



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 11 -

-Author-

Smoke Is A Path

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[LiberSpark]



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CREATED BY : A_MINERVA

Chapter 501

Lorist's Preparations

The rain poured continuously.

"We'll rendezvous at Armatrin Harbor," Lorist said as he tapped the red dot on the map with his wooden pointer, "You know this was our first stop on our way north with the convoy. Armatrin is the only port within Lormo."

The meeting room was quite empty. Only Charade, Spiel, Kedan, Malek, Camorra, Terman, and Reidy were present. Apart from Spiel, Kedan, and Camorra, the rest went all the way back to the days of the convoy.

"I picked Armatrin because it's only a day and a half away from Hidegold Bay, and only two from the front-lines. Even if Northsea can't destroy Invincible as planned, it won't stop us from reinforcing Bluwek.

"It would be ideal if they did; then we could strike Morante from there, but failing that won't derail our plans. Our minimum goal, then, is to reinforce the king. We'll take over the city's defenses and free some of his troops up so he can go on the offensive. I have no intention of driving my men into the enemy lines for just Yungechandler. We might have invested some in its development, but it's still a very poor province. It's not worth thousands of my subjects' lives.

"If this were also the only motivation, I wouldn't even have bothered going to war. But we need to teach the Union a lesson. They crossed my bottom line when they marched into my territory and joined in on our personal internal issues. They even dared to march on our forbidden grounds, slaughter our people there, and steal our secrets! They will pay back their transgression ten times over!"

Everyone knew Lorist was spouting bullshit. He wanted to plunder Morante, and this was just a convenient excuse. It was the richest city on the continent, he could probably make his entire fortune over in just that city, a fortune that took him a year and 5 provinces to accumulate. It would also be the biggest medal under his belt possible since he would be the first man in history to conquer the city.

Lorist would never admit it, however. He had to have an excuse that included everyone. Even if everyone knew why they were really going, appearances were still important.

Jinolio sat in a corner of the room noting everything down. His transcript would be copied and sent out to every city, town, village, fort and outpost in Lorist's territories, it would eventually even make its way to Hanayabarta and Shyarsia. It was also meant to make the men more capable in combat. History had proven time and time again that troops that believed justice was on their side fought harder and raided more thoroughly than when they either didn't know, or thought it wasn't.

"This war should not have happened in the first place. The Union occupied the empire's territory unjustly. Andinaq bears the empire's heritage and had to retake its lands. His Majesty didn't want to fight this war, he just wanted to take the land rightfully his. The Union betrayed our trust and threw their name in the dirt. His Majesty even rolled out the white road for them, but they spat on it! They are the cause for this war!

"We must punish them for their shame and vile behaviour! You, my men, my trusted children, have been chosen to bring down the sword of justice down on these demons. Fight! Fight knowing that you don't do this for yourself or your kings or lords. You fight for your family, your parents, your siblings, your wives, and your children!"

Lorist wiped the sweat from his forehead. Fortunately, he only had to give the speech for a couple of people in a small room. He didn't think he had a thick enough skin to lie through his teeth to thousands of loyal subjects when he could see them staring at him. This whole business was Malek's idea, god smite him. Lorist really need to hire a speechwriter. He knew Charade was bad, but he didn't think he was no good either.

Jinolio finished recording the nonsense and handed the draft to him. He signed it after giving it the once over and handed it back. After finishing with the bullshittery, it was time for serious business.

"Our agreement to reinforce the king will give us Yungechandler. I'm making Shadekampf the governor. Charade, see to it that the necessary staff are assigned to him. He'll report to you, so you should also make sure everything stays on track."

"If I may, Your Grace, Shadekampf is dealing with Wild Husbandry. We'll need to fill his position there if we move him. How about Hector?"

"Make whatever arrangements are needed."

"Spiel, we'll develop Wild Husbandry and Yungechandler at the same time. Adjust the budget accordingly."

"I will, Your Grace."

"Kedan, I'm putting you in charge of the reformed constabulary. I want only the best, most loyal men. We can't afford mistakes, don't disappoint me."

"Don't worry Your Grace. I will make sure only the most loyal men are selected and I'll swap them out every couple of years to make sure they don't get too cozy anywhere."

"Good. We can't have anymore wavering or split loyalties. They have to be upright individuals whose lives will be the examples for the peasantry. They also won't be allowed to get involved in the local governments and other matters of administration."

"Understood, Your Grace."

"Malek, what's the status of our active forces?"

Malek stood up and flipped through a folder in his hands.

"Firmrock should be on Silowas by now. They'll weather the rainy season there before moving on to Armatrin where they'll wait for the go ahead to march to the king's aid. Tigersoar and Jaeger are camped outside Vanades. They'll march to Armatrin once the rains stop and join Firmrock. The sentry legion moved out by sled and ski a week ago and have reached Flowater Creek where they're busy setting up the first supply hub.

"Camorra is responsible for the supplies, and will take over all the Ministry's logistics once he takes his post. General Terman and I will stay here and retrain the domain's garrisons. They'll be a loyal, reliable force when we're done with them, I promise."

Lorist nodded. He looked at Terman, was seated beside Malek.

"Are you frustrated I didn't allow the knight brigade to deploy? You've had to sit back for two battles. I'm sure your knights are getting restless."

"We obey your orders without question. We just hope to be given a chance to prove ourselves."

"It's not that I don't want to let you take part, we need a reliable force to hold down the fort here, you saw what happened the last time we didn't. I made you the deputy chief of the Special Investigations Unit so you could help settle everything faster. You will get your chance, my friend."

"I will look forward to that day."

"The key to this battle is Northsea. Malek, Senbaud made his report and asked to be held responsible for the two Blitzes and four LLDAWs we lost. Does the Ministry have any thoughts?"

"We've looked into it determined that the admiral is not responsible. He didn't make any mistakes or give any wrong orders. The fault lies with the commodore who fell for the enemy's trap, but he went down with his ship, so there's no one to be held responsible. The admiral deserves praise for salvaging the situation and preventing the enemy from capturing our ships."

"Do you believe Northsea can defeat Invincible?"

"It will be difficult, but it's possible. We've only faced a flotilla in combat so far, not the whole fleet. We can be certain our next engagement will be with at least double that number. The Union will undoubtedly deploy their remaining two flotillas and sail into combat with whatever is left of the fourth. We just don't have the numbers. Fourteen Blitzes isn't enough, even with the other ships that will be armed with cannons added, we can't match Invincible."

"Don't worry about ships. Bullhorn Bay's shipyards are working day and night to finish every ship they can. Grandmaster Sid has fashioned 300 bronze cannons and 16 we had on the whaling ships have also been moved to the larger ships. By the fourth month we'll still have a further 80 ships waiting to be retrofitted. I don't doubt we'll have the numbers and firepower to fight the enemy. As long as our captains, commodores, and admiral are trustworthy, we'll win."

"We still have a shortage of capable high-tier fighters. Senbaud reported that he saw a blademaster slaughtering his way across one of the Blitzes' decks before he sank it. We don't currently have anything to match that."

A sinister smile cracked Lorist's face.

"High-tier fighters? No problem. I, Reidy, and Shuss will head for Silowas after the

rainy season and join the fleet. I wonder if Invincible has a sword saint."

Chapter 502

Intel and Final Battle

"Urgent news, Your Grace!" cried Tarkel as he rushed into the study.

They were in Silowas's Seaview Manor. Lorist had been lodging there for a couple of days now. A little over 20 days past the end of the rainy season, he bade his wife and concubines farewell. He finally felt released from his cage.

It was all Arriotoli's fault for being such a busybody. She wrote after the rainy season to announce he had a new daughter, named Irie. Arriotoli gave her the Dina name, of course, and told Lorist he needed to prepare a dowry for when she eventually got married.

Arriotoli's letter made Sylvia go berserk. None of the three women who were not yet pregnant wanted to lose to this outside woman, so they kept riding Lorist for a child. Daisy finally fell pregnant near the end of winter, but Sylvia and Fennazalli were still barren. With half of the 4th month passed, Lorist finally excused himself for Silowas.

Women are nothing but trouble!

How on earth did people manage harems? Sylvia wanted another son, her eldest needed a little helper for when he inherited his father's title. His concubines didn't have any thoughts on the position of heir, they just wanted a lot of children that could accompany them when they got older.

Unfortunately children weren't born from will alone and desire alone. There was an element of luck involved, and their partner had to be fertile. Once a day was fine, and twice was exciting, but three times... Well, it was still bearable for a sword saint, but he had two concubines and a wife who each wanted three rounds a day. He couldn't refuse the child-crazed Sylvia, and if she got it, then the other had to, as well, lest he have a second rebellion on his hands. And this one would make him the envy and laughingstock of the entire continent: a rebellion over his loins rather than his throne.

Now that he was at Silowas, there were no women by his side and he felt like the skies were bluer than ever, the air was fresher and he was more energetic. Before, his legs

would feel soft when he woke up to train. But these days, he felt energized whenever he got up, filled to the brim with vigor. He couldn't help but admit his ancestors in his past life were right. Lust truly was the blade that shaved one's bones. Fortunately, he managed to weather through it.

Tarkel saw Lorist half asleep on his sunbathing chair when he entered the study. Lorist was making the best use of the calm before the storm to catch up on sleep he knew he would lose once things got going. Their offensive would be launched at the end of the month when the last ships' retrofits were complete.

Senbaud led the 14 Blitz-class warships back to sea when the rainy season ended. He didn't come across any enemy ships, however. Even smugglers were few and far in between. The whole stretch from Hidegold Bay to the Golden Coast was deserted. Something was obviously off. Senbaud took the risk to barge into Hidegold Bay only to be pushed back by the fourth flotilla. Tarkel sent a few agents to the bay, but he didn't hear back from them once they left. Not a peep.

"Well..." Lorist mumbled as he sat up, "What's going on? Do we have word from the bay?"

"Nothing. Our informants in Jigda sent word. Invincible's first flotilla and 50 thousand of the kingdom's forces are headed to Chikdor's dominion. They'll join up with the second flotilla and escort a massive convoy to the bay. From there they are set to move on Silowas."

"The reports are trustworthy?"

If the reports were right, then everything made sense. The Union's fleet was going all out and. They were no doubt betting everything on this convoy and wouldn't let it go easily. Jigda was also quite clearly completely in bed with the Union if there was any doubt. This also confirmed that the Union was not going to surrender. They had to be crushed completely.

"The reports are trustworthy, Your Grace. My agents are disguised as vets. There is no suspicion about them at all so there's no chance they were fed false information to fool us. They've also learned that the Jigda forces being sent with the fleet is the duke's most elite legion, the Firebirds. They bribed a captain to let them go along to Chikdor. They've confirmed everything in their report with their own eyes.

"Their original plan was to sail to Morante before heading to one of our hubs to report, but they ran into Tok along the way and were brought here. The two flotillas will set sail from Chikdor's harbours on the 10th of the 5th, they have to restock first. We expect at least 800 ships."

Lorist caught his breath. The entire fleet must be at least around 1300. That was nearly a hundred ships for every ship he had.

"They cannot reach the bay!" Lorist exclaimed.

If such a convoy's supplies were to reach the front-line, they would lose the plains within the month. They might even wipe Auguslo out completely, which would leave the path into the kingdom open and no one left to stand against them.

"Jinolio, gather everyone! Also, get me 100 gold Fordes."

Jinolio soon returned with five heavy pouches.

"Tarkel, give this to your agents. Tell them I'm giving this to them personally as thanks for their hard work."

"Understood, Your Grace," Tarkel bowed.

"Alright. Come back quickly. I need you in the meeting as well," said Lorist with a wave before he started brainstorming in front of the massive map of the continent.

The meeting started right after lunch. Every captain in the fleet was present. Tarkel brought them up to speed. The room burst into a roar the moment he finished. Everyone was shocked. Even if Northsea had superior ranged combat abilities, they didn't have the ammunition to sink 1300 ships, nevermind win in a fight.

The more extreme insisted they use the sea-wolf tactic. As long as there were enough ants, even an elephant could be bitten to death. The problem was that only the 14 Blitz-class warships could execute that tactic. Other ships weren't fast enough, if they got into a fight, they were committed.

Some conservatives suggested they withdraw and fortify Silowas instead. If they could put cannons on forts along the coast and draw the enemy fleet in, they stood a chance. If need be, they could draw the fight onto the island itself while the Blitzes whittled the enemy down from the sea.

Lorist slapped the table.

"That won't work! Yes, we can win against Invincible if we fight on Silowas, but then we'll lose the war, regardless. If that convoy reaches the bay, it won't matter whether we win against the fleet or not. The supplies and reinforcements will bolster the Union and we'll lose on land. They'll wipe out the king and his forces and take the entire kingdom!

"We have to sink the convoy, or at least force them to turn around. If we have to sacrifice Northsea, then that's what we have to do. We can rebuild the fleet, but we can't hold on to our lands if we lose the kingdom.

"Yes, we will face an unprecedented force. But don't forget that 800 of the fleet are just transports. We can ignore them mostly and focus on the escorts. Four hundred is still a lot, but it's manageable. Remember that by the time we face them, we'll have another 500 cannons."

Lorist was right. Apart from the 300 cannons Sid had made for the fleet the artillery brigade's cannons had also been requisitioned.

"Today's the 24th of the 4th. The convoy sets sail on the 10th of the 5th. We won't allow them to reach the bay. Senbaud, take our Blitzes to Chikdor. You're to harass them the moment they leave port. Don't stop until you run out of ammunition."

"We can't, Your Grace. We can at most be at sea for 20 days before our supplies run out, and it takes 17 just to get to Chikdor and we have no way to resupply along the way. We can't even manage a round trip."

"Then build supply points along the way. We can use Einiba. I'll send the whaling ships and 60 of our medium ships. We'll turn Einiba into our forward supply base."

"It's too dangerous. What if the fourth flotilla notices and attacks?" Senbaud asked.

"No worries. I've had Uncle Torin bring 40 ships to Silowas. He can keep the fourth flotilla busy. We don't have much time. We have to move quickly to turn this around! Alright, dismissed. Make your preparations, we depart in two days!"

"Yes, Your Grace!"

Chapter 503

Captain Woodleis's Worries

Thunderous booms echoed across the waves. Captain Woodleis had heard it came from Norton cannon fire. He could only hear the cries and screams of terror around him. When he realized the nearby ships were still intact condition and maintained their formation, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Mermaid's Song, his LLDAM was his pride and joy; it could carry 5 tons of goods. The hard fight and sacrifice of three generations of his family, his grandfather, father, and now himself, had culminated in Mermaid's Song. She was his kingdom, and he was king. He had no interest in putting his ship on the line in someone else's war, but he had no choice. When one of the big-six demanded something, no one dared not give it. And so, he was now in the midst of a warzone, sailing with over a thousand other ships in what must be the biggest naval convoy in history, listening to ships exploding and people dying all around while he prayed he and his ship didn't become one of them.

When he first got the order, he quickly made inquiries with his connections and learned why they were mobilizing so many ships so forcefully. Invincible was fighting with Northsea and they'd lost badly. Port Einiba had also been torched.

Northsea had also captured almost every ship that sailed the surrounding waters for the whole season. Among them were ships and captain Woodleis knew, a few could even be counted as friends. Eima, Dragonfly, Molinmodren were just three that had been captured. He even heard rumours that Northsea's ships could spew fire and decimate ships from unheard of distances. One connection told him it had something to do with the dwarves and their gunpowder and cannons.

The Union was utterly reliant on the sea to keep their soldiers on the plains supplied and reinforced, they could not afford to lose the sea. But that's what had happened for the last four months. They were desperate, and this convoy was their last answer, their last hope. This was their life line, not just for their war on land, but for their war on the sea as well. They desperately needed to resupply their armies, but they also needed to boost their navy's morale. They had to win a victory, and one that didn't cost them half their deployed ships.

Captain Woodleis was one of the people they were trying to reassure. He suspected this voyage was not going to be peaceful, and, indeed, it wasn't. The danger began even before they'd left port. He was woken the night before they were scheduled to set sail by explosions. Northsea had attacked the bay where the convoy was anchored.

He couldn't be more thankful that his ship was anchored the furthest away from the bay's entrance. Smoke was blotting out the stars by the time he got onto the balcony and he could see the glow on the horizon from the burning ships. It might well have become a second Einiba had the fleet's Swifts not taken immediate action and chased their attackers away. He thought of that glow every time he went to bed.

The attack delayed their departure by a week while the bay's entrance was cleared of the burning wrecks. The men who saw the attack were forbidden to talk about it, but the grapevine could not be silenced. The fleet had apparently suffered heavy losses in the initial attack and during the chase that followed. They lost 50 medium supply ships and 20 Daws and 30 Swifts. The Nortons, on the other hand, didn't even suffer a single injury or a chip on their boats.

It seemed the flotilla's commanders finally realised they weren't up against mere pirates, because they issued a new voyage plan the day before departure. Instead of sailing straight across the open sea to Hidegold Bay, they would not hug the coast all the way. This upped the travel time from 21 days to over 40.

It was almost funny that the biggest fleet in history had to sneak along the coast like a small smuggler ship, but Woodleis knew this was the best option. The coast would force their enemy to attack from a predictable direction and kept them from being surrounded. Normally this would also mean that the ships would be cornered and could not escape, but the fleet's size made that a moot concern.

The escort's main concern wasn't defeating Northsea, at least not for now. They had to keep the convoy safe until they reached Hidegold Bay. They would focus on escort duty until then and only bother with a full on confrontation once they reached the bay. The coast meant that the relatively smaller escort could better protect the convoy since they only had to defend one side, and it also meant that any damaged transports could beach themselves and save their cargo.

"This is the third time, huh?" mused Woodleis as he listened to the distant booms.

The coast was safer, but they weren't sailing fast enough for his taste. They were

indeed crawling along. They'd been at sea for 21 days and they weren't even halfway yet. The first attack was the one in the bay. The second came fourteen days into their journey. It lasted three days. He suspected the enemy only withdrew because they ran out of either shells or gunpowder. Their escorts were quite a bit fewer when they returned. He couldn't be sure, but they certainly hadn't lost any less than 50, 70 was more likely.

After that attack, ten sailors were moved onto Mermaid's Song. Woodleis was told it was to protect the ship in case the enemy broke through, but everyone knew they were rescued from the sunken ships and the escort didn't have space for them. He had his quartermaster and a few midshipmen make merry with them for a few days, after which they let slip a few details of the battle.

The enemy admiral was very cunning, it seemed. He only had fourteen ships, but he sank numerous ships. He skilfully kept his fleet at their maximum range and peppered the escorts from there. If the escorts turned to pursue them, he'd run away and keep peppering the enemy as he withdrew. The escorts couldn't just keep chasing the detachment either; they had to stay close to the fleet. When they turned around to return to the fleet, the enemy admiral would also turn around and start peppering them again. The escort fleet had tried a couple of times to set a few traps for their harassers, but they never fell for them.

Woodleis also learned a bit about the ships attacking them. They were very powerful. Their cannons could do significant damage all the way up to what seemed to be their maximum effective range, about 300 meters. They fired iron balls about the size of a big fist which shredded through hull, deck, and mast alike.

The most talkative of the bunch was a man named Shira. He seemed very happy to babble about the enemy when alcohol lubed his lips. Woodleis didn't know how he'd gotten by without being whipped regularly all this time, the fleet didn't like babblers.

"So we really can't sink just a few enemy ships with our entire fleet? Surely their cannons can't sink our entire fleet before we've surrounded and closed in on them!" complained Woodleis.

Shira burped, "Y-you... you don' un'ershtan. Northshea iz really hard'o catchch. They shail much fashter an'r much more agile than'r warshipsh. If we chashe'em, they'll draw ush out to shea and shink ush'ere. We shent thiry shipsh af'er 'em onshe an' ony three came back.

"Initially, our rammersh poshed a huge threat'o 'em. The... the lash'ime... we managed'o chashe 'em away with'ose little rammers lasht time... But recently, they come with a cruel countermeas-sure. You know norm'l met'l cannonballs're about the diameter'f a bowl, right? Hic B-but they've an ev'n small'r one... pelletsh ab't the shize of a fing'rtip... Eash shot they fire'll launch a hun'r'd an' they'll spread all ov'r...

"Fore this, they'd ushe thoshe larg'r cannonballs'o fire a'the ramm'rsh a'miss seven ou'of ten. Now they've switched'o these pelletsh, they le'the ramm'rsh ge'closhe an' fire when they're 60 met'rsh away. The poor bast'rdsh jus'vanish..."

Woodleis cursed his curiosity from that day onwards. Every night he'd wake up in a cold sweat. Dreaming of his ship being torn to shreds, and watching his crew crawling into his cabin, half shredded, cursing at him for bringing them to their deaths.

He decided he'd escape the moment he got the chance. He'd wait for the escorts near him to chase after the Nortons and make a break for it. If he ran into the Nortons, he'd wave the white flag and plead for his ship. He was fine with having to spend some time under scrutiny if he could just keep his ship and crew. It wasn't like he really had a side in the war. He just wanted to keep trading.

The next attack started a week after the previous one. They definitely had a supply base nearby, no way they could get to Silowas, resupply, and return in just seven days. He didn't even want to think about the other possibility, which was that these weren't the same ships, and that they actually have a massive fleet waiting for them somewhere up ahead.

He didn't care who won the battle, he just wanted to make it out alive with his ship intact. He stroked the white flax cloth in his hands as the cannons boomed in the background. He carried the white flag with him all the time lately.

Chapter 504

Confident of Victory

"Cape Romani. Also, the end of the Tedanini mountains. We can't hug the coast anymore. The reef ahead forces us to head out to sea. Once we're past the cape, it's just another three days to Einiba, then three more to Hidegold Bay.

"Unfortunately House Norton is waiting for us on the waters just off the cape. It seems they plan to stop us here or sink trying. We should thank Captain Bluden for risking his ship to bring us this intel. If he hadn't charged after the detachment after their last attack, we'd be sailing into their ambush blindly.

"He says the Nortons have deployed sixteen massive ships at least double our biggest Daw, but not as big as our Sabnim-class. They also have a hundred Daws and forty Sams on patrol. The twelve ships that've been harassing us are keeping an eye on our flank, sandwiching us to between them and the reef."

Lord Admiral, Viscount Penelope, tapped the map with his wooden pointer as he explained. His cabin on board the fleet's flagship was packed with the fleet's commodores and rear-admirals. The atmosphere was tense.

Penelope couldn't help but sigh. How many times already had he seen these faces? How many times had these commanders been ferried over by row-boat to his ship to sit in on the latest casualty report? When they first got together to get the announcement about this trip, they almost literally fought one another for a spot on the escort fleet. They only calmed down when they heard they were all going. Now they didn't even have the energy to frown or get angry when they heard how many ships were sunk and how many had died in the latest attack.

Then again, it would have been more surprising if they weren't like this now. They'd suffered four attacks and four pursuits; they'd lost 200 ships as a result. Most were rammers and Saws, but the enemy only had fourteen ships and they couldn't even scratch them. They couldn't even console themselves that their losses were suffered chasing off the enemy. The Nortons only left once they ran out of munitions, not because they were chased off.

Everyone's noses had been red with pride when the two flotillas met up, the two sides betting and having fights over who would get the most kills and the most glory, and laughing at the third and fourth flotillas' incompetence. They were all technically part of the same fleet, but each flotilla was backed by a different guild and crewed mainly by people from that guild, so competition was fierce and there was very little love lost between the four flotillas.

Twinhead Dragon backed the first flotilla, the second and third belonged to Chikdor, and the fourth was shared between the other five, now four, guilds.

While the first three were quite competitive against one another, it was all mostly just spirited banter and competition, but they all looked down on the fourth. It was the bastard child no one liked. Despite that, while it was in the worst shape of the three still standing, it still stood, whilst the third didn't exist anymore, so everyone mocked and insulted it ruthlessly. If the fourth could cause some damage to the Nortons, then the first and second could surely wipe them out completely.

The fourth had warned that the Nortons had very powerful ranged attacks, but because it was the fourth, the first and second didn't take it seriously. And even if what they said was true, the enemy only had a few left, what could they do against hundreds of ships all charging at them at once?

Their tune had changed now, however. These meetings were usually very boisterous, and it was hard to get everyone to settle down so the meeting could start, but now no one spoke. Everyone just sat quietly and waited for their admiral to start. When they first came together back in Chikdor's domain they didn't really do much planning. They just boasted about how many kills they'd get and betted on how quickly they'd take Silowas. Now, they sat quietly and waited to be told the latest bad news.

The first attack had shown them the enemy could be thorny, but they had still been very confident, especially when their response chased the attackers away, even if the losses were quite a bit more than expected. The subsequent attacks, however, shook them completely. They'd sailed for almost a month and had been attacked four times, but had not inflicted a single casualty on their enemy. They hadn't even caused a single gold Forde's damage to the ships' paint. They'd tried to take the initiative by setting a number of traps which they hoped the enemy commander would take in his arrogance and lack of understanding, but he didn't take the bait.

They'd thought they could swarm the Nortons with their rammers, but the enemy

quickly identified and exploited the small ships' weakness. In order to maximise their boarding contingent, the ships didn't have any ranged weaponry or archers, so the Norton ships would just sit and wait for them to get close then shower them with volley after volley of small pellets packed like grapes into their cannons' barrels.

A single full broadside from one of those ships could make several rammers just disintegrate. It was like blowing a dandelion, everything was there the one moment, and gone the next. When the third attack came, the rammers refused to sail at all. Even the punishment for insubordination wasn't as bad as the fate of those that sailed against the Nortons' black ships.

And this came from men who crewed rammers. They were already the bravest in the fleet. If even they refused to face the enemy, how bad would it be if the rest of the fleet was to sail against the enemy once or twice? Rather than spend their time before each battle sharpening their swords and polishing their armor, the men on board the ships spent their time checking that they had enough rations to spend several days floating at sea, that the straps on either armor would come loose quickly enough so they wouldn't be dragged down and drown, and making sure which direction the coast was. They weren't men preparing for battle, but men preparing to abandon ship!

Once his briefing was finished, Penelope waited for his captains and rear-admirals to give their input, but even several minutes later they had yet to show even the tiniest hint of getting involved.

"Am I shouting at corpses?!" he barked, slamming his pointer into pieces on the desk, "Did someone cut off your balls last night? Or did they take your tongue instead? If you don't get your act together, I'll kill you myself and use your corpse as ammunition when we face Northsea! Are you captains and admirals of Invincible or pirates?"

His rage finally lit the last embers of pride left in the men's hearts. Their faces slowly regained color, and they stood up, hands on their hearts.

"If they want to kill us, we'll drag them down with us! No, we'll send them on their way alone!"

"I'll take the vanguard! I want the first kill!"

"I will sink five ships before I let mine drink water!"

"Let us fight, Admiral! We will not let those bastards sail on our waters any longer!"

Cannons? What cannons? They are no match for our courage!"

The cheers suddenly stopped, leaving the man who spoke last flailing his arm in the air in the silent room awkwardly. The mention of the enemy's cannon was like a bucket of cold water. It immediately sobered up everyone drunk on their own pride.

The man lowered his arms, coughed once and walked over to Penelope with a warm smile. The captains wanted to ridicule him for bringing up their bane, but they couldn't. He was Chikdor's young master, Serihanem, and currently the read-admiral in command of Chikdor's fleet.

"Young Master, do you have any basis for your claims?" one captain asked, having finally scrounged up the courage.

"Yes. You will find out soon enough. They attacked us several times now. In total they've sunk 129 Swifts, 86 Saws, 13 Sams, and 15 Daws. See the pattern? They're sinking mostly small ships. Yes, part of it is because we've sent mostly small ships at them, but the bigger ships we did send out lost a much smaller proportion than the small ones, and many returned with damage from the engagements. This means they can take a few hits and still keep going.

"We lost seven Daws in the first attack, two of which sank because they caught fire, not because they were blown apart by cannon fire. We sent out a lot more Daws in the later attacks and they were only sunk after taking a heavy beating.

"Wingsoar, one of my ships, took several hours of beating and is still afloat. I also noticed something when I inspect the damage on some of the ships. One shot pierced through the ship's hull near the supply deck. It shot through the hull and into our stash of flour. It burned's heat scorched some of the flour, but besides that and the hole in the hull it did no damage.

"We tried something out when we sent Wingsoar after them after that last attack. We packed our stores against the hull to absorb more of the shock. As you know, Wingsoar made it out. We counted forty cannonballs when we checked the ship after it returned."

The meeting room erupted into cheers. If Serihanem wasn't lying, they now had an effective way to fight back. If they packed their supplies, especially their sacks of grain and flour against their hulls, they could ignore the fire and just charge right at the

enemy ships. They would still suffer heavy casualties and lose many ships, but this gave them a much better chance. Seeing the atmosphere finally becoming rowdy again Penelope smiled and thanked the young master sincerely.

"House Norton won't think of this so they won't expect us to last this long or do what we're going to do. We now have a way to blast them to smithereens!"

Serihanem bowed at everyone's thanks.

"The Nortons are expecting a big fight, what will we do?" asked Penelope.

"Give it to them! Smash them to bits! Victory to Invincible!" roared the rest of the room.

Penelope nodded and tapped on the map with a splinter of his wooden pointer.

"They're planning to stop or sink our whole fleet in this fight. But we won't let that happen. We have three hundred ships, and all four our Sabnims. Chikdor has another 100 ships. We outnumber them and now have a counter for their cannons. We'll send them to the bottom of the sea! Victory is ours!"

Chapter 505

Decisive Naval Battle

The waves roiled non-stop from all around. Lorist stood tall on the deck of his whaling boat, copper telescope in hand. He gazed at the shapes on the horizon. His lips crept into a smile.

"They still haven't had enough of Senbaud's beating. As expected of Invincible. I thought they would attack at night to avoid being shot at by the cannons. I didn't think they would actually come out to fight in the middle of the day. I don't know if they're brave or desperate. I shouldn't complain though; I like enemies better this way."

It was the 7th of the 6th. Dawn was fading, and the sun shone brightly -- a perfect day for barbeque. If only he hadn't stood watch the whole night. He fell asleep just before dawn and missed the most beautiful time of the day. Jinolio woke him shortly after it passed, informing him that the enemy had just come into sight.

He couldn't understand why they didn't attack at night. His cannons wouldn't be nearly as accurate then. They hadn't moved an inch the whole night and now they were charging with the sun to just above the horizon to the east.

"I doubt this is just a probe..." said he.

Wasn't the enemy commander being too foolish? They were charging right into what they had to know was a killzone. This wasn't bravery, it was suicide. The sea forced captains to be offensive, but one could be smart.

The 16 whaling ships lined up port broadside to the enemy. The wind blew along the line and tried to force them out of formation, so they had to drop anchor to stay in position. This also meant they couldn't run if things somehow went badly. It was do or die. This battle would decide everything. Lorist was confident though.

Ten windows opened on the first deck below on each ship. Each ship had ten to a side. It was nothing to smirk at, but it was just barely over half the complement of each Blitz, which had 18 to a side.

Sid had been busy the whole winter. He toiled day and night to retrofit the fleet. All in all the fleet was now 320 cannons stronger than before the retrofit. Half sat on these 16 whaling ships. The rest were put on Daws. Each ship only got four, so Lorist put the artillery regiment on them to make up for the shortfall. It added ten cannons to each ship on the top deck. They weren't limited to being 5 to a side though. The artillery regiment's cannons, being designed for land-based use, were wheeled, so they could be moved from one side to the other, making them far more powerful than their numbers suggested. The 40 surplus cannons were fitted on Saws; each got one on its nose with which to chase down fleeing enemies and take on the enemy's rammers.

Josk and Jinolio stood by Lorist's side. Reidy and Shuss were assigned to the two whaling ships at the end of the line. The three contingents could quickly respond to any enemy blademasters that attack anywhere on the line. Josk and Ovidis were the only men he'd brought with him from the legions.

Josk had disobeyed orders and should be in Wild Husbandry as punishment, but he was one of Lorist's most trusted subordinates and friends. It was tough on Freiyar to exercise authority over the man so close to his lord and who was the legion's father, so Lorist took this opportunity to give him a break. He could also use Josk's power and accuracy to incapacitate enemy ships as he had done all those years ago.

Ovidis was there to do what he did best -- fire catapults. Despite having ten cannons a piece, the whaling ships still felt under-armed, so Lorist fitted them with twenty catapults each. He could probably fit more carroballistae, but they weren't effective against big hulking masses of wood. And it never hurt to have more weaponry to take care of ships that got too close.

A horn echoed from above their heads; the lookout.

"Enemies spotted. 60 Daws in the front, those behind unknown. At least four hundred in total. Four Sabnims in their midst as well. 500 marks and closing!"

A kilometer. It wouldn't take long for them to arrive. The enemy had the one thing in their advantage that counted most for their tactic -- the wind. It had shifted in the last couple of minutes and now blew at their backs, giving them the maximum speed they could get.

"Tell Senbaud to flank them with the Blitzes. Keep them from going around the line. Push them into our killzone! Do they really think they can run us over with shear

numbers?!"

Jinolio sent the order up to the crow's nest. The lookout blared a series of short, sharp horn blasts and started waving his signal flags. Soon the signals fluttered down the line to the two fringes where Senbaud's contingents sat, waiting. A few minutes later the flags fluttered his acknowledgment back and a number of black dots began pulling away from the formation, heading towards the enemy in a wide arc. Cannonfire soon followed.

Their ships were very close to the enemy formation, probably just 200 meters, making maximum use of their power. The ships left white snakes in their wakes which the wind carried over to the line of whaling ships. Their fire seemed to have no effect though. Two more volleys only made two Daws slow slightly, the rest continued on as if nothing was happening.

"200 marks and closing," the lookout reported.

Lorist focused on one of the struck ships and noticed white powder leaking out of the holes in its hull. When he checked the deck, he saw sacks stacked all along the outside of the deck.

"Smart little bastards..."

No wonder they'd yet to sink a single ship. If the enemy thought this was enough to turn the tide, they were sorely mistaken. Lorist would teach the entire continent what it meant to charge his fleet today.

"Fire the first volley when they're 300 meters away and switch to chain shot. Hit their masts and sails!"

The flags waved again, all the way down the line.

There was no point in switching to chain shot now. It would take them longer to reload than to fire and then load again. They could not afford to waste any firing time.

"Hundred and fifty marks and closing!"

The lookout's voice was drowned out by cannonfire. Every ship up and down the line shuddered as they spewed fire and smoke. It blinded everyone for a few dozen seconds, but the steady breeze pushed it over the decks and out of the way, revealing

the enemy.

The largest barrage in history had just been fired, but to little effect. He could see the ripples of several hundred shots in the water -- two hundred had fallen short. Only the closest two Daws shook as dozens of holes popped into existence in their hulls. They lost direction, sliding to one side and slowly started to list.

Can't be helped, I suppose, Lorist sighed, *The boys only have a few months of experience. How unlucky.*

Five hundred cannonballs sank just two ships. Very disappointing.

"Fire!" Howard roared on his ship.

Everyone covered their ears, but they were still momentarily deafened by the roar. The ship shuddered. Their hearing recovered just in time to hear the last echoes of the low whistle as the cannonballs disappeared towards the enemy formation.

The 60 closest enemy ships lost their masts instantly. And started slowing down. The ships behind swerved violently to avoid running into them, some didn't make it and crashed into those in front. The enemy formation came to a halt just 200 meters from the line.

A copper whistle pierced the chaos. Dozens echoed down the line. The order to hold fire. Lorist didn't want to waste cannon ammunition. This was why he'd brought the catapults, after all.

"Fire!" cried Ovidis.

Wood and rope creaked up and down the line as hundreds of boulders arced through the sky. These boulders were different from those used on land. Those used on land were round so they could bounce better, but here they only hit or missed, they could not bounce off the water's surface. So they were as jagged as they could be found to cause as much damage as possible, even with glancing blows.

The first volley was very inaccurate, but that was to be expected; they were, after all, mostly range finding shots. A few quick adjustments later, the second volley was unleashed. This time the boulders were covered in a flax net, soaked in animal fat, oil, or tar, and set alight. The mixture was a nightmare to put out. Pouring water on it only made it spread faster.

The nearest several dozen Daws caught fire immediately. Every now and again one or two people would jump off, some covered in flames. The fire quickly spread to the ships that had crashed into their rear, hoping over using the fallen masts, or through sparks jumping to the sails. Those not on fire yet, though many were mastless, continued to drift towards the line on their own momentum.

A series of booms echoed from the flanks and small explosions of splinters racked the ships to the side, most of the rest losing their masts as well. The enemy was now completely caught. They couldn't sail forward since that way was blocked by burning and sinking ships, they couldn't sail sideways since they were constantly being peppered by Senbaud's ships, and their formation was too tight to turn around easily. Even if they did, the wind would be blowing against them. They could make a slow dash for the horizon, but no one expected them to make it.

An easy win. Lorist smiled.

Smoke rose into the skies and obscured the rest of the fleet, but the enemy could not use it. Senbaud would not let them.

"Enemies, 70 marks!" roared the lookout.

"What?" Lorist gasped.

"They're pushing the burning wrecks!"

"Ovidis! Switch fire to just behind the wrecks! Keep the rocks flying!"

A mistake, a big mistake. He never thought the enemy would use their own casualties against him.

"Danger!" cried Jinolio as he leapt over.

Chapter 506

Suicide Charge

"Why are you panicking?!" Lorist cried as he drew his sword and shielded Jinolio.

Clang! Clang! Clang! He parried more than ten arrows instantly. Cries of pain rang out all over the rest of his ship. The empty deck had been covered in arrows. The unshielded artillerymen and catapult operators had nowhere to hide and a third now lay dead and dying.

Damn it! Lorist's heart sunk.

Most of his men wore a layer of waterbeast leather that improved buoyancy instead of the usual armor. He trusted in his cannons and thought the enemy would be exterminated long before they had a chance to get into range to use their own weapons. His men were now paying for his shortsightedness.

He didn't think Invincible would drag them down with them. They ignored the fact that the 60 plus ships ahead of them had been immobilized and destroyed by the chain shot and flaming rocks. They didn't retreat. Instead, they charged right through their own wrecks. Now they were within range of their own weapons and were beginning to reap his men's lives.

The rain didn't stop.

Lorist never imagined this would happen. His men were cowering wherever they could, not one of his weapons was returning fire. Only the Invincible fleet could pull this off. They shot one ship at a time, when one had to reload, another took over, making sure that the arrows never stopped falling on their enemies. If only he'd kept a few ballistae he could have returned fire. He couldn't sink ships with them, but they could keep the enemy suppressed while the rest of his weaponry did that job.

"Sixty marks and -- agh!"

The crew soon plopped down, its nest empty.

Lorist jumped off the deck.

"Joe, protect Jinolio."

He rushed to one of the catapults, grabbing its lever and trying to reset it. Ovidis rushed over.

"Let me do it, Your Grace."

Lorist drew his sword again and started parrying the incoming arrows.

"Get a few sacks of gunpowder from the cabin! Have the cannons fire again!"

Ovidis rushed into the cabin despite the rain. Soon, the bronze booming sounded again. They couldn't sink the firing ships easily, but the ones already on fire were a different matter. They were half-sunk already. As the flames faded away, the breeze unveiled the enemy. They were on half-sail. A few rows behind them came the Sabnims. Their decks teemed with archers.

Lorist kicked the lever, and a rock flew.

"Load the catapult with gunpowder and get me oiled rope! Cut off half and ignite it, quick!" shouted Lorist to Ovidis, who was coming out of the cabin with a few sacks of gunpowder.

Ovidis cut half a piece of oiled rope with his sword just as a flaming arrow landed by his feet, setting the rope on fire. Lorist pulled the lever again, and the catapult sent the bag flying.

It quickly turned into a tiny dot. A bright flash exploded just as it was about to hit the deck. The arches in the vicinity vanished.

"Quick, keep firing like that!"

Ovidis jumped in front of Lorist.

"Let us do it. Take back command."

The surviving sailors heeded the call and soon the second bag of gunpowder flew. There were enough uninjured crew to man seven catapults. Lorist had one run back

and forth below decks ferrying bags of gunpowder for the rest to fire. Lorist and Ovidis focused on parrying the arrows.

After a flurry of flinging and explosions, the rain stopped. The charging wedge was reduced to a V, but they kept charging. The cannon-equipped ships continued to fire nonstop, with barely any effect. Mainly because the flaming ships shielded the rest. They weren't the usual, flimsy merchant ships. They were ablaze, but they just refused to sink.

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Penelope hid his head in shame. He had fought a hundred battles, but he didn't have his men's bravery. When the 60 Daws lost their masts, collided with the second row, and were being assailed by catapults, he panicked. His first thought was to retreat. He did it in the name of preserving the fleet, but deep down he knew it was just to save his life. It didn't help that no one questioned his order. They'd finally found a countermeasure to the enemy, but these were losses they'd never suffered, and now they were using catapults as well? Was everything with the Norton name behind it destined to be more impressive than anything anyone else had? Even their catapults were better than what his side had.

"We can't retreat!" called a determined voice just as Penelope announced the order.

Serihanem stood out in the crucial moment and changed everyone's minds. They decided to fight the Norton bastards to the death even if they only bloodied their nose. It wasn't like they would ever get such a chance again. The Nortons were bastards, but they weren't stupid. They'd have a new tactic or technology next time and things would only get worse. This was their one and only chance.

"We have a chance at victory as well!" Serihanem shouted.

He'd predicted this would happen to the vanguard, so he'd kept their corsairs back. If they could charge through and make it to the enemy ships, they still had all their close quarters strength intact and could wipe the enemy out.

Everyone cheered and their resolve returned. The enemy's painful wails shortly after only bolstered their resolve. Not long after, however, the enemy retaliated. A bag with a flaming rope soared over the burning ships and exploded right above their decks.

"What the hell?!"

"Forget about it!" Serihanem shouted, "Forget about everything! Just charge forward!"

The horns blared. The men shouted. The ships charged. Everyone ignored the intermittent explosions, the smell of burnt flesh, and the cries of their friends and comrades.

The enemy cannons fired incessantly. The ships shook with every boom. But no one cared anymore. They saw only the devils in front of them and heard only their own desire to kill.

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A man-sized rock bounced on the deck next to Lorist. The man only glanced at it momentarily before turning back to the enemy ships barreling towards them.

"Quick, prepare the chain shot!" instructed Howard impatiently.

Only four of the ten cannons on the deck were still manned. The rest were abandoned, their crew laying dead or dying somewhere nearby.

"We're out!" yelled an artilleryman.

Howard watched the enemy ships close in.

"Prepare the scatter shot, then! Get a sword or spear for each of you as well! Prepare to repel boarders!"

His words had barely left his mouth when a massive explosion wracked the ship to his left. His eye settled on it just in time to see one of the wheeled cannons splash into the water in front of the ship.

"Fuck them! What the hell are they doing?!" he roared.

Someone must have dropped a match onto the store, or they'd used too much gunpowder and blew up the cannon.

The enemy's cheers drifted on the breeze soon after. The enemy's weapon glints were starting to break through the smoke as they closed in. Each rammer had 24 rowers, twelve to a side, and they pulled with all their might.

"Rammers! Lower the cannons! Fire the scatter shot!"

All the artillerymen were familiar with these rammers. Scatter shot was the most effect. So everyone was ready with it. Unfortunately they were already too close. The shot didn't have time to spread out enough, so they couldn't hit multiple ships with one shot. Only thirty of the incoming 100 were hit.

A few seconds later the first rammers made contact. Grappling hooks soon sunk their teeth into the railings, and enemy corsairs started pouring onto the decks. Soon booming cannons were replaced with clanging swords.

Lorist's gaze settled on a Sabnim nearby. It was ramming into a whaling ship a bit down the line. The ship creaked and started to split in half. It held, only to be swarmed by enemy corsairs like ants swarming a carcass.

The crews still with their cannons turned them on the boarding enemies and turned them into a paste, but the rest just kept charging.

Lorist's gaze froze. "Jinolio!"

"Yes!"

"Order the Saws on the right flank to move in! Form a secondary firing line on the flank and splinter the enemy ships! Bring the guards in the cabin out as well! I'm going to clean up the mess!"

"Yes!"

Chapter 507

Messed Up Victory

Lorist was very frustrated. The overall battle was going as planned, but everything smaller than the broadest direction was completely messed up. This was his second lesson at sea, a second failure to be properly cautious of his enemy. He'd underestimated his enemy's resolve to kill him and his men.

There were no fools in the game. He had thought he could conquer the whole battlefield by using anachronistic bronze cannons, but the enemy used such a simple method to counteract him. He couldn't forget this lesson, lest he suffer an even worse one in the future.

Half a head wearing a black bandana rose from the railings. The first boarder. The whaling ships weren't very small or low in the water, so his arms had to be tired from the climb. The moment an artilleryman spotted him, he cried and hurriedly picked up the pike. An arrow dug into the head before the artilleryman could strike. The head vanished without a sound.

Lorist looked and saw Josk in the crow's nest. He held his green bow... truly domineering. Not only did he kill every boarder the moment their heads appeared, he even took care of the sailors climbing up the neighbouring ships. The enemy corsairs were nailed to the hull like sausages on toothpicks.

His display attracted the enemy's attention quickly. A dozen archers fortunate enough to survive the last barrage drew their bows and aimed. Josk, however, didn't dodge. He merely grabbed a few and shot them back.

"Howard! We're about to get into CQC. We'll deal with the boarders, you focus on the Sabnim just in front! Keep the rest from getting on board!" Lorist yelled.

"Understood!" Howard immediately moved four cannons to the helm.

Agitated cries echoed over from the left. A few Daws stuck to a whaling ship. The two sides were fighting on the deck already and its cannons were silent.

Of all the combatants fighting up and down the line, Reidy was the most ferocious. No one could stand against him. A few gold-ranked corsairs had charged at him at one point. They were all past on the deck now.

Two thousand guards had come with Lorist, spread across the whaling ships. Each ship had a hundred of his guards and 200 corsairs. Most were now caught up in the fighting. One ship's deck was still completely empty, however. The boarders were pouring onto the ship endlessly.

Lorist's own ship had no corsairs, just 500 of his guards. They stood side by side with Lorist, ready to face their enemy.

"Jinolio, have the Daws withdraw and put some distance between them and the enemy. They have to keep firing. Peel the ticks off our ship!"

"Right away!"

"Be careful! Collision imminent!"

The whaling ship shook horribly immediately and half the guards lost their footing.

The flaming ships clamped between the whaling ships and the Invincible's Daws creaked audibly. Their structures were crumbling. Only their frames still remained, like skeletons refusing to die.

A few of the burning planks fell onto the ships nearby but nobody bothered. They focused solely on their enemies.

"Kill them!"

Countless corsairs jumped over the small gap to the other ship. They couldn't get a grip, however, and simply tumbled into the water. They had to discard their weapons and climb up slowly, searching meticulously for places to grasp with every step. Despite this setback, the enemy ships were soon swarming with Invincible corsairs.

Those who had and used grappling hooks, were already on deck fighting. They died by the bushel, however. Lorist didn't even get a chance to kill a few, he just stood there watching his men slaughter the enemy. The deck was soon cleared, and the men started flinging javelins, spears, and axes at the men still climbing up the hull or waiting for their turn on the ships below. Those close to grappling hooks cut through

the rope, sending those clinging onto them tumbling into the water below or onto the decks below.

The ship shook again, it was harsher this time, enough to make Lorist stumble to keep his balance. He turned his gaze in the direction the hit came from and noticed boarders pouring in from four Daws on the other side of the ship. He darted over and started harvesting.

Soon after the cannons fired again. He caught the aftermath in the corner of his eyes. Several dozen enemies on the nearby Sabnim's decks vanished. Only two of the four cannons were focused on the ship, however. The other two pointed in the opposite direction, firing at a Daw to the ship's stern. The charging enemies vanished in an instant, but a few swung onto the ship from their ship's masts. Howard made short work of them but was soon after pushed into a corner by several gold-ranked corsairs fighting together.

Josk noticed this as well and ended one. An instant later Howard struck another distracted by his comrade's demise. With that the last boarder on the deck was dead. They now only had to keep mopping up the rest as they tried to climb up.

The enemy noticed this unnaturally large ship in the middle of the formation seemed to be faring much better than the rest. It had to be their flagship. A horn sounded and another group of ships charged at it, firing as they went.

Howard didn't sit by idly, however. He immediately turned his cannons on the new foes. Josk jumped down from the nest. A rope caught his feet halfway down, however, and he was left swinging back and forth halfway to the deck. He quickly cut the rope, but landed awkwardly next to Lorist, cursing.

As the enemy ships closed in, their more accurate weapons such as bows could be used. The height of Lorist's ship, however, meant they couldn't target the deck directly. Josk in the crow's nest, however, was a different story.

"There are at least a hundred high-tier fighters and a thousand or so sailors in total." Howard reported.

"Let them come. We'll deal with them, you just focus on their decks and ranged weapons. I don't want any nasty surprises again," ordered Lorist.

He dearly wanted to have a good slaughter.

The enemy had indeed moved their elites to his ship. He saw just over a hundred golden blade glows. The rest had silver glows. The six in the middle must be their commanders, they gave off the most bloody feeling. Blademasters.

It only took Howards cannons two volleys to completely decimate the enemy ballistae. Howard was just about to order another volley when he noticed there was nothing left to shoot at.

