerned even now Wessia might realize something's amiss and rally their 50 thousand miners. If they do, we won't be able to take the city without a protracted siege."

"Is the secret path His Majesty used still an option? Can attack through there?" Lorist enquired.

Potterfang shook his head.

"I've already taken a look. Lady Glacia gave us an accurate map, but Wessia found the tunnel and sealed it. It's not an option."

"Let's leave things at that for now. We'll discuss our plan of action after Tigersoar catches up. They should be here in two days."

# Chapter 465

## Siege

The city of Frederika used to be a glorious settlement in the southwest of the Krissen Empire. To its north was Cloudsnap Mountains and to its south Sunset Mountains. It sat in the great valley between these two mountain ranges. It was a rare location with rich farmland and plentiful resources. The city was in Bodolger, one of the most economically prosperous and important provinces in the empire. It was approximately 5 kilometers across; its walls nine meters tall in places, just half a meter shy of the imperial capital's. Towers dotted the wall at hundred meter intervals -- it was considered one of the empire's most well-fortified cities. That reputation was shattered two years earlier.

Auguslo crossed Cloudsnap in the middle of winter and stormed the city. One of the empire's jewels fell in a single night. Everyone realized: walls are not as strong as the stones of which they are built, but the mettle of the men manning them.

There weren't any secret passages leading into the city, neither were there any insiders who had contact with the outside. The garrison was on constant alert and the walls incessantly patrolled regardless of weather. Each tower stood four floors above the walls, each fitted with three ballistae. In effect, each hundred meter segment of wall could be targeted by up to 24 ballistae at any given moment. The soldiers on the walls could be dealt with relatively easily, but the ballistae were another story.

A protracted siege. This was the only viable option Lorist, Potterfang, and Malek had. Even in this bone-white winter the walls were defended tightly. They could not assault the walls, only a fool would do that. But Lorist didn't want to spend the months, possible years here necessary to topple the city. Even just the few weeks it would take to pound the walls into collapse was too much. It was already the 25th of the 1st. The snow would have begun to melt by the time they had the siege engines in place. It was meaningly to pound the walls during this time. Even if they collapsed immediately, attacking over open, muddy fields was suicide. He had to take the city before the snow melts.

They would attack at dawn. That was the moment the guard all across the city changed

and the rising sun blinded half of the city's wall. Even better would be a strong snowstorm or blizzard. It would almost entirely mitigate the biggest danger of this plan: the approach to the walls. Lorist was entirely confident that the battle would be won if he could get his men onto the walls before they were noticed.

Lorist had the almost entirely unique propensity to lead his men from the front, right where the fighting would be the thickest. This time would be no different. He brushed aside his entire council's counsel; he was determined to be the first Norton over the walls. He was the best man for the job of getting on the walls and slaughtering his way to the gate. If he let others do it, they might be discovered or killed. If this happened it would become a drawn-out battle they could not afford, neither in terms of time or casualties.

His council eventually gave up. Apart from Blademaster Shuss and Reidy, who could match Lorist for a few dozen exchanges, no one could even come close to being in his realm. It was a knight's shame to have their lord charge at the front of the formation, but they had no choice, they could not do this task for their liege.

Lorist, Shuss, Reidy, and Els would lead the charge. The first two would take the two towers next to the northern gate while Reidy and Els would hold the enemy off the gate itself while they waited for the rest of the force to charge through. Els would take charge once the main force arrived and push into the city while Josk held the walls. Reidy would take a detachment and charge along the walls to take the other three gates. Firmrock would then charge through them and join the fight in the city proper. Tigersoar's Loze would have the honor of being the first to set foot in the city -- he was beaming about it.

The first gate to be opened, opened into the military district, so Els and Tigersoar would be charging right into the district to wipe the defenders out. Once the fighting moved from the walls into the city proper, Malek would occupy the walls with one of Firmrock's divisions to make sure no one escaped.

Potterfang drew the short straw this time. He would stay outside the city and lead Firmrock's three other divisions from there. He could only enter the city once Malek occupied the walls. The inner district would only be assaulted once the rest of the city was secure. His hope was that its defenders would surrender before it had to be assaulted because, unlike the rest of the city, it would be on full alert long before the first Norton soldier even got close to the inner walls.

The snow was light and the skies dark on this, the 30th of the 1st. The cold winds howled over Frederika's walls and around the corners of the city's building and down its narrow streets and dark alleyways.

The army rested for the attack that would start at dawn. Jinolio woke Lorist at three. He had something to eat and donned his armor. Shuss, Reidy, and Els joined him soon afterwards, all clad in light-gray fur. Black veils covered their eyes and white masks their faces. White capes dangled behind their backs.

The skies were gray-black outside. The snow danced in a rowdy wind that howled down the mountainside into the valley and out onto the plains beyond. Every breath froze the lungs and men tough as tigers shivered like rattlesnakes in the cold.

Lorist stomped on the ground and took in a few deep breaths. Looking at the figures moving about in the camp, he asked, "You ready?"

His three companions nodded.

"Then let's go."

The four spectres slid through the white wasteland, heading for a pale-gray horizon broken up every so often by pale-gray protrusions that reached into the sky. They covered in half an hour what mortal men could only in a day and a half.

The only upside to a winter siege here was that the moat was frozen solid and covered by snow. Two months from now it would be an insurmountable obstacle to any besieger, but now it did not exist at all. It vanished beneath the snow and beneath the four spectres' skis and was behind them in a moment.

The horizon had vanished now, replaced by a solid mass of gray stone that stretched into the heavens. Lorist listened for any movement, but could hear only his own breathing and heartbeat, and the lonely howl of the wind. The four removed their skis. Each took two short black daggers from their backpacks and prepared to scale the wall.

A thin layer of ice covered the walls. However, the daggers infused with Dark Stage force dug into the walls like they were leather. A slight push was all it took to dig the blade into the stone.

When they were about to reach the top, footsteps sunk into snow above. The patrol.

Luckily no one was willing to expose his face to the cold in order to check the walls below, so the four remained undetected. They didn't even talk.

They had just passed where the four were climbing when Lorist vaulted over the top and landed right behind them. He matched their march and followed onwards. The rearmost guard noticed the extra set of footsteps and turned to look, only to feel a coldness puncture his chest halfway through. His body turned limped, and he collapsed soundless.

Lorist followed the patrol all the way to the tower, unnoticed. As the leader of the thirty strong patrol reached the door, Lorist dashed forward, felling a man with each step he took, to come up behind the man and his torch-bearer as he opened the door.

The floor was split in two. The one in which Lorist was now, was a passage that continued on to the other side while the other spiraled into a staircase. It should have been guarded by two men, but the gold had bested them and there were off somewhere warm, napping. The pair thought nothing of the sentries' absence. They charged at the nearest brazier to warm themselves.

"You guys should warm up, too. We'll continue short--"

The last word stuck in the man's throat. He saw none of his men behind him, only a tall, black shadow like death itself in the doorway.

"You..."

Swords flashed brightly as the captain and his compatriot rushed at the shadow. It stepped forward and hoisted the two bodies into the air before gently lowering them into a corner, careful not to disturb the others nearby.

Reidy and Els showed up at the doorway as it did that.

"Where's Shuss?" asked Lorist.

Reidy pointed to the tower on the opposite end of the gate.

Lorist nodded.

"Let's continue with the plan."

Both nodded. Reidy picked up the torch and followed Els out of the tower, twirling it twice. The gray abyss beyond the wall squirmed like a pit of worms. One shadow after another stepped out of the void and hug the wall. Els dropped a rope down the wall and the shadows began to ascend the wall one by one. The first shadow to reach the top of the wall was Josk, followed by two guards carrying two more ropes. Soon, three ropes hung down the walls and the number of shadows escaping the abyss grew.

Lorist descended the stairs and exited the tower onto the walls, blood running down the stairs behind him. The twelve soldiers on the three upper floors had been snoring like dogs, the arrow slits boarded up. It would not be surprising if even lightning could not wake them. No lookouts mounted the roof either. The walls themselves were completely deserted, their supposed occupants clustered around the islands of warmth that dotted the edge of the world. The fifty Lorist had come across thus far, all went to Singwa's welcome embrace quietly and peacefully.

Reidy prepared to move onto the next tower and start his trek along the walls, Els was descending the tower to clear the gate.

"Hold on. Let me take the gate. Els, go with Reidy. Pretend to be a patrol so you can get in without issue."

Reidy's eyes flashed, and he quickly gathered 40 guards and lined them into two rows. Torch in hand, he marched with Els to the next tower. Around thirty men remained with Lorist, whom he had take up positions in the tower. More continued to pour out of the darkness. None made a sound as they climbed into the wall. Silently, the continued into the tower.

A shadow emerged from the tower at the other end of the barbican, twirling a torch twice. Lorist let out a relieved sigh.

"Thirty of you, cross the barbican and take up position in the other tower. Also, ask Blademaster Shuss whether he'll attack the next tower. If he will, we'll send someone over to back him up," instructed Lorist.

The 30 guards dashed across soundlessly.

The guards were getting onto the walls too slowly.

"Joe, stand guard here. I'll take the gate now. Send the men down on my signal."

Though his personal guards were far more capable than Tigersoar or Firmrock's men, Lorist worried that bringing them down the walls would alert the enemy. He planned to take the gate himself.

He descended the spiral staircase within the tower. It emerged right behind the gate. He poked his head out carefully, but realized there were no guards, only a large bonfire. It was already dead, only a thin trail of smoke disappeared into the gray sky from the ashes.

"Hey, you, what are you doing, looking around as you get down from the walls?" rebuked a voice from the gatehouse.

"Ah, nothing much," Lorist said as he headed for the gate, "The captain told me to get him something to eat."

"Oh, go check if there's anything by the bonfire. Maybe some sweet potatoes haven't been eaten yet," said the voice, "Oh, and bring me some as well!"

Lorist made his way to the bonfire next to the gatehouse and peeked inside. Inside were 20 slumbering sentries. The one closest the door must be the one who'd just seen him. He leaned against the wall lazily, clutching a blanket to him shiveringly. A pretty decent idea. The garrison could sleep in the gatehouse warmed by the fire outside it while still technically manning their posts. It was killing two birds with one stone.

He slowly unsheathed his sword. The moment the tip left the scabbard, a horn sounded from the walls. The horn only blew for a moment before it was abruptly silenced.

The soldier leaning against the wall started.

"The alarm! Get up you idiots!" roared he.

# Chapter 466

## From Attack to Defense

Lorist drew his sword and dashed forward. A flash of his blade glow saw the garrison soldier silenced. The corpse slowly collapsed in two halves. Lorist's cut straight through him. The others, still only half awake, saw the flash and their compatriot's collapse and froze. They couldn't cry no matter how hard they tried. The abyss soon greeted them as it did their comrade.

Lorist stepped out of the barbican covered in blood. He lifted his gaze to the top of the wall to call his men, but a cry behind him interrupted.

"Enemy attack! Alarum! Alarum! Ugh!"

Lorist finished his jerk only to see the last moments of the figure whence the cry had arose's collapse. An arrow stood proudly, rooted in his neck, its tip replacing his tongue.

Moments later the buildings across the street's windows lit up, shadows dashed back and forth across them, and confused cries burst from inside. One door after another opened and soldiers poured out like hornets from a disturbed nest. Josk first continuously, but could not keep up. His shots were soon ineffective as shielded combatants charged out in front. They spotted the bloody Lorist and dashed at him as fast as they could.

His guards descended as fast as they could to join their lord, but would not arrive in time. Josk continued to fire. Lorist yelled at the gate. Once he saw the archer nod and direct the men emerging from the barbican to the gate, he turned to meet his attackers.

The city woke lazily to the alarms that spread across it. Dawn broke in bell chorus. Murder, death, and struggles for life chased away the darkness.

"Die!"

Lorist charged into the enemy's ranks like a dying tiger, slashing out ferociously like his death was certain and the only thing left to determine was how many would go

with him. He didn't use his slaughter domain. He wasn't taxed even though he was using only his reflexes.

Heads divorced their bodies wherever his sword passed. They fell wordlessly, only the clinking and rustle of their armor audible as they flattened on the ground. Though could not keep track of their reaper's movements. It could only be glimpsed in the last moment of life when death was already drawing the soul from the body. One continuous strike, felled the men like they were nothing, like stalks before the scythe. Those not yet on the other side froze like their departed brethren. A moment later, Lorist drew his sword from flesh and looked around. Everyone was gone before he'd even gotten to enjoy himself. How unfair...

The new arrivals stood at a distance, staring at him. Behind him the reaped field stood empty. A hundred stalks had been felled. The furrow was littered with head divorced of bodies. Red oozed out of the point of divorce, and a crimson odor hung sickly between the buildings. Twenty unfelled stalks stood ahead, shivering in the wind. None had dreamt their harvest would come so soon. The wind, as if privy to the scene, quieted, and only the chattering of teeth remained, an eerie silence otherwise.

Clang! A giant metal leaf fell to the ground. The shock rippled through the unfelled stalks. A moment later a second, then a third, soon twigs joined the leaves. The repeated din of the falling parts uprooted the stalks and they dashed away with the wind.

"Demon! Demon!" they serenaded as they drifted away.

The masses withdrew like autumn leaves blew by the wind. Their reaper was left speechless, standing alone in the empty field, rubbing his nose embarrassedly.

*Was I that terrifying? They actually called me a demon!*

Lorist couldn't bring himself to chase his victims. His priority was to open the gate and let the troops waiting outside in. Just as he returned to the walls, however, one of his men reported bad news.

"The gate is frozen shut, Your Grace. We can't open it. Also, the gate is entire wrapped in iron, so we can't set fire to it either."

Lorist stared wide-eyed at the two three-meter tall doors that made the gate<sup>[1]</sup>. Usual gates were made out of wood and covered in iron or copper on the outside.

*Is Wessia boasting their riches? They actually used black iron to make the gates, not to mention the latches that were 30 centimeters long and 8 centimeters thick... Must be from the cold. Everything is frozen into a single solid mass! Putting aside pushing, even ramming wouldn't open them.*

"Is Wessia insane? Did they intend to lock themselves in every winter?"

He suddenly realized the northern gates didn't have to be opened in winter. If there were any emergencies, they could leave through any of the other gates. He was just unlucky to have chosen the northern gate for his assault.

The gates could technically be opened, but they didn't have the time needed. They'd have to fire the gate up first, then pour oil into the latches before working to open it. They couldn't afford to spend time on this. The men on the other side had to rush in immediately.

"Can't you cut the latches?"

"No, Your Grace."

The man pointed at the middle latch.

The scratches on it showed they'd already tried. The deepest cut only struck through a few millimeters. Cutting would be no faster than the other option.

"Can't we just bash a hole in it?" Lorist persisted. Since he couldn't deal with the latches, he would just bust through the gate itself.

"We can't, we've tried already. The iron on the gates is just as hard as the latches, and the wood beneath very hard," replied the guard as he pointed at a few scratches on the gates.

Just like with the latches, the deepest barely made a dent. Lorist stared through the crack between the two doors. They were at least twenty centimeter thick, if not more. Beyond he could see Loze charging the final few meters to the other side.

He turned his attention to the latches again. He could probably cut through it, but it would still take him at least an hour. He would need at least five all-exhaustive strikes, and at least ten minutes of rest between each to recover his strength. Everyone inside the walls would be dead long before he finished. And if the city's one or possibly two

blademasters showed up, he would have no strength to fight them.

The horns of alarm bellowed every further away into the city. The enemy was deploying. Lorist's expression grimmed.

"Your Grace, the gates to the military district are open!! At least a regiment's worth of men are coming this way! We only have a few minutes!"

Lorist laughed bitterly. Everything was fucked up the moment that single soldier managed to call out. Nobody expected Wessia to change the two gates. He checked his surroundings. He had less than 200 men with him when the mission began. Of that, only six had not left with Els and Shuss. And, though more were constantly pouring over the walls, they could not match the rate at which the enemy could march men through open gates.

He slapped himself and sprang into action. He had Josk send word to Malek, Dulles, and Loze to find a way to scale the walls. He had the men on the walls prioritize turning the ballistae on the city. He also recalled Els and Shuss's detachments to the nearest towers along the wall. The plan was fubar, and he now had to do what he hated most -- improvise. There would be no quick conquest of the city now, but at least they had established a foothold on the wall without any casualties so the greatest hurdle had already been overcome. Victory was still far from uncertain, it would just take longer and be harder earned than was ideal.

"Worridge, take a few men and clean up the buildings nearby. Collect everything burnable you can find and pile it up by the gates. We'll melt the bastards if we have to!" ordered he.

Worridge was Viscount Eidis' eldest son. He was currently a peak three-star-silver-rank. Lorist predicted he would break through to the gold rank in two or three years. He'd joined Lorist's personal guards with his brother Sykos and performed really well. He climbed the ranks from a corporal to a lieutenant-major. His brother Sykos was transferred to Jaeger and now a full major.

"Understood, Your Grace." Worridge took a hundred men and started scouring the nearby buildings.

Lorist had the remaining men build makeshift barricades with whatever they could find. They acted quickly and several barricades quickly blocked the streets. Some had

even taken the initiative to pour water on the roads in front of the barricades. The water immediately froze and made it all but impossible to stay upright.

The roles were reversed, the attacker was now the defender. An hour had passed since the attack started, and the first rays of sunlight were hitting the tallest towers of the castle that watched over the city from the hill in its middle. The enemy's reaction was far faster than he had anticipated. He could only admire their discipline. The battle ahead was going to be even more bloody than he had first feared.

The soldiers weren't the only ones woken by the commotion. The peasants were also roused from their fitful slumber. The slum-dwellers gathered at the ends of the blocks. Their weapons glinted, reflecting the lightening sky. Figures pushed them aside and reformed in front. The front row hid behind shields, but pikes stabbed through the gaps between them and an additional row jabbed over the first's shoulders.

"Pikemen!"

Doubt flashed across Lorist's eyes. *Looks like Wessia sent their elites.*

Worridge returned with his men at that moment. They piled their plunder against the gate. The oil was poured out of their containers and lamps were smashed onto the pile. Several torches immediately followed and everything went up in smoke-choked flames.

"Worridge! Form everyone up behind the barricades! Keep the enemy away from the gate at all costs! Don't follow or send anyone after me! Understand?"

"I understand, Milord!"

Lorist vaulted over the barricades. He slid across the ice on the road and dashed on. His steps halted fifty or so meters beyond. His scabbard emptied, and he faced the oncoming black mass.

The mass became regular slowly as it approached, its footsteps regular and uniform, unrushed. It eventually stopped 40 meters away from Lorist. Silence pervaded.

A cry, and the battle was raging.

# Chapter 467

## Danger

"Who are you? Why are you attacking the city? Do you want a war with the Union?" yelled a high-pitched voice.

Lorist laughed heartily.

"Who says this is the Union's territory? I only know this as Frederika, the capital of the Krissen Empire's Bodolger province! House Norton has come to reclaim this land for the empire! The entire city is surrounded, there is no escape, you foul dogs! If you want to save your dog lives, you will drop your weapons and surrender now!"

Everyone immediately felt something was off. What gave a single man the courage to yell such obscenities when facing an entire regiment of heavily armored men alone, in the middle of their lands at their headquarters, no less? A small commotion broke out in the enemy formation, but it quickly subsided when what must be their commander shouted furiously.

"Who, then, are you?" the same high-pitched voice enquired.

"I am the duke of The Northlands, the head of House Norton, Norton Lorist."

Another commotion.

"He must be insane! Is he going against the entire city on his own?" one voice murmured.

"Even blademasters have to run against such odds!" another chimed in.

"Does he think his title is enough to scare us?" a third asked.

"Howling Bastards! Attack! First Company to the wall! Second Company, sweep the neighbourhood! Third and Fourth Company, reinforce First and Second! Fifth Company, forward!" the commander's orders came.

*Bastard, did you think I wouldn't notice those men on the wall? You've shown your hand. They aren't enough to be from a full-scale assault. This must be a lead party to open the gates for the main assault. The fact that you're standing here, alone, means your men must still be trying to open the gate and you're here to buy them time... I'll take back the walls first then slaughter you from above!* thought he.

The men acted immediately. The formation split into three neat groups. One headed for the wall, the other vanished between the buildings. The third formed a thick wall of spear and shield and advanced on Lorist slowly, each step shaking the ground.

"Let nothing stop your advance! Wipe them from our city!" the same, shrill voice yelled.

As they closed the last couple of meters between them and Lorist, the clash on the wall began. Luckily for Lorist's men, they met the enemy as they came to the wall up the stairs, so they didn't have to face their set formation. Instead they fought them in a loose conglomerate of a line. Even so, this was not a fight his men could win easily. The enemy had the better armor, and the greater numbers. The armor, however, was both a blessing and a curse in this instance. Fighting on the steps was not easy when one's helmet and breastplate kept one from seeing the steps at one's feet. A single misstep sent the hunks of metal hurtling to the ground several meters below, or opened them to a fatal strike from their more nimble enemies.

It was Wessia's mistake to send only close-quarters units to retake the walls. Archers could have massacred the Nortons as they fought on the steps. Lorist would have had no way to counter them. His men had neither shield nor bow. Josk was the only one who could strike back. Since he was not occupied with enemy archers, his strikes also reigned down on the turtles ascending the stairs.

The enemy was already wavering, and, at this moment, their own ballistae in the towers, fired on them. Their morale could not take it. They shivered like children in cold wind. Their steps slowed and their footing failed them, but they did not retreat. The steps were wide enough for two men to walk side-by-side. Two of the bulky spearmen could not fit side-by-side, but one could hold the front and a second strike around him. They abandoned this tactic when the ballista started firing, opting to hug the wall single file instead.

The towers were never meant to fire on the city itself. They were positioned to fire outwards, away from the city, and to cover the tops of the walls. They could only barely

catch the outer edges of the stairs. They also had to avoid hitting their own troops, so they were only a threat to the men walking recklessly close to the edge of the stairs.

The ballista at the very top of the towers, however, could fire into the city. The buildings made it difficult to see the enemy, though, and they could only catch them in a few spots. The enemy responded by pulling the doors off the buildings and using them to block up the spots so the enemy could not see them easily. Even if the ballista simply shot through the gaps, most of the bolts' energy was sapped and it didn't pose much of a threat to the men on the other side.

"Attack!" shouted the commander as he thrust his pike at Lorist, a lazy smile on his face. Like a peacock flaunting its plumage, near a hundred pikes struck at Lorist. There was only one way to move, backwards.

He took two steps back at the last moment, leaving the spears to eat the air millimeters from him.

*Damnit... if only mine was a little longer,* thought all men.

Their miss did not discourage them though. They withdrew their pikes, stepped forward, and repeated. So what if their opponents withdrew? They could just keep going until they were cornered. Neither this insane duke nor his pitiful barricades could stop them.

Their eyes swelled in terror and their pupils shrunk. Lorist moved forward with the pikes as they retracted. He held onto a spear-tip and let it pull him forward like he were a feather stuck to it. They reacted too late. Lorist was slaughtering his way through their ranks the moment after they noticed him. They cried like a chorus, wailing in despair at their fate.

Their pikes, so powerful at range, were useless once he was in their ranks. They could do nothing but watch him fell them like ripe wheat. Those not yet dead when they noticed what was happening dropped everything and ran. Some peaked over their shoulders to find the devil walking towards them on a road of corpses.

The men at the rear glared at their fleeing comrades, then charged forward, through their compatriots. They had only one thought on their minds.

"Kill him!"

The front infantry snapped out of it. They died of shame and their furious corpses charged back into the fray.

"To hell with you!" shouted the first to reach Lorist and was promptly beheaded.

Countless others charged forward to replace him. Lorist withdrew another two steps to avoid the mass of spears, only to find another mass ready to meet him. This disorganized mass was actually more challenging than an organized, orderly formation. He could deal with it using his slaughter domain, but he wished to reserve it for the blademaster.

Battle burst out behind him. Worridge and his men had finally met the enemy that had moved through the houses. Lorist flung corpses at his pursuers as he retreated and slaughtered his way through the enemy behind him.

Josk joined again with three arrows, clearing a portion of the steps. The steps were littered with arrowed corpses, as were the streets. He'd fired hundreds of arrows since the fight began. His shoulders were beginning to ache and his shots waver. He had maybe another hundred decent shots in him, after that he would be of no use.

Had the enemy been wearing any lighter armour, he could just hand things down to his men, but that was not the case. The enemy's armor may even be comparable to House Norton's. Even his infused arrows could only do real damage if he hit thin or exposed areas. Two of his silver-ranked men were already worn out. Only his arrows posed a threat to the enemies now.

His greatest worry was that their new tactics on the steps left the Norton men dying quite frequently. They could not hold on for long at this rate.

Wessia's heavy forces were mainly mercenaries. They were quite adept at single combat. Lorist's men were a match for their opponents man to man, but they were severely outnumbered. Even if they killed two for every one of their own they lost, their enemy would still have men to spare. Josk was the primary inflictor of losses, so the enemy wanted to get to him and kill him as quickly as possible.

The streets were paved in corpses, friend and foe alike. Lorist's bloody figure could be seen on the walls as he fought his way up the stairs. The men on the ground had been pushed back to the last few barricades in front of the wall, their numbers dwindling.

Things weren't deteriorating quite as quickly as they appeared, however. Every

moment the Nortons held out, one or two men joined them on the wall from outside. About six-hundred Tigersoar reinforcements had joined them by now. This angered Josk, rather than pleasing him, however. Tigersoar's cavarly troops had no business in such a static fight, Firmrock's men were what they needed. Rather than forces that could turn the tide, or at least stem it until the gates opened, they were just more bodies for the roads. Josk cursed incessantly as he shouted down the wall for Tigersoar to let Firmrock go first.

The heavy-armored soldiers on the left stone step roared loudly as tens of them gathered into a frantic, united charge. The guards were overwhelmed and their casualties soared once more. A good number of them were sent tumbling down by suicidal enemy soldiers that hugged them tight as they pushed. Fortunately, the guards on the walls rushed in to reinforce them. The two sides clashed on the fourth level of the steps that was nearest to the walls.

Josk could no longer spare any attention to the steps on the right side. The green longbow thrummed ten times in succession, sending the seven charging heavy pike infantrymen off the stone steps, successfully stabilizing the situation. Just as he was about to breathe a sigh of relief, a sword flashed brightly like lightning at the fourth level of the stone steps all of a sudden. The seven guards fighting desperately at the stone steps fell from it.

Terror struck Josk.

*A blademaster!*

Wessia didn't mobilize their blademaster against Lorist and instead had him take the walls back. It was no wonder those tens of heavy-armored soldiers charged. It was so that they could protect the blademaster while he made his way up.

The blademaster that made his way up the walls was a sinister-looking middle-aged man clad in the same black armor as the heavy pike infantrymen. He wore no helmet and his face was still covered with a streak of blood of the guards he killed, making him look all the more savage. The moment he got on the walls, a flash from his sword saw tens of guards falling. Josk's way was blocked by the guards and by the time they fell, the blademaster was within five meters of Josk.

*It's over...* Josk's limbs were stone cold.

The blademaster was too close, his arrows were no threat now. They were also on the walls and Josk couldn't escape on horseback as he would on land.

# Chapter 468

## Resolution

The spear's arm broke off with a woody snap. The cavalryman climbing the wall returned to the frozen ground the short way.

"47 seven," counted Dulles, shaking his head. They had planned the whole thing properly. Well, the whole thing except the gate. They had failed to take the effect of the cold on the iron into account. Instead of overwhelming the enemy before they could respond, their lord and his elite guard became fish in a barrel.

No one was prepared to climb the walls. The plan was to go through the gate, so no one had brought anything with which to assail the stones now blocking their way. Even now the entire army only had three ropes by which to get into the city and save their lord. Of the two thousand guards that went with the duke, only half had ascended, and the rest were unwilling to make way for the other units. The duke was their responsibility and they would be damned if they let anyone else take their charge.

It took nearly two hours for more ropes to be readied. The men outside returned to their camp and brought any loose rope they could find, mainly from the sledges, and fashioned half-decent climbing ropes. Loze was chosen to lead Tigersoar's men onto the wall to relieve their lord.

They flung spears with the ropes attached into the merlons. The spears were not made to hold fully armored soldiers, however, and 47 had snapped so far. Of the six hundred who had made the climb so far, 40 returned to the ground outside.

Most frustrating was that even as Tigersoar continued to ascend valiantly, they were ordered to stand down and let Firmrock take the lead.

Furious, lose and his men disobeyed and continued to climb.

"How many of our ballistae were brought up?" asked Dulles.

"Thirty-seven have been moved to the wall. More are on their way," reported a scribe, his eyes still glued to the parchment on which he scribbled notes.

"Then why haven't they started firing? I don't care that our standard compartment isn't set up yet, help out our lord!"

"We've only sent the ballistae up, Sir. Their bolts are still down here. The ballistae have nothing to shoot."

*Fuck!*

This was not looking good. They could send up 20 soldier at a time now, but it was still far from being enough, they were still slowly losing ground.

"Get the bolts up to the ballistae as quickly as possible! I don't want a single ballistae unable to fire! Keep them shooting until they fall apart! Send the 12th brigade out to get us wood to build ladders! We need to get more men--"

His orders were interrupted by the 48th spear snapping.

"Fuck me!... Hold on... Set up a few of the ballistae down here. Shot the bolts into the wall so the men can climb up using them!" Dulles yelled at a passing soldier.

Malek jogged up to Dulles.

"Most of the ropes in the camp aren't useable. They're either too thin or completely frozen in place. Heating up enough and making more ropes will take at least two more hours."

"Sir, why don't we pile up the snow and make a ramp? We have so many men just standing around we might as well put them to work," suggested the scribe.

"You might actually be on to something!" Malek yelled, "We can be on the wall in less than an hour!"

A sharp cry broke the conversation. Everyone's eyes darted to the walls just in time to see a Norton soldier flung off the wall through a crenel, a red rope trailing behind him.

"They're on the walls already? I have to go up and help!" yelled Malek as he dashed to the wall, "Dulles! Start building the ramp!"

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"It's over..." Josk murmured. He barely held out by blocking with his bow. A strike or two more would end him, however. He could not match a blademaster's battleforce.

The blademaster rapidly closed the remaining distance. If this archer fell, he pretty much already had the walls.

A golden sheened spear suddenly flew at him. He had to choose, kill the archer, and be injured, or protect himself, and let the archer get away. He chose the latter. He withdrew his sword and cut the incoming spear in half. Josk retreated ten meters and drew his bow again. Just as he was about to unleash his shot, Loze stepped in his way and clashed with the blademaster. Loze could not win the fight either, but he could hold the old man back for a few moments. The addition of an archer that could strike at any moment, those few moments could be extended a little further.

No one disputed Loze's place at the top of the house's 16 gold-ranked knights. Even Potterfang, who was the best of them all at defense, could only fight Loze to a draw. Lorist was also convinced he would be the first of them to become a blademaster, probably sometime in the next three years. He had the experience and the technique, he just lacked the inspiration necessary to make the final breakthrough.

The enemy blademaster must be one of the two that had only recently broken though. While his technique was fierce, it lacked proper control. Loze suffered two light cuts in the first couple of exchanges, but quickly caught on to his opponent's style and now fought on equal footing. With Josk drawing some of the blademaster's attention, the man was actually fighting an uphill battle.

The stairs were lost. The enemy mercenaries bubbled onto the wall non-stop and were pushing the Nortons back further and further with every passing minute. Tigersoar's men were constantly pouring onto the walls, though, and helped to keep the enemy back relatively well. The corpses lay so thick on the wall that with each new death an older corpse was pushed off the wall. The corpses were beginning to form a small ramp to the wall's city-side.

The elite trio's fight took place near the gate. The blademaster was frustrated by his current predicament. He'd come to kill the pesky archer, not to fight two-on-one. This was supposed to be a quick clearing of the walls. Now, however, though he was confident of his eventual victory, he didn't know how long it would take to tire his opponents out and finally kill them.

Several dozen soldiers rushed over to help, only to be cut down by Josk. This volley pushed him to his limit, however; he was temporarily out of the fight while he caught his breath. Lorist was in a similar state down by the gate. Though he was uninjured at present, he leaned against the wall and heaved as his men fought around him. Of the two hundred who had started this mission with him, only fifty were left. Worrige himself, while still alive, was badly hurt.

Of Wessia's four 10 thousand strong divisions and its five thousand strong logistics division, one had been sent to clear the enemy out of the city. The other three were probably each at another gate. Reidy and Shuss had once again started pushing long the walls to relieve some of the pressure on Lorist and his unit, so the guild couldn't mobilize their other divisions yet.

*Damn this metal gate!* Lorist cursed silently.

How could he let such a brilliant plan collapse so miserably? He'd killed thousands already, but thousands were still standing in line for their turn at trying to kill him... His saving grace was that the slum streets didn't let the enemy make use of their numbers. Otherwise, he'd have been a frozen corpse for an hour by now.

Another horn blasted through the sounds of fighting echoing back and forth between the city walls. Another three-hundred-man formation was attacking. His side was down to just fifty by comparison, and they were only a quarter of the way to opening the gate. Of the four hinges, only one was loose. They could not survive this next fight without serious reinforcement, and there was no sign of them getting it anytime soon. Lorist could still fight his way to the top of the wall and make it out safely, sure, but he would be leaving his dearest, most able men to die. As much as Lorist could let himself die, or worse, be captured, he couldn't bring himself to abandon his men either. The last attack's defeat had confirmed his blademaster abilities to the enemy, and they were now using appropriate tactics. His exhaustion aside, this fight was going to far harder than any he had fought so far...

Malek made it to the top of the wall. After surveying the situation briefly, he charged to his men. His addition boosted their morale and their slow retreat stopped. He fought there for a few minutes to stabilize the situation before heading for Loze and Josk. The blademaster panicked when he saw yet another gold-rank coming to join the fray. If he didn't leave immediately, he would be done for. He could still win against two gold-ranks by simply outlasting them, but his cultivation had yet to stabilize enough to fight three.

He swung his blade at Loze with all his strength. Loze was flung off balance and exposed his chest. Three golden-tipped arrows charged in at that moment, however, and forced the blademaster to retreat. Despite that, however, the blademaster sighed relievedly. All three arrows the archer had in his hands had been fired so he had a moment in which he need only worry about two opponents. He could now escape without--

Puchi!

He suddenly felt something cold thrust into his chest. He looked down and saw the shaft of an arrow dancing back and forth in the air, the tip vanishing through his clothing into his torso.

"How... How? There... were four..."

"Damn it, Joe! You stole my kill!" cried Loze.

Josk collapsed onto the cold stone of the wall, slumping against the crenellations. His arms had no strength left in them. Even his jaw and tongue refused to obey his will.

Malek's sword fell, and, with it, fell the blademaster's head.

"Quick, bring the steel ballistae!" he yelled down the length of the wall.

# Chapter 469

## Triumph

*So I have no choice but to use my slaughter domain*, thought Lorist as watched the three 100-man-formations approach. The two towers on the walls could support him no longer. Not only were their ballistae firing slower and slower, the bolts were flying all over the place. They could risk hitting their own men, so they were forced to stop.

The last volley was when the formations were about 60 meters from him, but only a single bolt hit someone. One of the other bolts hit a building next to the street, the other flew over at least eight-tenths of the entire formation. Someone cried soon after, though whether this was from shock or pain, no one knew. The third, and final, bolt, punctured the ground in front of his feet, blasting away a bodiless head. The shots were becoming too unreliable and unpredictable; they were as much a threat to Lorist now as they were to the enemy -- a good time to stop.

"Worridge! Withdraw with the injured when I make my move!"

The battle was souring quickly. Of the two possible escape routes, only one was still reasonably open. The tower to the right of the wall was swarming with enemies, still fighting his men somewhere inside. The tower to the left was relatively quiet, the enemy had taken it, but at severe cost, they would be easy to kill off with the fifty men currently by the gate. What was going on atop the walls was unknown to Lorist, nor did he particularly care right now. His first priority was getting his men down below up top. Whatever waited for them there could not be worse than being cut off from any possible escape down below. He would use his slaughter domain to keep the enemy at bay and buy time for Worridge and the others to make it to the wall.

"We can't just leave Your Grace behind. It is our sworn duty to protect you, not the other way around." Worridge protested.

"Now is not the time. Go!"

The enemy closed with every breath they wasted. The marching coffins approached at a constant, rhythmic pace, each step ringing like a funeral drum. Lorist could not hope for them to make the same mistake the first group had. They would not let him

get into their formation again. He clasped his sword, the veins on his hands and arms bulging. He had to get in close to his enemies. As powerful as his domain was, it only stretched five meters away from him, his enemy. His enemy could strike at him from three meters away, no more. At least a few men in their first two lines had to enter his domain.

"Fire!" he yelled.

Three shaft flew overhead and slammed into the enemy formation at random. While they could not strike the enemy accurately anymore, the ballista could at least still hit someone somewhere in a formation of this size at this distance. The formation broke up momentarily. Lorist closed his eyes. He could hear Worrdirge's cheers behind. Three more shafts whizzed by, the drums struck three times, and the choir began their lamentations.

Ballistae deserved their reputation as the deadliest weapons on the continent. Each, in peak condition, could fire ten times a minute, strike accurately, and hit further than anything else. They weren't omnipotent on the battlefield, but in tight, urban corners like this, and facing an unprepared enemy, they were the bringers of death. Sometimes just knowing the enemy had ballistae would make men and commanders alike think twice.

The enemy's counterattack was doomed the moment the ballistae on the walls were set up. The fight might truly have been lost had Malek not forced his way onto the wall with his ballistae. Few, if any, of Lorist's personal guard would have made it out alive, much less in a state still able to fight. Fiercetiger Loze was the best offensive gold-ranked knight in the household, Potterfang an unmovable mountain, he'd even been named after his legion, Firmrock Potterfang. Malek could not hold a candle to them in a fight, but give him a legion and an objective, and none could compare. Where the first two were born fighters, Malek was a born leader. None could notice or make use of opportunities like him.

He had a background in the military and many called him Old Ironface. It took a lot to solicit an expression from him. If he frowned, the legion was likely about to be wiped out. He'd even ordered the slaughter of several thousand civilians during the Edalise revolts in Sidgler without batting an eye. That particular incident changed his nickname to Ironface Bloodhands. Lorist had done his best to silence the name, though it was still whispered in unsavory tavern corners and dark alleyways.

Malek's first actions once he assailed the walls were to push the enemy back and stabilize his position on the wall. He then helped Loze and Josk finish off the blademaster before finally finishing the ballistae setup. These ballistae were from House Norton, the ones usually mounted on chariots. This meant that they were light enough to be hauled up the wall, but also meant they couldn't readily be set up. Since they were designed to use the chariots as stabilizing platforms, they weren't stable when standing on their own on the stone walkway. The men first had to fashion makeshift platforms to which to attach them. This however, would take too long. Malek's solution was to have men lay beneath the ballistae, hugging them, to act as makeshift platforms. While the ballistae weren't as stable, and thus as accurate, as one might want, it was good enough. The human platforms suffered moderate bruising, a few cracked a rib or two, but nothing too bad.

These new weapons quickly cleared up the walls and then turned their attention to the streets below. Loze led a group to retake the left tower and the steps within, while Josk joined the defense of the right tower. Everyone else was put to work getting more ballistae on the walls and hauling up more ammunition. Dozens of ballistae soon lined the walls and rained death down on the streets below.

Lorist opened his eyes to find himself standing on the edge of a forest. Bloody roots strangled the paved ground and thin, metal stems grew from them to about shoulder height, where they bloomed into metal leaves. The wind howled mournfully around the building and through the forest, carrying with it the dying echoes of moans and whines.

Those on the other side of the forest quickly surrendered when the blademaster's head was hung on the gate to cook over the fire. They were disarmed and quickly put to work cleaning the area of the dead and dying. Soon the forest turned into a mountain range.

"I apologize for being late, Your Grace," Malek whispered as he and Loze saluted.

Lorist waved his hand dismissively.

"Worry about apologies later, the city is yet ours. First is this gate," he said, glaring at the stubborn mass of iron. "Oh, also, how's Reidy, Els, and Shuss doing? Reinforce them as soon as you can."

The final snow bricks were laid in place the same moment the last hinge gave way.

"You're kidding me!" Dulles screamed as he collapsed into the ramp, his mouth almost foaming.

The outer wall, and with it the northern district, fell. Elsewhere in the city, however, the horns continued to blare. Barricades were quickly taking shape on the outer wall near the edge of the sectors and in front of the gates between the sectors. The citizens were also chased out of key buildings, which were then turned into makeshift forts. The first responders got word out of the situation and some particulars of their enemies before their defeat so the entire city knew what and who it was up against. The next wave set out prepared.

Dulles and Loze pushed further into the district twice before the second wave arrived, after some fighting their position stabilized about two streets in. They couldn't press any further because the entire district was set alight as the enemy withdrew.

"We'll hold for now. Evacuate the civilians first, move them outside the city and build them some temporary housing. Wessia burns them without a thought because they don't consider them Union citizens. We cannot show them the same disdain, they are imperial subjects even if only former." Lorist ordered.

Reidy, Els, and Shuss returned soon after. Lorist's two disciples had taken the entire outer wall up to the northern district's edge. They couldn't push any further since the enemy was prepared and halted them were the inner walls that separate the district meet the outer wall. The alert Lorist had heard earlier was thanks to a soldier stepping out onto the wall to take a leak on the other side of the tower. He returned to find his comrades dead and sounded the alarm before he could be killed.

Shuss did not manage to push all the way to the dividing wall to the east. He didn't make progress as quickly as the two disciples, and was exposed by the alarm. After that, he clashed with the garrison soldiers of Wessia single-handedly to defend the tower. He made it to within the last two towers, but was halted by two gold-ranked knights. When he tried to push through the other side of the tower once the two were dead, he realized it had been sealed from the other side. The enemy tried several tactics to force him out, but he held until he received the order to withdraw.

Reidy and Els had quite a few stories to tell. Reidy killed a rank 1 blademaster. The poor fool underestimated the youth thanks to his blade glow and was bisected after a few bouts. When he stepped out of the tower on the other end, however, he was showered with arrows. He avoided most, but his shoulder and right buttock each

caught one.

**On the 31st day of the 1st month, Year 1787, House Norton launched a surprise attack on Frederika and conquered the northern quarter of the city's walls. The local nobility, from the Union's Wessia merchant guild suffered heavy casualties, among them two rank 1 blademasters and a number of gold-ranked knights. The heavy troops they sent in to clear out the enemy were all but decimated. In a desperate, last-ditch effort to hold the invaders back until they could properly prepare, they set fire to the entire district. It burned for three days and smoldered for at least a dozen more. No one knows exactly how many died, but, whatever the exact figure, it was enough to make the guild and anyone associated with it, devils in the eyes of the survivors.**

# Chapter 470

## Fall of the City

"We have to stop the attack, Your Grace. Our casualties are too great," pleaded Malek.

The northern district had burned for three days before it finally subsided, even now, though, it still lay smoldering. With the ruins all around them still steaming, it was very hot, even difficult to fight properly, but they could wait no longer, so the men deployed. They moved the men in the city through the district and started attacking the district walls. At the same time, they marched the forces still waiting outside the city on the western and eastern gates. Wessia put up a determined fight, however. They buried the streets in barricades and manned much of it with miners and other militia. The Norton attackers couldn't walk a single block without fighting several battles.

Frederika was a large city. It used to be one of the empire's biggest city and a crucial hub in its south. Its size and importance meant it already had serious defences, plus its continuous growth and renovation meant no map was ever up to date. This was confounded even further when Wessia took over. They renovated three quarters of the city (everything except the northern district), and upgraded its defences yet again.

The city's western district housed all its military facilities. It also had entertainment for the soldiers; brothels, baths, medical facilities, and taverns, amongst other things. Wessia had indeed won its soldiers' hearts. The men fought loyally; they would not retreat or surrender unless ordered to do so by their bosses.

The eastern district housed the miners and other skilled artisans. It was to be expected that the Union's military supplier would own many skilled in related arts. These, too, were treated well. The guild was not much different from the Japanese companies Lorist knew quite well. The various trades were passed down in the family, and each new generation worked for the same company as the last. Such people were incredibly loyal to their employers. They, too, would not let House Norton take their city as long as they breathed. Lorist's greatest fears had come true. There was no way he could poach these skilled laborers, they would die before serving him, and were doing so alongside his enemy's army as one of them.

The fight in the west was particularly intense and unforgiving. The district had been turned into a citadel, an insurmountable fortress. The eastern district wasn't too far behind. It was littered with barricades and obstacles, in some places even the houses along the road were demolished, torn down and collapsed over the street to block it off. Corpses paved the streets and blocked the doorways. If only a single battle could be called one of attrition, this was it.

The ballistae, so crucial in holding their foothold on the northern wall just a few days ago, was no use. The streets curved and turned almost incessantly, and the few stretches of straight road was barricaded with furniture and rubble or blocked by a collapsed building. They were also prime targets and suffered frequent attacks out of nearby building or from nearby rooftops. A few days of this had forced Malek to pull the weapons back. A few more days brought everything to a halt. They stood at a stalemate.

"We cannot continue like this, Your Grace. Even if we take the city eventually, we'll be too weakened to push on to our other objectives. Tigersoar is down 4600 men and Firmrock about half that. All of this for barely any inroads. We haven't even taken half of the districts. Our best progress is in the eastern district, and that only because it's mostly rubble. We can do almost nothing with it and might as well not have taken anything at all. Our camp outside the city was attacked last night as well. We're still trying to figure out how bad the damage is. We're fighting blind and coughing while our enemy can see and breath clearly..." reported Malek.

A large portion of Wessia's forces were mercenaries. They excelled at guerilla tactics, and the ruined city was the perfect terrain as well. House Norton had no match. That the locals had taken up arms against them did them no favors either. They would usually take a city in a day or less, entirely intact. And the civilians would either be happy to have the Nortons as their new overlords, or be at worst indifferent. They had never faced a hostile populace before. Even the women, elderly, and children joined in the fighting. For the first time, House Norton was being treated as vile invaders, as the villains. The men's morale were not doing good.

Lorist stared at the simple city map on the table. It had been drawn based on descriptions provided by the men and th scouts' surveys. The southern district was almost featureless, only the inner, outer, and dividing walls, and a few landmark buildings like a church steeple were filled in. The eastern and western districts were far more detailed, but they might as well not be. The landscape inside changed almost by the hour -- the map was out of date even before it was drawn. In total, only a third

of the outer city had been conquered, none of the inner city, and half of that was still being contested.

He had three Tigersoar divisions and one Firmrock division in and around the city at the moment. By his side was also 2000 of his personal guard. His forces totalled 60 thousand. If the men were packed in like sardines he could only fit 40 thousand in the area of the city he currently controlled.

Wessia, conversely, had suffered heavy losses to their heavy pikemen, but still had 30 thousand soldiers. If the civilians who'd also taken up arms, many of whom spontaneously, they had 80 thousand fighting bodies. The guild's extensive weapon stores were also still in their hands, so all 80 thousand were decently armed.

It turned out the guild had three of their four blademasters in the city. So far they had lost their two rookies, but their rank 2 blademaster, which was accompanying the guild's president, was also present. No one knew how many gold-ranked knights they had left. The guild had double the Nortons' fieldable forces and a stubbornness they had not encountered. Malek was right. They could not let this continue. At this rate they would have lost the fight even if they took the city. A pyrrhic victory in this battle was a defeat in the war.

The guild clearly knew this and were trying to cost him as many lives as they could. Every enemy they killed was a small victory for them. The city itself was a minefield Lorist could not take easily, and the guild stuffed the towers and walls it controlled to the breaking point with archers and ammo, so taking the walls go around the bogs that were the districts was not an option either.

He'd planned to clear out the three districts in which he now sat mired before marching along the walls. Once everything there was under control he would clear the southern district and force the guild to surrender. Once he could see the walls to the inner city properly, however, he gave up on the idea. Wessia had made the inner city a city separate from the outer city. Surrounding the inner city by taking all of the outer city brought him no closer to victory than surrounding the entire city without assaulting it at all. The inner walls were several meters taller than all the others, and could not be assailed from the others. The also had numerous massive ballistae that could cover almost a quarter of the way to the outer walls. No street within that range facing the inner wall was safe. Lorist's only consolation was that they were slow to fire and had to be refitted with new rope springs after only a few shots.

"Why not give them their wish, Your Grace? Since they wish to die in their city, let us burn it all," offered Loze. He was furious at Wessia for resisting his conquering fist. Who were they to want to not be crushed under his Norton heel? What right did they have to kill his men? Didn't they know the proper thing to do was to sit still and wait quietly to be executed?

Lorist shook his head.

Wessia could burn the northern district because it was made of flammable materials. But the rest of the city was built out of stone and ceramics, there was no burning it down. It was hard to even set something on fire there, much less have it spread naturally. At best they'd only be burning the houses at the edge of the ballistae's range. They'd actually be doing Wessia a favor by creating open space so they could see the Nortons coming.

"We have three Firmrock divisions still being held in reserve, why not deploy them to the city? They will be much better at fighting in this environment than Tigersaor," suggested Josk.

"Not happening. Wessia still controls all the other city gates. If we move them out they can either escape, or worse, encircle us instead. The latter is obviously unacceptable, but we can't let them escape either. We have to uproot them completely.

"This stalemate is thanks to the machinations of the guild's leaders. If we can push into the city and kill the leaders, the enemy will fall into disarray and be easy pickings. Even better, if we can take them hostage, we can force the men to surrender. It won't be too late to execute them later, in fact, I would prefer it that way."

"I cannot sanction assaulting the inner city, You Grace. We'll expose our sides and rear to the enemy. If they use the opportunity wisely, which experience says they will, they could force us out of the city entirely, or, even worse, wipe out everything we have in the city," Malek protested.

"We won't make our push through the two contested districts. Have the men halt their advance. We'll push through the northern district which we control completely. Potterfang will arrive with Thundebolt Brigade in about a week. We can just smash the northern district's inner wall and barge in. As long as we capture the president and the rest of their high-command, the city is ours."

So it was done.

For the next two days the Nortons made no pushes. The only fighting happened when Wessia sent forces out to try and retake some of the city or walls they lost. On the second day Wessia became very suspicious, this was not how Norton Lorist was known to operate. He was docile, but when he made his move, he finished it in one go. He'd never given up and accepted a stalemate. The president sent an envoy to figure out what was going on.

The envoy was a well-spoken senior officer in the guild. He confirmed Lorist's suspicions. The guild would fight him to the last man. The city would only be his once he'd killed every single inhabitant. He even claimed that Norton would not take the city. Wessia outnumbered him, even if they had to sacrifice one and a half men for every Norton they killed, there would still be more of their men standing when the last Norton fell.

The second month was coming to an end, in thirty days the first rains of the rainy season would fall. Neither side could fight. The side with the most supplies would win if the fighting lasted until then. If that happened, House Norton would lose without a doubt. Wessia was fighting on their home turf, in their capital, no less. They had supplies to hold out for months, even years. The Norton forces, on the other hand, were out in the field, hundreds of kilometers away from the nearest friendly territory, they could not bring in any more supplies, and whatever they had with them would not last them until they could. The guild hoped that Lorist would accept his inevitable defeat and retreat.

The guild would hold out until the rainy season ended one way or another, and would call for Union reinforcement the moment the rains abated. Lorist had no way to stand against the millions that would come marching down his throat if he still stood on Union soil. He might not even be able to hold out on home ground. If he was still in the city when the time came, he would not leave alive even if he tried. The man was not all threat, though. He offered Lorist an olive branch. He said the guild understood that he'd acted only because he could not stand up to his king and it would not hold him directly responsible if he withdrew without further futile fighting.

Lorist curled into a ball which shook in laughter for several minutes. The envoy stood, staring at him awkward until he recovered.

"I thought you were an envoy, not a joker! We have only just gotten started with you.

Do you think you'll still exist when this is over? Where do you get your confidence from? No, this can't be called confidence, it's nothing but arrogance!

"But, since you've made this offer, I'll return the favor. If you surrender immediately, I might consider sparing you. I don't care who you think you are, but to us you're nothing but another snake to step on. We've never fought a snake that could bite us, and you are no different."

The envoy didn't retaliate furiously. Lorist had to give him that much, he was worth his salt as a diplomate. The man seamlessly switched tactics when his first attempt failed.

"As long as you retreat and return the land you stole from us, we will pay you two million gold Fordeas as ransom."

Another bout of laughter.

"Why do we need to give you the empire's land for money we'll own soon enough anyway? You should surrender and save your lives. Blame yourself for crossing the empire by occupying its rightful land. Learn your lesson well. You're free to go after whatever you want, but anything that belongs to the empire is off limits. If you surrender immediately, I guarantee you can leave the city safely."

The envoy finally snapped.

"This is our city, our land, our people! The guild and its people will go to hell before we give you what is rightfully ours, and we'll pull you down kicking and screaming along with us! We've already prepared everything. If you break into the inner city we'll burn everything down, you will get nothing but ashes even if you survive!"

Lorist slammed the desk, which nearly collapsed, and jumped to his feet, furious.

"If you set fire to even a single warehouse, I swear that not a single man, woman, or child of your guild will walk out of this city alive! I will hunt down every last living being with even a single drop of Wessia blood in their veins and slaughter them at the top of your castle! In no more than ten years not a single Wessian will walk this earth and you will only be remembered in the curses of your subjects!"

The envoy turned around and stormed out, not even bothering to adhere to etiquette and say goodbye properly.

Potterfang set Firmrock's Thunderbolt Brigade up in the northern district on the 7th of the 2nd.

On the 9th, the bombardment began. The inner wall in the northern district, and the portions of the western and eastern districts still under Wessian control were all assaulted. The defenders could do nothing to halt the bombardment and slowly withdrew to the inner city.

Lorist led his guards into the inner city in the afternoon. Wessia sent out its one remaining blademaker to face him. The man died quickly. In response the guilds leadership tried to retreat through the southern district, setting fire to everything behind them.

The fire raged for two days and almost nothing of the city was left untouched when the fire was finally put out. A third of the storehouses' contents were salvagable, however.

On the 12th of the 2nd, the miners in the eastern district surrendered. Nearly ten thousand Wessian soldiers withdrew to the citadel, however, and swore they'd fight to the last man.

Wessian leadership made it to the wall on the 13th but were all captured when they left through the gate. The men inside the citadel refused several offers of surrender and were crushed on the 14th. All were killed. Lorist then executed all the Wessian captives, men, women, and children.

On the 14th day of the 2nd month on Year 1787, Andinaq's Duke of The Northlands Norton Lorist's forces successfully took over Frederika and killed off 30 thousand of the guild's officials and men, as well as their families. Soon after the continent's second skeleton pyramid was built.

Wessia ceased to exist as a member of the Union's big-seven on that day. When word finally spread to the Union after the rainy season ended, it was tumbled into chaos for several days. When things calmed down the remaining guilds called a crusade on Norton Lorist. They declared him and anyone and everyone even remotely associated with him their mortal enemy and swore they would not rest until his torn corpse was rotting over Morant's city gates.

# Chapter 471

## The Coming of the Rainy Season

"Your Grace, here's the record. Everything we got is in it," said Malek as he put a beastskin on the desk.

The pair was in the mayor's residence in the middle of the city. It was now Lorist's base of operations. Wessia's chairman and some other officials had ordered everything's burning when they left and half of the building was now ash. Only a third was saved. Lorist stared out of the window at the rubble outside. A few holes punctured the ground outside as the men dug for any buried treasure. He sighed gloomily.

"Today's the 33rd of the 2nd. The rainy season will start in the next day or two. Is everything ready? It'll be hard to stay in this ruin through it..."

"Everything's ready, Your Grace. We've gathered the captives in the western district and have them under tight watch, Potterfang is there, too. Josk is watching over our defenses. And the refugees are being housed in the eastern district. They're calm and willing to serve us. Dulles is inventorying our supplies."

"And our men? Are they settled in?"

"They are, Your Grace. Loze is stationing Tigersoar in the southern district and Firmrock in the northern one. The temporary camps are ready. The rainy season won't be a problem."

"Well done. You've been very thorough."

Lorist walked to the desk. He picked up a beastskin and scanned it.

"We only got four million gold Fordes?"

"Yes, Your Grace. We found everything in the main treasury. The captured treasurers say it's Wessia's reserves. It was supposed to pay the soldiers' salaries. The leftovers were in case of emergencies.

"In total we have about 10 million in spoils. Most of the food couldn't be salvaged though. Most of the spoils are metals. It's all worthless to us right now."

It was to be expected. Wessia was a military contractor. Most of their wealth lay in the materials they used to make weapons and the weapons themselves. Such things were useless to House Norton right now. And most of the value would be lost in transportation costs.

In physical value they were worth something, but shipping back home would cost about as much as they were worth. As for the weapons... The house could make far better weapons so they were only worth as much as the materials that could be salvaged from them.

The best option would be to sell them immediately, but the territory to the south was enemy territory, besides the fact that he would not sell it to them, they wouldn't buy it even if he gave them an offer. And his allies were either not nearby, or didn't have the wealth to make the purchase. Auguslo might seem like a good choice, but he would never pay what the weapons were worth. Most likely he'd make an empty promise of payment and Lorist would never see the money.

"I've checked all the documents over the last three weeks. I've found nothing about the alloy's production, they must have been destroyed in the fire. Have Reidy and Els found any Wessian material engineers? Our best spoil would be the knowledge of making the alloys they used for the gates."

"I am not privy to such knowledge, Milord. I know nothing of their possible progress," Malek answered, his stoic expression still intact.

"Oh, I forgot. I shouldn't have asked you. Forget it. Too many unexpected things have happened recently. There is no chance we can catch up to our original schedule. At least we still achieved our most important objectives. I leave the logistics for this coming season in your hands!" Lorist said, patting Malek's shoulder.

"Don't worry, Your Grace. I will not disappoint you. In that regard, though, our biggest issue is food. We'd banked on using the spoils to tide us over, but, as you know, that didn't work out. I've had someone run the numbers. While we can last through the rainy season itself, we'll be running on empty and won't last a week or two afterwards if we're not resupplied the moment the rain stops."

"Lasting the rainy season is enough. We'll be resupplied as soon as the rain stops and the winter harvests will solve all our problems. We can sweep the surrounding lands once the rain clears if we need a few more weeks for supplies to arrive. Potterfang will head out to Kanbona with Firmrock once the rain clears, it should also have some good stashes.

"Jaeger will arrive with the supply train so we can begin moving the refugees back home then as well. It should lower consumption so our supplies should stretch even further."

Lorist couldn't be more furious that Wessia would spite him so much. All he'd been planning to do was wipe them out, it was no reason to spoil his plans this badly.

The fight would have been over a few days earlier if not for the fires. He had to give up catching the leaders quickly so he could fight the fire and try to save as much as he could. But, in spite of his quick reaction and efforts, they only saved a third of the resources. It would be really tight to get everyone through the rainy season.

Reidy and Els entered as Malek left. When Wessia's newly formed miner forces surrendered, Lorist left the two in charge of finding talented people. Their current confident gazes told him they had found a good few.

"Here's the list, You Grace. We found 178 people. Most are technicians but a few are technical supervisors. None of their family died in the fight so they don't have a death grudge against us," Els reported.

"We found the master refiner who made the material used to construct the gates. He's called Modira, 47 years old and single. His acquaintances all describe him as completely obsessed with his work," Reidy added.

"Oh? How'd you find him?"

"Actually, he found us," Reidy laughed awkwardly, "We were busy asking around when he suddenly grabbed a guard and refused to let go. He kept muttering incoherently. We initially thought he was attacking and almost killed him. Luckily we noticed he was staring at the guard's armor. He didn't pay anything any attention. He just stared at the armor as he muttered to himself. When we asked around, we learned who he was and about his obsession with metalwork and metal alchemy. Do you want to meet him, Your Grace?"

"What's he doing now?"

"He refused to let go of the armor, so we put him in a tent with a set of steel gloves. He's busy looking at the gloves. He hasn't even bothered to eat or drink anything. He just keeps asking for more beastskins and writing material."

"Leave him be for now, then. We'll send him to the factories when he goes back. Put him to work under Grandmaster Sid."

"Yes, Your Grace."

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The path up the mountain was a bloody one. Corpses were constantly rolling down the mountainside.

"We cannot press the attack, Your Majesty. It's too slippery. We can barely keep our footing even without the constant hail of arrows! We've lost three hundred men already and we haven't even reached the castle!" Ripleid reported.

He was the king's most trusted knight and the colonel in command of Blizzardblitz. His shame at being unable to accomplish his mission was unbearable. How could he not conquer a castle despite surprise and triple their numbers?

His king's expression was equally grim. He'd launched his attack at the very end of the previous year and everything had gone smoothly. He wiped out Zitram's entire army and pushed deep into enemy territory, wiping out 30 Union noble houses only to be halted by this tiny fortress.

He wanted to torture and eventually kill Duke Zitram, the traitor that had rallied ten thousand men against him and was the person behind his ambush last time he was here. He was made a duke when he joined the Union as a result. The bastard didn't stand his ground when Auguslo had Lorist invade last time. Instead he withdrew to a safe place and weathered the storm. He continued to rule over the lands he had left thereafter and never gave Auguslo an excuse to take action against him. He had yet to catch the bastard though. The duke kept evading him at every turn.

Auguslo underestimated how effective Zitram's defenses and alarms were. He was discovered almost immediately, and the duke was ready for him when he got to his castle. He couldn't make a quick breach and had to wait for the catapults to catch up

and batter down the walls. When he made it inside the castle, however, he realized the duke had already escaped. He couldn't go after him quickly, however, because the late winter melt and rainy season slowed him to a crawl. Zitram made it to his nearby cliff-side fortress with his remaining men.

The approach to the fortress was almost suicidal. The constant rain made the road muddy and landslides were frequent. He could only send small groups up at a time lest their weight cause the soaked cliff-side to collapse and make further attack impossible. These small groups, however, were easy pickings for the defenders' archers.

"If only the men would hurry up with the catapults! We'll pound that thing into rubble and send it down the cliff!" Ripleid grumbled.

"The roads are muddy and hard to travel," the king countered, "The rainy season is on us. We can't get the catapults up here quickly, if at all. Don't worry. The bastard isn't going anywhere. Withdraw for now and set up camp at the bottom of the mountain. It won't be too late to finish him off after the rainy season."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

# Chapter 472

## Regroup

On the 25th day of the 4th month, Year 1787, Frederika was occupied by House Norton, whose Tigersoar legion immediately moved against Bodolger. Firmrock moved on Kanbona at the end of the month.

Kanbona was a strategic location in the empire, being a transportation hub that neighbored Bodolger, the two southwestern provinces, the northwestern area, and the province of Malivia. The western edge of Cloudsnap Mountain Range and Morrison River made it a crucial location easy to defend and hard to attack. Whoever controlled Kanbona, controlled all the surrounding provinces.

Before First Prince Redlis saw his kingdom destroyed, Auguslo forced him to sign away the two southwestern provinces. The prince immediately started his preparations despite the treating including a five-year non-aggression pact. He built numerous forts all over the province, manned by over 70 thousand men. Kanbona was turned into a solid wall just as impassable and even more dangerous than the mountain range it bordered.

Auguslo slammed an army of 300 thousand against it but couldn't break through. The only strategy he could come up with would cost him two-thirds of his army and he wasn't willing to break his back that way. His enemies would immediately bring up their reinforcements and drive him back to his capital. He might even lose everything.

The Prince had made sure the men would never dare surrender by putting all their families in Frederika. If they failed to defend the province, their families would be next in line for the pillage. He'd played his cards well, but nothing unfolded like he wanted. Rather than fight through Kanbona and Bodolger, Auguslo had pushed through Egret Swamp in exchange for offering up 20 thousand bodies, crossed Cloudsnap Mountains and Greatsnow Mountain for another 10 thousand, and attacked Frederika directly. The first prince vanished on that day and no one had heard from him since.

Fortunately for the military families, Kanbona surrendered without a fight. In the end the fortifications didn't see a single day's fighting. With the prince vanished, his kingdom crumbled and was quickly forgotten. Auguslo let his victory go to his head

and got himself wiped out as well. He, too, vanished without a trace, though he did eventually make his appearance again.

The 70 thousand men in Kanbona's army had been put into the new army sent to Anderwoff, which left Kanbona's defences unmanned. Most of the local settlements didn't have the men to man the forts properly. At best they could put a few old men in them.

Wessia took the province easily and cut Augusto off from his kingdom. And were the ones to wipe his army off the map in the end.

Augusto escaped the city with a few thousand guards and moved to a secluded castle in the depths of Cloudsnap. There he ran into the first prince and his son. The two died in the ensuing battle, but wiped most of Augusto's remaining forces out in the process. Unable to take back his now-stolen throne, the ex-king was forced to turn to House Norton for aid, who put him back on the throne for a price.

Wessia was enfeoffed Kanbona, Bodolger, and Anderwoff. Queen Carey also ceded most of Hanstmost in the peace treaty, which was given to Lormo. The two Southwestern provinces were turned into the Union's puppet state, the Allied Duchies of Britt. Together, Lormo and Britt became good buffers between the Union and Andinaq.

Wessia thought they would never hear anything from Augusto again. They were quite surprised to hear of him retaking his throne with House Norton's help, given the two's notorious cold feud. They even wiped out the Allied Duchies of Britt and retook the two southwestern provinces before turning their forces towards Lormo.

Duke Zitram didn't dare to take them on head-on, so he retreated to the northwestern area, allowing House Norton to take it back for the king easily. Augusto reinstated himself as king and conquered the two southwestern province and Hanstmost. It was horrible news for Wessia; it meant the peace treaty they signed with Queen Carey was now void. Truthfully, though, the two nations never stopped considering each other enemies.

To prevent Augusto from entering Kanbona and cut Bodolger off from the Union, Wessia provided immense support to the Union's nobles in the province. As expected of one of the big seven guilds of the Union, they not only gained the Union nobles' support, but also constructed a rather cohesive defensive force. They also made good

use of the forts the king left behind.

Augusto, to the opposite, was all bark and no bite. While he appeared rather audacious, with his claims of restoring the empire, he forbade Whitelion from approaching the border or making any ruckus near it. They couldn't even patrol near it. The king knew he was just a paper tiger after his ascension. While he looked impressive, he didn't have any power. Fortunately, his enemies were completely terrified by House Norton. The house had a long list of impressive exploits. They destroyed Madras, swept the whole of the kingdom, levelled the Allied Duchies of Britt, and even defeated one of the old empire's war gods and the four duchies. Together with their alliance they had become the only pillar keeping the Union from simply stomping Augusto into the ground and wiping out the last remnants of the empire for good.

'The fox basks in the shadow of the tiger'. How Augusto loathed this saying. Wessia knew nothing of the true relationship between him and the alliance. They didn't know he was the smallest fox in the shadow of the biggest tiger. He needed to reorganize, so it suited him to keep his relationship with Lorist obscure. He could have attacked when the Union moved on the Coalition, but he knew Wessia would expect just that, so he sat tight.

He made his move only a year into the conflict, and not against the Union, but against the duchies. The move convinced Wessia that he didn't dare to attack the Union and lowered their guard. The Union had replaced the Krissen Empire as the continent's superpower, after all. It appeared Augusto had accepted this reversal and had, begrudgingly as it might be, accepted that he would not get back any land taken by the Union.

Andinaq played up this presumption by not moving on Anderwoff when he could have after taking over the duchies. He made every effort possible to avoid upsetting the Union. His decision to give Handra and Shabaj the lands bordering Wessia was also to assuage the Union's suspicions by not having any bordering land directly under his control.

The Union's occupation on the other side of their territory also helped to hasten their forgetfulness. They were quick to accept that Augusto had no more ambition because it was what they wanted to believe. That they now had a sword saint certainly made it a lot easier to think that Augusto no longer had the guts to go against them.

Unfortunately they all underestimated how determined -- or stupid -- Augusto could

be and fell for his ploy completely. As a result the Union lost one of its strongest guilds and almost a sixth of its territory. And, this was only the beginning. Not everything was down purely to surprise however, Augustus had to admit that Lorist's forces were even more formidable than he had imagined.

They took Anderwoff in a matter of days and had Frederika within a month. Wessia was completely wiped out with the city's fall and they had already taken Kanbona and Bodolger as well. When the union learned of this, they, as well as everyone else on the continent, collapsed in shock. This wasn't just a few slaps to the Union's face, this was stamping their face into dogshite!

They had just surpassed even the Krissen Empire at its peak and now they were already a sixth smaller? Even what was left of the Coalition began to drag on the negotiations. They were clearly trying their luck and hoping the Union would be forced to divert their attention, and forces, away from them, or, even better, lose the war.

Augustus had to give it to the Union, however, they were nothing if not decisive. They immediately recalled all their armies out in the field, and called up every free man, soldier, and mercenary in their lands. Within a few weeks a hundred thousand men were barreling towards the new front. Within a month they crossed the border into Kanbona. Unfortunately for them, they ran into Tigersoar.

Rumor was that Loze, one of Lorist's subordinates was so happy he couldn't shut up for days! Apparently he didn't see the 100 thousand men as a threat at all. It was better to describe them as juicy pieces of meat just waiting to be roasted. The two armies clashed in a single, massive battle, which Tigersoar won, obviously. Augustus knew of at least 20 thousand dead and 60 thousand captured. No more than eight thousand had escaped.

Tigersoar immediately moved into Malivia and it fell within a fortnight. Shocking the Union a second time in as many months.

Lorist left Frederika for Kanbona on the 23rd of the 6th to join Augustus, the dukes, and the various other minor nobles accompanying the king on his campaign. He couldn't take any of them seriously. Potterfang had informed him on the way that, even as he swept through a sixth of the Union, the dukes were still dallying in their lands, they had yet to take a single step over the border.

Auguslo at least tried to do something. He pushed into Zitram with Blizzardblitz and caught the duke off-guard. He failed to capture him, however, and had yet to make any other gains. He lost a lot of men to take the duke's castle, only to watch him escape and hold up in the next one over. He had finally, at least, cornered the duke and was about to attack him now that the rainy season had ended, but lost the duke again. The old man fashioned a number of simple boats from the wood in the castle and rowed across the river running along one side of the castle one night. When Auguslo breached the castle gate, he found the inside completely deserted.

**On the 11th day of the 7th month of Year 1787, Auguslo I of the Andinaq kingdom conquered the province of Kanbona with an army a million strong. From the fringes of the Union's province, Armenia, to Malivia, His camps could be seen from the fringes of Armenia to Malivia, their flags finally flapping over land lost to the empire for nearly 50 years. The Union panicked as the continent was thrown back a century to when the Krissen Empire invaded Falik Plains. Only, this time, they did not have any of the allies they had the last time. Strong as they may be now, they now had to face an enemy which -- thanks to House Norton -- was likely even stronger than the one they faced all those years ago.**

# Chapter 473

## Banquet

"Are we really going to sit here and do nothing, Your Grace?" complained Loze.

"What's wrong? Can't sit still?" joked Lorst as he flipped through the documents on his desk.

They sat currently in House Norton's main camp. They'd successfully joined up with Auguslo and the rest of the nobles. The entire army, a million strong, was now encamped near Armenia's border, in the part of Malivia Lorst had conquered. The encampment was imposing, but nothing really happened. Auguslo even strictly forbade anyone from crossing into Union-held territory. It made for a weird atmosphere.

They had not even been here for half a month, and Loze was already here to complain. He still thought the king's plan to pressure the Union into ceding Armenia and Malivia was just ridiculous. It would be much better to just take it themselves and then sue for status quo. The Union was at its most vulnerable, but it wouldn't last for long. If they didn't jump at this opportunity, it would be lost to them forever. Once the Union moved its armies into place, at best they could hope to keep what they currently had. Loze did not believe they could gain anything through negotiation.

"Loze, you know this was the plan from the beginning. It's not that the king doesn't know we have to conquer Falik Plains, eventually. He wants us to pressure the Union into negotiations, and they won't agree to it if they feel we're being too aggressive. The kingdom is in no better a position than the Union either. Any combat we can avoid is a win. We need time to rest and rebuild. If it bothers you that much, just think of this as a vacation instead."

"Even if it's just for show, we shouldn't prevent our forces and scouts from launching attacks at the fringes. It would put more pressure on them. A one million strong army not daring to do anything when there is no force in the area even remotely capable of opposing it is just farcical," complained Loze.

"That is being done for a reason. The king wants to send a message to the Union. He's

trying to tell them we don't intend to start an all-out war. We have a specific goal, and have no interest beyond that goal. They should send envoys soon.

"But enough of such tiresome talk. You don't fool me, anyway. I know you just want to make more money raiding."

"Haha... hahahaha..." Loze laughed awkwardly, scratching the back of his head, "I was only thinking of the House, Milord. Potterfang swept all of Kanbona but didn't get much. The 100 thousand youths only barely make us break even. I'm really disappointed with Kanbona's nobles!

"Malivia is different though. When we were chasing a few fleeing fools into the province, we took over a few castles. They're really rich! We took 38 castles in total and got about as much as half of Wessia's treasury from them!"

Loze hadn't acted according to a particular plan when to took out the nobles in the province. It was just a habit he'd picked up from the previous campaigns. He did not expect these small fry to be this rich. Bodolger's nobles were brand new, given land and titles by Wessia for their contributions to the guild. While they had some wealth, they could not compare to noble families who'd occupied their fiefs for generations.

Both, however, were rich compared to Kanbona's nobles. Their combined wealth was barely a fifth of the nobles in Bodolger. A Kanbona baron was rich is he had five thousand gold Fordes in his treasury. But Malivian barons had nearer a hundred thousand gold Fordes in their treasuries.

This was probably because the Malivian nobles came from rich merchants. The Union only got Lormo involved when they ran out of land to enfeoff, so the poorer bastards were the one that got that land later on.

"Enough. Stay put obediently for now. You've already caused me enough trouble by pushing into Malivia in the first place. The king nearly collapsed when he heard about it. He almost made me whip you as an apology to the Union! He may be acting belligerent towards the Union, but the king is walking a fine tightrope. He *really* doesn't want to go to war with the Union."

*He just wants to raid the nobles and make more money!*

The problem wasn't really with Auguslo's ban on sending troops into Armenia or Malivia. Lorist was more concerned for Loze's safety. Teribo VII offered exorbitant

bounties during the War of Glass, and many high ranking mercenaries died, both for being the target of a bounty, and for blindly chasing bounties. Greed killed, even more so in war. Lorist had no interest in repeating those mistakes. Especially not with Loze. He was a good general and a promising candidate for becoming a blademaster. All the money in Malivia was not worth a single Loze.

"Sigh..." Loze wanted to say something else, but was stopped by the curtains covering the entrance parting to reveal Jinolio.

"Sigh..." Lorist echoed.

The army had sat still for just over ten days while Augusto kept hosting banquets like the war was already won. The feasts weren't extravagant, but their number made it quite expensive. Augusto's harvest must have been quite decent. On the surface they were parties to celebrate their successes thus far in the campaign, in truth they were opportunities for Augusto to talk about the policies he wanted to implement after the war. Chances for him to get everyone behind him and his plans.

*The brat's old habits are surfacing again.*

This was exactly what Augusto had done after conquering Frederika. His ego went from being a hill to being a mountain and he started bragging about what he'd do once the empire was unified again. His ego didn't work well with his illness. He made ridiculous decisions and gave out ludicrous orders, which led to his downfall.

Now he was doing the same. He was certain the Union would cave in the negotiations. His behaviour was again becoming arrogant. At least he had not turned his arrogance towards Lorist. He continued to act friendly towards him, though the traces of wariness were not completely gone from his eyes. Lorist was under no illusions, however. He knew this was all because of how much he had contributed to their current success. His military exploits had shocked the world yet again, it wasn't a stretch to say that his reputation was the real winner in this war. If he'd not made so many spectacular gains, he would have been relegated to the sidelines.

Everyone else, even the king, appeared to be there just to cheer him on. The minor nobles, at the very least, were at best a waste of food. The three dukes couldn't be expected to do much. They had been wounded in their war with the kingdom and had had neither the time nor the resources and land to recover. Given their precarious positions, they were also not willing to take any risks.

Most surprising, to outsiders at least, was the lacklustre performance of Lorist's close allies. Without his forces acting as their backbone, and without him there to strategize and lead them, they were a sail ship without wind for its sails.

If Lorist made the greatest contribution, and the king himself standing second, then Duke Fisablen was third. He had a decent relationship with the king, and still had a bit to prove, so he made some efforts. He deployed two legions, Second Frontier and one of his reserves. That the queen was from the house also spurred him on to do a few things. It had originally been suggested that he take on Kanbona, but he was quick to rebuke them. Who on earth was dumb enough to use cavalry to siege castles?

No one really wanted to take on the thorny province, so they just kept kicking the ball at one another. It eventually fell to Lorist to do the actual work if he wanted to keep his rear secure. It had, at one point, been suggested that the minor nobles deal with the province, but they would have none of it either. No one minor noble had a force large enough to take out a castle, and none of them were willing to put their whole force on the line and possibly lose their chance to make any further contribution to the campaign.

Potterfang had initially thought he would meet up with whoever was attacking Kanbona somewhere in the province. He was completely speechless when he had to march through all of the province, and back across the border into the kingdom to meet a single friendly soldier.

Auguslo's plan was to attack the province from three sides, but it failed for several reasons. One was that he overestimated his own force's capabilities. Another that he didn't take his opponent in his theater seriously. Duke Zitram was far more capable than he gave the duke credit for. While he did eventually gain control of his theater, the combat part of the campaign was basically over already and he had no chance to contribute anything else.

Lorist didn't let the opportunity to mock everyone else pass him by. Nor did he refrain from sneering at the king for his ineptitude. They were all pretty thick skinned, though, and didn't really take his mockery to heart. They only cared about the end result, not how it was achieved, in fact, they were quite happy to have achieved their initial goals without having to do much.

Lorist abstained from most of the celebration, however. He was too busy to waste time on merrymaking. He had to organise the transport of hundreds of thousands of

captives and refugees back to his dominion. It was more challenging than the actual war as far as he was concerned. As much as Augustus bled to see so much taken out of his hands, they were Lorist's rightful spoils and plunder and he could do nothing, even as the king.

"I will not attend tonight's banquet. Inform the king, Jinolio. I have too much to do."

Jinolio left, but returned soon after.

"His Majesty asks if you want to meet the captured count he chose to be the messenger to the Union. He'll leave after tonight's banquet to send our demands to the Union."