Two figures landed on the deck and charged straight for Lorist. He smiled at them warmly, like he was welcoming dear friends to his home for tea; dodged their attacks and beheaded them. Their corpses collapsed limply, spewing fluids over the salty deck. The ten a bit further away also charging at him stopped and stared incredulously at the scene.

Huh? What's going on? Weren't you going to come and kill me? Don't chicken out, you cowards! I want a good fight!

"Step back," Lorist ordered the guards beside him.

The men obliged, leaving a small arena in which their lord could enjoy himself. Three more figures leapt onto the deck and took up positions in front of the ten.

"What's going on?" asked Penelope.

He had held back and allowed his subordinates to go up first. He expected to be greeted by a chaotic melee. Instead his men were just standing there, staring at the enemy.

What the hell?!

"L-look..." said one.

Penelope turned his gaze to the two corpses. Weren't they Blademasters Abigail and Fezny? He'd dueled Fezny before. The fight lasted a thousand bouts.

The gold-ranked swordsman muttered as he pointed at Lorist, "One... one move..."

Penelope's heart burst out of his chest. This was not good. He'd forgotten why he didn't want to join this fight. He licked his dry lips.

"I am the commander of Invincible, Viscount Penelope. Who are you?"

"This is my fleet," Lorist answered, "I am Norton Lorist, Duke of The Northlands. I will give you one chance. Everyone charge me at once. I've been waiting all day and my patience is running thin."

Come here you bastards! Fight me already!"

"The... the bloodblade saint..." muttered Penelope.

Penelope's companion dropped his sword, almost like it had just slipped out of his hand.

"I surrender. I ask only to be treated as befits my station."

"I... I--" Penelope discarded his weapon unwillingly as well. "--I... I also surrender and. I ask only to be treated as befits my station."

Chapter 508

Meeting After the Battle

The clash, soon to be known as the Battle of Cape Romani would be a matter of debate among historians for generations. Many believed it was the beginning of the age of cannons. House Norton ruled the seas from that day onwards. Many others, however, believed the outcome wasn't as exaggerated as the other thought. They considered the cannons much less of a threat. Invincible did suffer heavy losses, but they didn't think the outcome was as much of an overwhelming victory for Northsea.

If Invincible hadn't attacked the three ships in the middle where duke Lorist had been and had instead focused on the flanks, they might even have won. It didn't help that Northsea's performance had been rather lackluster. They'd let their guard down, which was why they were forced into close quarters combat. Their saving grace was that the enemy focused all their elites on their flagship where their swordsaint was. Had the enemy instead deployed their elites to other ships, the situation would have been unsalvageable.

Unfortunately, that's not what they did. They could not be criticised for their choices too much. What normal force would deploy a newly ascended swordsaint to a naval engagement? And what swordsaint would agree to fighting on a ship in the middle of nowhere? Swordsaints were the absolute pinnacle of power on the continent. Why would they serve on a shitty ship?

Lorist, however, was not as pretentious and self-important as was the norm for those of his stature or power. He didn't mind going to the front or duking it out on ships. If his participation could spare his men and end the fighting quickly so he could get back to ruling his lands, he would gladly participate. And he had to admit that he really enjoyed slaughtering helpless weaklings, even more so killing strong opponents after a good fight.

For all the arguments about the details, one thing was not disputed. Penelope surrendered without so much as a single swordstroke. He was unlucky to meet such a strong opponent. His surrender broke the fleet's back, and it routed.

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"Why would you do that?!" Lorist nearly screamed.

The enemy's strongest had finally come and he could have a good fight... only to surrender just as he was raising his sword! *Is that why you rushed over? To fucking surrender?!*

"I don't want to die," answered Penelope frankly. He regretted his actions already. Why did he have to come to the front-line? His gut had told him to steer clear of this place, but he still came! Then again, how was he supposed to know the enemy's single sword saint would be here? He was not going to throw his life away. He'd already earned a fief and a title, so why'd he fight to the death here if he could just surrender, pay the ransom, and return home and live out an early retirement at home?

He could not be blamed even if the entire fleet was wiped out. He had not made any mistakes, he had just been unlucky. In fact, the fleet would not have made it even this far if his leadership had not been spectacular. Surrendering to a sword saint after meeting them on the field was no shame. No one could expect him to try to fight the man, nor could anyone criticize him for surrendering to him.

Lorist finally understood why his side had been so terrified when they'd run into the windstorm sword saint that day. Even the usually brash Fisablen had curled up into a ball. Lorist had been the only one to face his enemy without fear because he already suspected that he himself was also a sword saint. Despite that, he could not accept such an unseemly display, especially not when it robbed him of a good slaughter.

"Fine, you'll get your treatment. Pick up your swords again and I'll let you take two men with you. Order the rest of the fleet to surrender and I'll spare them as well. If you don't, then I'll kill you as well," Lorist gave in.

These fool's gaze made him feel uncomfortable. It felt like a bunch of kids were staring at him, and adult, bullying them; like he had no business being here. True, it was a little overkill for a sword saint to be in this battle, but that was why he'd come in the first place. His presence could make things go a lot smoother, so why wouldn't he come?

"Thank you, Lord Norton," Penelope bowed elegantly.

He immediately ordered his men to surrender and had the order passed along to the rest of the fleet. Soon the rest of the ships raised the white.

Lorist left dealing with things to his subordinates. The battle had ended, but everyone

was still running around like crazy, if anything, they were now even busier than during the battle. Things only calmed down as the sun began to drink water. Senbaud returned from chasing a couple of the stragglers that fled. All but two had been sunk, but unfortunately those two had escaped. When Senbaud described the two ships to the captives, they told Lorist and the admiral that one of the ships was Serihanem's, that old bastard acquaintance of Lorist's.

When Lorist enquired about the man's presence in the fleet, he finally learned that the brat was the one who came up with the counter to his cannons. Jinolio immediately tried to move Senbaud back out after the bastard, but Lorist stopped him.

Serihanem was a bastard, but not a fool. He would definitely have anticipated such a deployment and have made preparations accordingly. Sending any ships after him would only be putting what was left of their fleet in unnecessary danger. As such, news of Invincible's defeat and complete eradication reached the Union.

That night, Lorist held a massive banquet to celebrate the victory and remember the fallen. As custom dictated, the enemy nobles were invited as well. Among them, Lorist saw a familiar face, though he couldn't put a name to it.

"Revered Lord Duke, I am Archduke Lorf Fustat, a rank 1 blademaster," the duke replied upon Lorist's inquiry.

YOU! his voice shrilled in his head, *No wonder you looked familiar, you fucker!*

"Why are you here?"

He was supposed to be the archduke of Jigda, rumours had it that he had more power than the king. Why was he out here?

"The Union is an ally. We need their help against Romon and Khawistan, so we came to help them when they asked it. I deployed my Firebird legion with the fleet to help in the fight and any invasions it might have launched. It is troubling that my legion became captives before they could have a decent fight."

Fustat even joked about the shame the legion's capture would bring to his family. It was supposed to be the kingdom's greatest force, but it had fallen to the enemy without crossing swords even once. He just wanted to pay his ransom and leave with his legion as quickly as possible to mitigate the damage to his reputation.

"I beg that you allow me to pay my ransom and that of my legion and leave. I promise neither I, my legion, nor any of the people over which I have influence, will get involved with the Union and its conflicts with you again."

"Why rush, Archduke?--" Lorist waved his hand. "--It's great to meet you again after so many years. Speaking of meeting again, how's your wife, Duchess Prinna?"

Fustat stared at Lorist wide-eyed."Have we met before? You... you know of my wife, Wenna?"

Lorist cracked a smile.

"Of course. We met nearly two decades ago when I was still just a student at Dawn Academy. You were just a Marquis then. Your wife was still Miss Windsor Prinna. In fact, she and I were dating at the time. We competed against one another for her hand but you won. How fortunes can be fickle, heh Archduke? You won on the battlefield of love, but I've won on the field of war."

The archduke's face paled instantly. His fellow captives listened carefully, forgetting the decorum of nobility, and the humility of prisoners. Everyone loved gossip, especially where it concerned this enigmatic saint. This was far too enticing to ignore. Oh how their peers would love to hear this when they finally returned

"You... it was you..." Lorf muttered non-stop. He had completely forgotten about the little man his wife had liked when they met. Now the little man was Duke of the Northlands, the continent's newest and youngest sword saint, and his captor.

I'm dead... It's all over...

Chapter 509

Decision and Promise

Lorist looked at the pale-faced archduke with an odd smile.

Kill you? Why would I? It's been 18 years. It's not like it was your fault either. That bitch left me for you because she wanted to. It doesn't really matter why she did either. She was the first one I loved, in both my lives, and she broke my heart for her greed.

First loves were the sweetest, but their pain was also the worse. While it didn't dominate his thoughts, the pain still ached in his heart. But it also revealed to him this world's true nature. Nobles were heroes and peasants were villains^[1].

He'd never had the thought of getting back at the then marquis. And striking at him now would only make him seem like someone who was vindictive over things that should long since have been put to rest. Destiny was cruel and unpredictable. He'd never thought his former lover's husband would be in front of him now.

Were he still that same common mercenary Lorf would have given him a few gold coins and gone back to his wife to tell of the funny encounter. No doubt he'd have praised her foresight as she'd still be a commoner's wife if she'd turned him down. It might actually have spurred the woman on to work even harder for his favour.

That was not the timeline in which they lived, however. Lorist was a duke with the power of a king, perhaps even more if his sword saint status was considered as well. He was a legend, a dragon amongst men. Archduke Lorf could not bend his neck back far enough to look up at him. Lorf was even less compared to Lorist now than Lorist had been to him all those years ago.

Lorist lost interest immediately, even as his ex-opponent in love's face continued to pale. He raised his cup with a smile.

"Don't worry, Archduke. I was just reminiscing on simpler days. Time had flown by us; eighteen years have passed and now we are involved in a continent-spanning war. Our last encounter saw me as just a lowly student-mercenary and you just a marquis. Neither of us are anywhere near where we were back then, though the rankings have

reversed. Now you are an archduke and I am a duke-swordsaint. So much has changed. Here's to a past worth remembering. Cheers."

Lorf looked down at his cup to see it already empty. Wasn't it full just a moment ago? When had he emptied it? He couldn't even remember what it tasted like. When he sat back down a cold, wet shirt pressed against his back. Penelope, sat beside him, joined the toast.

"You mentioned you worked as a mercenary back in Morante? Could you tell us a few stories?"

Alcohol worked wonders on Lorist's tongue, so he quickly started reciting his autobiography. When his grand tale came to his fights against three thousand silver swordsmen, everyone's jaws met the ground.

"So Iron Locke, the Silver Undefeated was actually you?! Invincible sent hundreds of silvers to fight you. Obviously none won! I lost several hundred gold Fordes because you..."

Lorist laughed happily.

"Your ascension sounds much more plausible now. Iron Locke, the Silver Undefeated is still a legend in the city. I was just a two-star gold rank back then. If only I'd not been working on a breakthrough, I'd have loved to see your matches. You were gone by the time I emerged from my training retreat."

Penelope obviously spoke out of politeness. He hadn't been at all interested in meeting some nondescript iron rank. It was just a topic thrown around the dinner table and bar to liven up the conversation. He did feel it was a shame the young man returned to his homeland. If he'd stayed in the city, he'd have become the Union's first homebred swordsaint. He'd also have been one of its top nobles. Invincible would still rule the sea and might even have been armed with cannons! The Union really let their fortune slip through their fingers.

Lorist smiled silently. He had some idea what Penelope was thinking. It was great fantasizing but would likely never have happened. If he'd stayed in the Union, he would not have been under any of the pressures that forced his improvement. He'd likely just have spent his entire life as an instructor at Dawn Academy. The Union would also never have become the continent's largest power -- however brief their

stint at the top ended up being -- since he was the spur that pushed them in that direction by leaking the techniques for making glass.

Penelope broke out of his reverie quickly.

"Milord, may I know how you plan to deal with Invincible?"

"I would have told you eventually, but, since you've asked... The top brass can pay a ransom for their freedom. We are all nobles so I'll adhere to custom. Lorf can ransom his legion as well. Granted they don't try anything or make any trouble for me or my men whilst we wait for the money I will not make trouble for him.

"Everyone will stay on Silowas Island until the war is over. Ransoming will happen thereafter. The fleet will stay there until the war is over as well. They can return once the Union pays their ransom. I will allow individual families to ransom their husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers as well.

"Those that don't have the money can earn their freedom. They can either serve in Northsea for a time, five years at least. They'll get half-pay in that time. If they choose not to, they can join my land-based forces for the same time, but they won't be paid, they'll only get room, board, and cloth. Either way, they'll be free to leave once their five years are up.

"You nobles may join me in Ragebear or stand by my side as I work to end this war quickly. You will be allowed to carry weapons as noble right dictates and keep two guards and two servants with you. Living conditions will unfortunately be less than ideal, this is a time of war, after all."

Such was the reality of feudal nobility. Nobles always had better treatment, even when captive. Their watchers still had to bow to them and speak and behave politely even though they were their prisoners.

Everyone was relieved. No one had wanted this. Everyone had thought it would end when the Union accepted Auguslo's offer for peace talks and sent an envoy. Those not at the very top of the Union's power structure were just as surprised by the Union's move as everyone else.

They'd also feared the duke would be as uncultured as his king. The bastard had declared their nobility void after the attack because they 'lacked the courage and decorum expected of nobles,' they 'knew only how to scheme and plot in the shadows

like the lowly and shameless rats they were', and massacred thousands of nobles and their families as he marched across the plains.

The Union retaliated in kind and relieved thousand of Andinaq noble heads of their bodies when they counter-attacked. The three years of war which had now passed had engrained hatreds in the two sides' hearts that would remain for generations, even centuries even if the war ended today and never started up again.

Until their clashes with Northsea, Invincible had not seen any of the war, but news of the bloody battles and reprisals still reached their sails. Despite Lorist's assurances, they could not sleep easily. He did have a far greater reputation than his king though. He, at least, as not known for lying, breaking promises, and deceiving others, so his words carried more weight.

Lorf was also much calmer now. Lorist may be a sword saint, but he had none of the pretension and arrogance Lorf had come to expect from people with that title. He was very reasonable, even likeable. It appeared that he treated everyone the same except when they acted in a way that made it necessary or appropriate to treat them otherwise. For one, he hadn't treated his captives as though he was looking down on them so far. Though he was bound to have different thoughts, that he kept them out of public was already a good sign.

"Duke Norton," Lorf said as he stood up, "may I contact my house so they can send someone to negotiate the ransom?"

"Hmm..." Lorist looked at Lorf and rapped his fingers on the table.

"I plan nothing, Lord Duke. I am fully willing to comply with what you've set out. I wish only for this war to an end as quickly as possible so the damage it wreaks can be limited as much as possible. I am still Jigda's Archduke and must tend to certain duties. I trust you know what I mean. We nobles are not truly free people. We must act in the interests of our houses.

"Jigda is far from this conflict and has no contact with Andinaq. We deployed only because of our friendship with the Union, not out of malice for Andinaq. We've not suffered any losses in this war yet and have not caused any harm to your side either. It could be said that we've not clashed with your house at all and as such have no grudge or bad blood between us. I wish only to explain this to my house clearly so they do not create conflict where there need be none. I also wish to keep my house from

making mistakes and leaving themselves vulnerable to espionage from those that wish to take our place."

Most of the noble voiced their agreement. Everyone understood the predicament in which the archduke found himself. It wouldn't have been as pressing an issue had Serihanem not escaped. Word would have taken much longer to reach home and there would have been time to settle in and gain the duke's trust, but things were not that simple now. Serihanem had escaped and word was quickly on its way everywhere. Time was of the essence.

"Very well. I would be no less anxious were our roles reversed. You may send two servants back with the message, but they must return with your houses reply and negotiator. I will have a small boat ready when you are done."

Lorf bowed deeply.

"Thank you, Lord duke. May we never be enemies."

Lorist laughed heartily.

"While our reasons may be different, we do have that wish in common. I do not like war. If I had my way, I would live out my entire life without ever having to march onto the field. Unfortunately the world has not been cooperative. A toast then, to a swift end to this bloody war!"

The banquet went on until the sun rose above the continent to the east. Everyone was drunk and merry. Lorist was cursed by his cultivation, however, cursed to be sober no matter how much he drank. He had his reasons for treating the nobles well. He was not one to bother with noble custom unless it was necessary. He cut corners where he could. No one would know what had really happened between him and the nobles out here, so he could have just killed them all. He didn't because he needed them to help keep the peace once he occupied Morante, and to force the Union to capitulate and surrender. Lorf was a great candidate to that end.

[1] Which is actually true. Villain comes from the Old French word vilein, and traditionally meant someone who was uncultured, uneducated, and boorish. Peasants were often referred to as villains and the language they spoke as vulgar (hence vulgar Latin and vulgar French). Which matches with the Latin origin of the word 'vulgus',

which meant 'common people'.

Chapter 510

Plan

Senbaud was ready to escort the 800 transport ships to Cape Romani three days later. He asked to meet Lorist when they were near the coast.

"Your Grace, this is the list of people for the transport fleet as well as an inventory of the supplies they're carrying. There are 843 large to medium ships. Among them, 103 Dams are carrying the 100 thousand Union recruits. Most are just barely more than kids. More than 500 ships carry food and most of the rest carry military supplies. Oh, 38 Dams are also carrying ten thousand buckets of green vine glue," Senbaud reported.

Why would the Union need so much green vine glue? That's almost how much Romon produces in a year! Lorist thought.

According to the list, Twinhead Dragon had spent a lot of money to purchase a year's worth of the green vine glue from Romon, at three-tenths more than market price.

Weird... Why does Twinhead Dragon need so much glue?

After some thought, Lorist began to understand what was going on. After three years of war, most of the plains were rubble. The guild purchased so much glue to rebuild the area. Perhaps they could even use the glue to rebuild the destroyed walls and fortifications.

Each bucket of weighed 50 kilograms, so ten thousand would make 500 thousand kilograms. With that much vine glue as a binder, Lorist could finally do something he'd thought of in the last couple of days.

"Wonderful. I was just lacking laborers," Lorist exclaimed, "When we get to short, let the recruits off. I need them for something. Tell them if they serve us properly for five years, they'll get their freedom back and be allowed to return home. Also, immediately offload the glue when you get to shore as well."

"Oh? Your Grace, aren't we sending the glue back to the dominion?"

"Follow me," said Lorist. He brought him out of the captain's cabin onto the deck.

"See that? I plan to build a crossing here. This will be where we start taking control of the sunshine seas and the golden coast."

Senbaud opened his eyes wide and stared out over the deck but saw nothing but ocean. His gaze finally settled where Lorist pointed and he saw Cape Romani. Cliffs burst out of the ocean like giant sea creatures coming up for air.

He wants to build a castle there?

Lorist, having not received a response, knew he was way off the mark.

"What are you looking at? I'm not going to build it on the cliff. I'm going to have something built on the reef."

Senbaud finally realized Lorist's finger was pointed at the ocean surface. However, it simply wasn't possible to build a castle on the reef. The deepest areas were ten meters while the shallower parts were around three meters. Even after the tide receded, only a part of the reef would be exposed. Unless Lorist was trying to fill up the reef to reclaim the land, there was no way a castle could be built.

"This reef is near the golden sea routes. If we build a castle and use it as a customs point, we only have to station a few Blitzes here and fit the walls with some cannons to control the entire region. We'll cut the Union off from the sea completely. We won't have to risk our ships in the south either. This will be our safe spot in the south as Silwas is in the north. It also allows us to have a supply station in the south."

Lorist had gotten the idea after receiving Howard's report and had already sent people to survey the region.

"But, Your Grace, this is too big," Senbaud said, "We are still at war. Even if we have the supplies and 100 thousand laborers, reclaiming the land around the reef isn't possible quickly enough to avoid getting attacked. This will take years. Isn't it a little too wasteful to invest so much into such a risky project?"

Lorist laughed.

"If we really have to spend three or four years, it really wouldn't be worth it. But we can begin construction in two months. We'll be done in half a year!"

"What?! Impossible! Your Grace, how are you going to fill this entire area in in just two months? Even if we have 100 thousand laborers, it's still impossible!"

"It's possible. We don't have to fill in the area at all," Lorist laughed, "Senbaud, the battle's outcome is out. Only 147 of INvincible's original 472 ship are still afloat. Putting aside the 74 Daws we destroyed, the remaining 250 ships are badly damaged.

"Fixing them temporarily will let us take them to Hidegold Bay, but they'll just sit there and rot. And we can't keep using them in their current state. They won't survive the north either, so there's no way to send them to Northsea to be repaired properly.

"They're useless to us. If so, then why not make some use of them? We'll fill them up and sunk them around the reef to make a dam. There's an oval-shaped lagoon in the middle of the reef around ten to twenty meters deep. If we remove a couple of the rocks, the lagoon can be a harbor. The buckets of glue will be really useful. We don't even need to stir them. We just have to thin the glue and pour it into the ships. When it solidifies and sinks, the ships will be walls."

Lorist had recycling on his mind all along. He would first build a makeshift dam before building a wall atop them where cannons could be installed so he could control the region. The house would also have a naval base near the sunshine seas.

Senbaud was struck and admired his lord so much he almost wanted to kneel on all fours. His lord was practically making something out of nothing. Castles built near reefs were usually unassailable. What kind of ship could take on a castle? It would create a massive chokepoint and they could use it to strangle the Union.

"Milord is wise," Senbaud said with a slap to his forehead, "I didn't think such a thing could be done. If we really build a castle here, we can get another source of income from the tolls as well. No private ships will be allowed, or able, to pass without paying. May I use the funds from that to expand our fleet?"

Lorist was surprised.

"Senbaud, I've already commissioned ten Blitzes. What more could you want? We're also going to change up the Daws and make them support ships. Besides, what do you mean by toll?"

The moment he heard Lorist was going to have ten more Blitzes built, Senbaud burst.

"A maritime toll is a hidden tax. When Invincible controlled the seas, all privately owned ships passing through had to pay a fee for use of the waters and protection from pirates. If a ship was caught without the right permit, it was confiscated and became property of the fleet. As far as I know, a Dam pays 25 gold Fordes a year for its permit."

"Wait, wasn't Chikdor the real hegemon of the south? When did Invincible become the lord?"

"It wouldn't be wrong to call Chikdor the hegemons since they do have a huge share of Invincible, but when Wessia was wiped out, Twinhead Dragon absorbed the rest of their shares in the fleet.

"On the surface, Invincible was the kings of the south. It could do anything in the Union's name and the nations near the golden coast had to endure everything. Chikdor managed to secretly assume control of Invincible while monopolizing most of the produce of the southern nations. Their ships and trading fleets are the largest apart from Invincible.

"Some ports and harbors are completely under Chikdor's control. They have a huge trading network in the nations in the south. However, they didn't really prioritize their business, they focused on taking advantage of the profits of other people instead." explained Senbaud.

"Oh, I see. You mentioned we can collect a huge sum from tolls? What if the ships don't want to come?"

"Hehe, don't worry, Milord. If the merchants only sail around the south, they won't earn anything. The profitable routes are all between the north and south, going past here."

"Is that so? And why do you know so much? Are you privately in this line of business as

"I'm not doing anything like that. I heard this from the merchants I caught. They helped me a bunch and stopped the men of Invincible from sinking their ships and sabotaging the supplies. I asked them what they wanted as a reward and they mentioned wanting an audience with Your Lordship."

"Why do they want to meet me?"

Senbaud scratched his head.

"Their ships were requisitioned by Invincible. Now we have them. They hope you'll return their ships to them. I think the help they lent me in securing the fleet is worth only a few gold coins. We don't need to give them the ships."

"I guess I won't be meeting them then," Lorist said, scratching his chin, "Accept their request and return their ships."

"But, Milord, that's 300 ships! It's a lot of money!"

"Give the ships back. We have 800 ships in the transport fleet, so we'll still have 500 left. It doesn't matter if we have the ships or not anyway, we don't have the men to crew them. Besides, this is a great opportunity. We couldn't expand our trade routes before, but now we can. Chikdor and Peterson kept us out of business in the south, but now they can't. This is a great chance to take hold of their trade routes. We'll give the merchants their ships and offer them good prices and protection to trade with us rather than the Union. Also, we'll show them what we can sell them when they stop by Silowas to drop off the supplies."

"Understood, Milord."

"Alright. If we can make Silowas a trade centre, the checkpoint castle will rake in profit as well. I'll do a check by the end of the year. If the profits are huge, we can consider expanding Northsea to three flotillas. That should be enough for you to sail in the north freely."

"Thank you, Milord." Senbaud's smile cracked his face in two from ear to ear.

"Senbaud, your next mission is really important. Let Howard take control of your corsairs. He will need some people to supervise the 100 thousand laborers. Take ten Blitzes with you and move the rest of our haul and captives to Silowas. I have notified Camorra to head there and make arrangements.

"As for the remaining ships, I will take them to Armatrin to meet up with the sentry legion and Firmrock. Once you've dropped everything off on Silowas, come back and watch over the construction here. Once that's done, send the laborers to Kenmays's dominion in batches. They'll go to Yungehandler from Platinum Beach."

"But, Milord, aren't you going to attack Hidegold Bay and Morante?"

"We no longer need Northsea to attack Hidegold Bay. Just look at the ships we captured. We can use them to sneak into the bay and occupy Morante."

Disguising themselves as Invincible to sail into the bay was much safer and the enemy couldn't be prepared for it. If they sent Blitzes, they would only put the enemy on alert.

"Understood, Milord. I will complete my mission."

Chapter 511

Befuddle

On the 14th day of the 6th month, seven days after the Battle of Cape Romani, Lorist finally finished making his arrangements and led the remaining ships to Armatrin Harbor. Senbaud left for Silowas with Firebird legion, the other captured sailors, and more than 300 privately owned merchant vessels a day earlier.

The Battle of Cape Romani was a costly victory. They'd lost two thousand men, and serious damage to their ships. The 16 whaling ships were completely incapacitated. It would take them months to repair and costs thousands of gold coins. Lorist decided it wasn't worth it; they were weak and outdated, so they would join the enemy ships at the bottom of the ocean as the foundations for the new castle and harbour.

Lorist arrived at Armatrin Harbor on the 21st of the 6th.

"The king sent a messenger a while back. He's asked us to deploy as quickly as possible. We've stalled saying we're waiting for you to arrive. He will notice the ships you brought and demand we deploy immediately. No doubt he'll think it's our supplies and won't let us delay any longer," Potterfang immediately reported.

Lorist laughed and waved.

"No worries. If he sends another messenger, just tell him he doesn't have to worry about the Union launching an offensive this year. We've taken their supply fleets so they don't have the means. In fact, it'll be surprising if they can hold the front-lines."

"So, we're going to attack the bay and take Morante?"

"We don't need to anymore. We're going to disguise ourselves of survivors of the battle and sail straight for Morante. The sentry legion and Firmrock should start preparing and embarking immediately. Tigersoar and Jaeger will remain here. They'll leave for the front-lines only after we take Morante. Without support from the city, their forces will crumble quickly. Wait for them to receive news of the city falling, then attack. Hit them while they're panicking and disorganized. Take as many prisoners as you can. We need a lot of new subjects for our new province."

"Understood, Your Grace!" replied all the high officers.

Lorist didn't expect that, instead of just sending a messenger, Auguslo came personally with Kenmays and Fisablen the next day. Apparently the loss of two of their strongholds on the plains the previous year had put a lot of pressure on the young would-be emperor. His forces were on the brink of collapsing. The enemy need only give them a light shove and they'd crumble. But, they didn't. He'd not been attacked even once this entire year, and half of it had already come and gone. The thought that the Union might be saddled with a problem somewhere else didn't even cross his mind, so he was left sleepless, worrying about the plot the Union had to be brewing. As such he was desperate to get Lorist on the front-lines. A sword saint and a couple hundred additional men would at least make him feel safer.

He was hysterical when he saw thousands embarking in the harbour. Lorist had to jump in and explain everything to him to calm him down. He quickly explained the goings-on on the sea for the last year. He made sure to emphasize that it was thanks to his and his men's valiant efforts that the Union could not launch any offensives, and to go into depth about how the Union had now shifted focus to him and his men. The Union had sent a hundred thousand men to Silowas, and he was moving to counter them with his two legions now embarking. He could not afford to lose Silowas, you sea. Without the island he could not support the front-lines.

Auguslo nearly emptied his stomach from relief. He could finally stop worrying about a Union plot. He decided to shower Lorist with praise rather than lunch. Among the many things he promised was to enshrine his name on a monument he was planning to build in celebration of the war and the empire's refounding.

He only stopped once Lorist tried to run away. He expressed his sincere understanding for Lorist's predicament, and suggested he give him control of the two legions he was leaving behind, Tigersoar and Jaeger. He promised to put pressure on the Union on land to pull some attention away from Lorist and increase his chances of victory at sea.

Lorist quickly turned him down.

"I appreciate Your Majesty's goodwill, but now isn't a good time. The kingdom is in a dangerous predicament and we have to remain united to resist the Union. It's not that I'm unwilling to hand Jaeger and Tigersoar over they just can't leave the harbour. I have a great track record but it is not perfect. If our retaliation fails, we have to be able

to mobilize them immediately."

Lorist took out a map of the sea off the coast and showed it to the king.

"I have word that the Union gathered 100 thousand men in the south. Jigda's also sent 50 thousand. I suspect they sent Firebird.

"They are all going to be sent against Silowas. If that is the case, I need to be ready to stand against them. There is, however, a chance that it's a ruse to get me to move my forces away from Armatrin so they can attack it instead. If that is the case and they take the city, they'll cut off our supply lines. If that is their plan, then you can be sure they'll push on the front-lines at the same time.

"I have to keep the two legions here in case that is their plan, and for in case I fail to hold Silowas."

Auguslo wiped the sweat off his forehead. This scenario was enough to give him sleepless nights again. This plan was absolutely terrifying, partly because it would be devastating, and because it was just too innovative. This had never been done before. He would never have thought of it and would have been caught completely off guard. It wasn't that people were too dumb to think about it, it was that noble honour didn't make it an option to even think about. There was only honor in fighting for land on land and fighting for water on water. Using naval forces to win a fight on land just didn't make any sense. It was, in a word, ignoble, so no one would even think about doing it.

"Your considerations are all-encompassing as usual, Locke," Auguslo said, "Tell me if you need any help. We cannot afford to lose either Armatrin or Silowas, so I will help in any way I can to make sure that doesn't happen."

"You don't have to do anything on this end. Just keep the Union occupied so they can't afford to send even more men against me. I suggest striking at a few inconsequential places. You don't have to win any actual victories, just make the enemy think you're getting restless or are testing the waters for an impending major offensive. If you can make them burn supplies, that would be even better, since they can't resupply easily now.

"If you can hold on until I wipe out Invincible, then this war will end in our victory, even if it doesn't immediately."

"Alright," Augustus agreed energetically, "Locke, I trust you will win and shatter the Union. Don't disappoint me."

I knew you loved to give out moral support, but this is just ridiculous...

"There is one more thing... I beg you treat the nobles I caught at sea as befits their standing. If we're to end this war quickly, we cannot make mortal enemies out of the entire Union. If we can show that we are the better men, the hearts of the Union's people will soften, if only slightly. If, however, we slaughter them again, the Union will only harden their hearts and resolve again to fight us to the death."

"You're right. I've vented my anger already, so now is the time to be pragmatic. I will spare the nobles and treat them as befits their standing."

Lorist returned to his tent after dealing with his visitors to find his men giggling uncontrollably.

"What's with you guys? Did you swallow too many poppy seeds?"

Loze smiled.

"Isn't turning the king down like that a little much, Your Grace? If he finds out you already destroyed Invincible, he'll not take it well and we might have him as an enemy again."

"You are right, but if he knows we're going after Morante, he'll demand to take part. When we take the city, he'll demand the lion's share of the plunder. Then he'll try to take all the glory. Morante's plunder and the glory of taking it is the lynchpin of our strategy for making a profit from this war. If we lose that, then why even bother?"

"I'm also worried that if the king gets the glory for taking the city, then he'll expand his ambitions to the whole continent. He'll certainly demand to be given the plains, and the Union will never settle for that. They can still stomach losing the lands they took from the Empire, but they will never give up their historical territory. We can take and plunder the city, but we don't have the means to hold on to it long-term. If the Union refuses to come to the table, the citizens will eventually rise up. If they do, we'll lose the city and many good soldiers. Even if that doesn't happen, we can't keep this war going much longer. The kingdom will lose if we don't end this quickly."

"If we're the only people involved in taking the city, then we can just tear it down if

worse comes to worst and leave. But the king will never let us abandon the city if he's involved. We'll have to hold it and we'll lose our entire army within its walls.

"Understand now? We must keep this plan a secret until it's accomplished."

"We won't disappoint, Your Grace!"

"Alright. Potterfang, Els, I want you ready to leave by tomorrow morning. We leave in the afternoon. Loze, Freiyar, head to the front-lines as soon as you hear we've taken the Morante. The Union has 400 thousand men on the plains. Even in their disarray they won't cave immediately. Push forward with the entire army, the king and our allies included when you see them start to withdraw or move forces away.

"We have to wipe that entire army out and leave the Union bare. They won't come to the table as long as they have a hope of winning."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Chapter 512

Occupation

On the 26th of the 6th, the ships carrying Firmrock and the sentry legion arrived at Morante. Invincible's fourth flotilla never imagined House Norton's forces would disguise themselves as their own to sneak into the bay. The battle of Cape Romani took place almost 20 days earlier, but the fleet's complete defeat was still unknown.

Serihanem, who had successfully escaped, had struck bad luck. His ships were severely damaged from the battle. He was forced to beach them shortly after escaping to avoid sinking in the middle of the ocean. It took him much longer to get home as a result. His messenger to Morante was still on the road.

As far as the Union was concerned, Invincible must have won. They were just waiting for the good news. It was odd that it would take so long for news to get back, but they didn't dare send out anymore ships before they knew of the fleet's victory. It would be suicide. The fourth flotilla was no wiser either and they certainly didn't have the manpower to face the enemy, so they couldn't send out any ships either.

So, when ships with friendly flags sailed into the harbor, they immediately accepted the ruse and cheered. Lorist made it easy for them as well. He had some of his ships bombard the flotilla as his ships sailed into the harbor, making it look like these ships had broken through a gauntlet. The enemy rushed to defend them and didn't bother with the usual checks. They did eventually realize it was a ruse, but by then it was already too late.

Penelope watched two of his captor's blademasters leading units against the city's harbor defenses from the deck of one of the ships.

"This is the first time Morante has fallen. It's all my fault. If I hadn't been this incompetent..."

Lorist laughed.

"There's always a first. You should stop blaming yourself and giving credit where credit is due. It's not your incompetence that defeat your fleet, it's my brilliance. The

Union wasn't built on a nobility system, it doesn't work with the kind of people and the kind of country the Union was. You destroyed yourselves. Morante used to be free and lively, I used to love the city.

"Now it's a rotting corpse. If by some miracle we don't conquer it today, it might hold out another decade, maybe even two or three, but it won't make it another fifty years. Someone else will come along and burn it. Seeing your city burn is much like a woman watching her rose being opened for the first time. It hurts really bad the first time, but by the third you hardly even notice, and by the fifth you enjoy it."

"Pffft!"

Jinolio and the guards burst out laughing. Even Duke Lorf couldn't contain his chuckle. The Union was his kingdom's overlords in all but name. He kept up a smile to placate them, but thought nothing of watching them burn if it didn't bode ill for him; in fact, he enjoyed the sight.

The Union officers within earshot turned red. They might have stabbed Lorist immediately if not for him being a swordsaint.

"D-d-duke Norton... Y-y-you're going too far. How is this noble behavior?" Penelope voiced his objection.

"My words may be crude, but they are true," Lorist rebutted calmly, "Apologies, gentlemen. I studied in this city for a decade and even worked as a mercenary here, so I tend to forget I'm a noble when I'm here. This is what Morante used to mean to me. If not for the sake of ending this war, I wouldn't have come for the city. I'd much rather burn everything outside the city and have it surrender without having to break a stone.

"Don't look at me like that. I've mastered gunpowder. If I move the cannons onto land, can you hold onto the plains? I am going straight for the city because I want to avoid another million deaths. My intentions are sincere. If the Union surrenders, we will withdraw without a word. Peace depends on you now, not me."

Penelope froze. Even Duke Lorf didn't think Lorist would start lecturing them. When Penelope snapped out of his reverie, he bowed respectfully.

"We will take your words to heart. We are willing to do all we can to stop this war."

Lorist stroked his nose as he nodded.

"If you do your best, we will soon have peace again. My word is my bond, I told you we'll leave once the Union surrenders, and we will. Alright, time is of the essence. Let us disembark. There is much to be done."

The surprise attack progressed quickly. Shuss and Els took the walls without trouble and the rest charged into the city. The locals even cheered them on, thinking they were reinforcements. The men didn't know how to react. Fortunately, they were disciplined and marched forward wordlessly. The invasion thus turned into a parade of sorts. Lorist's men marched through the streets in neat formation and the local spectators from the sidewalks, windows, and rooftops. Some of the more military-minded praised the army's armor and discipline. Everyone quickly cheered for their impending victory over the vile empire.

It wasn't that nobody questioned the Ragebear insignia on their armor. They just didn't think it was possible for House Norton's forces to march on Morante's streets openly. The men didn't lift their banners either, so they didn't have anything to corroborate the idea. In the end people assumed it must be a southern noble house that used a bear as well, but no one knew whom that might be.

The outer city's conquest was an easy matter. Most of the forces were on the front-lines, leaving the city only sparsely defended. Just eight thousand men manned the entire city's defenses and kept order in the streets. The two citadels nearby each only had a thousand men.

When Shuss and Els marched on the walls, the garrisons even thought they were their relief. They greeted the men smiling and gave up their positions willingly. They only realized something was off when their weapons were taken and their relief started tying them up. They fought as best they could, but without weapons, they were quickly overcome.

Reidy and Potterfang's march on the inner city failed, however. Unlike the outer walls' garrisons, the inner city's belonged to the big six guilds. Reidy was fortunate enough to capture 600 on the northern edge of the inner wall, but the patrols soon discovered them. The alarm sounded, and the enemy sent out blademasters to take care of the situation.

The two commanders were injured in the ensuing fight, though Reidy killed two

blademasters, and they were chased out. Firmrock suffered a thousand casualties during their route. The enemy suffered three-fold losses, however; three thousand guards and two blademasters were dead. They shut the gates and holed up inside.

This was not unexpected, however. Lorist's men were much stronger and outnumbered them many times over, but he couldn't match their elites. He just had too few. He only had three blademasters, Reidy included. Engelich was a coward, though, and could only be trusted with guarding the Northlands, so in effect Lorist only had two.

Shuss was a former slave and became a blademaster through constant fighting on the brink of death. Though he was a rank 2 blademaster, he wasn't strong enough to match a rank 3 blademaster. Reidy was another story. He had trained to the late part of the Dan Ocean Ki-refining Technique's fourth stage. While he couldn't match a blademaster, a rank 3 blademaster wasn't a problem.

No matter how strong, however, two people were just two people. They couldn't fight the enemy's numbers. Every big-six guild had at least three blademasters, some even had four. Some second-rate guilds also had a blademaster, and a couple third rate guilds might have one as well. Reidy had been forced out of the inner city by a rank 3 blademaster and two rank 2 blademasters and had a serious wound on his back.

Morante's inner city was the main merchant guilds' main base. Every guild that had a blademaster kept them there. It was the most-defended place on the continent. Besides the blademasters, hundreds of gold ranks and thousands of silver ranks lined the walls and streets. It would be a near impossible task to take it quickly. Especially with the Union now keenly aware of what was happening.

Lorist took ten guards to Brinn Hill amidst the chaos now quickly spreading across the entire city. It was one of the most beautiful and expensive areas in the city. Only the rich and elite could afford a house there. He had dreamt of owning a house there himself and living out his days there with his then-girlfriend. He wasn't going there now to fulfill his old dream though. He headed there now to take care of the Union's sole sword saint.

He'd been all but incapacitated in their last duel, but his opponent hadn't come off any lighter. It took him two years to recover, but his opponent was still licking his wounds. It was now the perfect time to plug this weed out by the root. Lorist wasn't foolish enough to wait until the man recovered before challenging him to another duel. Only

unreasonably talented geniuses with plot-armor would do such a thing. While he enjoyed good fights, he would not suffer a truly threatening enemy to live, and, without the sword saint, the Union would have no laurels on which to be stubborn.

The mansion was completely empty, however. The sword saint was nowhere to be found. Lorist couldn't even find any traces of him. He learned from one of the servants that the man had been out on a stroll when he suddenly told his servant he had to leave and vanished, accompanied by his disciples.

Lorist ran to where the servant had last seen the sword saint. It faced the bay and could clearly see everything. The old man's eyes were very sharp. He must have noticed what was going on and made to get away. No wonder he had felt like he was being watched when he disembarked.

"Should we give chase, Your Grace?" asked a guard.

Lorist shook his head. More than 40 minutes had passed. It would be impossible to find the man in the current chaos.

"He is blessed," Lorist said through grit teeth, "Let's finish things here first."

Chapter 513

Fall of the City

The Union always parroted freedom and justice as a virtue, but no Morantian was born equal even before the aristocracy. The twelve inner city districts, 24 outer city districts, slums, and external shelters, for example, were always had always been arranged in a hierarchy. The twelve inner city districts were the backbone of the various merchant guilds. The lowest position they usually occupied was that of supervisor. Most of the Union's military families also lived there. It was one of the unspoken benefits afforded their soldiers. At the same time, however, it made their families easy to reach in case a soldier went AWOL or chose to defect.

The 24 outer districts varied considerably even among themselves. The academy instructors, merchants, and foreign nobility drove up the price of property in the different districts. The cheapest and most basic properties were for servants and laborers. The mid-range ones were for artisans. Merchants and other mercantilely inclined individuals lived in the inner edges of high-end districts, a few closely associated or related to guilds might even live in the outskirts of inner districts.

The big-seven took the biggest pieces of the cake when the aristocracy was founded. They turned their focus from Morante to their far-flung demesnes and took most of their people with them, leaving a massive vacuum in the inner city. Usually second-rate guilds would have jumped to fill it in, but they, too, had left for lands outside the city.

It was a law of nature, however, that empty spaces were always filled in. The vacuum left in Morante was no different. As the Union accelerated its expansion, new guilds sprung up like weeds on an untilled field. They quickly bought places in the aristocracy and moved into the inner city. The price of land within the inner walls of the city quickly skyrocketed and the big-seven and second-rate guilds capitalized on it. They auctioned off all but their most sacred and secret land at exorbitant prices.

Currently, the inner city districts were no longer the place where the most influential merchant guilds were situated. Instead, they had become the place of residence for the Union nobles as well as the center of operations for many other merchant guilds

as well as a place where wealth was stored. It was also the place where the most elite Morantians resided, hence the heavy security. After it suffered an attack by Firmrock, the guards of the inner city districts regrouped and rang the alarm bell apart from taking the northern walls back.

Lorist wasn't too worried about the inner city. His biggest concern was that the outer districts might rise up. The 24 outer districts each had about 20 thousand residents. If they all rose up at once, he would suddenly be facing a force of 480 thousand. And, unlike normal militaries, he could not just march in, take out the general, and watch the army collapsed. Every single man, woman, and child involved would be their own general. Even worse, if the slums joined the uprising, the enemy would stand near a million strong.

Lorist had taken the outer city first before moving on the inner city, but he had yet to march through the slums outside the city walls. If they rose up, he'd only know once the masses started rushing the gates. Luckily he had control of the walls.

The city had three gates, north, east, and south. The west of the city ran straight into the sea through the harbor, so it had no gate. Each of the roads leaving the city through the gates headed to three of the nine other major cities in the Union, three to a wind direction.

The few armed ships in the harbor had two choices, either surrender, or try to do as much damage to the enemy before they were killed. If they chose the latter, their best choice was to ram the ships into the enemy and set them on fire. The problem was that most of the enemy ships currently occupying the harbor were captured from Invincible, besides the manpower losses their loss would incur, the enemy wouldn't have suffered any real damage. The defenders weren't willing to sacrifice themselves without getting some worthwhile results, so this idea was abandoned in favor of surrender.

Though the inner city had yet to fall, they were completely surrounded. Nobody could escape. The forces still hidden within the outer city was thus cut off from their leadership and couldn't muster a serious defense. They were quickly quashed.

Despite the ease of his victory, Lorist didn't commit too many troops to the city. If a large-scale revolt broke out, most of the men in the city would be lost, so the fewer he had in the city, the better. He thus only committed the minimum necessary to keep the enemy in the inner city at bay and man the outer walls. Such a revolt was almost

guaranteed the moment the people found out they were being occupied. Morante was famous for its pride and arrogance, the people would never accept a foreign occupier.

He thus kept his men out of the back alleys and side streets of the districts. He allowed his men only to patrol the main streets and set up checkpoints in major plazas and intersections. His men melted into the cityscape's background and behave like they were friendly visitors. They even obediently paid for drinks and chatted with interested people politely. When they bought something they paid the quoted price without haggling, which made them quite popular with the hawkers and merchants.

Despite this, however, some troubles still bubbled up here and there. A few women yelled at the men here and there about being invaders, though the soldiers never retaliated. They just kept their march or stood on guard like automata, even when several fingers were being shoved in their faces.

A few fools got it into their heads that they were easy pickings and tried their luck. A few mercenaries gathered and tried to chase a patrol out of the district, only to be crushed mercilessly. The soldiers lined up several ballistae and turned their would-be attackers into porcupines. Their corpses were then hung at key intersections with signs plastered on their chests.

The people's suspicions grew with each incident. And revolts soon began to spring up intermittently all over the city. Soon thousands of corpses lined the streets. Despite this, the Morantians kept rising up. They were nothing if not stubborn. The fighting left the street and went underground. Dozens of soldiers soon started to die after drinking or eating at local establishments or consuming their produce. Anyone even just suspected of having been even just remotely involved or related to someone who was involved in those incidents were hung, drawn, and quartered and displayed in front of their former establishments. Anyone who resisted the soldiers or impeded them were killed. An old, retired blademaker even got involved once. He gathered up everyone he knew and then some and charged at one of the outposts, only to be turned into a pin cushion.

While this drove fear into the hearts of many and finally made them obedient, it cemented an eternal hatred for these foreigners in everyone's hearts. No one associated with these devils would ever again be allowed into the city alive ever again.

Els and Ovidis moved out with a division to attack the nearby cities once everything calmed down. Shuss stayed behind to watch over the city. Mass and Gypsy, the two

cities in question, were close behind the front-lines, and served as the final logistics hubs for resources being sent out to the front-lines.

As Lorist had too few soldiers with him, he was spreading himself a little too thin. He had to control a city with more than a million inhabitants, so he gave up on chasing down the windstorm swordsaint. Fortunately, the plan proceeded well despite some minor hitches. He now had to deal with inner Morante. He couldn't just let them be until the Union capitulated. His plan hinged on plundering the inner city for its wealth.

The two Firmrock divisions that encircled it had 24 thousand men. Naturally, only around 22 thousand remained as a thousand plus was lost during the failed initial assault.

Lorist and the legion's catapult brigade arrived at the same time. The 500 catapults were split into four regiments, one for each wall, and lined up horizontally.

"Your Grace, there's no need to bring the catapults. We have 40 cannons!" Jim, the artillery brigade's sergeant-major complained.

Lorist laughed and patted his shoulder.

"They're too advanced for those bumpkins. I don't want to flatten the walls completely. It's enough to terrify the bastards with the catapults. Besides, once they learn we have a swordsaint, they'll surrender. The artillery brigade is our most important reserve. We shouldn't waste it on something as trivial as this."

Firmrock's wheelbarrow-ballistae were spread out all over the city to maintain order there. Only the two divisions of swordsmen and pikemen surrounded the inner walls. Jim and the artillery brigade was only present in case any of the enemy blademasters tried to escape.

If Reidy and Potterfang managed to take down the walls, Jim would install the cannons on them and point them at the city below. It was a shame the two divisions didn't take the walls. Jim had no choice but to spread his cannons along the walls.

Though the Battle of Cape Romani ended in their victory, they lost nearly half of their 200 land-use cannons and a third of their crew. For the sake of monitoring the 100 thousand new laborers back at the reef, Lorist gave Howard control of all but a 100 of his personal guards.

Though only ten cannons could fire on any single part of the inner wall, they should be enough to take out a blademaster in a single volley. Jim had hoped the enemy would try to escape so he could show off his weapons, but no one did.

Lorist didn't understand why they weren't trying to escape either. They must be unwilling to leave their families behind. Either that, or they thought they could hold out until friendly forces took back the city.

"I count on you now, Penelope. If you can get them to surrender, I promise no one will be harmed. They'll be moved to the camps until the war ends, but they'll be safe. We won't let them ransom themselves, however. They must stay in the camps until the Union surrenders.

"They may not take any more than one wheelbarrow's worth of personal belongings with them, no more. We will not take it from them and they may trade freely if they wish. This is enough to show our sincerity. If they refuse, we will flatten the inner city with our catapults. I trust you've noticed them already."

"I understand, Lord Norton. I will convince them to surrender. I just hope you'll give me enough time. Besides, didn't you promise to return the city intact once the war ends?"

"That would certainly have been the case had we taken the inner city without a problem, but if they will not let us take it, we will flatten it. The outer city is a volcano waiting to erupt. If I am doomed to lose the city, I will burn it to the ground as I sail out of the harbor."

"I will go talk to them immediately," said Penelope with a deep bow before he rushed towards the gate.

The gates opened as the sun set and the inhabitants walked out with their wheelbarrows.

Chapter 514

Trouble

"An urgent report, Your Grace. General Els has successfully occupied Gypsy. According to the captives' testimony, the next citadel, Robertway, is also defended by just a thousand men. The place is the Union's main medical facility in the theater. General Els has requested permission to continue his assault and take Robertway. He's confident he can take it before the Union can react."

Jinolio appeared troubled as he read the message with a yawn. Lorist hadn't slept for three days, not since Morante fell. Jinolio didn't do much better; just four hours of sleep. It wasn't that Lorist neglected his disciple; no one could afford to sleep. They had thousands of things to do.

"Have Els return. Taking Gypsy is enough. We don't need Robertway. Ovidis has secured 30 thousand laborers from the shelters outside the city so we don't need more. Els should focus on moving our supplies to Mass. We only have two days. Any supplies he can't take, he must burn. We cannot allow the Union to get anything back. Leave them only a ruin."

Both Lorist's eyes were bloodshot. A sword saint had far more stamina than any ordinary mortal, but they were not exempt from the needs of man. He could only go so long without sleep.

"When the Union learns of Morante, Mass, and Gypsy's fall, they will respond. If we do not have our supply lines in place by that time, we will lose the city in no time. If, however, the Union is the one without their lines, they will fall in less than a month. We must hold on until then."

"Understood, Your Grace. I will write the general immediately," responded Jinolio, slapping himself lightly before leaving in a hurry.

"Lord Tarkel requests an audience," reported a guard.

"Let him in."

Tarkel appeared before Lorist, no less tired than him.

"Everything in order?"

"Yes, Your Grace. The high officials' and 17 blademasters' families have boarded the ships with the 92 Union nobles and gold-ranked swordsmen and their families. A total of 1784 people, sans the 648 servants going along. Jim has installed five bronze cannons on each of the eight Daws and the linked deck ensures the guests have nowhere to go," reported Tarkel.

"Phew... Now everyone can finally get some sleep. You should rest too. It has been a busy three days for us

The inner city's surrender didn't mean all was well. Instead, Lorist and his subordinates raised their guard, mainly because the 17 blademasters and 40 plus gold-ranked swordsmen were still present. It was a high-tier force Lorist could not ignore, even though they'd surrendered.

With Lorist there, all would be well, but should he ever be absent... A sudden uprising by the blademasters and gold ranks would be devastating. The issue was that Lorist couldn't be in charge of looking after all the prisoners, so Tarkel came up with a solution to it.

He suggested the captives be held on the ships. The bay was safe so the prisoners could be kept on ships in the middle of it.

Lorist loved the idea. He immediately had two captured Sabnims and several dozen Daws prepared. None had masts, so there was no threat of the captors using them to sail away. They were all fastened together, hull to hull and moved to the middle of the bay.

The bay was sheltered from the normal turbulence of the sea and now was not storm season. The ships were in no threat of coming loose and drifting. It did present a slight challenge, however. Most of the captives were nobles of one sort or another, and they had to have certain luxuries. The ships had to be stocked beforehand. Some were even allowed a servant or two as company.

Naturally, Lorist was extra cautious. He moved several ships from the line defending the bay to keep watch on the floating prison.

"The nobles have been settled, Your Grace. But the rest of the prisoners from the inner city have complaints," Tarkel continued.

"Complaints? What complaints? We've done everything we promised!" Lorist exclaimed.

"They complain the food is too plain and too little."

"Hahaha! If they don't think it's enough, they can always buy more! It's not like I confiscated their wealth. They brought their wealth with them when they left. Remind them that they're captives. They should be happy to get any food at all!"

Lorist had indeed kept all his promises. He provided food and water and had not touched their wealth. Goods were very expensive at the moment though. He'd even gone as far as to set up a tavern in their camp. They could have good meals as long as they paid.

Lorist had a monopoly on anything going into the camp, so he set the prices as high as he could. He would bleed the people dry before he left the city.

"Alright. Pajik will take a sentry division to the camp and keep them all in their place.

"When Senbaud finishes escorting the captives to Silowas and hands us the name list, we can split the family members into two categories. Those sailors still alive may take their families to Silowas. Dead sailors' families will be sent to the camp in the city. I trust a 12-thousand-strong division is enough to keep them under control."

The 100 thousand captives from the inner city were Union loyalists and Lorist wasn't interested trying to get them to defect. They were nothing more than sacks of gold. He had agreed to great conditions to entice them to surrender, such as not taking their personal wealth and property, but he had his ways. He would leave with every penny this city had or his name wasn't Norton Lorist. Besides, everything belonged to him by right, anyway.

He would've had to be more careful were this the outer city -- it was just too large -- but the inner city was no trouble. He actually hoped they'd revolt. It would give him the perfect excuse to just take everything.

"Come to think of it, have the fourth flotilla's families boarded the ships?"

"They have, Your Grace. They will depart at three this afternoon," replied Tarkel.

Though Morante's port was for public use, the fleet area was reserved as the accommodation for the members of Invincible. Lorist set his sights on the surrendered sailors, all rich with seafaring experience. He planned to form a larger transport fleet in the future, so he turned to them sailors to solve his lack of manpower.

He didn't transport the families to Silowas to reunite with the sailors out of the goodness of his heart. He wanted to use them to make sure the sailors behaved, lived obediently, and served him. Their families were hostages. As long as they had lingering ties, they would serve him the best they could.

"Colonel Belnick took one division to occupy the warehouses outside the east gate. Colonel Jades took three brigades to the commercial area and Reidy is somewhere in the outer city. Potterfang occupies the inner city with a brigade. The whole of Morante is ours," concluded Tarkel.

"Sigh!"

I never have enough men when I need them.

The two legions had eight divisions, 96 thousand men in total, but it was spread very thin across the city. Men were needed everywhere. The city was a mass of holes in its defenses. Lorist had yet to get to plundering because he couldn't spare the men.

Of the sentry legion's four divisions, Els and Ovidis took one to Mass and Gypsy, Shuss put one on the walls, the third was guarding the port, and Pajik was on the prison ships with the last.

Of the four Firmrock divisions, Reidy was using two to watch other the outer city, one holding down the fort by the warehouses, and the final one had been split in two. Three of its brigades were with Jades, holding down the commercial area, and the last stood guard over the inner city with Potterfang. The treasuries, armories, and shrines were still unguarded, and Lorist's men had yet to set foot in the academy area and on Brinn Hill. Lorist couldn't watch over them all with just his 100 personal guards.

"Things should go better once Else returns," Lorist consoled himself, "Tarkel, any response from the dominion yet?"

"Not yet, Your Grace. It should be another day or two."

"Alright. That will do for now. With the blademasters gone, we can finally breathe, though just a little. I mean, come on... The Union actually has so many blademasters! Just the assholes left here to guard the city is more than the entire kingdom has. I never knew they were this common..."

"Do you want to try to recruit a few?"

"No. I cannot ensure their loyalty. Having a loose cannon that strong is a greater liability than it's worth. I would rather cultivate my own. Don't worry we'll have a few more soon enough. Loze and Potterfang might be our first ones next year."

Lorist yawned.

"Well, that's all. I'm going to take a nap. I haven't shut my eyes in three days. You get some rest too, Tarkel. Make sure you look after your health."

"Understood, Your Grace. Rest well. I take my leave now."

Lorist said he was just taking a nap, but only woke up seventeen hours later. He was greeted with Jinolio, red-eyed.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Bad news, Your Grace. Sir Belnick finished inventorying the warehouses. We don't have enough food to feed the city. We can last at best half a month!"

Chapter 515

Crisis Control

Lorist got up after forcing Jinolio to sleep, took a bath, and filled his stomach before he started dealing with the food shortage, refreshed. He had predicted Morante would be short on food. That half the transport fleet was carrying food made it apparent.

The city housed a million people. Coupled with the 200 thousand laborers and poor folk outside the walls and the 400 thousand troops at the plains, it fed 1.7 million people a day. Falik Plains was a well-known agricultural region back in the day, but it now lay in ruin thanks to the war. It had supplied half of the Union's food. The other half came mostly from Callisto Hills, which was stressed to the breaking point.

Tarkel arrived and brought with him more bad news. Mass was supposed to be the region's granary, but it only had a day's worth of food.

The Union had betted on the shipment and carted most of their supplies to the front-lines. But now that food was Lorist's spoils. Lorist knew there would be a shortage, but this was far worse than he'd imagined. Their entire stores could only last 15 days, and all of it was rough, cheap foods like wheat and potatoes.

All the fleet's food had been sent to Cape Romani instead to feed the laborers working on the reef fortress. Howard had kept only what was necessary and sent the rest to Silowas.

Lorist had the ships to go get the food, but no one to man them. All the old crews were now laborers or captives somewhere else. Silowas had the food, but not the ships. He just had to make due without it. The few merchants who'd been in the city's harbor when he'd attacked, had fled already.

Senbaud's Blitz flotilla was heading to the bay to get the captured sailors' families and take them to Silowas. Everything would have been perfect if only the damned city had food!

When Senbaud arrived, he quickly loaded the families and left again. He would return with as much food as he could, but no sooner than 15 days. He would make it in time

if nothing went wrong, but something always went wrong. And while the food would last 14-15 more days, the mere fact that the food was a danger.

Lorist expected the enemy to react in three or so days. If the enemy commanders were decisive, he'd be facing an army in ten days. The possibility of relief by their own side, coupled with knowledge that they didn't have much food left, might just be enough to push the 1.7 million people into a massive uprising.

Lorist had planned for the enemy's reaction and put Tigersoar and Jaeger on the front-lines to keep the enemy busy, but the Union had 400 thousand men. They could still send a massive force back compared to what he had in Morante.

His original plan had been to stand his ground in the city. He only needed to drag the fighting on for a week so Tigersoar and Jaeger could smash through the front-lines and march to the city. Or at least pressure them enough to threaten to do just that. The Union would crumble and surrender.

The city's lack of food made that plan nearly impossible. He could hold the enemy outside the city, but he couldn't fight the people inside it at the same time. Definitely not if a million rose up at the same time. They could crush his men under the weight of their corpses alone.

"How did the Union deal with this?" asked Lorist.

"They would supply some food every fortnight. Most would be coarse and every household could use their registered booklet to buy a set amount from the shops at a set price.

"Food aside, meat, wine, leather, even some other consumables were rationed. Any amount purchased within a set limit would cost little but they'd have to pay several times more for any more than the ration. A few of the ration shops are still open. Some even make a decent profit," said Tarkel.

Wait a second... Why does this sound familiar? This sounds just like planned allocation used during the time of the planned economy! My grandparents always took a large number of tickets with them for meat and cloth. I remember using a ticket to buy a piece of maltose candy only to be pummeled by my grandfather! He said he wasn't mad that I was eating candy, but that I took something without permission, I'd stolen.

I don't know what these Union merchants are thinking. They actually planned the whole

economy.

"Weren't there objections? How are the shops managed?"

Tarkel shook his head.

"The people were easily swayed. The Union said everything was for the war effort. They said everything would return to normal once it ends. Everyone was willing to suffer to see the kingdom defeated.

"I sent men to investigate the outer city. Nothing seems out of order. The cheapest food right now is dried and salted fish, and potatoes. The potatoes come from Callisto Hills and the dried fish from the sea. The fish in particular is from an old stockpile. Nobody really ate it before so a large stockpile had built up.

"We've taken over the city, so Callisto Hills won't send anymore potatoes and the stockpiles are nearly completely dry. If we shrink the rations, we might be able to stretch it to 15 days.

"The guilds handle the trade directly. Forde handled fine goods and meat, Peterson handled leather and cloth, as usual, Mayflower dealt with honey, spices, and other luxuries, Riwald the allocation of daily necessities, Chikdor seafood and other related goods, and Twinhead Dragon various precious ingredients -- mostly to nobles.

"The divide between rich and poor has become binary and extreme. The rich ate like there was no war going on at all until we barged in, while the poor were barely getting by. I've even heard a market for rat meat has sprung up and many people spend their days hunting the gutters and slums for rats.

"All the guild shops are now closed, of course. Luckily people mostly only buy when there's a sale and we haven't missed one yet. The next sale is four days. If we don't have food ready and shops open by then, however, people might start getting uppity."

Lorist stroked his chin as he paced around. Tarkel's report was grave. It was imperative that the people were placated soon. They could not afford to let them rise up. They already hated him and his men to the bone, and the slightest excuse would sweep them up into full revolt.

"Send for Torin, Belnick, and Jades. Also, tell Els and Ovidis to finish up quickly and come back."

The guards by the door saluted and dashed off.

"Tarkel, send an eagle to Camorra and Spiel. Tell them to prepare a convoy as quickly as they can. Send as much beast fur and food as they can. Have them send administrators as well."

"Understood, Your Grace."

Tarkel turned to leave.

"Wait. Invite the syndicates in the slums to a meeting tomorrow."

Torin was Tok's father, the second-in-command of Northsea. He was old, so he was put in charge of logistics. An exception had been made however, and he had been given the task of sealing Hidegold Bay. He had performed admirably.

Torin was the first to arrive, Jades and Belnick came soon after. Lorist briefed them quickly.

"Uncle Torin, go to the docks. Tell Pajik to leave some sailors behind. Also, have him leave a brigade as an escort. Take as many ships as you can and head for Silowas and bring back as much food as you can. You have to be back in 12 days.

"If you come across Senbaud, show them the parchment I'll give you later. Take them back to Silowas with you and use them as transports as well."

He regretted having Invincible's fourth flotilla sent to Silowas early. He should've waited. He could really have made good use of them now. The remaining sailors either didn't have family members or lost family during the fight. They were considered unreliable.

"Understood, Your Grace. I will be back as soon as I can," assured Torin. He bid his farewell and left for the docks immediately.

"Jades. seal off the commercial area and start searching the stores. Transport everything valuable to the inner city and make an inventory."

"Understood, Your Grace," Jades saluted.

"Belnick, take a brigade to Callisto Hills. Buy as much food as you can. Buy, you hear,

not take. You can offer 1.5 times the market price if you need to. You can double the offer if the farmers can transport the food to the city immediately. You have three days."

"Yes, Milord."

Lorist met syndicate bosses the next morning. Among them he knew Jindo, Els's old friend. The man had changed considerably, however. He was not friendly towards Lorist, at least. It was to be expected, however. Back then Lorist had been the friend of a friend, now he was a bloodsworn enemy. Lorist had also turned from a simple mercenary into one of only a handful of swordsmen on the continent and the ruler of what was a kingdom in all but name.

"Gentlemen, I have conquered Morante for the sake of peace. I am not here to deprive you of your riches," Lorist began shamelessly. He rattled off a speech about establishing lasting peace between the two countries. It took him twenty minutes to get to the point.

"I promise to not mistreat the people as long as they don't fight me. As I said before, I'm only here for the guilds who drag you into their war. We will take only their wealth.

"Quiet down. I know what you want to say. It's true that many of the supplies and daily necessities are in their hands. If we take it, you will starve. I have no intent of doing this. I will show my sincerity by keeping you all fed. I'm willing to sell the food we take from the guilds to you cheaply.

"Gentlemen, before, you were all in charge of your districts' security, hygiene, and taxation while the guild handled supplies. The guilds are gone, so you must step up. You will sell the food to the people instead."

Lorist's lips curved.

"I will give everyone free food in three days. Every household will get 5 kilograms of potatoes and half a kilogram of dried fish. We'll also have a sale on some of the stuff we took from the guilds."

Chapter 516

The Angle of Merchants

Just as Lorist was wracking his brains over the livelihoods of the city-folk on the 33rd day of the 6th month, the seventh day of House Norton's occupation of the city, the 400 thousand Union troops on the front-lines finally got word of the city's fall, as well as the occupation of Mass and Gypsy.

All the commanders seemed to have been done in the posterior. They instantly broke into a huge frenzy. They finally realized why the enemy had kept attacking them for the last two weeks.

The forces that had most troubled them, and continued to do so now, were House Norton's two other legions on the field: Tigersoar and Jaeger. They always had the upper hand in their confrontations and made the Union eat dust far too many times. They'd swept over every obstacle since the moment they showed back up on the front-lines and pushed the front-line back by a large stretch. If they hadn't had to return to the Northlands when the rebellion broke out, the war would likely have been over already.

They had to admit that House Norton and its damnable armies were far beyond their ability to fight. Luckily they were only a small fraction of the total enemy army. The rest of Andinaq's forces were incompetent at best, and downright dangerous to their own side at worst. A cake walk for the Union. So far they'd made up for the losses they suffered at the hands of House Norton's forces with victories against the rest of the enemy forces.

They won every battle in which House Norton was not involved. And beat Auguslo like a bully would beat a retard. It was almost sad. They'd done especially well during House Norton's absence and were on the brink of victory. But that damned fool just had to clean everything up just in time and send his men back into the fray. In just a few months they'd gone from being on the brink of victory to being on the brink of defeat. With Morante's fall, that was no longer just the brink of defeat, but the brink of total defeat.

The Nortons didn't strike their strongest fortresses; they hit only where the Union was

weak. It wasn't very efficient and had confused the Union for a while. Why would House Norton, known for striking decisively and trying to end things as quickly as possible, now hit large inconsequential places? The attacked slowly opened a hole in the lines in the far north of the plains, and they rushed in, forcing the Union back quite a bit. It took the Union three days and a hundred thousand men to close the gap.

It wasn't enough to stop them, however. Jaeger and Tigersoar didn't meet them on the field. They just melted away whenever the Union showed up. They soon lost track of the two legions entirely. When next the two legions were sighted, they were opening another hole in the south of the plains. It took four days this time to close the hole. Again the enemy melted away when they showed up and struck somewhere else. This quickly sapped them of their momentum and soon Andinaq had the initiative.

The Union's upper command, led by Twinhead Dragon's president, Cobleit, was painfully aware of this fact, but they could do nothing. Most of their troops were infantry and could not keep up with the mounted enemy. What little cavalry they had were all in personal guard units and no noble was willing to let them go out and face an entire legion on their own, not to mention that it would leave the nobles unguarded. They'd considered, for a while, sticking infantry on horses and just throwing them at the enemy, but horses were in cripplingly short supply.

Only two places on the continent bred horses in any real quantities. One in Andinaq's territory, the other straddled the border between Romon and Khawistan.

The Union had once been capable of fielding a 30-thousand-strong cavalry force, back during the War of Glass, but it'd taken generations to build up the horses and expertise for that unit, and the wars since then had all but wiped it out. They couldn't replace them either since both powers had stopped their horse trading with the Union, and Andinaq would certainly not sell them horses.

Lorist had played with the thought of joining the horse business, but it wasn't lucrative enough to be worth it. It certainly didn't help that the horses native to his territory were lean, relatively small, and weak compared to proper warhorses. They were fine for farmwork and other civil duties such as transport, but ill-suited to warfare, especially if they were to be armored to keep them alive.

The Union had been on the brink of negotiating a deal with Duke Fisablen several years back, but then Lorist attacked the duke and destroyed their plans.

The Union now paid for their lack of cavalry. The Nortons bullied their men with impunity. They could strike at a moment's notice, and didn't even have to bother with planning since they could just run away if things were looking bad.

Fisablen and Felim's cavalry suffered heavy losses two years earlier because they used them to take on strongholds, the worst thing one could do with cavalry besides trying to fight a navy. Tigersoar did not have that problem. They used their cavalry only to strike ill-defended positions and moved their catapult brigade against heavier positions.

The Union had built up their own catapult forces using the blueprints they got from The Northlands, but, while they were better than their old ones, without the right materials they were still no match for their Norton counterparts. Though every fort, castle, city, and stronghold was armed to the teeth with catapults and ballistae, they could do nothing as the enemy's rocks soared in from beyond their range and pummeled them into dust and bloody pulps.

Duke Cobleit, had been brainstorming plans to deal with the two legions for two days without sleep and was on the brink of collapse. He had just sent for his aides, advisors, and subordinates for the umpteenth time when he got news of Morante's fall. He fainted even before he could vomit the blood that suddenly burst into his mouth from that magical gland the people of Grindia had that stored blood for just such occasions. It was left to drool out of his mouth as he lay, convulsing, on the floor.

He was woken by his men several minutes later, his attack having passed, to hear of Mass and Gypsy's fall. He emptied that special gland, wiped his mouth, and started the meeting.

A few hot-headed youths among the junior staff clamored for revenge. They wanted to march on Morante with the entire army immediately. Their wiser seniors were wary of such a reckless move. They suggested redeploying only a part of the army. They suspected House Norton's two fielded legions would move the moment they noticed a thinning of the front-lines. If they turned their backs on them, they'd be wiped out.

The two sides fought endlessly in the tent. One side accused the other of cowardice, whilst the latter accused the former of stupidity. Cobleit was forced to adjourn the meeting for the day so everyone could calm down and think things through on their own.

He called a second, secret meeting with the other guild-heads in his private quarters.

Duke Peterson wanted to know why they had to have a secret meeting.

Cobleit smiled wryly.

"Information will leak easily with many people, and everyone is too emotional right now to think clearly. I'll be plain and direct. We've lost. This war is over. All we can hope for now is a good exit. We haven't lost because the Nortons took Morante, if only that we could still turn this around. We lost because those bastards sank the fleet and took the convoy. There's no coming back from this, there isn't even a stabilizing of this."

Duke Chikdor's expression fell apart.

"Impossible!"

"Nothing's impossible," Cobleit countered solemnly, "They started their attack from Hidegold Bay. We had a whole flotilla there, and the rest of the fleet was heading there. They've obviously been lost. You should've seen the fourth's report regarding their clash with the Norton fleet. They call it a victory, but it was a rout.

"We've not heard from the rest of the fleet for a month. They're gone as well. It's even more certain with the bastards having taking Morante. I suspect we'll hear of the fleet and convoys' demise in a few more days, but even if they weren't taken or sunk, we have no way of bringing supplies in by sea anymore and land transport is too slow. We should make our preparations."

"Shouldn't we take back Morante immediately even more if that's the case?" asked Peterson.

His angst to retake the city made sense, it was their capital. It wasn't just a matter of practical problems as a result of its loss. It having fallen to the enemy at all was bad enough for their honor and reputation already, but if it was still in enemy hands when they called it quits and surrendered, their honor would be completely destroyed and they'd never

"No, we can't turn back," said Cobleit, shaking his head.

"Why not?"

Peterson aside, the other presidents also let out shocked gasps.

"Think about it. What benefit does taking the city have? There are no food stores, so we don't get back supplies. Besides the losses we'd have to suffer to take it back, it would be a burden on us rather than a benefit. We'd have to find food elsewhere suddenly to feed the million people. We're already struggling to feed our million people here, how will we feed double that amount?"

"Morante isn't the anchor for our rule anymore, we can do without it. If anything, losing Morante has lightened our burden quite a lot. The biggest benefit is that we don't have to worry about feeding a million people that don't give us anything in return. Without our extensive trade network, all those merchants and craftsmen in the city are worthless. The farmers and miners, woodcutters and hunters in the rest of our lands are worth far more right now. We don't have to worry about the enemy pushing beyond the city much either. They won't be able to hold the city for long, hell, I wouldn't be surprised if they're already losing dozens of men a day keeping the people at bay. Remember why we moved out of Morante in the first place, and why we didn't hand it over to someone as a fief. The people in the city are completely dedicated to the idea of freedom and equality because of our propaganda during our war with the Krissen Empire. They'll never accept being ruled over by nobles. That same sentiment will be even stronger when the noble took over by force and is a sworn enemy of the Union.

"Let them keep Morante. This is actually an opportunity to inflict heavy losses on them. Send agents to infiltrate the city and whip the people up into revolt. They want to take Morante from us? Let's show them how stubborn the people there can be, and bleed them dry while we're at it! Even if we have to lose the war, we'll make sure they don't have the people to work the land they'll get and will be forced to pull back to their stinking castles!"

"We'll hold out in our dominions and wait for them to have to withdraw, and sweep in as the saviors again. If we play our cards right, they might even be so much weakened we can just march into their lands and wipe them out.

Cobleit's words didn't invigorate the other presidents.

Duke Forde sighed.

"Have we really lost the war, Cobleit? Can we not turn this around somehow?"

"I wish it were otherwise, We've not been bested on the field, but we can't keep this war going any longer. That bastard Norton struck us where we couldn't afford to be struck. We can't just keep fighting on the front-lines because we don't have the supplies, but we can't turn back and march on Morante because his allies will stab us in the back if we do. Not that taking back Morante will do anything, without the convoy and its resources, we'll starve in a few more weeks, anyway."

"We still have 400 thousand men, though, right? They can't just swallow us whole!" Duke Riwald interjected.

"Numbers alone don't matter. In fact, having that many makes us even weaker right now. Our supplies will run dry much faster because of our numbers. We can have all the men in the world, without food, every additional man just starves us out that much faster."

"What do we do now?" asked Peterson.

"We should conserve as much of our core and elite units as possible, the 200 thousand of our personal retinues, mainly. The rest can be sacrificed to cover our retreat. March the freedom zealots from Morante back to the city to hold them down. Charge the remaining hundred thousand against Andinaq here while we withdraw."

Cobleit brought over a map.

"We'll charge them into the enemy here, here, and here and withdraw while the enemy's focused on dealing with them. We'll head for Mauvlin as fast as we can. Everything between here and there is wasteland thanks to the war, so we lose nothing by giving that up. Mauvlin is the best place to defend. We can also keep our 200 thousand men fed with the rest of our territories and it's much closer to them so we will have an easier time getting the food there."

Chapter 517

Miscalculation

I seem to feel like there's something off, thought Lorist as he paced about on the walls.

It was the 17th day of House Norton's occupation of Morante. A week ago, Lorist received urgent word from a scout that the Union troops have already begun heading for Morante with 100 thousand men in the vanguard and another 200 thousand in the rearguard spiritedly. It seemed that a huge, bloody battle was about to break out at the city.

With the huge army coming their way, Lorist and the officers of the two legions didn't manage to get any rest in the next few days and were busy with managing various defensive aspects of the battle. They spent a huge sum of money and resources and managed to rely on the citizens of Morante to clear out the shelters for the poor folk and dug out some trenches and built some mud walls. It was a busy time.

When everything was ready and done, the first wave of attackers arrived. Near 10 thousand Union soldiers swarmed in a disorganized manner and discarded their weapons and armor with both their hands waving all sorts of white cloth in surrender as they called out, "Have some mercy and give us something to eat!"

"Open the gates! We surrender!"

"I want to go home and stop fighting!"

By the time Lorist, Potterfang and the other officers of the legions saw that, they were so shocked that their teeth almost fell out. Nobody knew what was going on. It was obviously not a trick as never has there been a performance to bait an enemy that was so realistic. Those soldiers ran up to the walls with ragged breaths and sat straight down without bothering to stand up.

Only when Els sent someone to ask them what was going on did they begin to understand the situation. Seriously speaking, those ten thousand people were the survivors of the Union's vanguard. They had set out to take Morante back with only five days' worth of rations and the Union higher-ups told them that since Gypsy and

Mass had fallen too, they would gain more supplies if they reconquered those places.

As those 100 thousand men were Morantian recruits, they set out without a second thought out of worry for their families' safety. However, they were only infantry men and no matter how quickly they marched, they only managed to reach Gypsy after they finished their food. It was unfortunate that only a husk of the citadel had been left behind by Lorist and the soldiers took the city back without shedding a drop of blood only to find that there wasn't the slightest bit of food there. There wasn't anything edible. It was bricks and stones galore, so they could only drink more water to fill their stomachs.

So, they placed their hopes on the citadel of Mass. The two citadels were only one day's travel away from each other. However, they were attacked by Tigersoar and Jaeger midway there. The 100 thousand soldiers were hungry and tired and crumbled immediately. That 10 thousand ran faster than most and managed to escape encirclement by the cavalymen. However, they realized that there was nowhere else they could run to and thought of their family members in Morante and decided to surrender after some discussion.

Lorist really didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He had spent a few day's effort only for it to end up wasted. A day later, Tigersoar and Jaeger's men returned with a large number of captives, adding another 100 thousand mouths to feed on Morante's food. Fortunately, Senbaud and Uncle Torin had already brought food back from Silowas and they had enough for the moment to feed a population of more than a million people.

Tigersoar's general, Loze, and Jaeger's general, Freiyar, arrived with the captives. It was then when Lorist found out that the Union's 100 thousand men were separated from their support troops at the rear for a distance of two day's travel and weren't able to call for help. Tigersoar and Jaeger used that opportunity to encircle them and exterminate the force of 100 thousand.

Loze and Freiyar mentioned that their two legions would continue to mount a surprise rear assault on the 200 thousand forces that remained at the frontlines to debilitate the return of the Union troops to Morante. After some brief discussion, the two of them set out with two brigades of captive-escorting cavalymen.

However, two days had passed and there wasn't a single report about incoming Union reinforcements. Lorist couldn't help but guess what was going on. Even if the Union reinforcements were frightened into retreat by the extermination of the 100 thousand

vanguard troops, Loze and Freiyar should've sent messengers back to inform him about it. It would still be better than having him wait at the walls with nothing better to do than anxiously await further news.

Three columns of smoke could be seen in the distance. A rider on a magnificent warhorse stormed towards the walls, calling out, "Urgent report from the frontlines! Open the gates!"

Lorist opened the letter personally penned by Freiyar and almost started with shock. "What?! The 200 thousand Union reinforcements aren't heading for Morante at all and are instead going to Mauvlin?! What are they doing?! Giving up on Morante and the whole of Falik Plains?!"

"Yes, Your Grace. I also received Tigersoar's urgent report as I was on my way to deliver Sir Freiyar's letter. The Union forces that were left behind to defend Robertway, Krido and Ritt all sent Tigersoar messengers to surrender and Sir Loze has already taken the three citadels back. If that is true, there's no doubt that the official report would soon arrive," uttered the messenger another surprising thing.

What the hell is going on? Are they cutting off their tail to survive? What in the world is the Union planning?! Would they really sacrifice half their forces to protect a mere 200 thousand soldiers? How could that be possible? That's too huge a price to pay! Or have they actually changed their minds after finding out that their vanguard had been defeated and returned to Mauvlin to conserve their troops? Why would the soldiers left to defend the citadel surrender then? That's around 100 thousand men too... Lorist couldn't understand what was going on no matter how much he troubled himself over it. Regardless, the avoidance of a battle at Morante was a good thing.

A day later, Lorist received another report from the frontlines and understood what was happening. *The heck! They're trying to move the warzone away. The Union is trying to conserve their elite forces by sacrificing their ragtag troops. This was something they had planned all along and they intend to let House Norton feed those 200 plus thousand hungry mouths. This number of captives will no doubt cost us a lot of food... But why would the Union forces give up on retaking Morante? Do they have any other aims?*

In Loze's report, the troops that were guarding the three citadels had surrendered because of a lack of food and other supplies as the rear forces of the Union had brought most of the supplies with them when they departed, leaving behind only five days' worth of food. As the soldiers were afraid that the allied noble army of Andinaq that

they had battled against for the past two years would do them ill after they surrendered, they took the opportunity to surrender to House Norton's troops instead.

Loze requested Lorist to send a batch of food to those three citadels as soon as they could because the 100 thousand captives were currently consuming Tigersoar's own rations. Even the Tigersoar soldiers were only half fed. At the same time, Augustus also discovered that the three citadels were in Norton control and sent a messenger over to take over the citadels.

Sigh, I just hope this king of ours doesn't give us any more trouble in such a busy time. Lorist wrote an order for Loze to refuse Augustus's request. There were seven citadel cities including Morante on Falik Plains and Augustus had only control over one of them, Bluwek. If the three citadels were handed to Augustus, he might stay there and refuse to leave, which would complicate negotiations in the future.

Lorist also had Loze borrow some food from the house's three allies and Duke Fisablen to overcome this obstacle. Jaeger was currently pursuing the 200 thousand Union forces that escaped and couldn't be mobilized for anything else. Lorist then had Firmrock take over the three citadels immediately. Only when Potterfang arrived would Loze escort the surrendered garrison soldiers over.

After dealing with the arrangements and ordering Potterfang to depart, Lorist gave it some thought before writing Augustus a personal letter which detailed House Norton's successful defeat of Invincible Fleet and conquest of Morante. He mentioned that the change in the situation on the frontlines was the result of the capital being taken. It seemed that they had given up on the city and Falik Plains altogether and retreated to Mauvlin.

Lorist impolitely demanded for Augustus to not make any rash moves to ruin the current state of affairs they had fought so hard for. Lorist was going to use Morante and Falik Plains as bargaining chips for a peace treaty between the two nations and he expressed his hopes that Augustus should go find something else to do, such as going back to accompany his poor wife that had spent three years alone in the palace.

Lorist also promised Augustus that he would use his status as a sword saint to negotiate with the Union and that he would bear any responsibilities for upcoming changes. Should the negotiations fail, it wouldn't be too late for Augustus to come and wrap things up. It was still much better than having it be ruined by Augustus's appearance.

But if the negotiations were successful, he would still need Augustus to show up and sign the peace treaty.

After sending his guards off with his letter, Lorist breathed a long sigh and began to consider what the Union really intended. Were they really going to ignore Morante altogether? That was the most famous trading capital on the whole of Grindia and the capital city of the Union.

Jinolio and Tarkel both came over, each holding a large stack of documents. But they wore rather grim expressions.

"What's going on with the two of you? You look so down," said Lorist with a laugh.

"Your Grace, the inventory of the inner city districts and the commercial area is ready..." Jinolio ignored Lorist's question and replied with a solemn look.

"Oh? Let's hear it. I wonder how much our accounts will grow after this." Lorist's mood improved. He wasn't doing charity by participating in the war. All the resources and riches in Morante were supposed to be his spoils and compensation for deploying his troops. He believed that they wouldn't let him down.

Jinolio replied with a pained look, "Your Grace, the spoils this time around wasn't as much as we expected. We only found around four million gold Fordes in the inner city and commercial district combined and another bunch of resources worth up to ten million gold Fordes, a small amount of which are expensive luxury goods. There are also many jewelries that are worth about a few million gold Fordes. That's all there is."

"What?! It's that little?!" Lorist said with a start, "That's impossible! How could there be so little spoils in Morante?! It's a city with a population of one million! Millions of gold Fordes circulate in the markets on a daily basis! Other things aside, the merchant guilds of the city should have a huge store of various treasures from all over the continent! How could the spoils be worth so little?"

If it were some other city, Lorist would be more than surprised at the amount of spoils he got. But this was Morante. How could the sum be so less? At that moment, Lorist wondered whether any of his subordinates were faking the accounts and trying to hide the spoils away. He definitely wouldn't believe that it was really that meager.

"Your Grace, that would be the case if it were a decade ago. The current Morante is not the trading capital it once was. To be honest, it's not even as influential as Jigda's

capital, Saint Manarde. Ever since the Union fought Teribo in the War of Glass and the implementation of the nobility system, the midsouthern nations erected trade embargoes against the Union and that caused Morante's status as a trade city to fall way down. The number of people that come and go can't even be compared to a decade ago. It's not nearly as merry as it once was," said Jinolio calmly, shattering Lorist's good impression of the city in an instant.

Hmm... It really does seem to be the case. Otherwise, the various academies wouldn't close down because they didn't have any new applicants. Dawn Academy wouldn't have to start over in The Northlands either. Just like Knight Lundmorde had mentioned in his reports before, Morante's prosperity had declined and there hasn't been a single trading convoy coming in from the outside. The city's market seemed to be completely in the hands of the various merchant guilds and the profits have all been split between them already, leaving no room for others.

A few years back, Tarkel once drafted a plan for the formation of a new merchant guild in Morante, which they would spend years to nurture into one that had a huge influence in the city. It was too bad that even though Lorist approved of that plan, they found that it wasn't practically possible.

As Knight Lundmorde had said, all the industries in the city were monopolized by those merchant guilds, ranging from products citizens consumed to military equipment. Even if a new product was developed and put into the market, the related merchant guilds would come to force the manufacture and distribution of the product to be given to them and there would be terrible consequences for a refusal to comply.

"Your Grace, ever since the Union implemented the nobility system, the various merchant guilds gained their own dominion and they basically moved all their production centers and stores there. The commercial areas of Morante are only glorified storefronts for their products. Even though they still keep a substantial amount of stock here, it really isn't that much.

"And since the Union went to war with the midsouthern nations, the market in Morante had only grown colder by the day. Most of the goods stored in the city are bad-selling spoils of war or daily necessities required by the citizens. There's almost nothing valuable here. That's the case for almost all the store houses of the merchant guilds here," explained Tarkel more clearly.

Lorist slapped his forehead at how he still considered Morante to be how it was in its

glory days when he was studying and working as a mercenary there. He didn't think that the passing of a decade would see the Union swallowing seven neighboring nations in the War of Glass and it being suppressed by the other neighboring nations due to its expansionist policies, which also resulted in the severing of the trade routes. A few years later, the Union waged war again to force the trade routes open, but that naturally didn't bring any good results for Morante itself. Could a trading capital without trade still be known as such?

Chapter 518

Pitfall Trap

Jinolio put a large stack of documents on the table.

"Take a look, Your Grace. They document the money spent to maintain Morante for the last three years. The Union lost 3 million gold Fordes in the first year, 5 million in the second, and just over a million last year. The trend suggests they'll have evened things out by the end of this year.

"This suggests Morante's been made completely self-sufficient. It no longer needs trade to supply its own demand, or at least will have needed none very soon. The guilds have also become the direct employers of nine-plus-tenths of the people. They work for the union for money, then pay that money right back to the guilds to buy the things they need. The Union might as well have done away with money in the city altogether if this kept up for a couple more years.

"We discovered a few letters between a guild vice-president and a few of his associates in the inner city. They were arguing over whether it was worth feeding the people not involved in production in some way or another. It's actually pretty interesting. His associates were arguing that they should move half the city's population to the dominions.

"The vice-president argued against it. He believed the people in the city were far more educated than the obedient plebs in their dominions and that the Union could exploit this. He talked about having moved his operations to his dominion, but that it was not up to standard, so he had to move it back to the city.

"We've picked up from a number of letters and documents that the guilds are still debating how the city's management was to be handled in the years to come. The city is no longer as impressive as used to be. It is also no longer the biggest trade port on the continent.

"One document is a proposal to disband the city almost entirely and scatter its inhabitants across the entire country. The abandoned districts would then be turned into resorts, retreats, villas, and palaces for the nobles away from the plebs.

"The big-seven vetoed it. Twinhead Dragon's President Cobleit rejected it outright. In his statement he made it abundantly clear that the problem was temporary and that it would go away once the war ended. They were not to disband the city under any circumstances. He even went as far as saying that, rather than disbanding the city, they should expand the city. He wanted it to be the biggest and most glorious city on the continent when they were done, a worthy of being the Union's capital."

Lorist tapped the table lightly as he listened. He had to admit that Cobleit was brilliant. His foresight was far greater than the rest of the gold-grubbing merchants. The Union's current state was those fools' fault. If they hadn't implemented the aristocracy, Morante would've remained the number one trade city on the continent. They weren't happy being rich commoners, however. They just had to be nobles too. They were tired lowering their heads in front of nobles far poorer than they just because the latter had a title and the former didn't.

In their own greed, they forgot everyone else was greedy too. Everyone jumped to become nobles and abandoned the city, leaving it to fall into ruin. Factories and productories were moved out of the city in a couple of months and tens of thousands lost their jobs. Without salaries they couldn't pay taxes. Without taxes there wasn't money to maintain and run the city.

The people were turned into vagabonds. When the guilds finally took note and started doing something, they did it in such a way that the people were turned into slaves in all but name. The guilds and merchants shouted freedom from the rooftops, but clamored slavery in their homes. How pitiful...

At least the highest officials, those on the council, still had some sanity left. They knew this system would collapse once the war ended and saw the city's potential to grow back afterwards.

"That all? Well done, Jinolio. Quite comprehensive," praised Lorist.

Jinolio smiled in a troubled manner.

"It's not all good news, though..."

"Oh? Out with it. It can't be worse than our current situation, can it?"

"Our occupation has crushed what shadow of an economy was still alive in the city. The people are completely dependent on us for food, and without anything to do,

they're lazing around all day. If this continues, they'll start making trouble if for no other reason than to beat back the boredom..."

"What?!"

How? I am this city's conqueror! I should be bleeding it dry of all its riches, not sinking all my money into feeding its sheep!

Jinolio shrugged.

"It's true, Your Grace. If we try to pack up and leave without leaving food for the people, they'll probably rise up and kill us before we get out. We could kill them all before we leave, but that'd ruin your reputation.

"I'm only speaking hypothetically. I know Your Grace would never kill so many people just because they're inconvenient. Callisto Hills isn't sending food anymore and nobody can work because the guilds are gone and with them the resources needed to keep business going."

It's like I dug a pitfall for the Union only to bury myself in it! Ah...

Lorist stood up frustratedly and knocked Jinolio's head.

"Aren't you a daring one? You dare speak to your teacher like this?"

He paced back and forth in the room, wracking his exhausted brain for a solution. His eyes flashed brightly several minutes later.

Is the Union not coming for the city so they don't have to worry about the city's people? Do they want to dump them all on me? No, that can't be. The food we got from the convoy was meant for the city...

Of course! We took the convoy! Without the convoy they can't feed the city! The bastards are leaving the city for me so they'll be spared the headache of having to figure out how to feed the city!

Callisto Hills had its harvest just before the convoy left. It'll be three months before they have another harvest and can send more food.

They were planning to tide themselves over until Callisto had its next harvest. But we've

taken their convoy and their food. They'd only be making more trouble for themselves by retaking the city under these circumstances. So that's why they gave up on the city and pulled back to Mauvlin...

They really are shameless, honorless bastards. Morante is their capital but they'll give up on it because it's not convenient to have it right now. A noble would've rushed back without any hesitation.^[1]

It can't be that simple. They know the food issue alone isn't enough to put us in a bad position. The real problem is the people that have nothing to do. They are going to start making trouble out of boredom.

"Jinolio, what were the people doing before we took the city? How are the rations distributed?"

"Sir Tarkel sent people to investigate. His report should be here..."

"Tarkel, speak."

"Yes, Your Grace. There were less than 800 thousand people in the city before the war. The slums had at best 100 thousand. The population skyrocketed when the war started as refugees fled from the plains. Some joined rich cousins or children. The richer ones bought houses and started small businesses.

"The Union conscripted 140 thousand from the city. Their families got more rations, which meant everyone else got less. They've lost 20 to 30 thousand in the two years since. Families included that's 400 thousand.

"Most were involved in production industries. The biggest was textiles, second is military equipment, mainly thanks to the war. Fishing is third. Fourth are jobs related to the guilds, but with them gone there's no bringing those back. Without the products to work, most of the production industry is gone. People have already started making trouble as a result."

Lorist smiled bitterly. He now suddenly had to both feed and work these people.

[1] Lorist calls it 'shameless and honorless', I call it smart and pragmatic. If your enemy wants to relieve you of such a burden, then why not let him? Never look a gift horse in the mouth.

Chapter 519

Jindo's Gift

I have to jump out of this pit, thought Lorist.

He did what he could immediately and invited Penelope and a few Union nobles to a banquet. After restating his reason for occupying the city, he spoke about the current state of affairs. Since hostilities had ceased, it was a good time for negotiations to begin. He hoped those present would head to Mauvlin and tell the Union higher-ups to come negotiate.

Lorist also talked about the war.

"This is a war without a victor. Just look at the plains. It's been reduced to a wasteland. We can't hear the herder songs anymore; we can't see the farmers harvesting their crops; nor can we enjoy the sweet fruit of the orchards..."

"This war must end. It has only brought destruction and pain. I refuse to believe the city I've lived in for so long is now bereft of life and hope."

Two perfectly, a little too perfectly, timed tears ran down his cheeks.

The crowd was moved by his speech and vowed to bring the Union to the table. Lorist thanked them. He promised that everyone would leave the city and the plains once the war was over.

After sending off the group, Lorist dunked his head straight into the water basin Jinolio brought. Too much powder. He'd put too much powder on his face. He couldn't stop tearing up and his eyes were swelling. Thank the gods they left so quickly.

Lorist weathered seven anxious days until Charade and Spiel arrived with his requested officials.

It had been two decades since the man had left Morante. He now finally stood on the soil of his homeland again. Charade's actual homeland was the now-defunct Teribo kingdom, but he spent most of his childhood here and knew this as his true home.

He'd looked forward to showing it off to his country-bumpkin peers, but Lorist, like a clingy wife, wouldn't let him have the time.

Lorist hid nothing from the group as he briefed them.

"What?! So we get nothing from this?! We just added *another* burden to our load?" shrieked Spiel. During his voyage to Morante, he had dreamed of getting tens of millions of Fordes into the house's treasury. *What shitty city is this?! So much for the number one trading city on the continent!*

Charade furrowed his brow. Morante's change was nothing like he'd envisioned. The city felt nothing like the homeland for which he yearned, which he'd tried to recreate in the new place he lived. It was completely foreign to him. Deep down, beneath his love for money, beneath even his loyalty to Lorist, he was a Morante man. But this was not his Morante, not anymore.

After reading the inventory and a few other documents, Charade spoke.

"Your Grace, give me three days. I'll form a unit to investigate the city. Let us decide what we will do afterwards."

Lorist smiled bitterly.

"I regret it now. Had I known, I wouldn't have refused His Majesty's request and left Morante and the five citadels in his care before returning to The Northlands. How nice it would have be to push everything onto him.

"I'm to blame. I shouldn't have used peace as our reason for conquest. We can only wait for the envoys to return and then negotiate the deal. We can only hope to minimize our losses."

Charade laughed dryly.

"Things aren't quite as bad as you think. Look here, isn't there good news too?"

Lorist read the document Charade put on the table. It was a report from the camp that held the captives from the inner city. The tavern there was finally open and was earning tens of thousands of Fordes every fortnight. Part of it was thanks to the decrease in free porridge. Each bowl was diluted with water. The hungry captives had no choice but to buy pricey bread.

"On the one hand, we have to keep our promise as nobles to not infringe on the captives' sacred right to private property. On the other, we have to find a way to suck them dry. This is just a small hustle. Our real problem is the million Morantians with nothing to occupy their time. They've started fighting out of boredom and I doubt a revolt is far off," said Lorist.

"I understand. The issue is finding suitable jobs. But we're not planning to occupy the city for long, so we can't invest too much."

"That's the gist of it. This will only work out if we use the food-work rationing system they had before. We'll pay them with food. The problem is they'll never trust us. We can try to force it, but they'll just riot. We can't pay them in gold either, though--"

Jinolio, burst into the room to report that Els had asked for an immediate audience.

Lorist then left to meet him. Els jumped to his feet to salute Lorist as he stepped into the study.

"Your Grace, can you follow me?"

"You're a close friend, Els. Don't act so formal. Let's go. Jinolio, tell Charade to head to Red Grace Inn and wait there. We haven't seen Old Char for quite a while. It'd be a good place to gather."

"Sigh... My uncle's inn has become one of the rationed inns in the city. Each customer can only drink a cup of wheat ale a day. Even the head chef, McDuffin, left with another viscount because there wasn't any more food to cook," said Els, crestfallen.

"You met Char already?"

Els nodded.

"I went there with Reidy. Uncle looks a lot older now, and he refuses many invitations from nobles who want him to be their knight. He's staying with his kids in peace. Aunt Louise takes care of the inn herself now though they serve nothing but a cup of ale. Reidy and I asked them to move to The Northlands instead. Our lands border each other and they can choose to stay anywhere they want. But Uncle refuses. He doesn't want to leave Morante. I tried to argue, but he chased me out..."

"Can I come with you?" asked Charade as the two stepped out.

Els hesitated for a moment.

"...Alright. But we can't attract any attention."

Els brought the two to the headquarters of his old syndicate. It was a three-story building next to a district with a large garden. An intricate angel fountain and a small forest of thirty or so trees stood in the middle of the garden.

According to Els, it used to be the property of a Teribo noble but it was confiscated by the Union during the War of Glass. It was auctioned off to Jindoze who bought it to use as the syndicate's headquarters.

Jindoze was no noble, but he was in charge of the taxes of three districts and quite well-known in the city. He was waiting for them at the entrance when they arrived. Lorist realized he was alone after entering. Jindoze didn't say a word. He just nodded before taking them to the kitchen. Lorist felt something was off, but followed quietly.

After entering the storeroom next to the kitchen, Jindoze lifted a trapdoor and revealed a ladder. Els climbed down.

"Your Grace..." said Charade, hesitation written on his face.

"It's fine."

The ladder led to a dark room connected to a tunnel. Several burning torches lined the walls into oblivion. Jindoze was the last one to descend and closed the trapdoor before leading the way.

"A subterranean waterway and the syndicate's private tunnel. Thanks to the rationing policy, they've had no choice but to use these routes to smuggle food and supplies," explained Els.

"What are we doing here? It's not like we're trying to smuggle anything. We didn't stop them from doing what they do either," protested Charade.

"Jindoze wants to give you something. There are lots of eyes on the surface and he's worried this will be bad for the syndicate if others find out. He has to hide it here," explained Els.

At Jindoze stopped in that moment and whispered over his shoulder:

"We're here."

They were near a hole dug in the ground, probably to use as a temporary store during smuggling operations. It was four by four meters. There were no supplies inside, just two dead-drunk men.