Lorist waved him out, annoyed. "No. His Majesty is free to do what he wants. What's so important about this count anyway? He's just a messenger. His Majesty's just looking to use my name to terrify the man. I have no interest in being his tool."

"As you wish, Your Grace."

# Chapter 474

## Reply

On the 13th day of the 8th month, Lorist finally caught a breather after five days of work. The last batch of forced immigrants left for The Northlands. He could finally relax, so he rode out of the camp with Potterfang to check on the Union army's encampment.

The big-six guilds mobilized their main force to the frontlines in the last twenty days and set up camp 15 kilometers from Andinaq's. The main force should be firmly entrenched by now. Similarly, the various smaller guilds, associations, and so on, also gathered. About 500 thousand men in all. Most surprising was that Jigda had apparently sent a contingent of 50 thousand to stand by the Union.

Lorist didn't initially care about the Union's army. He was too occupied with moving his new subjects home. Unfortunately, it was not winter, otherwise they would have been far more obedient since death would be the only other option. But, it not being that, many tried to escape, more willing to take their chances in the wilds than submit to this invader lord. It took far more effort and men to keep the move going relatively smoothly.

Their numbers were also much greater than Lorist had anticipated. He was only aiming for 400 thousand people from Bodolger, but Potterfang swept Kanbona and Loze took tens of thousands prisoner after his battles with the Union. His subordinates had also cleaned out the part of Malivia they'd conquered, adding another 100 thousand to their burden.

800 thousand people, double what he'd prepared for, had to be moved. The Northlands would have a three-million-strong population by the end of this, even if they didn't move a single person in the rest of the war. This duke now had more subjects than many kings. With this increase came more work, though, way more than Lorist could handle, even with all the protocols already in place. He only had enough energy to care about the war again after everything was done and dusted.

He immediately noticed something off about the Union's deployment when he turned his attention to it. Auguslo, in his usual overconfidence, hadn't paid proper attention

and had missed it. It'd already been over a month since he'd sent his message via the count. A reply was well overdue. He just kept on celebrating, however, and had yet to become sensibly suspicious.

The Union's main force had been in place for 20 days already, yet Auguslo didn't make any appropriate adjustments to his own force's disposition. He did nothing as more and more Union forces kept arriving. While there were no skirmishes being exchanged, Union were patrolling the area incessantly.

"Odd... Is the Union really planning to fight us properly?" mused Lorist, the enemy camp staring at him through his telescope.

"How can you tell, Your Grace?" Potterfang asked.

Lorist handed him the telescope.

"Take a look. Notice anything odd?"

Potterfang stared at the camp through the telescope, slowly shaking his head.

"The camp is built lightly. It doesn't have any of the features or styles you'd expect if they expected it to be a long term set-up. Specifically, they have no ditches, no palisades, no watchtowers. The fence is just a few poles and stakes fastened loosely with some string. They just came out of a long war, do you really think they'd either be this lax, or make such a simple mistake? Either they're going to march on us soon, or they aren't afraid of us marching on them."

Potterfang's face grimmed.

"You're right. This is as much a temporary camp as I've ever seen. They're either going to withdraw soon, or attack, either way, they don't plan to stay there for long. The setup is designed to deploy the troops as quickly and efficiently as possible, but as such has no defenses. Maybe they are willing to negotiate and the soldiers are just there to put up a front. Hence their laxness." Jinolio interjected.

Lorist stroked his head. He had no issue with such interruptions, quite to the contrary, he enjoyed it when others voiced their opinions.

"That might be. But I wonder... Does the Union really want to negotiate with the king? There would be no need for so many men if they did. It isn't cheap to deploy 500

thousand men, 100 thousand should be enough for negotiations. It's also been a month since we sent the message, and yet we've not heard back... Whatever. I should pay His Majesty a visit."

"Loze just left with the last of the immigrants. We only have Firmrock and my personal guard right now... Pog head to the rear and set up a stronghold on advantageous terrain. A good general is prepared for any outcome."

"As you wish, Your Grace." replied Potterfang.

Lorist headed for Auguslo, accompanied by Jinolio. It stood ten kilometers from his, he reached it in the afternoon. As expected, the camp's security was all but non-existent; the gates were wide open and soldiers were free to enter and leave as they wished. The sentries in the watchtowers were nowhere to be seen, probably sleeping inside, and the guards along the walls strolled lazily.

The sentries jumped when Lorist walked past. They and the ten or so dangling around saluted hurriedly. Fear was writ large on their faces; everyone knew Lorist, and everyone knew he was the kingdom's most powerful and feared man.

"Where is His Majesty?" asked Lorist.

"His Majesty is in the tent in the middle of the camp with the dukes and lords. Does Your Grace need us to announce your arrival?" asked one eagerly.

Lorist waved his horse whip.

"No need. Jinolio, tip them."

Jinolio took out a pouch and tossed it to who appeared to be the group's leader.

"His Grace just bought you guys some drinks."

"Thank you... Thank you, Milord."

The men bowed, the men on the periphery of this exchange looking on enviously. Duke Norton of The Northlands was known as a generous man. Whilst no one knew how much was in the black pouch, it was definitely not a small amount. It was probably at least a twelfth of their annual pay.

The camp was erected around a small hill, on which stood the king's tent. The hill itself contained a subsection of the camp completely cut off from it, separated by a thick palisade. The nobles couldn't mingle with the commoners after all. Especially not the nobles' families, who had come to accompany them. The inner sanctum also contained many capture noble females of the younger variety. The king's harem, in plain terms.

Normally noble families were not involved in wars, it was shameful to involve the innocent, after all. If the family could not pay their captured loved one's ransom, however... Suffice to say that never happened, even if the family themselves became the ransom.

Most of the Union nobles were in a bad position. They had nothing with which to pay ransom, not only were their lands and wealth seized, even their families were taken as well, it all became part of what had to be ransomed, and nothing could be used to ransom for it. The few that had land and properties in parts of the Union yet unconquered could offer that, but many had sold their properties to purchase what they had now lost.

The banquets Auguslo threw so lavishly was as much a show of his newfound riches and a celebration of his success as a slap in his enemies' faces. It was all the more sweet because most had to watch their wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters bare themselves for, and be ravished by, their enemy.

Such vulgarity repulsed Lorist, however. It was just another reason why he didn't attend. His house had its own protocols for dealing with captured nobles. If they were cruel, they died in the gallows along with their whole family. He would rather kill innocents than let possible threats escape. If they were kind and upright, they were free to serve the house if they so chose to earn their freedom. Nobles were educated from birth; they were valuable resources. When they finally got their freedom, they had to choose whether to continue to serve the house, or leave and try to make a new life for themselves. Most chose the former.

Lorist refused the guards of the inner sanctum's offer to announce his arrival and moved in without his guards. Kenmeys emerged from the tent just as he was about to step in, a noble lady in his arms, her clothes disorderly.

Kenmeys shoved the girl aside when he saw Lorist.

"Haha, Locke! What brings you here today?" he asked, open arms.

"Don't come any closer! Go about your own business. I'm here to see His Majesty."

"I'm just asking out of curiosity. Why come see His Majesty?"

"Nothing worth neglecting your lover over. I suspect the Union is preparing to attack us. I am here to hear the king's opinion."

Kenmays sighed.

"You're too one edge, Locke. Come blow off some steam. There won't be a battle, they won't attack. We just got the Union's reply. They will send negotiators in three days. His Majesty is celebrating. Come, join us for a few drinks! The king was about to send you an invitation, anyway..."

Lorist was already inside. The tent was large, it could accommodate a hundred people easily. A number of nobles lay passed out on the floor, other were hanging around tables with wenches, making merry. Some were even making merries in the furthest corners. Duke Fisablen, his face flushed, sat like a baboon on a bench near the king, his hands plundering a half-naked wench.

*Have some self-respect, you old coot!*

Auguslo looked no better though. He downed a vase of alcohol sloppily, letting half of it soak his clothes rather than fill his stomach.

Lo-locke... Y-you're hee... Come... C-home! Cheers!"

Lorist turned and left immediately.

"Let's go. We're heading back." he murmured to Jinolio as he passed him.

# Chapter 475

## Envoy Krilos

Three days passed quickly. Early in the morning of the 17th of the 8th, Auguslo sent a messenger to bring Lorist to his tent. Lorist took a simple bath and washed himself. After donning some fancy noble-military robes, left with Reidy and Jinolio and a thousand guards. Auguslo most likely wanted to impress the envoys with military might. Two rows of soldiers lined the road for five kilometers out of the camp. Their equipment shone like spit-shined cutlery. The people wearing the equipment, however, were less pruned. Lorist had no right to comment, however, feasting was a tradition and even a custom. The sludge called a road had been pressed and covered with sawdust and fine river sand. Lorist had no idea where on earth Auguslo got the supplies and materials necessary on such short notice. Or had he prepared it months earlier?

The white dragon curled through the landscape. According to Lorist's education on noble customs, this was the highest courtesy possible. Its use was only recorded seven times in all of history. The treaties signed in conjunction with its use were never less than 20 years long and often lasted much longer.

*Haha, looks like Auguslo really wants to have peace... He's pressuring them with his one hand, and offering a path to peace with the other. If this were anyone else, they might be touched, but our opponents aren't nobles in anything other than name -- I don't think this means anything to them.*

The entrance of the path of peace was guarded with soldiers who blocked the way with wooden barricades. Lorist brought his horse to a halt. A sergeant ran over and explained everything. Lorist nodded and took the detour. He couldn't complain since the path could only be used by the envoys. He knew that if he insisted on crossing the path with a thousand men, not only would everything be wasted, it might even make a haughty impression on the guests.

He arrived 20 minutes later. Lorist knew the main gates were off limits too, so he headed to the other entrance. As expected, there was a smaller gateway not far away with people traveling in and out constantly. He finally noticed how prettied-up the

fence was when he got closer. Not only were the damaged parts filled up and repaired, even the uneven parts of the upper fence were trimmed to uniform level. Auguslo truly put lots of effort into this project. He had wanted to make sure the camp was in perfect condition before the envoys arrived.

As for the outside of the military camp, it was clean. Hygiene was the baseline and Lorist noted a red-feather-wearing patrolman pushed to the ground and given ten canes for spitting on the ground.

The only thing that didn't fit with the atmosphere was the colorful flags all over. Their sizes were not uniform, and they were almost everywhere, making Lorist feel like he was in a children's theme park. When he arrived, he realized the colored flags outside were simple decorations in comparison.

Other things aside, the wooden fences themselves were wrapped in multi-colored silk and covered in a myriad of tones, just like a bouquet. As for the insides of the central areas, the tents were all taken down, replaced by a majestic and grand palace at the center of it all.

*Is that a palace?!* thought Lorist his shock. He squinted for a closer look. A breeze blew, and he caught the roof of the 'palace' wave about slightly. *Oh, so it's still a tent, it's just larger and drawn to look like it has a real roof.*

A royal guard came over. He dismounted, and a servant took his horse away. He walked to the huge palace-tent with Jinolio and Reidy while the guards behind him went to their respective resting areas while they were being briefed on what they could and couldn't do to not disrupt the envoys' visit...

Upon entering the tent, Lorist saw that the internals were also decorated to make them look like those of a real palace. However, Lorist could tell that it was all looks. He was quite curious as to how Auguslo managed to convert the tent to look like a palace though.

Auguslo was at the center of the main hall with many other nobles. The main hall really did look like a palace's assembly hall, complete with steps covered in black and gold carpets. On the carpet was one gleaming seat which looked to be the throne.

Auguslo wasn't seated in his throne and was instead chatting idly with the other nobles beneath the elevated platform. As he was wearing a golden crown on his head,

he stood out exceptionally from the other nobles who wore no hats.

All the nobles within the hall were clad in formal attire with their ceremonial swords. That was a tradition left behind from the time of the Krissen Empire. Formal wear accompanied with a ceremonial sword symbolized one's courage and remembrance for those that came before to build up the Krissen Empire. There was also an unofficial saying that claimed that the ceremonial swords were carried around back in the day when dueling was very commonplace. That way, the nobles could respond to duels at a moment's notice to settle their disagreements.

Seeing Lorist, Reidy and Jinolio entering the tent, Augustus waved for them to come over to him. After the greetings, Lorist noted Augustus's bloodshot eyes. He looked rather fatigued, so Lorist asked, "Your Majesty, did you not rest well the night before? You don't look too well."

"Is that so?" Augustus rubbed his face and said with a smile, "The mere thought at the envoys of the Union coming to sign a peace treaty with us and the realization of my ambition of the empire would stir me from sleep. I haven't got any shuteye for the past two days. However, that wouldn't pose to be a problem. I have more than enough time to rest after today."

All things aside, Augustus was still a rank 1 blademaker, so losing sleep over a couple of days wasn't something that could affect him much, apart from making him seem gloomier than usual.

Lorist advised, "Your Majesty, it's still rather early and the envoys of the Union might take another hour or two to come. Perhaps you might want to shut your eyes for a light nap during this time. That way, you'll look much better in an hour or two. At least, your eyes won't look that bloodshot."

Augustus was convinced. "Alright, I'll heed your advice and take a short rest lest the envoys come see all the veins in my eyes and get a bad impression. Go about as you like here and ask the servants if you need anything else."

By the time Augustus left, the nobles within the tent felt much more relaxed than before. Some found places to sit down at, some drank away as they chatted while others flirted with the maidservants beside them. However, they all knew that it was a momentous day and neither of them were willing to let Lorist see their debased states.

Kenmays and Shazin popped out of nowhere and made their way to Lorist's side. They shoved Lorist into a smaller partition of the tent where many small tables were laid out filled with food, juice and other beverages.

"What are you guys doing here? Where's Felim?" asked Lorist.

"Felim hasn't arrived yet. I brought you here for something to eat. You don't wanna be hungry when it starts," said Kenmays.

"How did you know they'd be food here?" asked Reidy. He hasn't eaten anything yet before following Lorist, so he began wolfing down a roasted goat thigh without hesitation the moment he saw that there was so much to eat.

"How did I know?" Kenmays said gleefully, "I laid this out, that's how. It's no problem for me to get the kitchen to cook something up for us."

"You're saying that you were in charge of this whole palace tent thing?" asked Lorist with surprise.

"Naturally. His Majesty had wanted to tear the main tent down to make a simple pavilion to receive the envoys, but he didn't have much time to do so. Seeing his trouble, I offered help as the representative of salt merchant committee and rebuilt it into something more appropriate with the help of some designers and artists to make it look like a palace. This is good business. I actually earned nearly 20 thousand gold Fordes doing this," replied Kenmays excitedly.

It could be seen from his expression that Auguslo was once more put onto a chopping board like a juicy sheep to be slaughtered. However, it was his own fault for liking grand spectacles. It's no wonder Kenmays didn't hold back at all when it came to pricing.

As they munched and drank within the small partition, Felim soon came to join them, followed by the thick-skinned Duke Fisablen as well. Duke Fisablen did complain to Kenmays for not having prepared any good wine, however.

An hour or so later as it was approaching noon, a loud horn could be heard from outside, startling all of them alert. The envoys from the Union finally came. Lorist and gang hurriedly straightened their robes and exited the partition.

Auguslo was also there. After a short nap, he seemed far more energetic and his eyes

were no longer bloodshot. There was also a healthy glow to his face. He was listening to a scout's reporting on the arrival of the envoys.

The scout reported that the envoys brought a hundred guards with them and had already entered the path of peace in their luxurious carriage. It should take about 20 more minutes for them to reach the main tent.

Auguslo then excitedly called for the rest to wait for the envoys outside the tent.

Duke Fisablen stepped forward and said that it was inappropriate for Auguslo to make the reception, as he was the king of Andinaq himself, so he couldn't lower himself to do such a thing. The king should be sitting in his throne, waiting for the envoy to arrive, as is fitting for a king and so on.

Auguslo humbly accepted Duke Fisablen's criticism. He gave it some thought and made a compromise to receive them at the entrance of the central area. After all, he wanted to show his sincerity and desire for peace too.

So, the lot of them waited at the entrance for around half an hour before they finally saw the carriage before them. A thin and lanky middle-aged man got off from the carriage, followed by a white-bearded old man who carried a small wooden case in his hand.

The tall man was called Krilos, a count of the Union as well as the vice president of one of the big six guilds, Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild. The old man beside him appeared to be his attendant who followed him everywhere.

Krilos's abilities were of the gold rank, but he mentioned that he was only training to keep fit and that he abhorred and feared jumping into a slaughterfest. He jokingly said that the ornate ceremonial sword he carried was only for show and that he hasn't even drawn it before. The old attendant on the other hand seemed to be a normal person who didn't train in battleforce and was in charge of tending to the count for his daily needs. Krilos joked that since he was born in a rich family, he was used to being spoiled and required the help of his servants for the easiest of tasks.

The hundred guards on the other hand caught everyone's attention. There were actually four blademasters and ten gold-ranked swordsmen among them, with the rest being all silver-ranked.,

Auguslo looked rather happy about that as the elite nature of the guard meant that

Krilos was of high status. He wasn't the slightest bit worried about the guards causing any trouble. Other things aside, there were ten blademasters of the kingdom there. Even the four blademasters among the guards wouldn't dare to mess around.

Auguslo greeted Krilos really warmly and chatted to no end. The two of them even held hands like they got along exceptionally well with each other. In the end, Lorist could no longer stand watching that and he cleared his throat and reminded, "Your Majesty, shouldn't you talk after going into the tent first?"

"Ah, that's right," said Auguslo as he snapped out of it and invited Krilos into the tent. He then asked whether the envoy would like the blademasters and guards to follow him in as well.

Krilos laughed and said, "There's no need. Let the guards stay outside with the other guards. All I need with me is my old attendant over here. I'm here to sign a peace treaty, not to pick a fight. So, I'm quite confident in my safety here."

Auguslo was all the more gladdened by that and hurried the two into the tent with incredible hospitality.

# Chapter 476

## Invitation

Delicious varieties of food and wine were... not possible in such a scenario. The so-called banquet Augustus threw for Viscount Krilos only had large pieces of roasted meat, honeyed bread, a large pot of potato and cow-innard stew, smoked fish, baked apples, vegetable salad, and a bowl of grapes and blueberries. In terms of food culture, Grindia's nobles were far behind Lorist's previous world.

To be honest, nobody really cared about the banquet. Even Augustus only toasted once or twice out of custom. With his first toast he expressed his wish that Andinaq and the Union could coexist in eternal peace. His second wished the envoy, Krilos, and his family good health. That was all. Augustus just stared at the viscount, hoping he had brought good news.

The envoy didn't seem in a rush though. He enjoyed the food with elegance and grace. He praised the roast meat and even asked Augustus to call the chef over. The white-haired old man behind him just stood quietly, holding his small red wooden case. Time passed in this odd tension. When the envoy finally had his fill, the nobles were speaking in hushed chatters with one another and adjusting in their seats. They stared at the group anxiously. Though Augustus appeared calm, anticipation flitted back and forth across his eyes when he looked at Krilos.

The viscount received the white handkerchief a maidservant brought with an elegant motion and wiped his mouth before getting rid of the oils on his hands. He rose slowly, thanked Augustus for the meal, and expressed his hopes that he would pay a visit to Morante. Augustus denied, remorseful of his lacking treatment. They were still on the frontlines, after all, so he could not provide the luxury due such an occasion. He thanked the envoy for his invitation and hoped he could head to the imperial capital as well so the king could play host too.

Lorist stifled a yawn at the laborious banter. Augustus didn't want to keep this going either, so he voiced the main question of the entire event.

"Lord Krilos, you were sent as an envoy. Has the Union made a decision regarding our offer? Will you sign the peace treaty?"

"Well..." Krilos stood silent for a few moments before he glanced at his white-haired servant. The old man nodded slightly, so the viscount put his elegant smile back on, "Naturally. I have come here to represent the Union. We wish for you to join us in Morante for some more talks."

Auguslo waved his hands cheerfully, "Lord Krilos, you've made the invitation already, which I already explained I cannot fulfill right now. The empire is finally unified again and there is still much that needs to be done before I can be absent for even a single day. The years of war have ravaged our lands and my people. That is why I wish to conclude our talks swiftly so I may return to the capital and begin the restoration work. I am sincerely grateful for the invitation, but I cannot leave now."

Krilos nodded without comment.

"Let us discuss terms, then."

The white-haired servant stepped forward and opened the red case. He removed from it a greyi-white beastskin which he handed to Krilos.

"Your Majesty, the Union has some disagreements with the terms. Here are our suggestions. I hope you will lend us an ear."

"Naturally," Auguslo nodded.

Disagreements were normal. In fact, he would be fraught with suspicion should the Union accept all his terms without some demand for negotiation. He reclined in his chair comfortably and sipped some wine.

"Pray tell, what are your disagreements? I'll gladly lend an ear."

"Firstly, the Union objects to your senseless invasion and infringement of our sovereign territory," Krilos announced loudly.

Auguslo's smile didn't fade, this was par for the course. It was only to be expected that the Union would have objections. Even some of the nobles present let out a few stifled snickers.

"As the largest superpower on Grindia, the Union will not tolerate invaders. Though the Kingdom of Andinaq has sued for peace, the high council believes being forced to sign by way of threat is a slight and insult to the Union's nobles and subjects. We will

not accept a forced treaty! Even the Krissen Empire couldn't force us to bend the knee, even when we were much weaker than it, your kingdom has even less ability to do so now that we are more powerful than even the empire was at its zenith. We warn Your Majesty, Andinaq Auguslo, that you are not the empire. Your self-centered military actions have led to the destruction of several kingdoms and duchies we recognize and guarantee. Your arrogance and ambition has thrown the continent into war, destroyed millions of lives, and set the continent back decades, if not centuries.

"The Union is neither the Redlis Kingdom nor the Madras Duchy, and not a target on which you can impose your will! While we love peace, we aren't afraid of war. Your million-strong army will not make us hesitate to defend ourselves and our values. If we must bleed you dry for a century or two as we did the empire before you, we will gladly do so!

"An unjust war will never win victory for its perpetrator. Signwa will protect the nobles and people of the Union. No matter what your response, the Union will give you a chance for peace. We hereby give you our demands and with it that chance for peace. Each and every demand will be satisfied or blood will flow like rivers and dam up to form oceans!

"First, Andinaq will retreat from and return the occupied territories of Bodolger, Kanbona, Anderwoff, and the northwestern area. Second, Andinaq must immediately withdraw the army standing on the Union's borders. You will dismantle your army and report, in detail, what forces you had. Third, Andinaq will release all captives and their families and compensate and apologize to those harmed. Fourth, Andinaq will punish its nobles for the atrocities they committed in Union territory and against its nobility and peasantry, especially the Duke of The Northlands, Norton Lorist, and his men, who have exterminated one of the Union's dear and treasured guilds. Andinaq will hand his entire house over to the Union to be tried and executed according to our laws."

Auguslo's face burned, his golden cup crushed. The wine within sprayed over his robes and the floor. He noticed none of it he stared at Krilos. The nobles were in a massive commotion. Viscount Krilos wasn't there to sign a peace treaty; he was there to declare war! Many stared at the viscount suspiciously. Their army was on the Union's borders, not the other way round. The kingdom wasn't defeated and forced to sign a treaty.

Krilos didn't bother with the change in atmosphere. He simply continued reading.

"Fifth, Andinaq will cede the two southwestern provinces and Majik to the Union as compensation for this unprovoked attack. Sixth, Andinaq's king, Augustus I, will head to Morante, apologise to the Union for this affront, and personally sign the peace treaty we deem appropriate. Seventh, Andinaq will open all trade routes and cooperate to carry out all trade activities in their territory. As for tax--"

"Enough!" roared Augustus, kicking the table.

"So, you're here to declare war? Don't forget we have a force double your size! I need only speak and your lands will be ravaged!"

The veins on the king's face pulsed. He had done everything possible to provide a path to peace but his opponents were blind! This was not a peace treaty, these were terms for his surrender! The tent was in chaos. Most of the nobles clamored for Augustus to give the order to march on Morante. Some even called for Krilos's hanging. Lorist didn't comment. He was more concerned with the source of the Union's arrogance.

Krilos still wore his elegant smile as if the curses and cries didn't faze him at all.

"Your Majesty will not start an all out war. You will not only accept this treaty, you will also come to Morante to apologize."

"Hahahaha!" laughed Augustus. He glared at the viscount. "On what basis?! Why would I accept such insulting and insane demands?! If you want war, I will give you war! You are right about one thing, though. I will go to Morante, but not to apologise, to burn it to the ground!"

"You are delusional, king. You **will** do as we command," said Krilos with his ever-annoying smile. He gazed at Augustus as an elder would a stupid child.

"Hehe... Hahaha!" Augustus's voice became rough and sharp. He had tried so hard to plan this out and promised his vassals that, as long as the army could be brought to their borders, the Union would agree to peace and that the empire could be brought back to its former glory. All his dreams were shattered in an instant. Not only was this an insult, it was no different from an actual slap to his face. His effort to prepare the 5-kilometer-long path of peace only to have it swatted aside would be recorded in history and spread all over. Their kingdom would become a laughingstock!

"Lord Krilos," said Augustus with sudden tranquility, "You are an envoy. Though you are from an enemy nation, worry not, I won't harm you. However, the blademasters and

guards you brought along will feed my dogs tonight. You will be stripped and covered in honey and feathers and sent back to the Union on horse. We will meet again soon. I hope there will still be some feathers left on you when I come to Morante."

"Hehe, Your Majesty, unfortunately, you will do no such thing, nor will you hurt my guards. They have to escort you to Morante, after all," retorted Krilos as he drew his ceremonial sword.

"Haha, Lord Krilos, are threatening me with that?" Augusto cracked a chortle. *A gold rank dares draw his sword in front of a blademaster? Are you trying to get yourself killed?* While Augusto was only a rank 1 blademaster, dealing with a gold-ranked swordsman was something he could do without breaking a sweat.

"Ah, no, Your Majesty. Don't misunderstand. A puny little gold-ranked swordsman like me can't threaten Your Majesty, neither am I wish to." Krilos handed the sword to the white-haired servant beside him.

"I ought to introduce this master beside me. He is not my attendant. He is Master Magrut. You may find this name foreign, because most know him by his sobriquet: the windstorm swordsaint."

Krilos turned to smile at Augusto. "It can't be more honorable to be personally escorted to Morante by a swordsaint."

# Chapter 477

## Lashing Out

The tent was filled with clashing. Not only did the nobles drop their cups, some also stood up with fright. Those already standing dropped their jaws. The tent was suddenly so quiet you could hear a pin drop. One noble after another glanced to the old servant beside Viscount Krilos.

The moment the old man received the sheathed sword, his aura changed dramatically. He stopped looking like an old man entirely. Krilos stood in the center of the tent with a gentle smile but he was no longer the center of attention. The old man no one paid any attention to now commanded everyone's gaze.

Master Magrut, the windstorm swordsaint, held his sword by the hilt and traced a few lines in the air, a smile cracking his face. However, that little move caused the nobles who were holding their breath in to despair, because all of them felt that they had fallen into the hands of the windstorm swordsaint completely. It was an indescribable feeling. Was this how the fish felt as it stared at the butcher's knife?

Duke Fisablen stood beside Lorist. Perhaps because of his identity or because Augustus wished to use him to suppress House Norton, he arranged the duke's position in front of Lorist. However, as they were standing together, Lorist could detect the slight shivering of the old man's frame. It was as if the stronger a blademaster was, the more they would fear the formless sense of pressure and threat a swordsaint exuded. Even Reidy's legs were shaking uncontrollably... Jinolio seemed panicked.

*Why do I feel nothing?*

"It's... it's really the windstorm swordsaint... Dead... We're definitely dead..." stammered Duke Fisablen as he shivered.

*Is he really that scary?*

Lorist squinted and tried to suppress his raving desire to fight. He used all the calm he could muster to inspect the enemy. The moment Krilos announced his identity and handed his sword to Master Magrut, Lorist realized he wanted to fight. It was as if he

was a hungry black bear, and his enemy was honey. He couldn't suppress this desire, it burned in every muscle in his body.

The sword saint stood right there and the sword in his hand gently moved through the air. It was a mystical rhythm. No one spoke. The sword saint stood calmly and played around with the sword, confident that he could end everyone if he wished. Regardless of how high their status; regardless of whether they were blademasters. He was an unsurmountable mountain. They were ants before a titan.

However, in Lorist's eyes, he was just an old man. Granted, he wasn't **just** an old man. He felt slightly ethereal. It felt like he existed almost outside of space, like his body was about to burst out of reality, tearing the world as he did.

The man stood beside Krilos, natural, carefree, and nonchalant. He looked as if he had openings all over. When Lorist played a fight in his head where he struck any of the openings, it always ended in a loss.

*A strong enemy!* As he struggled to suppress the desire to fight, excitement joined the fray. He wanted to make this challenge even if he couldn't overcome it. He suddenly woke to the fact that this could be the opportunity to break through he had so long sought. Now that a rank 3 blademaster like Duke Fisablen could not last a hundred strikes against him, only a sword saint could pressure him enough to burst through the barrier that held him back.

"Surely Your Majesty won't refuse a sword saint's invitation. The Union has sincerely invited you and the other lords to Morante for a relaxing vacation. You may return to your dominions after signing the treaty." Krilos still wore the same damned smile.

Auguslo's face was pale. He shivered. But his reply couldn't be more resolute.

"I'd rather die than follow you! Krissen's descendants will die rather than kneel before the likes of you!"

The elegant smile on Krilos's face vanished.

"Hoho? You **want** to die? Not so easily. Do you honestly think your life is still yours to take? Even if you resist, Master Magrut won't take your life. However, he will shatter your limbs and break your chin before bringing you back in a cage. If you think it'd be more fitting to travel like a prisoner, I will oblige you."

Just now, Auguslo was going to cover Krilos in honey and stick feathers on him. This was a punishment reserved for liars. Krilos's suggestion, on the other hand, was the punishment for bandits. They had each come up with the perfect treatment for the other.

"I admit I'm no match for a swordsaint, but can he really stop me from killing myself?" With a loud whir, Auguslo drew his sword and placed it against his throat.

"No, Your Majesty, don't!"

The nobles snapped awake. They racked their brains for a way to stop their king from dying. Some even drew their swords and stood in front of him. There was no choice. Should their king be killed by the swordsaint before everyone else, it would be a mark of for everyone's houses for the rest of eternity. They might as well commit suicide. Even if that meant facing a swordsaint, they could not stand by passively. At the very least, they could still leave their courageous deed behind for their house and make their reputation sore.

Krilos clapped slowly.

"I admire your bravery and your vassals' resolve. But I have to remind you that you can do nothing in front of a swordsaint, much less in their domain. Do you think you can take even a casual blow?"

Krilos shook his head.

"King, stop playing around. You had best come to Morante obediently. I want to leave you some face if at all possible. If you don't obey obediently, I will really break your limbs take you back in a cage. You, nobles. You had best advise your king likewise. We do not want to be called kingslayers, so he won't die, but you aren't kings. Time's running out."

*Huh? What does he mean time is running out?* Just as the rest were considering what Krilos's words meant, a loud alarm could be heard from the distance.

The patter of hooves soon approached. They stopped outside the tent and the royal guards barged in, instantly kneeling to make a report.

"Reporting to Your Majesty, the Union suddenly deployed their army and launched an attack. Near 100 thousand men are coming for Whitelion. The two divisions stationed

near the border have crumbled, please make your decisions swift-- Ugh--"

That royal guard finally realized something was wrong and lost his head. His legs twitched a few times.

Auguslo's face paled and he stumbled back two steps, tumbling back into his throne. He even dropped his sword. As a blademaster who had seen the royal family records on the sword saint, he knew Krilos' words were true. He was less than six meters from the sword saint, which meant he was within range of his domain. The moment the sword saint activated it, he would lose his ability to kill himself.

The guard's report only reinforces his despair. His army would be crushed. No wonder the enemy had kept gathering their forces. He had thought it was because they feared his army, the thought never occurred to him that they were just preparing to wipe his army out. If this happened, he would never be able to threaten the Union again even if he tried.

Two tears ran down his cheeks. He only wished he could die on the battlefield now. If he died like that, he would at least be remembered as a brave king. But his wish was destined to be unfulfilled. He couldn't even decide whether he lived or died. He could do nothing about his current situation. He hated his pride and recklessness. He was now the one responsible for the death of his bloodline, and the death of the last embers of the Krissen Empire. It could never rise again.

*It's all over. He stared at the patterns on the ceiling, How laughable... The plan I spent years crafting actually ends like this. So what if I have a massive army? The Union only needed one man to undo everything. They dealt with the whole kingdom's elites in one move. Everything is over...*

"Don't drag it on any longer. The weather is still good, so let us leave for Morante soon."

Auguslo didn't respond. He just sat catatonic on his chair.

"Sigh! Some people need to learn things the hard way!" Krilos turned to bow to the windstorm sword saint, "Master Magrut, I have to trouble you."

The sword saint nodded silently. With but a sweep of his eyes, the nobles blocking Auguslo's way were knocked aside, making a two-meter-wide path. The sword saint snorted before he paced towards Auguslo. But he froze after taking two steps as another kingdom noble appeared in his way. The noble showed no fear, he even

seemed confident. He had his hand on the hilt of his sword, slowly unsheathing it.

"Who are you?! How dare you draw your sword before Master Magrut?!" yelled Krilos angrily.

"Hehe, I am Duke Norton Lorist, the one your Union wants to punish publicly. His Majesty introduced us at the start of the banquet, have you forgotten already?"

Lorist glued his eyes to the swordsaint. The two were only three meters apart. The old man's face finally twitched. His sword was drawn, but he didn't attack. He waited patiently for his opponent to finish getting ready.

Whir! The tip of Lorist's sword pinged out of the sheath. He cracked a smile before everything inside the tent turned crimson. The swordsaint's expression shattered as he retreated in a hurry. He finally made a sound.

"A domain! You... You're a swordsaint too?!"

# Chapter 478

## Severely Injured

Magrut backed down far too quickly. Before the rest could react, his figure vanished. He disappeared from the tent, leaving behind a tear in one of its walls. Lorist stared at the hole, his jaw on the floor. He didn't think a swordsaint would run away without even putting up a fight. He wanted to fight Magrut and enjoy himself. He had no opponents that could challenge him. His skills had stagnated as a result. He'd finally found an opponent against whom to train his domain, how could he just leave? It was like downloading an erotic film between a youth and a widow, only to realize it's a lolicon after getting into the position.

*Nonsense. You think you can run?!*

Lorist gave chase with a grunt. He was determined to keep the all-bark-no-bite swordsaint behind if it was the last thing he did. The tent was large, and the place Magrut escaped from was about ten meters away from Lorist, and it was right at the border of Lorist's Slaughter Domain. But when Lorist rushed over and was no more than three meters from the hole in the tent, he felt a sudden humongous pressure attacking him from the outside.

"No good..." Lorist's legs sank into the ground. His body had become heavy as a mountain as his legs fixed him to the ground as he got into a defensive stance.

The walls of the tent were slowly torn apart before Lorist's very own eyes, with its pieces flying all over the place before settling on the ground. That was the same with both the cloth of the tent and the stainless steel frame it was clad over; they were all turned into fine airborne debris. The tent's walls had already completely disappeared and Lorist found that the windstorm swordsaint was no more than six meters away from him.

A loud boom rang out from the depths of Lorist's mind. He coldly humphed as he took two steps back. The swordsaint before him shuddered, but he didn't retreat.

That was the result of two domains clashing. Lorist's domain was blood-red, a color that couldn't be seen but only felt from experiencing the endlessly cruel bloodlust the

bloodbath brought. Within the bloodbath, all that was living was a sacrificial offering. The windstorm sword saint's domain on the other hand was greyish-black and it manifested in the form of the roar of a wild gust. The sharp sounds of the winds and the cold and desolate land made one feel like one was hanging by a cliff with one hand holding onto it while experiencing the assault of strong winds, going to fall at any moment.

The windstorm sword saint had not tried to run, but instead escaped Lorist's domain and activated his own to deal with it. *Darn it!* Lorist cursed himself for not having taken the perfect chance and letting go of the windstorm sword saint just like that. Within Slaughter Domain, Lorist was a god. However, he allowed the sword saint to escape without being able to react. Otherwise, the windstorm sword saint would've been eliminated without recourse.

The tent was already shaking flimsily, having been torn apart. In terms of range, the windstorm sword saint's domain seemed to be double of Lorist's own. The ones embroiled within that domain looked as if they were being assailed by a tornado, rising and falling within the tent. Things flew around and spun before they were torn to small pieces.

The people within tried to back off from the range of those two domains. As they backed up against the throne, some drew their swords and leaped out of the tent like the windstorm sword saint did. However, Auguslo and the nobles still wore expressions of disbelief that they had made it out of the tent alive. Viscount Krilos had also completely lost his calm and elegant smile, having it replaced by a look of terror.

While the windstorm sword saint's domain felt far wider than Lorist's, it didn't carry the dense feeling Slaughter Domain did. It was like a large plate that had a bowl on top of it. The bowl and plate was clashing against each other. The spectating nobles found it really funny how Lorist and the windstorm sword saint were fighting each other at the intersection point of their domains. The two of them were attacking and defending with the slowest of speeds.

Lorist had already sweat all over. What he never imagined was that the clash of the two domains exerted a mountainous pressure on his body. Not only did his whole body feel that stress, even the longsword in his hand felt heavy like a mountain to the point that he almost couldn't lift it up. The blood-red tornado formed a gigantic physical blade that pierced slowly from his side as Lorist slowly took a step forward and thrust his sword towards the sword saint at a snail's pace.

The windstorm swordsaint was faring worse than Lorist. Even though he had the experience of fighting other swordsaints, which Lorist lacked, he didn't think Lorist's domain would give him the feeling of being submerged in a quagmire. It was far too odd, as if he had fallen into a pot of rice. His Windstorm Domain focused on swiftness and agility. But now that it had clashed against Slaughter Domain, he was no longer able to use it to its full potential. His limbs felt like they were moving through thick mud. The pressure was huge and his movements couldn't be linked together, so he had no choice but to block Lorist's strike incredibly slowly, being able to do nothing about it.

Without their domains, Lorist and Magrut's fight would be swift as lightning to the point that the naked eye wouldn't be able to make out what was going on. But the clash of the domains brought with it the effect akin to gravity being multiplied a number of times. The two of them engaged in combat in laughably slow movements. One slow stab was parried aside really slowly before it would be followed by a crawling counter strike.

Lorist was already starting to get anxious. He could only use Slaughter Domain for 15 minutes, but he had already been slow-dancing with the windstorm swordsaint for more than ten without either of them being able to gain an edge over the other. Should that continue, once his domain ran out while Magrut's was still active, it would no doubt end horribly for him.

Lorist had to find a way to heavily wound the windstorm swordsaint. He strived to approach the swordsaint, but the cunning old man retreated every time Lorist made such an attempt. The two of them were separated by a distance the length of a sword. Perhaps the experienced windstorm swordsaint already saw through the properties of Lorist's domain and knew that it wouldn't be able to last long, so he started to draw it out until the domain crumbles.

*There's no other choice.* A look of absolute determination flashed through his eyes as his sword was parried away. The windstorm swordsaint followed it up with a thrust, and Lorist made no attempt to avoid it. The cold tip of the sword pierced into his body and came out of his back ever so slowly, only serving to exacerbate the pain Lorist was feeling. But he grit his teeth and pressed on, arcing the parried longsword in his right hand back down diagonally...