"Who are they?" asked Lorist.

"The bearded one is Riwald's chief supervisor. He used to be in charge of the rations. We had to kneel and beg in front of him to be given scraps. He was summoned back to the guild's dominion last year. The man behind him is the gold-ranked captain of the guild's guard. He's well-known in the city," replied Jindozy coldly.

"Why are they were in such a state?" asked Charade.

"They came to me and asked me to stir up a revolt. If we did well, they'd submit a request to the Council to make us nobles. I heard they came to us first because we had some ability to fight. I fed them something special when I treated them to a drink, and here we are."

Lorist looked at him with deep interest.

"Jindozy, why didn't you do as he asked?"

"I don't want to be cannon fodder. Not for them. They aren't nobles, but they offer it to us? They can't promise what is not theirs to give! Who would be that stupid? Most importantly, many in the outer city are family. I don't want them to get involved in this. It's easy to stir up a revolt, but people will die while they get to hide.

"They said they were only the first to be sent and there would be more later, so I thought they would still be of use. I'd have buried them alive long ago, otherwise. I'm not trying to get on your good side. We did this because of our brother, Els. We don't want a revolt that will kill many people," said Jindozy with the same cold expression.

"Thank you, Jindozy. I know you don't consider me a brother, but I see you as that loyal, passionate and sincere friend I made all those years ago," said Lorist.

"Oh..."

Jindozy froze and turned to see Els laughing.

"Just take them away. You can't go back the way we came. Someone will be watching. I'll take you to the other exit. It's in a derelict corner of an old slum outside the city."

Chapter 520

Auguslo's Trust

"We've made preparations just in case. I don't think the negotiations will be successful," reminded Charade when he returned to the inner city.

Lorist nodded with a grim expression.

"I don't either. The Union might be counting on Morante to crumble us. If they can get the city to riot, they'll slander our reputation and inflict heavy casualties. They'll have an excuse to turn this into a holy crusade if we put the city down. Once they do that, we'll never get a day's rest until either of us are dead. Most immediately, the people will not hold back and we'll be buried under corpses. We'll be forced to pull out and they can then just march back into the city as saviors, and without spilling any of their own blood.

Lorist was enraged. The Union had chosen the path he'd feared most they might. He was infinitely tempted to hang an official or two to make an example. Riwald's vice-president and one of the rank 1 blademasters that guarded the place would make good sacrifices.

Charade coughed audibly.

"What's wrong? Catching a cold?"

"No... You seem not to have heard what I said."

Lorist blushed.

"Apologies, old friend. I was lost in thought. Say again."

"I said we should be patient. If things go as planned, Viscount Penelope and his companions should be arriving at Mauvlin as we speak. If the Union responds, it'll take another ten days for news to get back. As for Jindoz's gifts, they're just another arrangement the Union made before they retreated. They infiltrated the city to gain more information and to incite revolts. I doubt they know we're trying to negotiate."

"Makes sense. I'll have Tarkel interrogate them thoroughly and find out even their most embarrassing childhood secrets. I'll spare their lives until I hear from the Union. If they plan to play tricks, I'll leave them two corpses unlike any they've ever scene. Even their nightmares will be fantastical dreams by comparison! I'll kill everyone we have if they send people to make trouble." Lorist half-shouted.

Charade smiled, shaking his head.

"Tarkel will be blind as a bat if we lose the syndicates' cooperation. We cannot tell Morantians apart from informants. Meeting Jindoze gave me an idea. I need some time to investigate and consider a few things, but it might not only bring us out of this predicament, but unexpected benefits. I must get to work."

Lorist was curious, but the latter left too quickly. Charade left for the city with a bunch of officials the next day. Lorist was just about to call Charade to get more information, two days later, when Augustus and a bunch of other nobles suddenly announced their arrival.

Augustus shamelessly demanded a share of the spoils. It was only fair, you see, since everyone had played some part in this glorious victory. Everyone had done their bit, and now it was time they got their reward.

Shameless as he was, Augustus knew better than to bring the matter up bluntly. Lorist was still the kingdom's sword saint, after all. He instead put up a tragic performance during the banquet until Lorist brought it up himself.

He first bemoaned the long, bloody, taxing war, then, one teary-eyed noble after another told Lorist of their losses.

Lorist watched the show grimly. His patience finally burnt out, and he slammed his cup on the table, rising like an arrow loosed from a bow.

"Follow me!"

Elated, Augustus and his cronies followed quickly. Lorist led them to the meeting room and asked the guards to bring him the inventory of their spoils. He tossed them to Augustus.

"See for yourself. When did I say the city was full of gold and wealth? Well? Everything's there. I've not let anything out. Take your pick, what catches your eye?!"

Augusto was dumbstruck. Neither he nor any of his cronies imagined the city had nothing to loot. Shazin looked at the accounts pale-faced.

"It's not as much as we'd expected, but 4 million Fordes is still a massive sum."

"Massive sum?" Lorist snapped, "I sacrificed almost my entire fleet to open the seas to Morante! The ships alone will cost more than ten million to repair or replace! Then there's the compensation I have to pay to the families of all the men I've lost! That aside, we'll be lucky to get half of this loot to help pay back that debt. Look here!--" Lorist tossed another document in front of the king, "--The Union left their storehouses bare. We have to use most of the money we got from the city to feed the one and a third of a million people living in the city! This whole endeavor's been a massive loss! I'm shitting money down the long-drop like someone with dysentery!"

Kenmays flipped the new document open.

"Incredible! They made something out of nothing! They're even doing it with cloth instead of coins! They didn't just keep all their money, they even got monopolies over everything!" cried he.

"Wondrous my ass!" Lorist bellowed, "I conquered Morante, I took this city but I get nothing for it! The merchants and their wealth are gone! This stupid rationing system is also now gone and I have to feed the whole fucking city! I'm sitting on the edge of a volcano about to erupt!"

"There is good news, however."

"Good news?" everyone asked in unison.

"Yes. Now that you're here I'll pass the city and the surrounding forts to you. You can do with them what you want, I don't care. I took part in this whole mess to end the war. I sank their fleets, took the plains, and even conquered their capital, and I've sent messengers to call for negotiation. My work is done so I'm heading home."

Lorist didn't care that he'd told the king he'd handle the negotiations to make sure things went smoothly. He just wanted to be rid of this whole business and go home, so he shameless tossed everything onto the king's shoulders and prepared to leave. This was one of the nice things about being someone else's vassal, you could just toss stuff to them if it was too much for you.

Augusto was not about to be given such a hot potato, however. He smiled and patted Lorist's shoulder.

"Locke. You're the kingdom's sword saint, you're the pinnacle of our power. It won't do to not have you at the negotiations. Your forces have also played a pivotal role in getting us this victory and this opportunity at peace. It would be a slander on your glory if you didn't get to sit at the table as we end this war. The plains and the city were taken by you, so it's only natural that you keep them until the negotiations are over."

With that Augusto tossed everything back to Lorist. He made him Fieldmarshal and gave him overall command of the front-lines and all the newly occupied territories as well as putting him in charge of negotiations with the Union.

He had to actually help out with the situation in the city, though, so he decided to give all the food stores in Bluwek to Lorist to help him out a little.

Lorist almost fainted. He didn't think he'd not just fail to get rid of this nuisance, but be given every other nuisance the king had. He couldn't find a counter to the king's arguments, however. He was indeed the kingdom's only sword saint, so he was the ideal pick to be the front-lines' guard dog. He'd never before wished so much to have a peer.

If only he'd killed the enemy sword saint. He could just argue that it was completely unnecessary to have him sit on the front-lines if the enemy had no counter. But the old bastard had gotten away, so it seemed only natural that the kingdom keep its most powerful soldier on the front to defend against the enemy's sword saint.

"This sounds all fine and good, Your Majesty, but where will you camp your forces if not in Bluwek?" asked Lorist.

"I do not think it's necessary to keep my men on the front anymore now that you're here and in command. We've all been fighting this war for two years and it's time to rest. I'll return to the capital and the other nobles can go home and rest some while you wrap things up here," said the shameless bastard.

Lorist's jaw fell through the floor.

This shameless bastard, this good-for-nothing dandy was shoving everything onto him! He summoned every ounce of restraint he had to respond calmly, but just as he began exhaling to speak, the king clutched his hands.

"Please, Locke, it all depends on you. We are in the perfect position to end this in our victory and only you can ensure that this ends well. If you can end this war as things are now, with a complete surrender from the Union, then you'll be inscribed in the history books and on every monument, palace, and city and town square in the kingdom as it's greatest noble for millennia to come!

"I believe the Union is no less wary of this war than we are, especially after this decisive strike. I do not think they have it left in them to fight on so there's no need for us all to stay on the front.

"Locke, my brother, please stay just a little longer. You can return to The Northlands the moment the treaty is signed. I'll send food as soon as I return to the capital. I won't let you bear this burden alone."

The visitors left early the next morning, before Lorist could come up with a counter argument. Lorist couldn't let them go empty handed, so he let each pick a single souvenir.

He saw them off with a smile.

It vanished the moment they were out of sight.

Why am I not reaping all the benefits?! Those fuckers pushed everything onto me! I'm a swordsaint, for crying out loud. I'm one of the most powerful people on the continent, probably the most if you count my forces as well. Why, then, am I driven like a common easel? Why must I suffer so many donkey years?

He spent the next day in self-loathing. He didn't even notice Charade coming into his study the next afternoon.

"When did you come in?" Lorist jumped when he finally noticed the figure. "Where have you been in the past few days?"

Charade took two sips of his wine before he replied.

"How long have you been snoozing on your desk? You really have it easy, don't you?"

"Don't get me started!"

Charade tossed him a handful of bound parchments.

"Take a look. It's the idea I mentioned a few days ago."

Lorist flipped the folder.

"What?! You want to form another Trade Union?!"

Chapter 521

Charade's Plan

"One hundred and eighty-six years ago, Duke Forde Morante who controlled the Falik Plains made a sudden declaration that caused an immense upheaval that would end with the abolishment of feudal society within the lands he conquered and the establishment of the Union. Uniting with Twinhead Dragon, Wessia, Mayflower, Riwald, Peterson and Chikdor, Forde formed the Forde Trade Union and traded with the other nations from their heartland in the plains. The Union's formation allowed the merchants, usually oppressed by the nobles, to finally have a reliable and trustworthy backing. Their statuses rose considerably as a result. They had a sovereign voice in the continent's geo-politics for the first time in history."

The room was filled with all the house's administrative officials currently in Morante. Everyone had answered Lorist's summons.

Charade stood on the podium and lectured everyone on the Union's history, his proposal, and its suspected benefits for the House.

To people who knew Morante well and had lived there for more than a decade like Lorist, Els, Charade, and Yuriy, the officials that didn't understand the history and background of the city were rather troublesome. Loze asked why Lorist wouldn't just force half of the citizens to the north, like Yungechandler. His thoughts were simple. They would move half of the population to one place and solve two problems at once.

Lorist smiled bitterly. It'd be great if things were that simple. The Union had fought against the Krissen Empire for at least a century. Its old principles were ingrained in the people deeper than even religion. The Krissen Empire was also their sworn enemies. They'd rather die than become their subjects. The people saw doing such a thing as disgracing their entire family line.

Moving them to his land would do nothing but invite the trouble into his home. Like zealots amongst heathens, they'd spread their beliefs to his people and eventually his own people would rise up against him. He couldn't even take willing people because they'd spread their ideals like a cancer, even if they didn't mean to.

"The time of its founding was very tough," Charade continued, "The surrounding nations refused to have anything to do with such heretics for years. Many sealed their borders entirely, killing anyone that tried to cross the border. For years it was as though the world outside the Union's borders didn't exist at all. The Krissen Empire saw their chance and tried to swallow it up.

"Krissen IV forgot one important thing, however. The Union was a heresy on the way the continent worked, but it was far less of a threat, at least militarily, than his empire. The other kingdoms were more than willing to work with the Union to stop him once he started mobilizing.

"When they joined sides, the Union undid their prejudice enough to let them accept them, even if begrudgingly, and even became somewhat admired.

"The decades of war that followed engrained their beliefs in them like a religious person suffering tribulations. Their final victory made them prideful and arrogant, on top of almost zealous belief in their principles. The people here would often tell me and His Grace that they were 'free men' with giant smirks on their faces. 'Here you are no different from all the other common people', their eyes always said. We can never accept them as subjects. They will never bow their heads to someone else.

"These people are a unique breed. They will never subjugate themselves to anyone. They are also, however, merchants. Gold is their god.

"The big heads in the guilds couldn't have made a bigger mistake by implementing the aristocracy. They wanted to be equals to the nobles from the kingdoms and empires, but they've broken their connection to the freedom-loving people as a result.

"They originally wanted to take land from the empire, but then the War of Glass broke out and their plans changed. The big guilds benefitted from the wars, but the rest of the Union suffered. Then the guilds went and moved their operations to their dominions, destroying the city's economy even further.

"The war with us is actually very convenient for the Union because they can shift blame to us for the suffering."

"All that said. We fought in this war for three years. We took this city to end the war but instead of negotiating with us, the bigwigs just pulled back and are preparing to drag this on even further. These merchants may have the titles of nobles, but they have

none of the education and principles, none of the character, that has to come with it.

"I finished my investigation a few days ago. We wiped out all traces of the old guilds in the city, and with it their system to feed the people. As a result that burden now falls to us. If we treat all the old guilds as foreigners to the Union, which isn't far off since they're all now based outside the old Union territories, then wouldn't this basically be the same Union of old?"

What did Charade mean? Apart from Lorist, everyone stared at him blankly. A few realized what he was saying. He was going to form a second, a new, Union. Without all the old merchants.

Was this even possible?

"We can do it," Charade declared, as if reading everyone's thoughts, "Duke Forde did it with even fewer people than we have now. And none of them were as educated and skilled as the million plus we have now. A century of war against kingdoms and empires have sculpted these people into irreparable egalitarians. Why not give them their wish?"

Charade's words stunned everyone. Most were nobles or about to be nobles, how could such thoughts come into their minds. One of the oldest feudal societies on the continent was now discussing how to form a second egalitarian one? What kind of a joke was this? If irony could kill...

"B-but..." Potterfang stammered, "the Union had the support of the six largest guilds. Their support is what let it survive. Morante has nothing like that now. Most of the merchants hate us to the bone as well, as do many, if not most, of the people. Why would they work with us?"

"It is easier to draw on a blank canvas." Charade smiled, "This is exactly why this is the perfect time for something like this. Without any big forces to interfere and stamp their own mark on this, we can shape this new Union however we wish. We can lift the syndicates up to replace the old guilds if need be. Without big guilds holding small merchants and individual entrepreneurs down to hold on to their own hegemonies, I have no doubt we'll see a miracle."

Charade's plan had several key goals. First, uplifting the syndicates to fill in the space left by the now-absent guilds together with the shrine guilds and unions. Second,

removing the old restrictions so everyone could trade, make, sell, and buy as they wished. The guilds were previously in control of lawmaking and set up policies that benefited their competing economic interests at the expense of everyone else. Charade would keep these two forces completely separate so the governing body could be objective and make laws that benefited everyone.

The house would only take recruits taken from the southern provinces as laborers, the rest would be used to fulfill his plan's third goal: forming a new defense force to man the city's surrounding citadels and, if possible, the rest of the positions in the plains. This would free up Lorist's legions to return home. It was not good to leave it so sparsely defended.

The fourth goal was to reinvigorate the new Union's industries. First on the list were the shipbuilding and fishing industries. These had the biggest potential for growth because they were now the most desolate. These were previously completely monopolized by the big guilds and had no small competitors. They were thus now completely empty and ripe for new guilds to take over.

Finally, bringing merchants back to the city from the surrounding lands so they could start up shops and other businesses in the city and begin rebuilding its trade economy. At the same time, some of them would be made to focus on farming on granges outside the city so the population could be moved there partially. The city had to be downscaled, and the farmlands repopulated, this was unavoidable.

Everything sounded great in theory, but Spiel knew the practical was far from it.

"And where will we find the money? Our coffers certainly can't pay for this," he asked.

"We don't have to put anything into this. Morante has enough money hidden in it. We just have yet to dig it out of the ground."

Chapter 522

Economic Measures

"I went to check Morante's financial records while we were doing our investigation. Can you believe they've collected just 7.6 million gold Fordes in tax over the last three years?"

Charade opened a large sky-blue folder.

"It's all documented here. It's ridiculous. Back when His Grace and I were still students here, the Union collected 30 million every year. The greatest year was 69 million. Now it's just a fifth of that.

"Why? Simple. The Union is run by merchants, but the aristocracy has certain unavoidable consequences inherent in its structure. The Union used to rely purely on trade. But after it started expanding aggressively, trade ceased. It forced the Union to rely mostly on raiding and plundering. At the same time, these riches were sent to and hoarded in the guilds' new dominions, rather than being invested in Morante and put back into circulation.

"It's pretty good that we got even just four million Fordes from the city. It was almost exclusively meant to fund Invincible. My investigation revealed something else as well.

"I was told that when the high officials and the nobles were about to surrender, they tried to have the people leave their possessions behind and take as much of the money instead. If they claimed it was part of their personal property, we'd let them leave with it. They could then return it at a later date once we were gone. Luckily most of the civilians refused and took their personal stuff with them instead.

"Morante is full of riches, but most of it is not in the guilds' safes and coffers, but distributed amongst all the inhabitants. If things are still anything like what they used to be, every household should have about 40 gold Fordes stored away somewhere, whether in actual coinage or in valuable heirlooms. Take Sir Els's old friend, Jindo. His syndicate earned nearly 100 thousand by smuggling meat into the city.

"The Union didn't resort to rations and handouts because nobody had any money, but

because there weren't any resources. They tout their ideals so proudly, but they've nothing but slaves by some other name.

"Reinvigorating Morante's economy can be done. We just need a bit of money and some supplies to kickstart the market. Everything else will follow on its own. If we pump the four million we got from the city back into the economy and make our products available in the market, everything will be done."

Lorist rapped the table with his fist and stood up, stopping the chatter that followed Charade's declaration.

"Raiding and taking wealth is the easiest way to get rich. But as we take wealth away, we also gain grudges and animosity. I eliminated Hanayabarta, executed all its inhabitants, and built a pyramid with their skulls. I plundered their storehouses, coffers, and safes. I erased a kingdom built over a century. I feel no shame, I feel no guilt, I sleep soundly at night because they deserved everything I did to them and more. But we cannot do this everywhere we go.

"You've all heard Charade. Morante's wealth isn't somewhere we can conveniently take it and slip away. We'd have to pry it bit by bit from the hands of the city's people. I know you're itching for a fight, Loze, but how will this get us anywhere closer to a peaceful continent? And I know you would love to fill our coffers with the money we take from the city's people, but with the trade network Morante offers and the markets it has destroyed, where would we sell our products to make a profit in the coming years? We may on occasion act like bandits, but we must not let our foresight be that of bandits as well. My family did not survive for three hundred years by plundering everyone around them. We do not have the history of bandits, understand?

"I am ashamed that rather than banditry being a last resort, and you all jumping at a plan that meant we didn't have to steal from people, you all oppose the plan like a thief being told to do some honest work. You disappoint me, Loze... and all of you that stood with him and supported his call for plunder. Think carefully about the principles on which our society and our position in it as nobles is founded. I want a reflection in writing from each of you. Jinolio, you'll handle taking them in, report to me when you have them all. If anyone doesn't know these principles, please come to me and I'll happily drill them into your thick skulls."

Lorist didn't shout or yell, but his words exploded in his men's ears one by one. Their faces were so red one could swear they were bleeding under their skin. Everyone

reflected on his words and quickly realized why he was so angry. Plundering the nobles and the leaders, plundering government coffers, and plundering the peasantry were two completely different things. They'd taken the city from the merchant guilds, so it was fine to take everything they owned, but the peasantry were a different matter. Shamelessly stealing them dry would stain Lorist's name and that of his house forever. It wasn't unlikely that he'd become known as the Bandit Duke.

It wasn't really so much that they'd be plundering the peasantry, it was not uncommon for invading armies to clean out the cities they invaded, nobles and peasants alike, but none did it after giving their word that they wouldn't. Keeping one's word was one of the most fundamental principles to nobles, it was the basis of all their authority and standing in society. Their word, their honor was everything. If Lorist stole from the normal cityfolk after vowing not to, and did so without a valid reason for breaking his word, he'd have no reputation left and no way to ever reclaim it because his very integrity as a noble would have been destroyed and no one would ever trust him again.

It would be even worse because Lorist had claimed he'd come only to end the war and bring peace to the ravaged lands where nobles fought for their own ambitions and bled their people dry. On top of all that he had vowed not just as one of the highest ranking nobles on the continent, but as one of it's less than a handful of swordsmen. He stood at the continent's peak in nearly every way, and his honor was held in far higher esteem than anyone else's. To break his word would mean the longest fall from grace ever recorded in Grindian history.

"Money is not like food or clothes or tools. It doesn't have any worth sitting in a coffer. It's only value is in being exchanged for other things. It's only worth something when it's flowing in a market, changing hands all the time. Sigh, talking to you feels like talking to a brick wall.

"I've gone through Charade's proposal, but we can't rush it. We mustn't agitate the Union unnecessarily before we know that they aren't willing to negotiate. Neither can we just sit around and wait for word that may never come. So, I've decided to take the following steps while we wait."

"First, we'll pass the Saw's we captured from Invincible out to the shipyards and hire technicians to turn them into fishing ships. Then we'll put them up for sale. We will encourage the peasants to buy them and start fishing. At the same time, we'll issue permits for fishing in the sunshine seas under Northsea's protection.

"If no one is willing to buy the ships, we'll recruit sailors. I don't doubt that things will pick up once the boys make a few successful trips. Also, the confiscated linen ropes can be used to make nets.

"Second, we'll form two garrison divisions by picking elite soldiers from the captives and let them take charge of patrolling the outer city. Potterfang, Els, that's your baby. We'll source their equipment from Firebird. If they are satisfactory, I will form a few more to replace our forces in the citadels on the plains.

"Third, we'll restore the farmland around Mass and Gypsy and start planting again. We will form granges and hire willing people to build them and sell them to the people left in the city once they're done.

"Pay everyone we hire in half-portions of money and supplies. We'll take the money for everything out of our plunder from the inner city. It should go without saying this isn't charity. I have every intent of making every copper and then some back once things are up and running.

"I have also ordered Northsea to move all the goods here from Silowas. I've seen a good opportunity to sell our stuff here in Morante. Most of the merchants we used to move our spoils to the island purchased a lot of our stuff before heading back. They have expressed their interest in continued trade with us, but complain that Silowas is too far and the seas too dangerous weather wise.

"Since they feel that way, we'll just move trade from Silowas to Morante. We'll ship everything from my lands to the island, and from there to Morante where we'll sell it to the merchants. We couldn't do this before because Chikdor and Peterson wouldn't let us, but they're completely out of the picture now so we can trade directly with the merchants.

"Moving trade here will jumpstart the economy whilst giving us direct access to the southern half of the continent. Both sides thus benefit greatly from this arrangement.

"Finally there's the question of who'll be my ambassador here and handle things on my behalf. I've put Charade in charge of that. He'll work with the council to set up the new government and put everything in place to get the city running again. Once the city is working again, we'll hand the plains over as well. Even if we don't declare this new Union officially formed, by setting up this 'interim' government in the meantime, even if our negotiation go through, we can still cause the Union trouble."

Lorist, Jinolio, and Reidy visited the slowly awakening commercial districts in disguise several days later. Life was slowly returning to the place and footfalls grew ever increasing in number with every day that passed.

The first of the products imported from The Northlands was finally hitting the stalls and shelves. It was a great set-up. Even if products were sold at three times what they'd cost back home, it was still considered cheap here and would sell out quickly. Lorist expected the first batches to result in a stampede sale as people stockpiled everything they could get their hands on, since they didn't know whether this was a once off thing or whether it was here to stay. Things should settle down in a few days and a more normal, healthy sales-rate should take hold.

Lorist was forced to swallow his words in laughter when Tarkel reported some of the discussions he'd overheard in the city. It turned out people weren't stampede-buying because they were unsure of whether it would last, but because everything was so cheap.

Peterson had bought its flower from Lorist at five times the kingdom's price but could still sell it for double that here because of the shortage. This had gone on for years so everyone had come to expect that to be the normal price. A market used to threefold the price they were now getting would naturally soak it up like dry earth soaks up the first rains of the season.

All the hatred towards him and his people built up because of their killings and gruesome displays were slowly beginning to fade. It would still take quite a bit more for them to become just normal foreigners again, but at least things were beginning to head in the right direction.

This slow change was helped along when the first payment cycle came around and Lorist's people paid everyone their full salaries on time.

A non-descript figure grew out of the crowds and whispered something in Jinolio's ear before melting back into the masses.

"Your Grace," Jinolio carried over the message, "Viscount Penelope is back. It's just him out of the group we sent though. He's not alone. It seems he has a Union ambassador with him. It's Peterson's vice-president, apparently."

Chapter 523

Response to the Peace Negotiations

Lorist's gut told him there would either be no negotiations, or very bad ones, the moment he saw Viscount Penelope.

Jinolio said Peterson's vice-president had come with him. What did this mean? He was an old acquaintance of Lorist's. He could not have come just to talk about those old days, could he?

As expected, Penelope's tone was moaning when he greeted Lorist.

"Revered Lord Norton, I apologize for not having fulfilled my task. I did my utmost, but the Union will not negotiate. They will not stop the war."

"This is disappointing to hear, but your efforts are dearly appreciated. This is not your fault, Penelope, and I do not hold it against you."

Lorist invited Penelope to sit with a warm smile and had Jinolio serve him fruit wine.

What is the Union planning?

Invincible was gone and Morante and the plains were in his hands. Their army was at half strength at best. Most were their elites, but even they could not compare to his men. The Union only held onto what it currently had because he had no desire to plunge his men back into war. Were he willing, however, he could smash through their lines and crush them completely without too heavy losses.

They can't just be doing this just to spite me.

There had to be something more to this. They had to have a trick still left up their sleeve. What, however, Lorist could not guess. Maybe he'd just not taught them a harsh enough lesson. This continued stubbornness angered him. They should just lie down and accept their fate. They were making things unnecessarily difficult for him. They should really just sit down and hand everything over to him. They had no right to be this stubborn.

"I have another confession, Your Grace. My companions became ill on the way to the Union strongholds. They are too sick to return so I had to come back alone. They hope you will release their families so they can reunite soon."

Jinolio clicked his tongue. What ill? They were fully kitted for the journey and they were all silver rank. No silver rank would fall ill so easily. This was nothing but an excuse to get out of captivity. It seemed Penelope was the only man with a good conscience and a working moral compass.

"Such a journey must surely be tiring for feeble silver ranks. I could not expect such weak bodies to come back through the cold so quickly. Don't worry, I'll look after their families carefully and they can reunite safely once the war ends."

"That will do as well."

Penelope was not inclined to argue on behalf of people unwilling to fulfill their tasks to earn their freedom, so he dropped the matter unceremoniously.

"The Union refused to negotiate, but they are willing to keep in touch with your captives and yourself. That's why they've sent Count Kaet, Peterson's vice-president. I am told you've had dealings with one another in the past, before the war, that is. He's come to be the Union's ambassador."

"Vice-President Kaet. Why would he come? Jinolio, quick! Get my old friend in here."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"President Peterson was very helpful when I left Morante all those years ago. I dealt with Vice-president Kaet when we started trading with the Union years later. Do you know what he has come to discuss?"

"I'm afraid I don't, Your Grace. It is a matter of discussion between two enemy factions. I, a captive of one side would not be told, certainly not when I'm a defeated and disgraced admiral. I tried to convey your intentions for peace to the Union, but they were only interested in the particulars of my defeat. I'm being blamed for the Union's current state. Honestly, it's a miracle I was even allowed to come back and wasn't just executed on the spot."

The general's face slowly reddened as he spoke and his heart raced.

"They know nothing of what happened. They know nothing of the circumstances of my defeat. They were so convinced of their superiority and the certainty of their victory that they wholly believe I must be the most incompetent admiral ever to have sailed on the sea, or have lost on purpose."

It could not be denied that the admiral had suffered a historic defeat, but he could not be accused of incompetence. Had the fight been any less one-sided technology wise, Lorist would have lost. Hell, even with his overwhelming superiority on the technology tree the admiral had brought him to the brink of defeat. Had the admiral not charged onto his ship, but one of the others, the fight might well have ended in Lorist's defeat.

Lorist searched awkwardly for consoling words, to no avail. Luckily only a few awkward seconds passed before Jinolio brought the Vice-president into the room.

"Ahah! Vice-president Kaet, my old friend, it's been too long! Are you well?"

"It is a happy day to meet you again, Lord Duke!" Kaet exclaimed as he greeted Lorist, "I didn't think you'd become my guild's enemy. Now you've even conquered our old capital and chased out of the plains. You've done what emperors and an entire empire could not! The world never ceases to amaze me."

"Old friend. I never wanted to be the Union's enemy. I want more than anyone else to end this horrible war and turn everything back to how it was before the war. I want not to point fingers and put blame on anyone's lap. I just want this to end. I have returned to the front-lines for this sole purpose. I had hoped that with this attack I could bring you stubborn boys back to the table, but now you've turned me down again. Tell me, have you grown fond of war?"

"Sigh..."

Kaet didn't know how to respond at first. Once Lorist's words sank in, however, he blasted back with a livid reply.

"Andinaq started all of this. That blasted king marched his men into *our* lands. You are the aggressors here. You started this bloody war. You were the first to slaughter our nobles, the first to break the age old taboo! You yourself wiped out one of our guilds like dogs. You disgraced us and then you have the nerve to criticize us for not

surrendering to you tyrants? Tell me Lord Duke, is your skin thick enough to deny your crimes? If so, I don't know how you get out of bed in the morning!"

"Oh?" an alien smile cracked Lorist's face, "I don't know how the empire's territory became yours. Auguslo, my king, waged a just war to reclaim the lands rightfully his by inheritance. You are the invaders, the foreign settlers. You are the greedy bastards stretching your dog claws into what is rightfully ours.

"Whatever... You merchants know nothing about nobility, and noble honor and prestige. You wear the clothes and spout the words, but you do not live the lives. You do not inherit anything, you know nothing about family heritage so of course you would think something belongs to you just because you could steal it. We're just teaching you how to be proper nobles. Land belongs to you because you have a claim hundreds of years old and a centuries long history and bond with the land, not because you managed to chase the true owners off the land.

"See what you did? I said I didn't want to argue blame, but now you've made me go down that road. I can't sit idly by and watch you monkeys mock us for having tails. I don't know what you're up to, refusing my offer of peace when you're on the brink of being wiped out completely, nor do I particularly care. Tell me, what secret mission do you have?"

"You..." Kaet wanted to argue, but Lorist gazed at him with a murderous gaze, and he knew the man was a swordsaint, so he swallowed his words.

He acted with restraint and respect in their previous meetings, but he always looked down on this little noble from the barbarian north. Now, however, the man was a swordsaint. And one that could go toe-to-toe with the Union's. He could not offend this man.

Kaet dropped the familiarity with which he'd behaved before. His countenance became far and cold. He bowed stiffly.

"I am Count Kaet Wesrena and I serve in this meeting as the Forde Trade Union's ambassador. I greet the bloodblade saint, Norton Lorist, Duke of The Northlands with the respect his title is due. I come to bring the Union's official response regarding your suit for peace."

"Go on."

"The Union is willing to speak of peace, but such talks will not take place as long as even one Andinaq foot stands on our land. We will speak of peace only once you and your king withdraw from our lands, including the seven provinces and the lands of our allied countries in the north, pay reparations for your transgressions, and admit to your crimes. The Union was not comparable to the Krissen Empire when we last fought, but we still won. The war lasted fifty years, but we won. This has lasted just three, do you really think we will give in now? Do you really think we can not fight you for the next fifty years until you've bled white? Even if we have to fight you for a century, we will do so. The Union is ever victorious!"

Lorist, Jinolio, and Penelope's mouths scraped the floor.

Did this man still have his brains? This sounded more like their declaration of war than a call for peace. What gave the Union their confidence? No. This could not be called confidence. This was a delusion. A collective insanity had swept over the entire Union.

"Nonsense! Men!" shouted Jinolio.

Kaet was being too rude. He'd insulted Lorist. Ambassadors were generally free to speak to their counterparts as equal, regardless of any rank difference so they could openly convey their messages, but this was an insult. Ambassadors, as unfettered as their speech may be, could not shout at their counterparts.

"Duke Norton! I am an ambassador! This is the Union's reply!"

Kaet remained stock straight.

"That all? Nothing else?"

Lorist stared at Kaet with an interested gaze. He waved his guards down. He could tell the ambassador had just recited the message. These were not his own words. There was no point in killing the messenger.

"Huh? You're not going to kill me?"

"Kill you? Why would I? I am not your heartless comrades. I am not an uncultured, uneducated, barbarous merchant. Your reply is perfectly understandable. You can't expect an idiot to speak in proper sentences, after all. I forgive your mistake. You guys are just being sore losers. You want to fight until there's nothing left of you. Fine by

me. I'll just wipe you off the face of the continent for good, then.

"A proper noble treats his guest, an ambassador even more so, with all the etiquette and decorum he has, even if the poor sod is a monkey. You don't have to worry, you just barely qualify as a monkey, so I'll treat you properly. Now, tell, me. I know you didn't come here just to give me that little babble. What else are you here for?"

"I'm..." Kaet shook violently, "We're still at war, but hostilities have ceased for the time being, so I've been sent to come get our captives. We are willing to pay a fair price."

Chapter 524

Leaving the Camps with Nothing

"Hahahaha..." Charade laughed badly in the couch, clutching his stomach.

It was far too much of a joke and such a foolish stroke would definitely remain one of the staple moments of history.

In the entire two thousand year history of the continent after the magic civilization, even including the millennium-long dark ages, there were countless unexpected results that came about from the interaction of two factions. However, not one was as laughable as the Union's reply. Lorist had suggested a peace negotiation, yet they came back with a declaration of war.

Usually, when nobles were at each other's necks, they would respond to requests or queries politely. If one side proposed peace, even if the other didn't agree, they would still be polite in their rejection. Such was the etiquette. No noble had ever broken this basic rule. The Union was the first.

"A bunch of fools! They don't know what's good for them!" Lorist barked.

Kaet's kamikaze-like attitude made him want to vomit. Did they really think Lorist was a complete fool and would anger so easily?

"They sent him here to piss you off," said Charade.

"I know. I won't fall for it. I don't understand what the Union is trying to achieve. How do they hope to continue this war?"

"They must think they can use the city's people as a bargaining chip. They must think we can't handle them, so if they anger you, you'll vent on them. It'll incite a massive uprising and we'll lose control of the city. Either they then get the city back, or we keep pouring in people to keep control, and we keep losing men."

"Hehe, aren't they idealistic?" Lorist laughed, "We'll make them regret it. Also, how are your negotiations?"

"I came precisely to make my report. I've not come across any problems with the syndicates. They're actually happy to see the guilds gone and are willing to be the new city administrators. Even if it's temporary, they stand to benefit a lot.

"The shrine sector is also responding positively. The 27 shrines couldn't be happier about our invitation. The shrines are the ones most harmed by the rationing system. They despise the guilds for sapping their income so badly. They are all too happy to take over governing the city.

"The two remaining academies aren't as cooperative. Saint William Academy and Saint Molinka Academy survived only because the guilds kept funding them. They're the last of the 28 academies the city used to have. They had a good relationship with the guilds since their students were mostly from the guilds. They've ignored my invitations completely."

"Haha, since they don't want grace, we'll kick them out. We still need a representative for the academy sector though... Have Tarkel track down all the former administrators and teachers. We'll found another academy, several if possible. Put them under the new government. There certainly is still a market for academies, Morante has a million inhabitants and thousands of prospective students. For now we'll offer loans so they can study."

"A good idea, Your Grace," Charade said as his eyes flashed brightly.

The 28 academies used to be open and assimilated all sorts of cultures and methods, making Morante the holy land for furthering one's studies and even earning it its moniker 'academy city', unlike its current state with only two academies that only served to train new personnel for the guilds. They also accepted normal citizens, but most couldn't afford the fees anymore.

"When Morante's economy stabilizes, the people will start to think about education. When we were studying in Dawn Academy, there were 28 academies and 200 thousand students. Morante's population was only 800 thousand. The academy sector used to be the most crowded. You remember when I followed you for patrols one day a student realized there were even quite a few senior students who'd studied in the academy for more than six years and even formed their families and had children in the student dorms?"

"Yeah. Studying a specialized course used to cost six gold Fordes. It was expensive for

the average person, but many still paid so their children could study. If they used up their funds, the students could work for a period before resuming their studies and there were many ways to earn money. But ever since the War of Glass and the worsening relations between the Union and its neighbors, most foreign students left. They were also the majority of the student body. It's no surprise the academies closed."

"Even if we sponsor 10 thousand students, it won't cost more than ten thousand Fordes. I can bear that. Let's consider it a memento for my decade here. Alright, it's decided.

"Now that the Union has responded, we can go ahead with our plans. Take over everything trade and administration. We can even change the governing body into a new city council and set Morante up as the capital of the plains." instructed Lorist.

"Understood. They will be really delighted to hear they will become the new city council," replied Charade.

"Oh and tell Jindoze to be more loose and let others have a chance. It'll be enough for him to have a tight grip on the two new sentry divisions. Military power is most important during war after all."

Charade nodded.

"I'm sure Jindoze will understand."

Jinolio entered after knocking on the door.

"Your Grace, Supervisor Spiel and Sir Tarkel have arrived."

"Let them in."

Spiel and Tarkel entered.

"I've called you over to get your input. Count Kaet came yesterday. The Union rejected our offer and refuse to negotiate. They've instead demanded we release their prisoners for ransom. I've agreed," briefed Lorist.

"But, Milord, the prisoner still have most of their wealth. They're still spending it at the tavern. We'll lose all of that money!" Spiel griped.

"I know, don't worry. I won't let them leave with their wealth. We're holding Kaet in the military prison outside the city so he won't notice our moves. Charade, start negotiating the ransom with the count, begin with the blademasters and move down from there. The Hidegold Bay nobles will be last on the list. Increase their debts in the taverns tenfold. We'll only agree to paying the ransom once the Union settles those bills."

"As you wish. I shall do my best," sighed Charade.

"Don't do your best. Get it done. The Union is aware of our current situation, we have to keep them talking to stop them getting suspicious. Make us sound desperate. They'll want to drag negotiations on in that case as well."

"Tarkel, tell me about the docks camp."

"There've been 17 brawls and robberies, in the last week. Mostly because captives are preying on one another. They've formed gangs and are competing for territory. We've chosen to ignore everything as long as no one dies. I've given the order that it should be encouraged as subtly as possible.

"That's also what's behind the increase in recent spending. They aren't settling for porridge because they can't afford to become weak and have everything stolen. So they're coughing up the money to buy meat. Our profits should grow to 100 thousand gold a day soon."

Lorist shook his head.

"It's too slow. One tavern isn't enough, set up more all over the camp. Open a casino if you can, or a brothel. Start a few pawn shops as well. We don't just want their gold, we want their belongings as well."

"Your Grace is a true genius!" Tarkel exclaimed, "I haven't even thought of that!"

Lorist rolled his eyes.

"Buzz off. Don't let others know I was the one who came up with it. I just want the people to have as fun a time as is possible under the circumstances. The price is only high because it's difficult to provide everything in war time.

"Also, have Pajik set up another camp for the people who're out of money. They'll get

only the normal rations. Kaet can negotiate for those prisoners only. We'll move people over as they use up their money and the Union can negotiate for them then.

"No matter how we do it, we have to bleed them dry. My only condition is you must not disrupt the camps. We can move behind the scenes, but we must not make promises we can't or won't keep."

"Understood, Your Grace," Tarkel saluted, "I know what to do."

Chapter 525

Dinag's Encounters

Dinag used to be a mercenary. When he was fifteen, he took the sword his father left behind and joined his Uncle Wag's small but reputable mercenary band, the Bloodblade Squad. After five years of adventuring, Dinag grew from a rookie mercenary into a seasoned hunter and an expert scout. So, his uncle began to consider his future.

"You should go to the academy to study. There's no way you're going to work as a rough mercenary for the rest of your life like Uncle," his uncle had said all too often.

He hoped his nephew would study for a couple of years and learn something worthwhile rather than just mingling with the rough and rowdy mercenaries. He didn't want him to be a lowly poor peasant for his whole life.

Dinag, however, didn't want to study. He liked the free mercenary life, but his uncle was strict and unrelenting and forced him to go along with his plans. Just as Dinag helplessly resigned himself to becoming a student of Saint Marceau Academy in Morante, the War of Glass began. It changed his fate completely.

Though the hot-blooded mercenaries first banded together to resist Teribo's invasion, they eventually became the invaders like the Union itself. Bloodblade also served as a hired lance during the war and quickly expanded. They fought their way into Teribo and eventually turned into lawless bandits. They committed all sorts of crimes. To them, the war was a rave party. It was exactly the kind of days mercenaries desired.

But the good times didn't last long. The straight-laced Teribo VII suddenly offered huge bounties and turned the battle into a war of angels and demons, a battle in which mortal men had no future.

Dinag's uncle was among the first killed. As the first leader of Bloodblade and a two-star gold rank, he led a group of elite mercenaries and raided Teribo nobles' manors. During one such raid he was ambushed by two blademasters and his entire contingent was wiped out.

Dinag found only his uncle's decapitated body. He was still grieving when the band began to disintegrate. No one could agree how to split their plunder. Disagreements became fights, and fights became duels. Less than half of the surviving band were still alive when the fighting ended, and they left what whatever they could carry. The band was disbanded.

After burying his uncle, Dinag joined the guild army Twinhead Dragon formed, bent on taking revenge. He hoped to fight in the vanguard, to have as many enemies to kill as his blade could fell. He had no chance against the blademasters who killed his uncle, but he could go after the enemy king.

But the entire war was a joke. He never fought in field battles or siege, hell, there were none. He spent the entire war in camp waiting for a chance to fight, only to hear one day that they'd won the war. Rumor had it the king had killed himself. The Union bigwigs split the spoils and land and everything ended.

A single mercenary's hatred didn't matter. He didn't have anywhere to go either. His uncle was his only family, he had no idea what to do now. He eventually remembered his uncle's wish that he study, but he had no money. The survivors of the band had taken everything. He'd earned a good salary while in the army, but he'd blown everything on booze and women.

He had no choice but to keep working for the guild. He fought in all the Union's wars for the next decade. He'd been there for all the great victories and losses, and somehow survived. His track record eventually earned him the name Dinag the Lucky.

He'd need all of the luck for what he now faced.

His current mission was to infiltrate Morante. The guild's chief supervisor, Sloph, had personally met them and promised the president himself would promote them to knights and give them great rewards if they were successful.

More than ten years of experience had molded Dinag into a seasoned veteran. He knew the bigger the reward was, so too were the risks. However, having the chance to become a knight moved him. He had fought in many battles and had quite the reputation, but he was still just a mid-tier officer. He was a mercenary. Even when he had served for more than a decade and was a three-star silver rank, he couldn't compare with the new talent the guild was cultivating. To the guild, Dinag would forever be an outsider.

He didn't care about the money. As long as he could fulfill his mission, he would be promoted to a knight of Duke Cobleit himself. That meant the guild would have accepted him. From that day on, he would be treated the same as the talent the guild cultivated. He would definitely get a bigger salary and a higher position. Even his children would be accepted and receive proper training. His worries would be over.

This was a chance. Not one of his comrades turned the mission down. Dinag didn't think it would be that dangerous anyway. He just had to infiltrate the city and establish contact with his foregoers. From there he'd take them to a secret armory and help them distribute the weapons to the people and incite a revolt.

Simple, much easier than the one when he was trapped on a hill by the midsouthern nations' cavalry corps. He recalled he had been trapped for nearly ten days and even lacked water. He had to drink his pee to survive. To prevent the cavalrymen from discovering he was hiding there, he had to lie on the ground for three whole days.

The hardest thing about this mission, was that he had to survive through the uprising. He knew how dangerous a revolt could be. Especially for him, since the enemy was bound to come after the leaders first.

He chose a mercenary called Ricador as his partner. The mission had eight participants, all of them mercenaries. They split into four groups to infiltrate the city. They'd reunite inside. Sloph told them the city had a group inside already, but they'd been unable to achieve their goals.

The first group sent word that House Norton's tyranny had sparked a sense of resistance among the citizens, but they didn't have any weapons. The informants themselves were also understaffed and couldn't effectively incite a revolt. They hoped the guilds could send them some.

Sloph had said Riwald once transported three ships' worth of weapons from Hidegold Bay. They'd left the shipment in a warehouse in the city and never got around to moving it to their dominion.

Dinag and Ricador wandered for days to shake off any prying eyes suspicious of their activities. They passed through Tedanini Mountains and headed to Callisto Hills, pretending to be mercenaries returning from Khawistan and heading to Morante to sell their catch.

The Norton soldiers by the east gate weren't interested in them and casually let them in. They headed for their rendezvous point, a place called the Red Grace Inn.

A man in his twenties sat behind the counter. He complained when he saw the secret sign.

"What's the deal? The rest arrived days ago. We're only waiting for you."

"I'm sorry, We were playing it safe," Dinag apologized, "We didn't think House Norton's security would be so lax, unlike what you reported. We also saw many people walking about the streets doing shopping. The city seems very peaceful. Where is this revolt you talked about? What's going on?"

"You're a sharp one. You're much smarter than your partners. When they arrived, they started eating right away. They even told us to get them women. They didn't even know what got them. I didn't want to waste my energy here, but I guess you're not the type to yield without a struggle," said the youth as he smiled and put his sword on the counter.

Dinag and Ricador drew their own, retreating towards the door slowly.

"A trap then? The request was fake?" asked Dinag as he observed his surroundings.

"Yes. After we catch you, we will send another saying you're all idiots who got caught by the Nortons. Seven of you died and none escaped. The revolt never happened. We'll ask for another batch of reinforcements," answered the young man.

He drew his sword from its scabbard lazily.

"You can bring out all your hiding friends," said Dinag.

The young man shook his head.

"Nobody is hiding. Don't worry, I'm the only one. You see that small door behind me? If you can defeat or kill me, you can leave through there safely. Nobody will stop you. As for the front door, forget it. My senior apprentice brother is outside and if you can't even defeat me, you'll have no hopes of escaping."

"You have a master?" Dinag squinted.

"Yes," the young man sighed, "Actually, I don't really like fighting and killing. But my master wanted me to come and said I could use the free training partners. This is much safer than fighting on the battlefield, he said. Alright, come on. I'll give you a chance. You're talented. Won't you serve House Norton?"

Ricador charged forward without saying a word. When Dinag saw the glow on the hot-blooded Ricador's blade, he cried loudly and charged as well.

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The windstorm sword saint's residence still stood atop Brinn Hills. It was now Lorist's residence.

Tarkel stepped onto the balcony hurriedly. Lorist lay on a chair in a corner.

"What's wrong? Jinolio fine?"

"He is, Your Grace. He captured the last informants. It's just he took longer than usual. Reidy's already scolded him. We just got a message from the capital."

"Oh. Didn't our king return already? Did he cause trouble again?"

"Well..." Tarkel hesitated. "I don't know how to say this, Your Grace..."

"What's so hard to say? Just read the message."

"Okay. The queen is seven months pregnant," said Tarkel, hiding his smile by lowering his head.

"The queen's pregnant? Great news. I guess we'll have to prepare some gifts to celebrate... Wait, seven months?!"

"Seven months?!" Lorist repeated.

"Yes."

What a scandal! Auguslo was gone from the capital for three years and had only just returned. Clearly the queen had had an affair! His crown was green!^[1] What was he going to do? He might normally just execute the woman, but she was a Fisablen.

"The letter says the queen didn't welcome the king when he returned. She tried to hide from him saying she was ill, but the king went with a bunch of nobles to check on her. The moment he saw her, the king realized she was pregnant. He slew her four servants on the spot. The queen fainted at the scene."

Lorist was speechless.

"The king won't be ascending to the imperial throne for at least two years..."

[1] Wearing a green cap is a popular Chinese saying of being cheated on. It's a reference to people losing their lovers to other men during their time in the military, hence the green cap. In this case, Auguslo was literally on a military campaign...

Chapter 526

Protest

"I protest! I express my strong objections House Norton as a representative of the Union! You have violated your promise to respect the sacred right to private property and lust after the wealth of the family members of the merchant guild members! You are limiting their freedom..." Count Kaet was fuming with rage as he glared furiously at Charade, his voice hoarse from his outburst.

Charade dug his ear with his finger.

"Lord Kaet, please don't be so emotional. I acknowledge your protest. Then should we continue to discuss the transportation of the captives after you pay for their ransom? If you send carriages over, then each carriage will have to pay a toll of one gold Forde. If you hire us to transport those captives, it will cost two gold Fordes each if you include the food they will consume throughout the journey. We have already discounted this by half for you, our old friend. If someone else had come, we'd charge them three gold Fordes minimum without even including food."

Kaet sank into his chair angrily. It felt as if his fist had caught nothing but air. Not only did he not strike his enemy, he even injured his back in the process. He clutched his face and sighed deeply.

Who's the merchant here? Didn't they say nobles only care for face and merchants only care for profits? Why is it the opposite with House Norton? Do they not care about their reputation at all? It's all gold Fordes, gold Fordes, and more gold Fordes in their eyes! They're more merchant-like than merchants!

He'd thought the negotiations were going well, initially. The sum of two million gold Fordes would include the ransom for all surrendered blademasters, gold ranks, high officials of merchant guilds and their family members, attendants, as well as the guards that came along with them, numbering around two thousand people in total. However, the bill he received caused him to jump with anger.

"I wouldn't believe even if you killed me that two thousand people consumed more than 800 thousand gold Fordes in the span of 50 days! 80 thousand is more like it!

Show me your menu! I want to see what they eat daily!" cried the count.

"Apologies, Count Kaet, you should know the state of Morante now. Actually, we spent lots of effort to provide for the food and drink as well as the parties these esteemed guest of ours hold. I I'm sure you understand how much ingredients of that caliber cost. Apart from this bill, there are around ten other blademasters' tabs. That's another two million. We won't release the blademasters in question until these tabs are settled. You pay their salaries, so just deduct it from their salary."

"Ridiculous! You even set up casinos!"

"That's not a big deal. You understand how terrible it must feel to lose one's freedom. They are our captives because of your incompetence. These people have big but brittle prides, so we gave them things with which to entertain themselves so they suffer as little as possible."

"Stop! Just stop!" Kaet looked at the tabs and quickly noticed something odd. "Tell me, why are these debts only for blademasters? Why does no one else have any debt?"

"We don't allow them to make any debts. We trust the Union will foot the blademasters' bill, but not for anyone else. You might just choose to leave them with us."

It sounded bad, but it did make sense. The Union was hoping to put the elites to work, the blademasters were worth the debts they had, but no one else would be worth it if they had large debts.

The negotiations finally closed. Kaet hoped he could strike while the iron was still hot and ransom the rest of the inner city's residents. Most were family members of the Union's mid-tier military and guild officials, so getting them back would improve the forces' morale.

Charade wasn't against it, but the negotiations dragged on once again. They eventually settled on one gold per child and elder, two for women, and three for youths. Charade was about to have men go out and count the people to get a detailed price, Kaet declared he'd pay a million regardless of their number so there was no need for a survey.

"Deal!"

Kaet's face nearly exploded when he saw the first batch, however. What inner city residents was this? These were fucking refugees! They didn't have anything but the clothes on their back, some didn't even have that! The only difference was they were plump and fat!

Kaet quickly learned what had happened. The three thousand leapt at him like he was their father. Some accused House Norton of intentionally jacking up food prices while others asked him to go back and take back the goods stolen from their peers. Some even asked him to treat them to a good meal.

He had to be escorted out of the crowd, only to realise his clothes had been stolen in the turmoil. Even his wedding ring had been stolen. He couldn't even get angry. He was completely numb. He didn't forget his duty, however, and demanded to speak with Lorist.

He'd been housed outside the city in a small compound. The compound was completely surrounded by guards and Kaet was not allowed to leave it, even for meetings, everything happened within the compound.

He'd initially complained, but was told it was for his protection since the city was very unstable.

The few people he was allowed to meet described seeing fires in the city frequently, and fishing ships frequently sailed past the prison ships to go fishing. Everything matched what Charade had told him so for a while he was convinced it was true. It seemed House Norton had not gained anything from the city and was now losing men and money by the day. Now, however, he learned what was really happening from the released captives.

House Norton had defaulted on their promise to respect personal property rights and had started taking the property of the inner city residents. Their schemes were clever, so it wasn't blatant robbery, but it was still against their promise. Kaet could not let them do this.

He planned to give Lorist an earful and demand everything be returned, lest he return to the Union and they take military action. Lorist, however refused to see him. Charade also stopped visiting for three whole days.

When he finally saw the scoundrel again, Kaet unloaded on him like a catapult.

Charade just kept saying they'd not broken their promise. The people had chosen to give up their riches on their own by using the services they'd offered.

"Is your situation in the north so bad that two bowls of watered-down porridge counts as a decent free ration?" Kaet laughed, both furious and disdainful.

"It is!" Charade replied shamelessly, "You must not know how lucky they are to get even this much. Things are so bad they've even started eating the bark of the trees in and around the city! Anyway, that's not important. I'm here to talk about the fees for transporting the people. We won't be feeding the people we've released, they're in your care now. If you want to keep them here, you'll have to send food yourself, we can sell you some, 50 kilograms of potatoes is one gold Forde. If you want to send them back to your territory, you have two options. If you want us to send them off, you have to pay the fee. If you transport them yourselves, you'll have to pay the toll."

Kaet inhaled deeply and forced his anger down.

"One question. Why did you offer to transport the first batch for free? I thought the transport fee was included in their ransom."

Kaet was referring to the blademasters, gold ranks, nobles, officials, and their families. The two thousand people were transported to the new border for free.

"Don't take me for an idiot. That was just two thousand people. We're talking about 100 thousand now. We don't get the carts and drivers for free. We have to recoup the costs."

"I already paid the ransom..."

"Yes, the ransom. That's all we negotiated and all you paid. We're talking about the costs of transport now."

"You... You're shameless! I... I protest!"

"And I acknowledge your protest. Now, have you decided? Will you use our services or your own and pay the toll?"

Kaet did not have the energy to get angry again.

"I... I demand an audience with your duke. I will complain to him personally. Is this

what you Nortons consider sincerity? Barbarians are more sincere! You've been away from civilization and mingling with the barbarians for too long. You don't know how to behave properly anymore! I warn you, the civilized people of the rest of the continent will not stand for this, you'll pay!"

Charade shrugged.

"Frankly, His Grace only met you because you had ties with us from before the war. You're just a count, don't get too big for your station. Even if His Grace was not a duke, he is a swordsaint, he is far above you.

"As for us paying for this, you're welcome to march your armies here. We'd be more than happy to hand the city over. It's just that if we're imminently handing over the city, we might not bother with putting out all those fires. Ah, I'm rambling. Send a letter to the Union and ask them to come for the city. The winner gets to keep it, how about that?"

When he finished, he noticed that Kaet was shaking his head forcefully, his mouth shut.

Chapter 527

Shocking News

Lorist was incredibly busy with training and paying attention to the developments of the scandal of Auguslo and his pregnant wife. He was really interested in how it would turn out. If something like that happened in a commoner's or knight's family, Lorist would not be nearly as interested.

But this happened to the king. Lorist's craving for gossip shot through the roof. He lamented that Morante was too far from the capital and the gossip would take a day or two to arrive. So, when Charade placed the letter of protest Kaet spent three days penning in front of him, He crumpled it and tossed it into the rubbish bin.

"Protest my ass! All bark and no bite like a useless guard dog! If the Union really has any bargaining chips left, they would've sent their troops instead of sending an envoy. Ignore him."

"I know, but we should at least leave him some face," Charade answered, "Actually, this letter is quite well-written. I didn't know he had that kind of talent. He wrote it over several days and it has several good points. I was quite surprised that it doesn't openly criticize us. He's implied everything instead. It's a shame you want to throw it away without at least reading it."

"You can take it out of the bin if you want. I don't care about his talent. Talent that doesn't serve me is worthless. There are no problems with your arrangements, are there? How much did you squeeze out of the Union?"

"Everything's going fine. The people we released are settling in by the port. Kaet has agreed to use us to transport the people to the border and is buying the food from us as well.

"He should thank us for releasing them in small batches. He's already struggling with that along, if we released them all at once he'd collapse. He's blind to his blessing and protesting us only releasing the people that have no money left.

"The Union has given us 6.3 million of the ransom and the bills we slapped on them.

Kaet complained about this as well. He mocked us for being rural bumpkins that only care about money and nothing for our reputation. He's also complained about being forced to cover his own expenses, but I've been deaf since he arrived.

"Spiel is personally managing the camp near the port. Tarkel secretly spread word that only those who spent all their money would be released, so everyone's rushing to get rid of their money. Tarkel spread two other rumors as well, that their wealth would be confiscated by the Union even if they managed to leave with it, and that, if they won the red betting chip in the casino, they would be released and House Norton would even ensure their personal safety and wealth. Two casinos have been overflowing for two days now.

"We've earned three million in the last ten days. Spiel's so happy he can't stop smiling or keep his mouth shut. He said the captives alone can give us ten million. Tarkel also had people put up a show at the port two days ago. He gathered two thousand outer city citizens and twenty buckets of cow and goat blood to put up a show on how our troops are trying hard to suppress a revolt. He wanted to scare the stubborn old folks in the camp so they think the city is very dangerous and won't try to escape, and so they'll believe we're barely keeping everything under control."

Charade's report made Lorist laugh. It all started when Jindoze handed over the two infiltrators, Riwald's chief supervisor, Mendauk, and the gold-ranked swordsman, Vingoff. The two didn't even last two days against Tarkel and spilled everything.

Lorist knew he could play this well. Since the two planned the whole operation, he would have them continue to send word back to the Union and ask for supplies and reinforcements. He wanted more training dummies for Jinolio. The kid had a good character, his only shortcoming was a lack of motivation; the kid barely touched weapons at all. He never strove to win and, at best, fought hard enough to get a draw.

Lorist's three disciples had been the center of attention since he'd become a swordsaint. His first disciple, Reidy, was already equal to a rank 2 blademaster and had a strong bloodlust. Howard was equal to a three-star gold-ranked swordsman and was calm and calculative. And his third disciple was tall and graced with a magnificent figure and was a peak three-star silver rank. In stark contrast to his physique, however, Jinolio had a soft heart and delicate handwriting, perhaps because he spent lots of time with his female tutor in his childhood.

Lorist was quite troubled by this kid. How could a pirate like Senbaud give birth to a

good-boy son? The old pirate had sailed the seas to raid, kill, and commit all sorts of crimes. Many of Lorist's knights were even ashamed to be in the same unit as him. But his eldest was loved by everyone. He was genuine and had a great temperament; his loyalty was also second to none. His aversion to combat was his only shortcoming.

Sending Jinolio to fight on the battlefield was too risky right now. Even a sword saint could not be certain of his fate. And sparring with the guards was pointless. Jinolio didn't care about winning, and he couldn't be put in a real life-or-death situation that way. Having him fight a Union operative trying to infiltrate the city was the best option. Hopefully, they would give him some spark of insight. The men would seriously aim for his life, whilst the situation meant Jinolio would not get ganged or surrounded as might happen on a battlefield.

Lorist didn't expect that Charade and Tarkel get involved as well. The two wanted to convince the Union they were really in trouble. They could buy more time for the new Union to stabilize and prepare the Union for a fatal blow once they met on the field.

"Alright, go all out," Lorist smiled, "Morante needs time. Let the Union think we are having a hard time dealing with the people and suffering severe losses. When they finally move on the city in force, we'll cut their head off. Morante needs just half a year then we can begin withdrawing. How about we call it Let's call it the Morantian Plutocracy? I want to see where the Union hides its shameful face next. Can they really still be called the Forde Trade Union after losing their headquarters? Once that's done we'll help the Plutocracy fend off the Union's invasion. I'm sure many will be too shocked to even react when the time comes."

"The Union will regret this. If they knew things will turn out like this, they would've surrendered long ago. Isn't a little too cruel, though, Your Grace? You're not just giving them a hard blow, you're completely uprooting them!"

Lorist shook his head.

"They asked for this. They want to enjoy the privileges of nobility, but won't uphold the dignity and honor that comes with that? They want to be both merchants and nobles? They can't have their cake and eat it too. They resisted outside forces because they were of singular purpose, but now they're fractured. Morante's deterioration is their fault. If Duke Forde Morante knew what would happen to the city, he would probably never have joined hands with the guilds. We have to turn the city back to how it used to be."

"Your Grace is right. Oh, has there been any news from the capital?"

As a staunch opposer of Augustus, Charade was really interested in the scandal. He'd been pestering Lorist since he'd heard of the whole affair.

"Nothing new. The last news is that the cheater's been found. No details on him yet. The king's apparently threatened death on anyone who as much as thought a word on this matter. The funniest thing is people celebrated the king having an heir when the news first spread, you know, before everyone realized she must have cheated."

The two laughed together, schadenfreude filling the room. This scandal was the greatest entertainment they'd had in years.

Tarkel burst into the room as the two wrapped up their laughter.

"News from the capital!" he shouted as he waved a small piece of parchment around.

"Let's hear it," beckoned Charade.

"The queen cheated with the palace guards' vice-captain! Wicksas, a 27-year-old two-star silver rank."

"Wicksas? Two-star silver rank at 27? Which house? How did he become the palace guard's vice-captain?"

Lorist's first guess was that he had relied on secret connections to get his station. His station was usually occupied only by people in the gold rank. The rule was made even stricter after the blademaster breaking several years ago during Lorist's recovery. Augustus had reorganized the palace's defenses in his rage and made sure all three hundred members of the palace guard were at least silver rank.

"Wicksas isn't a noble. He's just a squire. His adoptive father was a retired royal knight."

Tarkel's eyes suddenly popped out of his skull.

"Y-y-your Grace... The l-l-letter says W-w-wicksas is actually... the king's... illegitimate son..."

"What?!" Lorist snatched the letter from Tarkel and put it on the table.

Charade squeezed in to get a look as well.

It was true. Wicksas was indeed rumored to be Augustus's bastard son. It was unproven, however. It was, however, fueled by the fact that Augustus didn't kill Wicksas once he was discovered; he just locked him up.

Lorist's informant was a loyal and dutiful commander. He'd gone to great lengths to verify the rumor. He was told by a former servant to the king that when the king was 17, he had an affair with his father's maidservant which bore a child. The servant disappeared with her child soon after. There were no traces left over the years, so it wasn't certain whether the man was indeed the king's bastard, but his age did match.

Holy shit! This just keeps getting better and better! So Augustus had an affair with his father's maidservant, and the son from that affair now had an affair with his father's wife, which also now bears a child! God, I bet this kid will have an affair with his own mother or sister, that family just keeps getting worse every generation!

"Tarkel, ask Glacia if she knows anything about this bastard of the king's."

"Understood, Your Grace," replied Tarkel.

Chapter 528

Rather Miss Than Meet

Lorist focused intensely. A large piece of snow-white paper sat on the desk in front of his, aptly called 'snow paper'. Physical training stopped being worth it once he became a sword saint.

The largest difference between him and other sword saints was that he didn't train in battle force. He had his own path. He had reached the fourth stage of the Aquametal Technique, the limit of what he knew of the technique. Any further growth would come not from training his body and swordsmanship, but from polishing this technique.

He'd only trained it because he had been desperate. No one else had ever walked this path in this world, besides for him, this path didn't even exist in this world. He could not turn to anyone for guidance. He was forging a whole new path of cultivation, but he did not think he had the genius to really do it. He had no choice but to trudge on blindly now that he'd reached the limits of his understanding. He hoped to pass this on to his disciples or descendants eventually so his family's legacy could continue.

He used to be an avid xianxia webnovel reader. In many of them the great characters could cut through space and time and destroy things from worlds away. His luck, of course, was to be born in a place with an ailing martial tradition where a few meters was the best possible, and only for the people at the very pinnacle of what still existed of the martial path. Not even magi existed anymore, and he didn't know if immortals were even possible in this world.

Even if he lived for several centuries, maybe a thousand years if he had heaven's blessing and stepped beyond sword saint, he was doomed to die, eventually. He had no chance to gain immortality. His fated demise was not what saddened him most though. It was actually his long lifespan itself. Not because he despised living long, but because he despised the idea of living long when everyone else he knew would not. The thought of having to watch all his friends and loved ones grow old, decay, and eventually die, of having to attend their funerals, and then watch their descendants walk the same path, irked him. With all the ones close to him dead, in his dying days he would have no one to stand by him as he died. His descendants living in his final

days would not be close to him, he would be an old monster to them. A shadow of which they could not get rid quickly enough.

If this was to be his end, what was the point of it all? People built up fortunes and glory so they could enjoy it with their loved ones, and then die when everything was at its peak, surrounded by the ones for whom they cared, not to watch it wilt away or be passed into the hands of others and die alone.

He'd been in this world for twenty years now, his body nearing 40. He'd climbed from an abandoned third son to a duke more powerful than most kings, able to rival even the emperors of old, and a sword saint, an entity that stood at the pinnacle of mankind's current power. The entire species knew his name. Only one man had more authority than him, and stood above him, but it was more accurate to say that Lorist was humoring the man out of his respect for House Norton's heritage than to say that the man was an overpowering ruler Lorist had to obey.

He didn't have to commit treason to become king, his power, both his own and that of his domain, made that possible. The Krissen Empire was weakened by long periods of conflict and was severely wounded before it finally collapsed. Auguslo had saved it from complete death, but the kingdom was only just barely holding on. At best it was still in a coma and it would take decades, if not centuries, for it to return to its former glory. Lorist had no interest in playing doctor, definitely not for that long. As the saying went, 'first build walls, then gather food, and finally claim the throne'. The kingdom possesses all 29 provinces of the former Empire, and Lorist ruled over a quarter of them. He should first develop them before growing his branches into the rest. The royal family was rotten beyond any hope of saving, it was already hollow. Lorist just had to wait for that rot to cause the bark and reveal everything. The royal family would collapse and, if Lorist worked hard at building up his lands, he would be in the perfect position to take the throne.

This was the biggest reason for his interest in the king's little scandal. If this wasn't handled well, it might be the very crack he was waiting for. It certainly would be a brilliant crack. Lorist's biggest competition for the throne would be Duke Fisablen, and if this scandal was the crack, it would crack him as well and make it much easier for Lorist to take the throne. It was not unheard of for kings and queens to have affairs. But that didn't mean it did not reflect badly on the family from which the queen hailed. Especially not since the first child to be born from her womb was as a result of the affair rather than being an heir. This was enough to potentially make any future children she bore unworthy as heir regardless of whether their father was indeed the king. Her

womb was sullied and could thus not dam heirs.

Lorist was very interested in seeing how the king would deal with this. If the rumors were true, then his queen had had an affair with his bastard. The rumors being true, though dubious, the child did have the imperial bloodline. It was truly strange, though, for his wife's eldest -- should she have any other children -- to be his grandchild rather than his child.

He could spend more time on this affair because he didn't have anything to do in Morante, his subordinates were dealing with everything. The only reason he was still here was to intimidate the Union. He couldn't leave before he'd faced and ended their sword-saint. He thus spent all his time on his disciples and his contemplations.

He'd taken up painting. He'd meditate using that. He suspected his choice was influenced by the fact that his grandfather had used it to contemplate his cultivation. He remembered seeing the old man practise calligraphy and ink painting stroke by stroke often. He didn't understand how it was done, but he recalled his grandfather saying one had to write and draw with a calm mind. Only then would the strokes be infused with one's soul and essence. So, Lorist chose the same method.

However, Lorist had forgotten one thing. There was a developed art culture on Grindia, it resembled the dominant Renaissance style of realism. Even their tools were similar.

Fortunately, he could use his dominion's paper. He started with a mountain by the sea.

Charade came rushing over the moment he heard Lorist was painting. He thought he had finally begun to appreciate art and joined him in his passion. He took just one glance at the what Lorist was trying to do and left. Outside, he complained to Reidy that whatever it was Lorist was doing, it certainly wasn't painting. He had expected a sword-saint would have at least some talent for painting, but Lorist was worse than a 2-year-old slapping paint on their faces and slamming them into the paper.

Charade completely forgot that a sword-saint could hear what he was saying.

Two days later, when Charade finally finished his tasks and was about to take a breather, Lorist called him in. Lorist told him he had neglected his training after breaking through so he was going to spar with him a little.

His suffering had begun.

"Forgive me, Your Grace... I have more than enough guards... The kinds of people that can fight through them to me so that I'd have to face them are too strong for me to overpower regardless of how much I train..." begged Charade.

"No. None of my gold-ranked knights can be this weak, it's embarrassing. You have free time, so I'll train you. You should be happy, very few have the privilege of being trained by a swordsaint. Since you're ungrateful, I'll teach you how blessed you are, come, three more rounds!"

"Just kill me already! I'll die if I have to go three more rounds!" Charade lay on the ground, refusing to get up. He finally realized something was off.

"Did I offend you?"

"Of course not. I'm just worried for your safety. What if you encounter a gold-ranked assassin when you least expect it? You have to have the strength to fend off a couple of strikes so your guards have time to reach you. You occupy an important position under me, so you're a big target. Take the Union, they might send assassins after you if they learn that you're the one managing everything."

"Impossible," Charade denied, "Even the Union wouldn't go that far. They won't offend you for me. And killing me wouldn't do them any good. I'm just the chief administrator, not the head of the house. Would it be worth paying such a huge price?"

"Didn't I say just in case? Don't you know prevention is better than cure?"

Reidy, standing nearby, couldn't hold back anymore and made some brush stroke movements with his hands. Charade instantly understood. He breathed in deeply and apologized.

"I apologize, Your Grace. I shouldn't have commented on your painting. But being offended at my comments won't change the facts. You have no skill at painting."

"Your evaluation is honest, but you don't have to apologize. I would not be offended by something so trivial. Now get up and let's get back to training. I won't stop until your stomach is gone."

Jinolio came to Charade's rescue a few moments later.

"A merchant vessel has entered the bay. It's one of the people we captured during our

fight with Invincible. The captain wants to buy goods. He's also brought a few nobles with him. One is Duchess Prinna. She's asked to see you."

Charade struggled up from the ground. Now it was his turn to watch a show.

Should I meet her? Lorist's mind raced.

She used to be the love of his life, the first in two lifetimes. She was also the first to utterly shatter his heart. And now she'd returned to him not to apologize for what she'd done to him, but to open the old wound and slam the knife back in. She was here to ransom her husband, the man for whom she'd left Lorist. The man had taken her from him, and now it was her turn to take him from Lorist.

"You should at least meet her. She's an old friend, after all. Your history has been clean for 20 years. It is time to move on," Charade smiled. He was there to watch a show, and by the gods he was not going to let Lorist not give him one.

"I won't meet her. I'd rather miss her than meet her. You will deal with her, Charade." Lorist suddenly realized something. "Why didn't Kaet negotiate for that duke and his legion? Aren't they allies?"

"I've asked. He says the Duke never actually fought, not even when we clashed on the sea, he surrendered without upholding his end of the agreement, so they have no interest in ransoming him."

Charade knew there was more going on, and Viscount Penelope supplied him with the answer. The Union was either preparing to betray their alliance, or they had completely incompetent officials. If the latter, they must have thought of their allies as just mere subordinates, and didn't want to put in the effort to free incompetent trash.

"Are they still on Silowas?" asked Lorist.

"Yes," Charade answered, "Duke Lorf probably knows he lost the Union's favor. He asked to be left on Silowas. He must have sent a message back home with the merchants. I didn't think his wife would respond so quickly. I'm sure Wenna is here to beg you to let her husband and his men go.

"Then take her to her husband. I'll leave everything to you. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Since the Union has already scrapped their alliance, we ought to stir up conflict between the two."

"By your command."

Chapter 529

Merciless

Charade accompanied Madam Windsor Prinna to Silowas and negotiated her husband, and his men's ransom. The whole thing took almost a month. Fortunately, he could delegate his duties to Morante's new government before he left.

Lorist chose to meet the merchant captain. He was curious why the man had returned so quickly. His trip should have taken a month. He'd also had a full load of goods that he would have had to sell before he could sail again. He didn't expect any merchants would be returning for at least another month, perhaps even longer sales weren't great.

The captain's name was Fodris a third-generation seafarer. He had worked with other captains to capture Invincible's men when they were ordered to burn his ship and other ships when the fleet surrendered. Senbaud had even given him a commendation for it.

The meeting both excited and unnerved the captain. He presented Lorist with the most expensive thing his family owned: a foot-long deep crimson coral. His father had found it while stranded out at sea. Many believed such corals were good luck charms, and the larger the coral, the greater the luck.

The piece of dead sea creatures fascinated Lorist. Fodris was very happy to answer the duke's questions, whether regarding the coral or other matters. It turned out he was a Jigdan. His ship was called the Mermaid's Song -- his family's first large ship. The ship's name gave him the boost he needed to secure a contract with the kingdom's largest guild, Mermaid, and they were his most frequent employers, even now.

The guild's backer was House Fustat, which was why he'd been the one to bring the duchess to Morante. The guild started with trade in luxury goods and clothing, mostly dresses and gowns. Recently, however, mostly over the last two decades, it had branched out to other industries as it rose to prominence alongside its backer, Duke Fustat.

Fodris had nothing but praise for the duchess. She was the entire kingdom's angel. A

beautiful, gentle, and kind women of rare composure. She often donated vast sums of money to the poor and could even be found working in soup kitchens on occasion. She also chaired a number of charities alongside local religious groups. She was more beloved and well-known than even the queen.

A storm burst into being when he delivered the duke's letter, and the duke's house stood on the brink of being annihilated as new and old rivals alike took the chance to lash out. But the duchess took the reins and beat back the attacks. Once everyone was on their back foot, she moved funds onto Captain Fordis's ship and the two left secretly to go get her husband.

The captain could leave so quickly because the guild, Mermaid, bought everything he'd brought with him wholesale. He left as soon as everything was offloaded. The products were bought at ludicrous prices so the duchess's funds could be smuggled on board and they set sail immediately.

Regarding the trade he was to do here, the guild had given him an interest free loan to buy stuffs from Lorist, specifically glassware and snow paper. The captain was certain they would sell for a great profit. He might even have enough to buy a second ship.

Even the most obscure products sold very well. Everything not produced in the south of the continent was in severe short supply. Romon mostly produced green glue and Khawistan herded horses and sheep. These were exported and traded for everything else the two empires needed, mainly with the midsouthern countries. Teribo provided mostly glass, the duchy of Pitlin gave wine, the kingdom of Abossen porcelain, and the duchy of Zikthor gold and silverware.

When the Union rose to prominence, everything shifted gear. Rather than direct trade between the countries, small, local trade aside, most bulk trade was done with the Union either as the middle-man, or just with the merchants from the countries operating there. The Union won most of the competitions for the markets where its products competed with other countries as well. Pitlin, for example, lost its share of the wine market, as did Abossen with gold and silverware.

The War of Glass was really just a good excuse, an excuse the midsouthern countries had been waiting for, for years, to cut the Union out. But the Union's control of the seas in the south made it almost impossible for large scale trade to take place.

However, whilst the countries couldn't trade their resources directly with the empires

because of the Union's blockades, the Union, having lost its access to the raw resources with which to produce its products, sat with sea trade routes along which it had nothing to trade.

The war ravaged both sides, especially their industries, and everyone's economy was in shambles. It also didn't help that, with the Union's guilds moving everything to their dominions, what little they did produce were of very low quality.

This made House Norton's high-quality products a massive hit, they were exactly what the market was craving.

Lorist finally understood why Peterson and Chikdor were so strict with his products. They couldn't let him get even the tip of a toenail into the market because there was a vacuum they could not fill, and he'd immediately take over everything. They could do this, and keep anyone from bypassing them because they controlled the seas and its trade routes.

That, however, was no longer the case. Merchants could now trade as much as they could afford with House Norton and a flood was starting to form. It would probably take no more than six months before it roared over the seas and Lorist was drowned in orders.

He praised and rewarded Fodris lavishly. He even gave him a telescope. The captain almost jumped out the window when he realized what it could do.

"You should work and coordinate closely with the merchants. If you play your cards right, you can use them to gather information from the south and we won't have to risk agents there. You also won't have the risk of an incident when an agent is discovered, since they won't be directly related to the house, just good friends who talk about what they hear and see," Lorist whispered to Tarkel as they watched the merchant leave.

"I will make the arrangements."

Few people were as great gossips as merchants. If everything went well, Tarkel might soon even have a catalogue of all the queens, concubines, and daughters' taste in underwear.

Lorist now knew that the wide-eyed girl he had loved all those years ago was now a graceful duchess. He hated it. She'd been a pitiful girl, helpless when her family was in

trouble. She'd tried to end her life, but he'd saved her. She depended on him from then on, but abandoned him when someone better came along.

She was supposed to have fallen into despair. She should have become a toy for the duke he'd abandon after he took everything from her. She was supposed to come back to Lorist, begging for his forgiveness and a second chance. She was supposed to cry snot and blood as he shoved her out of the castle and told her to stick it where the sun never shone and then die a lonely death in a brother, a marsh, or some other shithole.

But instead she'd become a dignified duchess, a noble of renown. Her backstabbing had paid off, and she was now an entire kingdom's idol. She had won happiness, love, riches, and recognition with her treachery. It was even worse that it seemed she wasn't hiding a dark, vile personality; she'd become a genuinely good person.

Lorist might have been able to take it if she'd become a vile bitch that would eventually fall from grace and tumble into hell. He could at least sooth the scar in his heart. But that was not to be, and it hurt. It hurt so bad he wanted to tear the nearest building apart. He wanted to run down the roads and avenues of the city and scream his dissatisfaction at the heavens. Was this justice? Where was the world's karma? Where was the heaven's righteousness?

"Sigh."

He shook his head and pushed his feelings into the back of his mind. He did not regret not meeting the woman. He would not have been able to contain himself if he saw her face, regardless of the look on it.

His thoughts came back just in time to hear Tarkel finish a shocking report.

"Hold on, say that again! The queen's dead?! She died of a sudden, mysterious illness?!"

"That is what I just said, You Grace. She passed on the 32nd of the 8th. Hd rushed to the capital that afternoon. He stayed there for the night and the next day it was announced the queen was dead."

That's two for one! What's wrong with Auguslo?

It had been just a month since the world learnt of the queen's affair and pregnancy, and now she was dead, just a month from the child's due birth.

The king had not given any order besides ordering silence on the queen's affair, and now suddenly she and her child was dead. Lorist had thought he'd only make his moves once the child was born, he did not think he and Duke Fisablen would send the unborn to its grave.

There was no way the duke was not involved. The two must have made a secret pact and immediately executed their plan.

"What about Knight Weckas? Has he been punished?"

"No, but he's still being kept in the palace. There's been no word of him since his imprisonment."

Chapter 530

Loan Problems

Lorist got a message from Silowas on the 21st of the 9th. Charade and Duke Fustat had come to an agreement. House Fustat would pay a million gold Fordes for the duke and his legion. House Norton would send them back with Northsea.

Each soldier's ransom was ten gold. Five hundred thousand in all. Fustat, the gold, and the silver knights combined were a million. Charade didn't hold back at all. Windsor Prinna didn't get much of a discount.

Duke Fustat made a tempting proposal when he was released. The legion was stripped of its weapons and armor when it surrendered. He wanted to buy equipment from Lorist before he returned home. Charade was all too happy to oblige the duke -- this was no small deal, at least 60 gold per soldier, three million in all. Unfortunately, Charade did not have the authority to sell equipment to technical enemies, so they had to talk to Lorist himself.

Charade also passed along news he got from Sylvia and the rest. They were heading to Silowas. They would all leave for Morante in a couple of days.

Why is Sylvia coming to Morante? Don't tell me she heard about Wenna and wants to keep an eye on me. No, surely not... Didn't Charade tell her I refused to see the woman? I haven't done anything to give her a reason to come...

Whatever. Those women are a force of nature. I'll worry about them when they arrive, no point in losing sleep before then.

If only she wasn't that young and Lorist wasn't always out on campaign. She missed him very much and worried incessantly. Perhaps he should treat this as a vacation and spend some time with them and show them around the city which was his hometown for over a decade.

Spiel requested an audience two days later. He had been given charge of the prison camp near the docks and had been trying his best to empty the inhabitants' wallets. This had been settled since Charade and Kaet made their agreement two months

earlier. The second last group of 10 thousand were now being moved to Mauvlin, completely broke. In total, Spiel had brought in seven million gold, mostly in jewelry and other valuables.

He had come to complain because the last ten thousand refused to part with their money. They'd been living off the free food and weren't doing anything to spend their money. Lorist gave up, he couldn't get the people to let go of their money, and his patience was running thin with Kaet, who kept sending him letters of protest almost daily, so he ordered Spiel to just let them

"I need just one more month. I'll get their money if I have just another month," Spiel begged.

"Let them go. One more month would have been worth it for 20 thousand, but we'll lose more than we'll make for just 10 thousand people."

The money wasn't the only problem. Tarkel had done his best to put up their facade of struggle, but it was only a matter of time before their real situation leaked, and that became more likely with every passing day. For one, the Union had gotten sniff in the nose that something was off with the constant requests for more agents and had stopped sending them.

Morante was also starting to improve enough that a keen eye could see it even from outside the city walls. The factories were getting back up to speed and the merchants would soon come from the south to begin large scale trading again. Even if Lorist could keep up the facade until then, it would crumble the moment the merchant ships sailed into the harbor.

There was also the problem of Kaet noticing the livelier atmosphere and sending word back to the Union directly. He was being kept separate from the main population, but once things got really lively, he'd hear it. What city's people laughed and cheered whilst in the midst of constant uprisings and bloody street fighting?

No, it was time to wrap things up and pull out.

"The new government's made a request. They want to borrow ten million gold. Everything will be invested in the city and the surrounding areas, so I've agreed. I just need you to iron out the detail. Deal with it as soon as you're done with the final arrangements for the camp," commanded Lorist.

Such loans were usually issued at high interest rates. The shrine of the Goddess of Wealth and Trade's, Zejin's, primary income was from high-interest loans, though they also had a stake in the Forde bills industry. The guilds would deposit money with the shrine and get a bill of equal value which they could turn in at any other shrine for the money, for a fee, of course. The money was safe, both for storage and for transport since no one acted against the shrine.

It was much like the Catholic Church from Lorist's previous life. The shrine was as much a bank as it was a religious organisation. The Union had paid his ransoms completely in bills as well. They might have thought he'd ransack the shrines anyway, so they'd pay him in a way so he wouldn't get anything more, anyway. If he really did ransack the shrines, the bills would be worthless, anyway.

The shrine begged that they not cash all the bills at once when Charade and Spiel took them to the shrine. The shrine's entire vault came from the Union, so if everything was paid out, they'd be bankrupt.

Spiel jumped like a cat whose tail was stepped on.

"No, Your Grace! How can you agree to this? They already owe us four million! If we give them this as well, they'll owe us fourteen million! They can't service this loan, and even if they do, it'll take decades, maybe even a century for them to pay it back!"

If this was anyone else, Spiel would gladly have made the loan, but this was too risky. The new government didn't even have anything to put up as security!

Lorist had agreed, however, despite knowing how horrible a deal this was.

"Think about all of our people that've died in this war. We've gotten just barely more than nothing from this and now you want to piss millions away? You're pissing away everything we've worked decades to build!"

"Oh, tell me how much we made, then," said Lorist coldly.

"We got ten million from the city in gold and goods. We got ten million in basic material from the outskirts of the city, but it's all completely useless and there isn't a market for the stuff. The ransoms also got us just over six million, and we got just over seven from the prisoners."

"In all we made 23 million, but four of that's already been lent to the new government.

If you take away the money we spent on food, we have just over fifteen million left. If you give them another ten, we'll have just three million!

"You said logistics is the key to war. Just the last three months of campaign have cost us one and a half million, and then you put aside another five for Northsea's retrofit. And then there're all the pensions for the wounded and the compensation for the dead, which is another half a million."

"Enough. I understand. This loan would put us in the red, yes? But what would you do with the ten if we kept it? You're just going to ship it back to the dominion and shove it into our vaults to rot. You remembered my comment about logistics, but it seems you forgot what I said about money. Money is worthless unless it's flowing in the economy.

"Besides, you forgot a lot of benefits. What about the money we got from selling food in the city? What about the money we got from the trade with the merchants? The four million we lent will earn us interest, and it'll help get the economy here back up and running and we can sell stuff here as a result.

"I trust your loyalty, but your eyes disappoint me. You know what we plan to do here. But the new government isn't yet sure if we'll be any better than the old Union. I bet you this loan is less about them lacking funds, though they no doubt do, and more about testing our commitment to supporting them. Loaning them this money is us guaranteeing them that we will stand by them and guarantee their independence. You talk about security on the loan, this loan itself is their security on our support.

"Stop questioning my financial decisions and just do what I say. This loan will let them form a decent military, which means we can pull out and send out people home. The rest will speed up their development and let us start selling into the market in larger volumes faster.

"This is a great deal for us, actually. Ten million now will get us a great buffer against the old Union, a decent ally, and a good share in a market that will earn us hundreds of millions over the coming decades."

"...I understand. I shall do as you wish, Your Grace."

Chapter 531

Two Letters

Though Lorist was only a relatively skilled workshop owner in his past life, the influence of mass media and basic economic knowledge made him keenly aware that the four million gold Fordes he lent the new Morantian government was far from enough to kickstart an independent economy.

According to Charade, they had money; they were just forced to keep it for emergency use thanks to the years of monopoly under the various merchant guilds. Lorist had to instill confidence in the people for the market so they would take their money out and spend it.

While four million gold Fordes was a lot, it was nowhere near a lot in the long term. The two divisions' training and the establishment of institutions and facilities to encourage economic participation, as well as the cost of feeding the people until they became self-sufficient again, would dry up the four million in just a couple of months. They needed more money, and Lorist was their only option.

No other faction or party was rich enough to lend that kind of money. Even the high-interest loaners from Zejin's shrine were powerless. The newly formed government didn't lack talent. Had they not been staunch believers in individual freedoms, Lorist would've recruited them.

Jindo, for example, and the various shrine leaders, and a few old scholars, would all have made great officials. While they grasped power, they were willing to help House Norton form the Free Union to escape the Trade Union's rulers. They were weary of him, though, which was half the reason for their new loan application.

Lorist knew exactly what was going on in the market. The only reason it still existed was thanks to his support. Apart from a group of risk-taking pioneers that took the first step, most were still hiding their money and watching to see if the situation would change. Lorist had to continue investing, to assure them that he would keep the market stable.

His words to Spiel were his honest thoughts. He didn't care about being paid back the

loan directly from the government. The indirect benefits he'd gain through the market would more than cover it even if not a penny was returned by the government.

The transport ships returned to Morante from Silowas, escorted by Northsea on the 20th of the 9th. Sylvia had come as well, so Lorist had little choice but to go down to the dock to meet her and risk seeing his old lover. He was shocked and utterly crushed to see his wife and the woman getting along well, even like sisters.

The hell is going on?

A sense of foreboding washed over Lorist the moment he saw the two disembark holding hands. He ignored Charade and Duke Fustat's greetings and rushed to hold Sylvia's right hand before she stepped off the board.

"Your Grace..." Sylvia hurriedly let go of Prinna's hand and curtsied.

"Why did you come without notice? It's still dangerous here," reprimanded Lorist in a low voice.

"I missed you," answered Sylvia coquettishly, stepping in for a hug.

"You..." Lorist laughed helplessly before turning to Prinna.

"My humble thanks, Revered Duke," Prinna said, taking a step back and curtsying.

There was nothing about her posture anyone could pick at.

Lorist returned her curtsy with a nod. It had been two decades. Time had flown. Nobody expected their reunion to happen like this.

Her eyes were still just as big, but her gaze had a trace of maturity. She had an air of grace her younger self had lacked. She had become an exemplary noblewoman. All trace of the fairy in her youth had vanished.

Time flies and people change, huh... Lorist sighed.

"Welcome, Lady Windsor. This visit must be a nostalgic visit for you," said he.

"Indeed. My most precious memories are rooted here. I treasure them dearly. It is a most glorious occasion to return to this great city and see the old friends from my

youth," replied Prinna, gazing at Lorist.

Lorist averted his gaze slightly.

"Indeed? I can only wish you a joyous visit, then. I've arranged a residence worthy of you and your husband's grace. The two of you must be worn out. Please make use of the carriage I've prepared. Baron Charade will accompany you. I am hosting a banquet in two days. I hope you will attend."

"I am honored. We shall attend," said Duke Lorf, stepping forward.

Lorist nodded. "Then we shall see each other at the banquet."

Fennazali and Daisy came closer to greet Lorist when the foreign nobles left.

"Sheesh, you two came as well? I don't know what to say. Where's Anderbael?"

"I didn't bring him because Maria went home to deliver her child. Anna went back to her barony as well and Anderbael decided to tag along. He sticks to his elder brother like glue. Xanthi's with them as well. I got Cacanne's letter and wanted to stop by the capital on the way, I then that whole debacle happened and I decided to steer clear..."

Anderbael was five, the most rambunctious age for boys. His first older brother was Dilianna's son, Slophenk, three years his senior. The two got along pretty well.

Oh, right, Cacanne is Sylvia's cousin.

Why would she want to go see her, though, weren't they pretty antagonistic towards one another?

"I thought you didn't get along with her. Why would you suddenly want to go see her?"

"We may not have seen eye to eye, but she was still my cousin. Her message was a plea for help. I couldn't just ignore it. I didn't think she'd die like this. Her child was due soon."

Sylvia teared up. It took quite some work to get her in the carriage.

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Two letters lay on Lorist's desk. One was the queen's letter. She'd written about her affair and her pregnancy. She said it was related to Lorist. Wecksas had saved her life when the blademasters attacked to kill Lorist and she fell in love.

She didn't mention his identity, so Lorist suspected she didn't know. She'd even seriously considered eloping with him.

Of course, Lorist was blamed for her not getting to elope. He chose to help the king, which allowed him to return before she could deliver the child. She'd hoped to use the child as leverage against Wecksas, who refused to run away, to convince him to do it.

If she'd not been as far pregnant when she heard Auguslo was returning, she could have run away, but she was seven months along and couldn't travel easily. She believed only Sylvia, duchess of the kingdom's largest duchy and wife to its strongest duke and only swordsaint, could save her, so she wrote to her. If Sylvia could drag her husband's name into the middle of the whole affair, then her grandfather and husband would have to tread lightly.

If she could hold out until she gave birth, she'd annul the marriage and go live in some small, isolated town. She no longer cared about title and prestige, she just wanted to live happily with her child and lover.

The messenger had left the capital three days before the king's return and had traveled with only a few hours rest a day for almost a month to deliver the message, Sylvia, a mother herself, was moved and immediately set out to help her estranged cousin. She would be heading into dangerous territory, so she chose to leave her son with Xanthi and Dilianna.

She planned to head to Morante to meet up with her husband either when the matter was resolved, or with her cousin, but learned of her death on the way to Silowas. She knew she could not show weakness in front of another noble, she had to maintain her appearance as a strong, noble wife to her swordsaint-duke husband, so she'd been bottling up her sorrow.

Now together with her beloved husband, and away from prying eyes, she broke down completely. She cried herself to sleep that night and continued even in her sleep.

Lorist shook his head as he thought of the scene. His wife was way too free with her emotions. She cried for a woman who'd done nothing but bully her her whole life

because she sent a single message and then died.

The second letter was from Glacia. Lorist opened it slowly. It confirmed his suspicion that Wecksas was Augustus's bastard. The knight's mother was the maidservant that had raised the now-king after his mother died. He had bedded her, then ten years his senior, on his 16th birthday. Wecksas was born nine months later.

She was, however, one of his father's concubines. Andinaq was so furious he killed the maid in front of his son by strangling her to death, beheading her corpse, feeding her body to the pigs, and mounting her head above his son's bed for three weeks. He also gave the bastard child to a random knight. It was the biggest reason his father also put him in the bottom of the line of succession. If not for the ongoing civil war, he'd have disowned him entirely.

Glacia had been his lover for decades. She knew his heart better than anyone else, even his now-late queen. The dead maid was a black hole in his heart. She was the reason he never took Glacia as his queen. For her part, Glacia refused to live in that long-dead woman's shadow any longer and left him.

Chapter 532

Agreement and Rumors

The banquet continued as planned two days later. Duke Fustat and his wife attended as promised. During the proceedings, they brought up the duke's request for military equipment and Lorist agreed.

Sylvia, Fennazali, and Daisy attended as well, which saved Lorist from having to alone with Prinna. The best she could do was shoot him a begrudging glance to him from time to time. He, of course, never saw anything even when he was practically looking right at her. He instead discussed how Jigda took advantage of the Union and swallowed six kingdoms with the duke.

The duke casually admitted it was all part of his plan. Jigda had no choice but to borrow the Union's tactics and absorb nations once they started applying pressure on the alliance. Romon was threatening to invade and Khawistan was not far behind. The kingdom had to grow rapidly and become a force capable of giving the two empires enough of a fight to make them hesitate and think twice. Lorist's interference with the was between Andinaq and the Union ruined the alliance, however.

Luckily Fustat had been leading the kingdom's forces accompanying the navy, another commander might have chosen to go to war rather than surrender. Now his family had paid the ransom, the two sides could part amicably, and the kingdom didn't have to worry about a war with Lorist and his frightening armies. Despite their friendly conversations, neither was willing to ally with the other. Their lands were just too far apart. They could not offer each other effective support, and would instead just get dragged into a war in name in which they could do no actual fighting.

The banquet continued late into the night. Lorist's women only left for their bedrooms once they had promised to accompany Prinna around the city the next day. The group spent most of their trip talking about the duchess' business endeavors in her youth. Lorist had Reidy accompany them.

Charade and Duke Fustat concluded their negotiations several days later. The deal was for 100 thousand sets of armor and weaponry and two brigades' worth of catapults and carroballistae. The latter two would make Jigda the strongest military force where

siege was concerned on their half of the continent.

Duke Fustat was damn rich if he could throw away that much money so easily. Either that or he was in a very difficult situation.

Charade said that according to Duke Fustat, Wessia Merchant Guild, which he had recently exterminated, had monopolized the arms trade in the region. No one in the region had the mineral wealth to compete with them.

Wessia insisted on taking the old empire's territory as its dominion. It wanted all the mines there. They not only took all the mines, they also kept an iron grip on forging techniques and talents. They recruited or abducted every promising smith in their sphere of influence, and killed those they couldn't get.

Firebird's equipment came from Wessia and had cost the duke four million gold Fordes. With Wessia gone, Lorist was the only major arms dealer left on the continent.

Lorist had always wondered why he could never sell his clearly superior equipment, now he knew. He had tried to work through Peterson, but Wessia vetoed the deal. They would never let any competitor, much less such a major one, get a foothold in the market.

Charade realized this as well, and understood his lord's intentions immediately, which was why he had pushed to sell them everything they needed at a reasonable price. This was their ticket, their chance to get a foot in the now empty market and swallow everything up.

The Union was already moving to get back into the market, but with how secretive Wessia had been, and how utterly they'd been wiped out, it would take years, even decades, before they had a comparable guild up and running, and by then the entire market would belong to Lorist.

Prinna had Sylvia tell Lorist she wanted to meet him. She had noticed a business opportunity in Morante and wanted him to give sole distribution rights of Norton goods in the southern half of the continent to Mermaid.

Lorist refused. He was fine with the arrangement in principle, though only for Jigda, but would not see that woman no matter what. He instead sent Charade to deal with her in his stead.

Northsea only had enough strength to control down to the southern seas, it could not take control of Sunshine Seas or the Golden Coast, so he had to allow free trade there, at least for the time being. Lorist had every intention of shutting such trade down as soon as he had the power, however. He would not let anyone do any trade that was not regulated and taxed by him.

Besides, letting trade run rampant had its benefits. For one, it would help speed up Morante's recovery. He would also not go as far as to monopolize the actual trading itself. He had no trouble with letting independent merchants have their share, but they could not be allowed to trade where he could not regulate and tax it.

For another, he could use a healthy independent merchant industry to further his spy network and also cut the Union out of their old home turf. The Union's guilds were not settled enough as land barons yet, they had to rely on trade, so without it, he could starve them without having to go to war.

Prinna's gotten sharp over the years. She saw the market immediately. She doesn't understand that monopolizing this will make her guild a public enemy.

Charade refused to budge, he could be really stubborn when it came to money and wealth. Prinna eventually gave up and settled on just the Jigda market.

The duchess handed Charade a half-book of a letter before she left with her husband, making him promise to hand it to Lorist personally and make sure he read it.

It turned out to be a complaint about his distance to her. Her age showed as she nostalgically recounted their love affair like an old maid on her deathbed telling her great grandchildren about her wild, long-forgotten youth. One of the worst things she said in her letter, was that she'd have stayed by Lorist's side if she could do everything over, even if it meant she'd have lost her home. She wrote an extensive allusion to Lorist's marriage, talking about the happiness she saw in her replacement, she even hinted at being jealous of her once or twice.

She didn't forget to gripe about Lorist's refusal to give her a good deal despite being an ex-lover of hers, her only one, in fact.

From there she launched into a long fantasy about opening up her old shop in Morante and a branch of the guild. At the very end, she spoke of her various ideas for opening a second branch in his lands to the far north.

Women...

Lorist dropped each page into the fireplace in his office as he finished reading it. If a druid or apothecary ever invented medicine for regret, the women in a single city would give him enough business to retire.

No matter how much Lorist might want to deny it, that little fairy in his memories, the little witch that had danced on his heart, his first love, would always have the sweetest place in his heart, even if it was now vacant. Even Sylvia, for all her charm and love, even if they were to be together happily for several centuries, could never take over that place, could never match this woman in his heart. And it made him furious.

The merchants started pouring into the docks a few days after the duke and duchess left. Soon businesses -- some buying and selling the merchant's goods, some serving the sailors, and others serving the workers working in the new businesses in, around, and near the docks -- sprung up almost daily. The city slowly came back to life, nightlights grew outward from the docks like long tendrils, like a glowing plant slowly extending its roots into the surrounding city.

A letter arrived from Cape Romani as well, from Howard. Three months had passed since he'd been left with the indentured workforce and things were finally coming together. The reef had been filled and had had enough time to set and dry. It was not finally time to start construction on the castle-port-town proper.