Magrut was greatly shocked. He wouldn't dare dream that Lorist would fight so suicidally. His longsword was already pierced in Lorist's chest and there wasn't

enough time for him to draw it out or slash horizontally to bring it out from Lorient's body. The arcing longsword in Lorient's right hand could take the windstorm sword saint's head in the next moment.

The windstorm sword saint didn't share Lorient's death wish. He currently had two choices. He could retreat backwards, but he had to give up on the sword pierced in Lorient's chest. He might even be slashed on the chest by Lorient. The second was to get even closer to Lorient to avoid the edge of the sword. Even though he would get even closer, that would render Lorient's slash not as damaging. At the same time, he would have control over Lorient's life because he didn't have to abandon his sword. After avoiding that strike, he could tear Lorient into two halves by slashing horizontally with the sword he had stuck within Lorient's body.

Naturally, the windstorm sword saint chose the second option. The way he saw it, Lorient was courting death. He sidestepped slightly and stuck close to Lorient from his flank. As long as the slash caught air, he could ram Lorient with his left shoulder and swing his longsword with his right and it would be done. Little did he expect, Lorient took one step to the side at that very moment. The two of them had switched places. Lorient's left hand struck the windstorm sword saint's chest at that moment, using the full extent of his internal energy.

To the spectators, Lorient was already done with. Not only did the windstorm sword saint's longsword find its way through Lorient's torso, the old man himself switched places at close range to evade Lorient's fatal diagonal slash. The slow palm strike by Lorient looked like a futile move by him to push Magrut away.

It was over. Auguslo and the other nobles donned a renewed look of despair. The windstorm sword saint had still defeated Lorient in the end; the situation didn't change one bit.

.....

A soft rustling sound rang out, and the face of the old sword saint who stuck close to Lorient turned red all of a sudden, before he opened his mouth and sprayed a mouthful of blood all over Lorient's face. Soon after, the other side of the spot Lorient struck bulged huge before the sword saint was sent flying through the air. He tumbled down on the platform before the throne like a struggling old dog near its death, sputtering blood out incessantly.

The domain vanished all of a sudden; both the Windstorm Domain of the blood-vomiting swordsaint laying on the gold-laced carpet and the Slaughter Domain of Lorist, who was struggling to stand with a sword pierced through him, were without a trace. The chaotic area around the ruined tent finally calmed down.

None expected Lorist to turn the tables around so suddenly just as he was about to lose, neither did they know how Lorist managed to score a pyrrhic victory against the viscount. However, the fact that the windstorm swordsaint was no different than an old dying stray was undeniable. Auguslo and the kingdom nobles shifted their gazes to Master Magrut as their faces shifted from despair to crazed fervor. They had already gripped their swords unconsciously. At that moment, the gaze they shot the windstorm swordsaint was one they would shoot a helpless beauty, especially one that was stark naked.

Viscount Krilos gulped audibly as he turned back to look at Auguslo with a forced smile. Auguslo still seemed excited and agonized at the same time; a paradoxical combination which fused into something ever so sinister. Krilos felt himself soften as if he wanted to sit down from holding his urine in for far too long.

"Y-y-y--your Majesty, we... we are envoys... Even if our negotiations fall apart, you should le-let us go... Only then can y-you uphold the reputation of the royal f-f-f-family..." stammered Krilos.

"Hehe, Lord Krilos, don't worry. We will definitely send you back. As for the windstorm swordsaint and your guards, hehehe..." Auguslo said as he waved his hand with a smile, "Kill them!"

Krilos fell seated to the ground and made a huge wet mess beneath him. He had been relying on the windstorm swordsaint, yet he didn't expect that the old man had turned into a helpless fish on shore. He had vomited out large volumes of blood and people knew that it was the end of him. One could only imagine how terrifyingly the grudge-holding Auguslo would treat the envoys of the Union...

The sounds of swords drawing filled the air. If the windstorm swordsaint hadn't been injured, those nobles and blademasters would act like fearful turtles, helpless sheep waiting to be slaughtered. But now that the windstorm swordsaint and Lorist severely injured each other, as was obvious to the eyes of all present, they were all eager to finish the deed. Taking the kill on a swordsaint would no doubt let them pass their proud names down for centuries to come. Every one of them began to rush in for the

kill.

The first one to get on the platform was Auguslo's blademaster bodyguard, Manst. As a rank 2 blademaster, he was really careful. Even though he was the first one who made it up there, he pierced his sword into the left arm of the windstorm swordsaint in an attempt to test whether the latter still had any arm strength left. The swordsaint made a pained cry as Manst's sword bore a hole through his hand, causing fresh blood to flow out. Surprised, Blademaster Manst stepped back twice, only to find that the swordsaint didn't retaliate. Instead, he sat up and no longer laid on the ground, having stopped puking out blood.

The second one to get up there was Reidy. However, he didn't care about the windstorm swordsaint one bit and instead rushed to Lorist, his master and teacher, with concern.

The third was the blademaster employed by Duke Fisablen, Blademaster Forund. He was an honorary viscount of the former Forund duchy and he had participated in the banquet as the duke's personal bodyguard along with the other nobles. Seeing the windstorm swordsaint heavily wounded by Lorist, he also couldn't resist his ambition's temptations. He believed that after he killed the windstorm swordsaint, not only would his name be spread far and wide, Auguslo might also surprise him by making him a proper landed noble of the kingdom.

As he followed closely behind Reidy to get to the platform, he was worried that Reidy would get the kill before he could. The moment he saw Reidy rush for Lorist, he couldn't be happier and he made his way across Blademaster Manst and sent his sword cutting towards the throat of the windstorm swordsaint, desperately wanting to score that kill.

Blademaster Manst cried out in terror, "Look out!"

"However, Rimad was blocking in front of him, so all he could do was sidestep and prepare himself to receive the blow. Rimad himself had heard Manst's warning, but he didn't take it seriously. He had wanted to block Manst intentionally so that his kill wouldn't be stolen. *Look out? For what? It's not like the windstorm swordsaint is holding a sword. His chest bone is obviously shattered by Lorist and he's nothing but livestock waiting to be slaughtered. What's there to look out for? Aren't you jealous that I'm going to steal your achievement? Haha! Who asked you to probe so carefully? Couldn't you just have killed him in one strike?*

Rimad's sword continued coursing for the throat of the windstorm swordsaint. The moment before it collided, he felt his vision darken as the winds blew ferociously once more, causing the sands and stones in the area to tussle around. Blademaster Rimad cried out in a panic, "Domain!"

The windstorm swordsaint's body had already disappeared from his sight, and that was followed by a searing pain at his hand that caused his longsword to be knocked flying. Rimad really wanted to beg for his life, but he could no longer speak at that moment. The swordsaint had already used the longsword he took from Rimad and pierced it through his spine from the back of his neck. Rimad seemed as if he was struck by lightning and he only struggled for a bit before he fell to the ground lifeless.

Blademaster Manst clutched his right wrist as he hurriedly retreated. The moment the windstorm swordsaint activated his domain and started the killing, he had cut off the blademaster's right hand. Had it not been for his alertness, he might've lost his life just then. All the other nobles who haven't rushed up the platform hurriedly turned back to escape.

The figure on the platform flashed a couple of times before Windstorm Domain vanished once more, causing the windstorm swordsaint's standing form to be revealed with the corpse of Blademaster Rimad at his feet. Even though Magrut was still coughing out blood from time to time, and the injury on his left hand bled on without stopping, the nobles of the kingdom were like scattered birds who flew all over the place, not a single one daring to get close.

"Counter him with the longbowmen!" shouted Duke Fisablen from afar when he was certain that the windstorm swordsaint wouldn't harm him from that distance.

"Hmph!" cried the old man with rage. Duke Fisablen's suggestion had hit his weak point. Now that he was heavily injured, he could only barely hold on. If the nobles of the kingdom all charged at him, he'd only be able to kill three to four of them before being torn apart himself. He turned back and saw the silent Lorist who had a sword poking through him before tapping his longsword on the ground and leaping up in the air and landing outside the tent, spitting out another mouthful of blood. After that, he tapped the ground with his longsword once more and disappeared into the distant sky.

"Bluuargh!" The blood Lorist had been holding back so long had still been spat out. He crumbled to the ground like a soft noodle as he blacked out while amidst Reidy's

panicked cries. Right before he fainted, he heard Augustus call out angrily, "Give chase! We must definitely hunt down and kill that sword saint!"

# Chapter 479

## Awakening

*On the 11th day of the 7th month, Year 1787, King of Andinaq Augusto I gathered his million-man army to reclaim the provinces of Anderwoff, Bodolger, Kanbona and Northwest (the northwestern area). As their troops approached the border of the Union, they demanded the Union to return the territory formerly belonging to the Lormo duchy, Armenia and Malivia, to Andinaq so that the empire could once more be reunited and refounded.*

*After the 100 thousand reinforcements sent by the Union to Kanbona was destroyed by the Norton forces of Andinaq, the Union successfully hurried the signing of the peace treaty with the midsouthern nations and recalled the six armies of the big six guilds from the midsouthern nations. They also ran a recruitment drive for a garrison force and also requested their ally, Jigda, to send reinforcements. They managed to gather an army of approximately 500 thousand to stand off against the Andinaq army at the border.*

*On the 13th day of the 8th month, the Union sent an envoy to Whitelion's camp in the name of discussing a peace treaty between the Union and Augusto I. Augusto I was elated by the news and set up a 5-kilometer-long path of peace to express his sincerity during the welcome of the envoy.*

*However, the king who had his mind completely on the peace talks didn't think that the Union only pretended to send a team of envoys over. Instead, they also secretly included the windstorm swordsaint among the ranks in an attempt to hustle the king and the kingdom's nobles to travel to Morante and sign a humiliating agreement of surrender.*

*During the negotiation process, the Union suddenly had their forces travel in five different routes to attack Andinaq's army camp. Counting on the fact that Augusto I and the kingdom's elite were being held up by the windstorm swordsaint, they planned to take advantage of the fact that the army was without any leader to cripple it and remove the threat it posed to the Union.*

*If things went according to plan, then Andinaq would never pose any threat at all to the Union in the coming century. The kingdom's economy might even fall into the Union's hands. But what nobody expected to happen was that during the most crucial moment,*

*Duke of The Northlands Norton Lorist stood up against the windstorm sword saint and those two fought till the both of them were heavily wounded. The windstorm sword saint made a haggard escape with heavy injuries and was said to have needed more than three years to completely recovered. That led to the failure of the Union's plan to kidnap Augustus I and the nobles.*

*Having suffered the five-pronged attack from the Union's army, the Andinaq army experienced great casualties in their unprepared state and retreated immediately. However, House Norton's Firmrock remained to secure their camp and managed to use the territory to their advantage and dealt a heavy blow to the Union's forces. The Union split their forces into three to besiege Firmrock's stronghold for a whole month only to return with failure, causing Firmrock's reputation to soar right after.*

*As Firmrock had managed to hold back a large portion of the Union's forces, Augustus I had the necessary time to regroup his troops. After a month, Augustus I returned with more than 600 thousand troops. Being angered by the union, Augustus I made a solemn oath that he would use the Union's blood to wash away the humiliation he and the kingdom received from them. The Union's forces stood up to the challenge and sent 400 thousand of their own forces to wage battle in Armenia and Malivia. Both sides had their fair share of victories and losses and were in fierce competition.*

*On the 23rd day of the 10th month, House Norton's Tigersoar and Jaeger launched their assault and appeared on the battlefield all of a sudden. Their path was unabated and they crushed every obstacle in their way. The Union suffered consecutive losses and lost over 100 thousand troops, being helpless before the Norton assault, having no choice but to retreat from Armenia and Malivia back to the Falik Plains.*

*As the Union's forces were occupied by the Norton forces during their retreat, they neglected Augustus I, who was watching and waiting for an opportunity. In the end, Augustus I used mobility of cavalry troops from the Frontier legion of House Fisablen and their reserve legion as well as the Pegasus legion to mount a night attack on the Union's forces during their retreat. The attack was launched on their vanguard and rearguard as well as their flanks, causing the whole army to be drowned up in slaughter. The Union's forces suffered yet another gross loss of 240 thousand troops.*

*After that battle, Augustus I ordered for the thousand captive nobles to all be killed before leading his troops all the way to the Falik Plains, ushering in two years of bloody sieges and battles there. The Union on the other hand had been severely wounded by that exchange and had started to destabilize internally. Though they were considered the*

*largest superpower on Grindia, their army had been beaten back to their original form by the forces of Grindia. The big six guilds, having been greatly wounded, could only barely hold their defense line at the Falik Plains.*

*In the history of Grindia, as the Union had broken the sacred, unspoken noble tradition of not deploying troops during the negotiation of a peace treaty, the war starting all the way from Auguslo I's gathering of a million-man army at the Union's border to the night cavalry attack on the retreating Union soldiers was known as the War on the Traitorous Union. Some war scholars refer to it as the Betrayal of Peace.*

*During that war that fundamentally altered the political landscape of the continent, the richest and most popular legends were about Andinaq's Duke of The Northlands, Norton Lorist. Before the age of 40, he had challenged Windstorm Swordsaint Magrut, someone who had already taken the continent by storm before. Before 15 minutes elapsed during the fierce battle, he managed to greatly wound the swordsaint. Even though he had been greatly injured himself, his name still spread all over the continent overnight. That was the birth of a new swordsaint in the past five decades, one that was younger than 40 no less, and that incident was one of the most contented and doubted topics of all.*

*In the millennia-old records on Grindia concerning swordsaints, the youngest to ever reach that realm was 68. That person was one of the most legendary figures in the past millennium: Master Cloudsaint Cameron who lived three centuries back. However, Duke of The Northlands Norton Lorist actually broke that record, and that was where the point of contention was at. The duke was younger than 40 and it was said that he didn't train in the hereditary battleforce technique of his household, but instead, a mysterious technique of the eastern martial monks that lived during the era of the magical civilization.*

*Regardless of the fact that the duke didn't train in traditional battleforce but rather a lost, ancient martial monk technique, he had still managed to heavily wound the windstorm swordsaint. Even though the duke himself suffered similar levels of injury, being able to face off against the windstorm swordsaint gave Andinaq more confidence in their continued fight against the Union. The Kingdom of Andinaq now had a swordsaint they could call their own. It was a shame that the windstorm swordsaint had entered seclusion to recover from his sever injuries after returning to Morante and nobody was able to extract a testimony from him concerning the duke.*

*According to a reveal by the windstorm swordsaint's first disciple, Count Bolyde, the windstorm swordsaint did confirm that the Duke of The Northlands was a swordsaint.*

*His domain was an incredibly weird one too that was filled with bloody gore and killing intent, like a domain of blood. It could be seen that the duke must be a crook with his hands stained with the blood of others. But Count Bolyde later added that the Duke of The Northlands also suffered a strike from the windstorm swordsaint and was injured far worse and would require an even longer time to recover. The windstorm swordsaint said that he would challenge the Duke of The Northlands once more when he recovers to wipe that humiliation off his name once and for all.*

*After getting heavily injured in the fight against the windstorm swordsaint, Duke of The Northlands Norton Lorist also vanished without a trace and had probably gone to recover from his wounds. During the War on the Traitorous Union, House Norton's performance was stellar beyond comparison. Firmrock legion defended their army camps steadfastly while Tigersoar cruised forward, busting through one obstacle after another. Jaeger could scatter and gather freely as the wind and managed to find its way through any defense. It could be said that it was because of the three Norton legions that secured the kingdom's edge over the Union.*

*After that war, it was said that the Union formed a unit with 15 blademasters to infiltrate The Northlands to assassinate the wounded Duke of The Northlands. It was recorded in the Norton chronicles that the Norton forces frequently encountered hostile blademasters during that period. However, it was a point of suspicion that the high officials and household knights as well as the family members of the Duke of The Northlands weren't targeted by the assassins as well. However, that soon proved to be nothing but a rumor. After the Duke of The Northlands lost contact with his household, the internal situation of the household started to destabilize and that culminated into an internal rebellion.*

*The internal rebellion within the Norton domain caused the three Norton legions to return to The Northlands from the frontlines. Having lost the support of the three Norton legions, the Andinaq forces didn't have any momentum to carve their way forward, making them unable to take over the last three remaining stronghold cities and Morante the Union had on Falik Plains. That caused the war situation there to enter its bloodiest state. The Andinaq kingdom and the Union didn't think that in the following year and a half, both sides would lost more than 30 thousand elite soldiers on the bloodstained plains. That was a war without victor.*

*Extract from Rise of the Ragebear Dynasty -- Book 1: Fall of the Empire, authored by continental war historian and expert, imperial scholar, and professor of Dawn Academy, Sir Anderwlin Mismord, published throughout Year 2127 to Year 2131 of the Grindian*

"Where... am I?" Lorist finally awakened and said a full, clear sentence. The house he was in was completely dark and the sound of falling rain could be heard from the outside.

Ever since he fainted from his heavy injuries following his battle with the windstorm swordsaint, Lorist felt as if he dreamed for a really long time. He could only barely remember what the dream was about as well as the bitter and viscous medicines he had to drink, the pain he suffered all over his body, and the vague feeling on having been on a stretcher or a carriage. His body hurt the whole time like he was being baked by an intense heat. From time to time, he would wake up and see the blue sky. He also vaguely recalled hearing the sound of fighting and agonized cries.

"Your Grace, you're finally awake?" said a familiar voice beside him. *It sounds like Reidy...*

"Is it Reidy? Where is this? Why don't you have a candle lit?" asked he doubtfully.

"Your Grace, we're at Kobo. We can't light any candles for your safety," said Reidy with difficulty after a period of hesitation.

*Kobo? Can't light any candles for my safety?* Lorist took a few breaths and felt that his chest was still pulsing with pain. But the sword he remembered sticking out of it was no longer there. He soon happened upon the memory of his fight with his swordsaint.

"Tell me what time is it and what kind of situation we're in." As his eyes gradually got accustomed to the darkness, he could more or less make out the linen sacks all around him. He was probably within some food storehouse.

"Your Grace, you've been unconscious for nearly six months and was only sustained by medicinal concoctions. His Majesty had wanted to let you recover at the imperial capital, but the Union sent ten blademasters to the royal palace in an attempt to assassinate you. But you weren't within the palace like they thought. Blademaster Manst, who was recovering there, and another blademaster called Joseph, died from battle there. The imperial capital was thrown into chaos, and Blademaster Shuss and I killed three of the Union blademasters who were tracking you and used that chaos to bring you away from the imperial capital. We then left for Vanades with the guards.

"We had thought that since Knight Terman was stationed at Vanades with his brigade, he could help us protect you. But we soon discovered that the knight brigade had been reassigned to Wild Husbandry by the house. That was when the Union blademasters got on our tail again. To lead them away, Shuss and Jinolio brought the guard regiment with them to The Northlands, while I secretly brought you to Kobo in a food cart. It is the rainy season of the new year right now and we've been staying here for a month and a half."

Reidy's explanation contained quite a lot of huge developments that Lorist had to make a bit of effort to process and make sense of them.

"Did His Majesty send anyone to pursue the windstorm swordsaint after I fainted?" asked Lorist.

"He did, but the Union forces arrived just when they were about to catch him. A few divisions from Whitelion had already crumbled and everyone was busy running for their lives back then. Jinolio and I brought you and the guards to retreat. After that, His Majesty said that you had to be saved no matter what and let and had the injured Blademaster Manst bring us back to the imperial capital so that a herbalist could be found to treat you. We wanted to let you stay in the palace, but the poisonous wench of House Fisablen didn't let you live in 'for the sake of avoiding gossip and rumors'. So, we had to settle you down within a count's mansion near the palace. We didn't think that we'd manage to avoid the assassination attempt that way," said Reidy with relief.

"His Majesty didn't return to the capital?"

"No. The million-man army crumbled this time around and only Firmrock held firm within camp. That managed to buy His Majesty some time to regroup his soldiers. A month later, he led his troops on an assault. He had stayed at the frontlines the whole time without returning to the imperial capital. After that, Sir Potterfang sent Blademaster Shuss to the capital to protect you. He brought news that His Majesty had shaved himself in front of the army and made an oath to fight the Union to the bloody end to wash away his humiliation."

*Alright. Looks like Auguslo will be busy for a time. Who knows how long this battle will last?*

"You just said that Knight Terman was moved from Vanades to Wild Husbandry. Why? What about Jaeger? Weren't they within Wild Husbandry? Did something happen?"

"This... This is because His Majesty is going to lead his troops to attack the Union, so the knight brigade had nothing better to do at Vanades. General Josk was also said to explode with anger when he heard that Your Grace was injured and wouldn't follow his orders. All he cared about was bringing aeger and Sir Loze along with Tigersoar to fight the Union at the frontlines to avenge you. Wild Husbandry was left empty, so the house had no choice to call for Sir Terman and his knights to defend it," replied Reidy with a stammer.

"They're all messing around!" snorted Lorist. However, he could do nothing about it now that he was hiding within a food storehouse. Josk had always been rather close with him, so it was no surprise that he had to act after hearing about what happened. It wasn't something Charade could stop. Fiercetiger Loze on the other hand was arrogant and proud and heeded only Lorist's orders. He wouldn't even bother with Charade at all. If he weren't hiding away in this corner, he'd order those two to return obediently to pay for their mistakes.

"Does anyone else know that I'm here?" asked Lorist.

"Your Grace, only three people know. There are around three thousand local defense brigade soldiers here in Kobo. Apart from me, only the major of the brigade and his attendant know. The major called Selikoff and used to be part of our guard brigade. His attendant is his own cousin who is also in charge of bringing us food. However, when the rainy season passes and the harvesting of winter wheat in Delamock begins, there will be many food carriages traveling here. There will no doubt be more people by then and if anyone realizes that Your Grace is here, we might attract the attention of assassins."

"Let's find another place. There's no way we can return to The Northlands right now as some people will be looking out for us there. Let's disguise ourselves as the food-transporting farmers come the 4th month and head to the Dina barony," said Lorist after some consideration.

# Chapter 480

## On the Run

Delamock's skies were bright and cloudless on the 23rd day of the 4th month, Year 1788.

A strong horse pulled a four-wheeled cart across a narrow stretch of clay-and-lime road. Such 'flatboard' carts were rather commonplace in the province, mostly used to transport food and miscellaneous stuff. Each could move 1500 kilograms and was filled with linen sacks, making it look like small migrating mountains.

This particular cart, however, was mostly empty. It had only two people and a few linen sacks. A young man sat in the coachman's seat holding a long horsewhip, bobbing his head like one dozing off. The horse thus walked at its own pace. From time to time, it even stopped to graze. The other man, clad in typical gray-white farming wear, lay in the cart with a linen sack as a pillow. A straw hat covered his face to block out the sun. He slept soundly.

This wasn't common on the roads. The youth would whip the horse to the roadside when oncomers cursed at him and let them pass. Soon he would be dozing off again as the horse trotted along on its own.

Contrary to appearance, however, Lorist wasn't asleep. He just enjoyed the warm sunlight. Having stayed in the dark, dank storehouse for two months, he missed the sun and fresh air.

*How many years has it been since I've had the time to enjoy the sun? In Dawn Academy I would read in the sun on my balcony. Ah... how free those times were.*

Lorist wasn't in the best of shape. It took him six months to recover from his wounds. While their movements had been severely slowed by the pressure of their clashing domains, a stab was a stab, it just took longer. He still had to face the full force of his opponent's battleforce, which damaged his dantian. He was just a normal mortal right now, maybe even just a weak mortal. He couldn't do any labor or muster much energy. He was very grateful to have Reidy at times like this. Reidy's Dan Ocean Ki-refining technique was similar to his Aquametal technique, so Reidy could continuously inject

internal energy into his body, which, along with being fed medicine every day, had mostly healed him.

The stab had gone straight through his chest. Lorist's palm strike had shattered the old man's sternum. But, as Lorist had to take the stab first, he had reserved a portion of his internal energy to protect his innards. So, while he managed to break Magrut's sternum, he didn't liquify his innards, which was why the old man could escape. Had his internal organs been liquified, even the gods would have struggled to save him.

Though similarly injured, Lorist fared far worse. Magrut could recover in peace and quiet in Morante and had the best medicine and perfect environment while Lorist had to move around in secret to avoid the blademasters after his life. He couldn't even go home or contact his family.

If a kingdom had a patron swordsaint, it would offer them some protection in the form of high-tier fighters. If they lacked that, they would at least protect him with an army. But Auguslo was only concerned with getting revenge, so he dedicated everything he had to fighting the Union, and Andinaq was at a huge disadvantage when it came to their top tier fighters. Since the Union blademasters couldn't fight against the swarm of soldiers, their best use would be going after the next greatest threat, Lorist.

Lorist was worried for his wife, concubines and children, but knew he had to recover first. He could do nothing until he was at the level of a swordsaint again. Nobody would go after his family while his fate was unknown, so he didn't *have* to be by their side. If his ongoing recovery was discovered, everyone would go after his family immediately. It was not without precedent after all.

Two swordsaints had been wounded in battle two centuries earlier. One was nearly assassinated, but escaped. Having failed, his assassins went after his family. When he had recovered a year later, he killed all 70 thousand people related to the blademasters and nobles that were involved in his family's death. Even the enemy swordsaint didn't dare intervene.

His reasoning was that he would do exactly the same if it were his family. He had warned his king not to do it, but they wouldn't listen. As far as he was concerned, they deserved exactly what they got.

The big-six were aware of this story, and were not willing to make the same mistake, especially not now that it was clear Lorist was a swordsaint. Killing him, someone who

could threaten their strongest asset, was natural, but his family was off limits until he was dead. No one, not even Lorist, could really say anything against the Union for going after him, but touching his family was a whole other matter. Even household officials and knights were a risk. They had no interest in watching him rampage through their guilds, if they really went after his family, Magrut would no doubt do exactly the same as the second sword saint in the old story.

They had nothing to worry about once Lorist was dead, they could wipe out the entire kingdom if they wanted, but as long as there was even a chance that he still breathed, they had to be very careful. Thus, the best way Lorist could keep everyone safe right now, was to stay hidden.

The winter harvests came after the rainy season. This was also the first year his household's harvest tax would be implemented. All his vassals sent their taxes to Kobo, where it was stored for his forces.

He had also set up a trade center for Delamock where all the province's produce could be traded slightly under market price. He had legislated a monopoly for the market so only he could buy produce from the lords, and sell to merchants. Every fruit, vegetable, and grain had to pass through his hands. It let him earn a three-tenths profit on the province's entire agricultural economy and nobody could do anything about it. He could easily drive any merchant that offended him out of business, and could make anyone he disliked starve. There was no way he was going to give that up.

It was in this carting hay-day that the two were heading into his domain. They left Kobo incognito amongst thousands of similar carts, no one knew where they were going.

Reidy had informed Lorist of the current situation immediately after his awakening. Everything about Auguslo's recovery and ongoing campaign, Tigersoar and Jaeger's exploits, Auguslo's miraculous and decisive assault on the Union's camp and subsequent recovery of Armenia and Malivia, and his ingress into Falik.

He was also informed of Marquis Krilos's fate. Auguslo was so furious he broke all of the man's limbs, destroyed his cultivation and paraded him all across the kingdom covered in feathers before sending him back to the Union, tied to a cow. He didn't paint him in honey since water could wash it off. He had him covered in raw lacquer before the feathers were applied. Even Lorist thought this was going a bit far. The particular mix Auguslo used was known to irritate the skin severely, causing intense itching,

rashes, and swelling.

A chill ran down Lorist's spine for the duration of Reidy's narration. Krilos was completely wasted. If Auguslo did not hate the Union to hell and back before, he clearly did now. It was understandable, however. If not for Lorist, Auguslo would not only have become a prisoner, he would have been made the continent's fool. His legacy would have been as history's greatest non-fiction comedy.

Reidy knew nothing else, however. He'd hidden with Lorist in Kobo for more than two months after escaping the imperial capital and splitting up with Shuss. He knew nothing about what was happening to Lorist's forces or in his lands. And he couldn't ask around and risk rousing suspicions either. But Reidy wasn't too concerned since everything would be sorted out once Lorist recovered his strength. Even if the house had been uprooted, they could just rebuild it.

The two saw someone reprimanding a group of cavalymen because the messenger eagle sent to The Northlands had not returned for a months, nor had any of the messengers. Selikoff increased the area's security so it wouldn't happen again. Luckily the messengers were found unharmed, it appeared only their letters were searched. That this was made public, however, was clearly to let the two know that someone was looking for them in the area. Clearly their information network had been uncovered and was being used against them.

Lorist currently had a full beard, no different from a common farmer. Even those who knew him wouldn't recognize him at a glance. Reidy, who usually had a mustache, was now hairless. He'd grown it after Lorist declared him a rank 1 blademaster equivalent to appear more mature. He looked much younger without it, like a farmer's son unresigned to his life in the fields.

The journey from Kobo to the Dina barony took three days. It would have been much slower if not for the new roads, at least a week. The barony lay in the west of Delamock at the foot of the mountains between it and the sea.

Lorist had spent a lot on the barony. He'd been very worried about scuffled between his stubborn lover and her neighbors, so he'd arranged for it to be in a relatively unpopulated area where she wouldn't feel too cramped. The cart pulled into the barony as the day's last rays of sunshine faded away.

"Don't go to the village. Head straight for the castle."

Lorist knew his way around after having been here twice. The wooden castle was actually a popular joke at noble parties in the province. Arriotoli had prepared it for her younger brother, the future baron. It wouldn't have been a problem to build a one out of stone, but she wanted her brother to build his own as he wanted. He was studying at Nico Academy at the time and couldn't give his input. She didn't mind the jokes, even working on it every year. Not a year went by that *something* didn't change.

The cart rolled into the castle. Security was rather lax, Lorist hadn't seen a single guard on the walls during their approach. He would have suspected the castle abandoned if not for the servants faffing about in the bailey.

Three people emerged from a hall bordering the bailey as Lorist got off the cart. The two in front were an elegant middle-aged couple, Arriotoli walked behind.

Reidy tensed up immediately. The couple carried themselves like blademasters. He secretly grabbed hold of the hilt of his sword, hidden in the closest linen sack. Arratoli recognized the two by the cart immediately.

# Chapter 481

## Hunter's Cabin

'What should we do?' seemed to be what Reidy was trying to tell Lorist with his gaze.

Lorist made a pained smile and shook his head. He was completely powerless in his current state. Counting on Reidy alone to take on two blademasters was completely unrealistic. No matter which one of the couple Reidy manages to hold back, the other would definitely give Lorist a strike and that would be the end of him. All he could do now was pray that Arriotoli didn't call Lorist out there and then. No matter how big her boobs were, surely she did have some brains. After all, she was already a mother.

Lorist hurriedly pulled on Reidy's sleeve. He got down from the carriage with Reidy and lowered his head pensively, acting like a servant found out by his master for committing a mistake. He hoped that Arriotoli would be made aware of the situation after seeing them like that instead of leaping straight into Lorist's embrace with tears of joy flowing out of her eyes.

He was already regretting it deeply. *I must be half conscious when I decided I would come to the Dina barony. It's quite a known fact that two of my concubines, Fennazali and Arriotoli, are members of House Dina, so it's obvious that the blademasters would search this area. I really jumped into this trap on my own accord this time.*

That middle-aged couple gave Lorist a sweeping glance and thought him to be but a mere lowly farmer. Reidy on the other hand caught their attention. It was truly rather weird for one-star silver rank to be a farmer. Usually, those who awakened their battleforce in a dominion would be recruited by the dominion lord to be their subordinate or their soldier. Most wouldn't be allowed to continue working as farmers.

The middle-aged couple then turned to Arriotoli. Fortunately, she had already placed her hands down after covering her mouth from shock. She then marched over angrily and rebuked Reidy fiercely, "Krimando, why have you come back so late?! All I had you do was to accompany Kanon here to fetch some things outside! Don't give me the excuse that the axle of your carriage is broken. This carriage has already been spoiled by you three times this month already and we just got it fixed yesterday! If you keep

this up, I won't let you serve as a House Dina knight! I also won't let our Sunirulu marry you, got it?!"

*Huh? Reidy made a blank look. What the hell is going on? Did Arriotoli mistake me for someone else? I'm not Krimando, and since when was I going to be a knight of House Dina? What's the deal with letting Sunirulu marry me anyway? I know she's your maidservant and that she's pretty and all, but when I came with His Grace back then, you were the one who asked me to marry her! I already rejected that!*

Lorist breathed out a sigh in relief and added ten thousand points to Arriotoli in his heart. He didn't think that the lass would turn so much smarter after becoming a full-fledged knight and mother. Her performance was truly stellar. He tugged on Reidy and gestured for him to not argue with Arriotoli before he withdrew his body and pretended to be afraid of Arriotoli's scolding. Reidy on the other hand had opened his mouth, only to say nothing before lowering his head again, looking unwilling and stubborn.

"What? You aren't pleased?!" Arriotoli poked Reidy on the forehead with her finger. "You're not able to finish such a simple task, and yet you dare to follow Uncle Masa to the frontlines?! Do you think I'll knight you after you achieve something there?! Dream on! If you laze on like that without doing anything useful, I'll exile you from the Dina barony!"

"And you, Kanon!" Arriotoli snapped as she turned her attention to Lorist, "Even though I ordered you to watch this kid and make sure he works properly, you accompanied him on his fun journey instead! You two are not getting dinner tonight. Now you better get back in there and clean the tables. You'll be going to the mountains to pick herbs tomorrow too. These two revered herbalists are here to purchase some of our herbs and if you really do find some valuable ones, you'll get a tip for some drinks."

*Herbalists?* Lorist understood the situation after some thought. Those two blademasters were merely posing as herbalists on their way to purchase ingredients. Since Arriotoli was only a two-star silver-ranked knight, she didn't discover the couple's true identities. But now seeing Lorist return in that disguise, she got a feeling that both of them didn't want their identities revealed.

Even though the Dina barony was relatively near the mountains, they only produced some herbs of low value. The real place to purchase herbs was the eastern part of The

Northlands. The Magical Dragon Mountains were famous for their herbs across the continent, and the herbs produced by Delamock were often sent to the eastern part of The Northlands to make up for the demand of the market there. Who would go all their way to the Dina barony just for those normal herbs? It was obvious that something was off.

"Apologies, you two, for having to let you see this joke of a scene. It's all the fault of those two lazy ones." Arriotoli's face bloomed once more after she finished reprimanding Lorist and Reidy, smiling at the middle-aged couple brightly. Women were truly fickle after all.

"No worries. It's expected for a dominion lord to deal with things such as these. We have to apologize for disturbing your busy schedule," the man said with a smile, before he looked at Reidy and Lorist as the two of them entered the hall and added, "That young man's not bad. He's already a one-star silver rank. I think he can become a gold-ranked knight of your house after good training."

"Him?" Arriotoli snorted, "Master Herbalist, don't joke around with me. I'll be thankful if they don't anger me to death. You might not know this, but that fella's father used to be my father's subordinate. He fell on the battlefield together with my father. At first, I was considering giving him proper training, but that kid actually followed a traveling mercenary and said that he would learn the skills necessary to avenge his father! And then he left for almost eight years.

"After our house got the protection of the Duke of The Northlands and had our dominion moved over here, that fella somehow managed to make his way back as a one-star silver rank and said that he wanted to become our household knight and marry the girl that used to be his neighbor, my own maidservant Sunirulu! I tested his swordsmanship and found that he had learned a bunch of muddled crap from the mercenaries instead of the proper technique!

"So, I decided to have him forget the bad habits he learned from the mercenaries first before he would be properly trained in the techniques of a knight. Little did I think that he wouldn't focus on his training and instead spend his time traveling all over the place to slack off. He even secretly tried to make his way to the frontlines with our house's Knight Massa to rake in some achievements for himself to achieve his goal!"

Arriotoli had turned into a gossipy old maid and yammered on with the couple without end. The couple's faces contorted as time went on. How could they be

bothered with the backstory of some one-star silver-ranked mercenary? They were just casually asking around, yet Arriotoli actually started chattering nonstop. After she finally finished, the couple politely declined her offers for further hospitality and prepared to make their way off.

But before they left, the middle-aged man made a last-ditch effort. "Oh honorable knight, Lady Dina, do you truly not want to buy a cheap high-rank medicine from us? It's a rare chance and we happened to synthesize a few extra bottles back then. Since you treated us so warmly, we want to sell them to you for a low price. Just buy one for emergency's sake. We can assure you that this medicine really works well. As long as they can still breathe, we're sure it will help bring them back to full health. It'll even accelerate the speed of their recovery."

Arriotoli's long eyelashes fluttered as she blinked, seemingly with understanding. "But... but those medicines truly are too expensive! It's ten gold coins for one, and the expiry date is far too soon with less than half a year remaining. I really don't see a use for it even if I buy it! After half a year, ten gold coins would just go poof! It's not like our house needs medicine of that high rank anyway. We can just buy the most common medicinal concoction for a few large silvers for commoners who get injured."

The middle-aged woman smiled and said, "Alright, Jack, stop promoting those high-rank medicines. Lady Dina already said that she doesn't need any, so it'll just be a waste for her to buy some. It's about time we left. Thank you so much for your hospitality. We'll return a few days later to check on the herbs you gathered."

Arriotoli bowed and said, "Master Herbalists, won't you reconsider lodging by us for the night? Even though it's rather run-down here, we'll try our best to accommodate you to your satisfaction."

"There's no need. The thought is enough. We've already booked our own room at the tavern downtown. Should you require our service, please don't hesitate to seek us out at the town of Daphne in Viscount Sibok's dominion. You can also leave a message for us at the inn's counter. We'll definitely try our best to come as quickly as we can," said the middle-aged man politely.

"Alright, thank you for your kind intentions. I won't hold back if I really need your service. You are always welcome to visit the barony," said Arriotoli as she made a knight's salute.

The middle-aged herbalist couple came and left on horses. It was until their silhouettes vanished on the distant highways that Arriotoli returned to the hall of her wooden castle.

Lorist and Reidy were wolfing down food in the hall at a table served with delicacies. Arriotoli's maidservant, the beautiful Sunirulu, was pouting right beside them as Reidy scared her as he wolfed his food down and mocked her for not being able to marry someone because she was ugly.

"If nobody marries her, then you'll be his husband," Arriotoli said with dissatisfaction as she entered, "Locke, what's going on? What's with the getup?"

Lorist put the blackwheat bread back into his plate and gave Arriotoli a thumbs up. "You really reacted quickly today and put on a great performance. I almost died in the hands of that couple."

"Huh? That middle-aged couple?" Arriotoli said with surprise, "They were merely herbalists here to purchase some herbs. Why would they kill you? Also, I was there, wasn't I?"

Lorist rolled his eyes. "Dumb lass, those two were blademasters. They came here to check whether I was hiding out and recuperating here. I suspect they were sent by the Union to hunt me down and kill me. Otherwise, they wouldn't come all the way here to buy some common herbs."

"It's no wonder they kept on asking me whether I needed to buy some high-rank medicinal concoction at such a cheap price. I knew I should've got some," said Arriotoli in stark wonder.

"If you did, they would've known that I was there right away. I am thankful that you didn't do anything as stupid as buying those high-rank medicinal concoctions. You should know that each of those cost at least 30 gold Fordes and unless a dominion lord is injured, nobody would spend that kind of money to heal someone else. They offered you that at that low price to see if I was here with you," replied Lorist.