Most of the letter was a list of the materials the next phase of the project required. Lorist felt the boy's enthusiasm ooze out of his every pen stroke. He clearly wanted to build a grand citadel. Lorist was willing to indulge his second disciple a little -- a reward of sorts for all his hard work over the years, especially since they'd gotten involved in Augustus's war again. He even decided to let him leave his name on his first great project as his disciple. He crossed out Howard's suggested name, 'Fort Romani', and wrote in 'Fort Howard'.

The next three months passed quickly. Falik Plains saw no conflict in that time, it was completely peaceful. The Union had not made any effort towards making peace, but they also didn't launch any offensives, not even skirmishes. An eerie peace reigned over the continent.

The front-lines may have been free of conflict for the last three months, but they were far from quiet. Pickaxes, axes, saws, shovels, and hammers clanged away day and night

on the Trade Union's side of no-man's-land. Long, zigzagging lines were slowly crisscrossing the entire front, just like it had in Mauvlin several years earlier. The Free Union's side, on the other hand, was completely open. One could walk without paying attention to the ground from the citadels to the enemy front. Nothing but open, flat plains ran from horizon to horizon there. The only places evidence of military activity could be seen was on the various citadels' walls, where heads constantly moved back and forth across the crenels between the merlons, and in the barracks, training yards, and muster fields where men constantly shouted as they trained.

Lorist had no interest in the enemy's plots and plans, however. He just did what was necessary to keep his men fit and alert, and left the rest up to fate.

The Trade Union had started spreading rumors of the violence they believed was going on in Morante two months earlier, probably to drum up support from their subjects and from the remaining kingdoms, principalities, and duchies from the old alliance. Rumors spread like wildfires, and soon the entire continent was ablaze. House Norton was soon known to be killing tens of thousands of Morantians every week. Drinking babies' blood and eating young ladies' flesh after taking their innocence. They were crucifying anyone they didn't like and stoning whores who dissatisfied them. The city was always burning, and the entire plain in which it stood was constantly covered in a haze of smoke and the sickly sweet stench of death and rotting human flesh. A few even claim to have family members who'd seen Norton soldier do despicable, vile things to the corpses of young boys and girls, defiling them so badly that even the gods, even with their infinite mercy, could not accept their scarred, deformed souls into the heavens and they were left to haunt the city and the surrounding plains for all eternity.

The guilds owned all of the city's newspapers. They had closed when the city fell so no one had news directly from within the city. Similarly everyone in the camps had been kept in the dark about what was really going on in the city. They also hated House Norton for robbing them of their wealth and were all too happy to believe and spread, even exaggerate the rumors as they heard them.

As oblivious as the outside world was to the truth of what was going on within the city, so were its inhabitants to what was going on in the outside world. The first news of this came through the merchants sailing into and out of the city's harbor by the dozen every day now. House Norton didn't even lift a finger to counter the rumors. The Merchants, having a vested interest in people wanting to trade with the city and buy House Norton's goods, fought the rumors at every chance they got.

Even Duke Fustat did his bit. He wrote to every noble he knew and every merchant his wife knew to tell them what was really going on. Whilst this curbed the rumor's spread, people loved gossip and a new story made the rounds every couple of weeks. Luckily, people grew bored with a rumor just as quickly as they got excited by it, and they quickly vanished again, to be replaced by a new rumor a few weeks later.

Knowing all this, Lorist decided to just let whatever was destined to happen, happen, and instead focused his energy on helping to get the city back on its feet. He was training the city's new guard in policing and law-enforcement when he received news of Auguslo's impending arrival.

It was a surprise, but nothing really worth worrying about, only, he had come practically alone.

Chapter 533

Two Conditions

"I will not be at the king's reception! He's a murderer!"

Sylvia was near thirty, just a few weeks off, in fact, but she still behaved like a little child. She threw a tantrum when she was told she was expected to attend the banquet and refused to go.

"Fine, you don't have to go. Fennazali is struggling with her pregnancy, so go look after her," Lorist said, finally giving up.

He'd been kept up every night for nearly three months and had only gotten rid of one of his women. Sylvia and Daisy were still pestering him nightly.

"Where's His Majesty currently?"

"I don't know," Jinolio replied, "His Majesty came to Morante disguised as a messenger. He didn't stop in any of the towns or cities along the way. We wouldn't have known he'd arrived even now if Reidy hadn't bumped into him. He should be bringing the king around soon."

Falik Plains was nothing but ruins. Mostly abandoned for three years now, it was rife with pests. One was stray dogs, which roamed the abandoned farmlands and villages looking for mice, rats, cats, and even human corpses, anything meat-like to eat. It had gotten so bad in and around Mass and Gypsy that Reidy had to go clear the packs out.

"Fine. I'll go look for them along the road. I hope I can bump into him quickly and get things over with."

Auguslo was inspecting the largest of the city Markets when Lorist found him. Reidy stood beside him. Twenty royal guards dragged horses along not too far away.

Lorist dismounted and greeted the king with a shallow bow.

"What brings Your Majesty here?"

"Oh, Locke, brother, you're here!" the king said, turning around, "I didn't think you'd get Morante back into shape in just half a year. It's nothing like when I was here last. No wonder you're so often called the kingdom's interior minister. What do you think about becoming the empire's first chancellor? I'll hand all internal affairs to you. I know you won't disappoint."

Lorist laughed bitterly.

"Please stop joking, Your Majesty. Do you know how much money House Norton had to invest to get it to where it is now? I've put 14 million in so far and I'll probably have to put in more over the next two or three years! My treasury is empty and I have to sleep with my sword under my bed otherwise my financial advisor will kill me in my sleep."

Augusto almost slipped.

"How much?! 14 million?! Are you that rich?! You should lend me that money instead!"

"Rich my ass. I was forced! This whole campaign's been nothing but a massive loss! My fleet was ravaged, and I made nothing from Morante either. I had to bring everything I got from Invincible here to feed the people. I basically had to lend everything I made from Morante right back to it, as well as everything I made from the Union in the ransoms."

"I don't understand... Locke, I thought you were going to force the Union to negotiate for the city. Why are you investing in the city if it'll be back in their hands in a year or so? Do you plan to keep everything?"

Augusto had to know. He could not allow Lorist to take Morante and Falik Plains. The duke would then have more land than he and all the other noble under him had! He could still exercise some measure of control over Lorist as long as he was based in the Northlands. While it was a great defensive location, it was also easy to cut off from the rest of the world if need be. It also helped that it was close by and he could thus quickly respond to anything happening there. If, however, Lorist made his primary title one based in Morante, and moved his family and headquarters here, the king would have no control over him. The duke could easily seceded and declare his independence and Augusto would be unable to anything about it.

"You're Majesty's over-thinking," Lorist waved his hand, "How did you get the

impression that Morante's people would accept being ruled by a foreigner, and a noble at that, much less the man that took their city from them? Even if we could maintain control, we'd never have any peace. I have no intention of taking such a troublesome place.

"As for our investment. It wasn't really by choice, but that's something to discuss in private."

The group returned to Lorist's study where he explained everything.

"What?!" Auguslo cried, "You're forming a new Union?!"

"It's not that simple, Your Majesty. We're forming a Free Union. Unlike the Trade Union, the Free Union has no large merchant guilds, and none have any say in its governance. It governed by a body the people will choose themselves periodically. They won't let another monopoly form. SO we can expect a competitive, high-profit market to emerge in the next decade," explained Lorist.

"What good is this to you?"

"Don't forget the old Union is still watching from the sidelines. They refuse to surrender. Even when we offered a mutual peace, they continued to be obstinate. They made demands we could never accept. When negotiations failed, they declared they'd fight us to the last man, that this war would not end until every last one of them was a corpse.

"I have no confidence in securing a peace deal. So, I decided to make Morante and the plains into a new Union that will be a buffer between us and the old Union, deny them access to the markets and trade routes, and be our ally and give us access to these markets and trade routes. The 14 million is to get the new Union on its feet so the old one can't just stomp it as soon as we withdraw.

"Isn't Morante and the plains mankind's bastion of freedom? I don't think they'd fight against the Union at the behest of a foreign noble," Auguslo interjected.

"That Union stopped being the government of freedom when they became nobles. The new Union is now the bastion of freedom and the people won't let the old one get control again," Lorist countered.

"But why would the Union refuse to come a reasonable agreement?"

"Simple. They have money and a monopoly of most of the market in the Alliance. They believe they can hold out until we collapse. They want us to beg them to take back Morante and the plains. They'll march in and take back everything, demand we return the provinces we took back, and demand complete monopoly of our entire economy.

"This war is not just kill or be killed for our soldiers. It's kill or be killed for our kingdom as well. We're in at least as bad shape as they are, but we cut them off from their maritime routes, so they have to move their goods by land, which is prohibitively expensive.

"We're willing to invest in Morante so that we can get a harbor and a market halfway down the coast. This will give us access to the southern half of the continent. It'll also destroy the old Union's monopoly. We just have to keep them out of Morant and away from the coast for a couple of years and they'll wither away on their own."

"I'm grateful for your service," the king said as he leaned forward on his chair, his elbow digging into the table, his chin rested on his hands, a serious expression on his face, "Few sovereigns could ask for a better vassal. If you can make things go as you have described to me now, you will be the greatest man in the empire's history besides its emperors, and your house the greatest besides the royal family. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Auguslo wanted part of the credit. He, as the king, could not be just a bystander in this historic moment. If that really happened, there might actually be calls for Lorist to become the new empire's emperor rather than him.

"We hope Your Majesty can help." Lorist had given his explanation precisely for this. "I know the kingdom is in bad shape right now, so I will not ask for what it cannot give. I ask only that Your Majesty send a light legion to Malivia in support of the new Union's forces--"

"That is reasonable. It shall be done," Auguslo quickly agreed. This was exactly what he hoped. This way he could claim an active role in the victory without having to make any actual sacrifices.

"...And I hope you can give me Jillin Harbor."

"Jillin Harbor? For what?" the king asked, his guard rising.

This was to be expected. Jillin Harbor was not far from the capital. If Lorist was given

control of the city, he could land forces right in the king's backyard without any resistance, and, before anyone could react, he'd be in the capital. It could not be so he'd have a staging ground for trade and force transport further south, he already had Silowas and its harbors."

"You're Majesty's overthinking things again. I don't want the title, I just want the governorship."

"What governorship?"

"Governorship would be similar to the honorary titles you gave me before. I get to govern the land as if it were my own, but, unlike with honorary titles, the title dead for the city and the surrounding land remains with you. Think of it like me renting the harbor and the city from you. I will pay a fixed tax to you every year as well, regardless of how profitable I make the city or not."

Auguslo moved to the map on the wall and stared at the city for a long time.

"I cannot see the shop no matter how much I stare," he finally said, "Tell me, Locke, what do you plan to do with the city?"

"I want to make the city, specifically its harbor, the biggest, busiest, and most prosperous this side of the Golden Bay. I want to make it the first stop for any goods coming from the south. Everything will come here from the south, then from here it will go wherever else it wants in the kingdom and eventual empire."

"I can give you the governorship on two conditions," the king said, slowly, "You may not move any of your men into the city. Any disembarkation or travel through has to get my approval beforehand, like it would be if you had nothing to do with the place. I will provide the city guard, which will be independent of you but will cooperate to keep the peace. And I don't want a fixed tax for the city. If you're going to develop the city, it means it will become far more profitable than it is now. My tax will be half of the profits."

Lorist smiled bitterly, but nodded.

"Deal."

The big topics covered, Lorist poured them fruit wine.

"I heard you were going to survey the provinces. Why are you here?"

Augusto downed his cup and held it out for Lorist to refill.

"I'm here to explain the scandal. I know you know of what I speak."

Lorist handed Augusto the bottle.

"It is not my place as your vassal to comment on your personal affairs. It would certainly be hypocritical of me since I demand my vassals not comment on my personal affairs. However, my wife is Her Late Majesty's cousin, so I must speak and ask on her behalf. Your Majesty neglected the queen. Even with the scandal, did you and Duke Fisablen not go too far? Is the queen's paramour not your son? Her child, though not your offspring, is still of your bloodline. Could you not spare the queen 'till she birthed the child and punish her appropriately thereafter?"

Augusto downed the bottle.

"It is not that simple, Locke. Were I certain the child was Wecksas', I would have let it come into the world, but the queen had two other lovers -- of which we know, at least. There was no certainty who's bastard it was. I had to preserve my bloodline's purity. I could not risk the possibility of someone from a bastard bloodline climbing into my family tree."

Lorist broke.

This... queen... deserved everything she got.

"If I may ask then, Your Majesty, what agreement did you reach with Duke Fisablen?"

"He apologized personally and was the one who sent that woman on her way. I will do my survey later this year and the duke promised to have a new wife ready when I pass by there. He'll adopt his choice as his daughter before I take her as my wife."

Chapter 534

Callisto Hills

“You understand now, right? Your cousin hid a lot from you. She told you about her love for one of her lovers because she knew it would move you. She had no clue who the baby’s father was,” Lorist said finally, still stroking Sylvia’s long hair as she lay in his chest.

Sylvia gazed at him with teary eyes. Cacanne having multiple lovers didn’t change how cruel their deaths were. She didn’t lament the killing of her **cousin**, she lamented the **killing** of her cousin.

“I hate Grandfather... How could he kill her? Cacanne was his granddaughter, and the child was just a month away...”

“Stop grieving, dear. Let bygones be bygones. It wasn’t that His Majesty didn’t know about her promiscuity, he just didn’t care. He wedded her solely for political gain. He needed a queen from your grandfather’s bloodline, he didn’t care whom.

“If Cacanne had had a better sense of propriety and had been better at keeping secrets, the king wouldn’t have cared how many lovers she had. But she shouldn’t have seduced Wecksas and she most certainly shouldn’t have gotten pregnant. You know Wecksas is His Majesty’s bastard and the one he intends to make his heir. Why would Cacanne seduce him despite having so many lovers? She even let herself get pregnant! There is no way she did not know she’d get the guillotine if the king ever found out.

“The king told me he had no choice but to kill her before the bastard was born. He could not let his queen’s womb bear a bastard, especially not when it would be her first. I’m not sure whether it would be worse or better if the child was known to be Wecksas’s or not. But as things stood no one knew, and he could not have an heir that could become his enemies’ pawn. Yes, it’s cruel, but given what the king had to preserve, there was no other option. Your grandfather knew exactly how things stood. We are nobles, not commoners. We cannot allow cracks in our visage which other will use to ridicule us. We stand as the rulers of men as much because we have their respect as that we are better at ruling and fighting than they are. If we lose their respect, half our foundations will be gone and the slightest breeze could topple us.”

Sylvia was overcome with grief, but she had not lost her reason. She nuzzled into her husband's chest and fell asleep. Lorist held her for a while before he lifted her off him gently. He rolled to the edge of the bed to think more comfortably.

Auguslo left as quickly as he had come. He had only come to inform Lorist about the goings-on in the capital. Lorist was his only swordsaint. Auguslo needed his support to steady his throne, and he certainly could not afford to have him possibly turn on him. His other wish was to have the man take his bastard as his disciple. His bastard lacked legitimacy by birth, so he had to make up for it by molding him into the perfect heir in every other right.

Lorist turned him down. His disciples could be no older than sixteen when the process began and had to be his attendant for two years before they stood a chance at becoming his disciples. Even then it was not guaranteed. During the two years Lorist would carefully watch them and put them through countless trials and tribulations. Only if they passed, and were deemed worthy, would they be accepted. Wecksas had missed his chance. He was too old. It didn't matter how good he was, he could not become Lorist's disciple.

He'd also come to invite Lorist to attend his ascension ceremony. He planned to take the name 'Auguslo the Restorer' with his ascension and become the first emperor of the restored empire. He had originally planned to hold the ceremony a few months after his return, but that was stopped by his former wife's improprieties.

He did not have the gall to hold the ceremony so quickly after the scandal, and certainly not without a woman to sit next to him as empress. His inspection tour was an excuse to get out of the city and go get his new wife. He would marry the woman Duke Fisablen gave him and then ascend.

With that in mind, he'd hoped Lorist could end the war in less than two years. It was inauspicious to ascend to the throne during wartime, and he had no desire to have the Union barge into the ceremony. There was no such hope, however. It could only happen if he killed them all himself.

Tonight, Lorist lay contemplating a request the new government had made. They'd passed a motion in the council to ask and allow him to deploy a force to Callisto Hills. They hoped he could seize it for them. It was a historic part of the Morante governed Union, and was crucial to the city's functioning as it provided them with most of their key daily resources such as charcoal, pigs, dogs, cows, sheep, potatoes, wheat amongst

other things. Most importantly, any trade route to the Tedanini Mountains needed to pass through it. They had to control the region if they were to trade with the dwarves, trade vital to the city's economy.

Change was forever faster than plans. He'd only formed the Free Union out of necessity to keep the Trade Union in check. He'd chosen people that could effectively govern the new country and keep it going, but as a result they were also good enough to exploit him. They knew they did not have the might to stand against the Union on their own, and they knew they could not keep Lorist and his forces here forever, so they were hellbent on making the best use of him while they could. They would not let him leave until they were in a good enough position to feel comfortable standing on their own without him present. Callisto Hills was no doubt just the first of several moves they'd have him make.

He was becoming the buffer between the two Unions, rather than the Free Union becoming the buffer between him and the other Union. They were no doubt hoping this little excursion would boil over into another full-blown campaign would tie him and his forces down and keep him from withdrawing, thus giving them time to build up their forces.

Why do they have to be smart people? Can't they just be decent administrators and governors but bad at strategy?

Lorist smiled bitterly. They were sending three of their divisions to help him, but even in where they stationed the three they were holding back, they were shoving him in front of the Trade Union. Mass and Gypsy were the two cities closest to Morante. The surrounding land had been prepared for agriculture. They would soon be sold to farmers. They were the safest, and that was where Morante was putting its divisions. They, instead, shoved his Firmrock into the four cities closest to the front-lines and the ones most likely to be attacked.

Besides, there was no need to send him to retake the region. The people who'd been given the land were very loyal to Morante. They weren't members of the guilds, but were instead independent entrepreneurs and specialists from the city. Few had even bothered to find out where their lands were, a couple had even burned the deeds and had refused to leave the city.

They also didn't see the point to trying to manage such a backwater. The entire region was completely undeveloped. It had no infrastructure, even the biggest roads were

just small dirt cart trails.

The region was so poorly defended they could take it with just a division. The trouble was holding on to it. The complete lack of infrastructure meant it would be near impossible to supply the necessary occupation forces. It didn't help that the only port in the region, Einiba, had been crisped.

If he agreed to the request, he'd be in the quagmire and would likely be stuck here fighting for years to come. He couldn't just say no either. The request was not obviously outlandish, so he'd seem like the untrustworthy one if he turned it down. He could also possibly lose his currently guaranteed unfettered access to the market in Morante. The Free Union needed his assistance and support to establish itself on the continent, and he'd promised it to them -- in return for unfettered access to their market. If he turned down such a reasonable request, they might have legitimate cause to renege on their guarantee of access.

He spent most of the night reasoning his way through the possible outcomes time and again, and finally decided to reject their request partially. He would send a small force out to take Callisto Hills, but he would not deploy a large force, nor would take over the defense of any of the surrounding cities.

He decided to lend them Els while they trained their commanders. He would take over the city's defense. He was a native and had many connections to the new government through his acquaintances and former subordinates in the syndicates. He could most easily fit into the new system.

The plan was put into motion on the 21st of the 11th of Year 1779. A small contingent from Tigersoar marched into Callisto Hills, drove out the minimal Trade Union forces there, and occupied it. The Trade Union did not respond.

Chapter 535

War Discussion

“Our dominion’s production rate of daily necessities in the 10th and 11th months have doubled. Perhaps the south’s private traders know this will be their last chance for the year. Either way, they’ve been buying like crazy, even our luxury products have grown wings. We’ve made three million’s profit in these two months alone.

“The 400 thousand units of magic beast fur winter clothing sold out in fifteen days. Morantians were scrambling to buy them. The only thing is, the local tailors have been complaining. They’re dissatisfied that we’d make bland winter clothing with magic beast fur. They’ve had to painstakingly remake the clothes to be at least somewhat decent. They want us to give them the loose fur itself next time and let them make clothes from scratch.”

Spiel’s face was positively glowing. He was the picture of bliss. He finally understood why Lorist insisted on investing in Morante. Other things aside, almost 60 percent of all their goods and materials were already sold. Three million had been made from daily necessities, and a further two million from more luxury items. Five million all-in-all in just two months.

And that was just in trade. They’d also been reaping benefits in industries as well. All their workshops were at full capacity and a few had even switched to 24 hour operations to keep up with demand. This investment’s knock-on effects were reaching all the way back to the Northlands. Next year would see him collecting a lot more in taxes as well.

Lorist didn’t have much to say. He had instructed Spiel to monitor the goods prices so a single bad apple didn’t ruin the whole batch. He had also prepared to build new factories to keep up had introduced new regulations for entry to the market to steer clear of over supplying.

All the necessary arrangements made, Spiel left.

Senbaud was next. He’d come to bid his farewells before he left with for Jigda with the convoy. It carried the first shipment in Lorist’s deal with his former lover. He did not

expect to be back before the middle of the next year, but he hoped to return with products and good news from their new market in the south.

The southern seas had relatively good weather, but was rife with pirates. Half of his trip was to escort the convoy, the other half was to begin cleaning out the region. He would be accompanied by 11 Blitzes, besides his flagship, and a hundred Dams. This would be the first time a Norton ship crossed into the southern seas.

Charade was next. Sylvia interrupted their meeting by storming in unceremoniously. She had two pieces of good news. First was that Lorist's youngest children had been born. Maria had birthed a son on the 21st of the 10th back in the north, and Dilianna a girl on the 27th.

Lorist's family was becoming almost cumbersomely large. He now had three sons and three daughters, his dead bastard and the boy's abandoned younger brother, and the other unregistered children -- Arriotoli's two children, excluded. He had single-handedly turned around his family's slow decline. The only disappointment was that all but one of his children were legitimised bastards, and were thus, at best, half-Norton. So, while he had reversed his family's decline, he had only partially restored the bloodline. He had to have more legitimate children, children with Sylvia, to truly right his family's fortunes. Regardless, this was something worth celebrating. He finished two bottles of fine wine with Charade.

Charade was there to discuss Mass and Gypsy's agriculture. Thirty thousand households, 140 thousand Morantians, used cash or loans to buy the farmland. Half was profit. Together with the loan the government had secured from Lorist, they now had all the money they needed.

"They've asked for help expanding the military even further. They want to form four more divisions, two for Morante and one for Callisto Hills and Einiba each, and several cavalry divisions," explained Charade.

"Aren't they being too hasty?" Lorist asked, "Everyone knows Einiba is a wreck. Didn't Loze complain his men were being used to help build new homes for the city's inhabitants and to get them supplies? It hardly seems worth a division."

"That's exactly why they want to send a division there. They want to officiate their declaration of independence next year. You know the old Union will respond in force. They cannot allow this to happen.

“That said, they don’t have the forces to attack everything the new Union controls, so they’ll focus on the strategically important targets, which is neither Callisto Hills, nor Einiba. Those buggers plan to put us on the plains, where the old Union will no doubt strike first and most aggressively, and sequester themselves in the unimportant places, Callisto Hills and Einiba.”

Lorist shook his head.

“Tell them there is no need for a further expansion. As long as I’m still present, everyone will focus their attention on me, and since I’m too powerful for them to face head-on, they won’t attack in force.”

“You mean...”

“The windstorm swordsaint. The old Union is waiting for him to recover. They won’t attack until he is ready to keep me busy again. I suspect he’ll challenge me to a duel sometime late next year.”

The plains’ cities were now held by just a few new Union divisions. Lorist’s Firmrock had returned home, and Tigersoar was in Callisto Hills. There was no way the Trade Union did not know his current disposition. They quite possibly already knew of the Free Union. His men had killed all the spies they’d sent, but they had occupied the city for decades, they could not be so easily cut out of the city.

If they really knew about everything, but had yet to respond, it could only be that they were waiting for their swordsaint to recover. They needed a counter to Lorist, they would attack the moment they had it.

“I see... So once again, Your Grace is the key to our victory or defeat.”

“No, My duel is unimportant. The windstorm swordsaint can keep me busy, but he cannot defeat me. Which means the deciding factor will be our two armies. All the windstorm swordsaint can do for the old Union is assuage their concerns that I will go on a rampage and wipe their army out. He cannot win victory for them, that they have to do on their own. The same goes for us. In this upcoming war, I can only keep their swordsaint from rampaging, you must claw victory from the old Union yourselves. With us out of the picture, the next most powerful people, the blademasters, will be the greatest deciding factor. No matter how strong our ranged weapons, they will struggle against dozens of blademasters.”

So that's the problem! If they entrenched themselves, they could fight off the rank-and-file soldiers, but they'd be vulnerable to teams of blademasters striking from the shadows, and the Trade Union was certain to do this, they'd already used this tactic to great effect during the War of Glass.

"I knew we shouldn't have let them ransom the blademasters and gold ranks," complained Charade.

House Norton had barely 20 gold-ranked knights. Apart from the initial 16, only Patt and Pete had joined their ranks. Even if one was to count Glacia and Sylvia, they had twenty, but Lorist would never let his wife take the field, nor, he suspected, would any of the generals. And they could only truly count on Lorist's disciples, Reidy and Shuss. His father, Engelich, would not take the field, and Xanthi would only act to protect her adopted daughter.

"Tarkel's report," Lorist said, dripping a thick stack of paper onto the desk, "The old Union has been busy. They've built up their forces and repaired their relationship with what's left of the alliance. They've also been running an intense propaganda campaign against us. We've been painted as the 'great northern threat', and they've been painted as the south's defender. They are the guardians of civilization and we the barbarians from the north."

Charade chuckled. "Has it been effective?"

"Can't be sure. They've salvaged their economy, at least. They've also gained permission to recruit in several nations' lands. They've also reformed Wessia and plopped it in Kamott near Tedanini. They've set up several new factories there and are pumping out as much equipment as they can. They've even dared to begin using the technology they stole from us."

"Those shameless bastards!"

"With all the effort they're putting in, they must be betting everything on this one clash. It's clear they can't stay afloat as they are now, if they don't win this with the next clash, they'll crumble. If they do win, however, they'll wipe out most of our forces and cripple us for years."

"Are you confident?"

"Honestly? No. This could go our way just as easily as not. We cannot pull out, however.

We have to fight this. If we withdraw we lose this war, or at the very least we go back to where we were before we sacrificed so many men and all their deaths will have been in vain. I cannot shame my men like that. We have to fight this battle, and we have to win. Besides, it's not like we don't have any tricks cards still up our sleeve."

Chapter 536

Approaching Battle

1780 was destined to be a tumultuous year. Senbaud's flotilla was attacked on the 3rd of the 4th on their way back from Jigda. Their attackers were a pirate fleet led by what was left of Chikdor's ships. They attacked under the cover of night, sneaking up to the fleet and setting fire to as many ships as they could.

Only forty ships were left by sunrise. The remaining 50 were sunk or sinking. Most of the ships were now also under-manned. Senbaud slammed his head so hard against the nearest mast he nearly cracked his skull. He chased down the fleet and sunk every ship, then sailed up and down the coast of Chikdor's domain and flattened every building, town, and city he could find, as well as every ship, fisher, merchant or driftwood, flying their flag.

His cannons were still bellowing fire over the ocean while Morant held the signing ceremony. They signed their declaration of independence, thus officially establishing the Free Union. The day was filled with pomp and circumstance, the government made a point of holding a lavish parade to show of their military and declared the day 'Declaration Day'.

They claimed Morante, Falik Plains and all its cities and settlements, Callisto Hills and all its settlements, and Einiba as their territory. Their first act as an established country was to extend formal invitations to all foreign nations, the Trade Union excluded, to come trade freely in their territory, especially Morante. The government declared that they'd be a representative parliamentary democracy. The citizens could vote and choose representatives for a national parliament, called the Council, which would make the laws and appoint ministers and a premier who would govern the country.

Jindo was the current premier. He used his inaugural speech to declare that the Free Union would stand firmly alongside Andinaq. Andinaq's king had also guaranteed the Union's independence. Morante's merchants were free to travel to the kingdom and to trade. As long as they respected the regulations, they would be welcome.

The new trading guilds rejoiced at the news. Now they could expand northward. They

knew the kingdom had been ravaged by war, but it was still a massive market and would only grow in the coming years.

Word of the Free Union's founding soon spread to the Trade Union. Duke, and President of Twinhead Dragon, Cobleit made an angry statement about it, declaring the Free Union traitors, along a slur of other swears.

The Alliance refused to acknowledge the Free Union, and the Trade Union put out a bounty on everyone in the upper echelon's of the Free Union's government. Jindo, as the head of government and the nation, had the highest bounty: 100 thousand gold Fordes. Lorist had no choice but to make Reidy his bodyguard.

The Free Union didn't let the Trade Union's accusations go unanswered. They scrutinized Duke Cobleit's arguments in their new newspaper, the Daily Liberty. Their main argument was that their forefathers sacrificed themselves so they could live freely, as equals, not as subjects under nobles, even if said nobles were from the Trade Union.

The Trade Union, in their estimation, was not what its founders desired it to be. It had become a tyrannical, imperial force that had even become exactly what the founders had rebelled against: an aristocracy. The Free Union, they argued, were not the traitors. They were the ones restoring the ideals, the government, the country the founders had dreamt of when they first founded the Union. The Trade Union, instead, were the traitors.

Lorist joined in the response and declared that he'd kill every one of the guild-presidents-now-nobles and their families if any of the Free Union's officials were assassinated. This was the first time any sword saint had proactively declared their support for a nation, their own or otherwise. It shocked the entire Alliance.

Cobleit shot back that the Union was not like Teribo. The traitors would be captured during the upcoming war, not their killing. They were to be tried and executed properly for their treason. He also hinted at Lorist that making such a bold, proactive, public declaration was unfitting of a sword saint, individuals who were supposed to be aloof to worldly concerns and only acted to protect their own country, and suggested he should reconsider his shameful actions.

Lorist responded in the Daily Liberty's next issue. He declared that he was above sophistry. He had made his declaration to protect the integrity of the Union's dream,

which was rightly inherited by the Free Union after the Trade Union betrayed its founders' ideals, and that he would stand by his oath.

He soon after sent his three women home, each finally pregnant.

A few days after their departure, Tarkel reported the windstorm swordsaint had completed his recovery. Surprisingly, he'd refused to take the field for the Trade Union, however. One of Tarkel's top informers had told him the swordsaint had turned down their offers and made demands they could not meet. It took several more months for them to finally come to an agreement and the windstorm swordsaint issued a challenge to Lorist. He demanded they fight on the 10th of the 10th.

The date surprised Lorist. Was the Union not anxious to chase him and his people out of their ancestral homeland? Why set the date so far in the future?

Charade believed it was to give the swordsaint more time to get back into shape. Lorist didn't really buy it.

Everything became clear, however, when the Trade Union mobilized in the middle of the 8th month. The enemy marched on the plains and Bluwek. They had the advantage of numbers, 300 thousand stood against just 190 thousand, Free Union included.

"Their legions are 48 thousand strong each. Each of the seven guilds have sent their strongest forces, and the eighth is made up mostly of Invincible's survivors," Yuriy reported, "They've split their army in two. And are moving in two groups five kilometers apart. They've been countering our scouts quite effectively so I'm afraid I don't have anymore details than that."

"They've been moving very slowly and deliberately. We won't be able to catch them off guard. They also have a large contingent of siege equipment."

"We do not have the numbers to face them on the field, so it'd be best to hunker down in Bluwek." Loze suggested, "We can use the new Union's divisions to harass them as they move and whittle away their numbers. We can strike once they're at their weakest and do what damage we can."

It was a decent idea. But Lorist could not agree. He could not fight another protracted war. He needed a decisive victory that would completely incapacitate the old Union.

"No. We must face them on the field of battle. We must win a decisive victory and end

this in one fell swoop. We must wipe their force off the map so we can return home and leave everything to the new Union.”

“But, Your Grace, we do not have the numbers to face them on the field. They outnumber us at every level save that of sword saint,” Charade interjected.

“We cannot let the thought of defenses bog us down. We must focus solely on attack. The Ragebear Knights will arrive in a few days. They bring with them 500 bronze cannons. We will use them alongside our ballistae to end this swiftly. They will all die before they reach our lines. Then, when they break, we will run them down like the dogs they are!”

The knights cheered.

“Freiyar, Josk, Yuriy, Waxima, the four of you will move with Jaeger and harass the enemy. Intercept their scouts and informants, but don’t face the main force. Strike quickly and precisely only if you can be certain of a quick and safe retreat. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Els, Ovidis, take the sentry legion to Bluwek. Charade, tell Jindo to mobilize his forces to Bluwek as well, the cavalry division in Callisto too. We don’t need them for the main battle, but they should gain some experience fighting against the old Union, they’ll have to do it on their own in the future, after all.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Tigersoar will stay with me for the time being. We’ll escort the Ragebear knights and the cannons to the front.”

Chapter 537

Duel

Lorist was annoyed. He had thought he would have long since returned to the dominion. He had no interest in the empire; he was content watching from the sidelines. He didn't even take his upcoming duel seriously. The old man was much weaker than he had thought. He expected his recovery would take two years, not four.

The old man's domain was larger than his and he had more experience, but they were only enough to even the playing field. Their last domain clash had dumped both into thick gruel. Neither had full control of their domains. The simplest explanation was that it felt like his inertia had suddenly multiplied, everything felt less willing to begin or stop moving or change direction.

The challenge had been a great chance. Despite his injuries, he had won. It seemed their domains only affected the physical body, and techniques that left it, techniques that stayed within his body were completely unaffected. It might even be better for him to fight with fists rather than swords.

The fleet returned on the 33rd of the 8th. His thousand Ragebear knights disembarked awkwardly after a fortnight at sea. Their full number was three thousand, but only the one thousand silver-rankers were considered 'knights', the remaining two thousand were iron-rankers, squires. Their size did not reduce their cost, however, the three thousand men in the unit cost Lorist as much as the entire Firmrock.

With them had come the 500 cannons and 800 catapults and the supplies needed to operate them.

Charade had wanted Firmrock to come as well, but Lorist didn't see the point. Ragebear was far more effective and fewer men deployed meant fewer losses suffered, in victory and defeat. Besides, Firmrock shone when fighting from defenses, and the whole point of this battle was to avoid fighting from atop battlements and behind palisades. The forces on hand were enough to hold the line, so Ragebear would be a more worthwhile addition than Firmrock.

Howard, too, disembarked. His project had finished two months earlier. Fort Howard

was now Northsea's safe harbor in the south and more than doubled its effective operating range from the homeland. From it, they could now effectively control all but the most southern of coasts, mostly those controlled by the two empires. Most importantly, however, it meant that the fleet was out of commission for far shorter periods while it resupplied.

Howards next duty had been to form three new brigades of artillerymen. That he'd finished a month ago.

His three brigades had come with him and were currently hauling the cannons off the ships. The hundred surviving cannons from the battle with Invincible was now back under their command, so each brigade had 200 cannons. They'd spend a few days near the city, breaking in the new guns, and then leave for Bluwek.

Ragebear took leave for the days the artillery brigades checked the cannons and left together with Lorist and Tigersoar.

Military camps dotted the landscape around the city. Banners of every color pigments could make flapped in the wind. The Trade Union occupied the southern, eastern, and western fringes of the area, whilst the city itself and everything north of it flew Norton and Free Union banners.

The Trade Union's generals had been arguing for three days. Duke Cobleit walked around with a perpetual headache. The enemy sent a messenger with a letter from Duke Norton the moment they arrived. He duke said he would not be standing aside, nor reserving any force necessary for victory. He challenged them to a battle in front of the city on the 10th of the 10th, the same day he chose for his duel with their sword saint.

The heated debate revolved around this letter. Should they accept this? The enemy had not fortified the city at all. They had no retreat plan, no intent on falling back and holding the city if they lost the fight. This could only mean that they were certain of their victory.

Half of the commanders were in favor of storming the city before the enemy had time to organize their forces. They outnumbered the enemy 3 to 1, add to that the element of surprise and they had little chance of failure. Why sit around and wait for a month? Why give your enemy the time he so clearly needed to prepare for a confrontation? Was war not also a game of time and organization? He had clearly lost on both fronts

so it was only right to clean him out now.

Cobleit would have been of the same mind, were the sender of the letter in question anyone else, anyone but the infamously brilliant Duke Norton, anyone other than one of only a handful of swordsaints on the entire continent.

The duke had also followed an important ancient custom. He'd declared a date and a place for a battle between their armies. Much like the duel between swordsaints, it morally bound them to honor his call. They could ignore it if they wanted, but they would lose what little standing they had in the continent's noble circles, and their standing was shaky enough as it was already.

A break of this custom would also give the duke an excuse to target their upper echelons. Were he someone else, this would not be worth considering, but he was a swordsaint, he had the power, he just lacked the excuse.

The nobles were not pleased to hear this. This was news to them. Until recently they'd been mere commoners, rich merchants, sure, but still commoners. They'd known nothing of the intricacies of noble custom and etiquette, of the unspoken rules that governed noble life, and most of them had never made the effort to learn once they became peers.

But they had their own swordsaint, didn't they? If he was dumb enough to barge into their camp with a few hundred, maybe one or two thousand of his personal bodyguard, they could just send the windstorm swordsaint after him and crush his bodyguard with their own forces.

Naturally that fool of a duke had only bothered with noble custom because they had the perfect counter his personal involvement in the war. He was known for his unannounced attacks, among his many other barbaric tactics, he would have used one of them instead if not for the fact that they had someone that could match him.

They now thanked their lucky stars for paying the price to get the windstorm swordsaint on their side. Many had thought it a waste, and even those that had supported the idea, thought of it as just obtaining another laurel for their wreaths, something to solidify their position and give them greater legitimacy, no one had thought he would be such a crucial force.

"Where's the windstorm swordsaint?"

In the nearby city. He's stopped there to meditate and prepare for the duel. He said he'd join us shortly before the date for his due," Duke Chikdor answered.

"Why? Doesn't Duke Norton need to prepare for the duel as well? Why can he lead a legion and come to the front-line already, then? If we don't take Bluwek now, we'll sweat blood to take it later," clamored a deputy-general. He used to be a mercenary, and he didn't understand the frivolous rules nobles had to followed. It was all just pretentious horseshite to him.

"Stop talking nonsense," Duke Peterson interjected, "Duke Norton sent us an official challenge. Such is only issued to nobles. He's acknowledged us as peers, we have to respond according to noble etiquette. We'll be discrediting his acknowledgement and slapping ourselves in the face otherwise. He could then just storm in and kill us as bandits."

"But... Don't we have the windstorm swordsaint? Isn't he afraid Master Magrut would do the same to his forces?"

"Fool, we'd be the ones who would have broken the rules first. Why would Master Magrut stand up for us? Even if he did, it would be meaningless since we would be dead."

Duke Cobleit finally hammered the table. Why was it that the Trade Union's expansionist policy only worked well with the Alliance, why did it fail in the north? Andinaq, besides House Norton, was a shell of a country, teetering on the edge of complete collapse. House Norton, and, specifically, its duke, was the only thing keeping them from falling off the cliff. The Trade Union should thank its lucky stars he was a vassal of a stupid king, and not king himself, otherwise they'd long since have been made corpses.

Fuck! We should have gone to the negotiating table... thought Duke Cobleit.

Unfortunately that was no longer an option. The door to the table closed the moment the Free Union declared independence. They had to win the war or be replaced by that puppet state. If they did not shatter from defeat and become just a collection of duchies and backwater villages, they'd forever exist in the new Union's shadow.

The tent fell into silence. It lasted several minutes. Duke Cobleit's sigh finally broke it.

"Duke Norton sent that letter as a warning. Look at the date he set for our fight. It's

the same as the duel. He's warning us to follow the rules, or he'll come sort us out personally. I expect he'll respect his loss as well and withdraw without complaint, granted to do as he wishes and follow the rules."

"How are we supposed to stay here for a month? We're bleeding money!" someone cried.

"Gentlemen, let me remind you. We are nobles. You wanted the titles, and now you have it. It's time you started acting the part! Yes, we have to make sacrifices, but his recognition of our status means we can expect the perks that go along with being nobles. Proper treatment if caught, for one. We could ignore the rules when we fought the Alliance because we were certain of victory. Things are different this time. There is a serious chance we might lose. If we do after breaking the rules, we'll be hanged. If we do but we followed the rules, you get to keep your heads and go home."

"If only Master Magrut was here..."

Duke Cobleit laughed bitterly.

"He is a sword saint, our sword saint, but he is far from reliable. You should not bet on his aid."

"What?! We pay him a million gold Fordes a year! Does he want even more?"

"I won't hide it. Master Magrut originally refused to duel Duke Norton. He only agreed after we made several concessions. Besides many benefits and rewards -- among which is a province as a fief -- he will not fight the duke to the death. He will only keep him busy and out of the main fight."

"How dare he be so greedy! We've wasted our money!" yelled someone angrily.

It was one thing to be an exalted sword saint, but to be both a sword saint and a noble? One title was equal to the other, so a commoner sword saint they could stomach, but a noble sword saint would be their superior. This was unacceptable.

"We have no choice. We will not win this without him," Peterson interjected, "The big seven had already made the decision. As long as Duke Norton is out of the picture, we can win this fight. It doesn't matter if he's killed or just occupied, we just need him out of the fight. We outnumber the enemy three-to-one. A field battle, even if the enemy has time to prepare, is still better for us than a siege where we'd either have to starve

them out through the winter, where we'll be sat in cold tents and they in warm houses behind high walls, or storm the walls and suffer heavy casualties.”

Chapter 538

Day of the Grand Battle

On the 10th of the 10th, when the sky had just brightened, a horn blared lowly across Falik Plains. One tower of smoke rose after another amidst the camp's forest of tents.

A fog rose from the rivers as dawn broke. The men screamed, cursed, and yelled. Metal clashed, horses neighed, and sounds of all kinds mixed together in a chaotic ensemble.

The day had come. Duke Cobleit woke early, or, more accurately, had yet to sleep. The day's battle would decide both Unions' fate. He couldn't afford neglect. Stress weighed on him eternally. He had the advantage in numbers, so he could not understand why the enemy would choose to confront them on the field, in the open, where the terrain offered no advantage to either side. But he knew Duke Norton was no idiot, he would not do this without reason.

All the intelligence said House Norton only had three legions and a brigade of knights to field. They should number just 150 thousand at best. Cobleit didn't count the Free Union troops of Whitelion legion, which King Andinaq had sent as reinforcements, they were not worth much and could not change the outcome of the battle.

House Norton was his true enemy. However, they had remained in their camp for the whole month. While the higher-ups wouldn't claim they knew the Nortons inside out, they knew their specialties. House Norton had the advantage when it came to ranged weaponry. They used steel ballistae and catapults to break up their opponents' formations before charging in with cavalry. This was how Tigersoar had defeated their 100 thousand reinforcements in Kanbona with only 40 thousand.

The mere thought of House Norton's ballistae and catapults infuriated Cobleit. The big-six restored Wessia so they could produce House Norton's weapons from the blueprints they'd stolen. It wasn't that Twinhead Dragon didn't want to just abandon them. It couldn't, because the other five merchant guilds didn't want to. Their compromise was to reform Wessia, this time, however, each of the guilds owned a tenth of Wessia just like they did Invincible.

Despite that, the new guild still disappointed. They had the real ballistae and

catapults, but they couldn't forge the same elastic steel. They spent over 500 thousand gold Fordes but the research still failed. They only produced barely functional arms that couldn't compare.

Luckily they could counter the enemy's ballistae with shield carts. Only the catapults were trouble. House Norton were experts at combining the two weapons in combat. The Trade Union's forces had brainstormed many countermeasures, but only two were reliable. They were the elastic shield-carts, and long-armed trebuchets.

The elastic shield-carts were the result of a spark of inspiration from the carpenters that built the normal shield-carts. Normal giant shield-carts were mainly used to defend against ballista bolts, so they had to be firm. But that made them useless against rocks. In fact, the harder they were, the easier they broke. One of the carpenters had the bright idea of using bamboo, an elastic material, to support the shields. Not only did it increase its strength, but also made it possible to stop medium rocks. Heavy rocks were still a problem though.

With most of the ranged weapons nullified, they could rely on high tiers to eliminate enemy commanding officers and destroy their command infrastructure. They'd crumble soon after. The only problem was that they still had to cover a great distance under fire and casualties were unavoidable.

So far, the best way to stop the enemy's catapults was their long-armed trebuchets. They could launch stones up to 30 kilograms 400 meters. They fired slower and couldn't be moved, but they could match the enemy's range and keep them at occupied. He did not hope they could defeat the enemy catapults, he just wanted them to divert attention away from his forces as they closed in.

The old times were far better... We'd just meet on the field and charge at one another. We might shoot a few volleys of arrows before we engaged in close quarters, but things were nice and simple. House Norton has ruined everything. We can't get even get close to them normally. We'd just get wiped out as we approached. Even fighting from city walls is little better. They just smash the walls down over a couple of days and storm in...

"Please enjoy your meal, Your Grace," said his attendant as he served breakfast.

Cobleit didn't have much of an appetite. He took a few bites and fiddle around with the rest for a few minutes before giving up.

“Sollerson, anything happening on the other side?”

Sollerson was his trusted attendant. The man had been by his side for 20 years. He trusted the man implicitly.

“No, Your Grace. Apart from the mound they built two days ago, nothing has happened. The scouts said they have started to cook.”

The enemy built a small mound five kilometers from Bluwek, but nothing had happened since. The higher-ups thought they were setting up defensive fortifications, but it didn't really seem like it. Cobleit couldn't understand what Duke Norton was thinking. Maybe he wanted to use it to give him a better view of the battle? It certainly couldn't be used for anything else. Some had suggested that he might want to use it to increase his catapults' range, but it wasn't tall enough to make much of a difference.

“You can have the rest,” Cobleit said generously, “What time is it?”

“Just before seven, Your Grace.”

“Make me a cup of tea and give the signal to sortie. It is time for our grand battle. We must make preparations early. Make sure the troops are in formation in two hours.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

“Has Master Magrut woken up yet? What's the situation?”

The windstorm swordsaint arrived in with ten disciples three days earlier. After meeting him and the rest, he excused himself and wanted to set up his tent somewhere clean to rest. But where would they find a clean place in a military camp? Cobleit had no choice but to have ten tents taken down and moved to make space for the swordsaint. He even stationed guards around his tent to stop anyone from disrupting his rest.

“Master Magrut's disciples are outside. They were just asking for breakfast. We didn't see Master Magrut. We don't know if he's awake.”

Cobleit nodded.

“Since his disciples are here, Master Magrut will join them soon. Make sure the men are respectful and do whatever he asks. Master Magrut is the key to our victory today.

We can't mess things up. I won't forgive anyone who upsets him."

"Understood. I will make sure everyone is careful."

Cobleit waited anxiously for their sword saint to arrive. His eldest disciple came by near nine. Count Bolyde was the windstorm sword saint's eldest disciple, an arrogant bastard. He cared little for merchant wannabe nobles. He conveniently forgot that his own title was defunct along with Kalia, the kingdom that had given it to him.

"Lord Duke, I am here to get a pass," said Count Bolyde.

"What's going on?" asked Cobleit.

"My master will now leave for the duel grounds. I am here to get a pass to prove my and my fellow disciples' identities so we may attend."

"Huh? Wasn't Master Magrut going to duel Duke Norton on the battlefield? He's choosing another location?" asked Duke Chikdor.

Bolyde shot the duke a disdainful glare.

"You think Master is like your subordinates who want to duel in the middle of the battle to show off? Please understand, a duel between two sword saints is sacred. Only those dedicated to the arts and chosen by the sword saints themselves may be witness! Do you really think it's just two people swinging swords at each other? If you don't know what's going on, don't mouth off unnecessarily! Master issued the challenge and set the date, so the venue is naturally up to Duke Norton. We came here to get a pass to head to the other side so we can go to the grounds together."

"But... But today's the date of our battle..."

Duke Chikdor's embarrassment turned to rage.

"If the date is so fixed, then fight it. House Norton has three centuries behind it. They will not break their promises even if their lord is absent. You go do your battle and Master will duel Duke Norton. Neither has anything to do with the other."

These merchants want to come watch the duel just to make sure Master does not slack off!

“Haha, Lord Bolyde, we naturally know this is the day of our battle. We haven’t deployed yet was because we were worried we would steal the show. The duel is an eye-catching event. Our battle is nothing but a side show. Duke Chikdor is waiting with us because he is worried our battle will affect the duel. Since it won’t, there’s no issue. Sollerson, give the count my insignia and accompany him,” said Cobleit as he came to Duke Chikdor’s rescue.

“Thank you, Lord Duke,” Bolyde replied, turning stiffly and leaving, Sollerson jogging to keep up.

“Alright, gentlemen, it seems we don’t have to worry about the duel. Go and get our troops ready. You all know what our plans are, so let us not waste time and breathe reiterating them. Hold ranks, stick to the plan, obey any orders I might give, and fight bravely! By Singwa, this victory will be ours!”

“By Singwa! Victory! Victory!” responded the tent.

Horns reverberated across the plains as the Trade Union’s forces set off. House Norton responded in kind. The rumbling of drums jumped in and set the pace as the two forces marched towards one another, each’s cloud of dust obscuring the horizon for the other.

Bolyde, who had just rode out of camp, was shocked to hear the horn and cursed, but nobody heard him. The two armies were only kilometers apart and Bolyde and Sollerson were held up by a few light cavalry scouts when they were a kilometer away from the Norton camp. After checking their identification, the scouts took their weapons and escorted them to their lord.

Bolyde dismounted respectfully and gave his greetings before giving a noble salute and explaining his presence.

Lorist gazed at the map and picked a few remote locations. This was a duel between swordsmen after all, not just anybody could watch. The windstorm swordsman was right about that. In the end, Lorist settled on Lone Peak.

Lone Peak was the mountain nearest Bluwek, around 5 kilometers away. Its name came from its isolation. It towered above the gently rolling hills of the region, reaching for the sky, alone.

Bolyde returned with the location. Fanfare echoed across the gap between the armies as the Union sent their sword saint off. Lorist left his side quietly, followed only by Reidy and Jinolio.

Cobleit breathed a sigh of relief when his scouts reported Lorist's departure. Looking at the murderous Norton soldiers in the distance, he waved and ordered in a deep voice, "Blow the horn! We move as planned! Begin our attack!"

Chapter 539

Duel of the Swordsaints

“Lord Norton, please head up. Teacher arrived early,” said Bolyde with utmost respect as he saluted Lorist.

The other disciples spread out and surrounded the mountain. They appeared to be guarding the surroundings so nobody would interrupt the duel.

Lorist nodded. He turned to Reidy and Jinolio.

“Stay here, or go back if you want.”

Reidy glanced at Bolyde.

“We’ll wait here, Teacher. We pray for your victory.”

Lorist waved them off and dismounted before climbing the mountains.

This mountain had no path to the peak. The lower half had some greenery, mainly shrubs and grass, but the upper half was bare. It stood far from the coast and there were little in the way of prevailing winds, so no moisture was blown up it to wet the top. Only the hardiest of plants broke rock here and there.

The peak was a single, solid mass of gray rock. Lorist kicked up from a hole in the mountain and impaled a ledge with his sword before flipping off and ascending further. He peaked several flips later. The top was leveled, about a hundred meters square. A few hairline cracks danced like lightning in the shifting light, but the surface was stable. A few boulders lay on this surface, but not enough to severely hinder movement.

Lorist wondered where his opponent was. Had he not come early? Wind suddenly rose from behind him, lifting his cape and making it flap about aimlessly. He turned around and saw the battlefield stretched out from the bottom of the mountain to Bluwek. The two sides, like two blobs, covered two sides of the flatlands below. He felt like he should hear horns blaring and officers barking orders, but the sounds were long

washed out by the time the wind reached him.

As he perked his ears to see if he could hear any lingering noise of the war beneath, he heard a gentle flutter behind him. He turned his gaze and saw the old sword saint lumbering his way up the last couple of meters of slope. His face was slightly flush and his breathing heavier than would be expected of a sword saint.

“When you are as old as me, your bones don’t hold up as well as they used to. Apologies for showing you such a sight, Your Grace,” the old man said shamelessly, bowing slightly, “Greetings Duke Norton. I am grateful for your acceptance. Looks like this old man won’t have to lose face.”

How odd. What was the old man up to? Why was he being so polite? Was he not an arrogant fool?

“Umm...” Lorist opened his mouth to speak, but the old man’s name escaped him. *That Count Kris-whatsisname introduced him as Master Ma-something-ut...*

He couldn’t be bothered to trawl the name up from his memory.

“Can we get going?” he snapped, unsheathing his sword.

The sooner he could finish, the sooner he could return to the battlefield. He was anxious. His plans were thorough, but he could not afford to be absent if something untoward happened.

The old man just shrugged and sat down.

“No rush. Let’s rest for a bit. I’m old. I’m not nearly as energetic as you. You can at least give this old man some time to catch his breath, can’t you?”

Lorist stared at the old man, speechless.

What the hell? Is this his house?! He even dares sit down! He’s not worried I’ll strike him like this at all?!

Then again, they were fifteen meters apart. Even if he dashed at full speed, the old man would still have enough time to react.

Whatever, just rest if you need it so badly. There’s no point in rushing. Shoved his sword

into the stone and returned his attention to the battlefield.

From this vantage point, Falik Plains looked like a large chessboard, but the Union occupied two-thirds of it. Little squared of men checkered the landscape all the way to the horizon. The squares closest to his forces had been whittled down and were just small, scattered dots. He could just barely make out clumps where large numbers of men had died together, and a few pebble like dots sat scattered between them, probably shield carts of one kind or another.

“You seem rather confident in your forces. Is that why you’re fighting the battle on the same day as our duel? Where do you get that confidence? The Union is advancing very well. Your men are well-trained, but they’re completely outnumbered.”

“Had enough rest? Then let’s fight.”

“Anxious to get to join the battle?”

Lorist didn’t answer, but his face betrayed him.

The old swordsaint chortled.

“Frien-- Lord Norton. It’s true I challenged you to a duel, but the truth is I don’t want to fight you.”

“Then why’d you challenge me?”

The old man tapped the rock beside him.

“Do you know why I thanked you for accepting?”

Lorist shook his head.

Since you asked for a beating, I’ll give you want. I was having trouble finding you but now you’ve come to me. I should be the thankful one. With you out of the picture the Union will crumble. Why would I not grab such a chance?”

“You haven’t been a swordsaint for long, so you probably don’t know much about our way of doing things. But you’ll learn in good time.”

“What does that have to do with our duel? Weren’t we both heavily injured in our

last fight? You challenged me after you recovered because you want to get payback, right? I didn't get enough in our last fight, so I want to fight you again."

The old man burst into a short bout of laughter.

"I didn't issue the challenge with the intention to fight. I know taking you on will be torturous and I'll probably be just as badly injured as before. My old bones can't take it anymore. Everyone knows about our last fight. If I didn't challenge you they'd think I was afraid of you and I'd lose most of the respect and reputation I've earned. I had to challenge you to preserve my honor."

"I'm a swordsaint, one of just a handful on the continent. We have transcended the ruling classes. Nobody dares offend us. Even in wars we don't have to fight. We prefer it that way since we'd rather not fight and kill one another. There are few enough of us already, no need to lower that number ourselves. We don't care which of us is considered the strongest. I doubt anyone would have a problem with you being put at the top of our rankings. You're welcome to it. You're a noble as well as a swordsaint, the rest of us are commoners. We may have high statuses, but they're symbolic only. We have no real power.

"We're seen as these sages, divorced of the mundane world, our only pursuit perfection of our cultivation. We are respected and stand equal even to kings and emperors in the eyes of the people, but we have no authority. We only fight to preserve our reputation so we can hold on to what little freedom and influence we have. That's why I challenged you.

"Challenges are usually accepted as easily as this one. Most of the time a lot of conditions are negotiated first. We don't face each other often as a result. Most fights are spars between friendly swordsaints. I am grateful that you accepted my challenge without a fuss. I will repay this favor."

Lorist finally understood what was going on. The swordsaint wanted to put up a facade of a duel for the rest of the world to preserve his honor, but in reality he just wanted to chat. Even if he returned without a scratch, he could claim to have fought Lorist to a draw. It was far better than having to escape injury-ridden. And, given his status, there would be no need to try so hard on behalf of the Union, anyway.

Lorist was different. Like the old man had said, Lorist was a noble as well as a swordsaint. He had a domain and millions of people depending on him. He could not

sit by like a detached bystander and just watch the fight play out either way. He had to make sure his forces won.

He prepared to leave.

“Let’s not be hasty now,” the old man hastened to stop him.

Lorist frowned and clutched his sword.

“You want to stop me?”

“You’re a swordsaint. Why bother with such petty things? We must not be too involved in the world of mortals. Even if you’re a duke, you can’t lead every charge, can you? You must be confident in your forces being able to win in your absence, otherwise you wouldn’t have set the battle on the same day as our duel. Why not watch it from here? We might be powerful, but swordsaints can’t single-handedly change the outcomes of battles such as these.”

“Did you make a deal with the Union concerning me?”

The old man nodded shamelessly.

“I cannot let you take part in the battle, so I cannot let you descend the mountain until the battle is over. Besides, a duel between swordsaints cannot end this quickly. No one will believe we’ve fought.”

“Oh really?” Lorist’s glare froze. “Do you really think you can keep me here?”

“I admit I’m not your match. But stopping you from leaving is not the same as winning the fight. I have several strategies to lock you down on this peak even if I can’t win. I’d prefer not to have to fight you, however. There’s no point in us being enemies.”

“So what did they promise you?”

“The duchy of Walinya. Well, they didn’t offer it to me, I demanded it. It’s one of the smaller duchies south of the Union, near Jigda. It used to be a protectorate of Kalia. It’s about the same size as one of your empire’s provinces.”

“Are you sure the Union will really give it to you?”

“They won’t dare lie to a sword saint. As long as I keep you here until the battle ends and I’m not badly injured, they’ll give it to me. They’d like nothing more than for the two of us to fight one another until we’re just barely still alive.”

“Hey, old man,” Lorist interjected, “even if you get Walinya, aren’t you afraid the sword saints from the Romon and Khawistan will come after you? I heard they chased you out of Kalia by working together.”

Lorist suddenly felt a desire to gossip. He had nothing better to do up here, so why not?

“Hehe. Kalia wasn’t ruined because I was chased out of the kingdom. It was ruined because I and the king had irreconcilable differences. I would have liked to kill the old bastard, but I couldn’t if I wanted to preserve my reputation, so for years I’d just sequestered myself away and ignored the king. The two empires didn’t dare make a move as long as I was in the kingdom, though. One day I received a letter from the two empire’s sword saints saying they’d been asked to work together to chase me out of the kingdom or kill me so the two empires could split it up. It was the perfect excuse to get out, so I played along and pretended to be chased out of the kingdom by the two after a serious fight.”

“Being a sword saint comes with a lot of annoying shackles. I realized when I first came across you and learned you were both a sword saint and a noble that I can only really be free if I am both a noble and a sword saint. So I demanded land and a title in exchange for keeping you out of the fight.”

A loud, sky-shattering rumble burst up the mountain from the lands below. A line of smoke rose up from Lorist’s forces, and towers of smoke rose from semi-random positions on the Union’s side. Their formations instantly crumbled. Soon after a soft blur of cries and wails clawed its way through the air to the peak.

Lorist finally breathed again and sat down.

“Don’t you still want to go back to the battlefield?”

“The battle’s over. The Union lost. I don’t need to go back in a hurry anymore.”

“How?!”

The old man jumped up and stared at the battlefield. Smoke covered most of it, but he

could just make out the Union's side retreating like ants on a table after someone hit it. The enemy side's formation was also breaking up like a flood as it rushed over the battlefield, chasing the retreating Union.

"Gah!" cried the old man suddenly. He drew his sword and slashed the rock closest to him.

"The heck are you up to?" asked Lorist.

"Quick, help me. Leave a few sword marks on the rocks over there. This is the sacred ground of a sword saint duel. We must leave some signs of the intense battle. You take that side, I'll take this one, we can swap once we're done."

Chapter 540

Grand Victory

Lorist descended from the mountain, his face covered in soot. His clothes were stained with mud and somewhat torn. Even his short cloak was torn in half. Each flapped like a flag behind him.

“Your Grace!”

“Teacher!”

Lorist smiled when he saw his two disciples. Their cries made him feel guilty. But, thinking back to what the windstorm swordsaint had said, there really was no reason for two people without any real grudges to fight each other to the death.

The old man had said it crudely, but it made sense. Lorist’s forces had won, so he had no reason to rush back. The windstorm swordsaint also didn’t have to tire himself out by holding him on the mountain. Everyone could part on good terms. Lorist would have free reign in the north and the two would have nothing to do with one another in the future. They might even become friends in time.

The only thing Lorist didn’t like was having to ‘decorate’ their dueling grounds. It was even more tiring than actually fighting. The practiced manner in which the old man went about his decorating also called into question the stories about all the previous confrontations between swordsaints. How many had been honest fights, and how many were just decorations? No one had ever imagined that swordsaints, so venerated by the world, would just sit side by side on mountaintops talking about trifles as hundreds of thousands fought to the death beneath.

He nearly broke out in a rage when the old man said they also had to look the part.

“You can see how epic our fight must’ve been. Look at that boulder. It’s cut in half! How can we walk out untouched by dust or dirt? Wouldn’t that rouse their suspicions?”

He didn’t wait for Lorist to respond. He immediately cut his clothes into thin strips and covered himself in dust. Lorist was quite impressed with the old man’s fashion

sense. It was centuries ahead of its time. He had little choice once he started, so he joined in. Soon both were nearly half naked under strips of cloth completely unassociable with the clothes they had worn when they ascended the mountain.

Reidy and Jinolio rushed over excitedly. They breathed a sigh of relief once certain their master had not been seriously injured.

“Did Teacher win?”

Bolyde was pale and trembling. He clearly thought his master had lost. The fight had lasted some time and the fact that his master had not returned when his opponent had said everything.

Lorist shook his head.

“We drew. We fought for a while but stopped when we realized neither could of us could win without taking serious risks. I just came down first.”

Bolyde’s face immediately regained some semblance of color.

“Where is Master? Is he injured? Forgive my rudeness. I am just worried for Master!”

Lorist smiled.

“Your teacher is fine. He said he gained some insight from our fight and wants to meditate on it for a while. He’ll come down once he’s ready.”

That old guy had stubbornly insisted on Lorist saying this to his disciples. His disciples would go up to see what had happened and would come across their carefully prepared stage. He’d recount the grand battle and word would spread to the world from there.

“Thank you, Duke Norton,” said Bolyde before he called two other disciples and rushed up the mountain.

“Let’s go back.”

Lorist mounted his horse. Jinolio handed his cloak to him.

“Teacher, was the windstorm swordsaint strong?” asked Reidy as they rode.

“No,” Lorist said with a bitter smile, “He’s not very strong, but he’s as slippery as an eel. He couldn’t hurt me because I am too strong, but I couldn’t hurt him because I couldn’t corner him to land a strike.”

Such was the truth. The two had clashed with their domains to determine the most believable lie to tell. Though the old man was sly and lazy, his cultivation was the real deal. His Windstorm Domain spread out for 25 meters. Within it, stones flew and wind morphed into blades. Lorist’s Slaughter Domain, on the other hand, was like a physical manifestation of murderous intent. Everything inside was crimson and even the bravest turned into cowards. Its range, however, was a paltry 15 meters. It was a great improvement on what it had been when last the two had fought, however. The old man had been very impressed when he saw it.

Lorist had gained something from their agreement. Magrut had shared a lot of what he knew about the world of swordsmen with his younger protégé, such as what exactly domains were and how they worked. Lorist learned that swordsmen were divided into three classes, or stages, based on the size of their domain. First stage swordsmen had domains less than thirty meters but greater than 10 meters in radius. Anything less than that was a demi-swordsman, not to be confused with a quasi-swordsman, however. Quasi-swordsmen couldn’t manifest a domain at all, but were far more powerful than blademen, whilst demi-swordsmen could manifest domains, though unstable, of short duration, and less than 10 meters in radius.

First stage swordsmen moved into the second stage when their domains crossed the 30 meter mark, and the third stage when they crossed the 50 meter mark. Of all the swordsmen still living, only one, the firesoar swordsman, was in the third stage. Everyone else was still in the first stage. Romon and Khawistan’s swordsmen were comparable to Magrut. The firesoar swordsman was the last surviving swordsman from the previous generation, which was why he had such a large domain. The years of chaos of the last century and a half had prevented many new swordsmen from rising. Most of the current swordsmen were of roughly the same age. Lorist was in the trailing end of the current generation, quite possibly its last as well. The firesoar swordsman was an incredible 260 years old, and few thought he could hold out much longer, if he were even still alive. It had been years since he was last seen.

Domains were also based on the fundamental attributes of their users’ battleforce. Magrut’s was of the rare wind attribute. The firesoar swordsman’s was fire. His domain felt like an oven. When he exerted its full strength, he could even make bushes and grass burst into fire. Romon’s swordsman had a wood-attribute domain. Plants grew

wildly within it. Khawistan's sword saint had an earth attribute. It was great for defense and for limiting the enemy's movement by constantly changing the landscape within.

Lorist's was apparently the weirdest of all. Magrut had sparred with most of the known sword saints, but he'd never encountered something like this. He'd especially never felt the kind of sludging effect he did when his domain clashed with Lorist's. Usually their domains would overlap and their effect would manifest side by side, it was unheard of for the two domains to suppress each other and to instead slow down the sword saints inside like they were fighting in a thick sludge.

As Lorist approached Bluwek, he encountered more and more scattered Union soldiers. Apart from some blind fools who tried to rob them of their war horses, Lorist didn't go out of his way to chase the small fry soldiers down. He had to accept some of the points the windstorm sword saint made. As a sword saint, he should carry the kind of grace a sword saint should have. Troubling a small soldier was beneath his status of a sword saint. *Come to think of it, the old guy was like 'mortal' this and 'mortal' that. He doesn't even acknowledge their existence as individuals at all. Maybe he even considers himself as some sort of god.*

Now, Lorist finally understood why the windstorm sword saint seemed so arrogant when he tried to abduct Auguslo and the other nobles years ago. The old guy had been put on the high pedestal for far too long and started growing prideful. Had it not been for Lorist's own status as a sword saint, the old man wouldn't even have bothered with him. To the windstorm sword saint, anyone who wasn't a sword saint was not so different from little ants on the ground. Only by becoming a sword saint would one be acknowledged as an equal by the old man. It was no wonder he was so casual and loose-lipped about how sleazy he was and how he tricked the Trade Union for his own benefits.

Whatever, there's no sense in fussing with that old guy. I'll just do what he wants this time. He should be going to claim Walinya as his dominion from the Trade Union later and probably wouldn't have anything to do with me in the future. Lorist only felt pity for the Trade Union. Not only did they suffer a crippling loss on the battlefield, it was also quite obvious that the windstorm sword saint would no longer move according to the merchants' beck and call after he got Walinya. Whether he would still be in their employ was still unknown. That old man seemed like he was going to isolate himself after he got his dominion and nobody would be willing to invade the dominion of a sword saint. It was no different from forming an irreconcilable grudge.

A group of sentries were bringing some Free Union soldiers along to chase down the retreating Trade Union troops. Upon seeing Lorist and the other two, they raised their weapons up high and called out their victory cry. The cheer soon spread all over the battlefield. A few Norton knights rushed over and Lorist waved them away to resume their assignment instead of escorting him. He would arrive at Bluwek soon, anyway.

Charade received a report that the premier of the Free Union, Jindo, was waiting to welcome Lorist back at the citadel gates. The others had followed the rest to take as many captives as they could. Since the Free Union had settled on developing the rural Callisto Hills, they would be investing around one to two million gold Fordes annually into the projects and the most crucial thing that they currently lacked was cheap labor. This was a great chance to fill up that gap.

Since Lorist was able to return unscathed from a sword saint duel, he hadn't suffer any losses or inconveniences. Charade didn't really care about it after being told that it was a draw and started telling Lorist about the success they'd had with the battle. He had observed the battle from the beginning to its very end. Had it not been for the fact that others were worried about his lackluster swordsmanship and asked him to stay behind, Charade might have raised his sword and charged into the pursuit in the heat of excitement.

According to Charade, the Trade Union blew the horn for the battle to begin less than 15 minutes after Lorist left with Jinolio and Reidy. Everyone knew why they were so desperate to start. The Trade Union showed their might in the form of multiple formations spread across the plains and they applied huge pressure against the Norton forces, Whitelion legion and the defense divisions of the Free Union, which even saw some tens of soldiers desert.

The unit that launched the attack first was the Trade Union's so-called vengeance legion that was formed mostly from inner city citizens, surrendered garrison members and Invincible Fleet members as well as some sailors. They hated how their wealth was scoured clean by House Norton when they were kept in the captive camps and hated the Nortons to the bone. They were willing to become cannon fodder than retreat.

They were the ones who pushed the gigantic wooden shield carts that counteracted the ballista attacks. Some of those carts even managed to weather strikes from catapult projectiles outside the range of 200 meters. Most rocks weighing below 30 kilograms didn't have any effect on those carts. Only when projectiles weighing above

50 or so kilograms would crush the shield carts and cause some damage. That was how vengeance legion managed to approach the Norton formations and put up a short-lived assault. But they were eventually beaten after a few exchanges.

Perhaps because the success of the vengeance legion, the higher-ups of the Trade Union were encouraged, and they instantly threw half of their forces into the fray. Near 100 thousand people marched in multiple square formations and launched their heavy assault. They weathered the ranged weaponry of the Nortons using those gigantic wooden shield carts of theirs and made their approach. Behind the square formations were nearly 100 long-armed trebuchets that were also gradually being moved to the front of the battlefield.

The Norton commanding officers didn't give much heed to those trebuchets and thought that their firing range only measured to be around 300 meters like their own catapults. They didn't think that those trebuchets would be set down when they were still over 400 meters away before they were used to launch rocks weighing around 30 kilograms to the Norton ranks. That caused the unprepared Norton units a few hundred casualties and nearly crumbled the units.

Ovidis, who was commanding the catapult units, could only order his catapults to return fire. The worst part of that was that the enemy trebuchets were defended by those shield carts and most lighter projectiles didn't have any effect unless they struck the trebuchets directly.

So, Howard instructed Ovidis to pack some gunpowder along with those projectiles and ordered the 600 plus cannons and their operators to get ready to fire. At that time, the Trade Union formations were less than a hundred meters away from the Norton forces and would soon go in on an all-out attack to break through the Norton formation.

When the Union forces' 100 plus thousand soldiers finally began their final charge towards the Norton lines, what awaited them were countless thundering booms, whooshing cannonballs and endless tragedy. The Norton forces had completely swept the enemy forces clean, instantly creating rivers of blood and mountains of corpses. Soldiers from the Union and Norton ranks both vomited from the grotesque and cruelly stimulating sight.

It was then when the gunpowder-packed projectiles flung by the catapults detonated at the enemy's rear lines. Smoke and fire spread all over the enemy ranks. The

trebuchets and shield carts crumbled indiscriminately in the face of exploding gunpowder. Never would the Trade Union ever imagine that the Nortons had that trick up their sleeves. The remaining square formations of the Trade Union near the front of the battlefield crumbled almost right away and some other soldiers at the back were greatly unsettled.

Fiercetiger Loze and Freiyar grabbed the opening to blow the horn for Tigersoar and Jaeger to flank the enemy at that instant. Howard and Ovidis on the other hand led the cannon and catapult brigades forward to deal more suppression fire and to continue flinging more gunpowder bags to the rear camp of the Trade Union. Terman on the other hand mounted a frontal charge against the enemies. Els also led the sentry legion, Whitelion legion and the Free Union's defense divisions to suppress the enemy.

The result was simple. The Trade Union forces had been completely decimated. The repeated blows from the Norton forces completely crushed the merchant guilds' legions. Their soldiers escaped in all directions chaotically. The Norton troops thus dove into a delightful frenzy of pursuit and capture.

Chapter 541

After the Battle

On the 10th of the 10th, Year 1780, the new swordsaint and Duke of The Northlands, Norton Lorist, headed for Lone Peak to face Windstorm Swordsaint Magrut in single combat. There were no spectators, but the clefts in the rock and the rubble left behind bared witness to their engagement.

The duke's forces drove the Trade Union off the field during the fight as well. The duke didn't even take a look at the battlefield after the fight. He just headed to Bluwek to rest. Magrut, while having not lost badly, was very exhausted and chose to remain on the peak for some time. He later revealed to his disciples that he'd gained a great insight during their battle and had wanted to meditate on it in the midst of their arena. The fight won him back the face he had lost during their last confrontation, and he praised the duke's swordsmanship for years thereafter.

--extract from the Chronicles of Grindia

The battle was a complete route. House Norton was the undisputed victor. It was a historic battle for more than one reason. Not only was it the final nail in the Forde Trade Union's coffin, but it was also the first land battle where firearms played a decisive role. The Union outnumbered House Norton just under 2 to 1, but they were complete routed once their enemy opened fire with their cannons.

It was not that their tactics were completely incorrect, at least not based on what they knew about the enemy. They were quite effective against House Norton's conventional troops. They had never thought of the enemy suddenly using cannons, however.

Many of the battle's survivors described the moment like suddenly finding oneself in the middle of a thunder storm, like waking up in the midst of a cyclone, like coming across the end of times. The more religiously inclined said they were weapons that unleashed the devil himself, a blasphemy, a heresy against the gods. You would notice a slight smudge in the sky tearing towards you, then suddenly be blinded by a bright sun flaring into existence right in front of you. If it was far enough away, which was far indeed, you'd survive past the flash to hear a thunderous roar like a dragon

complaining about being rudely awoken. Once your vision returned -- your hearing would often be gone for several minutes after the explosion, some never got their hearing back for the whole battle, a new explosion taking it away before it's even come back from the last one -- you'd be confronted by a blurry world spattered with little black or dark gray dots and your nose would be assaulted by an other-worldly stench.

Actually, it was not just one stench. One part of it was completely unrecognizable. One man who lived near a volcano described it as similar to what the world would smell like after it erupted. The other part was a sickly sweet stench of burning human flesh. Many of the survivors looked like corpses themselves, collapsed into catatonia at the hell around them.

The explosive shells eradicated the long-armed trebuchets and shield carts all the same. To the thousand-man formations, it was as if they had lost the safe space in which they could hide. If they remained, only being blasted away awaited them. The men, most of whom had sworn never to back down quickly, fell apart.

It was a humongous failure. This was the Union's greatest loss to date. Most of their casualties were amongst their elite units at the front of their formation. They lost 70 thousand to death, and 200 thousand to the enemy.

The most bleeding loss, however, was the 14 blademasters and just over a 100 gold-rankers that fell with the cannons' first volley. They had bet everything on this engagement, if they won, they would have won everything, but in defeat, they had now lost everything.

Their other losses could be recouped in a couple of years, two if they tried really hard, but blademasters took decades to make, and the success rate was very low. The loss was even worse because in Morante they'd lost the infrastructure, the academies, necessary to train them.

Howard scattered the cannon fire. He had a quarter of the cannons fire at a time, this way he could shorten the time between volleys by three quarters, and the cannons could more effectively use their shots by adjusting to his areas unaffected by the last volley. The first round of volley thus disintegrated several tens of thousands of enemies. They could not make an accurate estimate of the kills because there were no corpses left, just a field of small chips of flesh and bone.

The battle's name quickly became known as the 'Cry of the Cannons'. It marked the

beginning of three hundred years of espionage. Every nation, every king, every noble, every merchant tried to steal the designs from House Norton, especially his gunpowder recipe. The funny thing is, they succeeded in less than two decades, but dismissed the recipe because they thought it was too simple and it got lost again amidst all the other fake ones.

In his twilight years, Duke Cobleit acceded to his granddaughter's pleas and wrote his memoirs of the campaign and its aftermath. In it he made clear that this particular battle was the death knell for the Union. It still had a chance to recover until the first cannons fired, from that moment on, its fate was sealed.

The commanders were so shocked by their loss that they became dumb. They believed their tactics were sound and blamed everything on Duke Cobleit's impatience and anxiety on the morning of the battle. The target of their ire, however, argued that they had little choice. They had little hope of their sword saint winning the fight against the enemy duke, and once the fight there was over, the duke would rush to the battlefield and their chance at victory would be lost. They had to win the battle before the fight ended.

He believed the route of their loss lay in his and his fellow commanders' acceptance of the duke's suggestion that they fight on the same day as the duel. It meant that they had to stay on the field for a month longer than they had planned, which brought down their troops' morale and gave the enemy the time they needed to prepare their cannons. If they'd attacked as planned, the enemy would have been ill-prepared and they would have lost.

He did, however, admit his fault in not thinking about the enemy's cannons. They knew they possessed land-based cannons from the time they infiltrated the Norton homeland and stole their weaponry designs. They had become complacent because they had never featured in the battles since, other than at sea, and had completely forgotten about them by the time of the big final battle.

Since the land-based cannons never featured again, and since the defeat on sea was such a massive blow to the men's confidence, he believed they had exaggerated the power of the cannons to soothe their egos. And had this discounted them as a possible factor in the battle.

Such recitations were matters of the future, however. In the present, Lorist had just returned to Brinn Hills. He had left dealing with the aftermath of the battle to his subordinates.

Loze was chasing down the enemy and plundering the Trade Union's remaining territories. Carade and Dulles were working with the Free Union to deal with their captives, some 200 thousand. Their ally's forces were eager to guard the captives. They were moved to the middle of nowhere on the plains where they were made to build large concentration camps where they would stay for the winter. Els was sorting out the loot he'd taken from the enemy camps and cleaning up the battlefield.

Howard was leading one of his brigades to Mauvlin to help out Jaeger and Whitelion while they cleaned the place out. Whitelion specifically was determined to bring back good loot to give to their king as a gift during his crowning ceremony.

The forces faced little resistance, partially because most of the men were either dead on the battlefield or in the concentration camps, and because what few were still at home, were either too few to fight back, or were scared shitless by what they'd heard from the escaped survivors. The legions returned with bounty a plenty, leaving empty wasteland in their wake, devoid of even people. They were all either killed or dragged back as prisoners.

House Norton returned much later than originally planned. They marched into Morante a few days after 1781's rainy season began. Lorist had no need for more subjects, and certainly no desire for any of his subjects to be old Unionites, so he dumped all but the most high-ranking captive on the Free Union.

He had Ragebear bring them to his manor. Duke Peterson, the unfortunate old clout, was an old acquaintance of Lorist's. An explosive shell had detonated almost right next to him. Luckily the shot had gone off behind a nearby mounted soldier. The mount and man absorbed most of the shrapnel so the duke had escaped mostly unharmed. The blast had burst his eardrums, however, so he could currently not hear very well and walked around with a constant headache, and had knocked him from his horse, the fall knocking him out. His attendants rushed to his side, but by the time they had prepared a stretcher, they, their duke included, were captured.

The old man accepted a cup of milk-leaf macks Jinolio offered. The young man had come up with the drink himself. The leaves of a bush native to the plains was dried, then soaked in milk before being added to a cup of macks. It had a rich aroma and a

creamy taste the duke had never come across before. Jinolio had proudly presented it to Reidy, who quickly spread it to the other servants. It would just a few years before the drink became popular all over the continent and the leaves from which it was made a staple of Free Union exports.

The duke only played with the odd-looking liquid absentmindedly, however. His gaze was fixed to his captor-host, Lorist. If only he had not broken ties with the man. He had first heard of him when he was still just a no-name instructor at Dawn Academy. Now, however, he stood on three of several mountain peaks on the continent. First, he was a noble as close to the top as a vassal could get, second, he was one of the most powerful fighters in the world, and third, he stood at the head of one of the most powerful families and militaries and economies on the continent.

Lorist briefly talked about the good old days when the two had been friendly acquaintances and business partners before moving on to business. He told the duke that the Trade Union had best surrender. There was no winning this war anymore, no drawing either. They had only two options, either continue on stubbornly and watch as their castles and cities were burnt one by one before they and their families were hanged, or surrender now and preserve what little dignity they had left, perhaps even keep their independence. The bastard dared to say that he wanted to bring peace to the countries as fast as possible. As if his men were not raping and plundering their way through the lands as he ran his disgusting mouth!

Chapter 542

Year 1781

The icicles dangling from the roof's edge dripped continuously. Today was the 15th of the 2nd of 1781, the time of snowmelt. Somewhat rarely, the sun hung visible in the sky. Morantian housewives busily hung their washing outside to dry.

Sigh, I wish we had cotton... Lorist suddenly missed the smell of freshly-dried cotton. Most of Grindia's textiles were linen or hemp based, or made from animal fur. Winter clothing, especially, was very animal based. The 400 thousand furs brought here a few months earlier had been sold in just a fortnight.

The buyers changed everything they bought to fit their tastes. They could afford to waste material on such aesthetic alterations because the furs came cheap -- very, very cheap.

Thanks to the new clothes, the city had its busiest winter in years. Protected from the cold, everyone was out and about and busy being industrious. In winters past most would have stayed indoors for the whole three months of the season, but this time the streets were only empty in the night's darkest hours.

This... This is the Morante I remember, thought Lorist.

He'd gotten to know the city during its two-decade golden age. It had been a merry and prosperous place, the most so on the continent. This was the true Morante in his mind, not the husk he had found when he occupied it, granted, he'd been at least partially responsible for that sorry state of affairs.

Charade's voice danced down the garden from main gate.

"Where's His Grace?"

"Over there enjoying the scenery."

Clear footsteps soon rung over the gravel pathway.

“What’s up?” Lorist asked, his eyes fixed on the scenery in the valley below.

“Tigersoar and Jaeger have returned. They a few men too many. Jindo is furious. He’s filed a complaint.”

“How many?”

“Seven... seven hundred thousand, at least...”

This was not a few! This was an entire province worth’s people! Had they at least left the dead in their graves, or had they exhumed their corpses and brought them along as well? No wonder Jindo was mad. How on earth was he going to settle so many? Especially with the rainy season just around the corner.

“Nonsense!” Even Lorist was speechless.

How irresponsible! Did they not think at all? They had just sent everyone they came across back to the Free Union, they hadn’t, not even for one moment, stop to think whether the Free Union could actually deal with them.

“You damn well better have a solution to this!”

“Maybe we can send them to other places? We can send half to Yungechandler, it still needs people. Shadekampf wrote about working on Egret Swamp for more farmland, so they can do some farming. These have only been part of the old Union for a few years, they’ve not been indoctrinated to value freedom and equality yet, so they can still be worth something. We can leave the rest here with the new Union, they should have enough resources to deal with them.”

“What about Jindo?”

“He’s biggest complaint is with the trouble the resettlers are causing. No one in the government is prepared to handle so many people, every penny’s already been invested in building up Callisto Hills and Einiba. We’d initially thought there’d still be a few more years of war after our battle, so we’d dissuaded them from moving there first.

“That’ no longer the case, however. They can now start thinking about developing the plains. Jindo wants us to give them resources and supplies to help with feeding the captives. Only crying babies get candy.”

Charade's answer made Lorist chuckle. News of the Trade Union's invasion had spread to Morante in the 9th month the previous year and caused quite a bit of chaos. The last couple of years of ill-governance had not erased two centuries of good rule. Many people still felt some loyalty towards the Trade Union and decried the foundation of the Free Union a betrayal of the founding ideals and everyone who supported the new government a traitor.

No one, however, regardless of which side they took, was happy to see Lorist's forces leave. When they returned triumphant, though, they returned to two halves of the city ecstatic with cheer, and the remaining third mourning the death of the continent's only moral country.

This turn of events was most surprising. They'd started out their time of tenure in the city as the devil himself. As demons and vile monsters from the underworld who drenched the city in blood and wanted nothing but to slaughter everything and everyone within its walls, but had now become its liberators, angels descended from heaven to protect, guard, and benevolently watch over the people like a big brother or doting uncle. A few young maidens had even begun husband hunting near the camps.

Before the war, Lorist and his commanders had played a major part in forming the new government. But the execution of its policies was sluggish. Though the city market had returned to the right path, the people were still hesitant to invest their savings for fear of something bringing it down again.

The government pushed many policies and prepared to invest in the Callisto's development, but the city's residents had responded with lackluster enthusiasm. With the battle now over, however, and their future bright and secure, people were beginning to move.

It was only natural for Jindoze to complain. The raids of the Norton forces that produced so many refugees only added to the Free Union's list of troubles. The government had no leeway to deal with the captives, neither in manpower nor in finances.

"How much wealth did Freiyar and Loze plunder?" asked Lorist.

"The five border provinces have been cleaned out. Ten million gold in all, not including the portion given to Whitelion or perishables. Spiel was planning to auction those things off in the city..."

Lorist shook his head.

“Take charge of settling the people in once the rainy season ends. You can pick out a few promising and capable once and send them to Yungechandler, but the rest stay. Take the supplies necessary from our spoils. The Free Union doesn’t have the foundation we do, it cannot settle so many people on its own. Use Tigersoar and Jaeger as labor; they have to clean up their mess themselves. Leave Spiel in charge of the rest of the supplies.”

“Understood.”

“I will send Howard to help you.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” said Charade, relieved.

If he had had to deal with all 700 thousand captives himself, he’d have collapsed from exhaustion. They were nothing like the people he’d dealt with back north. They had no respect for his lord’s forces.

The rest of the year passed peacefully. The Trade Union focused its efforts on licking its wounds and feeling sorry for itself. No big factions went to war either. Peace reigned on Grindia. Peace, however, did not mean quiet. Falik Plains was like a termite mound. It teemed chaotically. Loze finally regretted going overboard. His head was in constant pain these days, ever since he had received the order to move some of the captives to Yungechandler. He tried many excuses to get out of the responsibility, all of which failed. But he finally brought up wanting to break through to become a blademaster, at which Lorist allowed him to recuse himself, but demanded he break through before he show his face again. His punishment this passed to Messen and Dulles.

Sylvia wrote to Lorist in the 7th month to inform him of Fennazali successful birth of a girl. Sylvia and Daisy were due in three more months as well. She even demanded Lorist go back and join her for the birth.

Auguslo wrote Lorist soon after. He congratulated Lorist on his victory about a year earlier and asked about the possibility of getting some cannons for his army. Lorist wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Talk about a belated congratulations, but that was the limitations of this world’s technology. News traveled slowly here, even letters meant for a single destination took months to travel between two points with

a significant portion of the continent between them.

Even travel by sea, currently the fastest was to go, took months to cover some of the longer routes. A trip from Morante to Northsea was two months long, for example.

Lorist would have none of the king's fancy, however. He said in as few words as he could, that it was impossible. The guns were just hunks of iron on their own. They needed gunpowder to propel their projectiles, and this one battle alone had used up all the gunpowder Lorist had produced over several years. He made sure to hint that there was no point, either, since it was now only a matter of time until the Trade Union surrendered.

"Any news from Duke Peterson?" Lorist asked as he handed the letter to the king's messenger.

Jinolio shook his head.

"No. We've had no contact since he was released. We should not have let him go."

"Whatever. I'll wait another month. If we don't get an answer by then, we'll head home. We can let things be as they are for now. No rush."

Chapter 543

Arrangements

Duke Peterson finally sent a message in the 8th month. He said the Union had changed a lot. The guilds were drawing away from one another, which made it very hard to get them to agree to anything. Duke Cobleit, the nominal leader of the group had fallen sick and had not attended any of the meetings. He had only recently started recovering.

The remnants of the Alliance had started making moves on the Union's territory after their defeat in front of Bluwek. The trouble occupied them for quite a while, and forced them to keep their word and hand over Walinya's territory to the windstorm sword saint, which quelled the Alliance's ambitions.

Lorist had to admit the Union had handled the trouble with the Alliance quite well. They used Walinya and its title to kill several birds with one stone. By giving it to the sword saint they fulfilled their obligation to him, tied him to them, and put an end to the Alliance's ambitions for its old territory.

He didn't quite understand why Magrut didn't just declare independence the moment he arrived in his new fief. That had been his expressed intent on the mountain, at least. The Union must have offered him additional benefits. It would certainly sway him. He now had his own territory, but it was ravaged by years of war, so he needed resources and money to build it back up.

Duke Peterson only briefly touched on the Union's plans for the future. But he did take quite a lot of space to put forth his proposal. He proposed Lorist double or triple the prices of his products; he was selling them way too cheap.

Lorist could contain his laughter when he read it. He was clearly trying to win back the market monopoly Lorist threatened with his goods. Free advice on how to make more profit? Did he really think Lorist was so greedy?

If he raised his prices, the products would lose their competitive edge and the Union would push him out of the market. He didn't care about profit right now. He wanted to win market share. He could push his prices up later, right now he needed a foundation

in the south -- loyal customers and a reputation. Another reason was to force the Union out of the market, or at the very least force them to sell their stuff at much lower prices. This way he could ensure that they would take decades to recover, if they ever did.

How could they still call themselves the Forde Trade Union when they were no longer real traders, much less the best on the continent? They were now just nobles slightly better at trade than others. It was his duty as one of the exemplar nobles on the continent to guide them down the right path and made sure they became proper nobles and left their trading and merchant days behind them for good. He couldn't care less whether they wanted to or not, he had decided that was how it would be, so that was how it would be.

“So they don't want to surrender, heh? Even after I give them such a good spanking?” Lorist spat as he waved Duke Peterson's letter, “I don't understand why... Shouldn't merchants be smart and cunning? Why do they so stubbornly refuse to lower their heads? How could the old Union afford to continue this war? Do they really think they can mount a counterattack? Do they still have the ability?”

Tarkel bowed respectfully.

“Word from Twinhead Dragon's dominion is that Duke Cobleit has recovered and has returned to his duties. The chaos has come to an end. Apart from Chikdor, who completely ignores orders now, the others stand firmly behind the duke.”

Chikdor was the only one to come out relatively unscathed. They were in the rear and were the first to retreat so they escaped without much loss. They were now the strongest force in the Union and had become arrogant. Even worse, they plundered everything all the way back to their dominion, including others' lands.

Wessia was the worst hit. Chikdor abducted many of their best smiths and ores when they passed through their land. Most of the guilds wanted to punish them severely, a few had even called for their expulsion from the Union.

“Hehe, this is rather smart of Chikdor, hey? They fled as soon as they got even the smallest whiff something wasn't right and even made a profit on the way home. The rest can't do anything about it either since they are too weak right now. It's destroyed their trust of each other though. No one will let another group move a large force through its land, or be willing to commit a majority of its forces to a campaign and leave its homeland unsecured. They're too afraid someone else will try the same

thing,” commented Lorist.

“You’re right, Your Grace. Apart from Forde, Riwald, and Wessia, the three guilds who lost their dominions, the other 20 second or third rate guilds who lost their territory as well still stand firmly with Duke Cobleit. Apart from them, Mayflower and seven other guilds formed a separate faction that blames the duke for everything. They’re calling for his removal as the nominal leader of the Union.

“Our informants say Peterson is treated like an outsider. He has chosen to remain neutral, but has in turn be ostracized. He has rejected the mission you gave him. He’s chosen to stand with the Union, whichever road they take.”

So he had trusted the wrong person, then?

“Are they up to anything else?”

“Yes. Duke Cobleit has formed a force, 100 thousand strong. He’s stationed them in Gudlink, Mauvlin, Sanganworb, Hasmok, and Klinkus. Besides that, nothing is happening in those provinces, it seems they intend to turn them into wilderness, a buffer between us and them.”

Lorist looked at the map and nodded.

“A wise decision. If they developed them again, we could just storm in, defeat their garrison forces and raid it. But if they leave them be, it’ll become a difficult stretch to pass through and dissuade us from attacking them without the resolve to see this fight through. And without any infrastructure, even if we make it through, we’ll have weak supply lines. And it’s not like we’d let them redevelop them, anyway. They’re too close to the Falik Plains. If only Duke Cobleit was not their leader, this would all be over already. He is too wise for his own good.”

“I have two other pieces of news,” Tarkel continued, “The duke will be hosting a meeting with the landless guilds to get them new lands in the south of the Union’s territory.

“The south is largely barren, left fallow since the Union took it. It’s also been almost completely depopulated by the war. The people don’t like the Union, they’ve been nothing but bad news since they went there, so they’ll be very hard to govern. It doesn’t help that Chikdor is close-by. Most of the guilds are demanding they be given land elsewhere.

“The other information concerns a communique the duke sent to the Alliance and Jigda. He’s been trying to turn them against us. They want them to stop trading with us and ban our products and stand with the Union against us. They’ve not-so-subtly hinted at us being a new Krissen Empire and tried to paint themselves as the rest of the continent’s protectors yet again,”

Lorist burst out laughing again.

“They are either incredible optimists or suffering the worst case of delusions I’ve ever seen. What nonsense is this about protectors? If anyone is the new Krissen Empire, they are! There used to be 36 countries in the Alliance. Thanks to the old Union there are now just 16, 17 if you include the now-independent Jigda.

“Your Grace needs not worry. The Alliance has seen through them completely. Their previous aggressions, coupled with us not swallowing the territory we captured, but instead forming the new Union has won them over to our side, or neutrality, at the very least. There’s also the matter that our products are far better than the Union’s, and far fairer priced. The old Union is just showing its desperation.”

“We should still teach them a proper lesson,” Lorist said, stroking his chin, “The army is too busy to deal with them this year... Maybe we should raid their territory next year after the rainy season. Oh, investigate something for me. I want to know what nations the territories of the five provinces belonged to. See if you can track down their descendants.”

“Understood, Your Grace.”

“Also, hasn’t Senbaud been sinking all the Chikdor vessels he encounters? I heard their people have been forced to buy fish since they can’t fish along the coast anymore. Tell Senbaud to contact Chikdor and offer to stop sinking their ships if they declare independence from the old Union and form a kingdom. We’ll also let them trade in Morante. He can use my name to guarantee the windstorm swordsaint won’t take action.”

Lorist secretly returned home at the end of the 8th month.

Sylvia gave birth to a healthy boy on the 11th of the 10th. Daisy gave Lorist another bastard son three days later. He stayed with them until the 4th month of the following year before returning to Morante.

Lorist's family:

Irina, former maidservant and mother to Lorist's two eldest bastards (deceased, died from natural causes)

Norton Lysecott, Lorist's eldest bastard -- legitimized (deceased, hung for cruelty, crimes, and rebellion)

Norton Koboshik, second bastard -- legitimized (adopted by Knight Glacia after rebellion and death of his mother, Irina)

Nico Telesti. Lorist's lover, Dean of Nico Academy, mother to Lorist's two eldest bastard daughters.

Nico Olijess, eldest bastard daughter -- legitimized

Nico Freycia, second bastard daughter -- legitimized

Dina Arriotoli, Lorist's lover, mother to two Norton bastards, female knight, and acting leader of House Dina.

Dina Terryke, bastard son -- acknowledged

Dina Iri, bastard daughter -- acknowledged

Duchess Fisablen Sylvia, Lorist's wife, mother of Lorist's only two legitimate children.

Norton Anderbael, heir apparent, eldest son

Norton Jadebins, pretender, second son (named after the perished Paulobins, sacrificed during assault on artillery school)

Dilianna, concubine, mother to two Norton bastards, Arriotoli and Fennazali's aunt.

Norton Slophenk, bastard son -- legitimized

Norton Welianne, bastard daughter -- legitimized

Dina Fennazali, concubine, mother to a Norton bastard, Arriotoli's younger sister.

Norton Dirolia, bastard daughter -- legitimized

Maria, concubine, eldest daughter of a noble family.

Norton Moypete, bastard son -- legitimized (named after Brigadier-General Pete, sacrificed himself heroically in battle)

Daisy, concubine, of noble descent, Maria's close friend.

Norton Rolinors, bastard son -- legitimized (named after the two Dawn Academy students and Lorist's friends, Lind and Moss, both deceased)

Chapter 544

Report

“Your Grace, Tigersoar has sent the refugees to Yungechandler. Jaeger’s mission to help settle the refugees at Falik Plains was completed in the 2nd month. They’ve rested for two months now and are ready for another deployment,” reported Jinolio. He had been left in charge of Brinn Hills during Lorist’s absence. Apart from a select few, no one knew of the duke’s absence.

“Very well. How’s Reidy doing?” asked Lorist.

Lorist had sent his eldest disciple to fill in for Loze, who was on leave for his breakthrough, as general of Tigersoar. The men were very loyal to Loze, so only someone of Reidy’s stature could take command.

“Brother Reidy is doing quite well. Messen, Dulles, and Modrak are cooperating and the men obey his orders without complaint.”

Lorist nodded.

“What of the Free Union?”

“The government thinks our warning rings true. Premier Jindoze has started reorganizing the army. They will reduce the troops in the cities to brigade-strength. The leftovers will be merged into a new legion. The legion’s general is an old acquaintance of yours, I’m told. Someone called Brennan Charlando.”

“Oh? Old Char’s joining the army?”

Jindoze knew that if he was to stabilize the Union he had to keep a tight grip on the military, so he made Charlando its general.

The Free Union had a new name and clearly distinguished itself from the Trade Union, but it was essentially the Trade Union as it had been two decades before this fall. The central pillar of its economy was its trade; only, without the big guilds and their monopolies, the market was a frenzy of duels and competitions for the top spots.

Lorist didn't want to interfere too much, but he had to put in some regulations to keep things from getting ugly. People were quick to throw away their morals when profit was involved. Hence his suggestion to Jindo that he form a strong military and police force to keep a firm grip on things.

Another reason for his suggestion was so the Free Union could take up the gauntlet of guarding its peace on its own. He wanted to go home eventually, after all. He was an outsider, and his men were outsiders. Right now he had a good relationship with Morante and its people, but people would inevitably grow weary of having foreigners in positions of power, and, given how brutal the first months of his occupation had been, subversive elements had a lot of ammunition with which to sour people's hearts.

Previously people had not thought much of his continued military presence because his forces were actively involved in restoring the capital, and the Trade Union was still a threat against which he protected them. Now however, the restoration was on track and could continue without his men, and the Trade Union was no longer a threat. The people saw no excuse for his continued presence so they would soon become resentful and suspicious.

It was also likely that the merchants would start questioning whether they wanted to keep paying money for someone else to hold military power and protect them now that such a massive threat was no longer there. They would want to keep their money and fund their own forces. Such decentralization of military power would weaken the government and prevent them from ruling over dissidents who might want to change things.