Arriotoli began to tear up immediately. "Locke, haven't you recovered from your injuries yet?"

Lorist gave a pained smile. "It won't be that easy. While I'm more or less fine on the outside, my internals are still a mess. I'm no different from a cripple now. I can't even

lift a sword. I thought that I could stay here for a year and a half to recover at first but it seems that it isn't really safe here either. It's best if I left lest I drag you and your child down with me. By the way, where's Terryke?"

Terryke was the son of Lorist and Arriotoli. He was three that year and pudgy and likable. However, Arriotoli had him bear the Dina name and he didn't count as a Norton family member. So, he was just an illegitimate child.

"Terryke played around like crazy outside the whole day and went to sleep right after dinner. I had Sunirulu bathe him and let him sleep early," replied Arriotoli.

"And there I thought I could see that little pudgeball. To think that he's already slept," Lorist complained, "Arri, have your garrison forces been deployed at the frontlines as well? Didn't I ask you not to send them?"

"Well, our house wasn't going to participate at first, since His Majesty was being pushed back quite badly after all. But when your house's three legions swept Armenia and Malivia, His Majesty managed to defeat the Union and reclaim those two provinces from them. Right now, they're already attacking the Falik Plains, so I head Uncle Massa bring the garrison to haul some benefits back from the battlefield. Since they're with your house's forces, I doubt they'd be in any trouble. The Falik Plains are rich with wealth and it'd be a shame if we didn't snag a part for ourselves," reasoned Arriotoli.

Lorist, resigned by that greedy woman, thought that the Dina house forces would at most be tasked with simple things like guarding the captives and campsites as well as delivering supplies. They probably wouldn't be made to charge in the vanguard or head a siege, so they'd be more or less safe. It's no wonder Arriotoli was so eager to send them to the battlefield, seeing that they would return with some spoils as well.

"Your Grace, are we leaving tonight?" Reidy had already finished biting the roast goat meat off the thigh bone and tossed it aside, before grabbing a linen cloth to wipe his mouth and hands from Sunirulu, earning himself an angry glare.

Just as Lorist was going to say something, Arriotoli butted in first. "You can't leave. It's dangerous to do so."

Lorist shook his head. "No those blademasters already have their eye on this place. Fortunately, those two that came today didn't recognize us. But if some others do, then it's over for us."

Arriotoli laughed and said, "Locke, only I can recognize you with your full-bearded look. I'm sure the others will only think you a mere farmer. As for Reidy, he already shaved his little mustache off. If it weren't for Sunirulu, who's pining over him all day and night, nobody would've been able to recognize him. How about this? There's a hunter's cabin at the western side of the valley. The two who lived there followed Uncle Massa to the frontlines already. I'm sure nobody would suspect you if you stayed there.

"Also, those two were named Krimando and Kanon, the names I called you in front of the two herbalists. They will come over again in a couple of days and I'm sure they won't find anything out, so you can just rest well here. Also, Locke, are you sure you don't need that high-rank concoction?"

Lorist refused, "No need. You know that I'm a herbalist myself, a rank 2 one at that. As long as I'm able to get some ingredients, there's no need to buy any myself. I'll head to the cabin you mentioned with Reidy tomorrow and stay there if it's suitable. However, I hope that only the two of you know of our presence here. Don't tell your sister about it when you write to her, and don't contact The Northlands, understood?"

# Chapter 482

## Recuperation

*This place is pretty great: the air's fresh, and the view's beautiful and invigorating too.* Lorist thought.

They were in a valley near the Garilos mountains in Arriotoli's barony. She had built a hunter's cabin there and usually left two people to guard it. The nearby mangrove forest was a valuable source of timber. Their patterns were especially sought after by the rich. Arriotoli had been surprised to discover such a huge mangrove forest nearby and instantly laid claim to it.

The forest came with two other key products, one being raspberries. Each was slightly smaller than a blueberry, but thin-skinned and juicy. They sold for a premium more often than not. Raspberries grew on shrubs in mangrove forests and matured in the 8th or 9th month. Since raspberries couldn't be kept for long, they were dried or made into fruit wine. Raspberry wine was expensive because people believed they had medicinal and aphrodisiac qualities, both of which made it very popular with the nobility. The second product was red mushrooms. They sported a bright cap and were delicious. They bloomed shortly after the rainy season for a few nights, which was the only time in the year they could be harvested. They were one of the continent's favorite cheap delicacies. They were especially popular in soups, but worked in almost any dish. The forest was a small treasure chest, a godsent for House Dina. Just the two harvestables alone made the household 30 gold a year.

The three-floored hunter's cabin stood on the forest's edge in the valley. The bottom most floor was stone, while the other two were wood. There was even a beacon above the third floor. It looked like a small fort.

"Wolves come down from the mountain in search of food in the winter," Arriotoli explained, "so the cabin has to be fortified enough to keep them out and the guards inside safe. The beacon is to call for help in case a large group of bandits or poachers show up, or the watchmen are in trouble for some other reason."

The ground floor had four small rooms and one large communal area with the stairs. The first of the rooms was the stable, the second the pantry, the third a small vault,

and a workshop. The workshop had a small kiln and could make and maintain basic tools. The second floor had three rooms that fanned out from the stairwell which also functioned as the dining room, two were bedrooms and the third a kitchen. The dining room had a small table and four chair. A stag head hung on the wall above the table.

The ground floor might as well have been underground, for it was pitch black inside without windows and had to be lit with torches. The first floor, however, had windows, small as they were. Glasswork being as primitive and expensive as it was in this time, the windows were essentially just rectangular holes in the wall. The two bedroom-walls had two hinges boards that could be closed or opened, whilst the kitchen's window had a thin skin cover. The cold dominated most of the year here, even summer was cool, so the windows were closed most of the time, and the inside was still lit with braziers. Everything stunk of soot and smoke.

The bedroom to the left of the stairs was slightly smaller, the walls wrapping around the stairs that ascended to the third floor. It was the tallest of the three floors, and had the best lighting. It had two slit windows, and a murder hole in each of the outer walls, which let light reflected off the ground or snow into the room as well without letting the wind and cold air in too much. A trap-door-like contraption in the ceiling led to the beacon on the roof.

A bamboo pipe brought water over from the nearby stream. It ran by the house about 16 meters away. The steep ledges behind the house, down which the stream flowed, let the water run into the house on the first floor. It ran through a series of pipes, each with a tap in to use the water, down the house and into a pond in the yard, which overflowed back into the stream. Some of the pond's water ran into a trough in the stable.

"Not bad. I should be able to survive here," commented Lorist. He could see the fields and the castle at the foot of the mountain from the platform on the third floor. The village of Howak stood in the distance at the entrance of the valley.

"It's too run-down, Your Grace. It's severely lacking. Should we go get some cutlery, candles, and clothes?" asked Reidy.

"No. Have you seen watchers use silver and gold cutlery and candles? We're pretending to be watchers, best play the part. We can make our own utensils. Go fell a tree for some bowls and forks later. We'll use torches. As for clothes, just head further up the mountains and get deer or wolf pelts or something. Also, didn't Arriotoli

mention the two phony herbalists will be here again in another a couple of days? We should scavenge a few herbs."

"As you wish, Milord."

Lorist was surprised that the couple came all the way to the cabin when they returned. Fortunately, he and Reidy had scavenged a lot of herbs. They weren't cleaned or dried yet though. There were also a lot of holey wolf pelts in the yard.

"Not bad. I'll take everything," said the male, called Jack, without bothering to give them a detailed check. He even took the chance to inspect the cabin. The woman kept Lorist in the yard and asked a lot about the pelts.

"We caught them with a few traps. They were impaled on stakes buried in hidden pits. Unfortunately it means they aren't worth anything on the market, but that's fine since we only wanted them for personal use." Lorist acted like a sneaky, money-grubbing farmer. In reality, Reidy had ruined them. If he hadn't they would obviously have been bought by Arriotoli and sold for money. Mountain watchers would obviously not want that.

"What a shame. Where's your partner?"

"There. He just went to patrol the forest. I have to stay back to feed the horses and make lunch," Lorist offered as he pointed.

The woman turned around and saw Reidy coming over from the forest, a bow on his back and three turkeys and two hares in his hands.

Arriotoli exploded immediately.

"Krimando! You're weren't patrolling at all! Hah! Caught you red-handed! You won't get any money this month! You know House Dina owns everything in the forest. I'll be taking those kills as well!"

Reidy walked over crestfallenly, "But I didn't hunt them in the forest! I was hunting up the mountain! That's free game!"

"I pay you to guard the forest, not to hunt in the mountains! No excuses. No money for you! And how can you prove you didn't hunt them in the forest? Maybe they live there and happened to go out to the mountains!"

*How... how would I prove that?!* Having no choice, Reidy could only hand his game to Arriotoli, who picked them out meticulously and tossed a wild hare on the ground and complained, "Too thin. You can use it for soup."

The herbalist watched on from the side.

*So this is how a real noble acts!* Jack left the cabin and shook his head slightly.

Since they discovered nothing, the two prepared to head back. First, however, they had to pay for the herbs. Arriotoli was quite adept at bargaining, so it didn't take long to close the deal. She made 1 gold, 15 silvers in the trade. She pocketed the coins and tossed Lorist and Reidy two small silvers.

"Not bad. Here's your reward. Should be enough to buy five wheat bears in town."

Lorist smile painedly and rubbed the small silver. He had finally experienced how it felt to be a citizen taken advantage of by a noble. In fact, Arriotoli was being rather generous with two small silvers. The nobles saw everything in the dominion as their property. All of it belonged to them, so why would they pay anyone anything for getting it for them, whether that be by hunting, farming, or foraging? The three visitors left by horse. Lorist and Reidy were left with the herbs, which they had to take to town on their own. It would be shipped to Daphne by someone else from there.

"Why not just have those two bring it all the way themselves?" asked the woman.

"Not happening. If I let them leave, they'll vanish for who-know-how-long. I won't give them the time to waste their money, or an excuse to loiter."

The couple was speechless.

*You call two small silvers money?!*

They had, at first, wanted to bribe the two so they'd spy for them, but, since Arriotoli wasn't giving them the chance, they let the thought go. Seeing that the two spent most of their time in the mountain, they probably didn't really know or see much anyway.

Reidy sighed when the three vanished.

"I'm really glad she's Lady Dina and not Lady Norton."

"Didn't you see how good her acting was? She duped the couple completely. They don't suspect a thing. I'll start healing tomorrow. You remember the herb I asked you to get, right? Go find it for me. Also, make a bathtub.

It was time for Lorist to start his internal healing. He would use Reidy's Dan Ocean Ki-refining technique instead of his Aquametal technique, the former was calmer and more suited to such endeavors. Magrut's battleforce had completely ruined his dantian, it could only be healed by slowly rebuilding it over time. The two stayed in the mountains for two seasons.

Summer came and left, as did autumn. Arriotoli would come by with Sunirulu and Terryke from time to time. Sunirulu and Reidy would go scavenging in the mountain and the forest while the three nobles played around. Terryke, the chubby little rascal, kept tugging on Lorist's beard. Lorist had a new toy ready every time the kid came for a visit and the two would play together. They got along quite well.

Lorist was back up to the third stage of the Dan Ocean Ki-refining technique when the third 10th month rolled by. He was now once again equal to a gold-ranker and could just barely hold his ground against a single rank 1 blademaster. He would be back to sword saint in six more months. He was sorting some herbs currently, preparing them for processing, when Arriotoli came rushing up the mountain on horseback.

"Locke, News from The Northlands! Something's happened!"

# Chapter 483

## Internal Strife (1)

Arriotoli brought was confusing news. The news didn't come from The Northlands, it was brought by Massa. He said a rebellion had broken out within Lorist's domain which drew the three legions back home. Massa and the men had also returned.

However, because of their loot and the distance they had to travel, they would only be home in the middle of the following year. Preparations were already made for the unit to stay over in the imperial capital for the winter and the following rainy season. But they would bring with them a considerable haul. They'd also only suffered a few casualties for it. In total, they were bringing home three thousand gold Fordes.

Lorist had no comment, nor was he interested in their wealth. He was only concerned with the rebellion. Unfortunately, he only had what little Massa had mentioned in his letter.

"Arri, remind me again, the servant you sent to check on the situation was turned back, right? So the first local defense legion cut off all contact with the continent?" asked he.

"Yes," Arriotoli nodded, "Metropoulos' floating bridge has been disassembled. Only two ferries connect the two banks but they've been prevented from crossing. Their explanation is that they've cut off The Northlands for you to recover, until you do, no one will be allowed to cross."

*Did something really happen?*

Lorist stroked his beard, half an inch long by now. His reflection reminded him of the ancient general Zhang Fei. Arriatoli missed her brother. She'd not received word from either her sister or her aunt this month. She'd tried to send several, but none were allowed to cross the river. She made sure to quell any suspicions of Lorist being with her, she kept asking if anyone knew where he was.

She'd only come to Lorist once her letter were returned. He'd not thought it strange at the time. He'd given Belnick command of the forces when he left, and trusted he was acting in the best interests of the house. The lockdown made sense as well, since the

Union's hunting parties would naturally gravitate to The Northlands; it was the natural place for Lorist to flee too to recover, after all. The news Arriatoli brought, however, put everything in a new light. Something massive was happening.

*What did Massa mean when he said His Majesty didn't like it that the three legions were heading home? Don't tell me he started this? Impossible, he's stupid, but no fool. I'm a sword saint, going against me is suicide and he knows it.*

No matter how much he thought about it, Lorist couldn't understand what was going on. Belnick would never betray him, and he trusted no one more than Charade. Ovidis used to be a bandit, but he was one of Lorist's most loyal subordinates. And Furybear's headquarters was there, surely they would have uncovered any untoward goings-on long before anything could have gotten this bad.

Well, fretting over it from a distance would solve nothing. Reidy had to return and find out what was happening. Lorist had recovered enough that he didn't need Reidy for the rest of his recovery, so the kid could go and find out what was going on. He was also quite clearly bothered by this; refused to marry Sunirulu despite the two getting along so well.

Reidy departed the morning after he received his mission. His little wannebe lover cried her eyes out as she watched him leave, but he didn't stop even once. He would head to Silowas and take a ship home from there. It would take him at least three months to reach harbor. Just two months later, though, he burst through the door to the cabin amidst a blizzard with Tarkel.

Tarkel carefully explained what had transpired. When news of Lorist's injury reached home, everyone grieve for him, but excited at the same time. Their lord was a sword saint, so of course they were happy. If only he hadn't gone and gotten himself injured. Charade deployed to Wild Husbandry to fill in the gap Josk and Loze left when they marched off. Their departure left quite the mess.

They disappeared completely, leaving 500 thousand migrants untended, all of whom now had to be watched over by just two legions. Poor Freiyar and Els could barely sleep, they just didn't have the manpower to keep everything under control. Charade sent them one of the second garrison legion's divisions. Only one was now left defending Ragebear. Charade had Belnick lock down the river to make it easier to defend with their understaffed forces.

After the assassination attempt in the capital and Lorist's escape, all contact was lost with him and Reidy. Shuss and Jinolio successfully led their pursuers away, but they caused trouble in Ragebear when they realised Lorist wasn't there. Xanthi was present, luckily, and, together with Shuss and Engelich, they drove the blademasters off. They couldn't however, keep word of Lorist's disappearance from spreading, however.

Hansk invited Belnick to a banquet under the guise of finding out where Lorist was. During the banquet, held at the Bastide, Hansk suggested they make Lysecott the acting Lord until they knew where Lorist was. Belnick refused, but was quickly captured. It turned out Hansk had been prepared for his refusal; he'd employed two blademasters to help with his rebellion. He rallied his subordinates and co-conspirators to the bastide and declared Lysecott the house's head before marching on Ragebear.

"Wait, I thought I removed everyone with such inclinations from our forces. How did Hansk rallie forces to his side?"

"You didn't clean out the constabulary, Your Grace," said Tarkel.

Of course! The constabulary was made up of retired soldiers. The old coots naturally had loyalties to the old guard! Many of the constabulary's high-command came directly from the bastide's old guard! They were undyingly loyal to the house, but Lorist was only one member of the house, their loyalty wasn't necessarily to him directly. They felt marginalized in the greater house Lorist had established, so they would of course gravitate to having an heir from the bastide itself. Lysecott was the perfect candidate!

Lorist's face turned violet.

"Did Charade not take care of this?"

"They were the first ones outside the bastide to be captured. This whole thing was very carefully planned."

Hansk marched on Ragebear once he had control of the local defense legion. Ovidis held his ground however, and fortified the city with the division he had at hand. Charade and Spiel tried to convince Hansk to step down. They warned that when Lorist returned to find the dominion in this state, Hansk and everyone involved in this

rebellion would be put to the sword. But he would not listen. If Kedan hadn't placated Hansk and agreed to make Lysecott the next duke, he might have hanged the two on the spot.

Hansk considered Charade a crook. He saw him as the source of all the current house's malaise.

"What the fuck is Hansk thinking?!" Lorist yelled, "Hansk can win as many fights as he wants, he can take as much of the dominion as he wants, it will all turn to dust when I return! All he's doing is making his fate worse and worse when I return!"

"He's asked the king to officially declare Lysecott regent. He promised the three legions would return to the frontlines if the king did this. He plans to let Lysecott stand by the king's side. If the king backs him as your heir, there will be little you can do to change it, he will be all but guaranteed to inherit your title and lands one day. If possible, he even wants the king to split your demesne in two. You'll have the lands you conquered, but Lysecott will have rule over the ancestral homeland of the house."

# Chapter 484

## Internal Strife (2)

"In his fucking dreams!" raged Lorist.

Hansk's plan was insane. He wanted to use a royal decree to suppress him and raise Lysecott as successor, maybe even force a split? He could go screw a magic goat! Did he really think he could create a Norton dominion within a Norton dominion? Did he know Lorist so badly that he thought it would help him avoid punishment?

Then again, he was an old man, he'd never actually left The Northlands in his entire life, so he was way too ignorant of how things worked. Charade, Camorra, or Hector, who were familiar with how the house worked, would never dare rebel. Certainly not for something so futile as getting Lysecott to be heir de jure. Did he really think Lorist, now a *swordsaint* would care about some lousy royal decree?

Gleis would have known better as well. Had he still been alive, and obviously thus the head of this faction, he would not have let this happen. But he was dead and had left his position within the faction to Hansk, the idiot. He'd also left behind Hansk, Spiel, and Kedan as the house's administrative talents, his dying wish had been that they help Lorist make the house prosper. The house now was already far beyond what the old man had dreamt. It stood at the zenith of vassal houses, in terms of reputation, size, might, and rank. It could only climb higher by switching to the mountain of independent forces.

Each of the three talents had their own specialty. Spiel was great at saving money, even stingy, Kedan was slick, and quick to adapt, and Hansk was great at managing the normal day-to-day goings-on. Had he stayed in the house's old lands, he might have been known as a great servant, he might even have been mentioned alongside Gleis, by future generations.

But, the house broke out of its three-century mould when Lorist took over. It underwent historical, if not legendary, growth. No house of similar size had ever risen from bottom-of-the-barrel to cream-of-the-crop in such a short time before. It usually took several generations, two at least, working their entire lives to see this come to pass, but Lorist and House Norton did it in just ten years. Hansk, having lived in the

middle of nowhere his entire life, was very conservative, shortsightedly so. Lorist, on the other hand, had spent half his life at the time of his return in the continent's capital. When given the choice between such a shortsighted man and his long-time friend and fellow progressive, he naturally trusted Charade more, and thus gave the position of head administrator to him.

He didn't neglect Hansk on purpose, the man just wasn't capable of performing satisfactorily in the positions Lorist had given him. Rather than learn from his mistakes, and ask for advice so he could become better, he resented the newcomers and formed his own faction to try to force things back to how they used to be, where he could do well. He'd also grown bold over the year and crossed Lorist numerous times, the worst of which saw him all but expelled from Lorist's inner circle and exiled to the bastide.

To think that would not be enough punishment for him, that he would come back with even greater schemes for trouble, going as far as to plunge the house proper into chaos just so he could get some power for his corner of it, was unbelievable. Lorist was reminded of the old saying, 'the enemies at the door will never kill you, it is the ones sitting at your table that will deal the killing blow.'

"Did the king agree?" Lorist asked.

"He did. I arrived too late. Hansk had already announced Lysecott's appointment to regent. Charade smuggled a letter to the king explaining everything, it reached the front-lines long after everything was done. The king only realised his mistake after reading the letter. The three legions returned after they read it as well."

So that's what Tarkel meant when he said the king was regretful. He'd not acted as the mastermind in this rebellion, but was instead a victim as well. He had thought he was doing Lorist a favour, instead he was throwing him under the bus. He thought the house was asking for his support in making Lysecott regent, and, by extent, heir de jure, because Lorist didn't want to play the bad guy and make his bastard son heir when he had a legitimate son that had a stronger claim to the position.

The king must have thought that he might as well do this favour for Lorist since he could and win some points with him. There would be no problem for Lysecott to become the heir de jure with the king's endorsement, so he didn't hesitate to write the decree.

"Hansk declared Ovidis the rebel the moment he received the decree and prepared to assault the city. He ordered Glacia to take command of the assaulting forces, but she refused. Instead, she went to Lady Sylvia, and the two negotiated a short ceasefire.

"With Kedan and Glacia, Lady Sylvia your concubines and children escaped the city and are now in Cherry Blossom Ridge. Howard and Ovidis left the city as well and, along with the forces they have with them and the three blademasters, are all now at the palace as well.

The only good news out of this whole debacle was that no one important had died yet and no major battles had been fought. This did not have to turn into a full blown civil war.

"Where are the three legions now?"

"They're still in Frederika. They've run into a little trouble."

"Oh? What kind of trouble?"

"Firmrock and Tigersoar occupied Bluwek and Ritt in the plains. The king had Whitelion take Krido and Jaeger raided the countryside in Gudlink and Mauvlin--"

"Wait, where is is that? I haven't heard of those places before."

"They're in the former Teribo kingdom. They split the kingdom into five provinces, those two border the plains."

"I see. Continue."

Lorist stroked his beard, somewhat embarrassed. He remembered now Tarkel had told him this in a report long ago but he was too focused on his own lands to listen properly.

"The Union is extremely rich, even its minor nobles are quite wealthy. We've inned quite the haul. We need at least a thousand carriages to transport everything, and then there's the 500 thousand migrants we caught as well."

Tarkel's face reddened somewhat as he spoke. If this was told to any outsider, they would think the house were nothing but land pirates. All they did was raid and plunder. Even Lorist had to admit that was pretty much what his armies were at this

point; a bunch of well-trained nobility-sanctioned privateers. He would never admit it to anyone else, of course.

"That's all fine and good, but what's this trouble they ran into?"

"They're short on food, Milord. There are too many people for their current supplies. They can't start the journey back without a large resupply, and, given how things are looking in The Northlands, that won't be happening anytime soon."

"I know what you're thinking, Milord," Tarkel quickly added, "We did prepare enough for our forces in Winston, but then you sent back the immigrants from Anderwoff, Bodolger, and Kanbona. Three hundred thousand have been settled in The Northlands and can feed themselves, but 500 thousand are still waiting in Winston and are being fed by that stockpile. The only place that can spare the resources needed to resupply the legion and the refugees still in the south is The Northlands, but that's now under rebel control, so..."

*Fuck you, Hansk!!* Lorist slammed the table, disintegrating it.

"What are Potterfang, Loze, and Josk doing about it?"

"Potterfang will stay at Frederika to watch over the immigrants while Josk and Loze return to the plains. They hope to plunder enough supplies to be able to return by winter. They'll skip back on the snow."

"And what will they do when they're back in Winston? It's not like the city will have supplies waiting for them. Without proper preparations they'll only make things worse. We can't just suck in a million people like it's nothing," Lorist critiqued.

"I think they're planning to attack the rebels."

"Attack The Northlands? Do they think it's easy? There's a reason we chose to haul up there for so long before breaking out! All Hansk needs to do is destroy the bridges and all the forces in the world will do us no good! He'll just declare them rebels the moment they arrive."

"How is the situation on the information front?"

"When Supervisor Hansk gained control of the first local guard legion, he sent his men to take over the eagle hub at Firmrock Castle and forbade any contact with the outside

world. We can't send letters in or get anything out. The Northlands is completely cut off from the rest of the world. Our only chance is by sea through Northsea. But Hansk sealed off that route as well. The ships are stopped at Bullhorn Bay and forced to anchor. He ordered the Northsea Fleet to stand by Lysecott's side, but Admiral Senbaud moved it to Silowas instead."

Lorist would have moved the eagle hub to Ragebear when he moved, but he couldn't do that without retraining them all, so it had been left there. It turned out to have been a fatal mistake. He had established a second hub in the capital, but it was still in the process of growing and was nowhere near ready to take over from the old hub. Hansk made brilliant use of this weakness and cut off all hope of calling for help and letting the world know what was really happening before anything could be done.

"--Apart from the messenger eagles, though, the rest of our network is intact, outside of the Northlands, of course. Without the eagles, however, we can't get the information within anything approaching a reasonable time," Tarkel continued.

"Silowas and Northsea?"

"Not good. I escaped The Northlands through a secret cave Furybear uses for covert travel. I headed for House Kenmays and switched to a larger ship from there and headed for Silowas. When I arrived I saw the island and Northsea were facing off. Hansk had sent word ahead of the fleet in case they didn't obey him. He told Pajik that the fleet was the one rebelling and ordered him to capture or eliminate the fleet. Pajik has no clue what's happening, so he believed you were the one that sent the order. When I told him what was going on, and to ignore all orders except those coming directly from you, he stood down and the fleet was allowed to dock.

"I went to the plains from there to deliver news to the generals. The three nearly collapsed when they heard what was happening and began mobilizing immediately. The king tried to stop them, but Loze nearly jump on him and beat him, so he shut up and let them leave. I was heading back to The Northlands when I ran into Reidy on Silowas and he brought me here."

Lorist paced around the room, stroking his beard furiously. Hansk's rebellion was shaking the house to its core. Even if everything ended immediately and went back to how it was before, his plans were still set back by years. First things were first, though. The most immediate issue was the immigrants still waiting to go to Winston. In his dominion's current state, they would be nothing but a burden and a source of

unneded trouble. Luckily, Camorra wasn't in The Northlands when the rebellion broke out, but in Windbury, so he would deal with things in the short term.

"The rebellion isn't our biggest problem right now, I'll deal with it myself when I've completely recovered. Right now we need to settle the unrest in the rest of my lands. The immigrants should already be on their way to Winston, we need to deal with that first.

"I'll have orders ready for you shortly. Take them to Camorra. Hand it to him directly, the letter will only leave your hands to enter his, no one else's. First have him clean out our forces, anyone that rouses even the smallest amount of suspicion is to be executed. As for our legions, have Tigersoar and Jaeger borrow food from nearby friendly nobles. They have my permission to promise on my personal honour that the nobles will be paid back double what they give us.

"Also, Reidy, find the strongest whip you can and give Josk and Loze each a hundred lashes. Punishment for disobeying my orders and marching off on their own. Give their subordinates fifty lashes each for not stopping them. Potterfang will move two Firmrock divisions to Silowas where he'll wait for further orders. Senbaud and Pajik will get as many transport ships as they can together in the meantime."

"By your will, Your Grace."

# Chapter 485

## The Feral Wolves and the Magical Bear

Snow drizzled outside the window, everything was a wet white. The frozen wind descended in frigid gusts. The cabin jutted out of this white blanket, breaking the seamless purity of the mountainside, like a nail only half-hammered, three days abandoned.

Reidy and Tarkel had left for Windbury on skis a seven days ago. The letters they carried didn't have the customary household seal, but Lorist's handwriting was unmistakable, and his personal seal was worth far more than a household stamp in these trying times.

The order of most immediate concern was for Camorra. Lorist suggested a solution to the coming predicament, a simple, one word solution written in large bold strokes over half the page: borrow. No peasant, merchant, or noble household, no business, factory, storehouse, or other enterprise in his own lands or those of his allies was out of reach, as long as they had food, they had to lend it to him.

War had indeed ravaged the kingdom for years now, but none of the fighting had been done in either his or his allies' lands, so most of their stores were still wholly intact. On top of that, the years had been fair and gave good harvest, it would take a miracle, or an absolute idiot, for a house to not have full stores. Even Arriotoli's barony had overflowing vaults. The house usually bought most of their harvest, but they always held back some as a failsafe in case of famine or, indeed, war. Food was the most stable resource in the world, after all, because it was always needed, it always had value, and that only skyrocketed in wartime. Lorist trusted the three legions wouldn't have any problems borrowing from the nobles. No one would dare cross his forces when their master was the kingdom's only swordsaint, especially for a little food that was promised to be repaid with interest.

In a few more days the convoy would set out on their great pilgrimage. Even Arriotoli would not be spared. It displeased her quite a bit, but she knew how crucial this was to salvaging the situation so she could only stand by her lover's side.

The new year had rolled around three days ago, hence the abandoned cabin. Lorist

spent the celebration in the castle with his lover and child. His injured recovered, his lover had been demanding his undivided attention for these three days, determined to give Terryke a sibling.

"Crazy woman..." complained Lorist as he slapped his waist.

It was expected of lovers to be in each other's arms a lot of the time, but three days of uninterrupted loving was just punishment. If one put him out of commission for three days, what would five more, all two years deprived of his care, do to him? The thought sent shivers down his aching spine. Swordsaint or not, he could not handle so many women.

*I'm overthinking...* Lorist slapped his forehead.

He knocked the icicles off the sill above the door with his batons and entered. He took off his ludicrously thick clothing and put on something more reasonable, quickly lighting the brazier and fireplace to begin heating up the place. Next came the snow in the yard, lone man or not, housework had to be done.

It took him until early afternoon to finish the work needed outside and decided to patrol the forest before moving to dealing with the inside of the cabin. The decision came neither of a sense of duty to fulfill his temporary guard duties, and most certainly not out of a desire to avoid the work still needed inside the cabin. He just wanted to check the traps for any catches.

Many of his traps had indeed caught prey, but his three day absence was long enough for most of them to be devoured by passing predators, leaving only a bone or two connected to the actual snare. Some had no carcass at all, and only the blood and disturbance of the snare revealed they'd caught something. It was a shame. His traps had been set to catch turkeys and hare. They were plentiful and easy to find, and were the most delicious of all possible catches in early winter, having fattened themselves up for the season.

Seven of the 18 traps he'd set were undisturbed but empty. Three located in harder-to-reach places gave him two turkeys and a wild hare, but the remaining eight had been poached and the traps themselves ruined. The devastation he found at these traps and in the areas around them, convinced him several large predators had descended the mountain. At least two, maybe three wolves, and one magical bear. It seemed he would not be getting his much desired rest for a while.

Lorist had no thought of lighting the beacon though. He had returned to the peak of the Dan Ocean Ki-refining Technique's third stage, about rank 1 blademaster level, so the four pests, while irritating, were nothing he could not handle. He would be insulting himself if he lit the beacon, after all, the strongest person that could come to his aid would be Arriatoli herself, who was just a two-star silver rank.

He returned to the cabin, cleaned it, and made dinner -- turkey, hare, and mushroom soup, and a few sausages and several slices of black bread. He downed a few cups of raspberry wine, took another herbal bath, and went to bed.

The time was nearly right to begin training the Aquametal Technique again. The sooner he became a swordsaint again, the better. It would let him solve the house's troubles once and for all.

He found himself questioning the worth of being duke more often here in the mountain. It was true that nobles led far more luxurious lives than the peasantry, but with it came far greater stresses and troubles, most draining of which was the backstabbing and internal politics of their families. He had been the foreman of a workshop in his last life, these tribulations were far beyond his desire to deal with, and he didn't feel he really needed the luxuries he got in return. For all his stress and work he didn't get a television, a computer, the internet or a mobile phone. Had it been his old life, the only troubles he had to go through for all of the above was a day job and a little saving. No matter how high he rose in this world's ranks, he could never even come close to the peasantry of his old life, and he certainly would never be as worry-free as them; if anything his worries would only grow and multiply. Oh, how he wished he could give all this up for a simple life like he'd had.

It did him no good to dwell on such things, however, however much he wished for it, he would never have his old life again, and pining for it would certainly not solve the very real troubles he faced now. Besides, he was kept safe in this world not by his power or his position, but his cultivation. And what made it worthwhile for him were his loved ones, his responsibilities, and the joy of cultivating. His previous life could not give him the thrill of breaking through in his cultivation; he could not experience the pleasure of playing god with his enemies within his domain... He didn't think the joys of his previous life, missing them as much as he did, was worth giving up what he had now.

Besides, his family, friends, subordinates, allies, and vassals pinned their hopes and dreams on him. He could not let them down. And then there were his three disciples,

the three stooges. He certainly could not give up the joy of teaching the young ones.

*Young ones? Am I growing old? I never used to bother with this much idle pondering.* Lorist stroked his finally smooth chin.

Arriotoli refused to let him keep it. 'It's all for your disguise and you don't have to be afraid of the blademaster anymore'. They both knew it was only a convenient excuse. She just didn't appreciate his grand facial hair. He eventually caved and let her shave it, but she even went as far as to apply oil to his jaw. It now felt like an egg, or a baby's arse...

The hare sizzled as it's fat dripped on the coals.

*They had a really good fall, huh? Just a bit more. A pinch of salt... There we go. Now it just needs to crisp up.*

Last night's put was heating up again, the leftovers of the soup slowly turning liquid again. Its fragrance slowly wafted out the half-open window and chimney and drifted into the forest.

*Hmm! Not bad.*

Lorist wasn't a chef by any stretch of the imagination, but he believed he had quite decent skills, it was definitely above average for males of his age and background. He moved the pot to the table, shifting the brazier into a corner with his foot and brought over the bread and a flask of wine. He was just marvelling at his handiwork when he heard claws scratching at the front door.

He shut the door to the kitchen, moved the brazier to one of the rooms -- plunging the rest of the place into darkness -- and made his gingerly way to the window. Below him three cattle-sized wolves circled the house, scratching at the door in turns. They stopped and sniffed the air every time the wind shifted, as if to make sure the sent was still coming from the odd landscape feature in front of them.

*Great! I was going to look for you today anyway, but you were kind enough to spare me the trouble.*

He closed the window carefully, got the sword on the table, and headed for his bedroom. He climbed out of the window onto the roof there and moved to the edge. The wolves continued to claw at the door and circle around in blissful ignorance of the

devil looming over them, their minds wholly focused on getting to the source of the scent.

Lorist stepped off the roof and sunk into the soil beneath, crushing one of the wolves beneath him. His sword flung out and impaled itself in the second wolf through its eye. The poor puppy collapsed to the ground silently. The final wolf reacted in time, however, and flashed to the edge of the yard, preferring to stare at the intruder from a safe distance.

Lorist walked towards it calmly, sword in hand. The wolf glared at him but didn't make any moves. Instead, it backed off slowly, keeping a good distance. Lorist dashed at him the moment he reached the edge of the yard himself. The wolf responded in kind, leaping at him. Lorist flashed his blade and stepped out of the way, letting the lump of flesh crash into the other two lumps by the cabin.

"Dumb as always. Why do they insist on chasing everything they come across and think I'd stand nice and still for them to hit? Well, thanks to that the pelts are mostly intact so they should be worth a bit, and I don't even have to waste too much effort on cleaning them."

He returned to the crushed-but-still-whimpering wolf and finished it off with a stab through what remained of its eye socket. Just as he was about to open the door, however, he suddenly vanished. A miniscule moment later, a claw streaked by where he'd been standing. Leaving several deep etches on the door.

Lorist landed three meters away.

*Today seems to be my lucky day! All four of my prey came to me. I didn't even have to leave the yard!*

The beast that faced him now stood at least 2.5 meters on its hinds, about as big as a magical beast could get. Oh, how happy Arriotoli would be to get its pelt. She had a few magic pelts, but they were nowhere near as big as this one would be, and they were certainly not as intact.

*She'll probably brag about how brave her house was and how valiantly they fought against the bear. I doubt she'll consider me an outsider for this, well, even if she did, I doubt she'd admit it and give up the glory.*

The bear stared at its paw incredulously. How had its prey just vanished? It was certain

it should be a paste by now. Its attention suddenly drifted to the wolf carcasses by the door and forgot about Lorist completely. It just wanted to enjoy the feast.

"Fuck off! They're mine!"

Lorist appeared in front of the beast and sheathed his sword in its eye. The bear roared in pain and flailed wildly for a few moments before it collapsed.

Arriotoli arrived a few hours later to check on her hubby, having heard the beast's cry all the way down in the valley. When she saw the creatures in the yard, she buried her tongue in Lorist's mouth for a few seconds before taking the carcasses away.

# Chapter 486

## Karitoke

The white snow was already wiped away. Only the damaged walls and the burning farms of the small towns remained. Corpses, frozen green, and large black blood holes littered the ground. The wind carried stifled moans and agonized cries. The once prosperous plains were now the gateway to hell.

Of the seven cities, Morante was the sole shining pearl. The rest were built solely to protect it. The Union, having angered King Andinaq had lost 300 thousand men on the plains around these cities. It was the biggest blow the Union had ever suffered, not even the centuries of war with the old empire had anything comparable. The slap still sat red on the Union's faces. It was a painful lesson to learn, without a strong military, no superpower would be one for long.

Three of the cities had been lost to their enemy -- Bluwek, Ritt, and Krido. Two of the provinces on the plains, Gudlink and Mauvlin, and five neighboring provinces were also now completely empty wastelands, raided clean by two Norton legions.

Their only saving grace was that the offensive stirred up memories of the old war and whipped their citizens into a furor. Twinhead Dragon's president swore an oath to wipe Andinaq of the face of the world if it was the last thing he did.

"For two centuries we have stood against those wolves in the north," his words had rung, "They have lusted after our plains for centuries. For generations our people have shed their blood to keep them safe, in return they've wanted nothing by freedom! Four decades of peace our ancestors won with blood, sweat, and tears. Now, having barely licked their wounds clean, the wolves come for the plains again! Once again we must fight, bleed, and die for our freedom! Let us put them down once and for all!"

His words were fuel on the fire. Tens of thousands answered the call and the Union now had another legion to throw at their enemy. The new forces were moved to Mass, Gypsy, and Robertway, the four yet to fall to the enemy.

"Does the Union think the last two hundred years haven't happened? Do they really think we have not learned from our predecessor's mistakes? Ptooy!" Auguslo spat as

he watched dozens of catapults smash another stronghold's walls and the grey mass of Whitelion soldiers storm through the gap.

The plains were rich and prosperous because of the natural causeways and man-made canals that ran through it like veins through flesh. They fed fields and carried goods year round. During war, they were barriers to hold back the enemy. A simple fort became an impenetrable citadel when there was water between it and its assailants.

"Your Majesty, even if the Union knows we can attack in the winter they can't counter it. They can only watch their us streak across the canals and smash their walls!" Ripleid commented.

Auguslo finally had a successful winter campaign last year. The spoils meant he could finally afford form-fitting winter wear for all of Whitelion, which he promptly ordered from House Norton. It didn't look any different from their usual winter wear, so they could easily launch surprise attacks. He wanted to clear out the rest of the plains in one swoop and march on Morante.

Though the Union made some preparations, it didn't occur to them that their man-made canals would freeze over. The usual barriers were rendered useless and one stronghold after another fell to catapult barrages. The garrisons defending the strongholds had nowhere to run and could only fight to their deaths or surrender. In just tens of days, Whitelion broke through the first line made of hundreds of ad hoc strongholds and made their way to Robertway.

Karitoke stood on Robertway's walls and watched the distant crumbling strongholds and enemy gathering in the ruins. All of the soldiers understood the enemy would begin their attack at noon, and none could say for sure whether they would survive. He used to be one of the enemy. He used to be one of the enemy king's direct subordinates, actually. Now, however, he stood opposite his former liege. Where the king used to trust him, he now hated him.

Eighteen years earlier he was a student in Dawn Academy. He was enamored with Iron Locke, and joined the swordsmanship society to be close to his idol. He was excited for his bright future, certain he would be the next legendary swordsman in the academy.

His life changed radically when Lorist left for his ancestral home. Charade convinced him to give everything up and join his idol. He was excited to use his talents to make a name for himself and maybe even become a noble. Would it not be great to be a vassal

under his idol? The journey was arduous, but it polished his swordsmanship. He was one of just ten councilors chosen from the 36 students and instructors that followed Lorist, he could weigh in on the convoy's future in Lorist's absence. He even stood at the head of a small faction loyal to him.

When they set foot in Andinaq, he ran into the king, then known only as the second highness, who spared no effort to woo him into switching sides. Maybe it was the thought of being an imperial knight, regardless, he accepted and switched sides with seven of his fellow former students. He could still see Charade, Terma, Dulles, and Lundmorde's looks of disdain as he left the convoy. They cut to the bone and his self-esteem had yet to recover. He, however -- being the arrogant, naive idiot he was, covered up his pain with anger. He thought they were the fools. Lorist would just be a count and they could never be anything more than simple knights. He now served the future king as an imperial knight!

Oh how great it all sounded in his head. His fantasies were quickly shattered. He and his companions were just pawns, used and disposed at their king's leisure. A single fight with Madras saw two of them dead. Flowater Creek followed, and, while Augusto became famous as the new generation's first god of war, only two of the original seven remained, Karitoke and Sander.

Lorist came to find him for the paradise gathering, and, on hearing of his misadventures, offered him a chance to return to his side, promising to take care of any objections or obstacles in his way, but he hesitated when he thought of the disdain his former companions would have for him and the humiliation he would have to suffer and didn't rejoin his idol.

Sander fell in Augusto's crossing of Cloudsnap. With his last friend, and his only reason for staying dead, Karitoke left Augusto and snuck back to Morante. But he found both himself, and the Union unrecognizable. They had recently implemented their nobility system and occupied their neighbouring territories. His plan was initially to become a mercenary, but there were all but no mercenaries left. He tried to become an instructor at his old academy, but they could barely keep their doors open. He could not fathom what had ripped the world apart so thoroughly. He stayed at home for a full year before he had the strength to walk outside again. If not for the fact that his parents were industrious citizens and that his elder brother was afraid he had come back to fight him for their parents' inheritance, he might have stayed there until he died of old age.

His parents were thrilled that he had become a gold-ranked knight. They pretty much threatened him with suicide if he didn't join his father's guild so the man could get a promotion.

Now, he stood opposite both his idol and his former king. His mouth smiled bitterly as he watched Whitelion's flag flap over the Union fort. The seven pale-faced men around him were fellow garrison commanders. None were from big guilds and none had fought any real battles.

Karitoke currently had the rank of colonel and command of the second sentry legion's eleventh division. A command of eight thousand men. Apart from the thousand men from the first regiment directly under his command, all the men were passionate and idealistic Morantians and guards from various merchant guilds.

"No reason to be nervous. Our walls are tougher than the small strongholds. The catapults will do nothing to them. They can only shoot 300 meters, which our ballistae can match. As long as we destroy the catapults, they have no hope of taking the walls," Karitoke consoled his subordinates.

"I'm not kidding! The catapults are nothing to fear. You know why I had you stack the walls with sandbags? It'll make them much stronger against the catapults. As long as we hide behind them, the catapults can't do anything. You don't think our luck is that bad, right?"

"B-but... The catapults could make a hole in our walls for the enemy to rush in..." said one of the pale-faced leaders.

"I already envisioned that long ago. If they make a hole in our walls, we can use these sandbags to fill it up," replied Karitoke calmly.

"W-we're definitely going to die! I-it's better if we run immediately..." Everyone was on the brink of breaking down.

"Bastard! Where do you plan to run, huh? It's snowing and freezing all over! And do you think you can outrun the two wooden sticks the enemies wear beneath their feet? If you say anything else that'll affect our morale, I'll kill you myself!" raged Karitoke. Just as he was about to give that man a slap to snap him out of it, what happened next was beyond anyone's imagination. A thin layer of ice that formed on the ground caused him to slip and almost fall.

"Who the f\*ck poured tea on the ground?!" yelled he, before an idea popped up in his head. He recalled what Lorist said about watering the walls to reinforce them to fend off the magic beast attacks.

Elated, Karitoke proclaimed, "I have a way! A way to prevent the catapults from pulverizing our walls!"

# Chapter 487

## War on the Plains

On the 10th day of the 12th month, Year 1788, Andinaq launched another assault in the Falik Plains. Augusto led Whitelion and crushed the first line of defense, strongholds across the man made canals, within four days and arrived at Robertway. Andinaq was among the first to use the catapult and almost all the Union higher-ups believed Robertway would fall in less than three days.

However, the defenders filled the walls and turned them into ice fortifications. No matter how many times Andinaq fired, they couldn't breach Robertway's walls. Angered and frustrated, Augusto led Whitelion on a couple of direct attacks without any successes and moderate casualties.

Augusto had planned to use no more than a month to deal with all the strongholds in the plains and conquer the three cities before moving on to Morante. He'd either conquer the city, if there were exploitable weaknesses in its defences, or besiege it and force the Union's leaders to surrender. In the following negotiations the Union would either have to cede vast swathes of territory, or give up most of their wealth.

It wasn't that Augusto wasn't willing to fight a protracted campaign; his vassals were getting tired and wanted to go home. They'd only joined the campaign because they thought it would be a quick campaign, not this now three-year-long war. They'd also been fighting for most of the three years and had suffered many casualties. Fatigue had weathered their resolve and enthusiasm. Some had even started finding excuses to sit out on battles.

Things had gotten worse much faster after the Nortons left. He had to move Pegasus and Fisablen's reserve and frontier legions in to fill in. They did well, but they didn't have the Nortons' staying power, they were being whittled down much faster and the two dukes had already asked to be allowed to return home and recuperate.

Augusto had made the audacious declaration that he wouldn't stop until he set foot on Morante's central square as the city's new master, but he was actually fine with ending the war as it was now. The old empire had fought with the Union for centuries and had never even made it near the city, but he'd taken three of the Union's most powerful

citadels on the plains and taken back everything the empire had lost and then some. This was already enough to cement his name in the history books for centuries to come. He was already on par with the Empire's founder.

The forty years of peace since the empire's fall had made the towns on the plains rich, especially the three citadels. The nobles didn't believe their eyes when they saw the inside of the vaults, filled to the brim with plunder. And this didn't even include House Norton's plunder, which they hadn't even let him see. This would normally be considered a supreme lese majeste, but since Lorist was now the kingdom's most powerful warrior, its sole sword saint, Augustus let it go.

Augustus now turned his mind to the coronation ceremony he was going to have when he returned to the capital to crown himself First Emperor of the new empire. First, though, he had to wrap up this little war. He wanted to make sure it would be centuries before the Union ever thought of making trouble for the Empire again, and millennia before they actually could.

He didn't think he would be stopped at Robertway, the fucking ice-fortress. Karitoke, the leader of the city's garrison, had been holding him at bay for over a month now. He'd also heard that the man was made a baron for his efforts. He used to be one of Augustus's subordinates, which stung even more. He'd defected to the Union several years earlier, and the Union made every effort to mock him for his inability to keep good subordinates on his side.

His advantage on the field in his most recent campaign was not because of his own tactical brilliance, or the power of his forces, it was thanks to the catapults he got from Lorist, in that sense his glory was only partially his. Karitoke's use of the canals to counter his tactic, however, was entirely to his own credit, all of that glory went to him. It bit at Augustus's pride.

It was in the midst of this struggle that Tarkel and Reidy visited Lorist in his cabin again. Camorra had taken note of his lord's orders and had dealt with the situation. Loze and Potterfang had arrived with their legions and the immigrants and were resting up. Josk and Jaeger were still lagging behind though.

The great borrowing didn't run into any trouble, apart from a few unwilling nobles who had to be convinced with a firmer hand. Camorra had, however, sent word back with the messengers asking how to settle the immigrants since the food would only last them till the end of the rainy season and Winston couldn't accommodate anymore

people.

Lorist prepared a letter to be taken back with Tarkel and Reidy ordering the baron to send 500 thousand to Wild Husbandry and start resettling the land. Josk would accompany them with Jaeger and see to their safety. A hundred thousand of the most skilled among the immigrants were to be settled in Windbury and Pedro to boost their industries. The new settlers in Wild Husbandry would also jumpstart the abandoned trade routes to and in the province. The rest would be used to finish any unfinished infrastructure projects. They would be settled in the Northlands once Lorist had taken care of the rebels.

Lorist continued his training after his two messenger boys left. The rest of winter and the rainy season passed, soon it was harvest season. Lorist was now back to rank 3 blademaster level and only needed another two month to be back to full strength.

Arriotoli was declared pregnant in the 6th month, finally putting and end to Lorist's torture.

Tarkel and Reidy came round again on the 17th of the 6th. Only Tarkel came to the cabin however, Reidy was rolling in the bedsheets with his little lover back at the castle. Tarkel brought news of Augustus's defeat on the plains. He'd retreated to Krido and was standing his ground there. The confrontation had cost the two sides 170 thousand men, two thirds of which were Union dead.

Lorist was speechless when Tarkel informed him that it wasn't a set piece battle at all. Neither side had thought a big battle would happen. It had started as a skirmish, but both sides, each unwilling to lose it, kept piling in reinforcements. They only realised what was happening when it was already too late, and they were completely committed. Augustus only withdrew because he realised he couldn't match the Union.

Tarkel also talked about the winter campaign between Augustus and his former subordinate. Augustus kept going at it until the snow melted, but was completely swamped when the rain fell. He couldn't cross the morass the excess water made before the Union's reinforcements arrived and was forced to fight the now numerically superior enemy. He called up his vassals, but the morass between the two forces kept both from making any decisive attacks. The forces were separated into many smaller units scattered across the morass on the small firmland islands.

Augustus's forces were upstream of the Union and one of his vassals suggested they

send fire boats down the river into the Union's wooden fortifications. It didn't do much, only burning a couple bridges and setting fire to a few camps. The Union retaliated a few days later. They set Auguslo's main camp on fire one night, killing almost a hundred men and burning almost a third of the camp to the ground.

Auguslo retaliated in kind, which prompted the same from the Union in a to-and-fro which lasted several weeks. In one of these exchanges, the attacking side got bogged down in the fight, and both sides kept sending in reinforcements, which eventually turned into a full-on battle. By the time the two sides realised what was happening, neither could back out. If they did, the enemy would push their forces forward and rush their camps, driving the other side out of the morass altogether and possibly crushing much of their army in the process.

Auguslo was slightly faster than the Union in committing all of his reserves and got the early upper hand, but the Union wasn't far behind and the stalemate was soon re-established. The forces were eventually forced to return to their camps, but the fighting didn't really stop. The islands became like a chess board. When one side lost an island, they would soon take another.

Seeing where this was going, and with less forces he could afford to lose, Auguslo was forced to withdraw. Auguslo lost 60 thousand in the month-long campaign, the Union 110 thousand. Despite their heavier losses, however, the Union now had the initiative and drove Auguslo back to Krido. Auguslo had lost fewer forces, but he also had fewer to begin with.

"It's time I returned home," said Lorist.

"Is Your Grace fully recovered?" asked Tarkel.

"Yes. Come, let's go home. I have some house cleaning to do."

# Chapter 488

## Bad News

Lorist's return to The Northlands was a breeze. No one was willing to fire at him. Wherever he went, the rebels surrendered obediently. They let Firmrock march across the river as well and didn't resist when they were arrested.

On the 21st day of the 7th month, Year 1789, Lorist, led the Northsea fleet to the city of Northsea. The sentry legion's third brigade, first division received him and surrendered. Lorist headed straight for Maplewoods and rescued Belnick, who was still sitting prisoner there, and arrested everyone related to the bastide, Irina and her sons included.

From there he retook the town of Poplar and marched onwards to Nico Academy where he visited Telesti and his daughters. He rested there for two days and then left for Firmrock Castle, making an appearance at every town along the way. The castle was taken without incident and Lorist ordered news of his return be spread to the rest of the world.

The first to bring bad news was Howard, who came from Cherry Blossom Ridge. The cannon foundry and training grounds were discovered by the blademasters after him. They thought he was hiding behind the guards, and attacked. Lorist read the damage report and exploded. Of the 200 cannons, 141 was destroyed, and 1377 of the 2000 artillerymen were dead or injured. The sentry regiment suffered 824 casualties. Their captain, Jim, was still recovering from his wounds and Regiment Sergeant-Major Paulobins was dead.

Lorist managed to keep himself under control, but completely lost it when he heard about what happened to his refineries in the Bladedge mountain range. Grandmaster Sid's research facilities and foundries as well as Grandmaster Felin's workshops were searched, by enemy blademasters, lead there by the constabulary. Most of the blueprints for his weaponry was stolen.

"Who... who gave the order?! Who revealed our top secret industrial centers to the enemy?!" Lorist's demanded, eyes bleeding.

"S-Supervisor Hansk. He sent the constabularies and the blademasters. He said he was forced to do so because they held Madam Irina and the second young master hostage, so he had no choice but to yield to their demands. He even said that since Your Grace wasn't there, there was no harm in letting them go..."

"He even said the house spent too much money there without seeing any returns and wanted to uncover what was going on there. He said the mountains were part of the old house's domain and was thus under Lysecott's jurisdiction. As such, he had to root out the corruption there. He planned to investigate the accounts personally when he had the time.

"When the blademasters found the cannon ranges and the explosives research center, Sir Jim refused the search order and got into a fight. Several dozens were killed before they could chase the blademasters away. Which roused their suspicions.

They attacked the facilities 14 days later. Jim was prepared and had several canons aimed at the valley entrance. The first volley killed three blademasters and heavily wounded four. The remaining seven retreated with the dead and wounded. They snuck into the valley that night and slaughtered everyone and destroyed the cannons..."

"Where are they now?"

The cannons and the men that operated them were his trump cards. They were his house's greatest security. It had taken them years to build the cannons and train the men, this was an unbelievable setback. It would take years to recover, maybe even a decade.

"They left The Northlands in the 5th month. Supervisor Hansk issued arrest warrants for them, but he has no strength to actually carry it out. They left by sea and we only know they're heading south."

Lorist stroked his chin. So he had seen so few during his stay in the barony because they were mostly busy here.

"How many blueprints?"

"The ones for the super steel ballistae, three types of catapults, and 16 types of armor. They also took the designs for Jaeger's new crossbows. The rest are designs for failed projects. Fortunately, Master Julian's material recipes were kept safe. I don't think they

knew what those recipes were so they just left them. Without them, it should be almost impossible to make the designs work."

Lorist breathed a sigh of relief. That they'd left behind the recipes was his only consolation. It was manageable to lose the designs, but the recipes could not be leaked. The former were pretty much useless without the latter.

"Is Sylvia and the others alright?"

"Lady Sylvia, your mistresses, and your children are fine. They told me to tell you not to worry about them and deal with the situation first. Lady Sylvia said they would spend the summer in the palace and return to Ragebear come autumn."

"I heard Jinolio and Shuss went there with the city's garrison. Reidy and I are worried, why didn't they come with you?"

"Jinolio's helping me investigate what let all this come about. Supervisor Hansk played a huge part, but he certainly can't be the sole reason behind this."

"No worries. You did well. Jinolio did great too. I heard the blademaster actually barged into the mansion in Ragebear and you even held one back for a time. Is it true?"

Howard scratched his head.

"I was at a disadvantage and even hurt my hand. I had no choice but to have Jinolio write the reports. He has pretty handwriting at least. I'm only at the level of a two-star gold rank. Your training is what let me fight a blademaster.

"Six came over to search the mansion. They were really careful since they knew you were a blademaster. They didn't cause anyone any trouble or hurt anyone. Apart from Blademaster Shuss, Lady Xanthi and Grandpa Engelich was there too. They were the ones who chased the blademasters away."

Howard didn't blow other people's horns, nor was he greedy with credit. His humility was refreshing.

"Since the cannon range is damaged, Paulobins is dead and Jim is injured, I need someone to take care of the mess. You will be the artillery brigade's major. Rebuild the brigade. I will have Sid restore the cannons. You can fill your command as you see fit. What do you think?"

"You wish is my command, Your Grace," Howard saluted, "It's just... Is it okay to hand internal security to Jinolio?"

Lorist shook his head.

"Jinolio is still young and naï̇½ve. He should focus on his training instead. He'll stand by my side again. Anyone else in mind?"

"Baron Calliston is a suitable candidate."

"How so?"

"Internal security is basically spying on the people in the house for the house's safety. I didn't get a grasp on things quick enough, Hansk rebelled before I could get everything in place. Baron Kriston is in charge of investigating crimes in a whole region and I've met with him a number of times. He was the one who pointed out the odd prejudice the constabulary and sentries have against the immigrants. I didn't take his warning seriously and investigate. I would have caught this before the rebellion if I had.

"While the constabulary is important, we shouldn't waste Baron Kriston's talent there. He is bright, capable, and -- most of all -- loyal. He is a perfect replacement."

"Alright. I'll summon him when I go back to Ragebear."

Lorist arrived in Ragebear on the 25th of the 7th. The moment the city gates opened, Glacia, the new general of the first sentry legion, paid her respects to him with her subordinates. Firmrock relieved the local garrison, which left the city, leaving only Glacia and Lorist to walk to the castle and mansion.

"This isn't fair, Locke. The men were just following orders. They didn't know they were betraying the house. They were actually the most loyal. You can't treat them like this."

"So I should, what? Reward them? Knowingly or not, they betrayed me and rebelled against my authority. You're my elder cousin sister. I really appreciate that you're willing to step out of the shadows to serve the house. I'm thankful for what you did for Sylvia and for keeping a battle from breaking out. But there's something you're failing to understand. You may think this is what's good for the house, but it's not. I'm already doing as little as possible. I am going to execute everyone involved in this rebellion knowingly, the legion should just be thankful their heads aren't going to roll as well."

"No! You can't, Locke! The men were following orders. They're loyal!" cried Glacia. She didn't understand why Lorist would be this angry.

Lorist smiled bitterly.

"Firmrock, Tigersoar, and Jaeger's men are the loyal ones. While the sentry legion are obedient, we don't know for sure where their loyalties lie. You know almost all the men in the legion used to be our prisoners. They're all former enemies. They were only recruited because they served us well for years. This is nothing but a way to feed their families to them.

"The policies I have for my men make them increasingly loyal over time, yes. Whether it be Firmrock, Tigersoar, or Jaeger, even if their general went missing and many of their superior officers were replaced, I am willing to bet they would never march on my capital even if they were ordered to. I would have to order them to do so myself, in person or they would kill anyone who showed any sign of listening to the order. They would never believe I gave such an order in my absence and would arrest the messengers immediately.

"Even a letter written in my handwriting and carrying my personal seal might not be enough for them to carry out such an order. Were they really following orders or are they just fools? Did they never question their orders? Is someone who follows a wrongful order loyal to the house?"

Glacia was speechless.

"...Then how will you deal with the men?"

"I will not let them stay in my demesne. They can settle in Wild Husbandry. If they don't want that, they can move to one of my other jurisdictions, but I will not let them set foot on my land again."

## Chapter 489

# The Loyalty of a Scoundrel, The Loyalty of a Traitor

Spiel stared at Hans, who stood in front of the reception team, and felt like laughing. Hansk had held power for a few days, far above the command of anybody else and with the power to jail anyone, even Kedan was forced to go with the flow to make sure the administration's operations weren't impeded. However, when Hansk received word of Lorist's return, he aged ten years overnight. His aloofness and arrogance vanished; he now acted with earnest sincerity and a twang of fear. He had, after all, named himself chief administrator. Though Lorist might tolerate his son's appointment to heir, he wouldn't let Hansk off scot free.

Hansk appeared a martyr as he awaited Lorist's arrival. He instructed Lysecott in hushed tones how to greet his father and how to deal with his questions. He might even believe making Lysecott the heir in exchange for his life was the right and best thing he could do. If one viewed it in that light, he was indeed loyal to the house. Unfortunately Lorist didn't care for loyalty to the house, but about loyalty to him, personally. Besides, the house to which Hansk was loyal wasn't the same house Lorist was in.

Horses rumbled up the street. Lorist soon appeared round a curve in the road. Glacia rode behind him. Reidy, Tarkel, Potterfang, the guard brigade, and Firmrock followed behind her. The reception group started chattering, Hansk and Lysecott included. When Lorist stopped in front of them on horseback, they bowed. Everyone understood Lorist was House Norton's sky. He was now a swordsaint and the proudest protector of the house.

"We welcome Your Grace back to the house..."

According to noble etiquette, Lorist should get off his horse and ask them to drop the formalities before tending to the officials there to receive him one by one. He didn't need to say much, only a word or two of greeting and a pat on their shoulders to thank them for their hard work and express his gratitude. But their lord sat firmly in his saddle. Everyone felt his eyes stab the tops of their heads. Everything was quiet as a soft gust of wind blew across the yard. The pressure made some who knew what they

did lower their heads further and bow deeper as if it would help them hide in the others' shadow.

"Your Grace!" Hansk finally stood straightened up proudly to dispel the atmosphere.

Lorist waved his hand without saying anything. Reidy, astride his horse, trotted in front of the group. He took a silver tube out of a pocket on his saddle. He removed from it a scroll which he unrolled and read.

"Grus! Ivanson! Ikefall! Moslin! Byschuss!..."

Two guards vanished into the reception party and dragged someone out with every name announced. A few realized they were all either Hansk's confidantes or people from the bastide. Most were retired soldiers who'd moved to the constabulary and had been deeply involved in the rebellion. Reidy didn't name either Hansk or Lysecott though.

"What are you doing?!" Hansk panicked and ran up to Reidy.

Reidy tightened his legs round the horse's middle, and it sidestepped Hansk, who now stood at its flank. Reidy slipped his foot out of the stirrup and slammed it into the man's face. The old man stumbled back several feet and fell to the ground. He raised his head heavily. A dirty boot print and bruise straddled his face. He spat out a mouthful of blood and two teeth. The names continued to be announced.

One after another the culprits were dragged out of the group. Reidy rolled the scroll up and return it to the tube when 45 stood on the side. Lorist dismounted behind him and walked up to the remaining officials, a sincere smile on his face. He raised each from the ground and thanked them warmly.

Kedan apologized to Lorist, tears running down his face incessantly on behalf of the thirty or so left.

"No apology can make up for this, Your Grace. It is our fault this could not be stopped or avoided."

Lorist waved dismissively.

"Don't say anything. You did what you could. You did well to not spill blood. You continued to perform your duties and waited for my return loyally. You did the right

thing. I cannot express my gratitude adequately. But let these two words stand. Thank you."

The officials in the centre of the yards shuddered, tears running down their faces. The ones held by the guards on the side paled. Lorist had declared the incident a rebellion with these words. There were all now officially traitors, at least as far as everyone else was concerned, and they would be recorded as such in the house's records, if every mention of them was not erased entirely.

"We... we're not traitors! We're the ones most loyal to the house! We will not stand for this insult!" Hansk shouted, his face crimson. There was no greater insult to his loyalty. He stepped in front of Lorist in spite of his swollen face.

"Ho, look who we have here," Lorist chirped as he finally noticed Hansk's existence, "I'm curious, Baron. What are you doing here? Didn't I tell you to buzz off to your lands and reflect on your shitty attitude and behaviour? I resolved myself to not mention things further out of consideration for what you did for me in the past, but here you are. Tell me, who gave you permission to come here, and who told you you could open your mouth?"

"I..." Hansk suddenly realised his dilemma. His prepared arguments were useless. Lorist didn't recognise him as an official of the house, but spoke to him as just another vassal. Clearly he had no authority to meddle in the house's affairs as an outsider. Without recognition as a member of the house, he had no foot to stand on, no excuse for his presence or actions.

If he were indeed a loyal house official, he should have stayed in his dominion as ordered. He had no right to leave his lands if he still regarded himself as a house official. Being here was itself basically a declaration that he was no longer a house official, just a vassal.

"I... I was here to support Young Master Lysecott as regent and heir de jure. I was only doing my duty as a loyal servant," he replied after some thought.

"Hehe, regent? Heir de jure?" Lorist turned to the shivering ostrich. Hate flashed across his eyes as they gazed at the fat figure.

"I don't remember ever naming an heir," the man murmured, as if in thought to himself. "Lysecott, my son, time really flies. You're seventeen already. I was too busy,

so I neglected your upbringing. I didn't think you were in such a rush to become heir de jure. Is this really what you want?"

Though Lysecott didn't frequently get to see his father, he feared him down to his bones. Lorist had tossed him to Malek's family to be disciplined. The man even had Reidy cane him thirty times in Nico Academy publicly because of a simple mistake and sent him back to the bastide, bloody and battered. He remembered the lessons and froze though Lorist asked him nicely. He couldn't stop teeth chattering.

When his father's gaze fell on him, he remembered his mother's instructions and Hansk's encouraging words. 'No matter what, you're His Grace's eldest son. He won't do much to you'. He mustered his courage and answered.

"Mo-mother a-and Ha-- Uncle Hansk said I am your rightful heir. Everything that belongs to the house also belongs to me and no-no one ca-can take it from m-me..."

"My rightful heir?" Lorist laughed, stretching out his hand.

Tarkel handed him a scroll.

"I was injured and lost contact. You declared yourself heir on your own, I never endorsed you. I can't fault you, having ambition isn't a bad thing, but you listened to others. You're just going along with the ambitions of others. Others used you and you were happy to be manipulated. You're nothing but a brainless fool--" Lorist opened the scroll. "--You've been in Ragebear for seven months, right? Let's see what you did."

"Wow, how amazing! You raped 21 maidservants, killed four servants and a cook because you didn't like their cooking and tossed their heads into the fire. Your uncle even went out of his way to gag everyone for your sake and buried the corpse in the garden..."

"You ordered Dawn Academy to tie up Helias and send him to you so could get back at him for calling you out when you were harassing your half-sisters. The academy refused, so you ordered the legion to burn it to the ground. Luckily Glacia refused. In turn you cursed her in front of a lot of people.

"You sent your guards after Madam Malek so you could pay her back for the years of hard work she put in to raising you properly. Luckily she wasn't at the mansion, but in retaliation you burned it to the ground.

"You went out four times in the last seven months and raped three women and killed their families. You ran thirteen people over in the streets with your carriage, killing three and badly injuring the rest. You demanded tributes of interesting trinket from the merchants in the city..."

"I admire that you did everything I wanted to, but didn't. I've always wanted to act like you did and ignore everything, I've always entertained the idea of being a tyrant. You know why I didn't become one? If I did, my father, your grandfather, would hang me to apologize to the ancestors and strike my name from the registry."

"Your mother spoiled you and raised you into a monster. You don't have empathy or humanity. As House Norton's lord, as your father, I have to correct my mistake. You are hereby struck from the family registry. Neither you, nor anyone else, may ever use your name and House Norton's name in the same sentence. You are unfit of my name, unfit to be even a bastard. I shall uphold my father's honour, the honour of my ancestors, and the honour of my name. The world will be told of your crimes. The names of every victim and the crime you committed against them will be tattooed on your body and you will be hanged in the city square. Once you're dead, your body will be left on the gallows to rot."

Lorist turned to everyone else present and raised his voice.

"From this day forth this shall be the fate of every man, woman, and child who tarnishes the Norton name! Be they peasant, soldier, official, noble, or family member!"

Lysecott paled and stumbled backwards as he listened to the lord. He never dreamt the man had been keeping such a close eye on him. His gaze flitted to the house's officials. He was certain they had ratted on

"F-f-f-father... F-f-forgive me..." he tripped and fell on his ass. His pants darkened, and a puddle formed under him.

"You can't do this, Your Grace! The king had recognized Lysecott as your heir. I have a sealed decree from His Majesty! You do not have the right or authority to harm him!" bellowed Hansk frantically as he scrambled in front of Lysecott and fumbled for Auguslo's decree.

"The king's decree?" Lorist chuckled, "Are you joking? Or did I hear wrong? Baron,

when did I give the king the right to meddle in my personal affairs, or in the internal affairs of the house? Do you really think he can just appoint my heir on a whim? Is he trying to incite a rebellion and start another civil war?"

"H-He made his decree because you were absent and no one knew if you were still alive! We asked the king to endorse Lysecott because you weren't here to do so yourself!"

"And who told you I would ever have made him my heir?! So you didn't hear from me for a while, do you assume I'm dead the moment I walk out of the door and you can't see me? Do I have to stand in front of you every minute of every day so you can be sure I'm alive?! How quickly do you want me to die?" Lorist was a sword saint, he could easily live for two or three centuries even if he never improved his cultivation another step. His endorsement aside, even if Lysecott was the best heir in the world, if he didn't become a sword saint himself, he would never live long enough to inherit his father's position.

"Is that why you let the enemy blademaker go around looking for me? You were fine with revealing our secrets to the enemy as long as they could take me out of the picture for good, huh?! You killed 2000 of my loyal men!"

"I... I was just trying my best to ensure the house remained stable... and helping Young Master Lysecott manage the dominion. I am loyal..."

"Loyal? Ha! You soil the word with your lips!" Lorist sneered, "Even if I were dead, you of all people had the least right to step in! Imprisoning a gold-ranked knight and forging his order to take over his forces and attack the capital; sealing the dominion's entrances; cutting off supply to our forces on the front lines; and burying Lysecott's crimes... Is this what a loyal man would do? If it is, then I want nothing of this loyalty! This is the loyalty of a scoundrel, the loyalty of a traitor!"

"Take them away. I don't want to soil my eyes with their visages. I will personally announce your crimes before I execute you!" ordered Lorist coldly. He watched on as the guards took the traitors away.

Glacia walked over.

"I'm sorry, Locke. I didn't understand what the brat was doing. I would've stopped him if I did. Are you really going to kill him? He's your eldest--"

"The law is the law. Princes and paupers are punished the same!"

# Chapter 490

## Various Matters

Charade and Spiel rushed back to Ragebear a day later. Lorist felt a heavy burden lift from his shoulders when he saw them. He instantly let Charade, Spiel, and Kedan deal with the aftermath. Punishing Hansk and the traitors wasn't the highest priority at the moment. The highest priority was dealing with settling the hundreds of thousands of refugees in Winston.

Lorist rushed to the artillery range in the mountains with Reidy. It was the greatest insurance of their future and had to be set back on track. Howard had already taken up his post. He told Lorist that, so far, 342 artillerymen had recovered and rejoined the unit, which brought their functional size up to about 1300. A hundred were crippled and could never return even after they healed though. A full 1563 men died during the blademasters' attack and most of the unit's top artillerymen were among that number.

Lorist went to check on the brigade's former commander, Major Jim. His injuries had more or less recovered. He could sit and tell Lorist about his experiences, at least. He was now convinced, more than ever, that the cannons were the single greatest threat to blademasters. However, they complicated to operate and they hard to move.

When the blademasters attacked during the day, he lined up 46 cannons and fired a volley which broke the attackers. He didn't think the rest would attack again that night. He could do nothing once they were up close. Three thousand men faced the blademasters, but it was a complete slaughter. Paulobins leapt into the fray with a barrel of gunpowder and a torch. He blew himself up to take a few of the enemy with him. They couldn't find even a scrap of his flesh or armour to bury. The rest of the men also grabbed barrels of gunpowder and dozens blew themselves up as the blademasters got close. Another blademaster fell, and the rest retreated cursing the insane bastards as they let. Tears covered Jim's face as he described the scene. Lorist listened to him solemnly. All he could do was console the man. After telling him to get some rest, Lorist left.

In stark contrast to the two commanders, Professor Balbo and his wife who were hard

at work in the research facility. Jim moved them to a safe location before the blademasters came to attack. Though the facility was flipped over, Balbo was unharmed.

Balbo introduced his latest breakthroughs as soon as Lorist arrived. He had successfully made the gunpowder into pellets. Though Lorist had only casually brought it up, Balbo managed to make it after years of work. It wasn't a small breakthrough either. It let the cannons fire with far greater power, or achieve the same power for much less gunpowder. He was currently working on how to dissipate the heat build-up from constant firing. He was just about to meet the two other masters for another consult in that regard, in fact.

His other great breakthrough was a new saltpeter harvesting technique. Lorist was convinced this, more than almost any other discovery, was the man's greatest achievement. Grindia wasn't Earth and the chemical principles of this universe were slightly different. On Earth, gunpowder was mainly made of one part sulfur, two parts nitrate or saltpeter, and three parts coal. The mixture added to some other ingredients produced standard black powder. But on Grindia, the recipe had one more part powdered fire crystal to react the way it did on Earth.

It was too bad Lorist had been just a workshop owner. Chemistry and physics weren't his strong suits. Though he had some basic knowledge, Grindia's laws were rather different from those of his former world, so the knowledge he had wasn't of much help.

On the continent there were two key factors that got in the way of his dream to make firearms. The first was the material. Grandmaster Sid's refinery still relied on ancient metallurgical methods to refine steel. Though he provided the man with the idea of water-powered machines that greatly increased House Norton's production efficiency, it was still far from what was necessary to produce the right materials required for firearms production. Before they could mold metal like liquid, the firearms from Lorist's world were still a pipe dream.

The second factor was the lack of saltpeter required to synthesize gunpowder. It was said that the dwarven kingdom had an underground saltpeter mine already running out. The dwarves considered the material very valuable. Lorist used nitrate in the soil to make what gunpowder he had. The biggest obstacle was the limited supply of gunpowder.

Lorist also had rather different experiences on Earth and Grindia. For instance,

making gunpowder into pellets was easy on Earth. The powder only had to be wetted, shaped into pellets, and dried. However, the same process produced smoke-emitting powders on Grindia rather than gunpowder. Balbo thought the process destroyed the gunpowder's explosive effect. It took him three years to find a work-around.

Using gunpowder pellets not only raised its quality and increased its power, it also decreased the amount of saltpeter needed. At the same time, over his long years of research, Balbo found the ideal method of producing nitrate, doubling the yield. House Norton's gunpowder stores could now finally be stocked properly.

Lorist was sad and angry at the brigade's losses, but Balbo's good news lifted his mood considerably. He made Balbo a viscount on the spot. Balbo was pumped as he no longer had to act humbly around Sid since they were now all viscount.

Lorist loitered around the facility for ten days before going to Sid's refinery and staying there for half a month to optimize the production process and arranging for the construction of another batch of cannons before he returned to Ragebear.

He arrived back in the city on the 7th of the 10th. Sylvia, his concubines, and his children had returned to Ragebear at the end of the 9th. They welcomed him warmly. Everything would have been perfect if the slow-witted Arriotoli had not bragged about her latest pregnancy in her latest communique.

Sylvia, being the jealous vixen she was when it came to Lorist, subjected Lorist to a thorough inquisition. It didn't help that his other concubines demanded fair treatment. Dilianna was completely unwilling to see someone not even recognized as a concubine have more children than her. It took Lorist several days to escape.

His three subordinates were ready with their reports when he got out. Each stared at him with a different expression. Charade appeared troubled, Spiel looked like he'd just walked through a field of flowers, and Kedan was completely stoic.

Charade was up first. He had completely the planning for the migrant settlement and was ready to begin implementing everything. Shadekampf and Camorra had already moved the migrants to their final destinations and they would be set by the 11th month. Once they were settled, the region's population would officially be over 3 million and all their goals would have been achieved. Charade was adamant that, at least for the time being, they not bring in anymore people; the natural population growth from those already present could take care of any future needs.

Mass immigration was not a sustainable model of population growth, least of all when it was done forcibly. It made for an unstable and volatile population and fundamentally changed the values and loyalties of the peasantry. It was also a pain in the neck to manage. Just looking at Charade was enough to convince Lorist. The poor man looked two decades older than he was. Lorist thanked him for his hard work and told him to take a long vacation. Shadekampf could handle things from here.

The final topic was reorganizing the military. Charade was put in charge of the new year's celebration for the foreseeable future. This upcoming one would be the first since Lorist's disappearance and was bound to be the grandest yet.

Spiel was next. It turned out his jubilation was because of the wealth the legions brought with their return. They had swept several provinces during their campaign and had brought back six million gold Fordes' worth of wealth. And this was before they were untethered from Lorist. The legions went haywire after Lorist vanished. They cleaned out five more provinces. Loze and Josk knew Lorist would be furious at their disobedience, so they were careful to bring back even every shiny stone they found. In total, they brought back 15 million gold, previous artwork, decorations, wares, jewels, and other valuables included. This was the second most profitable campaign in the house's history, only surpassed by the Hanayabarta campaign.

Lorist immediately got to work getting rid of his money like he was allergic to it.

The house had done nothing but fight for several years now. They needed rest. He decided to give everyone a fat bonus and a long vacation. Two million was gone immediately. Another million vanished into the research projects in the mountains and the pensions for the losses suffered there.

Spiel's wailed internally. His eternal crusade against the devil had not ended. He finally thought he'd won a small reprieve, a small victory, only to have the beast rear its head again. Ah, if only he could shoo it back off to the battlefield. It just kept bleeding money. At least when it was off on campaign it bled everyone else dry and wasn't his problem, but now that it had returned he had to fight again. Please, please, someone piss the devil off again!

Kedan was the last to report. He was in charge of the trials. He brought out the folder. The first row's names had yet to be judged. Their judgements were up to Lorist. First on the list was Lysecott. He was Lorist's eldest son, so Kedan didn't feel he had the right to judge. Lorist just asked what kind of punishment a peasant would get for such

a crime. The answer was simple: death by beheading or hanging.

"Alright then. I said this before, but everyone will suffer the same fate for the same crime. He'll be hung then. I would kill him ten times in ten different ways if I had the choice. Letting himself be made a puppet is the worst shame he could have brought on himself and, by extension, to the house. His cruelty and lack of self-control are also unacceptable. If he didn't have such a rotten personality, and if he hadn't done those horrible deeds, I would have forgiven him. He would never have become my heir, but he would at least be able to live a normal life as a commoner or low level family official. But I will not suffer him to live and continue to stain our name, even if he's already been stripped of it."

Lorist filled his son's fate in personally. The kid was literally condemned by his father's hand. He didn't love the kid, he barely even knew him, but they were blood relatives and this came about because of his own shortcomings as a man and his failure as a father, so it was only right that he be the one to correct it. The memory of the first time he held his son came back to him and he couldn't stop the tears from rolling down his cheeks.

The fate of his erstwhile son and his role in bringing it about, both in terms of making the judgement that sent him to his death and letting it get to the point where this judgement was necessary, weighed heavy on his heart. Since this was his son's fate, he would not let those who also played a part in it get off any lighter. Hansk was stripped of his title and all his entire family's, all 17's, heads would roll along with his. Lysecott's personal guards would be hanged as well, their families would be spared but exiled to Hanayabarta. Every official and officer who openly supported Lysecott and his rebellion, about 300, and their families would suffer the same fate as his guards. The rest would be tried for whatever offences they committed during the rebellion, like robbery or murder. Those innocent of such crimes would be moved out of Lorist's demesne to Wild Husbandry, and those who served time for their offences would join them once their time was done. The judgements were to be announced publicly, ten thousand in all. It was a huge political shift in the house.