"Understood, Your Grace. Sir Jindo initially wanted to talk Sir Els into going over to his side as general, but Els would have none of it."

Ah, Old Char is beholden to his wife, Els knows. There shouldn't be a problem now that he convinced Louise.

Lorist didn't like that Jindo, and through him a foreign power, had tried to poach his subordinates. He might have abandoned the Union if it were successful. Luckily, it wasn't.

"Anything else?"

Jinolio nodded.

“Young Master Serihanem is here, the kid from Chikdor. He’s been waiting for an audience for three months. Chikdor responded to your letter by sending him and ten attendants.”

“I see.”

So they were interested?

“Did Serihanem seem rushed or agitated? What has he been doing?”

“We arranged a villa at the foot of the hill for him. He’s not done anything untoward as far as we can tell and we haven’t picked up any impatience. He does visit the markets almost daily though.”

“What does he do?”

“I’m not too sure. You should ask Sir Tarkel. He had men tail him. I have heard that his attention is mainly on our products.”

“I’ll talk to Tarkel. Tell Serihanem he can see me tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Also, Baron Camorra sent a report from Jillin Harbor. The harbor and docks have been restored and its begun handling the many ships now streaming up and down the coast in the region. Baron Fenston has done his best to cooperate. He said he was one of Your Grace’s acquaintances and had been looking forward to the development. He provided whatever Baron Camorra asked. He’d even offered the contract to expand the city garrison to us.”

“Baron Fenston, huh?” Lorist laughed.

He can read between the lines, alright. He’s always been courteous.

“Alright. Tell Camorra to give the cooperative nobles a couple chances to make some money. We’ll turn a blind eye as long as they don’t go overboard. Also, didn’t His Majesty say he would send a division to watch over the city? When did he decide to expand the local garrison instead?”

“You forgot about that report? The king doesn’t have the manpower anymore. He’s had to reorganize his entire military just to keep things going with the forces he has left. He has only one legion and the royal guard that look after the capital.

“He’s had to make his garrisons independent since he doesn’t have the men to centralize them into regional legions, not to mention that the provinces are too barren to support large portions of the population locked in the military. That’s the big reason for his survey. He’s trying to figure out how to deal with this.

The only royal knights in Jillin will be the garrison’s commander and the couple of captains beneath him. Baron Fenston is not happy, but he has little choice, which is why he asked us to help out. He wants us to set things up so he, rather than the king’s knights, will have control of the forces.”

Lorist slapped his forehead. Auguslo’s army had been just 300 thousand, of which only 120 thousand were his men back then. He’d started out with 300 thousand personal forces, then lost two thirds of them.

“Camorra did well. I’m relieved he’s there. Did he talk about any difficulties?” he asked.

“Baron Camorra said the work has been welcomed. Most of the nobles in the region rely on the port for most of their purchases and imports, so everyone is happy to see it improved. Baron Camorra is troubled, however, by the cancellation of our food deal with the king. We heard it was cancelled by Wecksas, now in command of the city’s guard. Everyone now knows who he is, so no one dares argue with him.

“Wait, what?”

Auguslo had asked Lorist for ideas on solving the kingdom’s insolvency, from which the decision to upgrade Jillin’s docks and harbor. Lorist had also suggesting exporting the kingdom’s surplus agricultural produce to Morante. They’d done so for two years now under the deal which made them two million a year. Auguslo had finally paid his backlog of salaries and was slowly building up a stable, solvent, financial reputation. Lorist took a ten percent commission for his part in the work, mainly transport and sale.

“Baron Camorra inquired about it. Wecksas said the deal jeopardize the kingdom’s safety. He’d frozen the deal to give him time to properly evaluate how much could be sold.

“He later said that he would allow the trade to continue, but the buyers would have to come to Jillin to get their purchase. He would also not allow credit purchases, everything had to be paid for before it was loaded onto the ships. He also doubled the

price and reduced the volume by half. The baron turned him down. In response Wecksas threatened to chase us out of the city if we didn't agree."

"What?! What kind of shit does that brat have for brains?! Is someone egging him on? Tell Camora to stop all trade with the kingdom immediately. We don't need their food, so there's no reason to play their games!" Lorist fumed.

So someone had set their sights on the harbor city and was using Wecksas to get it? They could go screw a boulder!

What a daredevil... Doesn't he know Auguslo? Has he forgotten how he slaughtered almost every noble in the capital?

Auguslo had wanted to borrow money from Lorist back then, but he knew the king would never pay it back, which was why he proposed the Jillin business. But now someone was threatening such an income so vital to the king? The King was not going to react well to this.

Lorist couldn't care less about Wecksas.

Auguslo had placed great hopes in his bastard. He hoped the brat could be turned into a decent heir. No doubt that was why he'd made him the city guard's commander. It now seemed he was destined to be disappointed. The bastard was far too easily goaded. It seemed he was just a greedy, horny, fool. Auguslo's only hope for a decent heir was for his new queen to birth him one he would have to raise from scratch.

"Send word of this to the king and tell Camorra to ready his defenses. It won't be the end of the world if we lose the city, but give that royal bastard a good fight. If things go badly, he can withdraw to Silowas while we wait for the king."

"Immediately, Your Grace. Sirs Charade and Tarkel have arrived and are awaiting an audience."

"Let them in, and prepare a meal while you're at

"Right away, Your Grace."

Chapter 545

Independence Pact

"Duke Norton, I, Serihanem, pay my utmost respect as the representative of Chikdor. I hope you will always be with good health and that things go according to your will," said Serihanem as he saluted respectfully.

"No need courtesy, Young Master Serihanem. You and I are old acquaintances; we can skip the pleasantries. I've always appreciated your talent. It's a shame you caused me quite a bit of trouble in the Battle of Cape Romani. The things that followed made me regret being unable to come to an agreement with you. I believe that if you had been by my side, you would've checked for loopholes in my security so people would not have escaped like that." smiled Lorist.

"I have embarrassed myself, Lord Duke. I did my best but couldn't change the outcome. In the end, I couldn't help but escape. The war has worn us down and we could not have afforded my ransom. I had a duty to avoid putting my guild in that position. I survived thanks only to your benevolence. Thank you for your grace."

"Haha, you're pretty good with words," Lorist smiled again, "Alright, let's talk business. Is Chikdor interested in breaking off from the Trade Union?"

"To be frank, Chikdor does want to break off. But we are one of the big seven. Our survival depends on the Union. Everyone knows we specialize in naval trade, and your ban keeps us from applying our only trade. Land trade is neither our specialty, nor in our hands. The Union controls it. Our largest market is also within the Union. Without our fleet, we can't trade, without the Union's market, we can't trade, and our domain cannot sustain us as it is now. We wish more than anything that we could take you up on your offer, but it would be signing our own funeral slips."

Lorist snickered to Charade and stretched out a hand, opening his palm. Charade unwillingly took out a gold Forde and handed it to the duke.

Serihanem gazed at the exchange, perplexed.

"What is this?"

"Nothing. I just won a bet. He thought you would agree in principle but put forth many conditions. I thought you would turn me down because of your difficulties."

"Uhh..."

Had this happened anywhere else, it would be a gross offense. But he couldn't get on his horse in front of this sword saint duke. He had no choice, Chikdor was at a disadvantage; he had to endure.

Lorist tossed the coin in the air before returning it to Charade.

"Let's not play games. Charade should've won. The fact that you came to Morante shows Chikdor is interested. You are smart and I'm sure you can tell the old Union is beyond salvation. Your forces wouldn't have raided Wessia's dominion if you could not. You know what this means for the Union. Treason.

"To me, you are part of the Union, one of its claws, if you will, and our foe. We remember your aggressions along the Golden Coast. Our ban is in response to that. This is your only chance to make up for that mistake. It's really simple. Break from the Union, declare your independence.

"I'm not trying to trouble you, but there will be no games. You either do as we say, or there is no deal and you will continue to be our enemy -- with all that entails. And the Union will be wiped out. I have tried many times to negotiate, but they have refused, so I have no choice but to end them.

"You are no fool. What are your demands. Be quick and concise. If they are reasonable, I will consider them."

Serihanem blushed.

"You speak the truth. We have pushed countless times to end the war, but the other guilds will have none of it. We lost Invincible, which lost us our right to raise our voices during the meetings.

"We have no desire to stay in a country in which we have no voice. But it's not that simple. Especially not considering the history we have with you. Many don't trust you. They believe you will go back on your word and wipe us out the moment we secede from the Union.

"I am here to understand your intentions and make the final decision. We are weak, so we cannot stand on our own if the Union comes after us. We will only take up your offer if you will back our independence and defend us against any reprisals from the Union."

Lorist nodded.

"That's more like it. We are willing to guarantee your independence. Don't worry; I do not break my word. Sort out the details with Charade and we can get things rolling."

Charade returned two days later.

"This is the agreement. I believe they have more ambition than just gaining independence."

"And?"

Charade got to the map on the wall and pointed at the guild's territory.

"Chikdor doesn't want their original dominion when they declare independence. They want the land here. The land used to belong to the Duchy of Lauderta and the Kingdom of Engislun. If they get that, they'll possess seven provinces' worth of land. They'll be able to stand with the empire as an equal.

"When I asked why, Serihanem said that their dominion has little potential for growth. It's mountainous and has little surface area fit for farming, forestry, or any other economic activity. They will only have a good prospect of a bright future if they have lands with open, flat plains. I have acquiesced and made that territory part of their kingdom in our guarantee."

Lorist smirked.

"Having ambition is fine. I would be wary if they did not demand more territory. Everything around them is Union territory, and everything they want is Union territory, so I don't care what or how much they want. The more they demand, the greater the damage to the Union, and the better for us. Besides, they'll only get to keep what they can defend anyway. I actually think they're being a little meek with their demands."

"I don't understand why you're willing to help them," Charade griped, "They are our

enemy. They've cause us much pain and suffering. Now, however, not only are you not getting back at them, you're rewarding them? This does not feel right."

"I understand, Charade. I have no choice. Look at the map. Morante and Chikdor are separated by 500 kilometers of mountains. Their land is almost entirely mountains. They cannot stand with the land they have and I have no intention of putting my men on their soil, not as an ally, and certainly not as an enemy.

"We know what Serihanem hasn't said. You saw Tarkel's reports. Their dominion used to be the Duchy of Urubaha and the people are mostly poor and foolhardy. Apart from those enlisted in Duke Urubaha's rental armies, most became pirates. 'Seven of a pirate's fingers are Urubahan' as the saying goes.

"Chikdor brought down the piracy and put most of them in their navy. Now they no longer have a navy, however. Everyone is back to piracy. If we do not curb this, our trade with the south will become very costly.

"If we can get them to keep the peace in the south, then we have no issue. And that's only part of it. We can also use Chikdor against the Union. If Chikdor leaves with the lands they want, the Union will collapse. They cannot survive a blow like this, not in the state they're in already."

Charade nodded helplessly.

"Is this 'choosing the lesser two evils', and 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'? Whatever, you don't have to mind me. Look at this. Everything we can do is signed. I can't guarantee they won't be threatened by the windstorm sword saint in the future though..."

"No issue. I'll write them a letter they can show the old man. He will give me face and stay out of their business."

"Alright then, Your Grace. There are these as well. I've agreed to let them reform their trading fleet as long as they abide by our rules. They've agreed. I've also given them a similar exclusivity deal to the one we gave Mermaid.

"The other thing is... Serihanem asked that we strike the Union and damage them enough to give Chikdor cover to declare

"Alright, I have no problem with that," Lorist answered, "It's natural to have doubts.

We have little ground for trust right now, so it's understandable. The legions will be here in a few more days. Set up a meeting with the Free Union council."

Chapter 546

Debate

"Jindo, aren't you daring? You actually dare solicit Els to leave House Norton?! Are you taking us for granted?" yelled Lorist as he entered the council chambers.

Jindo shrugged helplessly. Charlando whistled and glared.

"What? Can't I get my nephew to come back to help his brothers? Locke, my boy, don't think you're some kind of bigshot just because you're a duke and a sword saint. If you're really that capable, why wouldn't you let Els come home? The guilds have left and his brother controls much of the Union. What ought Els do other than come back?"

Jindo looked at Charlando, smiling bitterly. Lorist instantly understood the geezer was probably the one behind it all. He remembered one night the previous year when he invited all the Dawn Academy alumni who had joined Lorist to the Red Grace Inn for a reunion. Els and Reidy were there too. Charlando nagged on about Els and Reidy leaving home without giving the slightest care about their uncle. He wanted the two to come back home.

Both suggested Charlando go north with them instead, but the old man was stubborn and refused to leave. When Lorist and Charade tried to convince him, he, somewhat drunk, said he would never become a subject. He was a proud, independent, free Morantian. He would never be someone else's slave.

Lorist gave up at that point and left.

He thought that would be the last of such talk, but now the old geezer was going after his disciples and followers!

Lorist smiled furiously.

"Old Char, stop messing around. People have different goals and paths. Els and Reidy are doing great with me. Els has a family, and Reidy has a bastard and a woman he loves, though he has yet to marry. Els will also soon be made a count and get more land. What can you give him if he stays here, huh? Els was Jindo's boss before he left,

it would be inappropriate for him to be his subordinate, especially given how high he's risen in the aristocracy."

Charlando was the two's senior, but he was just a commoner. Hierarchy and social standing didn't impede his serving Jindo, but Else was different. He was a minor noble, he would, in fact, soon be a major noble. He could not serve under a commoner. He also still had great prospects with Lorist, he had little future with Jindo even if he didn't mind being under a commoner. He also had a family back north, his wife certainly wouldn't accept having to give up her title as Baroness - soon to be Countess to be a commoner and a foreigner here.

"What's the problem? They're brothers! It doesn't matter who's on top or at the bottom!" insisted the old man. He acted like he was still a mercenary, taking up the burden of band leader and looking out for his comrades. "What's the big deal with count? It doesn't matter how much land he gets, it'll be in that shithole of a place called the Northlands! Look at Morante! It couldn't be more prosperous!"

"And then there's that whole nobility thing! Slavery by another name! All you do is scheme against each other and plot how to steal more money from your poor slaves! Els is an honest boy, he doesn't belong in such a degenerate place! So what if he's a general? You're only using him! You'll throw him away like an old napkin once you're done with him! Don't take it personally, Locke, even if you can take care of Els for his whole life, what about your son, or your grandson? Can you guarantee they'll have the same temperament and beliefs as you? How will they treat his descendants? If they're greedy and scheming they'll have the power and authority to take everything for him or his descendants! Here that can never happen! This is where he belongs and where he can live the best life!"

Lorist didn't know how to respond. He couldn't help but be amazed at his imagination.

"You're letting your imagination go again, old man. I'm a sword saint, I will live for hundreds of years, but of course I can't guarantee what my descendants will do. But you can't guarantee what the people who will rule after Jindo will do either. Morante might turn into the old Union again in half a century, then what? The north is neither as desolate nor as chaotic as you think. Nor the aristocracy as lawless. Every system has its bad eggs, yes, but ours are no more than yours. I'd even say ours are less than yours."

"I'm disappointed with you, old man. You know nothing about the rest of the world."

My lands house three million people. At least three times what Morante has. Els's dominion is in Delamock as well, the empire's breadbasket. He and Reidy don't have to oppress their subjects. Their tax income is over ten thousand gold Fordes a year."

"They dominions each have around 13 thousand serfs and their personal retinues are no less than a hundred men each. Els has three knights under him, pledged to him personally, and Reidy is training two squires. They levy just a one-half tax on their lands' produce and only have to give one-fifth of their taxes to me. Then they also earn a good salary for being in the military and have a lot of other benefits. Altogether they earn at least 20 thousand a year.

"When they retire, they'll go home and focus on their dominions. They won't have to worry about anything. Hell, even if their dominions earned them nothing they'll have enough money to live lavishly for the rest of their lives. Their children will get the best education on the continent, the same as my children. Hell, they'll at some point probably be in the same class as some of mine. They'll attend both Nico and later Dawn Academy. If they have the skills they'll go on to serve in the military or administration of the house just like their fathers. So even those that don't inherit their father's title and land will have a rich live. I might even take one or two as my disciples, or my disciples might take them themselves if they're good enough."

"Hold on. Just one-half tax?!" Jindoze interjected. That must be the lowest tax on the continent. It was normally six- or seven-tenths, and that was if the lord was feeling generous. The average was eight-tenths, leaving just barely enough for the people to survive, sometimes not. The Free Union's tax was six-tenths. The old Union's tax had been eight-tenths.

"Yes, I only take one-half of the produce, and only allow my vassals to take up to six-tenths from their land. My other taxes are at most one-tenth on things like trade and factory production. And I also run a lot of programmes that reduce taxes as subsidies. Only luxury goods are taxed at more than one-tenth."

Lorist had wanted to set the crop tax at just one-third, but Charade wouldn't allow it. They could go beneath the average a little, but if they deviated from the norm too much, rocked the boat too much, they'd be ostracised.

"Why?" asked Jindoze curiously.

"Simple. The more loose money the people have, the more they can buy. They will be

happy and live better and the moving money will let businesses do better. The better the businesses do the more money can be taxed, and the more they will pay their workers, which we can tax as well, which gives the workers more money to spend again, and it all starts over."

"You're just playing fancy with words! Even if you're a benevolent lord, what of your descendants? It takes just one bad heir to undo everything because he will have absolute power! The people will suffer the most and won't be able to do anything about it. Only by making sure that everyone is equal, and we give as little power to any one person as possible, can we protect ourselves from those kinds of people, can we live truly free," mocked Charlando.

Lorist smacked his forehead. Charlando was a staunch believer in freedom and liberty, as were most of the people in the city. That was why Lorist didn't want anyone from here to become his subjects and move to the north. They would only be trouble. Even worse, they were blind to the reality of the old Union. They were slaves in all but name to the big seven and their crony guilds as well.

There was no true freedom in the world. Lorist didn't even believe it was a goal worth pursuing, a dream to have, a wish to desire, to begin with. The Grindia's history was mostly talk of the of the dark ages after the end of the magical era. There were no more swordgods or swordsaints made by magi and the humans constantly struggled against magic beasts. People only barely began recovering after they rediscovered how to cultivate battleforce. The first people to do so obviously became kings and their vassals.

After the dark ages the nobles fought to establish the new hierarchy. From a certain point of view, it could be argued that these nobles brought war and suffering to the people. But on the other hand, they also brought order and development. In the following millennium, the nobles even established strict chivalric customs.

"Char," Lorist said as he shook his head and sighed, "I don't know how you managed to get the prejudice you hold against nobles. The noble code and customs no longer allow lieges to command their vassals or exploit them as they will since a thousand years ago. A liege also can't simply threaten the safety of the lives or wealth of their vassals. Unless the vassal commits an unforgivable crime or if there's proof of rebellious intent that has to be verified by other vassal nobles, only then can a liege punish the offending noble.

"In some sense, nobles are their own watchdogs. We also hope for peace and order to be maintained. An anarchy benefits nobody. Also, have you so-called believers in freedom forgot about the days when the merchant guilds ruled over you before our house came to Hidegold Bay and conquered Morante? Do you think that rationing system is what freedom looks like?"

"I believe that freedom can only come from orderly governance. That way, everyone's rights can be ensured. For example, the rules and regulations of the Free Union can protect the freedom of its citizens. That is not too different from the regulations we nobles use. If the nobles are kind, their subjects will be no different than free citizens. If the nobles are cruel, they will be akin to the Trade Union. No matter how much you boast about your freedom, you're still beholden to those who rule. No matter whether you have a noble ruling you or not, it's all semantics. In the end, you're just a subject like everyone else."

Charlando no longer argued. Even though Lorist was straightforward with his arguments, they still made sense. Jindozy, on the other hand, had a question. "Brother Locke, there's something that has always been on my mind. Even though the formation of the Free Union hasn't posed any problems yet, would a repeat of what happened to the Trade Union occur again when the rich and powerful are no longer satisfied with the privileges that they already enjoy and start demanding for more?"

Lorist laughed and understood why Jindozy brought the question up. "Of course, there's a huge possibility for that to happen. But that is something that will only show up in many years ahead. To solve it, it's simple. Simply implement a nobility system."

"A nobility system?" Jindozy said anxiously, "Isn't that exactly what the Trade Union did?"

"No, the kind of nobility system I'm referring to is different from what the Trade Union implemented," Lorist said with a dismissive wave, "The Trade Union implemented a landed nobility system, and that proved to be the downfall of Morante and the nation as a whole. What I'm suggesting is an honors system. The noble titles given will be a symbol for their status. For example, each title will come with a set annual income and those who bear the titles will have special manors to live in. The treatment afforded by different titles vary. Apart from not having a fief, there's not much difference between an honorary noble like that and a landed noble. That way, you can avoid the fragmentation of power and resources to the different fiefs like what happened with the Trade Union. You'll also be able to motivate people to strive harder and contribute

to the Free Union to be awarded those honors."

JindoZ looked like he was both enlightened and confused. He muttered in deep thought, "Is that really possible?"

"Just find someone to discuss it when you get back. Get their thoughts on the matter. I was only suggesting it casually."

At that moment, Jinolio entered the room and reminded, "Your Grace, it's time. Please head to the meeting room with the other two sirs. The council will begin soon."

Chapter 547

War Council

Baron Malek was hosting the war council, he was the Deputy Minister of War. He had yet to let Lorist down in the two years they had worked together. He managed his forces incredibly well and even restructured the garrisons based on their new military standards, with the ministry at the very top.

This time, Lorist was going to use war to pressure the Trade Union even more. He wanted to beat their stubborn asses for good so they would never pose a threat to the Free Union again. Malek had been called in from the Northlands to lead the charge himself. Lorist wanted him to be promoted to Minister of War.

Lorist, Jindo, and Charlando were the last to arrive. The council chambers were filled with knights and commanding officers from Tigersoar, Jaeger, the sentry legion, and the Free Union's military. Even Whitelion's general, Sybek, and five imperial knights were present. Everyone was seated and waiting for the meeting to start.

Malek walked to the map with a small stick. He tapped the table a few times and turned around.

"Silence, the meeting will now begin. Please do not make any noise. If anyone has a question, please ask it after the briefing."

Malek waited expressionlessly for the hall to quiet down before he continued, "Our primary objective is to topple the old Union so they will never be a threat again. We will launch a large invasion and finish the Union off. We will target primarily Casirota, Tenelik, Feldunba, and Sylugnika.

"Please turn your attention to the map. You'll notice the old Union's territory form a 'T'. If we don't include Falik Plains, it looks more like an overturned 'L'. Our targets sit in that corner of the 'L'. If we take those provinces, we split the Union in two.

"This here is the territory the Union took from the Alliance. That arm at the top was taken during the War of Glass. The territory we are targeting is old Union territory, they've controlled it for years. Right now Twinhead Dragon, Peterson, and a number

of smaller guilds reside there.

"If we don't include the five empty provinces next to the plains, Chikdor's territory, and the Duchy of Magrut, the old Union only has 23 provinces. Our goal is this split. We need to cut the Union in half. It'll cut the majority of the Union off from any decent supply lines.

"What is worth paying attention to here is that Feldunba, one of our targets, is within the dominion of Mayflower. Sylugnika used to be the Duchy of Zikdor. Zikdor produced fine gold and silverware. It still has two gold mines and five silver mines. Mayflower paid for the territory with the glass recipe.

"Mayflower's forces suffered heavily in our last confrontation, but a dead camel is still larger than a horse. Mayflower is a huge guild with a long history. They've already formed a new legion. It now also contains a division of heavily armored troops. The guild appears to be opposing Duke Cobleit, there are a number of rumors claiming the guild's president is scheming to take over Cobleit's position and the Union's leader.

"I don't care why they aren't surrendering. We will kill them all since they insist on opposing us. Wessia, Forde, and Riwald are landless. They are demanding the Union take back their land and are thus refusing to let the Union come to the table. Mayflower and the rest are pro-war as well, but unlike the former, they want Ducky Cobleit to resign. Peterson has stayed on the sideline of the debate and Chikdor is abandoning them altogether.

"We've singled out Mayflower because they're one of the strongest. If we take them out, we'll not only cripple the Union even further, we'll also send a clear message to the rest that they best not mess with us ever again. Chikdor will declare its independence and ally with us once we've split the Union in two. It should be the final nail in the Union's coffin."

Malek drew a red line through the five provinces around Chikdor.

"Chikdor's forces will occupy this area before declaring their independence. It'll half the Union's territory in the south. I don't think the Alliance will let this opportunity pass, so we can expect them to take the rest."

"Lord Malek, a question," General Sybek interjected, "Why don't we just push all the way and wipe the Union out for good?"

"We considered this originally, but the price would be too big and the Free Union would be saddled with more territory than you can control. It'll make you a prime target for other's ambition at a time when you cannot afford war."

"The land has four million people. Peterson and Twinhead have invested everything they have there. If this war drags on any longer than is absolutely necessary, they'll bog us down in a second Falik Plains.

"Not to mention that he's fortified it immensely. We'll lose half a million men if a complete push goes well, and up to as much as two million if this goes badly. Can you afford that kind of loss?"

"How?" Sybek argued, "Doesn't House Norton have those amazing cannons? What kind of fortification can withstand a bombardment from them? Just blast through their forts."

"The cannons aren't infallible," Lorist interrupted, "Don't place all your hopes in them. We've used up all our gunpowder. We have no reserves, so they are useless until we get our reserves back. We've built up a small stockpile, but, even if we are ridiculously frugal, we'll still use everything up to take the land we've already planned for. We just don't have the supplies to push any further. The rest will have to be won with blood, and I, for one, will not bleed so much for the Union's land."

Sybek lowered his head.

"I apologize, Lord Duke. I didn't know. Please forgive me."

"Don't worry. I can see you're only anxious to end the Union's threat. If they refuse to surrender after this as well, we'll keep them in check for two more years. We'll have enough gunpowder then for that final push. At worst we'll attack in waves, taking a province or two each year until there's nothing left."

"Understood, Your Grace."

Jindo was next.

"Lord Malek, a question. We won't be raiding the four provinces clean like last time, right?"

It was to be expected for Jindo to be anxious about that. He was to inherit rule of the

land, he certainly wouldn't want to get nothing but more wasteland. The current state of the Union could barely support the people it already had, if they got another influx from those provinces, it would be the Free Union that would collapse, not the Trade Union.

"Don't worry," Malek acknowledged, "Sir Tarkel has gone to the Alliance to find the heirs to the duchies that used to be there. We'll reform the countries that used to be there. They'll no doubt rejoin the Alliance, which will put a buffer between the two Unions."

Jindozi breathed a sigh of relief. Seeing as nobody else had questions, Malek pointed at the map and continued the briefing.

"Next, is deployments. We will attack from Gudlink. The Union had fortified the empty provinces with ten divisions, so we can't march through there, not to mention it would be a nightmare for our supply lines. That said, we have to maintain a force on our side of that border so they don't roll into the plains once we begin or attack and hit us in the rear. Jaeger will have that responsibility. It has to keep the enemy there occupied. Don't give them a chance to build up for an attack. Everyone else will be part of the invasion. Remember, our goal is to take the land as quickly as possible. Don't get bogged down in sieges, if the settlement or castle won't be a quick conquest, leave a token force to keep up the siege and move on. They'll all surrender once we end the war."

"Understood," answered Freiyar.

"Tigersoar will clean Gudlink again before we deploy" Malek continued.

The main participants of the attack from Gudlink included House Norton's sentry legion and the Free Union's own legion. Feldunba and Tenelik had mostly mountainous terrain and the Trade Union had stationed four divisions there and fortified the area. So, house Norton would deploy two artillery brigades. Tigersoar would join the fray after the two provinces were taken. The remaining provinces of Casirota and Sylugnika covered mostly steppes and it was perfect for cavalry.

General Sybek was really unhappy that his men would not be on the front but instead had to be logistics. They had earned a huge haul when they raided the five provinces and were hoping to make more profit. In the end, Lorist said he would let Whitelion and Tigersoar pick one province each after Feldunba and Tenelik was conquered.

Chapter 548

Mountain Path

"This freaking weather... It's so damn hot even though it's only the 6th month. Who can even stand it?" complained Carmen weakly. He was drenched in sweat and used his mithril spear as a walking stick. His helmet hung on his back. He couldn't wait to strip off his armor.

"Have the scouts not found any water yet? We're dying here! Carmen, give me some from your water," said Bell, sticking his spear into the ground in the shade of the tree. He looked even more haggard than Carmen.

"No. It's your fault for sipping yours non-stop. I gave you half of my water already. I don't even have enough left for me."

"We grew up together. We help each other out. I even stood up for you a number of times. Can't you give me a few mouthfuls?"

"Fine, fine... You always bring this up. Don't you ever get bored? And it's not like your help made us win the fights. You'd just end up getting beaten with me. If you didn't join the fights, they might've beaten me less. They only hit so hard because you're so huge... Only two mouthfuls. Open your trap," said Carmen as he carefully poured a set amount of water into Bell's mouth.

Bell immediately looked better. He soon stood up again and leaned against the tree. The two watched the other men trudge up the hill.

"I thought we would charge into battle courageously. That's everyone here's dream too. But all we've been doing for months now is marching. Those Nortons scared everyone away. The closest we get to battle is scouring the battlefield, gathering the corpses and sorting the loot." complained Bell.

"Fool, don't involve others in your deathwishes. Don't think you'll survive a battle. Fool like you are usually the first to die. And why are you always half-jogging? I thought something happened to you when I lost sight of you," said a bearded middle-aged man.

"Uncle Good," Carman and Bell greeted.

The man was their commanding officer, a lieutenant named Good. He was in his late forties and an experienced two-star silver mercenary. He quit when the mercenary guild was dissolved. But when the new Free Union issued a call to arms, he picked up his sword again.

"Make space, I need a rest," Good said as he wiped the sweat off his face, "I'm getting old and useless. Hills like this were nothing to me ten years ago, but now? I'm pooped after just half a day's march."

Carmen and Bell moved aside and gave the old man some space between them.

"Come, Uncle Good, sit here. It's cool and the breeze blows from time to time. It's real good," Carmen said, trying to curry favor, "Did you come to pick us up?"

"Yes. Who else would I look for? Your parents asked me to look after you two monkeys when you enlisted. Who asked you two to be my neighbors?"

Good took a few gulps of water from his canteen. Bell stared at him jealously but he didn't dare ask for some. Good noticed, however, and handed his canteen to the man when he finished, who almost swallowed the canteen whole.

"So why did you charge off like you were chasing something? If you were goofing around I'll cane you when we set up camp!"

"Bell forgot to refill his canteen this morning. He's already drunk half of mine. We were hoping to get to the next stream quicker, but no luck yet," explained Carmen hurriedly.

"Idiot, why didn't you tell me?" Good said as he knocked the two on their heads, "I've walked this path many times. We won't reach a stream before nightfall. I doubt we'll camp there, though. Our schedule's too tight. I've got two buckets of water on the ass. There's enough for a hundred people, so stop worrying."

"What do we do now? Head back?"

"Rest here for now. They have to come by us anyway."

A sudden boom blasted in from the distance.

"Are their cannons really that amazing?" Carmen eventually asked, "The fort was in shambles. I don't understand why they had us come along if they're so strong. They could've won everything on their own. It's not like we've been used in battle or anything. We could've just stayed home and kept on training."

Good laughed.

"Foolish child. They dragged us along so you greenhorns can get a taste of what war is like. Training won't teach you that. We might just be marching, but even that is important. You're learning what it's like to be on the campaign trail in enemy territory. I heard we'll finally get our chance tomorrow, anyway. They're going to have us take the fort after they're done bombarding it."

"They're just looking down on us!" Bell complained, "What's so amazing about them? It's all just the cannons. I could kill five of them if we fought fair and square."

Good flicked a finger at Bell's head.

"What are you saying, dumbass? You and Carmen are three-star iron ranks at just 23. But you'll die the moment the fight begins. Battles are nothing like fights in the streets, or even small skirmishes between mercenaries. You don't win with above average strength if you're fighting ten thousand enemies. It's all about teamwork! The average Norton soldier is nothing special, but put ten thousand of them in a line and they'll beat anything you can throw at them. The can take the Free Union five times over with just their infantry alone. Did you already forget how many of the old Union's legions they took out without cannons?"

"But didn't Colonel Husk say we shouldn't have joined House Norton? He said we broke away from the old Union to get rid of nobles, but now we're fighting alongside one. We should be against the Nortons. They don't believe in freedom and liberty. We should be working with the old Union to drive them out," said Carmen.

Good's face turned red.

"Didn't I tell you not to listen to that madman?! He's sick in the head. The Nortons are aristocrats, but the Trade Union is as well! They put us through three years of suffering because they wanted to be nobles too!"

"Use your brains. Why were your parents so against you joining the army when the guilds were recruiting, but were fine with it when it was the new Union? Even an old

guy near fifty like me wants to join. It's simple. The Free Union protects our freedom and liberty. We made it and we rule it. In its army, we aren't just cannon fodder for someone else's ambition.

"I am an old mercenary. I've lived in Morante for thirty years. I've seen everything and know this clearly. We think we're so proud and free, but in the old Union we were slaves by another name. Think about those last three years. Is that something a free man should have to go through? They restricted even what we could eat and we had to work more than 12 hours a day! You call that freedom? I'd rather not work and have my whole family starve to death if that were the case.

"Stop listening to that fool. Think about this: if it weren't for the Nortons, you two would still be hunting rats in the sewers. Why should we chase the Nortons away? Did they take anything from us? No. Not only did they not hurt us, they even gave us free food and brought new products to us and loaned us money. They rebuilt Morante and put us back in our golden age. And they're not even trying to rule over us in return!

"We must know gratitude and tolerance. So what if the Nortons are nobles? They've been nothing but good to us and haven't forced their system on us. We would still be under the guilds' heels if not for them. Why should we make enemies of them? Just because their political system is different? They haven't taken our lands, and they didn't take our money. Exactly the opposite. They're making us rich and helping us take care of the old Union. Is chasing away our benefactors something a sensible person should

"Only fools would say something like 'make peace with the Trade Union'. I am certain that if we do as they say, we will suffer the greatest loss. The old Union would still treat us as traitors and if Morante is ever returned to them, they will kill us all. Best case, we will be made into slaves and sent into the mines to work until we die.

"Seriously, I wonder how a fool like Husk made it into the military. Is he trying to cause trouble? Carmen, Bell, tell me when Husk said that. What else did he say? was there anyone else when he said it?"

Seeing how anxious Good was acting, Carmen and Bell looked panicked.

"It isn't that serious, right, Uncle?" Carmen muttered, "It happened the night before last. When Bell and I were on night duty and Cad was leading the patrol, we complained how tough the marching was. Ten Colonel Husk passed us and told us that,

as well as a lot of other things that mocked the Nortons, mostly jokes about how nobles got toyed with by their subjects. We were only releasing stress, nothing serious."

"You're overreacting, Uncle. Colonel Hask doesn't mean ill. He's just a little loose-mouthed when he rants and doesn't think about what he says. Didn't you evaluate him back then?" Bell said, "His parents died on the battlefield during the last Krissen invasion and he was raised by his grandparents. That's why he hates everyone from the empire so much.

"Everyone knows how much he hates all northerners, the Nortons included. Also, Colonel Husk is only mouthing off. I bet he doesn't have the gall to actually go against them."

Good sighed.

"Whatever. I won't say anything else. Just don't spend too much time around him. If he continues what he's doing, he's bound to be killed, best not associate with him. The Nortons and their duke must not be crossed lightly. Think about it. Many of the duke's top subordinates are old Morantians, that's why they're so good to us."

"How can you know? Tell us!"

"No, I don't know the duke's subordinates very well, but I know the duke. He spent the last half of his childhood in Morante, and was a mercenary and instructor at Dawn Academy for many years. He lost contact with his family because of the empire's civil war and pretty much became one of us before he went back. Those bags you're carrying, the duke designed them himself. I was the first guy to buy one of them from him before he left."

A regiment passing by greeted them. Good picked up his stuff and prepared to leave.

"Come, the boys are here. Time to go. I'll tell you more stories about the duke as we march. I'm sure you know the name Iron Locke, Silver Undefeated..."

Chapter 549

Sandbag

"And another one bites the dust!"

~ Forde Trade Union chant when enemy cannonfire hits sandbags

Howard appeared troubled. Though the artillery brigade he led was in the vanguard, he had been trapped in the area for more than three days. He had not expected this to happen. His brigade and the sentry legion had marched at the forefront since entering Feldunba. They never once encountered a fort that could weather their attack. The enemies ran in fear and most of the time after the first cannon shell hit.

The Trade Union had long been prepared for their attack, but they didn't know where it would happen. They thought it would most likely start in the south. Given that those areas were only recently conquered, not many nobles had moved in.

They'd also been severely depopulated by recruitment drives during the war. Most of the agricultural produce was also confiscated to fund the war. The area was severely destabilized. If not for the depopulation, the revolts might have been large enough to kick the Union out.

They believed the Nortons would march through the area and charge straight into the Union's heartland. They planned to let them march deep into their own territory before cutting off their supply lines and letting them starve.

Lorist attacked Mayflower's Feldunba instead. The Union scrambled to reposition their forces, but it was a little late. Clearly the enemy wasn't aiming to take land, but to destroy the guilds.

Duke Cobleit, however, breathed a sigh of relief rather than stressing. The territory had been ruled for just five years, but it was already covered in forts. It would become a wall against which House Norton would smash itself to pieces.

The duke didn't think they could push through the province, even with their cannons. He'd let the two sides duke it out while his faction just provided logistical support. With Mayflower weakened, his position within the Union would be secure again. Mayflower and its allies, however, put severe pressure on him and he was forced to deploy troops as well.

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The thunderous booms bounced through the mountains.

Howard stared at the fort's walls but they just wouldn't collapse.

"How long 'till Ovidis arrives?" he asked between thunder strikes.

"Thunderbolt Brigade was deployed in the rear. It'll take them four days to get here," his subordinate shouted, "Sir Ovidis himself should arrive tomorrow."

"Sigh, I should've stopped His Grace from releasing those damned sailors," complained Howard.

He signalled for the bombardment to end and descended the hill.

"Sir, are we not continuing the bombardment?"

"Best save our gunpowder. Those walls aren't going to give. We'll have to wait for Ovidis. Only his catapults can get us inside now."

"I doubt he'll have any more luck than us, Sir. With the way the walls tower over the terrains outside, we'll have to be within their firing range to get things over the walls. Our cannons are already on the edge of being in range."

Howard stroked his chin frustratedly.

"We've no choice, commander. You saw yourself. They've lined the walls with sandbags. We don't have the firepower to blast through them and the walls quickly. It's those damned sailors! They must have told them about the tactics they used when we last fought them.

"We're just wasting gunpowder. Our only hope is lobbing sacks over the walls, which our cannons can't do. Any better ideas?"

The men kept quiet. There was indeed no other option. They couldn't go around the fort, the cliffs and marshes wouldn't let them, and the fort was on top of a big rocky mound which meant they had to fire up at it. They just had no options.

They couldn't charge in for a standard assault because the walls were littered with catapults and ballista. They could still take the fort, but with unacceptable casualties.

The fort was a crucial chokepoint, they could only push through into the rest of the province through here, otherwise they'd have to go a long way around to attack from the south, but both the delay and the new location were unacceptable.

Their approach was also severely limited by the cliffs. They had to approach the main gate via a thin outcrop which made their massive number advantage null and void.

"They're turtles!" shouted Lorist when he got the report.

While the Union didn't own a cannon or anything similar, they had learned how to deal with it quite effectively. There was no decent counter to this yet. There were only two options. Either make the cannons bigger, which current metalworking technology didn't allow, and which would use too much gunpowder anyway, or develop howitzers and mortars, but they were years away from anything even resembling something like that.

The Union's main tactic to deal with cannons was to charge in a team of elite soldiers, mostly gold ranks and one or two blademasters, to take out the crews. Lorist was prepared for this, however. Reidy and Shuss always stood guard when the cannons were deployed in battle. The Union tried their tactic several times, but stopped after a whole team was wiped out, including a blademaster and three gold ranks.

One raid, however, was both very successful and catastrophic at the same time. One team, a blademaster and three gold ranks, caught a camp unprotected. They wiped out the crews and destroyed the cannons, but then discovered the gunpowder kegs. They carried torches since the attack was performed at night. As one of the gold ranks leaned over the open keg to look at the strange black powder inside, a spark fell from the torch into the barrel. None of the four were found thereafter. In fact, no one ever knew it was an attack that killed the brigade. Everyone thought some nitwit in the unit decided to have a smoke in the tent housing the gunpowder and blew everyone to kingdom come.

The Union didn't have unlimited elites. The Battle of Bluwek had already cost them half their number, and Mayflower's loss was salt in the wound. But Lorist only had forty cannons after the ten in the camp were destroyed.

Mayflower never launched another raid with their elites and the forts continued to fall. That all stopped, however, with Fort Linston, where sandbags were used on land for the first time.

Chapter 550

Duke Nikolas

"Never be blindly loyal to your superior. He is using you for his benefit, so use him for your benefit."

In terms of appearance, Duke Nikolas, Mayflower's president, could be considered the ugliest among the presidents. He had a long, horse-like face and two small eyes which he liked to squint at others. It made it appear that he was always scheming. Everyone called him 'old snake' behind his back as a result.

His eyes had, in fact, lost him the position as the Union's premier. Duke Cobleit had the look of an upstanding old man. That damned goody-two-shoes-looking bastard.

Those that knew Nikolas, however, knew his looks belayed his true personality. He was sincere and gentle, and treated servant and noble alike respectfully. He never discriminated based on status. Among the guilds, Mayflower had the most loyal staff and anyone who interacted with the duke would disregard his appearance and be drawn in by his charisma.

Currently, Nikolas was subsumed with the map on his desk. He closed his eyes from time to time, falling into a kind of catatonic state of deep thought. House Norton had suddenly picked his lands as its target. He wondered whether their aim was to sweep through his territory or something else. Perhaps they were trying to push the Union into another stalemate to delay its recovery. Or were they just intent on pillaging some riches? His land was rich with gold and silver and they had concentrated their attack on the mining hotspots in Feldunba.

Captain of the Guard, Cyros, entered quietly, two letters in his hands.

"Your Grace, I have a report from Fort Linston. The front-lines have been quiet since the last assault. It looks like they've given up. They haven't fired a single cannon shot in three days.

“I also have a message from Morante. Our informant says Duke Norton is heading to the front-

“Oh?” Nikolas raised his brow curiously and read the two letters.

His gaze returned to the map, which he surveyed for a few moments, before his eyes widened.

“Start the migration plan immediately! I want everyone ready to leave in three days!”

“But the front-lines are stable, my lord?”

This plan would see them abandon Feldunba entirely. But was there a need if things were stable? They’d given up so much to get the region, and then invested even more to develop it.

“The quiet front-lines mean nothing good. Just do it. We won’t get to leave at all if we don’t do it now.”

“Understood, my lord.”

Cyros immediately left. He was a loyal man. He obeyed his lord’s orders even when they weren’t understood.

However, Mayflower’s vice-president, Count Abraham, soon barged into the room.

“What’s going on, brother? You think the situation is bad?”

Nikolas nodded tiredly.

“Duke Cobleit just ask us to hold the Nortons back for half a month? Everything’s stabilized and the front is quiet. We can just sit tight until the reinforcements arrive.”

“It’s not that simple,” Nikolas countered, “That geezer isn’t going to do us any good. Think about it: he knew about the sandbag trick before this invasion even started, but he waited until we were about to crumble to tell us. We have only Fort Linston left. Once that fort falls they have a clear charge into the open plains and we’ll never stop them. They’ll wipe us out overnight before we can even get our pants on.”

“Didn’t the duke say we can still dig trenches to slow them down? We just have to hold

on until reinforcements arrive,” insisted Abraham anxiously.

Nikolas sighed.

“Brother, I understand your feelings. But, whether you want to accept it or not, that bastard won’t send in his reinforcements until we’ve been sufficiently weakened. He wants to grind us into dust using House Norton as the grindstone so we won’t be a threat to his rule.”

“But... Fort Linston won’t fall that easily! We’re doing just fine against their cannons, aren’t we? And they won’t try to brute force it with numbers, it’ll be a bloodbath even they can’t afford. I’m sure they’ll grow impatient and move on and be someone else’s problem soon.”

“You’ve forgotten that they have a swordsaint. Fort Linston can defend against cannons, but it stands no chance against a swordsaint. It would have been fine if the duke had stayed in Morante, but I just got news that he’s heading for the front. He’s coming to take out Fort Linston himself. I also doubt he’d have come if they were just interested in a little pillaging.”

“That... that can’t be,” Abraham gasped, “Duke Norton is a swordsaint! How can he get involved in a war between normal people?! Master Magrut would never lower himself like that!”

“People are different, so are swordsaints,” Nikolas smiled bitterly, “Can the Magrut really compare to Duke Norton? Can any of the swordsaints really be used to judge Duke Norton? They’re all only associated with kingdoms and empires for the benefits. They have no reason to get involved in wars like this. If their kingdom or empire is destroyed, they can just attach themselves to someone else. Duke Norton is different. He is a noble with land to his name and a noble reputation to uphold. He has a vested interest in seeing his side win all the time. And he’s a tenacious one, just look at how he clawed his way to swordsaint and duke from iron rank and baron on the brink of losing his land and his title.

“And now that fool Cobleit went and gave Magrut a title and land at the other end of the country. Do you really think Magrut will ever leave his territory again? Do you think he’ll ever take to the field against Duke Norton as long as the duke doesn’t threaten his territory directly?”

“Other sword saints might want to stay aloof because actual fighting is rarely beneficial for them, but Duke Norton is different. He’s always led his men from the front, he’s always been the first one to charge into the enemy formations, and now he has every incentive to continue doing that. If this were before the War of Glass, we might have had the option of wearing him down and killing him in exchange for dozens of blademasters and one or two hundred gold ranks, but we don’t have the numbers for that anymore. I doubt we have more than two dozen blademasters altogether, if even that, and our gold rank numbers are similarly abysmal.”

Abraham stood sadly. There was no way he was going to change Duke Nikolas’s mind. It stung badly. He had been responsible for Feldunba’s development and had invested the better part of fifteen years into it. It could even be considered his life’s work. But he trusted his older brother’s judgement implicitly, so he didn’t make a fuss.

“Where will we go? Even if we manage to get everyone out and no one scatters and leaves us, Cobleit will blame us and won’t let us settle somewhere else. He’ll probably take our army and leave us to rot.”

“You think we’re going to that old bastard?” Nikolas asked as he stared at the map intensely, “We’ll go south.”

“South?”

“Yes, south. You remember the letter Duke Chikdor sent us last month? He said he was going to declare independence at the end of the year. I thought the letter was sent to provoke us, but then I started thinking. If that were his goal, then why send the letter to me and not Duke Cobleit?”

“I finally understood his intent when the Nortons started pouring across the border. He’s offering us a chance at peace. If we pack up and head south, and make sure to cut ties with the Union, Duke Norton will leave us alone. It’s good for both of us. We get a new domain, so we get to continue existing, and Duke Chikdor gets a much needed ally. He wants us to secede from the union and found a kingdom alongside him.”

Abraham stared at his brother blankly, his mouth agape.

“No way... You got all that from that letter?”

Nikolas nodded.

“Once we’re finished with the preparations, you’ll take the men to Casirota. If anyone asks what you’re doing, tell them you’re clearing out a piece of land so the young, the elderly, and the women can hide there until the war is over. It should be obvious to everyone that the Nortons will target Tenelik and Sylugnika once they break through Fort Linston. They want to cut the Union in half and that’s the best way to do it. We have to go to Sylugnika immediately and send an ambassador to Duke Norton. We’re ask for a short truce and negotiate our withdrawal from the region and the conflict. I don’t think the duke will have a problem letting us go.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t be willing to make a move this daring otherwise. Duke Norton doesn’t care about the south at all. He just wants to cut the Union off from its trade routes. Getting us to back out so they don’t have to fight us, while adding another obstacle to the Union’s recovery will be a welcome development for him.”

Abraham bowed respectfully.

“I understand. I’ll get everything ready.”

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The men were in the dumps when Lorist arrived. Ovidis had arrived two days earlier and, based on his experience and some experiments with some trebuchets constructed on the fly, it wasn’t practical to fling gunpowder sacks into the fortress. The largest obstacle was the fort’s location on elevated ground. They had to be within 200 meters of the fortress to get the sacks over the wall, but that would expose them to too much counter fire.

“We cannot push through without taking the fort, Your Grace, and we can’t do that without heavy casualties.”

Howard described the situation on the sand table. Lorist couldn’t help but admire the expert placement and design of the enemy fort. It was the greatest use of a fort he had ever seen. Even with his cannons, it was still a near impossible task to take it.

“I will take charge.”

If he couldn’t take it with cannons, or blow it up with gunpowder sacks, then he would just barge in himself and slaughter his way through. What use was being a sword saint

if he couldn't flex his muscles to solve sticky situations like this? His men refused vehemently, however. Their self-esteem would not let them allow their lord, a sword saint no less, take the field because of their inadequacy.

“Don't worry, I'm not going to risk my life alone. Reidy, Els, pick out a few capable knights. We'll take a few gunpowder sacks as well. After we get on the enemy walls, we will destroy their weapons. Howard will then roll the cannons up the hill and blast his way through the main gate.”



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