"As for the sentry legion's fate... Put them back to work for now. We'll deal with them when we do the restructuring."

# Chapter 491

## Human Resources

Lorist didn't attend the execution. He shut himself in his study, turning away all audience requests. Charade and the other officials understood how he felt and made sure not to bother him. Sylvia couldn't hold back any longer and went to visit him that evening. She found him sitting in his chair, facing the window, watching the moon quietly as tears rolled down his face. This was the largest single-event execution the house had ever carried out. They hanged and beheaded 349 people in one go. Lysecott, the king-endorsed heir, was also hung from the gallows. Thousands more were exiled from Lorist's demesne.

Unsurprisingly, it sent waves across the entire kingdom. Outsiders considered it excessive for a bloodless revolt put down without incident. The rebels neither killed nor tortured anyone. Lorist looked like the tyrant by contrast. Especially on the matter of his son. Lysecott may be a legitimized bastard, but he was still the duke's son. His crimes were made public, but they were nothing untoward for nobles. No one in the nobility considered it something worth an execution. Even the strictest of nobles usually only demanded an apology and some form of compensation. Lorist had reacted way to excessively.

The other thing that brought up big discussions, was the fact that, under false impressions or not, the boy had the king's endorsement -- sealed decree and all. How it was obtained was irrelevant. Custom and norms dictated that Lorist accept it, or at the very least find a way of dealing with his son that wasn't a clear disregard of the royal decree. Instead, the duke just hanged his son. He acted like the decree didn't exist. His status as the country's only sword saint protected him from public criticism, however.

Only the duke's inner circle knew the reason for his fury. Hansk's rebellion destroyed years of his hard work, especially where his cannons were concerned. Only the few that had seen them in action knew how much of a setback this was. The rebel had indeed sought his own death. When Kedan brought him his last meal, the old man cursed his lord for being blind to his loyalty and ignoring his advice. He cursed the house a fall from grace and a descent into ruin, proclaiming that he would laugh at the

fools from beyond the grave.

Kedan watched on silently. He didn't speak until the old man was done with his food.

"Hansk, you've been blinded by power. Your talents weren't enough. I understand what you want. You want to be the next Gleis and control almost everything in the house. You would have been, too, if the house was still just a backwater barony, but it's not. His Grace has a full provinces and the equivalent of a second as his demesne, and two more under his jurisdiction.

"Lord Norton is the one that led us to the glory we have today. You just had to follow him obediently and serve him loyally. You're delusional if you think you can compare to Gleis. It's too bad your delusion is now your end. Why do you still pretend like this is out of loyalty?"

Kedan left as Hansk slumped. The man knew Kedan was right. Gleis had been in charge of everything, baron in all but name, until Lorist returned. Lorist's father couldn't be bothered with the small things so he left everything to Gleis. All he did was hunt magical beasts and barbarians. Hansk wanted to be the same for Lorist. He wanted the kid to go off hunting beasts and barbarians and leave him in command of everything. Had the new lord been anyone but Lorist, this would have been the case, but Lorist was different.

Hansk could not compare to any of the new officials, the only reason he and the rest of the old guard hadn't been forsaken already was because Lorist didn't want to step on Gleis' wishes. In his resentment he didn't work hard and even split the house between factions. He had undone the trust Lorist had in him himself. Lorist didn't give him special treatment, despite technically being the most senior servant, he was passed over for promotion and it took him years more to be enfeoffed than the newcomers. Rather than get his act together, he blamed everything on Lorist and the greenhorns and even started openly disobeying and lecturing his lord.

Some things could be tolerated, but this disrespect was not one. He had brought about his own downfall. If only he'd obediently reflected for a few years in his fief, but, instead, he returned to the bastide and fanned the flames of insurrection in his lord's son.

He'd dreamt of splitting the house's ancestral homelands off from the greater dominion and governing it under Lysecott, but dreams were far-fetched and reality

cruel. His forces surrendered without even complaining when Lorist returned. They'd let the core of their plan, Lysecott, be captured. If they had kept him out of Lorist's reach, then even if the rebellion failed, they could still return with the heir and the decree when the house was weak and push their claim. But with him captured, there was no way out. They were tried for treason, heir included, and were now going to be executed.

His greatest mistake was underestimating how much control Lorist had over his lands. He now understood that the rebellion was only allowed to happen so Lorist had an excuse to get rid of him and everyone in his faction.

Three days after the execution, Baron Kriston rushed to Lorist's study. Lorist was back to normal, save the gloom in his forehead. He held a scroll containing Kriston's personal information.

"Please have a seat, Kriston. You have done well for several years now as security chief. You've formed multiple constabularies and organized the drafting of laws and regulations, with appropriate punishment for crimes. You've even been given a fief."

Kriston rose the moment his toosh touched the cushion and bowed.

"I'm only doing my duty. I do not deserve your praise."

"I'll get straight to the point. I summoned you because I have a new job for you. Furybear, my intelligence service, is being broken up into two smaller departments. Each will focus on a particular domain of security, one internal, the other external. The former I'll call the Department of Internal Affairs. It will be in charge of counter espionage, counter insurgency and maintain a stable, peaceful internal environment. Howard recommended you for the position of Head of Department. Any thoughts?"

Kriston's mouth dropped. He paid great attention to detail, and was aware of the two's relationship. So this was why the lord had sent a messenger directly to his castle to summon him.

"I am willing to serve you unreservedly, Your Grace. I give you my word."

"Very well. I am happy you're up to the task. You have three days. Have Tarkel give you a crash course. I expect a report on my desk by sundown on the third day with your thoughts on how to structure the department and a complete preliminary budget."

"As you will, Your Grace."

Belnick entered the room shortly after Kriston left. The old white-haired man shuffled in and knelt as soon as he was through the doorway.

"This whole debacle is my fault, Your Grace. I beg for your punishment."

Lorist hurriedly pulled back on his feet and consoled him. The man had only been captured because he had been too trusting. Belnick was one of the house's oldest and longest-serving gold-ranked knights. His greatest claim to fame was facing a bear to save Lorist's younger brother when he was just a three-star silver rank. His efforts, unfortunately, were for naught. The young lord died soon after of the wounds from his fall from his horse. The fight injured him severely and a plot by the denizens of Wildnorth to poison him saw him bedridden for three years.

He only learned what was going on when Lorist informed him. Not only had his lord saved his life, he'd even given him the manual that let him finally break through into the gold rank. His loyalty was above reproach, which was why he was given command of a legion and stationed in the house's home territory.

His origin was his downfall during the rebellion. Being from the bastide as well, he didn't want to offend Hansk, so he went to the bastide at the latter's invitation and was captured. He would have been executed if Hansk did not believe he would eventually come round and join his side. Belnick could not contain his shame at being poisoned twice in his life.

Though Lorist spent lots of effort on consoling him, he wouldn't accept it. He had to be held accountable for his failures. Frustrated, Lorist relieved him of his command and fined him two years' bonus and salary. He transferred him to the three main legions. Belnick was only willing to leave after he heard he had a chance to go to the battlefield.

# Chapter 492

## Heavy Military Reorganization

Lorist decided to reorganize his military yet again. He'd learned his lesson from the rebellion. This time he'd completely separate the military and administrative branches of the house. The only forces that had been separate from the administration thus far were the three legions and the Northsea fleet which could and would only move by Lorist's command. The rest of the house's forces, the sentry legions, the constabularies, and the other guard forces not associated with a legion, could be commanded by any household official of appropriate rank. Technically even Spiel, who was as far removed from a military commander as could be, could order any of the forces to do anything.

This was, as far as institutional structure was concerned, why the rebels could so quickly and so easily take over the forces within the Northlands. Take the local sentry legion, for example. It recruited almost exclusively from the house's captives. Since the legion worked almost more as a general labour force than a military unit per se, it was only natural for it to be closely entangled with the local administrations. It was neither uncommon, nor untoward for the legion to dispatch units to help administrative officials.

Hansk had asked for help with suppressing the mountain barbarian revolt during his final months as a legitimate household official, and Spiel had also asked for help on occasion with transporting spoils of war. Even Charade had, at times, mobilized the Ragebear Knights.

Lorist's plan now was to have dedicated and independent bureaucracies to deal with his military and administration. The department that was to handle the military would deal with everything related to it, from logistics to recruitment to compensation and deployment. Officials could only be part of one of the two bureaus and only officials from the military bureau could command forces.

Lorist's biggest issue was what to call these two new institutions. Maybe he could call it the military department, or perhaps the bureau of military administration? The People's Liberation Army? Or maybe the Self Defence Force? No, they all sounded to

cringey. A severe headache pending, he decided to put the naming aside for now.

Lorist didn't have an issue finding people to head this new institution. Potterfang and Malek were the two most obvious choices. Putting either in charge of the institution was really no different from making them his knight commander. They would be answerable only to him and had authority over everyone else in the institution.

Charade had been Chief knight for over a decade now, but everyone knew he was not the most suited for the title. Charade's strength lay in his administrative capabilities to begin with. He was the only one to have not made a breakthrough in the last seven years and was the weakest of his peers in his rank. His father-in-law, being a blademaster, was not very happy this abysmal state of affairs.

If the position only needed combat ability, then Loze would be the obvious choice. His nickname, 'Fiercetiger', was indeed very apt. He stood above all the other knights -- whether it be as a general or a warrior. His approach to combat was simple, almost thuggish, he kept attacking like a crazed madman until his enemy collapsed. He was currently on the edge of becoming a blademaster and no one would be surprised if he announced a breakthrough in the next three years.

Unfortunately for Loze, the position required more than personal combat ability or general military leadership. He would no longer be the commander of a legion, but would stand at the head of a bureaucracy. He had to win people over with charm, not just brute force. In this regard, few could not best him. Loze was a proud, stubborn, and arrogant man. He didn't listen to anyone besides Lorist and a few close friends. Even Charade, as his superior, could not get him to do anything. He was the penultimate medieval warrior, fantastic at combat, to a fault, but horrible at everything else. Not only did he have a completely unlikable character, he was a drunkard and a lecher. If he was measured by any metric besides his combat ability, his uprightness as a man would be in doubt. Well, even if none of this was an issue, even if he were the perfect candidate, his recent insubordination meant he could not be trusted with overall command of the military.

Besides, Lorist did not think Loze would want the position, anyway. He was made for the battlefield, he would never be able to stomach the idea of sitting in an office thousands of kilometers away from the front line. Even if there were no battles to be fought, Lorist couldn't picture him sitting behind a desk and signing paperwork.

Potterfang one of the other options. He was the only knight able to compete with Loze

in the arena. He was Loze's antithesis when it came to their combat style. If Loze was a thug, then Potterfang was a turtle. Make no mistake, he stood no chance of winning a fight against Loze, but Loze also stood no chance of winning a fight against him. While Potterfang had no strikes that could take Loze down, Loze had no strikes that could break his defence. All the fights they'd fought over the years also went the same way. Loze would attack furious and Potterfang would just defend until Loze either got exhausted or became completely furious with frustration and gave up.

The general defined the army. Tigersoar, which Loze commanded, was a ferocious beast on the battlefield. They specialized in offensive operations. Firmrock, on the other hand, under Potterfang's command, could hold any enemy force no matter how big, at bay. Tigersoar was Lorist's spear -- or, more aptly, his bludgeon -- and Firmrock was his shield.

Making Potterfang would be the obvious conclusion, and certainly the one with which the rest of the military would be most happy, if not for Malek. Lorist was of the opinion that Malek was the best candidate for the job. Lorist biggest concern with Potterfang was that he was too timid. He would likely try to play the good guy and would consequently be unable to make cold decisions. Malek, had no such inclinations.

He was the most feared night under Lorist's command. Some even questioned if he could even feel anything. He could not only make tough, impartial judgements, but he could enforce them no matter who the victim was. Even Loze could not escape him. He was also a very decisive man, and unwavering loyal to Lorist, almost to a fault. As far as Lorist was concerned, there just was no competition. The only issue was that Malek didn't have the greatest reputation, which wasn't surprising. Not many could like the stoic. He had few friends, and they were mostly officials of similar rank with whom he'd served for years.

Lorist would face stiff resistance if he tried to appoint him to the office. In the end he decided to compromise. He'd appoint both Potterfang and Malek to the position. Potterfang would be the head of whatever the military ended up being called, and Malek would be his second-in-command. Potterfang would be the military's face, whilst Malek would be the one doing all the actual work.

Besides preserving the military's integrity, Lorist also wanted to separate his government to bring down its overhead. The near constant war since his ascension had forced him to build a massive military, but now that the house was in a stable position and unlikely to expand in the near future, it could not afford to maintain such

an extravagant force, much less justify the expense. Lorist could not afford to spend two thirds of his annual income on the military.

Hansk's rebellion was a painful wake-up call. The five sentry legions stood at 200 thousand men and manned his lands' defenses. They were reserve forces for all intents and purposes, they never saw combat, nor would they ever unless the house was put in a dire position. Certainly they didn't need to enjoy the same benefits as his front-line troops? In the past he had used these reserves as a way to quickly absorb the immigrants, but now that he would not see large force migrations for some time, he had no need of this bloated setup.

And Hansk's rebellion showed him how unreliable the setup was, anyway. The men in the reserves served there out of a pragmatic understanding of their need for money, not out of any sense of loyalty to him. Then again, this should be obvious, would Lorist serve a lord that had just ripped him and his family away from his ancestral homeland, marched them across the continent and told him that he now had to live here and serve him and that he didn't have a choice in the matter, loyally? Of course not. If the Auguslo had done this to him, he would have sworn on his ancestors and honour as a man that he would one day kill him. At the very least he would have no qualms joining a rebellion or in some other way betraying the man.

Since the reserve were only doing the job for the money, and had no sense of loyalty to him, they followed orders without questioning whether they were appropriate or not or whether they came from the right people. As long as their pay would be handed over as always, they didn't care. In that case there was no need to pay them any more than was necessary.

Lorist wrote down the names of the forces he considered part of the active military. 'Firmrock', 'Tigersoar', 'Jaeger', 'Northsea', 'Ragebear', and 'artillery brigade' were on the list. The rest were at best reserves. He decided to form a single legion out of the five current sentry legions which would join the others as active forces. The men not put in this new legion would be transferred to the local towns guard.

Each of the legions would be 48 thousand strong; Northsea was 12 thousand strong; and Ragebear 15 thousand strong. Lorist's personal guard had three thousand members, and the artillery had another three thousand. With this the military would stand at only 220 thousand. Until now no legion had less than 60 thousand men, but there was no need for such a bloated military. Years of experience had taught him why no legion was bigger than 50 thousand.

Most militaries actually only had 10 to 12 thousand men in a division. A few divisions would be groups together into a legion, which was what a general commanded. While his legions had 60 thousand men, his generals would only ever deploy about 40 thousand at a time, no more than a standard foreign legion. The rest stood in reserve. He had a force which looked impressive, but was no bigger than a small legion in effective size on the battlefield.

What, then, was the point to the extra 15 to 20 thousand troops? They were an extra expense that clearly had no effect on the actual combat strength of the legion in any given engagement. They were only a further financial, logistical, and command burden which slowed the legions down and meant that they couldn't respond as rapidly and effectively as their enemies. It wasn't, then, just about having the bigger force, but having a force of the right size that is used effectively.

Lorist cut one division out of each legion. The new legions were no different in size from other kingdom's legions. He could do this so easily now because none of the legions were at full strength after their last campaign. Had they been fully staffed, he would be trouble with what to do with the troops he removed, but, as things stood now, even with the cuts the legions would likely still need to recruit men to fill in their shortages.

With this matter dealt with, Lorist moved on to appointing new officers. Potterfang would stay in command of Firmrock; while he was the entire institution's head in name, it wouldn't add anything to his workload, so he could stay on as a field commander. Malek had an actual job to do, so his old position needed filling. Lorist put Belnick's name in the spot. It would be a demotion from general to legion sergeant-major and put him in a position that would see combat if they got involved in another war.

The commanders of Firmrock's third and fourth divisions were old schoolmates of Lorist, Wilson and Sybra. Wilson had asked for a leave of absence to focus on his training so he could break through to the gold rank. Lorist transferred the third sentry legion's general over to fill his command. It was technically both a demotion and not. While his rank dropped from general to colonel, he was also being moved from a reserve legion to an active force, so it balanced out. And, since his legion was going to be scrapped anyway, he couldn't really complain since this was the only way he could keep his job. Lorist decided to give him a fief, just to be on the safe side.

Tigersoar was the legion that would see the smallest shuffle. Loze, Messen, Dulles and

Eid Modrak all remained in their positions as commanders of the first through fourth divisions in order.

Jaeger would see the biggest changes in leadership, Colonel Freiyar, currently commander of the legion's fourth division, would be promoted to general and put in command of the entire legion. Josk would take his place as commander of the fourth division with a corresponding demotion to colonel for his disobedience. Loze and his legion were justified in returning to the frontline since they were responsible for moving the migrants and had to go back for the rest, but Josk had no reason, and no permission, to move. Lorist was already being very soft by demoting him just one rank. He could have stripped him of all command authority entirely if he wanted.

Besides being general of the army, Freiyar also took over command of the first division, Yuriy, Josk, and Waxima had command of the second through fourth divisions. However, Waxima had also submitted a request for a leave of absence for training. Rather than fill his spot himself, Lorist decided to leave it to them to decide.

The men and commanders from the now defunct sentry legions that weren't moved into the active units, were moved out of the military entirely and put into what was effectively civil law enforcement. They either fill in for the positions cleared in the constabulary by the rebellion, or joined town guards and other garrison forces. Lorist promoted Els to general and put him in command of the sole sentry legion, which he planned to make an all-rounder. Els would also command the legion's first division. Ovidis had command of the second division, Pajik would be put in command of the third, and the fourth would be filled at some point in the future. With the current leadership setup each legion had three gold-ranked knights in its senior most positions, so they wouldn't lose out to any enemy force.

Senbaud would stay on as Admiral and have command of Northsea and Terman stayed with Ragebear. Ragebear's function and position in the command structure was changed, however. They were no longer just a knight brigade, instead they were made effectively the military police and put under the direct command of whatever the institution would be named in the future. They would answer to Malek and Potterfang only, and to Potterfang only in his capacity as the institution's head, not as general of his legion.

Reidy stayed on as the captain of Lorist's personal guard, with the rank of major. As Sergeant-major Park had taken a leave of absence to focus on training for a year now, he was fortunate enough to not be embroiled in the rebellion. He had now successfully

broke through and would return to his post at the end of the year. Howard was given command of the artillery brigade and was promoted to major. Sergeant-major Jim wanted to take a leave of absence once he recovered to focus on training as well.

As the sun grew lazy in the sky, Lorist finally finished the plans. Jinolio knocked on the door as Lorist stretched.

"Baron Kriston requests an audience."

# Chapter 493

## Tying Up Loose Ends

Kriston had come to submit his report on the Bureau of Internal Affairs -- as the department was now called. Lorist initially thought he was there to ask for a bigger budget and more manpower. But such was not the case.

"How did you come up with using the constabulary? I thought you'd want to form a new department."

"In the old empire, Krissen III felt the garrisons were useless and made mistakes too frequently, so he formed an independent constabulary to patrol the settlements and keep the peace. When Krissen VI came into power, he gave the constabulary charge of solving crimes and combating the spread of underworld syndicates.

"They were also later put in charge of taxes and spying on political enemies of the crown. They were pretty much what you want me to set up now. So I thought we might as well make use of a similar model. Plus, it won't take as long as setting the bureau up from scratch."

"Did you forget about the constabulary cage incident at the end of Krissen VI's reign? They were given too many responsibilities so it could do none of them effectively. The citizens had also become afraid and untrusting of them.

"When the cage incident happened, the entire city took to the streets. Even the nobles, who usually never got involved in protests, much less joined the commoners in doing anything, joined in and demanded the emperor disband the constabulary. The emperor was so furious when he learned what had happened that he executed three thousand of their leaders in a single day and banished every constable and their family from the empire. He only formed a similar organisation ten years later and explicitly limited their powers to managing the cities.

"It's not a bad idea, mind you, but I cannot let the constabulary get involved in anything other than just doing some basic peace-keeping. Do you know why I decided to form the Bureau?--" Kriston shook his head, "--I need an organization that'll keep enemy spies off my lands and out of my organizations. I need an organization that'll

stop anything like this rebellion from even coming up as a thought for any of my subjects, subordinates, or vassals. And I need an organization independent of all the others that'll keep my officials in line and punish them if need be.

"Think of it this way: if the house is a great tree, then I want to make the Bureau a gardening that'll prune the tree and keep it growing properly. That'll cut off all the dead and rotting branches and nip any ill-growth in the bud. At the same time, however, it must not have the size and power to take large scale action on its own. It's fine to reprimand a few solitary officials, but if you need to tackle something that requires a reasonably sized force, then you can just contact the constabulary or the guard and have them deal with it."

More than anything else, Lorist wanted to avoid something like the constabulary cage incident. It was a well-known scandal on the continent. The constabulary had gained too much power and had become the de facto rulers of the capital -- for as long as they could keep the emperor ignorant of their doings. They accused people they disliked or that crossed them of treason left, right, and center, often hanging entire families from the gallows at a time. Countless rich merchants disappeared overnight, families included, their property and estates were seized, and the story would be spun as the constabulary successfully unearthing yet another conspiracy against the crown. People were so terrified they didn't even greet each other in fear of it being used as an excuse to kill them.

Some nobles came home from their studies in the capital telling stories of hearing wails all over the city at night, like ghosts haunting the streets in search of revenge, especially near the canals. A small group of them went in search of the cause of the wails one night. They stumbled through the underground network of sewage tunnels, following the noise, until they found a stuffy room. Inside it large iron-barred cages hung from the roof, each had a single occupant, most barely any more than a skeleton with skin.

They ran away as fast as they could, their faces looking much like ghosts as well, and told their instructors. The news quickly spread to the citizens, whom were in an uproar. The constabulary could detain people for questioning, but they had no authority to imprison anyone, and yet here they were, locking poor souls up in cages and letting them slowly starve to death and rot away.

The entire city was whipped into a furor and marched in the streets in protest, joined even by the nobles. This had all be done behind the emperor's back, and he was just

as furious when he heard what had been going on. It only took two days for the entire constabulary to be uprooted, their leadership executed, and the rest banished from the empire. Unfortunately, whilst their expulsion rested the hearts of the capital's citizens, it didn't make the city any safer. Gangs and syndicates quickly rose to fill the power vacuum their absence created. Krissen VII was forced to reform the constabulary when he took the throne a decade later. It was all fine and well to limit the new constabulary's power as he did, but he didn't create other bodies to do the jobs the constabulary was no longer allowed to. With their vigilant gaze keeping rebellions and conspiracies at bay, the emperor's death years later plunged the empire into a civil war which led to its eventual break-up.

The rejection took the wind out of Kriston's sails, but he didn't give up.

"Your Grace is right. We must learn from the past, but that's just it. We did. We know how to avoid such a future now. Using the constabulary as the base for the bureau is the fastest way."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not against the idea completely. While I won't allow you to merge the two organizations, you're welcome to poach some staff from the constabulary. Rather than merging the two to make a massive, bloated new constabulary, just work closely together, making use of each organization's strengths.

"I have other plans for the constabulary. The Northlands now has 3.2 million inhabitants. We have a lot on our plate to keep them safe. I want to have the constabularies specialize in peacekeeping and law-enforcement. They operate in the open light of day to keep the dominion safe from those who conspire against it in the open. The Bureau, however, works in the shadows to fight those that conspire against me and my people in the darkness. D'you understand?"

"I do, Your Grace. The constabulary will work to keep us safe from small criminals and those that conspire in the open, while the Bureau works against those that move in the shadows or whom the constabulary can't touch. I'll go revise my proposal immediately."

"Hold on. I have another job for you." Lorist turned to his desk and took out a black folder.

"This has been troubling me for a while but I don't know how I to deal with it. Take a look. I want nobody to get wind of this. If you have any bright ideas, have Reidy help

you out. Return the folder if you can't think of anything."

Kriston took the black folder and shuddered.

"I will think with something."

Lorist waved without a word. When he was alone in the study again, He sighed deeply, a conflicted expression on his face.

An eagle arrived from the bastide three days later carrying news of Irina's death. He had died from a sudden illness while under house arrest.

Lorist was too busy, so he sent Glacia to handle the funeral in his stead. He also had her bring his second son, Koboshik back with her.

The council meeting lasted five days and the military department's name was settled by the end. It would henceforth be called the Ministry of Defence. It was also decided that any mobilization of more than ten men without Lorist's personal order or the Ministry's stamp of approval would automatically be considered treason. Even people like Charade had to go through the ministry to get permission.

Besides the 220 thousand men who stayed in active service, the rest were declared either reserves or civil defence and lost their benefits and half their salaries. 240 thousand were moved to local garrisons, now classified as reserve forces. About two legions' worth of garrisons spanned the Northlands, and all the other territories under Lorist's jurisdiction each had a legion of their own which had to protect every settlement, not one man more was allowed to be hired. With these reforms Lorist had cut his armed personnel in half.

Spiel had finally won a small victory; the military spending was finally less than a third of the entire annual budget. His euphoria was quickly shattered by all the other officials' protestations. Charade, Camorra, and several other official were dead set against demilitarization.

Their biggest issue was with the constabulary's downsizing in both manpower and responsibilities. Yes, it had been involved in the rebellion, but they all considered it an indispensable part of the house's forces. It was the only force over which the administration institution had any control. The constabulary was also only ever used by the administration. They were never involved in any military actions. Lorist had nearly entirely forgotten they even existed.

"This cannot be avoided. I've thought about this a lot. We must separate the branches of the government. And we cannot let any branch be a threat to the role of the other. The constabulary has no need for its current size, it can do its new job just fine with the numbers I am willing to give it. Anymore just makes it a threat to the military, a threat I will not tolerate. If you really want them to stay as big as they are now, then they have to become part of the military, which would only create more needless bureaucracy.

"We'll move the responsibilities I took from them to the military police. With the separation, no administration's official can mobilize the garrison on his own authority. Each garrison, barring a special order from the Ministry of Defence or myself, will have no right to mobilize outside the towns and its surrounding farmland.

"Everything else will be handled by the military police. We'll set up constable stations and booths in the towns and city neighbourhoods manned by the constabulary. They are the only ones the administration will get to control."

Lorist also made it clear that the administration would be responsible for covering the cost of running the constabulary, not the military, as had been the case thus far. Kedan was given interim command of the constabulary until a permanent appointment could be made.

When the meeting ended, everyone jumped into action. They wanted as much as possible done before the new year's celebration. Lorist had no free time until the 11th month came around.

Glacia was back by then. Irina had apparently died from a heart-attack after hearing what had happened to her son. She'd cried in her room for days on end, literally crying herself into the grave. In that time she only opened her mouth to curse Lorist to hell and back. She'd died in the evening. She cried herself to sleep every night, but not before midnight came around. The guards, confused as to why tonight she fell asleep so early, peeked into the room, and found her lying on the floor. They didn't check any further since she had fell asleep like that a few times before. When her maidservant went to wake her the next morning, however, she found her cold as ice and blue as water, still lying on the floor exactly as the guards had seen her the night before. Glacia had checked the corpse herself, and there were no wounds anywhere on her body, not even a needle prick or insect bite.

Glacia wanted to adopt Koboshik. The kid was completely terrified, having lost both

his mother and brother in less than a month. He wasn't even thirteen yet. Lorist agreed after some consideration.

# Chapter 494

## Reinforcement

There were some things Lorist had to do, but couldn't let his three disciples handle. Though Reidy was loyal, he was far too straight-laced and dealt with things too straightforwardly. While Howard seemed like he could handle everything perfectly, Lorist didn't want to stain his hands, at least not this early in his life. Most of all, though, he didn't want Howard's impression of him to change. And Jinolio was simply still too young.

The other reason was that everyone knew they were his disciples. He had no plausible deniability if any of them were caught doing something. Their involvement in something immediately implicated him. He needed a pair of hands that were not associated with him that could be stained on his behalf, a pair of gloves, as it were. Tarkel was a suitable candidate, but he was too well-known. It was not at all uncommon for random people to recognise and call out to him whenever he was out and about.

Kriston was another candidate. He was neither well-known nor closely linked to Lorist personally. Also, his position as the head of the Bureau of Internal Affairs made such things part of his job description.

Kriston had visited the bastide on the day of Irina's death to investigate a drowning. They didn't finish in time to make it to the first town on the road back to the capital, so they stayed over for the night. He did not join his two subordinates in the tavern below to drink and make merry, but had his food brought up to his room instead. The waitress that took it up to him praised him as a gentleman on her return. She was a little baffled, though, at how the madam's nightly wailing didn't seem to bother him at all. When she asked him about it, he just said she had lost her mind after losing her child so he didn't want to make a fuss.

Moved by his compassion and understanding, the waitress almost jumped into his arms to hump through the night. Now back in the tavern, she was even considering waking him in the middle of the night to a beautiful moonlit surprise. For some unknown reason, however, she chose not to, and she was happy she did the next

morning. Just imagine, she'd have been bobbing away whilst the madam was dying just a couple dozen meters away. The thought sent a shiver down her spine.

It had to be admitted, though, that the madam, for all her insanity, had picked the perfect time to kick the bucket. She died on the very night the biggest shot in crime investigation was staying in the bastide and could quickly solve the case.

Lorist took the folder from the baron and tossed it in the fire. He didn't take his eyes off it until its ashes scattered up the chimney.

The peasantry were very disappointed by this turn of events. They thought the only reason Lorist had yet to execute his old flair was because he couldn't be bothered while he reorganized his forces. But they'd hoped he would get around to it eventually and give them a good spectacle. Why did the hag have to be so inconsiderate and die before the duke could deal with her properly? Everything was pointing in the direction of the lord executing her in a grand fashion. Her curses and wails had spread through the lands very quickly and everyone was waiting to hear about her dramatic execution, only to hear that she'd went and died of a heart attack. God, how selfish.

Lorist buried everything in the darkest corners of his mind and abandoned the bastide all together. It might be the place his family had come from, but did orphans revere their shitty orphanage when they were adults? When Glacia asked what he was going to do with the bastide, he told her to let it sit for now. He would just give it to Helias when he graduated from the academy.

Helias, Lorist's nephew via his elder brother, would thus get the family's ancestral homeland. Unlike his bastard cousin, the kid was revered and praised by everyone he met, even Lorist fancied him quite a bit. Leaving the bastide for him would be considered a great honor by both the kid and outsiders, and let Lorist rid himself of the place easily.

Glacia asked to be made commander of the garrison forces in Wild Husbandry. Most of the old garrison forces now banished from the Northlands were now in it and she wanted to once again be their leader. Lorist agreed but refused to let Koboshik go with her. She insisted however, saying that it could only do him good, and that, since he was now her foster son, Lorist could not stop her.

Lorist called for another house meeting near the end of the 11th month. This time the meeting dealt with the main projects and targets the house would be undertaking in

the following year. The administration would mainly be occupied with settling the immigrants in The Northlands. They would also resume construction on the palace, delayed by the rebellion. Their new task was to build the various constable stations across the lands.

Camorra was now the head of the armory under the Ministry of Defence. The reconstruction of the artillery brigade and the establishment of the Bureau of Internal Affairs were not on the docket since they were secret matters.

Lorist returned to his room to relax a little once the meeting finished. Winter was coming. Apart from the household forces, most of the officials had already gone on break. Only the last vestiges of paperwork were left. Charade and Spiel would be in charge of the celebration so Lorist didn't have to worry about it.

Dilianna and Maria were pregnant again, so they were off his back, but Sylvia and his two other concubines rode him enough to compensate, determined to be pregnant by new years.

Two unexpected guests showed up with the arrival of the 12th month. Kenmays and Fisablen had travelled all the way from the plains across the kingdom for the celebration, well, officially, anyway. They'd actually come to get reinforcements.

Lorist suddenly remembered the kingdom was at war. News from the front-lines was grim. They were at a stalemate. The Union had launched five offensives in the last 7 months alone, three of which were repelled, but two of which had forced them to give up land for better defenses. They'd lost control of Krido and Ritt, Bluwek was their last stronghold in the region. If they lost that final city, they would be driven back to the empire's historical borders.

Kenmays was particularly sour. He only had a single legion, and it was the one Augustlo put in front of the enemy the most. He only had 18 thousand of his original 45 thousand left when he left the front-lines. His losses meant that, despite having made a lot of money from plunder, he only just broke even. As things stood, however, he was not going to get anymore wealth out of this since he couldn't plunder friendly territory -- and even if he did, it was already cleaned out -- and he was still losing men. If this continued, it would turn into a loss and he couldn't get out of it.

Whilst Kenmays had suffered pretty badly, he was not the only one with severe losses. Less than a dozen nobles still had more than half their starting forces. Shazin's two

light infantry divisions were completely lost, and Felim's Pegasus only had a third of its original forces. Whilst Fisablen's two legions looked to be in a much better state, most of their men were new recruits; of the original soldiers, only a tenth were left, if even that.

"Is Auguslo intentionally trying to cripple his vassals?" asked Lorist.

Fisablen shook his head. Apparently even the king's legions had lost at least 50 of his original 300 thousand men, a full sixth of his army. That was before the last five attacks. He only had three legions left over when the two left.

"He's losing too many men too fast," sighed Fisablen, "All-in-all we've lost 200 thousand men. No one has not suffered and no one will not have it hard after the war is over, if it ever ends. We can still just barely afford the loss if we win, but that's not going to happen. The Union has the upper hand. If the king takes steps to withdraw they'll charge in and we'll lose.

As far as they're concerned we're the old empire reborn. They won't let us stay united. They'll throw peasants at us until we crumble, even if their cities are left empty. They won't even take a rest between attacks and plan their moves properly, they just keep throwing people at us hoping to bury us under their corpses."

"Aren't they suffering a lot as well?"

"Yes. They've lost at least 300 thousand, maybe even as much as 400 if you count people who died of their injuries. The problem is they can afford to take the losses, and they're fine with taking them. They're willing to rebuild everything from scratch, but they're not willing to let us live in peace. Their new territory has also seen centuries of peace so they have a good population they can afford to thin out.

"We're different. We've seen non-stop war for nearly a century. Our people are few and our land barren. We can't neither stomach so many losses nor replace them easily. Auguslo wouldn't have accepted your conditions otherwise. If he'd known this would turn into such a slugging match, he would not have started this war. Now he can't back out and he can't keep going. He's been forced to send his personal guard onto the field more than once recently. If this keeps up, the Union will really bury us under the corpses and just walk over them into the kingdom. And if they do, they'll turn every inch of land into a desert so we won't ever be able to recover.

"Auguslo's even willing to give back some of the land he currently controls to end the war, but the Union will have none of it. He's willing to give you jurisdiction over Yungechandler if you'll help us end this.

"What will I do with that place?"

"You've already invested in it under your agreement with Duke Forund, Lorist," Kenmays reminded, "While you never finished the work, you would still start off far better than if you worked on any other province."

"The Union's using inferior versions of your catapults. They're not as strong or effective as yours, but they can field them in enough numbers that it doesn't matter. They've been the main killers on the battlefield," Fisablen chimed in.

# Chapter 495

## To Deploy or to Not Deploy

Lorist initially refused, but eventually agreed to give it serious consideration. He called another meeting of his confidantes the moment the two dukes left.

"Should we consider it?" he asked after explaining everything.

"Do we even need to discuss it? The Union doesn't know what's good for them. We should teach them a good lesson. They should just sit in Morante like good little boys and not bother us. Plus, we can make a good profit while we're at it!" Loze chimed in almost before Lorist was finished.

Then again, he was a freak for battle so it would be stranger if this wasn't his answer.

"No! We shouldn't. The king can't make a good offer and we've never had a close relationship with him. The Union knows how thorny we are and they'll be stretched to the breaking point by the time they reach our borders; I seriously doubt they've march into our territory. Our men and stability are worth much more than the king's throne and delusions of grandeur. Besides, as Your Lordship just said, the plains are meat grinders. If we march onto them, we'll just be throwing our men away and we might become just as embroiled as the king and be unable to withdraw," said Charade.

He'd never had a good impression of the king. He'd also not grown up in the empire and had no loyalty to it. His only loyalty was to Lorist personally. He had no issue with abandoning the kingdom altogether. Lorist, however, could not be so carefree. House Norton was famous for its loyalty, and -- until recently -- only for its loyalty. If he had any hopes of preserving his house's standing and legitimacy with the rest of the continent's nobility, he could not just stand by and watch the kingdom crumble.

Charade, however, however much he disliked the king, didn't support abandoning him purely based on his distaste for the man.

"Next year will be crucial," he explained, "If we don't settle the immigrants, complete the palace, and complete our restructuring, we will be unstable for years to come. We can't afford to divert attention and resources from these endeavors. We've also not yet

fully healed the wounds from the rebellion. We can't afford to move our forces out of our territory, especially not whilst those that stay behind will be in disarray while we restructure. You also can't go on your own, we need you here to keep what remnants of the rebels have yet to be uprooted at bay and the peasantry calm. You've just returned from a year's absence and injury in this very war, the people will be restless if you go back now. If you must help the king, at the very least wait for a year or two."

Lorist saw through Charade's charade. He wanted Auguslo to suffer a lot more and be in a far worse state. That way they could extort him for much more benefits and he would not be in a position to meddle with them for several years. He would have been inclined to go along with it as well if this did not concern the whole kingdom and not just the king. If nothing else, Houses Kenmays, Shazin, and Felim were still in an alliance with him, he had to step in and help them.

"What do you think, Pog?"

"We'll have to take the field eventually, even if it's only when the Union is on our doorstep. If the king can't hold on, the Union will not stop until they've wiped out every man, woman, and child that call themselves subjects of the king or any of his vassals. If we wait until they're on the river banks, we'll have to face them alone. Best settle this far away from our lands while we still have allies that can stand on our flanks.

"At the same time, fighting on the plains is definitely not acceptable. That whole area has been trodden into mud and both sides are completely entrenched. We won't be able to break through there no matter what plan we come up with. Especially not now that the Union also has siege weapons -- as inferior to ours as they are."

"We have to teach those merchants a lesson, even if just for the fact that they dare march blademasters into your lands and steal your plans!"

Freiyar's fervour was understandable. Until recently he'd served as the sentry legion's general and was only involved in logistics and security. Now that he'd been moved to a combat legion and finally had the chance to go to war, he would naturally jump at the chance. Ovidis, similarly, also wanted to take revenge for the blademasters sent into Lorist's dominion. The merchants would only get the message that House Norton was not to be trifled with through a beating or two.

"Well said!" Loze chimed in happily.

Lorist shot him a glare, and he shut up. He motioned for another bottle of wine, which Jinolio quickly supplied.

"Spiel, what are your thoughts?"

"Potterfang is right. We cannot allow the Union to defeat the king and march on our lands. The best option is to keep the war on the plains. If things are going to get wrecked anyway, we might as well make sure it's in the Union's territory. If we can get Yungechandler in the process, all the better."

Lorist saw Spiel in another light. He did not think the stingy man could think so far ahead.

"The king didn't mention anything about covering our costs, though, so this will be a big investment. At the very least we'll have to clean out any land we occupy to lessen the burden."

Lorist rolled his eyes immediately.

*I knew he had another angle. He really only sees coins. Does he really think we can do it again so easily? Even if we do break through and get onto virgin territory, the king won't let us just take whatever we want again.*

"With the king and the Union bogged down on the plains, we could just go around them and march straight into their under-defended territory. We can both take some pressure off the king, and will have untouched land to clean out."

*It sounds great, doesn't it? But does he really think Auguslo hasn't thought of trying it himself? I knew you weren't a genius when it comes to military matter, but you're a complete idiot! Why'd I even ask you?*

Charade was currently the house's chief administrator, but he had extensive experience with war. He knew how obscene Spiel's suggestion was and didn't know how to respond. In the end he decided to explain everything to the old man.

"That won't work. At best we'll just move the front-line a little, at worst we'll be surrounded and lose all the men we marched across the border.

"We caught the Union off guard last time, but they'll be ready for us this time. Even when we caught them off guard, we still lost 20 thousand men. This time we could

easily lose everyone."

The Union was present in the area in force and woefully outnumbered the king's forces. Their recruitment and training machinery was also in full swing. It wouldn't take them long to respond to the new enemy with overwhelming force. They'd either be crushed, or, if they pulled out in time, they wouldn't even have raided enough to cover their deployment costs.

Spiel turned red in the face. The Union was a far bigger foe than he'd thought. The Union outclassed them in every metric that counted in a grand and long war like this. If they joined the fight, they were doomed to suffer heavy if not total casualties, but if they didn't, they would smear their names with shit and ruin their reputation. Besides, even if they could keep the enemy off their land their economy relied heavily on trade with the lands outside their own. If they were cut off from their trade, they would crumble within a few years. Even if the Union didn't besiege them, they certainly wouldn't allow them to trade, which was no different. Even if they someone managed to not crumble, they would not be able to grow at a rate comparable to the Union, if at all, and in a decade or maybe even less the Union would be big enough to steamroll them.

"I've thought things through, Your Grace," Malek interjected, "We have to strike the Union a fatal blow in one move. I have one idea that might let us do this. I don't think it'll defeat them, but it should damage them enough that they have to stop their attacks and recover, and it might even do enough damage to force them back to the negotiating table, even if only to sue for status quo."

He pointed at the map.

"Impossible!" Loze shouted, "We can't even march around the enemy to strike right behind their front line, how are we supposed to strike at Morante?"

"Who said anything about going in over land?" Malek asked, "Tarkel said Morante is their logistics hub. We can get in, burn their stores, and be out again before they can react. And since it's a port city, we can go by sea.

"Senbaud always boasts about Northsea's invincibility -- even the king agrees. I suggest we move Northsea on Morante. We can burn the Union's Invincible Fleet on the way there as well, then pull back to Hanayabarta to resupply before returning to Silowas."

# Chapter 496

## Invincible Fleet

Northsea fleet, Hidegold Bay; Invincible fleet, Morante...

Everyone was shocked by the suggestion. The room was so quiet you could hear a needle drop. Lorist raised his brow, considering the proposition. Malek's suggestion was far too shocking. Even Lorist didn't think Northsea could defeat Invincible and still have the momentum to go on to Morante. It wasn't that his foresight was lacking. Invincible was known for its perfect record.

When the Union first formed it, it was known simply as Union. Its purpose was to defend Morante from pirates and keep Hidegold Bay safe. Eventually, but the scope of their operations soon expanded to the trade routes through the sunshine seas and the golden coast. They curbed piracy in the territorial waters of other nations. It had not suffered a single loss in the century of its commission thus far and its name was changed to Invincible somewhere along the way.

The merchants clamored for a downsizing of the fleet and their military in general when the empire fell into civil war. They first cut the garrisons, but when they went after the fleet, the big-seven vetoed their motion and nothing happened. While they could reform their mothballed land forces in a matter of months in the event of war, it would take years to bring the fleet back up to strength.

*Can we really do it?*

Senbaud declared Northsea undefeated and Lorist was keen on agreeing but there was a difference between claiming invincibility and actually having it. They had indeed never lost a fight, but they'd never faced an established navy, and they were just two-thirds the size of Invincible. That said, they did have the bronze cannons...

But Invincible had a completely different operation protocol and structure. They had decades of experience. At least eight tenths of their sailors and marines at any given time were veterans. He heard of their exploits almost every six months back in Morante. The thought of facing them had never even crossed his mind.

Northsea wasn't meant to be a wartime fleet. They were formed only to patrol local waters and take on small bands of pirates. Their ships, training, doctrines and command structure was not meant for fighting large scale naval engagements against even a similarly sized fleet, nevermind one one-and-a-half times larger.

It wasn't that he didn't have any ambition. Grindia was a single, massive landmass. Whilst travel by sea was faster, it wasn't necessary, besides a couple of islands, you could get everywhere without ever having to use a boat. He'd never made his fleet big enough to fight Invincible because it didn't mean much against the Union's incredible influence in the world of trade. If they announced a boycott against Norton goods and trade, then even if he could dominate the seas, the ports would still refuse to dock his ships and it meant nothing.

A strong fleet was neither necessary nor sufficient to keep a nation safe. Nor was it needed for trade. It made trade faster, easier, and less expensive, but one could still do just as much trade over land.

This all made it a pointless endeavour to invest in Northsea. Lorist might as well toss the money directly into the sea for all the good it did him. He had an unspoken agreement with Chikdor to not meddle in each other's waters. Each had their territory and neither would make trouble for the other.

The two fleets were the most powerful to have ever existed, each with its own speciality. Northsea excelled at mobility and immense ranged attack capabilities while Invincible used numbers and superior crew for close combat. Invincible did not sail into the northern seas because the ships they had weren't suited to the stormy conditions there. Northsea also did not enter the southern seas because it was uncharted territory and they didn't want to face Chikdor on its home turf. The only time the two interacted was during the yearly House Norton's annual meeting and Chikdor and Peterson's fleets docked at Silowas, during which many spices and daily necessities would be traded. In some sense, the two guilds treated House Norton as a supplier. The two completely withdrew when the war started, however.

Northsea had 16 Blitz class warships were fitted with bronze cannons, 28 LLDAM, 56 MSM class and 26 Swift class. They were split into two flotillas and a patrol detachment. The flotillas each had a unit with 20 LLDM class because Northsea was also in charge transporting daily necessities to Hanayabarta and spices from Shyarsia. They had to escort the merchant fleets to the two archipelagos every year.

The great majority of Northsea's power was vested in the 16 Blitz class ships. The rest were almost entirely transport vessels. The fleet's combat detachment was far smaller than Invincible's. They had a good chance of winning if Invincible fought them in the north, but those chances dropped drastically the moment they went south.

"Tarkel, briefing them on Invincible's status. Jinolio, check the logs. See when your father will arrive for the celebration."

"Understood, Your Grace."

Tarkel took out a few files on Invincible.

"Invincible was formed 136 years ago with just 20 vessels. Now it has enough ships to fill four Northsea-style flotillas. It has at least a thousand ships. There is no fleet that can compare. It has a force of about 43 thousand men. Its operating cost stands at two million gold Fordes a year. And it's mostly responsible for patrol and escort duties in the sunshine seas and the golden coast. They charge a fifth of profit as tariff for their protection. We have on record two instances of noble fleets in their area of operations being attacked and wiped out by pirates, but we suspect Invincible to be the true culprits.

"Chikdor is in direct command of the fleet and take four tenths of the fleet's profits. The rest is split between the other big guilds. As for the fleet's structure, it is split into several flotillas. Each has two floating fortresses, known as Sabnim class vessels. They are only deployed when the fleet plans to annex a location.

"Each flotilla also has 50 LLDAM and MSAM class vessels and at least a hundred rammers. The small ships form the largest part of their combat operations. They're typical approach is to swarm the enemy and ram into them. If they want to wipe out a fleet, they'll just keep ramming the hips until they sink. If they want to take the ships intact, they'll ram into the ship and deposit their contingents of marines.

"In dire situations they have used the small ships as fire ships.

"Each flotilla has ten thousand crew and armed personnel. Civilian detachments, mainly traders and transport vessels and their crew add another 10 to 20 thousand. Whilst their assignments change from year to year, they always have at least on flotilla at Hidegold Bay--

"You mean the ships in the bay is only a quarter of the whole fleet?!" Lorist shouted.

"This is would be the case under normal circumstances. We're at war now though. While I don't know how much of their fleet is now in Hidegold, it's definitely not just one flotilla."

Lorist nodded. He was just about to speak when Jinolio returned.

"I've checked the logs and Admiral Senbaud left Silowas five days ago. He's expected to arrive in Northsea tomorrow and be in Ragebear in three days."

"You little rascal. He's your father; why call him 'Admiral Senbaud'?" Lorist asked, stroking the child's head.

"This is a formal meeting. You were the one that said private and official matters must not be confused."

"Hahaha," Lorist laughed, "Let's end it here for the day. It goes without saying that this is confidential and top secret. I'll speak with Senbaud about Malek's idea when he arrives. We can make our final decision with Senbaud's input. Dismissed."

Senbaud entered Lorist's study, the snow still perched on his shoulders.

"I can sink Invincible any day you want me to!" he proclaimed when he heard the plan.

# Chapter 497

## Northsea

The cold breeze carried flecks of snow. The ships oscillated non-stop with the waves. The northern seas were the most terrifying in winter. Black dominated the world, a black abyss beyond the edge of the deck. The cold froze to the bone. Even the inside of the ship was never more than cool.

Senbaud stood undaunted at the helm of the ship, gazing into the black beyond like a king over his lands.

A decade. A full decade had come and gone since he swore fealty to His Lordship. For ten years he'd sailed in the cold, chasing pirates not much different from his former self. Barely not rotting away on Silowas and the surrounding waters. Now. Now, ten years after his fate changed, it was finally time to prove his loyalty, to show the extent of his skills, to demonstrate his worth to his liege.

He'd finally been given land and title by His Lordship. A reward for his years of service. His hands clenched when he thought about that night, to the promise His Lordship had made, almost casually, as he saw him off.

"If you pull this off, you'll come back a viscount."

God, wouldn't that be great? He would become the only knight under His Lordship to have risen to viscount.

"Invincible, we're finally going to have a good showdown. Let's see who's the real unbeatable one..."

Come on, Silowas, come on! Faster, faster! He would have loved to sail straight for Morant from Northsea, but he had to stop and stock up, and pick up eight Blitz class in Silowas. He was determined that he would not stay for more than three days though.

*Loze, Freiyar, Josk, and the rest all look down on me. They think the only thing this old pirate can do is kiss His Lordship's ass. They think I sent Jinolio to buddy up to His Lordship. Hah! Do they really think His Lordship would have accepted him if he wasn't*

*talented enough? They're just jealous! His Lordship didn't accept Freiyar's twins, now did he? I'll show them! I'll wipe Invincible out and lord over them as their senior noble! Just try and mock me and Northsea then!*

A waved crested and crashed into the ship's flank, shaking the deck. Senbaud stood firm; his legs were long used to this. His gaze lifted to the sails, bulging in the wind. If the wind got any stronger, they'd have to lower the sails to keep them from tearing.

"Blow the horn! Remind the others to be alert! We'll reach Silowas tomorrow! I don't want any accidents!"

The wind wailed and howled across the deck and around the ships as eight black silhouettes cut through the black night.

Flagfish Ridge was Northsea's headquarters. The curled deep into the ocean, creating a small bay of calm water where the fleet sat at anchor. Senbaud jumped onto the jetty from his small row boat and headed for the castle. The few on guard shivered in the cold. They saluted him stiffly as he passed.

Inside, soothed by the relative warmth, he cuddled up to the fireplace, an open barrel of rum beside him and a dozen sausages on a plate, ready to be grilled over the fire, on the table on his other side.

"Why'd you come back so quickly? I thought you'd want to keep warm with the wife a little longer. I thought you said you were going to be made a noble. I thought you'd go look at your territory after the celebration and only come back after winter ended," a towering man grumbled as he stepped into the room. It was Tok, the second flotilla's commander -- a fellow former pirate.

"I was, and I would have, old friend, but we have a job to do. A change to not just gain glory that'll outstrip all the others', but to make history. To do something so huge our names will be sung in shanties for hundreds of years to come!

"I didn't hand in your request for leave. They wouldn't have allowed it, anyway. You'll only get it after we're done with this job. And trust me, you don't want to miss this!"

"Really?" Tok shrugged casually, "Let's hear it, then. I don't mind delaying a little if it's worth it. You sure you want to sail in this weather though?"

"Yes. We won't be in this weather for long though. We're heading for Hidegold Bay!"

"What?!" Tok dropped his chicken, "Does His Lordship know about this?!"

Chikdor and Peterson stopped all trade the moment they heard about Lorist wiping out Wessia. They didn't even bother to pay the 450 thousand gold Fordes' debt they still had. Senbaud had submitted requests to go take the money from Hidegold Bay several times, but was always refused. His Lordship thought the peace treaty would be signed quickly and trade would resume.

When the negotiations failed, Senbaud again asked to go and take the money several times, but with His Lordship's whereabouts unknown he couldn't leave, and later when the rebellion started leaving was even further out of the question.

Now, however, rather than Senbaud again submitting a request, His Lordship had ordered him to move out.

"Yes. In fact, it was his idea this time."

"Great! I'll ring the bell and gather the men! Let's show those monkeys who's boss!"

The two sides were not without their friction. While they had unofficially divided the ocean between them, Northsea's men weren't happy that Invincible had claimed the Sea of Grief, which was part of the north. But they couldn't do anything since Invincible insisted on holding on to it to keep Hidegold Bay safe. They'd tried numerous times to dislodge Invincible with small skirmishes, but they wouldn't budge, and they couldn't engage them with full force without permission from His Lordship. Invincible operated as if they thought they were the ones letting Northsea keep hold of the north only because they couldn't be bothered to clean them out.

Last summer, for example, two Invincible LLDAMs were out on patrol and tried to run into one of their ships. They could easily have avoided the collision, but they just kept their course. The men aboard the Northsea ship would have sunk them if only they weren't forbidden from firing their cannons unless openly attacked.

The bell rang loudly. Mountains of muscle soon burst through the doorway. When Senbaud announced their mission, they roared uncontrollably. Some even turned around and punched the men behind them.

"Tok and I will lead twelve Blitzes. Eight LLDAMs will follow with supplies. Well man each Blitz with a hundred corsairs. The other four will stay here and keep the peace. Don't worry. You won't be the first wave, but you'll get your chance. It's still mid-

winter; we have all the time in the world.

"Those of you not taking part in this first attack will return to Northsea. Your ships will be overhauled and fitted with cannons. We'll keep harassing the enemy and keep them on the back foot until you're done. I want the big fight to be in the 4th or 5th month when you're all ready.

"We have 200 cannons to work with, so, while you won't match our Blitzes, you'll still have more than enough firepower. The men have to be able to fire blind once the training's done, you understand?"

"Understood!"

"You'll all get to join the fight, so don't worry. Concentrate on getting used to using the cannons, I won't have any mistakes, misfires, or friendly fire during the battle, you hear?!"

"Yessir!"

"Alright, go get the men ready and make your preparations, you leave tomorrow."

When the captains heading back to Northsea had left, Senbaud began his briefing.

"Our first target is the patrol ships in the sea of grief. There're still quite a few of them out despite it being winter. We'll sink them all.

"Our second target is Eilniba. It's the closest to Hidegold Bay and an important hub for ships going north. Everything sailing up from Morante has to stop there to resupply before sailing further north along the Golden Coast to Hidegold Bay. After we sink the patrols, we'll go around the bay and blow up the city's port. It'll cut the enemy fleet off from supplies. We'll also seal off the entire region. I don't want a single ship to pass us by!"

"Admiral, why don't we just rush into the bay and sink the fleet?" asked Tok.

"Are you out of your mind? You want to sail right into their trap? D'you know how many ships are docked there? We don't even have enough cannonballs and gunpowder on board to sink them all even if they don't move. No. We'll fight them on the open seas outside the bay when the time comes."

# Chapter 498

## The First Encounter

**"The navy is an idea by geniuses designed to be executed by idiots. If you're not an idiot, yet somehow still find yourself in the navy, your only hope is pretending to be one." ~ Lord High Admiral Senbaud**

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Sylode was a newly minted captain. Thirty years had passed since he started sailing when he was 15, working his way up the chain of command step-by-step he was now finally a captain in Invincible. Who knew how much hardship he had gone through on the seas? He recalled that others called him an idiot for volunteering. But when he was officially included in the fleet's long-term roster, people envied him. He was only 30 when that happened, however the owner of the grocery shop in the street where he lived wedded his then-17-year-old daughter to him without hesitation. Sylode had two cute children.

His first command was an LLDAM vessel. Success was a simple affair. All it took was decades of hard work, following orders obediently, and handing out valuable gifts to curry favor with the right people. He never complained or cursed for having to go out on a mission in the middle of winter when everyone else was resting. He just nodded and made his preparations. Sailing in such cold stormy weather was risky, and he had to pay attention to the smallest details. If his luck were good, he would arrive at his destination without problems despite the weather.

His patrol path took him around the sea of grief in a wide circle before he returned to port. The sea of grief wasn't barren in winter; patrols came across a few ships from time to time. Everyone knew most of them were smugglers. Though Andinaq and the Union were at war, smuggling still persisted. The harder the two sides fought, the more egregious the smuggling got.

The captains didn't bother them, however. As long as they had the right colors, they were of no concern. It was known as 'having the colors'. Merchant captains paid several gold coins to loan a flag from the fleet that showed they had permission to sail in their waters. The flag had to be returned when they returned to port, or within a

certain amount of time, whichever came first. It was a red flag with a single blue line from bottom mast to top fly. The end of the flag nearest the mast to which it was fixed was called the mast, and the end of the flag that flapped freely in the wind was called the fly. So a line that ran from bottom mast to top fly, ran from the bottom corner near the mast to the top corner flapping in the wind. As long as a ship flew that flag, they could sail unmolested in waters under Invincible control, and was entitled to their protection.

The best kind of find to make, thus, was not a smuggler that had the colors, but a smuggler without it, any ship without it, for that matter. If such a find was made, everyone would get a nice bonus. Ships captured at sea without the colours could be dealt with however the flotilla wished. Most would sell it and distribute the reward as a bonus among the crews. It didn't matter if it was a smuggler ship or the ship of some noble.

Fire crackled in a brazier in the middle of the captain's cabin. Sylode granted himself this luxury, he had earned it with his years of hard work, after all. A captain was entitled to his luxuries. Sylode wasn't content with his current station, however. He wanted to earn a title and a fief before his retirement. It was much easier to get a fief and a title in the Union than in any of the traditional aristocracies. Here, with enough wealth and the right connections, anyone could buy a title and a bit of land. Elsewhere, one could only serve one's lord loyally and hope they rewarded one with a bit of land and a title.

"Ship! Black ship! They fly the Raging Bear!" shivering voice descended from the black abyss above the ship.

Everyone was excited. Oh, they would make a great haul today! The Union had given permission, nay, ordered them to attack any Norton vessel they came across.

"Hahaa... So the rat came out of its hole at last!"

It seemed this had been good rather than bad luck. This was yet another silver medal for him. He just hoped it wasn't a mouse. They were impossible to capture.

When he stepped into the deck, the voice descended from the abyss again.

"It's not just one ship! I count twelve five hundreds marks away! They're coming straight for us! Alert!"

"Battlestations!" Sylode roared.

Five hundred marks was a kilometer. So they were coming for a fight, huh? At this distance it would be ten minutes before the fighting began, more than enough time to get ready. His gaze lifted to the abyss above him. The weather was perfect for a fight.

When he didn't hear any more reports, he frowned.

"Bastard, finish your report!"

"I did! Twelve black ships--"

"Only twelve?"

"Eye, captain! Just twelve! Four hundred marks yonder now!"

*What're they thinking? They have 16 black ships, if they're finally moving to confront the fleet, then why bring only 12? Has the black fleet lost their rudder?*

The men called House Norton's fleet the black fleet because they refused to acknowledge them. The seas belonged to Invincible, everyone else was just an imposter. As far as they were concerned, they were no different from noble-backed pirates.

Their 16 warships were said to be armed with dwarven cannons. A few patrols had seen one of them spewing flames and sinking a pirate ship. Sylode wasn't worried about it, however, because according to the people that saw it, the black ship could only hit its target from 50 or so meters. Even then their first volleys missed. That was even worse than their own catapults.

House Norton's black ships themselves however did interest the fleet somewhat. They had a weird ship in the middle of their formations with certain unique characteristics. For one, they could sail quite easily in the stormy north. But, when their shipwrights told them one cost at least six times as much as an LLDAW (large long distance armed warship), they lost interest. The fleet made a lot of money every year, but most of it had set recipients. It could not afford such a lavish expense.

*Maybe I can capture one. If I can take it back to be checked out, and maybe even ask to be given one as my next command, I will be a lot closer to getting a title. We will win. We have twelve daws and 24 saws (moderate swift armed warship).*

Sylode didn't drop his guard though. He thought the enemy commander had probably lost his rudder, he couldn't be careless. It wasn't that the black ships didn't have any chance of victory at all. If all twelve carried a hundred corsairs, they could still overwhelm his men.

Each patrol had at least twelve LLDAWs and 24 MSAWs. Half of the LLDAWs were fitted for close combat, the other half for ranged combat.

*They may be trying to board us, Sylode smirked coldly, We've seen all sorts of situations. Do you think that'll work on us?*

"Blow the horn! Have the saws split off and hold the flanks! Have six daws move forward and screen the centre. Avoid close combat for now! We'll move in to board when the enemy's crippled!"

The horn echoed across the black water soon after in a long series of blasts. When it was done it repeated. When it finished, Sylode ship, the Seahorse, a ranged LLDAW, led the charge. He stood on the deck like a mast and watched the crew prepare the stone slingers and ballistae.

When the twelve black ships were only 150 marks away, they suddenly turned broadside, exposing the port sides of their vessels.

*What's going on?! Are they trying to flee? We're too close for that to work, aren't we? Even if they turned around and fled as fast as they could, the turn would cost them time and burn speed. They could not get away. Even the greenest captain knew this. If they wanted to flee, the best would be to charge through the enemy formation so they were the ones that had to turn around and bleed their speed.*

He was still trying to figure out what they were thinking when dozens of windows suddenly appeared on the ships' sides. Moments later white smoke burst out of the windows.

*Their cannons! But they can't hit us from that far, can they?!*

The mast in front of his suddenly exploded into splinters. A moment later a cascade of bangs blasted into his ears as the sounds of the enemy's cannons finally caught up. The rest of the mast fell slowly, like a tree being felled in the forest, and crashed into the water. The rest of his ship's sails were shredded and their tatters danced in the wind.

The shockwave nearly toppled Sylode as he shielded his eyes and was showered with splinters. The ship immediately started slowing down and turning due to the mast dragging in the water on one side like a giant oar. His helmsmen was not as lucky as he and rolled on the ground grabbing his eyes, hundred of small cuts all over his face and several splinters stuck in his skin.

Just as the ship got back on course, the enemy's ships spewed white smoke again. The ship shook and splinters exploded everywhere again. An instant later the bangs echoed across the deck again. When his hearing recovered, he heard men wailing like dying dogs. He opened his eyes and saw his ship shattered. The deck was in tatters, the railings had dozens of holes in them, chunks of wood lay splattered across the deck and thousands of splinters covered it like snow. Here and there he could see splashes of red and the odd limb. A few men were rolling in the mess, some clutching stumps where once there were arms, others hold their intestines in their hands, and yet other clasping pieces of wood embedded in various places in their body. Two fist sized metal balls rolled across the deck, covered in blood, linked by a chain.

Seahorse wasn't the only one struck, either. Wails echoed from all six of the ships in the lead. The two further to port were on fire, their lamps toppled by the shocks and explosions, spilling their oil onto wood and rope, which quickly caught fire. The Octopus, the ship directly to starboard of the Seahorse had also lost its middle mast. It's however, had collapse backward onto the helm, crushing the captain, his helmsman, and the wheel. The ship was completely immobilised and out of control now.

The ships on the very flanks and to the rear were untouched and continued the charge. The 24 MSAWs sped through the floundering LLDAWs and moved in to screen them. The six remaining LLDAWs moved forward after them, charging straight for the enemy.

For several hours following that, he watched his flotilla get ripped apart. The enemy would sail away until they'd opened up enough distance, turn, fire a broadside, and sail away again. The scene was burned into his mind and haunted his nightmares.

The enemy's cannons roared across the sea further and further away. His men had no choice but to watch their comrades get torn to shreds and their ships explode in splinters with every volley. When they could no longer see the enemy, they just winced with every volley. The enemy didn't just hit the sails and decks of the other ships, they tore into the body of the ship. Most sunk, the worst kind of death sentence out here in

the cold waters. And none of them could do anything.

The black silhouettes soon re-appeared on the horizon, like giant black demons. They sailed past the six crippled ships and chased down the running MSAMs. For several hours more roars sounded. Everything went quiet eventually. No one on the ship cried in pain or moaned either, they'd all died, and everyone else just stared at the horizon where the ships had vanished.

The black silhouettes eventually appeared again and came for them. This was it. Their end. Sylode knew he'd never see his wife or daughter again.

"Quick, hoist the white!" he suddenly yelled.

"What?!" his quartermaster yelled.

"Quick! Hoist the white! I'm saving your lives! If you don't want to be fish food, hoist the damned white!"

# Chapter 499

## The Second Naval Battle

**"Invincible's arrogance cost it its existence, but Northsea was no better. Their arrogance cost them a perfect record only a few days after they'd used the enemy's arrogance to inflict on them a great loss. In all honesty, neither fleet was any better where its commanders and tactics were concerned. Northsea was saved only by its technology." ~ Professor Nico, Nico Academy**

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**On the 17th day of the 1st month, Year 1790, Invincible's patrol flotilla heading to the sea of grief was attacked by Northsea and sunk. Captain Sylode surrendered six LLDAWs and nine MSAWs. This was the start of Invincible's fade into obscurity.**

**In the evening the 20th, Admiral Senbaud attacked Einiba. They sunk the 500 merchant vessels in the harbor and defeated Invincible's third flotilla. The fleet was completely unprepared. They did not think Northsea would be daring enough to strike their home port so deep in their territory. Most of the flotilla's men were ashore and could only watch as their ships were sunk.**

Not even Senbaud thought everything would go so smoothly. His men couldn't stop laughing and kept joking around for hours afterwards.

The port was engulfed in flames. They had to stop firing after a while so the cannons could cool down, so Senbaud had the ships close in so they could use their backup catapults. The ships moved without hesitation. When the ships left, the entire city was burning. The flames didn't die down for two weeks. They left nothing but ash and cracked stone in their wake. The ships that arrived after the attack could only drift outside the port and watch the blaze from a distance. One or two ships tried to beach themselves nearby so their crew could help put out the fire, but were forced to turn around when gusts of wind blew sparks dangerously close to the sails.

The attack, the first port burning by sea -- soon called the Burning of Einiba -- instantly made the fleet and its admiral famous. Few people actually died, only a couple

thousand, but the Union's material losses were enormous. And put the Union in a terrible position. The surviving sailors were forced to walk back to Morante and so were out of commission for several weeks. The ships burned in the harbor carried the weapons and armor intended for the next wave of reinforcement destined for Southern, which meant they had to be deployed unarmed and armored. It also didn't just destroy Invincible's reputation, but also the trust merchants had in them. Those who lost ships in the port and in the encounters with Northsea out at sea blamed Invincible and called them incapable and inept. Some even demanded outright compensation.

The city's inhabitants refused to leave their carcass of a city, which forced the Union to divert resources to tide them over for the winter. This one, single burning, the actual attack of which lasted only half a day, cost the Union at least 20 million gold Fordes. But the damage went far beyond monetary and resource loss. Without the port the Union couldn't adequately resupply the front line. Even worse, it shook their confidence and morale. And things only got worse.

They soon heard that a patrol flotilla had gone missing in the sea of grief, and rumours started trickling in of merchant ships going missing up and down the Golden Coast. A few incidents were even reported further south than Morante. The higher-ups didn't believe the last could possibly be Northsea, but after what happened in Einiba, they couldn't be sure. They were suddenly fighting an enemy that appeared to be popping in and out of existence everywhere.

The Union had gone from controlling most of the known world's oceans, to controlling only the port in Morante in a couple of days. At the very least the entire Hidegold Bay region was silent, as if it'd vanished off the face of the world. Any ship that sailed north of the ghost city vanished. And most of them carried much-needed supplies.

The plains could not hold without their supplies. The two years of war had stripped the plains clean, no crops were left in the field their forces could requisition, no rivers had any drinkable water left, no fruit tree or berry bush had not been picked clean. Their forces there were completely reliant on supplies shipped or carted in from elsewhere, and most of it was moved by ship. The forces could be kept alive by land supplies, but it was only barely enough to keep them from starving, not enough to keep them in fighting condition.

The Union had to retake the seas, only, they didn't have the manpower. The first flotilla was wintering in Jigda, and the second was wintering in Chikdor's new dominion. The

first could not be pulled because they were there at Jigda's request, and moving them would break their agreement. The second could also not be moved because Chikdor's dominion was the source of most of the supplies heading to the front, and their coasts were rife with piracy, if they moved the fleet they would only be worsening their supply situation, not solving any problems.

The third flotilla didn't exist anymore, burned with Einiba and, though the crews were mostly alive, they had no ships. The fourth was on station in Hidegold Bay, but they were already engaged with Northsea, and had lost a flotilla of their own already. The biggest problem for the fourth was that they didn't know how to face their enemy. They didn't know how big their fleet was, but they clearly had enough strength to wipe out a patrol. How many should they mobilize, then? If they sent everything out, and the enemy could fight them, they'd only be destroying the flotilla. If they sent out less, but they weren't enough, they'd be whittling themselves down.

Most of the crews knew this, and many refused to sail unless the entire flotilla moved, some even refused to sail at all, regardless of whether the entire flotilla sailed together. By the second month, however, they'd finally come to a decision and convinced everyone to follow it. They sailed out of the bay to have a decisive battle with Northsea and let the gods of the sea decide the victor.

They sent out a different force than normal. They deployed all their ships save their two Subnims and their ramming ships, which stayed behind to protect the bay. They wouldn't be worth much in a confrontation with Northsea anyway since they couldn't sail well in the stormy winter sea in the north.

The second clash between the two fleets took place not long after. They came across the captured merchant vessels heading for Silowas a day after leaving the bay, escorted by just four Blitzes. They sent out 39 LLDAWs -- 28 of which had a hundred corsairs on board -- 83 MSAWs, and a blademaster.

The commander split the force into three waves, three kilometers apart. They knew from the one or two ships that had seen the burning of Einiba and survived, that Northsea only had 20 ships in the region, which operated in four contingents.

The day was dark, the black sky peppered with the occasional snowflake. The darkness blinded by the vicious rocking of the ship in the waves and the darkness. The two sides only noticed one another when they were 400 marks apart.

When the merchant vessels noticed the flotilla, they immediately swung out and ran strait for them. The Northsea contingent's commander made a grave mistake in that moment. Rather than immediately fire at the approaching enemy, he shot at the fleeing merchants instead.

The chaos destroyed the fourth's formation and they suffered heavy casualties as they tried to avoid the merchants. Things soon cleared up, however. The first wave was ordered to keep the enemy busy while the rest of the flotilla surrounded them. They new Northsea couldn't match their numbers, so they were willing to pay any price to sink the enemy. Unfortunately, they severely underestimated their enemy, for which they paid dearly.

The first volley aimed at the flotilla destroyed three LLDAWs. Another lost its masts and was dead in the water, though in no danger of sinking. A dozen MSAWs managed to close in, however, and started fighting the enemy's LLDAWs at close range. Those enemy ships weren't armed with cannons, only the usual ballistae, which the flotilla could match. Two of the four enemy LLDAWs were soon smoking.

"More enemy ships! They're six hundred marks away on our flanks!" cried a lookout.

Though his telescope increased his range, it was almost completely negated by the rough seas and the darkness. Though he noticed the second wave further than the first, it was still too late to pull out. Right at that moment, however, several of the ships shuddered in explosions of splinters. Moments later a blur of booms echoed across the ocean. The lookout didn't even need to check to know who it was. Senbaud had arrived with the rest of the contingent.

Another volley from the four black ships wiped out the rest of the first wave. Six MSAWs were limping away. In exchange, however, Northsea's contingent had lost three LLDAWs.

"Give chase! Sink every last ship!" Senbaud shouted.

His voice had barely faded when the lookout shouted.

"Enemy ships to port! More than 30! Currently 700 marks and closing!"

Moments later he shouted again.

"Another thirty to starboard! Six hundred marks and closing!"

It's a trap!

"To port! Broadside to the ship forward! Break through the encirclement!" the admiral ordered.

The fourth flotilla's commanders had predicted the enemy wouldn't give up easily, but they didn't think their cannons would pack such a punch and have such a range. The first wave was reduced to splinters in just a couple of volleys. The two enemy detachments were separated from one another however, and flotilla's blademaster was slaughtering his way across one of the encircled black ships' deck.

A few minutes later the other back ship was boarded as well.

"Turn broadside on our captured ships! We must not let the enemy take them!" Senbaud ordered.

Invincible did not expect the enemy to fire on their own ships even before they had completely fallen. The two ships were quickly reduced to rubble, and the flotilla's only blademaster was dragged down with them.

# Chapter 500

## Conclusion of the Battle

**"There is an old sailor's tale. It tells of two black ships sailing the sea around Hidegold Bay. Tattered sails and broken hulls they straddle the waves. By all rights they should be at the bottom of the sea, but they are kept afloat by the ungodly hatred of the undead crew. They say that if you see them, you will never see land again. But if you're from Silowas or Northsea, you can only pray you die before they get too close, because if not, your soul will be forever doomed to torture in their bowls."**

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The historical 'Clash of 218' was the second engagement between Northsea and Invincible. After the battle, Invincible declared itself victorious. Northsea did not contest.

The fleet announced they'd freed the thirty ships Northsea had captured and destroyed two of their black ships and four LLDAWs. What they didn't announce, however, were the losses on their side. If one considered losses, while Northsea got a slap in the face, they came out much better and might even be considered the overall victors. Of the just over one hundred ships Invincible deployed, fewer than 50 returned, and most needed months in drydock. The flotilla didn't send out a single ship for the rest of winter and the entirety of the rainy season. They lost 7000 men and a blademaster. The entire flotilla was now combat-ineffective and out of the fight.

No one expected Northsea to be so ferocious. They sunk their own ships when they were in danger of falling to the enemy, they didn't even wait to confirm that they had indeed fallen. Just a hint of the possibility was enough to make them fire on their own. The loss of their blademaster was a blow almost equal to all the ships and men they lost. While they technically won the battle, because the enemy was forced to retreat, in terms of losses, they were the clear loses. Pyrrhic victory could not even describe this. If this went on, they'd lose the war even if they won every battle along the way.

The battle was over, but nobody expected the enemy admiral to leave things at that. This was a massive humiliation to Northsea. And indeed, the enemy admiral struck

almost immediately. He charged at them as soon as the two remaining black ships joined the rest of the contingent. His contingent couldn't match the flotilla in numbers, but they had ranged superiority and, without being encircled, the speed and agility to keep their distance while they fired.

Knowing that they couldn't win unless they encircled the enemy, the fourth flotilla pulled back to the bay, but were dogged all the way and lost a number of vessels along the way, with many more severely or moderately damaged. Not a single ship got back to port without *some* damage.

They did try to take out their pursuers halfway home, but the same tactic couldn't work on their enemy a second time. Shortly before they reached the bay, their pursuers changed tactic. The contingent split into three groups, one continued to chase them from behind, whilst the other two caught up along their flanks. The ships got into position, then closed to just within firing range, fired a volley, and retreated. The flotilla was on the brink of collapsing entirely, and were even preparing to raise the white, when Northsea ran out of gunpowder and was forced to withdraw.

The only real victory for the flotilla was their freeing of the captured merchants and sinking a couple of enemy ships. The freed merchants had some supplies onboard, and, while not enough to solve the military's problems, could take the worst edge of for a couple of days. Word finally reached Chikdor that the merchant ships weren't just being sunk, but taken by their enemies, supplies and all, and they stopped sending any ships at all.

The Union understood they had to finish off Northsea before they could use the seas again, so they bit the bullet and mobilized the second flotilla as well as Chikdor's personal fleet. They would also send every ship capable of sea travel north loaded to the brim with supplies under the flotilla's escort. If possible, they would conquer, or at the very least blockade Silowas.

Shortly before the fleet was to set sail, however, the fourth flotilla's report made it to the leaders. Every surviving captain had signed his name to it. It said that they stood no chance against Northsea. The report detailed meticulously the engagement. Most shocking was the black ship's range and destructive power and their willingness to sink their own ships to keep them out of enemy hands. Second was their maneuverability. Ships of any size were as mobile as ships one or even two classes smaller.

The only even remotely viable tactic was to swarm them with smaller ships, but those ships couldn't brave the rough north, so they only stood a chance in the south where the waters were calmer. The report concluded with a request of funds to research similar weaponry.

The leaders laughed bitterly. They knew of the cannons for a year already. Their blademasters sent into Norton territory brought back blueprints and news. Unfortunately, the cannons were too heavy to transport, and they none of the blueprints they had contained anything on the cannons. Even if they had them, they neither had the recipes for the metal they used, nor for the propellant. They'd hoped to solve at least the gunpowder problem by relying on the dwarves, but their negotiations had been less than smooth. They also didn't have the funds to rebuild the flotilla.

The Union was rich, but war was expensive, and it had been at war constantly for almost a decade and it had been unable to trade for several years prior to that. It was nearly bankrupt. It didn't have a single spare penny to rebuild any ship it lost, they could barely even afford to repair the damaged ones. They had only one option. They had to through every ship they had at the enemy and sink their ships. Even if they lost every last of their own ships in the process, at the very least they wouldn't have to worry about attacks by sea for several years thereafter and could focus on the war on land.

As long as they could conquer Silowas, they could write House Norton off for several years. The island and its ports were their headquarters, and its dry-docks were where all their ships were made. Without it they would lose the seas. Without their dry-docks, House Norton would never be able to build up at a pace matching the Union, who would control every other inch of coastline, and every dock outside Andinaq.

Their plans made, the Union deployed both the first and second flotillas. The two would meet up outside Morante before heading north together. They would escort the merchant convoy to Hidegold Bay before heading for Silowas with whatever was left of the fourth flotilla. Since they couldn't match Northsea ship for ship, they would just sink them with numbers.

Senbaud arrived at Silowas at about the same time as the Union settled their plans. His campaign was a massive humiliation, for himself, the fleet, and his lord. The shame nearly made him fling himself overboard several times on the way back. The only thing that kept his feet planted on the deck was his determination to clean up the mess.

Killing himself and leaving this mess to his subordinates and his lord would only bring further shame.

He wanted to set out the moment the ships restocked their gunpowder stores and flatten Hidegold Bay, but the rainy season, known as the Season of Storms by sailors, started. He could not move the ships out. He also had to repair his ships, and it was time for their annual drydock maintenance. He spent the season locked in his office and study, studying sea charts and history books, planning his revenge.



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